

The First Two Pages: “Murder & Mystery: Live in Five” by K.C. Shelby
From *The Most Dangerous Games*, edited by Deborah Lacy (Level Best Books)

An Essay by K.C. Shelby

Writers are curious—and occasionally nosy. Our minds are constantly wandering and examining the world around us. It’s a helpful trait, as most of my story ideas can be traced back to a single question I had contemplated. Before writing “Murder & Mystery: Live in Five,” I’d been wondering how our technology would evolve in ten or twenty years. AI is dominating headlines, but I wanted to know what other changes we would see—those outside of AI, robots, and self-driving cars. What would our movies look like? Or television? And from that, the idea of virtual reality TV was born.

Now armed with a starting point, I needed a plot. No matter what genre I’m writing or reading, I love a good mystery, and for this story I knew I wanted that mystery to be surrounding a crime—preferably a murder. When I saw the call for *The Most Dangerous Games*, I knew the TV show involved would be a game show. It also needed to take place in the future to accommodate advancements in tech, and since most of my stories are set in the Midwest, I landed on Detroit in the year 2044.

With the premise and setting decided, I needed my cast. I often write character-driven stories, so my choice of protagonist is carefully considered. I

landed on Nova, an employee of the game show's production company. It's my hope that the reader will be just as invested in Nova's journey as in solving the crime. In the opening, we're introduced to her as she observes her co-worker, Lottie.

It's subtle. The small uptick of her lips. The slight increase in pace as her heels click against the carpet between our cubicles. The subtle hum emanating from her as if her body is quite literally running on its own happiness.

She has news. Good news.

When you've spent as long as I have without any of your own, you become an expert in witnessing it in others. Not that I won't be excited for her. I'll force my mouth into a smile. Maybe jump up and hug her—depending on the magnitude of the news. Tell her how happy I am for her while my ribs squeeze tight with envy.

"Morning, Lottie," I say when she reaches my desk.

"Nova," she says with a knowing smile, her fingers curled around the top of my cubicle wall.

It must be the promotion. It's not supposed to be announced for several weeks, but maybe they told her early. My chest burns and I tell myself it doesn't matter. There will be other opportunities.

I was hesitant to open with so much focus seemingly on a character other than our protagonist. However, my hope is we're still able to connect with Nova and get an immediate insight into her personality. Right away we know she's unhappy, we're just not sure why yet, and her unhappiness will be the driving force of her decisions throughout the story. And the envy she feels towards her coworker is hopefully an emotion we can all relate to.

We can also tell from the details Nova registers that she can be observant, a quality that will come into play during the game. Although, as we'll see in the next excerpt, Nova isn't attentive in all areas.

"Guess what?" she asks while bringing her left hand up before I can voice my prediction. "I'm engaged!"

Oh, right. Leo from the writers' room. "Congrats! Wow, that ring is beautiful."

"Thanks." She holds it out to look at it herself, the overhead lights causing it to glitter like a miniature disco ball. "I mean, I might have given him a little help. During our virtual trip to New York City last month, we stopped at a jeweler and Leo pointed out a pear cut. I told him I'd never be caught dead in it. That I was more of a princess girl myself."

I slip my hand over my own ring. A small—possibly fruit-shaped—diamond on a thin gold band. "Well, you both have great taste then."

Lottie lets out a satisfied sigh. "I feel like I'll be on cloud nine forever." She lets her hand down and turns back to me. "So, what's your best marriage advice?"

"Oh." I wave my hand in the space between us. "I'm probably not the best person to ask." I hope it sounds like a joke and I worry it's coming out bitter.

"You two must be doing something right. You recently celebrated your fifth anniversary, right?"

I swallow a lump in my throat. I can barely remember she's dating someone and here she is knowing what anniversary we just hit. If I asked Roman, would he even know?

A theme I wanted to touch on with this story was connection and how technology has shaped it. As our tech advances, the amount of in-person time we spend with each other declines. While in some ways, video conferencing allows us to socialize with people we wouldn't otherwise be able to connect with, sometimes we can get lost in our screens and miss out on the time with those around us.

Later, we'll see that Nova can be judgmental of those who get sucked into their screens, so in the above section I wanted to hint at one of her flaws with the fact that she forgot Lottie was dating another one of their coworkers. Being addicted to our devices isn't the only cause of disconnection.

Within these first two pages, I also wanted to begin to show how their world in 2044 looks with the mention of a virtual trip. I didn't want the overall feel of the story to be sci-fi, so I introduced it slowly with a few more details coming on the third page and building from there.

The last line of the above section is also the first suggestion on why Nova might be unhappy. Each time I bring this up, I want to give the reader a little more information. Not so much that they get the entire backstory at once and not so little as to frustrate them if they're not learning anything new. Her relationship issues become more apparent in the next section as she fumbles through some marital advice for Lottie before quickly changing the subject. With Lottie's response, we're introduced to our game, a murder mystery game show.

“Well, um, never go to bed angry.” Is this the best I've got? A clichéd piece of advice?

However, she's nodding her head, eager for more.

There's got to be something I can impart. “And communication is really the most important thing. Without that, it's hard to have a successful relationship.” It's not a lie at least, it truly is difficult without it. “So, are you two going out to celebrate?”

“We'll do something this weekend. Tonight we'll, of course, be watching the new *Murder and Mystery*.”

“Oh, right. First Wednesday of the month. Almost forgot.”

Lottie lets out a laugh. “I think that’s a fireable offense.”

I laugh too, as if I know it’s a joke and not an actual fear I’ve had. What would management say if they knew I’ve never plugged into a single show of ours? Roman does enough of that for the both of us.

The end of our first two pages leaves us with another clue about Nova and Roman’s marriage. Could a relationship where only one side lives mostly in a virtual world ever work? Will Nova try to meet Roman where he is? And most importantly, who ends up dead? I hope you’ll read to find out!

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