

BLOOMING MURDER

SIMON WHALEY

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CHAPTER ONE

“**L**isa! Call an ambulance!” Aldermaston, Marquess of Mortiforde, dropped to his knees and placed two fingers against the side of Councillor Smethwick’s neck. Something was moving, but it wasn’t her pulse. He pulled a snail from behind the eighty-four-year-old’s jaw bone and threw it over his right shoulder. Was that good or bad luck? Should he have thrown it over his left shoulder instead? It hadn’t brought Councillor Smethwick any luck. Any passer-by would think she were drunk, the way she lay spreadeagled on the cobbled pavement outside The Nooseman’s Knot public house. Except she wasn’t. Two minutes earlier, she and Aldermaston had been standing outside the local hostelry with the rest of the esteemed delegation, awaiting the impending public announcement and photoshoot.

Aldermaston felt another cold, slimy sensation between the folds of skin under her chin. Another snail. He threw that one over his left shoulder.

“ETA five minutes,” Lisa called behind him. He sensed her turn towards the ballooning crowd of onlookers. “Okay then,

folks. Let's just take a few steps back and give the woman a chance to breathe."

Aldermaston liked the way Lisa's Mancunian accent grew stronger whenever she began issuing instructions, carrying an urgent air of authority. The shadows hovering over them abated, and he felt the warmth of the late spring sunshine on the back of his neck.

Lisa crouched next to him, her fingers smoothing the creases of her black skirt along her athletic thigh. "She isn't dead, is she?"

Aldermaston wrinkled his nose. No need to panic yet. "Councillor Smethwick isn't the sort to be bullied by a geranium. She's out cold, though. Heaven knows how much that hanging basket weighs. It was only watered half an hour ago in preparation for the group photo."

"About the photo ..." Lisa hooked her jet black hair behind her right ear and looked at him. Her face was lightly made-up, with some pink lipstick and a little magenta eye shadow above her brown eyes. "The *Chronicle's* photographer says he has to be in Lower Soddum in fifteen minutes. Apparently, the parish council there are unveiling a new dog waste bin on the bowling green. He wants to know if His Lordship could gather everyone into a group now, while we wait for the ambulance to arrive, so he can take his picture and skedaddle."

"Since when has dog poo been a higher priority than ..."

Aldermaston caught Lisa's sardonic smile. She'd joined Borderlandshire Council as a Democracy Support Officer six months ago from the private sector, yet she'd learnt fast. Aldermaston sighed. Cynicism in a thirty-year-old was a little dispiriting. His hadn't kicked in until eighteen months ago. That's what unexpectedly inheriting the Marquess of Mortiforde title did to one.

"Look." Lisa took off her purple raincoat, folded it into a pillow, and knelt on it. "I'll take over here and make sure

Councillor Smethwick doesn't come to any further harm. You go and get ready for the group photo. It's why you're here, dressed like that." She nodded at his tweed jacket in Radnor green, with family crest on the chest pocket, matching tie and beige-checked shirt. "Then the photographer can naff off. Hopefully, the Three Stooges over there—"

Aldermaston's eyebrows arched. Her perception of the pretentious gardening television presenter, Kizzy Whiffle; the mayor of neighbouring county town Portley Ridge, Councillor Fortesque; and the Head Judge of the Borders in Blossom competition, Hortensia Hayes, was spot on.

"Hopefully, our three esteemed visitors," Lisa corrected, "will then naff off too."

Aldermaston nodded. Lisa was right. Always keep the press happy. His short time as the local Lord of the Manor had taught him that much. And if *The Mortiforde Chronicle* was more interested in some dog poo hitting the bottom of a dog waste bin than that meant the shitty situation developing here hadn't yet hit the fan.

He rose to his full six feet height, pulled the hem of his tweed jacket tight and straightened his sage tie. Image. Society expected it. He ran a finger round his collar. Bloody noose. He detested these photo calls. They only ever wanted the title in the photo, never the person. But with Mortiforde's mayor now out of action, he had to take charge. It's what Mortiforde expected of him.

He faced the crowd, fastened the second of his jacket buttons to conceal a slight middle-age spread, and ran his fingers through his thinning brown hair. Only then did he step over to the picnic table where Lisa's three stooges were nervously waiting, albeit not under any of the hostelry's other hanging baskets.

"That just shows you what overzealous watering can do," Kizzy Whiffle muttered loudly to the Mayor of Portley Ridge.

From the cream Gucci handbag, slung over her left forearm, she pulled out her smartphone and swiped the screen. Her perfectly manicured fingernails matched her handbag, Gucci outfit and, Aldermaston noticed, her choice of foundation and concealer around her crow's feet. "Perhaps I ought to mention that on next week's show," she said.

"Lord Mortiforde, is everything all right?" Hortensia Hayes rushed forward and clasped Aldermaston's elbow with her chubby fingers. "Only, I hate to see such death and destruction."

He straightened his tie again, if only to free his elbow from Hortensia's grip. "Death? No. Councillor Smethwick will be fine, once the ambulance arrives."

"Oh, yes! Your mayor's welfare is of great concern," Ms Hayes stumbled. "Such a shame, though, when perfectly good geraniums and busy lizzies are damaged in an incident like this. We at Borders in Blossom are always sad to see a plant wither and die."

The chances of Ms Hayes withering and dying were slim, unlike her body. Her black wiry hair had been combed with a good-sized privet hedge and probably contained the first of this season's blue tit brood. Her dark brown eyes were each the size of a wren's nest and her cheeks bulged as if she had an afternoon snack stuffed inside each of them for later consumption. Her matching red and gold vertically-striped jacket and skirt reminded Aldermaston of a Moroccan tent he and Lady Mortiforde had once stayed in near Tangiers. Yet Hortensia's dainty feet, in their black, shiny court shoes, seemed they should be incapable of supporting such a large structure.

"Perhaps we could get back to the matter in hand, whilst we wait for the ambulance," Aldermaston suggested, with an encouraging hand in the not-so-small of Hortensia's back. "I understand the photographer needs to be elsewhere, and we're

keen to ensure that the Borders in Blossom competition gets all the publicity it deserves.”

Her body bristled. A little ego-massaging always worked wonders.

“Come along, everyone. Gather round.” Hortensia clapped her hands like a circus seal. “It’s time for the announcement we’ve all been waiting for.”

Aldermaston felt the crowd’s eyes fall upon him. He nodded his approval.

Tentatively, the silver-haired, heavily sun-tanned, and Marks and Spencer-suited Councillor Fabian Fortesque, along with Hortensia, Kizzy Whiffle and Aldermaston, took up their designated positions once again, outside the entrance to The Nooseman’s Knot, and fixed a publicity shot smile on their faces.

Aldermaston felt the indentations in the paving slabs, hewn from the repetition of this annual press pose, moulding to his size ten black leather brogues. This might only be his second year standing here, but his father, the seventh Marquess, had stood in this same spot for twelve years before him. From the corner of his eye, he caught Hortensia glancing up in fear at the remaining hanging baskets. At the end of the line, Kizzy Whiffle gave him a mischievous wink. His fixed grin concealed his confusion. She wasn’t normally *this* friendly towards him.

“Right,” the *Chronicle’s* photographer instructed. He clamped the camera against his left eye and twisted the zoom lens, assessing the framing.

Aldermaston prayed Councillor Smethwick’s body, lying a few feet away, was out of shot.

“I want you all to say, ‘Cherry Trees’ after three—”

“I don’t think so!” Hortensia remonstrated. “I’m here to make an announcement and that’s what I’m going to do. Cherry Cheese will have to wait.”

The photographer dropped his smile, and the camera, from his face.

“Lord Mortiforde, my darling Kizzy, mayor, council officials, ladies and gentlemen,” Hortensia declared to the assembled crowd outside the pub. “I’m delighted to find myself back here in Mortiforde, to announce the two finalists in the annual Borders in Blossom competition. The judging this year has been tremendously difficult, but the eighteen communities have been whittled down to two, and I can now reveal who they are. Going through, for the fifteenth year in a row, the two market towns competing for the title of the Border’s most Blossoming Market Town are ...”

A loud crack and a metallic twang, followed by a teeth-clenching scream from a woman in the crowd of onlookers, gave the dignitaries, but more importantly Aldermaston, a split-second warning of further impending doom. A second hanging basket plummeted to the ground. Without an octogenarian councillor, or any other human crash test dummy to break its fall, this ball of busy lizzies and geraniums smashed onto the pavement sending fragments of compost into orbit, enabling numerous other members of the gastropod family to collect frequent flyer loyalty points.

“Bloody hell, Your Lordship! How much water have you put in those hanging baskets?” yelled Councillor Fortesque, pulling Hortensia closer to his side, for his protection rather than hers. “What are you trying to do? Kill off the competition?”

“I’ve always said a hanging basket can add floral impact,” Kizzy sniggered, her thumb and forefinger toying with the pear-drop-shaped diamond earring in her right ear.

Aldermaston saw Lisa’s head buried underneath her arms for protection. “Are you okay?”

“I think so.” She spat some compost from her lips and then brushed the fresh debris from Councillor Smethwick’s face. “I’ll

be happier when the ambulance arrives. Can we just get on with things, please?”

He nodded. This was turning into a bloody farce. Even the photographer was checking his watch again. Aldermaston grabbed hold of Hortensia, which wasn't easy. "It's okay, folks. Nobody's hurt. Come on, let's get this photo taken." The sooner this sodding photo was taken, the sooner the sodding photographer could sod off to Lower Soddum. "After three now," he bellowed. "... one ... two ... three ..."

A rather dazed Hortensia, flanked by Kizzy Whiffle, Aldermaston and Councillor Fortesque, attached false grins to their faces as they shouted at the photographer in unison, "CHERRY TREES!"



In his wood-panelled council office, Nigel Hughes-Banes scrutinised the eight community representatives of the Borderer's Guild sat around his oval meeting table. How would they receive his proposal?

The Revd Makepiece appeared to be asleep, although judging by the white-knuckled clench of his hands, being mid-prayer could also have been a possibility. Gerald Lockmount hid behind *The Mortiforde Chronicle*, inspecting the property pages for any Mortiforde residents with the audacity to go with a competing estate agent in the next town. Stella Osgathorpe slipped a gold-edged, black leather folder, emblazoned with the Historic Borders agency logo on its front, from her briefcase and began making notes with a sterling silver Montblanc fountain pen.

Beside her, Cissy Warbouys, from the Save the Aged charity shop in town, continued knitting a trunk-warmer for an Indian elephant, while Jane Crookmann's devilishly red nailed fingertips tapped at her tablet's screen, as she worked

on her latest divorce case. Meanwhile, her husband, Martin, the local branch manager of West Mercia Bank, tried his damndest with a white plastic spoon to retrieve the large chunk of chocolate hobnob that had just dropped into his tea.

Nigel's right foot kicked out under the table and collided with something wooden. The Revd Makepiece snorted into life.

"Have I missed anything?" He deftly turned the wiping of dribble from the corner of his mouth into a patriotic flourish, using it to slick down the hairs growing from his ears.

Nigel shook his head. "I was just about to start."

"Start what?" Stella replaced the cap on her fountain pen. "Why this dramatic urgency? And why isn't Lord Mortiforde here? Never in my twenty years of being a member of this prestigious and historic guild has the Marquess missed a meeting."

Nigel stood and paced the room. "There's a reason I called this meeting now, while Lord Mortiforde is otherwise engaged. What I'm about to say isn't comfortable listening, but I think the time has come."

Gerald Lockmount dropped *The Mortiforde Chronicle* into his lap and stared at Borderlandshire Council's Chief Executive. "Don't tell me the council is finally giving the go ahead to the supermarket on the outskirts of town. At last! That'll raise house prices on the adjacent plot by at least—"

"Sorry, Gerald," Nigel interrupted. "It's an entirely different matter. The Borders in Blossom competition."

A chorus of moans reverberated around the table.

Nigel continued. "It's about time we won! There's no dignity being runners-up for fourteen consecutive years!"

Jane Crookmann looked up from her tablet. Her eyes narrowed, seemingly drawing her high cheek bones even higher. "What's this got to do with the Borderer's Guild?"

Nigel stopped pacing. “Lord Mortiforde needs an ultimatum.”

Cissy’s knitting needles stopped clacking. “The Marquess? What sort of ultimatum?”

Nigel took a deep breath. “If we don’t win this year’s Borders in Blossom competition, he should step down.”

Stella leant back in her chair and crossed her arms. “Step down from what?”

“The Borderer’s Guild.”

Stella burst out laughing, and smacked the tabletop with the palms of both hands. The Revd Makepiece began praying under his breath.

“I’m serious.” Nigel stood defiantly, his feet planted wide.

Stella stared at him. “But ... but you *can’t* do that!”

Jane Crookmann swiped a finger across her tablet screen, then looked at Nigel. “So *that’s* why you asked me to look into this.” She turned to Stella. “Actually, he can. It’s in the Guild’s deeds.”

Stella looked at Jane quizzically. “The Borderer’s Guild is an historic organisation, dating back to the 18th century when it was reformed by the first Marquess of Mortiforde. There have only been eight chairs in its two-hundred-and-seventy-year history. The position is hereditary.”

Jane drummed her red fingernails on the Chief Exec’s oval desk. “Technically, it’s not a hereditary position.”

Stella closed her black leather folder and slipped it into her briefcase. “I’m not listening to any of this drivel. I can assure you, the Borderer’s Guild must have a peer of the realm as its leader.” She swept her fingers through her brilliant-white, tightly cropped hair. “Historically, the Borderer’s Guild was the Lord of the Manor’s private army. It dates back to Norman times. The Guild as we know it today was adapted by the first Marquess of Mortiforde, not to be an army, with swords and armour, but to fight for the town as a whole, through business

and community development. In essence, today's Guild is still the Marquess of Mortiforde's private army. Lord Mortiforde *has* to be our leader."

Nigel thumped the table, sending Martin Crookmann's teacup dancing, Cissy Warbouys' ball of wool flying to the floor, and, seemingly, the Revd Makepiece to a more angelic altitude. "That's my point! Where's the fight? Where's the leadership? Today's Guild is all about promoting the well-being of the town."

He walked around the table and its occupants. "We're still an army, albeit a community one with a common goal. It's hard work trying to survive here. The nearest motorway is fifty miles away. A decent airport is seventy. We're the town that time forgot. Nobody knows where the Welsh Borders are. If we can't win a bloody flower competition, what hope have we got? We *need* to issue an ultimatum."

"Which is?" Stella crossed her arms.

"If Mortiforde fails to win this year's Borders in Blossom competition, His Lordship should step down as leader of the Borderer's Guild."

Stella tilted her head to one side. "It can't be done. Without the Marquess as leader of the Guild there is no Guild."

Jane held out her tablet. "Take a look for yourself. That's a facsimile of the deed in question. Third clause from the bottom. Same set up as the Commonwealth. Traditionally, the British Monarch is leader of the Commonwealth, and they can recommend who their successor should be. That's usually the next in line to the throne. But that's only *if* the Commonwealth members agree. The leadership role is at the behest of the Commonwealth, ergo, the Guild is not forced to have a peer of the realm as its leader."

Nigel grinned. "Has that brought some clarity, Stella?"

Stella handed the tablet back to Jane. "I accept the deeds

for what they are, but I don't have to accept your proposal. I assume you're putting this to a vote?"

Nigel stood behind his chair, clasping the top of its back. "As there are only eight out of the full thirteen of us here, all seven of you need to vote the same way for a majority verdict. All those in favour of tasking Lord Mortiforde to win this year's Borders in Blossom competition, but to resign from the Guild should he fail, raise their hand."

Tentatively, six hands rose into the air.

Nigel faced Stella, whose arms were still crossed. "Not with us on this one, Stella?"

She shook her head. "I won't be a part of it." She picked up her briefcase and stormed towards the Chief Exec's door, grabbing the door handle.

"I see," Nigel nodded. "Remind me, Stella. How desperate is the Historic Borders agency for the planning permission it needs for that posh new café and visitor centre in Mortiforde Castle? I'd hate for the planning department to misunderstand anything I said that might cause them to reject it."

Stella pulled open the door, paused, and then shut it again. Her eyes narrowed as she turned towards him. "You know *exactly* how much we need that extension. That's blackmail! This is not how the Guild operates!"

Nigel rocked back and forth on his feet. "I'd hate to see all that planning work you've undertaken on the project in the last five years being wasted."

Stella's head fell. Slowly, she turned away, but raised her hand in the air.

Nigel beamed. "Excellent. Seven votes. A majority. Motion carried."



Before the flash reflecting on Hortensia's retinas could dissipate, the photographer was packing up. Aldermaston took charge again.

"And Hortensia, you were about to announce that the two finalists in this year's Borders in Blossom competition are ..."

"Oh ... yes. Mortiforde!" she yelled, grabbing Aldermaston's right wrist and yanking it into the air. Hortensia's five-foot-three-inch stature put her at a slight height disadvantage next to Aldermaston's six-foot frame. Rather than punch the air, his hand merely waved limply at shoulder-height. "And Portley Ridge!" Hortensia finished, repeating the action with Councillor Fortesque's left wrist. Being two inches shorter than Aldermaston, Councillor Fortesque's hand rose level with his face, revealing matching orange skin tones. Quite an achievement for something out of a bottle.

"Good luck to both towns," Hortensia continued, "and the winner will be announced here, at The Nooseman's Knot, on Friday morning at eleven o'clock."

"Better bring some protective headgear," Councillor Fortesque muttered.

A mild applause fluttered through the crowd, which was quickly drowned by the wailing sirens of an impending ambulance. The fluorescent-jacketed driver jumped out and dashed towards Councillor Smethwick.

"... severe trauma to the head," Aldermaston overheard Lisa telling the paramedic. "Pulse is weak. She's been unconscious since the incident ten minutes ago."

The second paramedic joined them with a trolley from the back of the ambulance. "It's okay, love. We'll take it from here."

"You'd better have this." Lisa handed him Councillor Smethwick's large black leather shoulder bag. Then she slipped alongside Aldermaston. "I hate to tell you this, but we have a problem."

“Lisa, this is Mortiforde. There’s *always* a problem.”

“Take a closer look at this.”

Aldermaston held out his hand and caught the short chain Lisa dropped into it. “Well?”

“It’s from the second hanging basket that fell. Look at the chain links.”

Aldermaston squinted. He needed reading glasses. “They’re broken. That’s why the basket fell.”

“No, not *broken*. Look. Scorch marks. They’ve been forced apart. Those baskets were *sabotaged* not overwatered. Councillor Smethwick’s injuries aren’t accidental. And that second hanging basket was targeting you!”

Aldermaston shook his head. “This is Mortiforde, not Manchester.”

Lisa’s eyebrows rose. “Don’t you think it’s strange that the only two hanging baskets to fall are the ones representatives from Mortiforde were standing under?”

“It’s a bit far-fetched,” Aldermaston suggested.

Lisa tugged at a hanging basket beside her, which swung violently, but remained suspended in the air. “As someone who’s never been involved with the Borders in Blossom competition before, this is how I see it. This is the fifteenth year in a row that Mortiforde and Portley Ridge have made it through to the finals of the competition.”

Aldermaston nodded.

“This is the fifteenth year in a row that the flower woman—”

“Her name is Hortensia—”

“Hortensia, has made a public announcement here, outside The Nooseman’s Knot, notifying everyone who the two finalists are.”

Aldermaston nodded.

“And this is the fifteenth year in a row that you or your

father has stood under that particular hanging basket, and Councillor Smethwick stood under the other one.”

Aldermaston stared at where they'd stood for the group photo. A bead of sweat burst through his pulsating left temple.

“One of the things you told me when I first became involved in the Borderer's Guild six months ago is that Mortiforde is a creature of habit. People do the same things year in, year out. They sit in the same chairs at meetings, use the same mug for their tea or coffee, and park in the same car parking space every day. So, I bet you all stand in the same place for that group photo every year, don't you?”

Aldermaston forced a finger between his neck and the heavily starched collar. The sooner he could change into comfier clothes the better.

“These chains have been tampered with. Those hanging baskets were *meant* to fall.” Lisa's Mancunian accent grew stronger. “Somebody, somewhere, wants you and Councillor Smethwick dead.”

This time, Aldermaston didn't nod. He gulped.



Inside the heavily beamed Nooseman's Knot public house, Councillor Fortesque ordered some drinks and handed the septuagenarian barmaid a crisp £50 note. Named after the gallows that once resided in front of the 16th century building, its low ceiling and small windows now offered an intimate, cosy atmosphere.

“Take a seat with your lady-friend, Mr Fortesque,” Cynthia replied. “I'll bring your drinks over to you.”

“She's not my lady-friend. I'm merely buying the Borders in Blossom judge a drink to calm her nerves after the dreadful shock she experienced outside your premises.” He watched Cynthia's spindly fingers hold the note against a six-watt bulb

table lamp as she squinted at it. “Not seen a £50 note before?”

“Company policy, sir. We always check for forged notes from councillors of Portley Ridge.”

“Bring the change over with the drinks, if you decide it’s genuine enough for your till,” he snarled. Fabian looked around the dimly lit chintzy interior and spotted Hortensia, sitting in a semi-secluded alcove, waving her chubby fingers at him.

“Kizzy had to dash off,” she said, as he sat down opposite. “Something about planting schedules. You know what these television personalities are like. Thank heavens one of those hanging baskets didn’t hit her!”

“I’ve ordered you a Hangman’s Anaesthetic to calm your nerves,” said Fabian.

“Calm my nerves? You do know a Hangman’s Anaesthetic cuts off all sense of feeling in the drinker’s body from the neck down.” Hortensia leaned closer to Fabian’s right ear and whispered. “That’s ideal, if you’re about to become acquainted with the nooseman’s knot around your neck in the year seventeen hundred and whenever, but not if you’re looking for a fun time tonight with a certain Mayor of Portley Ridge.”

Under the table, Fabian felt Hortensia’s fingers find his replacement right knee and then slowly glide their way up the inside of his thigh. He swallowed. “Sorry, Hortie. Can’t tonight. I’ve an urgent meeting in Portley Ridge at nine-thirty.”

Hortensia scowled. “What do you mean?” she hissed. “You promised!”

“There we go, ladies and gentlemen. Two Hangman’s Anaesthetics.” Cynthia placed the pint glasses down heavily on the table, slopping some of their contents across the tabletop. The veneer surface fizzed. “And your change, sir.” She handed Fabian a £20 and a £10 note.

“Where’s the rest of it?”

“Didn’t I explain? We’re having a whip-round for Councillor Smethwick. It was nice of you to contribute in the spirit of the Borders in Blossom competition. It shows true gamesmanship.”

“Fabian, that’s *so* kind,” Hortensia sang. “That rather puts me to shame, doesn’t it?” She snatched the £20 note from Fabian’s hand and handed it back to Cynthia. “Take that from me. What are you going to buy with the collection money?”

“We thought a nice little hanging basket would cheer her up.” Cynthia smiled, then returned to the bar.

Fabian grabbed his drink, took a sip, then coughed, wheezed and spluttered.

“But, Fabey Wabey,” Hortensia whispered, returning to her original conversation topic and forcing her index and middle finger to walk their way along Fabian’s arm. “I thought we’d agreed you would get your dibber out and plant some seeds in my garden this week.”

Fabian tried grabbing her hand, but Hortensia’s fingers dodged his grip and clasped themselves tightly around his right wrist. Her whisper dropped two more octaves. “May I remind you of our little arrangement? If you want Portley Ridge to win the title of the Border’s most Blossoming Market Town for the fifteenth time, then you need to fulfil your side of the bargain. And that, Councillor Fortesque, means seducing me before I make the announcement on Friday lunchtime. And when I say seduce, I mean the gardener has got to get rotavating and double-digging, not titivating my formal borders with a hand trowel. Is that clear?”

Fabian nodded, his eyes searching her cleavage contemplating where Hortensia’s formal borders might be.

“And if you don’t,” Hortensia continued, “not only will Mortiforde win the Borders in Blossom competition, but your wife will learn about the extra propagating you’ve been doing for the past fourteen years.”