

DEATH BY CHOCOLATE

A MYSTERY IN TWO ACTS

By Craig Sodaro

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SYNOPSIS:

Nick Noir, private eye, has fallen on hard times. His botched last case has cost him whatever jobs may have come his way. Now he's at the end of his rope and is forced to fire his devoted secretary Selma. That is, until a call from Coco Purvis offers a tantalizing case that just might pay off for Nick.

Coco and her sister, Bonbon, run Precious Perks Coffee Shoppe, which is known for its signature drink, Death by Chocolate. Unfortunately, the name came all too true for a fellow named Vinnie the Leech who died while drinking it one month earlier. Now, business has fallen off and the shop might have to close unless somebody figures out what happened to Vinnie.

Nick is immediately confronted by some pretty strange characters. Bobbie Sue, the waitress, warbles like a country singer who can't carry a tune in a bucket. Bonbon is a sour, bitter woman who doesn't like to stir things up. Her "twin" sister, Coco, is the exact opposite, a bubbly, homespun treasure. Henry, an old man who wears cross-trainers and hasn't a wrinkle on his face, sits and watches all the action. Francois, more French than a bottle of Bordeaux, hides behind his newspaper. And who's the woman dressed in black, including a veil that hides her face? A dowdy bag-lady type turns out to be a restaurant critic and a perky twenty-something suddenly starts paying attention to the old man. All these characters were sitting in these exact spots the night Vinnie the Leech fell over dead.

Though he fired her, Selma keeps showing up at opportune moments with tidbits of background information that help him piece together the puzzle, though he often gets the pieces in the wrong way. After a second death under the same circumstances as Vinnie's (which had been caused by poison), and the disappearance of Bobbie Sue, Selma plays a psychic who—with the help of her ever-present Blackberry—reveals some deep secrets.

Armed with motives and opportunity for each suspect, Nick weaves his way through a lot of false deductions, but it all clicks just as a third murder is about to be committed. The motive for the murders? Money, of course—a lot of it, left to the twin Purvis sisters by an uncle they never knew they had. Nick earns kudos, and now maybe he can afford an office—and Selma.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(3 MALES, 7 FEMALES)

NICK NOIR..... 30s, a Humphrey Bogart wannabe private eye. He wears the classic trench coat and fedora, talks out the side of his mouth, and addresses the audience regularly. *(358 lines)*

SELMA..... 20s, Nick's devoted secretary. She's behind the time fashion-wise, looks like a Kewpie doll, but she's got her Blackberry and a brain as back-up. *(174 lines)*

BOBBIE SUE..... 40s, a brassy waitress who wants to be a country singer - - and everybody knows it, because she likes to sing. The trouble is, she can't. And, boy, has she got a secret! *(89 lines)*

BONBON PURVIS..... 40s, a classic straight-back, straight-laced no-nonsense business owner who is suspicious of everyone and everything - - and is thus suspicious herself. *(87 lines)*

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HENRY HIGGINS HICKENBOTTOM..... 23, a typical young guy just beginning to make his way in the world. So why's he dressed up and acting like grandpa?
(60 lines)

COCO PURVIS 40s, a prematurely white-haired sweetie-pie who really brings the home into home cooking.
(108 lines)

FRANCOIS LEPEW..... 40s, a Frenchman through and through. So what's he doing sitting in the coffee shop hiding behind his newspaper?
(59 lines)

GEORGIA GORE..... 40s, a restaurant critic who tries to blend in so nobody knows what she's really up to.
(30 lines)

YOLANDA LAMB 30s, a mysterious woman dressed all in black, complete with a black hat and veil. So what's she hiding? *(53 lines)*

JUNIPER BERRY 20s, a perky breath of fresh air. So whose side is she on?
(46 lines)

SETTING

SCENE ONE:

Nick's Office, played before the curtain. A series of cardboard boxes and crates piled up helter-skelter. On one, about the height of a table, sits an old typewriter with paper in it. A chair or crate sits behind the typewriter. A sign on one of the boxes or crates reads, "Nick Noir, Private Eye."

REST OF PLAY:

The Precious Perks Coffee Shoppe. A counter up center is set with coffee mugs along with a small case containing pastries. Behind the counter stands a table set with one or more coffee machines (either real or homemade from cardboard). A sign above proclaims "Precious Perks Coffee Shoppe" in flowery letters. Up right is a small table for additional coffee pots, cream, sugar, and so on. Small tables dot the stage along with two or three chairs at each. The furniture doesn't have to match, but it should, perhaps, be painted the same color so the coffee shop has a clean, country feel to it, even though it's smack in the middle of a city. Wing entrance right leads to outside. Wing entrance left leads to kitchen, storeroom, and back door. A window, if desired, can be placed up right with a night city scene visible.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

ACT I

Scene One: Nick Noir's Office, one rainy evening.

Scene Two: Precious Perks Coffee Shoppe, a short time later.

ACT II

Scene One: The same, a few minutes later.

Scene Two: The same, a few minutes later.

ACT ONE, SCENE 1

SCENE:

NICK's office, played before the curtain, one rainy night. A series of cardboard boxes and crates piled up helter-skelter. On one, about the height of a table, sits an old typewriter with paper in it. A chair sits behind the typewriter. A sign on one of the crates reads "Nick Noir, Private Eye."

AT RISE:

SELMA sits in front of the typewriter (facing the audience), pecking away with one finger of her left hand. In her right hand, she holds an umbrella. She is dressed in a tight sweater, a short skirt, and her hair is obviously done up and up and up. Her wrists, ears, and neck are decorated with lots of sparkling jewelry. After a moment, NICK enters left and leans against the proscenium. He takes out a candy bar, opens it, then takes a small bite.

NICK: *(To audience.)* Noir here. Nick Noir. You might be wondering what I'm doing here in this crummy alley in this crummy part of this crummy town. Don't bother, 'cause I could ask you the same thing. *(NICK takes another bite of his candy bar.)* This? Candy bar. They won't let us smoke on stage anymore. Too bad. That smoke curling up into the lights gave the stage real atmosphere, you know what I mean? It set the whole mood. But I guess my office there sets the mood well enough. I got tossed out of my old office, which wasn't a whole lot better than this alley, 'cept it had a roof. Beanie, who owns the greasy spoon next door, said I could temporarily relocate by his kitchen door. That was a year ago. If a good case don't come up soon, I may have to start doin' Beanie's greasy dishes.

SELMA: *(Making a typing error.)* Aw, shucks!

NICK: *(To audience.)* That's Selma, my secretary. She's a real peach, but life is full of pits. I'm gonna have to let her go because I can't pay her.

NICK moves to SELMA

NICK: *(To SELMA.)* Hey, Selma, how's tricks?

SELMA: Nick! I didn't see you standin' there.

SELMA looks at her umbrella and picks up a pencil, hoping to erase her mistake. She tries to figure out how she'll do that holding the umbrella.

NICK: Looks like you got an issue there, Selma.

SELMA: Oh, Nick, I made a typo . . . just a little one . . . but you know how I like everything to be perfect for you.

NICK: *(To audience.)* If there's anything I hate, it's seein' a dame in distress.

NICK takes the umbrella from SELMA.

SELMA: *(Dreamily, looking at NICK.)* Thanks, Nick. You're a lifesaver.

NICK: Anything for you, baby.

SELMA sighs and erases her mistake.

NICK: What are you typing there, if I might ask?

SELMA: Sure you can ask, Nick! It's a report on your last case.

NICK: *(To audience.)* She had to remind me! I was close . . . that close . . . to finding out who bumped off Herbert Grimsickle, the steel magnet. I had my ducks in a row and I thought for sure it was that quack doctor of his. Yeah . . . Doc Quickshot was feathering his nest with overpriced placebos that Grimsickle kept taking. I figured Grimsickle found out and told Quickshot the cops were gonna find out real quick.

SELMA: Nick, how do you spell "incompetent"?

NICK: What do you need that word for?

SELMA: It follows, "Detective Hammer shouted at Nick, 'You stupid, idiotic . . .'"

NICK: *(To audience.)* I got the cops over to Quickshot's office to arrest him, but that's when Quickshot's nurse gave him an airtight alibi. He and the nurse were at a birthday party at Chucky Cheese, a party for Quickshot's wife. And right at that same time, the real killer, Grimsickle's widow, Leticia, escaped to the Caribbean. It's i-n-c-o-m-p-e-t-e-n-t. My middle name.

SELMA: *(Typing in the word.)* You can't win 'em all, Nick.

NICK: Sure would be nice to win one of 'em, Selma. Just one would put us on the map, and you could . . .

SELMA: I could what, Nick?

NICK: Oh, nothin', baby. Nothin' important. *(To audience.)* I just didn't have the heart to spill the bad news to Selma right there in the rain. *(Holding his hand out to see if it's raining. To SELMA.)* Hey! It ain't raining! What have you got this umbrella for, Selma?

SELMA: The weatherman said it might rain.

NICK: What weatherman?

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SELMA: In the paper there.

NICK looks at the paper.

NICK: Selma, this is yesterday's news.

SELMA: Well, I didn't want to get my hair mussed.

NICK: *(Folding up the umbrella.)* You look pretty good tonight, kiddo.

SELMA: Thanks, Nick. I . . . I got a date.

NICK: Oh yeah?

SELMA: Does it surprise you?

NICK: Heck, no, Selma. You're a peach. You could get any guy you wanted.

SELMA: *(Sighing sadly.)* Yeah, well, peaches get bruised real easy.

NICK: *(To audience.)* Selma sometimes talked like that . . . real cryptic like. *(To SELMA.)* So who's the lucky guy?

SELMA: Mike, the guy who runs the hot dog stand.

NICK: Aww, Selma, you can do a whole lot better than that.

SELMA: *(Inserting appropriate actors' names.)* Yeah, Nick? I used to think I'd get Brad Pitt. And then I lowered the bar to Tim Allen. Now I'd settle for any of the Three Stooges. Anything else tonight?

SELMA pulls the report from the typewriter, walks around the front of the crates, opens one, and drops it in.

NICK: I don't think so, Selma.

SELMA: Well, then, I'll see you tomorrow, Nick.

NICK: Well, Selma, you know things haven't been too busy lately, and I don't think . . .

SELMA: Oh, Nick! Don't! Don't say another word!

NICK: But, Selma, I ain't been fair to you! You ain't had a paycheck in three weeks.

SELMA: Four . . . but who's counting?

NICK: As soon as I get a big case, I'll give you a call.

SELMA: Who'll type up your reports? File them? Make you coffee?

NICK: Selma, the coffee fund is empty.

SELMA: No, it's not! I put a dollar in this morning.

NICK: You're making this mighty hard, Selma. I'm standin' in your way. You could go out 'n get a great job bein' a secretary to a CEO or somethin'.

SELMA: Nick, you never know when you're gonna need me.

NICK: Yeah, well, I know when I don't need you.

SELMA: Oh, Nick! How could you! (*NICK'S cell phone rings. He pulls it out. SELMA grabs it and flips it open.*) Nick Noir, Private Eye. Yes! Yes! Yes! Absolutely!

NICK: Has a positive ring to it.

SELMA: A Coco Purvis for you.

NICK: Noir here, Nick Noir. Yes . . . yes . . . yes . . . Really? Oh, gross! No, of course not . . . yes . . . yes . . . tonight? Well, let me just check my schedule . . .

SELMA: I lied about a date with Mike. He's the only guy I know by his first name.

NICK: Yeah . . . sure . . . I'll be there in about twenty minutes. Right. (*He clicks the phone shut.*) So, what do you know about the murder of some guy in a coffee shop called Precious Perks?

SELMA: Oh, Nick! The police gave up on that one!

NICK: You're kiddin'!

SELMA: (*She grabs newspaper and opens to a page.*) Detective Hammer officially dropped the case of Death by Chocolate into the cold case file.

NICK: Death by Chocolate?

SELMA: Precious Perks is famous for it. A super-duper creamy, rich chocolate mocha latte.

NICK: Somebody slipped a little cyanide into the latte?

SELMA: Nobody can figure it out. Just that the victim was drinking a Death by Chocolate when he died.

NICK: And who was the victim?

SELMA: Let's see, somebody named Vinnie the Leech.

NICK: (*To audience.*) For a minute, I hesitated. How come Selma had said she had a date when she really didn't? And if she really didn't, how come she was all dolled up like a Christmas tree? And how come her eyes kept getting watery every time she looked at me? And, oh, yeah . . . I wasn't sure about getting involved with somebody named Vinnie the Leech, dead or alive.

SELMA: This could be the big one, Nick.

NICK: Yeah, but we could find ourselves in real danger.

SELMA: Oh, Nick, I'd follow you anywhere.

NICK: But there's nothin' in it for you, kiddo! I can't keep you tied down like this!

SELMA: Oh, Nick! I can take shorthand and I've got a Blackberry!

NICK: Sorry, Selma, but I gotta fly solo on this one. (*He moves right, then turns back to SELMA.*) Turn out the lights on the way out.

SELMA: Nick . . . there ain't no lights.

NICK: I knew that.

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NICK exits right. SELMA bursts into tears and runs off left as the lights dim to darkness.

ACT ONE, SCENE 2

SCENE:

Twenty minutes later, Precious Perks Coffee Shoppe. We see a counter up center set with coffee mugs along with a case containing a few pastries. Behind the counter is one or more coffee machines, either real or homemade. A sign proclaims "Precious Perks Coffee Shoppe" in flowery letters. Up right is a small table for additional coffee pots, cream, sugar, and so on. Small tables dot the stage along with two or three chairs at each. The furniture doesn't have to match, but should, perhaps, be painted the same color so the coffee shop has a very country feel to it, even though it's smack in the middle of a city. Wing entrance right leads to outside; wing entrance left leads to the kitchen, storeroom, and the back door. A window would be located up right if one is desired. Since the action of the play takes place at night, a dim city scene could be seen through it.

AT RISE:

YOLANDA, dressed in black and wearing a hat and veil concealing her identity, sits at table right. FRANCOIS sits at table left, holding a newspaper in front of his face so he can't be identified. HENRY sits at table center wearing a long white beard and hat with white hair flowing from under it. However, his T-shirt, jeans, and old athletic shoes show he's no old man. BOBBIE SUE walks from table to table, pouring coffee as she sings in horrible voice.

BOBBIE SUE: *(Singing.)* My man gave me the brush off, so I combed that rat out of my hair. Did my nails, got a new do. Now I don't got a single care! *(BONBON enters left, carrying a pot of coffee.)* Walked up Main Street, proud as punch. Had three dates lined up for lunch. Who needs a man like the one I had? Broke my heart 'cause he was bad!

BONBON: Bobbie Sue!

BOBBIE SUE: Yes, ma'am?

BONBON: How many times have I told you? This is a coffee shop, not the Grand Ole Opry!

BOBBIE SUE: Sorry, Miss Purvis. I just get so happy sometimes, I burst out singing.

BONBON: Well, Julie Andrews you're not.

BOBBIE SUE: Who's she?

BONBON: The customers want peace and quiet here. It's supposed to be a relaxing place.

BOBBIE SUE: If you don't mind an observation, Miss Purvis, this place is more like a morgue!

YOLANDA drops a spoon, FRANCOIS drops his newspaper briefly, and HENRY coughs loudly.

BOBBIE SUE: Sorry, I guess that hit a bit close to home.

BOBBIE SUE looks down at the floor

BOBBIE SUE: Still a bit of outline tape on the floor.

BONBON: Shhhhh! I'll scrape the rest off after we close.

HENRY: *(Affecting an old voice.)* Say there, girlie!

BONBON: Yes, sir?

HENRY: No, the cute one!

BOBBIE SUE: You mean me?

HENRY: You're the only cute thing in here aside from the buffalo on a nickel. Wait . . . they don't make buffalo nickels anymore, do they?

BONBON: Fossil! *(She huffs off left.)*

BOBBIE SUE: What can I get for you?

HENRY: A cup of coffee.

BOBBIE SUE: French roast? Columbian? Javanese? Hawaiian? South African Gold Coast? Special Arabic Blend?

HENRY: Just coffee.

BOBBIE SUE: What flavor?

HENRY: Coffee flavor.

BOBBIE SUE: We got Irish mist, Irish crème, Irish Irish, pecan, pecan walnut, butter pecan, mocha java, java java,

HENRY: Just coffee!

BOBBIE SUE: And what size?

HENRY: A cup. A cup of coffee!

BOBBIE SUE: We've got giant size, King Kong size, t-rex size, and down with the Titanic size.

HENRY: A small.

BOBBIE SUE: One giant cup of regular.

HENRY: A small, not a giant!

BOBBIE SUE: But a giant is our small! Now, do you want that black? With sugar? With cream? With both? Maybe a sprinkle of cinnamon?

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NICK enters right just as HENRY is about to grab BOBBIE SUE, presumably to strangle her.

NICK: *(To audience.)* Twenty minutes later, I stepped into Precious Perks Coffee Shoppe. That's with an extra P and an extra E. Business wasn't hopping, but it looked like I was just in time to prevent another murder.

HENRY: *(Exasperated.)* Black! Plain black coffee!

BOBBIE SUE: Why didn't you say so?

BOBBIE SUE walks behind the counter to fetch the coffee.

NICK: *(To audience.)* Looked like a nice place, kinda homey if your home's a farmhouse in the middle of Nebraska somewheres about 1948. I glanced around . . . *(NICK glances around quickly.)* Nothing much out of the ordinary. *(NICK sits. FRANCOIS drops his newspaper. YOLANDA drops her spoon. HENRY coughs. To BOBBIE SUE.)* Excuse me!

BOBBIE SUE: Be right with you! *(BOBBIE SUE brings a huge mug of coffee from behind the counter. She delivers it to HENRY.)* One small regular.

HENRY: Girlie, that's enough coffee to fill Lake Superior!

BOBBIE SUE: Enjoy!

BOBBIE SUE moves to NICK.

HENRY: I'm gonna turn into the Bellagio fountain, I just know it!

BOBBIE SUE: What can I do for you, mister?

NICK: It's Noir. Nick Noir.

BOBBIE SUE: How about a double Fudge Mocha Surprise?

NICK: *(Conspiratorially.)* I said, "I'm Noir. Nick Noir."

BOBBIE SUE: A single Frappe Caramel Latte?

NICK: Nick Noir.

BOBBIE SUE: We don't make anything like a Nick Noir.

NICK: That's my name! You called me.

BOBBIE SUE: Gosh, I surely don't think I called you, *(Dreamily.)* but I wish I had.

NICK: *(To audience.)* Right then, I started getting the feeling that this case was gonna have some pretty odd angles to it. *(To BOBBIE SUE.)* You're Coco Purvis, aren't you?

BOBBIE SUE: Me? Coco? Gosh no!

NICK: That explains a lot.

BOBBIE SUE: I'm Bobbie Sue Cash. This job's just a stepping stone.

NICK: To what?

BOBBIE SUE: (*Bursting into song.*) I wanna be a country singer. I wanna beat up old car! I wanna wail and moan a bit! I wanna be a Nashville star!

COCO bustles on left. She is dressed in a flower print dress, an apron, and sports a head of white hair.

COCO: Oh, dear! Oh, dear! Is someone choking? (*COCO moves to FRANCOIS.*) Are you all right, sir?

FRANCOIS snaps his paper indignantly.

BOBBIE SUE: I was just singin' a bit, Miss Purvis.

NICK: Coco?

BOBBIE SUE: That's Coco!

NICK: (*To audience.*) I hadn't seen anybody like Coco since last Christmas when I watched "It's a Wonderful Life."

COCO: Oh, well, Bobbie Sue, you know how my sister feels about your singing.

BOBBIE SUE: Some day she's gonna regret it! I'll be a star 'n I'll remember all the little people who were good to me. But not her!

COCO: Oh, now, you know she's just a bit on edge what with all this . . . well, you go back and help her grind some more coffee.

BOBBIE SUE: Oh, this guy wants to see you.

COCO: Oh, why, what would you like? A double Mocha Caramel Mint Latte?

NICK: How about a Death by Chocolate?

All gasp.

COCO: Well, we were thinking of removing that item from our menu.

NICK: But that's what I want!

BOBBIE SUE: (*Nervously.*) Coming right up . . .

BOBBIE SUE moves behind the counter and under next dialogue, makes a Death by Chocolate.

NICK: Just nix the poison this time.

Again, all gasp.

COCO: Oh, my goodness!

NICK: So you're Coco Purvis.

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COCO: Why, yes, but who . . . who are you?

NICK shoves the other chair at his table with his foot so it rests in front of COCO. All lean in to hear who this stranger is.

NICK: Rest your bones. *(COCO gingerly sits on chair.)* I'm Nick.
Nick Noir.

COCO: Oh, why, you're right on time!

COCO glances about the room. FRANCOIS snaps his paper up in front of his face, YOLANDA acts completely disinterested. HENRY takes out a video game and begins to play it.

NICK: What can I do for you, Coco? I can call you Coco, can't I?

COCO: Oh, yes, of course, Mr. Noir.

NICK: I figure your call had something to do with the murder.

All slowly look one to another.

COCO: Oh, dear! Dear! But it . . . the police don't think it was . . . murder.

NICK: Yeah? Well, I can smell murder a mile away.

HENRY sniffs his underarms quickly and, he thinks, discreetly.

COCO: Apparently, so can all our customers.

NICK: Tanked your business, ha?

COCO: Oh, Mr. Noir . . . unless we can clear this thing up, Precious Perks is going down the garbage disposal.

NICK: Hate to see something like that happen to a sweet old thing like you.

COCO: Oh, you are a dear. Do you think you can find out what really happened?

NICK: What really happened is my middle name.

COCO: You must have had very unusual parents.

BOBBIE SUE brings a large frothy drink and sets it in front of NICK.

NICK: *(To audience.)* So this is what Vinnie the Leech was drinking when he croaked, huh? I could smell the cocoa, cinnamon, caramel, and more cocoa. Funny. The one thing I couldn't smell was coffee. Though something inside me warned me not to do it, I took a sip. *(NICK takes a sip of the drink. To COCO.)* That's a killer drink!

COCO: *(Almost in tears.)* That's why we're dropping it.

NICK: No, I mean, it's the best thing I've tasted since my first kiss.

COCO: Oh, well, aren't you sweet.

NICK: Look, lady, this is sweet. I'm not. I'm tough. I've been shot four times, nearly strangled twice, beaten by a two-by-four, a baseball bat, and a tire iron. At the same time. Danger doesn't scare me. I welcome it. I embrace it! I don't have a scaredy-cat bone in my body!

HENRY sneezes. NICK jumps up, pulls his revolver from his pocket and aims at YOLANDA. She points to HENRY.

HENRY: 'Scuse me!

COCO: Gesundheit! *(To NICK.)* I think he could use a tissue more than that thing.

NICK: Hey, I don't tell you how to make coffee, you don't tell me how to catch a killer.

COCO: Do you really think Mr. Leech was murdered?

NICK: Tell me about it. Everything you remember!

COCO: Well, that lady sat there . . . and the gentleman reading the newspaper sat there. This old man who sneezed wasn't here. And Bobbie Sue was behind the counter.

NICK: Just like now.

COCO: Yes. Except that I was over at the table filling the cream and sugar bowls.

NICK: That right, everybody?

FRANCOIS drops his newspaper, then pulls it back up again. YOLANDA crosses her legs in disinterest. HENRY starts braiding his beard.

BOBBIE SUE: *(Moving to NICK.)* You got it, good-looking.

NICK: Look, doll, I'd like to keep this professional.

BOBBIE SUE: What profession are you in?

NICK: *(Whispering.)* I'm a private eye.

BOBBIE SUE: A what?

NICK: *(Louder.)* A private eye!

BOBBIE SUE: I still can't hear you!

ALL: He's a private eye!

NICK: You got any other bright questions?

COCO: Mr. Noir's going to clear up this mess over that Leech man.

NICK: *(To BOBBIE SUE.)* I understand you made him the fatal drink. *(To audience.)* I thought I detected a brief shudder of fear running through Bobbie Sue's body. Or it might have been indigestion.

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BOBBIE SUE: Sure, I made it. Just like I made yours.

NICK: You mean - -

BOBBIE SUE: I mean what?

NICK: This time you left the poison out, right?

BOBBIE SUE: (*Flustered.*) No! Yes! All I know is I didn't put any poison in his Death by Chocolate! I didn't even know the guy!

BOBBIE SUE runs off left crying.

NICK: (*To audience.*) It was the biggest case of guilt I'd ever seen!

COCO: Oh, Mr. Noir, you have to forgive poor Bobbie Sue. The police . . . they've questioned her for hour after hour.

NICK: Grilled her like a salmon steak, huh?

COCO: And I'm sure she really didn't know him. I'm sure of it!

NICK: Who is Bobbie Sue Cash anyway?

COCO: Just the sweetest thing you ever wanted to meet.

NICK: Maybe her name ought to be Candy.

COCO: Oh, no! Bobbie Sue fits perfectly. She wants to be a country singer, you see. But . . .

NICK: But what?

COCO: I'm afraid she's not really very . . . good.

NICK: If that little appetizer she served up a couple of minutes ago is any indication of her singing talent, she'll make a great plumber.

COCO: Well, she came in needing a job and that was before . . . before . . .

COCO looks down on the floor.

NICK: You can still see the crime scene tape.

COCO: It's awful! Once the police took away the crime scene tape and said we could open up again, we thought everything would be just fine, but it wasn't.

NICK: Murder makes people lose their appetites, Miss Purvis.

COCO: But was it murder? The police never found anything . . . at least, that they told us.

NICK: Yeah, well, they can be pretty tight-lipped about all that.

COCO: Can you call Lt. Hammer and find out for us?

NICK: (*To audience.*) I didn't have the heart to tell her that Hammer hated my guts. He was old school. Cops cooperate with nobody. One time, an interested party hired a psychic to help out in an investigation. He tried to throw the psychic in jail on trumped-up traffic charges. Didn't pan out for him, 'cause the psychic saw what Hammer was about to do in her crystal ball. By the way, she later fingered the murderer and Hammer was left with egg on his

face. Which is pretty much how he looked all the time. But I couldn't tell little Coco the truth, so I just said: Yeah, sure. He'll let me look through the file.

FRANCOIS peers over the top of his newspaper, YOLANDA lifts her veil, and HENRY stares at COCO.

COCO: It's just such a terrible thing, you know?

NICK: What is?

COCO: I always have the feeling that people are thinking, "There she is! The Coffee Shop Lizzie Borden!"

NICK: I think you're imagining things.

COCO: No. I can feel their eyes on me! They're always staring!

COCO looks around quickly. FRANCOIS snaps his newspaper up. YOLANDA drops her veil, and HENRY returns to braiding his beard.

NICK: So tell me, Miss Purvis, how long had you known Vinnie the Leech?

COCO: Oh, heavens, Mr. Noir, I never knew him at all!

NICK: Never seen him before the day he dropped dead right here?

COCO: Cross my heart . . . never!

NICK: *(To audience.)* Couldn't argue with those apples.

COCO: He was a customer, just like everybody else.

NICK: Not just like everybody else. He was a victim! Say . . . just to cover all bases . . . could he have been allergic to anything in Death by Chocolate?

COCO: I don't think so.

NICK: What's in the drink, anyway?

COCO: *(Stage whisper, quickly.)* Well, milk, coffee, sugar, cream, dark chocolate processed with potassium carbonate, cocoa butter, cocoa oil, soya lecithin, partially hydrogenated palm kernel oil, vanilla, sorbitan tristearate, corn syrup, and natural peppermint oil.

NICK: That's a mouthful. Did they test for allergies to all those things?

COCO: *(Bursting into tears.)* I don't know, Mr. Noir! I just don't know!

NICK: *(To audience.)* There's nothin' that gets me more than a sweet old thing cryin' like that! I knew I had to help Coco Purvis, even though I didn't smell a lot of cash in it for me. All right, Miss Purvis, I'll find out what happened and clear your name. Here's what I charge.

NICK slides a card across the table to her. She looks at the card.

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COCO: Oh, that's fine. Here's what I can pay. *(She writes a figure on the card and slides it back.)*

NICK: *(To audience.)* She chopped my fee in half and then some. But half my fee was better than none of my fee, so I told her: You drive a hard bargain.

COCO: Where do we begin, partner?

COCO shakes hands with NICK.

NICK: *(To audience.)* For an old gal, she had one heck of a handshake! *(To COCO.)* Let's start by talking to your sister.

BONBON enters left.

BONBON: Coco, what are you doing? Bobbie Sue said there was a man here - -

COCO: Oh, Bonbon, meet Mr. Noir. He's going to straighten all this mess out for us.

BONBON: What mess?

COCO: He's going to find out once and for all what happened to Vinnie the Leech. I mean, Mr. Leech.

BONBON: That is best forgotten, Coco! We talked about it already.

COCO: Yes, you talked.

BONBON: But you didn't listen!

COCO: Well, I'm sorry, but - -

BONBON: Coco, I am your older sister - -

COCO: By four minutes!

NICK: Hold it! Hold it! You two are twins?

BONBON: Non-fraternal. We aren't alike in any way.

COCO: Well, that wasn't our fault. You see, when we were little—

BONBON: Go wash the dishes, Coco!

COCO: But I want to help Mr. Noir, Bonbon.

BONBON: The dishes! *(COCO exits left. BONBON goes behind the counter.)* And as for you, Mr. Noir . . . *(BONBON pulls a five dollar bill from the cash register (if there is one) or a box.)* Here's five dollars for your time.

NICK: *(To audience.)* Five dollars? Five stinkin' dollars? What'd the old bat think I was? A loser, a lowlife? A bum looking for a handout?

NICK grabs the money from her.

BONBON: That terminates our agreement.

NICK: Sorry, lady, but I don't have an agreement with you. I was hired by your sister.

BONBON: My sister doesn't hire anyone! Half the time she doesn't know what she's doing!

NICK: I think she knew just what she was doing when she hired me!

A glamorously dressed SELMA enters right. She prances up to the counter. SELMA carries a large purse and wears a big hat.

BONBON: Excuse me, but I've got a paying customer. (*BONBON moves to SELMA.*) Can I help you, madam?

SELMA: Hey! Watch who you're calling madam!

NICK winces when he hears SELMA'S voice.

NICK: (*To audience.*) So, what was Selma doin' here in Precious Perks Coffee Shoppe, I asked myself? But dang'd if I could come up with an answer!

BONBON: What would you like?

SELMA: I want one of them Death by Chocolate drinks!

BONBON: Bobbie Sue! Bobbie Sue! (*BOBBIE SUE enters left.*) This lady would like the specialty of the house.

BOBBIE SUE: Popular drink today.

SELMA: I heard they're to die for!

All gasp.

SELMA: No, I mean, really!

BOBBIE SUE gets to work on the drink as GEORGIA GORE enters, wearing an old dress, hat, and coat. She carries a small notepad and pencil along with an oversized purse. She moves to the table up right and pours herself a cup.

BONBON: You got money, sister?

GEORGIA: Of course I do! I just got paid today, and I think my ship's about to come in.

BONBON: Let's see some cash.

GEORGIA: (*Pulling out a handful of coins.*) That enough?

BONBON: Go light on the cream and sugar.

BONBON moves back to NICK.

NICK: You aren't exactly cut from the same cloth as your sister.

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BONBON: If it's any of your business, she was raised in Buttercup, Arkansas.

NICK: Where'd you grow up?

BONBON: Hell Froze Over, Montana. And out there, we don't mince words.

NICK: They probably freeze faster than you can spit 'em out.

BONBON: I don't want you here.

NICK: You need my help.

BONBON: We're doing just fine! The police have already given up, Mr. Noir.

NICK: They might not know everything.

BONBON: And what they don't know can't hurt them.

BONBON exits left. BOBBIE SUE hands SELMA her drink.

BOBBIE SUE: There you go. That'll be five ninety-five.

SELMA: (*Hands BOBBIE SUE a five dollar bill.*) Here you go. Keep the change.

BOBBIE SUE: Lady, this here's just a five dollar bill. You owe me another ninety-five cents.

SELMA: Get technical! (*SELMA hands BOBBIE SUE another dollar.*) And keep the change.

BOBBIE SUE: Thanks!

FRANCOIS folds his paper and places it on the table. He moves to SELMA.

FRANCOIS: Pardon, mademoiselle, avez vous une parapluie?

SELMA: Are you talking to moi?

FRANCOIS: You sprechen ze English!

SELMA: Si, si!

FRANCOIS: You are tres belle.

SELMA: Actually my name is Selma.

FRANCOIS: Selma! Selma! My heart leaps at zee sound.

SELMA: Well, aren't you a fast mover!

BOBBIE SUE: Look, Frenchy, you want another cup of coffee?

FRANCOIS: I only want to feast my eyes on zis beauty!

FRANCOIS embraces SELMA and takes a look in her purse.

NICK: (*To audience.*) It was the first time that guy said a word. And I didn't like what I heard - - or was seeing! He was planting a smacker on Selma, and I could tell she wasn't enjoying it.

SELMA: (*Delighted.*) Oh, oh, monsieur! Kiss me again . . . harder!

NICK: *(To audience.)* Well, she shouldn't have been enjoying it!
(NICK springs over to FRANCOIS and grabs him.) Hey, you!
What are you trying to do?

FRANCOIS: Excusez moi, imbecile! I am speaking with zee lady.

NICK: That ain't no lady, that's my secretary!

SELMA: Oh, Nick!

FRANCOIS: You two know each other?

NICK: Know each other? We're like matching bookends.

SELMA: Salt and pepper shakers.

NICK: Bedroom slippers.

SELMA: Mickey Mouse and Minnie.

NICK: Let's not go that far, baby.

FRANCOIS: D'accord for now. But zee lady does not seem to be so taken with you, monsieur.

NICK: *(To audience.)* Fine and dandy, but I didn't want his paws messin' up Selma's get-up.

FRANCOIS moves to GEORGIA.

FRANCOIS: Bon soir, Mademoiselle. Is this seat taken?

GEORGIA: Yeah! I'm waitin' for Godot.

FRANCOIS: I'll move when he comes in.

FRANCOIS sits at her table and begins a one-sided conversation, quite animatedly. NICK pulls SELMA downstage.

NICK: What are you doing here, Selma?

SELMA: I figured you'd need me, Nick.

NICK: You figured wrong, toots.

SELMA: I don't care if you can't pay me, Nick. I don't care nothin' about money.

NICK: Then how come you're drippin' with diamonds?

SELMA: It's a costume, Nick! I got it from Charlene. I thought I might need a disguise.

NICK: Look, Selma, baby . . . this could be dangerous. And the last thing I'd want . . .

SELMA: I got the goods on Vinnie the Leech.

NICK: How'd you do that?

SELMA: I told you . . . I got a Blackberry.

NICK: Yeah?

SELMA: He was one suspicious character, Nick.

NICK: How so?

SELMA: He had a rap sheet long enough to tie a bow around the Empire State Building.

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NICK: Rap sheet, ha? What kind of raps on the sheet, doll?

SELMA: Oh, Nick, I love it when you're politically incorrect.

NICK: Don't make me ask you again - - what's on his record?

SELMA: (*Looking at her Blackberry.*) Assault, assault with a deadly weapon, grand theft, grand theft auto, attempted murder, attempted robbery, attempted attempts, spitting on a sidewalk, dog at large, and blackmail.

All look at SELMA and gasp.

NICK: Blackmail, ha?

SELMA: And attempted blackmail.

NICK: (*To audience.*) I knew right then we had the motive for Vinnie the Leech's decease. He must have been blackmailing somebody who was breathin' down my neck. (*NICK now moves to each character in turn.*) It wouldn't have been Selma, would it? She's too much of a peach . . . but like she said, a peach can get bruised. (*He moves to HENRY.*) How about the old codger? Any secrets hidden in that beard? And how come he's wearing cross-trainers? You'd think by his age, he'd already be trained. I guess it all depends. (*He moves to BOBBIE SUE.*) Maybe it's our country songbird. She's older than she looks - - (*BOBBIE SUE breaks out of her freeze, slaps NICK across the face, then re-freezes.*) I could almost feel her slap me for that crack, but maybe all that pining was for Vinnie's pine box! (*NICK moves to FRANCOIS.*) And how about this mysterious character? He's a foreigner and who can trust them? At least, I think he's a foreigner 'cause he talked foreign. But come to think of it, he could be yanking my chain big time. How come he's hitting on the two gals who walked in just now, but never even said boo to the lady in black there/ Do they know each other? Are they in cahoots? (*NICK moves to GEORGIA.*) And what about this ragamuffin? Looks like she just climbed out of a dumpster. But what's with the notebook? (*NICK moves to YOLANDA.*) And this one's the cagiest of them all. Who is she? Why's she wearin' a getup that makes her look like she's at a beekeeper's funeral? There's only one reason anybody would wear something like that—they're hiding something. Could her secret be what Vinnie the Leech found out? And I sure can't forget the twins in the backroom. They're as different as night and day, salt and pepper, good and evil. Hmmmm . . . a good twin and an evil twin . . . where have I seen that before?

SELMA: Whaddaya think, Nick? Did I do good?

NICK: You did swell, Selma. Just swell.

SELMA: And I got more on Vinnie. He was born in Hell Froze Over, Montana.

NICK: Somebody just said somethin' about that town.

SELMA: He spent some time knockin' around France.

NICK: (*Looking at FRANCOIS.*) Figures.

SELMA: Had an affair with a Russian princess.

NICK: I didn't know there was any Russian princesses left.

SELMA: And he worked at an old folks home in Buttercup, Arkansas, until they caught him stealin' the silverware.

NICK: You know what, Selma?

SELMA: (*Dreamily.*) Oh, what, Nick?

NICK: I think we got a few too many coincidences here.

FRANCOIS suddenly stands.

FRANCOIS: You American women! So . . . so . . . so-so.

GEORGIA: Look, Frenchy, you wouldn't know a great dame if one bit you.

FRANCOIS: I know zee Great Dane! She is a big dog. Zees tall! And she bit me right here!

FRANCOIS slaps the back of his leg and returns to his table with the newspaper.

NICK: Selma, we gotta find out who these people are.

SELMA: Gosh, Nick, you could just ask 'em.

NICK: No way! We gotta do it so they don't know why we're doin' it.

SELMA: All right, then, let me think . . . (*SELMA snaps her fingers, then moves to HENRY.*) All right, Danny Kramer, I found you at last!

HENRY: You talking to me, good looking?

SELMA: Cut the sweet talk! You're the guy who rear-ended me! I'd know you anywhere, Danny Kramer!

HENRY: My name's not Danny Kramer, it's . . .

SELMA: Sure, you can deny it, Danny, but we both know it's you!

HENRY: My name's Hickenbottom. Henry Higgins Hickenbottom.

SELMA: Sure! And I'm the Queen of Sheba. (*SELMA flounces off to FRANCOIS.*) So it's gotta be you!

FRANCOIS: Pardon?

SELMA: Don't try and hide it, Danny Kramer. I got you at last!

FRANCOIS: Ooolala! You have given up on zee ape over zere?

SELMA: You're the guy who sideswiped me in the parking lot the other day!

FRANCOIS: No, no, no! I do not even own zee car!

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SELMA: I'd know your mug anywhere, Danny Kramer!

FRANCOIS: Je m'appelle Francois. Francois LePew!

SELMA: Ha! And I'm Betsy Ross! (*SELMA moves to YOLANDA.*)
So I finally found you, Dani Kramer.

YOLANDA: I do not know what you are talking about.

SELMA: Sure you do, sister. You keyed my car at the ATM around
the corner the other night. It's all on videotape, Dani Kramer!

YOLANDA: My name is not Dani Kramer!

SELMA: Think I can't tell you're lyin' 'cause you're wearin' that
getup? It's the quiver in your voice, the trembling hands . . . the
higher nasal pitch!

YOLANDA: I am not Dani Kramer!

SELMA: I'm calling the cops!

YOLANDA grabs SELMA.

YOLANDA: Wait!

SELMA: Get your hands off me, nightshade!

YOLANDA: My name is . . . my name is . . . Yolanda.

SELMA: Yolanda? You expect me to believe that?

YOLANDA: Yolanda Lamb. My father was Larry Lamb and my
mother was Lucinda Lamb.

SELMA: And I'll bet their fleeces were as white as snow.

YOLANDA: You insulting creature! I could kill you for that!

SELMA: In front of all these witnesses?

YOLANDA: There are ways and there are ways! Like it or not, my
name is Yolanda Lamb!

SELMA: Sure, and I'm Carmen Miranda. (*SELMA moves to
GEORGIA.*) So it's gotta be you, Dani Kramer!

GEORGIA: Oh, why, you've made a mistake, my dear. My name
isn't Dani.

SELMA: You didn't say that when you cut me off the other night and
ran me into that garbage truck.

GEORGIA: You must have terrible nightmares.

SELMA: Took me six hours to get the spaghetti somebody threw out
out of my hair.

GEORGIA: Well, you must be mistaking me for someone else.

SELMA: I'd know your face anywhere.

GEORGIA: Really, my dear, I don't know what you're talking about.
My name is Georgia.

SELMA: I've been to Georgia once. Nice place. That's why
nobody'd name you Georgia.

GEORGIA: Did anyone tell you you've got no manners, young lady?

SELMA: Yeah . . . the night guard at the state pen, Dani. And you know all about that, don't you?

GEORGIA: Really! (*GEORGIA picks up her bag and reaches in it.*)

SELMA: I wouldn't go for your Uzi, Dani.

GEORGIA: I don't usually carry a bottle of Uzi in my purse, my dear.

SELMA: You know what I meant! You wouldn't pull a trigger in here.

GEORGIA: No, but I might use a little pepper spray!

GEORGIA pulls a small aerosol can from her purse and aims it at SELMA.

NICK: Watch out, Selma! That's loaded!

SELMA: Nice bluff, Dani Kramer!

GEORGIA: Try Georgia . . . Georgia Gore!

BOBBIE SUE: Georgia Gore?! Oh, my goodness!

BOBBIE SUE runs off left as GEORGIA tries to spray SELMA, who runs right into JUNIPER, who is entering right.

JUNIPER: Hey! What's going on?

SELMA: You're not Dani Kramer, are you?

JUNIPER: I'm Juniper.

SELMA: Like the berry.

JUNIPER: Yeah . . . Juniper Berry.

SELMA: Nice to meet you!

GEORGIA has approached SELMA, still with the pepper spray.

GEORGIA: Get lost, floozy!

NICK grabs GEORGIA'S arm as SELMA runs off right, crying.

NICK: You got a mean right, lady.

GEORGIA: (*Jerking herself free.*) Unhand me, you ruffian!

NICK: (*To audience.*) The old gal sounded like she stepped out of Oliver Twist. (*To GEORGIA.*) So, what do you do for an encore?

GEORGIA: Peasant! (*GEORGIA returns to her seat.*)

NICK: (*To audience.*) I can take people calling me just about anything, but when they call me "peasant," my blood begins to boil. Know what I mean? But before I could re . . . re . . . get back at her, my attention was drawn to the newcomer, Miss Juniper Berry. I knew she was a Miss because she didn't have no ring on her pinkie.

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JUNIPER walks by HENRY and drops a small piece of paper on his table. She then sits at another table.

NICK: Get a load of that! She just dropped her garbage on that poor old guy's table!

BONBON, COCO, and BOBBIE SUE enter left.

BOBBIE SUE: She's right over there!

BONBON: I'll handle this!

JUNIPER: Would it be too much trouble to get a cup of coffee?

BOBBIE SUE: Why, sure, honey . . . *(Reciting quickly.)* French roast? Columbian? Javanese? Hawaiian? South African Gold Coast? Special Arabic blend? Irish mist? Irish crème? Irish Irish? Pecan? Pecan walnut? Butter pecan? Mocha java? Java java? Giant size? King Kong size? T-Rex size? Or down with the Titanic size?

JUNIPER: *(After a beat.)* You know . . . on second thought, I'll just have a Death by Chocolate.

All gasp.

COCO: Oh, dear! Oh, dear! Bobbie Sue, I wish you'd erase that!

JUNIPER: Why? It sounds to die for!

BOBBIE SUE: That's just the point.

BOBBIE SUE goes behind the counter to make the drink. COCO walks around pouring coffee for the other customers, while BONBON stands over GEORGIA.

BONBON: Back again, Ms. Gore?

GEORGIA: Well, yes, Ms. Purvis.

BONBON: I gathered from your review of Precious Perks that you couldn't stand this place. As I recall, our coffee was like river bottom sludge, our pastries were light as bricks, and our décor was trailer park chic.

GEORGIA: You've taken everything out of context!

BONBON: The context was your restaurant review, Ms. Gore.

GEORGIA: Well, I'm sorry you didn't remember the positive points of my review.

BONBON: Oh, yes. You said our water was fresh and clean, the sugar was sweet, and the cream was . . . how did you say it? "Critter free."

GEORGIA: And I raved about your Death by Chocolate.

BONBON: That's right. And it was that very night that poor Mr. Leech died while drinking one.

GEORGIA: Well, that wasn't my fault, my dear.

BONBON: No?

GEORGIA: Surely you don't think I had anything to do with it!

NICK has moved over to the two.

NICK: Why not? You're obviously a pretty shifty chick.

GEORGIA: I may be pretty . . . I may be shifty . . . but I'm no chick, sir! I am a professional journalist.

NICK: So with fifteen thousand restaurants in town, how come you came back here?

BONBON: Mr. Noir, I told you to get out of here!

NICK: Sorry, lady, but you didn't hire me.

COCO: I did that, Bonbon.

BONBON: You know you don't make decisions like that without my approval, Coco.

NICK: I thought you two owned this place fifty-fifty.

COCO: Oh, we do.

NICK: Then I work for your fifty percent, Ms. Purvis.

COCO: There, you see?

BONBON: Well, you're standing in my fifty percent!

NICK: *(To audience.)* I knew this lady had some issues, but this lady had some issues! *(To BONBON.)* Where's your fifty percent, Ms. Purvis?

COCO: Well, Mr. Noir, I don't exactly . . . Bonbon, where is my fifty percent?

BONBON: Out back, by the dumpster!

NICK: That ain't fifty-fifty, and you know it. Now, Ms. Gore, answer my question.

GEORGIA: I don't even remember what it was.

NICK: It was . . . it was . . .

HENRY: How come you're back here after you gave the place a lousy review in the paper?

NICK: Thanks, old timer.

HENRY: Don't mention it.

BONBON: I don't care why she's back! Between her and that poor man falling over dead on the floor, Precious Perks is in a very precarious position. And I'd thank you to butt out, Mr. Noir!

COCO: Please, Bonbon! He only wants to help! He's going to find out what happened to Mr. Leech and clear our names. Isn't that right, Mr. Noir?

NICK: You got it, sister.

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GEORGIA: All right! I came back because . . . because . . . I thought I was a bit harsh. Sometimes I decide in hindsight that I've been too critical.

COCO: But you're a critic, my dear.

GEORGIA: Maybe a second review will undo the damage done by the first.

BONBON: I don't believe you for a second!

GEORGIA: My dear, why else would I be here?

NICK: Because you were here the night Leech died. All of you were!

BOBBIE SUE: Here you go, hon . . . one Death by Chocolate.

All gasp and lean towards JUNIPER who sips her drink.

JUNIPER: Mmmmmmm . . . yummy!

All breathe a sigh of relief.

GEORGIA: I'd like one of those, too, my dear!

BOBBIE SUE: Comin' right up! And how about a tune to go with it?
(Sings.) I'm just a country girl at heart!

ALL: No!

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