

MURDER, SHE WROTE

BY THE TIME
YOU READ THIS
I'LL BE GONE

AN ORIGINAL NOVEL BY

**STEPHANIE
KUEHN**



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“HEY,” I SAY WHEN JACKSON finally answers the phone. Like me, he’s stayed in tonight, opting out of attending our school’s homecoming game and related festivities. There’re good reasons for this, but we’re definitely in the minority with our choice. A recent social media check featured post after post of our highly identifiable classmates engaging in acts of pregame debauchery before packing the bleachers to cheer on the hometown Cabot Cove Devils in their annual matchup with the South Harbor Seals.

On the other end of the line, Jackson Glanville yawns. Loudly. Clearly, I’ve woken him. Or at least that’s what he wants me to think.

“Don’t play coy, Bea,” he says. “This is the fifth time you’ve called. I assume there’s some sort of emergency unfolding.”

“I wouldn’t have to call so many times if you actually answered your phone. Or responded to my texts.”

“Texting’s not secure. We’ve talked about this.”

“So now you think the feds are reading your messages?”

“When did I ever mention the feds?” He lowers his voice. “They could, though, you know. Us Glanvilles aren’t to be trusted.”

I laugh because this is what Jackson wants me to do. To pretend I don't hear the current of fear and paranoia running through his voice. To pretend I don't know how much he's suffering.

"Don't worry," he says brusquely. "I'm not going all conspiracy theory on you. The only people I'm worried might be spying on me are of the homegrown variety."

"Well, I'm relieved to hear it."

"So why *are* you calling?"

I bend to double knot the laces of my Caribou boots. "Maybe I just like the sound of your dulcet voice."

"How flattering," he says. "Hey, I read your latest column, by the way. The one you just posted."

So he *wasn't* asleep when I called. I knew it. "What'd you think?"

"Did you have to mention me by name?"

"I said good things!"

"Yeah, well, my dad might not see it that way. He'll probably ground me for being in the presence of nicotine over three years ago. You know how he is. 'If you were truly committed to God's path in your heart, then your body would follow . . .'"

"I'm sorry," I say quickly. "I won't do it again."

"Nah. Don't worry about it." Jackson forces a shot of bravado into his voice. "I'm just being my usual dramatic self."

"You're not dramatic."

"How's that whole thing going?" he asks. "Writing for that true crime site?"

"Well, I'm averaging about three readers a post, but also

they're not paying me. Kind of hard to tell who's coming out on top there."

"They're really having you lean into the cryptocurrency lingo, huh? The disrupting Downeast Girl. Plus all that 'proof of work' stuff?"

I laugh. "My theory is that both owners are heavily invested in Bitcoin. But it's not such a bad metaphor, is it? Cyber detectives as the modern-day crypto miners. It's all decentralized work being generated by anonymous internet users. I think it fits."

"Did you just say *modern-day crypto miners*?"

My cheeks warm. "You know what I mean."

Jackson pauses, and the thing is, I've known him so long that I can picture him perfectly. Right now, he's up in his room with the door locked, and I'm positive he's shirtless. Given the option, Jackson's always shirtless, which is beyond annoying, although he looks great and he knows it. He's probably pacing, too, long legs carrying him back and forth in front of the wide bay window that spans the length of his bedroom. Plus, I'd bet anything Jackson's staring out at the ocean, watching the dark waves churn beneath him as he ponders—not for the first time—what it would feel like to sink. To lose himself in those watery depths.

And look, morbid as that is, I *get* it. Despite our friendship—or maybe because of it—it's been years since I've personally stepped foot inside the Glanvilles' sprawling showcase waterfront home. But suffice to say there's a reason for that.

It's also the reason I'm calling.

"Jax," I say softly.

"It's an analogy, by the way. Not a metaphor."

"What?"

"The crypto mining thing."

"Oh." A quick glance at the clock tells me it's past time to get to the point. "So do you think you can meet up tonight? Are you able to get out?"

"Where?" he asks. "When?"

"At the Hollow. Thirty minutes."

Jax groans. "I *hate* that place."

"I know you do."

"Those Broadmoor kids make me want to puke."

I sigh. Jackson rarely has anything nice to say about the local boarding school or its two hundred or so snobby inhabitants. "Well, tonight those Broadmoor kids are going to be your alibi."

"Hold on." His voice tightens. "Do you mean—"

"Yes," I say as my heart starts to pound. My palms start to sweat. Is this really happening?

Are we really going to do this?

"I'll be there," he tells me, then hangs up.

I grab my stuff and go.

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Outside in the darkness, frigid air nips my cheeks, stings my eyes. I gird myself by zipping my fleece coat and cinching the hood as tight as it will go as I make my way into town on foot. There's a saying in Maine that the farther north you go, the

more resilient Mother Nature makes you. This is meant to explain our hardiness, our rugged core of self-reliance, but if you ask me, “natural selection” works just as well.

It’s a twenty-minute walk under good conditions. But it’s Friday night and football means people are out and ready to let loose. Not just high schoolers, either. Cars, SUVs, even a few semis whiz dangerously close as I follow the narrow shoulder of the coastal highway. I’ve seen enough roadkill out here over the years that I don’t dare risk crossing to the ocean side. Not after nightfall. But trust me, that’s where the better view is. Even by moonlight you can see over the cliffs and down to the craggy beaches, swirling mist, and pounding surf below.

More cars race by, some honking, and a few passengers even take the time to roll down their windows to yell, wave, pound the paint, and make other—less generous—gestures at me. I can’t understand what they’re saying, and it seems early still for the game to have ended. But the general spirit of their efforts tells me that somehow, some way, our side’s emerged victorious.

This isn’t a total surprise. Cabot Cove High’s football team is notoriously terrible—as in, our school should cut their funding and spend the money on stuff that actually has a positive impact on students, like, you know, teacher salaries and the girls’ volleyball team. But our rival school, South Harbor, has had a serious run of bad luck this year. Okay, luck’s an understatement, because what really happened is that two of their players were killed in a car accident back

in July. A third came down with Lyme disease during pre-season, and now their star quarterback abruptly withdrew from their school just *last weekend*. Rumor has it he's got a drug problem and failed a test, but I've also heard it was an overdose. Regardless, it's not exactly a miracle that we beat them this year, and I'm not sure that it's even worth celebrating. Feels a little like cheering for a win after the other team's bus breaks down.

"Go *Devillllls!*" I duck right as a beer can flung from the open window of a pickup comes flying at me. Missing my head by inches, the can ricochets off the asphalt, and I watch as it spins, sparks, then skids into the grass. Whirling around, I'm ready to confront whoever's responsible, but the truck's long gone. Screeching tires leave the air charred and smoke-filled as the pickup's red taillights swerve across the center line then back again before fading into the fog.

Heart pounding, fists clenched tight, I continue my march onward while allowing my mind to indulge in a series of gruesome revenge fantasies that I'll never have the courage to act on. It's times like these when I lament not having my license yet. There're still six whole *months* until I can take the test, which is practically an eternity in high school years. Everyone in my grade is driving already, and this includes Bobby Miller, who's riding a D average these days and spends most of his time doing donuts in the marina parking lot. But that's what I get for having the audacity to skip third grade. No good deed goes unpunished, and in the

eyes of the law—not to mention my dad’s insurance policy—raw intelligence holds no bearing on personal liberty.

Well, there are greater injustices in this world, which is why I’m meeting up with Jackson tonight. He and I have been friends since grade school. It’s been more off than on over the last couple of years—until recently, that is. But Jackson’s troubles run deep. They always have, though you wouldn’t know it to look at him. At school, he represents that most perfect of clichés: He’s seemingly got it all. From his reluctant rock star good looks to a starting spot on our school’s all-state basketball team. Not to mention he’s, like, a genius. His academic ranking’s top of the class, and for the past two years he’s been a part of this statewide accelerated science program you have to be invited to apply for. He’s already got his college sights set on the Ivy League. Maybe MIT or Caltech, if they’re lucky.

But if appearances can be deceiving, then Jackson Glanville could make a liar out of just about anyone. His bright-eyed ambition and endless accomplishments don’t stem from drive or passion or even God-given talent. No, his striving is the very twisted consequence of having been raised by a pair of sadists who equate fear with morality and obedience with virtue. I used to think this was a religious thing—Jackson’s dad is an ex-military officer turned Episcopalian deacon. But there’s nothing spiritual about the way the Glanvilles treat their son—like he’s fundamentally rotten to the core and their job is to prevent him from

spoiling the rest of the world. I've had to talk Jackson off more than a few ledges over the course of our friendship. Some of them literal. Anyway, he's recently been offered a lifeline—one I've helped to arrange—and my goal tonight is to ensure he takes it.

My muscles tense as I approach downtown Cabot Cove. There's so much *life* out tonight. Sparkling confetti from the earlier parade litters the street; red, white, and blue ribbons snap from light poles; and the whole atmosphere swirls with postgame revelry. It's infectious, even catching up with the tourists spilling out of the overpriced seafood restaurants and brew pubs running along Main Street. Live music blaring from the speakers at Neptune's Palace adds to the chaos, plus my phone won't stop buzzing. I pull it from my pocket and see messages from Evie, Dane, Roo, everyone—they're all heading to Rock's Head Beach for a bonfire. *Where are you?* they ask. *Game got called at halftime. Too many injured Seals. Arf arf arf. Get out here already.*

Well, this explains the early celebration, and the invitations are tempting. I'm a sworn introvert, but even I can get behind an evening on the beach with people I like, one that ends with salt in my hair and sand in my shoes. They're good people, too, the kind who don't mind my awkwardness or my inability to get out of my head. Only none of them are Jackson, and I won't let myself be distracted. I can't. Not tonight. So rather than respond, I switch off notifications, slide in my earbuds, and hit play on the podcast I've been listening to. It's different than what I usually go for. Rather than a deep-dive true crime story,

this is an audio drama—a fictional one. It’s about a murder that takes place on a ship and it’s told Rashomon-style with its cast of characters rotating to share their version of events as the listener tries to solve the crime along with them.

Like I said, fiction isn’t my usual preference, but this came recommended by a family member whose taste I trust without question. “It’s the writing,” she told me, gripping my arm with an eagerness that felt electric. “You have to listen all the way through. Then listen to it again to figure out how they pulled it off. It’s genius. These writers, whoever they are, know precisely what matters in a mystery.”

“What’s that?” I asked, because I’ve always assumed that what matters most in a mystery is whether or not the case gets solved.

But she disagreed, emphatically. “The solution’s the least important part.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.” Her blue eyes twinkled as she pressed her lips into the most inscrutable of smiles. “You see, I’ve always believed mysteries aren’t about uncovering what’s hidden so much as shining a light on what you’ve always known, deep down, to be true.”

Yeah, well, I’m not sure what I think about that. As someone who dreams of becoming an investigative reporter someday, true crime doesn’t interest me because it somehow manages to represent the totality of human experience or whatever. Honestly, I kind of like when it does the opposite by refusing to hand out easy answers or offer pat platitudes

about tragedy. I also like when it asks us to confront the most slippery parts of ourselves. The parts that so rarely end up in fiction because they're the hardest to own and easiest to look away from.

This is the tone I aspire to with my cold case column for TrueMaine, which is the newly launched brainchild of two Portland tech bros aiming to fill the gap between Nextdoor and Netflix. Regardless, this fictional podcast is just what I need at the moment—something that can hold my attention without demanding more. And it's not like good writing and storytelling don't have their place in crime reporting. Story's always what draws me in, and if nothing else, this show's been darkly entertaining so far.

Murder or no murder, there are a lot of ways to be trapped in this world, and I know I'd hate to be stuck on a ship with a group of strangers. Even more, I'd hate having my survival hinge on learning how to depend on said strangers.

What could be worse than that?