

THE MURDER BOX

Also by Olivia Kiernan

Play Dead For Me

The Killer in Me

If Looks Could Kill

THE MURDER BOX

Olivia Kiernan

riverrun

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For Louis

'Whatever the objective in life, so often, success is not dependent on knowing how to play but knowing how to win.'

Camille Forbes

CHAPTER I

Some murder cases come in quietly. They ease you in, allowing you to enter from the shallows, to take your time before wading in deep. Each investigation leaves its stain, its scar somewhere, either on the body or the mind but, by the time they began to make their cuts, you're halfway there to expecting it. Then, once in a while, a case lands on your desk and immediately the tiny hairs on the back of your neck stand on end. These are the cases that, despite all your experience, all your skill, you find yourself asking, am I cut out for this?

The Box arrived at the Bureau yesterday. It was wrapped nicely, an unsigned card stuck on the front. The box itself is of high quality, finished in a glossy red. Inside, the contents are arranged like games pieces – each item slotted into its own cubbyhole. There is a case file, a bus ticket, two pieces of card, each covered in protective plastic. On one, a strand of hair. On the other, an earring – a silver knot from which hangs a shimmering tassel. There is a brown envelope. Inside the envelope, a blue plastic case containing a glass slide, of the kind you view with

a microscope. There are six round pins, their tops like drops of crimson blood. And lying beneath it all a fold-out board, a miniature case board, on which to fix my findings.

Welcome to The Murder Box, the addictive murder-mystery game, says the introductory letter. And you might think that with my day job being actual murder I would've set that sucker aside, but I didn't. The headache of a case the Bureau is working on, finds me craving diversion. It's a case that's been kicking my backside for a month. The disappearance of TV personality Teddy Dolan. No leads, the foot of my superior digging so far into my back I can taste shoe leather, and half my team paralysed by apathy.

Or perhaps the box grabbed my attention because the contents look so convincing that if I were to remove the case file from within, I could drop it alongside all the other real-life cases in my filing cabinet and it would be right at home.

This box contains everything you need to begin cracking this case, the letter goes on. *Inside, you should find: a case file including a post-mortem report, victim details and an envelope containing crucial pieces of evidence.* It tells me there's an online community, a website, where, should I need to, I can share my findings with other detectives. Other players. *As you investigate, enter your progress into our online portal to unveil more vital pieces of information. But don't dally. Life and time are short. And this killer respects neither.* I felt a prickle of adrenalin at that.

The PE, the post-mortem examination, is dated, 11th of August 2013. The state pathologist's address stamped at the top. Whitehall, Dublin 9. A satisfying flourish of authenticity. The report shows the external auditory canal – the ear – was sliced off.

Blacklight picked up traces of ink on the back of the victim's right hand. A rupture of the left cornea, fractured orbital floor. Stab wounds, seven inches deep through the lower chest bilaterally. Pneumothorax, collapsed lungs. Cause of death: heart failure. Manner of death: homicide.

In the end, it was Baz, who got the game started. Detective Baz Harwood became my partner just over two years ago. I wouldn't say I'd be dragged kicking and screaming to the idea of working with a partner, but I wasn't begging for one either. I've spent years dragging my forearm across the desk of life, pushing anything from the table that might clutter up my career. I guess to some that makes me the lone wolf. The maverick. Laughable, really, when there are few people outside of my work who can say without a breath of hesitation they'd put their life in a colleague's hands. But I would do it. I have done it. Particularly Baz's. Jack Clancy, my boss, must be laughing at that one. I remember that day in Whitehall, peering down on the corpse of another victim. Feeling the need to prove myself, drinking coffee to rinse the bile from my mouth, desperate just to get through the autopsy. Jack, friend and stranger in the same moment, telling me I needed a partner and my response: I prefer to work alone. And I have to wonder whether that was ever true. I felt sure about it back then. But time has ways of showing us to ourselves.

Now, I can't imagine a case without Baz by my side. It's not that I couldn't get the job done without him. That's not it. I'm good at what I do. But we work well together. Where one of us acts the other reacts, like a Newton's cradle.

Late last night, Baz and I were still in my office, off the clock, the guts of a bottle of wine down, the eyes bleeding out of our

heads from going through witness statements, emails and calls from the public on Teddy Dolan. It was coming up on eleven by the time we gave up for the day. I tidied up my notes, closed the case file and took up my wine. Baz did the same and we sat quietly for a bit.

The Bureau for Serious Crime is the brainchild of Assistant Commissioner Jack Clancy. Designed to bring together the best of the best, across all ranks. No point in accruing all the bells and whistles that come with experience for those skills to grow mouldy behind a desk. In my view, a case is never well managed from afar. That's one of the benefits of leading a department like ours. I can get up close and personal with all our investigations. We're a multidisciplinary team who tackle Ireland's most complex and often most headline-grabbing crimes. But if you're only as good as your current investigation, then we are falling desperately short.

'There's more to this Dolan case,' Baz said, casting his eyes down at the bundle of papers. 'The wife must know something.'

'We've questioned her twice. Everything checks out her end,' I said. He knew that. He was there with me. 'What are you thinking?'

He ran a hand through his brown hair, leaving it standing up at the back. 'Don't know. Mightn't be anything major. Could well be something she hasn't told us because she doesn't think it's important.' He unbuttoned his cuffs, rolled up his sleeves and stretched his arms above his head. 'My mam used to have this habit, still does, to be honest, where she'd cover stuff up. Stupid things like where she was off to for a night, like if she were off to a fancy bar instead of the local. Or it'd be, "Don't be mentioning

this to so and so.” And it’d only be about where she’d bought the sausages at the weekend, and you’d find yourself telling a different story on her behalf over a pack of sausages when no one could’ve given two shites where she got them.’

I sipped my wine, gave him a grin: ‘Some people might call that lying.’

A half-smile, then, ‘I reckon there’s something like that here. We’re not getting the full picture and it’s not that I think there’s malice at the other end of it, but it could be important all the same.’

I let out a sigh, sick to the eye teeth of the puzzle of Dolan’s disappearance and placed my wine on the desk. ‘Let’s give it a rest for tonight.’

‘Happily,’ he said. Then his eye caught on the red box in the corner of my office, ‘What’s that?’

I got up, retrieved the box. ‘Birthday present, I think.’

‘It’s your birthday today?’

‘Tomorrow. Don’t get sweaty-palmed. It’s not in your job description to remember my birthday. It’s a murder-mystery game.’ I said.

‘Let’s have a look then.’ He held out his hand and I passed it to him. He opened it, looked the contents over, straightening in his chair. ‘Who’s it from?’

‘There was no signature on the card.’

‘Huh! Secret admirer, then?’ He emptied the box onto my desk and laid out the clues. The strand of brown hair, the histology slide. The earring. ‘Looks unnervingly realistic,’ he said.

I picked up the earring, examined it through the protective covering, rubbed at a rust-coloured smudge on the earring post.

Dirt. Old blood, my mind said. Then I remembered it wasn't real.

'I would've gone with flowers myself,' Baz said, 'but these young buckos nowadays certainly know what to get the detective who has everything.'

'Funny.'

He unclipped the glass slide from its casing and held it up to the light. 'What are you doing for your birthday?'

'Working.'

He raised his eyebrows at that.

'We've a high-profile case,' I said, a touch defensively.

He tilted the slide to and fro, squinting up at the fragment of tissue trapped on the surface. 'Larry, on front desk, whose tweezers can't even find that giant nose hair that's been curling out of his left nostril since time immemorial has more chance of finding a lead in this case than you do tomorrow. Take the day off.'

'And do what?'

He returned the slide back to its case. 'I don't know. Contemplate your mortality or something. Have fun. Isn't there someone—' he began, scanning the desk innocently.

'Don't even think about finishing that question.'

He held up his palms. 'Alright. Alright. Just saying. I know a couple of blokes—'

'Good for you,' I interrupted.

He laughed again, then passed me the bus ticket. 'Here,' he said. 'Reckon that's a good first step. The ink on the back of her hand mentioned in the post-mortem report. It's probably the stamp from a nightclub.'

I looked it over. Timed, dated. Route 8a. A tantalizing starting point. I found myself opening up a search engine to track the route of the bus. We spent some time, writing down the stops, Baz commented on how convenient it would be if our real cases gave up their answers so readily.

The victim was found clothed but dead in the basement of a nightclub. But the case notes don't provide the club's name or address. In the file, there were labelled photos of each item of clothing. They were stained in places. Mud and blood. She'd been dressed in open-toe heels, tight jeans, a diamante detail along the seams, a pale pink one-shouldered tank top.

The bus stopped close to Temple Bar. A quick search online gave me the clubs in the area. Three within a block of each other. Two closed for renovations on the night our victim was murdered. I typed in the web address provided with the game, created a username and logged on. We fed the name of the club into the site and I felt the glow of satisfaction when I discovered we were right. In seconds, we were rewarded with another clue. A witness statement and a digital receipt. A local corner shop employee who said she came in for cigarettes and a tooth cleaner.

There were no real victims here. No grieving family who we'd have to tell we'd found their daughter's body. But what was most appealing was that I knew there was an answer. There would be a solution at the end of this. Our killer would not slip away into the grey mists of the cold-case archives, out of my hands, away from justice. Someone had put The Murder Box together to be solved. That was the point, right? To play the game. Unmask the killer. To win.

The Dolan case, active for a month, had sucked us dry. In every sense. Over a thousand calls and messages from the public. And nothing yet to give us an idea of what's happened to him. All other cases, as directed by the commissioner, Donna Hegarty, to be sidelined, passed to other departments until we find him. And, as if pressure wasn't bad enough with Teddy being the nation's sweetheart, he's also our commissioner's nephew. Every day, Dolan's face in the papers. And just when it looked like the press were inclined to give a different story a spin, Dolan's amputated finger turned up in his wife's post and back he was again, more headlines, more press briefings and still nothing.

And so, The Murder Box was the perfect distraction. It never crossed my mind to think about which one of my family or friends would've sent it. All I knew was that when I read the invite to solve the murder of a twenty-two-year-old woman, like a sighthound entranced by the flashing tail of a rabbit, I couldn't help but go after it. It was fun. Safe. That's what I thought. And I did think that, right up until twenty minutes ago, when Neve Jameson walked into my office and began to tell me about her missing friend.