



A Murder of Magpies

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CHAPTER ONE

‘OH, JUST KILL me now!’ I didn’t shriek that out loud, just clenched my teeth more tightly. It was eight-thirty, and already the day couldn’t get much worse. I’m always at my desk by eight, not because I’m so wonderful, although I am, but because it’s the only time of day when no one asks me anything, when I can actually get on with some work, instead of solving other people’s problems.

Being a middle-aged, middling-ly successful editor has a downside that no one tells you about when you’re starting off. Publishing offices are run by middle-aged women like me. We will never be stars, but instead know dull things like how books are put together. We know how to find reliable proofreaders, what was done on that three-for-two promotion in 2010 and why it failed miserably, and even how to sweet-talk a recalcitrant designer into designing our book jackets instead of tweeting clips of his cat being adorable.

And so people ask you questions. They ask you all day. They text in meetings. They grab you in the corridor.

They stop you in the street on your way to lunch. I'm only surprised that no one has followed me into the loo. Yet.

Luckily, most publishing people are not early risers, and from eight until at least nine-thirty, often ten, the place looks like the *Mary Celeste*, and I get through all those jobs that need complete concentration and yet are completely boring – checking jackets (remember the time some squiffy copywriter thought that *The Count of Monte Cristo* was *The Count of Monte Carlo*?) or reading the stuff the marketing department wants to send out (I know they can't spell. It's just always a shock to find they can't cut-and-paste, either). In fact, on a good morning, I should be deeply aggravated by the time my assistant of the week staggers in.

Miranda was the current one, and to be fair to her, she's lasted three months. Before her was Amanda. Then Melanie. Then – well, lots more Amandas and Melanies. Publishing from the outside is so glamorous they arrive in droves. Then they discover that it's just office work, and that I don't spend my days swanning around the Wolseley taking TV presenters for three-hour lunches to discuss their autobiographies. Worse, they discover that I'm *glad* I'm not swanning around the Wolseley taking TV presenters for etc. etc. So they move on, either to the publicity department (more parties), or to the star editors (more everything).

Miranda is impressive. She has mastered such essential skills as getting the right address on the right mailing of proofs. (I know, but the last Amanda looked at me like I murdered kittens when I suggested she give it a try.) She likes reading, not something that always happens. And, bless her tidy little heart, she's a neatness freak, and files everything

almost before I've put it down. It's true, she never shows up before ten, and her retro neo-Goth make-up makes some of my authors pause, but it's a small price to pay for someone who not only knows that M comes before N, but actually does something about it.

She wouldn't be in for another hour and a half, though, and my jaw was already clenched tight. My dentist tells me that I ought to have one of those contraptions that you wear to bed, to stop you grinding your teeth. I don't have the heart to tell him it's the daytime that does it for me. Today's gem was lurking for me first thing, a voicemail message from Breda, left last night after I went home, saying in a faux cheerful voice that she hoped I liked the new book, and when was she going to hear from me?

Good question. Because I hated the new book. David, the editor-in-chief and my boss, hated the new book. The publicity department was frankly appalled by the new book. None of us, in fact, knew what to do about the new book, which was so embarrassing a hot wave of shame washed over me every time I thought about it, which I did as little as possible.

Breda McManus was one of our star authors, and my starriest author. Regular as clockwork, every other January for the last twelve years, she had delivered a nice fat slab of a manuscript, filled with middle-class girls growing into middle-class women, overcoming middle-class problems on the way. We published them in September, ready for the Christmas market and they paid my salary, many times over.

They did well because Breda was exactly the kind of woman she wrote about. She was a secretary in a solicitor's office in Galway and decided to write in her spare time. She

now lived in a Georgian house with her husband, her children were grown, and she had decided that instead of redecorating the house she was going to redecorate her style. I felt exactly like one of those people on a makeover programme where they walk in and have to pretend to *adore* the fact that the walls have been covered with aluminium foil.

Because Breda delivered a chick-lit novel.

Not only was chick lit well past its sell-by date, so was Breda's connection to twenty-year-olds. Hell, her children were in their forties. The damn thing was supposedly set in a poly (she hadn't noticed they were turned into universities decades ago), but it was more like a school story. The characters didn't quite have crushes on their teachers, and get up to 'japes' in 'rec,' but it was awfully close.

Lots of readers (including most of my colleagues) despise Breda's books at the best of times. They love the literary fiction that we publish, and think that my sort of book is beneath contempt. I love literary fiction, too, but I also love what are called, usually dismissively, 'women's reads'. The fact that our literary fiction list has never paid its way, in the entire twenty-eight years of its life, is something we tactfully never mention. Instead the hip twenty-year-old *du jour* gets a huge publicity campaign, and once in forty or fifty writers we strike it lucky. In the meantime, Timmins & Ross makes its money every year on women like Breda.

Until now. So instead of reading proofs, checking marketing and publicity copy, and going through the schedules before our weekly progress meeting, I was on my fifth cup of coffee, which was something of a miracle when you consider how tightly my teeth were clenched.

I smelt French fries, but it couldn't, surely, be ten o'clock already. Then I heard Miranda's computer hum in the space outside my office where all the assistants are shoved in like battery hens. It *was* ten o'clock, and Miranda had evidently been out late the night before – the French fries and a Coke are her hangover cure. I collected the minutes for the meeting and headed out, whispering a tiny hello to Miranda, whose eyes were closed against the glare of her computer screen.

I hadn't gone ten feet when her phone rang, and, wincing, she called after me, 'Sam, there's a Jacob Field in reception for you.'

'Field? For me? Are you sure?' She stared at me. On hangover days she had the energy to say everything only once. I didn't know anyone named Jacob Field, and I don't make appointments on Tuesday mornings because we always have a meeting then, from ten o'clock until everyone is too bored to go on – usually lunchtime. 'I'll go past reception – will you call David and tell him I'll be a few minutes late?' It was probably a friend of a friend, or someone who'd got my name somehow and was trying to flog a manuscript, no doubt about how his mother had abused him, or proving that his great-great-grandfather was Jack the Ripper. We don't have to deal with real live members of the public often, but every now and again one sneaks under the radar. It wouldn't take me long to get rid of him.

I walked briskly in to reception, smiling with my teeth bared. 'Mr Field? How can I help you?'

He was a surprise. No scruffy manuscript, no lost-dog look.

Instead he was conservatively dressed, in student-y sort

of way, a short, dark, stocky man in his early forties. He looked, in fact, like a publisher. I hesitated. Maybe he was an ex-colleague, and I was supposed to remember him? I looked again. Well-cut brown hair, nice brown eyes. In fact, generally just nice-looking, although it would have been difficult to put a finger on why. ‘Inspector Field.’

I was confused. What did he inspect? Drains? Schools? Oh God, not a novel about a schools inspector.

He must have seen that I’d missed a few steps, so he spoke kindly and gently, as one does to the hard-of-thinking. ‘Inspector Field. CID.’

Now I was totally lost.

He went on gamely, although he had realised he was going to get no help from me, as I was too dim-witted to know how to breathe without help. ‘Can we go somewhere to talk?’

He was right. Whatever he wanted, our reception area was no place to talk. ‘Area’ was really a polite fiction. It was a desk stuck in a niche carved out of the corridor, and as most of my colleagues were only now arriving, dozens of people were pushing past us, reaching over us to collect parcels left overnight, calling back and forth to one another.

I motioned him up the stairs, signalling confusion at Bernadette, the receptionist, whose raised eyebrows signalled in return that this was more interesting than usual.

Once back in my office I gestured to a chair and waited. He took his time, looking at the piles of manuscripts, the acres of files, the almost obsessively empty desk surface, and the absence of anything decorative at all: a blank white space.

He sighed, as though I'd requested the meeting, and this was the last place he wanted to be. When he finally spoke, his voice was as abrupt as his manner. 'Thanks Ms Clair, can you tell me if you were expecting any parcels that have failed to appear?'

I mulled this gently for a moment. 'Can I tell you about something that hasn't happened?' All right, I was being slow on the uptake. 'I'm sorry,' I said insincerely, 'but could you tell me what we're talking about? And why?' I tried to find a way out. 'I'm in the middle of a very busy morning. I should be in a meeting right now.' His eyes narrowed at my very overt desire to avoid the meeting I was in, with him, and I softened my slightly schoolteacher-ish tone. 'I'm really not sure who you are or why you want to talk to me.'

He shrugged, but now he was apologetic, not dismissive. 'I'm investigating a car accident.'

That was no help. 'An accident? CID? I don't know anything about the workings of the police, but it seems, well, an over-reaction?'

He nodded. I wasn't the first person to say that to him today, and his earlier snappish tone was explained: I wouldn't be the last. I gave him that complicated shrug-hand-roll that says, *Sorry your day is crap, but this is really nothing to do with me, now is it?* He seemed to translate it without difficulty. 'It's an unusual hit-and-run.' He went on, as if slightly surprised himself that he was telling me this. 'There was an accident on the Hammersmith flyover, early yesterday morning. A courier was hit by a van that didn't stop. It was wet and it looks like a straightforward hit-and-run, except that there were no parcels on his bike, and his

list of deliveries for the day had vanished, too. Maybe the material vanished before the accident. Or maybe someone stole it afterward – no one saw it.’

‘What does the courier say?’

‘He doesn’t. He’s dead.’

I digested this in silence. Then, ‘How do I come into the picture?’

‘The list and deliveries vanished, but his office had a copy of his schedule. You were on it.’

‘Who was the parcel from?’

‘A mail shop. Without a tracking number or an order reference, they can’t tell us who sent it. They have a few thousand items going through every day.’ He clicked his pen. To business. ‘I realise this is a nuisance, but we’ll have to ask you to list everything that you are expecting.’

I gave a snort. ‘Expecting? Lists? Inspector, this is publishing. Schedules are’ – I searched for the word. ‘They’re what we would like to believe might happen.’ I could see he wasn’t following. ‘I have, I don’t know, a hundred, a hundred and fifty authors with contracts that I look after. Some are due to deliver now, but in my business “now” means . . .’ I tried to think how to explain it. ‘Have you ever watched when parents call their children in a playground? And the children shout “Coming!” and keep on doing whatever they were doing before?’ I widened my eyes and whispered, ‘Authors in the making!’ He smiled, which was an improvement, but I could see he didn’t think I was making a serious point. ‘Really. Most authors think that if they’ve delivered a manuscript within their lifetime it meets the legal definition of “on schedule.”’

His lips quirked, but what I was saying was also annoying him.

He wanted boxes to tick. *Don't we all, Sunshine*, I told him. But only in my head. Outwardly I tried to look sympathetic and helpful, not merely curious and simultaneously wanting him to go away so I could get to my meeting. I made a helpless gesture. 'I don't know how to think about this – you're asking me to tell you what hasn't happened.'

He jotted something in his notebook. Thank God, one boxed ticked, at least. 'If you think of anything, will you ring me, please?'

He gave me a card, I pointed him in the right direction down the rabbit warren of corridors and headed off to the meeting room.

As I slipped into my seat, murmuring an apology for my lateness, Ben was saying, 'This is going to be really mega.'

If anything could have pushed a meeting with a detective out of my mind, it was Ben being mega. I hastily looked down at the minutes, because like Pavlov's dog, all he had to do was say the word and I was ready. But the dogs only drooled when Pavlov rang his bell. I was worried that one more time and I'd roll up my minutes and assault him with them, all the while shrieking 'The word is big, you little toad. Big!' As you may be able to tell, Ben and I already have problems. Ben is twenty-six, and this is his first job. He is small, weedy, and terribly, terribly serious about his work. *His*. Not anyone else's. He despises everyone else's. He has, however, produced our only literary fiction in the

last two years that has sold over five thousand copies, so people listen to him. Which is a pity, since he doesn't really have anything to say.

I've made an effort with him, truly I have. When he arrived, fresh-faced and eager-beaver-ish, straight down from Oxford, I took him out to lunch. I nearly drowned in my soup as I dozed off while he told me in detail about his life to that point. Even someone as self-absorbed as Ben noticed I was bored, although naturally he didn't think it was anything to do with him. We didn't repeat the lunch.

He is a good reader, and he spots trends, but everything for him is mega. Ben has never bought a book because he thought it would be a nice steady seller. His books either fail miserably (often), or they earn enough to be partly worth the ridiculous advances he pays (sometimes). Ben has major-league Big Dick Syndrome – if a book doesn't cost several times the GDP of many third-world countries, then he doesn't think it can be worth anything.

'Sam?'

I looked fixedly at the minutes, as though still trying to find my place. 'Yes, I see your point.' Translation: *No, I don't.* 'The proposal was quite interesting.' Translation: *It was barely three pages long, one entire page of which was about the author. Who was still at school.* 'But shouldn't we ask to see a sample chapter?' Translation: *We don't know if the child can write.*

An exasperated sound from Ben. 'Look, Sam, there is major interest in this, and we've only got this far because his agent likes me.'

Of course the agent likes him. Ben pays top dollar for

very little on paper. I'd like him, too, in those circumstances. I don't know why I bother. We're going to buy this book, and I'm going to have to be nice to the little shit, and pretend I like his novel whether I do or not. Then it will fail and the next little shit will be along. Like buses. I stared at the wall behind Ben. I couldn't look at him. I wasn't sure I could look at the wall much longer, either. It was grey and dingy and peeling. Over the years people had pinned up notices and pulled them down again. Dozens of bits of Sellotape were all that remained, gradually yellowing and growing old. I felt the same. Our offices in general were not particularly attractive, but the meeting room was the worst. It was a small partitioned area of what had once been a bigger room. The furniture was all 1960s style, and it must have been described as 'fun' or 'cheerful' in the furniture catalogue, but in reality orange-moulded plastic is never a good look. Orange-moulded plastic that had half a century of dirt covering it didn't bear thinking about. I continued to stare at the wall, otherwise I'd have to look at Ben.

A phone was nudged to where I could see the screen without moving my head, and a finger tapped at it to get my attention. Sandra, the publicity director, and one of my closest friends in-house. I let my eyes float down. *Wnkr*, said the text. It wasn't going to change anything, but it made me feel better. I considered. Probably about half the people around the table – maybe eight or ten – thought the same as I did, either about Ben himself, or this book in particular. Of those, possibly four or five had been paying attention, the others either openly doing e-mails or just reading on their iPads until the meeting got around to a book that directly

concerned them. Three others were chatting openly, about a lunch they'd all been to, nothing to do with work, officially. But maybe it was – work in publishing is often indistinguishable from chat, and chat was what we did all day.

The two from production, who were there only to deal with schedules, weren't even doing that – even from my end of the table I could see they were playing a rousing game of hangman. And I'd lose a few more if I continued to argue, not because anyone disagreed, just because they were desperate for the meeting to end. I let my attention drift. If you can't beat 'em . . .

'Well,' said David brightly. 'If we're all agreed.'

I woke out of my dream. 'Please. We really do need to talk about Breda.' I knew I sounded sad and desperate, but that's only because I was. We did need to talk about Breda, but there wasn't anything to say. If we refused this book, she'd go to another publisher; if we published it and it got the reaction it deserved, she would take her next book elsewhere, too, despite the relationship I'd nurtured for over a decade.

Everyone looked embarrassed, and got up to go, as though I hadn't said anything at all.

So we had to buy this book, and it was up to me to turn it into something that wouldn't make her a laughingstock. A success would be beyond me, but maybe I could engineer a quiet, genteel sort of failure.

Miranda had turned up my heater before I came back, which meant she was beginning to recover. Timmins & Ross is in four Georgian houses, which have been knocked together

into one highly confusing interior in a turning just off Great Russell Street, behind the British Museum. They are lovely houses from the outside, but the inside has not seen much work done to them in the last century. They *do* have plumbing, it's true, but they don't have central heating, and the beautiful sash windows let in gales even in the summer. In winter it's often warmer outside.

My office is a partitioned bit of what must have once been a drawing room, because it has a huge window, which is great unless you care about your extremities. If I keep an electric fan heater on full blast from eight, which officially we're not allowed to do, by noon I can usually manage with just one sweater.

Before I'd even sat down, Miranda's head was around the door. 'So what was that all about?'

'What was what all about?' She's smart, but she can't possibly have known I'd fantasised about assaulting Ben with the acquisition meeting minutes.

She thought I was stonewalling, and wasn't going to have it. 'The police?' she nudged.

My eyes popped wide. 'Good lord, I'd forgotten.' I gestured her in. I outlined the conversation and asked her to check delivery dates for both new manuscripts, even though most came electronically, and proofs, which didn't. She nodded, but her mind wasn't on it. 'A hit-and-run? Really?'

'That's what I said. But maybe that's the way the police work. God knows, he didn't believe me when I told him how publishing worked.'

I shrugged and turned to my desk. And then swore comprehensively when I saw my e-mail was down. Already

on her way back to her desk, Miranda called through the wall that it was the entire company, so it should be fixed relatively quickly. Meanwhile my voice mail was stuffed, in only an hour. Breda. Breda's agent. Marketing, asking why I hadn't approved copy they'd sent down a whole ten minutes earlier. Two copy editors who weren't going to make their deadlines. A proofreader touting for work. My mother. And Kit, three times.

Kit Lovell is one of my favourite authors. He is a fashion journalist, he is efficient, he is professional, he meets his deadlines, and he is the best gossip on the planet. I don't usually do his sort of book – quick-and-dirty low-downs on the rich and famous – but he came to me through a friend, and he's been a constant delight. But it was unlike him to keep calling. If he had got some really hot gossip, he'd leave a message and then I wouldn't be able reach him because he would be busy calling the immediate world while it was still fresh. Maybe that's why we'd become friends so quickly – like publishers, Kit lived off chatter.

I had his latest manuscript, which his typist e-mailed to me two weeks earlier – Kit was above such mundanities as computers – and I'd already told him how much I loved it, so it couldn't be that. Whatever it was, he took precedence over my mother, and he absolutely took precedence over Breda that week. I put the phone on automatic redial, hoping his gossip wasn't so hot that it took him the whole morning to work through his contacts list.

In the meantime, I had to start preparing his book. It didn't need much editing from me – Kit's work never did – but like all of his books, it would have to go to a libel lawyer before

we sent it out for copyediting. It was not that Kit was reckless, it was just a by-product of the kind of books he wrote. Most people in business have things that they don't want the world to know, even if they've never so much as crossed the road against the lights. People in the fashion business, which is built entirely on appearances, *really* don't want the world to know how they got to where they were. What Kit supplies is the true story, which as he says sweepingly, 'everyone' knows. But the 'everyone' of the fashion business, and the 'everyone' who reads a Sunday newspaper, where Kit's books usually get serialised, are not the same thing, and his subjects often objected. Strenuously. With lawyers.

The three rules of checking for libel are short and sweet. Is the reported incident true? Can we prove it? Then the most important one: Can the subject afford to sue, whether it's true or not? With fashion houses owned by multinationals, the answer to the questions were yes, yes, and *yes*. So far as I could see, taking a dispassionate look at it, our troubles with this book began on the title page. Kit had called his biography *The Gilded Life and Tarnished Death of Rodrigo Alemán*. Alemán was Spain's most prominent (only?) international star on the fashion scene. He had been brought in to put the ailing French couture house of Vernet back on its feet after Jules Vernet's retirement. And he did, although in a way that probably hastened Vernet's death – hip-hop and trance at the shows, ads featuring semi-naked models in soft-core pornographic poses. He'd created a diffusion range, with lower-priced clothes than the standard prêt-à-porter, and then began opening boutiques across the world to sell them in.

Most of this was no different from any other fashion house, but everything Alemán did was brasher, brighter, bolder – and bigger. There were questions about how the gigantic warehouses he called boutiques managed to survive, given that most days you could shoot a cannon off in any one of them without risking harm to a paying customer. His lavish parties always got into the glossy magazines, but the actress-model-whatevers all borrowed his dresses, they didn't buy them. And short of hookers, who couldn't afford them, it wasn't clear to anyone who would want to.

All fashion stories are stories of money and excess. And money and fame. And money. And, in this case, violent death.

I tried Kit one last time. Still busy. Instead of gossiping I took the manuscript along the hall to David's office. David Snaith is our editor-in-chief, so he has an office that isn't a partitioned bit, but is what must have once been a morning room: a good-sized, east-facing room. Nothing could look less like a social environment than its present incarnation, however. David has kept every single piece of paper that has ever crossed his desk, and most of them are not filed, but thrown into trays, to be dealt with at some mystical 'later' time. When the tray is filled, and starts to overflow, he just slings it onto a shelf where it moulders gently for the next few years, with additional trays thrown on top as they fill up in turn. When they all fall over David nudges them back into a heap with his foot as he walks past, but that's the only attention they ever get. The books and spilt papers lie in heaps, and you have to walk through the snowdrifts of memos. If you stick to the little cleared pathways, and the

one empty chair, you're fine. If more than one person comes in for a meeting, they are given a spare chair by David's assistant. It is much easier to carry one in than to try and excavate the ones that are already there, buried.

I tried not to get depressed when I sat down. David and I are temperamentally opposed, and it is hard for us to communicate. He has been at Timmins & Ross for nearly thirty years, ever since he left university, working his way up to editor-in-chief, which he had achieved about a decade before. He is going to stay here for the rest of his life, and they will have to carry him out feet first, probably in the same bin liners the old papers are taken away in.

I shook myself. These kind of thoughts were not helpful in getting him onside. David is so cautious, anything out of the ordinary has to be approached full-frontally, otherwise he will duck and run, pretending it isn't there.

'It's about Kit's book,' I said baldly. 'We are going to have to give this more than our usual once-over.'

'Is it so bad?' David already looked hunted.

'It's not bad. In fact, it's terrific. It's just that all the fun stuff, the stuff everyone will want to read – and the stuff newspapers will pay big money for – is exactly what everyone concerned wants to keep hidden.'

'But surely no one denies Alemán was murdered? Isn't that why we bought the book?'

'No one denies it. Except his family. Vernet. Oh, and the police. Apart from them, everyone, as you say, knows it was murder.'

'Do they think it was an accident? How is that possible?'

'It isn't. They don't. They just *want* it to be one. And

they think if they say so loud enough, and often enough, gradually we'll forget what really did happen.'

'So what did really happen? I'm not much for fashion news. I read the proposal, but that was last year. I can't remember them all.'

I tried not to look impatient. 'David, this was all over the front pages for weeks. Cut down to the basics, Alemán was coming home from a club in a Paris suburb at five o'clock one morning when a car screeched out of a turning, drove up onto the pavement, hit him hard enough that his body flew over the top and bounced off the back window, at which point the driver backed up and ran over it again. Apparently a belt-and-braces type of killer.'

'There were witnesses?'

'Five. And two were bodyguards, so they were sober. But somehow their first statements vanished, and once the Vernet lawyers got there, they saw, I believe, a little old lady who was confused about which was the brake pedal and which the accelerator. Although she was clever enough to drive a car with fake number plates, and then vanish.'

'How can anyone believe that?'

'No one does. But as far as Vernet and Alemán's family is concerned, that was the inquest verdict, and the papers are too scared of being sued to print anything else.'

'Why aren't we too scared, then?' David was looking at me like a puppy that's just made a mess in the house, but hopes that if he looks cute enough, it could be overlooked. David wasn't cute enough.

'Kit has done some extraordinary research: early police reports, witness statements that were suppressed, witnesses

who were mysteriously never contacted by the police.’

‘Bottom line, what’s he saying?’

‘Organised crime. It’s not phrased that way, naturally. He says there is a dodgy bank and companies laundering money through Vernet. Not that anyone at Vernet knew about it. Maybe Alemán didn’t, either. Or didn’t want to. But it’s what kept the company afloat. That’s how the boutiques survived without customers. Everyone knew. Only no one did.’

‘Does Kit have enough for us to publish safely?’

‘More than enough. Names, dates, copies of invoices for goods never supplied – never even manufactured – with corresponding bank statements for cash received. *Lots* of cash received. Millions every month.’

‘How did Kit get it all?’

‘I haven’t asked and I don’t intend to. He assures me he has broken no laws, and I believe him. Everything else is for him and the lawyers to sort out.’

David looked pained. ‘Is there something about you that just magnetically attracts trouble?’

I bristled. ‘This isn’t trouble. It just needs a legal read.’

If I could go back now and erase the dumbest thing I’ve ever said in my whole life, it would be that.