

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

by Tommy Jamerson
Adapted from the original screenplay by Robb White

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

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This script is dedicated to Nick, who not only gave me a chance, and a venue, but also the opportunity to stretch my voice. Who knew writing a play about death and betrayal could be so much fun?

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

TIME

Winter, 1959.

PLACE

The House.

CHARACTERS

Frederick Lauren – Male. Fifties. Debonair. Wealthy. The life (and death) of the party.

Annabelle Lauren – Female. Forty. Sleek. Opinionated. A waspy, femme fatale of sorts.

Nina Meers – Female. Early twenties. Mousy and timid, but cleverer than she realizes.

Lance Schroeder – Male. Late twenties/early thirties. Handsome. Relies more on his looks than his intelligence. A bit of a womanizer.

Ruth Bridges – Female. Forties. Think a young Bea Arthur crossed with Hedda Hopper.

Dr. David Trent – Male. Forties. Keenly intelligent but with an air of superiority.

Watson Pritchard – Male. Thirties, perhaps older. Moody. Aloof. But not without a sense of humor. The House's owner.

Cassidy Bowman – Female. Twenties. Graced with a warm disposition and kind eyes.

Rebecca Valifax/The Bride – Female. Ageless. The madam of the house.

Louis Slides/Byron Valifax – Male. Older. The caretaker of the House. Large and menacing. Walks with a limp. Think Lurch.

Eleanor Slides – Female. Older. The caretaker's wife. Old and haggard. Also walks with a limp. Think Carol Kane.

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PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTES

First and foremost, when it comes to casting it should be stated that the actors are not required to possess the features described in the play (hair color, eye color, body type, etc.). Feel free to change them should the need arise. These comments are merely meant to be a description, not a hindrance. It is my fervent belief that the performer best suited for the role should receive it. Lines can be adjusted, talent cannot.

Regarding the style of the piece: because the play is set in the late 50s, words, phrases, even reactions, are going to be considered comical to today's audiences. That's fine. They should be. That said, the characters should not be in on the joke. They're gravely serious about most of the things they're saying and (especially) feeling. It should also be noted that while this is NOT a direct sendup or parody of the original film, the play is meant to have a goofy, affable, somewhat campy (yet still slightly horrifying) air to it. This is a world where ghosts exist, characters double-and-triple cross each other, and every dramatic line of dialogue is punctuated with a loud thunderclap. It should feel as such.

Ad-libbing. As is the case with most of my plays, ad-libbing is not only suggested, it's encouraged. Because the actors are living and breathing these characters, there will undoubtedly be moments where they'll conjure up lines far superior than the ones I've given them. My sole request is that if you choose to alter or add a line, please make sure it still fits within the world of the play. I've gone to great lengths to make sure the dialogue feels like a horror picture from the 1950s (as viewed through the lens of a modern-day observer). Please do the same.

Above all else, I ask that you have fun. Ghoulish, blood-soaked fun.

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The House on Haunted Hill was first produced by interACT Theatre Productions (Maryann Galife Post, Producer) in Maplewood, NJ on October 11th, 2019. The performance was directed and designed by Nicholas J. Clarey (Artistic Director), with costumes by Mike Patierno, lights by Nicholas Von Hagel, sound by Alexander Post, and music by Eddie Bean. The Production Stage Manager was Felicity D. Selby and the Production Assistant Stage Manager was Alicia N. Fink. The cast was as follows:

Frederick Lauren.	Nat Gennace
Annabelle Lauren.	Kayann Richards
Nina Meers.	Melissa Mugica
Cassidy Bowman.	Molly Gilman
Lance Schroeder.	Guy Gunther Rose
Watson Pritchard.	Rahil Kassam
Ruth Bridges.	Sabrina Santoro
Dr. David Trent.	Jerry Narciso
Rebecca Valifax/The Bride.	Hannah Gaston
Louis Slides/Byron Valifax.	Robert Rasczyk
Eleanor Slides.	Marla Freeman

Special thanks to Isaiah J. Abdul-Qawi, Mark Aquilino, Samantha Colon, Dawilla Madsen, Anthea Marley, Holland Jancaitis, Mark J. Parker, Cyrus Rodriguez, Caitlyn M. Roper, Niassim Williams, and David Wren-Hardin

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The House on Haunted Hill was subsequently produced by Columbia Theatre for the Performing Arts in Hammond, LA on October 29th, 2021. The performance was directed by Jim Winter (Artistic Director), with sets by Ben Norman, costumes by Jade Antoinette, lights by Katy T. Baronich, and sound by Shelby Lowder. The Production Stage Manager was Katy T. Baronich and the Assistant Director was Chelsea Krause. The cast was as follows:

Frederick Lauren.	Ben C. Dougherty
Annabelle Lauren.	Ally Holloway
Nina Meers.	Leigh Moore
Cassidy Bowman.	Payton Core
Lance Schroeder.	Kenan Murphy
Watson Pritchard.	Caleb Hager
Ruth Bridges.	Kayla Bullard
Dr. David Trent.	DeJuan "DJ" James
Rebecca Valifax/The Bride.	Taylor Meng
Louis Slides/Byron Valifax/Ghostly Voice.	Dennis J. Watts, Jr.
Eleanor Slides/Ghostly Voice.	Katherine Loyacano
Young Rebecca/Ghostly Voice.	Lauren van Mullem
Additional Ghostly Voices.	Tara Bennett, Alex Richier, Logan Watts

Special thanks to Mariah Adams, Cameron Andries, Avery Brent, Paul Catalanotto, Keri Clement, Jonathan Connor, Adrian Coté, Bryant Fontenot, Averi Laughlin, Ben Norman, Payton Onellion, Angelle Reeves, Corey Saltaformaggio, Beanie Stansbury, and Michael Trahan

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Director's Notes on *The House on Haunted Hill*

November 2021

A first reading of Tommy Jamerson's wonderful adaptation of *The House on Haunted Hill* is likely to have potential producers and directors thinking, "We're going to have to budget a good bit for this one." For my production at the Columbia Theatre for the Performing Arts, my staff and I were prepared to stage it as it unfolds on the page: a proscenium-style thriller with some fairly elaborate technical demands.

Then came Hurricane Ida. With our main auditorium destroyed, we reimaged our production for a much more intimate space: a studio theatre that would be able to seat about 80 patrons a night if we played it right. The choice was made to trade out a lot of the creepy spectacle in favor of embracing the intimacy of our new venue.

We staged it essentially in the round, with a few pieces of furniture and two platforms: one representing the various bedrooms in the play and the other serving as the cellar. We used 20 lights (LEDs but no movers, most weren't even color changing, we still had to drop gel). We did incorporate digital projections along one wall. This got us out of a few jams such as the bleeding portrait, Annabelle's hanging, and the Rebecca Valifax story. We made sure to have a killer (pun intended) sound design and some good equipment to deliver it through because sound is everything in horror. I also had 5 audience plants every night who served as other "spirits" in the house and who would deliver the ghostly voices that accompanied Rebecca.

In the end we had infinitely more fun staging this play as a stripped-down fright-fest in an intimate venue. The audience loved the immersive nature of it. Many of them said they felt like they were guests at the Laurens' party, which is exactly what we were hoping for. I think we unintentionally proved that this fantastic play can be done on any budget and in any venue.

Tommy Jamerson has one of the finest imaginations of anyone I know, and his plays are best served by keeping everyone's imagination at the forefront.

Jim Winter
Artistic Director
The Columbia Theatre for the Performing Arts

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ACT ONE PROLOGUE

Darkness. Silence. All is still. This goes on for a few seconds longer than it should, allowing the audience enough time to grow restless. To giggle. To question whether the play is ever going to start...or if something unexpected has happened backstage. Something sinister and deadly.

Then, without warning, we hear a woman screaming – loudly and with total, and tonal, abandon. This is not just any scream mind you, but the kind of eardrum-popping, blood-curdling, bone-rattling scream that would put both Janet Leigh's and Jamie Lee Curtis' signature squalls to shame. The kind that not only makes theatre patrons bolt upright in their chairs, but also the hairs on the back of their necks.

Silence immediately returns, only to be followed by a series of growls, howls...maybe even the hooting of owls. Harsh laughter bellows throughout the theatre. Chains rattle. Doors slam. Floors squeak. Teeth gnash. Children weep. It's a symphony of chaos. The hysteria reaches a crescendo of fright and fervor when suddenly...a single spot shines down, silencing the noise and presenting in its wake, a tall, older man sporting a suit as black and sharp as his pencil mustache. This is FREDERICK LAUREN. Standing on either side of him are two, disheveled housekeepers – MR. and MRS. SLIDES.

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Frederick turns to face Mrs. Slides who presents him with a glass of brandy. He downs it in one gulp. Frederick then turns to Mr. Slides who pulls out a golden cigarette case and hands Frederick a cigarette. As Frederick clamps down on it, Mr. Slides pulls out a lighter. Frederick leans in, and before long, he's puffing away like a chimney. The two bow and limp offstage. A cloud of smoke surrounds Frederick as he takes a long drag from a cigarette.

FREDERICK. *(Calmly but with just a hint of mischief.)* The ghosts are moving tonight. You can hear them, can't you? But of course you can. They're restless. Hungry. And I should think...in desperate need of some company. Fortunately for them, company is prominently featured on tonight's menu. Permit me to introduce myself – I am Frederick Lauren. You've no doubt read about me in the papers and such. None of it true, I assure you. But you're not here to talk about me. Least not entirely. No, you're here because you want to learn more about the strange goings-on that occurred at this century-old, chef-d'oeuvre of brick and slate simply known as the House on Haunted Hill. *(Lights rise on the interior of an old, Aztec-style – yet surprisingly modern – mansion, swathed in fog. He finishes his cigarette, tosses it to the ground, and stamps it out with his shoe.)* Built by the infamous miner, Byron Valifax, the house was meant to be a wedding present for his daughter, Rebecca. Poor Rebecca. Hers was a tragic story. Filled with lust, betrayal, violence...and all those other delicious little morsels that make ghost stories so appealing. But more on her later. All you need to know presently is that in February of '59, I rented the house so my wife could give herself a party. A haunted house party. She's so amusing, my wife. Or at least, she was... *(He loses himself in thought for a moment, then...)* Anyway, only five guests were invited, and as an incentive for staying until daybreak, they were each promised a party favor of fifty thousand dollars, cash. Now you might be wondering, who were these fortunate five? Why were they chosen? What made them so special? And to that I say...allow me to introduce you. *(He claps his meaty hands. Trancelike, and in single file, the partygoers enter. Dead-eyed, they face the audience. Frederick touches them. He moves their heads up*

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and down, side to side, raises and lowers their arms, etc. They are his playthings. He approaches the dashing, square-jawed LANCE SCHROEDER.) First was Lance Schroeder – young, rugged, and always lucky with the opposite sex. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for his gambling prowess. Lance was a test pilot, so purportedly a brave man... but I must ask, don't you think you can be a tad braver if you're paid for it? Something to chew on. *(Turns his attention to an older woman, RUTH BRIDGES. She's sporting a fire-engine red hat covered in so much plumage that it looks more like a ceremonial headdress.)*

Next was Ruth Bridges. A reporter and gossip columnist who, like an old basset hound I once had, was always sticking her nose where it didn't belong. Ruth claimed her reason for accepting my invitation was to write an article on ghosts. But I have it on good authority that she was desperate for money. Spendthrift. *(Moves to WATSON PRITCHARD.)*

Watson Pritchard. He was the House's owner, but constantly swore he was too afraid to step foot in it. Here's what I don't understand – why would a man who claimed to live in mortal fear of a house risk his life by spending the night in it? One thing you should know about Pritchard, he was quite loaded...but not in the financial sense. *(Opens Pritchard's jacket. A shiny silver flask is visible. Moves to DAVID TRENT. He sports a bland, brown suit.)*

Next, we had Doctor Trent. His friends called him David – or at least they would have if he had any. Trent was a psychiatrist who said my ghosts would help with his work on hysteria, and maybe they would have...but alas, we'll never know. Perhaps it's just me, but don't you see tiny little touches of greed around the mouth...and eyes? *(Notices NINA MEERS. He instantly lights up.)* And finally, we come to my personal favorite. A lost, wounded little bird known as Nina Meers. She was selected because she needed my money more than most. Wasn't she pretty? Soft eyes. Golden hair. Delicious red lips. It's hard to imagine someone so beautiful could have a past so tragic... *(Forgets himself for a moment and leans in – as if he's about to kiss her – when at the very last second, the old grandfather clock begins to chime – its foreboding tone underscoring the following dialogue.)* Ah! Hear that? It means it's time to go back to where it all began. Time to reignite the flames of the past...and uncover secrets that have been

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buried for far too long. And this story, like all great ghost stories, begins on a dark and stormy night...

Claps his hands. A crash of thunder booms through the theatre as lights flicker. The sound of heavy rainfall is heard. A gleeful smile plays across Frederick's lips as he observes the audience once more, and then amid a second thunderclap, disappears.

The Guests – Lance, Ruth, Trent, Pritchard, and Nina – cover their heads with their overnight bags and/or purses – and run towards the house. The lights continue to flicker as the sound of rainfall grows louder. Though no rain is falling, they should all act as if they're soaked.

As they approach the house, a bolt of lightning illuminates the stage, allowing Nina to catch a glimpse of Trent's face. He also catches hers. The two lock eyes for a moment. A beat passes, then...

LANCE. *(Calling out.)* Hey! What are you two waiting for? Come on!

Another clap of thunder. Nina and Trent turn and run into the house, giving us a better view of...

SCENE ONE. THE DRAWING ROOM, A FEW MOMENTS LATER.

The House. A grand, multileveled mansion from yesteryear, with two great staircases, one leading to the second floor, stage left, and the other to the second floor, stage right. A grandfather clock sits, wedged between the two staircases on the first floor. The house is furnished with a few couches, a chair or two, a coffee table, and a credenza. A large portrait of Rebecca Valifax hangs over the fireplace. The members of the group attempt to dry themselves off.

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LANCE. Well wasn't that something?!

RUTH. The worst! The absolute worst! I'm soaked! Completely!

NINA. *(Quieter.)* It was pretty bad out there...

RUTH. Pretty bad!? It's disgusting!

TRENT. Not much better in here. Where is everybody? Surely, we can't be the only ones.

LANCE. Only one way to find out – *(Calls out.)* Hello? ...Mr. Lauren? Anybody? ...Hello?

Perhaps it echoes.

RUTH. I'm no detective but it appears as if no one's home.

TRENT. That'd be my diagnosis.

NINA. Somebody must be close by. The house is warm...and all the lights are on. If only this place weren't so menacing...

RUTH. *(Pats the sofa. Dust flies everywhere. She coughs.)* ...Or dusty. *(Ruth takes her hat off. It's a small, red pillbox hat covered in a red netting. A large, wilted ostrich plume dangles pitifully from it. She attempts to wring it out. Pritchard watches in amazement. Exasperated.)* Ugh. Will you just look at this hat? Ruined! Sixty dollars down the drain.

NINA. Sixty?!

RUTH. And worth every penny. Fashion is an art. And you can't put a price on art.

LANCE/TRENT. I can.

TRENT. Perhaps we'd better stay in here until someone comes and finds us.

RUTH. I hope whoever comes brings some warm towels and shows me where I can freshen up.

LANCE. You got that right! *(The sound of thunder and rain continues for the rest of the scene. Lights occasionally flicker. Lance wanders about...)* You know you gotta hand it to this place. If I were a ghost, this would be the house I'd haunt.

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TRENT. Embellishments aside, these certainly are not the accommodations one expects when dealing with someone as notable as Frederick Lauren.

RUTH. I always heard he lived in a mansion in Trousdale...not a dank old tomb in the middle of...where are we exactly? *(No one knows. They stare blankly at each other, hoping for an answer. Say things like "beats me," "I have no clue," etc.)* Oh, come now. At least one of us has to know. Anybody?

Pritchard, who has yet to speak and is sitting on a couch, far away from the rest of the group, pipes up.

PRITCHARD. ...Death Valley.

RUTH. ...I beg your pardon.

PRITCHARD. *(Jittery. Unscrewing the lid of a flask he normally conceals in his jacket pocket. Not three sheets to the wind yet...maybe one-and-a-half?)* That's where we are. Death Valley. About two hours outside of Vegas...give or take.

NINA. Vegas!

LANCE. Hey! Now we're talkin'! Maybe we can convince Mr. Moneybags to move this party from the desert to the Sands. Get a room. Shoot craps. I've been on a bit of a losing streak lately, but if Lauren's payin', I could play all night.

RUTH. And just how do you propose we get there? The procession of hearses that brought each of us here left without saying a word. No card. No number. Nothing. Besides, the last thing some of us need is to find ourselves in more debt...

NINA. ...They were rather disturbing, weren't they? The hearses. And that iron gate out front – it appeared to open all by itself.

TRENT. Just a simple party trick. Nothing more.

PRITCHARD. I, uh, hate to break it to ya, but uh...only ghosts have parties here.

No one is sure how to respond.

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TRENT. (*Amused.*) Is that so?

PRITCHARD. Yes. But don't worry...my guess is we'll be joining them soon.

LANCE. (*Chuckling.*) In a drink?

PRITCHARD. ...In death.

A loud clap of thunder punctuates Pritchard's last line.

RUTH. That was cheerful. Not to mention appropriately timed. And you know all this because...?

PRITCHARD. Because I own this place.

The group is stunned.

TRENT. You mean to tell us that *you* live here?

PRITCHARD. No. Nobody lives here. They can try but...they won't last long. This place was my grandfather's. Then when he died...it went to me. Not entirely sure why. My whole life I've only spent one night here, and that was plenty. I was lucky to make it out alive.

NINA. ...What happened?

RUTH. Yes. What did happen?

PRITCHARD. I, uh... (*A beat. The group leans in, intrigued.*) I don't really feel comfortable talking about it, you know? ...Especially to strangers.

RUTH. He is right. Outside of introducing ourselves before the storm hit, we are all strangers to each other. Or at least, you're all strangers to me.

LANCE. None of you look familiar to me.

TRENT. (*To Nina.*) What about you, Miss? Do *you* recognize anyone here?

NINA. (*Hesitant.*) ...N - no. No.

We don't believe her.

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TRENT. Well then let's try another approach. Who here is acquainted with Lauren?

LANCE. Not me. Heard about him, sure, but never met him.

RUTH. I've tried several times to get an interview with him, but none of them panned out. Even wrote a few articles about his supposed affairs, hoping to get his attention, but still nothing. Then about a week ago I received a telephone call from some personal assistant inviting me to his wife's birthday party.

TRENT. That was my experience as well.

NINA. I used to work for one of his companies, but that was a long while ago.

LANCE. (*Slapping Pritchard on the back.*) Ok then, Pritch, I guess you're the only one of us who's had any interaction with him, huh?

PRITCHARD. Not me. I don't even know what he looks like. All the details about renting this house were done by mail. ...And don't call me Pritch.

TRENT. Well, whatever he paid you, he can clearly afford it. You'd have to be quite wealthy to throw a two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollar party for five people.

RUTH. I recently read he bought the old Cromwell theatre, the one on Fountain. And I know for a fact he owns eight steel mills – and at least half-a-dozen movie houses.

LANCE. Since we're talking numbers, he's also had what, five wives?

RUTH. Four...so far.

LANCE. Lucky dog. Though I don't know if he could do much better than his current one. Any of you seen the pictures of her? Looks like she stepped right out of a painting.

TRENT. What I can't understand is why someone with his wealth and resources would want to spend any evening, let alone his wife's birthday, with five complete strangers in a supposedly haunted house...

PRITCHARD. There's no supposedly about it. The ghosts are real. Everything will seem normal at first, but then one by one things will start to happen. Objects...people...they'll start to vanish. To disappear. You'll see. Just give them time. (*Takes another swig from the flask.*) Give them time...

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Another crash of thunder. Lights flicker. Nina has been growing anxious this entire time – looking about the room, tightly clutching her left arm with her right hand.

NINA. Mr. Pritchard, I hate to bother you again, but while we're waiting, would you please tell us what happened? Normally I wouldn't be so persistent, it's just...I'm a little anxious, is all.

PRITCHARD. Look, I said, I really don't like talking about it and -

NINA. Mr. Pritchard...please.

PRITCHARD. *(A beat. He stares at the group. A sigh.)* Fine. It was...the walls.

TRENT. Walls?

PRITCHARD. *(He nods.)* They uh, they started in on me. Slowly at first. Very...very slowly. It took hours.

NINA. Wait, which walls?

PRITCHARD. All of 'em. Every last – there was no way out.

TRENT. And these walls, you say they were –

PRITCHARD. Moving. I tried to stop them. To escape. But I couldn't. They wouldn't – she wouldn't let me. I think she wanted to crush me.

NINA/RUTH. She?

PRITCHARD. That's right.

TRENT. And you were conscious during this? Not incapacitated in any way?

Trent eyes Pritchard's flask.

PRITCHARD. I wasn't drunk if that's what you're implying.

LANCE. Hey, no one was thinking that.

RUTH. Speak for yourself. Now Mr. Pritchard, this *story* of yours, you mean to tell us you witnessed all of it? You were awake for *all* of it?

PRITCHARD. Held out as long as I could but...when my bones started to splinter...and break...I passed out.

NINA. That sounds just awful.

LANCE. Probably didn't feel too great either.

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TRENT. What about when you came to? These walls, they were...?

PRITCHARD. Back where they belonged. I was in the hospital and they were...back where they belonged. It was as if nothing had happened. After that...I never stepped foot in this house again. Least until tonight.

Lightning. Again.

LANCE. I wouldn't be too discouraged, Pritch. Things like this happen to guys in the air force all the time.

RUTH. Walls crush their bones? What kind of planes are you boys flying?

LANCE. No, I mean – you work too many hours, don't get enough sleep...you start to see things. So I've been told...

TRENT. Lance is right. The power of suggestion can be a dangerous thing. The mind can play tricks on you.

PRITCHARD. And what are you? Some kind of doctor?

TRENT. Only Monday through Friday. And every other Saturday, eight to noon. *(Pritchard stares at him blankly.)* I'm a psychiatrist.

PRITCHARD. That so? Well then, I'll show you exactly where it happened – *(To Lance.)* I'll show it to you too. Maybe the walls will start moving and messing with your minds as well.

TRENT. Perhaps...but I think we all know that's highly unlikely.

PRITCHARD. You calling me a liar?

TRENT. Of course not.

PRITCHARD. *(Raising his voice.)* 'Cause it sounds like you are.

LANCE. Pritch, that's not what he meant.

TRENT. Not in the slightest. I was merely stating –

PRITCHARD. You were saying the same thing everyone says – that they're delusions! That I'm delusional. That I'm seeing things – that I saw things – that aren't really there.

TRENT. No, no. I'm saying that if you believe that you saw –

PRITCHARD. No, I know what I saw – and soon you will too. All of you. You'll see, and know, and fear the same things I've been dealing with for years!

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TRENT. This has gotten out of hand. Please, calm down.

PRITCHARD. I am calm!

RUTH. Could've fooled me.

TRENT. Ruth!

PRITCHARD. I am!

LANCE. Look, Pritch –

PRITCHARD. And stop calling me Pritch!

BAM! His words are cut short as all the doors slam shut – one right after the other. The sound of doors slamming all over the house is heard. BAM! BAM! BAM!

RUTH. ...What was that?

Lance approaches the main door to the house and attempts to open it. He gives it a good pull. No luck.

LANCE. The doors, they're – *(Yanking on the doorknob. Furiously attacking it.)* Locked.

PRITCHARD. Who's delusional now?

RUTH. Oh sweetie, still you. *(To Lance.)* Try turning that harder.

TRENT. Let me see that... *(Trent approaches the door, also attempts to open it. No luck.)* It won't budge.

Bangs against the door with his fist.

LANCE. What kind of game is this?

RUTH. I'm not sure, but it's one I have no intention of playing. *(Shouting.)* Lauren, if you're there and this is your idea of a joke, you can just stop it. You hear me? It's over!

Tensions rise. Another thunderclap. Another flicker. Nina slowly creeps away from the group, clearly shaken. At some point during an earlier moment in the scene, Nina placed her purse down near the sofa. She

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now turns to approach it. The group barely acknowledges her. They continue to battle the door, ad-libbing dialogue.

LANCE. *(Fiddling with the handle.)* C'mon!

They begin talking over each other when – BOOM! Another loud clap of thunder! The loudest by far. This time, the lights go out completely. We're in complete darkness.

RUTH. And just when I thought this evening couldn't get better!

TRENT. Come now. Everyone, remain calm.

PRITCHARD. He's right.

TRENT. Thank you.

PRITCHARD. The ghosts are going to get us whether the lights are on or not.

RUTH/TRENT/LANCE. Shut up, Pritchard!

We hear heavy breathing.

LANCE. Nina? Is that you?

NINA. *(Jittery. Through deep breaths.)* I – I'm all right.

TRENT. It'll be Ok, Nina.

LANCE. Doc's right. All we need to do is stay perfectly – *(Suddenly, another thunderclap, as the lights flicker back to life.)* still.

RUTH. *(Dryly.)* Well, let there be fright.

TRENT. There we go. See. Just a few twisted wires.

LANCE. If only we could get this –

Nina is looking about, somewhat frantically. She pipes up.

NINA. ...Have – have any of you seen my purse?

TRENT. What?

NINA. I set it down right here. I know I did. I saw it a moment ago...before the lights went out, but then it...

PRITCHARD. ...Disappeared?

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NINA. No. I'm sure it's – (*In a daze.*) n – none of you have seen it?

They all look at each other.

LANCE. Not me. Did you have anything valuable in there?

NINA. Not really. Just um, my wallet and some –

THUMP. THUMP. THUMP. *There is a knock at the door. They all turn in unison.*

TRENT. ... Was that the –

THUMP. THUMP.

RUTH. Well...anybody going to get that?

CASSIDY. (*Off.*) Hello?! Is anyone there? ...Hello?! (*They all look at each other, not sure how to respond. Perhaps they whisper things to each other like, "you get it." "No, you."*) Hello??

LANCE. (*Leaning against the door.*) Um...hello?

CASSIDY. (*Off.*) Thank goodness! Could you open the door please?

Lance looks back at the group, then...

LANCE. Yeah. I mean, I would...whoever you are...but – it's locked. We're trapped in here.

CASSIDY. (*Off.*) The door sticks. Just give it – give it a good tug! Please! This storm it's – I'm soaked out here.

LANCE. All right, but it's not going to do any –

Lance gives the handle a tug – it opens with ease. CASSIDY BOWMAN enters. She's harried but well put together.

CASSIDY. Thank goodness! That storm was just so – oh, look! You're all here! I was hoping you would be. Your cars didn't have any trouble finding the place?

RUTH. You mean hearses? ...And no.

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CASSIDY. Hearses? Right. Mr. Lauren's idea – spooky, but you know how he can be.

TRENT. Actually, we don't.

CASSIDY. *(To self.)* No you don't, do you. Well let's get the party started. *(Extends hand.)* I'm Cassidy Bowman, Mr. Lauren's personal assistant. I'm usually much more punctual, but this storm is...well, you know. Tell me, did I miss anything?

BAM! Once again, the front door slams shut – hard. Cassidy jumps back, alarmed. Ruth snatches the flask from Pritchard's grip and hands it to Cassidy.

RUTH. Here. You might need this.

We shift to...

SCENE TWO. A REMOTE AREA OF THE STAGE.

A pool of light illuminates Frederick.

FREDERICK. *(Almost gleeful. Lighting a cigarette.)* That certainly escalated quickly. Nothing like the flickering of lights and slamming of doors to get the blood pumping. The pulse racing... *(Puffs on his cigarette.)* Maybe not so much for you but...poor little Nina. Not even in the house – *(Looks over at the grandfather clock.)* twenty minutes and she's already stiff with fright. Want to know what makes me stiff? *(Lights rise on Cassidy. Like the other characters Frederick introduced, she too is frozen.)* You've already met my personal assistant, Cassidy Bowman. Wasn't she pretty? Truly. Just exquisite. *(He sighs. Lights out on Cassidy. As Frederick speaks, he makes his way through the house and up the stage left staircase.)* Anyway, while the guests were making themselves comfortable, I made my way up the stairs without being seen, and after taking one last longing glance at my dear Cassidy, ventured forth and went from beauty...to beast. Permit me to introduce you to... *(He approaches a door.)* my wife.

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Lights flicker eerily. He knocks on it and enters. We shift...

SCENE THREE. UPSTAIRS. ANNABELLE'S ROOM.

Frederick opens the door and steps inside an opulently decorated, but still gloomy, bedroom. Lights flicker a bit.

FREDERICK. Annabelle...dear...

ANNABELLE. *(Off.)* Who is it?

FREDERICK. It's me – your loving, faithful husband.

ANNABELLE. *(Off.)* ...You must have the wrong room, sir. I'm afraid I don't have one of those.

FREDERICK. Hilarious. Hurry up, will you. Our guests have all arrived and are unfortunately still breathing. *(He pulls back the drapes on the bedroom window. The thunder, though still rumbling, has softened.)* It looks as if the storm is finally dying down, though I doubt we've seen the last of it. You weren't frightened by that power outage, were you? What am I saying? Nothing frightens you...other than poverty, of course. *(He laughs to himself. Beat.)* ...Annabelle? What are you doing in there? You put your face on yet?

ANNABELLE emerges from a nearby bathroom. She's dripping in satin and privilege.

ANNABELLE. Of course. What do you think?

FREDERICK. *(He caresses her cheek for a moment.)* I think...you should try putting on another one. Cracks in your mask starting to show.

ANNABELLE. Why do I even bother?

FREDERICK. Beats me.

ANNABELLE. If only I could. *(She slinks over to an overnight case resting on a vanity.)* I swear, Frederick – you couldn't have found a worse place if you tried. Cobwebs and dirt everywhere. The sink barely

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trickles...and I refuse to step one foot in that rust bucket they call a bathtub.

FREDERICK. Atmosphere, darling. Atmosphere. When people think of a Frederick Lauren party, they think of style. Sophistication. Just like when they think of Frederick Lauren the man, they think finesse and flair.

ANNABELLE. Really? That's not the f-word I was thinking of.

FREDERICK. Don't be crass. (*Looking her up and down, eyeing her plunging neckline.*) Speaking of which...that's some outfit you've got on. But don't you think it's time you shed your skin and slither into something a bit more appropriate? You know I don't like it when you dress this way.

ANNABELLE. I know – that's why I'm wearing it. And as far as the party is concerned...I already told you, dear, I'm not going.

FREDERICK. That you did, darling. But as I told you – that's not an option. The "spend the night haunted house" party was your idea after all.

ANNABELLE. Yes. And I was looking forward to it too...until that assistant of yours had to commandeer the guest list. Not that it should surprise me. She's rather excellent at taking things that don't belong to her.

FREDERICK. It wasn't Cassidy's fault. She was merely following orders. You know how she bends over backwards to please me.

ANNABELLE. ...As well as other positions.

FREDERICK. My, you are in rare form, aren't you? But not tonight. Not on your birthday. Now that you're getting along in years, you can't keep sneering at me every chance you get. Causes wrinkles.

ANNABELLE. (*A beat. Concerned.*) Frederick...why didn't you invite any of our friends? My friends? You're up to something, aren't you?

FREDERICK. Aren't I always? And I didn't know you had any friends left.

ANNABELLE. I would if it wasn't for your jealousy. (*Back to the matter at hand.*) What's your angle?

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Frederick goes over to a champagne bucket on a nightstand. Pulls out an expensive looking bottle and begins shaking it.

FREDERICK. You're always so suspicious. If you must know, I had a distinct reason for inviting each person here. I told Cassidy I wanted a sort of cross-section, from psychiatrist to typist, drunk to jet pilot. See, they all share one thing – they all need money. You remember what that was like, don't you? Being so desperate for a few lousy dollars you're willing to do practically anything? Even trick a millionaire with a penchant for blondes who have more curves than Route 66 into marrying you.

ANNABELLE. *(Smiles a Cheshire smile.)* I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about.

FREDERICK. Perhaps a glance at that ring on your finger will refresh your memory. And if that doesn't work, try a swig of this. *(Hands her a glass of champagne.)* Don't worry, it won't kill you. Less of course you've poisoned it...like last month's dinner.

ANNABELLE. *(To self.)* Not this again. *(To Frederick.)* The doctor said it was something you drank.

FREDERICK. Right. Arsenic on the rocks. *(Holds the champagne glass out.)* Here. Just a few sips. You'll enjoy the party more.

ANNABELLE. I said, no thank you.

She begins fussing with her hair in her vanity mirror. He places the champagne glass in her face.

FREDERICK. Come on, Annabelle? ...Annabelle? ...Annabelle.

ANNABELLE. What?!

FREDERICK. *(Firm. A far cry from the playful man we met at the top of the play.)* I'm not going to have any until you do. And you know how I love my champagne. Don't make me wait, Annabelle. *(Beat. Through gritted teeth.)* Annabelle! *(Defiantly, Annabelle takes the glass, wraps her lips around the rim, and sips a few bubbles – locking eyes with him the entire time.)* That's a good girl –

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He pats the top of her head like a cat or a dog. Immediately she swats him away.

ANNABELLE. Get off me, you –

FREDERICK. *(He grabs her hand. Laughing.)* Ha! There's the girl I married. *(Releases it.)* Tell me, would you go away for five million dollars, tax free?

ANNABELLE. Only five?

FREDERICK. How silly of me. You want it all, don't you?

ANNABELLE. I deserve it all.

FREDERICK. Yes, I'm sure you think you do. *(Downs the glass of champagne.)* Cassidy will be waiting for me.

ANNABELLE. Like the good little bitch she is...

FREDERICK. I expect to see you downstairs with a changed outfit and attitude. Oh, and one more thing: happy birthday, darling. May you get exactly what you deserve. *(Places his hands on her shoulders and kisses her on the lips.)* Something to remember me by.

She flashes another Cheshire smile, then wipes her lips, attempting to wipe away every last trace of him. He exits. Blackout.

SCENE FOUR. THE DRAWING ROOM, A FEW MOMENTS LATER.

We quickly transition back into the drawing room. Nina is resting in a large easy chair, while Ruth is busy manning an old-fashioned hair dryer, attempting to keep her hat from molting. Cassidy enters carrying a large pile of folded towels.

CASSIDY. Here we are: warm towels fresh out of the dryer. *(She hands one to Trent.)* Here you go, Doctor.

TRENT. *(He takes one and wipes his brow.)* Thank you.

CASSIDY. Mr. Schroeder.

LANCE. *(Takes one.)* Oh. Swell.

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CASSIDY. *(Hands one to Pritchard.)* And one for Mr. Pritchard... *(She sets one next to Ruth, who is busy at work.)* and Miss Bridges. And an extra fluffy one for Miss Nina.

NINA. *(Nina, who has been in a daze up until this point, is lulled awake by Cassidy offering her the towel. She takes one.)* Oh. Thank you. You didn't have to though.

CASSIDY. I was happy to. We need to keep you from getting sick. *(Almost whispering.)* You seem like the only normal one here.

NINA. I don't know about that.

CASSIDY. I do. Believe me. *(Points to Ruth playing with the feather in her cap. Nina laughs.)* That's a pretty fragrance you're wearing. What is it?

Nina opens her mouth to speak. Perhaps she even gets the word "oh" out, but she is quickly interrupted by Lance.

LANCE. Say uh, Cassidy, there wouldn't happen to be any food around here, would there? I know it's late, but with the long car ride...

TRENT. Yes, I'm rather hungry myself.

CASSIDY. Actually, as luck would have it, we – *(The doors to the dining room slowly creak open as Mr. and Mrs. Slides enter, standing in the doorway for a moment. The guests aren't quite sure what to make of them.)* Perfect timing. Everyone, this is Louis Slides and his wife, Eleanor – they're the house's caretakers. *(They enter the room, both wheeling in carts. Mrs. Slides wheels in a mini rollaway bar, while Mr. Slides wheels in a long room service tray with various dishes on it.)* I've been told Eleanor is an exceptional cook – so this should be a treat for everyone.

The ghoulish couple works quickly and efficiently – every move done with purpose. It's evident they want to flee the scene as quickly as possible. Lance salivates as Mrs. Slides removes the lids from each dish.

LANCE. Wow. This sure is some spread.

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CASSIDY. These are only the hors d'oeuvres. Wait until you see what they have planned for dinner.

LANCE. *(Lifting one of the lids by himself.)* If they have those little cocktail wieners, I'm going to – *(Mrs. Slides smacks his hand away.)* Ouch!

CASSIDY. Eleanor! *(To Lance.)* Sorry about that. From what I gather they're very traditional. Isn't that right, Mr. Pritchard?

PRITCHARD. Don't ask me. I barely know them. *(The Slides stop what they're doing and turn and stare at Pritchard. Perhaps they punctuate their turn with a low grunt. In unison, of course. An awkward beat. To the Slides.)* Well I don't.

The Slides finish what they're doing and begin to exit, dragging their bad legs behind them.

CASSIDY. Anyway, thank you, Mr. Slides – *(He nods his head, perhaps even grunts, but refuses to make eye contact with her.)*

Mrs. Slides. *(She ignores her.)* Thank you, Mrs. Slides. *(Still nothing. A louder attempt.)* I SAID, THANK YOU, MRS – *(To Nina.)* She must be hard of hearing.

When Cassidy isn't looking, Mrs. Slides turns towards her and flicks her gnarled thumb from the back of her upper front teeth, as if to say... well, you know what she's trying to say. Like before, she grunts as she does this. She then drags herself offstage...

LANCE. Is it safe now?

CASSIDY. Help yourself.

TRENT. Miss Bowman, I'm confused about these, um... caretakers. When we first arrived, Lance here called out for help, but there was no reply. Isn't that right, Lance?

LANCE. *(His mouth half full of food.)* Nope. Didn't say a word.

TRENT. Now they're here and roaming about the house. Why didn't they respond earlier? Pretty peculiar if you ask me.

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PRITCHARD. (*Sipping from his flask. Chuckling to himself.*) Not for this house. This house only lets people hear what it wants them to. I could set firecrackers off in your bed, and if the ghosts didn't want you to hear them, you wouldn't...least not until it was too late.

RUTH. You know, Pritchard, what I don't understand is, if this house is so evil and splinters people's bones and whatnot, why don't you just sell it?

PRITCHARD. Sure! You want it? The State doesn't. And last I checked people aren't lining up to buy a dilapidated old house in the middle of a desert.

LANCE. Then why come back?

PRITCHARD. Because as scary as ghosts are, there are some things in this world even more terrifying...unemployment for starters. (*Annoyed at Ruth's futile attempt to salvage her hat.*) Don't you think it's time you gave up on that ratty thing? Hasn't it suffered enough? Throw in the towel.

He tosses the towel at her.

RUTH. My hats are my signature. They worked for Hedda. They'll work for me. To me they're like children – only you love them.

She places her hat back on her head.

TRENT. (*To Cassidy.*) Back to the matter at hand – who else is in this house? And where's Lauren? Why isn't he here yet? This isn't all some ruse, is it?

FREDERICK. (*Off.*) On the contrary, Doctor. (*Emerging, in dramatic fashion.*) Your host has arrived. (*The group is taken aback.*) You'll have to excuse me for leaving you to fend for yourselves. You see, you're a bit early, and my wife, as usual, is more than a bit late. She'll be joining us shortly. (*Eyes Cassidy.*) Ah! I see Miss Bowman was able to keep you company. Hello, Cassidy.

CASSIDY. Mr. Lauren.

FREDERICK. (*To Lance.*) And you must be –

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RUTH. Ruth Bridges, Hollywood Gazette. It's a thrill to meet you, Mr. Lauren. An absolute thrill.

FREDERICK. *(Less-than-thrilled.)* Yes, I'm sure the pleasure is all yours.

RUTH. *(She feigns amusement and continues.)* Yes. I know now's not the time for it, but I was hoping we could arrange a sit-down interview sometime. Something big. Something exclusive. A two-page spread even. I can see it all now, and it's all in bold font: "Ruth Bridges Gap Between Millionaire and Myth!" *(Whips out her card.)* We'll be the talk of the town for sure!

FREDERICK. Absolutely! I would love that.

RUTH. *(Surprised and relieved.)* Really?

FREDERICK. Of course. *(Snatches card. To Cassidy, who is standing by his side.)* Cassidy, put this somewhere safe. *(To Ruth.)* I'll be sure to take you up on this.

RUTH. Wonderful!

He holds the card out and hands it to Cassidy, who is standing by his side. While Ruth isn't looking, Cassidy tosses it in a nearby waste basket.

FREDERICK. And who is this charming young flower?

CASSIDY. This is Nina Meers, Mr. Lauren. I believe she used to work at one of your factories.

FREDERICK. Is that so?

NINA. ...Yes.

FREDERICK. It's wonderful to meet you. It's wonderful to meet all of you. Since we're still getting to know each other, let's get acquainted with a drink. Cassidy?

CASSIDY. Right away, sir.

She approaches the tiny rollaway bar.

PRITCHARD. Mr. Lauren, Watson Pritchard.

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FREDERICK. The homeowner – yes! You certainly have an interesting place here. Filled with so much...character. And what's that unusual aroma I keep picking up? The house is covered in it.

PRITCHARD. Oh. Death. *(Frederick smiles and turns away. Pritchard grabs his arm, tightly.)* Mr. Lauren, I must advise you to call this whole thing off now. The ghosts, they're already moving, sir. I can feel them.

FREDERICK. Can you?

PRITCHARD. They've already shown themselves once. *(Points to Nina.)* They took her purse!

FREDERICK. *(Looks at Nina.)* Is that true? ...How delightful. Hopefully there's more to come. *(Changing subject. Pritchard is furious.)* What would everyone like to drink? What's your preference?

PRITCHARD. *(Snatching a bottle off the bar and walking over to a corner of the room.)* ...Shouldn't you say, pick your poison?

RUTH. I'll go first. Scotch and, please.

CASSIDY. Scotch and...?

RUTH. Surprise me. All I care about is the scotch.

FREDERICK. I like your spirit. Scotch Ands all around.

NINA. None for me, thanks.

FREDERICK. What? Of course one for you! Don't want to be left out of the fun, do you? *(Motions to Cassidy to make Nina a drink. To the group.)* Now, while Cassidy pours the drinks, I'll go over the details. First, to answer the question I'm sure has been gnawing away at the back of your minds all evening – yes, each of you will receive fifty-thousand-dollars, cash, simply for staying the night. *(They soak this in for a moment.)* Should one or more of you have an encounter with one of Pritchard's ghosts and not survive, the two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollar prize will be divvied up amongst those who do. If I should die, well then...you'll be paid by my estate. I've instructed the house's caretakers to leave precisely at midnight – not a minute before. *(He motions to the grandfather clock. It is presently 10:00.)* When they do, they're to lock us in here until they return at 5 AM. Be advised, once these doors are locked, there's no way out. All the windows have bars that a jail would be proud of, and the house seals itself like a vault.

PRITCHARD. *(To self.)* Or a coffin.

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FREDERICK. Right. I should also point out there's no phone and no one around for miles. So, if any of you decide not to stay, you'll have to let me know within the next two hours. Of course, if you don't stay, I shan't be able to pay you...but the choice is yours. Simple, no?

NINA. Mr. Lauren...do you mean to say there aren't any phones around here? Not one?

FREDERICK. That's correct.

NINA. But what if we need to check on someone? Or they need to call us?

FREDERICK. Outside of using two cans and some string I'd say you're out of luck.

CASSIDY. *(Hands Nina a drink.)* It's odd, isn't it? The amenities this house does and doesn't have. Like no furnace, but indoor plumbing. Electricity, but no telephone. *(Hands the others their drinks as well.)* Still though, I wouldn't worry too much. It's only for one night.

FREDERICK. Exactly. Any questions? *(They all raise their hands in unison.)* Of course. Doctor?

TRENT. I'm interested in your reasoning. Why throw this so-called party aside from the pleasant – albeit unconventional – company?

FREDERICK. I should think the answer is obvious. Ghosts. Everyone wonders what they'd do if they saw one, and now my lovely wife has given us all the opportunity to find out. Isn't she amusing?

TRENT. Amusing indeed. But ghosts, apparitions, what have you, are only creations of hysteria...and unless something tragic happens, I doubt we'll see any.

FREDERICK. I don't know. Pritchard here guarantees genuine ghosts. Isn't that right, Pritchard? *(Pritchard raises the bottle of booze and goes back to his business.)* Eloquently put. Now, who wants to go exploring?

RUTH. B – but we have a dozen more questions for you – at least! Why did you invite us? What's in it for you? And how do you –

FREDERICK. And all your questions will be answered – I assure you. But for the time being, down your drinks, and let's see what this place has in store for us, this house on haunted hill.

LANCE. Uh, speaking of – I'm confused. Is it the hill that's haunted? Or the house on top of it?

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FREDERICK. Excellent question. Pritchard?

PRITCHARD. *(Has a nice healthy buzz going.)* The answer, Lance...is both.

Dramatically places the lid back on his flask. An insanely loud clap of thunder. Everyone jumps.

RUTH. How does he keep doing that?

We shift...

SCENE FIVE. EXPLORING THE MANSION.

Frederick turns and faces the audience as he, Trent, Lance, Nina, and Ruth are guided through the house by Pritchard.

FREDERICK. *(Addressing the audience.)* It was then I forced Pritchard's hand and made him take us on a guided tour of his house. He was apprehensive at first, but once I told him there was an extra fifty in it for him, his nerves, like so many of his ghosts, mysteriously vanished. He escorted us down a dark, cavernous hall – one draped in cobwebs. He then began swatting away at them the way an explorer cuts through the underbrush of the jungle. *(Pritchard does this as Frederick narrates.)* He seemed to find delight in this...we all did...that is until he turned the corner and –

PRITCHARD. Stop.

LANCE. What? What is –

PRITCHARD. Shhh! *(A beat, then...)* Listen.

They all do as they're told. The sound of something dripping is heard.

NINA. *(Almost whispering.)* What is that?

TRENT. Probably just a leaky pipe –

PRITCHARD. Shhh! No. Look. *(Pointing up into the darkness.)* There. Right there. It's blood.

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RUTH. (*Squinting.*) I don't see anything.

LANCE. Me neither.

PRITCHARD. It's there. Believe me.

RUTH. Believe you? (*Scoffs. Sarcastically.*) Ok.

FREDERICK. (*To Ruth.*) Don't be a spoilsport. I'll play along, Pritchard. Why is there blood on the ceiling?

PRITCHARD. ...It's from the room above us – the master. That's where she killed 'em. Her first victim. Their blood not only stained the floor, it seeped right through it. It drips down now...occasionally marking who she'll kill next.

LANCE. Who *she* 'll kill? Who are you talking about?

TRENT. (*Ignoring him. Pressing on.*) Does it matter? This is preposterous. That stain, if it's even there, could be a million things.

RUTH. He's right. We need to stop wasting our time looking for things that aren't there and –

Pushing past Pritchard.

PRITCHARD. No, don't!

Tries to stop her, but it's too late. Blood splatters on her notepad. We see it. She feels it.

RUTH. What? What is this – (*Reaches her hand up.*) Why, it's... (*Blood trickles down on her...not fast or violent, but slowly, in small droplets.*) It's all over me! My hat! My – hand.

PRITCHARD. Wipe it off! Quickly! Don't let any of it stay on you.

She pulls out a handkerchief and begins dabbing herself. Nina, Lance, and Frederick all take a step back.

TRENT. Come now. Let's use a little less imagination and a little more logic, shall we? Water stained by rust as it came through the plaster. It isn't a ghost. It's a leak.

RUTH. You're right. Just rust...or something. And anyway – there. It's gone now. See.

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PRITCHARD. Good. ...I just hope it doesn't come back.

He presses on. They all do, except Ruth.

RUTH. Why would it –? What, your ghost is going to come get me or something? Who'd want to hurt me?

Again, we shift. The house moves and contorts...

SCENE SIX. THE CELLAR.

FREDERICK. (*Addressing the audience.*) She was right. Who would want to hurt her? Certainly no one in our party. (*Moving on...*) We pressed on, and ventured through the library, the billiard room, the various parlors, and eventually made our way down to the subterranean level of the house and one of its main attractions...its wine cellar.

The scene picks back up. Lance coughs a bit. Perhaps they all do.

LANCE. Sure is dusty and dry down here. Don't you think so, Pritch (*Realizing his error. Awkwardly.*) ...ard?

PRITCHARD. Yeah. Well. Not much to see either. (*Standing in the doorway. It's obvious he doesn't want to enter.*) Maybe if we head back, we can –

FREDERICK. Just a second now. Isn't this the room where a woman, a millionairess I believe, threw her husband into a vat of something?

PRITCHARD. Oh. That. Well, I don't think it's –

FREDERICK. (*Holds up a fifty-dollar bill. Singsong-y.*) Pritchard.

PRITCHARD. (*Hesitantly.*) Fine. Uh...from what I remember – from what my grandfather told me – after the Valifax incident...

TRENT. Valifax incident?

PRITCHARD. The – the house was immediately put on the market. It didn't sell at first...but after a decade or so, it was bought by a wealthy woman who wanted to experiment with winemaking. Didn't matter how

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hard she tried, though...she could never get it to taste right. Least that's what her husband said. Finally, she got so tired of him complaining about her wine that one night, out-of-the-blue, she filled the vat with acid and threw him in it. He was discovered days later by the police. The acid had gnawed through his flesh...all that was left were his bones...

NINA. ...what about the wife?

PRITCHARD. *(Almost as if he's in a daze.)* She was found locked in a closet, moments from death, raving about a ghost who'd possessed her – forced her to kill her husband. She said it looked like a...bride, wearing a long, bloodstained dress and leaving a trail of dead flowers in its wake...

NINA. What's in the vat now?

He doesn't respond.

FREDERICK. Well? She asked you a question.

Again, he holds out the money. Pritchard snatches it this time and quickly shoves it in his jacket pocket.

PRITCHARD. Don't say I didn't warn you. *(Begrudgingly, he approaches a small trap door in the floor near the group's feet and slowly begins to open it. The hinges squeal loudly as it creaks open.)* Go ahead. Take a look.

They all peer in. Steam rises from the vat.

RUTH. My god!

TRENT. But that's impossible. That acid must be half a century old.

LANCE. Does acid ever go bad? I mean, that stuff can't still be dangerous, can it?

Ruth takes another step closer, looking down at the steaming concoction.

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FREDERICK. Only one way to find out. Who wants to go swimming?
(And then, without warning, he pushes Ruth forward, as if he's attempting to shove her into the vat. Ruth screams. Lance and Trent catch her before she falls. Frederick chuckles playfully. Ruth glares at him, furious.) I kid. I kid. *(Looks about – spies something in the shadows.)* Ah! Here we go. *(He approaches the object – a dead rat in a steel cage.)* Au revoir, little friend!

He lowers the cage – which is attached to a rope or chain of some-sort – into the acid. Steam continues to rise. The acid bubbles. After a few beats, Frederick yanks the chain and pulls out the cage. The hair and flesh on the rat have melted away – only the skeleton remains.

NINA. *(Horried.)* That's horrible.

RUTH. It is. Though it still looks better than my ex-husband.

TRENT. Lauren, get rid of it. It's disgusting.

FREDERICK. You're right, doctor. It is disgusting. *(He discards the cage. A change in demeanor. Clapping his hands together.)*

Well! Who's ready for dinner? Come on, let's see what delicacies the Slides have prepared for us...

PRITCHARD. *(Exiting quickly.)* Fine by me.

The group doesn't know how to respond to this...

RUTH. Anything to get out of this dungeon.

Nina does not exit with the rest of the group. She crouches down and examines the rat. Almost as if she's drawn to it. Trent sees this. When he realizes the coast is clear, he quietly shuts the door to the cellar and makes his way over to her.

TRENT. He is rather creepy, isn't he?

NINA. Dr. Trent. Has everyone else gone?

TRENT. Only for a moment. What are you doing here?

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NINA. I've been wanting to ask you the same thing. I can't believe you're here – that we're here – together!

TRENT. I know. Strange coincidence.

NINA. Very. *(Beat.)* By the way, I want to thank you for not saying anything earlier. The last thing I want is everyone thinking that I'm... you know.

TRENT. Of course. How are you doing?

NINA. *(Beat.)* Fine. Though, to be honest – being here, around all this...it's bringing up a lot of memories.

TRENT. Yes, I suppose it would. Are you still taking your medication?

NINA. *(Nods.)* I was going to take one of my pills earlier, but –

TRENT. Your purse.

NINA. Right.

TRENT. *(He thinks for a moment, then...)* Nina, I know you're no longer my patient, but as someone who's not only familiar with your condition...but cares for you deeply...I think it best you tell Mr. Lauren you want to leave.

NINA. I can't do that. I wish I could but...Barbara and I – things aren't good. And they're only going to get worse. I can't turn down an opportunity like this. Not when it could solve so many of our problems.

TRENT. I know what you mean.

NINA. You do?

TRENT. Just last year alone I –

Nina hears something. A scratching noise of some sort.

NINA. What was that?

TRENT. What was –

The noise again.

NINA. There it is again!

TRENT. Probably just another rat. *(The noise continues. He approaches a door.)* I believe it's coming from in here.

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

Slowly, hesitantly, he enters – disappearing into the darkness.

NINA. What is it?

TRENT. It appears to be a – Hey! What the –

Then, odd, gurgling noises are heard. Noises that sound like someone being strangled. She takes a few steps towards the door.

NINA. Doctor? ...Doctor!

BAM! Like in the first scene, the door slams shut! She bangs against the door with all her might. In the distance, we can see the silhouette of a figure moving slowly towards her. Again, lights flicker. A chorus of GHOSTLY VOICES begins to hiss and coo...

GHOSTLY VOICES. Nina...

Nina...

NINA. ...What?

GHOSTLY VOICES. Nina...

She's coming Nina...

She knows what you've done...

And she's coming...

NINA. Who's comi –? What's going on? Mr. Lauren? Mrs. Slides? Is that you...? *(Turns back to the door.)* Doctor! Doctor?!

Eerie, unsettling music is heard. Nina turns around. The lights dim, or perhaps even strobe. A spot shines down, illuminating THE BRIDE. Slowly, menacingly, she makes her entrance. A long, thick veil covering her distorted face. A bouquet of dead, wilted flowers in her hands. Splashes of blood strewn across her faded-white wedding dress.

GHOSTLY VOICES. Nnnniinnnaaaa...

Ninnnaaaa...

NINA. Who-who are you?! *(It does not answer.)* Go away, you hear me! Go away!

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

GHOSTLY VOICES. She's after you, Nina...

She knows...

NINA. Stop it! Stop it! HELP ME! PLEASE!! SOMEONE! HELP!

The Bride backs Nina into a wall, and reaches out to her with a gnarled finger...

GHOSTLY VOICES. Ninaaaa...

Ninnnnnaaaa...

RUTH. (Off.) Nina? Nina, are you in there?

NINA. Miss Bridges! Help me! Please!

The cellar door rattles as Ruth, and the rest of the group, attempt to open it. They shout over one another.

FREDERICK. (Off.) Nina? We're coming, my dear. Don't worry.

NINA. Hurry! *(The Bride touches Nina's face for a moment, then cocks its head to one side, observing her. As the cellar door begins to give way, it moves away from the girl and exits the scene. Suddenly, the cellar door bursts open as Frederick, Lance, and Ruth rush into the room.)* Thank goodness you're here! There was a ghost...or something!

I don't know what, but she – she attacked me and Dr. Trent! *(Realizes.)* Dr. Trent! *(Points to the closet door.)* He's in there! You'll have to break it down! It's locked!

RUTH. *(To Frederick.)* You people really need to invest in some door stoppers!

Lance gives the doorknob a good turn, and, as if by magic, it slowly swings open.

NINA. But it was locked. I swear!

Lance and Frederick dash into the closet.

LANCE. (Off.) Come on, Doc. There we go.

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

They lift Trent up, wrapping one of his arms over each of their shoulders and carry him onstage. He's a little worse for wear and appears unconscious.

FREDERICK. He must've hit his head.

NINA. Dr. Trent! Are you all right? (*Smacking his face – hard.*) Dr. Trent!

TRENT. It's all right, Nina. I'm all right

LANCE. (*To Frederick.*) Nothing that money won't cure, right Lauren?

TRENT. I don't know what happened. One minute I was talking to you, the next...

NINA. It was the ghost. I know it sounds ridiculous, but it's true. It was the one Pritchard was telling us about. She was here. I saw her.

TRENT. Come now, Nina, you know very well that's not possible. Ghosts aren't real.

NINA. But I did see her. I did. (*To Ruth.*) You believe me, don't you?

RUTH. Well, I...

NINA. Lance?

LANCE. I mean...if the Doc says –

NINA. It was real! It was! And none of you believe me. Where's Pritchard?

RUTH. Where do you think?

Mimes drinking from a bottle.

NINA. I'll find him. He'll believe me.

TRENT. Nina!

FREDERICK. Miss Meers! Come back!

Loud organ music plays as we transition to...

SCENE SEVEN. A HALLWAY, A FEW MOMENTS LATER.

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

Nina runs to a dark and poorly lit area of the house. She stops for a moment, breathes heavily.

NINA. Get it together, Nina. Get it together. You know what you saw.

*She throws her head in her hands and begins shaking it for a bit.
Annabelle enters, sporting a new gown. She's stunning. She watches Nina for a moment, then...*

ANNABELLE. Are you all right?

NINA. *(Startled.)* Ah! *(Annabelle barely reacts – just stares at the girl.)*
I'm sorry. I'm a little jumpy tonight.

ANNABELLE. *(Looking her over.)* I can see. I'm Annabelle.

NINA. *(Realizing.)* Oh. Mr. Lauren's wife.

ANNABELLE. Unfortunately. And you are...?

NINA. Nina Meers. I'm here for your party.

ANNABELLE. Mm. That's sweet. But I'm afraid it's not my party. Not anymore.

NINA. What do you –

ANNABELLE. It doesn't matter. How long have you known my husband, Nina?

NINA. I beg your pardon?

ANNABELLE. You can't expect me to believe he invited you out of the goodness of his heart; that would require him having one. No, you two know each other...

NINA. I've never met him before. Honest.

ANNABELLE. *(Not buying it. She wasn't born yesterday.)* Of course you haven't. Why were you so upset a moment ago? What happened?

NINA. I saw –

ANNABELLE. *(Cocking her head to one side.)* Yes?

NINA. I thought I saw something.

ANNABELLE. In a place like this, that's bound to happen. *(Beat.)* May I give you a piece of advice, Nina? Don't go anywhere in this house by yourself. It's not safe.

NINA. What do y –

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

ANNABELLE. And don't ask questions. You won't like the answers – not that I have all of them. But I do have my suspicions, and those are bad enough. If you do as I say, you'll be fine. But if not...well, don't say I didn't warn you.

CASSIDY. (*Rushing in.*) Nina, there are you! Mr. Lauren told me that you – (*Eyes Annabelle. Caught off guard.*) Annabelle!

ANNABELLE. Cassidy Bowman. I mean, it's one thing to hijack my party, but to show up when nobody –

CASSIDY. Annabelle, there must be some mis –

ANNABELLE. (*Placing out her hand to shush her.*) And please refrain from speaking to me so informally. I am still your employer's wife, whether you like it or not. So, until the day comes we're no longer married – or you're no longer employed – I insist that you only address me as Mrs. Lauren. Think you can handle that?

CASSIDY. Of course. (*Annabelle smiles sweetly, waiting for Cassidy to say it...*) Mrs. Lauren.

ANNABELLE. That's a good girl. Well, Cassidy. Nina. I'd better go find my husband. And you two had better fix your faces...as best you can.

She exits. A moment.

CASSIDY. Are you all right?

NINA. Yes, I'm just...it's been a bad night. My heart's pounding.

CASSIDY. (*Touches her hand.*) Your hands are like ice. Here, let's get you a blanket.

She attempts to lead her off. Nina stops her.

NINA. Cassidy, do you think it's safe here? For me?

CASSIDY. What do you mean? You don't really think this house is haunted, do you?

NINA. Well, Pritchard said...

CASSIDY. Nina, Pritchard is nuts. You can't go listening to someone like him.

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

NINA. You're right. It's just – first my purse. Then the blood. Then whatever that was in the cellar... *(Lost in thought for a moment.)* We really need the money, but...maybe it's best I leave.

CASSIDY. I'd hate to see you miss out on an opportunity like this...but if you're that concerned, maybe you should leave. *(The sound of the clock chiming in the distance is heard. Cassidy looks down at her wristwatch.)*

Listen, dinner's about to be served. Have a hot meal. Relax. If after dinner you're still feeling anxious, then I say go. No amount of money is worth your sanity.

NINA. ...Thank you.

CASSIDY. It'll be all right/You'll see. Just try and avoid Annabelle. I'm sorry – Mrs. Lauren. *(She curtsies as she says it. They share a smile. And exit together.)* And I really do love that perfume.

NINA. Thanks...

We shift...

SCENE EIGHT. AN ABANDONED AREA OF THE STAGE.

Lance enters, looking around. Annabelle enters – she sees him, he does not see her.

LANCE. Nina? Nina...? *(Beat. Louder.)* Nina?!

ANNABELLE. If you're looking for the young girl with the pink sweater and bad hairdo, she went that way.

LANCE. *(Instantly taken with her.)* Thanks.

ANNABELLE. I'm Annabelle Lauren.

LANCE. Well I'll be.

ANNABELLE. And you are?

LANCE. Better than I was a moment ago. I'm Lance Schroeder. *(Deepens voice, pumps out chest.)* Test pilot.

ANNABELLE. Impressive.

LANCE. It's a living.

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

ANNABELLE. *(She looks around. Touches his arm.)* Lance, this may sound rather peculiar given we've just met, but if I were to, say, need your help this evening, can I count on you?

LANCE. Sure. But with what? Aren't we just doing dinner and cake?

ANNABELLE. I wouldn't eat anything around here if I were you.

LANCE. ...Not even the little wieners?

ANNABELLE. What?

LANCE. Nothing.

ANNABELLE. Call it women's intuition, but I know he's up to something. I'm just not sure what.

LANCE. You mean your husband?

ANNABELLE. He isn't who you think he is. Not even close. You realize I'm his fourth wife.

LANCE. *(Jovial.)* I sure do. The lucky – *(Realizes.)* I mean, so sad.

ANNABELLE. What you don't read about in the papers – what nobody tells you – is that he didn't simply divorce his previous wives. He buried them. Every one of them. Once they reached a certain age...an expiration date...he got rid of them. One after another. Once they reached...the age I'm turning tonight.

LANCE. And uh, how old is that?

She turns and glares at him.

ANNABELLE. ...Old enough to know when a gal's in trouble.

LANCE. Mrs. Lauren, I don't know what's going on here, but if your husband is planning on doing something – why now? In a house full of people?

ANNABELLE. Not just people. Strangers. Strangers who are so desperate for money they're willing to do practically anything for it.

LANCE. I can't act like I don't need the cash, but...even I have my limits.

ANNABELLE. That's good to hear. Reassuring. *(She touches him. Maybe even hugs him. He melts.)* We'd better get going. If my husband were to discover us together...he'd go insane with jealousy. You're positive I can count on you should the need arise?

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

LANCE. Just say the word. *(She smiles, then begins to exit.)*

Annabelle...you really are afraid of him, aren't you?

ANNABELLE. He'd kill me if he could.

They exit. A moment passes, then...from out of the shadows, Frederick emerges, smoking a cigarette. He engages with the audience.

FREDERICK. Look at my little Annabelle, making friends wherever she goes. Isn't she amusing? •

A chuckle escapes him. With Frederick still onstage, narrating, we transition to...

SCENE NINE. THE DRAWING ROOM, LATER THAT NIGHT

FREDERICK. *(Cont'd.)* Later that evening, my wife and I, along with our motley crew, sat down to a large feast courtesy of the Slides. And while the food was splendid, the same can unfortunately not be said about the conversation. Barely a word was spoken, and for much of the meal, we sat in complete silence...listening to the sounds of the storm clouds rolling back in. *(Frederick claps his hands. The crackling of thunder is heard. The storm has returned. Lights flicker, and rainfall is heard throughout the entirety of the scene.)* Once the plates had been cleared, we retired to the drawing room. *(Almost instantly, the doors to the kitchen swing open as Mr. Slides enters, wheeling out a large table of some-sort, a cloth on top of it, clearly concealing something from sight. To Mr. Slides.)* I must say, Mr. Slides, that was some meal you and your wife served. Quite exquisite. My compliments to you both. *(Frederick extends his hand, expecting Mr. Slides to shake it. Mr. Slides looks at Frederick for a moment, then turns on his heel and clumps offstage.)* Right. And speaking of exquisite things... *(Annabelle and the rest of the guests begin to file in. Ruth eyes the rolling bar cart, which is positioned next to the sofa, and makes her way over to it. She grabs a bottle of club soda, dabs a little on a napkin, and begins rubbing at what appears to be a stain on her jacket. The other guests choose to ignore*

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

her. Frederick eyes Annabelle.) You look ravishing, my dear. You truly do.

ANNABELLE. *(Surprised. Touched even.)* Thank you, Frederick.

FREDERICK. I only wish it hadn't taken you so long to get dressed. Almost half the evening's over.

ANNABELLE. Perfection is rarely punctual, darling.

FREDERICK. And perfection you are. *(Lance passes by.)* Don't you agree, Mr. Schroeder?

LANCE. What's that?

FREDERICK. Isn't my wife a vision?

LANCE. Um...yeah. Really pretty...

FREDERICK. Yes. Pretty indeed. *(Lance begins to exit, but Frederick grabs his arm, stopping him.)* Tell me, my boy, are you all right? A strong, healthy fellow like yourself, I expected you to be the first to clear your plate at dinner...and yet you barely touched it. It's as if you thought we were going to poison you or something? *(To Annabelle.)* Now where would he get an idea like that?

ANNABELLE. I haven't the foggiest.

FREDERICK. *(Lance pulls his arm free from Frederick's grip and walks to another part of the room.)* Say, Cassidy? Be a lamb and whip everyone up a little after dinner drink, hm? I'll have my usual.

CASSIDY. And you, Mrs. Lauren?

ANNABELLE. Martini. Two olives.

CASSIDY. Dirty?

ANNABELLE. ...It will be once you've touched it.

CASSIDY. Coming right up. *(She approaches the minibar and begins mixing a few drinks. Ruth is sitting near her, wiping away the stain on her jacket.)* May I get you something to drink, Miss Bridges? *(Ruth is frantically trying to remove the stain with club soda. Perhaps Cassidy gently touches her on the shoulder.)* Miss Bridges?

RUTH. Huh? Oh. Can't you see I'm preoccupied? First my hat disappears – just vanishes, right off my head – then Lauren spills soup on my blazer during dinner. And try as I might – *(Rubs the spot with all her might.)* Ugh! I can't seem to get rid of it. At least the last time a man stained my clothes I got a promotion.

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

CASSIDY. Oh. Well on the bright side you can hardly see it. (*Ruth doesn't appreciate her optimism.*) And I'll personally make sure we'll pay for the dry cleaning. It's the least we can do.

RUTH. The very least. Unfortunately, I was hoping to return it after all this. (*Pulls back her sleeve to reveal the price tag is still attached.*) It's a bit out of my price range at the moment. Then again...what isn't these days...

CASSIDY. I know the feeling. (*Goes back to mixing drinks.*) But, if everything goes as planned, after tonight you'll leave here with enough money to buy more blazers than you'll know what to do with.

RUTH. Yes, I suppose you're – (*Something occurs to her.*) right. Cassidy, do you mean to tell me the money is here? In the house? All two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars of it?

CASSIDY. It had better be. I withdrew it myself.

RUTH. And there's no red tape? No hold up? The sun rises, the doors open, and we walk out, cash in hand?

CASSIDY. That's correct. Mr. Lauren will personally take it out of the safe in the – (*Realizes she's said too much. An awkward laugh escapes her.*) Pretend you didn't hear that.

RUTH. No. Of course not.

CASSIDY. Your drink order, Miss Bridges?

RUTH. Scotch and, of course.

CASSIDY. (*Hands an already prepared drink to Ruth.*) Of course.

RUTH. (*Takes a sip.*) Mm. Perfect. (*Much more cheerful.*) If you'll excuse me my dear, I suddenly need to use the ladies' room.

CASSIDY. Down the hall, to your left.

Ruth takes the glass and exits. As she does so she makes her way past Trent, who approaches Nina. She is sitting in a large, oversized armchair that's practically swallowing her. Trent crouches down next to her.

TRENT. Hello, Nina.

NINA. Doctor.

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

TRENT. Have you given any more thought to what we talked about earlier?

NINA. I have, and...I'm going to stay. I know you don't approve, but I need to do this.

TRENT. If you're certain.

NINA. I am.

He pats her shoulder reassuringly and mingles with the rest of the group. She sits in thought for a moment, then...

PRITCHARD. *(Much drunker than before.)* Psst. Psst. *(Nina looks about to see who Pritchard is 'psst-ing' at.)* Psst.

NINA. You mean me?

PRITCHARD. *(Attempting to speak in a surreptitious manner.)* I know. I know all about you.

NINA. What do you mean?

PRITCHARD. You pretend to be just like everyone else here – act like I'm just some drunk with a wild imagination – but deep down, you know I'm right. You have the look.

NINA. What look?

PRITCHARD. The look of someone who's seen something they can't describe. The look of someone who's encountered something most haven't. I see it every time I pass by a mirror. *(Leaning closer.)* You saw her, didn't you? When you were in the cellar? You saw Rebecca Valifax. You know, the Bride. Tell me you haven't seen her. Try and convince me. Go on.

NINA. *(Nina doesn't answer – but her expression says it all.)* Um...if you'll excuse me...

She gets up and warmly approaches Trent who is at the other end of the room. The moment is painfully awkward.

PRITCHARD. Hey! Where are you going?

The grandfather clock chimes ominously.

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

FREDERICK. Hear that, everyone? It means the fun is about to begin. Only thirty minutes now until the doors lock for the night, so if you're planning on leaving, I suggest you start gathering your things now. For those of you staying, my wife and I have a few party-favors. Give you all a taste of what's to come. So, without further ado...

He approaches the table Mr. Slides wheeled out at the top of the scene. In a quick motion, he dramatically yanks the sheet off with a flourish, revealing five identical black boxes all shaped like tiny coffins. If they weren't so menacing, they'd almost be adorable.

LANCE. Coffins?

FREDERICK. Merely for show. The real gift is inside. Go ahead, take a look. *(Trent, Lance, and Nina all hesitantly open their respective coffins. Nina gasps. Trent, attempting to remain calm, reaches in and pulls out a small, black gun.)* This was my wife's idea. Personally, I think it's a tad dangerous, but perhaps that's what makes it so exciting. Isn't that right, dear? *(Annabelle sips her martini while glaring at him angrily. He continues.)* I suppose you all know how to use one of these things, but in case you don't, allow me to demonstrate. *(He takes a gun out of the coffin with the ease of someone who's no stranger to firearms.)* Simply press down on this lever with your thumb, like so, and then when your target is in sight – *(Aiming directly at Annabelle's forehead. Cocking the gun.)* pull the trigger.

LANCE. Hey! What's the idea?

FREDERICK. Yes, Mr. Schroeder? Something wrong?

Lance looks at Annabelle, she shakes her head "no." Frederick's eyes follow Lance's. He turns to his wife, who smiles a toothy smile.

LANCE. No, but those guns...uh, they're not loaded, are they?

FREDERICK. Only one way to find out.

Lifts his arm into the air and fires. BANG!

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

LANCE. I'll take that as a yes.

PRITCHARD. (*Matter-of-factly.*) I wouldn't do that again if I were you, Lauren. You'll only upset them.

FREDERICK. Well, then it's a good thing we have our weapons, isn't it?

PRITCHARD. Those things are useless against the dead. Get rid of them.

TRENT. I hate to say it, but I'm afraid I agree with Pritchard. (*The room turns – "Huh?!"*) Not about the ghosts, of course. That's ridiculous. But given the circumstances...walking around a dark, old house with a loaded weapon in the middle of the night doesn't seem like the smartest decision in the world. It'll only make people more afraid. And fear, as we all know, can make even the sanest man do the most imprudent things.

FREDERICK. Coincidentally Doctor, (*Turns to Annabelle.*) the same can be said for greed. Well, this is a birthday party after all. And what's a birthday party without cake? (*Calls out.*) Mr. and Mrs. Slides? (*No response.*) That's odd. Where could they be?

CASSIDY. I'll get them, sir.

FREDERICK. Per my wife's request, we're not putting any candles on her cake this year. Probably for the best. I doubt we could fit them all.

ANNABELLE. You know, Frederick, I –

A loud, violent thunderclap. Cassidy enters holding a cake stand, a silver dome on top of it. She starts to sing.

CASSIDY. (*Singing.*) Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you.

FREDERICK. C'mon, everyone.

The group begrudgingly joins in.

GROUP. (*Singing.*) Happy birthday, dear Annabelle.

CASSIDY. (*Singing.*) Mrs. Lauren.

GROUP. (*Singing.*) Happy birthday to –

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

Cassidy lifts the lid off the stand. Instead of a cake...we see Ruth's pillbox hat. A few gasps escape the group. No one knows how to properly react.

LANCE. What kind of cake is this?

NINA. That's Miss Bridges' hat. *(Picks up the hat.)* But...where's she?

FREDERICK. *(Calling out.)* Ruth? Are you here?

LANCE. Hey, Ruthie!

PRITCHARD. They've taken her, haven't they? Just like your purse! I told you she was marked! That she'd be the first to die.

ANNABELLE. Cassidy, is this your idea of a joke?

CASSIDY. It wasn't me –

ANNABELLE. Please –

CASSIDY. The lid was on the cake stand when I went into the kitchen. I didn't know it was under there!

TRENT. Let's try and calm down, shall we? Wherever she is, I'm sure she's perfectly safe.

A wheezing sound echoes through the theatre. A bolt of lightning. Ruth enters – blood pours from her mouth. Nina screams!

ANNABELLE. My god!

LANCE. What the –?!

FREDERICK. Cassidy, go find the caretakers!

Frantically, Cassidy runs out of the room. Nina begins breathing heavily once more, just like she did during the first scene. Ruth stumbles into the middle of the room, gurgling loudly, perhaps even clutching her neck. Another thunderclap, and she collapses to the ground, face-first.

LANCE. Oh god! Oh god!!

PRITCHARD. *(Making his way to the mini bar.)* I'm not drunk enough for this.

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

TRENT. Everyone, quiet! It'll be all right! (*Rushing to Ruth's side.*) Lauren, help me! (*They do just that. Ruth begins to vomit out large chunks of blood – it oozes from her mouth. She begins to convulse.*) Miss Bridges! Miss Bridges! Can you hear me?!

FREDERICK. Do you understand us, my dear?

CASSIDY. (*Rushing in.*) They're gone, sir! The Slides, they're not here!

TRENT. Ruth, stay with me. Stay with me!

She convulses violently – low, horrific gurgling noises escaping her. Her face is stained in blood. And then....just as it begins to escalate, all is still.

CASSIDY. (*A beat. Quietly.*) Is she...?

FREDERICK. (*Kneels down. Feels her pulse.*) Dead.

NINA. (*Almost whimpering.*) No. No.

LANCE. What...what could've happened to her? Doctor?

TRENT. (*Examining her.*) This is outside my field of expertise but...it looks as if it was something she ate.

FREDERICK. That's impossible. She barely touched her meal. All she had was...

GROUP. Scotch And!

Pritchard immediately, and comedically, spits out the drink he was guzzling only moments before.

FREDERICK. (*Angrily approaches wife.*) You! I don't know how you did it, Annabelle, but you did, didn't you? You poisoned her! Just like you poisoned me!

ANNABELLE. What are you talking about? I didn't do anything.

FREDERICK. Well if not you, then who? Who was it? (*He grabs her by the shoulders and begins shaking her violently.*) You hear me?! Who was it?

LANCE. (*Shoving Frederick.*) Get away from her! How do we know it wasn't you?!

FREDERICK. I would never!

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

ANNABELLE. No. You'd have someone else do it for you. Isn't that right, Cassidy? You were the one who was serving the drinks! You're the one who brought in the hat!

CASSIDY. It wasn't me!

FREDERICK. Of course not.

ANNABELLE. Oh, her you'll believe.

TRENT. Everyone, calm down at once. *(The yells build, the thunder rumbles, the lights flicker. Nina can't take it anymore.)*

NINA. We've – we've got to call someone. We've got to get out of here! I've got to get out of here! *(She begins to turn the knob. It won't budge.)* It's locked! Just like before! *(Yelling to the group, who at this point has continued to ignore her.)* You hear me?! It's locked!

FREDERICK. But that can't be! *(Rushing to the door.)* Dammit, Pritchard, where are the caretakers? It's not yet midnight! Who told them they could leave?

PRITCHARD. Hey, I told you I don't know them!

FREDERICK. Well somebody must! Why aren't they –

ANNABELLE. *(Notices something horrifying!)* Oh my god! Oh my god! Look!

Annabelle points to the portrait of Rebecca Valifax. They all turn and to their horror, see that the portrait has begun to bleed!

PRITCHARD. She's here! Rebecca Valifax! She's here! I told you! I told you!

His words are cut short by an eardrum popping bolt of thunder. And then – BOOM! The lights go out again.

ANNABELLE. What do we do now?

A loud ripple of thunder punctuates her line.

END OF ACT ONE.

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

ACT TWO

SCENE TEN. A DARK HALLWAY. LATER THAT EVENING.

A pool of light shines down center stage. Frederick is standing there, a cigarette in hand. A smile again plays across his lips.

FREDERICK. Welcome back. *(Looking about the theatre.)* By the looks of it, I'd say the majority of you have returned...and not a moment too soon. When you last saw the guests, they had just witnessed the horrible tragedy that was the passing of poor Miss Bridges. *(A spot illuminates a dying Ruth, convulsing for a few moments.)* Yes. Horrible, horrible tragedy. *(The spotlight, like Ruth, dies.)* To make matters worse, the storm that had caused so much trepidation was continuing to rage, *(Thunder. Lightning.)* and the house was still shrouded in darkness. We still didn't know why the caretakers departed so suddenly,

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(A spot shines down on Mr. and Mrs. Slides.) what made the ghostly apparition appear to Nina in the cellar... *(A spot shines down on Rebecca, her face concealed behind a bloodstained veil.)* or who the culprit behind Ruth's murder was. *(A spot shines down on Ruth, still in the same spot she was a moment ago.)* We had a real mystery on our hands. And as any detective will tell you, the best way to solve a mystery is by candlelight.

Once again, he claps his meaty hands together, causing the storm to rage and the lights around him to dim. All is still. Slicing through the darkness, we just make out what appears to be the flame of a flickering candle, bobbing along stage right. Cassidy enters and makes her way through the darkened halls of the mansion. She is searching for something, we're just not sure what.

CASSIDY. Hello...? Mr. Lauren...? Hello...? Anybody here? *(To self.)* I don't understand. He said he was...where could he – *(Frederick sneaks up behind Cassidy and places his hand over her mouth. She screams!)* Ahh –! *(She whirls around and sees Frederick.)* What's the matter with you?!

FREDERICK. *(Laughing heartily.)* A joke, my dear. Nothing more.

CASSIDY. Well it wasn't very funny. *(Her heart is still pounding.)* Have you seen Pritchard?

FREDERICK. Yes, and it's just as we suspected – a blown fuse was the culprit. Or at least that's what he appeared to be muttering through his boozy, delusional fog. Either way, we won't have a drop of power until morning.

CASSIDY. And Annabelle?

FREDERICK. Locked in her room for the night, just like everyone else. Not that I blame them.

CASSIDY. What happened to Ruth was upsetting to say the least...especially to Nina.

FREDERICK. Yes, Trent made sure to point out that fact before everyone scattered.

CASSIDY. Did he?

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FREDERICK. Even pulled me aside and told me he's concerned she's suffering from hysteria.

CASSIDY. Poor thing.

FREDERICK. Indeed.

CASSIDY. So, let me be sure I'm understanding this correctly: we're stuck in the middle of a storm with no phone, no power, no way out...and a girl on the brink of a nervous breakdown.

FREDERICK. I know.

CASSIDY. *(A change in demeanor.)* Everything's going according to plan.

He approaches her and begins playing with strands of her hair.

FREDERICK. And it's all thanks to you. Dear, sweet, beautiful...

He leans in to kiss her. She stops him.

CASSIDY. Mr. Lauren, what if someone sees?

FREDERICK. Then we'll... *(Holds up gun.)* shoot them. Dump their body next to the reporter's.

CASSIDY. Frederick.

FREDERICK. Only teasing, darling. Only teasing. *(Playful.)* Or am I?

CASSIDY. And you're positive Annabelle doesn't suspect a thing?

FREDERICK. On the contrary, Annabelle suspects everything. She's inherently mistrustful. It's one of the few qualities I truly like about her. Fortunately for us, she's far too vain to believe someone could conceive of such a plan, let alone execute it...and her.

Frederick and Cassidy embrace.

CASSIDY. *(Still in Frederick's arms.)* It's almost shocking how well it's coming together. *(Something is still gnawing away at her.)* ...Frederick?

FREDERICK. Hm?

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CASSIDY. You swear it wasn't you? *(He looks puzzled.)* ... Who killed Ruth?

FREDERICK. On my life. It must have been Annabelle. *(Thinking out loud.)* ... Though what that busybody columnist has to do with Nina, I'm not sure. *(Moving away.)* I'd better get moving. We don't have much time. You keep a close watch on Nina. I'll handle Annabelle myself.

CASSIDY. Right.

She nods and begins to exit when...

FREDERICK. Oh, and Cassidy – one more thing... *(He approaches her, takes her in his arms, and kisses her passionately.)* something to remember me by.

They both exit. A beat, then who should emerge but the Bride. She floats by, observing...

SCENE ELEVEN. ANOTHER QUIET AREA OF THE HOUSE.

A spot shines down stage left. Candle in hand, Annabelle – now sporting a rather glamorous nightgown – sneaks out of her room, quietly shutting the door behind her.

LANCE. *(Calling out.)* Annabelle! I was hoping I'd find you here. I wanted to see how yo –

ANNABELLE. Shh!

LANCE. *(Slightly whispered. Awkward.)* Were doing.

ANNABELLE. Keep your voice down. He might hear you.

LANCE. He?

ANNABELLE. My husband, of course.

LANCE. So, you really think he did it, huh? *(Looking around.)*
You really think he *(Gulp.)* offed Ruth?

ANNABELLE. I don't think. I know. In fact, I'd bet every house I own on that hunch – and at least three of the yachts.

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LANCE. Yeah, me t – (*Exclaiming.*) three!

ANNABELLE. Shhh!

LANCE. (*Whispered.*) Sorry.

ANNABELLE. That's why I'm out here. He's been gone for too long. I told you I know he's up to something, and I'm going to find out what it is.

LANCE. But it could be dangerous!

ANNABELLE. For an amateur, maybe, but I've been in worse scrapes than this. Trust me, it's nothing I can't handle.

LANCE. (*Hesitant.*) Fine, but...I'm going with you.

ANNABELLE. No. You're sweet, and I appreciate you wanting to protect me...but as I already told you, if Frederick were to see us together –

LANCE. Let him. If it came down to it, I could take him.

ANNABELLE. (*Condescending.*) I love that you think that. But Frederick doesn't fight with flesh. Only his brains. And I'm afraid that the two of you aren't evenly matched in that arena. (*Lance looks away, obviously insulted.*) Oh Lance, don't be upset with me. It's nice to be around a man who doesn't want to choke the life out of you. It's refreshing, actually. But this, this I've got to do alone.

LANCE. There must be something I can do.

ANNABELLE. (*Thinks for a moment, then...*) Honestly? Pray my suspicions are wrong and that my husband isn't trying to kill me.

She slips off into the darkness.

LANCE. (*More to himself.*) Actually, I meant more like distract him, or get you a sandwich, but praying works too.
We shift...

SCENE TWELVE. PRITCHARD'S ROOM.

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A dimly lit bedroom. Pritchard lies back on a chair with a cool rag on his forehead. He's nursing a beast of a hangover. A small table rests next to his bed, a brightly burning candle positioned atop it.

PRITCHARD. *(To self.)* Ohhh. My heaaaadddd. *(A soft knock is heard at the door. Calling out:)* Ugh. Who is it?

NINA. *(Off.)* Mr. Pritchard? It's Nina. Are you in there?

PRITCHARD. *(He groans. Muttered.)* Go away.

NINA. *(Off.)* Mr. Pritchard?

PRITCHARD. I said, GO AWA – *(A bit too loud for the hangover's liking.)* OW!

NINA. *(Enters – a small candle clutched in her hands.)* Mr. Pritcha – are you all right?

PRITCHARD. Terrific! The room's spinning, everything's blurry, and tonight's dinner didn't taste as good coming up as it did going down. Now, what do you want?

NINA. Well...you said earlier that you could tell that I'd seen her. You know the –

PRITCHARD. Ghost. I remember. I also seem to remember you refusing to answer me. Just walking away like I wasn't in the room.

NINA. Oh.

PRITCHARD. I don't particularly care for the others – Trent, Lance, the dead one – but at least they have the decency to insult me to my face. You couldn't even acknowledge me. You must really think you're better than me, don't you?

NINA. No. Not at all!

PRITCHARD. Doesn't matter. None of you have any idea what I've been through. Not just with the ghosts, but...with family. And loss. And barely having enough money to make it from day-to-day. It's hard out there when you don't have anyone or anything to fall back on...

NINA. You're right. It is. I know. But if you would help me for one –

PRITCHARD. Sorry, Nina. Now, uh...I need to get some shuteye. And you...you need to go. Goodnight.

NINA. I just –

PRITCHARD. I said goodnight.

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Nina turns, dejected, and heads for the door.

NINA. I'm sorry. I didn't...I never meant to hurt you. And for what it's worth...I do believe you...about the ghosts.

She turns the knob on the door and begins to exit when...

PRITCHARD. *(He lifts the rag up and peers at her.)* ...You really mean that? You actually believe me?

NINA. I do.

PRITCHARD. *(Sighs.)* How do you like that? My own family didn't believe me when I told them about this place. Except for my grandfather. *(A moment of reflection.)* ...So, you really saw the Bride, huh?

NINA. It was...terrible. She was just – I can't get that image out of my head. I don't know how you've been able to function after an encounter like that. Especially for all these years.

PRITCHARD. Trick is to keep a level head. Otherwise you'll develop some pretty bad habits.

Reaches under his pillow, grabs a bottle of whisky, and takes a swig. He offers her some; she politely declines.

NINA. When I saw her in the cellar, she uh, she said that she knew something about me. And to be honest, it almost felt like she did. *(Beat.)* Who is this ghost, Mr. Pritchard? What do you know about her?

PRITCHARD. *(He takes another swig.)* Only what my grandfather told me and it's...not pretty. You ever hear of Byron Valifax? *(Perhaps a spot shines down on Byron, portrayed by Mr. Slides. Or perhaps the following story is acted out through silhouettes, with a little help from the candlelight.)* He was a coal miner who struck it big during the gold rush of '49. Made a lot of money. After that, he could pretty much buy whatever he wanted. And what he wanted more than anything was a child of his own. A daughter. So he adopted one. A young girl about

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twelve years old, named Rebecca. *(Another spot shines down on Rebecca.)* He loved her dearly. *(They embrace.)* In fact, he loved her so much that he could never see the harsh truths that were right in front of him.

NINA. What harsh truths?

Eerie, melodic tones are heard, like the sound of a music box forged in hell. Rebecca makes her way over to a small gilded cage with a yellow canary in it. She opens the cage door and cradles the bird in her hands.

PRITCHARD. Rebecca was...different. Not like most girls her age...or any age, really. My grandfather said the way he heard it, bad things always happened whenever she was around. Little stuff at first. Playing a bit too rough with the other kids. Talking back. But then... as she got older...things got worse. All of her pets went missing. The staff kept quitting. People started getting hurt. It was like she had this darkness inside her. This evil. *(With each description, Rebecca squeezes the bird's neck tighter and tighter, eventually...)* And the more she tried to contain it, keep it at bay, the more powerful it became...until eventually it would just overtake her, make her do things, horrible things, and... *(She breaks its neck – or pops its head off. Your choice. If you do go with the head-popping route, blood should squirt out from the stump where the head used to be.)* Another strange thing about her...every person who crossed her would eventually find some of their personal belongings would go missing. Or disappear. Some said it's because she used them for...spells.

NINA. Spells?

PRITCHARD. Apparently, she got a reputation for being some kind of witch, at least that's what everyone said. Everyone but Byron. He refused to admit his daughter was the cause of all these mysterious problems. A few years later, Byron hired a man from out of town to work for the family. He and Rebecca fell in love, and before long, he proposed. *(Lights shine down on a boy, around Rebecca's age, down on one knee proposing to her.)* Whatever evil was inside of Rebecca, this new fella helped her contain it. For a wedding present, she asked her

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father to build her a house, a mansion, out in the middle of the desert, with no one around for miles. That way, the two of them could have all the privacy in the world. Of course, Byron complied. Finally, the day of the wedding came, and the Valifaxs pulled out all the stops. My grandfather said they even arranged it so rose petals would fall from the rafters of the church as the bride made her way down the aisle. *(Rebecca reemerges wearing a long, flowy bridal gown.)* About an hour before the ceremony, Rebecca left her dressing room, having decided to share a private moment with her fiancé. But as she made her way past the church's reception hall, she saw, behind the wedding cake, her fiancé with another woman. *(Lights rise on her fiancé kissing another woman.)* He tried to explain that there was nothing between them, but it didn't matter. All the darkness that had been kept at bay exploded out of Rebecca. *(She grabs a large, ornately decorated knife from the cake stand and begins stabbing the two of them.)* She grabbed a knife and began stabbing the two of them – over, and over, and over – until eventually...her wedding dress was covered in blood.

NINA. That's horrible!

PRITCHARD. Gets worse. When she realized what she'd done, she fled...here. That night, during a thunderstorm, she placed a curse on the house, saying that if she wasn't going to get her happily ever after, then no one who stood within these walls would either. And then she took her knife – the very knife she used to kill her fiancé – and plunged it into her heart...dying in a pool of her own blood.

NINA. Wait...you mean, the blood that seeped through the floor, the blood of her first victim in this house was–

PRITCHARD. Her own. And now, a hundred years later, she still roams these halls, coming and going as she pleases, but usually, whenever she's near... dead flower petals start to fall from the rafters – like they were supposed to at her wedding. *(Pritchard speaks with growing intensity. As he does this, maybe the wall by Nina begins to move and contort. Shift. Almost as if the spirit of Rebecca is about to walk right through it. As if she's being summoned. Music builds.)* You can feel her presence, can't you. Like she's in this room with us? It just hangs there in the air. It's like all the light leaves the room. Your breath

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grows short. The walls begin to move. And you can feel her cold hands as they wrap themselves around your neck and – *(A woman screaming is heard offstage.)* What was that?

NINA. I – I don't know.

They hear the scream again, this time punctuated with a low, gurgling sound, as if someone is being strangled!

PRITCHARD. C'mon!

The pair grab their candles and scurry out the door and into the hallway where...

SCENE THIRTEEN. HALLWAY AND/OR DRAWING ROOM.

They run into Trent.

TRENT. What was that? What's going on?

PRITCHARD. I don't know. We were just talking when –

CASSIDY. *(Running onstage.)* Nina! Are you all right? *(Sees Nina.)* Oh, thank goodness. I heard a woman scream and thought that –

A bolt of lightning flashes, illuminating the room and revealing the silhouette of Annabelle Lauren's lifeless body dangling from a rope, hovering over the group. The group is speechless. A gasp or two escapes them, but nothing more.

FREDERICK. *(Rushing onstage.)* What's going on here? Who's – *(And then he sees her, hanging there.)* ...Annabelle?

LANCE. *(Entering.)* Annabelle? *(He also sees her. Stunned.)*

Annabelle! *(He spies Lauren.)* You! Lauren, you son-of-a-bitch! *(Practically lunging at him.)* You did this to her, didn't you?

FREDERICK. Me? How could I –

LANCE. She said you'd kill her, and you did!

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TRENT. Gentlemen.

FREDERICK. And where were you just now, hmm? How do we know it wasn't you?

LANCE. Why, I'm gonna –

TRENT. Gentleman! Please! Let's show a little decorum. Now, help me get her down.

Trent takes a step forward, as if to retrieve the body.

FREDERICK. No! Don't touch her! ...I'll do it. *(In a state of shock, he begins to leave...but stops just short of exiting the scene.)* I hope you're happy...whoever did this.

He exits. Beat.

LANCE. I knew it! I knew it! And it's all my fault!

CASSIDY. First Miss Bridges and now...we have to find a way to get out of here.

TRENT. Yes. We do.

PRITCHARD. Just one problem – the caretakers are gone, and there's no getting out until they come back. Assuming, of course, that they do. The only door to the outside is made of steel. The bars on the windows are set in solid stone.

CASSIDY. Then we'll have to try and pick the lock.

PRITCHARD. Yes, but like I told you, that'll only work if she wants it to. Right, Nina?

TRENT. *(Cutting Nina off, not allowing her to speak.)* Miss Meers is not afraid of your ghosts, Pritchard. And neither am I.

PRITCHARD. Is that so?

TRENT. Yes. But...I am afraid. Two of our companions are dead, and neither by natural causes. Ruth barely touched her food, so something must've been slipped into her drink. And Mrs. Lauren...well, even if she wanted to harm herself, she couldn't – at least not alone. These ceilings are far too high. How did she get up there? By herself? One of us had to help her. Or at least hoist her.

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LANCE. I'm telling you it was Lauren. Why doesn't anyone believe me?

PRITCHARD. I believe you.

LANCE. Why doesn't anyone lucid believe me?

PRITCHARD. That's fair.

CASSIDY. Wait just a minute. I'm not going to stand here and let you accuse Mr. Lauren of murder! He would never do something like that. Not in a million years.

LANCE. Million years? No. But what if it was to keep his millions of dollars?

CASSIDY. Where's your proof? Your facts?

LANCE. You want facts? How about the fact that all four of Lauren's wives have ended up dead? Or the fact that Annabelle told me personally she was worried her husband was going to kill her. Or the fact that the last time I saw her, she was on her way to see him.

CASSIDY. That means nothing.

LANCE. Ok, then how about the fact that two people were murdered tonight...and there's a pretty good chance it'll happen again. I say we cut to the chase and take care of Lauren ourselves.

TRENT. Lance, that's mob mentality. It's also a matter for the police. The most important thing now is to protect ourselves. Clearly going to our respective rooms and locking the door isn't the solution.

NINA. ...Then what is?

TRENT. (*A beat.*) We all stay in the drawing room. All night. Watching each other. That's where our time here began, and that's where it will end. No one leaves.

PRITCHARD. But what if I have to –

TRENT. No one leaves. Can we all agree to that?

CASSIDY. I do.

NINA. ...I do.

They look at Lance.

LANCE. ...Whatever.

PRITCHARD. This doesn't sound very –

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TRENT. It's decided then. Let's all go to our rooms and gather our things.

LANCE. Wait...you just told us we're supposed to stay here, and now you want us to split up? Who's to say we'll even come back?

TRENT. Because the innocent will have no reason not to come back, and the guilty will admit their guilt by not returning. Let's give ourselves... *(Looks at the clock.)* ten minutes. Ten minutes to grab what you absolutely need and get back here. Starting...now.

CASSIDY. Come on, Nina. I'll go with you.

The group begins to disband. Trent calls out to Nina.

TRENT. Nina, just a moment. *(Walks over to a coffin, and hands one of the remaining guns. He hands it to Nina.)* I'd like for you to take this with you. For protection.

NINA. That's all right, doctor. I –

TRENT. I'd feel much more comfortable knowing you had a way to defend yourself should the need arise. *(Reluctantly she takes the gun.)* Thank you.

CASSIDY. Let's go.

They exit.

PRITCHARD. *(To self.)* Guns? Stakeouts? I keep telling them it doesn't make a difference. But why listen to me?

He takes a swig of his drink as lights fade.

SCENE FOURTEEN. NINA'S ROOM. A FEW MOMENTS LATER.

Frederick emerges from the shadows.

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FREDERICK. *(Narrates.)* While I was...mourning...the passing of my wife, Cassidy and Nina made their way upstairs to Nina's bedroom. Though barely a word was spoken between the pair, it was obvious to Nina that Cassidy was fuming. My little spitfire clearly wasn't fond of the accusations Trent and Schroeder were hurling my way – but being the good Protestant she was, she waited until she was behind closed doors before she allowed her geyser of frustration to erupt. *(He chuckles to himself.)* Oh, to be a fly on the wall. Or a narrator with a peephole...

He exits. Nina's overnight case is sitting on her bed. She is grabbing a few things to pack in it while Cassidy is sitting on her bed. Cassidy is wild and animated – a completely different person than who we met at the top of the show.

CASSIDY. And another thing – the nerve of that test pilot! And Dr. Trent! They have no proof whatsoever – none – and yet both of them are making these wild claims about Mr. Lauren. And if this were to get out to the press – *(A realization hits her. A gasp.)* The press! Oh, well it could ruin his reputation. Not only his reputation, his life! It's all just so – so –

She groans loudly. A beat. A breath.

NINA. You all right?

CASSIDY. *(Sickeningly sweet.)* Never better! *(Back to her previous tone.)* Sorry. It's been a long night.

NINA. It has. But...I do understand...where you're coming from.

CASSIDY. Glad somebody does. Most people don't. Most men anyway. They just expect you to push everything down – all that frustration and outrage. Just suppress it and smile. And make sure it's a big, toothy one while you're at it. The world kicks you, and kicks you, and kicks you, and...you're expected to just keep chugging along, taking it. *(Moving on.)* All right, enough wallowing. *(Nina turns and goes back to her folding. Cassidy looks over at Nina's overnight case and sees a glass bottle shimmering in the candlelight.)* That's a pretty bottle. It

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looks old. Delicate. Oh! Is this the perfume you have on that smells so good?

NINA. What? *(Turns. Realizes. Doesn't want her to touch it.)* No.

CASSIDY. *(Lifting the bottle to her nose.)* It smells just like it, only –

NINA. C – can you hand it over, please?

CASSIDY. *(Ignoring her.)* Of course. I'm just trying to get the cap off so I can –

NINA. Give it back. *(Forceful.)* Give it back!

Beat. Cassidy takes the bottle of perfume and gently hands it back to Nina. Nina clutches the bottle in her hands, staring down at it.

CASSIDY. I'm sorry. That was rude of me. I shouldn't have touched it without asking. *(Beat.)* ...I'd better head back before Lance and Dr. Trent try and accuse us of murder too.

She approaches the door.

NINA. Cassidy...I didn't mean to... *(Rolling the bottle over and over in her hands.)* It belonged to my mother. She used to wear it all the time. It's one of the few things of hers that I have left. And it's the only thing in the world that makes me feel as if she's still here, in the room. Just one spray and she's by my side.

CASSIDY. Ah. I lost my mother too. It's hard. Do you mind if I ask what happened? ...You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, I was just –

NINA. No, no, it's...it's Ok. *(All is still. The sound of the rain pattering against the tin roof echoes through the theatre. Thunder softly rumbles in the distance. Gently spoken. Nervously clutches her left arm with her right hand.)* It uh, happened about five years ago. Back when I still worked for Mr. Lauren. My father had recently passed...and my sister Barbara and I decided to take our mother out for dinner – sort of as a distraction. Ever since he died, she wouldn't leave the house for anything. When uh, we told her we were taking her to a restaurant, she begged us not to. But Barbara and I, we were determined. We went to

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this little French Bistro we'd read about and ordered all sorts of appetizers and things to try. But it didn't matter. She was miserable. So miserable that...when my sister wasn't looking, she grabbed my hand and begged me to take her home. She said she didn't feel right being out. That she wasn't ready. (*Moving on.*) Barbara insisted we stay. But she looked so pitiful. Broken. I couldn't stand to see her like that, so I excused myself and said I was going to get the car. And I did. But...not before stopping off at the bar. Normally I don't drink, but with all the pressure and everything...I needed something to help –

CASSIDY. Calm your nerves.

NINA. Right. (*Takes a deep breath.*) I had two glasses and...and when I got to the car, it started to rain. It was hard to see. Coming down in sheets. All of a sudden, we started spinning out of control. I kept hitting the brakes, trying to stop the car, trying to slow down but...nothing worked. (*A pause.*) When I came to, I was in the hospital. Only a few scrapes and bruises. The impact of the crash...threw my sister through the windshield. Paralyzing her. And my mom...she never made it to the hospital.

CASSIDY. Nina, I'm so sorry.

NINA. After that, I started having trouble. I saw a therapist and took medication, and it helped for a while but...eventually I lost my job. Barbara's medical bills started piling up, and I still had to pay off my mother's funeral. I went through my savings, but it wasn't enough. It's never enough. We're behind on almost everything...we're even about to lose our house...and I feel like it's all my fault.

CASSIDY. No.

NINA. Yes, it is. I should never have taken her out. She didn't want to – but I pushed her. I did that. I made her go. I drank the wine. And Barbara...well, she'll never forgive me for what I've done to her. And who can blame her? Maybe if I were stronger, I'd be able to fix all of this. But I'm not...and I can't.

CASSIDY. Yes, you can. Nina. It was an accident. And anyone who has ever been under pressure, who has been in your shoes, can understand why you did what you did. (*Notices Nina crying.*) Nina. Here. (*She grabs a handful of tissues and hands them to Nina, who uses them to dab*

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her eyes. Cassidy looks back at the box.) We're all out. You stay right here, and I'll go get some more.

NINA. You don't have to, really.

CASSIDY. It's just down the —

NINA. It's fine. But if you don't mind...I'd think I'd like to have a moment alone.

CASSIDY. Of course. *(She begins to exit.)* Take all the time you need.

Cassidy exits. Nina sits down on her bed.

NINA. Come on, Nina. Only a few more hours and you're home free.

GHOSTLY VOICES. Nina...

... Nina...

NINA. *(Petrified. Almost whispered.)* No. No.

GHOSTLY VOICES. She's back, Nina...

She's back...

She's back...

And she knows...

We all know...

NINA. I don't know who you are, but...if this is Rebecca...I promise I'll be out of your house in a few hours. You'll never see me again. Please. *(To self. Repeated a few times:)* It's Ok. It's Ok. It's Ok. It's —

Nina's words are cut short as Rebecca's face appears in the mirror next to her. The image is aided by a loud musical chord. Nina screams! The voices return.

GHOSTLY VOICES. Nina!

...Nina!

Nina! Nina!

Nina! ...Nina!

Nina! ...Nina!

NINA!

SHE KNOWS, NINA. AND SHE'S ANGRY!

NINA. Stop it! STOP IT!

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Nina grabs her gun, and heads for the door, exiting. Thunder. Lightning. Blackout.

SCENE FIFTEEN. ANNABELLE'S ROOM/THE HALLWAY. A FEW MOMENTS LATER.

Lights rise on Frederick, sitting next to Annabelle's lifeless body. The room is aglow with candlelight. He gently caresses her cheek.

FREDERICK. Oh, Annabelle. My Annabelle. You were so beautiful. And so...greedy. Right up until the end. I know you can't respond, but I also know you're looking up, watching this scene unfold. Please know, dearest, that while our marriage wasn't perfect, and we had as many fights as you had infidelities, deep down, in my own way, I still... tolerated you. Goodbye, my sweet. *(He kisses her forehead.)* Something to remember me by. *(The door opens. Trent enters.)* Doctor? What are you doing here?

TRENT. I've just spoken with Miss Bowman. She said we're moving the party down to the cellar.

FREDERICK. The cellar?

TRENT. I thought it odd too. But I suppose it doesn't matter where we go, as long as we're all together.

FREDERICK. True. *(To Annabelle.)* Farewell, my dear. Until we meet again. *(The two step out into the hall.)* Shall we?

TRENT. *(Snaps his fingers.)* I just remembered – I left something in my room. I'll catch up with you in a moment.

FREDERICK. Of course.

He exits. Music underscores for a moment. Trent looks about the room to make sure the coast is clear. Once he's sure he's alone, he reaches underneath Annabelle's bed and produces a small black bag. He unzips it and pulls out a needle and pre-filled syringe. He flicks the needle a few times, then lifts Annabelle's lifeless arm and sticks it with the needle.

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He then sits on the bed, looks down at his watch, and begins checking her pulse.

TRENT. *(Softly spoken.)* Annabelle. Time to wake up, darling. It's almost over. We've done it.

ANNABELLE. *(She wakes.)* David? What's happening? Has she done it? Has she killed him?

TRENT. Not yet, but she will. Frederick's on his way to the cellar as we speak.

ANNABELLE. And the girl?

TRENT. In her room.

ANNABELLE. We've got to hurry. We don't have much time. *(She's clearly uncomfortable.)* Get me out of this thing. This hanging harness. *(She climbs out of bed and unties her robe. Underneath it she is sporting a hanging harness. Trent immediately goes to work, unlacing it.)* What about the reporter? Has anyone confessed to killing her?

TRENT. Not yet.

ANNABELLE. I know it was Frederick. Death by poison? He's clearly trying to frame me. To this day he accuses me of attempting to do the same to him.

TRENT. But didn't you?

ANNABELLE. That's beside the point.

TRENT. Yes well, come tomorrow you'll never have to deal with him again. *(Annabelle reaches into her closet and pulls out a white wedding dress covered in bloodstains.)* And there's my beautiful, bloodstained bride! *(Trent helps her step into it.)* It truly is the perfect crime, you know. Luring an emotionally unstable girl here with the promise of money, only to scare her so badly she accidentally kills the great Frederick Lauren. Who would ever suspect we planned it? That we set her up right from the start?

ANNABELLE. It was almost too easy. The blood. The voices. *(Pointing to herself.)* The ghost.

TRENT. Not to mention the pills. *(He opens his jacket, pulls out Nina's purse, and hands it to Annabelle. She laughs and places it on her*

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vanity.) She'll be so jittery and nervous she'll shoot the first thing that scares her.

ANNABELLE. You did make sure she took the gun, didn't you?

TRENT. All taken care of. And if for some reason she misses, well then there's always Lance. You planted the seeds of doubt beautifully in that one.

ANNABELLE. I did, didn't I? We're just lucky he doesn't remember running into you at the casino.

TRENT. Drunkenly lamenting about his money problems and telling me he wished he could find a girl half as attractive as Annabelle Lauren.

She gazes at her reflection in the mirror, pleased with what she sees. She grabs a nail file and begins filing her nails.

ANNABELLE. Well you can't say he doesn't have great taste.

TRENT. If Nina doesn't do Frederick in, I have no doubt Lance will take care of him.

ANNABELLE. And my suicide?

TRENT. A simple party game that went a few steps too far. Nothing more. We can't be held responsible for the actions of others.

ANNABELLE. My darling, you truly have thought of everything, haven't you?

TRENT. Before long we'll be off on a little island somewhere, sipping cocktails and spending Lauren's millions.

ANNABELLE. Sounds like heaven.

TRENT. I know.

They share a passionate kiss.

ANNABELLE. *(Something occurs to her.)* There's just one problem. Frederick's money.

TRENT. *(Playfully.)* Worried you won't be able to spend it all?

ANNABELLE. No. You see...I don't want to share it.

TRENT. What?

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

Quickly and forcefully, she stabs him in the chest. Trent falls to the floor.

ANNABELLE. Sorry darling, but I'm afraid you've worn out your welcome.

TRENT. *(With his last ounce of strength.)* Annabelle, no! No!

But her mind is made up. Again, she stabs his chest – presumably jamming the nail file right into his heart. He screams in pain, then his body goes limp. In a quick motion, she yanks the file free.

ANNABELLE. That is one tough nail file.

Lance walks in head lowered in reverence. He sees Trent's bloody carcass on the ground.

LANCE. What the –!? Doc! What happened to – *(Eyes Annabelle with the bloody nail file. All the color drains out of his face.)* Annabelle!! You're alive? But you – I, I saw you –

ANNABELLE. Lance, calm down. Calm down. It's Ok.

She approaches him; he jumps back, attempting to get away from her.

LANCE. Ah! Get away from me you ghost...or...whatever you are!

ANNABELLE. Don't be silly, Lance. It's me. I'm alive.

LANCE. You are? B – but how is that possible? I saw you hanging from the ceiling!

ANNABELLE. It was my husband – he and Trent drugged me.

LANCE. What?!

ANNABELLE. They're working together. They wanted to make it look like I hanged myself. They put me in a hanging harness, even dressed me in this ridiculous getup!

LANCE. That's terrible! But, if they wanted to kill you, why didn't they just –

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

ANNABELLE. Oh Lance, who knows! Who knows how their minds work! But at least you're here now, and we can stop Frederick together! You will help me, won't you? Lance, say that you will!

LANCE. Yeah, I...I will...

ANNABELLE. (*Burying her face in his chest.*) Thank god! Thank god!

She pretends to weep. It's an incredible performance.

LANCE. (*Still in a state of shock. Attempting to console her.*) Yeah... it's Ok. Everything'll be Ok.

ANNABELLE. I don't know what I'd do if you weren't here. I truly don't!

LANCE. Right... (*Notices something.*) Um, Annabelle...?

ANNABELLE. (*Wiping away her tears.*) Yes?

LANCE. (*Approaching the vanity.*) What are you doing with Nina's purse?

ANNABELLE. (*Caught off guard.*) What? That? No, I – Frederick must've brought it here. They uh, they've got all sorts of things down in the cellar. Check your pockets – they're robbing people left and right when they're not looking. Trying to trick everyone into thinking it's the ghost. Why, I even overheard the doctor say they're hiding all their stolen goods behind the furnace. Probably because they assume no one will think to look there.

LANCE. Oh. (*He knows.*) But I thought Cassidy said this house doesn't have a furnace...

ANNABELLE. (*A beat. A sigh.*) Damn.

LANCE. What?

ANNABELLE. Nothing. You're just smarter than you look.

BANG! She shoots him. Music blares as we transition from Annabelle's room to...

SCENE SIXTEEN. THE DRAWING ROOM. MOMENTS LATER.

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

Perhaps the sound of the gun firing morphs into a thunderclap. Thunder continues to rumble in the distance. Nina, gun in hand, cautiously makes her way into the drawing room. Practically paralyzed with fear, she breathes heavily as she searches for Cassidy, looking this way and that. The candles are dying – the room is dark and hard to navigate.

NINA. (Sort of a half whisper.) Cassidy? Hello. Cassidy, you here? Doctor? Lance? (She leans against a bookshelf, peering around the corner – hoping it's safe. Suddenly, a rustling noise.) What's that? What's – (BAM! A book flies off the shelf and onto the ground, as if hurled by an invisible hand.) Ah! (Nina sprints past the bookcase, only to see more books flying off the shelves of another bookcase! One book after another! BAM! BAM!) Ahhh! Stop it! Stop!

She runs towards one door – it slams shut in her face. She races towards another – it slams as well! Then, out of the darkness, she hears...

GHOSTLY VOICES. Nina...

Nina...

Where are you, Nina?

NINA. (Trembling. To self.) Not again. No! No –

And then a door stage right opens slowly, its hinges in desperate need of some WD-40. Nina moves towards the door but isn't sure if she should go in or not.

FREDERICK. (Narrating.) Poor Nina. She knew not what horrors lay ahead of her...

GHOSTLY VOICES. Nina...

She's going to find you, Nina...

And she's going to kill you...

Nina rushes towards the open door and exits.

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

FREDERICK. But she knew whatever it was, it couldn't be nearly as terrible as what was following her. The voices continued to chase her, almost as if they were guiding her, and she ran right into the cellar, where I was waiting...

Lightning. Thunder. The Bride slowly makes her way across the stage as we shift...

SCENE SEVENTEEN. THE CELLAR.

Darkness surrounds Nina. She breathes heavily, holding the gun out. She's consumed with fear. Other than the sound of breathing, and the occasional squeaking of the floorboards, all is silent. Five candles, each evenly spaced apart, attempt to brighten up the otherwise dreary cellar. She attempts to look around at her surroundings when... one by one, the candles go out. All but the fifth one. Nina reacts accordingly to this.

NINA. No! No! *(She hears something. Footsteps.)* What was that? Who's there? You hear me? Who's –
Frederick emerges from the shadows.

FREDERICK. Nina, it's only –

NINA. Ahh!

Startled, she screams – and pulls the trigger. BANG! The bullet flies through the air and hits Frederick in the chest. He falls backwards from the impact. Nina, trembling, lowers the gun. Silence. She slowly approaches the body.

NINA. Mr. Lauren? Mr. Lauren! *(She rushes to his side.)* Are you all right!? I – I didn't mean to! Oh, please don't be dead – please don't be – *(Her words are cut short as a cough escapes Lauren. A loud, wheezy cough.)* You're all right! You're not hurt!

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FREDERICK. I don't know about that, but... this bulletproof vest seemed to absorb most of the impact – along with the bullet.

He takes off the vest and tosses it to the side.

NINA. Why are you wearing a –

But before she can even finish the sentence.

GHOSTLY VOICES. Nina...

Nina...

Nina...

The Bride enters! Music underscores!

NINA. She's here! We've got to leave, now!

The Bride approaches them, her face veiled.

GHOSTLY VOICES. She knows, Nina...

Nina...

And now the time has come...

to die...

Nina begins tugging at Frederick with all her might, attempting to pull him up off the ground.

NINA. C'mon, Mr. Lauren. You have to get up!

With each step, the Bride, clutching a bloody knife in her right hand, gets closer...and closer...

GHOSTLY VOICES. Nina...

Nina...

Until suddenly she lifts her veil, only to reveal...

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

ANNABELLE. Nina.

Nina is taken aback. Squinting to make sure it truly is...

NINA. Mrs. Lauren? Is that –? But you're –

ANNABELLE. Very much alive. *(Notices something.)* And I see the same can be said for my husband. *(Dripping with sarcasm.)* How wonderful.

FREDERICK. Sorry to disappoint you, darling. Better luck next time.

ANNABELLE. Yes.

NINA. W – what's going on here?! How are you alive? Why are you dressed like that?

FREDERICK. All valid questions, Nina. It appears that my lovely little wife here was going to take another shot at killing me. Only this time she decided she would trick someone else into doing it for her.

NINA. You mean me?

FREDERICK. Hear that, Annabelle – and you said she wasn't very bright. *(To Nina.)* Yes, my dear. My assumption is Annabelle did some digging and learned all about your past. Your treatments. Financial problems. And she thought that if she scared you enough, she could orchestrate it so you would shoot me without anyone being the wiser.

NINA. But who told her about my...about me? There's only one person who... *(She realizes. In disbelief.)* No. No. He would never.

FREDERICK. I've learned a great many things in my lifetime, Nina. The most important being you can never really trust anyone... not even doctors.

NINA. But it's not true. *(To Annabelle.)* Is it?

FREDERICK. Annabelle...it's the least you can do.

ANNABELLE. As much as it pains me to utter these words, my husband is...right. But don't worry, Dr. Trent won't bother you ever again.

FREDERICK. Stabbed him in the back?

ANNABELLE. Actually, the front. *(Frederick forms a circle with his thumb and index finger as if to say, 'nice job.' Annabelle approaches*

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

Nina.) Now as enjoyable as this little tête-à-tête has been – I did come here to make sure that my husband was properly disposed of. And if you're not going to do it for me, Nina, I'll have to take care of him myself!

She brandishes her blade for a moment, then lunges at Nina, attempting to take the gun from her! Nina leaps back, Frederick catching her.

NINA. No!

Just as Annabelle is about to thrust the blade in Nina's direction –

CASSIDY. *(Off.)* Annabelle, stop! Don't hurt her!

Cassidy runs on stage, pushing Annabelle away from Nina, and knocking her to the ground – the knife falling out of her hand.

FREDERICK. Cassidy! Right on time.

CASSIDY. Mr. Lauren, are you all right?

FREDERICK. Better now.

CASSIDY. And Nina. I've been looking everywhere for you! How are you?

FREDERICK. *(Not allowing Nina to answer.)* Much better than Annabelle's about to be, I assure you. *(He approaches Annabelle, who is desperately crawling for the knife. Just as she's about to snatch it up, he steps on it and kicks it away. Cassidy grabs it.)* And now, dear wife, for the twist you didn't see coming. After all, one good double-cross deserves another.

ANNABELLE. Is that so?

FREDERICK. Indeed. Not only were Cassidy and I in on your scheme from the start, we've been helping you and Dr. Trent the entire time, making sure every detail went off without a hitch. That way, when we made it to this moment right here, I'd be able to look you in the eye and tell you that the thing you fear most is about to come true. You, Annabelle, are going to be replaced. Just like those who came before

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

you. Cassidy and I will be married, and you...you have a date with a vat of acid. (*Points to the vat of acid, the trap door wide open. Annabelle stands up and dusts herself off.*) What do you have to say to that?

ANNABELLE. Only that...this is all so unfortunate.

FREDERICK. Unfortunate?

ANNABELLE. Yes, darling. It's unfortunate that you had to be stubborn and not die like you were supposed to. Poor Nina could have simply played her part, unaware of what was truly going on. Everyone would have gotten what they deserved. Everyone would've been happy – excluding you, of course. But I suppose fate had different plans... isn't that right, Cassidy?

CASSIDY. (*Sighs.*) Unfortunately.

She places the knife at Frederick's throat. Nina gasps. I wouldn't be surprised if Frederick does too.

NINA. What?

FREDERICK. Um, dearest, what's going on?

CASSIDY. Isn't it obvious, Frederick? You've been had by the most unlikely of partners: your wife and –

ANNABELLE. Your mistress. To think we've been pulling the strings the entire time. Manipulating you and Dr. Trent to get exactly what we want. I suppose what you said is true; you never really can trust anyone.

FREDERICK. But, Cassidy –

ANNABELLE. (*Mocking.*) “But Cassidy!” I have to hand it to this one. I always thought I was the master when it came to manipulating men, but Cassidy, you my dear take the cake.

CASSIDY. Thank you, *Mrs. Lauren*. Setting up an operation this elaborate takes time...

ANNABELLE. Resources...

CASSIDY. Not to mention months of planning. Sure, we could've just slit your throat in your sleep, but where's the fun in that?

ANNABELLE. None whatsoever. Besides, all eyes would fall on moi as the prime suspect.

NINA. Cassidy...why? How – how could you do this?

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

CASSIDY. (*Scoffs.*) How could I do this? How could I not? It's always the same story, Nina – girl gets job. Girl excels at job. Girl catches the eye of an employer who thinks "no" is just her idea of foreplay. And then after that, she's faced with two choices: either give him what he wants...give him all of her...or he'll give her the door. That's it. And even if I could find another job without his recommendation, how long until the cycle repeats itself? Do you have any idea how many personal assistants the great Frederick Lauren has gone through? Not to mention secretaries, stenographers –

ANNABELLE. Wives.

CASSIDY. It's time someone took a stand, it's time someone put him in his place. It's time for someone to think about the next girl, the next assistant, the next...bride.

NINA. B – but how is killing him going to help you? What do you want?

CASSIDY. At this moment? For you to listen. I like you, Nina. You deserve so much more out of this life. And I want to help you get it. That's why – and I know this is going to be hard for you to hear – but that's why I need you to shoot Frederick.

NINA/FREDERICK. What?!

ANNABELLE. She's right. Shoot him, Nina. Right in the head.

NINA. Never!

FREDERICK. Good girl, Nina.

Cassidy digs the knife even harder into his neck.

CASSIDY. Oh, come on. We'll say it was an accident. Annabelle and I will be your witnesses.

ANNABELLE. The three of us will come up with a story, together. One that explains the murders. Ruth, Trent, Lance...

CASSIDY. Lance?

ANNABELLE. Collateral damage.

NINA. I can't – I can't do this.

ANNABELLE. Of course you can!

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

CASSIDY. Nina, you said it yourself: you're drowning in debt. You're about to lose everything. Think about that for a minute. Think about your sister. Sure, fifty thousand dollars is great, but what about two hundred and fifty thousand? Can you imagine all the things you'll be able to give Barbara?

NINA. But...I can't murder someone! It wouldn't be right!

FREDERICK. I agree with her. *(Cassidy digs the blade in even deeper.)* Ow.

CASSIDY. Who's to say what's right?

ANNABELLE/CASSIDY. Men?

ANNABELLE. Please! They've had this game rigged against us from the start. They make the rules, and the rest of us are forced to play by them.

CASSIDY. Exactly. All you need to do to change your life is to take someone else's. I'd kill him myself, right here, but slashing his throat doesn't scream accident.

ANNABELLE. No. It just screams.
They share a laugh.

CASSIDY. But an innocent, troubled young woman mistakenly shooting a man in a dark cellar after a fuse was blown...no one could convict you, no matter how hard they tried.

ANNABELLE. She's right, Nina. Shoot him. Shoot him now.

FREDERICK. Nina, don't.

She digs the blade even harder into his neck.

CASSIDY. Yes, Nina. Shoot him.

CASSIDY/ANNABELLE. Give him something to remember us by.

FREDERICK. Wh – don't listen to them!

Cassidy and Annabelle begin shouting over one another, telling Nina to shoot Frederick. When he's able to, Frederick chimes in with a "don't do it." Or a "don't listen to them."

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

CASSIDY. Shoot him.

ANNABELLE. *(Overlapping.)* Shoot him.

CASSIDY. *(Overlapping.)* Shoot him!

ANNABELLE. *(Overlapping.)* SHOOT HIM!

CASSIDY. *(Overlapping.)* SHOOT HIM!

Cassidy, Annabelle, and Frederick's lines build and build, melting into one another, causing Nina to grow increasingly anxious. She's anxious. Exhausted. Jittery. Confused. And she can no longer hold it in.

NINA. Stop it! STOP IT!

BANG! A gun goes off. Nina's breath catches. The group looks around, confused. Suddenly, Annabelle clutches her stomach.

CASSIDY. Annabelle? *(A whimper begins to escape Annabelle when – BANG – another shot is fired. Annabelle falls to the ground, dead. Cassidy rushes to her side.)* No! *(She checks her pulse.)* She's dead. But who –

The sound of the floor creaking is heard. Followed by a low thud. Lance hobbles onstage.

NINA. ...Lance? Lance!

Nina up to Lance, hugging him a bit too tightly.

LANCE. Ow! *(Winching in pain, he drops the gun in his hand.)* Good to see you too.

While Nina's back is turned, Cassidy rips the gun out of her hand and kicks Lance's away.

CASSIDY. Now, where were we?

FREDERICK. It's three against one, Cassidy. It's over. You've lost.

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

CASSIDY. *(Pointing to Frederick and Nina.)* Please! You two are unarmed, *(Pointing to Lance.)* and he barely has one. Oh, I'm going to enjoy putting a bullet in you, Frederick. And Lance. And little Miss Nina. *(Shakes head. Dismayed.)* I am so disappointed in you. I practically handed this opportunity to you – this chance to rise up and take more control of your life. And you couldn't even do that. I suppose you were right all along. You aren't strong. You weren't strong enough to save your mother, you aren't strong enough to help your sister, and you'll never be strong enough to stop someone like me. *(She cocks the gun, ready to fire, when... the sound of something stirring is heard. Wails and moans echo throughout the theatre. And then...a series of dead rose petals begin to fall from the rafters.)* What's happening? *(To Frederick.)* What are you trying to pull?

FREDERICK. Me? How could I –

NINA. Look!

Rebecca appears. The real Rebecca this time. She glides onto the stage, soaked in blood – her gnarled fingers clutching a large kitchen knife. She opens her mouth and emits a terrifying guttural sound as she makes her way towards the group. The ghostly voices underpinning Cassidy's dialogue.

CASSIDY. Enough of this! *(BANG! She fires the gun at Rebecca. Nothing. She isn't fazed by it.)* What? *(Rebecca moves closer and closer towards Cassidy.)* What? Stop! *(BANG! She fires again!)* Stop!! *(BANG! And again! The bullets do nothing. She's unstoppable. Cassidy clicks the gun again, only this time, she's completely out of bullets.)* No! No!

She hurls the gun at the ghost, hoping to stop it.

GHOSTLY VOICES. Cassidy...

She knows, Cassidy...

She knows what you've done...

And she's going to kill you...

CASSIDY. What? Get away from me! Get away! Get –

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

GHOSTLY VOICES. Come with us, Murderess!

Cassidy, terror-stricken, backs away from the specter, not realizing what rests just a few steps behind her. She slips – and SPLASH! – falls backwards into the pit of acid. Steam rises from the vat as Cassidy's screams, like her, eventually melt away. Silence. Nina takes a small step forward.

NINA. Cassidy...

And then, in a quick motion, Rebecca turns her attention to Nina. A growl escapes the ghost.

NINA/FREDERICK/LANCE. Ahhh!

LANCE. *(Yanking on Nina's arm.)* Let's get out of here!

NINA. No. No more running. Not anymore.

Rebecca opens her mouth and shrieks.

FREDERICK. ...Suit yourself.

He makes a mad dash for the door, but Rebecca stretches out her hand, causing it to slam shut in his face.

LANCE. Ah! Now what?

Rebecca begins to approach Nina.

GHOSTLY VOICES. Nina...

It's time, Nina...

Time to die...

NINA. No. It's not.

GHOSTLY VOICES. *(Overlapping.)* Nina...

She's going to kill you...

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

NINA. I've – I've spent too long hiding in the shadows. I'm not afraid of you. Not anymore! *(Rebecca continues to approach her as Nina stands her ground with all her might. To Rebecca.)* I know what it's like to be different. To be betrayed. But this isn't right, and you know it. That's why you killed yourself. *(Rebecca raises her knife high into the air, ready to bring it down on Nina, when – Nina grabs the bride's arm, stopping her.)* Because you felt guilty for what you'd done!

Nina gently lowers Rebecca's wrist.

GHOSTLY VOICES. Time to die, Nina...
Time to die.

The ghost is fascinated by her. Perhaps, in a moment reminiscent of Nina's first encounter with a ghost in Act One, she cocks her head to the side, both curious and puzzled.

NINA. I'm not afraid of you, Rebecca. I'm not afraid! I'm not – *(Rebecca opens her mouth and shrieks – loudly – into Nina's face. It's horrible, and my guess is her breath doesn't smell too great either. A beat...)* I'm. Not. Afraid.

Nina places her hand on Rebecca's cheek – startling her. Rebecca backs away from Nina – almost if it's Rebecca who is now frightened. Rebecca looks heavenward and lets out one last scream, causing the lights to flicker. She then... disappears. In her wake, the lights come back on... and the door to the cellar unlocks.

FREDERICK. She's gone! Ha-ha! She's gone! You did it!

LANCE. How d'you like that?

NINA. *(In utter disbelief.)* I did do it, didn't I?

FREDERICK. Oh, my dear, you have my eternal gratitude. You both do. My gratitude and...my money.

LANCE. That's great and all, but after all this...I really need to use the john. Wait. *(Looks down.)* No, I don't.

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Lance exits. Frederick smiles. Nina studies the spot where the ghost recently vanished. Frederick turns and looks at her.

FREDERICK. You really outdid yourself, Miss Meers. Truly. Now, perhaps we should vacate these premises before Rebecca decides to come back, hm?

NINA. I'm still confused. Miss Bridges...who was responsible for killing her?

FREDERICK. Who knows? My guess is that it was Annabelle and Trent. Or perhaps...the ghosts. They did mark her after all.

NINA. Perhaps...

She begins to exit.

FREDERICK. Nina. *(She turns.)* It seems that Cassidy's unexpected...termination has left an opening in my company that desperately needs to be filled. What do you say? Personally, I can't think of anyone better. The pay is excellent...and so are the benefits. *(He begins to stroke her hair.)* My, my. You are beautiful. You know that?

NINA. *(Steps away from him. Firm.)* No, Mr. Lauren.

FREDERICK. No? *(A laugh escapes him.)* You're sure you realize what you're turning down?

NINA. I do. And my answer is no.

She leaves, shutting the door behind her.

FREDERICK. Such a shame. And she was so...amusing. *(He makes his way over Annabelle's corpse.)* So much bloodshed in one evening. Poor Annabelle. *(Then to the vat of acid.)* Poor Cassidy. *(He reaches into his jacket and pulls out an ostrich plume.)* And poor, poor Ruth. Suffered the same fate as my first three wives. You just couldn't hold your liquor, could you my dear? It's a pity. But if it's any consolation, I suppose you've finally learned your lesson about writing nasty,

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muckrake columns, detailing my numerous, alleged affairs. Oh well.
(*The lights begin to flicker again. From out of the darkness...*) What?

GHOSTLY VOICES. Frederick...

Frederick...

FREDERICK. Damnit. (*The ghost of Ruth Bridges enters. Frederick is stunned.*) No! B – but you're dead! I killed you!

RUTH. Yyyeeeeesssss...

FREDERICK. No! No! (*She lunges at him. He steps back, only to discover a recently deceased Annabelle rising to her feet. The ghostly voices continue to call out his name throughout the rest of the scene*) Ah! (*Annabelle lunges at Frederick as well; he backs away, towards the vat, where the ghost of Cassidy rises up and grabs his leg.*) Ahh! Get away! Get away!

He quickly makes his way to the door.

GHOSTLY VOICES. She's coming, Frederick... (*He turns the knob, opens the door, and finds Rebecca, knife raised, waiting for him on the other side.*) And she's going to kill you.

FREDERICK. No! No!

And blackout – the air pierced by the sound of Frederick screaming.

SCENE EIGHTEEN. THE DRAWING ROOM. SUNRISE.

Nina and Lance make their way onto the stage. Lance is still in a great deal of pain.

NINA. (*Helping Lance as much as she can.*) There we go, almost there... (*Suddenly, they see Pritchard, motionless and face down on the ground, a bottle of rum in his hand. She gasps!*) Pritchard! (*She approaches him and crouches down, touching him gently.*) Oh no. No, no. It's not right. You didn't deserve this. It's not fair.

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

LANCE. Poor guy. Sure, he was a few pepperonis short of a pizza, but still. Poor Pritch. Poor, poor Pritch.

PRITCHARD. *(A slight beat, then...)* Don't call me Pritch!

NINA. You're all right!

PRITCHARD. 'Course I am. I think. *(Checking his person.)* What's going on? What happened? Did the walls close in? I feel like I missed a lot.

NINA/LANCE. You did.

Suddenly, the old grandfather clock begins to chime once more.

NINA. The clock! *(A realization.)* It's 5 AM! You know what that means?

LANCE. I sure do! It means we're –

Suddenly, we hear the sound of the door unlocking. Nina rushes to the door and turns the knob. It opens, and sunlight pours in.

NINA. We're free! We did it! We actually did it!

They embrace.

LANCE. *(Still wounded from the gunshot.)* Ow. Ow. Ow. *(Moving on.)* I don't believe it!

PRITCHARD. Neither do I. Last time I passed out in this house, I was broke, and my bones were being crushed. This time, I barely have a scratch on me, and I'm about to get the biggest payday of my life! *(The chimes of the music box, the ones that played while Pritchard was recounting Rebecca's story, begin to play. The trio can hear them.)* What's that? What's that?!

And then, as if by ghostly magic, the portrait of Rebecca swings open by itself. As the lullaby continues to play, Nina bravely approaches the portrait, only to discover piles of hundreds stashed behind it.

THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

NINA. It's here! It's all here!

Lance and Pritchard make their way over to the money and begin tossing it in the air, victoriously. Frederick enters and one last time surveys the audience.

FREDERICK. *(Narrating.)* And so, the few souls who made it through the night were rewarded...and the prize split three ways. And as for the rest of us, well... *(He turns around, the Bride's bloody knife sticking out of his back. Slowly, the Slides begin to emerge from either end of the stage – Mr. Slides carrying a tray with a lid on it.)* There you are! Where have you two been? Where did you go? *(Mr. Slides lifts the lid off the tray: underneath it rests a bottle of wine and a goblet. Perhaps Mr. Slides grunts, insinuating Frederick should take a swig from the goblet.)* Fine. But don't think this changes anything. *(Frederick takes a sip then immediately spits it out.)* Ghastly! The worst!

MR. SLIDES. See. I told you your wine was terrible.

MRS. SLIDES. Quiet, you! You want the acid again?

FREDERICK. *(Narrating.)* Yes, it turns out the Slides were nothing more than the ghosts of that charming old-world couple who purchased the house after Rebecca cursed it. And yet even with all the pieces put into place and all the strands drawn together, we're left with so many questions and hardly any answers. So many implausible impossibilities. *(As he speaks, he lights himself another cigarette as the ghosts of the deceased begin to emerge...Annabelle...Ruth...Trent...Cassidy...all bloody and covered in scars.)* My advice: don't think too deeply about anything you've witnessed this evening. Some things...some things defy explanation. But if it's truly answers you seek – you'll just have to come back and see us again, won't you? These parties, after all...they're to die for.

He laughs, they all do. A wicked, nasty laugh. The lights slowly dim. Suddenly, one last thunderclap, and we're left in total darkness.