

MURDER AT COPPERSMITH INN

By Dan Neidermyer

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MURDER AT COPPERSMITH INN

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

(6 MEN, 9 WOMEN, EXTRAS AS DESIRED)

- MANDY/DESIREE (f).....A zany high school junior who wants to be an actress. Her stage name is “Desiree Coulton.” *(164 lines)*
- ELINOR/BARTON (f)A studious high school junior who has an interest in becoming an actress. Her stage name is “Barton Bardot.” *(124 lines)*
- SARA/FRANCHOT (f)A very good friend of both Mandy and Elinor who also wants very much to be an actress. Her stage name is “Franchot.” *(122 lines)*
- BIRDIE MAYHEW (f).....The housekeeper at Coppersmith Inn. *(35 lines)*
- MORTIMER SCROGGS (m).....The villainous landlord of Coppersmith Inn. *(33 lines)*
- MISS GOOCH (f).....Scroggs’ lackluster lackey secretary. *(10 lines)*
- GERTRUDE ESTHERWORTH (m).....An elderly woman in disguise. She’s actually “Roger,” a G-Man hot on the trail of counterfeiters. *(66 lines)*
- HEIDI BREITENBACH (m).....Gertrude’s sister, also in disguise. She’s actually “Bruce,” another G-Man working with Gertrude. *(55 lines)*

KRYSTAL LYNN McCORD (f).....A romance novelist. (25 lines)

THE “COPPERSMITH” PLAYERS

LOUELLA DU-PAGE (f).....The grande dame of Coppersmith Inn, but in reality, a fading star who never quite achieved any fame whatsoever. She is known to irritate her fellow actors. (140 lines)

ARCHIBALD McCOX (m).....Another ancient actor distinguished for his ability to forget almost everything, especially stage business. (13 lines)

ROCKY CHEEVERS (m)The players’ thick-skulled, wise-cracking athletic type. (101 lines)

CELIA INNIS (f)An accomplished actress who could have been a high fashion model and cover girl.(15 lines)

MABEL DERKIN (f).....Assistant director who never stops taking notes on the production. (17 lines)

ALEX ANDERSON (m).....The players’ ever-patient and quite talented director. (226 lines)

EXTRAS.....GUESTS at Coppersmith Inn’s murder-mystery dinner theatre production. WAIT STAFF at Coppersmith Inn’s murder-mystery dinner theatre production.

PLEASE NOTE: The roles of “Gertrude” and “Heidi” are played by men in disguise.

SETTING

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The basic set is the lobby of a Victorian hotel, known as the Coppersmith Inn, a beautiful, gracious, historic hotel long since past its prime. The set may be as simple or as elaborate as desired.

NOTE: ACT ONE, SCENE 1 can be very simply suggested with a table and several chairs placed in front of the curtain. All other scenes occur in the lobby of Coppersmith Inn.

Do Not Copy

PROPS

ACT ONE, SCENE 1

- Newspaper classifieds (Help Wanted section)..... MANDY
- Telephone MANDY
- High school textbook.....ELINOR
- Peanut butter sandwich (eaten on stage)SARA

ACT ONE, SCENE 2

- Script for directing purposes.....ALEX
- Notepad, pencils MABEL
- Scripts for auditioning purposes MABEL
- Dirty Coppersmith Inn linens BIRDIE
- Coppersmith Inn registration book, pen BIRDIE
- Room keys BIRDIE
- Registration desk bell BIRDIE
- Luggage, hatboxes GERTRUDE
- Luggage, hatboxes HEIDI
- Four heavy black suitcases SCROGGS

ACT TWO, SCENE 1

- Scripts for acting purposes.....ELINOR
- Scripts for acting purposes..... MANDY
- Scripts for acting purposes.....SARA
- Detective's notepad, pencil.....SARA
- Six pieces of heavy luggage KRYSTAL
- Room keys BIRDIE
- Same four heavy suitcases as in ACT ONE, SCENE 2 ..SCROGGS
- Same notepad, pencils as in ACT ONE, SCENE 2 MABEL
- Pair of gloves ARCHIBALD
- Piece of twine ARCHIBALD

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ACT TWO, SCENE 2

- Tables for dinner theatre production/trays of food/pots of coffee, etc.
..... SET
- Red light for fireplace (Placed inside fireplace during the play) SET
- Firewood..... BIRDIE
- Same notepad, pencils as in previous scenes..... MABEL
- Basketball ROCKY

ACT THREE, SCENE 1

- Official-looking G-Man badge GERTRUDE
- Official-looking G-Man badge HEIDI
- Official badges..... GOOCH
- Heavy black suitcase, same as in previous scenes..... GOOCH
- Large water pistol GOOCH
- Large bowl of water..... BIRDIE
- Handcuffs HEIDI
- Pistol KRYSTAL
- Vest (should appear to be bulletproof) SCROGGS
- Basketball ROCKY

SOUND EFFECTS

ACT TWO, SCENE 2: Thunderstorm; Romantic “love” music

ACT THREE, SCENE 1: Gun shot(s)

ACT ONE, SCENE 1

SETTING:

It's Wednesday, less than an hour after school. MANDY, ELINOR, and SARA, three high school juniors who do everything together and view themselves as sisters, have just walked home from Bateman High School to ELINOR'S house.

AT RISE:

ELINOR, the studious type, is reading from a textbook. SARA, in her eyes a future prima ballerina, is making herself a peanut butter sandwich while rather clumsily and incorrectly executing several ballet steps, as MANDY, the zaniest of the three, leafs through the local newspaper and notices an audition announcement. After reading the audition notice, her excitement knows no limits! Suddenly:

MANDY: Ellie! Sara! Stop everything! Listen to this! *(Clutching the newspaper in her hands, whirling around the room.)* Just listen to this!

SARA: *(Munching on her peanut butter sandwich.)* We're listening!

ELINOR: *(Not overly interested.)* I'm studying.

MANDY: A waste of time. Listen to this.

SARA: We're listening!

MANDY: This is it! **THIS IS REALLY IT!**

ELINOR: *(Nose remains in the book.)* This is what?

MANDY: It's too good to be true. I really can't believe it. *(Another whirl around the room.)* The answer to all of our dreams.

SARA: *(Taking a bite out of her sandwich.)* What kind of prom date can you find in the daily newspaper?

MANDY: Not prom dates.

SARA: *(Executing a ballet step.)* I don't have any other dreams.

ELINOR: *(Looking up from her textbook, speaking with disdain.)* Honestly, Sara, don't you ever think about anything other than boys?

SARA: *(Pause.)* No, not really.

MANDY: Stow it and listen.

ELINOR: So read, we're listening.

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MANDY: (*Reading.*) "Wanted: Three college-age actresses for murder-mystery weekend at the beautiful, historic Coppersmith Inn. Must have experience in dinner theatre. Call 872-5596 for an audition. Ask for Alex."

ELINOR: (*Not impressed.*) So?

MANDY: So? This is what we've been waiting YEARS for - - great roles! Think what we could do with great roles in a professional murder-mystery production.

SARA: Yeah! (*Overwhelmed.*) Think what we could do with great roles in a murder-mystery production.

ELINOR: (*A wet blanket.*) Nothing.

MANDY: What?!!

ELINOR: One teeny little fact seems to have eluded you. Mandy, we're in high school!

MANDY: So?

ELINOR: So you can't call Alex for an audition.

MANDY: Have you ever heard of makeup, Elinor?

ELINOR: Makeup? You can't be serious. I mean, to make us look like college students we'd need heavy-duty special effects!

MANDY: (*Quite dramatically.*) Pluck the eyebrows and a flick of the mascara brush, then a little puff of powder, a change or two in the coiffure, a little jewelry decorously strewn about the hair, and voila, we're - -

ELINOR: Still high school juniors in makeup trying to look older!

MANDY: Age is a state of mind, Elinor. My mother always says, "A woman's only as old as she thinks she is."

SARA: That's when a woman's fifty trying to look twenty. It doesn't work in reverse!

MANDY: Sure it will. Look, I'll call Alex, the three of us will go over to Coppersmith Inn, audition, and they will beg us to take the leading roles, we'll give smash performances to great reviews, and no one will ever know we're high school juniors. Besides, this'll be a great start for our acting careers!

ELINOR: What acting careers?

MANDY: Aren't we all just dying to get onstage or be up there on the big silver screen opposite Clark Gable?

SARA: (*Executing another dance step, poorly.*) Or dance on air with Fred Astaire.

ELINOR: Look guys, I know it's unfortunate, but Gable and Astaire are six feet under, which is exactly where we'll be if we go through with this harebrained scheme.

SARA: What harebrained scheme?

ELINOR: (*Pointing toward MANDY.*) Her harebrained scheme!

MANDY: Moi? I'm hurt, Elinor, deeply hurt.

ELINOR: Come off it, Mandy. I know what you're planning.

MANDY: What?

ELINOR: You're going to scheme to get this acting job, an acting job for which none of us have any qualifications.

MANDY: A rather minor point, Elinor. Besides, what's the problem with "trying"? The world wouldn't have jets today if Wilbur and Orville hadn't ever tried. All mankind wouldn't have walked on the moon if someone hadn't tried. And - -

ELINOR: The engineer who cooked up the Edsel might not be in the poorhouse if someone hadn't tried quite so hard! Besides, the audition notice expressly states "must have dinner experience"!

MANDY: Another teeny little fact.

ELINOR: Obviously overlooked by you. And not only do we not have dinner theatre experience, we've got no acting experience! - - None! - - Zero! Nada! - - Zip!

MANDY: And what do you call last year's sophomore play?

ELINOR: A flop!

MANDY: No one has to know.

ELINOR: Alex. When he reads our résumés.

SARA: Résumés?

ELINOR: Actresses who go to an audition are required to leave a picture and a résumé.

MANDY: How do you know?

ELINOR: That's show biz. You see it all the time in movies and television: the old "leave your picture, résumé, and number, kid" and "oh, by the way, honey, don't call us, we'll call you."

MANDY: (*Scheming.*) Look, Elinor, we all really want to be actresses, right?

SARA: I know I do! That is if acting doesn't interfere with my (*Another awkward dance step.*) dance career.

ELINOR: (*Looking at SARA.*) Not a chance.

SARA: *(Ceases dancing, instead now utilizing her hands and body to pantomime a great screen performance.)* Up there on the big silver screen. *(Becoming Scarlett O'Hara, complete with a Southern accent.)* Rhett, Rhett, don't leave me. Not now! Not today! Where will I go? *(Then changing, becoming Rhett Butler, answering herself with an imitation Clark Gable voice.)* Frankly, my dear, I don't give a -

MANDY: Imagine your picture splashed on posters in video stores everywhere! All across America. *(Striking a video poster pose.)* Just think: you, your clothes ripped, your hair tussled, oily strands hanging down in your face, but your makeup is exquisite and you're being clenched tightly by a super hunk as he miraculously saves you from a pit filled with a thousand slithering poisonous snakes or lifted by his strong hairy arms at the last second out of a cave filled with three thousand rabid rats, every last hunger-crazed rodent viciously gnawing at your feet!

SARA: *(Dancing again.)* Or your legs in pantyhose commercials! Or on posters at checkout counters everywhere!

MANDY: So since we're actresses now, and since we want to become great actresses in the future, and since an actress acts . . .

ELINOR: This isn't going to work, Mandy.

MANDY: What?

ELINOR: You want us to distort our age and our theatre experience.

MANDY: Distort?

ELINOR: Lie!

MANDY: No, never lie, "perform." We'll give a performance as college-age actresses.

ELINOR: Oh, great! So now we're going to give a performance to get a performance.

MANDY: Why not?

ELINOR: It'll never work, that's "why not."

MANDY: But you keep forgetting we're actresses, and as actresses we should be able to create any role given to us at any point in time. So, we cast ourselves in the roles of "college-age actresses with dinner theatre experience." And then we simply act that role.

SARA: (*“Becoming” a college-age actress and overacting the role.*) I say, Mandy dear, wasn’t doing Desdemona last evening just simply the most rewarding and inwardly fulfilling experience of your entire stage life?

MANDY: (*Following SARA’s lead.*) Oh, most, most, most rewarding! And most inwardly fulfilling, too. And really, Sara, when you died in that Greek tragedy last week, I felt real tears for you deep, deep down inside as I experienced your pain, your agony, your heartfelt anguish.

ELINOR: And you’ll both be out on your ear because nobody’s going to believe two high school girls with no acting experience are really two college-age girls with extensive theatre credits.

MANDY: So what if we are out on our ear?! That’s right where we are now anyway. Nowhere!

ELINOR: And how far is a high school junior supposed to be?

MANDY: Elizabeth Taylor was known around the world by the time she was our age.

SARA: And Shirley Temple had an entire film career behind her years before she was our age.

MANDY: Come on, Elinor, be a sport. What do we have to lose? And we just might get a role in a murder-mystery weekend!

SARA: Wow! Wouldn’t that be gr . . . (*Then suddenly.*) What’s a “murder-mystery weekend”?

MANDY: When people come to a place, usually a hotel - - like this (*Holding up the newspaper.*) “beautiful, historic Coppersmith Inn.” Then, throughout the weekend, these people who would be guests at the inn watch everyone die.

SARA: Murder?

MANDY: Not a real murder, of course, but the guests of the inn watch the show and try to solve the crime.

SARA: You mean guessing who was the murderer?!

MANDY: Of course, and the entire inn is the scene of the crime. And everyone at the inn - - actors and guests alike - - become totally involved in solving the crime.

SARA: Sounds really exciting!

ELINOR: Sounds really difficult!

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MANDY: But that's what it's supposed to be, Elinor. Solving the murder is meant to be difficult so the guests of the weekend have a great time. You know: snooping around, searching for clues, asking questions, returning to the scene of the crime, dusting for fingerprints, making deductions, reflecting on the events surrounding the crime - -

SARA: (*"Becoming" Sherlock Holmes; pretending to hold a large magnifying glass, suddenly finding a speck of something, surely a "clue"! Then inspecting the clue, concluding.*) Surely the murder weapon. Brilliant deduction, Watson! Or perhaps I could be the victim. (*Now becoming the victim, her hands thrusting upward trying to pull off unseen hands strangling her, staggering about the room, having trouble breathing.*) No! No! . . . Please, no! . . . Please don't - - (*She falls to the floor, hard, dead.*)

MANDY: (*Screams. Then:*) Oh, who did this terrible thing? (*Rushing to the victim.*) Who strangled this beautiful young maiden? Who could have done such a dastardly deed?

ELINOR: (*Unmoved by the girls' shenanigans.*) Neither of you seems to realize how difficult it will be for you to pretend you're college-age actresses for an entire weekend when at the same time you're also pretending to be some character pretending to commit murder!

SARA: We're actresses!

MANDY: Pretending's our job!

ELINOR: You're teenagers pretending to be twenty-five. You're inexperienced teenagers pretending to be experienced theatre pros. You're high school juniors pretending to be college students. And on top of that, you're trying to be actresses playing characters committing a murder all while being very guilty and at the same time trying to look and sound very innocent to confuse the audience!

MANDY: (*Walking to the telephone.*) Sounds great. I'm calling. I don't care what you say, Elinor, I'm calling and asking for "Alex."

SARA: You're really going to do it?

MANDY: (*As she's dialing.*) Watch me!

ELINOR: (*As MANDY's dialing.*) Well, here goes nothing.

MANDY: Shh . . . shh . . . it's ringing.

ELINOR: I'm not doing this.

MANDY: (*Placing her hand over the phone's receiver.*) Yes, you are.

All for one, one for all, remember? That's the way it is with us.

ELINOR: Until now. This crazy scheme will never work!

MANDY: *(Speaking into the phone.)* Yes, hello . . . *(Then, remembering, changing her voice to that of an “older woman.”)* Yes, hello . . . I’d like to speak with Alex please . . . *(Suddenly quite nervous, slipping back into her “Mandy” voice.)* Oh, hello, Mr. Alex . . . *(Then, remembering and changing back into her “older woman” voice.)* Oh, hello, Alex, yes . . . I’m - - I’m - - *(Her voice changing back to “Mandy,” then back to the older woman.)* I’m calling about the audition notice in the newspaper; the three “college-age actresses” you need. Well, we’re three - -

ELINOR: *(Correcting MANDY.)* Two.

MANDY: *(Speaking strongly into the phone.)* We’re three - -

ELINOR: Two!

Suddenly, SARA moves to cup her hand over ELINOR’s mouth, effectively stopping any more of ELINOR’s “Two’s!”

MANDY: - - three “college-age” actresses who might be interested in the roles you’ve got for three “college-age” actresses . . . what year? *(Back to MANDY’s voice again.)* Juniors - -

Sensing trouble, yet having a change of heart, ELINOR shouts a college year even while SARA shouts a different “year” simultaneously.

ELINOR: Freshman./**SARA:** We’re seniors!

Then:

MANDY: *(Back to her older woman voice.)* Sophomore. *(Then, becoming more sure of herself, falling into the “college-age actress” routine, rather successfully pulling off the rest of the telephone conversation.)* Actually, we just started college, Alex. This is our first semester . . . What are we studying?

Each of the girls shouts the title of a different “major” simultaneously.

ELINOR: Journalism./**SARA:** Boys, I mean biology./**MANDY:** Drama.

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MANDY: Dinner theatre experience? Alex, I can assure you each of us has had plenty of experience serving dinner . . . Oh, performing experience? Certainly, we've got plenty of that, too. We've performed in everything . . . such as?

Each of the girls shouts the title of a different show simultaneously.

ELINOR: "Romeo and Juliet."

SARA: "A Chorus Line!"

MANDY: "The Sound of Music."

At the mention of "A Chorus Line," SARA does a quick two-dance step, once again admiring her legwork, then slipping, falling.

MANDY: When are we able to come for an audition?

Each girl shouts a different time, simultaneously.

ELINOR: Next Tuesday.

SARA: Right now!

MANDY: Tomorrow after school. *(Then correcting herself.)* I mean tomorrow after "class." . . . About 4:30 . . . Yes, we know where the Coppersmith Inn is. *(Putting on the dog or rather putting on a "college-age" false sophistication.)* We often dine there. My colleagues and I think Coppersmith Inn is très elegant, très sophisticated, and very très chic

--

ELINOR: Ask about picture and résumés.

SARA: Ask what we get paid.

MANDY: *(Cradling the phone so ALEX won't hear.)* Sssh . . . you two.

ELINOR: Pictures and resumes. Find out if we've got to bring pictures and résumés.

SARA: Find out what we get paid.

MANDY: Nothing if you don't let me finish this call. *(Turning back to speak into the phone.)* And, Alex, do you require pictures and résumés? . . . Yes, certainly, we'll be delighted to . . . Who are we? Our names you mean? Mandy Ferguson.

ELINOR: *(Moving close to MANDY.)* Don't give him our real names!

MANDY: *(Quickly pulling phone away from her ear and thrusting it against her chest, mouthing.)* And why not?

ELINOR: Because our real names sound too “high school-ish.”

MANDY: Suddenly, the girl who didn’t want to be older now is concerned her name sounds too young!

ELINOR: And with stage names, they won’t be able to find us when they come to arrest us.

MANDY: So what names should I give him?

ELINOR shrugs her shoulders, much to MANDY’s frustration.

MANDY: Come on, come on . . . *(Pointing to the phone as if she’s got to say something to ALEX . . . and quick!)*

ELINOR: Barton Bardot.

MANDY, her eyebrows raised, repeats the name, but only mouths the name, making no sound as she repeats: “Barton Barton.” Then, she points first to ELINOR then to herself, implying “Is it your name or mine?” ELINOR responds to MANDY’s question by pointing to herself and mouthing, “Mine.”

MANDY: Barton Bardot . . . *(Then she points toward SARA, expecting a name.)*

SARA: *(Suddenly put on the spot, having a very difficult time, then, finally.)* Franchot - -

MANDY motions for her to “hurry up” with a name.

SARA: Tone.

ELINOR: No!

SARA: No?

ELINOR: Somebody’s already using that name.

SARA: So?

ELINOR: A “real” actress is using that name.

SARA: And I’m not a real actress?

ELINOR: Pick another name.

MANDY: And pick it quick!

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SARA: I can't think of another name . . . just make it Franchot . . . you know . . . like Twiggy's only got one name.

ELINOR: Lassie and Trigger only had one name, too.

MANDY: (*Into the phone.*) The other "college-age" actress is Franchot . . . yes, that's all . . . just Franchot . . . Me? Well, I'm . . . (*Slipping back into her MANDY voice.*) I'm - - (*Then back to the older woman, more confident than ever.*) I'm Desiree . . . Desiree Coulton . . . Yes, we're looking forward to meeting you, too . . . tomorrow after class . . . about 4:30. Just ask for Alex. We'll be sure to do that, Alex. Bye. (*Hangs up the phone; whirling around; excited; whooping.*) We're on! We got the audition!

SARA: (*Squealing with joy.*) Great!

ELINOR: I think it's going to be murder.

MANDY: You're right, Ellie. That's exactly what it's going to be. (*Pretending to slit ELINOR's throat.*) Murder.

ELINOR: (*Correcting her.*) Barton.

MANDY: What?

ELINOR: If we're going to use stage names, we better get used to calling each other by them.

SARA: Oh, yeah, so we don't make a mistake in public. Good thinking, Barton.

MANDY: We have a lot of work to do!

ELINOR: You can say that again. Clothes, new hairstyles, makeup.

SARA: Where are we going to get everything we need?

MANDY: My sister's closet.

ELINOR: Tooty? She's only five.

MANDY: No, not Tooty, Crissy, my older sister. She's at college. She's got more than we'll ever need, and besides, she'll never know. Her clothes'll be back in her closet before she comes home on break.

SARA: We've got a lot of work to do.

ELINOR: Aging and dressing the part.

MANDY: Preparing for a great future in the theatre!

As the GIRLS exit:

ELINOR: Or the end of it.

ACT ONE, SCENE 2

As the scene opens, LOUELLA DU-PAGE, the aging, actually ancient "Tallulah Bankhead" of COPPERSMITH PLAYERS, is rehearsing a scene from "MASQUERADE," the murder-mystery that will be staged at the Inn two days from this rehearsal. Standing (Or is it "draped?") at the landing at the top of the staircase. LOUELLA is "deep into her character," to the point of greatly and very dramatically over-playing the conniving, scheming "Lucille Cashman." As "Lucille," LOUELLA plays the overprotective mother hen guardian of her nephew, star basketball player "Chad Cashman," a role currently being played by the very handsome and most athletic, yet in truth quite thick-skulled, college-age ROCKY CHEEVERS.

ROCKY, dressed in a big-name college's sweats, leans nonchalantly against the mantle of the fireplace. The scene is being carefully observed by ALEX ANDERSON, director of the Inn's COPPERSMITH PLAYERS, who is seated as far downstage as possible, script in hand. His assistant director, MABEL DERKIN, is seated next to him, continuously and feverishly taking notes detailing LOUELLA's and ROCKY's performances.

ROCKY: (As "Chad.") It was kind of you to invite me over for dinner tonight.

LOUELLA: (As "Lucille.") Kind? Nonsense. My obligation.

ROCKY: (As "Chad.") Obligation?

LOUELLA: (As "Lucille." *Descending the staircase very slowly, one step for each word.*) Have to keep my investment well-fed - -

ROCKY: (As "Chad.") That you're doing.

LOUELLA: (As "Lucille." *Continuing to descend the staircase.*) And happy.

ROCKY: (As "Chad.") You're succeeding.

LOUELLA (as "Lucille") - - now on the floor of the inn - - slinks toward ROCKY (as "Chad"), smiling a bit too sweetly, her slinking movements a bit overstated for the old and aging windbag she truly is.

LOUELLA: (As "Lucille.") Am I?

ROCKY: (As "Chad.") Sure. You've been great.

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LOUELLA: (As "Lucille." Moving in for the kill.) Chad, are you playing at this dream of yours?

ROCKY: (As "Chad.") Playing?

LOUELLA: (As "Lucille.") I didn't think you were working hard enough at practice today.

ROCKY: (As "Chad.") I'm not accustomed to being observed in practice. Practice is supposed to be private.

LOUELLA: (As "Lucille." Becoming quite testy.) Look, Chad, your uncle and I have a lot invested in you, and we expect a lot from you. The gold, remember, you're bringing home the gold. We planned it that way.

ROCKY: (As "Chad." Amazed.) "We?"

LOUELLA: (As "Lucille." Looking far off into the distance.) I always think Cameron's alive.

ROCKY: (As "Chad." Hurling reality back at his aunt.) Well, he's not!

LOUELLA: (As "Lucille.") But if he were . . . this is what he'd want you to do. My husband, your uncle Cameron, thought the world of you.

ALEX: Cut!

LOUELLA: What?

ALEX: Cut. I want to fix something in this scene.

LOUELLA: Fix something? There's nothing wrong to fix!

ALEX: (Standing and moving toward Louella. Then, addressing Louella and "directing.") When you say, "I always think Cameron's alive." Turn downstage toward the audience, then walk toward the audience, your eyes always looking heavenward, staring, quite glazed over. Like this. (Becoming "Lucille," he follows his own stage directions while very sincerely intoning the line.) I always think Cameron's alive.

LOUELLA: Walking toward the audience with my head upward like that and my eyes quite glazed over will make me look like a zombie.

ALEX: You're supposed to look like a zombie, Louella!

LOUELLA: In my forty years in the theatre, I have never played a zombie. And I don't intend to start now!

ALEX: Louella, this is the characterization needed to make Lucille Cashman work. Lucille's an evil, wretched, driving louse, widowed by some unknown sudden and terrible accident which crushed her husband beneath a rolling jeep in the wilds of Africa. And as we believe, but we don't know for certain, your husband's jeep was probably tipped over by charging bull elephants during Cameron's big-game safari in the Congo bush. Since that horrible time, Lucille's been off her rocker - -

LOUELLA: But playing "off my rocker" isn't becoming to my image.

ALEX: But you've got to give that impression: crazy! It's the only way the murder-mystery'll work for our audiences!

LOUELLA: Why are we doing this awful play anyway? This play and this part just aren't right for me. I was wonderful as "Abby" in "Arsenic and Old Lace." Everybody said I was. Why don't we do that play?

ALEX: We've got to do a murder-mystery this weekend, Louella.

LOUELLA: Why?

ALEX: Because the weekend's two days away!

LOUELLA: Postpone the play.

ALEX: We can't do that. We've already advertised this murder-mystery weekend.

LOUELLA: And have we sold any tickets yet?

ALEX: No.

LOUELLA: Then postpone the performance, select a better play, cast me in a larger and honestly, Alex, a bit more flattering role, and success will naturally follow even as the sun follows the night.

ALEX: No. This murder-mystery weekend is a special gimmick to pull us an audience.

LOUELLA: Obviously, Alex, this special gimmick of yours hasn't pulled anyone yet, has it?

ALEX: If this weekend doesn't work, Louella, none of us will ever work again!

LOUELLA: What?

ALEX: We're broke, Louella. Coppersmith Inn's almost bankrupt. Unless we earn big bucks this weekend, we're through, closed up, out of business. I go back to writing poetry in some attic somewhere, and you go back to the farm in Connecticut.

LOUELLA: I can't go back to the farm in Connecticut! I sold it forty years ago to pursue a career in the theatre.

ROCKY: Maybe you should never have sold the farm.

ALEX: Let's run the scene again from the top. And please, Louella, make that simple change in your characterization: look like a zombie.

Her feathers ruffled, LOUELLA talks (ad libs) to herself as she ascends the staircase, mumbling her discontent with her role, the show, and Coppersmith Inn's shaky financial situation.

As LOUELLA is moving toward the stairs, ALEX turns to MABEL, who has never ceased feverishly taking notes concerning LOUELLA and ROCKY's performances and ALEX's stage directions.

ALEX: Mabel, please make a note that I've asked Louella to be more zombie-like. Perhaps you could find a picture of a zombie. Show it to Louella so she could adapt her makeup and her facial gestures and perfect her glazed-over stare.

MABEL: Right off the bat, Mr. Anderson, I'd say Elsa Lanchester in "The Bride of Frankenstein" would be a good zombie model. Her hair stood straight out from her head.

ROCKY: Really, I'd say the creature Frankenstein would be better. That is, if being a role model to Louella wouldn't insult him!

LOUELLA has now reached the top of the stairs. Not having heard ROCKY's obtuse remark, she strikes the same pose as in the beginning of the previous rehearsal.

ALEX: Okay, everyone, action!

ROCKY: (As "Chad.") It was kind of you to invite me over for dinner tonight.

LOUELLA: (As "Lucille.") Kind? Nonsense. My obligation.

ALEX: (Shouting.) Zombie, Louella, zombie!

LOUELLA: (As "Lucille." Descending the staircase very slowly, one step with each word, but now trying to descend the staircase as a "zombie.") Have to keep my . . . (But she never quite finishes her line. Instead, her feet slipping on a step, she takes a tumble, grabbing the banister to catch herself, catches herself, then completes the line, rather nonplussed. After all, she is a "pro" even if she's being forced to be a zombie.) . . . investment well-fed . . .

ROCKY: (As “Chad.”) That you’re doing.

LOUELLA: (As Lucille.”) . . . and . . .

But before LOUELLA can finish her line, BIRDIE MAYHEW, Coppersmith Inn’s housekeeper, her arms loaded to overflowing with the Inn’s linen, makes a grand and very clumsy entrance onto the landing at the top of the staircase. Her entrance bumps up against LOUELLA, throwing the aging thespian slightly off-balance and sending linen flying most everywhere. LOUELLA’S reaction is what would be expected: instant rage!

LOUELLA: (First screaming her fear.) Ooh . . . oww . . . ohh! (Then screaming her rage.) Clumsy!

BIRDIE: Excuse me, mum.

LOUELLA: What are you doing? This is a rehearsal.

BIRDIE: And this is dirty linen. You want people to stay here this weekend, I’ve got to get these linens washed. Why don’t you go somewhere else for your rehearsal.

LOUELLA: Me? Go somewhere else? I’m the show!

BIRDIE begins picking up the linens from the staircase, much to LOUELLA’S consternation.

LOUELLA: (Turning toward ALEX.) Alex, do something about this!

BIRDIE: (Having gathered up the linen, moves on down the stairs, very matter-of-factly.) There’s nothing can be done about this. You want business, somebody’s got to do the important work around here to keep the guest happy if and when they arrive here.

LOUELLA: (Issuing a retort.) My show keeps the guests happy!

BIRDIE: If that’s the case, Louella . . .

LOUELLA: (Her claws bared.) “Miss Du-Page” to you.

BIRDIE: As I was saying. “Miss Du-Page,” if you’re the one who keeps the guests happy with your show, it’s easy to understand why this here inn’s on its last legs. (Exits through the kitchen door.)

LOUELLA: Alex, why didn’t you say something? You just sat there and let her talk to “me” like that.

MURDER AT COPPERSMITH INN

ALEX: What's to say? Birdie's right. I keep telling you, Louella, the inn's going to close and close soon unless we make some money, a lot of money this weekend.

LOUELLA: Well, it's not as if I haven't tried to save this place with my performances. Standing ovations every night when I die in decent plays.

ALEX: Twelve people standing, Louella! And six of those twelve are actors already standing at the end of the last scene. We can't keep the inn open with only six guests per show.

LOUELLA: If you'd put my picture on billboards so people would know who's starring in this show - -

ALEX: Please, let's get back to rehearsing the scene. The girls will soon be here.

ROCKY: Girls? What girls?

ALEX: The three co-eds who telephoned in response to our audition notice. So since we've got an inn and a theatre company to save here, let's get back to rehearsing the scene!

As LOUELLA is ascending the stairs, moving toward the landing, once again to strike her "beginning of the scene" pose, ROCKY remarks:

ROCKY: Maybe these new girls will have something we need around here.

LOUELLA: *(Stops her upward ascent momentarily.)* Like what?

ROCKY: Talent.

LOUELLA: *(Furious.)* Alex!

ALEX: *(Totally exasperated.)* Action! Start the scene! Now!

And the rehearsal once again begins.

ROCKY: *(As "Chad.")* It was kind of you to invite me - -

Suddenly and without warning, the most miserable miser ever - - MORTIMER SCROGGS, a skinflint so stingy, so mean, so penny-pinching he makes Ebenezer Scrooge look like a philanthropist - - bursts into the room through the outside door. He is followed at a respectable distance by his lackluster lackey, MISS GOOCH.

SCROGGS: (*Shouting.*) Stop everything!

LOUELLA: (*Turning; enraged.*) What now?

SCROGGS: Where's my rent, that's "what now?"

ALEX: Mr. Scroggs, I thought we agreed you would wait for your rent money until after this weekend's murder-mystery.

SCROGGS: This weekend's show's going to be any more successful than the past how many years' shows? I don't think so. (*Turns to MISS GOOCH.*) You think so, Miss Gooch?

MISS GOOCH: (*With a very dour look.*) No, Mr. Scroggs, like you, I don't think so.

SCROGGS: And like you, Miss Gooch, I don't think so either. And I don't think anyone's going to come to your miserable murder-mystery weekend, Alex, Mr. So-Called "Director," so I might as well bar the front door right this minute and close up this poor excuse for a dinner theatre.

ALEX: But, Mr. Scroggs, our production this weekend is very special. It's going to knock our audience dead. I mean, Mr. Scroggs, this show's going to be different, really different. Lots of action. A real thriller. (*Moves about the room, literally re-enacting the murder-mystery.*) Act One, we stage a murder. Act Two, the audience returns to the scene of the crime and then has the opportunity to recreate that same sinister crime. Act Three, each member of the audience seeks clues, trying to determine who committed this terrible murder.

SCROGGS: Sounds like a flop to me.

ALEX: But everyone in the audience will eagerly watch our play.

SCROGGS: Why?

ALEX: Because we're offering a grand prize to the person who solves the murder.

SCROGGS: And what's the grand prize?

ALEX: An all-expenses paid weekend vacation of a lifetime.

SCROGGS: To where?

ALEX: We're still working on that, Mr. Scroggs.

SCROGGS: Just as I thought. An all-expenses paid weekend vacation of a lifetime to "nowhere"! This murder-mystery weekend's nothing but a scam! Why, I should close you down this very minute. Give me one good reason why I shouldn't!

MURDER AT COPPERSMITH INN

ALEX: Close us down, and you won't get so much as a cent of your rent money. Let us stay open - -

Suddenly, the outside door opens. Two tottering old biddies - - GERTRUDE ESTHERWORTH and HEIDI BREITENBACH - - enter. Both are over-dressed, overly-made-up, bewigged ancients, struggling to carry too many pieces of luggage and hat boxes while leaning on wooden canes. As the two women enter, the conversation between SCROGGS and ALEX stops abruptly, so unique are the old biddies in their appearance. For a moment, GERTRUDE and HEIDI look around the inn, then move slowly toward the inn's registration counter. As they walk, their gait seems a bit exaggerated, a bit unreal. When GERTRUDE and HEIDI get to the registration desk, GERTRUDE rings the bell to summon the registration clerk. BIRDIE pops her head out the kitchen door, very improper for a registration desk clerk.

BIRDIE: Yeah? What'd ya want? I've got linen to wash if you want people to stay here this weekend.

Then noticing the two "guests," BIRDIE'S manner changes. She actually becomes the proper registration clerk.

BIRDIE: May I help you?

GERTRUDE: I do hope so.

HEIDI: My sister and I, we'd like a room for the next several days.

GERTRUDE: We've, my sister and I, been told this is the finest inn in this part of the country.

HEIDI: And that the Coppersmith Inn has the most exciting of shows.

HEIDI: That's why we've come. My sister and I, why, we just love murder mysteries. Can't seem to get enough of them.

ALEX beams with pride, giving SCROGGS an "I told you so" look, while SCROGGS seems to be wearing an "Are you daft, woman?" kind of expression, which of course, MISS GOOCH mirrors. And of course, MABEL continues to take feverish notes about the play.

GERTRUDE: We've also come to get some peace and quiet. Heidi's nerves, you see, are a bit on edge.

HEIDI: Just a bit.

GERTRUDE: And Heidi's physicians have strongly advised total peace and quiet for a period of time. Unfortunately, if she doesn't get peace and quiet, well - - *(Reaches into her purse, pulls out a frilly lace handkerchief, dabs her eyes.)* - - well, poor Heidi, she won't - - *(Turns to HEIDI, about to break down emotionally.)*

HEIDI: *(Trying to support GERTRUDE during this very difficult moment.)*
It's okay, Gertrude, I know you feel badly - -

GERTRUDE: I do, Heidi, I do very much. We've been sisters for such a long time. I can't even imagine what I would do without - - *(Breaks down as HEIDI comforts her sobbing sister.)*

From behind the door, at the top of the staircase, comes the loudest of screams. LOUELLA appears to be terrified. She flings open the door, screaming.

LOUELLA: Alex! Alex! Come quick!

As if on cue, ALEX, BIRDIE, and MABEL, even SCROGGS and MISS GOOCH turn to look at LOUELLA, their index fingers raised to their mouths issuing the warning, "Shh . . . shh . . ."

LOUELLA: *(Not getting anyone's cue; still screaming.)* It's terrible, Alex! Come quick! There's the biggest, ugliest thousand-legger you ever saw crawling up my wall. *(Screams again.)* Help me! Get rid of that - - that creature or I'm not going back into that room!

SCROGGS: Ah, perchance a way to keep her off the stage. Fill it with thousand-leggers!

LOUELLA: I mean it, Alex! Do something!

ALEX: Rocky, go up to Louella's room and get rid of the thousand-legger.

ROCKY rushes up the stairs, heading for LOUELLA's room.

LOUELLA: Hurry!

MURDER AT COPPERSMITH INN

ROCKY exits while GERTRUDE and HEIDI, having just moments ago looked upward toward LOUELLA, suddenly recognize the actress. Both women, now enthralled, stare at LOUELLA with childish wonderment.

LOUELLA: *(Snapping at the staring women.)* Well, what are you looking at? Haven't you ever been frightened by a thousand-legger or something equally as terrifying?

GERTRUDE: Aren't you, isn't she, sister . . .

HEIDI: Yes, I'm certain she is, sister . . .

GERTRUDE: . . . Miss Du-Page, star of . . .

LOUELLA: *(Changing immediately.)* Stage, screen, and television? Why yes, I am.

GERTRUDE: Ooh, we've, my sister and I, long admired you and your work, Miss Du-Page.

Apparently vindicated, LOUELLA looks down at SCROGGS, MISS GOOCH, and ALEX with an expression that says, "See, I told you so!"

HEIDI: We had no idea you were staying here.

LOUELLA: *(Quite affected.)* Oh, I'm appearing in this weekend's murder-mystery.

GERTRUDE: *(Much impressed.)* You are!

Having successfully gotten the thousand-legger, ROCKY appears on the staircase.

LOUELLA: A minor role, you understand. I'm on hiatus from my last movie.

HEIDI: *(Though HEIDI and GERTRUDE seem to be fawning over LOUELLA, their eyes seem to be staring down SCROGGS and MISS GOOCH.)* If my sister and I would have known you're starring here this weekend, Miss Du-Page, we would have invited all our friends to come.

GERTRUDE: But we didn't know.

LOUELLA: *(Again, apparently vindicated, looks down at ALEX with a "There you see!" kind of look.)* Well, they were thinking of putting my picture on billboards.

HEIDI: (*Eyeing SCROGGS and MISS GOOCH, but talking about LOUELLA.*) Maybe we still have time to call our friends, sister?

LOUELLA: Of course you do.

ALEX: Of course you do.

ROCKY: Go for it.

GERTRUDE: Then we will. We'll call all our friends, won't we, sister?

HEIDI: Oh, yes. And it's going to take us all day and into the night to make the calls.

GERTRUDE: But think of it! Miss Louella Du-Page staying and starring here!

LOUELLA: (*Exiting.*) Oh, yes, it is a bit much, but after all, we stars have to stay and star somewhere. Ta-ta.

BIRDIE: (*Getting down to business.*) I can give you a spacious room with a view of the mountains. It's a lovely view in the mornings, quite lovely at dusk too.

HEIDI: (*Still looking at SCROGGS and MISS GOOCH.*) Oh, now that we know Miss Louella Du-Page is here - -

GERTRUDE: Any room will do.

BIRDIE: Kindly fill out our registration book, please, ladies.

Both GERTRUDE and HEIDI fill in the appropriate lines in the registration book as BIRDIE finds room keys, then signals ROCKY to assist the ladies to their room.

BIRDIE: Rocky will help you to your room. (*Looking at the names in the registration book.*) Miss Estherworth and Miss Breitenbach.

ROCKY: (*The perfect gentleman.*) May I help you with your luggage, ladies?

Both GERTRUDE and HEIDI "coo" their delight at being helped by such a handsome young gentleman. THEY ad-lib their delight. ROCKY picks up the ladies' luggage and begins walking up the stairs with a simple:

ROCKY: Please follow me, ladies.

BIRDIE: Enjoy your stay with us.

GERTRUDE: We're sure we will.

HEIDI: Imagine! Staying at the same hotel with Louella Du-Page! Momma would never believe this.

As the LADIES exit up the stairs, ALEX turns to MR. SCROGGS.

ALEX: You see, Mr. Scroggs, our fortunes are changing already. Close us down, and you'll get no rent money. Let us stay open a while longer and not only will you get your money, but we'll also become a most successful theatrical company.

SCROGGS: That'll be the day!

ALEX: So, let us stay open, Mr. Scroggs. What do you have to lose?

SCROGGS: My rent!

ALEX: But we've just gotten guests. Guests who're going to call their friends and bring more guests! It's going to be a very successful weekend. You'll see.

SCROGGS: Okay, "Director," you drive a hard bargain. I'll let you stay open this weekend.

ALEX: Thanks, Mr. Scroggs! We're going to have a terrific weekend! I hope you'll be my guest at the show.

SCROGGS: But come Monday morning at eight a.m. sharp, if I don't have every cent of my rent money, you'll be doing your murder-mystery play while standing in the unemployment line. Understand?

ALEX: Understand. And we'll see you then? Friday night? At the opening?

SCROGGS: *(With a grin.)* With my eyes counting every one of your paying guests Friday night and my hand stretched out waiting for my rent money Monday morning.

ALEX: Monday morning, eight o'clock sharp. You'll have your rent money, Mr. Scroggs. I guarantee it.

SCROGGS: I'll believe that when I see it. Now I've got to go downstairs and check the plumbing.

ALEX: Again? You just checked the plumbing yesterday.

SCROGGS: It's an old building. Pipes can develop leaks overnight. *(Heading toward the basement door, followed by MISS GOOCH.)* Had any trouble with leaking pipes this morning?

ALEX: None that I know of.

SCROGGS: *(Exiting to the basement.)* Well, just want to make sure. With old buildings like this, never can be too sure. Coming, Miss Gooch?

MISS GOOCH: Coming, Mr. Scroggs.

And with that, both SCROGGS and MISS GOOCH exit into the basement.

ALEX: Well, Mabel, we're doing the show.

MABEL: *(Looking up from her note-taking.)* But according to my notes, Mr. Anderson, we still need three actresses.

ALEX: I've got that covered, Mabel. Three girls are coming to audition this afternoon.

MABEL: But you don't even know if they can act.

ALEX: Then they'll fit right into this cast. *(Looking back toward the basement door.)* I wonder why Scroggs is always checking the plumbing in the basement? Every time he comes here he has to check the plumbing.

MABEL: Preventive maintenance, I suppose.

ALEX: Perhaps. Still it seems strange: checking pipes every day.

The outside door opens. DESIREE, BARTON and FRANCHOT - - otherwise known as MANDY, ELINOR, and SARA - - enter. From their appearance, it is quite obvious that each girl has worked for hours to perfect her "older woman" image. Everything about them is "overdone"! But nothing could be more overdone than their speech and mannerisms. The result: absolute hilarity even as DESIREE, BARTON, and FRANCHOT take themselves and their new personae very, very seriously.

DESIREE: Alex, please.

ALEX: Yes, I'm Alex, Alex Anderson, and you must be the - -

DESIREE: Three college-age actresses with dinner theatre experience? Yes, we are. Pleased to meet you, Alex.

ALEX: Likewise.

DESIREE: I'm Desiree Coulton.

ALEX: *(Taking her hand.)* Charmed.

BARTON: I'm Barton Bardot.

ALEX: *(Taking her hand.)* Pleased to meet you, Barton.

FRANCHOT: I'm just Franchot.

ALEX: *(A slight bow.)* A most exquisite name, Just Franchot.

FRANCHOT: *(Very flattered.)* Thank you.

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ALEX: It'll look good on our marquee.

DESIREE: (*Back to DESIREE.*) Oh, you've got a marquee? I hadn't noticed.

ALEX: Actually, our marquee is a beautiful signboard filled with our cast's pictures. Stands quite prominently in our lobby before each show.

FRANCHOT: With my name and picture on it?

ALEX: But of course! Should you get the role.

FRANCHOT: How wonderful!

ALEX: So you've come to audition for our special murder-mystery weekend here at CopperSmith Inn?

DESIREE: Yes, we were hoping we'd be able to fit your exciting project into our busy theatrical lives.

FRANCHOT: Actually, we were hoping you'd make our theatrical lives busy.

ALEX: Oh, really?

BARTON: You must excuse Franchot, Mr. Anderson, she sometimes speaks her enthusiasm about a certain project before she ever checks her calendar.

FRANCHOT: (*To BARTON.*) Huh, what's that mean?

BARTON: (*To FRANCHOT.*) You talk before you think.

ALEX: Well, you all certainly look quite beautiful, stunning actually.

DESIREE: Oh, you must forgive us, Alex, may I call you, "Alex," Mr. Anderson?

ALEX: Yes, yes, of course.

DESIREE: But we rushed right over here from class. Hardly had any time to get ourselves ready to meet you. You know how busy actresses can get sometimes. Up before dawn, struggling with makeup, spending all day rehearsing intense emotional scenes, then having to get to bed to catch our beauty rest . . . it's really quite a very busy life. And then with college! Well, we've hardly got a minute to ourselves, such is the life of busy college-age actresses with dinner theatre experience.

ALEX: Yes, I understand. And you've come to audition, so I suppose we really should get started. I've got quite a full schedule this afternoon. More auditions, you know.

DESIREE: Many college-age actresses with dinner theatre experience auditioning?

ALEX: Oh, yes, many. Murder-mystery weekends are quite popular you know. Seems everyone wants to be in one these days. So we'd best get moving so I can give you girls proper time and ample consideration.

ROCKY enters at the top of the staircase landing and notices the girls.

ROCKY: And what do we have here?

ALEX: Three actresses auditioning for our company, Rocky.

ROCKY: Welcome to Coppersmith Inn, ladies, and with those looks, none of you need audition.

FRANCHOT: *(Suddenly very nervous, pulling at her wig.)* You mean we won't make it?

ROCKY: Quite the contrary! You three are the best-looking actresses to walk into this inn as long as I've been here.

DESIREE: How long have you been here?

ROCKY: Counting today, twenty-two days.

FRANCHOT: Wow! That's a long time!

ROCKY: And most of that time's been rehearsals - - day and night.

DESIREE: *(Totally smitten with ROCKY.)* You must be really good!

ROCKY: I try.

DESIREE: I'd love to work opposite you.

ROCKY: Perhaps you will. What'd you say, Alex?

ALEX: I'd say we better get these auditions started. Many more auditions today, you know.

ROCKY: Really?

ALEX: *(Winking at ROCKY.)* Of course.

ROCKY: *(Catching ALEX's cue.)* Oh, yes, of course. Many more.

BARTON: Guess competition's stiff here.

ROCKY: Oh, yeah, real stiff.

ALEX: Desiree, would you like to read a scene opposite Rocky?

DESIREE: *(For a moment, reverting to MANDY.)* Would I? Jeepers, yes! I mean - - *(Back to DESIREE.)* I'll try to give the scene my very best interpretation and to give you what you want.

ALEX: Miss Derkin, scripts please.

MABEL: *(Handing ALEX several scripts for the girls.)* Right here, Mr. Anderson.

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ALEX: (*Handing DESIREE a script.*) Turn to page fifty-four, Miss Coulton.

DESIREE: (*As she is turning to page 54, and ALEX is handing the scripts to ELINOR and SARA.*) Please call me simply "Desiree."

ALEX: Okay, Miss Coulton, "Simply Desiree" it is.

ROCKY: Where should I stand for this reading, Alex?

ALEX: Let's begin the scene on the staircase, then as the scene progresses and becomes more intense, move down the staircase toward Desiree, who'll remain standing here.

ROCKY moves immediately and quickly to a position on the staircase.

ALEX: Now, Desiree, when this scene opens, Rocky as "Chad" has discovered his Aunt Lucille's been tragically murdered. As you can well understand, he's feeling quite badly, even more so because he's being accused of the murder.

DESIREE: Oh dear. Wrongly, I trust.

ALEX: Wrongly. And that's why you're in the scene. You're "Lynn," Chad's close companion.

DESIREE: And my motivation?

ALEX: What you might expect.

DESIREE: Horror! Fright!

ALEX: Not exactly. Deep concern, caring, sincerely disturbed.

DESIREE: Ah, like "how could this possible ever happen to my Chad?"

ALEX: Exactly. So let's begin the scene. Ready, everyone?

ROCKY: Ready, Alex.

DESIREE: Yes, Alex, ready.

And the audition begins: ROCKY providing a most excellent performance as the wronged nephew; DESIREE is giving a most stilted, "non-feeling" reading. Quite frankly, DESIREE is giving a very bad reading. So bad in fact her reading becomes quite funny, even hilarious to everyone but DESIREE herself, who is trying so hard, should one really laugh?

ROCKY: (*As "Chad."*) Why would I kill my aunt?

DESIREE: (*As "Lynn."*) What a mor - - mor - - mor - - bid thought.

ROCKY: (*As "Chad."*) That detective doesn't think so.

DESIREE: (*As "Lynn."*) That - - is - - what he's paid - - to - - do.

- ROCKY:** (As "Chad.") He's paid to track down a murderer, not bug me.
- DESIREE:** (As "Lynn.") Maybe - - he - - thinks you know - - some - - thing.
- ROCKY:** (As "Chad.") Like what?
- DESIREE:** (As "Lynn.") You - - were - - the last person - - to see - - her - - alive.
- ALEX:** Quite good, Miss Coulton.
- DESIREE:** (*Smiling, overjoyed.*) Thank you, Alex, and please, just call me "Desiree."
- ALEX:** Quite good, Desiree, but could you read that last line with a bit more feeling?
- DESIREE:** Certainly. What feeling do you want?
- ALEX:** Deep concern. Your boyfriend's been suspected of doing in his aunt. So pathos, much pathos is needed here.
- DESIREE:** Pathos? (*An aside, mouthing the words; "What's pathos?" to ELINOR and SARA. ELINOR quickly pantomimes deep sadness to the point of great tears, a gesture and facial features DESIREE mimics every time she reads.*)
- ALEX:** Yes, plenty of pathos, deep anguish, heavy pain, sincere concern for your boyfriend, who could get the chair.
- DESIREE:** Is he guilty?
- ALEX:** That's not important at this point.
- DESIREE:** Oh, yes, that's very important. I don't want to be dating . . .
- ALEX:** Engaged. Lynn's engaged to Chad.
- DESIREE:** Oh, that's worse! I don't want to be a murderer's bride!
- ALEX:** You're an actress, Desiree. You're whatever the role demands.
- DESIREE:** But my inner motivation? It's got to be right for me to read the lines and give my very best interpretation.
- ALEX:** In your character's eyes, Chad is innocent no matter what anyone says, and to you, he's being framed for his aunt's murder.
- DESIREE:** Now that makes a lot of difference. I can get into that! (*Overly dramatic.*) My beloved, my one and only, framed! Grips me. (*Clutching her heart.*) Right here!
- ALEX:** Great! Great! That's what it's supposed to do to you so the actress in you can do that to our audiences.
- BARTON:** What kind of audiences do you get here?

MURDER AT COPPERSMITH INN

ALEX: Fantastic audiences! The place'll be packed this weekend, and we get the kind of audiences that hang on an actor's every word. So could we get back to the reading, please?

DESIREE: Certainly. *(Closing her eyes, walking around in a small circle, beating her fists against her chest, trying to get into the scene's intense mood.)* My boyfriend's being framed. My boyfriend's being framed. *(Wailing.)* Ohhh! What will I do? *(Shouting with great pathos, tearing her hair out.)* MY BOYFRIEND'S BEING FRAMED! HELP ME!

Suddenly, BIRDIE runs out of the kitchen door, screaming.

BIRDIE: What's going on? Who needs help? Is it a fire?

ALEX: No, Birdie, just an overactive imagination. No problem. You may return to laundering our dirty linen.

From the landing at the top of the stairs, HEIDI hurriedly enters. She herself is greatly overacting. GERTRUDE follows close behind, excitedly talking and trying to calm her sister down.

HEIDI: Oh, dear! What's happening! I've got to have peace and quiet.

GERTRUDE: My sister's condition! What's happening? My sister needs peace and quiet or it's all - - *(But can't bring herself to say the last word - - "over.")*

ALEX: Sorry, ladies. Just a new actress working hard in an audition.

GERTRUDE: Oh, good. For a moment, we thought - -

HEIDI: *(Interrupting.)* Sister, sister, I'm feeling faint.

GERTRUDE: No, sister, you'll be fine. *(Quickly moving to grab her sister before she faints; then hurriedly helping her sister into the room, exiting the stage, all the while talking.)* You'll be all right, Heidi. Come, let's go lie down and get some rest. *(Turns back to ALEX.)* Please, peace and quiet. I beg of you.

ALEX: *(Whispering.)* Yes, we understand. *(Then to DESIREE.)* Now, let's try the scene again, quietly, please.

For several moments, everyone talks in a stage whisper. DESIREE tries her lines again, but with no noticeable improvement or change despite all the previous histrionics. However, she does mimic ELINOR's "pathos gesture and facial features."

DESIREE: (As "Lynn.") You - - were - - the - - last person - - to - - see - - her - - (Then, really exaggerating, pouring on the fake pathos!)
alive!

ROCKY: (As "Chad.") No, I wasn't. Mary, the maid, was. Why does everyone keep forgetting that?

DESIREE: (As "Lynn.") I guess no one - - can imagine - - a nice little old mady - - I mean, "lady," like Lary - - I mean Mary - - doing anyone - - (More pathos.) in!

ALEX: Wonderful, Desiree, absolutely . . . breathtaking.

DESIREE: Really? You like it?

ROCKY: Mr. A never says what he doesn't mean.

ALEX: And no - - one has ever read those lines quite like that before.

DESIREE: (As MANDY.) Gee, well golly, well jeeppers . . . I mean - - (Back to DESIREE.) I'm grateful for your words of confidence, really grateful. Does this mean I've got the part?

ALEX: What do you think, Rocky?

ROCKY: Well, Desiree, you're wonderful like Alex said, but perhaps we should let your two friends have an opportunity to read for the role.

BARTON: Oh, no, we would never want to compete against Mandy, I mean Desiree. She's our friend.

BARTON: So you see we couldn't possibly deprive Desiree of such a wonderful opportunity as this: to play opposite Rocky in such a major emotional role.

ALEX: (Dumbfounded.) Oh.

BARTON: And since your audition notice indicated you wanted "three college-age actresses with dinner theatre experience," surely you've got two more roles for Franchot and myself.

ALEX: (Caught by his own audition notice.) Surely. Well then, turn to page thirty-six. Ah, this rather short scene, girls, is actually written for a man and a woman . . .

FRANCHOT: You need a man? I'm your woman.

ALEX: Well, actually, the male role is already cast, but for purposes of reading . . .

MURDER AT COPPERSMITH INN

FRANCHOT: I don't mind reading (*Lowering her voice, man-like.*) a man's lines. (*Lowering her voice another two steps.*) I've had all kinds of acting challenges in the past.

ALEX: (*Tongue in cheek.*) Yes, I'm sure you have. Well then, the scene is this: Lucille, whom everyone believes to be dead, is actually quite alive.

FRANCHOT: She wasn't murdered?

ALEX: Nope. All faked.

DESIREE: My boyfriend's being framed for a fake murder?

ALEX: Yes.

DESIREE: (*Erupting in pathos, complete with ELINOR's gestures.*) Oh, how terrible! (*Then, quite determined.*) I shall fight to the nth degree. I shall give every last ounce of courage. I shall do what no woman's ever done before to save the man I love! My inner preparation demands I commit myself to climbing Mr. Everest or fording the Mississippi if I must to save my man.

ALEX: Yes, well, as I was saying, Lucille is quite alive and in this scene, she is plotting with her late husband, Cameron - -

BARTON: Her "late" husband?

ALEX: Yes.

BARTON: There's a séance going on? Lucille, whom everyone thinks is dead, is talking with someone who's really dead?

ALEX: Lucille's husband, Cameron, isn't really dead. He faked his own death also.

FRANCHOT: What?

ALEX: Cameron had himself murdered.

BARTON: How does someone have himself murdered?

ALEX: Rather carefully. You see the whole murder was faked in deepest, darkest French Equatorial Africa . . .

BARTON: Which no longer exists.

ALEX: It was a while ago, okay? Cameron's jeep was attacked by raging bull elephants - -

DESIREE: Wow!

BARTON: So, Alex, no one's dead, but everyone thinks everyone else has been murdered?

ALEX: More or less.

DESIREE: Cool.

FRANCHOT: But I thought the audience has to solve the murder to win the grand prize?

BARTON: And from the sound of this plotline there's no murder to solve!

ROCKY: And no grand prize.

DESIREE: What?

BARTON: What?

FRANCHOT: What?

ROCKY: Just kidding. There's something to solve, really there is.

BARTON: What?

ALEX: Let's read the scene. Then we'll tell you.

FRANCHOT: No. I'd rather not know. I'd rather be forced to think my way through this murder-mystery. I mean, really get involved in the story. But I was kind of hoping to be the one who gets murdered. You know, "the body," so I could act dead all weekend.

ROCKY: Sorry, Franchot, Louella's got that part all sewed up. She acts dead even when she's supposed to act alive.

ALEX: The scene! Let's read the scene!

FRANCHOT: Okay, so I'm the husband who everyone thinks perished beneath charging bull elephants. So how do I sound?

ALEX: Sound?

FRANCHOT: Being dead for so many years, how do I sound?

ALEX: You sound normal, because you haven't been dead for so many years. You've never been dead.

FRANCHOT: Except, of course, in people's minds.

ALEX: Yes.

FRANCHOT: So I guess it wouldn't matter how I sound, because I wouldn't know how a murdered man who's not dead and who's not even been murdered would really sound inside peoples' heads who think that a dead man who's really alive is murdered but who really never was.

ALEX: Yes. Yes. Exactly. So read - - PLEASE.

Both FRANCHOT and BARTON look at the script.

BARTON: I take it I'm reading Lucille?

ALEX: Please.

FRANCHOT: And I'm Cameron.

ALEX: Yes.

FRANCHOT: And this is Lucille and Cameron's first meeting after everyone thinks they're dead but actually they're quite alive? But just one question.

ALEX: *(Totally exasperated.)* Yes!

FRANCHOT: I know it's a little matter . . .

ALEX: No, no, nothing's a little matter when it comes to creating a great performance.

FRANCHOT: Then, does Cameron know Lucille's dead even though she's alive and does Lucille know Cameron's alive even though he's supposed to be dead?

ALEX: Yes.

FRANCHOT: Yes, what?

ALEX: Yes to what you just said. PLEASE READ!

And thus the reading begins. But if DESIREE hit a new low in reading, she was Sarah Bernhardt or Helen Hayes compared to ELINOR and SARA's readings.

FRANCHOT: *(As "Cameron," in a deep voice.)* You can - - come out - - *(Hesitation.)* Please let me start over. I wasn't happy with that voice. *(Lowers her voice.)* You can - - come out - - *(Dropping the script.)* Oh, please excuse me, I'm just a bit nervous...

ALEX: Please, no need to be nervous.

FRANCHOT: It's difficult when you're reading cold like this. I'm usually not very good on cold readings, but once I've got the scene, I've got the scene! You know what I mean?

ALEX: Yes, I know what you mean. Please try again.

FRANCHOT: Yes, I'm going to try again. *(As "Cameron.")* You can come - - out - - now, Lucille. We're - - *(Tries to give herself a very sexy male voice.)* alone *(But the voice doesn't work!)*

BARTON: *(As "Lucille." Reading sweetly; a totally incorrect reading.)* I thought he'd never leave.

FRANCHOT: *(As "Cameron.")* Being a good attorney - - I suppose - - covering all his bases. *(Turns to ALEX.)* Alex, I don't understand these lines.

ALEX: Lucille and Cameron want to meet to talk with each other, but their meeting is being delayed by their attorney, so both Lucille and Cameron are quite impatient, waiting for their attorney to leave.

BARTON: Oh, if that's the case, I read the line wrong. Let me try that line again.

BARTON: (*As "Lucille" but with no change, try as she might.*) I thought he'd never leave.

FRANCHOT: But if both Lucille and Cameron are waiting for their attorney to leave, does their attorney know that Cameron's alive even though everyone thinks he's dead and Lucille's also alive even though everyone thinks she's been murdered?

ALEX: No.

FRANCHOT: No?

ALEX: No, the attorney doesn't know either Lucille or Cameron are alive, because they're both supposed to be dead.

FRANCHOT: But if the attorney doesn't know Lucille and Cameron are alive, then why are Lucille and Cameron impatient because the attorney won't leave when the attorney doesn't even know they're alive waiting to have a secret meeting, so how can he know he should leave so they can have their secret little rendezvous?

ALEX: Because the attorney doesn't know Lucille and Cameron are in the same house he's in.

DESIREE: And whose house are Lucille and Cameron in?

ALEX: Their own.

DESIREE: But if everyone thinks Lucille and Cameron are dead, shouldn't they be in graves?

ALEX: That's just it. Lucille and Cameron are not dead, and they've both come back to their own home - -

BARTON: Which wasn't sold or rented or held in probate?

ALEX: Look, Lucille and Cameron are both alive even though everyone thinks they're dead. They've had obituaries printed in the newspaper, flowers and memorials sent, funerals and everything. And in this scene, they come back to their own home unknown to anyone else.

DESIREE: Why?

ALEX: Because they've come home to pack so they can leave to go to Hawaii.

MURDER AT COPPERSMITH INN

FRANCHOT: Gee, shouldn't they have thought of that before? Like, shouldn't they have packed to go to Hawaii before they were murdered? I think coming back home after you're murdered is pretty risky. Someone might see you and then know you're not really murdered after all.

ALEX: Let's just read the scene.

DESIREE: But the attorney?

ALEX: What about the attorney?

DESIREE: Where is he?

ALEX: Where I will be soon . . . the looney bin!

FRANCHOT: Really? This play's about crazy people?

ALEX: No, I mean, yeah, this play's about crazy, conniving, scheming people.

BARTON: Oh, well, now that I know that, now that I know Lucille's not only alive even though she's supposed to be dead but also crazy, I know I read that line wrong. Let me try that line again.

BARTON: (*As "Lucille" but try as she might, no matter the "crazy" gestures and facial features she makes, the line is still read like the first reading.*) I thought he'd never leave.

ALEX: Great, Barton, just great.

DESIREE: But the attorney?

ALEX: (*About to lose it.*) Is in Lucille and Cameron's house sneaking around looking for valuables.

FRANCHOT: And the attorney thinks the house is empty?

ALEX: He knows it's empty.

FRANCHOT: How does he know that?

ALEX: Because Lucille and Cameron are dead.

DESIREE: But not really.

FRANCHOT: So the attorney's taking a real chance.

ALEX: No. He thinks Lucille and Cameron are dead.

DESIREE: Then the attorney's a crook?

ALEX: Precisely.

FRANCHOT: Well, I'm certainly glad to know that. That'll help my understanding of the character so I can read these lines better. Give it my very best interpretation!

ALEX: Yes, yes, good, great, now that you understand the attorney, you can read his lines better.

FRANCHOT: Except I'm not reading the attorney's lines.

ALEX: Then you'll read Cameron's lines better.

FRANCHOT: Except Cameron's not supposed to be in the house because he's dead even though he's alive.

ALEX: (*Acquiescing.*) Right. You've got the scene down pat. So PLEASE READ, BOTH OF YOU!

BARTON and FRANCHOT read the scene again with no improvements of any kind from the first reading. Thus, their reading remains fodder for a Grade Z late, late night poorly-made, extremely low-budget TV movie!

FRANCHOT: (*As "Cameron."*) Being a good - - attorney, I suppose, covering - - all - - his bases.

BARTON: (*As "Lucille."*) Or perhaps - - he - - suspects.

FRANCHOT: (*As "Cameron."*) No! Never! You gave a - - most convincing performance, my - - dear - - even I thought you were - - dead.

BARTON: (*As "Lucille."*) Any tighter with the rope, and I - - would have been.

FRANCHOT: (*As "Cameron."*) Had to make it look - - realistic. (*Then, suddenly as FRANCHOT.*) Hey, I get it! Lucille's husband murdered Lucille! Wow! A murdered man murdering his wife! Who would know? Great plot! Not even the soap opera have thought up this one!

ALEX: And you both have read beautifully.

FRANCHOT: Does that mean what I think, what I hope it means?

ROCKY: If Mr. A. says it, it means it.

ALEX: Yes, you've both got the parts.

FRANCHOT: I'm the husband whom everyone thinks is dead but is alive and murders his wife whom everyone thinks is dead but is also alive?

ALEX: No. No. No. You, Franchot, can be the maid. "Mary."

FRANCHOT: (*Disappointed.*) Who doesn't do anything.

ROCKY: The maid's the last person who saw Lucille alive.

FRANCHOT: But Lucille's never been dead!

ALEX: But everyone thinks she's - - oh, never mind, you'll understand in rehearsals.

BARTON: Rehearsals? When are those?

ALEX: (*Looking at his watch.*) In about ten minutes.

BARTON: Ten minutes?

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ALEX: We've only got two days until opening night. So we've got a lot of work to do.

DESIREE: We're going to put an entire play together in two days?

ALEX: And two nights.

BARTON: That's not possible, is it?

ROCKY: Why not? Flash Gordon only had fourteen minutes to save the entire world. And look what he did!

DESIREE: But Flash Gordon was in the movies! Anything can happen in the movies!

ALEX: And you're now in a play. Anything can happen in a play too. Well, time's a wastin'. Keep the scripts you've got, girls, and start working on your lines. We'll meet again in ten minutes.

DESIREE: My role is "Lynn?"

ALEX: Most definitely. From the moment you walked into this inn, I said to myself, "She's Lynn."

ROCKY: And if Mr. A. says it - -

BARTON: - - he means it!

FRANCHOT: And I'm Mary, the maid.

ALEX: Yes. A most important role.

BARTON: And who am I?

ALEX: The detective.

BARTON: A detective?

ALEX: Detective Rooney. A first-class Irish copper, a real dynamite flatfoot whose nose for clues always gets his - - I mean - - her man.

BARTON: His?

ALEX: Detective Rooney's actually a male role.

BARTON: I'm to be a man?

ALEX: Well, for the sake of the show, it would be best.

FRANCHOT: I'll be a man. I'd love to be a man. I always told my mother, "Why wasn't I born a man?"

ALEX: (*Wanting to put an end to all this.*) Okay, Franchot, you can be a man, Detective Rooney, and that means Barton is Mary, the maid. Everyone satisfied?

FRANCHOT: Definitely.

ALEX: Good.

FRANCHOT: But just one more question.

ALEX: (*Thinking, "Oh, no!" but saying.*) Yes?

FRANCHOT: Is Detective Rooney dead or alive?

ALEX: Very much alive.

FRANCHOT: Good. I'd hate to have to try to be a girl pretending to be a man who was dead pretending to be alive!

ALEX: Well, girls, you're in. You're part of our cast.

DESIREE: We're thrilled!

ALEX: We'll talk about salaries and wardrobe and makeup and the other little details that make life after our rehearsal. Okay?

DESIREE: Sure.

BARTON: Fine.

FRANCHOT: Yeah, that's cool.

ALEX: Well, Mabel, take a break from taking notes.

MABEL: Thanks, Alex. I need one.

ALEX: *(Exiting through the kitchen door.)* See you girls later.

MABEL: *(Smiling as she exits.)* You're going to love the show.

FRANCHOT: Yeah, I think so, if I can ever remember who's alive that's supposed to be dead and who's dead that's supposed to be alive.

MABEL: After the first rehearsal, it'll all come to you. *(Exits through the kitchen door.)*

ROCKY: Say, girls, welcome to our cast.

DESIREE: Thanks.

BARTON: Thanks.

FRANCHOT: We're glad to be a part of your cast.

ROCKY: I'll see you in a few moments. I'm going over to the gym and work out before rehearsal.

DESIREE: Wow! You work out often?

ROCKY: As often as I can. In this business, one's got to be the body beautiful.

DESIREE: Need someone to spot you?

ROCKY: Thanks, but I've got Brutus over at the gym. He was a trainer for the Team USA Olympic wrestling team. And is he big or is he humongous! See you. *(Exiting through the outside door.)*

DESIREE: Yeah, see you.

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After everyone's left the room, each girl turns to the other and shouts her joy. Suddenly, the three girls fill the room with so much excitement, joy, and happiness, and shouts, and wild jumping about that a passerby would think an entire cheerleading squad was in residence. Suddenly, because of the noise, GERTRUDE and HEIDI, feigning a faint, enter through the door at the top of the staircase landing, about to scream, "Be quiet!" Their screams are interrupted, however, by SCROGGS and MISS GOOCH, who slowly push open the basement door, peer out, see the girls shouting, then very slowly and very cautiously, tip-toe behind the girls and toward the outside door without being seen by the elated girls, but observed quite closely by GERTRUDE and HEIDI. Both SCROGGS and MISS GOOCH are each carrying two large and apparently very heavy suitcases. They exit never once being seen by MANDY, ELINOR, or SARA, who finally shout:

FRANCHOT: We've got the parts! We got cast in this show!

DESIREE: And he never asked for our résumés.

FRANCHOT: Guess Alex knows talent and experience when he sees it.

GERTRUDE and HEIDI talk to themselves beneath their breath as they exit through the door at the top of the staircase landing.

DESIREE: And now what are we going to do?

BARTON: *(Walks forward without saying a word, then stops, eyes both girls and says very seriously.)* Panic!

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