

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 herself.

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 going to run through 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.)*

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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, by Lou taking his life, that all you can do is end yours.,

NORA

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

CHESTER

Maureen, 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 —

(MARTHA shoots NORA. NORA jumps back as if something has struck her chest. She collapses. MARTHA lets go of the gun and it falls to the floor as we have a slow BLACKOUT.)

SIDNEY

(in the BLACKOUT) Finally! That's great Nora. She shoots. You die.

CHESTER

(in the BLACKOUT) See, Nora it's easy. Nora? Nora? ... Hell, there's blood on my hands. Hey, give us some light. I think Nora's been shot.

(END OF ACT ONE)

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(CHESTER sits behind the coffee table. He sprinkles a little white powder out of the paper bag. Then begins to sniff it. NORA enters.)

NORA

My, my, what do we have here?

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MARTHA

(as she is about to leave) Uh ... Lieutenant ... I actually do have a piece of news ... some evidence that might be relevant to your investigation.

HASTINGS

Yeah? What is that?

MARTHA

Chester is a ... drug addict.

HASTINGS

Really. And how would that effect the investigation? Was Miss Lamour a drug addict, too?

MARTHA

That, I don't know. But what I overheard suggests she might have been a blackmailer.

HASTINGS

(sceptical) What you overheard. What was that exactly?

MARTHA

(She sits.) Well ... Chester was sitting on the stage set ... I think the expression is "snorting" some kind of white powder.

(LIGHTS up on the sofa and coffee table. CHESTER is "snorting" a line of powder. There is a small paper bag on the table. This is a memory scene, so the lighting should make it look unreal. NORA enters.)

CHESTER

(He sneezes, then tries to hide the remaining cocaine.) You shouldn't sneak up on people.

NORA

Well, I guess not. Just look at what they can discover.

CHESTER

It's not what it seems.

NORA

Oh, I don't know about that. It seems pretty obvious to me. You're a drug addict, Chester. That explains your churlish behaviour. Wouldn't Sidney like to know. Or better yet, the police.

CHESTER

No, no. Don't do that.

NORA

Give me the bag. Come on. Or do you want me to call the police.

CHESTER

(He reluctantly hands her the bag.) What are you going to do with it?

NORA

It's evidence. In case I should need something from you.

CHESTER

Like what?

NORA

I don't know. I'll think about it.

CHESTER

I'll tell them it's yours.

NORA

Be my guest. One look at your nose should just about seal the situation. So who is the good Samaritan who supplies you with your pick-me-up white powder.

CHESTER

Actually, this was never my idea. I didn't know what I was taking and then I was hooked, I guess.

NORA

Where'd you get it from. It's not something you're liable to find on grocery store shelves.

CHESTER

It was all Tony's idea. He's the drug dealer. Not me.

NORA

Interesting. I guess I'll have pay a visit to said Tony, too. With accent on PAY.

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CHESTER

I didn't catch your name.

FANNY

(to CHESTER) I didn't throw it. *(to NORA)* It's Fanny Graham, Miss Lamour.

NORA

Fanny Graham. Wait a minute. I know who you are. You're "Whispers Around Town." Gossip for the theatre crowd.

FANNY

That's me.

NORA

Well, I might have some gossip for you. Maybe in a day or two.

FANNY

Can't wait.

NORA

Me, too. Bye.

FANNY

Bye. (*NORA exits.*) When did she arrive?

CHESTER

What?

FANNY

Has she been with the company for very long?

CHESTER

Oh, she's been with the cast from the beginning. She had a bit part in Sid's last play. She and Sid have history — if you want some gossip — when he wasn't babysitting Martha. But don't put that in your column. You'll get me fired.

FANNY

Don't worry. For now. But, you know, all of you should be on your guard.

CHESTER

What?

FANNY

Don't you know who this Miss Nora Lamour really is?

CHESTER

What? Oh, that's probably her stage name. All the young ingénues like to have one. She says she's from somewhere in Mississippi.

FANNY

Ever heard of the Crystal Hanson case?

CHESTER

What? No.

FANNY

In L.A. About fourteen, fifteen years ago. A teen murders her parents along with her uncle. Little sister, who was only three — I think her name was Natalie — was sleeping thankfully at her friend's house down the street. Gruesome scene. The teen was still technically a child under the law. All they could do is hold her until she was eighteen. Nobody knows why she did it. She doesn't speak at the trial. Doesn't talk to her lawyer. For a few years, lots of stories about her, but since she won't talk to anyone, mostly made up. After a while, the yellow rags got tired of

the story. But when she was released on her eighteenth birthday, an army of reporters were waiting for her. Unfortunately, not me because I was just graduating from Fairfax High in L.A. Just a few blocks where the murders took place. The only story the reporters got was from the warden. He let her leave by another exit. Don't know what happened to the little sister. And as for the child murderer, the day she left prison was the last anyone ever heard of her. *(a beat)*
Until now.

CHESTER

You don't say. That's a little off your Broadway beat, isn't it?

FANNY

I wouldn't say that. You see, your little miss Nora Lamour is really Crystal Hanson.

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JORDAN

(Off stage) Hey Tony, have you seen my briefcase. I left it somewhere when I went home.

TONY

(Off stage) Nora has it. I think she was going to put it in the prop room.

JORDAN

(Off stage) Oh. Okay. Thanks.

(LIGHTS up on JORDAN. As he turns to exit, NORA enters. She is holding the briefcase.)

NORA

Looking for something?

JORDAN

Oh, yeah. Thanks for finding it. I have a hard time keeping track of my things ever since Joan left me. You know the old joke: I'd forget my head if it wasn't screwed on.

NORA

Joan? Your paramour?

JORDAN

My ...? Oh, very cute. No, it never got that serious. You looking to fill the void? I know you and Sid once had thing together.

NORA

A thing, was it?

JORDAN

Oh, never mind. The briefcase?

NORA

Sure. *(She hands it to him.)* Here. *(He takes it and is about to exit.)*

JORDAN

Thanks.

NORA

If you look inside, you'll see there's something missing.

JORDAN

What? *(Checks that the briefcase is still locked.)* What do you mean?

NORA

Mean? Why I think if you look inside, you'll find that poor, little Oren Cohen has gone missing.

JORDAN

What? Why you ... *(He opens the briefcase.)* Why you little sneak thief. You stay out of my things.

NORA

You got that wrong, Jordan. That little play of yours isn't yours.

JORDAN

I don't know what you mean. That was just an early version of What Price Murder.

NORA

What price, indeed.

JORDAN

I tell you, I don't know what you mean. Oren and I were at Yale together. It was just a joke. Him writing his name on the play. Just a joke.

NORA

On you, Jordan. Why don't we get in touch with Mr. Cohen and see what he says. I think a good detective wouldn't have any trouble finding him.

(A moment of silence as each regards the other.)

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HASTINGS

My name is Hastings. Detective Lieutenant Hastings. This is a homicide investigation. My men will be taking finger prints of all of you. As for you women, if you have purses, be prepared to empty them in front of me or my sergeant. No one is to leave the stage or the theatre without my permission.

TONY

Now wait a minute. This isn't a homicide. It was an accident. I don't see why we have to be here.

HASTINGS

What's your name

TONY

Uh ... Tony. Tony Fellows.

HASTINGS

Well, Tony Fellows, I don't like to be interrupted when I'm speaking. It's bad manners. *(He goes to one of the exits. Speaking to someone OFFSTAGE. He's downstage of everyone, so we can see their reactions.)* Sergeant, is everybody here?

SERGEANT

(offstage) We're still trying to locate this Chester guy. Oh, and one of the actresses, Martha Brody ... we think she's somewhere in the building. She's the one who pulled the trigger.

HASTINGS

(to everyone) Where would this Martha Brody be?

SIDNEY

She's in her dressing room, but she's too upset to come out.

HASTINGS

And I'm too upset that everyone isn't here. Get her. NOW. *(SIDNEY reluctantly exits.)*

JORDAN

Really, Officer. Miss Brody is in a delicate state. All this has been quite a shock to her. As it has been to all of us.

HASTINGS

It's Detective Lieutenant Hastings. Not officer. What's your name?

JORDAN

Jordan Cooper.

HASTINGS

What do you do around here?

JORDAN

This is my play. I'm the author.

HASTINGS

Do you make it a habit of shooting people in your plays?

JORDAN

This is a murder mystery, Lieutenant. That's what the audience expects.

HASTINGS

They don't expect murder.

TONY

Now wait a minute. This was an accident. Plain and simple.

HASTINGS

That's to be determined, Mr. Fellows. But there's still a dead body in the morgue where a live one should be standing here. Now exactly, what happened?

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My sergeant informs me that the murder weapon has disappeared. That's not a very good start to an accident investigation. I would call that suspicious. Wouldn't you? Can any of you tell me what happened to the murder weapon?

TONY

Uh ... I put it in the prop room. I didn't want that thing lying around here in case—

HASTINGS

You did what? Don't you realize it's a criminal offence to remove evidence from a crime scene?

TONY

But this isn't a crime scene. It's a—

HASTINGS

Shut up. *(yells)* Sergeant!

SERGEANT

(off) Yes, sir.

HASTINGS

Get someone to show you the prop room, and get all the firearms you find.

TONY

(puts a hand up) Lieutenant.

HASTINGS

Put your hand down. This isn't a classroom. If you have to go we-we, you'll have to wait.

TONY

I only wanted to say that I would be happy to show your sergeant the prop room.

HASTINGS

And I would be happy to say, just remain where you are. All of you. I have men stationed at all the exits, so just cool your heels for a while.

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(LIGHTS up. JORDAN and HASTINGS are sitting down in the interview room. The script is hidden. The rest of the stage is dark..)

HASTINGS

So you're the playwright.

(At first JORDAN is nervous, but he begins to relax as HASTINGS is just asking him general questions.)

JORDAN

Yes.

HASTINGS

Written lots of plays?

JORDAN

A few.

HASTINGS

So this isn't your first play?

JORDAN

Why do you ask?

HASTINGS

You weren't romantically involved with the victim, were you?

JORDAN

(With that question, he really relaxes.) Romantically involved. Really, Lieutenant, you sound like a character out of an old-fashioned murder mystery. No, of course not. If anyone was involved, it would have been Sidney.

HASTINGS

How do you go about writing one of your mysteries? Do you take a story from real life? Or do you make it up?

JORDAN

Oh, well. It depends. Depends what kind of a germ of an idea strikes you.

HASTINGS

Take this play. What gave you the idea?

JORDAN

Oh ... the idea. Uh, something I read in the paper. Don't remember which paper or when the idea popped into my head. That's how I work. I let an idea simmer for a while before I start writing.

HASTINGS

(reveals the playscript) Did this Mr. Oren Cohan let his idea simmer for a while before you got his playscript?

JORDAN

(startled, but recovers quickly) Oh, that. That was just a joke when we were in university. Oren always wanted to write a play, so for a joke, I let him put his name on the title page. Just a joke.

HASTINGS

Was it just a joke when Miss Lamour threatened to blackmail you?

JORDAN

That's not true. Whoever told you such nonsense didn't know what they were talking about.

HASTINGS

I see. Well, police forces are very good at finding people. So when we find Mr. Cohen, we'll see what he says. *(a pause)* What did you do when you found out that Miss Lamour discovered you hadn't written this play. What Price Murder, I believe it's called.

JORDON

Discovered? I think you got the wrong end of the stick. I don't know who told you that.

HASTINGS

I have a witness, if it comes to that. But I'd prefer it if you just told me the truth.

JORDAN

Oh ... This is ... this was all just a misunderstanding. Nora never liked me. She thought because of few scribbles on a script, she could get something out of me. She always liked to make people squirm.

HASTINGS

I guess, we'll let Mr. Cohen decide who squirms.

(There is a moment of silence while JORDAN "squirms.")

JORDAN

This is embarrassing, Lieutenant. I admit I ... there is a striking resemblance to what Oren ... wrote, but that isn't a crime.

HASTINGS

No. that's a civil matter. But it would be a blow to your career. And that would make you a very plausible suspect of the murder.

(BLACKOUT)