

ALIBIS

TWO ACT MYSTERY-COMEDY SPOOF

By Peter Kennedy

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

(4 MEN, 5 WOMEN)

- JUSTIN (M)Butler. (25 lines)
- HOPE LESLIE TRITE (F)A social butterfly. (101 lines)
- SANDY LYNXE (M).....A playboy. (68 lines)
- DOCTOR JACQUELINE HYDE (F)A dotty chemist. (75 lines)
- SIR TANLEY A. FRAUDE (M).....An aristocrat. (60 lines)
- SISTER BELLA DONNA (F).....A nun. (12 lines)
- MR. E.S. SOLVEDD (M)A detective. (140 lines)
- MONIQUE (F)A maid. (47 lines)
- THE STRANGER (F)A stranger. (6 lines)

SCENE

Seven Oaks, a mansion in the English countryside

TIME: Ostensibly, a stormy night in the late 1940s.

HAND PROPERTIES

ACT ONE

- Suitcase
- Spectacles
- Steering Wheel
- Telephone (traditional and cordless)
- Index cards
- Flashlight
- Marker

Handbag
Feather duster
Pipe
Script
Newspaper
Lipstick
Magazines
Suicide note
Ice bag
Bell
Platter
Purse
Magnifying glass
Handkerchief
Leash
Diary
Straw
Revolver, Dagger
Compact
Check

ACT TWO

Sofa feet
Cocoa Mugs
Afghan
Tissues/Change/Lipstick
Handbag
Breath mints
Bananas
Emerald
Ledgers; clippings
Four revolvers

NOTE: The grandfather clock is made of cardboard or plywood, however, at the director's discretion, eliminating the mobility of the clock as a secret passage would not affect the play. The characters could enter and state that they had found a secret passage in a different room of the mansion.

ACT ONE, SCENE 1

SETTING:

The drawing room of Seven Oaks, an old mansion in the English countryside, owned by actress Primavera Donna. Prima is obviously a woman of means. The room is spacious and tastefully furnished, although the heavy furniture and darkly colored walls suggest the room has remained largely undisturbed for some time. Upstage center, double doors lead into a small foyer area, presumably this is the main entrance to the mansion. At the right side of the room, two large armchairs are seated in front of a cozy-looking fireplace. Upstage of the chairs, a hallway leads off into the kitchen. There is a large clock set against the back wall. Upstage left, an arched hallway leading from the foyer to the study is visible behind the steps of a banister staircase. Downstage of the stairs is an elegant looking sofa and a well-stocked bar.

AT RISE:

It is evening. JUSTIN, a rather stuffy looking butler, is positioning the swords hanging above the fireplace, when a ridiculously cheerful DOORBELL is heard, followed by a crash of THUNDER. Straightening his tie, he crosses to the double doors and opens them with a practiced flourish. Standing in the doorway is a woman (HOPE LESLIE TRITE) in an evening gown.

JUSTIN: *(Launching into a well-rehearsed speech.)* Ah, good evening, Miss Trite! It is my humble pleasure to welcome you to Seven Oaks. I do hope . . .

HOPE: *(Interrupting as she barges inside.)* Hello, Jerry darling. Do be a dear and take this for me, will you? *(Flings wrap at him.)* Thank you, dear. My, what atrocious weather – it's simply raining cats and dogs out there! I simply **deplore** wet weather; it makes my hair so frizzy! And where is our charming hostess hiding? Prima? Prima, darling!!!! Yoo-hooooo??

JUSTIN: *(Gingerly peeling wrap from his face.)* My mistress wishes to extend her utmost apologies for not being able to greet each of her guests individually. Please make yourself comfortable until the rest of the guests have arrived.

HOPE: Oh, dear. What a crashing bore! (*Spies bar.*) Well, I suppose I could use just a teensy drink – to warm myself up, like some hot chocolate. Thank you, Jeeves.

JUSTIN: Justin, Madam.

HOPE: (*Crosses to bar.*) Yes, yes, of course.

JUSTIN turns as SANDY LYNXE stumbles through the open doorway. His arms are piled high with luggage.

SANDY: Good heavens, Hope, what did you pack in these things - anvils? (*Collides with JUSTIN.*) Oh, drat it all! I'm terribly sorry, Jason!

JUSTIN: (*Shakily.*) Quite all right, Mr. Lynxe. However, my name is Justin, sir.

SANDY: Terribly sorry! Are you sure you're feeling well? You look a bit ill.

JUSTIN: Well, actually sir, I . . .

SANDY: Glad to hear it! Would you mind taking these up to Miss Trite's room? (*Tosses luggage to JUSTIN, who promptly sinks to his knees.*) Thank you! Hope, darling, whatever you're concocting over there, make one for me. When's dinner, Jason?

JUSTIN: Eight o'clock, sir.

SANDY: Oh good! What are we having?

JUSTIN: Red herring.

The DOORBELL rings again, followed by a crash of THUNDER. SANDY joins HOPE at the bar as JUSTIN sets luggage down to answer the door. He opens the door to discover DOCTOR JACQUELINE HYDE at his feet.

JUSTIN: (*Regaining composure.*) Ah, good evening Dr. Hyde. It is my humble pleasure to . . .

JACQUELINE: (*Crawling between his legs.*) Wait! Don't move, don't whisper, don't touch a thing!!

JUSTIN: Madam, may I inquire exactly what you are doing?

JACQUELINE: I dropped my glasses and I can't see a blasted thing without them! Oh, here they are . . . (*Trails off.*) right underneath your foot. Oh dear. Do you think that anyone else will notice? (*Holds up mangled spectacles.*)

JUSTIN: Assuredly not, madam.

JACQUELINE: Oh, thank heavens!

SANDY: Jackie darling, how are you? Can I fix you up with something to drink?

JACQUELINE: No, thank you, dear. Let me catch my breath. (*Sees HOPE.*) Prima! You look simply ravishing in that gown. My, how you've changed! Your hair, your face. (*Eyes chest curiously.*) Your . . .

HOPE: No, no, Jackie. It's me, Hope, Prima hasn't arrived yet.

JACQUELINE: That's odd. Well, you look ravishing anyway, dear. (*Turning.*) Jacob? Will you fetch me something tasteless and non-alcoholic, please?

JUSTIN: Certainly, madam. But my name is JUSTIN!

JACQUELINE: Yes, dear. I'm sure you are. (*JUSTIN crosses to bar as SANDY and HOPE join her at sofa.*)

JACQUELINE: (*Continued.*) Well. Here we are! I wonder whatever could be keeping Prima?

HOPE: (*Sweetly.*) I suppose that it must take her quite a long time to put on all that makeup. Don't you agree, Sandy?

SANDY: (*Looking up from magazine.*) I'm sorry, darling, I wasn't listening.

HOPE: I said, don't you think . . .

There is a tremendous CRASH offstage. Everyone leaps up simultaneously.

SANDY: Jason! What the devil was that!

JUSTIN: I haven't the foggiest, sir.

HOPE: It sounded as if it came from outside!

Suddenly, the DOORBELL rings. JUSTIN remains motionless.

SANDY: Well? Aren't you going to answer it?

JUSTIN: I'm waiting for the thunder, sir.

SANDY: Thunder? What thun . . . ?

There is a tremendous clap of THUNDER.

JACQUELINE: How did he do that?

Again, JUSTIN opens the doors to reveal another guest. SIR TANLEY A. FRAUDE is looking quite muddy and disheveled. He holds a steering wheel in one hand and a pipe in the other. JUSTIN is at a loss for words.

TANLEY: Hullo, everyone. I seem to have had a bit of car trouble.

SANDY: Good grief, Sir Tanley! Are you alright?

TANLEY: Nothing that a cup of coffee loaded with caffeine couldn't fix.

JUSTIN: *(Taking the hint.)* Right away, sir. *(Pause. JUSTIN eyes the steering wheel.)* Would you like me to take that for you, sir?

TANLEY: Yes, thank you very much.

SANDY assists JUSTIN in prying TANLEY'S fingers loose. JUSTIN places the wheel carefully on top of the luggage and crosses back to the bar to begin fixing the coffee.

HOPE: *(Leading TANLEY to sofa.)* Here, darling. You just sit right over here while I fetch you one of those cute little ice-bag things for your head.

TANLEY: Really, Miss Trite, that's hardly necessary.

HOPE: Oh, but I insist! *(She tweaks SANDY on the nose and exits stage left.)*

SANDY: Extraordinary!

TANLEY: Yes. That blasted dog never knew what hit him.

SANDY: No, not that. I mean Hope doing someone else a favor – when it doesn't even benefit her.

JUSTIN: *(To TANLEY.)* Your caffeine, sir.

TANLEY: Thank you, er . . .

SANDY: Jason.

JACQUELINE: Jacob.

JUSTIN: Justin!!!

This is followed by the usual DOORBELL and THUNDER. JUSTIN opens the door to admit SISTER BELLA DONNA, who stands wordlessly as he rushes through his speech to avoid being cut off again.

JUSTIN: *(Continued.)* Ah, good evening Sister Bella Donna! It is my humble pleasure to welcome you to Seven Oaks. I do hope that you will have an enjoyable evening, and if there is any way at all that I can be of assistance please let me know. *(Pauses to catch breath.)* May I take your coat?

SISTER has remained standing silently throughout his speech. Smiling happily, she reaches into her handbag and pulls out an index card, which she hands to JUSTIN.

JUSTIN: *(Reads card.)* “Dear sir or madam (as the case may be), My name is Sister Bella Donna and I have taken a vow of silence for the next thirty years or so. Have a nice day, and God bless you.”

SANDY: *(Confiding to TANLEY.)* Isn't that Prima's long lost sister? The one who ran away to Switzerland to become a nun?

TANLEY: Quite so. Rumor has it she became a nun and took a vow of silence after being spurned by her lover. Of course, that's only a rumor.

JACQUELINE: Really, it isn't polite to gossip! How would you feel if she were to talk about you?

SANDY: That's all very well, dear, but she can't talk at all, remember?

JUSTIN: *(Responding to second card.)* Second door to your right.

SISTER smiles in thanks. Waving merrily to the guests – who wave back politely – she exits stage left.

JACQUELINE: This is going to be an awfully interesting evening.

HOPE: *(Re-entering stage left and calling over shoulder.)* Sorry, darling! *(Turns.)* Who on earth was that woman in the funny black dress? I bumped into her in the hallway and she blessed me.

SANDY: That's Sister Donna, darling. She's a nun.

HOPE: Oh, that explains it! Anyway, here's your ice-bag, Tanley. *(Hands bag to him.)* I had a devil of a time finding it.

TANLEY: Thank you, Miss Trite. That was very nice of you. *(Examines bag.)* Even if there is no ice in it.

HOPE: Oh, silly me! Where could my mind have been?

JACQUELINE: We do wonder sometimes, dear.

There is a KNOCK at the door, followed by THUNDER.

SANDY: A knock? Someone must be reading the script wrong!

JACQUELINE: Quick! Answer it before we have to listen to that dreadful thunder again!

JUSTIN is about to open the door when it is suddenly flung open, obscuring him from view. MR. E.S. SOLVEDD strides in. He holds a magnifying glass in one hand and a leash in the other.

SOLVEDD: Good evening, everyone! Sorry I'm late – my bloodhound was run over by some maniac driver on the way over.

TANLEY cringes and attempts to hide his face. SOLVEDD holds up the leash and stares at the bit of fur that is still attached to the collar.

SOLVEDD: *(Continued.)* Oh well. I suppose he was bound to die someday, anyhow. But enough of me! Where is our dear friend Prima?

SANDY: We don't quite know, actually.

SOLVEDD: Hmmmmm. What about the butler? I don't see him anywhere, either.

HOPE: He was just here a minute ago . . .

There is a muffled groan from behind the door.

SOLVEDD: Shhhhh! *(He tiptoes over to the door and pulls it back slightly.)* Ah, Joseph! There you are! *(There is another groan.)* What's that? Oh, of course I meant Justin. Here, be so kind as to take this for me, will you? *(Tosses leash behind door.)* Thank you. Oh, and close the door when you get up. It's rather chilly in here.

JUSTIN emerges shakily and closes door as SOLVEDD warms himself by the fireplace.

SOLVEDD: *(Continued.)* Well, we're certainly having quite a storm tonight.

TANLEY: I'll say. It's raining cats and . . . er, it's raining quite heavily out there.

HOPE: Oh dear. I do hope that old bridge holds out until morning.

There is suddenly the sound of GROANING TIMBERS, followed by a far-off SPLASH.

JACQUELINE: Thank you, dear. A little melodrama always livens things up.

SISTER returns stage left from bathroom. She smiles shyly at SOLVEDD and sits dangling her feet back and forth.

SANDY: Well, as long as we're waiting, I may as well relax and reflect on the day's events. You should too, Tanley.

TANLEY: Why is everyone staring at me?

JUSTIN: *(Crossing to SISTER.)* Your chocolate milk, madam.

SISTER accepts milk and straw as JUSTIN exits stage left. There is an awkward pause as the TICKING of the clock becomes audible. SOLVEDD fiddles with fire. JACQUELINE taps her foot and stares at her watch. TANLEY stifles a yawn. HOPE looks in her compact. SISTER slurps noisily through straw.

JACQUELINE: Really, this is most impolite! You would think that Prima would have enough manners to show up at her own dinner party on time.

SANDY: Maybe we should start eating without her.

TANLEY: Perhaps she's ill.

HOPE: Wouldn't that be a shame!

SISTER hands a card to SOLVEDD.

SOLVEDD: Sister Donna has suggested that we summon the butler and ask him what's going on.

Chorus of agreement.

TANLEY: Good idea! I'll ring for him.

TANLEY takes a small bell from the bar and begins ringing. He is still facing stage right and ringing away when JUSTIN enters with a platter stage left. JUSTIN crosses to him and taps him lightly on the shoulder.

JUSTIN: You rang, sir?

TANLEY: Yes . . . er . . . *(Whispers to SISTER.)* What was his name?

SISTER holds up a card.

TANLEY: *(Continued.)* Yes, Jimmy, we were wondering . . .

JUSTIN is not listening. Dropping the platter with a clang, he begins screaming.

JUSTIN: JUSTIN!!! My name is JUSTIN!! Are you people stupid? I can't take it anymore!!! *(He begins to run around the room, flapping his arms like a bird.)* J-U-S-T-I-N!!! What does that spell? JUSTIN!!!! *(He runs screaming from the room.)*

TANLEY: *(Pause.)* Was it something I said?

JACQUELINE: Good help is so hard to find these days.

SANDY: Now what do we do? We're trapped in a spooky old mansion with a missing hostess and a maniacal butler!

SOLVEDD: I must admit, this isn't your usual weekend sociable.

HOPE: I have an idea!

JACQUELINE: How unusual.

HOPE: The telephone! We can call the police on the telephone! *(Runs over and picks up receiver.)* Hello? Hellooo? Is anyone there? *(Looks up.)* The phone is dead.

SOLVEDD: Of course the phone is dead. This is a mystery. The phones are always dead in a mystery. The wires were probably just blown down by the storm.

HOPE: No. *(Holds up wire.)* The phone is dead.

THUNDER.

TANLEY: Well this is just bloody marvelous! Now all we need is a dead body.

JACQUELINE: (*Eyeing HOPE.*) I'm sure that could be arranged.

SOLVEDD: Please, this isn't getting us anywhere. I suggest that we take some decisive action. Let's split up into pairs and search the mansion for Prima. She must be here somewhere.

SISTER points to her head and makes a circular motion.

HOPE: Wait a minute, Mr. Solvedd. Sister Donna has a point!

SOLVEDD: (*Muttering.*) Yes, her head.

HOPE: Have you forgotten that there's an insane butler running around?

SOLVEDD: Who, Jacques? I'm sure he's completely harmless. (*Pause.*) Well, unarmed anyway.

Chorus of "No thanks!" and "Count me out."

TANLEY: Safety in numbers, I say. As long as we're all together nothing can possibly happen.

At that moment, the room is plunged into darkness. There is a confused babble of voices until SOLVEDD's rises above the rest.

SOLVEDD: Everyone, please remain calm! There's no reason to be alarmed. The circuit was probably just blown out by the storm.

TANLEY: That's odd. The fireplace went out, too.

SANDY: Perhaps it's electric.

EVERYONE cries out as a beam of light appears.

JACQUELINE: It's all right, everyone! I carry a small electric torch in my purse. (*Pause.*) Now let me see if I can find it -

HOPE: Jackie, did you break your glasses again?

JACQUELINE: Oh, I was hoping that no one would notice.

SANDY: Forget the glasses, who's holding the bloody flashlight? (*Silence.*) Well, somebody must be holding it!

HOPE: I know! Sister Donna, is that you?

Beam moves up and down.

SOLVEDD: Very ingenious, Miss Trite. Now, if Sister Donna would be so kind, I'd like to make sure that we're all here. (*Beam moves from head to head as SOLVEDD counts.*) One, two, three, four, five, six, seven. Good, we're all here.

JACQUELINE: SEVEN?

There is a crash of THUNDER as the lights (and fireplace) return. MONIQUE, a French-looking maid, stands clutching a feather duster.

TANLEY: Who are you?

MONIQUE: Oh! (*Curtsyng.*) I am Monique . . . the maid.

EVERYONE: We can see **that!**

TANLEY: Where have you been during all of this chaos?

MONIQUE: Chaos? I do not understand, monsieur.

JACQUELINE: Let me update you, dear. The roads are flooded, the bridge is washed out, our hostess is missing, the phone is dead, the butler went insane, and the lights just blew out. Where were you?

MONIQUE: (*Defensively.*) Look here.

Everyone does just that as she pulls a piece of paper from the front of her blouse.

MONIQUE: (*Continued.*) I look at my script and it tells me to enter the room after the lights go out. Then I, Monique, am supposed to scream. I am just trying to do my job, and everyone, they are yelling at me! (*Begins to sob.*)

HOPE: There, there, darling. It's alright! You can start all over again, whenever you're ready.

MONIQUE: (*Sniffing.*) Merci. (*MONIQUE exits, then re-enters the room and strikes a theatrical pose.*) Oh no, I cannot believe it! It is simply horrible.

SANDY: Monique, what on earth . . .

MONIQUE: It is Madam Donna, Monsieur! She is – she is . . .

JACQUELINE: Spit it out, dear.

MONIQUE: Dead!

TANLEY: Dead??

SOLVEDD: Dead???

MONIQUE: (*Nodding.*) DEAD!

HOPE: Wait a minute. Do you mean **murdered**?—Or just plain, ordinary, everyday type of dead?

MONIQUE: Actually, I am not quite sure. But she IS dead.

JACQUELINE: Prima always could liven up a party.

SANDY: So does this mean we can eat now?

SOLVEDD: Quiet, everyone! I suspect the possibility of foul play. Monique and I will go investigate our bodies . . . er . . . the body, I mean, and search for clues. The rest of you are to remain here in this room. No one is to leave here under any circumstances.

HOPE: And why is that, Mr. Solvedd?

SOLVEDD: Why, because one of you is the murderer, of course!

TANLEY: One of us? What about you? You could have bumped her off just as easily!

HOPE: Wait a minute! We're not even sure that Prima's been murdered yet!

SOLVEDD: A minor detail. Besides, I'm the detective here, I'll call the shots. (*Turns.*) Come along, Monique. Show me to the scene of the crime.

MONIQUE: Oui, monsieur.

SOLVEDD: (*Happily.*) Oui, oui!

The two exit upstairs.

JACQUELINE: Really, the nerve of that man!

TANLEY: Hmmmph! Treating us like common criminals.

HOPE: Well, I wouldn't believe if for a moment! That one of us could actually **murder** Prima in cold blood! (*Pause.*) Of course, the thought had crossed my mind once or twice . . .

EVERYONE jumps as the BEEPING of a telephone is heard.

SANDY: (*To HOPE.*) I thought that you said the phone was dead.

HOPE: (*Holding up wire.*) It is – look.

TANLEY: There must be another one in the room. Quick, everyone look around!

There is a hasty search as the BEEPING continues. Finally, HOPE cries out triumphantly and removes phone from under couch.

HOPE: No wonder. It's cordless! (*Raises antenna.*) Hellooo? I'm sorry, could you speak a little louder, please . . . who? Primavera Donna? Ummm, nope, sorry, wrong number! (*Hangs up.*)

JACQUELINE: What on earth did you do that for?

HOPE: What was I supposed to say, "I'm sorry, she's dead right now, may I take a message?"

SISTER scribbles a note to HOPE.

HOPE: (*Continued, reads card.*) "We can call the police on the telephone." Don't you spell 'telephone' with three e's?

TANLEY: No, I think it's just two.

SANDY: There's a dictionary over by the bookcase . . .

JACQUELINE: Never mind! Sister's right! Now we can . . .

Suddenly, JUSTIN rushes into the room. His clothes are rumpled and his hair stands on end. Spying the telephone, he makes a lunge for it and misses. A game of frantic "keep-away" ensues with JUSTIN finally seizing the phone. Laughing insanely, he is pursued off stage right by SANDY, who returns a moment later as the others stare at him expectantly.

SANDY: (*Pause.*) Now there's something one doesn't see everyday.

HOPE: That telephone was our last hope! Now what are we going to do?

TANLEY: Don't worry, Miss Trite. Mr. Solvedd will take care of everything.

JACQUELINE: Why does this frighten me?

There is a crash of THUNDER as SOLVEDD and MONIQUE return via the stairs. SOLVEDD has a few stray feathers from the duster in his hair.

SANDY: (*Expectantly.*) Well?

SOLVEDD: Well, what?

SANDY: Is she . . .

SOLVEDD: (*Looking at MONIQUE.*) Yeah! She's fine.

SANDY: No, not her! Prima, Prima!

SOLVEDD: Oh, her. She's dead, alright. In fact, she's been murdered.

HOPE: Murdered?

SANDY: Murdered?

JACQUELINE: Will you please stop that!

SOLVEDD: You may all want to sit down. I have a brief monologue coming up.

EVERYONE hurries to find a seat. A disgruntled TANLEY is left standing, as there aren't enough seats.

SOLVEDD: (*Continued.*) Ahem. If we're all ready now?

JACQUELINE: Go ahead, dear. We're breathless with anticipation.

SOLVEDD: Right. First things first. I'm sorry to inform you all that our hostess is indeed dead. The circumstances surrounding her death are, to say the least, unusual. I discovered Prima's body slumped over a chair next to her dressing table. In the center of her back was the unmistakable mark of a bullet wound. But that's not all! There was a glass of what appeared to be water standing on the dressing room table. Upon closer examination, I discovered traces of sediment in the water glass. Then I found this note taped to the mirror of her dressing table. (*He pulls out note and reads aloud.*) "I can't go on. I'm putting a stop to this once and for all. Goodbye, Prima" Oh yes, I almost forgot, the room had been completely ransacked, and on the floor I discovered . . . (*Whips out knife from beneath his coat.*) this dagger!!!! (*He flourishes it dramatically in front of JACQUELINE, who is apparently unimpressed because she can't see it.*) And . . . (*He pulls a handkerchief from his pocket.*) this bloodstained handkerchief!!!!

He flourishes it in front of SISTER, who accepts it thankfully and uses it to blow her nose. Smiling in thanks, she hands it back to a rather shocked SOLVEDD.

SOLVEDD: (*Continued, weakly.*) You will note that the handkerchief bears the initial 'T' on it. (*Pause, as SOLVEDD gingerly tucks the hanky back into his pocket.*) Anyway, these facts leave me with

several questions. Was Prima murdered, or did she commit suicide? Who is the owner of the handkerchief? Why was the room ransacked? How did the dagger get there? And finally, where is the revolver now? However, I do know one thing . . .

HOPE stifles a laugh.

SOLVEDD: *(Continued.)* Prima's murderer is in this room right now. And I will not stop until I have discovered whodunit!!!!

He looks around expectantly until a scattered applause breaks out.

JACQUELINE: Congratulations, dear. I'm thoroughly confused, but that sounded very professional.

SOLVEDD: Thank you. I practice a lot. Now, does anyone have any questions? I think it would be best if we split up into pairs and conduct a search for the missing revolver. Perhaps there are fingerprints on it that will lead to the guilty party.

SANDY: I'm not so sure that's a good idea, Solvedd.

HOPE: What if we're paired with the murderer? We could be killed?

SOLVEDD: Then we'll know who the murderer is! Besides, the killer is safe now. There's no reason to kill anyone else. *(Pause.)* I think.

MONIQUE: May I accompany you, monsieur? I would feel much safer with a big, strong police officer!

SOLVEDD: Of course you would. What about the rest of you?

JACQUELINE: I'm sorry, dear. I feel that I'm a little above doing searches.

HOPE: I'll go with Sandy!

SANDY: Jolly good!

TANLEY: *(Reluctantly.)* I suppose that leaves you and me, Sister Donna.

SISTER claps her hands delightedly and runs to his side.

SOLVEDD: Very good. Now everyone, keep your eyes open for revolvers, psychopathic butlers, and anything else out of the ordinary. We will meet back here in one half-hour. Agreed?

Chorus of agreement.

SANDY: Jackie, are you sure you won't join us? Safety in numbers, you know.

JACQUELINE: No, thank you, dear. You children run along and have your fun. I can take care of myself.

SOLVEDD: Suit yourself. Remember everyone, half an hour. If you need any help, just scream.

HOPE: Don't worry. I'm sure we'll let you know.

The pairs exit, talking amongst themselves. HOPE and SANDY exit to the kitchen stage right, TANLEY and SISTER to the study stage left, and SOLVEDD and MONIQUE center stairs.

JACQUELINE: *(After a pause.)* Fools! Traipsing around the mansion at this time of night! Well, I'm staying right here. I'm certainly not afraid of a little . . .

THUNDER.

JACQUELINE: *(Continued, nervously.)* . . . thunder. After all, what could possibly . . .

There is a bloodcurdling SHRIEK offstage.

JACQUELINE: Oh, well! Perhaps I could look around for a little while!

She looks around vainly for an exit and spies the front door. Squinting, she opens it. The noises of the STORM outside are audible as she stumbles outside, closing the door behind her. A moment later, SANDY and HOPE enter stage right.

SANDY: Really, Hope, was that necessary? You frightened me half to death!

HOPE: I'm sorry! I **hate** it when I break a nail!

SANDY: You didn't have to scream bloody murder.

HOPE: Don't say that word! I'm scared enough as it is.

She walks over to bookcase and begins pulling out volumes randomly.

SANDY: I'm sorry, darling. I suppose that we're all a little bit on edge after . . . what on earth are you doing?

HOPE: Silly! I'm looking for a secret passage. They're **always** behind the bookcase.

SANDY: We're supposed to be looking for a revolver.

HOPE: Oh.

SANDY: Come on, let's go investigate the study. I'm sure there aren't any secret passages in here.

They exit stage left. Moments later, there is a slow creaking of rusty hinges as the clock suddenly swings open. MONIQUE emerges, followed by SOLVEDD.

SOLVEDD: (*Chuckling.*) Heh-heh. Who would believe it! An honest to goodness secret passage!

MONIQUE: Oui, monsieur. There are many more of them in the mansion. This I find one day when I am . . . dusting.

SOLVEDD: Remarkable!

MONIQUE: There is another in Madam Donna's kitchen, if you like.

SOLVEDD: Oh, I like, I like!

She leads him off stage right. TANLEY enters stage left. Looking around carefully for SISTER, he sneaks over to the clock and alters the hands so that their time together is almost up. Looking around again, he sneaks out stage right. SISTER dashes in stage left looking for TANLEY. Exasperated, she throws up her hands and flounces off stage right. JACQUELINE enters confusedly through the front door, pushing it shut against the wind. Hefting her purse for protection, she wanders over to the clock to check the time. Squinting at her watch and then back to the clock, she shakes her head, alters the hands back to their original position. Satisfied, she works her way slowly over to the stairs and ascends them carefully, tripping on the top one and speeding up her exit considerably.

SANDY and HOPE enter stage left.

SANDY: But darling, we simply must tell Solvedd about this. It could be an important clue to the killer!

HOPE: (*Holding a small leather-bound book.*) Why do diaries always have these stupid little locks on them?

SANDY: So people like you and I don't read them.

HOPE: We could smash the lock.

SANDY: Then Solvedd will know it's been tampered with. Besides, we have nothing to worry about. I certainly don't have any dark secrets that Prima would know about.

HOPE: Speak for yourself!

SANDY: Come on. We'll discuss this later.

They exit stage right. JUSTIN emerges from the hallway stage left. He seems to be completely in control of himself at the moment. As he turns the corner and reaches the stairs, the lights dim and a FIGURE is suddenly illuminated at the landing of the staircase. IT is dressed completely in black and only the bottom half of its body is visible below where the landing wall meets the banister of the stairs.

JUSTIN: Good! You're right on time. I'm sure you know why I arranged our little meeting. I know what you did! And if you don't pay up now, I'm telling the others!

The FIGURE hands JUSTIN a slip of paper.

JUSTIN: What's this? I'm sorry, I don't accept checks or credit cards. I want cash—now!

The FIGURE draws a gun and clicks the safety off.

JUSTIN: (*Hastily.*) Of course, there's always my special layaway plan!

The FIGURE shoots. JUSTIN clutches his stomach and careens wildly as he grimaces in pain. He is about to fall over dead when he takes a backward look at the floor and realizes that he's supposed to die farther to the left. Shuffling backward a few feet, he resumes dying and falls behind the sofa with his legs sticking up behind the back of the sofa. He is dead. The FIGURE casually raises the gun

BY PETER KENNEDY

and turns to ascend the landing. The light illuminating the stairs extinguishes. BLACKOUT. End of Act One.

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