

# DEATH STALKS A LADY

## By David J. LeMaster

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## CHARACTERS

NICK WALLACE (M)	a hardboiled Private Eye; think Humphrey Bogart, think Spade and Marlowe
MR. DASHIELL (M)	an enormously fat man with a jovial attitude and an air of mystery; think Sydney Greenstreet in The Maltese Falcon
PHINEAS (M)	DASHIELL's hitman, small, eerie, and untrustworthy; think Peter Lore
DOROTHY BROWNE (F)	a strong-willed woman; NICK's secretary; secretly in love with Nick; the play's female lead, but not a weak woman
VERONICA STANLEY(F)	a mysterious woman with a past; use a Veronica Lake haircut
HEDY (F)	DASHIELL's daughter; is not what she appears
CHIEF FRAULEY (M)	the police chief; got a bad side; think Edward G. Robinson
CIGARETTE GIRL (F)	an innocent caught up in the action
JOHNSON (E)	a working stiff at the police office
BARTENDER (E)	a tough guy
HOTEL CLERK (E)	
ELEVATOR OPERATOR (E)	
POLICE (E)	
POLICEMEN (E)	
FIREMEN (E)	
EXTRAS (E)	may be in hotel lobby, on streets, in bar, etc.

**NOTE:** This play may be performed with as few as eleven (4 men, 3 women, 4 either with doubling), or as many as the company has. The action goes from place to place, and the set should be minimal, but cast members/extras may be in the background in the bar, on the streets, in the hotel lobby, etc. The action should be continuous, without blackouts, and scene changes should be minimal and a part of the action.

### **TIME & PLACE**

The setting is the city, sometime in the 1940s. It may be played on a bare stage or with minimal set pieces. The action is continuous.

There are six basic places where the action takes place:

Wallace's Private Eye Office

A City Street

A Bar

The Lobby of The Ambassador Hotel

Dashiell's room on the third floor of the Ambassador

Dorothy's Flat

### **DIRECTOR'S NOTES**

This play is heavily influenced by film noir classics such as "The Maltese Falcon," "The Thin Man," and "Double Indemnity." The dialogue is highly stylized pattern that should be fast and continuous. I've suggested actors and characters that influenced my composition. The director is free to take inspiration from these or other characters.

Should the director choose to use set pieces, they should be minimal and stylized. The costumes should be by 1940's style.

This play is intended to be suitable for any age. Should a director work with a younger cast, the "kissing" scenes may be edited or cut down at the discretion of the director for the comfort of the actors. Have fun, play a style, and entertain the audience.

## PROP LIST

Gun (WALLACE)	Ropes (HEDY)
File (WALLACE)	A knife (HEDY)
Cigarettes (WALLACE)	Cigarettes (HEDY)
Handcuffs (WALLACE)	A zippo lighter (HEDY)
Money (WALLACE)	Cigar (FRAULEY)
Drinks (DASHIELL)	Gun (FRAULEY)
Telephone (DASHIELL)	A tray with cigars and cigarettes (CIGARETTE GIRL)
Gun (DASHIELL)	A pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes (CIGARETTE GIRL)
Gun (PHINAES)	Files and Book of Suspect photographs (JOHNSON)
A chair (PHINAES)	Telephone (JOHNSON)
Ropes (PHINAES)	Drinks and bottles (BARTENDER)
Pad and paper (BROWNE)	Shot glass (BARTENDER)
Photograph of Mr. Stanley (STANELY)	Rag (BARTENDER)
Money (STANELY)	Hotel book (HOTEL CLERK)
Gun (HEDY)	
Drinks and bottles (HEDY)	
Necklace (HEDY)	

## COSTUMES

HEDY – dresses conservatively. White blouse with khaki pants.

CHIEF FRAULEY – 1940s suit and tie and fedora.

CIGARETTE GIRL – wears cigarette girl costume with short skirt.

JOHNSON – coat and tie.

BARTENDER – wears white shirt and dark pants.

HOTEL CLERK – Wears suit.

ELEVATOR OPERATOR – Wears red uniform with buttons and white gloves.

POLICEMEN – Wear Police uniforms

FIREMEN – Wears fireman uniform

EXTRAS – May have any number of extras dressed in 1940s clothing

## SOUND EFFECTS

Police sirens

Sounds of fire

Sounds of city

Sounds of hotel and bar

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## ACT I

**SETTING:** *Sparse. The action moves from place to place without pause. When WALLACE walks out of the office and to the bar, stage hands bring on the various needed pieces as he narrates.*

**At Rise:** *Open on NICK WALLACE's office. WALLACE speaks directly to the audience when HE narrates and then turns to the other characters and interacts with them. If WALLACE speaks to the audience when someone else is onstage, that actor does not join him or react to him.*

WALLACE: Name's Wallace. Nick Wallace. I'm a private eye. I used to be a cop. It's a tough city. Cops get used and thrown away all the time. I'd been both. I was down on my luck and desperate for work. The case started on a cold winter's night when I was just about to go home.

**(DOROTHY BROWNE enters as HE speaks.)**

DOROTHY: You got anything else for me, boss?

WALLACE: No, sweetheart. Looks like you can take a hike.

DOROTHY: Thanks, Wallace. A gentleman's picking me up at nine.

WALLACE: Gentleman, huh?

DOROTHY: To go dancing.

WALLACE: Is that a fact? And what's this gentleman's name?

DOROTHY: What's it to you?

WALLACE: Got to be sure he's on the up-and-up.

DOROTHY: Sorry, Wallace. It's a secret.

WALLACE: How're you gonna keep a secret from a guy like me?

DOROTHY: Do I detect a hint of jealousy?

WALLACE: Better leave the *detecting* to me, sweetheart.

DOROTHY: Aren't you the clever one. Listen, boss, I wanted to ask you—

**(The door opens. They both pause. Enter VERONICA, a beauty. SHE looks scared.)**

WALLACE: **(to audience)** And that's when it happened. She walked through the door, looking like a million dollars. I couldn't take my eyes off her.

DOROTHY: **(to VERONICA)** May I help you?

VERONICA: Yes. I'm looking for Mr. Wallace.

DOROTHY: **(to WALLACE)** Guess that's my cue to leave.

WALLACE: Guess it is.

DOROTHY: Talk to you tomorrow, chief.

WALLACE: Right. Take care of yourself, Miss Browne.

DOROTHY: Aw, what do you care, you big lug. **(leaves)**

VERONICA: I guess you're Wallace.

WALLACE: I guess I am. **(pulls out cigarette)** And who are you, dollface?

VERONICA: Stanley. Mrs. Veronica Stanley.

WALLACE: **(with interest)** Stanley, eh?

VERONICA: You've heard the name?

WALLACE: Yeah, I've heard it. What's it to you?

VERONICA: Then you must know I'm heir to the Stanley fortune.

WALLACE: So? That and two bits will buy me a cup of coffee.

VERONICA: I don't have time to waste, Mr. Wallace. I need your help. I'll pay.

WALLACE: How much?

VERONICA: What's your going rate?

WALLACE: Depends on the services rendered.

VERONICA: I want you to trail my husband.

WALLACE: And what else?

VERONICA: Bring me photographs.

WALLACE: I'll take two and a half.

VERONICA: I can have it done for two.

WALLACE: Lindquist charges three and a quarter and Baker charges four.

VERONICA: You know your competition.

WALLACE: What's it to you, sister? You're heir to millions. Why're you pinching pennies?

VERONICA: I'll answer no questions. That's why I've approached a sleazebag like you to do my work.

WALLACE: Please. My feelings.

VERONICA: You'll take any case so long as it pays. You don't look at clients' backgrounds, and you don't care if they're on the up-and-up. Just as long as the checks don't bounce or the cash isn't dirty, you'll take it and look the other way.

WALLACE: Got to pay the bills, sister.

VERONICA: But you *don't* pay the bills, Mr. Wallace. You've been threatened with eviction and at the office. And your secretary's paychecks are seldom on time. But she's loyal to you anyway. Poor

girl. She carries a torch for you the size of Rome. You could throw her off a cliff and she'd come right back for more. **(pause)** Depending on if she survived.

WALLACE: You've done your homework, Toots.

VERONICA: Then you'll take two and a quarter.

WALLACE: So what do you know, a chintzy millionaire?

VERONICA: *Heir* to a million, Wallace. I don't have it yet.

WALLACE: What do you *really* want?

VERONICA: To catch him. That no-good, lying cheat. He's seeing a girl on the side, I know it.

WALLACE: And if he is? What then, Mrs. Stanley?

VERONICA: Call me Veronica.

WALLACE: I'll call you Mrs. Stanley.

VERONICA: Very well. **(takes out cigarette)** I'll want you to kill him.

WALLACE: **(amused)** Is that a fact? Sounds like you're setting me up.

VERONICA: I don't know what you mean.

WALLACE: Look me in the eyes and tell me a bird named Frauley didn't send you.

VERONICA: Frauley?

WALLACE: That's right. Jonathan Frauley. The police chief himself.

VERONICA: I assure you, Mr. Wallace. No one "sent" me. Will you take my case or not?

WALLACE: All right, sister. I'll trail your husband. But if you want him eighty-six'ed, you'll have to shell out a lot more than two fifty.

VERONICA: Two and a quarter.

WALLACE: Two fifty or you can take a hike.

VERONICA: **(smiles)** And how much to kill him?

WALLACE: We'll talk about that when it's time. You got a photo?

VERONICA: Yeah, I got one.

WALLACE: Well, pass it by me.

VERONICA: **(gives photo)** Here.

WALLACE: **(looks at photo)** Nice looking fella. Too bad you want him in a pair of cement overshoes.

VERONICA: It doesn't have to be that way.

WALLACE: Doesn't matter what I do, as long as he doesn't come home in the morning, is that it?

VERONICA: Enough of this chitchat. Will you take the case?

WALLACE: Yeah, I'll take it.

VERONICA: Good. Here's fifty now. You'll get the rest when I see my photos.

WALLACE: I'll get it all now, sister. Or you don't get your proof.

VERONICA: You drive a hard bargain. **(pays)** Call me at this number when you've got what I want.

WALLACE: All right.

VERONICA: Oh. And Mr. Wallace.

WALLACE: Yeah?

VERONICA: I want pictures of *her*, too.

WALLACE: Her?

VERONICA: The girl he's with.

WALLACE: And what do you plan to do with *her*?

VERONICA: **(pause, smiles)** Goodnight, Mr. Wallace.

WALLACE: **(scene changes behind him as HE speaks to the audience, walks into the scene; to audience)** I wasn't about to kill her old man, but tracking him was fine. She'd greased my palm with a couple of fifties, so I did a little undercover work. Seems her old man claimed to be popular with the fellas. Told her he was working late and then went to a bar. I tailed him across town to a dive called Fred's.

**(We are in Fred's. WALLACE walks in and takes a stool. If using a large cast, the entire stage may be inhabited by patrons. WALLACE should become caught in a flood of people as HE tries to leave the bar. The BARTENDER looks at him.)**

BARTENDER: What'll you have?

WALLACE: Give me a whiskey.

BARTENDER: **(making drink)** You're new around here.

WALLACE: What's it to you?

BARTENDER: I got my eye on anyone new. I don't want trouble.

WALLACE: There's no trouble.

BARTENDER: Then here's your whiskey.

**(BARTENDER puts the whiskey down and WALLACE shoots it. Pause. The BARTENDER leaves. Enter a CIGARETTE GIRL.)**

CIGARETTE GIRL: Cigars. Cigarettes. Cigars. Cigarettes.

WALLACE: I'll take a pack of Lucky Stripes.

CIGARETTE GIRL: **(makes exchange)** Yes, sir!

WALLACE: Thanks, sweetheart. Keep the change.

CIGARETTE GIRL: **(looks around, lowers voice)** They *know* you're here, Wallace.

WALLACE: I beg your pardon?

CIGARETTE GIRL: Them. You're in danger here. You need to leave.

WALLACE: What are you talking about, sister?

CIGARETTE GIRL: The walls have ears.

WALLACE: So let's go someplace else.

CIGARETTE GIRL: I can't. He's watching.

WALLACE: Who's watching?

CIGARETTE GIRL: Him. Buy another pack of cigarettes so he doesn't get suspicious. Hurry.

WALLACE: (*paying*) Here you go.

CIGARETTE GIRL: (*glancing around*) I'll meet you outside in ten.

WALLACE: On the street?

CIGARETTE GIRL: The alley behind the bar.

WALLACE: Right.

CIGARETTE GIRL: Be careful. Things are not as they seem.

WALLACE: Oh? What are they, then?

CIGARETTE GIRL: It's no joke, Wallace. They're after you. I'm not trying to pull the wool over your eyes. You hear me? You're in *danger*. (*pulls away from him and puts on a fake laugh*) Oh, sir! You're such a flirt. (*walks away*)

WALLACE: (*watches her, then directly addresses audience*) I watched her walk away—and then I noticed something else. While she talked to me, the guy I was tailing gave me the slip. I caught a glimpse of him in the crowd—

BARTENDER: Hey, where you goin'?

WALLACE: I'll be back.

BARTENDER: You gotta pay for that drink.

WALLACE: I said I'll be back.

BARTENDER: And I said you gotta pay. Now. You hear me, tough guy?

WALLACE: Yeah, sure, I heard you. I'll pay. (*takes out money and pays, turns back to audience*) It wasn't much distraction, but it was enough. The suspect had vanished. But then, she came in. And everything began to make sense.

**(Enter DOROTHY, in spiffy dress.)**

DOROTHY: Why, Nick? Is that you?

WALLACE: Miss Browne! What are you doing here?

DOROTHY: I could ask you the same question. Are you spying on me?

WALLACE: (*amused*) Spying?

DOROTHY: You showed up here, where I am.

WALLACE: Mere coincidence.

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