

MURDER IN DUBLIN

By Christina Koning

THE BLIND DETECTIVE SERIES

The Blind Detective

Murder in Regent's Park

Murder at Hendon Aerodrome

Murder in Berlin

Murder in Cambridge

Murder in Barcelona

Murder in Dublin

Murder at Bletchley Park



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CHRISTINA KONING

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For Eamonn

Chapter One

It was getting on for ten o'clock at night when the Liverpool ferry docked at North Wall Quay after what had been as smooth a crossing of the Irish Sea as one could have hoped to enjoy, thought Frederick Rowlands. It was of course high summer, he reminded himself as he lit a cigarette; he supposed it might be a very different story in the depths of winter when storms would make the crossing a far less pleasant experience. Standing by the ship's rail, he savoured the first few moments of arrival in a strange city as around him the business of disembarking passengers and unloading cargo began.

'I always think this is the best way to approach Dublin,' said his companion, who was standing next to him, close enough so that he could catch the scent of her hair, and the perfumed smoke of the Turkish cigarettes she favoured. 'With the lights of the buildings along the

waterfront shining on the river, and the loafers on the quayside, and the feeling one has – here, more than in London, I feel – of having arrived in the heart of things . . . although I imagine,’ she added, as if it had just occurred to her, ‘it isn’t the same for you.’

‘Not exactly the same,’ he replied, offering her his arm as the two of them started to move towards the gangplank, across which groups of foot passengers were already making their way. ‘But I can picture it, from what you’ve said. The lights and the buildings. The loafers, too – one finds them in every port. Then there’s the smell of the place – or rather, that of the warehouses along this stretch of the river. Coffee, and pepper, and beer – there must be a brewery nearby. And the sounds of the voices. Is that Irish they’re talking, those fellows?’ She said that it was. ‘I knew it was a language I hadn’t heard before although heaven knows I met enough Irishmen during the war . . .’ But she was only half-listening.

‘Now, where’s O’Driscoll got to?’ she murmured, looking out for the servant who was to meet them. ‘He should be here. I wired before we left Liverpool.’

They had, by this time, reached the quayside where a crowd of those meeting the ferry jostled against those who were getting off; there seemed to be no particular organisation. ‘Perhaps,’ said Rowlands, feeling himself pushed this way and that, and doing his best to protect his companion from the same, ‘we should find a quieter spot to wait until this crush clears?’

But just then there came the clatter of hurrying footsteps along the cobblestones. ‘Milady! Oh, milady! I was afeared I’d come too late and missed you.’

‘You certainly might have been earlier,’ said his mistress. ‘But no matter. Where have you left the car?’

‘Over the way, milady. Was it a good journey, now?’

‘Not bad.’

‘And the sea as calm as a millpond,’ said the man, sounding as satisfied as if he’d arranged this himself. ‘Would there be any luggage, milady?’

‘Yes. There are my two bags and one of Mr Rowlands’. See to it, will you? And then let’s waste no more time. We’ve had a long journey.’

‘To be sure,’ was the reply. ‘Patsy’s after collecting the luggage now. Hi there, Patsy! Over here with the bags, now! Car’s this way, milady. Just a few steps,’ added O’Driscoll in an encouraging tone. Within a few minutes, the travellers were seated in the back of the Bentley, with O’Driscoll taking his seat next to the silent Patsy, whose functions evidently included that of chauffeur. ‘Merrion Square, is it, milady?’ enquired the former. Being assured that it was, he conveyed this fact to the latter. Then they were moving, at a steady but not excessive speed, along the river – ‘The Liffey,’ murmured the woman beside him to Rowlands – and across O’Connell Bridge. Trinity College soon appeared on their left, so Rowlands’ companion told him, after which it was more or less a straight line to their destination where they arrived in little more than ten minutes.

‘Here we are,’ she said as they drew up in front of a house about halfway along the far side of the square. As he got out of the car, Rowlands had a sense of a freshness in the air that came from the presence of trees, and of a fountain playing softly somewhere. There was something else – the quiet that hung about the wealthier parts of cities where the raucous sounds of the poorer streets seldom, if ever, penetrated.

Rowlands followed the mistress of the house up a short flight of steps, to a door that already stood open. A sensation of warmth and light met him as he entered the spacious hall. A smell of fresh flowers and polished wood, with a faint, underlying scent of something else – fine cigars, he thought, wondering if he was shortly to meet the man whose indulgence they were. Invisible hands, like those in one of the fairy tales his girls had once loved, divested him of his coat. ‘Baths first, I think, don’t you?’ said his hostess, preceding him up the stairs. ‘And then we’ll see what Mrs Keane has left for us. You needn’t dress,’ she added. ‘Half an hour, shall we say? John will show you to your room.’

Left to his own devices in the room to which he had been conducted by the servant, Rowlands took a few moments to familiarise himself with its layout, something which had, of necessity, become habitual in the more than twenty years since he had been blinded by an exploding shell at Passchendaele. Having first ascertained the position of bed and fireplace (in which a fire had been lit against the evening chill), and finding

that his suitcase had already been brought up, he undressed, and having put on his dressing gown, took his sponge bag and found his way across the corridor to the bathroom that served this end of the house. Here, a bath had already been drawn; he got into it gratefully, finding the water as hot as he could have wished.

It had been almost twelve hours since he had met, at Euston station, the woman at whose behest he was here. As he let the tensions of the day slip away, in the warmth of the pleasantly scented water, he reflected on what had led up to that meeting, and why it was that she had sought him out after so long.

Two days ago, if you'd mentioned her name to him, it would have conjured memories already almost a decade old: memories of a dangerous sweetness that threatened his carefully maintained peace of mind. He'd had news of her over the years, of course. A woman who occupied the place she did in society, and who, moreover, had been briefly notorious, couldn't expect to disappear entirely from public awareness although her marriage six years before, to an Irish peer, had seemed to guarantee her removal from the epicentre of London society. There'd been nothing in these occasional snippets of information, concerning her appearance at a Dublin ball, or a race meeting, perhaps, that might have pointed to her sudden reappearance in Rowlands' life.

He'd stayed at work later than usual on that particular evening because, with Edith and the girls

away in Cornwall at the start of the summer holidays, and Edith's mother seen off that morning on the train to visit friends in Scotland, there was no special reason to hurry home. Miss Collins had already left, taking the letters for posting with her, and Rowlands was making notes in his careful script – guiding his hand by means of a ruler so as to avoid going off the page – to remind him what needed to be addressed with his secretary the next day. Absorbed in this task, he wasn't aware that anyone had come into his office until the intruder spoke: 'I hope I'm not disturbing you? I asked at the house and they said you hadn't yet left.'

For a moment, Rowlands found himself unable to utter a word. Was it really her – or was this merely a soft-voiced hallucination, come out of the past to torment him? 'Lady Celia,' he managed at last. 'I . . .'

'You don't seem awfully glad to see me, Mr Rowlands.'

'I'm just surprised, that's all. It must be seven years . . .'

'Eight,' she said. 'Almost to the day. It was at that party in Richmond where the girl was attacked. Awful business. I drove you home after the police had finished with us, didn't I?'

'You did,' said Rowlands, for whom every detail of that night was etched in memory. 'And I *am* glad to see you,' he added. The obvious question, which was what it was that had brought her there, hung in the air between them. But if she sensed this, Celia Swift evidently wasn't in any hurry to answer it. 'So this is

where you work?’ she said. ‘Rather nice to be right in the middle of Regent’s Park.’ For this indeed was where the St Dunstan’s HQ was located. ‘It took me quite a while to track you down. I had to ask at the other place – Gerald’s old office, you know.’

‘Yes.’ The mention of his late CO, Gerald Willoughby, briefly transported Rowlands back to his former place of work where he’d been for seven years until disaster intervened, a disaster in which Lady Celia (Celia West, as she was then) had been intimately involved. ‘I came there once, if you recall.’ He did, all too vividly. Because it had been then that he’d come to realise the power she had over him. It was a power she was exercising at that moment as she moved about the room. It had to do with her voice, her scent – musky, exotic – with the languor of her movements, the rustle of her silk dress. One might have called it seductive, except that it seemed artless.

Pausing for a moment in her restless wandering, she fiddled with the objects upon his desk: a paperknife; a painted jar that one of his girls had made, containing pencils; a wave-smoothed stone, picked up on Brighton beach.

‘I was hoping,’ she said at last, ‘that you’d have dinner with me.’ She was staying at the Savoy: ‘We can get a bite to eat in the Grill,’ she said. ‘Then we needn’t dress.’ It was all the same to Rowlands, although he rather wished he’d been wearing his best suit instead of the one he wore to the office; he reminded himself that

while he was in Celia Swift's company, no one would be looking at him anyway.

In the taxi on the way from Regent's Park, their conversation had necessarily been confined to pleasantries. She enquired after the health of his wife and family; he reciprocated by hoping that she herself was well. 'Never better,' she replied with an airiness that made him think she wasn't being entirely frank. Then, changing the subject: 'I remember your daughters. Dear little things! I've a boy of my own now, you know.'

He hadn't known, and said that that was good to hear. 'Yes, he's quite a jolly little chap. Just turned five. Ned – that's my husband – is keen to start him off with his first pony, but I think he's too young.' A brief silence ensued.

'I haven't seen you since your marriage,' said Rowlands, deciding to follow up on this conversational opportunity. 'It must be very different, living in Ireland . . . I mean after London.'

'Oh, it *is*. Although I've only just begun to realise *how* different.'

Before he could discover what, if anything, she meant by this cryptic remark, they arrived at the hotel. Greeted by the manager in that fashionable establishment's lofty entrance lobby, they were conducted by another factotum to the restaurant. From the subdued murmur of conversation that met them as they walked in, Rowlands judged that the place was far from full. It was still early, of course. A waiter led them to a table on the far side.

‘I believe the steaks are good here,’ said Lady Celia as they were seated. Rowlands said that, in that case, he’d have the steak. ‘We’ll have a bottle of Burgundy to go with it,’ said his hostess to the waiter. ‘And I’ll have the fish.’ She waited until the man had brought the wine, poured it, and left them to their own devices before she spoke again. ‘Tell me . . . how’s your sister?’ Rowlands, who’d been wondering for the past hour what her reason was for inviting him here since he assumed it couldn’t simply be for the pleasure of his company, was nonetheless taken aback.

‘My sister?’ he echoed, recalling the circumstances under which the two women had last met – circumstances no doubt highly uncomfortable to both. ‘She was very well when I last saw her. She . . . she married again, you know. Seems very happy.’

‘I’m glad,’ said Lady Celia. She took a sip of wine and set down her glass. ‘And the child? I forget his name . . .’

Rowlands had the feeling this wasn’t true. ‘William,’ he said. ‘Known as Billy. He’s not such a child any more. He’s seventeen.’

‘I suppose he must be,’ she said drily. ‘You know there was money left to the boy . . . in my late husband’s will?’ She seemed reluctant to mention him by name.

‘Yes,’ said Rowlands. ‘I believe I did hear something about that.’ Was this why she’d sought him out? ‘But I don’t think she – my sister – cares about the money,’ he added, wanting to disabuse her of the idea that he,

or his sibling, might harbour such mercenary designs.

‘Perhaps not. But I do,’ replied Celia Swift impatiently. ‘That is . . . I *don’t* care about it. I don’t want it. It’s his. The boy’s.’

‘Lady Celia—’

‘I’ve been to see my solicitors,’ she said, cutting across him. ‘It’s one of the reasons I came to London. Ned, my husband, agrees with my decision. He says it’s my money, to do with as I please. I’ve put it in trust for the boy . . . for William,’ she said. ‘He’ll get it when he’s of age.’

Somewhat stunned by this information, Rowlands did not at once reply. ‘What about your own boy?’ he wanted to say, but did not.

She must have read his thought, however, for she said: ‘I don’t need, or want, his money.’ Rowlands knew it was her late husband, Leo West, of whom she spoke. He thought he understood the reason for this. After the shocking events that had ended her marriage to the wealthy entrepreneur, she would doubtless regard the money as tainted.

Their food arrived, and for the next few minutes they occupied themselves with the agreeable business of consuming it, or rather, Rowlands did. Lady Celia merely pushed her food around her plate. He remembered her figure as slim and girlish; he guessed she hadn’t changed in that respect. She would have kept the same graceful form he had once, briefly, held in his arms, just as the same delicious scent – a heady

mixture of expensive perfume and Turkish cigarettes – clung to her skin and hair. What was different was a new hardness in her voice. She pushed her plate away, and lit a cigarette. ‘That wasn’t the reason I wanted to see you,’ she said. ‘Or not the only reason.’

He hadn’t finished eating, but he put down his knife and fork, and waited to hear what she had to say.

‘That was the reason I gave *him* – Ned, I mean – for my coming to London. Setting up the trust, and some other business I had to see to. The sale of some property . . .’ She broke off as if the subject bored her. ‘No, it was something else I wanted to ask you about,’ she was saying. ‘The truth is, I need your help, Mr Rowlands . . . or may I call you Frederick? You helped me once before when no one else did.’

Rowlands waited. His companion seemed to be nerving herself for what she had to say. Even so, it was a shock when it came: ‘I think someone’s trying to kill my husband,’ she said. ‘In fact, I’m sure of it. You must help me prevent it.’

There had been letters, she said: vaguely threatening in tone at first, latterly of increasingly violent language.

‘Have you kept them?’

‘Only the most recent ones. Ned threw the first couple in the fire.’

‘Can you give me an idea of what they said?’

‘Well . . .’ She lit another cigarette. ‘Shall we have our coffee in the lounge? We can be more private there.’ When they were settled in a corner of this vast

apartment, whose atmosphere of hushed opulence was made more so by the luxurious thickness of the carpet, Lady Celia resumed her tale, which sounded all the more luridly fantastical by contrast with these civilised surroundings. ‘To begin with, as I said, the letters contained vague threats. “We know how to deal with your kind.” “Go home, English scum.” That kind of muck. Then they got more specific. “You’ll be sorry you ever set foot in Castletown and your English whore with you . . .” I don’t think,’ she added wryly, ‘that they approve of me, either.’

‘Who are they? Do you have any idea?’

‘Ned thinks they’re IRA malcontents, or they could just as well be Blueshirts. That’s the Protestant lot,’ she explained. ‘They’re all as mad as each other. The one thing on which they agree is that they hate the English. Unfortunately for Ned, he’s only a quarter Irish, on his mother’s side, and I haven’t a drop of Celtic blood.’

‘But . . .’ Rowlands refused her offer of a Turkish cigarette, preferring his own. ‘Why *now*?’ he said when it was lit.

‘Haven’t you heard?’ was the faintly mocking reply. ‘There’s going to be a war. And Ireland’s keeping out of it if de Valera has his way. Ned says it’s a golden opportunity for them to rid themselves of the enemy.’

‘The enemy?’

‘Us. The British.’

‘And you believe these letters are part of a campaign to force you and your husband out?’ said Rowlands.

‘I do,’ she said. ‘It’s not just letters, either. One might ignore those, although it’s not very pleasant to know one’s hated. But it was when they killed Ned’s favourite dog that I really started to worry. Oh yes,’ she said, seeing his horrified expression. ‘Shot the poor beast in cold blood and left him for Ned to find. *He* says it was probably an accident – some farmer letting loose at what he thought was a stray – but I don’t believe it. Especially not when another letter came the next day. “You’ll be next, my lord,” it said. If that isn’t a death threat, I don’t know what is.’

‘Have you informed the police?’ said Rowlands. ‘Surely they—’

‘The Gardai are as mixed up in politics as all the rest,’ said Celia Swift crisply. ‘Ned did talk to the local man, Sergeant Flanagan, who said he’d look into it, but I don’t imagine he’ll exert himself overmuch. To be blunt, Frederick, they want us gone. We’re the oppressors, in their view. The sooner we, the English, get out of Ireland, the better, in their estimation.’

Rowlands was silent a moment, reflecting on what she had said. ‘I still don’t see how I can be of help,’ he said, at last. ‘I’ve never set foot in Ireland . . . and my knowledge of its politics is shaky, to say the least.’

‘I’ve come to you because you stood up for me, all those years ago,’ she said. ‘You saved me from the gallows. Now I want you to save my husband from being murdered. Please, Frederick. You’re my only hope.’

* * *

Having bathed and changed his shirt, Rowlands made his way back to the entrance hall where the obliging John was waiting to conduct him to the library. Here he found Lady Celia seated in front of a good fire. 'There's a chair directly opposite mine,' she said. 'And there are sandwiches and coffee . . . unless you'd prefer a whisky?'

'Coffee's fine.'

She poured them each a cup. 'Black or white?'

'Black, please.'

She placed the cup on a low table at his side, and handed him a plate of sandwiches. 'Mrs K's made enough to feed an army. I hope you're hungry.'

He was, as it happened. It seemed a long time since they'd lunched on the train to Liverpool. The sandwiches were ham, and very good. He had eaten two before his hunger abated. Celia Swift seemed content to watch him eat while she sipped her coffee and smoked a cigarette. 'I'm so glad you agreed to come,' she said. 'It makes me feel so much *safer* to have you here.' Although what good his being there would do was debatable, thought Rowlands. A blind man, with little knowledge of the country in which he had just arrived.

'I don't know what you expect me to achieve that the police can't,' he said. He pushed away his plate, and lit a cigarette. 'And . . .' He hesitated.

At once she picked him up. 'What?'

'Just that . . . I don't imagine your husband will take kindly to having a man he's never met interfere in his

business,' he said. 'I mean, surely he must have his own ideas about all this?'

'Oh, Ned just dismisses it as some kind of nasty prank,' she replied. 'As for what he'll think of *you*,' she went on. 'He'll think what I've told him to think, which is that you're an old friend I happened to run into in London and that you've had considerable experience of this kind of thing.'

'You told him *that*?'

'Don't look so alarmed. It's true, isn't it?'

'Well . . .'

'Ned's much more likely to listen to you than he is to take notice of what a mere wife might say,' said Celia Swift. 'I want you to convince him to take these threats seriously, that's all.'

Rowlands doubted whether anything he could say would make the slightest difference, but he held his peace. He was here now, wasn't he? He might as well go along with what she'd proposed. 'Will we see Lord Castleford tonight?' he asked.

The answer was in the negative. 'He's at the estate. We'll see him tomorrow with all the rest of the crew. I'd better put you in the picture about Ned's family,' said Lady Celia.

Edward Swift was the younger son of an earl. His elder brother, John, had been killed at the Somme, and so the title had passed to Edward, on the death of his father. The latter had been married twice – the boys' mother having died when Edward was an infant – and there was

another son, Jolyon, by the second marriage, to Eveline, the much younger daughter of a local landowner. ‘I wonder what you’ll make of our dear Eveline?’ said her daughter-in-law, with a faintly satirical edge to her voice. The Dowager Lady Castleford had been given a home by her stepson, to which, naturally enough, her own son was frequently invited. ‘Jolyon lives with us most of the time,’ said Lady Celia. ‘At least . . . it *feels* as if he does, he’s about the place so often, with that wife of his.’ The couple had a young son, Reginald. ‘He’s two years younger than our boy, and so he’s not much company for him. Besides which . . .’ She left whatever comment she’d been about to make unsaid.

In addition to these people, she went on, there was ‘Cousin Aloysius, a retired canon. I’m not sure what relation he is to Ned exactly, but he’s a dear old boy. The best of the lot, in my opinion. You’ll also meet Robert Butler – he runs the estate – and his wife, Elspeth. She’s rather a starchy sort, but she means well. And there’s Sebastian Gogarty, who’s been cataloguing the Castleford library for the past few weeks. Now,’ she said as if the subject held no more interest for her, ‘I want to hear all about your girls,’ which was no hardship to Rowlands, whose three daughters were the delight of his life.

And so he told her about Margaret, midway through her studies in mathematics at Cambridge; and about Anne, who was currently torn between following her sister to St Gertrude’s College, or pursuing a career in

fine art; and finally about Joan, the youngest, whose preoccupations at present were those of any healthy schoolgirl: hockey, the games mistress, and getting enough to eat. 'You never saw such an appetite!' said her father fondly. 'I think she'll end up being the tallest of the three.'