

What Price Murder? Excerpt

SCENE 1

Broadway in the early 1950s. A theatre-stage living room of an upscale apartment in New York. This is a set in the play that MARTHA, NORA and CHESTER are in: What Price Murder. There is a small divan or love seat. Two easy chairs and a coffee table. It's the basic set for Acts One and Two. MARTHA is holding a pistol, pointing it at NORA. There is a long moment of silence.

NORA

Well, what are you going to do? Shoot me? Come on, Maureen. That's too dramatic, even for you.

MARTHA

It's always been you, hasn't it, Ramona? The threatening phone calls. The anonymous tips to Hal O'Brian's column. The secret meetings between you and Lou's lawyer. You've poisoned Lou against me. You think you can get everything once we're divorced. Well, all you're going to get is an expensive funeral.

NORA

All you're going to get is life in prison. That's some divorce settlement.

CHESTER

(off stage) Ramona darling. I have the tickets. *(enters)* We just need to...Maureen! I thought you were going to Boston for the opening of the art gallery.

MARTHA

Come in Louis. You've arrived just in time.

CHESTER

Just in time?

MARTHA

Yes. For your ... big scene. Like the one in the movies before the heroine kills yourself.

CHESTER

Why that's my gun. Don't point it at anyone, Ramona. It could go off.

MARTHA

Exactly. I've thought it all out. It's going to be a lover's quarrel. You're so devastated, Maureen, by Lou taking his life, that all you can do is end yours.,

NORA

Maureen, what are you talking about. That's crazy.

CHESTER

Ramona, put down the gun. Quit acting like a jealous lover. Save that for the roles you play.

MARTHA

Jealous? Not after today. Not after both of you are dead.

(She shoots CHESTER. He collapses.)

NORA

(now frightened) What have you done? What have you done? *(She goes to him.)* He's dead. This is crazy. You can't go around killing people.

MARTHA

It seems I just did.

NORA

I thought you loved Lou.

MARTHA

That's why I killed him. That's why I'm going to kill you. If I can't have him, nobody can. *(starts to approach NORA)* You think you're so smart, so fashionable, that everything you want will just fall into your lap. Well here is one thing you'll get that *will* fall, all right. You sprawled out on the floor with a bullet through your heart.

NORA

Now hold on, Maureen. I never meant to harm you. It was Lou who came after me. He's the one you should blame. I'll admit I was attracted to him. I tried to resist, but he kept at me. And you know me, I don't have much will power. But the divorce was all Lou's doing. That's when I realized I had to break it off. That's when —

(She shoots NORA. NORA slumps to the floor, but takes an unusually long time to die.)

(SIDNEY comes on stage from the audience as CHESTER gets to his feet.)

SIDNEY

No, no, no. Damn it, Nora. This isn't a B-Movie thriller. Just die. Can't you do that? She shoots you. You die. It's that's simple. Chester, you don't have any trouble with that. She shoots you, you just die.

CHESTER

No trouble, *mon capitain*. You should go back to summer stock, Nora dear. That's your *métier*. Two-week rehearsals and performances in a barn to a bunch of yokels.

MARTHA

See, Sidney. That's what I've been telling you. That little minx upstages me every chance she gets.

CHESTER

Add me to the list, Sid.

MARTHA

If you don't put a stop to it ... I tell you, I can't take any more of this. She's always sneaking around my dressing room, doing god knows what.

NORA

Upstaging you? I'm doing you a favour, Martha, darling. You mumble most of your lines. At least the audience can hear mine.

SIDNEY

Cut out of the hysterics. Both of you. Save it for your scenes.

NORA

What scenes? I die at the end of act one.

CHESTER

Good riddance, I say.

NORA

This was supposed to be my big break. Jordan was supposed to write a big part for me.

CHESTER

Big parts are for big people, Nora dear. Maybe when you grow up.

SIDNEY

Shut up, Chester. He did, Nora.

NORA

Then why am I not in act two? I've five scenes in act one and then I die.

MARTHA

You should have been killed at the beginning of act.

CHESTER

I'll second that.

NORA

Look who's talking. The both of you. The moment you open your mouths, the whole scene dies. With you in the lead, *What Price Murder* should be retitled. *A Two-Bit Murder*. You're not a has-been, Martha. You're a never-was-been. Or haven't you read the reviews of your last four plays? And as for you, Chester darling, the only good notices you get are the ones you pay for. This play is going to die, Sidney. Can't you see that? It's going to take more than your direction to give Miss Mumbles here life. As well as—

(MARTHA slaps NORA.)

NORA

Now look who's the primo donna.

CHESTER

Way to go girl. I've been wanting to do that for weeks.

SIDNEY

That's enough. Martha. Nora. Chester. Martha, you apologize. And Nora, quit trying to upstage her. Just play the scenes as we rehearsed them. And Chester, keep your opinions to yourself. We've got three weeks before previews. And as for direction, Nora. JUST DIE! Period! Like Chester. *(a*

pause) Okay? Is that too difficult for you to do? Now the scene I want to do next is scene 4, act two. That still needs work. *(calls out)* Tony. Where the hell is that guy?

MARTHA

I'm sorry, Sid. I've just got to lie down for a moment.

SIDNEY

Tony!

NORA

That's right, Martha. Better lie down before you lay an egg. Like you do for most of your scenes.

SIDNEY

Goddamn it. Both of you cut it out. Martha, honey. Just one more scene, and then we'll quit for the day.

MARTHA

I'm sorry, Sid. I have a splitting headache.

SIDNEY

(to MARTHA) Please. (shouts) TONY!

(TONY enters. He carries a three-ring-binder.)

TONY

Right here.

SIDNEY

Where the hell have you been? I haven't seen you since the morning.

TONY

I've been at my club practicing for the tournament next week. You said it would be all right.

SIDNEY

You said for an hour, not all morning. *(exasperated with everything)* You're supposed to be my stage manager. That means managing the STAGE. Not the OFF STAGE.

TONY

Right you are.

(MARTHA starts to exit.)

SIDNEY

Martha, dear, please. We'll just go over the end of scene 4. Just once. It won't take but a few minutes. You don't have to stay, Chester. But be here at eight tomorrow morning. We're doing a run through of act two.

CHESTER

Do people really get up that early?

MARTHA

I'm afraid, Sid, I'm not going to be any good to you that early. Not with this headache coming on.

CHESTER

I'll second that, but without the headache.

SIDNEY

Okay. Make it twelve. So now, can we just go over scene 4? Just you and me, Martha.

MARTHA

I'm sorry, Sid. Tomorrow. We can do the scene tomorrow. I have my health to think of.

SIDNEY

(looking at NORA) Not another word out of you.

(MARTHA touches her head.)

MARTHA

Now, I have to lie down.

SIDNEY

(frustrated) Okay.

MARTHA

And I don't think I'll make Sardis tonight. I know Jordan wants to discuss some changes for the beginning of act two, but honestly, I just don't have the energy for a round of changes. Can't we just have a quiet dinner at my place?

SIDNEY

(surrenders) Sure. *(She starts to exit.)* Martha, the gun. I don't want it lying around in somebody's dressing room. We've already misplaced one prop gun, and if we don't find it, it's going to cost. And were already over budget, and the backers are breathing down my neck.

MARTHA

(a thoughtful silence) Oh, sure. *(She hands it to Tony.)*

SIDNEY

(to TONY) Put in the prop box.

NORA

That's right, Sidney. We don't want Miss Brody to get ideas.

MARTHA

Don't worry, honey. Killing you at the end of act one is enough for me. *(She exits.)*

BLACKOUT