

# ACTING CAN BE MURDER

A BACKSTAGE MYSTERY-COMEDY IN TWO ACTS

By Eddie McPherson

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**ACTING CAN BE MURDER**

**By Eddie McPherson**

**CAST OF CHARACTERS**

*(6 MEN, 8 WOMEN, OPTIONAL EXTRAS)*

- DOLORES GORDON (f) .....Hard to tell if she's the epitome of evil or just crazy. Mid-to-late 40s. *(232 lines)*
- HOWARD WEAVER (m) .....Owner of a small but nice antique shop in town and seems to be up to no good. Sophisticated, late 40s or early 50s. *(101 lines)*
- BEVERLY GLADSTONE (f)....The theatre's competent director. Mid-40s. *(146 lines)*
- JANET DUNCAN (f).....BEVERLY's stage manager. Young and helpful. Early 20s. *(57 lines)*
- GEORGIA STYLES (f) .....Highbrow aristocrat who feels it's her job to put everyone else in their place. Early 50s. *(68 lines)*
- LLOYD FISCHER (m) .....The theatre's handyman who is involved in something mysterious. Early 30s. *(26 lines)*
- GUINEVERE BLACK (f).....Dolores's murder victim. Seems to restlessly lurk in the shadows of the theatre. Same age as Dolores. *(No lines)*
- ISABELLA WATTS (f).....Recently learned of her husband's ongoing "hobby". 30s. *(44 lines)*
- OLIVIA ANDERSON (f) .....ISABELLA's friend in need. Young and attractive. Early 20s. *(52 lines)*
- ALICE OLDACRE (f) .....“Overhears” something she shouldn't have. Late 40s. *(27 lines)*
- OSCAR FAIRFAX (m).....A local medical doctor. Mid-60s. *(33 lines)*

OFFICER EVAN BIDDLE (m)..A policeman who is very concerned about his standing in the community. Mid-to-late 20s. (62 lines)

GEOFFREY CHANCE (m).....Young and arrogant. Likes fast cars and adventure. Early 20s. (27 lines)

ALBERT FISK (m).....An eager actor. Mid-to-late 20s. (15 lines)

EXTRAS (m/f).....Other cast members in the play and/or members of the dream sequence.

### SYNOPSIS

Dolores Gordon, who loves the stage, has always dreamed of stardom, but the only role she ever seems to land is that of the lowly understudy. She decides the only way she might receive the lead role in an upcoming community theatre production is to murder the lead actress, Guinevere Black. And that is exactly what she does. To make the murder more fun, Dolores hides Guinevere's body in a large wooden trunk that is used as the centerpiece of the production's murder mystery set.

But Dolores's thrills soon turn to chills when she begins to observe strange things going on among the production's suspicious and dysfunctional cast members. They seem to know something she doesn't. Out of mere nervousness, Dolores decides to open the chest in an effort to make certain her victim hasn't disappeared. That's when her worst nightmare is realized: Guinevere's body is indeed *gone*. But who took it? Which cast member is on to her horrific crime? And is that Guinevere herself peering through the French doors of the set when no one but Dolores is looking? Find out the answers when you read this murder mystery that spoofs both Agatha Christie and Alfred Hitchcock in one keep-you-guessing backstage comedy.

Simple set.

**RUNNING TIME:** 90 minutes.

### SET:

The set is decorated as a Victorian-style living room. A sofa sits center stage with a matching chair sitting left of it. A fireplace sits against the upstage

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center wall. A large picture of DOLORES GORDON hangs above the fireplace. French doors open up to a garden right of the fireplace and there are bookcases full of old books on the left of the fireplace. On the stage left wall, there is a door that leads to the rest of the house and more nice pictures. On the stage right wall is another door and a long window beside it. This door exits to the outside. A large antique-looking chest sits in front of the sofa serving as a coffee table. A small round end table sits left of the sofa. A telephone sits atop the table.

### **PROPS:**

Candlestick

White handkerchief

Poster-size pictures of actors playing Guinevere and Delores

Compact

Dinner party dress

Medium-size cardboard box with vase of silk or plastic flowers inside

Couple of framed pictures (*One must be of a pretty lady*)

Director's notebook

Purse

Large doily

Handkerchief

Pieces of tissue

Tube of lipstick

Toy gun

Headset

Clipboard

Small tablet and pencil

Martini-type glasses

Silver tray

Telephone

Fake butcher knife

Unlit cigarette

Detective badge

Small toolbox

White masks (*For optional dream sequence*)

Fake stick of dynamite (*For optional dream sequence*)

Book

Two pitchers of water

Several glasses

Bottle of “tranquilizers”  
Two pieces of paper (*As letters*)  
Several plastic medallions for charms  
Feather boa  
Ugly hat  
Unlit cigar  
Pair of handcuffs  
Cell phone  
Tape measure

### PRODUCTION NOTES

This is a farce, so the play should move along rather quickly and be played for fun, but please notice the pauses and the other silent places in the stage directions. These should be played to the fullest for desired effect. For example, notice stage directions such as the following: “When Dolores takes the glass, her hands are visibly shaking.”; “It looks, by their body language, as if Howard is reprimanding Lloyd”; “As Dolores crosses to Oscar, her eyes stay fixed on the glass in his hand.” etc. The play is very visually oriented, so attention should be paid to these details.

Extra cast members can be added to play in the dream sequence and/or as other actors rehearsing the play if desired.

The actor who plays Guinevere should be dressed like her large portrait. Also, if you use the dream sequence, Guinevere’s outfit should be pretty basic and easy to find and put together so that the actors in the dream sequence can dress like her. For example: Black dress with white pearls; white dress with blue scarf etc. It needs to be easy to dress many actors alike.

The chest should be the centerpiece of the set. It should sit facing the sofa so that the lid opens toward the upstage wall.

Have fun with this play. It is something of a parody in that it takes Agatha Christie-type characters and places them in an Alfred Hitchcock-type situation. Remember, too, that it is a comedy and not a drama to be taken seriously. Enjoy the ridiculous situations and the somewhat stereotypical characters. If you enjoy it, the audience will too.

ACT ONE, SCENE ONE

**SCENE:**

*The set is decorated as a Victorian-style living room. A sofa sits center stage with a matching chair sitting left of it. A fireplace sits against the upstage center wall. A large picture of DOLORES GORDON hangs above the fireplace. French doors open up to a garden right of the fireplace and bookcases full of old books are on the left of the fireplace. On the stage left wall there is a door that leads to the rest of the house and more nice pictures. On the stage right wall is another door and a long window beside it. This door exits to the outside. A large antique-looking chest sits in front of the sofa serving as a coffee table. A small, round end table sits left of the sofa. A telephone sits atop the table.*

**AT RISE:**

*DOLORES GORDON is calmly closing the chest that sits in front of the sofa. She notices the audience.*

**DOLORES:** Excuse me while I catch my breath. *(She wipes her forehead with a white handkerchief.)* Have you ever murdered anyone and hid the body? Let me tell you – it is *not* as easy as it looks in the movies. Who did I murder? Here. *(DOLORES holds up a poster-sized picture of GUINEVERE who is posed the same as DOLORES in the portrait over the fireplace, though the dress is different.)* Guinevere Black. *(Giving the picture a good looking-over.)* She was one tough cookie to knock over – very stout for her age. *(She puts the picture away.)*

Why did I do such a dastardly thing? She had it coming, it's as simple as that. *(Pulls out a compact and powders her nose.)* She was terribly arrogant. Let me explain: You see, I'm playing Clarisse Dubois, who owns this quaint Victorian-style home here. The picture above the fireplace used to be *(Points to the wing where she put the portrait.)* that picture of Guinevere Black I showed you a moment ago. That was back when *she* was playing Clarisse. But after Guinevere *(Makes quotation marks with her fingers.)* "ran off to Europe," leaving the cast and director high and dry, they were forced to bring in her understudy. *(Throws out her arms.)* Yours truly.

What is this world coming to when you have to kill a body just to land a decent part in a play? I mean, really!

You're just dying to know how I did it, aren't you? *(Points to the candlestick on the end table.)* There it is right over there – the candlestick I used. I researched for weeks figuring out exactly where in the back of her head I should strike. The candlestick is

serving as one of the props in the play. Isn't that fun? (*Stands beside the chest*) Guess where I hid the body? You already know, don't you? (*Touches the corner of the chest. Speaking to the chest.*) You just keep quiet in there and don't give me away. (*Giggles.*) I just crack myself up. (*BEVERLY GLADSTONE, the director, enters carrying a medium-sized box and watches DOLORES. DOLORES doesn't notice BEVERLY and continues to speak to the audience. Her demeanor changes suddenly.*)

I bet you're like all the others who think I should be nothing but an understudy. That I don't have the talent it takes to be a star. About that I have only one thing to say: BLAH on you!

**BEVERLY:** Dolores? (*DOLORES is startled and turns quickly and places the dress in front of her as though she were trying to protect herself.*) Who are you talking to?

**DOLORES:** (*Nervously.*) Beverly? How long have you been standing there?

**BEVERLY:** I just came in. (*Places a hand above her eyes and peers out toward the audience.*) Is anyone out there?

**DOLORES:** Just . . . a few people. I was . . . performing a monologue for them.

**BEVERLY:** Dolores, I don't see anyone out there.

**DOLORES:** (*Composing herself.*) Of course not, silly; I was only *pretending* there were people sitting out there so I could rehearse my monologue in front of an audience, that's all. It helps me get into character.

**BEVERLY:** (*BEVERLY gives DOLORES a strange look, then walks around the set arranging things.*) You're early. How long have you been here?

**DOLORES:** (*Picking at the dress.*) Only a few minutes. Mr. Fischer let me in.

**BEVERLY:** Lloyd let you in? That's odd, he told me he would be out of town until later. That's why he asked if I could open the theatre tonight.

**DOLORES:** I just took for granted it was Mr. Fischer who unlocked the door. All I know is that it was certainly unlocked. You see, I had to return a scarf over at Ratliff's Dress Shop before they closed. Well, no use going all the way back home before rehearsal.

**BEVERLY:** That makes sense. How do you like the set? Isn't it marvelous?

**DOLORES:** Simply adorable. It makes me want to move right in.

**BEVERLY:** (*Crossing and looking up at the portrait of DOLORES.*) The portrait turned out nice. How does it make you feel seeing your likeness bigger than life?

**DOLORES:** Like a star!

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- BEVERLY:** (*Crosses to the chest.*) The only thing I'm not so crazy about is this chest for a coffee table.
- DOLORES:** I think it's perfect. It certainly sets off the antique look you were after.
- BEVERLY:** I suppose we could move it to a different area of the stage.
- DOLORES:** (*Quickly.*) Oh no, Beverly! It belongs front and center, if you ask me. (*Rubbing the top of the chest.*) That way, everyone can see and appreciate its ornate characteristics.
- BEVERLY:** I guess you're right.
- DOLORES:** (*Puts the dress back up against her.*) Beverly, I simply adore the dress; it fits me perfectly.
- BEVERLY:** And you were afraid it wouldn't be finished in time for our first dress rehearsal.
- DOLORES:** I think I'll hang it in my dressing room so it doesn't get wrinkled. (*Before she leaves.*) Beverly, I can't thank you enough for giving me this chance. I won't let you down.
- BEVERLY:** You're welcome, Dolores.

*DOLORES looks over at the chest, covers her mouth with her fingers, giggles and exits. BEVERLY starts straightening things on the set. She takes the candlestick off the end table and places it on top of the chest. She takes a vase of silk flowers from a box she brought in with her and sets it beside the candlestick. She begins to arrange the flowers. JANET DUNCAN, BEVERLY'S stage manager, enters carrying a few framed pictures.*

**JANET:** Hi, Beverly – sorry I'm late.

**BEVERLY:** I just walked in myself.

**JANET:** (*Sets one of the pictures down on the sofa and holds up the other picture, which is a painting of a beautiful lady.*) I brought these pictures from home to hang up. This is my favorite. Isn't she beautiful?

**BEVERLY:** That's an awfully expensive-looking picture to use for the play.

**JANET:** Nah, it's been in the back of a closet collecting dust. I think I bought it at a yard sale once.

**BEVERLY:** Janet, do you remember if Lloyd locked the theatre last night?

**JANET:** (*Crossing to BEVERLY, who is still arranging the flowers.*) Yes – he and I were the last to leave.

**BEVERLY:** But are you sure he *locked* the door?

**JANET:** Let me think. Yes, he did, because just after he drove off, I remembered I had left my script inside the theatre so I returned to get it. But the door was securely bolted.

- BEVERLY:** That's odd – Dolores said it was *unlocked* when she arrived this evening.
- JANET:** Perhaps someone came by today.
- BEVERLY:** Only Lloyd and I have keys, and he left early this morning for Gadsden to deliver a bookcase he built for his aunt.
- JANET:** Well, I know it was locked last night. (*Notices the candlestick.*) What's this?
- BEVERLY:** I was rearranging a few pieces to see how they look. I hope you don't mind.
- JANET:** (*Picking up the candlestick.*) No, I mean this candlestick. Where did it come from?
- BEVERLY:** You brought it in last week. Remember?
- JANET:** I brought in a candlestick, but not this one. (*Hands it to BEVERLY.*) Feel how heavy it is. This is the real deal. The one I brought in was plastic.
- BEVERLY:** Hmmm. I don't know. Perhaps one of the cast members brought it in.
- JANET:** (*Setting it back down on the chest as DOLORES enters.*) I'd sure hate to get hit over the head with that heavy thing.
- DOLORES:** (*Rushes over to JANET.*) Why did you say that?
- JANET:** Say what?
- DOLORES:** You said someone was hit over the head with that candlestick.
- BEVERLY:** (*Laughs.*) No, she didn't, Dolores.
- DOLORES:** (*Rushes over to the candlestick, picks it up and holds it up next to her.*) I'm not sure why you had to move it from the end table.
- BEVERLY:** Janet didn't move it, I did.
- JANET:** Dolores, are you feeling all right?
- DOLORES:** What? Yes. (*Relaxing a little.*) I guess I'm just getting nervous about opening night. Forgive me, Beverly – you're the director. You have the right to move the props any place you'd like.
- JANET:** It really doesn't matter. It can go back to the end table if you think it looks better.
- DOLORES:** (*Setting the candlestick on the chest.*) I think it looks fine anywhere.
- BEVERLY:** Dolores, do you know who brought it in?
- DOLORES:** I think it was owned by my grandmother's grandmother. Somehow, it was meant for *me* to have it, though. You know, so that it might be used for some higher purpose. (*She stares at and touches the chest.*)
- BEVERLY:** I'm glad you are excited about the play, Dolores, but I would hardly consider a community theatre production a *higher* purpose.
- ALBERT FISK enters wearing a butler costume. He's excited.*

**ALBERT:** I'm here, is it time yet?

**BEVERLY:** Not yet, Albert. Sorry.

**ALBERT:** Darn! *(He exits.)*

*HOWARD WEAVER enters and stands just outside the French doors. He raises his hand in a dramatic stance. He is dressed as your typical butler.*

**HOWARD:** "I have done the deed. Didst thou not hear a noise?"

**DOLORES:** *(Throwing a hand out toward HOWARD.)* "I heard the owl scream and the crickets cry – Did you not speak?"

**HOWARD:** *(With arms still out, he moves toward her.)* "When?"

**DOLORES:** *(Meeting HOWARD center stage behind the sofa.)* "Now."

**HOWARD:** *(Taking DOLORES'S hand, still dramatic.)* "Hark! Who lies in th' second chamber?"

**DOLORES:** *(Out of character, giggling.)* Oh, *Macbeth* was such a fun play to do. If only I could have actually played Lady Macbeth in that one.

**HOWARD:** That's right, you were Guinevere's understudy in that one, too, weren't you?

**JANET:** *(Taking the picture of the lady she brought in with her.)* I need to get a stronger wire for the back of my picture. Good to see you, Mr. Weaver. *(She exits.)*

**HOWARD:** Always a pleasure, Janet. *(Turns to BEVERLY.)* I think it's time we do another Shakespeare play, Beverly. Everyone said they enjoyed *Macbeth*.

**BEVERLY:** Shakespeare's a master all right, but for my taste, there's nothing like a good murder mystery on the stage.

**DOLORES:** *(She has been staring at HOWARD the whole time, patting her hair. She's smitten with him.)* You played a wonderful *Macbeth*, Mr. Weaver.

**HOWARD:** Don't forget, Dolores, to call me Howard.

**DOLORES:** *(Giggles.)* Oh, Howard.

**BEVERLY:** *(Opening her director's book.)* Now that I have my two leads together, let's go over a few things we need to focus on in tonight's rehearsal. *(HOWARD has spotted the chest and crossed to it. As BEVERLY speaks, he slowly rubs the sides and top of it.)* I thought the pacing was off a bit last night. I'll depend on you two to pick things up a little . . .

**DOLORES:** *(To HOWARD.)* Isn't it a lovely piece of furniture, Howard?

**BEVERLY:** If someone misses a cue, I need you two to help cover as much as possible.

**HOWARD:** *(Pats the top of the chest.)* Built by a true craftsman, that's for sure.

**BEVERLY:** *(Realizing she's being ignored, shuts her notebook.)*

Well, I guess those are all the notes I have for today.

**DOLORES:** *(To HOWARD.)* Did Georgia finally decide to sell it to you?

**HOWARD:** Not yet, but I'm not the kind to give up so easily.

**BEVERLY:** *(Giving up.)* I guess I'll go in the back and help Janet with the props. Don't mind me, I'll let myself out. *(She exits.)*

**HOWARD:** It's *(Staring at the chest.)* so sturdy . . .

**DOLORES:** *(Staring at HOWARD.)* So strong.

**HOWARD:** *(Staring at the chest.)* So well put together.

**DOLORES:** *(Staring at HOWARD.)* So well-built.

**HOWARD:** *(Staring at the chest.)* So much character.

**DOLORES:** *(Staring at HOWARD.)* Such masculine vitality . . .

**HOWARD:** *(Snapping from his fog.)* I beg your pardon?

**DOLORES:** *(Quickly looks down at the chest.)* I was talking about your chest. I mean *the* chest! I love *this* chest!

**HOWARD:** It goes without saying that this is a classic piece of furniture.

**DOLORES:** Speaking of your dead wife . . .

**HOWARD:** *(Taken aback.)* Were we?

**DOLORES:** Did that slip out about your poor deceased wife? Where *are* my manners? You were looking at the chest!

**HOWARD:** Yes, this would be a perfect piece to showcase in my antique shop.

**DOLORES:** That's a wonderful idea. Perhaps Georgia will give in and let you have it.

**HOWARD:** I'll ask her when she gets here. Now, let's talk about us.

**DOLORES:** *(Swallows hard.)* Us?

**HOWARD:** Yes, our scene that's coming up tonight.

**DOLORES:** *(Disappointed.)* Oh, *that* us.

*GEORGIA STYLES enters. She's very high-brow and walks with a poise that lets everyone know she's just a bit better than everyone else. She holds a large lace-type doily over one arm and her purse hangs on the other. She wears a typical maid's uniform.*

**GEORGIA:** Here we go, all. Hello, Dolores – Mr. Weaver. *(Places her purse on the sofa and keeps the doily.)* I thought I would never find it. My, but the set does look nice. I believe it will help us all get into character, don't you? *(She starts to move the candlestick and the flowers off the chest.)*

**DOLORES:** *(Rushes to her.)* Georgia, what are you doing?

**HOWARD:** Hello, Mrs. Styles.

**GEORGIA:** *(To DOLORES.)* Help me, dear. *(Hands DOLORES the candlestick and the flowers.)* There you are. *(She takes the doily and unfolds it.)* I just want to be sure it doesn't get scuffed up.

(*She places the doily on top of the chest.*) This is a very old piece of furniture, you know.

**HOWARD:** We were discussing its beauty before you came in. Mrs. Styles, I'd like to ask you to reconsider selling the chest to me once the play is over.

**GEORGIA:** (*Laughs as she takes the flowers and the candlestick from DOLORES and places them on the top of the doily.*) Sell my priceless antique? Come now, Mr. Weaver. Would one sell the Mona Lisa?

**HOWARD:** Like I said before, I'm prepared to pay what it's worth.

**GEORGIA:** (*Places her hand to her chest.*) My dear Mr. Weaver, as I have said before, I would never attempt to put a price on this rare family heirloom. The mere thought of it makes it hard for me to breathe. Besides, all you would do is turn around and sell it at that shoddy little antique shop of yours.

**HOWARD:** But that's just it, Mrs. Styles. I want to display it in the front window of my shop. That way dozens of people could admire and appreciate it on a daily basis.

**GEORGIA:** The answer is still no and I don't intend to discuss it any further. I did *not* obtain my wealth by making foolish business deals.

**DOLORES:** No, you made it when your rich husband died.

**GEORGIA:** Well, Dolores Gordon, why don't we just come right out and say what we think?

**DOLORES:** Don't get me wrong, Georgia. I agree that you should keep the chest at home where you can look at and admire it every day.

**GEORGIA:** Admire it? On the contrary; I think it's rather ugly. I keep it stored in my attic underneath a stack of homemade quilts my grandmother made.

**HOWARD:** But it's a masterpiece that should be shared with the world.

**DOLORES:** Or at least used to store things. Quilts, winter clothes, bodies . . .

**GEORGIA:** Bodies?

**HOWARD:** Bodies?

**DOLORES:** (*Quickly.*) Bonnets! I said *bonnets*, not bodies. (*Giggles nervously.*) Who would want to store a dead body inside an antique chest? I mean, what would that prove? (*The three laugh.*)

**GEORGIA:** I suppose if you wanted to get rid of someone you didn't like, that *would* be a good place to hide the body after you have killed them. (*They laugh.*)

**HOWARD:** If the person were too tall, you could always chop the body up so it would fit better.

**GEORGIA:** (*Laughs and places a hand on HOWARD'S arm.*) Oh, Mr. Weaver – stop! I can't breathe.

**DOLORES:** (*Sees this and stands between GEORGIA and HOWARD.*) You lay a hand on him again, and I'll hit you over the head with a candlestick and stuff you in that chest. (*All three laugh harder than ever as GEORGIA removes her hand.*)

**BEVERLY:** (*Entering.*) Well, sounds as if everyone is in a good mood for a night of rehearsing. Georgia, I love that costume on you.

**GEORGIA:** (*Twirling around, modeling.*) Playing a domestic servant has certainly been a challenge for me. I'm used to being the one who *tells* servants what to do.

**BEVERLY:** That's why they call it acting.

**HOWARD:** (*Wiping his eyes with a handkerchief.*) We were just having a little fun talking about murder.

**BEVERLY:** (*Removing the picture from the sofa, where JANET had placed it earlier.*) That's appropriate, since a murder mystery is what we're rehearsing. (*She hangs the picture, steps back to look at it.*)

**GEORGIA:** I should check my makeup. Dolores, dear – would you like me to do your makeup for you?

**DOLORES:** But I have already done my makeup.

**GEORGIA:** You didn't understand what I meant, dear. Would you like for *me* to do your makeup?

**DOLORES:** (*Looks at the chest.*) I'm not sure I should leave her.

**HOWARD:** Leave whom?

**DOLORES:** (*Thinking quickly.*) Um, Beverly – she might need my help.

**BEVERLY:** I'm almost done here, Dolores – go ahead.

**DOLORES:** (*Reluctantly.*) Very well. I guess it shouldn't take *that* long. (*She exits with GEORGIA.*)

**BEVERLY:** (*Referring to the picture.*) Mr. Weaver, does that look straight?

**HOWARD:** A little that way. There.

**ALBERT:** (*Runs in.*) Beverly, is it time yet?

**BEVERLY:** Not yet, Albert.

**ALBERT:** Darn!

*He exits. ISABELLA WATTS enters sniffing into a tissue and barely able to walk. She's being comforted by OLIVIA ANDERSON.*

**OLIVIA:** There, there. I'm sure it will be all right in the long run.

**BEVERLY:** (*Rushing over to ISABELLA, taking her by the arm and helping her to the sofa.*) What's the matter with Isabella?

**OLIVIA:** She just received terrible news, Ms. Gladstone.

**HOWARD:** Here, put her down on the sofa so she can relax. (*OLIVIA, HOWARD and BEVERLY surround her.*)

**BEVERLY:** Terrible news? What is it?

**OLIVIA:** I'll let Isabella tell you.

**ISABELLA:** *(She's sniffing and crying and speaking incoherently. Of course she isn't actually saying "blah blah blah..." but her sentences don't need to be understood.)* Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah . . . *(She breaks down.)*

**OLIVIA:** She says she caught her husband of fifteen years having a fling with *another* woman.

**ISABELLA:** *(Again incoherent as she tries to talk while she's crying.)* Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah!

**OLIVIA:** *(Interpreting.)* She came home one night after working hard all day . . .

**ISABELLA:** Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah . . .

**OLIVIA:** And while she was changing clothes in her bedroom, she saw the corner of a shoebox sticking from underneath the bed . . .

**ISABELLA:** *(Standing and acting it out as she explains through her sobbing.)* Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah!

**OLIVIA:** She took the box and placed it on her bed.

*DOLORES enters unseen by the others. Only one lip is painted bright red. She holds a tube of lipstick.*

**ISABELLA:** Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah!

**OLIVIA:** She knew she shouldn't look inside the box, but her curiosity got the better of her.

*DOLORES, hearing this, stops in her tracks.*

**DOLORES:** *(To herself.)* Look inside?

**ISABELLA:** Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah!

**OLIVIA:** She bit her lip and bent down to open the box, afraid of what she might find inside.

*DOLORES puts her hands over her mouth in shock.*

**ISABELLA:** *(Acting it out.)* Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah!

**OLIVIA:** She slowly opened the lid and there she saw the most horrible thing!

**DOLORES:** *(Rushing over to them.)* She's lying! You can't believe a word she's saying!

**BEVERLY:** Shhhhh, Dolores – let her finish. *(Back to ISABELLA.)* What was inside the box?

**ISABELLA:** Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah!

**OLIVIA:** It was a *love* letter!

**DOLORES:** It wasn't! It wasn't! She's lying, I tell you! She didn't find a . . . *love* letter?

**ISABELLA:** *(Sobbing more than ever.)* BLAH, BLAH, BLAH, BLAH, BLAH!

**OLIVIA:** *(Also sobbing.)* A LOVE LETTER WRITTEN TO ANOTHER WOMAN!

**BEVERLY:** Poor thing. Don't cry, Isabella—your heart will mend.

**DOLORES:** *(Giggling.)* A love letter? She's crying over finding a silly love letter written to some other woman? How embarrassing for her.

**HOWARD:** Dolores, can't you see she's upset that her husband is in love with another woman?

*ISABELLA, hearing this, lets out a loud cry.*

**DOLORES:** What I mean is, that dirty scoundrel isn't worth crying over. She should wipe away her tears, stand up and throw him out into the street!

**OLIVIA:** Ms. Gordon – really.

**ISABELLA:** *(Still sniffing, but audible now.)* No, she's absolutely right. That man is not worth the salt in my tears . . . *(Sniffing into her tissue.)* If I only knew who the biddy he has been meeting was.

**BEVERLY:** *(Hanging on to every word.)* So, you don't know who the other woman is?

**ISABELLA:** *(Crying again.)* Blah, blah, blah, blah!

**OLIVIA:** No, only someone with the initials R.G.?

**HOWARD:** Hm . . . R. G.? *(JANET enters with her picture of the beautiful lady and hangs it.)*

**JANET:** *(To DOLORES.)* Dolores, Mrs. Styles asked me to tell you she needs to finish your makeup. *(Pause as she looks around.)* Is something the matter?

**BEVERLY:** *(Taking ISABELLA by the arm.)* Janet, would you be kind enough to take Ms. Watts here to the dressing room so she can freshen up?

**ISABELLA:** *(As she tries to explain everything to JANET.)* Blah, blah, blah, blah . . .

*JANET politely nods her head as if she understands what ISABELLA is saying. She takes her through the French doors. ISABELLA keeps blubbering inaudibly. JANET turns to the others and shrugs, then exits.*

**HOWARD:** Poor girl.

**BEVERLY:** Dolores – your makeup, please. We will need to get started soon.

**DOLORES:** Well, all right *(Glances back at the chest.)* – but I'll hurry. *(Exits quickly.)*

**BEVERLY:** *(Turns to OLIVIA who is wearing a traditional maid's uniform.)* Let me look at your costume. How does it feel?

**OLIVIA:** Fine, thank you. Ms. Gladstone, I'm worried about Isabella. How could anyone be so cruel to another person?

**BEVERLY:** Her husband's a rat and she's better off without him.

- OLIVIA:** I hope so – poor woman. She’s so nice too. I’ll have to see if I can . . . *(Places her fingers over her lips.)* There I go again!
- BEVERLY:** *(Rushing to OLIVIA.)* You’ll have to see if you can what?
- OLIVIA:** Nothing.
- BEVERLY:** You were about to say something you shouldn’t again. Olivia, you have been *almost* letting a secret slip for two weeks now. Why don’t you just go ahead and spill it?
- OLIVIA:** I . . . I don’t know what you’re talking about.
- BEVERLY:** You’re a good actress, Olivia – but not *that* good.
- HOWARD:** *(Sitting looking over the lines in his script.)* Beverly, can’t you see the girl doesn’t want to reveal her secret? Now, be professional enough to allow sweet Olivia here her privacy.
- BEVERLY:** You’re right, Mr. Weaver. It’s just that now I’m going to be wondering all night. It just isn’t fair. *(She exits.)*
- HOWARD:** *(Standing and quickly crossing to OLIVIA.)* You tell me your secret, little lady - or I’ll see to it you never work in this town again!
- OLIVIA:** *(Hand to her chest.)* Mr. Weaver – you wouldn’t do that, would you?
- HOWARD:** *(Composing himself.)* Of course not. I’m sorry, Olivia. You have every right to keep your dirty little insignificant secret to yourself.
- OLIVIA:** Thank you.
- HOWARD:** When you feel you’re ready to tell someone, I’ll be in the back going over my lines.

As HOWARD starts to exit, he almost runs into GEOFFREY, who enters rather quickly, wearing a butler costume. Without saying anything, HOWARD points to the stage left wall and then gives GEOFFREY the “Okay” sign. GEOFFREY shoots one back to HOWARD. HOWARD exits. OLIVIA takes a small mirror from her purse and checks her makeup. GEOFFREY sees OLIVIA. He reaches inside his pocket, brings out a fake gun and points it toward OLIVIA.

- GEOFFREY:** *Don’t move!*
- OLIVIA:** *(On instinct, darts behind the chair.)* Oh!
- GEOFFREY:** I told you not to move!
- OLIVIA:** Geoffrey Chance, how dare you scare me that way!
- GEOFFREY:** Scare you? On the contrary; my firearm is loaded only with Cupid’s persuasive arrows. One hit in the heart and you will fall for me, head over heels. *(OLIVIA crosses quickly to the chest and picks up the flowers and candlestick in order to make herself look busy.)* So what do you say, Olive? Will you go out with me or will I have to fire?
- OLIVIA:** *(Not looking at him.)* My name is Olivia. And as you can see, I’m quite busy at the moment.

**GEOFFREY:** (*Putting the gun away.*) Don't worry; it's only a prop. (*Crossing to her.*) In case you're interested, I drove here tonight in my convertible.

**OLIVIA:** (*Sarcastically.*) And you still managed to stay looking perfect.

**GEOFFREY:** Yes, I did. You wouldn't believe my car! (*Rushes to down stage and sits on the trunk, facing the audience.*) The power – the speed – the smooth handling. It was great taking those curves! (*Holds his "steering wheel".*) Brrrrrr! Passing everyone on the street! Brrrrrrrr! Only to slow down and come to a nice smooth stop! (*Puts on his "brakes".*) Yes ma'am, I was made for adventure! (*Stands and crosses quickly to the back of the trunk.*) You give me the open road and a fast engine under my hood, (*He raises the lid of the trunk as though it were a car hood, but keeps his eyes on OLIVIA.*) and I'm a happy, happy man! I'll take you for a ride tonight after rehearsal, if you'd like.

**OLIVIA:** Let me think about it – (*Slams the lid onto his fingers.*) NO!

**GEOFFREY:** Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!

**OLIVIA:** (*Placing the items back onto the chest.*) Oh, were those your fingers? (*Sarcastically.*) I'm so sorry, Jerry.

**GEOFFREY:** My name's Geoffrey.

**OLIVIA:** A skunk by any other name is still a skunk.

*BEVERLY enters.*

**GEOFFREY:** (*Rubbing his fingers.*) So you're saying I have a chance, right? (*OLIVIA rolls her eyes and storms out. GEOFFREY turns to BEVERLY.*) She's crazy about me.

**BEVERLY:** (*Ignoring his arrogance.*) Did your costume fit, Geoffrey?

**GEOFFREY:** I had it taken in a bit.

**BEVERLY:** Why?

**GEOFFREY:** I needed it to show off my physique a little better. It does, too. Especially when I suck in my stomach – see? (*Demonstrates.*)

**BEVERLY:** Then put those muscles to use and help me move this chest over just a bit, please.

**GEOFFREY:** Sure. (*BEVERLY positions herself on one side of the chest – GEOFFREY the other.*)

**BEVERLY:** It needs to come this way just a bit. On the count of three. One, two, three! (*They try picking it up to no avail.*)

**BEVERLY:** That's funny, I didn't realize the chest was so heavy.

**GEOFFREY:** What's inside?

**BEVERLY:** Nothing – or so I thought. Perhaps Janet stored some props inside it. If you'll take the candle and flowers, I'll look.

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*BEVERLY picks them up off the chest and hands them to GEOFFREY. DOLORES enters and sees what they're about to do. She pretends to become faint.*

**DOLORES:** Ohhhhh! OHHHHHHH!

*BEVERLY and GEOFFREY look back at DOLORES. BEVERLY has only opened the lid a couple of inches. She quickly shuts the chest and rushes back to DOLORES.*

**BEVERLY:** Dolores? Dolores – are you all right? Geoffrey, help me. (*GEOFFREY places the things back onto the chest.*) Here, have a seat on the sofa. (*They help her sit.*)

**DOLORES:** Oh dear – I felt faint for a moment. (*Fanning herself with a pillow.*) There, I feel better already. I'm sorry, dear - I didn't mean to give you a start.

**BEVERLY:** Can we get you anything?

**DOLORES:** No – don't fuss over me, child.

**BEVERLY:** Geoffrey, let's see if we can get this chest moved over.

**DOLORES:** OHHHHHHHHH! On second thought – I could go for a cold glass of water. (*Pitifully.*) If it isn't too much trouble.

**GEOFFREY:** Not at all, I'll get it. (*He exits.*)

**DOLORES:** A cold compress would be nice – oh, but I hate to ask you to fuss over me with everything you have to do.

**BEVERLY:** Don't be silly. What kind of director would I be if I didn't take care of my lead actress?

**DOLORES:** You are *too* sweet.

**BEVERLY:** Now, you just stay right there.

*BEVERLY starts to leave. DOLORES begins to stand, but BEVERLY turns quickly to DOLORES. When she does, DOLORES plops down on the sofa again.*

**DOLORES:** AHHHHHHHHHHH!

**BEVERLY:** I'll be right back!

**DOLORES:** (*Sounding as though she were on her deathbed.*) Take your time, dear. I don't want any fuss made over me. (*BEVERLY exits. DOLORES makes sure she's gone, then jumps up and starts to pace.*) Oh, dear sweet Guinevere – if they open this chest, it's all over. Should I move you to another location? Keep calm, Dolores Gordon, keep calm. I can't become hysterical – I can't become paranoid. No one is on to me. No one!

*ALICE OLDACRE enters and stands in the French doors holding a purse and dressed as a maid. She smiles as she watches DOLORES. DOLORES doesn't notice ALICE.*

**DOLORES:** *(To the audience.)* It's just that every time I think about what that Beverly said to me, the prouder I am of what I did. *(Mocking BEVERLY.)* "Would you mind very much serving as Guinevere's understudy? You're so dependable." *(Back to the chest.)* I showed you, dear Guinevere – I showed you and I'll show the rest of them! *(Her emotion builds.)* I'll be the star I deserve to be! And they will applaud and applaud and wonder why they never gave me a part in one of their plays in the first place. After I take my bows every night, I will pose for a few pictures and sign a few autographs; then, when all the lights are out and the theatre grows dark, I'll come back for you, Guinevere. I'll take you and throw you to the bottom of the river just as I had planned all along. And no one will stand in the way of that plan! Not Beverly! Not Janet! Not . . . *(DOLORES turns and sees ALICE standing there.)* Alice!

**ALICE:** *(Smiles and throws DOLORES a friendly wave.)* Hello, Dolores.

*DOLORES drops to the sofa, continuing to stare at the intruder.*

**BLACKOUT.**

## ACT ONE, SCENE 2

**AT RISE:** *It's the next day. LLOYD and HOWARD are standing in front of the fireplace. HOWARD is wearing his butler costume. LLOYD wears a pair of overalls. They are whispering about something very secretly. LLOYD points to offstage left. DOLORES enters wearing the Act Two party dress, but her appearance is not quite as neat as before. There are light gray circles under her eyes and her hair is beginning to fall down on her forehead. The two men stop talking abruptly and turn and stare at her.*

**DOLORES:** Am I interrupting something?

**HOWARD:** *(With fakeness.)* There she is, the star of our show. Let's hear it for Madam Dubois! *(The two men clap their hands.)*

**DOLORES:** You two are up to no good, I can tell.

**LLOYD:** Us? Why, we were just talking fishing and hunting, that's all.

**DOLORES:** *(Crossing to center stage, keeping her eyes on the two men the whole time.)* Why were you looking so suspicious if you were only talking fishing and hunting, Mr. Fischer?

**HOWARD:** *(Crossing to her.)* Come now, Dolores. Do we really look as if we are up to something? Why, you couldn't find two more boring gentlemen if you tried.

**DOLORES:** It's just that . . .

**HOWARD:** *(He interrupts her in order to change the subject. He crosses to her, takes her hand and kisses it.)* Just look at that

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dress. Before you adorned it, it was merely a dress, plain and simple – but now, it is nothing short of a heavenly vision.

LLOYD coughs.

**DOLORES:** (*Giggling.*) Oh, Howard – I couldn't agree with you more.

**HOWARD:** Was there something we could help you with?

**DOLORES:** (*Thinking.*) Oh, yes. Have either of you seen Alice Oldacre?

**LLOYD:** I don't think she's here yet, Ms. Gordon.

**DOLORES:** She probably *has* been here. (*Looks around the room, behind the chair, underneath the sofa.*) Snooping around where she has no business snooping. I haven't had the courage to ask her questions.

**HOWARD:** Alice Oldacre, a sneak?

**DOLORES:** Only the worst kind. Always lurking in the shadows, listening in on conversations people have with themselves. Ruthless!

**LLOYD:** I admit Ms. Oldacre is a bit mysterious, but I can't imagine that she means any harm.

**DOLORES:** I don't trust her any more than I trust you two. Separating yourselves from the others, whispering the way you were.

**HOWARD:** Perhaps this murder mystery has gotten you on edge a bit.

**DOLORES:** You just couldn't wait to use that word, could you?

**HOWARD:** What word is that?

**DOLORES:** *Murder.* (*Moving away from them.*) You think you're so clever with all your charm and animal magnetism. And to think I was somewhat smitten with you, Howard Weaver. I'm equally ashamed of you, Mr. Fischer. I mean, you are the one who is supposed to be keeping this place together! You should be fixing the cracks in the wall, instead of standing around scheming.

**LLOYD:** Ms. Gordon, I don't mean any disrespect, but I can promise you I have no idea what you're talking about. What's wrong with this set?

**DOLORES:** What's wrong? Just take a look around. Cracks in the wall. (*Points to the stage left wall.*) There's one right there.

**LLOYD:** (*LLOYD and HOWARD cross and look to where she is pointing.*) Where?

**DOLORES:** In that wall right there. Show him, Howard.

**HOWARD:** (*Getting a closer look.*) Over here?

*Once the men have their backs to her, DOLORES darts and sits slumped in the chair, completely invisible to the two men.*

**LLOYD:** I don't see a thing.

**HOWARD:** Why, there's nothing wrong with that wall, Ms. Gordon.  
(Turns around.)

**LLOYD:** Ms. Gordon? She sure did disappear quick.

**HOWARD:** (Rushing behind the sofa.) At least she's gone. Now, listen closely, Lloyd. (LLOYD crosses to HOWARD.) Are you sure you hid it so that no one will find it?

**LLOYD:** It's hid nice and safe all right. I took her out last night after everybody left. It took some doing, but I got her out.

**HOWARD:** And you're sure no one saw you.

**LLOYD:** Not a soul – I was sly as a fox.

**HOWARD:** Don't forget, Lloyd, this is *our* little secret. No one, and I do mean *no one*, is to know about this, right?

**LLOYD:** I won't tell a soul! And don't worry, Mr. Weaver - nobody will even notice it's missing.

**HOWARD:** I hope you're right. Oh, by the way – how much do I owe you?

**LLOYD:** Seventy-five dollars should cover it.

**HOWARD:** (Hands him the money.) All right, then. I'd better check my props. See you later, Lloyd.

**LLOYD:** Okay, Mr. Weaver.

*They exit through separate doors. Once she's sure they're gone, DOLORES rises.*

**DOLORES:** (To herself, looking at the chest.) No, it couldn't be. There's no way they could know . . . I have been too care . . . Dolores, stop worrying yourself this way – they were talking about something else entirely. (Begins removing the candlestick and flowers from the chest.) But then again – (She sets the items on the floor. JANET enters wearing a headset and carrying a clipboard.)

**JANET:** Ms. Gordon? (Immediately, DOLORES picks up the candlestick and vase of flowers from off the floor and places them back on the chest.) Have you seen Beverly?

**DOLORES:** (Nervously.) I was just rearranging the items here on the chest, that's all, Janet.

**JANET:** Ms. Gordon?

**DOLORES:** Yes?

**JANET:** Are you feeling okay? You're looking a little pale.

**DOLORES:** Yes dear, I'm fine – just didn't get much sleep last night.

**JANET:** Oh. I was looking . . . (Noticing the picture on the wall.) That's strange.

**DOLORES:** Not really – I just wanted to make sure everything looked all right for rehearsal. I know that's your job, but . . .

**JANET:** No, I was referring to the picture. This is not the one I put here yesterday. I hung the one of the beautiful lady – remember?

**DOLORES:** (*Nervous, not looking at the picture.*) No, I'm sorry – I guess I wasn't paying attention.

**JANET:** (*Looking around the stage.*) And it was the one I brought from home, too. Why would anyone want to take something that didn't belong to them?

**DOLORES:** (*Eyes back to the chest.*) That's what I would like to know.

**JANET:** (*As she rushes out.*) Beverly!

**DOLORES:** (*Crosses back to the chest and stands behind it.*) You are still in there, aren't you, Guinevere? (*Slow smile.*) Of course you are – and Dolores will make sure that no one harms you, dear. I'll start by turning the air conditioning down so you will keep better. (*Sits on the floor and practically hugs the big chest the best she can.*) That's right - I will take care of you, Guinevere. Everything will be all right. (*As she strokes the lid of the chest, the fact that she may be just the slightest bit crazy begins to surface as she sings her sad song.*)

Hush, my baby,

Lie still.

Thy mommy has gone to the mill

To grind thee some wheat

To make thee some meat,

Oh, my dear baby, lie still.

*JANET and BEVERLY enter and cross to the picture.*

**JANET:** This one right here – it's not the one I hung yesterday.

**BEVERLY:** That *is* odd. No one asked me about changing it.

**JANET:** I just hope it isn't lost – I brought that picture from home.

**BEVERLY:** We'll find it. It's got to be here somewhere. (*ALICE enters and sits on the sofa, going over her script.*) But we'll have to look later; it's time to get rehearsal start . . . (*Sees DOLORES on the floor.*) Dolores, did you lose something?

**DOLORES:** (*Calmly, laying her head over on the chest.*) I don't think so.

**ALBERT:** (*Running in.*) Is it time yet?

**BEVERLY:** Not yet, Albert.

**ALBERT:** Darn! (*He exits.*)

**BEVERLY:** (*Speaking to JANET.*) We'll ask the cast about the missing picture later. Right now, let's round everyone up. You get the men; I'll get the ladies.

*They exit through opposite doors. DOLORES sees ALICE, rises and quickly crosses to her.*

**DOLORES:** There you are, you old biddy!

**ALICE:** I beg your pardon?

**DOLORES:** (*Mocking.*) I beg your pardon? You're real clever, aren't you? Sneaking around behind people's backs – eavesdropping on personal conversations. And don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about. What I need to know is how much did you hear?

**ALICE:** (*Honestly confused.*) Hear when?

**DOLORES:** Okay, that's the game you want to play, huh? How much do you want to keep quiet? Just name your price!

**ALICE:** (*Standing.*) Everyone has been talking about how you've been going off the deep end lately, but I didn't believe them until now.

**DOLORES:** Oh, they think that do they? Well, if chasing your lifelong dream is going off the deep end, then maybe I am. (*Picks up the candlestick and crosses toward ALICE.*) Maybe I'm just crazy old Dolores who has nothing better to do with her time than knock off old ladies who don't deserve their time here on earth.

**ALICE:** (*Trying to be friendly.*) I'm sure glad to know you haven't gone crazy.

**DOLORES:** You will take my hush money and forget this little conversation. (*Holds the candlestick up in the air.*) Is it a deal?

**ALICE:** It's a deal! Whatever you say, I'll be glad to take your money.

**DOLORES:** That's more like it. (*Sets the candlestick down and composes herself as GEORGIA enters unseen by DOLORES.*) I've waited a long time for this chance to be on stage and if it doesn't happen, I don't know what I'll do.

**GEORGIA:** Good heavens, Dolores Gordon – you would think this were Broadway the way you're behaving.

**DOLORES:** It *is* Broadway to me. The closest I'll ever get.

**GEORGIA:** It's a local, amateur play, and with the exception of myself, it is being performed by common everyday people from around town. It isn't that big of a deal.

**DOLORES:** (*Offended.*) That's what my mama told me when I won my first spelling bee. That's what my daddy said when I told him I made the dean's list in college. It's no big deal. It's no big deal! Well, I would have you know it *is* a big deal! I have worked very hard to get this role.

**GEORGIA:** Worked hard? You got the part because Guinevere Black rushed off to Europe at the last minute. You were all they had, Dolores.

**ALICE:** I wouldn't upset her if I were you, Georgia dear.

**DOLORES:** (*To GEORGIA.*) You're only saying that because you're jealous of me, Georgia Styles! Jealous that I'm playing Madam Dubois and you're *not*!

**GEORGIA:** Jealous of *you*? I think it is high time you knew something, Ms. (*Sarcastically.*) Broadway star!

**ALICE:** (*Rushing to GEORGIA.*) Georgia, no!

**GEORGIA:** (*Ignoring ALICE.*) I could have played Madam Dubois. Beverly offered the part to me after she discovered Guinevere had run off and I turned her down.

**DOLORES:** (*Taken aback.*) What?

**GEORGIA:** That's right – and after I turned the part down, she offered it to Alice and then Isabella and Olivia and they *all* turned down the part for one reason or another and that is the *only* reason *you're* playing the lead! You, Dolores Gordon, were the last resort!

**DOLORES:** I don't believe you.

**GEORGIA:** That's because you live in some type of fantasy world you have created in your mind.

**DOLORES:** (*Trying not to act hurt, she turns to ALICE.*) Is what she said true, Alice?

**ALICE:** You've really done it now, Georgia.

**GEORGIA:** (*Slowly twisting the knife in DOLORES'S back.*) We've all been secretly hoping Guinevere would surprise us by showing up to rehearsals again so she could take her part back and we could take that hideous portrait of you off the wall once and for all.

**ALICE:** (*Standing and speaking firmly.*) Well, Georgia – now you're being unnecessarily cruel. (*Turns to DOLORES.*) Dolores, I think you are doing a splendid job playing Madam, just splendid. We all do.

**DOLORES:** (*Building up inner strength, turning back to GEORGIA.*) I can guarantee you that Guinevere Black will never darken the doors of this theatre again.

**GEORGIA:** You don't know that.

**DOLORES:** Oh, but I *do* know. And do you know *how* I know? (*Crosses and stands only inches away from GEORGIA.*) Because she left on account of you.

**GEORGIA:** Me? Don't be ridiculous.

**DOLORES:** I asked her to stay and stick it out with the rest of us, but she said that she had had enough of your sassy, sarcastic and arrogant ways. (*They are nose to nose now.*)

**ALICE:** (*Trying to lighten the mood.*) You know what I like about doing a nice play like this? It's how we all become like a little family

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**GEORGIA:** (*To DOLORES.*) Vagabond!

**DOLORES:** (*To GEORGIA.*) Self-important hag!

**ALICE:** We learn to work together . . .

**GEORGIA:** (*To DOLORES.*) Commoner!

**DOLORES:** (*To GEORGIA.*) Aristocrat want-to-be!

**ALICE:** To respect one another . . .

**GEORGIA:** (*To DOLORES.*) May the bird of paradise fly up your nose!

**DOLORES:** It would rather fly up yours, where there's more room to build its nest!

**GEORGIA:** Are you calling my nose big?

**DOLORES:** No comment, *Pinocchio!*

**ALICE:** (*Not giving up, ALICE stands between them and puts her arms around them and sings as BEVERLY enters.*) Love can build a bridge . . .

**BEVERLY:** It's so nice to see my actresses building a strong bond before rehearsal.

*OSCAR FAIRFAX and EVAN BIDDLE enter. OSCAR is dressed as a butler and EVAN as a detective.*

**OSCAR:** (*Speaking to EVAN.*) I'm sorry, young man – but I just don't think I can agree with you on that point.

**EVAN:** Don't you see, Dr. Fairfax? If Madam Dubois were that careless with the murder, Detective Blake would be on to her sooner. Don't you think so, Beverly?

**BEVERLY:** Hello, Officer Biddle, Dr. Fairfax. What are you two talking about?

**EVAN:** The line where my character asks Ms. Dubois what she was doing in the pantry all alone while the rest of us were on the patio and she says, "I was fetching some olives for the martinis."

**BEVERLY:** I know the line – what about it?

**OSCAR:** Mr. Biddle here doesn't believe his character should be that easily fooled.

**EVAN:** That's right – he should already know that Ms. Dubois was *not* in the pantry during that time, but committing the murder instead.

**OSCAR:** I tried to explain that if that were the case, the mystery would be solved too soon in the play.

**EVAN:** I just think it makes my character look inept, that's all. The fact that I'm a *real* police officer here in town should matter. If the people who come see the show see me acting incompetent, they may start believing it.

**OSCAR:** I'm really a doctor, but that has nothing to do with me playing a butler in this play.

**BEVERLY:** Officer Biddle, I don't think our audiences are shallow enough to get the characters in a play confused with the actors playing the parts. Besides, *Which Butler Did It* is a mystery classic and doesn't need to be rewritten.

**EVAN:** Okay, look. Come over here, Ms. Gordon, please. Let me show you what I mean.

**GEORGIA:** Oh, I don't think Dolores is feeling much like acting right now, do you, (*Sarcastic.*) dear?

**DOLORES:** (*Out of spite.*) Of course I do, because I am a professional, (*Mocking GEORGIA'S tone.*) dear. (*Taking her place beside EVAN.*) Go ahead, Officer Biddle.

**EVAN:** Let's start with my line: Ms. Dubois – where exactly were you at precisely nine-o-five this evening when everyone else was in the garden?

- DOLORES:** (*Her acting is second-rate.*) Are you supposing me of murder, Mr. Blake?
- EVAN:** I'm merely doing my job. Now, if you would kindly answer my question. Dolores Gordon, did you sneak into the theatre last night before everyone arrived and murder Guinevere Black?
- DOLORES:** (*Coming out of character, completely taken aback.*) What did you say?
- EVAN:** I said: Ms. Dubois, where were you at precisely nine-o-five this evening when everyone else was in the garden?
- DOLORES:** That's not what you said.
- EVAN:** (*Also out of character.*) It isn't?
- BEVERLY:** Is something the matter, Dolores?
- GEORGIA:** (*With disdain, filing her nails.*) She's only being "professional".
- DOLORES:** He changed his line – why did you do that?
- EVAN:** I didn't change the line, Ms. Gordon – that's the way it's written in the script.
- DOLORES:** (*Looks round, confused. Everyone is looking strangely at her.*) Oh . . . I'm sorry. I guess I just heard you wrong. Let's continue the scene. Say your line again, please.
- EVAN:** (*Clears his throat and is back into character.*) Ms. Dubois, where were you at precisely nine-o-five this evening when everyone else was in the garden?
- DOLORES:** I went to the pantry to fetch some olives for martinis, you fool.
- EVAN:** (*To BEVERLY.*) Now, I think this is where Detective Blake should ask: (*Back to DOLORES.*) Don't you usually have your servants do menial tasks such as fetching items from the pantry?
- BEVERLY:** Hmmmmmm – maybe. Go back and say it in character and let me see how it sounds.
- EVAN:** (*To DOLORES.*) Go back to your last line, please.
- DOLORES:** I went to the pantry to fetch some olives for martinis, you fool.
- EVAN:** Don't you usually have your servants do menial tasks such as knocking someone over the head with a candlestick and stuffing the body inside a large wooden chest? (*To BEVERLY.*) See?
- BEVERLY:** You know, I think that does sound better.
- DOLORES:** You did it again!
- OSCAR:** Now that I hear it – I think you're right.
- BEVERLY:** Okay, you can keep the additional line.
- EVAN:** Great! Thanks, Beverly.
- DOLORES:** But you said . . . (*Pause.*)
- OSCAR:** You don't think we need to change the line, Dolores?
- DOLORES:** I . . . (*Pauses as she fans herself.*) No, I think changing the line is fine.
- BEVERLY:** Good. All right, if everyone would take their places, we'll take it from the top of Act Two.

**GEORGIA:** It's about time we got started.

*All but DOLORES scatter and exit through different doors.*

**BEVERLY:** *(To DOLORES.)* Now, this is the scene where Madam Dubois is admiring her portrait when her head butler enters to let her know that one of her other butlers has been murdered. *(Shouting to backstage.)* Howard, are you in place? Howard? Now, where did he go? *(She exits, leaving DOLORES alone on the stage.)*

**DOLORES:** *(To herself, as she rubs her temples.)* Pull yourself together, Dolores Gordon; you are hearing things, that's all. It's that overactive imagination of yours. *(Crosses to the chest and speaks to it.)* Oh, what the heck. *(She quickly pushes the items off the chest and starts to open it, but stops herself.)* No, I can't look. If you're not in there – I can't go on with rehearsal. What am I saying? I can't go on at all. But they know. Don't they? *(Shouts.)* Janet, could you come out here, please?!

*She looks up in time to see GUINEVERE appear at the French doors wearing a headset and the same dress she was wearing in the picture at the beginning of the play. She holds a clipboard. DOLORES gasps and runs to the other side of the sofa.*

**DOLORES:** *(In shock.)* Guinevere?

*Backstage, BEVERLY is heard.*

**BEVERLY:** Howard?!

*GUINEVERE exits again through the French doors. DOLORES'S hand goes up to her chest. She fumbles around the sofa and sits directly behind the chest. She sits on the edge of the sofa cushion, takes a deep breath, leans over and places a hand on either side of the chest's lid. She closes her eyes and starts to open it. Again, she's interrupted by an intruder, as JANET reenters through the French doors wearing the same headset and carrying the same clipboard that GUINEVERE had.*

**JANET:** Sorry about that, Ms. Gordon. *(DOLORES slams the lid shut before having the chance to look inside.)* Now, what was it you needed?

**DOLORES:** *(Rises quickly and crosses quickly to the stage left wall.)* Janet, is it you?

**JANET:** I beg your pardon?

**DOLORES:** Is it a joke, Janet? Did Alice say something to you? You can tell me if it is – I won't be upset. It's just you and me here.

ACTING CAN BE MURDER

**JANET:** Is what a joke, Ms. Gordon? Did Alice say something about what?

**DOLORES:** You wouldn't do something so cruel, would you, dear, sweet Janet? Not to an old woman like me.

**JANET:** *(Calling.)* Beverly?

**DOLORES:** After all, I've known you since you were just a little girl.

**BEVERLY:** *(Entering.)* Yes, what is it?

**JANET:** It's Ms. Gordon; I'm worried about her. She's saying some strange things again.

**BEVERLY:** Dolores, is there anything I can do for you before we start rehearsal?

**DOLORES:** *(Pointing to the items she knocked off the chest.)* The props – they're on the floor. That's why I was calling Janet.

**JANET:** *(Picking up the props.)* Don't worry about it, Ms. Gordon – I'll get it.

**BEVERLY:** Is there anything else we can do?

**DOLORES:** *(Wiping her forehead with a handkerchief.)* No, dear. I'm ready to start. I . . . I'm a professional, you see.

**JANET:** *(Arranging the items on the chest.)* There. Everything is back in order. *(Takes a martini glass from her pocket and hands it to DOLORES.)* Here's the glass you'll need for this scene. *(As DOLORES takes the glass, her hands are visibly shaking.)*

**BEVERLY:** Try and relax, Dolores. Everything is going to run as smooth as silk, I promise. Places everyone!

*JANET exits as BEVERLY takes a seat in a chair extreme stage left facing the action. DOLORES moves nervously to the portrait over the fireplace. She puts her handkerchief away and takes a deep breath.*

**DOLORES:** *(To herself.)* I am a professional. *(To the audience, this time it's a question.)* Professional?

**BEVERLY:** Curtain!

**ALBERT:** *(Peeping around the French doors.)* Is it time yet?

**BEVERLY:** Not yet, Albert.

**ALBERT:** Darn! *(He disappears.)*

**BEVERLY:** *(Shouting again.)* Curtain!

**DOLORES:** *(Everyone speaks with a bad British accent. DOLORES holds up the martini glass as though she were making a toast.)* Oh, Madam – I do believe you get more beautiful every day. Cheers to you. *(She takes a sip from her glass as she crosses to down stage.)* Throwing the servants a dinner party to show my appreciation was a splendid idea! They'll be loyal to me for the rest of their dreary lives.

*HOWARD enters walking stiffly with his nose in the air. He carries a large silver tray.*

**HOWARD:** Madam Dubois?

**DOLORES:** Oh, Rogers – come in! Come in! *(She notices the tray.)*  
Rogers, what are you doing with that tray? The party is for you and the rest of the servants.

**HOWARD:** Sorry, Madam – some habits are hard to break.

**DOLORES:** Don't you think the dinner party is going splendidly? Is everyone having a good time?

**HOWARD:** They were, Madam, until something tragic happened.

**DOLORES:** Tragic? Oh dear, did we run out of shrimp?

**HOWARD:** *(Calmly.)* No, Madam Dubois. One of your butlers has been *(Looks to the audience.)* murdered. *(Loud thunder.)*

**DOLORES:** Murdered? How dreadful. Which servant was it? Rogers?

**HOWARD:** No, Madam – I'm Rogers. It was Wallace.

**DOLORES:** Wallace? But he was my favorite one.

**HOWARD:** I thought I was your favorite, Madam Dubois.

**DOLORES:** Don't make me laugh.

**HOWARD:** Everyone is quite upset, Madam. What should we do?

**DOLORES:** I'll call the employment agency first thing in the morning and have them send over a few applicants for me to interview.

**HOWARD:** But shouldn't the police be called, Madam?

**DOLORES:** Police at one of my dinner parties? How inappropriate.

**HOWARD:** But, Madam – someone has been *(Looks to the audience.)* murdered. *(Loud thunder.)*

**DOLORES:** Oh, very well. The phone is right there. *(HOWARD picks up the receiver and dials.)* You would think someone would have the decency to wait to be murdered until *after* my party. What is the world coming to?

**HOWARD:** Hello, police? I'd like to report a murder. The Dubois estate. Thank you. *(He hangs up. OLIVIA runs in, upset.)*

**OLIVIA:** Madam Dubois! Madam Dubois! It's just awful! Blood everywhere!

**DOLORES:** There, there, dear. You won't have to clean up until *after* the police finish their investigation.

**OLIVIA:** He was such a fine man! Why would someone do it? Why? Why?

**DOLORES:** *(Grabbing OLIVIA'S shoulders and shaking her.)* Maria, settle down. Remember yourself. *(Turns to HOWARD.)* Rogers, how was Wallace murdered?

**HOWARD:** He was stuffed in the chest. *(He points to the trunk.)*

**DOLORES:** What did you say?

**HOWARD:** I said he was stabbed in the chest. *(He points to his chest. DOLORES stares at him.)*

**JANET:** It's your line, Dolores.

**DOLORES:** Um, get everyone in here at once. I mean to get to the bottom of this party-crashing escapade.

**OLIVIA:** I will get them. *(She runs out the French doors.)*

**HOWARD:** Is there anything I can do, Madam?

**DOLORES:** Yes, there is, Rogers. In the midst of this horrific news, you can fix me another (*Looks to the audience.*) martini. (*Loud thunder.*)

**HOWARD:** Yes, Madam.

*He exits stage left. OLIVIA enters, followed by GEORGIA, ISABELLA and ALICE, wearing their maid outfits and carrying martini glasses. They are followed by OSCAR and GEOFFREY, wearing butler costumes and also holding glasses.*

**OLIVIA:** Here is everyone, Madam Dubois. I have called them in from the garden just as you asked.

**DOLORES:** Everyone fall in line. (*Everyone lines up shoulder-to-shoulder across the stage as DOLORES marches back and forth in front of them.*) I am sure all of you are aware of the hideous crime that has taken place outside on my patio.

**ISABELLA:** It's just awful, Madam – just awful!

**OSCAR:** He was like a brother to me.

**GEOFFREY:** He was like a father to me.

**DOLORES:** He was like a servant to me. (*Pacing again.*) Now, one of your own has been brutally murdered. (*Out to the audience, very dramatically.*) The question is *which* butler did it? (*Loud thunder.*)

**OSCAR:** One of us? But Madam Dubois, you can't be suggesting we would murder Wallace. He was like family.

*HOWARD enters and hands DOLORES her martini.*

**DOLORES:** Thank you, Rogers. Fall in line. (*He does.*)

**GEOFFREY:** How do we know one of the maids didn't murder Wallace, Madam Dubois?

**DOLORES:** Look at them, they couldn't cut a wet noodle with a fork. How would you expect them to stab a large, strong man like Wallace in his chest, then twist the knife 360 degrees without breaking a nail? No, I'm afraid this murder was committed by (*To the audience.*) a man. (*Loud thunder.*)

**GEORGIA:** (*Pointing to OSCAR.*) I saw *him* arguing with Wallace only minutes before the murder.

**ISABELLA:** (*Pointing to GEOFFREY.*) I heard *him* tell Wallace that he wished he were dead.

**GEOFFREY:** (*Points to ALICE.*) But I heard *her* say she would get even with him some day!

**ALICE:** (*Points to HOWARD.*) Rogers did it! He has the murder weapon hidden in his coat! I saw it!

**HOWARD:** That's absurd! (*Pulls out a large butcher knife from his coat.*) I was only going to cut up some cucumbers for the shrimp salad.

**DOLORES:** Everyone calm yourselves; you're becoming hysterical!

**EVAN:** (*Standing in the French doors, legs spread apart; an unlit cigarette hanging from his bottom lip.*) That's good advice, Ms. Dubois. Advice I think you should follow yourself. (*Loud thunder.*)

**HOWARD:** Excuse me, sir – but you're trespassing on private property.

**EVAN:** (*Showing his badge.*) The name's Lieutenant Biddle, Private Investigator.

**DOLORES:** It seems there has been a murder in my garden, Lieutenant.

**EVAN:** Murder, huh? So that's who I stepped over on the patio just now. (*Turning to BEVERLY, coming out of character.*) I hate that line, Beverly – it makes me sound so stupid.

**BEVERLY:** Shhhhh – keep going.

**EVAN:** (*Sighs and turns back, in character.*) Were these people present at the time of the murder? (*Referring to the staff.*)

**DOLORES:** Yes, Lieutenant. I was throwing a little appreciation dinner for my staff. I'm convinced the murder was committed by one of my butlers, since the knife had to go through Guinevere's chest through the rib . . . (*Out of character.*) Oh, do excuse me . . . what I meant was . . . (*Back into character.*) I'm convinced the murder was committed by one of my butlers, since the candlestick had to go through . . . um – I mean, *knife* had to go through his chest. A female couldn't pull that off.

**EVAN:** Oh, so you've seen the murdered victim's body?

**DOLORES:** No.

**EVAN:** If you hadn't seen the victim, how do you know *where* he was stabbed?

**DOLORES:** Are you questioning *me*, Lieutenant? Madam Dubois?

**EVAN:** I'm sorry to have to tell you this, Ms. Dubois – but everyone in this room is a suspect until I get to the bottom of this. Until I finish my investigation, I don't want to hear a peep out of anyone! Now everyone be QUIET!

*There's a thud heard off stage left followed by a bellow from LLOYD.*

**LLOYD:** (*Offstage.*) Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!

**BEVERLY:** (*Jumps up from her chair.*) What was that? (*Calling to off stage.*) Janet, are you okay?

**JANET:** (*Entering from the French doors.*) I'm right here. (*Pointing left.*) It came from that way.

**BEVERLY:** Albert!

**ALBERT:** (*Enters quickly and takes his place on the sofa.*) Is it time yet?

**BEVERLY:** No, Albert, did you just yell backstage?

**ALBERT:** It wasn't me.

**HOWARD:** I'll check it out. Officer Biddle, come with me.

**GEOFFREY:** Let me go. I was born for adventure!

**OSCAR:** Come on, Howard. You and I will take care of this. *(They exit through the stage left door.)*

**ISABELLA:** I wonder who it could be, since everyone is on stage.

*GEORGIA, on instinct, grabs EVAN'S arm. She realizes what she is doing and quickly lets go. Suddenly, HOWARD and OSCAR enter the French doors, helping a hobbling LLOYD on. They assist him to the chair left of the sofa as everyone surrounds him. During the following conversation with LLOYD, GUINEVERE appears just inside the French doors again. DOLORES looks back and sees her. GUINEVERE slowly smiles and throws up a wave to DOLORES. DOLORES doesn't respond. GUINEVERE slowly motions for DOLORES to come to her. DOLORES shakes her head. GUINEVERE patiently motions her over again. DOLORES looks back at the others who are still paying their full attention to LLOYD. DOLORES eases over toward GUINEVERE who is still standing in the French doors. As DOLORES begins to move toward GUINEVERE, GUINEVERE slowly exits and disappears. DOLORES follows her out.*

**BEVERLY:** Lloyd? You scared us to death. I thought you had left.

**LLOYD:** Well, I did, Ms. Gladstone – but then I began to wonder if I had hidden the . . .

*HOWARD loudly clears his throat and begins coughing to stop LLOYD from saying anything else. It works, LLOYD stops in his tracks.*

**BEVERLY:** Was wondering if you had hidden what, Lloyd?

**HOWARD:** Don't you mean you came back to get your toolbox you forgot earlier?

**LLOYD:** Yes, sir – that's what I meant. I forgot my toolbox.

**JANET:** What was the noise we heard?

**LLOYD:** *(Becoming nervous as he looks back toward HOWARD.)* Well, when I was getting my toolbox from off the shelf in the back, it slipped and fell on my foot. That's when I screamed.

**BEVERLY:** You poor thing; are you all right?

**LLOYD:** Yes, ma'am. I'm sorry for interrupting your rehearsal. I meant to slip in and out unnoticed.

**JANET:** We're just glad you're okay, Lloyd. If anything happened to you, we'd all be in a fix.

**BEVERLY:** Now, if you are all right, then we really need to get back to our rehearsal.

**HOWARD:** Can you stand, Lloyd?

**LLOYD:** I think so. Don't mind me – I'll just get my things and get out of here.

*LLOYD and HOWARD stand off to the side and whisper during the following conversation. It looks, by their body language, as if HOWARD is reprimanding LLOYD.*

**BEVERLY:** *(Looking through her script.)* We will take it back a few pages. Dolores, if you would . . . *(Looks around, showing frustration.)* Where did Dolores go?

**DOLORES:** *(Entering through the stage left door.)* I'm right here.

**BEVERLY:** Dolores, you look as though you've seen a ghost.

**DOLORES:** Do I? Do you believe in them?

**BEVERLY:** Do I believe in what?

**DOLORES:** Ghosts, specters, spirits that return from the chest . . . I mean, *grave!*

**GEORGIA:** Here we go again. Really, Beverly – I don't see how we can possibly get anything done with all these distractions . . .

**EVAN:** *(Crossing to the other side of the stage.)* I think everyone needs to get a hold of themselves . . . *(He stumbles over a toolbox.)*

**OLIVIA:** Officer Biddle, are you all right?

**EVAN:** Lloyd, you really need to keep your toolbox off the floor – a person could hurt himself.

**LLOYD:** *(Crossing over to the toolbox and picking it up.)* Sorry about that, Officer Biddle.

**JANET:** Lloyd, I thought you said you dropped your toolbox backstage.

**LLOYD:** Oh . . . Um . . . Well . . .

**HOWARD:** *(Coming to his rescue.)* That was his *other* toolbox. Right, Lloyd?

**LLOYD:** *(Following HOWARD'S lead.)* That was my *other* toolbox.

**EVAN:** Something strange is going on here.

**GEORGIA:** *(Looking at EVAN.)* Oh, good heavens. There he goes with that detective look in his eyes. There is nothing going on here that you should concern yourself over.

**DOLORES:** *(Off to herself, in a fog.)* Of course there aren't any such thing as ghosts. I've never believed in them. Never!

**BEVERLY:** I think this murder mystery is getting to everyone. Perhaps next time we should put on a romantic comedy.

**GEORGIA:** Why yes, perhaps we could write our own. *(Crossing and looking at ISABELLA.)* About a man who has a fling with every woman in town and his poor, naïve wife has no idea what is going on.

**OLIVIA:** *(Putting an arm around ISABELLA.)* Mrs. Styles, you have gone too far.

**ISABELLA:** *(Starts to cry.)* She's right, Olivia. I was a fool. Everyone but I knew what he was doing behind my back! Blah, blah, blah, blah! *(She runs out.)*

**OLIVIA:** Mrs. Oldacre! *(Turns sharply to GEORGIA.)* Now look what you have done!

**GEORGIA:** It isn't my fault that she can't handle the truth.

**OLIVIA:** Speaking of the truth, everyone knows about you and Officer Biddle going out on your secret dates. *(She runs out.)*

**GEORGIA:** Well, I never!

**EVAN:** *(Out of nowhere.)* I never, too! That whole rumor about Mrs. Styles liking younger men and asking me out after her rich husband died is simply *not* true! *(All stare blankly at EVAN.)*

**BEVERLY:** Would everyone *please* calm down?

**GEORGIA:** Officer Biddle – you sit down this instant! I don't remember anyone talking to you.

**HOWARD:** Come on, Lloyd – I'll help you get your tools to the car.

**BEVERLY:** Wait, we *need* to rehearse!

**GEORGIA:** I'm afraid I'm now too distraught to rehearse, Beverly. *(GEORGIA runs off.)*

**EVAN:** *(Jumping up and going after her.)* Georgia! *(Stops and looks back at everyone.)* I mean, Mrs. Styles! *(He runs out.)*

**BEVERLY:** Would everyone help me get my cast back on stage so we can finish and go home, please? *(As she exits.)* Everyone! Everyone!

*All but DOLORES run out.*

**DOLORES:** *(Stands and speaks to the chest.)* But I felt your pulse and there wasn't any. I checked your breathing and you were dead! DEAD! This is all a game to them. They're trying to break me. *(Takes a few steps back and looks at the chest. Without hesitation, she crosses behind the chest, pushes the items off and flings open the lid. Her hand goes directly to her lips as she breathes in a gasp. She shuts the lid quickly and looks around the stage.)* Who took her!? Which one of you dirty thieves stole my Guinevere!? *(She begins rubbing her temples. Pause. She calmly replaces the items to the top of the chest. She sits zombie-like on the sofa and slowly rocks back and forth with that crazy look in her eye again. She sings sadly. As she gets halfway through her song, we hear arguing off stage and BEVERLY trying to calm everyone.)*

Hush thee, my baby,

Lie still.

Thy mommy has gone to the mill,

To grind thee some wheat

To make thee some meat,

Oh, my dear baby, lie still.

BY EDDIE MCPHERSON

*As she finishes the last line to her song, the arguing off stage continues, thunder is heard and the lights fade slowly to a . . .*

**BLACKOUT.**

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