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"Charms and
chills."
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Real Murders



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Mystery*

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SHAKESPEARE'S COUNSELOR

The Aurora Teagarden Mysteries

REAL MURDERS

SWEET AND DEADLY

A SECRET RAGE

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An Aurora Teagarden Mystery

Charlaine Harris



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REAL MURDERS

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Chapter One

“Tonight I want to tell you about that most fascinating of murder mysteries, the Wallace case,” I told my mirror Enthusiastically.

I tried Sincere after that; then Earnest.

My brush caught in a tangle. “Shoot!” I said, and tried again.

“I think the Wallace case can easily fill our whole program tonight,” I said Firmly.

We had twelve regular members, which worked out well with twelve programs a year. Not all cases could fill up a two-hour program, of course. Then the member responsible for presenting the Murder of the Month, as we jokingly called it, would have a guest speaker—someone from the police department in the city, or a psychologist who treated criminals, or the director of the local rape crisis center. Once or twice, we’d watched a movie.

But I’d come up lucky in the draw. There was more than enough material on the Wallace case, yet not so much that I’d be compelled to hurry over it. We’d allocated two meetings for Jack the Ripper. Jane Engle had taken one for the victims and the circumstances surrounding the crimes and Arthur Smith had taken another on the police investigation and the suspects. You can’t skimp Jack.

“The elements of the Wallace case are these,” I continued. “A man who called himself Qualtrough, a chess tournament, an apparently inoffensive woman named Julia Wallace, and of course the accused, her husband, William Herbert Wallace himself.” I gathered all my hair into a brown switch and debated whether to put it in a roll on the back of my head, braid it, or just fasten a band around it to keep it off my face. The braid. It made me feel artsy and intellectual. As I divided my hair into clumps, my eyes fell on the framed studio portrait of my mother she’d given me on my last birthday with an offhand, “You said you wanted one.” My mother, who looks a lot like Lauren Bacall, is at least five-foot six, elegant to her fingertips, and has built her own small real estate empire. I am four-foot eleven, wear big round tortoise-rimmed glasses, and have fulfilled my childhood dream by becoming a librarian. And she named me Aurora, though to a woman herself baptized Aida, Aurora may not have seemed so outrageous.

Amazingly, I love my mother.

I sighed, as I often do when I think of her, and finished braiding my hair with practiced speed. I checked my reflection in the big mirror; brown hair, brown glasses, brown eyes, pink cheeks— (artificial), and good skin (real). Since it was, after all, Friday night, I'd shucked my work clothes, a plain blouse and skirt, and opted for a snug white knit top and black slacks. Deciding I wasn't festive enough for William Herbert Wallace, I tied a yellow ribbon around the top of my braid and pulled on my yellow sweater.

A look at the clock told me it was finally time to go. I slapped on some lipstick, grabbed my purse, and bounded down the stairs. I glanced around the big den/dining/kitchen area that took up the back half of the ground floor of the townhouse. It was neat; I hate to come home to a messy place. I tracked down my notebook and located my keys, muttering facts about the Wallace case all the while. I had thought about xeroxing the indistinct old pictures of Julia Wallace's body and passing them out to show the murder scene, but I decided that would perhaps be ghoulish and certainly disrespectful to Mrs. Wallace.

A club like Real Murders seemed odd enough to people who didn't share our enthusiasms, without adding the charge of ghoulishness. We kept a low profile.

I flipped on the outside light as I shut the door. It was already dark this early in spring; we hadn't switched to daylight savings time yet. In the excellent light over the back door, my patio with its high privacy fence looked swept and clean, the rose trees in their big tubs just coming into bud.

"Heigh ho, heigh ho, it's off to crime I go," I hummed tunelessly, shutting the gate behind me. Each of the four townhouses "owns" two parking spaces: there are extra ones on the other side of the lot for company. My neighbor two doors down, Bankston Waites, was getting into his car, too.

"I'll see you there," he called. "I've got to pick up Melanie first."

"Okay, Bankston. Wallace tonight!"

"I know. We've been looking forward to it."

I started up my car, courteously letting Bankston leave the lot first on his way to pick up his lady fair. It did cross my mind to feel sorry for myself that Melanie Clark had a date and I always arrived at Real Murders by myself, but I didn't want to get all gloomy. I would see my friends and have as good a Friday night as I usually had. Maybe better.

As I backed up I noticed that the townhouse next to mine had bright windows and an unfamiliar car was parked in one of its assigned spaces. So that was what Mother's message taped to my back door had meant.

She'd been urging me to get an answering machine, since the townhouse tenants (her tenants) might need to leave me (the resident manager) messages while I was at work at the library. Actually, I believe my mother just wanted to know she could talk to me while I wasn't even home.

I'd had the townhouse next door cleaned after the last tenants left. It had been in perfect condition to show, I reassured myself. I'd go meet the new neighbor tomorrow, since it was my Saturday off.

I drove up Parson Road far enough to pass the library where I worked, then turned left to get to the area of small shops and filling stations where the VFW Hall was. I was mentally rehearsing all the way.

But I might as well have left my notes at home.

Chapter Two

Real Murders met in the VFW Hall and paid the Veterans a small fee for the privilege. The fee went into a fund for the annual VFW Christmas party, so everyone was pleased with our arrangement. Of course the building was much larger than a little group like Real Murders needed, but we did like the privacy.

A VFW officer would meet a club member at the building thirty minutes before the meeting and unlock it. That club member was responsible for restoring the room to the way we'd found it and returning the key after the meeting. This year the "opening" member was Mamie Wright, since she was vice president. She would arrange the chairs in a semicircle in front of the podium and set up the refreshments table. We rotated bringing the refreshments.

I got there early that evening. I get almost everywhere early.

There were already two cars in the parking lot, which was tucked behind the small building and had a landscaped screening of crepe myrtles, still grotesquely bare in the early spring. The arc lamps in the lot had come on automatically at dusk. I parked my Chevette under the glow of the lamp near the back door. Murder buffs are all too aware of the dangers of this world.

As I stepped into the hall, the heavy metal door clanged shut behind me. There were only five rooms in the building; the single door in the middle of the wall to my left opened into the big main room, where we held our meetings. The four doors to my right led into a small conference room, then the men's, the ladies', and, at the end of the corridor, a small kitchen. All the doors were shut, as usual, since propping them open required more tenacity than any of us were able to summon. The VFW Hall had been constructed to withstand enemy attack, we had decided, and those heavy doors kept the little building very quiet. Even now, when I knew from the cars outside that there were at least two people here, I heard nothing.

The effect of all those shut doors in that blank corridor was also unnerving. It was like a little beige tunnel, interrupted only by the pay phone mounted on the wall. I recalled once telling Bankston Waites that if that phone rang, I'd expect Rod Serling to be on the other end, telling me I had now entered the "Twilight Zone." I half smiled at the idea and turned to grasp the knob of the door to the big meeting room.

The phone rang.

~~I swung around and took two hesitant steps toward it, my heart banging against my chest. Still nothing moved in the silent building.~~

The phone rang again. My hand closed around it reluctantly.

“Hello?” I said softly, and then cleared my throat and tried again. “Hello,” I said firmly.

“May I speak to Julia Wallace, please?” The voice was a whisper.

My scalp crawled. “What?” I said shakily.

“Julia...” whispered the caller.

The other phone was hung up.

I was still standing holding the receiver when the door to the women’s room opened and Sally Allison came out.

I shrieked.

“God almighty, Roe, I don’t look that bad, do I?” Sally said in amazement.

“No, no, it’s the phone call...” I was very close to crying, and I was embarrassed about that. Sally was a reporter for the Lawrenceton paper, and she was a good reporter, a tough and intelligent woman in her late forties. Sally was the veteran of a runaway teenage marriage that had ended when the resulting baby was born. I’d gone to high school with that baby, named Perry, and now I worked with him at the library. I loathed Perry; but I liked Sally a lot, even if sometimes her relentless questioning made me squirm. Sally was one of the reasons I was so well prepared for my Wallace lecture.

Now she elicited all the facts about the phone call from me in a series of concise questions that led to a sensible conclusion; the call was a prank perpetrated by a club member, or maybe the child of a club member, since it seemed almost juvenile when Sally put it in her framework.

I felt somehow cheated, but also relieved.

Sally retrieved a tray and a couple of boxes of cookies from the small conference room. She’d deposited them there, she explained, when she entered and suddenly felt the urgency of the two cups of coffee she’d had after supper.

“I didn’t even think I could make it across the hall into the big room,” she said with a roll of her tan eyes.

“How’s life at the newspaper?” I asked, just to keep Sally talking while I got over my shock.

I couldn’t dismiss the phone call as lightly and logically as Sally. As I trailed after her into the big meeting room, half listening to her account of a fight she’d had with the new publisher, I could still taste the metallic surge of adrenaline in my mouth. My arms had goosepimples, and I pulled my sweater tightly around me.

~~As she arranged the cookies on her tray, Sally began telling me about the election that would be held to select someone to fill out the term of our unexpectedly deceased mayor. “He keeled over right in his office, according to his secretary,” she said casually as she realigned a row of Oreos. “And after having been mayor only a month! He’d just gotten a new desk.” She shook her head, regretting the loss of the mayor or the waste of the desk, I wasn’t sure which.~~

“Sally,” I said before I knew I was going to, “where’s Mamie?”

“Who cares?” Sally asked frankly. She cocked one surprised eyebrow at me.

I knew I should laugh, since Sally and I had discussed our mutual distaste of Mamie before, but it didn’t bother. I was beginning to be irritated with Sally, standing there looking sensible and attractive in her curly bronze permanent, her well-worn expensive suit, and her well-worn expensive shoes.

“When I pulled in the parking lot,” I said quite evenly, “there were two cars, yours and Mamie’s. I recognized Mamie’s, because she’s got a Chevette like mine, but white instead of blue. So you are here and I am here, but where is Mamie?”

“She’s set the chairs up right and made the coffee,” Sally said after looking around. “But I don’t see her purse. Maybe she ran home for something.”

“How’d she get past us?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Sally was beginning to sound irritated with me, too. “She’ll show up. She always does!”

And we both laughed a little, trying to lose our displeasure with each other in our amusement at Mamie Wright’s determination to go to everything her husband attended, be in every club he joined, share his life to the fullest.

Bankston Waites and his light of love, Melanie Clark, came in as I put my notebook on the podium and slid my purse underneath it. Melanie was a clerk at Mamie’s husband’s insurance office, and Bankston was a loan officer at Associated Second Bank. They’d been dating about a year, having become interested in each other at Real Murders meetings, though they’d gone through Lawrenceton High School together a few years ahead of me without striking any sparks.

Bankston’s mother had told me last week in the grocery store that she was expecting an interesting announcement from the couple any day. She made a particular point of telling me that, since I’d gone out with Bankston a few times over a year ago, and she wanted me to know he was going to be out of circulation. If she was waiting in suspense for that interesting announcement, she was the only one. There wasn’t anyone in Lawrenceton Bankston and Melanie’s age left for them to marry, except each other. Bankston was thirty-two, Melanie a year or two older. Bankston had scanty blond hair, a pleasant round face, and mild blue eyes; he was Mr. Average. Or at least he had been; I noticed for the first time that his shoulder and arm muscles were bulging underneath his shirt sleeves.

“Have you been lifting weights, Bankston?” I asked in some amazement. I might have been more interested if he’d shown that much initiative when I’d dated him.

~~He looked embarrassed but pleased. “Yeah, can you tell a difference?”~~

“I certainly can,” I said with genuine admiration. It was hard to credit Melanie Clark with being the motivation for such a revolutionary change in Bankston’s sedentary life, but undoubtedly she was. Perhaps her absorption in him could be all the more complete since she had no family to claim her devotion. Her parents, both “only” children, had been dead for years—her mother from cancer, her father hit by a drunk driver.

Right now Melanie the motivator was looking miffed.

“What do you think about all this, Melanie?” I asked hastily.

Melanie visibly relaxed when I acknowledged her proprietorship. I made a mental note to speak carefully around her, since Bankston lived in one of “my” townhouses. Melanie must surely know Bankston and I had gone out together and it would be too easy for her to build something incorrect out of a landlady-tenant relationship.

“Working out’s done wonders for Bankston,” she said neutrally. But there was an unmistakable cast to her words. Melanie wanted me to get a specific message, that she and Bankston were having sex. I was a little shocked at her wanting me to know that. There was a gleam in her eyes that made me realize Melanie had banked fires under her sedate exterior. Under the straight dark hair conservatively cut, under the plain dress, Melanie was definitely feeling her oats. Her hips and bosom were heavy, but suddenly I saw them as Bankston must, as fertility symbols instead of liabilities. And I had a further revelation; not only were Bankston and Melanie having sex, they were having it often and exotically.

I looked at Melanie with more respect. Anyone who could pull the wool over the collective eye of Lawrenceton as effectively as Melanie had earned it.

“There was a phone call before you got here,” I began, and they focused on me with interest. But before I could tell them about it, I heard a luscious ripple of laughter from the opening door. My friend Lizanne Buckley came in, accompanied by a very tall red-haired man. Seeing Lizanne here was a surprise. Lizanne didn’t read a book from one year to the next, and her hobbies, if she had any, did not include crime.

“What on earth is she doing here?” Melanie said. She seemed really put out, and I decided we had here another Mamie Wright in the making.

Lizanne (Elizabeth Anna) Buckley was the most beautiful woman in Lawrenceton. Without Lizanne exerting herself in the slightest (and she never did) men would throw themselves on the floor for her to saunter on; and saunter she would, calm and smiling, never looking down. She was kind, in her passive, lazy way; and she was conscientious, so long as not too much was demanded of her. Her job as receptionist and phone answerer at the Power and Light Company was just perfect for her—an

for the utility company. Men paid their bills promptly and smilingly, and anyone who got huffy over the telephone was immediately passed to someone higher on the totem pole. No one ever sustained a huff in person. It was simply impossible for ninety percent of the population to remain angry in Lizanne’s presence.

~~But she required constant entertainment from her dates, and the tall red-haired man with the beaky nose and wire-rimmed glasses seemed to be making heavy weather of it.~~

“Do you know who he is, the man with Lizanne?” I asked Melanie.

“You don’t recognize him?” Melanie’s surprise was a shade overdone.

So I was supposed to know him. I re-examined the newcomer. He was wearing slacks and a sport coat in light brown, and a plain white shirt; he had huge hands and feet, and his longish hair flew around his head in a copper nimbus. I had to shake my head.

“He’s Robin Crusoe, the mystery writer,” Melanie said triumphantly.

The insurance clerk beats the librarian in her own bailiwick.

“He looks different without the pipe in his mouth,” John Queensland said from behind my right shoulder. John, our wealthy real-estate-rich president, was immaculate as usual; an expensive suit, a white shirt, his creamy white hair smooth and the part sharp as an arrow. John had become more interesting to me when he’d started dating my mother. I felt there must be substance below the stuffed-shirt exterior. After all, he was a Lizzie Borden expert...and he believed she was innocent! A true romantic, though he hid it well.

“So what’s he doing here?” I asked practically. “With Lizanne.”

“I’ll find out,” said John promptly. “I should greet him anyway, as club president. Of course visitors are welcome, though I don’t believe we’ve ever had any before.”

“Wait, I need to tell you about this phone call,” I said quickly. The newcomer had distracted me. “When I came in a few minutes ago—”

But Lizanne had spotted me and was swaying over to our little group, her semi-famous escort in tow.

“Roe, I brought you all some company tonight,” Lizanne said with her agreeable smile. And she introduced us all around with facility, since Lizanne knows everyone in Lawrenceton. My hand was engulfed in the writer’s huge boney one, and he really shook it, too. I liked that; I hate it when people just kind of press your hand and let it drop. I looked up and up at his crinkly mouth and little hazel eyes, and I just liked him altogether.

“Roe, this is Robin Crusoe, who just moved to Lawrenceton,” Lizanne said. “Robin, this is Roe Teagarden.”

He gave me an appreciative smile but he was with Lizanne, so I realistically built nothing on that.

“I thought Robin Crusoe was a pseudonym,” Bankston murmured in my ear.

“I did too,” I whispered, “but apparently not.”

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