

Dead Reckoning

A Murder Mystery in Reverse

By Butch Maxwell

Program Notes

The Place: An island off the coast of Greece, where a group of American tourists has arrived.

The Time: A Little Earlier

We're going to tell this story backward.

The play begins with Scene 6 and moves backward to Scene 1, revealing how each moment reshapes the one that came before it. What first appears confusing or incomplete gradually becomes clear—as the audience arrives, finally, at the beginning.

During the pre-show mingle, you are meeting the characters in the hours leading up to the evening's dinner. (Scene 5)

To help orient you, each scene is identified by its time and setting:

Act 1

Scene 6 – The Mourning After

A shared common space at the village hotel

Scene 5 – The Last Dinner (Previous Evening)

An outdoor dining terrace in the village

Act 2

Scene 4 – Late Afternoon

The village market

Scene 3 – Earlier That Afternoon

The mosaic excavation site

Scene 2 – That Morning

The hotel terrace at breakfast

Act 3

Scene 1 – Three Days Ago

The airport arrivals area and tour van

As the story moves backward, details shift, meanings change, and assumptions are challenged. In *Dead Reckoning*, understanding comes last—and only by seeing what came before.

The Characters

Kostas Papadimitriou

A composed local guide with deep roots in the village, Kostas moves through chaos with unsettling calm. He speaks sparingly, observes everything, and seems to understand more about the past—and present—than he ever says out loud

Diane Mercer

Thoughtful, observant, and emotionally attuned, Diane experiences the world deeply—perhaps too deeply. She journals everything, processes everything, and remembers details others wish she wouldn't.

Carol Ann Bickford

Hyper-organized, hyper-prepared, and deeply committed to structure, Carol Ann approaches every situation—vacation or homicide—with the efficiency of a workplace investigation. If there's a system, she's already improved it.

Jay Alvarez

A media-minded observer who treats life like a live documentary, Jay narrates events in real time with disarming honesty. He's curious, impulsive, and always one step away from filming something he absolutely shouldn't.

Morton Fitch

A charismatic academic and relentless storyteller, Morton lives to interpret the past—and occasionally reshape it. Even in death, his presence lingers through the questions he left behind.

Fun Facts

Kostas has, on more than one occasion, redirected a tour group away from a “less photogenic” section of the excavation—always just before someone asked a particularly specific question.

Diane once filled an entire journal on a two-week trip and later admitted she never wrote down what actually happened—only what she believed people meant.

Carol Ann maintains a travel kit so comprehensive it includes items for “unlikely but manageable scenarios,” a category she refuses to define but updates frequently.

Carol Ann insists on keeping duplicate versions of certain supplies in separate compartments, explaining that “redundancy prevents regret.”

Jay has been asked to stop filming in at least four countries, three museums, and one funeral, though he maintains that “context improves with documentation.”

Morton was known to describe himself as a “custodian of history,” a phrase that sounded admirable until people realized he rarely clarified who had given him the keys.

Production note: All of the characters have this in common: They want to appear culturally intelligent, emotionally evolved, adaptable, and discerning. All except Kostas are privileged, entitled people.

Act One**Scene 6 — "The Mourning After"**

The actors enter in the loose, uncoordinated way of people who have been in the same room too long. KOSTAS is already near the edge of the space, doing something useful. DIANE follows, journal closed in both hands. CAROL ANN enters slightly ahead of the others, travel kit in hand — it has already been reorganized twice this morning. JAY is last, phone technically in his pocket.

A beat of suspended stillness.

Jay notices the audience. He looks at them. He takes out his phone.

JAY

Okay, so —

(to the audience, completely matter-of-fact)
— one of us is dead.

He lets that sit for a second.

Not me, obviously. Morton. Khaki guy. You probably met him in the mingle. That was last night for us. He quoted Herodotus at you incorrectly.

CAROL ANN

(Without looking up from the kit)

Jay.

JAY

What? They're going to find out. The police are coming.

CAROL ANN

The police are coming, and until they arrive, what would be helpful is if everyone remained calm and didn't —

JAY

She's been saying that since six a.m.

CAROL ANN

— didn't speculate, didn't —

JAY

Same speech.

CAROL ANN

(Closing the kit with finality)

I have managed fourteen workplace investigations. Three of them involved fatalities. None of them were this disorganized.

JAY

This isn't a workplace investigation, Carol Ann. Morton is dead in a village in Greece.

CAROL ANN

The *principles* are the same.

A beat. Jay looks at the audience.

JAY

They're not the same.

DIANE

(Quietly, to no one in particular)

He was perfectly fine at dinner.

Nobody responds. This is not the first time she has said this this morning.

JAY

(To the audience, lowering his voice slightly, not at all lowering his voice)

She's said that like eight times.

DIANE

(She heard him)

I've said it because it's true. I am the one who told Carol Ann he had a headache —

(A beat.)

Which he did not have.

She opens the journal. She closes the journal. She is not going to write in the journal.

JAY

(To the audience, genuinely curious)

Do we think he had a headache? Like, in addition to the — or just —

CAROL ANN

There was aconite in his system. The doctor suspects cardiac arrest.

JAY

Wait, you know about the aconite?

CAROL ANN

Everyone knows about the aconite, Jay. The doctor knew the signs — it grows here. He told us about it this morning.

JAY

I wasn't there for that part.

CAROL ANN

You were filming a stray cat.

JAY

It was a significant cat. There's a narrative there.

Beat. Jay looks at his phone. Looks at the audience.

I have the cat on here if anyone wants to see it.

Kostas, who has not moved, who has said nothing, who has been a still point in the middle of all of this:

KOSTAS

(Quietly, to no one in particular)

It is a very good cat.

The group looks at him. It is the first thing he has said since they entered.

(Completely composed)

It comes to the café every morning. The owner pretends not to feed it.

(A beat.)

Morton gave it some bread last Tuesday.

Silence. The specific silence of people who did not expect to feel that.

DIANE

(Very quietly)

He did?

KOSTAS

(Returning to whatever he was doing)

He had good instincts about certain things.

A beat of the silence. Then Jay looks around the room with the particular alertness of someone whose documentary instincts have just switched back on.

JAY

Hey — where's Morton's bag?

Nobody answers immediately. The quality of the silence changes.

It was right there this morning. The big khaki one.

(To the audience)

He had a khaki bag. Obviously. The man committed to an aesthetic.

CAROL ANN

The bag has been looked through.

JAY

By who?

CAROL ANN

By the doctor. And then by Kostas. And then, briefly, by me.

JAY

Why briefly?

CAROL ANN

Because I found what wasn't there.

JAY

...What wasn't there?

CAROL ANN

His phone.

JAY

(A beat.)

Morton's phone is missing.

A beat.

DIANE

(Who has been very still since the cat)

Why would his phone be missing?

Nobody answers.

I mean — people don't just — phones don't —

She stops. Something is crossing her face that she is not ready to look at yet.

He texted me. Last week. From that phone. About the tour.

A beat. She opens the journal again. She is definitely not going to write in it.

JAY

(Carefully, for him)

Diane —

DIANE

I'm fine.

JAY

I know, I just —

DIANE

I said I'm fine, Jay.

(Quietly, but very clear)

I'm not confused.

(A beat.)

I'm deciding what to do with what I know.

*Jay looks at the audience. The look says: She is not fine.
The look also says: I am not going to say that.*

He pats his pocket. The package is still there. He doesn't mention it.

Jay is looking at his phone. Not filming. Just looking. The documentary brain is running.

JAY

Okay so —

(To the audience)

— I'm just going to think out loud for a second.

CAROL ANN

Please don't.

JAY

Morton's dead. Phone's missing. And the most composed person in this room —

CAROL ANN

Jay.

JAY

— is the guy whose family built the road to the site where Morton was —

CAROL ANN

Jay.

JAY

I'm not saying anything. I'm just noticing. Aggressively.

CAROL ANN

(Evenly)

Jay. What you are doing is constructing a narrative from incomplete —

JAY

The phone is *missing*, Carol Ann —

CAROL ANN

I *know* the phone is missing, Jay. I *know*. I know about the phone and I know about the bag and I know what time Kostas left and I know —

She stops. A beat. She has said too much. She knows she has said too much. The room goes very still.

(Completely level, snapping the kit shut)

The police will be here in ninety minutes.

Everyone looks at Kostas. He finishes whatever he is doing. Straightens up. Looks at Jay with the patient expression of a man who has been looked at like this since six a.m. and has made his peace with it.

KOSTAS

You want to ask me something.

JAY

I mean — do you want me to ask you something?

KOSTAS

Not particularly.

JAY

But I could.

KOSTAS

You could.

JAY

(To the audience)

See, this is what he does.

KOSTAS

What do I do?

JAY

The —

*(He makes a gesture that attempts to describe
Kostas's entire demeanor)*

— the whole —

KOSTAS

I am standing here.

JAY

Calmly. You're standing there *very calmly*.

KOSTAS

Would you prefer I stood here differently?

JAY

Most people, their tour guest dies, they're a little —

KOSTAS

I have had time to —

JAY

You've been calm since six a.m.

KOSTAS

(A beat, perfectly level)

I am a morning person.

Jay stares at him. Looks at the audience. Looks back.

JAY

(To the audience)

He just said that.

CAROL ANN

(With genuine administrative exhaustion)

He has said several things this morning, all of them reasonable, none of them —

JAY

Carol Ann, the man is *serene*. Morton is dead and Kostas is *serene* and his grandfather's name is on a plaque at the site where —

Diane:

(Looking up sharply)

What?

JAY

The plaque. At the excavation. Nikolaos Papadimitriou. Same name as —

He stops. Looks at Kostas.

I just connected that.

KOSTAS

(Quietly)

Yes.

JAY

Like — just now. While I was talking.

KOSTAS

I noticed.

JAY

Why didn't you — we've been sitting here for two hours, why didn't anyone —

KOSTAS

(Simply)

You didn't ask.

A beat. Jay looks at the audience with the expression of a man who has just realized his documentary has been missing its most important subject.

JAY

(Almost to himself)

He didn't ask.

(Beat, to audience)

We didn't ask.

He raises the phone.

KOSTAS

(Without turning around)

Please do not film me.

JAY

(Already recording)

Just for a second.

Carol Ann sets the travel kit down on a table with the decisive click of someone who has had enough.

CAROL ANN

All right.

Everyone looks at her.

The police will be here in approximately ninety minutes. In that time, what would be helpful — what would be *productive* — is if we each took a moment to organize our recollections of last evening into a clear, sequential —

JAY

Are you giving us homework?

CAROL ANN

I'm giving us *structure*. A timeline. Who was where, when, what they observed. Factual. Unemotional. In order.

JAY

(To the audience)

She made an actual list this morning. On hotel stationery.

CAROL ANN

Lists are helpful.

JAY

Of suspects. She made a list of *suspects*.

CAROL ANN

I made a list of *persons present*.

JAY

With notes.

CAROL ANN

Brief notes.

JAY

Can we see the list?

CAROL ANN

No.

JAY

Are we on the list?

CAROL ANN

...Everyone is on the list.

JAY

(To the audience)

We're on the list.

He sets his phone down. Without interrupting herself, Carol Ann rotates it ninety degrees so it lines up squarely with the edge. Jay watches her do it.

...Did my phone offend you somehow?

CAROL ANN

It was diagonal.

JAY

It was resting.

CAROL ANN

Poorly.

DIANE

(With some feeling)

I don't want to be on a list, Carol Ann.

CAROL ANN

It's not a *bad* list, Diane. It's simply a —

DIANE

I came here for a vacation. I'm on a list.

CAROL ANN

We are all on a list. That is what happens when —

DIANE

Is Morton on the list?

A beat.

CAROL ANN

Morton is on the list.

DIANE

He's *dead*.

CAROL ANN

He is categorized differently.

Jay makes a sound that is not quite a laugh. He turns it into a cough. He does not turn it into a cough successfully.

DIANE

(To Jay)

Don't.

JAY

I'm not. I'm not doing anything.

Carol Ann opens the kit again. Not for any reason. Just to have something to do that is not this conversation.

CAROL ANN

The point is — the point is that when the police arrive, it will be better if we present as a calm, cooperative, *organized* group of tourists who have experienced a tragedy —

JAY

What if one of us isn't a calm cooperative tourist?

Silence.

CAROL ANN

(Carefully)

What do you mean?

JAY

I mean what if one of us knows more than they're —

(He stops)

— The phone is *missing*, Carol Ann.

CAROL ANN

I know about the phone. I know about the bag, the wine glass, and what time Kostas left. I know.

Kostas, who has been standing at the edge of all of this, speaks without turning around.

KOSTAS

Morton photographed the mosaic. Extensively. He was in contact with someone in London about the site. His phone contained the photographs and the excavation coordinates for the disturbed border section.

A beat.

Whoever took the phone did not want that information to reach London.

Silence. The room reorganizes itself around this.

JAY

(Slowly)

How long have you known that?

KOSTAS

(A beat)

I made a phone call last night. During dinner. I was told there was nothing to be done without proof.

JAY

So, Morton was — he was actually —

KOSTAS

Yes.

JAY

And you knew, and you tried to —

KOSTAS