

# MURDER AT MERRILL 220

A  
TEXT-ADVENTURE  
MYSTERY  
BY  
JEANIE FRANZ RANSOM

B

uddy Anderson couldn't wait to get home.

He knew there had been a murder, and tonight he felt he finally had enough information to solve the crime and claim the \$100,000 reward.

Buddy burst into his small apartment, barely pausing to throw his overcoat on a hook by the door. He went immediately to his computer, which sat on a cluttered desk in the living room. Remnants of the previous evening surrounded the keyboard . . . crumpled wads of paper, clues provided with the text-adventure game, a pizza box with a few remaining hunks of cheese clinging to the inside cover.

He impatiently swept everything onto the floor. He wanted nothing to get in the way of the game tonight.

He was so close, after weeks of working on it night after night. He had thought about the game all day as



Fresh

he went through the motions of fixing engines and changing tires at Rod's Body Shop. It was while he was installing a new muffler on a customer's car that the answer hit him. It was so obvious. He couldn't wait to wash his hands of the day's drudge and grime and escape into the game.

Buddy sat down at his desk and turned on the computer. The monitor displayed the name of the text-adventure game: MURDER AT 220 MERRILL.

He impatiently scrolled past all the background information he had seen a hundred times before. The information established his character as Detective Harry Honcho. He had been called to the scene of a murder at 220 Merrill, the imposing home of millionaire Dutch Langdorf, who had made his fortune selling gold on the commodities exchange. Now Langdorf was dead, with only his wife, Veronica, and their pet poodle, Fluff, surviving.

Buddy had already been to the Langdorf house many times—via computer, of course. As Detective Harry Honcho, he had questioned Veronica, searched the house, even talked to the servants and made friends with Fluff. He had gathered many important clues along the way, and acquired a kit that was designed to tell real gold from fake gold—if he ever got near any. But until now, Buddy had never had quite enough clues or information to solve the murder . . . the murder that would award him \$100,000 from the software manufacturers if he could solve it. Buddy just needed a little more time, a little more information. He knew that tonight was the night . . . he could almost smell that \$100,000.

Buddy continued to scroll through the text, until he reached the part where Harry Honcho was on the driveway in front of the towering mansion, set on 18 acres so lushly landscaped you would swear it was a national park. This was where Buddy always hit "N" on the keyboard, advancing Harry to the front door, where he would be admitted by the Langdorfs' rather forbidding German maid. But tonight, Buddy decided to try a different avenue. He pushed "W" and the RETURN key. The monitor read, YOU CANNOT GO THAT WAY. DO NOT PRESS "W" AGAIN! Buddy pressed "W" again, more insistently this time. The monitor read, ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT TO DO THIS? Buddy typed YES and pressed RETURN.

Suddenly, he felt his fingertips tingling, and a black veil descended over his eyes. He tried to fight the cloud that was making it impossible to think. He closed his eyes and the room careened sickeningly. Everything went blank.

Buddy awoke with a foreign object quite rudely poking his back. He was staring straight up into the night, with the moon staring right back at him. How had he gotten outside? He knew he wasn't dreaming, and he hadn't even had a beer before sitting down at the computer.

Buddy rolled to one side and reached behind him to find the object of his discomfort. It was a knife. Horrified, he sat straight up and saw a dark form lying near some bushes several yards away. Cautiously, he crept over to the still shape. It was a person, and by the light of the moon, the face matched the description he

---

JEANIE FRANZ RANSOM has written for *Seventeen*, *Sunday Woman*, and the *Detroit Free Press*. This winter, she and her husband are planning to write their own adventure game. This is the first piece of fiction she has published.

knew so well from playing the game . . . it was Detective Harry Honcho.

But Harry wasn't dead yet. As Buddy leaned over him, Harry forced open his eyes and gasped, "Come closer." Buddy wasn't sure he wanted to, but his curiosity got the better of him.

Harry struggled to speak. "I got too close to the answer. But somebody's gotta solve this murder . . . the final clue is in my coat pocket . . ." Harry's sentence trailed off as he bubbled his last breath.

Buddy looked around frantically. This couldn't be happening! And then he saw the unmistakable Tudor mansion in the eerie moonlight and knew . . . somehow he had gotten inside the *220 Merrill* text-adventure game. But how? Then he remembered pressing the forbidden key. Now what was he to do?

Buddy remembered Harry's last words and dug a piece of paper from his coat pocket. It was a candy bar wrapper. He looked again, and found another piece of paper. Examining it under the light of the moon, he saw it was a map. It was a clue he hadn't found in the game before . . . the final clue he needed to wrap up the mystery. Buddy had already figured out that Langdorf had met his messy fate because he had been caught selling fake gold bars to some very important businessmen who didn't appreciate that kind of thing. But Buddy hadn't yet figured out who had actually killed Langdorf, and where the real gold bars were.

**H**

was distracted by a sudden blaze of light from the ominous dark house. It was late now, and he assumed Veronica Langdorf and the servants had gone to sleep long ago. Buddy ventured closer to the house and saw a woman through the open upstairs window. He watched as she disappeared, then returned with clothes heaped in her arms. She must be filling a suitcase, and a very large one at that. It could only be one person, Veronica Langdorf. She mustn't get away—not before Buddy could follow the map.

On a hunch, Buddy ran toward the rear of the house and found the garage. There was only one car inside . . . a powder-blue Mercedes. With expert hands, he popped the hood and tinkered around for a few moments. Veronica Langdorf wouldn't be going anywhere in this car.

Buddy jumped as he heard a door slam. Veronica must be on her way out. He ran from the garage, heading blindly for the back of the house. As he reached the safety of a series of tall, square hedges, he paused to look at the map once more. He was startled to see hedges on the map much like those he was crouching next to. They were arranged in a maze, with a giant "X" marked inside one of the corridors.

Buddy knew he didn't have much time before Veronica would discover her car trouble and start looking around the grounds. He sprinted toward the entrance to the maze and ran up and down the vast corridors, his breath ragged in his throat. He kept glancing at the map as he ran, trying not to stumble. A wrong turn here . . . a dead end there . . . he heard the agonized wheeze of the Mercedes' tortured engine. It was only a matter of minutes now.

Buddy turned and stumbled, falling with a slam against the ground. He pulled himself up, ready to continue, then thought of looking down to see what

had caused him to trip. He felt around the clipped grass and found an edge with his fingers. Dropping to his knees, he pulled on the sod. It came away in one neat hunk to reveal a steel door with a handle.

Buddy yanked on the handle. Nothing happened. He summoned up all his strength and pulled harder. The door flew open, revealing a spray of light that almost blinded him. Poking his head inside, he thought he was hallucinating. Bars upon bars of gold were stacked from floor to ceiling in a room directly beneath him, with corridors stretching into darkness beyond. Was this the real gold? There was only one way to find out.

Buddy pushed his feet through the opening and dropped to the floor below, his soles stinging from landing on the concrete. Just as he was pulling out the gold test kit provided with the game, he heard a noise above him and looked up into the grinning face of Veronica Langdorf. She had always been described in the game as resembling a battleship, but close up, she looked more like 10 battleships. Her round, fleshy face was flushed from hanging upside down as she peered through the opening.

**W**hat are you doing here?" Her voice echoed in the underground chamber. "Not that it matters. You won't get out of here alive, or rich!" Her face disappeared for a brief moment and then Buddy saw with horror that she was preparing to drop down to the floor beside him. He turned to pick up a gold bar for protection as she landed with a solid "thwunk"—too close for comfort.

"Ah, I see you found the real gold!" Veronica smiled with teeth that revealed even more gold. "But it's all mine now. A reward for working for my husband all these years. You think I killed him, don't you?" She hooked one thin eyebrow at him.

In fact, at first Buddy had thought she'd done it, but that was too obvious. The answer was just a shade less so. He managed to stammer out an answer, watching her warily. "No, I think someone else killed him for you, so you wouldn't have to soil your lily-white hands. I know you were the one who filled all the orders for gold . . . but you substituted fake gold, bit by bit, hiding the genuine article for yourself. Your poor husband never knew he was dealing in fake commodities . . . until somebody got mad enough to kill him!"

Veronica smiled. "That's right. You're a smart one, but not smart enough to live." She lunged toward him and he saw the gleam of a knife, the same type of knife he had found near Harry Honcho. Buddy managed to hurl the bar of gold he had been holding, throwing her bulky body momentarily off-guard. He turned and ran down the nearest corridor. It seemed like all he had done tonight was run for his life. And all he had wanted to do was finish playing his innocent little text-adventure game. He never thought it would become this real. Buddy vowed never to complain about the dullness of his job again.

Buddy heard heavy footsteps behind him as he reached a dead end. The dim light in the corridor was just enough to make out a door blocking his escape. He turned the handle, sure that it would be locked. Miraculously, it swung open.

The scene that greeted his eyes almost seared them with brightness. Gold bars filled the back of a large

delivery van, the door open as if somebody was in the middle of loading the cargo.

Buddy realized that *this* must be the real gold. Veronica had thrown him off with the stuff in the other room. He quickly got his gold test kit and climbed into the back of the truck to rub one of the gold bars with a special test paper. It was the real gold, all right. Hearing sounds in the corridor, he leapt from the truck, slammed the back door, and ran to the cab. There was no key, but that didn't stop him. He reached into his jeans pocket, pulling out a bit of wire left over from work, and quickly hot-wired the truck. The engine roared. Now he could get away with all this gold . . . and the \$100,000 prize money. He laughed until he realized he was still inside the game.

How could he get out? The old-fashioned *Wizard of Oz* trick of tapping shoes together and wishing for home wouldn't work in this new computer age. There was a large garage-type door between him and the outside, with no way to open it except with an electronic device . . . he could see the mechanism from where he sat. Just as he was ready to leave the relative safety of the truck, a face pressed against the window, hideous now. Veronica may not have killed her husband directly, but she certainly looked like she was going to kill Buddy all by herself. He saw the gun and threw his hands up in a futile attempt to shield himself. He heard an explosion and lights danced before his eyes, more brilliantly than a thousand gold bars. Buddy fell blissfully into unconsciousness, dark and cool.

Buddy awoke with a splitting headache. He was on the floor beside his computer. He felt his head gingerly, but there was only a bump. He looked around at the familiar surroundings, his old sofa, the empty pizza box. He was alive. What a nightmare, he thought. But then the full realization of last night's encounter came rushing back at him. Veronica had to be stopped . . . that dame belonged behind bars! Hands trembling, Buddy began to dial the Police Department. Then he remembered. It was only a game. And although he'd come close, he still hadn't gotten the name of the murderer. Veronica had been too smart . . . too smart for all of them.

Still, maybe he could call the software manufacturer, tell what he knew about Veronica, and collect half the prize money. He could sure buy a lot of beer and pizza with \$50,000.

Buddy reached for the phone and dialed the software manufacturer. The line was busy. He paced around the living room and tried again.

When a pleasant woman's voice answered the phone, Buddy blurted out, "I'm calling in regards to the 220 *Merrill* murder. I don't have the exact name, but . . ." The woman interrupted him in midsentence.

"I'm sorry, sir, but someone's already solved that one—just this morning. In fact, we mailed out the check a few minutes ago."

"Could you tell me who solved it, please?" Buddy managed to stammer into the phone.

"Someone named Veronica Langdorf. Funny coincidence, huh?" The woman laughed lightly.

As Buddy fainted, he dimly heard her say, "Would you care to send for one of our *new* text-adventure games, sir?" No, Buddy thought, he had had enough excitement for a while. Maybe he would just stick with *Pac-Man*. ☐