

MURDER, SHE WROTE

CARRY MY SECRET
TO YOUR GRAVE

AN ORIGINAL NOVEL BY

**STEPHANIE
KUEHN**



SCHOLASTIC PRESS
NEW YORK

If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as “unsold and destroyed” to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this “stripped book.”

Murder, She Wrote © 2023 Universal City Studios LLC. All rights reserved.
Photos © Shutterstock.com.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Published by Scholastic Press, an imprint of Scholastic Inc., *Publishers since 1920*. SCHOLASTIC, SCHOLASTIC PRESS, and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

ISBN 978-1-338-76458-1

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

23 24 25 26 27

Printed in the U.S.A. 40

First printing 2023

Book design by Keirsten Geise and Cassy Price

1

GRIPPING THE OVERSIZED RED ENVELOPE, I wait as the trio of well-dressed Broadmoor Academy students, Leif, Leisl, and Carlos, huddle close around me. Our friendship, our connection to one another is still new. Still tentative. There's no denying I'm the rough-edged townie girl to their boarding school shine, that fresh-faced glow that comes from living in brick and ivy-draped dorms on a secluded campus in the hills overlooking Cabot Cove's working class streets and glittering blue bay.

Even so, I welcome their presence. More so than usual, seeing as being alone isn't something I'm able to enjoy much these days. Standing shoulder to shoulder in the dense woods, all four of us shielded from the worst of Maine's dreary November chill, I not only feel a surge of purpose.

I feel *safe*.

Mostly.

I turn and glance back at the trees, the dark shadows, before returning my attention to the group.

"Do it." Leisl arches a dark blond eyebrow and offers me the wryest of smiles. The faintest twitch of her pink glossed lips.

My cheeks warm, but I do as she says, prying open the red envelope containing the next clue in the century-old game they're playing. It's called *tenace* and apparently, it's a Broadmoor tradition, one best described as high-stakes and highly secretive. Warned to trust no one and nothing, players set out in search of red-coded clues rumored to lead to some wondrous—yet unknown—prize. From what I've gleaned, this game's built on a foundation of illusion and mystery and is only played once every four years. I'd never heard of it before—not a hint—despite having grown up in Cabot Cove.

But this is how it is with Broadmoor. Our town's boarding school has always had its own secrets. Its own circles. In fact, my current involvement with *tenace* was only made possible by my childhood friend Jackson who recently plotted to escape his family's cruelty. In the process, he not only managed to connect with his biological father—a Broadmoor alum who was also my psychiatrist at the time—but in his wake, Jackson left a mystery so compelling it basically ensured I'd join forces with these three in order to solve it.

In other words, I'm playing the game, too.

Holding back the torn glued flap, I peer directly into the envelope, which is stuffed full and straining at the seams. "It's papers. Like, a whole bunch of them. They're all folded up."

"Here." Beside me, sixteen-year-old Carlos, who's got shy good looks, short dark hair, and brown skin that's just a touch lighter than my own, extends his hands, palms cupped tight together. "I can hold them."

“Thanks.” I pull out the contents, careful not to tear or damage what I now realize are long-form news articles, each paper-clipped separately. Some are on newsprint—the pages, thin, yellowed, and smeared with ink—which contrast starkly with the articles printed on magazine stock, thick and glossy, alongside color photos. There are four in total, all originals that hail from the following publications: *Miami Herald*, the *Daily Mail*, *Underwater!*, and *Occupational Health and Safety*.

“Is that it?” Leif’s sharp-eyed gaze meets mine, and though he possesses the same lean, cherubic beauty as his twin sister, Leisl, their personalities couldn’t be more different. Both have proved craven in pursuit of the game’s glory, but in the brief time I’ve known them, Leisl’s shown me genuine mirth and boundless invitation. Leif, on the other hand, is hard edges and bolted doors. Toward me, at least.

“That’s it.” I dutifully tip the envelope upside down and give it a shake.

“Well, what do they say?” Hands on his hips, Leif turns to Carlos, who’s already working with Leisl to smooth the creases out and ensure everything’s readable.

“We don’t know yet,” Carlos says.

Leif sneers. “How can you not *know*?”

“Could you give us a moment?” Leisl holds a finger in her brother’s face as she scans the articles, one by one. “You know, I think I need glasses.”

“I was just thinking the same thing!” Carlos exclaims. “But I mean me. I think I need glasses, too. I keep getting these headaches from the computer. They make me—”

Leif groans, loudly. “Can we please diagnose your insecurities later? Some of us have finite lives.”

“Rude.” Leisl sniffs. “Anyway, these articles are weird.”

“How so?” I ask.

“They’re just random stories about accidents. But they take place in all different parts of the world. Different time periods. Plus, the writing style ranges from clickbait to academic and almost unreadable.”

“That’s not *weird*,” Leif says. “The word you’re looking for is *varied*.”

Leisl ignores him. “How about I read the headlines? Then you can decide for yourself.”

“Go for it,” I say.

I spot that lip twitch hint of a smile again as Leisl clears her throat. “First off is ‘Famed Fort Lauderdale Aquarium Suffers Mass Die-off. Over 1,000 Organisms Feared Lost in Unexplained Tragedy.’”

“Organisms?” Carlos echoes.

“I assume they mean fish and plants. And maybe snails?”

“Keep going,” Leif says.

“Fine. Up next is ‘South of the Border Horror: Two American Teens Found Dead in Cabo Resort Pool. Vacationers Report Hearing Mum’s Screams for Hours.’”

“That’s the *Daily Mail*, isn’t it?” I ask.

“Did ‘mum’ give it away? Oh, here’s my favorite: ‘In the Ocean, No One Can Hear You Scream: An Exploration of Three Commercial Diving Fatalities and Recommendations for Improved Safety Planning.’ Finally, we end with the dry

but informative: ‘Lawsuit Filed against Maldivian Dive Shop That Allegedly Filled Tanks With a Toxic Mix, Leading To Four Deaths.’”

“These are *grim*,” Carlos says. “*Alien* reference notwithstanding.”

Leisl nods and looks up. “What do you all think?”

An idea pops into my head. “Could this be related to—”

“To what?” Leif asks.

But then the fear surfaces and I bite back my words. Shake my head vigorously. “Never mind. Anyone else?”

“I got nothing.” Carlos sighs. “I usually need a day or two to sit with this kind of stuff. It’s not natural.”

“He lacks a conspiratorial mind,” Leisl says.

“Is that supposed to be a bad thing?” he asks.

She shrugs. “Generally, no. In this context, yes.”

“This conversation’s pointless,” I snap. “Who cares how our minds work? We don’t know anything about these stories.”

Carlos’s eyes widen. “We know people died.”

“So these clues are always about death then?” My voice rings with petulance. “It’s kind of getting old.”

Leif cocks his head at me. “How could that possibly be a problem? Isn’t *death* the reason you’re here? You write a whole column about unsolved murders. Or you used to.”

“I still do,” I say quickly, but the flutter of nerves roosting in my stomach awoken at the mention of my true crime column. The one I’ve been avoiding since that package arrived. That threatening note. All I’ve got to show for the last month

is a handful of unpublished drafts. Words I'm too scared to make public. In fact, I haven't even told my friends about the note I received. "And yes, I like murder mysteries. It's just . . ."

"It's just what?" Leisl asks.

"I don't know."

She reaches to squeeze my arm, a gesture that makes me die a little inside. "That's okay. Why don't you take the rest of the weekend to look over the articles and see what comes to mind? We can meet up again in a couple days."

"You want *me* to take them?" I squeak.

She pauses. "I thought you'd want to. This being your first clue and all. Well, first official clue. Plus, I kind of have to get back to campus now. I've got midterms next week."

"Don't tell me you plan on studying," Leif sniffs. "That would be a first."

"I'm also doing set design for the winter play," she says. "Turns out it's a lot of work."

"I'd better go, too." Carlos is looking at his phone. "I've got to get back for auditions."

"For the play?" Leif asks.

He nods. "I'm behind on performing arts credits. I thought I'd give auditioning a try. Can't hurt, huh?"

"Oh wow." Leisl puts a hand to her mouth. "I cannot picture you acting."

"I appreciate the confidence," Carlos tells her.

"What's the show called?" I ask, and the thing is, I *can* picture him acting. Carlos is quiet, but he's got a presence to

him that's grounding. Like someone born to lead. A little like my father, actually.

"*The Visit*," he says, "It's Swiss. And very dark."

"I don't know that one."

"Thank God," Leif groans. "There's something you don't know."

"I'm sorry about my brother." Leisl bounds over to give me a hug, all good manners and boisterous energy, like an overgrown Irish setter pup, and I don't want her to let me go. I don't want her to leave. "He's been in such a mood lately. You want to meet up on Monday? Can you get up to Broadmoor after classes are out? I'll have time then."

"Works for me."

She shoves the articles at me. "These should probably stay in the envelope. But just keep them somewhere safe."

"I will."

"I'll try and make Monday, too," Carlos says. "I'll even tell you more about the play, if you want. Or if I manage to humiliate myself in the process."

I smile. "That'd be great."

Then it's over in a crush of hugs and waves and murmured good wishes, and I'm buoyed by the warmth emanating off Carlos and Leisl, my new partners in adventure. Their patter and friendship are a welcome antidote to the abject loneliness that has filled my days of late. Along with the dizzying fear and near certainty that I've set something into motion that I can't stop.

But what?

I suck in air, forcing myself to breathe, *in then out*, to not lose my mind or my body in some soul-crushing wave of dread. It works. I stay grounded, but before I know it, they're gone, the two of them hiking side by side while they continue talking and joking and enjoying themselves. I watch, near bursting with envy—maybe a little jealousy, too—as they depart, following the steep coastal trail leading back to their boarding school, their forms fading and shrinking into the cool mountainside mist.

“So what do you think?” Leif appears beside me like a ghost. “Is there something going on there with those two?”

This startles me more than I want to admit. “You’d know better than me.”

“Could be an interesting development.”

“You should probably stick to your own love life,” I say.

He shrugs. “What do you want to do now?”

“Oh, so it’s our turn for a date?” I start laughing until I see the chilly look on his face. “Wait, you’re serious? You don’t have plans or anything?”

“It’s noon on a *Saturday*. What plans could I possibly have?”

“I didn’t realize—”

“I didn’t mention anything about a date, though,” he says.

I roll my eyes. “I wouldn’t go on one with you if you did.”

“Glad that’s cleared up.” Leif gestures at the envelope I’m still carrying. “Look, I came out here to work on that. So why don’t we do it together?”

“Uhhh,” I say slowly because this is unexpected. In the short time we’ve known each other, Leif’s shown zero interest in me—and that’s a generous interpretation. He’s mostly been outwardly hostile to my presence. According to my own conspiratorial mind that means he must be pretty eager to get a look at these articles. More eager than he wants Leisl and Carlos to know.

Or maybe he just *wants* me to think he’s eager. It’s hard to get a footing on reality when you’re playing a game whose primary rule is “bad faith.” But as I turn once again to peer over my shoulder into the forest gloom, my breath hitches and my stomach knots, and I realize how vulnerable I am. How vulnerable I always am because how do you prepare for a threat when you don’t even know who made it?

When you don’t know who it is who wants you dead.

So I lift my chin and gaze up at Leif while pressing my lips into what I hope resembles an earnest smile. “Yeah, sure. We could do that.”

In return, Leif doesn’t smile back, but his cool brown eyes light up with what could easily be mistaken as charm as he reaches to hook one arm through mine so that we’re joined at the elbow.

So that I can’t get away.

“My dear,” he purrs, guiding me firmly toward the stone steps leading back into town. “You don’t happen to know any place we can go that’s, like, comfortable?”