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SF PERUSALS

A Party to Murder

Marcia Kash
and Douglas E. Hughes

A Samuel French Acting Edition

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A PARTY TO MURDER was first produced at Kawartha Summer Theatre, Canada in August 1996. It was subsequently produced at Ensemble Theatre in Cincinnati in September 1996 with the following cast:

REV. MERRYWEATHER / ELWOOD ..... Gordon Greene

MRS. McKNIGHT / VALERIE ..... Marcia Kash

KONRAD / CHARLES ..... Scott New

O'KARMA / HENRI ..... Regina Pugh

ERNIE / WILLY ..... Robert B. Rais

EVELYN / McKENZIE ..... Berni Weber

Directed by Ron Ulrich

Scenic Designer Kevin J. Murphy
Costume Designer Gretchen Sears
Lighting Designer Jay Depenbrock
Stage Manager Amy Lewis

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

KONRAD / CHARLES:
A successful mystery-novelist. English. Urbane, intelligent, well bred. The ultimate host.

ERNIE / WILLY:
Former football player, big, friendly, gregarious, good sense of humor. Around 40.

EVELYN / McKENZIE:
Fashion model, late twenties, witty, extroverted, a tough exterior. She is Elwood's girlfriend.

MRS. McKNIGHT / VALERIE:
Early to mid forties. Henri's older sister. Smart, savvy. Used to getting her own way. Very well turned out.

O'KARMA / HENRI: *(pronounced "Henry")*
Late twenties. Valerie's younger sister. Shy, easily intimidated. Dresses conservatively.

FATHER GERRY MERRYWEATHER / ELWOOD:
Mid-fifties, balding. Corporate CEO type. Confident, friendly. Powerful and he knows it.

TIME: Present

PLACE:
A cottage on an island, in the middle of a lake,
somewhere in North America.

ACT I

Scene One

(Setting: The living area of an older, rustic house on a tiny island in the middle of a lake. SL is a fireplace, above which hangs a portrait of Agatha Christie. US is a large bookcase filled with books. In the USR corner is an archway leading to the bathroom and bedroom off. The main door is on the upstage wall to the L of the bookcase. DSR is a large window with a practical window seat underneath, upon which sits a jack-o-lantern with a light burning in it. USL is a staircase leading off to the bedrooms. There is a love seat and an armchair facing the fireplace, in which a fire glows. This, apart from the jack-o-lantern, is the only source of light in the room. It is Halloween night. At rise, there is a table center stage. Around the table are seated KONRAD LEIMGRUBER, a suave, well-bred surgeon in his forties; EVELYN WATERS, a conservative-looking woman in her thirties; FATHER GERALD MERRIWEATHER, a priest in his fifties or sixties; MADAME O'KARMA, an exotic woman wearing a turban. In front of her is a crystal ball. Sitting at the head of the table with his face in a bowl of soup is ERNIE FENTON, a bald-headed man in his seventies. He appears to be dead. Spooky organ music plays underneath the following scene. Standing next to KONRAD is MRS. McKNIGHT, a maid. She is pointing a gun at KONRAD. Everyone stares at her.)

MRS. McKNIGHT. I hate to do this, Sir.

KONRAD. Oh, just get on with it, Woman!

MRS. McKNIGHT. *(Deadpan)* If you insist, sir. *(She pulls the trigger on the gun, and a small flame shoots out the end. KONRAD holds up a cigar and puffs on it until it's lit.)* You must give those up, Dr. Leimgruber, sir. They're bad for your health.

KONRAD. Thank you for your concern, Mrs. McKnight. That will be all.

MRS. McKNIGHT. *(Indicating ERNIE.)* Is Mr. Fenton finished with his soup, sir?

KONRAD. That will be all. Thank you.

(She curtsies perfunctorily, and begins to shuffle off L.)

MADAME O'KARMA. No please don't go. I need everyone here.

MRS. McKNIGHT. *(To KONRAD.)* With your permission, sir.

KONRAD. Oh, very well.

(KONRAD pulls up another chair and MRS. McKNIGHT joins the others at the table.)

MADAME O'KARMA. Now, if I may have your attention, everyone. Please join hands, and concentrate ...

FATHER GERALD. This is a lot of superstitious nonsense. I could be defrocked just for being here.

EVELYN. And if the press ever finds out I am involved in a scandal like this, I can forget about getting re-elected.

O'KARMA. Father Gerald, Ms. Waters, please. I require your full attention.

EVELYN. Couldn't we at least put Ernie in the bedroom? I can't bear to look at him, sitting there with his face in his soup.

KONRAD. Good idea. We should move him now, before rigor sets in.

O'KARMA. Please, Dr. Leimgruber, we must not. It is too soon. If we disturb the body, the spirit may flee as well. Now, if you will all close your your eyes –

(They do.)

FATHER GERALD. Wait a minute – I hear a voice. It's Harry Houdini! He wants to know why we're bothering him.

(MRS. McKNIGHT, EVELYN and LEIMGRUBER laugh.)

O'KARMA. SILENCE! *(Beat)* Now, concentrate. *(They do. MADAME O'KARMA's breathing deepens as she begins to go into a trance.)* Ernest! Ernest Fenton! Madame O'Karma beckons to you. Speak to us!

(Suddenly the room is filled with a ghostly, anguished moan, apparently coming from underneath the table. It rises in pitch and volume, until EVELYN, FATHER GERALD and KONRAD begin to cast nervous glances at each other and about the room. The spooky music rises with the tension in the room.)

EVELYN. What is that?
O'KARMA. Silence, please! Ernest, are you there?
ERNIE's VOICE. *(Quavering mournfully.)* Yes.

(A sting of organ music. Gasps of surprise from KONRAD and EVELYN. FATHER GERALD snorts derisively. Throughout the following, ERNIE's VOICE continues to emanate from underneath the table. The organ music continues underneath.)

O'KARMA. I want you to look back, Ernest. Tell us what you know about your murder.
ERNIE's VOICE.
Time's passage brought about my death
With speed I could have cheated Fate;
The weapon used to stop my breath
Turned fatal when it changed its state!

(The organ music builds to a crescendo as ERNIE's moans fade into the distance.)

O'KARMA. Ernest! Ernest! *(Beat)* He is gone.

(The sound of ERNIE's VOICE returns, sped-up and backwards, as though a tape machine were being rewound. They all look puzzled. FATHER GERALD looks under the table.)

EVELYN. What on earth is that?

O'KARMA. Oh, it is nothing. It is just Ernest's spirit departing.

FATHER GERALD. Oh, is that so? Here, I'll show you Ernie's "spirit". *(He pulls out a tape recorder from underneath the table. They all gasp. Indicating O'KARMA.)* That woman is a fraud! Here's how she conjured Ernie up.

(He pushes a button on the tape recorder and rewinds it. He presses again, and we hear the sound of ERNIE moaning. They all react.)

KONRAD. Madame O'Karma, would you mind explaining this?

O'KARMA, Um, I er – I don't know who put that there. It was nothing to do with me.

(Suddenly, the jack-o-lantern explodes with a loud bang. Everyone screams.)

O'KARMA/HENRI. What on earth was that?

KONRAD/CHARLES. Please, stay where you are. I'll try the lights!

(KONRAD/CHARLES turns on the room lights.)

EVELYN/McKENZIE. What the hell was in that pumpkin – dynamite?

KONRAD/CHARLES. It was only a lightbulb. It must have shorted out.

EVELYN/McKENZIE. What a drag. Things were just getting interesting.

FATHER GERALD/ELWOOD. Yes, talk about spiritus interruptus!

O'KARMA/HENRI. What do we do now, Charles? Pick up where we left off?

CHARLES. Not much point, really. We were all but finished anyway.

EVELYN/McKENZIE. What a shame. I was beginning to find my character.

MRS. McKNIGHT/VALERIE. Nonsense. You were wonderful as Evelyn, right from the beginning.

EVELYN/McKENZIE. Thanks. You know, I could get used to being a politician. You can be as bitchy as you want and blame it on the economy! By the way, my real name's McKenzie. McKenzie Arnold.

(She offers her hand. No longer shuffling, MRS. McKNIGHT/ VALERIE, crosses to McKENZIE, and shakes her hand.)

MRS. McKNIGHT/VALERIE. Nice to meet you. I'm Valerie Addison. *(Indicating O'KARMA.)* And this is my sister Henriette.

O'KARMA/HENRI. Please call me Henri. *(She takes off the turban – the wig and glasses come off with it.)* Oh, excuse me, I have to take this off, I'm roasting! *(Extending her hand.)* A pleasure to meet you.

FATHER GERALD/ELWOOD. *(Taking off his collar.)* And I'm Elwood O'Callaghan.

HENRI. *The* Elwood O'Callaghan? The shipping magnate?

McKENZIE. That's him, alright.

VALERIE. Shipping magnate?

HENRI. Goodness, I had no idea we were in such illustrious company.

CHARLES. *(To HENRI and VALERIE.)* I apologize for not having made proper introductions when we first met, but of course the game prevented that.

VALERIE. Well it's a pleasure to meet all of you, at last.

ELWOOD. Good to meet you too, ladies. And congratulations on a game well played. You really got into the spirit of it, if you'll pardon the pun.

McKENZIE. Yeah, you two were terrific. If I didn't know better, I'd never have guessed this was your first time. I think we should have them back next year, Charles. They were a lot better than the Bartleys. *(She taps ERNIE/WILLY – still in his soup.)* Hey, Willy, say hi to Valerie and Henri. *(She stops.)* Willy, it's over. Time to get up. *(She shakes his shoulder. He doesn't budge.)* Willy? *(She shakes him again. He doesn't move. They look at each other in concern.)* Oh come on, stop fakin' it will ya?

HENRI. Maybe he fell asleep. He's been dead for an awfully long time.

ELWOOD. Maybe he drowned.

McKENZIE. Can you drown in a bowl of vichyssoise?

CHARLES. I think we should try moving him. *(As they move towards him.)* Come on Elwood, give me a hand here. Willy, are you alright?

(Beat. They are on either side of him, about to lift him up when suddenly WILLY rears up, roaring, his face ghostly white from the soup. They all scream.)

WILLY. Gotcha!

ELWOOD. For crying out loud, Willy!

VALERIE. *(Overlapping)* Good grief!

McKENZIE. *(Overlapping)* Willy, you jerk!

WILLY. *(Laughing)* Oh come on, what's Halloween without a good scare or two?

VALERIE. I'll admit you had me going for a moment. I was beginning to wonder if you were still with us.

HENRI. *(With her.)* – with us, yes. That would have been a real twist, wouldn't it? Playing a murder-mystery game with an actual corpse.

CHARLES. Valerie and Henriette, may I present the late Ernie Fenton – also known as Willy Yaskovitch.

WILLY. *(Taking a napkin and wiping the soup off his face.)* How ya doin'?

VALERIE. Very well, thank you. And congratulations. You made a very convincing body.

HENRI. *(With her.)* – body, yes.

WILLY. Thanks, ladies. *(Pulling off his bald pate and rubbing his head.)* Ah, it's so nice to have hair again.

ELWOOD. Don't get too attached to it, Willy. It doesn't last forever.

(ELWOOD takes off his own beard and wig to reveal his own balding head.)

CHARLES. Well, now that you've been safely returned to the land of the living, Willy, it's time to solve your murder. So, if you will all take out your notepads – *(Everyone crosses back to the table.)* I want you to write down who you think killed Ernie Fenton and how he or she did it.

WILLY. Alright, I admit it! It was suicide!

CHARLES. Careful, Willy. You could be right, you know.

WILLY. Oh yeah, I never thought of that.

VALERIE. Surely you must know who killed you.

WILLY. Nope. I have no idea. *(He pulls a little card from his pocket.)* My instructions simply said this: "Be sure to expire before you finish your soup."

CHARLES. Note that I did not instruct you to expire *into* your soup.

WILLY. No, but you're always telling us to improvise. I thought it was a nice touch on my part.

CHARLES. Now when you're finished, hand your answers to me. Whoever comes closest to the real solution wins.

(During the following, people are writing their responses down.)

HENRI. You know, Charles, I just can't believe the amount of work you put into this. Those character descriptions you sent us, for instance. All those details – right down to the medical history.

ELWOOD. Excuse me, but I failed to see the significance of Father Merriweather's hemorrhoids. Here you are.

(He hands CHARLES his answer.)

McKENZIE. The best part for me was getting here – all that James Bond stuff. The secret map, and that meeting in the middle of the forest –

HENRI. *(With her.)* – the forest, yes.

WILLY. Then riding over here from the mainland on that old boat, blindfolded. *(Handing CHARLES his answer.)* Here you go.

ELWOOD. I could have done without the blindfold, actually. That boat ride played hell with my stomach.

VALERIE. The biggest challenge for me was staying in character all that time.

HENRI. *(With her.)* – all that time, yes.

(She and VALERIE hand CHARLES their answers.)

CHARLES. Thanks. How about you, McKenzie? Are you ready?

McKENZIE. *(Scribbling)* Not quite.

ELWOOD. Come on, McKenzie, you're holding everything up.

McKENZIE. Alright, alright. *(She hands CHARLES her answer.)* Here you go – for what it's worth.

CHARLES. That's everybody. Now, let's find out who our winner is. I hope you've all given some thought to what you're going to ask for in the event that you've won.

(He moves away from the others and begins to read the responses.)

VALERIE. What we're going to ask for? I don't follow.

McKENZIE. What he means is, if you win, you get to pick your own prize.

VALERIE. Really? Like what?

WILLY. Anything we want, actually – within reason.

McKENZIE. That's why these weekends are so expensive. A big chunk of the money we put up front goes towards paying for the prize.

VALERIE. What sort of thing do you usually ask for?

WILLY. Depends on who wins, really. Remember the last time you won, McKenzie?

McKENZIE. Sure. We played Charles' version of "Murder on the Nile", and I asked for some ancient Egyptian jewelry.

ELWOOD. Yes. She pranced around for weeks afterwards pretending she was Nefertiti.

McKENZIE. And last year, the Bartleys chose that first-class trip to Monte Carlo.

WILLY. Yeah, the fools. Went and gambled away their life savings. No wonder they didn't come back this year.

CHARLES. Well, this is a first. You're not going to believe it.

WILLY. What happened, did we end up with a tie or something?

CHARLES. No, no, no. It's much better than that. This year's winner, for the first time ever, is Elwood!

McKENZIE. Elwood?

WILLY. You're kidding!

ELWOOD. *(Overlapping)* Me?

CHARLES. *(Applauding)* Congratulations, Elwood.

(The others join in the applause.)

ELWOOD. How do you like that? After all these years.

(He pulls McKENZIE towards him and embraces her. She resists.)

VALERIE. Congratulations!

HENRI. *(With her.)* – lations, yes.

CHARLES. Well done. You finally broke your losing streak.

WILLY. *(Good-naturedly)* Yeah, spoiled your perfect record.

ELWOOD. At last! I've been waiting a long time for this.

WILLY. So, any idea what you're going to ask for?

ELWOOD. Well, I've got a few thoughts.

WILLY. I should hope so. God knows you've had long enough to think about it!

HENRI. Is that how this works, Charles? Does Elwood just ask for what he wants?

CHARLES. Not just yet, Henri. First we have to complete the game. We can't have the prize until we've had the solution.

VALERIE. Yes of course, you must tell us who the murderer was.

HENRI. *(With her.)* – murderer was, yes.

WILLY. Yeah, who killed me? I've been dying to know, ha ha!

(Groans all around.)

CHARLES. Elwood – would you be so kind?

ELWOOD. My pleasure. It was Mrs. McKnight.

VALERIE. I killed him? You're joking. How did I do it?

ELWOOD. You poisoned his drink. Remember when you fixed us all a round?

HENRI. But everyone was drinking the same thing. How come the rest of us didn't die?

ELWOOD. Ah, but Ernie's was the only drink that was on the rocks. The poison wasn't in the drink – it was in the ice cubes.

WILLY. Of course! "The weapon used to stop my breath turned fatal when it changed its state." Very clever, Elwood.

HENRI. *(With him.)* – clever, Elwood, yes.

McKENZIE. Poisoned ice cubes. I'd never have thought of that.

CHARLES. Yes, congratulations. Nice bit of sleuthing.

ELWOOD. Thank you.

CHARLES. So would you like to tell us what you've decided on as your prize?

WILLY. Yeah, what are we going to have to cough up?

ELWOOD. *(Crossing to mantle and getting a cigar.)* Well, I'm going to need a few minutes to think about it, if that's alright with everyone.

CHARLES. Of course. Take all the time you need.

McKENZIE. In that case, I'll go and get changed. If the people at Chanel ever saw me in this get-up, they'd cancel my contract. Excuse me.

ELWOOD. Don't be too long, Darling.

McKENZIE. Of course not.

ELWOOD. You know what you're like when you get in front of a mirror.

(She exits up the stairs. Throughout the following, the others remove what remains of their first costumes, putting them in the window box, and adding on pieces of their "real" clothes.)

WILLY. Did you leave any food for me? I'm starving.

CHARLES. We certainly did. It's keeping warm in the oven.

HENRI. I'll go and get it for you.

WILLY. Thanks, Henriette.

(She crosses to the panelled wall UR.)

VALERIE. Where are you going? The kitchen's that way.

HENRI. I know, but I've been dying to try this secret panel. *(She pulls a handle [or pushes a button] and suddenly the panelling swings open like a door. She looks inside, hesitates.)* Which way do I go?

CHARLES. Just bear right. It will take you right into the pantry.

HENRI. Ooh, how marvellous!

(She exits.)

WILLY. What is that, a servants' passage or something?

CHARLES. I imagine. It goes all over the house. It'll even take you upstairs.

WILLY. Man, this place is great. It's like something right out of Agatha Christie!

ELWOOD. That's no surprise. Everything Charles does is like something out of Agatha Christie. Haven't you ever read any of his novels?

(CHARLES picks up the gun/lighter and re-lights his cigar.)

CHARLES. Are you implying that my books are derivative, Elwood?

ELWOOD. I wouldn't go that far. Let's just say it's not hard to see where your inspiration comes from. *(Indicating the picture of Agatha hanging above the fireplace.)* I mean, you take the poor woman with you wherever you go, for heaven's sake!

VALERIE. Well, it doesn't matter to me where you got the idea from, I thought the game was brilliant.

CHARLES. Thank you, Valerie.

VALERIE. But of course, I am a little biased. Henri and I have been big fans of yours for years. We've read everything you've written. I must confess, when she told me we had been invited to spend the weekend playing a murder mystery game hosted by Charles Prince himself, I couldn't believe it. I thought she must be pulling my leg.

CHARLES. Well, I hope meeting me in the flesh hasn't been too much of a disappointment for you.

VALERIE. On the contrary. It's been delightful. But it must be a bit of a busman's holiday for you. I mean, creating a game like this

must be almost as much work as writing one of your mystery novels. One would think you'd get tired of all that death and destruction.

ELWOOD. *(Crossing to the mantelpiec.)* No, no. Murder and mayhem, that's what Charles lives for. That's why he keeps coming up with these games every Halloween.

VALERIE. Every Halloween? How long have you been doing this?

CHARLES. As a matter of fact, this is our tenth anniversary.

VALERIE. Ten years? That's a long time. What got you started?

CHARLES. Well, ever since I first came here I was captivated by the idea of Halloween. You see it just isn't celebrated in England the way it is in North America. I couldn't believe what I'd been missing all my life. So after my first Halloween here, I decided I would make up for lost time. The very next year I wrote the first game, turned my home into a haunted house for the evening, *(He gestures to the WILLY and ELWOOD.)* and invited a few friends to dress up and participate.

WILLY. It was a blast.

CHARLES. Yes, it was a rousing success, if I do say so myself. In fact, we all had so much fun, we decided to make it an annual event.

(McKENZIE enters down the stairs, now dressed in a glamorous and somewhat revealing dress.)

McKENZIE. Ta-daa! How's that for a quick change?

CHARLES. Goodness.

WILLY. That's quite the dress, McKenzie.

McKENZIE. *(Preening)* Do you like it?

CHARLES. It's stunning.

McKENZIE. Isn't it? I got it from that Vogue shoot I was on last week in Paris.

ELWOOD. Er, Darling, I thought I asked you not to bring that dress with you this weekend.

McKENZIE. But Elwood, I haven't had a chance to wear it yet.

ELWOOD. Yes, but it's not exactly appropriate for the occasion, now is it? Don't you have anything a little less – showy?

McKENZIE. Not really.

ELWOOD. What about the black outfit?

McKENZIE. Oh, Elwood, you always want me to wear that.

ELWOOD. Only because you look so lovely in it, Darling. Now be a good girl and go and put it on, alright?

McKENZIE. *(Protesting)* Elwood –

ELWOOD. Just do it, will you, McKenzie?

McKENZIE. *(After a beat.)* Alright.

(She hoists up her dress and trudges up the stairs. There is an awkward pause.)

VALERIE. What a lovely-looking girl. Have you been married long?

ELWOOD. Oh, we're not married.

VALERIE. I'm sorry. I just assumed –

ELWOOD. That's alright.

(Suddenly there is a scream from behind the secret panel.)

WILLY. What was that?

(CHARLES and VALERIE cross to the secret panel.)

VALERIE. It sounded like Henri. *(CHARLES opens the panel. HENRI enters, carrying a plate covered by a silver plate-warmer. She is terrified. VALERIE takes the plate from her.)* Are you alright?

HENRI. There's something in there.

VALERIE. What are you talking about?

HENRI. I was coming back from the kitchen and I felt something behind me.

CHARLES. How odd. Let's have a look.

(CHARLES goes into the passage to investigate.)

ELWOOD. What are you saying? Do you mean there's someone in there?

HENRI. Not someone – some*thing*.

VALERIE. What kind of something?

HENRI. I don't know.

VALERIE. Henri, you're imagining things.

HENRI. It was cold, like something out of the grave.

WILLY. Maybe it was Casper the friendly ghost, trying to cop a quick feel!

HENRI. It's not a joke, Willy.

(CHARLES re-enters.)

CHARLES. There's nothing in there, my dear. Just a lot of old cobwebs.

ELWOOD. There you go, Henri. That's probably all it was.

HENRI. No, I swear, there was something in there.

VALERIE. It was nothing Henriette. Now pull yourself together.

HENRI. But I fealt it, Valerie –

VALERIE. That's enough! *(HENRI lowers her head.)* Please excuse Henri. She's always been a little on the sensitive side. She used to be horribly afraid of the dark when she was a child. I'd sometimes have to sit up and read to her for hours before she'd go to sleep.

HENRI. *(Embarrassed)* Valerie, please.

VALERIE. Anyway, here's your dinner, Willy. Bon appetit.

WILLY. *(Lifting up the plate-warmer.)* Thanks. Mmm, this looks great.

VALERIE. Oh it's delicious.

ELWOOD. Yes, you outdid yourself this year, Charles. Quite a feast.

VALERIE. You mean, you did the cooking as well?

WILLY. Yeah, Charles does everything.

ELWOOD. A man of many talents, is our Charles. *(Calling)* McKenzie, where are you?

McKENZIE. *(Off)* Coming!

VALERIE. *(To CHARLES.)* Well I have to say, despite Henri's ghosts in the passageway, I've had a marvellous day. Thank you so much for inviting us.

CHARLES. Not at all – only too happy to have you. When the Bartleys told me what mystery buffs you two were, I knew this sort of thing would be just your cup of tea.

VALERIE. The Bartleys?

HENRI. Yes, you know the Bartleys. Margaret and I are on the board together at the Emmerson Art Gallery. I introduced you to them at the Humphrey exhibition last year. Don't you remember?

VALERIE. No, I don't.

CHARLES. Well they remembered you. When they called to tell me they couldn't make it, I asked if they knew of anyone else who might be interested, and they immediately suggested you.

HENRI. Well, I'm very glad they did. *(With a look to the secret panel.)* I think.

VALERIE. Yes, I couldn't imagine a more appropriate way to spend Halloween.

CHARLES. And it's not over yet. We still have to determine what Elwood has won.

WILLY. Yeah, we've had the tricks, now it's time for the treats!

ELWOOD. What the hell is taking her so long? *(Calling)* McKenzie, what are you doing up there?

McKENZIE. *(Off)* Be right there.

(CHARLES crosses to the drinks table and picks up a bottle of brandy from a lower shelf.)

CHARLES. Some brandy, Henri?

HENRI. Yes, please.

CHARLES. *(Proffering the bottle.)* Valerie?

VALERIE. Yes, thank you.

(McKENZIE comes running down the stairs in a much more modest outfit.)

ELWOOD. Ah, there you are.

McKENZIE. Sorry to keep you.

CHARLES. Brandy, McKenzie?

McKENZIE. Thanks.

(CHARLES hands McKENZIE and HENRI each a drink. He then puts the bottle back on the lower shelf and pours a drink from the decanter. He hands this drink to VALERIE.)

CHARLES. Now, in keeping with our tradition, I'd like to propose a toast. If you would all stand and raise your glasses – *(All but WILLY stand up. CHARLES turns and faces the portrait above the fireplace.)* To the woman who inspired our love of mysteries in the first place – that dowager of dramatic mystery, that matriarch of murder, that heroine of the whodunnit – Agatha Christie!

(They all turn to the portrait and raise their glasses.)

ALL. To Agatha!

(Suddenly the passageway door opens slowly with a loud creak. They all react. HENRI gasps and backs away.)

HENRI. I told you there was something in there!

CHARLES. *(Crossing to the panel and closing the door.)* Come now, let's not read too much into this. The latch probably just gave way.

HENRI. I'm not so sure.

VALERIE. Oh come on, Henriette. Your little scare in the passageway has got your imagination working overtime.

McKENZIE. What scare in the passageway?

WILLY. Henri thought she saw a ghost.

HENRI. I didn't say it was a ghost.

VALERIE. Oh, Henri. You've been reading too much Stephen King.

HENRI. It's this place. There's something awfully spooky about it. It gives me the willies.

(Everyone looks at WILLY.)

WILLY. So to speak.

ELWOOD. *(In an attempt to lighten the mood.)* Well it certainly scores full points for atmosphere.

VALERIE. Indeed. I've been meaning to ask you, Charles – how did you find it?

CHARLES. Oh, through one of those real estate brochures, you know.

McKENZIE. What was it listed under? Haunted Houses for rent?

CHARLES. Holiday homes, actually. It was quite a catchy advertisement – said something like, "Haddington House – secluded summer home perched on a cliff on private island in the Cassandra Lakes."

HENRI. Cassandra Lakes?

(VALERIE puts a warning hand on HENRI's shoulder.)

ELWOOD. Cassandra Lakes! So that's where we are.

CHARLES. But it was the line at the end that really caught my eye. In bold print it read: "Not for the faint-hearted."

WILLY. *(Imitating the spooky organ music.)* Ooo-ooo-ooo-ooo-ooo!

CHARLES. It sounded ideal, so I rented it.

ELWOOD. It's certainly perfect for our purposes.

WILLY. *(Indicating window R.)* And you got to love the view.

CHARLES. Yes. I would have opened the shutters on all the windows, but they warned me that this place gets awfully draughty this time of year. It's really only intended for summer use.

WILLY. I'm glad you opened this one, anyway. That was some sunset.

McKENZIE. What do you suppose they meant by "not for the faint-hearted?"

ELWOOD. They probably meant that climb up from the dock. It just about did me in.

CHARLES. I think it was just an advertising ploy, actually. They like to play up the mystery angle around here. It helps the tourist trade.

McKENZIE. The mystery angle?

CHARLES. Yes, you know. The Phantom Five. They were rumoured to have disappeared somewhere in this area.

McKENZIE. Who were the Phantom Five?

(HENRI and VALERIE exchange another look.)

WILLY. Oh come on, Mack. Don't you read anything except fashion magazines? You must have heard of them. They were the biggest disappearing act since Amelia Earhardt.

CHARLES. It was a famous case about twenty-odd years ago. It's never been solved. Five very wealthy, influential people with no apparent connection to one another suddenly vanished at the same time.

WILLY. People have been trying to figure out what happened to them for years. Some people think they were killed in a boating accident, some say they were taken out by the mob; some people even think they went off and joined a religious cult.

HENRI. Nonsense!

VALERIE. *(Cautioning her.)* Henri –

McKENZIE. So what does all this have to do with the Cassandra Lakes?

ELWOOD. The only connection is that on the day of their disappearance, all five of them were seen arriving at a private airstrip in the Cassandra Lakes area. They were never seen again.

McKENZIE. Really. No wonder you're seeing ghosts, Henri.

CHARLES. Anyway, that's all ancient history; and we still have some unfinished business to attend to – Elwood's prize.

WILLY. Yeah, I almost forgot. What's it going to be, Elwood?

ELWOOD. *(Lightly)* Well, as you so nicely pointed out, Willy, I've had a long time to think about this; and I decided years ago that if I ever did win one of these games, I'd want my prize to be something – a little out of the ordinary. Something that would require a bit of creativity on my part. And I think I've finally hit on the perfect idea: What I would like ... is a favour from each of you.

WILLY. A favour?

ELWOOD. Yes.

McKENZIE. What does that mean, exactly?

WILLY. You mean you get to borrow my power tools? Or drive Charles' Jag convertible for the weekend?

ELWOOD. If that's the sort of thing I choose to ask for, yes.

McKENZIE. That's it? Doesn't sound like much of a prize to me.

(ELWOOD crosses to pour himself another drink.)

HENRI. I'm not sure I understand. What is it you're asking of us, exactly?

ELWOOD. It's very simple. I'm saying that I get to ask one favour of each of you, and you're obligated to do it. Whatever it is.

CHARLES. One favour each.

ELWOOD. Of my choice. That's right.

WILLY. Wait a second. Anything? You can ask for anything you want?

ELWOOD. Yes.

WILLY. And we've got to give it to you?

ELWOOD. Correct. You've grasped the concept admirably.

WILLY. No restrictions, no exceptions?

ELWOOD. None.

WILLY. Oh my God.

(ELWOOD crosses to the fireplace.)

ELWOOD. *(Chuckling)* Yes, this is going to be fun.

(He picks up a cigar from the humidor on the mantle, crosses to the table and lights his cigar with the gun/lighter.)

WILLY. I don't like it. I think it's a bad idea.

HENRI. Why? It seems harmless enough to me.

WILLY. Harmless? What are you talking about? It's worth a fortune.

HENRI. How so?

WILLY. He's written himself a blank cheque! Suppose he asks me to hand over everything I own?

ELWOOD. Oh, come on. I won 147 companies around the world. I don't need anything of yours.

WILLY. Who said anything about need?

CHARLES. Willy, it's only a game, remember. Anyway, Elwood is aware of our budget. He knows we can't give him anything too extravagant.

WILLY. It's not the money I'm worried about. What if he asks me to rob a bank? Am I expected to go out and do it?

ELWOOD. Don't you think you're over-reacting just a bit, Willy?

HENRI. I think it's very clever. I mean, winning a trip to Monte Carlo is all very nice, but this is much more imaginative.

ELWOOD. Exactly! *(With an arm around McKENZIE.)* Of course, for some of you, deciding what to ask for won't take too much imagination at all.

(McKENZIE smiles half-heartedly.)

CHARLES. I'm sure we can count on Elwood to keep his requests within reason.

WILLY. Can we?

VALERIE. Look, if you're so concerned about it, why don't we just ask Elwood what he wants of us?

CHARLES. Good idea.

WILLY. Yes, let's get this over with. *(Turning to ELWOOD.)* OK, Elwood? What's it going to be?

ELWOOD. I beg your pardon?

WILLY. Your favour. Don't keep us in suspense. Tell us what you want.

ELWOOD. Well I don't know yet. I wasn't exactly prepared to win the game, you know. I need some time to think.

WILLY. How much time, exactly?

ELWOOD. Be reasonable. Part of the fun of a prize like this is figuring out what you're going to do with it.

McKENZIE. Oh, God.

WILLY. I'm telling you right now, Elwood. You take this too far, and I'm not going along with it.

ELWOOD. Don't be such a poor sport. You don't hear any of the others complaining, do you?

WILLY. It's got nothing to do with being a poor sport. I just don't think it's fair to expect us to sit here indefinitely, wondering when the axe is going to fall. *(Turning to CHARLES.)* I want to know what he wants, and I want to know now!

McKENZIE. Willy, cool your jets, will you? You're just going to make things worse.

ELWOOD. Alright people, I tell you what I'll do. In the interests of good sportsmanship, I'm going to go upstairs right now and make my decisions. You'll all have your requests before the night is out. Will that satisfy you? *(WILLY says nothing. ELWOOD crosses to the staircase.)* Very well then.

(He exits.)

WILLY. And what are we supposed to do in the meantime – sit here and play tiddlywinks?

CHARLES. Calm down, Willy. What's the matter with you?

WILLY. Look, I just know what Elwood's like, alright? I worked with the man, I've seen how he treats people. You think he got to own 147 companies by being a nice guy?

VALERIE. Yes, but that's business. You have to be tough in business if you want to survive.

McKENZIE. I don't know, Willy, maybe you are jumping to conclusions a bit. Why don't we wait and see what he asks for?

WILLY. Oh come on, Mack. Back me up here. You know what he's like as well as I do.

HENRI. You don't really think Elwood would ask us to do anything – unsavoury, do you?

WILLY. That's exactly what I think.

VALERIE. But why would he? He doesn't even know Henri and me. What could he possibly want from us that would be so unpleasant?

HENRI. *(With her.)* – so unpleasant, yes?

WILLY. Frankly, I'm not sticking around to find out.

VALERIE. What do you mean?

WILLY. I mean I'm getting out of here.

McKENZIE. You're not serious.

WILLY. You better believe I'm serious. Where's my chair?

McKENZIE. Come on Willy. Think it over, will you?

WILLY. I've thought it over. Where the hell is my chair?

McKENZIE. Running away is no answer. You should know that better than anybody.

WILLY. Will somebody get me my damn chair?

McKENZIE. *(Sighs)* Yes, alright. It's in your room.

(McKENZIE exits UR.)

CHARLES. Don't you think you're being a little premature? Why don't you give him the benefit of the doubt? I'm sure all he wants is a bit of fun.

WILLY. That's what I'm worried about, Charles. His definition of fun and yours are two very different things. I'm telling you, he's a dangerous man.

HENRI. You're starting to frighten me, Willy.

WILLY. Well it's nice to know I'm getting through to somebody.

CHARLES. Alright, that's enough! There's no point in alarming people unnecessarily.

WILLY. Fine, but don't say I didn't warn you. Now, how the hell do I get out of here?

HENRI. Willy, please, you can't leave!

CHARLES. That's right. You *can't* leave, I'm afraid. The boat's back on the mainland, and it's not scheduled to pick us up until tomorrow.

WILLY. Can't you call somebody? Tell them one of your guests is going home early?

CHARLES. No, I'm sorry. There's no phone here.

WILLY. Well, hasn't someone brought a cell phone with them, at least?

CHARLES. Even if they did, it wouldn't work. There's no service in this area.

WILLY. There's got to be some way off this rock!

CHARLES. Not unless you fancy a two-and-a-half-mile swim.

(McKENZIE enters UR with wheelchair.)

WILLY. Shit. You mean I'm stuck here?

CHARLES. That's right, so you might as well make the most of it.

McKENZIE. Here you go, Willy.

(She helps him into the wheelchair.)

WILLY. Well, maybe you can make me stay, but you can't make me go along with this.

CHARLES. Can't you at least wait until you've heard Elwood's request?

VALERIE. Yes. I mean. if it's that unreasonable, you can just refuse to do it.

HENRI. *(With him.)* – do it, yes.

WILLY. Not according to Elwood. He can ask for whatever he wants – and we have to give it to him.

CHARLES. Within reason, of course. Elwood wouldn't take advantage of us. He's an old friend after all.

WILLY. He's no friend of mine.

CHARLES. Well, I still think we should wait and see what he asks for. If anyone has any strong objections, I'm sure Elwood will be happy to change his request.

ELWOOD. Don't bet on it.

(Everyone turns to see ELWOOD standing in the entrance to the secret passage.)

McKENZIE. Elwood!

ELWOOD. I'm surprised at you, Charles. To think you'd even suggest such a thing. I thought you had more integrity than that.

WILLY. Elwood –

ELWOOD. Shut up, Yaskovitch. I've heard enough out of you. *(To the others.)* I've waited ten years for this, and I'm not going to be cheated out of it now. If you don't like what I ask for, that's just too bad. You're going to have to pay up anyhow.

WILLY. What if we refuse?

ELWOOD. Oh you'll pay, Willy – *(He pulls out a gun and levels it at WILLY.)* one way or another.

CHARLES. Elwood, what on earth are you doing?

ELWOOD. Just making my point. I won the game – now I'm collecting what I'm owed – and I *will* collect. *(Brandishing the gun at them.)* Understood? *(Silence)* Good. In that case, I think I'll call it a night. *(ELWOOD turns and heads towards the stairs. He stops, turns and smiles.)* Sweet dreams.

(He exits. They all watch him go. Suddenly CHARLES bursts into applause, laughing as he does so.)

CHARLES. What a performance!

VALERIE. Performance? What do you mean? He certainly looked as though he meant business.

HENRI. *(With her.)* – business, yes.

CHARLES. Oh come now. What did you think he was going to do? Commit mass murder with a cigarette lighter?

VALERIE. Cigarette lighter?

CHARLES. Yes, of course! I must admit, he was rather good. He even had me going for a moment.

VALERIE. You don't mean ... ? Oh, that old prankster!

HENRI. *(With her.)* – prankster!

McKENZIE. What a slimy stunt to pull – threatening us with a lighter!

(They laugh.)

WILLY. That was no lighter.

(Everyone turns to WILLY.)

CHARLES. What do you mean?

WILLY. Look.

(WILLY holds up the gun/lighter and pulls the trigger. A small flame shoots out the end. BLACKOUT.)

Scene Two

(Setting: The same as above. Night – a few hours later. The table and some of the chairs have been struck. The curtains have been drawn across the window DR. A storm is raging outside. The only source of light is from the fireplace. There is a banging sound from the window area. HENRI, dressed in her nightclothes, appears at the top of the stairs.)

HENRI. Hello? Is anyone there? *(She comes down the stairs a bit, peering through the gloom, stops. There is a second bang from the window.)* Valerie, is that you? *(She reaches the bottom of the stairs. There is another loud bang from the direction of the window R. HENRI freezes in her tracks.)* Who's there?

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