



RUTH BUCHANAN

Murder on Birchardville Hill

THIS CHRISTMAS, THERE'LL BE
NO SILENT NIGHT

Murder on
Birchardville
Hill

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*Stop and see as you pass by,
As you are now, so once was I.
As I am now, so you will be,
Prepare for death and follow me.*

On the headstone of
Betsey E.
WIFE OF
Elisha H. Warren
DIED
Apr. 9, 1862
Aged 56 years
Birchardville Cemetery, Est. 1812

1

Birchardville is real.

Not that I believed it at first. I mean... Birchardville. It sounded like the name of a small town in a book about a girl who moves from the big city to find love. Not that I read books like that.

But in my experience, my listeners hardly ever sent hoaxes. I stood before the map above my desk, hunting for the right place to stick the pin. When I couldn't immediately spot Birchardville, Pennsylvania, I resorted to an online search. Even with the help of the Internet, I couldn't confirm that Birchardville was an actual town, though I did find record of a Birchardville Cemetery near the quaint-sounding Cobb Hill Road. A quick zoom on the interactive map revealed a Birchardville Church and a Birchardville Hill Road.

OK. So.

Birchardville.

Not made up.

But the online map bore no flags to indicate points of interest: no restaurants, no gas stations, no libraries, no schools—nothing. Just gray space. I zoomed out to locate the nearest town and checked it against the postmark on the mailing envelope. Bingo. Although my name on the address label—*Morgan Scott, c/o*

USUAL SUSPECTS—had been penned in a flowing pseudo-calligraphy, the return address was printed in a tidy, boyish scrawl. And sure enough, it was postmarked from Montrose.

I turned back to the map. Using Montrose as a guide, I stuck a pin in the approximation of Birchardville. I then snapped a photo of the map and posted it to my Vibe account—“Shout out to *The Usual Suspects* in PA—is Birchardville for real?”

I tossed the mailing envelope containing the fan-compiled case onto the crooked stack of papers next to my computer, making a mental note to dig into it over the weekend. Hopefully it would be interesting enough to distract me from the fact that I’d be spending the upcoming holidays alone.

My computer pinged. I’d forgotten to close Vibe after I’d posted my update, and the comments and responses from the show’s fans were already rolling in. Not wanting to contemplate how many might be from Bev Pickett and her various accounts, I closed the page. I didn’t have to worry about Bev Pickett any more. Not really. That’s why I’d hired my assistant Leah. My crazy, middle-aged stalker wasn’t going to block herself.

As much as I hated the nonstop Internet culture, connecting with fans kept the audience engaged. And an engaged audience bought books. Books that paid for my research trips and—ironically—helped me afford Leah.

Hired only within the last few weeks on recommendation from a longtime friend, Leah Archer had already proven herself a Godsend. Working remotely from her home, she answered standard online questions when I was traveling or too busy

writing episodes to interact online. She sorted my incoming e-mail, monitored ongoing cases, and forwarded me pertinent details. Most importantly, she agreed to sift the dregs of social media and send any suspicious activity on my account to my contact at the local cyber-crimes unit.

Although we're still in the honeymoon phase of her employment, I'm fully sold on the idea of a remote assistant. All the joys of less computer time with no forced social interaction.

After closing Vibe, I padded to the kitchen, the slap of my flip-flops echoing against the high ceilings. On nights like these, I almost regretted the upgrade to a full-blown house. Ironic, considering how long I'd longed for a home of my own.

But living in a house was different from what I'd expected. Instead of feeling independent, I felt isolated. Instead of enjoying privacy, I felt alone.

Friends from church kept tabs on me, of course. They called and texted and sometimes stopped by. But it wasn't the same as when Mom and Dad Scott had been alive. Writing and recording shows in the morning, lunch at noon, an afternoon dip in the pool, then research until dinner and a quiet walk in the dark before bed. This was my life now.

I padded toward the kitchen. With every step, the slap of my flip-flops beat a mantra against the tile: alone, a-lone, a-lone, a-lone.

I couldn't bear the thought of another solo meal. Jogging back to the study, I nabbed the mailing envelope from the top of the stack. Perhaps the lure of a nineteenth-century Pennsylvania murder would pull me from my funk.

Flipping the manila mailer onto the counter, I

opened the rice cooker and lifted out the attachment, dumping the steamed vegetables into one bowl before scooping rice into another. I swiped a spoon from the dish rack and upended the packet, spilling paper and home-printed photos across the counter.

Ten minutes later, I placed the spoon across the empty bowl, pulled my phone from my back pocket, and composed a quick text to Leah.

I need you to book me a trip.

2

The palm trees waved against a balmy sunset as my flight took off from Palm Beach. I clamped my headphones in place, tugged my sleep mask over my eyes, and willed myself to rest.

I don't know what I'd been expecting, but Scranton came as a shock—the airport tiny and the air biting cold. Flying into a tiny regional airport had one benefit, though. I made it from the plane to my rental within ten minutes.

Although the car came equipped with dashboard GPS, Leah had cautioned that I probably wouldn't receive much of a signal once lost in the Endless Mountains. She'd also warned against stopping to ask for directions, claiming that a woman of my plain looks and small stature was practically begging to be kidnapped. In her infinite wisdom, Leah had prepared turn-by-turn directions ahead of time, along with a confirmation number for my StayAway rental.

Feeling like a time-traveler, I dug my notebook from my backpack, flipped to the proper page, and studied the route. Confident I'd remember the turns, I tossed the notebook onto the passenger's seat and reversed at snail speed, wary of black ice. I wasn't entirely sure what black ice was, but someone had warned me about it. I thought it best to take precautions.

Though the GPS cut out a time or two—especially

west of Montrose—it stayed connected at the critical moments. As it turned out, I should have been less worried about the driving directions and more concerned about the actual driving.

I'd learned to drive late, as many foster kids do. I'd also learned to drive in Florida, where streets were laid out in parallel North-South, East-West grids. A place where everything was flat and nothing froze. While the twists and turns of the Endless Mountains weren't the steepest, they were steeper than anything I'd tackled. Plus ice. And possibly bears.

Hitting a bear would do some damage to the rental—although I was much more likely to hit a deer, apparently. I'd already spotted several along the road, their glassy eyes shimmering in the glare of the headlights.

I took my time. When vehicles roared up behind me, I pulled over and let them pass. But I needn't have worried. Once off I-81, I encountered no traffic of any kind. Which, though unnerving, really shouldn't have surprised me. It was, after all, the middle of the night and the middle of nowhere.

Leah had hardly been able to believe her luck in finding a StayAway rental out here. Although I couldn't imagine who would bother venturing that far into the boondocks. Maybe writers on crazy deadlines or people in witness protection, Leah had suggested in an e-mail.

When I'd first read those words—snug in my Florida kitchen—they'd had a different effect than they did now, as I drove down a deserted highway in the dark.

My navigation system pinged, signaling a left turn. I spun the wheel to comply, easing from Route

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267 onto a sharply inclined gravel lane. The sweep of headlights illuminated a row of choppy headstones. Behind them, starkly white against the black, loomed a white clapboard church, steeple stabbing skyward.

Birchardville was real, and I had arrived.

3

Pat Martin wasn't what I'd expected. For one thing, she looked older than Birchardville itself. Yet she'd posted a rental on StayAway—a rental with multiple five-star reviews. Still. She looked like the sort of person who wouldn't know the Internet existed.

She must have been waiting to greet me, because as soon as I pulled in, she came tapping down the stone steps, leaning on a cane. At the sight of me, she cocked her head back and sucked her teeth. "You don't look like a Morgan."

She was right. My current name gave no hint of my Asian-American ethnicity. I'd been born Chen Meifeng—or Meifeng Chen as my American documents read, listing my family name second in the Western way. My birth parents must have loved me—why else would they have named me Beautiful Wind (美风)? But they'd died in a car crash before I was two, leaving fire fighters to extract me from a mangled twist of metal. As an only child of only children whose parents had died young, I was left alone. No relatives came from China to claim me.

Eventually, to save everyone trouble, I chose a Western name. After spending my grade school years bouncing from foster home to foster home and school to school, it just seemed easier than teaching everyone to pronounce my birth name. "My name's Meifeng, but you can call me Morgan," I used to say. A nice, plain

American name. The name of a child you might want to adopt as a sister to your sons and daughters. Only that's not what happened.

When I was seventeen, Mom and Dad Scott finally adopted me. They'd urged me to keep my given name, insisting that Meifeng was part of me and that keeping the name would honor the ones who had given me life.

I didn't agree. At that point, it just seemed easier to leave Meifeng behind.

But all this seemed a bit much to explain to an elderly stranger on a cold December night. I met Pat Martin's narrowed gaze and shrugged. "Sorry." I wasn't sure what I was apologizing for, but I didn't want her to think I was offended. Because I wasn't. After what I'd put up with over the years, it would have taken a lot to offend me.

She sniffed. "I've seen worse."

Which could mean anything. I definitely had questions.

"I'm eight-two," she informed me, unsolicited, as we mounted the rough stone steps toward her porch. A cheery strip of white twinkle lights hung from the eaves, and another set outlined her front door. She half turned and regarded me over a bony shoulder through bug-eye glasses. "I keep spry."

She must. Hiking these steps was a workout in itself.

"Over there's the garage." She jabbed her cane toward a dark hump off to the right. "But you'll need to leave your rental in the drive. I've got mine parked in there." She thrust the cane the other direction. "Over there's the woodshed, down there's the old mill, and that way's the woods." Cackling at this last remark, she swung her cane in a wide, 180-degree arc to encompass

the dark mass of trees marching up the hill behind the house. Her heel slipped, and she jammed the cane into the ground, glaring as if the two had conspired against her. "Don't just stand there," she barked, shooting another look back at me. "It's cold out here."

No kidding. But it wasn't my fault she'd come down to greet me without a coat. Following her up the steps, I had no choice but to carry my small rolling suitcase. My breath rose in white clouds as I panted. It was all very surreal.

"Shoes off!" she barked as I stepped over the threshold. "Always shoes off! I don't want you tracking anything onto my carpet!"

I slipped off my boots. My toes curled against the cold floor. Since she didn't seem to keep a set of slippers for guests, I leaned down, unzipped the outside flap of my suitcase, and tugged out my flip-flops. Too cold to remove my socks, I jammed the straps between my toes and let the thick fabric bunch up.

Pat Martin observed me through slit-like eyes.

"They're house shoes," I assured her. The Florida version, anyway.

"Oh." Her eyebrows arched, her forehead crumpling into an accordion of creases. "They're *house shoes*." She *harrumphed* and poked her cane toward a darkened stairway headed down. "That way's your room." The cane swung the opposite direction toward a set of stairs leading up into the black. "That's me."

So it was a split level. I nodded, gripping the handle of my carry-on and heading down. The cane slid in front of me like the arm to a revolving gate.

Pat Martin inclined her head toward the ascending staircase. "Business first."

I left my bag and followed her up the steps into a cozy kitchen. She set a kettle on the stove and plunked down at the tiny table, gesturing toward the chair opposite her. She slid a sheaf of papers toward me. Leah had warned me about this.

“Since you weren’t the one who made the reservations, I saved these ’til you got here.”

I skimmed the list. No loud music. No pets. No smoking or drinking alcohol indoors. No members of the opposite sex on the premises after nine o’clock.

Whom did this woman think I’d bring in? This was Birchardville, Pennsylvania. According to Leah, the entire town had only a few hundred residents, and some of those were probably cows.

I scrawled my name at the bottom and pushed the papers toward her.

Pat Martin leaned forward and studied my signature as if it contained some hidden code. Then she set the papers on the table, slapped them with the flat of her palm, and nodded once. “If you want a hot breakfast, you’ll have to be up here by seven.”

She didn’t seem to be joking. It was probably pointless to remind her that this was my Christmas vacation.

When I nodded, she cackled, her eyes disappearing into crow’s feet so deep you could have sounded them with a depth charge. “Don’t worry. If you oversleep, you can just get breakfast at The Olde Birchardville Store.” She eyed me appraisingly. “You’ll be headed down that way anyway.”

I would? This was news.

She cackled again. “That’s where the Wi-Fi is.”



Eight thirty the next morning found me picking my way down the lane toward The Olde Birchardville Store, which Pat had assured me was just across from the church and therefore “unmissable.” We would see about that.

I walked lightly, reveling in the delicate crunch of snow under my boots. The sound was almost like walking on fresh sand, only more palpable. I slowed, lowering my feet from heel to toe, savoring the slow, crisp crunch. Why was this so enjoyable?

Following Pat’s instructions and heading straight down gravel drive toward Route 267, I passed Birchardville Church and its accompanying cemetery on my right. Beyond the church sat a large, tumble-down barn with a pickup truck parked out front. To my left, the woods stretched away into rolling hills. My breath rose in soft clouds. Although it was only a two- or three-minute walk, I already regretted not wearing the hat Pat had set out for me: a hand-knitted purple number with tie-down ear flaps and a giant red pom-pom on the top. I’d worried that it would make me look silly, but if it could keep my ears from turning to ice chips and dropping off my head, I’d resign myself to drawing laughs from the locals. After all, I’d only be here a few days. Who cared what sort of impression I made?

I crossed the street and approached The Olde Birchardville Store, passing a set of bright red, old-timey gas pumps. I mounted three shallow wooden steps and pulled open the door. Honestly, I’d half expected that my entrance would be greeted by the kind of silence evidenced in old Westerns when a stranger swings through the saloon doors and

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everyone stops talking and stares.
That's not what happened.
Instead, a bell fell on my head.

4

It wasn't just one bell, either. It was a strip of jingle bells, no doubt tacked up for the holiday season.

For one crazy moment, I thought someone had thrown something at me. It wasn't until the bells clanked from my shoulder to the floor that I realized what had happened.

So much for being inconspicuous. I lifted my hand to press against what felt like a dent in my scalp. A giant bobble would have saved me from that.

The interior of The Olde Birchardville Store was unexpected. While one wall held shelves stocked with small snacks typically found in a gas station, the other was lined with a lunch counter. Or, as the case may be, a breakfast counter. Small tables and chairs clustered down the center gave the store a small-town-diner feel. Which, I suppose, was accurate.

Intent on their coffee, eggs, and conversation, none of the locals even glanced my way. The only person who made eye contact was a skinny teenage kid in a red hoodie behind the counter. Straight, tall, and stringy, he sported the largest blond puff-ball of a hairstyle I'd ever seen.

Our gaze locked, and his eyes lit in an irresistible spark. "Hey!" He waved me toward the counter as if we were old friends. "You're here!" His hair drifted angelically, a soft blond nimbus.

That got heads turning.

A man sitting along the counter actually swiveled

all the way around in his seat. "What's got Reed so worked up?"

"When is Reed not worked up?" A youngish man with an impressive mustache lifted his coffee mug and sipped. He caught my eye and smiled. At least, I think he smiled. His mustache shifted, anyway.

The boy in the hoodie gazed at me as I approached the bar. The sparks from his eyes could have powered a small city. They must not get many visitors to Birchardville. What else would explain this boy's glee? He must be dying for a brush with the outside world. Aiming to give him a thrill, I slid onto the stool directly in front of him, flipping the strip of bells onto the counter with a mild jingle.

"Hey, Reed," I said, not even cracking a smile.

"I can't believe it." He hopped on his toes. The tips of his fuzzy curls waved like the tentacles of excited, airborne sea anemone. "You know my *name*."

This was way more exuberance than I'd been expecting. Apparently my face rang a bell—and not just literally. I paused, recalibrating. Should I remind this kid that someone had just now said his name out loud?

Or, wait—maybe he was my mysterious packet-sender. I had fans of all ages, but the packet had been so professional that I'd just assumed it had been sent by an adult.

The boy lifted the divider and passed to the front of the counter, talking all the while. "Wow—I didn't think you'd actually come. But as soon as you sent out that message on Vibe about Birchardville, I started asking Pat Martin if you'd booked her StayAway room. She said bookings were confidential, so she couldn't tell me. But here you are." He laughed—a high,

delighted chortle.

Goodness. My packet sender for sure. Still, my stomach dipped. I hated being recognized. "You seem pretty confident you know who I am."

He grinned, reached for the hem of his hoodie, and jerked it over his head. On the way up, it pulled at the T-shirt underneath, exposing a strip of pale, bony mid-section. He held onto the hem of his shirt with one hand as he emerged, flushing, from the hoodie. He draped it over the counter, tugged down his tee, and gave me a double thumbs-up. Emblazoned across the front was the logo for *The Usual Suspects*.

The logo—an icon I used on my social media profiles and book's dust jacket instead of a head shot. It wasn't often I was recognized on sight. Still. This kid had put it together.

"You got me," I told him.

He grinned and jammed himself back into his hoodie, skinny elbows flailing. "I can't believe it. I listen to you every week. And I just got this shirt. I asked for it for Christmas, and Uncle Levi went ahead and gave it to me as soon as it came in because he said I might as well enjoy it while I'm here. Mom probably won't let me wear it. She hates your show. She says it reminds her too much of—"

"Easy, Reed," said the man with the mustache, his voice rumbling. "Don't want to scare her off."

"Scare her off?" Reed whirled, gaping. "Do you know who this is?" He turned to the room at large. "This is Morgan Scott, the syndicated crime podcaster!"

Forks clinked against plates. Someone coughed. A low-voiced hum rose as conversations resumed. I took two slow, even breaths. No need to panic. I could

handle this.

Reed raised his voice. “She started out as a local crime reporter, so she totally knows how to do her own research. She travels and takes interviews. She coordinates with local, state, and federal authorities and has been instrumental in bringing attention to under-investigated crimes. She wrote *Sins of a Father*.” Reed hopped on his toes, clearly frustrated as this announcement, too, was met with silence. “The book about Mitchell Charles David Johnson—you know the *Florida Family Annihilator*. She covered his trial for the paper and later wrote a book about him...and he hates her.” More silence. “You know, Mitchell Charles David Johnson. The Florida man who killed his whole family, chopped them up, and tossed the pieces into the Everglades hoping the alligators would eat them.” This description, though accurate, was met with coughs, groans, and requests that Reed stop ruining breakfast by talking about body parts.

“Anyway, that’s who this is.” He flung his arms toward me, showcasing me as if we were on a game show. “Morgan Scott’s never been scared of anything.”

Which wasn’t true. I was scared of many things, Mitchell Charles David Johnson included. But it didn’t seem the moment to unburden myself to strangers. Also, half of what Reed said came straight from my podcast opener, which he’d clearly memorized. He really was a fan.

“Hmm, syndicated.” The man with the mustache pronounced the word in tones of mock awe. Shaking his head at Reed, he drained his cup, smoothed his mustache, and dropped some bills onto his table.

“Don’t mind him,” Reed assured me as the mustached man shrugged into his coat and jammed a