

CROUCH END, LONDON

A bottle of wine. A family-sized packet of Nacho Cheese Flavoured Tortilla Chips and a jar of hot salsa dip. A packet of cigarettes on the side (I know, I know). The rain hammering against the windows. And a book.

What could have been lovelier?

Magpie Murders was number nine in the much-loved and world-bestselling Atticus Pünd series. When I first opened it on that wet August evening, it existed only as a typescript and it would be my job to edit it before it was published. First, I intended to enjoy it. I remember going straight into the kitchen when I came in, plucking a few things out of the fridge and putting everything on a tray. I undressed, leaving my clothes where they fell. The whole flat was a tip anyway. I showered, dried and pulled on a giant Maisie Mouse T-shirt that someone had given me at the Bologna Book Fair. It was too early to get into bed but I was going to read the book lying on top of it, the sheets still crumpled and unmade from the night before. I don't always live like this, but my boyfriend had been away for six weeks and while I was on my own I'd deliberately allowed standards to slip. There's something quite comforting about mess, especially when there's no one else there to complain.

Actually, I hate that word. Boyfriend. Especially when it's used to describe a fifty-two-year-old, twice-divorced man. The trouble is, the English language doesn't provide much in the way of an alternative. Andreas was not my partner. We didn't see each other regularly enough for that. My lover? My other half? Both made me wince for different reasons. He was from Crete. He taught Ancient Greek at Westminster School and he rented a flat in Maida Vale, not so far from me. We'd talked about moving in together but we were afraid it would kill the relationship, so although I had a full wardrobe of his clothes, there were frequently times when I didn't have *him*. This was one of them. Andreas had flown home during the school holidays to be with his family: his parents, his widowed grandmother, his two teenaged sons and his ex-wife's brother all lived in the same house in one of those complicated sorts of arrangements that the Greeks seem to enjoy. He wouldn't be back until Tuesday, the day before school began, and I wouldn't see him until the following weekend.

So there I was on my own in my Crouch End flat, which was spread over the basement and ground floor of a Victorian house in Clifton Road, about a fifteen-minute walk from Highgate tube station. It was probably the only sensible thing I ever bought. I liked living there. It was quiet and comfortable and I shared the garden with a choreographer who lived on the first floor but who was hardly ever in. I had far too many books, of course. Every inch of shelf space was taken. There were books on top of books. The shelves themselves were bending under the weight. I had converted the second bedroom into a study although I tried not to work at home. Andreas used it more than I did – when he was around.

I opened the wine. I unscrewed the salsa. I lit a cigarette. I began

to read the book as you are about to. But before you do that, I have to warn you.

This book changed my life.

You may have read that before. I'm embarrassed to say that I splashed it on the cover of the first novel I ever commissioned, a very ordinary Second World War thriller. I can't even remember who said it, but the only way that book was going to change someone's life was if it fell on them. Is it ever actually true? I still remember reading the Brontë sisters as a very young girl and falling in love with their world: the melodrama, the wild landscapes, the gothic romance of it all. You might say that *Jane Eyre* steered me towards my career in publishing, which is a touch ironic in view of what happened. There are plenty of books that have touched me very deeply: Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, McEwan's *Atonement*. I'm told a great many children suddenly found themselves in boarding school as a result of the Harry Potter phenomenon and throughout history there have been books that have had a profound effect on our attitudes. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is one obvious example, *1984* another. But I'm not sure it actually matters *what* we read. Our lives continue along the straight lines that have been set out for us. Fiction merely allows us a glimpse of the alternative. Maybe that's one of the reasons we enjoy it.

But *Magpie Murders* really did change everything for me. I no longer live in Crouch End. I no longer have my job. I've managed to lose a great many friends. That evening, as I reached out and turned the first page of the typescript, I had no idea of the journey I was about to begin and, quite frankly, I wish I'd never allowed myself to get pulled on board. It was all down to that bastard Alan Conway. I hadn't liked him the day I'd met him although the strange thing is

that I'd always loved his books. As far as I'm concerned, you can't beat a good whodunnit: the twists and turns, the clues and the red herrings and then, finally, the satisfaction of having everything explained to you in a way that makes you kick yourself because you hadn't seen it from the start.

That was what I was expecting when I began. But *Magpie Murders* wasn't like that. It wasn't like that at all.

I hope I don't need to spell it out any more. Unlike me, you have been warned.