

THE VULTURES

By Mark A. Ridge

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TOLL FREE (800) 950-7529 • FAX (319) 368-8011

THE VULTURES

By Mark A. Ridge

BASED ON PUBLIC DOMAIN WORKS BY
JOHN WILLARD, MARY ROBERTS RINEHART AND AVERY HOPWOOD

SYNOPSIS: It's a dark and stormy night at the mansion on Westmount Estate. As the guests arrive for the reading of a will, the mysterious housekeeper declares, "The relatives are swooping in like a wake of vultures ready to pick the carcass clean."

Who will ultimately inherit the fortune? Will it be the charming realtor, the handsome male model, the dimwitted nail technician, the bitter old woman, the endearing hairdresser, or the mild mannered accountant? Throw in a priceless pocket watch, an androgynous housekeeper, an escaped mental patient, and a pair of reunited lovers and the result is murder, with a hefty dose of laughs. *The Vultures* puts a comedic, modern day, gay spin on the classic murder mystery genre.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(2 females, 7 males, 1 either)

- TALBOT (m/f).....A dark, severe, androgynous being, who dresses in black and wears dark spectacles. Age unknown, probably somewhere between fifty and eighty. (146 lines)
- MR. CROSBY (m).....A friendly lawyer in his fifties or sixties. (115 lines)
- HARRISON BLYTHE (m).....A tall, handsome male model with an amazing body. He is in his mid thirties to early forties. (163 lines)
- MARY ROBERTS (f).....A stately, well dressed, bitter old woman, who appears to dislike everyone and everything. She is somewhere between fifty and seventy. (170 lines)

- ASHLEY HOPWOOD (f) A young, perky, nail technician from the South in her twenties. She is a little loud, a little tacky and not too bright. *(111 lines)*
- CHARLES WILLARD (m) A charming, mild mannered realtor in his thirties or forties. *(119 lines)*
- PAUL JONES (m) A sweet, gentle accountant in his late twenties or early thirties. *(272 lines)*
- HUNTER WEST (m)..... A friendly, charming male hairdresser in his late twenties or early thirties. *(381 lines)*
- RINEHART (m)..... A hospital guard in his thirties or forties. He is big and can be brutal. *(36 lines)*
- DR. AVERY (m) A friendly, small town doctor in his sixties or seventies. *(34 lines)*

DURATION: 120 minutes.

SETTING: The secluded estate of Simon West.

TIME: The present. A dark and stormy night in September.

SYNOPSIS OF ACTS

ACT ONE: The library

ACT TWO: The master bedroom

ACT THREE: The library

SET

LIBRARY: The library is a large, old-fashioned room, full of dark corners and shadows. The back wall is covered by built-in bookcases. A large portrait of Simon West hangs on the wall. There is a safe in the room. The room contains the usual furniture, chairs, a couch, a desk, a portable bar, lamps, a butler bell pull, etc. A door to the left opens out into the entrance hall.

MASTER BEDROOM: It is a large, gloomy room with a large canopy bed upstage and a fireplace with ornate mantel and antique clock. Next to the bed is a night stand and lamp. There is also an armoire and a couple of chairs.

SOUND EFFECTS

- Storm effects (including thunder, wind and rain)
- Erie, haunting music (Talbot's trances)
- Gong sounds
- Doorbell chime
- Clock strikes

TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS

- Lightning flashes
- Framed portrait of Simon West
- A safe (can be behind portrait, freestanding or in the desk.)
- Bookcase in Library with secret panel opening
- Master Bedroom wall behind bed with secret panel opening
- Fireplace mantle with secret opening compartment

PROPS

- Stack of three envelopes from safe
- Cell phones (Ashley, Paul, Harrison, Charles, and Hunter)
- Fully stocked bar with bottles and glasses
- Ring of old antique house keys
- Letter from Simon West
- Straitjacket
- Marijuana joints (Harrison and Hunter)
- Cigarette lighter
- Crystal Ball
- Ouija board and paddle
- Tarot Cards
- Bones
- Large urn
- Handgun
- Architectural plans of Westmount
- Hunter's suitcase with clothes, including sexy underwear, sweatpants and T-shirt
- Antique mantle clock
- Hunter's wristwatch
- Mary's internet notes
- Talbot's ornate talisman
- Antique velvet box containing antique pocket watch
- Dr. Avery's medical bag and stethoscope and bandage
- Rinehart's gag and rope
- Knife
- Phone (on desk)

PRODUCTION NOTES

For companies concerned about the marijuana usage in the play, alternate passages are included at the back of the script.

To avoid any confusion amongst the audience, double casting is not recommended.

The role of Talbot may be played by a male or female actor; however the character is a female and must be played as such. The role should not become a “man in drag” performance, one in which the audience is anxiously awaiting the moment he removes his wig and is revealed as a man. Talbot is a person of mystery. Ideally, the audience should leave the theatre never really knowing the sex of the actor, even if this requires the curtain call to be taken in character, or an ambiguous listing in the program.

Sound can play a very important part in creating the atmosphere of *The Vultures*, especially with the rain and thunder effects. In addition, when Talbot is under her trances, dark, ominous music will add to the haunting effect.

If desired, Talbot can be on stage for the preshow or a portion of it. Throughout the storm and before the start of the actual show, she can be standing stationary in a trance and communing with the spirit world.

If technical issues necessitate, the end of Act One may be altered slightly. Instead of “The Hand” appearing above the back of the armchair, lightning may illuminate the standing, dark figure of the intruder, or the bookcase can open slightly and “The Hand” can be seen as it reaches out.

PREMIERE PRODUCTION

THE VULTURES was the winner of the 2018 Original Playwriting Competition at the Jewel Box Theatre in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Chuck Tweed, Producing Director.

In October of 2018, *THE VULTURES* was produced by The Florentine Players, a community theatre in Omaha, Nebraska, Derek Kowal, President.

The first professional production of *THE VULTURES* occurred on May 24, 2019 by The Evolution Theatre Company in Columbus Ohio, with the following cast and crew:

TALBOT	*Mark Phillips Schwamberger
MR. CROSBY	*Tom Holliday
HARRISON BLYTHE	*Leland Leger
MARY ROBERTS	Sonda Staley
ASHLEY HOPWOOD	Carolyn Demanelis
CHARLES WILLARD.....	William Darby IV
PAUL JONES.....	Davion T. Brown
HUNTER WEST.....	Scott Risner
RINEHART.....	Mike Gwydion Ream
DR. AVERY.....	David Johnson
Director.....	David S. Harewood
Stage Manager /Light Board Operator.....	**Lauren Wong
Scenic Designer.....	Katherine Wexler
Lighting Designer.....	Caroline Dittamo
Sound Designer / Sound Operator	Riley Galvin
Costume Designer.....	Dayton E. Willison
Set Construction	Michael Bynes
Box Office / Intern.....	Jarrod Turnbull
Assistant Stage Manager	Isabel Bagley
Producer.....	Lane Schlicher
Artistic Director.....	*Mark Phillips Schwamberger

**Denotes member of Actors' Equity Association or working under contract.*

ACT ONE

AT START: *The stage is dark. As the audience is being seated, the SFX: sounds of a storm can be heard. As the storm approaches, the sound grows louder and louder. SFX: huge crash of thunder sounds, startling the audience.*

As the lightning continues to flash and the thunder continues to crack, we catch a few glimpses of the room. This is the library at Westmount Manor, a dark, foreboding house, and the type they don't build anymore. The library is a large, old-fashioned room, full of dark corners and shadows. The back wall is covered by built-in bookcases. A large portrait of SIMON WEST hangs on the wall. The room contains the usual furniture, chairs, a couch, a desk, a portable bar, etc. A door to the left opens out into the entrance hall. The room appears to be deserted, until flashes of lightning illuminate a mysterious figure, TALBOT. SFX: ominous doorbell chime sounds. When the lightning flashes again, TALBOT is gone. After a moment, TALBOT re-enters the room and begins to turn on the lamps. She is escorting MR. CROSBY.

TALBOT: *(Entering.)* This way, Mr. Crosby.

MR. CROSBY: I hope this rain stops soon.

TALBOT: It will not.

MR. CROSBY: Well, this old place looks just the same as I remember it.

TALBOT: It should. Nothing has been changed in twenty years.

MR. CROSBY: You've done your job well. I don't know how you've managed living here, all alone.

TALBOT: I have had my friends to keep me company, my friends from the shadow world.

MR. CROSBY: Oh, you believe in ghosts, do you?

TALBOT: I do not believe. I know. There are spirits all around us. Some are good. Some are evil.

MR. CROSBY: Nonsense. It's just your nerves getting the best of you, spending all these years here, alone.

TALBOT: It is not nerves. It is the gift. My mother had it. My grandmother had it. All the females in my family have it, dating back to the time of Bridget Bishop. She was burned alive in Salem.

SFX: lightning flashes and thunder cracks.

MR. CROSBY: Well, never mind. In a few minutes, the house will be full of people and all the spooks will vanish.

TALBOT: How many heirs are coming?

MR. CROSBY: Six. All the surviving relatives. That reminds me, your job as guardian of this house will be up tonight. What are you going to do?

TALBOT: That depends. If I like the new Master, I will stay.

MR. CROSBY opens the safe and removes a stack of envelopes.

MR. CROSBY: Well, here it is... the will. All three envelopes. They've been locked in that safe for the last twenty years, undisturbed, just as Mr. West sealed and marked them. *(Examining the envelopes.)* Wait. These envelopes have been opened, all of them. The seals are broken. Someone has opened that safe and read the will.

TALBOT: How could they? Nobody knows how to open that safe but you.

MR. CROSBY: Well, I didn't do it.

TALBOT: Why would someone go to all that trouble?

MR. CROSBY: There's a lot of money at stake.

TALBOT: What do you think they were trying to do, change the will?

MR. CROSBY: I don't know. Money can have a strange effect on people.

TALBOT: You do not have to tell me. I have seen it happen before. The night he died, those relatives came scurrying out of the woodwork, like rats in search of sustenance. And now, a whole new batch is swooping in here, like a wake of vultures, ready to pick the carcass clean.

SFX: lightning flashes and thunder cracks.

MR. CROSBY: Well, if the will has been changed, it won't do any good. There's a duplicate one, per Mr. West's instructions. It's locked in the vault of the Empire Trust Company, and if this one has been tampered with, I'll know it, and I'll know who did it. (*SFX: ominous doorbell chimes.*) See who that is. And don't say a word about this.

As TALBOT exits, MR. CROSBY crosses upstage and starts examining the bookcases. When he hears TALBOT again, he returns to his original position. TALBOT escorts HARRISON into the room.

HARRISON: (*Extending his hand.*) How are you, Mr. Crosby? Oh, excuse my wet hand. It's pouring out there.

MR. CROSBY: Hello, Harrison. Did you come up on the train?

HARRISON: No, I drove. Lucky I left when I did. Parts of the road are starting to flood out. Am I the first of the pack?

MR. CROSBY: Yes. The others should be here shortly.

HARRISON: How many besides myself?

MR. CROSBY: Five. All the heirs.

HARRISON: So, this is the old man's library?

MR. CROSBY: Yes. Haven't you been here before?

HARRISON: No, why do you ask?

MR. CROSBY: (*Glancing at the will in his hands.*) Well, someone has.

HARRISON: I'm not sure what you mean.

MR. CROSBY: Oh, nothing.

HARRISON: (*Noticing TALBOT.*) I don't mean to be rude, but is she just going to stand there?

TALBOT glares at HARRISON and then exits.

MR. CROSBY: You've offended her. Don't you know who she is?

HARRISON: I don't know what she is.

MR. CROSBY: She's Mr. West's oldest and most trusted servant. He's kept her on the payroll for the past twenty years. He relied on her for all matters, business, personal, and spiritual.

HARRISON: Well, if I have any say, she won't be here much longer. Is that the will?

MR. CROSBY: Yes, but it can't be read until all the heirs are assembled.

HARRISON: If you ask me, this is all just a little too melodramatic.

MR. CROSBY: Mr. West was very specific. Everyone must be present.

HARRISON: Obviously, he was a nut.

MR. CROSBY: Have you no respect for a dead relative?

HARRISON: Not unless he has made me the sole heir. Come on, Mr. Crosby, you have to admit that this is all a bit strange.

MR. CROSBY: He was a little eccentric.

HARRISON: Eccentric? He was crazy! Why did he want a twenty-year old will read to his heirs, at midnight, in this room? Why not in the daytime in your office? Why not save us all a lot of time and handle it with a conference call or Skype? Why drag us all out here in the middle of nowhere, to a place that looks like something out of an Agatha Christie novel?

MR. CROSBY: Mr. West stipulated that this will should be read, in this room, at the very hour of his death. One of his whims.

HARRISON: Whims. Hell, everyone knows that insanity runs in this family.

MR. CROSBY: That remains to be seen.

HARRISON: It's really coming down out there. What happens if I'm the only one that shows? Does that mean that I inherit—

MR. CROSBY: (*Cutting him off.*) They'll be here.

SFX: thunder cracks.

HARRISON: I don't know. That bridge was almost under water. If this keeps up, we may get stuck up here.

MR. CROSBY: Oh, it's already been settled. You'll all be staying here at Westmount for the night.

TALBOT opens the door and leads ASHLEY and MARY into the room.

TALBOT: They are starting to arrive.

MR. CROSBY: Come in, come in. How do you do, Miss Roberts?

MARY: It's late and I'm wet.

MR. CROSBY: I'm sorry. And you must be Ashley. I'm Mr. Crosby.

ASHLEY: Oh, nice to meet ya'. You don't look at all like I had pictured. From your voice on the phone, I thought you'd be much younger.

MR. CROSBY: Well, you're just as I imagined. (*To MARY.*) I didn't realize you two were traveling together.

MARY: We weren't. We met at the train station.

ASHLEY: Can you believe it? Two days in a bus and eight hours on the train and we both ended up on the same platform at the same time. Lucky I overheard her tryin' to get a cab.

MARY: Of course there was none to be found. Only Simon West would be idiot enough to drag people out at this hour, in this weather, to this godforsaken town.

ASHLEY: Jack gave us a ride.

MR. CROSBY: Jack? Who's Jack.

MARY: A complete stranger. We got in the car with a complete stranger.

ASHLEY: He was our Uber driver. He's a cutie. He's gonna be a vegetarian.

MARY: A veterinarian.

ASHLEY: Same thing.

MARY: We were lucky we weren't killed.

ASHLEY: (*Seeing HARRISON.*) Hi. I don't think we've met.

MR. CROSBY: Oh, I'm sorry. Let me introduce you. Mr. Harrison Blythe, this is Mrs. Ashley Hopwood and Miss Mary Roberts.

MARY: So, you are Harrison Blythe.

HARRISON: Guilty.

ASHLEY: I feel like we've met before. You ever been to Galesburg?

HARRISON: No.

ASHLEY: You sure? I'm pretty good at faces.

HARRISON: I'm sure.

ASHLEY: You look so familiar.

MARY: You probably don't recognize him with his clothes on. He's an underwear model.

HARRISON: Among other things.

MARY: (*To MR. CROSBY.*) I have internet.

ASHLEY: OMG, you're the Prosciutto Underwear Man!

HARRISON: Pacchetto.

ASHLEY: Same thing. Your picture is hangin' in the lunchroom at Nails and Tails. That's where I work. It's a combination nail salon and pet groomers. My boss Staci-Lynn is in love with you.

HARRISON: I'm flattered.

ASHLEY: Well, why wouldn't she be? You've got an amazing—

MARY: *(Cutting her off.)* Ashley!

ASHLEY: Well, he has! Staci-Lynn will never believe this. I tell you, she's gonna flip her fanny. Can I get a picture with you?

HARRISON: Sure.

ASHLEY takes out her cell phone and snaps a photo with HARRISON.

ASHLEY: Thanks. This will throw her over the edge.

MARY: I couldn't quite figure out how we are connected, Mr. Blythe. Did you know my great Aunt Eleanor?

HARRISON: No, Miss Roberts. I didn't know your great Aunt Eleanor.

ASHLEY: Me, neither.

MARY: Well, she's—

HARRISON: *(Cutting her off.)* I'm sure this is very fascinating, but why delve into ancient history?

MARY: But I—

HARRISON: *(Cutting her off.)* Aunt Eleanor and I are somehow related, correct?

MARY: Correct.

HARRISON: So, let's let it go at that.

MARY: Mr. Blythe, just because God has graced you with a handsome face—

ASHLEY: *(Cutting her off.)* And body.

MARY: That doesn't give you the right to be rude.

MR. CROSBY: Don't pay any attention to him. I'm sure he didn't mean anything.

HARRISON: I'm sorry. It's just late and I'm hungry and tired. Forgive me?

ASHLEY: Of course.

HARRISON: *(To MARY.)* What do you say? "Friends?"

MARY: "Relatives." You know, ever since we came in here, I have had the strangest feeling, like someone is peering at me. Look at that painting. I think the eyes have moved.

MR. CROSBY: Nonsense. That's Mr. West.

ASHLEY: He was a handsome man.

MARY: He was an idiot. Why is it so dark in here?

TALBOT: The master liked dim lighting. It calmed his nerves.

MARY: Oh, this house is haunted, I just know it. I can feel it in my bones.

TALBOT: Ah ha! You also have the gift. I sensed it when you came in the door.

MARY: What?

TALBOT: There are spirits all around you. That feeling means that someone in the other world is trying to tell you something.

MR. CROSBY: What are you trying to do, Talbot? Frighten her to death?

HARRISON: No one has ever been frightened to death.

MR. CROSBY: Oh, it has happened before and you know it. Lots of people have lost their minds, sometimes their lives, through fright.

TALBOT: Hillcrest is full of such cases.

MR. CROSBY: That's the hospital on the other end of the ravine.

TALBOT: It is an asylum.

HARRISON: Well, I don't believe it.

SFX: doorbell chimes and TALBOT exits.

MARY: Oh, I wish I hadn't come. You heard what she said about those spirits. I want to go home.

HARRISON: Oh, don't worry. Come and sit down.

ASHLEY: You'll protect us, won't you, Harry?

HARRISON: Of course I will.

ASHLEY: See, Cousin Mary? He's strong and handsome. Sit down.

MARY: I don't want to sit down.

As MARY sits, TALBOT opens the door and admits CHARLES.

MR. CROSBY: Welcome to Westmount, Charles.

CHARLES: (*Holding out his hand.*) Thanks. You must be Mr. Crosby. I hope I'm not late.

TALBOT exits.

MR. CROSBY: Right on time. Miss Mary Roberts and Mrs. Ashley Hopwood, this is Charles Willard.

ASHLEY: I didn't know I had such handsome relatives.

CHARLES: And I didn't know I had such charming ones.

MARY: We'll see if you still feel the same way after that will is read.

MR. CROSBY: And this is Harrison Blythe.

HARRISON: Nice to meet you, Charles.

CHARLES: Call me Charlie.

HARRISON: Nice to meet you, Charlie. And you can call me Harry.

CHARLES: How about this weather? I wasn't sure I was even going to make it up the hill. Any chance a guy could get a drink, something to warm me up?

MR. CROSBY: Certainly, I'll ring for Talbot.

MARY: Must you?

MR. CROSBY pulls the cord, signaling TALBOT.

MR. CROSBY: She's really very nice. You'll grow to like her.

MARY: Highly doubtful.

TALBOT enters.

TALBOT: You rang?

MR. CROSBY: Yes, thank you, Talbot. Would you mind getting a few glasses for our guests?

TALBOT: Of course. Mr. West's wine cellar is still intact, just as he left it. And there is brandy and whiskey in those decanters.

CHARLES: Anything will do.

HARRISON: You can say that again. *(To ASHLEY.)* How about you?

ASHLEY: I'm easy.

MARY: Obviously.

HARRISON: And you? Something to take the edge off?

MARY: There's not enough liquor in the world.

TALBOT begins to remove glasses from the bar.

CHARLES: When are you going to read the will, Mr. Crosby?

MR. CROSBY: As soon as the other two arrive.

CHARLES: Oh, that reminds me, I think I left one of them downstairs. Guy by the name of Jones.

MR. CROSBY: What's he doing down there?

CHARLES: Trying to clean himself up a bit. I think his cab got stuck in the mud and he helped push it out.

TALBOT sets the glasses on the liquor cabinet.

TALBOT: I will just leave these here. You can serve yourselves.

CHARLES: Thank you.

TALBOT: If you require anything else, I shall be right outside the door.

TALBOT exits.

HARRISON: She really brightens a room, doesn't she?

CHARLES and HARRISON make drinks.

MR. CROSBY: She's very nice.

CHARLES: *(Handing ASHLEY a drink.)* Here you go.

ASHLEY: Oh, that's strong.

HARRISON: Cousin Mary, would you care for some?

MARY: Perhaps, a little.

CHARLIE pours MARY a drink. Before he can return the bottle, MARY finishes it and motions for another. The door opens and TALBOT motions PAUL into the room.

PAUL: So, this is where everyone is.

MR. CROSBY: Hello, Paul. Glad to see you. Come in and make yourself comfortable. I'm Roger Crosby. We talked on the phone.

CHARLES: And I'm Charlie. We almost met downstairs. We must be related somehow. Would you care for a drink?

PAUL: No, no thanks. Nice to meet you.

MR. CROSBY: And here are some distant cousins you should know, Mrs. Ashley Hopwood and Miss Mary Roberts.

MARY: So, you're Cousin Paul.

PAUL: Yes.

ASHLEY: Another cute one.

MARY: He's an accountant.

HARRISON: Fascinating.

PAUL: It is! I've always loved math. There's something beautiful about the logic of numbers and the concise information on a balance sheet or income or loss statement, don't you think?

ASHLEY: I don't know what you're talkin' about.

PAUL: You just can't beat the thrill of a positive cash flow or the creation of a successful budget.

HARRISON: *(To MR. CROSBY.)* I told you, insanity runs in the family.

MR. CROSBY: And this is Harrison Blythe, another cousin.

PAUL: Nice to meet you. You look familiar. Hey, you're the Pacchetto Underwear Man!

HARRISON: That I am.

PAUL: I can't believe I'm related to The Pacchetto Underwear Man. Would you mind if I took a quick picture?

HARRISON: Why not?

PAUL takes out his cell phone and snaps a selfie with HARRISON.

TALBOT: *(Shouting.)* Listen! *(MARY, ASHLEY, and PAUL scream.)* There is a car coming up the drive, the sixth heir.

TALBOT exits.

ASHLEY: OK, she gives me the willies.

CHARLES: I didn't hear any car.

MARY: She's psychic. She's psychic and this house is haunted.

MR. CROSBY: Nonsense. The next thing you know, you'll be seeing ghosts.

PAUL: Well, personally, I've never seen a ghost, but I've felt kind of queer ever since I came into this house.

HARRISON: And not before then?

MR. CROSBY: Mr. Blythe!

PAUL: I just meant that this place makes me a little uncomfortable.

MARY: Me, too.

CHARLES: If you're not comfortable here, what will you do if you inherit this place?

PAUL: I don't expect to inherit it. I never win anything. Of course, I do have a one in six chance. That would be about a 16.66666 percent chance, wouldn't it?

ASHLEY: I still have no idea what you are talkin' about.

TALBOT escorts HUNTER into the room.

HUNTER: Sorry, I'm late. It's really coming down out there. My car stalled out twice. I hope you weren't all waiting for me.

MARY: We had no choice.

MR. CROSBY: You made it, that's all that matters. Mrs. Ashley Hopwood, Miss Mary Roberts, this is Hunter West.

MARY: A hairstylist. I googled him, too.

ASHLEY: Nice to meet you.

HUNTER: It's nice to meet you.

MR. CROSBY: And this is Charles Willard.

CHARLES: Hi, call me Charlie.

HARRISON: Can we speed this up a bit? I'm Harry Blythe. We're somehow related.

HUNTER: Hey, I recognize you. You're the Pacchetto Underwear Man!

HARRISON: Guilty.

HUNTER: I can't believe I'm related to the Pacchetto Underwear Man.

HARRISON: *(Standing up.)* I suppose you'd like a photo.

HUNTER: Why?

Embarrassed, HARRISON sits back down.

MR. CROSBY: And last, but not least...

HUNTER: *(Recognizing PAUL.)* Paul. Paul Jones.

PAUL: Hi, Hunter.

HUNTER: Hi, Paul.

MR. CROSBY: You two know each other?

HUNTER: I wasn't sure he would remember. It was over ten years ago.

PAUL: I remember.

HUNTER: We met at a wedding.

PAUL: *(Blushing.)* I remember.

HUNTER: I was hoping you would be here.

HARRISON: Look, this is all very nice, but let's be honest. Even though we are related, after tonight, there's a pretty good chance we will never see each other again.

HUNTER: *(To PAUL.)* I hope that's not true.

HARRISON: We're gathered here tonight for one reason, and one reason only. Don't you think we should get on with it?

MR. CROSBY: All right. If you'll all take a seat, we can begin. *(Everyone sits.)* As you know, Simon Canby West died in this house, exactly twenty years ago tonight and he made me the executor of his estate. As you may not know, Mr. West was a very eccentric man and hated all of his living relatives.

HARRISON: Lucky for us.

MR. CROSBY: Not wishing any of them to enjoy the fortunes he amassed through his publishing company, Mr. West invested in Government bonds that matured in twenty years. At the end of that time, I was to assemble all his surviving relatives and read his will.

ASHLEY: This is so excitin'.

MR. CROSBY: You six people are the last living descendants of Mr. Simon Canby West.

SFX: huge flash of lightning and a large crash of thunder. The lights go out, leaving everyone in total darkness.

TALBOT: I was afraid this would happen.

MR. CROSBY: Don't anyone panic.

CHARLES: Why would we panic?

ASHLEY: It's dark in here. Why is it so dark?

MARY: Because the lights went out.

HUNTER: It's the storm, that's all.

HARRISON: Can someone pass me the vodka?

MR. CROSBY: Talbot, are there any candles?

TALBOT: Yes sir. I will find them.

HARRISON: Don't bother.

HARRISON takes out his cell phone and turns on the flashlight. CHARLES, PAUL, HUNTER, and ASHLEY do the same.

ASHLEY: Oh, this reminds me of sittin' around the campfire back home.

PAUL: I love camping.

ASHLEY: Me, too. Anyone know any ghost stories?

HARRISON: I'll bet Talbot does.

MR. CROSBY: Talbot, is there a generator in the house?

TALBOT: No.

MARY: Are we just going to sit here in the dark?

CHARLES: It looks like we have no choice.

TALBOT: The power will return shortly. It always does.

MARY: *(After a moment.)* Well, this is fun.

After a short silence, ASHLEY begins to sing.

ASHLEY: *(Singing.)*

NINETY NINE BOTTLES OF BEER ON THE WALL,
NINETY NINE BOTTLES OF BEER.

ASHLEY and PAUL: *(Singing.)*

TAKE ONE DOWN AND PASS IT AROUND...

MARY: Please!

PAUL stops singing.

ASHLEY: *(Singing.)*

NINETY NINE BOTTLES OF BEER ON THE WALL.

(After a moment of silence.) Well, we can't just sit here doin' nothin'.

HUNTER: What do you suggest?

ASHLEY: Anyone want to play charades?

MARY: No.

PAUL: I will.

MARY: I am in hell.

ASHLEY: I'll go first.

PAUL: *(Referring to ASHLEY'S gestures.)* It's a movie...

CHARLES: OK, pass me that bottle.

PAUL: *(Playing charades.)* It's one word. Face.

HUNTER: Cheek.

The lights come on again.

MARY: Oh, thank god.

HARRISON: Maybe we should get back to business, in case we lose the lights again.

MR. CROSBY: Yes, let's all take our seats.

ASHLEY: What about charades?

MARY: You won.

CHARLES: Mr. Crosby, you can continue.

ASHLEY: (To PAUL.) The answer was Jaws.

MR. CROSBY: Here is the will in these three envelopes. I will now read the instructions on the envelope marked number one.

TALBOT: (Yelling.) Wait!

MARY, ASHLEY, and PAUL scream.

MR. CROSBY: What is it?

TALBOT: Silence! Listen.

SFX: a strange gong sounds somewhere in the house, striking seven tolls. ALL listen.

HUNTER: That was weird.

TALBOT: (Yelling.) Wait!

MARY, ASHLEY, and PAUL scream.

HARRISON: (To PAUL.) You've got to quit doing that.

PAUL: She's got to quit doing that.

ASHLEY: She scared me.

HARRISON: You scream like a girl.

ASHLEY: I am a girl.

HARRISON: Not you.

PAUL: Hey!

TALBOT begins to gurgle, moan and sway, as if in a trance.

CHARLES: (To TALBOT.) Are you all right?

- TALBOT:** (*Speaking in a low, demonic voice.*) Yes. Yes. I understand.
Tell me.
- MR. CROSBY:** Talbot! Talbot, are you OK?
- CHARLES:** I think she's in some kind of trance.
- TALBOT:** (*In a trance.*) Yes, I hear you.
- PAUL:** OK, now she's starting to freak me out.
- MARY:** This house is haunted. I knew it. I just knew it.
- TALBOT:** (*In a trance.*) What are you trying to tell me?
- ASHLEY:** Is she possessed, like in that movie?
- PAUL:** I don't know.
- TALBOT:** (*In a trance.*) Tell me the name!
- CHARLES:** (*Waving his hands in front of her.*) Miss Talbot? Miss Talbot?
- PAUL:** If her head starts spinning around, I'm out of here.
- ASHLEY:** Is she gonna throw up?
- TALBOT:** (*Coming out of the trance.*) What? What is it?
- MR. CROSBY:** Are you all right? You appeared to be in some kind of—
- TALBOT:** (*Cutting him off.*) It was the spirits. They use my body as a vessel.
- ASHLEY:** Oh, I hate that.
- HUNTER:** But what was that noise?
- TALBOT:** That was a warning. That gong foretells death. The master heard it just before he died.
- PAUL:** OK. I've been thinking that there really isn't any use of my staying around here. (*Taking out his cell phone.*) Maybe it's not too late to get a ride back.
- HUNTER:** No, you can't go.
- PAUL:** I can't seem to get a signal.
- HUNTER:** You don't believe in ghosts do you?
- PAUL:** No! No! Of course not! Do you?
- MARY:** I do.
- ASHLEY:** I'm startin' to.
- HARRISON:** Well, I don't.
- PAUL:** But what about that gong?
- MR. CROSBY:** It's nothing. Probably an old grandfather's clock running somewhere in the house.
- TALBOT:** There is no clock running in this house.

MARY: I knew it. This place is haunted.

CHARLES: Nonsense.

TALBOT: The toll says seven may live.

PAUL: But there are eight people in this room.

TALBOT: One must die before morning.

MARY: Oh, I feel faint.

PAUL: Me, too.

CHARLES: Pull yourself together.

PAUL: But it's so hot in here. I need some air.

HARRISON: Quit your kidding and sit down.

HUNTER: Hey, don't touch him.

CHARLES: Mr. Crosby, can you please just go on with the will? We've had enough interruptions.

MR. CROSBY: Yes, we should. Everyone, please take a seat. (*Reading.*) On, September 27, you will open this envelope and read its contents to my relatives who are assembled in my library at Westmount Manor. First, let my executor ask the prospective heirs assembled this night if they are willing to take what fortune offers them, and not question my judgment in the manner in which I shall dispose of my fortune. Is that clear? Any objections?

MARY: No, that's all right.

CHARLES: Go ahead.

MR. CROSBY: (*Reading.*) If they are willing...

PAUL: Just a minute. I don't know about that. Maybe his judgment wasn't so good.

MR. CROSBY: Are you satisfied, or not?

HARRISON: He is. Go on.

MR. CROSBY: Are you?

PAUL: I guess.

HUNTER: (*To PAUL.*) It's fine.

MR. CROSBY: (*To ASHLEY.*) Do you agree?

ASHLEY: Usually.

MARY: Ignore her. She has a hard time keeping up.

MR. CROSBY: (*Reading.*) If they are willing to take what fortune offers, then let my executor open the envelope marked number two, and read my will. (*Opening second envelope and reading.*) I, Simon Canby West, being of sound mind and body, do hereby declare as the sole heir to all my money, bonds, securities, estate,

real, and otherwise, my descendant, man or woman who bears the surname of West. If more than one bears the surname of West, then my estate shall be equally divided among them. Signed Simon Canby West." Witnesses: Abigail Talbot, Roger Crosby. (*PAUL stands to congratulate HUNTER.*) There is, however a codicil. (*PAUL sits back down.*) In the event of the death of the beneficiary or if he or she be proved to be of unsound mind, or if it be proved in a court of law that the said beneficiary is not competent to properly handle the estate, then my executor will open the envelope marked number three, and declare the next heir. (*Putting down the paper.*) Therefore, in accordance with the will, I now declare Mr. Hunter West as sole heir of the West Estate, and the master of Westmount Manor. Hunter, I congratulate you. And as there is no doubt as to the good health and sanity of Mr. West, I trust that this third envelope will never be opened.

CHARLES: Congratulations, Hunter.

HARRISON: I can't say I'm not jealous, but congratulations, too.

HUNTER: Thank you. And rest assured, Westmount is open to you all.

ASHLEY: Congratulations, Hunter. I guess I won't be quittin' my job anytime soon.

CHARLES: What are you planning on doing with all that money? And this place?

HUNTER: I don't know. It's a lot to take in.

MARY: Well, just to show I'm not a jealous old lady, I congratulate you, as well.

HUNTER: Thanks. (*To PAUL.*) Isn't it wonderful?

PAUL: Well, of course, money doesn't always bring happiness.

CHARLES: But it certainly helps.

HUNTER: Mr. Crosby, one thing puzzles me about the will.

MR. CROSBY: What is that?

HUNTER: What did he mean when he said: "If the heir proved to be of unsound mind"?

MR. CROSBY: Mr. West believed that there was a streak of insanity in the family. That clause was put there in case that failing should reappear in the heir. In that event, the estate would go to the heir named in the third envelope.

PAUL: I wonder who that is.

HARRISON: I wonder.

HUNTER: I didn't know there was insanity in the family.

HARRISON: Just look around this place.

MR. CROSBY: In any case, the will is legal and binding.

HARRISON: I don't dispute that. I'm only saying that the old man was nutty.

TALBOT: (*To HUNTER.*) Here are the keys to the house, Master West.

PAUL: (*Laughing.*) Master.

TALBOT removes an envelope from her pocket and hands it to HUNTER.

TALBOT: And this is for you. When Mr. West was dying, he gave me this letter to give to the heir, after the will was read. You are to open the envelope tonight, in his room, where you are to sleep.

HUNTER: So, everyone is staying tonight?

TALBOT: No one is getting out of here.

PAUL: What do you mean by that?

TALBOT: There is only one road to Westmount. When the bridge is submerged, our connection to the outside world is cut off, completely severed.

MARY: Oh, dear. Oh, dear.

ASHLEY: This might be fun, kinda like a slumber party. I can do your nails. I brought my beauty bag.

MARY: Of course you did.

HUNTER: (*Taking the envelope.*) Could this be any weirder? Imagine trusting someone to deliver a letter twenty years after your death.

MR. CROSBY: This is all news to me. Talbot, when did he give you that letter?

TALBOT: Just before he died.

PAUL: I wonder, what's in it?

MR. CROSBY: I have no idea, but it wouldn't surprise me if it was about the watch.

CHARLES: Watch?

MR. CROSBY: The missing pocket watch.

HUNTER: I don't understand.

HARRISON: Oh, yeah. I remember my mother telling me about that.

MARY: We've all heard about it.

HUNTER: I haven't.

PAUL: Me, neither.

ASHLEY: I have no idea what you're talkin' about. But then, I usually don't.

MARY: According to family history, the Wests acquired an extremely valuable pocket watch that remained in the family for generations.

MR. CROSBY: Its origins can be traced back to King Louis XVI, when Marie Antoinette commissioned the watch. Somehow, it survived the revolution and the West family procured it from an auction house. It's worth a fortune.

PAUL: How much?

MR. CROSBY: I would estimate that in today's dollar, it would be somewhere in the neighborhood of ten million.

MARY: Mother said that after it came into Simon's possession, it was lost or stolen.

MR. CROSBY: It did disappear. But I don't believe it was lost or stolen. No attempt was ever made to collect on the insurance. I believe Mr. West hid it somewhere in this house.

CHARLES: Why would he do that?

HARRISON: Because he was a nut.

HUNTER: Did you ever see it?

MR. CROSBY: No. But I imagine it's magnificent, like everything else here at Westmount. I must congratulate you again.

MARY: Some people have all the luck.

HUNTER: Thanks again, everyone. I'll open this envelope before I go to bed. Right now, I need to get something to eat. I don't know about you guys, but I'm starving.

TALBOT: I anticipated that and have prepared a tray of delicacies. Just a few recipes that I was dying to try. I will warm them.

HUNTER: While you're doing that, we can explore the house, and you guys can pick out your rooms.

ASHLEY: Oh, I can sleep anywhere.

MARY: And probably have.

HUNTER: I'm starting to feel at home already.

PAUL: Aren't you just a little bit scared to sleep in that room where he died?

HUNTER: Why should I be?

MARY: Because this house is haunted. Ask that woman. She says that she's seen spirits.

HUNTER: Suppose she has? She has been living here all this time and they haven't hurt you yet, have they?

TALBOT: But there is something evil in this house now.

SFX: lightning flashes and thunder cracks. MARY, ASHLEY, and PAUL scream. TALBOT exits.

HUNTER: *(Starting off.)* Come on.

MARY: Wait. I'm not going alone.

ASHLEY: You'll protect us, won't you Paul?

PAUL: Well, I don't know if I'd be much use.

HUNTER: Don't worry, I'll protect you all.

MARY, ASHLEY, HUNTER and PAUL exit.

MR. CROSBY: *(Exiting after them.)* I don't want to miss this.

HARRISON: *(Refilling his drink.)* Well, it looks like this was a wasted trip.

CHARLES: Look on the bright side. We got to meet some relatives.

HARRISON: Big deal. All these weeks of anticipation, all this time traveling here, and the whole thing is over in thirty minutes. And it's kind of ironic, don't you think?

CHARLES: What is?

HARRISON: That in the end, everything goes to the person named West.

CHARLES: And?

HARRISON: And Hunter will probably be the last one. I feel pretty confident that he won't be having any children.

CHARLES: Why do you say that?

HARRISON: Oh, come on. Couldn't you tell? Hunter is...

CHARLES: What?

HARRISON: You know...

CHARLES: What? Gay?

HARRISON: Yes.

CHARLES: I didn't pick up on that. And so what if he is?

HARRISON: I didn't say there was anything wrong with it. It's just that virtually every man that recognizes me from those ads is gay.

CHARLES: Paul recognized you, too.

HARRISON: Exactly. There is, or was something going on between those two. I could sense it.

CHARLES: (*Laughing.*) You seem bitter.

HARRISON: Well, I'll admit I'm not happy. I was really hoping to hear my name read.

CHARLES: Well, since we're being honest, so was I.

HARRISON: You want another?

CHARLES: No. I'm fine. So, what's it like being a model?

HARRISON: It had its perks. But that inheritance would have been nice. Hell, I'd settle for that watch. Do you really think it's hidden somewhere in this house?

CHARLES: Who knows?

HARRISON: We should look for it.

CHARLES: What's the point? If we did find it, we couldn't keep it. It belongs to Hunter. Everything belongs to Hunter. Did you see the look on Mary's face when the will was read? She looked pissed.

HARRISON: How could you tell?

CHARLES: She's not the friendliest, is she?

HARRISON: No, she's not. She's also broke. She's not the only one that googles. It seems her side of the family wasn't the best with finances. Her house is in foreclosure.

CHARLES: Oh, that's too bad. What about Ashley? She seemed to take it well.

HARRISON: I think she's just happy to be out of Galesburg. I couldn't find much about her. Her husband, on the other hand, was a different story. He's got a rap sheet about a mile long. He just served three years for check fraud.

CHARLES: Wow. It sounds like you did your research. What did you find out about me?

HARRISON: Not much. You passed the real estate exam and got your license. You've sold quite a few houses. You won a local sales competition. Nothing out of the ordinary.

CHARLES: I guess I'm pretty dull.

HARRISON: You don't know the meaning of dull until you've read Paul's page. He writes an accounting blog. I couldn't get past the first two paragraphs.

CHARLES: Well, he did say he loves math.

HARRISON: Apparently, so do a lot of other people. He has a ton of followers.

CHARLES: What about Hunter?

HUNTER enters.

HUNTER: Yeah, what about Hunter?

HARRISON: We were just saying that you were one lucky guy.

HUNTER: Thanks. I needed a refill. Want one?

CHARLES: Sure. Where did you put me?

HUNTER: At the end of the hall. Harrison, you are sleeping in the first room at the head of the stairs.

CHARLES: Did you find any spirits in the house?

HUNTER: Just this scotch and whiskey.

CHARLES: I think I'll check out my new digs. (*Exits.*)

HUNTER: Aren't you curious?

HARRISON: Not really. I'm sure the rooms all look pretty much the same. Dark, decrepit, and decaying.

HUNTER: The house does need some renovations, doesn't it?

HARRISON: Well, you can certainly afford it.

MR. CROSBY enters.

MR. CROSBY: What did I miss?

HUNTER: Not a thing.

MR. CROSBY: I wasn't the least bit hungry until Talbot mentioned food. What do you think is keeping her?

HARRISON: Maybe she's having trouble lighting her cauldron.

HUNTER: She's really pretty nice.

MR. CROSBY: I told you.

HUNTER: She probably won't like me interfering, but I'll go check on her.

HARRISON: Good luck. (*HUNTER exits.*) Pour yourself another one, Mr. Crosby. It looks like it's going to be a long night.

MR. CROSBY: (*Refilling his glass.*) Well, I'll say one thing for the old man, he knew his scotch.

HARRISON: I wish he knew as much about wills.

MARY and PAUL enter.

MARY: My room is ghastly.

PAUL: You guys won't believe mine. There's a leopard skin rug on the floor. I think it's real.

MR. CROSBY: Everything in this house is real.

MARY: Including the ghosts. This place is haunted. I know it. I know it just as I'm standing on this spot.

CHARLES enters.

PAUL: What do you know?

MARY: That something is going to happen tonight, something terrible. (*HARRISON laughs.*) Don't you dare laugh at me, Harrison Blythe. I can feel it. Aunt Eleanor is trying to warn me.

PAUL: What's she trying to warn you about?

MARY: Danger.

SFX: lightning flashes and thunder cracks. PAUL screams.

PAUL: Sorry. Are you a medium, Miss Roberts?

MARY: I always thought that maybe I was, and now I know it. Didn't you hear that Talbot say that a spirit was trying to warn me? That spirits were swirling all around me?

MR. CROSBY: You mustn't believe everything that Talbot says.

MARY: But I do. I felt it in my bones, the moment I entered this house. Something terrible is going to happen.

SFX: lightning flashes and thunder cracks. PAUL screams.

CHARLES: Are you going to scream every time there is thunder?

PAUL: I don't know.

HARRISON: (*To MARY.*) So, if nothing terrible happens tonight, will you be disappointed?

PAUL: I won't!

MARY: I hope I'm wrong. But I know I'm not.

HARRISON: (*Playing.*) Maybe you're right. Maybe there is something... something waiting just outside this door. (*Touching the door.*) I can feel it. The door is freezing. Something is there, waiting to pounce.

MR. CROSBY: Harrison...

MARY: I can sense it, too.

PAUL: Really?

HARRISON: (*Tapping on the door.*) Oh hideous spirit, we know you are there.

PAUL: Stop. Don't antagonize it.

HARRISON: Can you hear me? If you can hear me, tap three times.

Three distinct taps are heard at the door.

TALBOT: (*Offstage.*) I can hear you. (*PAUL and MARY scream. TALBOT enters.*) There is a man outside. He wants to see the master of the house.

MR. CROSBY: Who is he?

TALBOT: He is from Hillcrest, the asylum.

MR. CROSBY: What does he want?

TALBOT: I do not know.

HARRISON: Why don't you just show him in?

CHARLES: Well, technically, Hunter is now the man of the house. Where is he?

TALBOT: I believe he is investigating the wine cellar.

MR. CROSBY: Oh, I'm sure it's OK. Send him in.

TALBOT: As you wish. (*Exits.*)

CHARLES: I wonder what he wants.

HARRISON: Probably wants to take one of us back with him.

PAUL: Where is this place, Mr. Crosby?

MR. CROSBY: Hillcrest? It's about two miles past the ravine, about five miles outside the village.

TALBOT enters with RINEHART, who is carrying a straitjacket.

TALBOT: This is the man.

RINEHART: Are you the boss?

HARRISON: Not exactly.

MR. CROSBY: I represent the owner of the house. Who are you?

RINEHART: My name is Rinehart. I'm the head guard up at Hillcrest.
We're looking for a patient that got away this morning.

CHARLES: A patient?

MARY: You mean, you're looking for an escaped lunatic?

RINEHART: Well, yes.

PAUL: Oh, my god.

HARRISON: Well, why didn't you just come right out with it?

RINEHART: I didn't want to scare anybody.

PAUL: Too late.

MR. CROSBY: Is there any cause for alarm?

RINEHART: Yes.

PAUL: Yes?

MARY: Is this patient dangerous?

RINEHART: Dangerous? He's a killer.

PAUL: Oh, my God.

RINEHART: A homicidal maniac. Have you ever heard of The Calderhead Murders? Six people died that night, at his hands – or should I say his talons? He rips open the throats of his victims, with nails like claws.

MR. CROSBY: OK, I think we've heard enough.

RINEHART: He fancies himself to be some kind of bat or giant bird.

CHARLES: What makes you think he would be here?

PAUL: Yes, what makes you think that?

RINEHART: I didn't say he was here. We're asking at all the nearby houses. He might be anywhere. He likes to break into houses and hide. Then, he waits till everyone has gone to bed and prowls around...

MARY: He's escaped before?

RINEHART: Yes, he got away from us about a year ago. And... well, lucky I got there just in time.

HARRISON: What does he look like?

RINEHART: When he escaped, he had on a black stretch hat and a long cape-like coat. He's an old guy, with a bald head, sharp teeth, and finger nails like claws. (*Pointing at CHARLES.*) He's about your height and build. For some reason, I'm the only one up there that can handle him.

MARY: Well, it doesn't sound like you've been doing a very good job of it.

PAUL: Just exactly how do you control him?

RINEHART: With anything I can. A chair, a club, an electric prod. We usually keep him sedated. When he's not medicated, we have to keep him strapped down in this jacket.

CHARLES: That's terrible, and it seems so inhumane. Think of being strapped in that thing. It would make anyone violent.

MARY: Is he medicated now?

RINEHART: He was, but I'm sure it's worn off by now.

CHARLES: Poor old guy.

RINEHART: This poor old guy would just as soon tear you open, like a vulture ripping into its prey. Take my advice, if you see him, run like hell.

PAUL: I will.

MARY: Do you think...

RINEHART: Now, don't get too excited. It's not likely that he's around here. And I've got the rest of our men looking over the grounds of the estate, on both sides of the ravine.

PAUL: But suppose...

RINEHART: Don't get nervous. The chances that he could get into this house are very slim.

PAUL: How slim?

RINEHART: Well, there is a chance he may be prowling around, so just to be safe, none of you had better go out before morning. And be sure to lock all the doors and windows.

MARY: Oh, something terrible is going to happen. I just know it.

RINEHART: If we get him, I'll drop back in and let you know. I need to get out there and help the other men. Goodnight.

TALBOT escorts RINEHART out.

MR. CROSBY: Well, what do you think we should do?

PAUL: I don't know. But I'm not going outside.

CHARLES: We shouldn't say anything about this to Ashley or Hunter.
There's no point in scaring them.

HARRISON: Are you kidding? Both of them need to be told. If there is any danger, which there probably isn't, they ought to know. Where are they, anyway?

MARY: Ashley said she was going to freshen up. I'm not sure where Hunter went.

CHARLES: What do you think, Mr. Crosby?

MR. CROSBY: I don't believe that we are in any danger, so there probably is no use alarming them. What do you think?

PAUL: I think someone ought to make sure all the doors and windows are locked.

MARY: Yes. Yes.

MR. CROSBY: I meant about telling the others.

PAUL: Well, I don't know. Maybe they ought to be told. On the other hand, maybe they shouldn't.

CHARLES: You're a lot of help.

MR. CROSBY: Let's just keep it between us, OK?

HARRISON: You win. I won't say anything.

MR. CROSBY: You won't say anything, will you, Miss Roberts?

MARY: Of course not. Do you think I'm the type that can't keep a secret? Oh dear, oh dear. I just know we'll all be murdered in our beds.

ASHLEY enters.

ASHLEY: Oh, here you are. I got lost. Hunter says the food is ready. They're in the dining room.

MARY: Oh, dear, oh dear.

ASHLEY: Why Cousin Mary, what is wrong?

MARY: Nothing. Nothing. I wonder if that Talbot creature can make me a strong tea.

ASHLEY: I'm sure she can.

MARY: Come along. (*Exiting.*) I have something to tell you. There's a deranged, escaped lunatic prowling around the neighborhood. He might be in this very house.

MARY and ASHLEY exit. (*Begin Alternate Passage A.*)

MR. CROSBY: Now, I don't think there is any danger, but we should be prepared. Where are you going?

HARRISON: To get a little fresh air.

HARRISON reaches into his pocket and takes out a joint.

PAUL: Suppose you run into the madman?

HARRISON: I'm not sharing.

HARRISON exits.

MR. CROSBY: Maybe we should go down and check that all the windows are closed and the doors bolted.

HUNTER enters.

HUNTER: I thought you guys were hungry.

PAUL: I seem to have lost my appetite.

MR. CROSBY: We'll be right there. I just want to check on something.

CHARLES: I'll go with you.

CHARLES and MR. CROSBY exit.

HUNTER: Why are they acting so weird?

PAUL: I don't know.

HUNTER: I hope they don't hate me. Were they talking about me?

PAUL: No.

HUNTER: Where's Harrison?

PAUL: (*Miming smoking pot.*) Getting some air.

HUNTER: That sounds like a good idea.

HUNTER takes out a joint.

PAUL: Should you be doing that in here?

HUNTER: Why not? It's my house.

PAUL: Oh, yeah.

HUNTER: *(After an awkward silence.)* So, aren't you going to say anything?

PAUL: About what?

HUNTER: Why you never called me... or answered any of my emails.

PAUL: I'm sorry. It just got weird.

HUNTER: I thought we had a good time.

PAUL: We did, until I found out we were related. Then, it just seemed kinda...

HUNTER: Hot?

PAUL: Dirty. And not in a good way.

HUNTER: I asked my mom about you. The best we could tell is that we're fourth cousins, once removed. Practically strangers. Want some of this?

(End Alternate Passage A.)

PAUL: No. I need to keep my wits about me.

HUNTER: Are you seeing anyone?

PAUL: No. How about you?

HUNTER: I was living with a guy for a while, but it didn't work out. He was a lawyer and really into money. I didn't make enough to keep him interested.

PAUL: If only he had waited. I did try and keep track of you. When I heard your dad died, I thought about coming down.

HUNTER: I wish you had. That whole thing with him was a nightmare. When I finally came out, he was not happy. He tolerated me, but he was not happy. Mom took it well, but after she died, he became so unbearable that I had to move out. Even when he got sick, he didn't want me around. You know what the last thing he said to me was, on the day he died? That I was going to "Rot in hell."

PAUL: He didn't.

HUNTER: He did. He said "People like me were an abomination in the sight of God."

PAUL: People?

HUNTER: Yes, people.

PAUL: That makes me so mad. Why is it always the "religious" people that... I'm sorry.

HUNTER: You're sweet. And cute. Cuter than I remembered.

PAUL: Stop it.

HUNTER: You need to update the photo on your blog.

PAUL: Have you been stalking me?

HUNTER: Maybe.

PAUL: Good. This place sure is creepy.

HUNTER: You don't believe in all this ghost stuff, do you?

PAUL: Me? (*Lying.*) Of course not. Well, maybe a little. That Talbot woman is very strange. Everything about this place is strange. (*Looking around.*) Look at this stuff. A crystal ball, a Ouija board, Tarot cards. I think these are real bones. I know I won't sleep a wink tonight.

HUNTER: (*Approaching PAUL.*) Is that an invitation?

PAUL: Come on. What if one of them walks in here?

HUNTER: I don't care. They all seem OK.

PAUL: Harrison is more than OK. You think there's any chance he will take off his shirt?

HUNTER: Should I be jealous?

PAUL: I was only kidding. He's not my type.

HUNTER: He's everybody's type. I read somewhere that he was being replaced, that Pacchetto dropped his contract.

PAUL: Really?

HUNTER: Yeah, but don't say anything. I think they're going with a younger guy.

PAUL: That's too bad. Do you think he's gay?

HUNTER: I don't know. Let's find out.

HUNTER picks up the Ouija board.

PAUL: Oh, I hate those things.

HUNTER: Come on. What? Are you afraid?

PAUL: No, but they don't work. They're just stupid.

HUNTER places the Ouija board on the desk.

HUNTER: Then you have nothing to fear. Come on. Put your hand on the paddle. (*Reluctantly PAUL places his hands on the paddle and they both stare at the board.*) Ouija, is Harrison gay? (*They wait.*) Hey, it's moving.

PAUL: No, it's not! You're moving it.

HUNTER: I'm not. Look. *(Reading.)* N... O...

PAUL: N. O. No! He's straight. I knew it.

HUNTER: Wait, it's still moving. M...

PAUL: You swear, you're not pushing it?

HUNTER: I'm not. *(Reading.)* I... S... N.O.M.I.S.

PAUL: N.O.M.I.S. No Miss! It means no misses. No girls. He's gay!
I knew it.

HUNTER: There are two S's in misses. And it's stopped. No, it's just one word. Nomis.

PAUL: Nomis?

HUNTER: What does that mean?

PAUL: I think it's that Indian word they use in yoga.

HUNTER: No, that's Namaste. I have no idea what Nomis means.
Hey, wait! It's moving again. *(Reading.)* U.

PAUL: You!

HUNTER: *(Reading.)* R.

PAUL: Are! You are.... You are.... You are what?

HUNTER: *(Reading.)* N.

PAUL: In! You are in what? You are in luck? You are in danger! I'll bet it's a warning.

HUNTER: I don't know. But it's stopped again. U.R.N. Urn. Do you think it means that urn?

HUNTER gets up and crosses to the big urn by the desk.

PAUL: Why would it say that?

HUNTER: I don't know. It's just an urn.

PAUL: Maybe it has someone's ashes in it. Maybe it contains the remains of Simon West! *(HUNTER looks inside the urn and then sticks his hand in.)* Be careful.

HUNTER: It's an urn. It's not going to bite me. *(Pretending something has grabbed his hand.)* Ouch!

PAUL screams and HUNTER bursts out laughing.

PAUL: That's not funny.

HUNTER: Hey...

HUNTER pulls a gun out of the urn.

PAUL: *(Ducking.)* Watch it!

HUNTER: What do you think this is doing in there?

PAUL: I don't know, but put it back.

HUNTER: I wonder who it belongs to.

PAUL: I don't care. Just put it back before you shoot yourself, or me.

HUNTER: *(Laughing.)* God, you are so butch. Maybe it belongs to Talbot. Maybe she keeps it for protection.

HUNTER puts the gun back into the urn.

PAUL: What could hurt her?

MR. CROSBY enters.

MR. CROSBY: Hunter, do you mind if I talk to you for a moment.

HUNTER: Not at all.

MR. CROSBY: In private.

HUNTER: It's OK. You can say whatever you want in front of Paul.

PAUL: No, that's OK. I'll go grab something to eat. *(Exits.)*

HUNTER: What is it? You look so serious.

MR. CROSBY: I don't want to worry you, but there is something that you should know.

HUNTER: Can't it wait until tomorrow?

MR. CROSBY: No. Tomorrow may be too late. *(Going to the desk and looking for some paperwork.)* You know, Mr. West was very eccentric. Well, along with his papers, I've made a discovery. It has convinced me that it might be dangerous to leave you here alone.

MR. CROSBY hands HUNTER some papers.

HUNTER: *(Looking at the plans.)* These are blueprints, prints of the house. I don't see the big deal.

MR. CROSBY crosses upstage to examine the bookcases. HUNTER is engrossed in the plans and does not look up or see MR. CROSBY.

MR. CROSBY: Do you notice anything in particular?

HUNTER: No. Not really.

MR. CROSBY: Look closely.

HUNTER: I don't see anything. (*MR. CROSBY turns his back to the bookcases.*) They just look like ordinary plans. Wow. I didn't realize that the property was so big.

MR. CROSBY: Hunter, I'm worried.

A secret panel opens on the back wall bookcase. Neither of the men notice.

HUNTER: (*Referring to the plans.*) It looks like at some point, there was an addition to the house.

MR. CROSBY: Hunter, you are in danger, grave danger. And I think I know who is behind it.

Suddenly, A HAND comes through the panel. It wears a glove with long, silver, claw-like fingernails. The HAND grabs MR. CROSBY by the throat and pulls him back into the wall. The panel closes.

HUNTER: Mr. Crosby, it's been a long day. I don't want to have to think anymore tonight. Can we pick this up again tomorrow? (*Looking up and finding MR. CROSBY missing.*) Mr. Crosby? Mr. Crosby? (*Looks around the room for a second and begins to panic. He rushes to the door, opens it and finds TALBOT standing in the doorway.*) Oh, you scared me. Where did Mr. Crosby go?

TALBOT: I have not seen him.

HUNTER: You had to have seen him. He must have passed you in the hall.

TALBOT: I passed no one in the hall and I have not seen Mr. Crosby. Are you sure he was here?

HUNTER: I was just talking to him. He was here.

TALBOT: Perhaps he is in the dining room with the others.

HUNTER: (*Yelling.*) Paul, come here. Charlie! (*To TALBOT.*) Why are you looking at me like that? I haven't lost my mind. I'm not crazy.

ASHLEY and MARY enter.

MARY: What are you shouting about?

HUNTER: Was Mr. Crosby with you in the dining room?

ASHLEY: No, only Charles and Paul.

CHARLES and PAUL enter.

MARY: What is wrong? You look pale.

HUNTER: A few minutes ago, I was sitting there and Mr. Crosby was over there talking to me. Then suddenly, he vanished.

MARY: Vanished?

CHARLES: Mr. Crosby vanished?

HUNTER: Like he melted into thin air. Talbot was standing out there and said no one left the room.

TALBOT: No one left this room.

HUNTER: But you must have heard me talking to him.

TALBOT: I heard only you.

TALBOT exits.

MARY: Perhaps Simon West wasn't the only lunatic in our family.

HUNTER: What's that supposed to mean?

MARY: When a person begins to talk to himself and see people vanish right in front of him, it is curious.

CHARLES: Are you implying that Hunter is losing his mind?

MARY: They say it runs in our family.

HUNTER: You believe me, don't you?

CHARLES: Of course we do.

PAUL: Yes. Crosby was here when I left.

HUNTER: See?

MARY: That doesn't prove anything. He was here when I left, too.

HUNTER: Do you think I imagined Mr. Crosby disappearing in front of me? If it was my imagination, where is he?

(Begin Alternate Passage B.)

PAUL: Yes, where is Mr. Crosby?

MARY: Probably out with Harrison Blythe getting stoned.

ASHLEY: What?

MARY: I'm not an idiot. He reeks of marijuana. In fact, this whole room does.

ASHLEY: How come no one asked me?

MARY: Mr. West, it's been a long night and you are clearly upset and nervous. I didn't mean to imply that you were actually crazy, I was only trying to.... Oh, never mind. Come on, Ashley. Let's retire to our rooms and lock the doors. With a dozen lunatics in the house, it will be a mercy if we're not all murdered in our beds.

ASHLEY: But it's still early.

MARY: It's late.

ASHLEY: Can we at least stop by the dining room again? If I go to bed with an empty stomach, my mind wanders.

MARY: That would be a short trip.

MARY and ASHLEY exit. (End Alternate Passage B.)

CHARLES: Is there anything I can do?

HUNTER: Yes, you can find Mr. Crosby.

CHARLES: Where was he standing when he vanished?

HUNTER: There. Right where Paul is standing.

PAUL: *(Jumping off the spot.)* Oh!

HUNTER: Please try and help find him.

CHARLES: All right. Well, we know he's not in here. Let me investigate.

CHARLES exits.

HUNTER: You don't think I'm mad, do you?

PAUL: Of course not. But I'd be mad, too, if someone accused me of being crazy.

HUNTER: You're sweet.

PAUL: Maybe this isn't the right time, but we should talk.

HUNTER: OK.

PAUL: I only wanted to say that now that I'm here and you're here...

HUNTER: (*Cutting him off.*) I know. Me, too. Let's talk about it tomorrow.

PAUL: If we're still alive.

TALBOT: (*Entering.*) Has Mr. Crosby returned?

PAUL: No.

TALBOT: It got him. The demon in this house.

PAUL: What?

TALBOT: The gong foretold it.

SFX: huge flash of light followed by a loud crack of thunder.

PAUL: Ohh! Ghosts, spirits, and now demons. I'm locking myself in my bedroom. (*Rushing out.*) Goodnight.

TALBOT starts turning off the lamps and gathering up the dirty glasses.

TALBOT: Remember, you have got to open that letter.

HUNTER: Oh, yes.

TALBOT: (*Exiting.*) And I will prepare your room.

HUNTER goes to the table to retrieve the letter. He looks at the envelope for a moment and then turns off the last remaining lamp. This leaves him in the dark, with only the moonlight from the doors illuminating the room. Suddenly, HUNTER feels as if he is being watched. As he makes his way to the door, there is another SFX: flash of lightening and crash of thunder. As HUNTER exits, the clawed HAND appears above the back of the armchair. Blackout.

END OF ACT ONE

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