

LESSONS IN DEATH

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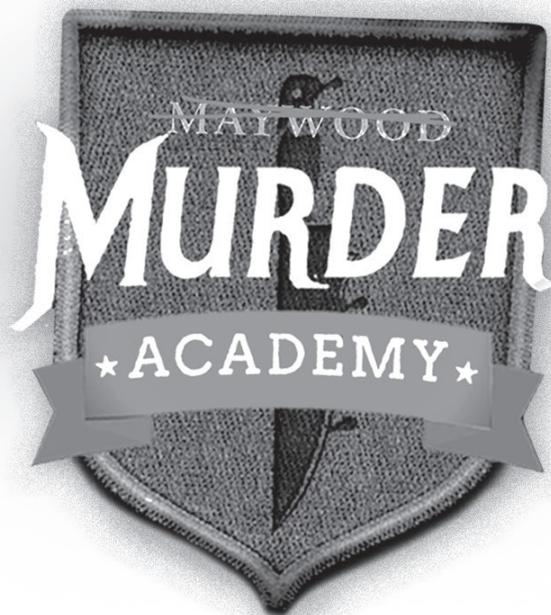
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LESSONS IN DEATH



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*For my mum, who fed my love
of stories from the start*

ONE

It's a week into the summer term, the last day of April, and murder is the last thing on my mind.

I'm too nervous to think about *anything* other than today's auditions for our school play. The hall at lunch break is hot and stuffy. Our drama teacher Mr Truckle's eyes light up as he tells us how excited he is that we're going to be performing the mystery drama he's written.

'Everyone who tries out for a part in *Murder at Glen Grange* will be included in the production in some capacity,' he says from the stage, 'though there are only twelve actual speaking roles.'

I nod. I've heard Mr T describe his play before and I *really* want the main part of Hyacinth Bell. Hyacinth is so cool – an amazing artist with a great fashion sense. She is also the amateur sleuth who solves the murder at the heart of the play. It's just that I hate being looked at or performing in front of other people. It's *scary*. Mr Truckle says that it's the things we do that frighten us that make us who we are. And that it's important to step out of your

comfort zone once in a while. Easy for him to say. With the way I feel right now, I couldn't see my comfort zone through the world's most powerful microscope.

There are about thirty of us here, all from years seven, eight and nine. Most people seem more bored than nervous, as Mr T explains what a closed circle story is.

'The beauty of "closed circle" mysteries is that they take place within one environment, meaning only a limited number of suspects could have perpetrated the deadly crime!' he enthuses.

'That's right!' gushes Ms Baxter, standing beside him. I glance across at Billy and he makes a face. I suppress a giggle. It's well known that our English teacher has a massive thing for Mr Truckle. She's always cooing and simpering around him.

'Right, let's get going!' Mr Truckle claps his hands together excitedly, nearly knocking over his coffee mug. He always has a coffee with him, in a mug that says '*this is what an awesome drama teacher looks like*' with an arrow pointing upwards, to the drinker. With some teachers this would be annoying, but with Mr T you know he's just being ironic.

Billy once took a sip of it while he wasn't looking and said it must have contained ten sugars. Which doesn't surprise me. Mr Truckle is always saying what a sweet

tooth he has and loves to bring in cakes and biscuits at the end of term. Unsurprisingly, he's one of the most popular teachers at Mayfield Academy.

'I have a copy of a short passage from the play here,' Mr Truckle says, waving a sheet of paper in the air. 'Or else please feel free to do your own thing. I'm just looking for confidence and poise at this point.'

Two girls from year eight start the auditions, followed by Maisy Shaw who is in my year nine form. Then come two year nine boys and all the year sevens, one after the other. None of them are terrible. None of them are great. I glance at my best friend again. Billy is sprawled over his chair, relaxed as anything. My guts are twisted with nerves. The last year seven is so quiet no one past the front row can hear him. Mr Truckle sends him off the stage with an encouraging smile.

I sidle up to Billy. 'I don't think I can do this,' I whisper.

'But this is what you want,' Billy says, looking confused. 'I'm only auditioning because you said you thought it would be fun.'

'I know,' I say, 'but—'

'It'll be fine.' He jumps up, just as Mr T is asking who wants to audition next. 'Look, G, I'll show you.' Billy turns to face the teacher. 'Can I go next please, sir?'

A second later, Billy's up on the stage. My heart thuds

with nerves, but not for him. Unlike me, Billy Okoye totally belongs on a stage. Not because he's a show-off, but because that's where he comes alive. We're totally unlike in that respect, though we've been mates since for ever. Billy clears his throat. The whole room is focused on him; he's definitely got the most presence of everyone auditioning so far.

'For goodness' sake!' he says in his best posh, mock-appalled accent. 'I wasn't even *in* the drawing room at teatime.'

Everyone laughs, including Mr Truckle. Even Ms Baxter cracks a smile. It's the way Billy says it, just the right amount of outrage together with perfect timing. Billy bows, soaking up the love. He's beaming round the room. He catches my gaze and I grin, just as the door at the back of the hall slams shut. Everyone turns.

The smile falls from my face, as Wren Starzynski slinks into the room.

TWO

There's an audible gasp from the huddle of year sevens at the front by the stage. No wonder. Wren is wearing a silk evening dress with thin shoulder straps and elegant pointy-toed slingbacks. She's swept her long, dark hair into an elegant up do and applied false eyelashes and red lipstick, both of which are forbidden under school rules.

Under her arm she carries a paint box. My jaw drops as she hurries, breathlessly, towards the stage. A sinking feeling fills my stomach. Wren is going to audition for Hyacinth, the part I want, and she's going all out for it.

'I'm so sorry, Mr Truckle, I know I'm late,' she says, her forehead creased in a frown. 'I'm just so nervous and I spent ages in the bathroom getting changed. I'll take the make-up off straight after I've tried out, I promise.' She pauses, her lip trembling as she smooths the green silk of her dress. 'This was my mum's, so ...'

A sympathetic murmur runs around the room. You see, Wren's mum died when she was three. She was from Mayfield, like my own mum. In fact, the two of them

were good friends when they were my age, though Wren's mother moved away long before Wren was born and they totally lost touch. Anyway, Wren and her rich dad, who Mum has never met, came back to the area a few weeks ago. Mum is super excited that Wren is in my year. She thinks we're bound to be good friends and keeps nagging me to invite her over.

To be honest, I haven't even mentioned the connection to Wren, and she certainly hasn't said anything about it to me. Just because our mothers were mates, doesn't mean we're going to be, and nothing I've seen so far makes me think Wren and I have anything in common. It's not just that she's small and delicate, like a bird, whereas I am tall and clumsy, but that – and I know this sounds mean – everything I've seen of Wren suggests she's spoilt and fake.

Look at her now, lip still wobbling over her mum's old dress. I get that it's emotional for her to wear it, but it's not like she only just discovered the thing. I glance over at Mr Truckle. Of course, he's so nice that he's totally buying Wren's anxiety act.

'Not to worry, Wren, perhaps you'd like to take a moment before—'

'I'd like to go now please, sir, before I get too nervous.' Wren glances round the room, her eyes wide. 'I'd like to be considered for Hyacinth, if that's okay?'

‘Of course.’

I grit my teeth as Wren ascends the stage and Mr T hands her the page of script. My heart sinks as she reads. She’s brilliant, putting loads of expression into all her lines, even the ones that just explain what’s going on.

‘If you weren’t in the drawing room . . .’ She points her finger with a theatrical flourish. ‘How do you explain that candle wax on your dinner jacket?’

Though I hate to admit it, she’s the best so far, even including Billy.

As she steps down off the stage, Mr Truckle calls for a five-minute break.

‘Just need to refresh my beverage!’ He taps the side of his coffee mug, then wanders out of the room.

Lots of our year are crowding round Wren. I can see Maisy making admiring noises over her dress and Billy telling her how great her audition was.

I head for the nearest bathroom which is beside reception. Most of the tarmac drive between the school and the main gate is visible through the window. I stand at the sink and splash some water on my face, then take a deep breath and let it out slowly. How on earth am I going to compete with helpless, perfect Wren?

Mr Truckle wanders into view through the window. He stands in the sunshine halfway along the drive, sipping at his

freshly made coffee. His creased shirt hangs shapelessly around his hips and the hem of one scruffy trouser leg trails in the dust. A man dressed in a sharply cut suit comes through the main gate and strides towards the school's front door. Mr T looks up and says something as he passes, I can't hear what. The man ignores him, hurrying out of sight. A moment later, Mr Truckle turns and makes his way back inside too.

Suddenly realizing I'm going to be late back to the auditions, I hurry to the hall. Out of the corner of my eye I spot Billy and Wren deep in conversation. I grimace. Billy is probably telling her how amazing she is again.

As soon as I've thought that, I feel mean.

Mr Truckle asks if anyone else wants to try out for a role.

Billy looks over. 'Georgia does!' he says cheerily.

All eyes swivel to me. I gulp.

'Excellent!' Mr Truckle smiles brightly. 'Come on then, Georgia.'

I somehow make it onto the stage, but I know before I start that I'm going to mess up. I can't seem to focus on the page Mr Truckle hands me, stumbling over every word and having to force myself to look up at everyone as I read.

'Great, great, well done,' says Mr Truckle when I finish.

But as I stumble off the stage, I know that I wasn't great at all.

I grab my bag, trying not to make eye contact with anyone. Billy hurries over, smiling. I make a face. ‘I was rubbish,’ I say before Billy can speak.

He shrugs. ‘No, you weren’t, G,’ he says. ‘You just seemed a bit nervous, but when you got into it, you were great.’

‘Yeah, totally.’ Wren has come up beside him. She’s wiped off her lipstick and removed the false eyelashes, but she’s still wearing that stunning silk dress. ‘Honestly, G, you were really good.’

I stare at her, my emotions tumbling. ‘Only my friends call me “G”.’ As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I regret them. They sounded rude and mean.

Wren blinks, her eyes registering hurt. ‘Oh,’ she says. ‘Sorry.’ Then she turns away and disappears into the crowd.

‘What was *that* about?’ Billy asks, looking surprised.

‘It’s *her*. She’s so *extra*,’ I blurt out. ‘Making out she’s all nervous. And all of Daddy’s money she’d spent on getting ready.’

‘What are you talking about? You heard her. That dress belonged to her dead mum.’

‘I know.’ I shrug, now feeling guilty not only for my comment but because I haven’t told Billy about Wren’s mother and mine being friends, and we tell each other

everything. ‘I’m going to the café,’ I say, looking away. ‘You should make sure Wren’s okay.’ I’m trying to show that I regret being mean, but the words come out all wrong again and I just sound bitter.

Billy stares at me, bewildered. I hurry away. The cafeteria is at the other end of the corridor from this hall, but suddenly I can’t bear to be around lots of people. The quad at the back of the school will be heaving too, so instead I creep out the front. Our year aren’t supposed to come out here during the day, so I hug the wall to avoid being spotted through the staff room window. As I slip through the school gate, I jump with shock. Mr Truckle is out here, his back to me and his arms outstretched. He’s remonstrating with the man in the sharply cut suit I saw brushing past him earlier.

‘Please reconsider,’ he says.

‘You better leave me alone or else I’ll . . .’ The man leans closer to Mr Truckle and the rest of his words are lost. I’m frozen to the spot as he looks up and sees me behind Mr Truckle. His lips twist into a snarl, his dark eyes like a threat, boring into me.

I gasp in fright. And before I know I’m moving, I’ve turned on my heel and am racing back to school, my heart pounding.