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SF PERUSALS

Out of Sight... Out of Murder

A Mystery Comedy

by Fred Carmichael

A Samuel French Acting Edition



New York Hollywood London Toronto

SAMUELFRENCH.COM

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Out Of Sight ... Out Of Murder
by Fred Carmichael

Premier Performance By The Valley Players,
Waitsfield, Vermont.

Staged by Curtis Wright

(in order of appearance)

Peter Knight ..... Huck Davies
Minna ..... Joann Flanagan
Lydia ..... Kimberly Cruz
Cogburn ..... Mitchell Kontoff
Kay Kelsey ..... Nancy Cohen
Fiona ..... Wendy Cohen
Addie ..... Robin Grinnel
Dick Stanton ..... Bill McMullin
Jordan Dillingham ..... Jake Brickman

SCENE
The living room of an old house in Vermont.

TIME

ACT ONE
A late summer afternoon. The present.

ACT TWO
scene 1
Later that day. Evening.

scene 2
A short time later.

Produced by Barbara Wright and Ronald Court
Setting Designed by Donald Hirsch

ACT ONE

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SET: *(The action of the play takes place in the living room of a very old mansion in Vermont. Not a typical Vermont house, the room looks more like the setting for a Victorian mystery. Up center a stairway leads to the upstairs of the house. There is a landing a few steps up and then the exit to the hallway. Above the stairs there is a passage leading to the off-stage library. To the right a hall leads off to the front door. A short wall right stage has built-in bookshelves, down right is a typing table with a typewriter on it with a half-typed sheet of paper in it. Just above this is a desk with a swivel chair to the right stage of it so the chair can be used at the desk or the typing table. The left wall jogs onstage a few feet and then there is the opening for the up center getaway and stairs. The left wall has an archway opening leading to the dining room and kitchen. Below this is a large fireplace with no fire laid, it being*

summer. Above the fireplace is a large armchair with a small table to its left. A small straight chair is in the down left corner. Center stage is a sofa with pillows and above it is a table. Onstage of the desk, which runs perpendicular to the audience, is a backless, padded bench. A bell cord to summon the servants is upstage of the dining room arch. The appearance of the room is of heavy molding, dark wood and over-hanging shadows.)

(Typing is heard. The curtain rises to show PETER KNIGHT at the typewriter. PETER is probably in his mid-thirties, a man who is very harried at the moment. He is dressed casually in shirt and slacks. The typewriter keys stick.)

PETER. What good did Physics do me? I should have taken a typing course. *(He undoes the stuck keys and resumes typing. The phone rings.) (into phone)* Yes ... Fine, Jason, just fine ... *(looking around at room)* Yes, I would say it is gloomy. I would say just that... How do I know if the Vermont air is pure? You think I've been out in it? You gave me the deadline ... Oh, no! ... Now look, Alan, I know an agent is supposed to push his client, but you're sending me into a sanitarium ... OK, what's the name? *(Writes it down.)* Phil Smith ... I'll have Minna meet the bus. What's the time?... Got it ... Minna? ... Oh, Alan, you'd be consumed with jealousy. She's about twenty, long blonde hair, and a figure an eight would be jealous of. *(MINNA comes in up center. She is a hefty and strong lady used to working on the farm, but she is fun to be with and has an intense manner about her. She wears a cotton house dress.)* You should see her in a bikini. Good morning, Minna.

MINNA. Ayah, hope so.

PETER. *(into phone)* Yes .. *(glances at MINNA)* Oh, about 36 - 24 - 35. *(to MINNA)* Those are my lottery numbers.

MINNA. Ayah.

PETER. *(into phone)* Yes, Alan, I'll make your deadline if your Phil Smith can take decent dictation. Now let me get to work. *(hangs up)*

MINNA. *(goes to left of desk)* You spend a lot of time on the telephone.

PETER. That was my agent. He'll charge it to me and then I'll make it deductible so Uncle Sam pays for it. What can I do for you, Minna?

MINNA. Question is what I can do for you. You pay me.

PETER. The real estate agent pays you.

MINNA. And you pay the rent. Same thing.

PETER. I don't think I'm in need, Minna. Possibly buckets if the roof leaks. There is a storm coming on.

MINNA. Roof's sound as a tractor seat.

PETER. That's good?

MINNA. Ayah. *(Goes to table above sofa and picks up magazines and straightens the pile.)* Never got no complaints about leaks. Other things though. Mice, flies, rottin' boards and, of course, ghosts.

PETER. *(goes to MINNA)* Mice and flies I can believe but not ghosts.

MINNA. It's the wind whistlin' through the upstairs hall. That's what it is.

PETER. I thought it might be old Norman Napier.

MINNA. *(crosses above desk to typing table)* Lands sakes, he's passed over. I don't hold with people comin' back. Once you've left it's one way, not round trip.

PETER. My sentiments exactly.

MINNA. *(Pointing to paper in typewriter.)* What you're typin', that goin, to be a book or what?

PETER. *(goes to right of sofa)* I hope a book and not a "what".

MINNA. Will it be on the TV?

PETER. *(sits on sofa)* One can always hope.

MINNA. *(goes to right of desk)* I like TV. Saves time. Instead of readin' "She says", you can just watch her sayin' it.

PETER. The redeeming grace is no commercials.

MINNA. *(sits on the bench)* Ayah. Pearly likes the ones for beer. Reminds him to open a can.

PETER. How is your husband doing?

MINNA. Damned fool. Spends all his time fixin' everyone else's house and pays no attention to ours. I been hintin' that them cellar stairs was rottin' away. Why, I haven't used the third from the top since last time the sap was runnin'.

PETER. And you didn't tell him?

MINNA. Lands, I wouldn't tell him a thing. He'll be outta the cast come Tuesday. He probably would have tended to you better'n me.

PETER. You've been a great help, Minna.

MINNA. *(crosses to him)* Folks come up here and rent this place, they don't know nothin' about it. Got to tell 'em all the little odd things about it, y'know. Where to check the hot-water tank, where the fuse box is, how to jiggle the handle on the toilet upstairs after you flush.

PETER. I'm just glad it flushes. When my agent got this place I had visions of an outdoor john and kerosene lamps.

MINNA. *(goes to desk looking toward typewriter)* Why'd he get this for you anyways? Bad luck for authors, this is.

PETER. Because of Norman Napier?

MINNA. Ayah.

PETER. *(crosses to her)* Maybe he's the lucky one. He doesn't have to worry about deadlines any more.

MINNA. Don't have to worry about nothin' no more. *(points to typewriter table)* Right there was where I found him.

PETER. At his typewriter. How appropriate.

MINNA. Nice to go while you're at work, I reckon. I'll just keel over into my johnny-cake.

PETER. *(crosses to fireplace)* If Napier hadn't died here I wouldn't be here. Did you ever think of that?

MINNA. Can't say I did.

PETER. An author dies here of mysterious circumstances -

MINNA. *(moves in center)* Nothin' mysterious. He just died.

PETER. But why?

MINNA. Heart stopped pumpin'.

PETER. Exactly, but they couldn't find a cause. He just died. It got a lot of publicity for him when he didn't need it. He was right at the top of his popularity.

MINNA. You at the top?

PETER. *(sits in chair left)* Minna, you always ask the wrong things.

MINNA. Believe in speakin' my mind.

PETER. I was at the top several years ago but now I need a good mystery so what better place to write it than here?

MINNA. *(sits on the sofa)* If your heart don't stop.

PETER. It's all my agent's idea. "Write a good murder mystery in that mausoleum where Napier died," he said. "Great publicity." He even gave me a title. "Death of an Author".

MINNA. Kinda catchy.

PETER. It's working. Did you see this week's *Newsweek?*

MINNA. Must have missed that.

PETER. *(gets it from table above sofa)* But I still can't get a handle on it. *(looks for his article)* I've started it though. Have a collection of characters coming in here and - *(finds the article and shows it to her over the back of the sofa)* Here it is.

MINNA. Why, that's you, ain't it?

PETER. Yes.

MINNA. You look real intelligent there.

PETER. *(puts magazine back and goes down by left of sofa)* I wish I was there. That's taken in Southampton.

MINNA. That's in England.

PETER. This one's on Long Island. *(sits on sofa)* I have an ultra-modern house there looking right out over the ocean.

MINNA. And you left it?

PETER. I rented it. Needed the money. Royalties are not what they used to be and the place is hocked up to its skylight.

MINNA. Maybe you should think of gettin' a real job.

PETER. This is a real job.

MINNA. I mean like work, somethin' by the hour.

PETER. But I'm a writer.

MINNA. Then you should be writin' instead of talkin'.

PETER. I'm too scared to write.

MINNA. What you scared of?

PETER. Well, to tell the truth, I don't know where I'm headed. I've gotten as far as bringing some characters in but I'm not quite sure where the mystery is going.

MINNA. This is a perfect place for a murder all right.

PETER. *(paces over to desk)* But it is hardly a typical Vermont house. This belongs to Edgar Allen Poe.

MINNA. Not Poe. Pocock.

PETER. What?

MINNA. Abner Pocock had this place built back in the last century. *(PETER sits on the bench.)* He wanted a showplace when he spent the summers here. T'ain't another house like it in the

whole county. Cost a bundle, too. *(goes to PETER)* Now-a-days you can't even afford to heat it. That's why no one rents it in the winters. Not even skiiers and, Lord knows, they'll rent anything. The Cutlers rented their little two bedroom Cape and you know how many skiiers crammed in there?

PETER. More than four?

MINNA. Twenty-three. They was sleepin' everywhere. Wouldn't be surprised if they find one in the freezer. *(goes up center)* Well, I gotta make my legs start movin'. You want anythin' down to the store?

PETER. *(goes to her)* You've kept me well supplied, Minna. There is one thing, though.

MINNA. Ayah.

PETER. Could you meet the morning bus from the city?

MINNA. The ten twenty-five?

PETER. And pick up a Phil Smith. He's going to be my secretary, take dictation and all that. I'm sure you'll recognize him. He's bound to be a short, plump man with owl spectacles. No, that's mean. He's probably a very nice-looking out of work actor.

MINNA. And he's bound to be the only one gettin' off the bus.

PETER. That's true enough.

MINNA. *(starts out)* I'll stop in later with the paper.

PETER. I'm sure the Burlington Free Press is fine, but could you bring the New York Times this time?

MINNA. Everyone to his own taste as the old lady said when she kissed the cow.

PETER. *(smiles)* Thanks, Minna.

MINNA. And don't forget to jiggle the upstairs toilet. *(She goes off up right.)*

PETER. *(as he sees her out)* That is uppermost in my mind. *(He*

comes back, sits at typewriter and thinks a moment. reads over what he has written) "... as the thunder echoes throughout the mountains." *(thunder sound in distance)* Oh, that's all I need. *(reads more)* "It was as if the old house was preparing for murder. But at that moment all was calm and tranquil. The countryside was growing darker." No. *(speaks as he types)* "... was growing dimmer as if fortelling the events of the grusome evening ahead. Oblivious of the storm's warning, Lydia came to the top of the stairs."*(LYDIA appears on the landing. She is an attractive woman in her forties, dressed and groomed beautifully. She is sophisticated, brittle, and caustic but with a good sense of humor. PETER doesn't see her.)* "She is an exquisite creature.

LYDIA. That's obvious.

PETER. "Lydia is probably forty-two years old."

LYDIA. Why am I always over forty?

PETER. "But she carries it well."

LYDIA. Make-up does wonders.

PETER. "Only a close inspection would reveal her true age and many men have had the advantage of that close inspection." *(looks up)* I like that.

LYDIA. So do I.

PETER. *(resumes typing)* "As usual, she is dressed with impeccable taste."

LYDIA. That's a relief.

PETER. "A green scarf is wound round her throat."

LYDIA. Blue. Couldn't I have blue?

PETER. *(rereads)* "a green scarf ..."

LYDIA. Oh, hell. *(exits off landing)*

PETER. *(thinks to himself)* That could be used in a murder, of course. Scarves are always handy. A quick twist and it's all over.

LYDIA. *(comes back onto landing tying a green scarf around her*

neck) I hope you're satisfied. Green.

PETER. *(types)* "She comes downstairs." *(She does.)* "There is an ominous roll of thunder." *(Thunder rumbles. LYDIA shivers.)* "It sends a shiver through her."

LYDIA. Thunder makes me nervous.

PETER. "She paces the room nervously."

LYDIA. *(She paces to fireplace and back below sofa.)* I'm going to get murdered. I know it. I always do.

PETER. "She sits on the sofa trying to calm her nerves." *(She does.)* "She picks up a magazine."

LYDIA. *(gets a copy of THE READER'S DIGEST from table above sofa)* The Readers Digest? Why can't I ever read anything uncondensed?

PETER. "There is another clap of thunder." *(thunder)* "Lydia rises in alarm." *(She does.)*

LYDIA. You don't have to write that. I'd do it anyway.

PETER. "She hears footsteps coming from the kitchen into the dining room." *(sound of footsteps off left)* "Every nerve in her body is alert and tingling."

LYDIA. Don't murder me yet. I just got here.

PETER. "The footsteps come closer and closer and ..."

(Lights go out. BLACKOUT. Sound of rain can be heard intermittently from now on, but it is mainly audible the few times the front door is opened. LIGHTNING FLASH.)

PETER. Oh, hell! This wouldn't happen in Southampton. I mustn't panic. The flashlight's here in the desk somewhere. Somewhere, but where? Here it is. *(PETER lights the flashlight he has gotten from desk drawer.)* There we are. I wonder if it's this house or the whole town.

LYDIA. *(from the darkness)* Just this house, darling.

PETER. Who said that?

LYDIA. I did.

PETER. *(flashlight on her face)* Who are - how did you get in here? What's going on?

LYDIA. The lightning blew something-or-other.

PETER. But who are you?

LYDIA. Lydia.

PETER. Lydia?

LYDIA. *(moves to him)* Don't you recognize me? The green scarf and all that? I did so want to keep the blue.

PETER. You mean you're Lydia - my Lydia?

LYDIA. *(sits on the bench leaning towards him)* All yours, darling.

PETER. The lightning. I've been struck by lightning, that's it. Call an ambulance, the rescue squad. *(picks up phone on desk)* They must have a rescue squad.

LYDIA. The phone's out. It always is.

PETER. *(trying to get a dial tone)* You're right. *(hangs up)* Now suppose you tell me.what this is all about?

LYDIA. Suppose you tell me. You're the author.

PETER. I am hallucinating, but I don't take drugs, I don't even take aspirin that's extra-strength. *(lights flicker)*

LYDIA. Goody. The light's are coming back.

PETER. I want to know what you are doing here. *(lights come on and stay on)*

LYDIA. There we are. Now you can put that beastly torch out, there's a good boy. I must say you're better looking than most I've worked for. A trifle sallow, perhaps, but some Vermont sunshine will take care of that.

PETER. *(flashlight in desk drawer)* Let's start all over. Who are you?

LYDIA. Lydia Whatever-you-decided. Dillingham, wasn't it? But then you hadn't really made up your mind.

PETER. But Lydia Dillingham is - she isn't real - she's in there. *(points to typewriter)*

LYDIA. No, dear, up there in your head. *(rises and turns a circle for him to admire her)* Do I look like you expected? You didn't describe every last detail yet. I hope you like the hair. Do you?

PETER. It's very fetching.

LYDIA. Thank you. Now tell me, am I going to get murdered? I don't particularly want to be but I usually am.

PETER. I've fallen asleep. I am dreaming and that's why you're here.

LYDIA. *(sits on sofa and relaxes back)* That's not quite it. I am Lydia, though, do you believe that for starters?

PETER. I'll have to. You look like her, you sound like her, but -

LYDIA. Good. You created me and here I am. Aren't you happy to see me?

PETER. *(crosses center)* I never expected to meet you - in the flesh if that's what you're in.

LYDIA. It's all been a lucky happenstance. You were thinking and writing and the lightning came exactly at the right moment and zingo, here I am. It doesn't happen very often.

PETER. But it has happened before?

LYDIA. Occasionally when all the elements meet at the right moment. We're always around, you know, the people you think up. We're in your head running about doing your bidding. It's probably my running around in high

heels that gives you headaches.

PETER. I suppose you think that's amusing?

LYDIA. You did give me a sense of humor.

PETER. *(crosses to fireplace)* Well, it's warped.

LYDIA. Then it's your fault.

PETER. How long are you going to be around?

LYDIA. As long as you need us to write your story.

PETER. *(turns to her)* You said "us". There are others here?

LYDIA. Of course, all your characters.

PETER. I'm like Pirandello. I've got six characters in search of me.

LYDIA. Pirandello's a bore. I worked for him once.

PETER. You mean like this?

LYDIA. No, darling. He didn't bring us to life. We stayed in his head. Gloomy place. *(rises and goes to PETER)* Peter - may I call you Peter since we know each other so well?

PETER. Why not?

LYDIA. Peter, might I have a drink?

PETER. You can drink? You're not just ectoplasm or something?

LYDIA. When we get released we can do everything. *(leans closer to him)* Everything.

PETER. I'll get that drink. *(starts to go out dining room arch)*

LYDIA. No, you don't have to. Pull the bell cord. There. *(points to bell cord above dining room arch)*

PETER. *(pulls the cord)* I don't believe it. You're telling me the butler will come?

LYDIA. *(moves away center)* It's his duty.

PETER. What's his name? I changed it last night. It was - Cogburn.

LYDIA. He's very good at butlers, been playing them for centuries.

COGBURN. *(Enters from dining room. He is older than the others and is, in every sense, the typical butler, proper, quiet, unemotional. He knows his job to perfection and relishes it. He is dressed in a butler's outfit. He comes to behind PETER'S back.)* You rang, sir?

PETER. *(Startled, he turns.)* Oh, my God!

COGBURN. No, sir. I'm Cogburn.

LYDIA. I rang. Cogburn, could you get me a nice Scotch and water? I don't suppose there is any Chivas Regal out there?

PETER. No.

COGBURN. Certainly, Madame. For you, sir?

PETER. *(at wit's end)* Why the hell not?

COGBURN. Very good, sir. *(exits)*

LYDIA. He's a dear.

PETER. How did the Chivas Regal get here?

LYDIA. Cogburn always brings the best. Evidently you hadn't written what kind of a liquor supply was here.

PETER. I hope I did the same with the food.

LYDIA. *(crosses to him)* Food! Oh, Peter, to eat again. How marvelous.

PETER. How long since you've had a meal?

LYDIA. *(sits on right end of sofa)* Let's see now. There was that dreadful Mickey Spillane thing. I didn't eat there, of course. I spent most of my time in bed. Then there was - do you know, Peter, I can't remember when I ate my last meal.

PETER. *(sits next to her)* That's quite a diet.

LYDIA. *(leans back on sofa)* A good figure is one of my specialties.

PETER. Then, for now, you are real? You and Cogburn are solid flesh?

LYDIA. Very solid, Peter, and moulded just right.

PETER. When the Author's Guild hears about this -

LYDIA. No fair, Peter, You can't exploit us so don't go calling 60 MINUTES.

PETER. Who has time? I am on a deadline to finish my book.

LYDIA. That's why we're here. We're only real to you.

PETER. Who would believe this?

LYDIA. If you try to tell anyone, you'll only end up in a sanitarium. It's happened before.

COGBURN. *(enters with two highballs on a tray; goes above sofa to LYDIA)* I hope these will be satisfactory, sir.

PETER. I imagine they will be.

LYDIA. *(takes her drink)* Cogburn.

COGBURN. Yes, Madame.

LYDIA. You don't have to be formal. We're set free. This dear author has released us.

COGBURN. *(with his usual calm)* I know. I'm very excited.

PETER. You don't seem it.

COGBURN. *(goes above sofa to give PETER his drink)* Butlers are butlers. Our excitement is within.

LYDIA. Come on, relax. Make yourself a drink and join us.

COGBURN. *(shocked)* Oh, Madame.

LYDIA. We're all in the same boat. Sit down, have a smoke.

COGBURN. I couldn't sit in here. *(goes to dining room and turns)* But if I might, I'll take a small libation in the pantry.

PETER. Enjoy yourself, Cogburn.

COGBURN. Thank you, sir. *(exits)*

LYDIA. He'll loosen up when he gets used to being free.

PETER. Does he have to stay in the character I invented for him?

LYDIA. We all have our specialties. There are all sorts of butlers, proper ones, lower class ones, trainees, even those who rob their employers blind. Cogburn is one of the top sophisticates, but he really excells in murder mysteries. He used to work so much he was hardly ever at home.

PETER. Where is home?

LYDIA. Where we come from.

PETER. Which is where?

LYDIA. Shh! There are some things it's unwise to talk about. *(doorbell rings)*

PETER. *(rises)*Someone's here. How can I explain you?

LYDIA. You don't have to. They won't be able to see us.

PETER. But your drink? What about that? Will it just float around in the air?

LYDIA. I won't touch my glass in the presence of company.

PETER. And I'll just ignore you?

LYDIA. That's right, but have you thought it might be one of us at the door?

PETER. *(crosses up to right of arch)* Good Lord, which one?

COGBURN. *(enters)* There is a visitor, sir. Shall I answer it?

PETER. I guess so.

COGBURN. Very well, sir. *(turns back before leaving)* I do hope it isn't an unexpected guest, sir. They always cause such mayhem. *(exits off right)*

LYDIA. *(rises)* I think I'll go up and finish unpacking. I know who that must be. *(goes up the stairs)*

PETER. I can't entertain anyone else. I have to work.

LYDIA. *(on landing with her drink)* But, Peter, isn't it time for the beautiful ingenue to enter all rain soaked and fragile looking?

PETER. You must mean Kay? I called her Kay.

LYDIA. That's the one. Those ingenues are always so sweet and boring.

PETER. *(goes below stairs)* She might be very nice.

LYDIA. She'll come in saying - *(imitating ingenue)* "Oh, I'm so wet. I must look a fright." *(stops imitating)* Just you wait and see. *(exits upstairs)*

COGBURN. *(comes in up center leaving room for the guest below him)* Right this way, Miss.

(KAY enters She is the typical ingenue, sweet, ingenuous, and trusting. She is lovely looking and wears a raincoat and carries a small suitcase.)

Oh, I'm so wet. I must look a fright.

COGBURN. Allow me to take your coat, Miss.

KAY. Thank you. *(COGBURN takes her coat and goes off up right.)*

PETER. How do you do. I'm Peter Knight.

KAY. I know. I wish you hadn't brought me here in the rain. It makes such a bad impression.

PETER. I didn't mean to bring you here at all.

KAY. Well, that's a nice greeting, I must say. I go to all this trouble, not that I had any choice in the matter, of course, and then you're not glad to see me.

PETER. Of course I'm glad. It's just that you're so unexpected.

KAY. *(laughs and goes by the desk)* No, I'm not the unexpected guest. I never am. I'm the ingenue. Everyone falls in love with me and some even try to kill me, but I am never the unexpected guest.

PETER. *(goes to her)* But you don't get killed, do you?

KAY. *(moves below typewriter and looks at paper in it)* Silly man. What kind of mystery would it make if the ingenue got killed just as the hero was about to save her? You know better than that.

COGBURN. *(reappears U C)* May I get you a drink, Miss?

KAY. *(warning him)* Cogburn -

COGBURN. Sorry, Miss. *(comes down a few steps)* How about a cup of nice hot tea?

KAY. *(goes below PETER to COGBURN)* Perfect. Thank you. You're very sweet.

COGBURN. *(goes out dining room)* Thank you, Miss.

KAY. I always find everyone very sweet. Isn't that sickening?

PETER. I rather like it.

KAY. It palls on one after awhile. *(goes below sofa)* Shall we sit down and wait?

PETER. For the tea, you mean?

KAY. For the tea and midnight.

PETER. *(moves into sofa R)* What happens at midnight?

KAY. *(sits on L side of sofa)* Really, Peter, you ought to know. It's your story. I sometimes wish things would happen at eleven-forty or even at one o'clock but no. You authors always stick to midnight like glue.

PETER. Readers expect it.

KAY. I suppose they do. Well, now, aren't you surprised to see us?

PETER. That is an understatement.

KAY. It's going to be such fun being free for a bit. Oh, we'll stick to your story. We have to, but we can enjoy ourselves a bit.

PETER. I do hope you have a good time.

KAY. My only wish is that I can have a nice hot bath with loads of fragrant bubbles in it.

PETER. I'll try to arrange it.

KAY. There is a tub and hot water, isn't there? This place looks rather like the House of Usher.

PETER. It has all the modern conveniences.

KAY. May I ask a rather impertinent question?

PETER. Be my guest.

KAY. Why did you have to make your story happen here? There are lots of other nicer places. The Riviera, for instance. I always have a good time there. The sun, the gambling -

PETER. The topless beaches.

KAY. Not for me. I'm the ingenue.

PETER. Wishful thinking.

KAY. You are nice, Peter.

PETER. Thank you.

KAY. Now tell me. Why here?

PETER. It's all due to publicity. Norman Napier died here.

KAY. I never liked him. I worked in his head once for that thing about the corpse - yes, THE CORPSE WITH ONE SHOE. He was much too graphic.

PETER. Napier died here under rather peculiar circumstances.

KAY. *(laughs)* You authors love that, don't you?

PETER. What?

KAY. That phrase "under peculiar circumstances". It explains a great deal and nothing at the same time.

PETER. You're clever for an ingenue.

KAY. Why does everyone think we have to be so dumb?

PETER. Anyway, my agent thought it would be good to do a murder mystery set right here in the old house where Napier died. I'm supposed to use all the stock characters of the twenties but give them a modern twist.

KAY. It might make a TV movie but, as a book - well, I doubt it will even be a Book of the Month Club alternate.

COGBURN. *(enters from dining room with cup of tea, sugar bowl, and spoon on a tray)* I believe you take your tea with one sugar?

KAY. Good for you, Cogburn. *(He holds tray while she puts in one spoonful of sugar.)* You remembered.

COGBURN. Yes, Miss.

KAY. Whenever we work together he gives me my one sugar. If the author specifies something else, of course, I

have to follow it. *(to COGBURN)* Remember that dreadful time I had that movie script to do?

COGBURN. THE BURNT CAMELIA? Oh, yes, Miss.

KAY. The author made me take four sugars and cream.

COGBURN. And the cream was poisoned.

KAY. I had that stomach pump scene in the hospital. There aren't any hospitals in this, are there?

PETER. Not so far.

KAY. Thank you, Cogburn. Isn't it fun being free for once?

COGBURN. Yes, Miss. *(as he exits)* Perhaps after dinner, I'll relax and have a good laugh.

KAY. He's a dear. Always right there when you need him.

PETER. He could have inspired Wodehouse to write Jeeves.

KAY. He did. *(sips tea)* This is good. There, you see what I mean about Cogburn. This wasn't made with a flow-through tea bag. It's genuine orange pekoe with a touch of camomile.

PETER. I'm glad I thought him up.

KAY. I suppose it's all for the best you have the mystery set here. If it wasn't, we wouldn't have been set free. There was a bolt of lightning, I assume?

PETER. Rather a big one.

KAY. That always does it. If the story takes place where it's written and there's a good shot of lightning, we're in. Or rather out.

PETER. Out of where?

KAY. Out of - you know, that's strange. *(rises and puts her*

cup on table above sofa) I was about to tell you, but now it's all gotten fuzzy. I live in a nice place, I know that, and I report to a large room and wait to be called along with hundreds of others.

PETER. Other characters?

KAY. *(moves to R of sofa)* Every conceivable kind of person from mad rapists to happy philanthropists. When an author dreams us up in his mind, we go off till the story's finished. That's all I can remember.

PETER. *(rises and goes to her)* How long have you been there?

KAY. *(goes below him to the fireplace)* Oh, Peter, let's not get into time. It's all so relative.

PETER. Silly question, I guess.

KAY. *(turns)* Tell me about yourself. Are you happy?

PETER. *(crosses to her)* I guess so. I never stop to think about it unless I'm unhappy.

KAY. Are you married?

PETER. No. You?

KAY. *(goes to her tea on the table and sips)* I don't remember having marriages back there. But I do know when I work I'm always engaged. Sometimes my fiance is the murdered but then there's always some other nice young man around to save me, especially if I'm an heiress. That's always messy because everyone wants to marry me for my money.

PETER. I was thinking of making you an heiress in this.

KAY. You're forgiven. *(goes to him)* You're a very nice author, Peter. We don't get to talk to many of them but we do know what goes on in their heads. If I were a real per-

son, I'd want to be engaged to someone just like you.

PETER. It would be nice to dream up your own girl and have her a real person.

KAY. Would she be like me?

PETER. I guess she would. I made you up.

KAY. Thank you for that. I wish I could stay.

PETER. So do I.

KAY. *(sits in chair L.)* But after midnight things will start popping and who knows what will happen.

PETER. Why do you keep harping on midnight?

KAY. The will. You planned to have it read at midnight.

PETER. *(crosses R.)* It was just an idea.

KAY. That's all we need. You planned it so we have to do it. Rather hackneyed, isn't it?

PETER. This is an old-time plot with new twists so there is a will read at midnight. *(goes above bench)* But we don't have to if you don't want to.

KAY. But we do, Peter. It's - well, it's ordained I guess you'd say. Who else will be here for the reading?

PETER. God knows. This has gotten out of hand. Maybe I should go upstairs and check the rooms to see who's here.

(FIONA BABCOCK comes onto the landing. She is the character lady and fits the part exactly. She is dressed severly with her hair tied back in a bun. She is well into her fifties or sixties and knows everyone else is wrong. She carries a knitting bag.)

FIONA. I am here, Mr. Knight and I am very distraught. *(marches down the stairs)*

PETER. *(shocked at another one appearing)* You're distraught? I'm hysterical.

KAY. *(whispers to him)* The old character lady.

PETER. I'm sorry, Miss - Mrs?

FIONA. Miss Fiona Babcock. You ought to know. You thought me up. *(comes to the R. of sofa)* But you didn't take enough time to think up a decent room for me. It's too bright. That wallpaper, roses everywhere. And the bed is lumpy and, Heaven forbid, there is a connecting bath to the next room and the water runs unless you jiggle the toilet handle.

PETER. Perhaps I could rethink your room.

FIONA. It's too late for that. We're free now and we're stuck with our accommodations. Hello, Kay.

KAY. I didn't know you were on call for this story.

FIONA. That author seems to have dug up all the old characters so here I am complete with knitting. *(holds up her knitting bag)* And, as usual, I am not content. You, I suppose are deliriously ecstatic?

KAY. I am rather.

FIONA. I've never worked with you when you weren't. Now, Mr. Knight, what shall we do?

PETER. What can we do?

FIONA. Nothing, that's what. *(crosses below sofa)* Nothing can ever be done. I have been upset for more stories than you'll ever write. *(sits on sofa)* That Christie woman, Agatha, she always uses me and never lets me get what I want, a little comfortable corner to call my own. On top of that, she usually murders me by the fourth chapter.

PETER. I'll do whatever -

FIONA. And another thing.

PETER. Yes.

FIONA. Can you manage to control that hysterical maid up there?

PETER. What maid?

FIONA. That incompetent idiot trying to unpack my things.

KAY. *(rises laughing)* It can't be, but it must be. Is it Addie?

FIONA. Naturally. That child haunts me.

PETER. Who is Addie?

FIONA. You named her. You brought her here.

PETER. *(crosses above sofa to R.)* I remember thinking there should be the usual maid but I hadn't really decided what kind.

FIONA. Oh, yes, you had, Mr. Knight. You authors have some stupid child rushing about all the time. Sometimes for humor, sometimes just to have another person to murder off. But they're always opposed to everything I stand for. Always. I'm sure she is unmarried and pregnant.

PETER. I wouldn't know. I -

FIONA. Then the subconscious knows. You people are preoccupied with sex. I believe that -

KAY. *(crosses down L.)* Please, Fiona, don't get started on one of your diatribes on purity. We all know how you feel. You've said it often enough. *(sits on chair down L.)*

FIONA. It bears repeating. As an author, Mr. Knight, perhaps you will tell me why you always have sexy young things prancing through your pages?

PETER. Well, I guess it's -

FIONA. Yes.

PETER. It's just that it sells well. We do have to appeal to the public.

FIONA. Money. That's all you people ever think of.

PETER. I suppose you don't need it in your - should I call it a profession?

FIONA. Money is of no importance to me.

PETER. If you had to go out and earn your own living it would be. You get everything handed to you on a silver platter. Why should you care what sells and what doesn't? I think you are very selfish. *(sits on the bench)*

FIONA. Well!

KAY. *(rises and goes to PETER)* Don't blame her too much, Peter.That's the way she is. That's why she's on this assignment.

FIONA. I don't mind saying I wish I were back with Louisa May Alcott. She never treated me this way.

PETER. You knew Louisa May Alcott?

FIONA. We never met, of course, but I was in her head. She gave me some pleasant things to say and a few laughs. I had a warm side. Lately, I'm all shriveled up into a typical spinster. Sometime, perhaps, they will call me down for a friendly mother.

KAY. *(egging her on)* Married or unmarried?

FIONA. *(rises)* It's no use talking to you. *(crosses to chair L.)* I shall sit over here with my knitting and think good thoughts. If I can.

PETER. *(rises)* I do apoligize if I've brought you down here for nothing.

FIONA. I suppose it isn't your fault entirely. You have to have the character lady in these stories and she's always the same.

KAY. *(crosses to her suitcase by the stairs)* I think I'll go upstairs and unpack.

FIONA. You're lucky if Addie hasn't beaten you to it.

KAY. I can handle her. I'll try a little kindness.

FIONA. That's a dig at me, I suppose. *(She has opened her knitting and brings out a partly completed piece of work. It is a horrendous mix of colors and has no definite shape and many partly completed armholes.)* Oh, no! Look at this. What is it? Is this your idea of a joke, young man?

PETER. *(goes to her)* I had nothing to do with that.

FIONA. Someone wasn't thinking nice thoughts when this was put into my bag. Knit. I always have to knit. *(looks at garment)* I suppose this is a sweater for an octopus.

KAY. You can always dye it grey when it's finished.

FIONA. *(starts knitting)* I'll be murdered long before that.

KAY. Perhaps not. We're free now and -

FIONA. Free or not, we're here to be murdered and we will be murdered. Mark my words.

PETER. I hadn't really planned the murders.

FIONA. You brought us here and murder was in your mind. So murder it will be.

PETER. *(to KAY)* Is that what must happen?

KAY. I'm not sure. Now that we're free, perhaps we can change things. Don't worry about it, Peter. We'll just pretend each moment as it comes. *(goes upstairs)* I'll try to soothe Addie down. *(from landing)* Oh, dear. She must be pregnant. She always is. *(exits)*

PETER. *(At a loss for a moment, he finally goes to FIONA.)* Miss Babcock - may I call you Fiona?

FIONA. You can do what you like. You're not trapped into a character like we are.

PETER. Fiona, I -

FIONA. Where did you ever dream up that name? It's preposterous. Fiona. Sounds like a rare tropical disease.

PETER. If I ever get back to writing again, I can change it.

FIONA. *(starting to melt towards him)* Would you? Would you really?

PETER. *(sits in chair down L)* What name would you like?

FIONA. Well, you won't laugh if I tell you?

PETER. No. Cross my heart and hope to - well, cross my heart.

FIONA. I always wanted to be named Glinda.

PETER. Glinda?

FIONA. I worked on THE WIZARD OF OZ.

PETER. You weren't -

FIONA. I was the Wicked Witch of the West for awhile but I got scratched with the rewrites. I wasn't mean enough.

PETER. You mean when I rewrite, if I make a big enough character change, another of you comes down and takes over?

FIONA. Precisely.

PETER. It's like an actor being replaced out of town.

FIONA. It's very humiliating going back up there knowing you've failed.

PETER. But it's not your fault. Sometimes we authors realize we've made a character too much one way or another and so we change it. You can't be blamed for that.

FIONA. That's a very nice thing to say. You're not as ter-

rible as I thought you were. Do you suppose I might have a cup of tea?

PETER. *(pulls bell rope)* What's mine is yours.

FIONA. I think I'm mellowing a bit. Do you suppose it's because I'm free?

PETER. Perhaps. *(goes to sofa L)* How free are you exactly? I mean, can you just leave here if you want and go some place else?

FIONA. *(worried)* Oh, I don't think so. What would I use for money? Of course, you might have made me an heiress and I'll find huge wads of it in my suitcase. No, Addie would have found it and stolen it. Besides, this is where the mystery is set so I'd better stay here.

PETER. What happens to you if I leave?

FIONA. You can't go anywhere.

PETER. Sure I can.

FIONA. The phone is dead and the doors and windows won't work for you. No, dear boy, you are trapped here with the rest of us until we solve the mystery.

PETER. But there isn't any mystery.

FIONA. There will be. That's why you called us down, isn't it?

PETER. Yes, but I didn't expect you to come.

FIONA. Then you shouldn't have invited us.

PETER. I didn't know you existed.

FIONA. Then you shouldn't be so rash with your thoughts.

PETER. When I think of what I could have thought of.

FIONA. Now you're sounding like Harold Pinter. I get so confused working for him, I get a migraine and I'm out

of commission for weeks.

COGBURN. *(enters from dining room and goes to between chair and sofa)* You rang, sir?

FIONA. *(rises and points at him)* He did it!

COGBURN. Did what, Madame?

FIONA. *(goes to PETER)* Whatever was done. The butler did it.

PETER. Nothing's happened.

FIONA. *(goes to bench)* When it does, he did it.

COGBURN. *(to PETER)* Did you have to have that same character lady, sir? There are lots of others to choose from.

PETER. I rather like Fiona Babcock.

COGBURN. Fiona? *(tries to suppress a laugh)* Oh, sir.

FIONA. And what's so amusing?

COGBURN. You've had it this time, old girl. Fiona? You'll be the first one to get it.

PETER. You two must know each other.

FIONA. We have worked together at times. But butlers are getting so passé. *(goes above sofa)* Not much call for your type any more, is there?

COGBURN. I do very well in those historical biographies on Public Television.

PETER. Cogburn, Miss Babcock would enjoy a cup of tea. Would you mind?

COGBURN. Whether I mind or not is of no consequence, sir. It is my duty. Regardless of what I may think of her, I shall fetch her the most delicious tea it is possible to brew. *(exits)*

PETER. That really was very kind of him, now, wasn't it?

FIONA. *(to L of sofa)* He has no choice. He is a

butler. He has to butle. We can't throw off our traces all at once like a strip-teaser peeling off her garments. *(a sudden thought)* You don't have one of those here, do you?

PETER. Is it too late to think one up?

FIONA. *(sits in her chair and resumes knitting)* Much. We have to abide by the rules.

PETER. But I don't know them.

FIONA. What you have wrought we must not put asunder.

(ADDIE appears at the top of the stairs. She is the maid and wears a complete maid's outfit. ADDIE is a very young girl who is pert and vulnerable but is almost constantly in a state of emotional stress. She has a handkerchief to her face and is crying audibly. She speaks with a cockney accent.)

PETER. Now you're paraphrasing. *(sees ADDIE, rises and cross R)* Oh, my God, its another.

ADDIE. *(goes to him)* I'm sorry, sir. I just can't stop me tears.

FIONA. Don't cry, girl. It's your fault and you've got to live with it.

ADDIE. Beggin' your pardon, sir. I'll pull meself together in no time.

PETER. You must be Addie.

ADDIE. Can't you tell by me uniform? Ain't I what you expected?

PETER. I'd thought of a maid, yes, so I guess you'll have to do.

ADDIE. You'll keep me on then? I'd hate to be sent back with the rewrites.

ETER. Of course I'll keep you, if you can change one thing.

ADDIE. I'll do anything to oblige, I will. *(moves very close to him, looking up into his eyes)* Anything at all.

FIONA. Careful, Mr. Knight, she uses sex with abandon.

ADDIE. That one's jealous, that's what she is. *(to PETER)* Now what can I do for you?

PETER. It's your accent.

ADDIE. What's wrong with it?

PETER. You sound so British.

ADDIE. This ain't the Cornish Coast? Or the outskirts of London?

PETER. It's Vermont, the United States of America.

ADDIE. *(drops cockney accent)* Oh, that's a relief. I thought I was one of those cockneys again.

FIONA. Didn't you read your instructions? I know you were late for the briefing and I can imagine why.

ADDIE. She's always picking on me. I do my job as well as I can. *(goes below sofa)* I haven't been at it as long as she has.

FIONA. Hmph!

ADDIE. She's been doin' this since they carved mysteries on stone tablets.

FIONA. Well, I like that.

ADDIE. I'm glad you do because it's true.

PETER. *(crosses to ADDIE)* Can't we have a little peace between you two? This is all very confusing for me and I need a little help to get through it.

FIONA. Yes, Addie, keep your problems to yourself. Mr Knight has enough on his mind. He'd just started this story when we showed up and surprised him.

ADDIE. No one's been killed yet?

PETER. No.

ADDIE. *(glances at FIONA)* I know who I hope the first one is.

FIONA. It is usually the immoral maid.

ADDIE. Us poor servants always get it early on. You have a cook here, I hope. I'm rotten in the kitchen.

PETER. I don't really know. I was trying to keep the cast down so I'd thought of having the cook's arrival delayed.

ADDIE. By what?

PETER. I hadn't decided.

(phone rings)

ADDIE. Shall I answer It?

PETER. No, I will. *(starts for phone, turns to FIONA)* You said the phone was dead.

FIONA. You can't call out but you can receive one.

(phone rings again)

PETER. I wish you'd brought me a list of rules. *(into phone)* Hello ... yes, it is ... yes ... No, that's all right, I was expecting it ... Now, would you mind telling me what - ... Hello ... hello .. *(turns to others)* That was an employment agency. The cook has ptomaine poisoning and won't be here. *(hangs up)*

FIONA. Ate her own cooking no doubt.

ADDIE. Then who's going to prepare the meals?

PETER. Do you suppose the butler cooks?

ADDIE. *(crosses in)* A butler? Is he young and handsome?

FIONA. He's just your type.

COGBURN. *(enters with tea cup on tray, serves FIONA)* Your tea, Miss Babcock.

FIONA. Thank you, Cogburn.

ADDIE. *(to PETER)* Why didn't you make him young and handsome?

PETER. It never occurred to me. I suppose all butlers were young at one time.

COGBURN. The young ones always get sent back with the rewrites. *(goes below sofa to ADDIE)* I presume you know your duties. You were late to the briefing because -

ADDIE. We've already been through that.

COGBURN. Sorry, I hate repetition.

ADDIE. I've never been free before. I mean I was always stuck with the story and had no leeway. Do I have to obey you?

COGBURN. You're the maid, aren't you?

ADDIE. Yes, but -

COGBURN. No buts. You do what I tell you. *(crosses to dining room)* Come along now and help me prepare something edible for the guests.

ADDIE. *(to PETER)* Do I have to?

PETER. Would you mind?

COGBURN. Come along! *(ADDIE goes to him)* You're not pregnant again, are you?

ADDIE. *(starts crying again)* I always am. Every time I work on a story I'm pregnant. Or that one -*(points to FIONA)* throws me out and then I get killed or jump in the river. I *(voice trails off as she exits)* Maybe this time it will be different.

COGBURN. *(as he follows her off)* I sincerely hope not.

FIONA. What did I tell you? Wanton. That child is wanton and worthless.

PETER. I thought you were mellowing.

FIONA. Around the edges only, but certainly not towards her sort.

PETER. *(goes above sofa)* Maybe she'll quit. I'm not holding her here. As a matter of fact, I'm not holding any of you here.

FIONA. *(rises, putting the knitting aside and crosses to him)* Don't try to side-step the issue, Mr. Knight, You thought us up and just as we arrived there was a cosmic something-or-other and we materialized - oh, how I hate that word - anyway, we are here and we can't leave until it's over.

PETER. How can it be over when I didn't think up the ending? *(goes to fireplace)* I didn't even think up the middle, only the beginning with an odd set of characters.

FIONA. Odd we may be but we've worked for better authors than you. *(sits on sofa)* I'll have you know that I was Shakespeare's Nurse for Juliet. Think that one over.

PETER. You didn't do such a good job. She killed herself and now I think I know why.

FIONA. A great pity. A charming girl, the one who played Juliet. We still exchange Christmas cards.

PETER. *(crosses in to R of sofa)* You have a post office - up there?

FIONA. As I recall, we have everything.

PETER. So how is Juliet?

FIONA. I run into her now and then and she deplores the lack of writing today as I do. She keeps getting called

down for those television series where she's mugged, raped, beaten senseless and then saved after a commercial for a detergent. *(sighs)* Ah, give me the days of Shakespeare with a simple poison or a knife. So civilized.

PETER. *(crosses below her to bench)* I would hardly call HAMLET civilized with all the characters bloodied up at the end.

FIONA. But in iambic pentameter?

PETER. *(sits on bench)* Anyway, Shakespeare is in public domain. He doesn't get royalties.

FIONA. Are royalties so important?

PETER. If you had to work for a living you'd know what I'm talking about.

FIONA. Fortunately my vocation provides room and board and, I might add, fringe benefits.

PETER. Like what?

FIONA. Hospitalization for one, although I don't recall ever being that ill. Dead, yes, but ill, no.

PETER. Then you're content in that big library in the sky?

FIONA. *(rises)* Why, Mr. Knight, are you applying for a position with us?

PETER. No, I don't think it's for me.

FIONA. *(crosses to chair and picks up knitting)* You're an interesting type. I'm sure you'd get a lot of calls.

PETER. I don't want to be some other author's character.

FIONA. It's pleasant work, not dangerous at all. Of course you're frequently killed and, if they steal your body, you have to stay around for your funeral. Those are gruesome things. I don't like them at all.

PETER. *(rises and crosses in)* How did you start in this work?

FIONA. Which came first, Mr. Knight, the chicken or the egg? Did authors put characters into their heads or were they there already? The riddle of the Sphinx. *(looks at knitting)* This is appalling, isn't it?

PETER. Perhaps on your next call you'll get imported wool and you can make an afghan.

FIONA. That would be nice, wouldn't it?

LYDIA. *(comes downstairs She has changed to a blue dress and is very upset.)* Peter, I'm very upset with you.

PETER. Everyone seems to be upset with me.

LYDIA. *(sees FIONA)* Well, look who's here. I didn't know you were on call for this.

FIONA. I'm here to bring some moral values to the situation.

LYDIA. But nothing immoral has happened.

FIONA. It will. It always does.

LYDIA. Aren't you being the horse behind the cart to coin a phrase?

PETER. You two must have worked together before.

LYDIA. Innumerable times. *(to FIONA)* I'm called Lydia this time.

PETER. This is Fiona Babcock.

LYDIA. Fiona? *(not successfully suppresses a laugh)*

FIONA. I don't see why everybody finds that so amusing.

LYDIA. Fiona Babcock! *(sits on L end of sofa)* You've come a cropper this time.

FIONA. A rose by any other name would still smell. *(realizes what she has said)* That didn't turn out quite right.

PETER. *(crosses to FIONA)* I hope you ladies will get along while you're here. I can't put up with any fighting. *(goes to fireplace)* Now that you're free, as you call it, there's no reason not to be friends.

FIONA. I am civil to everyone.

LYDIA. Oh, I don't mind her. There's one in every book.

FIONA. *(She gathers up her knitting and rises.)* If you don't mind, I think I'll go and knit elsewhere. *(goes up C)* There must be a den or library. There always is in these old places.

PETER. To your left.

FIONA. Thank you. I presume I shall be called by midnight. I won't inherit anything, of course, I never do.

LYDIA. What good would it do you? You're always the first or second to get murdered.

FIONA. I don't mind. The sooner I get back to Homer the better.

PETER. Homer?

LYDIA. She lives with Homer.

PETER. *(feigning shock)* Fiona Babcock!

FIONA. *(She starts off U L above stairs.)* I'll have you know Homer is a cat. *(turns back)* And he is neutered. *(exits)*

LYDIA. Poor lady. She's never forgiven me for being called down by Somerset Maugham to play Sadie Thompson when I made that man of the cloth commit suicide.

PETER. *(goes to sofa R)* Was that you?

LYDIA. One of the few times I played a woman who was poor.

PETER. You're rich this time.

LYDIA. And that is precisely why I came down here. *(rises and goes to PETER)* Do you know who is upstairs in my bedroom?

PETER. I suppose it must be Jordan Dillingham.

LYDIA. Exactly. *(crosses below desk)* I go in to change and I'm down to my slip and he comes out of the bathroom rubbing scalp lotion on his head.

PETER. *(goes to her)* That wasn't my idea.

LYDIA. And he announces we're married again. *(pats PETER'S cheek)* Now, Peter, darling, couldn't you have been more original? Every time Dilly and I get married it never works. He's an insufferable bore and I find someone more attractive and younger.

PETER. But he has loads of money.

LYDIA. That's why I'm constantly marrying him. 'Tis always thus. *(goes below chair L)* Why can't you authors get some
original ideas?

PETER. *(crosses D C)* There aren't any left.

LYDIA. Maybe he'll get murdered. *(goes to PETER)* That's it, isn't it? He's the first one killed. Oh, thank you, Peter. *(kisses his cheek)*

PETER. I'm not sure.

LYDIA. Maybe at this very moment. The electric heater dropped into the bathtub. That's what I did to him in THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE.

PETER. You're way ahead of me. I hadn't decided who would get murdered first.

LYDIA. *(goes to fireplace)* Then none of us knows what will happen. It's most unusual but rather titillating, isn't it? *(has a sudden thought)* I hope it isn't me. *(sits in chair L)* I like

being able to do things I want for a change and not being hemmed in by a tiny brain. Not you, darling, I'm sure you're an excellent writer.

PETER. I've always tried to be. *(crosses to fireplace)* But why should anyone get murdered? I hadn't planned it out.

LYDIA. You are really very naive. All of us here, and whoever else you invited, are all specialists in murder. Naturally, there will be a lot of killings and lights going out and screams in the dark. You didn't start to write REBECCA OF SUNNYBROOK FARM, did you?

PETER. I was trying to write a fictional murder based on Norman Napier's death.

LYDIA. *(shivers)* Sadist, that's what Norman was.

PETER. You worked for him?

LYDIA. In St. Moritz. He would ski half the day and write half the night. In AVALANCHE OF MURDER he had me -

PETER. Buried under the snow -

LYDIA. With a ski pole through my heart.

PETER. That was a good mystery.

LYDIA. Good or bad, it was damned cold. And they didn't find me for three days. And to top it all, he dressed me in green. *(rises and turns for PETER'S inspection)* Don't I look better in blue, Peter? Tell me the truth.

PETER. *(rises and goes to her)* You look magnificant in blue.

LYDIA. I know. Kay won't wear blue, will she?

PETER. She might.

LYDIA. *(goes to foot of stairs)* I caught a glimpse of her in the hall upstairs. I suppose you had to have an ingenue?

PETER. It's usual.

LYDIA. *(comes down to above sofa)* Couldn't you have thought up someone not quite so nice? I always have to hate her when we work together and it's difficult because she's such a sweet little thing. But she's so young. She's always so damned young. *(slaps table for emphasis)*

PETER. *(crosses below sofa to L)* She is nice, isn't she?

LYDIA. *(circles to R)* There, you see. Right away you like her. Perhaps she'll be killed off first. That would be a plot twist, wouldn't it?

PETER. It's been done before.

LYDIA. Really?

PETER. *(sits on L end of sofa)* In LAURA. She was killed at the beginning.

LYDIA. *(sits R side of sofa)* But they only thought so and she appeared anyway. I mean really killed dead permanently. Then I'd have the men to myself.

PETER. Who would want to murder Kay?

LYDIA. *(laughs)* Silly boy.

(doorbell rings)

PETER. Now who is that?

LYDIA. Don't you know?

PETER. *(goes to U C looking off R)* I have no idea.

LYDIA. It's the unexpected guest. You must have one of those, a mysterious stranger who comes in out of the night?

PETER. I don't remember thinking about one.

COGBURN. *(comes in from dining room and crosses to PETER)* Excuse me, sir, but I have to let the unexpected guest in.

PETER. You think that's who it is, too?

COGBURN. *(crosses below PETER)* Naturally, sir. *(turns back)* It would be most unexpected if there were no unexpected guest. *(exits)*

PETER. *(goes to fireplace)* Why do you all know so much more than I do?

LYDIA. We've been doing this longer than you have.

PETER. Then tell me how it ends.

LYDIA. We only know each moment as it happens.

(DICK STANTON bursts in from up R. He is the juvenile and is very hearty, eager, and overly-pleasant. He is virile and shakes hands with authority making him something of a bull in a china shop. He wears a raincoat under which are grey flannels and a blazer. He carries a suitcase.)

DICK. *(puts suitcase down)* Sorry if I'm late. It isn't midnight, is it?

LYDIA. No, darling. You still have time.

DICK. Good. *(takes his coat off)* Beastly night out, isn't it? But then it always is when there's a will to be read.

COGBURN. May I, sir?

DICK. *(hands coat to COGBURN who takes it)* Oh, thanks - Cogburn, is it?

COGBURN. That's right, sir. *(exits off R)*

DICK. *(goes to sofa L)* They told me he would be called Cogburn this time. *(advances on PETER with his hand extended)* How do you do. You must be the unexpected guest.

PETER. Isn't that who you are?

DICK. No, I'm expected. I'm Dick Stanton.

LYDIA. You must have forgotten you had a juvenile.

PETER. I'm lucky I can remember who I am. How do you do.

DICK. *(They shake hands.)* And you are -?

LYDIA. Dick, this is our author.

DICK. Gee whiz, you're Peter Knight?

PETER. That's right.

DICK. *(slaps PETER on the shoulder)* It's great working for you. Never done it before.

(COGBURN crosses from U R to exit into the dining room.)

PETER. Thank you.

DICK. And to be free, too. That's the greatest. I'm not sure how to act.

LYDIA. You could try being a little less hearty.

DICK. Can't be any other way it seems. *(crosses to LYDIA)* Never worked with you before, either, but I've seen you around. Say, you look great in blue.

LYDIA. *(smiles)* Thank you. I'm Lydia.

DICK. That's a great name, too. *(crosses to sofa R looking over the room)* And look at this room. It's great.

PETER. That's great.

DICK. *(crosses to bookshelves behind desk as he cases the room)* I love working in gloomy old places. Never done one in Vermont before. In Maine once on the coast. *(turns to them)* Say, why do they always have these old places on the coast?

PETER. So someone can be pushed off a cliff.

LYDIA. And authors can have all that description about waves breaking on the rocks and surf rolling over a body.

DICK. *(looks at typewriter)* This place has enough atmosphere for FRANKENSTEIN.

LYDIA. Let's not get into monsters, please. They give me gooseflesh.

DICK. I don't mind them. *(to PETER as goes below typewriter to L of desk)* You might have seen some of my work. I was the lead in I WAS A TEENAGE WEREWOLF.

PETER. I somehow missed that one.

DICK. Say, where's the ingenue? They told me she was named Kay. Great name all right.

PETER. She's upstairs unpacking. *(DICK goes to foot of stairs.)* Maybe you won't like her.

DICK. No way. I have to like her. It's built into me.

LYDIA. And she has to like him.

DICK. *(crosses down to desk)* You're darn right she does.

KAY. *(appears at top of stairs)* Dick! Dick Stanton! *(She rushes down and into his arms. They kiss.)*

DICK. Kay, it's you. Sorry I'm late.

KAY. I hoped you'd get here. The storm is terrible.

DICK. I was afraid the bridge would be washed out.

LYDIA. *(to PETER)* A washed out bridge wouldn't have stopped him.

DICK. I'd have swum across to get to you.

KAY. I'm so glad you're here. *(her head on his chest)* I'm so frightened.

PETER. Of what?

KAY. *(head comes up and she looks at him)* I don't know really. I always say that.

PETER. There is nothing to be frightened about.

LYDIA. I bet there is. We'll find out at midnight.

DICK. *(His arm around KAY, he pulls her to him.)* Aren't you going to leave us alone? It's customary for us to have a love scene.

LYDIA. *(rises, links her arm through PETER'S and takes him U C)* Come on. Peter, let's let them have their moment alone. It's a lot of foolishness and doesn't change the plot at all. We'll needle Miss Babcock in the library.

PETER. I don't want to go.

LYDIA. This is the way it has to be. *(as LYDIA pulls him out to library)*

PETER. We won't be long.

LYDIA. If my husband gets killed, then maybe we could have a mature love scene.

DICK. *(starts to kiss KAY)* I'm so glad to see you.

KAY. *(breaks away below sofa)* You don't have to do that, Dick. We're alone now.

DICK. *(goes to her)* Can you think of a better time?

KAY. But we're free. We don't have to be in love.

DICK. I know we're free but I still love you. I think.

KAY. You're just used to it, that's all. You always love the damsel in distress.

DICK. And she always loves me.

KAY. And I do. I suppose I do. I always have.

DICK. Of course you do. Besides, if I wasn't here who would save you at the end?

KAY. *(goes to fireplace)* Maybe I won't need saving this time.

DICK. That's a stupid thing to say. *(goes to her and puts his arms around her from behind)* You always need saving at the last moment and not a second sooner.

KAY. *(turns to him)* I wish one of you would show up early and not just ten seconds before the bomb goes off.

DICK. I'm just not capable of getting there any quicker.

KAY. It makes me very nervous.

DICK. Come on, let's have our nice little love scene now. *(tries to kiss her)*

KAY. *(breaks away R)* No. Let's wait until later, until after the will is read.

DICK. I have never been turned down by the ingenue yet.

KAY. *(goes to bench, her back to him)* I'm not turning you down. I'm postponing you.

DICK. All right, have it your way. *(picks up his suitcase)* I'll go and unpack. Where do I go?

KAY. *(goes to him)* Upstairs. You must be the second on the right. It's very masculine looking.

DICK. Boy, I can't wait for the will to be read. That's always the most exciting part. *(on landing)*

KAY. Not if you're the ingenue. That's when they set me up to be killed.

DICK. But I'll save you. And I'll try to be early this time. *(looks down the hallway upstairs)* Boy, look at the gloomy hallway. This is great. *(exits)*

KAY. *(moves to table above sofa, looks around and suddenly realizes she is alone)* Oh, I'm alone. I shouldn't be left alone. The ingenue never should be left alone. There's a secret panel and a gloved hand will come out or a hooded figure bent on my destruction. *(crosses U C and calls towards library)* Peter! Peter!

PETER. *(off stage)* I'm here.

KAY. *(moves down into room)* Come quickly, please.

PETER. *(rushes in)* Kay, what is it?

KAY. *(into his arms)* Oh, Peter, I'm so glad you're here.

I'm so frightened.

PETER. That's exactly what you said to your boy friend.

KAY. It is, isn't it? *(crosses to bench)*

PETER. Word for word.

KAY. And now I've said it to you. That must mean something.

PETER. I think it does. *(goes to her)* Now what are you frightened of?

KAY. I don't know. I was alone and I should never be left alone. It's always dangerous. Authors think up reasons for everyone leaving me alone and then something horrifying happens.

PETER. It's all right. I'm here now.

KAY. Yes, you're here. *(They kiss.)*

PETER. That wasn't at all unreal.

KAY. *(breaks away L)* I shouldn't do that. I'm in love with Dick Stanton. That's the way it's written.

PETER. *(goes to her)* But you're free now. You can do what you want.

KAY. People always fall in love so quickly in stories but it isn't that way in real life, is it?

PETER. It's never been that way with me.

KAY. *(crosses below him to his R)* You're in love with someone then?

PETER. I was once, but no more. She married a man who went into microchips before anyone knew what they were.

KAY. Was that good?

PETER. For him, for her, but not for me. Now she's living happily in a penthouse overlooking the East River.

KAY. Poor Peter.

PETER. It's surprising how quickly I've recovered.

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