

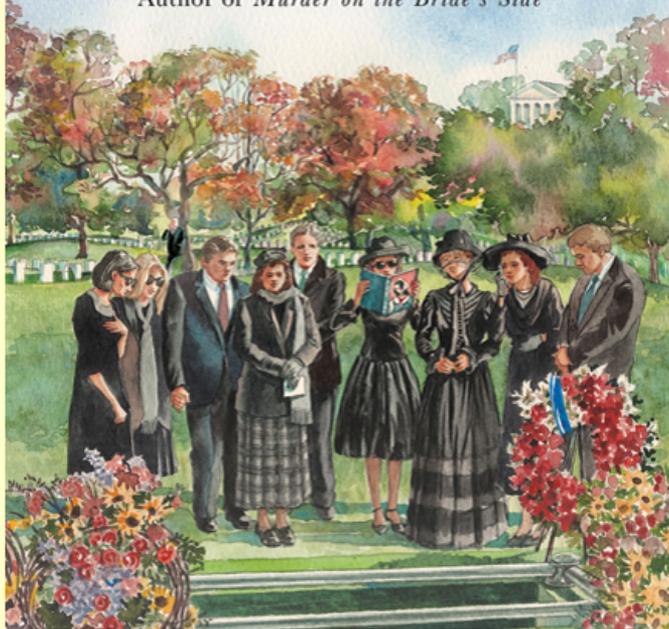
READ IT FIRST

*Murder*  
MOST  
PERSUASIVE

*A Mystery*

TRACY KIELY

Author of *Murder on the Bride's Side*



This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

A THOMAS DUNNE BOOK FOR MINOTAUR BOOKS.  
An imprint of St. Martin's Publishing Group.

MURDER MOST PERSUASIVE. Copyright © 2011 by Tracy Kiely. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. For information, address St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010.

[www.thomasdunnebooks.com](http://www.thomasdunnebooks.com)  
[www.minotaurbooks.com](http://www.minotaurbooks.com)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kiely, Tracy.

Murder most persuasive : a mystery / Tracy Kiely.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-312-69941-3 (hardback)

1. Murder—Investigation—Fiction.
2. Police—Maryland—Fiction.
3. Saint Michaels (Md.)—Fiction.
4. Domestic fiction. I. Title.

PS3611.I4453M88 2011

813'.6—dc22

2011018780

First Edition: September 2011

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## CHAPTER 1



*Unfortunately . . . there are so many who forget to think  
seriously till it is almost too late.*

—PERSUASION

*M*ARTIN REYNOLDS'S DEATH came as a surprise to no one. No one, that is, except his wife, Bonnie. It was the final and most telling example of the total lack of communication that existed in their marriage. The fact that the cancer he'd battled for years proved more than his weakened seventy-seven-year-old body could handle somehow managed to escape Bonnie entirely. But to be fair, most things escaped Bonnie entirely.

"My poor, poor Marty!" Bonnie now murmured with a mournful shake of her blond head. "How could this have happened?" No one responded. The funeral services had been held at ten in the morning, after which the family had escorted Martin's remains to Arlington Cemetery where, as a former naval officer, he was granted a burial spot. It was now one in the afternoon. By my modest count, Bonnie had uttered this same question some eighty-seven times since the day began. After about the sixty-fifth utterance, most of the family had stopped trying to console her, as our words of sympathy fell on deaf ears. By the

seventy-second time, even the nicest among us had fallen silent. Now, unfortunately, her rhetorical murmurings were prompting unabashed eye rolling from the more callous attendees.

“Stop that!” I hissed at my aunt Winnie, whose orbs now seemed in danger of disappearing completely into her skull.

“Oh, please,” she retorted with a toss of her head. The small movement sent her bright red curls quivering. “This is nothing more than standard Bonnie drama.”

She was right, of course, and as Martin’s younger sister, Aunt Winnie had had a front-row seat for several of Bonnie’s performances over the years. “Besides,” Aunt Winnie continued, “you know how I hate artifice of any kind.”

I rolled my own eyes at this and glanced meaningfully at Aunt Winnie’s trademark curls, which, if anything, had only grown redder during her seventy-odd years. Curving her equally red lips into a warning smile, Aunt Winnie murmured, “Don’t be a smart-ass, Elizabeth.”

“Me? Perish the thought. I didn’t say a word.”

“No. But you were thinking it.”

“True.”

“Careful,” she said meaningfully, “or I’ll tell your mother.”

“Tell her what?” I inquired after a moment’s pause.

Aunt Winnie opened her green eyes very wide and leaned in close. “Do you really need me to catalog all the dirt I have on you?” she asked good-naturedly.

Aunt Winnie is my great-aunt on my mother’s side. More important, she has been my confidante ever since I was twelve years old and she bagged me trying to stuff my pathetically empty bra with toilet paper. I’m now twenty-eight. While I no longer stuff

my bra—more due to a resignation to certain facts than because of any major developments in that area—Aunt Winnie still has enough dirt on me to start a landfill. I sat back in my chair, an exaggeratedly polite expression on my face. “Blackmailer,” I hissed.

She gave a firm nod of her head. “Damn skippy.”

Seated opposite me, my mother kicked my leg under the table while sending me a reproachful look across it. Next to her, my older sister, Kit, eyed me with the slightly superior expression she generally adopts whenever she perceives that I have stepped out of line. While I’ve never actually caught her, I suspect she practices it in the mirror. Not that she needs much practicing. Kit has those angelic features that lend themselves perfectly to holier-than-thou looks. She inherited my mom’s straight blond hair. I had ended up with my dad’s curly brown hair, which looks just fine cut short and close to the head; grow it shoulder length and that’s a whole other story. Add to that large blue eyes, perpetually clear skin, and a smirking mouth, and Kit looks like a smug Botticelli angel. I, on the other hand, have green eyes and freckles. Throw in the aforementioned chest issue and I’m more likely to be compared to Botticelli’s *Portrait of a Young Man*.

While I restrained myself from sneering at Kit, Aunt Winnie sent me a sly wink before demurely ducking her bright red head into a position of quiet respect.

Forcing myself not to roll my own eyes, I focused my attention on Bonnie just in time to hear her murmur again, “Poor, poor Marty! I just don’t see how this could have happened!”

Bonnie was Martin’s second wife. His first wife, Rose, died

some twenty-five years earlier, leaving Martin in the unenviable position of sole parent to three young daughters. Although a savvy businessman who had built a family construction company into a national business, Martin was no match for the demands of parenthood and he knew it. Using the same cool determination he employed to build his multimillion-dollar business, he set out to remedy the situation the only way he knew how—by remarrying. Of course it helped that he was both very rich and very handsome. Within two years, Bonnie McClay, a naïve thirty-five-year-old secretary employed in the head office, was tapped for the role. It was one of only a handful of times where Martin’s legendary acumen failed him, as Bonnie was even more helpless about children than Martin. Within three months, the children had dubbed their stepmother “McClueless” and commenced an unspoken war of resistance against her. Looking around me now, it appeared that the war still raged today.

We were sitting at a long table in the Hotel Washington’s elegant Sky Terrace restaurant. Located on the hotel’s rooftop, it afforded a spectacular view of Washington, D.C. The first strokes of autumn’s vibrant hand were apparent in the nation’s capital and the city was awash in color. A mosaic of purple, yellow, and red foliage reflected in the rippling waters of the Tidal Basin. Flora in riotous golden hues bloomed along the perfectly groomed grounds of the monuments. The monuments themselves stood tall and proud, the timeless lines of their crisp, white façades majestic against the clear indigo sky.

As glorious as the view was, it couldn’t hold a candle to the scene that was playing out around me. Clutching a lacy black handkerchief and gently dabbing it to her teary sapphire eyes,

Bonnie sat like a Victorian queen in mourning. Swathed from head to toe in black, her outfit was faintly reminiscent of Scarlett O'Hara's garb in *Gone with the Wind*, the one she wears after her first husband, Charles, dies. In fact, I thought, as I peered closer at the dark, flowing dress, I wouldn't be at all surprised if it *were* an updated copy. Given Bonnie's flair for the dramatic, as well as her love of Margaret Mitchell's epic classic, it would be entirely within her dingbat character. (Bonnie was not only named for Scarlett's daughter, Bonnie Blue, but also had an annoying tendency to quote Scarlett's lines from both the book and the movie. A lot.)

Now, while I've been known to quote my fair share of Jane Austen, I maintain that it is an entirely different habit. Muttering "Capital! Capital!" is one thing. Randomly calling out "Fiddle-dee-dee!" is quite another.

At Bonnie's insistence, Uncle Marty's burial flag had accompanied us to the restaurant. Tightly clutching the flag to her chest, Bonnie had advanced on the poor hostess and mournfully (and rather loudly) announced, "My husband is dead. May I have some lunch?" Hostesses in D.C., especially those in such close proximity to the Capitol, have seen their fair share of the odd and have as such developed a certain immunity to it. However, based on the way ours took a sudden step back and seemed incapable of speech, I think Bonnie managed to penetrate that professional façade.

The flag now sat propped up in a chair next to hers. Not just any chair, mind you, but the chair at the head of the table. From time to time, Bonnie would glance at the flag and then quickly press the hankie to her quivering mouth. Like now.

Next to her, Frances, who at age thirty-five is the second eldest of Bonnie's stepchildren, gave a loud sigh of exasperation. Frances is something of the family expert on sighs of exasperation. Over the years, she's cultivated it into its present deep, melancholy, breathy sound. Hearing it, a stranger might legitimately expect to find that it originated from a kind of modern-day Marilyn Monroe rather than a dowdy plump woman with a penchant for tweed.

"Bonnie," Frances said, running her fingers through her short nut-brown hair, "Father had been ill for years. His passing is a blessing, really. He's in a better place now."

Bonnie lowered her black hankie and peered in astonishment at Frances. "A better place?" she echoed, her chin wobbling. "A better place? How can you say that?" With an accusatory gesture at the flag, she added, "He's in a coffin!"

Frances blanched at this blunt, although apt, description of her father's whereabouts. Pursing her lips and studiously not looking at the flag, she tried again. "What I meant is that he's no longer in pain. He's at peace." Frances's voice held the steely intonation that adults often use with petulant children, not that I ever heard Frances use it on her own kids. Steely intonations have no effect on Frances's twin boys. Referred to by the rest of the family as Thing One and Thing Two, they respond only to threats and bribes. It is only a matter of time before stun guns are employed.

Bonnie gave a loud sniff and raised the hankie back up to her eyes. "Well, *he* may be at peace, but *I'm* certainly not," she moaned from behind the black veil.

Frances threw up her hands in defeat and looked beseechingly around the table at the rest of us. Her gaze settled on her younger

sister, Ann. Catching her sister's eye, she jerked her head toward Bonnie's slumped form and hissed, "Do something!"

"Like what?" came Ann's frustrated reply.

Hearing the exchange, Bonnie peeked up again from her soggy hankie. "Annabel, were you saying something?"

Ann (aka Annabel) is the youngest of the Reynolds siblings. In my opinion, she couldn't look more unlike her name. To me, the name Annabel conjures up an image of a curvy figure with masses of wavy, golden hair and a coy smile. Ann is none of those things. She's trim, with short auburn hair and a direct, intelligent gaze. Ann obviously felt the same about her given name and long ago opted to shorten it to Ann. It was far more suitable, and in fact, no one ever called her anything but that.

No one, that is, except Bonnie. At the sound of her given name, Ann winced slightly, the faint lines of exhaustion around her large hazel eyes making her look older than her thirty years.

"Bonnie," Ann said, shifting her body to face her stepmother, "I know this is a hard time for you. It's hard for all of us. But we need to be strong. Father would want us to celebrate his life rather than cry at his passing."

A watery blue eye peered over the hankie. "Celebrate?" Bonnie asked.

"Yes." Ann nodded. "We should concentrate on all the good times."

I applauded Ann's efforts, but the sad fact was that Martin Reynolds had been a dyed-in-the-wool workaholic. If we were to celebrate all his good times, we would either have to hold the party in his opulent board room or down at the bank. However, the idea appealed to Bonnie and she cautiously lowered the hankie.

“Do you really think Martin would want that?” she asked dubiously, glancing at the flag as if for confirmation.

No doubt glad that the hankie had finally been cast aside, Ann nodded her head. Across the table, Frances added, “I’m *sure* of it.”

“What do you think, Reggie?” Bonnie asked, turning to her oldest stepdaughter.

Regina “Reggie” Ames, née Marshall, née Stewart, née Reynolds, lowered her martini glass and studied her stepmother with undisguised scorn. At thirty-seven, Reggie ran one of D.C.’s more popular wedding planner services, services that she herself has used quite frequently. She’s now, as she puts it, unaffiliated with a husband—hers or anyone else’s. But by no means is she through with the institution. Reggie attracts men the way butter pecan ice cream attracts me. She’s one of those women who are better-looking today than they were at twenty-one—and at twenty-one she was gorgeous. She’s slim, toned, and still has all the right curves. Some of my closest friends still refuse to believe we’re related. In fact, if we weren’t related, I’d probably hate her. If I’m completely honest with myself, there likely would be a voodoo doll involved.

“What do I think about what?” Reggie asked.

“About having a party for your father,” Bonnie replied.

“Bit late for that, isn’t it?” Reggie murmured, before raising her glass to take a sip.

“Reggie!” hissed Frances.

“What did you say?” asked Bonnie, leaning closer. “I didn’t hear.”

“I said I think it’s a wonderful idea,” Reggie said, setting

down her glass. Pushing a lock of her glossy black hair behind one ear, she said, "Let me know what I can do. I'd love to help."

Bonnie leaned back in her chair, a faint line forming between her brows. "I don't know. I'd hate to appear insensitive." Reaching out to the flag, she lightly stroked its stars and stripes, before continuing. "Annabel, you're always so sensible. Do you really think we should have a party?"

From the way Ann blinked several times before answering, it was clear that she was a bit perplexed that her suggestion that her father's life be celebrated had been taken seriously. Nevertheless she said, "I think a party honoring Dad would be lovely."

Bonnie considered this before announcing with a teary smile, "Then it's settled. I'll start planning it as soon as I get back."

"Get back?" asked Frances, an edge in her voice. "Get back from where?"

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" asked Bonnie, her blue eyes round. "I was sure that I did. I'm going on a spa retreat, out to a place in Arizona. The horrible suddenness of poor Martin's death has been so stressful for me. I need to find my center. I need to unwind."

"What exactly does she call what she does now?" Aunt Winnie muttered to me.

It might not be the most diplomatic question, but it was a fair one. Much of Bonnie's day was spent either shopping or lunching. It was hard to see how such a schedule would require unwinding.

Frances shot her husband, Scott, an anxious look. His round face mirrored his wife's concern. Rubbing his large hand across his chin, he leaned across the table, his posture reminiscent of an arm wrestler—an arm wrestler wearing an expensively tailored gray suit. However, despite its obvious excellent quality and fit, it

still looked all wrong on him. Scott Phillips was one of those men who are more at ease in jeans and a T-shirt. Although he'd been tapped to take over Uncle Marty's business years ago and had shown great promise in continuing the company's success, he'd never gotten used to having to wear the suit.

"When are you leaving, Bonnie?" he asked.

"Tomorrow. I'll be gone just a week."

Scott coughed. It was not the cough of someone with a cold. It was the cough of someone with a problem. "Bonnie, I know this isn't the best time," he said, with an uneasy glance at the rest of us, "but there's that matter I discussed with you earlier."

Seeing the perplexed expression on Bonnie's face, he continued, "The property in St. Michaels? We need to discuss the proceeds of the sale of the house."

"Oh, fiddle-dee-dee, not that again," said Bonnie, with a dismissive wave of her hand.

"Yes, *that* again," said Scott through gritted teeth. "I realize this is a difficult time, but it's best we get this sorted out as soon as possible."

"I understand that," she replied. "And I fully intend to do just that. When I get back."

"But—"

Bonnie interrupted. "But nothing! I need to get away. I realize that everything's in a jumble right now, but it's not as if we can't sort it out when I get back. I know you think the proceeds are to be split among the three of you, but I don't agree that that was what Martin wanted. I'm sure he meant for me to have a fourth. However, we can discuss it when I get back."

"But—" Scott continued.



## MURDER MOST PERSUASIVE

**BUY THE BOOK NOW**

**Amazon  
Barnes & Noble  
IndieBound**

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE BOOK

**macmillan.com**

