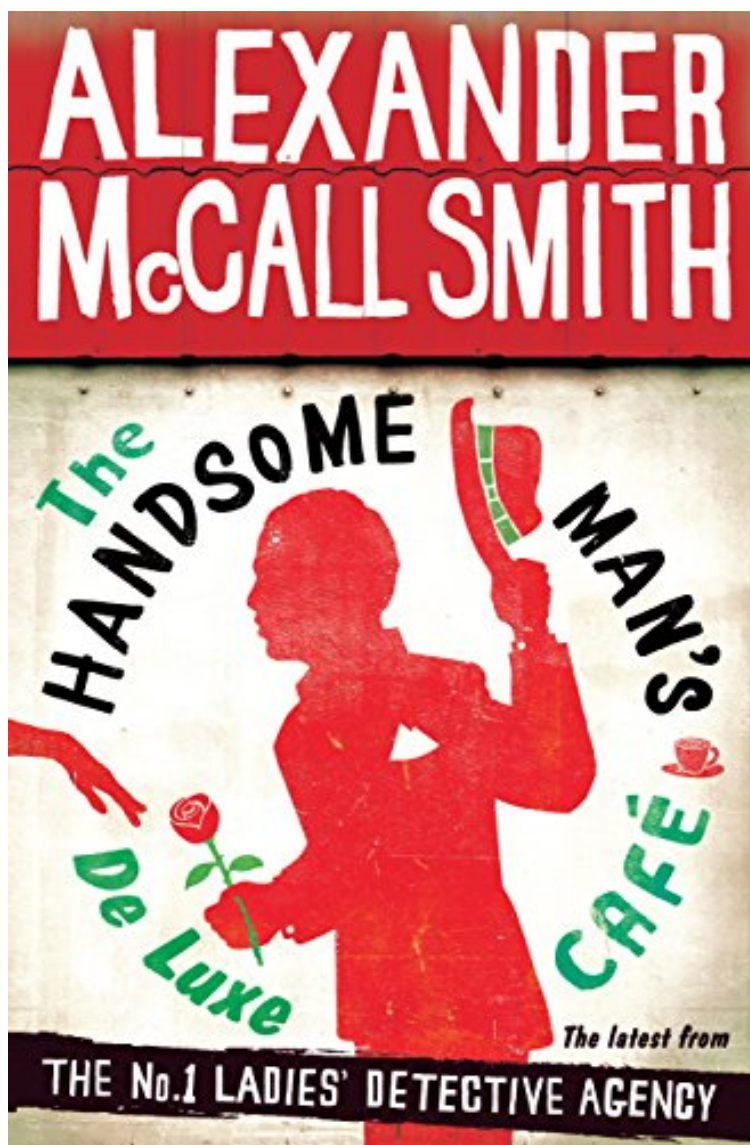


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The Handsome Man's De Luxe Caf



Par Alexander McCall Smith
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurEven the arrival of her baby can't hold Mma Makutsi back from success in the workplace, and so no sooner than she becomes a full partner in the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency - in spite of Mma Ramotswe's belated claims that she is only 'an assistant full partner' - she also launches a new enterprise of her own: the Handsome Man's De Luxe Caf. Grace Makutsi is a lady with a business plan, but who could predict temperamental chefs, drunken waiters and more? Luckily, help is at hand, from the only person in Gaborone more gently determined than Mma Makutsi . . . Mma Ramotswe, of course.ExtraitChapter One The Women of Botswana Now Fly Aeroplanes Precious Ramotswe, creator and owner of the No.1 Ladies Detective Agency, friend of those who needed help with the problems in their lives, and wife of that great garagiste, Mr.J.L.B.Matekoni, felt that there were, broadly speaking, two sorts of

days. There were days on which nothing of any consequence took place these were in a clear majority and then there were those on which rather too much happened. On those uneventful days you might well wish that a bit more would happen; on days when too much occurred, you longed for life to become a bit quieter. It had always been like that, she thought, and always would be. As her father, the late Obed Ramotswe, often said: there are always too many cattle or too few never just the right number. As a child she had wondered what he meant by this; now she knew. Both sorts of day started in much the same way, with the opening of her eyes to the familiar dappled pattern made by the morning sun on the ceiling above her bed, an indistinct dancing of light, faint at first, but gradually becoming stronger. This intrusion of the dawn came from the gap between the curtains the gap that she always intended to do something about, but did not because there were more pressing domestic tasks and never enough time for everything you had to do. And as long as curtains did their main job, which was to prevent nosy people unauthorised people, as Mma Makutsi would call them from looking into her bedroom without her permission, then she did not have to worry too much about their not meeting in the middle. She woke up at more or less the same time each morning, thought for a while about getting up, and then rose, leaving Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni still deeply asleep on his side of the bed, dreaming about the sort of things that mechanics, and men in general, dream about. Women, she felt, should not enquire too closely as to what these things were, as they were not the sort of things that women liked very much engines and football, and so on. A friend had once said to her that men did not dream about things like that that this was just what women wanted men to dream about, while men, in reality, dreamed about things that they would never reveal. Mma Ramotswe doubted this. She had asked Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni one morning what he had dreamed about and he had replied: the garage, and if this were not proof enough, on another occasion, when she had woken him from the tossing and turning of a nightmare, he had replied to her question about the content of the bad dream by saying that it had all been to do with a seized-up gearbox. And then there was Puso, their foster child, who had told her that his dreams were about having a large dog that chased away the bullies at school, or about finding an old aeroplane in the back yard and fixing it so that it could fly, or about scoring a goal for Botswana in a soccer match against Zambia, with the whole stadium rising to its feet and cheering him. That, she thought, settled that. Perhaps there were some men who dreamed about other things, but she felt that this was not the case for most men. Once up and about, clasping her cup of freshly brewed red bush tea in her hand, she took a walk around the garden, savouring the freshness of the early morning air. Some people said that the air in the morning had no smell; she thought they were wrong, for it smelled of so many things of the acacia leaves that had been closed for the night and were now opening at the first touch of the morning sun; of a wood fire somewhere, just a hint of it; of the wind, and the breath that the wind had, which was dry and sweet, like the breath of cattle. It was while she was standing there that she decided whether the day would be one in which things might happen; it had something to do with the way she felt when she considered the day ahead. And most of the time she was right, although sometimes, of course, she could be completely wrong. On that particular morning as she walked past the mopipi tree she had planted at the front of the garden, she had a sudden feeling that the next few hours were going to be rather unusual. It was not a disturbing premonition not one of those feelings that one gets when one fears that something is going to go badly wrong it was more a feeling that something interesting and out of the ordinary lay ahead. She remarked on the fact to Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni as he sat at the kitchen table eating the brown maize porridge that he liked so much. Puso and his sister, Motholeli, had already eaten their breakfast and were in their rooms preparing to leave for school. The school run that Mma Ramotswe had become so used to was now no longer necessary, as Puso was of an age to make his own way there the school was not far away and he was also able to help his sister with the wheelchair. This gave the children an independence that they both enjoyed, although departing on time could be a problem when Puso had some boyish task to complete the catching of flying ants, for instance or Motholeli had at the last minute to find another pair of cotton socks or locate a book that needed to be returned to the school library. I have a feeling, announced Mma Ramotswe, that this is going to be a busy day. Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni glanced up from his porridge. Lots of letters to write? Bills to send out? Mma Ramotswe shook her head. No, were up to date on all of those things, Rra. Mma Makutsi has been busy with her filing, too, and everything is put away. Lots of clients to see, then? He thought of his own day and imagined a line of driverless, impatient cars, each eager for his attention, their horns honking to attract his notice: cars, in his view, were quite capable of all the human emotions and failings, including a lack of patience or restraint. Mma Ramotswe had looked at her diary just before leaving the office the previous day and had seen that it was largely empty. No, she answered. There are no appointments with clients. Nothing this morning and nothing this afternoon, I think.

He looked puzzled. And yet its going to be a busy day? I have that feeling. Its difficult to say why, but I am sure that this will not be a quiet day. Mr.J.L.B.Matekoni smiled. People talked about the intuition of women, but he was not sure that he believed in it. How could women possibly know things that men did not know? Was their hearing more acute than mens, so that they heard things that men missed as dogs or cats might pick up frequencies audible only to them? He thought not. Or was their eyesight more acute, so that they saw clear details where men saw only indistinct blurs? Again, he thought not. What we knew, we knew from our senses, and the senses of women were no different from the senses of men. And yet, and yet... As he returned to his porridge, Mr.J.L.B.Matekoni reflected on how there had been so many instances in which Mma Ramotswe had shown a quite uncanny ability to notice things that he himself had simply missed, or to know things about others that most people most ordinary people, or men, to be specific would not be expected to know. He remembered how, while out shopping with her a few weeks earlier, she had whispered to him that a woman walking towards them was probably one of MmaPotokwanes cousins. He had cast an eye discreetly over the woman and wondered whether he had ever met her in the company of MmaPotokwane, but decided that he had not. How, then, could Mma Ramotswe tell? She was carrying one of those bags that the orphans make in MmaPotokwanes craft workshop, said Mma Ramotswe. Thats the first thing I noticed. Then I saw the shoes that she was wearing. They were very unusual shoes, and I had seen them before when they belonged to MmaPotokwane. She must have passed them on. He had dismissed this as fanciful, but several days later, when he had gone out to the Orphan Farm to attend to one of the vans, on a pro bono basis of course, he had remembered the incident and asked Mma Potokwane whether she had any cousins visiting her. She did. And had she passed on an unusual pair of shoes to this cousin? As it happens, said Mma Potokwane, I did. But lets not waste time talking about these small things, Rra. Now there is something wrong with the spare van too, and I was hoping that you would have the time to look at that one as well. He had sighed. I am always happy to help you, Mma Potokwane, he said. But there are places called garages, you know, and they are there to fix vehicles. That is their job. Perhaps you might try in future to Mma Potokwane did not let him finish. Oh, I know all about garages, she said lightly. But I would never go to one of them your own garage excluded, of course, Rra. Ow, those garages are expensive! You drive onto their forecourt and straightaway thats two hundred pula. You get out of the car thats another fifty pula. They say, Good morning, Mma, and what can we do for you? That costs seventy-five pula to say, and so it goes on.

No, Rra, I will not go near those places; not me. Now, as he finished the last of his porridge, Mr.J.L.B.Matekoni reminded himself that the one thing he felt certain about when it came to women was that you could never be sure. If Mma Ramotswe said she had a feeling about something, then it was perfectly possible that her instinct was correct. So rather than say, We shall see, Mma, he muttered, Well, youre probably right, Mma. And then he added, very much as an afterthought and a hesitant afterthought at that Who knows, Mma, what will happen? Who knows? *** When Mma Ramotswe arrived at the office that morning, MmaMakutsi was already there. Grace Makutsi, wife of Mr.Phuti Radiphuti and mother of Itumelang Clovis Radiphuti, had recently been made a full partner in the business. It had been a long road, one that stretched from her first appointment as secretary in the fledgling agency, to assistant detective, to the vague, rather unsatisfactory status of associate detective, and finally to partnership. It had been a road that started in distant Bobonong, in the north of the country, in a home that housed six people in two cramped rooms, and from there had led, through much scrimping and saving by MmaMakutsis family, to the Botswana Secretarial College. At the end of her course the road had climbed sharply uphill to the glorious mark of ninety-seven per cent in the final examinations a result never before achieved at the college, and never since then equalled. But even that distinction provided in itself no guarantee of a life free of struggle, and for some years MmaMakutsi had been obliged to endure an existence of parsimony and want. Mma Ramotswe would have paid her more had she been able, but the No.1 Ladies Detective Agency made no money at all, and there was a limit to how generous a loss-making business could be. There would have been no point, she thought, in giving MmaMakutsi a bigger salary and then having to close the business down after a month or two when it went bankrupt. MmaMakutsi understood all this. She was grateful to Mma Ramotswe for all she did for her, and so when her fortunes changed dramatically on her marriage to Mr.Phuti Radiphuti, she made it clear that she would not give up her job, but would continue to work at the No.1 Ladies Detective Agency. As a partner in the business, her devotion to the enterprise became even more intense hence her new habit of arriving earlier than Mma Ramotswe on most mornings. To begin with, her baby son, Itumelang, accompanied his mother into the office, sleeping contentedly in his carrycot while she got on with her work. Now, however, he had become more wakeful, and consequently more demanding,

and this meant that he was left at home with the woman from Bobonong who had been employed as a nursemaid. I am very happy with my life, said MmaMakutsi. I find professional satisfaction in my work, and at the same time I have all the pleasure of running a home. It is a very good thing when a woman can do both of these things. Yes, we women are doing very well in Botswana, agreed Mma Ramotswe. We dont have to sit out in the lands all day. We are running businesses now. We are building roads. We are flying aeroplanes.

We are doing all the things that men used to think were not for us. For a moment, MmaMakutsi pictured Mma Ramotswe at the controls of a plane. It would be hard for her to keep the aircraft level, she thought, as her traditional build would make it far heavier on the side on which she was sitting. It would be possible, she felt, to adjust the controls so that the wing on her side came up a bit, but she still imagined that landings would be a bit heavy, and bumpy. Of course it would be quite a shock if one were to get into a plane and see that Mma Ramotswe was in the pilots seat. It would be rude to refuse to board the plane in such

circumstances, and one would simply have to put a brave face on it and hope for the best. Perhaps one could hide ones surprise by saying something like, Oh, Mma Ramotswe, I did not know that you had taken up flying. This is good news, Mma. This is a big victory for women. Coming into the office first, MmaMakutsi took it upon herself to have the early morning cup of teaa distinct from the mid-morning and late morning cupsready for when Mma Ramotswe arrived. This cup was an important one, as it enabled the two women to consider their plans for the day ahead. There might have been no scientific connection between drinking tea and getting ones thoughts in order, but that was the way it seemed, at least in Mma Ramotswes opinion. Tea

brought about focus, and that helped. So, said Mma Ramotswe. What have we today, MmaMakutsi? We have tea to begin with, said MmaMakutsi. That is very good. And then... well, we have nothing, as far as I can see, Mma. MmaMakutsi paused. Unless, of course, something turns up. And it might. Sometimes there is nothing at eight oclock and then at ten oclock there is something. I have a feeling therell be something,

said Mma Ramotswe. When I was in my garden this morning I had a feeling about that. MmaMakutsi, looking down at the surface of her desk, moved a pencil from one place to another. Yes, she said pensively. There might be something. Later on. You think so, Mma? asked Mma Ramotswe. MmaMakutsi waited some time before answering. Then at last she said, I am expecting some news, Mma. It might come today. Mma Ramotswe knew better than to ask exactly what this news might be. MmaMakutsi sometimes liked to shroud her affairs in mystery, and did not always respond well to direct questioning. So she simply said, I hope that you get your news, Mma. Thank you, Mma. When you are waiting for news, it is better to get it. It is not easy not to get news that youre waiting for. Then you think: What has happened about the thing that Im waiting to hear about? Has it happened, or has it not happened? Mma Makutsi stared at Mma Ramotswe as she made these remarks. The light caught her large glasses and danced, in shards of gold, across the ceiling.

And if you dont hear anything, she continued, then you can spend the whole day worrying about it. This news of yours, said Mma Ramotswe, trying to sound as if the matter under discussion was barely of any interest at all, will it come in a letter, or... No, said MmaMakutsi, shaking her head. It will not be in a letter.

Or a telephone call? Yes, it will be a telephone call. It will be a telephone call from my lawyer. This could hardly be ignored. Your lawyer, Mma? MmaMakutsi waved a hand with the air of one who is accustomed to having a lawyer. Of course she might have a lawyer now, thought Mma Ramotswe, but she would not have had one all that long ago. Yet she did not begrudge MmaMakutsi the satisfaction of having a lawyer after having lived so many years without one, even if she had no lawyer herself, now that she came to think of it. It is nothing very important, Mma Ramotswe. Just a little... Mma Ramotswe waited. A little personal matter. I see. MmaMakutsi rose from her desk. But we should not be talking about these things. We should perhaps

be going over that business plan I drew up, Mma. Ah, yes, said Mma Ramotswe. The business plan. MmaMakutsi had drawn up a business plan when she had seen one that Phuti Radiphuti had prepared for the Double Comfort Furniture Store. Of course the two businesses were as chalk and cheese in terms of turnover and profit, but Phuti had told her that every concern should have a plan and she had volunteered to do the necessary work. Mma Ramotswe took the sheet of paper passed to her by MmaMakutsi. The heading at the top read The No.1 Ladies Detective Agency: Challenges Ahead and Options for the Future. That is a very good title, said Mma Ramotswe. Challenges and options. I think you are right to mention those, Mma: they are both there. Back in her seat, MmaMakutsi accepted the compliment gracefully. It is forward-looking, Mma. Youll have noticed that. Mma Ramotswe glanced down the page. And there is this paragraph here that talks about enhanced profit. That is good, Mma. MmaMakutsi inclined her head. That is the objective of every business, Mma. Enhanced profit is what counts. If we were a company, that would drive the share price up. Yes, said Mma Ramotswe, knowing even as she spoke that she sounded rather vague. She had no

head for finance, especially when it came to companies and share prices and so on, although she understood the basics and was particularly good at counting. This she had learned from her father, who had been able to count a herd of cattle with astonishing accuracy, even as the animals moved around and mingled with one another. She frowned. Enhanced profit had to come from somewhere. But where do these bigger profits come from, Mma? MmaMakutsi answered with authority. They come from greater turnover, Mma. That is where profits come from: turnover. Mma Ramotswe muttered the words greater turnover. There was a comforting, mantra-like ring to them, yes, but... Turnover is the same thing as fees? she asked. It is, said MmaMakutsi. Turnover is money going through the books. She made a curious gesture with her right hand, representing, Mma Ramotswe assumed, the progress of money through the books. It all looked so effortless, but Mma Ramotswe was not convinced. More money going through the books, MmaMakutsi, must mean...

She hesitated. More fees? Yes. In a sense. In a sense? Yes. Mma Ramotswe looked down at the business plan. So, unless I misunderstand all this, Mma, more fees means more clients, or, I suppose, higher charges to the clients we already have. MmaMakutsi stared at her. Her large glasses, thought Mma Ramotswe, reflected the world back at itself. People looked at MmaMakutsi and saw themselves. You could say that, said MmaMakutsi. That is one way of putting it. Mma Ramotswe's tone was gentle. And how are we going to get more clients, Mma? MmaMakutsi opened her mouth to answer, but then closed it again. She shifted her head slightly, to look past Mma Ramotswe, through the window behind her. There is one arriving right now, she said. Mma Ramotswe slipped the business plan into a drawer. The trouble with plans, she thought, was that they tended to be expressions of hope. Everybody, it seemed, felt that they should have a plan, but for most people the plan merely said what they would like to happen rather than what they would actually achieve. Most people did what they wanted to do, whether or not that was what their plan said they should do. So plans were useful only in revealing what people wished for. If you wanted to know what they would actually do, then the only way of finding out was by watching them and seeing what they did. Then you would know what they might do in the future because most people did what they had always done. That, thought Mma Ramotswe, was well known in fact, it was one of the best-known things there was. We can talk about plans some other time, said Mma Ramotswe. We would not want this client to think that we sit about making plans all the time. MmaMakutsi felt rather relieved. She was aware that her business plan was optimistic, but she had found it difficult to write anything that took a bleak view. After all, what did it matter? The important thing was that they were perfectly all right as they were. She had Phuti Radiphuti and her baby and her new house. Mma Ramotswe had Mr. J. L. B. Matekoni and her white van and Puso and Motholeli. She had her garden too, with her mopipi tree and the runner beans. And they both had the land about them; the sky that went on forever, it seemed, and was filled with sun and with the air that they all needed, that the cattle needed, that the animals in the Kalahari needed there was plenty of that; they had Botswana. So everybody had the things that mattered, when you came to think of it, and if you had that, did you really need a business plan? Those were the thoughts in MmaMakutsi's mind as she watched the car being parked beside Mma Ramotswe's white van under the acacia tree. Two people got out two clients, not one: as in the business plan. *Revue de presse* McCall Smith's depictions of the sights and sounds of Botswana and his overarching theme of compassion make this novel radiant . . . Humor runs rampant, as always, except in the darkest situations . . . Calling Precious Ramotswe, owner and chief investigator of the No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency in Botswana, a detective doesn't do her justice. Problem solver extraordinaire would be much better. Mma Ramotswe takes on one or two true mysteries per novel, it's true, but she also treats a whole range of human difficulties as they come her way, finding good solutions through her wisdom, kindness, and tact. *Booklist* (starred review) Enjoyable . . . Series fans will be moved by a supporting characters' growth, and newcomers will be charmed by the gentle humor. *Publishers Weekly* Amusing . . . An escape from life's woes [as well] as a suggestion for how to make the whole deal more palatable. *The Boston Globe* McCall Smith's accomplished novels [are] dependent on small gestures redolent with meaning and main characters blessed with pleasing personalities. *Newsday* McCall Smith is a vivid observer and an elegant writer, honoring Botswanan customs and culture . . . Like the best traditions, this series is one we hope will endure. *The Plain Dealer* Endearing . . . The long-running series has lost none of its gentleness or its love for Botswana. *The Christian Science Monitor* Alexander McCall Smith is a prolific, popular, and wonderfully peculiar writer. His capacity to deliver quality new installments . . . is unrivalled by any other modern writer. *The Independent* (London)