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My Fatal Valentine

*An Audience-Participation
Murder-Mystery*

by

EILEEN MOUSHEY

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THE SET-UP

MY FATAL VALENTINE is set at a convention of romance writers and their fans. The purpose of the event is to honor five authors and present the Loveknot Award for the Best Romance of the Year, to be given by Heartthrob Books. The actors interact, in character, with the audience throughout the event. The script describes how the original production was mounted - at a community theatre, where the lobby and theatre were both utilized. However, it is possible to adapt the mystery to be done all in one room, add dinner, etc. The Production Manual describes different ways to modify your event. Also, MY FATAL VALENTINE calls for five specialty acts. Four of these occur during Scene Two, and the fifth is showcased to provide time to tally the “votes” before Scene Four. Additionally, there are several audience members utilized to give “interpretive readings.” in Scene Two. These are chosen by the stage manager, with input from the actors. It is also possible to use local “celebrities” - elected officials, radio personalities, etc. - as readers.

Scene One occurs as the audience arrives. Basically, “mini-scenes” and confrontations occur in the lobby. The script describes the action, but relies on the improvisational skills of the actors. Characters are encouraged to initiate conversations with audience members and establish their relationships, personalities, etc.

Scene Two includes introduction of the authors with their latest books, interpretive readings from these books, the specialty acts, “the murder” and an interrogation scene. The action on stage was originally played downstage of a grand curtain. Again, any playing area will do, although adaptations for “the murder” may be dictated by your location. Scene Two is scripted, although characters can digress from the script in order to interact with the audience (“asides”, etc. - but always ending with the next actor’s cue!!) At the end of Scene Two, the audience is sent out for intermission, with instructions.

Scene Three is intermission. (Please note: this is longer than your usual intermission to allow people time to talk to the suspects.) The audience members are able to question suspects individually. At our production, refreshments were also served at this time. You can use an evidence

display case to hold the authors' books, the blackmail note, the murder weapon, etc. At a pre-arranged signal, the audience is sent back into the theatre after casting ballots for the suspect they think "did it". Results are quickly tallied.

Scene Four is the solution scene. The suspect who has received the most votes will, indeed, be the guilty party. There is a solution scene for each suspect.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Besides giving the "basics" of each character, the following describes motives, etc. In the case of the Romance Writers, the script will use their real names, except for Hattie, who is known to almost every one as "Lucretia".

MAUDE PETRY - the hostess and organizer of the event. Harried and continually flustered, Maude is the President of FARN - Fans of Romance Novels. Dressed nicely. Any age over 35. She will be in view during the murder and is above suspicion.

BENTON FISH - the Editor-in-Chief at Heartthrob Books. He is also the Master of Ceremonies for the event and, as such, begins the evening very much in charge. This is a situation that will change and Benton's demeanor and confidence quickly erodes. Dressed in a suit. Has a major crush on Jane. He will also be in full view during the murder and is above suspicion.

JANE FORTHRIGHT - Head of Security at Heartthrob Books. Jane is beautiful, no-nonsense, terse, and direct. Any age over 25. She has no motive, is present during the murder and is also above suspicion. She will handle the investigation.

HATTIE GLICK (pen name - LUCRETIA DEWITT) A Romance Writer. Very arrogant, rather crude, loud and obnoxious. Her conversation is punctuated with frequent abrasive "HA!"s. She is wearing a purple suit over a white blouse. A hat makes her especially noticeable. Any age over 40. Her books have all been very different. No two were alike. Which is not surprising considering she didn't write

any of them. She's been blackmailing all of the Writers with the "dirt" she has on each of them. But instead of extorting cash, she's forced each one to write a book which she has passed off as her own. The final straw will be when she wins the "Heartthrob Book of the Year" for "Savannah Passage" which was written by one of the others. That's why she's murdered.

MAYNARD GLICK - Lucretia's husband. He's a basically sweet guy for someone who works for the FBI - in the Witness Relocation Program. He's also been henpecked by Hattie for years. Wearing a shirt and tie. Any age over 40.

PRISCILLA EMBERLY - A Romance Writer. Very Victorian, sweet and fussy. Wearing a dress covered in ruffles, ribbons and flounces. Any age over 40, the older the better. The Emberly books are always set in romantic locales and feature heroines who are as chaste as they are "chased." In Priscilla's world relationships are never consummated beyond the passionate kiss. This is very unlike the other books that she used to write with her sister, Veronica, under the pen name CALIBAN STERN. Those books were only sold behind the counters of seedy stores. Unfortunately, Lucretia discovered these early books on a day she was visiting for tea.

VERONICA EMBERLY - Priscilla's twin sister and co-author. They are completely devoted to each other and to their books. Dressed in a fashion similar to Priscilla. Like her twin, Veronica is petrified that their fans will find out about their other books.

NOTE: In the original production, I was unable to cast both of the Emberly sisters satisfactorily. My solution: PRISCILLA had a Muppet-style puppet which had all of VERONICA'S lines. (See Program Notes.) It really worked and was great fun.

CHET FARQUIRK - (pen name - ALLISSA WENTWORTH) A Romance Writer. Chet couldn't make it as a serious novelist so he's been "reduced" to writing romance novels. He actually hates them. He's a tough-talking, abrasive guy. Dressed in a rumpled suit, with an unlit cigar butt dangling from his lips. Any age over 30. His books

usually feature exotic locales and lots and lots of sex and violence Chet “talks” and writes tough but he’s really a softie. Especially where Mitzi is concerned.

MITZI MOONEY - Chet’s girlfriend. Mitzi acts dumb, mostly because she is. She looks and dresses like a bimbo. She’s also very nervous. Being in the Witness Protection Program can do that to you. Age 20-30

EDITH CRUMPOWSKI - (pen name IVANA) A Romance Writer and a mousy little thing, Edith lives through the romantic fantasies she creates for her heroine, Dijon. Dressed unattractively and poorly, no makeup, her hair pulled back, etc. Edith was a prodigy - her first Dijon book was printed when she was 16. Has a secret crush on Benton Fish and made the mistake of confiding in Lucretia. She’d just die if he knew how she felt.

MARTHA CRUMPOWSKI - Edith’s mother. Overbearing and domineering. Dressed in a sensible dress, sensible shoes etc. Twenty years older than Edith and she’ll do ANYTHING to make sure Edith continues to churn out the books.

LADY DOROTHY KNOLLS OF WYNCHLEY - (pen name PORTIA ST. REGIS). A Romance Writer. A British aristocrat from the tip of her elegantly coiffed head to the cardigan around her shoulders, to the single string of pearls to her low-heeled pumps. Very ladylike and regal.. This is the image which she has carefully created and cultivated, but if the truth were known, she is actually an American - Billy Sue Barlow of Gator Junction, Arkansas. Her son, Denis, was actually the result of a liason with one of the Gator Junction males - she’s not quite sure which one. But she’d do anything to keep him from finding out. The only person she’s ever told was her psychiatrist. Which is where Lucretia used to work - as a cleaning lady - before she became a famous writer. Lady Dorothy is eighteen years older than Denis.

DENIS KNOLLS - Dorothy’s playboy son. Fancies himself to be Cary Grant. He’s always in need of cash and is constantly being rescued from various escapades - usually involving women - by his mother. Dressed in blazer with ascot, Denis can be anywhere from 15 to late 30's.

SCENE ONE - CIRCULATING

During Scene One, the characters mingle freely with the audience. While this scene is “improv”, it can be rehearsed. The actors can take turns “role playing” to the others as “audience members”. Because so much of this section emerges from a thorough knowledge of the characters, their intermingled relationships, the story line and plot, it is better to rehearse it last. The following describes, generally, what happens in Scene One. It is not vital to do every little thing as outlined. Everything integral to the plot and solving the mystery is contained in Scene Two. Scene One merely “sets the stage.” One additional note: it is important to MY FATAL VALENTINE, and, indeed, all of my mysteries, that actors be able to improvise. They cannot be shy, or reluctant to start talking to complete strangers. They must be able to initiate the interactive portions of the play. They will be the ones to introduce themselves and they shouldn’t wait to be questioned but volunteer information.

There will be five portraits on easels. The portraits are standard color author studio shots, but LUCRETIA’S picture is in color and shows her sitting at her desk, holding a purple pen.

The audience enters. Greeting them immediately is MAUDE. She will be ever-so excited to meet all these wonderful authors and that nice MR. FISH, Editor-In-Chief of Heartthrob Books. And isn’t it wonderful that they’ve picked this event to award the Best Romance of the Year Award - the coveted Loveknot Award? She’s a big LUCRETIA DEWITT fan. Of all the authors, LUCRETIA is the only one with versatility - her books are always different - not just the plot and characters, but the styles as well. She’s a genius, that’s all, and MAUDE should know - she’s read every romance novel and will quote characters, plot, etc. (See APPENDIX.) Also, if there are no “celebrities” scheduled to do interpretive readings, MAUDE will recruit five “volunteers”. If audience volunteers are used, she’ll explain that she was supposed to get (she names several VERY famous people - Oprah, Charles Grodin, Monteil, Maury). In fact, she promised Mr. Fish. But they weren’t available so will whoever-it-is step in and help her? She’ll get some basic information from them to insert into the introductions.

BENTON FISH is also greeting people and complaining about that darn

PETRY woman. This event is about as organized as a swap meet. There was supposed to be extra security. All his best-selling authors are together under one roof and anything could happen. Anyone could walk in here. He'll just have to rely on his own people, or rather, one person, JANE FORTHRIGHT. He pursues JANE constantly, under the guise of asking about security, but really because he is IN LOVE. He also tries to avoid the advances of EDITH. He knows who's won the Loveknot, but isn't talking.

JANE FORTHRIGHT is all business. She will seem to be everywhere at once, checking tickets, questioning people, having women open purses, etc. She will evade BENTON with "I'm working here, Fish. I've got a job to do." She's been entrusted with the envelope containing the name of the Award Winner. Each author, at some point, will attempt to get it from her.

LUCRETIA is there, in her glory. She gushes over everyone she meets and gives MANY (unsolicited) autographs. These are written in purple ink and say "Best wishes, Lucretia DeWitt" She never stops nagging MAYNARD GLICK to get her a drink, stand up straight, etc. "I'm a somebody, Maynard. The least you can do is act like a Mr. Somebody." She complains about him with members of the audience. Hard to believe he's with the FBI, isn't it? He works in the Witness Relocation Program. Which is such a coincidence - one of his "alumni" is here tonight. When she sees MITZI and CHET, she might ask if they're going to get married. In which case, MITZI will have to change her name again. When LUCRETIA sees the EMBERLY sisters, she'll ask when she can come to tea again. It was so lovely the last time, and oh, have they written any more of those other books. Not the romances, the other ones. When she bumps into EDITH she'll encourage her to "Just speak up and tell Benton how you feel." EDITH will be aghast, "What are you talking about? You promised you wouldn't tell? That's why I. . . He must never know, never!" LUCRETIA will spot LADY DOROTHY from across the room. She'll urge everyone to ask her about her poor, late, husband and her life as a British aristocrat. She'll tell everyone how she first met LADY DOROTHY. She was a patient of Dr. Ramon - a psychiatrist. She yells to LADY DOROTHY not to be embarrassed. There's nothing to be ashamed about - going to a shrink. Heck, she was his cleaning lady for years and she wasn't ashamed of it.

The entire time, LUCRETIA uses less than perfect English. And always, she expresses confidence that she will win the Loveknot. Because “my books are the bestest. Everybody says so.”

MAYNARD will encounter MITZI, whom he accidentally calls “GINA”. CHET will be furious, “Just what sort of FBI man are you, anyway? Don’t you know how to keep your big mouth shut?” Isn’t it bad enough that he blabbed about MITZI to that wife of his?” MAYNARD will tell everyone how surprised he is at HATTIE (LUCRETIA’S) success. He didn’t know she could write like that. The only other job she ever had was as a cleaning lady at a psychiatrist’s office. And she writes so fast. Why, he’s never actually seen her writing. Of course, he’s gone a lot, relocating witnesses, and maybe she doesn’t want to take away from their time together. It would be ok with him if she did. He sincerely hopes she wins the Award because, otherwise, she’ll make his life a living hell. Not that it isn’t now.

PRISCILLA and VERONICA will circulate together. They will be very sweet to everyone and instigate conversations centering on the idea that romance novels should leave something up to the imagination. There’s just too much sex on TV and at the movies. It shouldn’t be in books. That’s why their fans love them and that’s why they deserve to win the Award. Crudity should not be rewarded. They warn everyone not to ever invite that LUCRETIA to tea. She uses the poorest grammar and she’s a . . . , well, there’s no other word for it - a snoop. She went through some papers of theirs and . . . she’s just not a lady, that’s all.

CHET is overly protective of MITZI. He thinks this whole thing, as well as romance novels themselves are stupid. He describes what he writes as “garbage” and says he’s only doing it for the money. But even his garbage is better than the drivel the others write. He says he doesn’t give a damn about the Loveknot Award, but fully intends to win it. Especially after he learns there’s a cash award of \$50,000 that goes with it. LUCRETIA is surprised to hear that he thinks his books are trash. Why, she can think of at least ONE that, personally, she thinks absolutely perfect.

MITZI is very nervous and sticks closely to CHET. She seems to be on the look out for someone. She’ll ask audience members if they saw any

long dark cars in the parking lot or a guy with a gold tooth. He's tall, dark, and mean-looking and has a suspicious bulge under his arm. He answers to the name of Lenny The Tooth.

EDITH is trailing after BENTON like a love-sick puppy. If he notices her at all, he just shrugs and moves on. She asks everyone if they think he isn't the dreamiest. He's been the inspiration behind all the heroes in her books. She talks about the heroine in all her books - Dijon. She thinks because Dijon is a continuing character that she deserves the Romance Award. It takes real talent to create and craft an entire life. It's obvious that EDITH sees herself as Dijon and BENTON as all the different men who have ravished her.

MARTHA takes over any group she meets. She is busily campaigning for EDITH to win the Loveknot Award. She was a prodigy, after all. They even named some computer software after her - y'know - Prodigy. Been writin' since she could reach the keyboard. She urges everyone to tell BENTON that Edith's books are the best. She knows the facts and figures and what the Award can mean to book sales. MARTHA may look like a mother but she's an agent underneath. She also is the most persistent with JANE. She wants to know who won the Award and she wants to know now. She may encourage EDITH in her pursuit of BENTON. It can't hurt, it might help.

LADY DOROTHY is being too-too gracious to everyone. She asks everyone to forgive the "rougner" elements there. She is quite British, except for a twang that sometimes creeps into her voice. She'll be at a loss when asked about her British life and late husband and her answers will be halting and vague. (And many will ask - LUCRETIA told them to.) She'll refer to her late husband, Lord Basil Knolls, but then immediately stop - it's too painful to talk about him. She is, of course, convinced that she will win the Award. After all, romance novels are intrinsically British and she's the only British author in contention. She also introduces DENIS to everyone. He's her dear, darling son - but don't cash any checks for him. And she reminds him that they won't have time to shop this trip. She doesn't always notice, at first, when he slips away - usually to "hit on" some "chicks." When she does notice, she goes into action, soliciting the aid of audience members. This includes calling loudly for him, etc.

DENIS obviously worships his mother. That doesn't, however, prevent him from displaying the playboy characteristics that have gotten him in trouble. He tries to make dates with a number of women, married and not. He also tries to get people to cash his check. He tells LUCRETIA that she's a rotten author and that ALL her books are trash, compared to his mother's. She finds this hilarious - ALL her books? Isn't at least ONE of them worthy? DENIS is especially sure that his mother will be given the Award - when he hears about the \$50,000 cash prize.

SCENE TWO - THE PLAY

PLEASE NOTE: The staging described within the script is what we used at our original production and locale.

The audience enters and is seated. There are five seats, *audience left*, with "Reserved" signs. These are for MAUDE, MAYNARD, MITZI, MARTHA (who will, nonetheless go onstage with EDITH), and DENIS (who will try to sit next to MITZI.). There will be steps leading onstage, also *audience left*. JANE will take up her "post" against the wall, far *stage left*. *Stage right* are six chairs for LUCRETIA, PRISCILLA, VERONICA, CHET, EDITH AND DOROTHY. The curtain will be open in the *center*, for entrances and exits. The *center stage area and stage right* will be used for the readings and specialty acts. Pre-show music is heard. JANE comes onstage and takes her position. MAUDE will enter from the center split, after we see her fumbling behind the curtain, looking for the opening. Lights down, she is hit by a single spot.

MAUDE: (*emerging and then being taken aback, for a second to find herself onstage in the spot*) Ooooh. . . oh, dear. Um, hello. . . (*She remembers where she is.*) OH. Good evening and welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to the Loveknot Awards, sponsored tonight Hearthrob Books and FARN. That is - Fans of Romance Novels. I am Maude Petry, the President of FARN, and I am just trembling with excitement. I am. I am simply all a-twitter. But you're not here to see me, are you? Let me bring out our nominated authors. Mr. Chet Farquirk, who, of course, writes as Alyssa Wentworth. (*CHET enters, salutes the audience, sits in the chair far stage right.*) Lady Dorothy Knolls of Wynchley. (*LADY DOROTHY enters, nodding and doing the "royal wave". She starts to sit next to CHET but then carefully moves one seat away.*) The Emberly Sisters, Priscilla and Veronica, who have both told me to call them Prissy and Ronnie. I just may die. (*The EMBERLY sisters enter, and give*

identical little waves to the audience. They sit to LADY DOROTHY's left.) The versatile and just ever-changing Lucretia Dewitt. (*LUCRETIA makes a very grand audience, bowing and blowing kisses, even after the applause has died. She sits in the furthest stage left chair.*) And, finally, our child prodigy romance writer, the very sweet and young, Edith Crumpowski. (*MARTHA enters, gives the audience a wave and then goes and sits next to CHET. MAUDE is flummoxed to see her.*) Uh, oh dear. This is Edith's mother, Martha. Where is the precious Ivana, Mrs. Crumpowski.

MARTHA: She'll be along. (*she yells*) EDITH! Get out here.

(EDITH enters shyly and MAUDE gives her an encouraging hug. She goes to where MARTHA is sitting and obviously tries to explain that the chair is for her. But MARTHA just as obviously shows her intention of staying on the stage. Finally, EDITH concedes and stands behind her.

MAUDE: And, finally, the man who makes it all possible. The Editor-in-Chief at Heartthrob Books - Mr. Benton Fish!! (*BENTON enters through the split in the curtain*). Oh, thank you so much, Mr. Fish, for choosing our little town for this prestigious ceremony. Now let's see. Is everyone here? I am just speechless in the company of these wonderful, talented authors. I really am just speechless. Speechless.

CHET: Why doncha prove it, honey, and move it along.

LADY DOROTHY: Oh, really, Chet, do hush up.

BENTON: Hah, hah. Our Chet is such a kidder. Thank you, Mrs. Petrie, for organizing our awards ceremony. It's really good to be here in

MAUDE: (*Immediately lost in her reverie*). I was fifteen when I read my first romance novel. It was called Wings of Passion by Alethea Fullgood and it was all about this beautiful and spirited young heiress, Sydney, who was escaping from her sardonic brother -in-law, the dark and brooding Lord Darcy. . .

PRISCILLA: I read that one too. Very. . .passionate.

VERONICA: Yes, a little too passionate to our liking.

LUCRETIA: Hey, I thought this was supposed to be about our books. .

BENTON: Yes, our books. Heartthrob books. And we are happy to. .

MAUDE: (*Interrupting him.*) Oh, goodness, you are right. I am sorry, but you see, you have no idea how much your books mean to me. Everything- that's what they mean to me. I just live through the adventures of Malva, and Chartreuse, and Sierra, and Lancome. Oh, and Miss Crumpowski, I adore the Dijon books.

MARTHA: Thank you.

CHET: I always thought Dijon was a mustard. You named your chick after a mustard? Who was the hero? Ketchup? After he ravished her did she get pregnant with little Pickles? Ha-ha. Where do you guys come up with some of that crap? Dijon. Geez.

BENTON: Now, Chet, heh-heh. Let's not get started, okay? That Chet. A kidder. A real kidder.

EDITH: (*Indignantly*) Mr. Farquirk! Dijon is a section of France. My Dijon was born in that area and, although she is actually the daughter of French nobility, she was kidnapped at birth by the evil Count Le Mans and brought up as a peasant. .

CHET: Geez, I'm sorry I asked.

MAUDE: Anyway, tonight we will honor each of you and hear selected readings from the nominated books before the winner of the Loveknot is announced. (*BENTON clears his throat.*) Oh, dearie me. I guess I was doing your. . .

BENTON: Thank you again, Mrs. Petrie. I can take it from here. (*Pause*) Really. Thank you. (*He is obviously waiting for her to exit. She doesn't. He may give her a little gesture indicating "offstage".*)

MAUDE: (*Starting to exit, then turning back.*) Oh, I forgot. In honor of your appearance here tonight, Mr. Fish, and all of your wonderful writers, we've got some wonderful entertainment that we'll kind of "sprinkle" throughout the evening.

BENTON: Sprinkle? Oh, that'll be nice, Mrs. Petrie. We're looking forward to it. But now, if I may, I'd like to . .

MAUDE: Oh, yes, of course, you must! And, Mr. Fish, you just call me Maude. Everybody does. I'll just go down there and sit and when it's time for my acts I'll just give a yoo-hoo, okay? Right there.. I'll be right there with Lucretia's husband, Mr. Glick and . . . well, um. . . I'll be right

down there.

BENTON: Thank you again, Mrs. Petrie.

MAUDE: Tsk, tsk, tsk.

BENTON: Sorry...Maude.

CHET: If ya don't mind, Maudie, could ya sit with my Mitzi? Lady Dorothy's kid is hangin' on her like Dijon on a hot dog.

LADY DOROTHY: If you are intimating, Mr. Farquirk, that my son, Denis, is propositioning your little "friend" I will have you know that he is a gentleman and a product of the very best public schools in Britain and (*she looks into audience.*) Denis!! Stop that! You don't know where she's been.

CHET: She's been with me, Lady Doo-Doo.

LADY DOROTHY: Oh, like that's supposed to make me feel better. Denis, I mean it. Hands to yourself! This minute!

BENTON: (*clearing his throat*) Please!! May we begin. The first Loveknot nominee is Lady Dorothy Knolls of Wynchley. Lady Dorothy's books have always been on the top ten lists of every fan of the romance novel. Books, such as Mistress of Canary Manor, Love's Forgotten Passion, and Lord of the Marsh have made her a household name.

LUCRETIA: Particularly in Arkansas. HA!

VERONICA: Oh, do be quiet, Lucretia.

BENTON: (*looking at her before continuing.*) But at Heartthrob Books, we think her latest book may be her very best. Lady Dorothy, would you tell us a little bit about how you came to write The Yancys of Yorkshire?

LADY DOROTHY: I'd be happy to. But, first, may I tell all of you Yanks - that's what we call you - Yanks - well, it is just positively jolly to be here? The people in the States have always been so very welcoming. Now, about "Yancy" - actually, the inspiration for that story came about in a most interesting way. I was on the train with my son, Denis - the next Lord Knolls of Wynchley (*she gives him a little wave.*) - on holiday - or "the hols" as we call them. The weather was beastly - cold, rainy and foggy - thank God we'd remembered the bumbershoot, ha-ha. I

happened to look out the window as we crossed the moors and there, high on a bluff, I saw the most remarkable thing - a magnificent ruin of a home. Now that alone is not peculiar - England is absolutely riddled with ruined manor houses. But parked outside this burnt shell was a late model Bentley. "How queer," I thought, "What would bring someone - especially someone of obvious substance - to a wreck of a house - on such a day?" And I decided only one thing - remembrance. Remembrance of a lost love. And from there "Yancy" was born.

EDITH: It's a wonderful book, Lady Dorothy. I wept when I read it.

PRISCILLA: So did I. So romantic. Without descending to sleaze.

VERONICA: We hate sleaze.

PRISCILLA: That's right. Hate it. HATEITHATEITHATEIT!!!

BENTON: *(Interrupting her tirade against "sleaze."* And at Heartthrob books we've taken a strong stand against sleaze. We sell love, and romance and. . .

CHET: Oh, yeah, me too. I hate sleaze. Sleaze makes me wanna upchuck, y'know.

LUCRETIA: It's a nice effort, Lady Do. *(Pronounced "doe".)* It won't win the Loveknot, HA - but it's ain't a bad book.

LADY DOROTHY: *(losing the British accent in favor of a "twang" - she's furious.)* What the heck you mean it ain't a bad book? Why, you no talent. . .*(a shouting match ensues.)*

BENTON: Ladies! Ladies! Ladies!! Remember - you're all in the Heartthrob family and. . .*(He gets out his handkerchief. . .he knows he's starting to lose control of the situation.)*

LUCRETIA: Oh, dear, Lady "Do" - what would Dr. Ramon say? You'd better schedule a nice, long session on the couch with him, HA!

MARTHA: A nice, session on the couch. OOOh, sounds like my high school years.

LADY DOROTHY: How'd you like a nice long session with my fist, Lucretia! *(Notices audience suddenly.)* Oh, dear, I am sorry. I forget how dear Lucretia loves to tease. Another little American custom.

Teasing. Do go on, Mr. Fish.

BENTON: I'm trying, I'm trying. Here to read a selection from the latest Lady Dorothy Knolls novel, written under her pen name, Portia St. Regis, is . . .is who, Mrs. . .Maud?

MAUDE: *(from the audience)* What. . .OH, our first reader is *(she has a stack of index cards which she begins shuffling through)* Well, the first one, from the Portia St.Regis book, oh, I'm sorry, the Lady Dorothy book.

LUCRETIA: That's alright, Maude dear. Her ladyship answers to a lot of names. HA!

CHET: Yeah, well I can think of a few names for you, too, sweetheart.

VERONICA: But not here, Mr. Farquirk, not here.

PRISCILLA: Later.

VERONICA: Yes, we'd love to hear your other names for her later, Chet.

BENTON: *(Stage whisper.)* Maude. Help me out here.

MAUDE: *(Finding the correct card and holding it aloft triumphantly.)* The first reading will be performed by a dear, dear friend of mine. . *(she introduces the local celebrity, or volunteer, whose "biography" can be grandly inflated.)*

Reader #1 enters from the split curtain with a stool and places it center stage. The lights dim. The reader is illuminated by a single spot.

READER #1: From The Yancys of Yorkshire by Portia St. Regis. *(Underscoring music, suitable to the reading, is heard. It continues and then gets softer. The reading begins.)*

Stephanie blinked her clear turquoise eyes in an attempt to clear the mist from them as she scanned the moors desperately. As far as she could see, the wind rippled the sea of heather. Her heart pounded madly as she wondered if he would keep his promise and deliver the brooch and letter. The black steed, lucifer, pawed the ground impatiently and whinnied as her long skirt whipped his huge flanks. she stroked his glossy neck and spoke to him soothingly. The moon was rising and stephanie knew she

must leave soon as her presence would be missed at evensong. She couldn't face the questions and searching glances at the convent - not again. Her throat tightened with fear at the thought of mother mary corelle's last threat. Oh, she was a fool - to trust a yancy! But just as she turned lucifer's head to go back, ready to admit defeat, through the purple light of twilight she saw him. Riding madly across the moor, his golden hair streaming behind him and his clothes all but torn from him by the galing wind, brad yancy galloped as if the devil were at his heels. Reaching stephanie, he flung himself to the ground, and in a quick, catlike movement, took the horse's reins and pulled stephanie from the saddle. "I have something for you, sister," he breathed, before tearing the veil from her head and crushing her body to his. (*Applause*)

BENTON: Thank you, (*name*). The Yancys of Yorkshire by Portia St. Regis. Our next nominated author is . . .

MAUDE: Oh, Mr. Fish. Excuse me for interrupting, but I thought we might showcase some of our entertainment now. (*Musically*) Time to sprinkle.

BENTON: (*Also musically*) Sprinkle? (*Straightforward again*) that's right. Would you like to introduce them, Maud?

(*MAUDE does. They perform. Following the applause.*)

BENTON: (*Joining the applause.*) That was wonderful. Thank you. And now, if I may, I'd like to put the spotlight on another wonderful Heartthrob writer. Or, rather, writers. Priscilla and Veronica Emberly first enchanted us with their Victorian romances in The Lace and the Crown. Since then, these lovely sisters have collaborated on ten romance novels, the latest of which is Love's Sweet Ransom which is a nominee for Best Romance of the Year.

LUCRETIA: Too bad your other books can't be nominated, girls. HA!

(*PRISCILLA and VERONICA glare at her.*)

BENTON: Um, ladies. The Misses Emberly. What served as the inspiration for Love's Sweet Ransom?

PRISCILLA: Well, actually we're a little embarrassed to admit it. . .but,

well, the idea was really Veronica's. She had gone shopping for some new doilies and on her way out of the store. . .

VERONICA: I was behind this lovely young lady who dropped her glove. I picked it up, came home and told Priscilla. We both decided it could make a lovely theme for a book.

EDITH: Isn't it funny how little incidents like that can just set your ideas racing? What did the lady say when you returned it?

VERONICA: Returned it? (*VERONICA and PRISCILLA look at each other, puzzled.*)

PRISCILLA: What do you mean? We didn't return it. We added it to our collection.

LADY DOROTHY: What collection? Never mind, I don't want to know.

BENTON: (*continuing*) And here, with a selected reading from the latest Emberly romance is. . oh, oh, oh. . . Who, Maud?

MAUDE: (*Jumping up.*) I've got it!! Right here in my hot, little hand. It's (*she introduces celebrity reader OR volunteer.*)

Reader #2 enters from the split curtain with a stool and places it center stage. The lights dim. The reader is illuminated by a single spot.

READER #2: From Love's Sweet Ransom by Priscilla and Veronica Emberly. (*Musical underscoring is heard, suitable to the reading. It gets even softer and the reading begins.*)

The Duke of Fenwick threw down the letter contemptuously. "The devil take him!" he thundered just as the Duchess entered the room, leaning heavily on her silver-headed cane. "Ransom!" she exclaimed, "Your language." "I'm sorry, Mother, it's that damn whippet, Cornwall. He has the gall to write to Chantal without securing my permission." "Oh, son," murmured the Duchess, "You know how high-spirited the girl is." Just then the girl in question burst into the room. "Your Lordship," Chantal said, "Bentley informs me that I received a letter in today's post. I would like it, please." Imperiously, she held out her kid-gloved hand. The Duchess limped to the door, "I think it best if I leave you with your ward, Ransom. I shall be in my salon." As soon as

the door closed behind her, Chantal whirled to the Duke, her copper hair flying free from it's pins and her emerald eyes blazing! "How dare you!" she hissed. "That letter was for my eyes only." "How dare !!!" stormed the Duke, his face darkening and his eyes like live coals. "How dare you disgrace this family with a scandal!" Chantal ripped off her gloves and flung them to the ground. "I never asked to be in this family! I never asked to have you for a guardian! And I'll run away! Just see if I don't!" With that she burst into tears and ran sobbing from the room, slamming the door behind her. Ransom started after her, paused, then leaned his tall frame to pick up her gloves. Silently and reverently, he sniffed them, before pressing his lips to them and nibbling gently on the fingertips.

BENTON: *(Joining in the applause.)* Thank you, _____.
Next we have. . .*(We here loud sobbing from MAUDE.)* Maude, dear, are you all right?

MAUDE: *(On her feet and applauding, in tears, very moved.)* Brilliant! Oh, Mr. Fish! Benton! I need a moment to compose myself before we hear a word more.. May we have some more of our entertainment?

BENTON: Of course, Maude. You'll be okay?

(Speechless, MAUDE silently waves that she is okay. But she hands BENTON the card so he can introduce the next act.)

BENTON: You want me to sprinkle? *(MAUD nods wordlessly. He introduces them. They perform. Following the applause...)*

BENTON: Are you composed now, Maude? May I go on to the next. .

MAUDE: I'm sorry about that. It's just that particular selection moves me so. I really enjoyed Love's Sweet Ransom. Oh Miss Emberly. And, Miss Emberly.

VERONICA: Ronnie.

PRISCILLA: Prissy.

BENTON: Ronnie and Prissy. Sounds like a . . .never mind. Thank you for Love's Sweet Ransom. NOW. . .moving right along.

EDITH: (*Inerrupting*) I loved the part where Chantal is drugged and kidnapped and ravished by the Irish revolutionaries. .

LADY DOROTHY: Sssh. We don't want to give anything away to our friends who haven't read the book.

CHET: What? You're kidding right? All their books are strictly formula. Broad falls in love, broad runs away, broad gets caught, broad in disguise, broad in danger, broad rescued by the guy she loved in the first place. And all HE gets for his trouble is a couple of lousy kisses. Or, he gets to chew on her glove. We got a name for dames who tease like that. One of my guys woulda given her what-for. Lemme tell you, that Chantal was beggin' for it.

VERONICA: How dare you speak of our Chantal like that!!

PRISCILLA: Just because our heroines don't wallow in the mud like some characters we could mention.

CHET: Hey, I only had one mud scene - and it was perfectly valid. And, for your information, it wasn't mud - it was tar.

MARTHA: Gotta tell you, Chet, I loved it. Edith's books are ART but yours really get to me, you know. Lift my arches. So - this tar book - that your latest?

BENTON: (*Attempting again to get control of the event.*) Yes, it is. The Pit of Passion, set at the LaBrea Tar Pits, is the latest in a long list of best-selling novels from the pen of Chet Farquirk, writing as Alissa Wentworth. . .

VERONICA: I don't know why you bother with a woman's nom de plume, Chet. Anyone with a scrap of taste would know those disgusting books have to be written by a man. Would a woman write a male character named Ram?

PRISCILLA: Oh and remember that awful gaucho named Breech.

MARTHA: I loved Breech. Almost lost my dentures reading the part on the pampas. And the llamas. . .who'dda think those animals could. . .

BENTON: (*attempting to continue*) . .Okay, everyone. Let's get something straight. I am the Editor. I am in charge. I am. . .(*Everyone is sitting angelically. BENTON makes a concerted effort.*) I am. . . I am.

. *(the congenial host is back)* I am going to continue. Chet Farquirk, writing as Alissa Wentworth, proves, once and for all, that romance novels can have spice as well as sugar. And though I have a feeling I'm going to regret asking this - tell us, Chet, what inspired The Pit of Passion?

CHET: I was there. At the Tar Pits. With my little squeeze, Mitzi. *(He waves to her.)* Hi, ya, Mitzi, baby. Anyways, we were. . .we were. . .ah, c'mon, you know what we were doin'. . .

EDITH: Right there? In the Tar Pits??

LADY DOROTHY: How positively revolting. It's a wonder you weren't arrested.

CHET: Not IN the Tar Pits. Geez, lady, whatdya think I am? We were in the car. Overlooking the Tar Pits. *(To LADY DOROTHY)* Hey, you may get inspired by moors and big houses and all that crap, but nothin' gets my creative juices flowing like the backseat of a '93 Cutlass.

MARTHA: Is anybody else warm?

LUCRETIA: I read it, you know, Chet. And I have to be honest. The Pit of Passion was. . .well, the pits. HA! Don't save a space on your mantel for the Loveknot, Chet, ol' boy.

CHET: Y'know, Lucretia, one of these days someone is going to close that big mouth of yours.

LUCRETIA: OOH. I am so frightened, Chet. Not as much as Mitzi will be - IF. . .HA! Well, never mind. . .

BENTON: Boys and girls. . .Remember my ulcer. Maude, oh, Maude, do you have our reader?

MAUDE: Oh, yes, Mr. Fish. It's *(she introduces celebrity reader OR volunteer.)*

Reader #3 enters from the split curtain with a stool and places it center stage. The lights dim. The reader is illuminated by a single spot.

READER #3: From The Pit of Passion by Alissa Wentworth. *(Musical underscoring is heard, appropriate to the reading. It gets softer and the reading begins.)*

Daphne opened her eyes and saw the evil face of Captain Ventura leering down at her. She was naked, trussed and helpless with the smell of the bubbling tar filling her aristocratic nostrils. "Well, *Senorita*," he sneered, "We meet again. We will see just how brave you are after a dip in the tar. It is like the hot tub where we met, is it not? Only perhaps a little hotter. And thicker. My *compadres*, they tell me you like it that way. We will see, eh, little one?" With his one arm he reached down to push her over the edge. Suddenly, from behind the scrub of trees, there was a burst of gunfire as Sheath rushed forward, his twin Berettas piling round after round into Ventura's hunchbacked shape. With a scream, the Captain's chest exploded into brilliant flashes of scarlet and he toppled backwards and disappeared into the pit. Sheath rushed to Daphne, and caught her in his muscled arms. The stench of the tar and blood was mingled with the smell of his sweat and desire. "Oh, Sheath," she cried, "He was going to. . . He was just about to. . .". "Hush, hush, little one. You are safe with me now and I will take you home. But first. . ." She arched her back to meet him as with leatherclad hand he scooped hot tar from the pit.

MARTHA: (*Breathing heavily*) I gotta get a copy of that book.

EDITH: Calm down, Mother. Have you got your pills?

MAUDE: Mr. Fish, yoo-hoo, Mr. Fish?

BENTON: Let me guess, Maude, sprinkle?

MAUDE: Oh, yes! Let's! (*MAUDE introduces the next act. They perform. Following the applause. . .*)

BENTON: (*Joining the applause.*) Thank you! That was super! Next on my agenda is another contender for the Loveknot Award. She's our little prodigy, Edith Crumpowski, who published her first book when she was only sixteen. Under her pen name, Ivana, Edith Crumpowski introduced the literary world to a romantic heroine of beauty, courage, and spirit. I speak, of course, of the continuing character in Ivana's books - Dijon.

CHET: And her brother, Grey Poupon. (*He leads the laughter that follows.*)

BENTON: (*Studiously ignoring him.*) Millions of romance fans have thrilled to the adventures of Dijon and her ongoing search for her one, true, love. . .

CHET: Horseradish. (*More laughter.*)

BENTON: Now, Farquirk, that's about enough. Pick on someone your own size.

LUCRETIA: Edith, dear, he defended you! Could it be - HA - true love!! (*EDITH reacts in horror.*)

BENTON: As I was saying, millions of romance fans have thrilled to the adventures of Dijon and her ongoing search for her one, true, love - Count Pellagro - Eduardo. What inspired your latest book, Edith?

EDITH: Well, I don't know exactly. Well, yes I do. It was something that. . . somebody said. Just kind of in passing. It's set in Russia, you know. I have this friend. Well, he's a very special friend. (*It is obvious from the way she looks at him during this, that she is referring to BENTON.*) And he started talking about how much he admired Lenin and that got me thinking about Dr. Zhivago and all and I just started imagining my. . . my friend in Russia and I even thought of going there for a while and. .

BENTON: Whoa, whoa! Just wait a minute. This sounds very familiar.

LUCRETIA: Maybe you have Dijon vu. HA!

BENTON: Wait a minute. Me. That was me. At the Publisher Clearinghouse Party. But I wasn't talking to you, Edith. I was talking to Ed McMahon. And I wasn't talking about Lenin. I was talking about Lennon. (*He pronounces them exactly the same.*) John Lennon. I admired John Lennon. Not the Russian Lenin. The Russian Lenin was a cruel tyrant who ruled with a whip and an iron fist.

CHET: You're starting to talk like one of our books, Fish.

EDITH: There's more than one Lenin?

ALL: Uh-huh.

EDITH: And the Russian one was a bad man?

ALL: Uh-huh.

EDITH: A REAL bad man.

ALL: OH, YEAH.

EDITH: But in my book he's the one who saves the orphans and. . .oh, dear. . .

LADY DOROTHY: Research, darling, research.

MARTHA: It doesn't matter. The book is super anyway. Sales are already going through the roof. Lenin Schmenin. Who cares? Come on, Fish, let's hear from Edith's book.

BENTON: That's a dandy idea, Mrs. Crumpowski.

EDITH: Well, I could just die.

MAUDE: And here to read the selection is *(She introduces the celebrity or the volunteer.)*

Reader #4 enters from the split curtain with a stool and places it center stage. The lights dim. The reader is illuminated by a single spot

READER #4: From Dijon in Danger by Ivana. *(Musical underscoring, appropriate to the reading, is heard. It gets softer and the reading begins.)*

With trembling hands and fear in her heart, Dijon's sleigh raced through the streets of wind torn Moscow and into the countryside. She whipped the horses faster and faster, heedless of the chilling cold that tore through her fur cloak and thin silk nightdress. Her mind was a jumble of thoughts. What if Yuri had lied? What if Maruschka had been mistaken? What if the Prince noticed the uneaten mint on her pillow? She must reach the hunting lodge and the safety of Pellagro's arms. Just the thought of Eduardo made her body tingle with a heat that grew from her very center. She closed her eyes and imagined his smooth head, his smouldering eyes, his soft, sensuous mouth, and his broad chest, crisscrossed with the scars of a dozen duels. She arrived at the rustic lodge, breathless and chilled. The golden glow from within told her that someone was there. Suddenly timid, Dijon raised her tiny frozen hand to knock. The door opened and there

he was. Wordlessly, he swept her into his arms and carried her effortlessly into the room. The sudden heat and brightness made Dijon's head swim and her large lavender eyes filled with tears. It was her love, her Pellagro. The last thought she had before she sank into unconsciousness was "Eduardo. My love. Or is it? And if it is him, why is he dressed like a woman?"

(There is applause and a then a moment of stunned silence as the Authors look uncomfortably at each other and then start to snicker.)

CHET: He's WHAT! You've got a hero that's a cross-dresser? Are you nuts, Crumpowski?

PRISCILLA: You have to read the whole book, Mr. Farquirk.

VERONICA: Yes, the whole book.

EDITH: That really isn't a very good selection. Kinda gives a wrong impression of the book.

LUCRETIA: Not to mention a wrong impression of ol' Eduardo. HA! Dear Edith, I think the transvestite section may cost you the Loveknot.

MARTHA: There is no transvestite section in Dijon in Danger! Edith, I warned you about using Eduardo's evil twin again. You killed him off in Double Dijon. Didn't I tell you that no one would believe that Pasqual could have survived the volcano? But, then, I'm only your mother. What do I know?

VERONICA: If it's any consolation, Edith, dear, I believed it. But then, I believe in love and romance.

CHET: Yeah, so do I. As long as it doesn't get mixed up with sex.

LADY DOROTHY: I daresay with you it never does.

EDITH: *(Bursting into tears)* Oh, stop it, all of you. Don't say anymore! *(Everyone starts talking at once.)*

BENTON: Does anyone know just exactly when I lost control of this event? Maude, I'm yoo-hooing. Way past time to sprinkle.

MAUDE: Yes, I think you're right. *(She introduces the musical act, they*

perform. Applause.)

BENTON: *(Also applauding.)* Thank you, so much _____. Our final Loveknot nominee is Hattie Glick, known to her thousands of romance fans as Lucretia DeWitt. Lucretia's own story reads like one of her books. Just five years ago, she was a simple cleaning woman, toiling away in a medical building. A simple woman with a dream and stories to tell. Now she is the incomparable Lucretia DeWitt. With three very different, very diverse books behind her, we look forward eagerly to the next. Passage to Savannah is Lucretia's fourth novel and her newest. What inspired this tale of Southern intrigue and forbidden love, Lucretia?

LUCRETIA: What?

BENTON: Was there anything that sparked your imagination? For example, the character of Bliss - was she based on someone you knew?

LUCRETIA: *(Obviously at a loss.)* It was. . .it was. Look, Fish, it's tough for me to talk about all that inspiration stuff. It just came to me, okay? Maybe it was something I ate. HA! Look, these people don't care. Just read it and then give me my award so Glick and I can go home. He's gonna be snoring down there in a minute. That's the story of my life. HA! Glick. Glick. GLICK, wake up!

GLICK: *(Waking up)* Huh, huh, what?

LUCRETIA: Glick. Here, make yourself useful. Hold my jacket. It's hot as hell under these lights. *(She removes her jacket, folds it and hands it to him. From here on she is careful to NEVER face upstage as her blouse has a bullet "wound" and blood on the back.)*

BENTON: Okay, okay, sure. *(He's given up.)* Moving right along. Maude?

MAUDE: Our next reader is *(She introduces the celebrity reader or the volunteer.)*

Reader #5 enters from the split curtain with a stool and places it center stage. The lights dim. The reader is illuminated by a single spot.

READER #5: Passage to Savannah by Lucretia DeWitt. *(Musical underscoring is heard. It gets softer and the reading begins.)*

The room grew quiet as Bliss entered, her crinolines spreading around her like a luminescent halo. The crowd parted and it grew silent as she walked proudly through the ballroom, her head held high and tears stinging her large doe-like eyes. Delaney Beaumont stepped forward and grabbed Bliss's arm, her crimson talons sinking into the delicate white skin. "And just what do you think you're doin' here, Bliss? This ball's for decent folks. Not your kind." "I invited Bliss" a deep voice said behind her. It was Chance. "I trust that meets with your approval, Miss Beaumont." Delaney tossed her head and sniffed before she turned on her heels and walked away. Chance placed his large hand on Bliss's tiny waist and his black eyes burned into hers. He felt the familiar stirring in his loins as he whispered, "I believe this is our dance, Miss Bliss." Tingling from his touch, Bliss stammered, "But, Chance, there isn't any music." "I know that" said Chance, "I was just testing you. Bitch."

BENTON: (*Joining the applause.*) Thank you, thank you (*reader's name.*) And, finally, FINALLY, thank God, that concludes selected readings from the five nominated books. Yes, romance fans, the big moment has arrived. The Loveknot Award is given every year to a book that represents the very best that Heartthrob books has to offer. Past recipients of the award include Weekend in Limbo, Calypso Nights and Hauling Ashes. Tonight's winner will receive, in addition to the award, a cash prize of \$50,000. The judging panel for the Loveknot includes past winners and fan club representatives. And this year's celebrity judges include Dr. Joyce Brothers, Dionne Warwick, and the incomparable Nipsy Russell. (*Everyone "oohs" and "ahhs" and ad-libs. "I wish I were psychic." "I love that Nipsy."*). Their decision is in an envelope being held, at this moment, by my head of Security, Ms. Jane Forthright. Ms. Forthright, may I have the envelope, please.

(*JANE hands the sealed envelope to BENTON.*)

BENTON: Thank you, Jane. And may I say that you are looking lovely tonight. Noone fills out a security guard uniform quite like you.

JANE: I'm on duty, Fish. Can the chatter. (*She returns to her post and stance.*)

BENTON: I can't help it, Jane. How much longer are you going to keep putting me off. I'm crazy about you, you know. . . (*He "notices" the*

audience.) Oh. Sorry. Ladies and gentlemen. The moment we've been waiting for. (*A drumroll is heard.*) The 1997 Loveknot Award for the Romance Novel of the Year goes to. . . (*there is great anticipation from the writers and their associates in the audience.*). . . PASSAGE TO SAVANNAH BY HATTIE GLICK, WRITING AS LUCRETIA DEWITT!!

There is **immediate** reaction to the announcement. *GLICK and MAUDE come on stage to congratulate LUCRETIA. MITZI and DENIS come on stage to join the general protest and uproar. Clearly, the others are not pleased. All begin to chant.*

ALL: WE WANT A RECOUNT! WE WANT A RECOUNT! WE WANT A RECOUNT!

A riot appears imminent. This ends immediately when JANE fires her gun into the air. There is shocked silence as all look to her.

JANE: Now, hold it right there, all of you. I mean it! HOLD IT!! We aren't going to have this. Fish?

BENTON: (*Equally indignant.*) That's right! WE AREN'T GOING TO HAVE THIS!! No more Mr. Nice Fish. Jane's right. Talk about your poor sports. (*The group looks ashamed.*) Acting like spoiled children. (*The group looks even more ashamed, heads hung.*) In front of your fans. (*The group is most ashamed.*) HeartthRob is disappointed in all of you! Leave this stage immediately!! Except you, Lucretia. You can make your acceptance speech. All of you. I mean it! Go, go, go. (*To GLICK who is remaining.*) You too, Glick.

GLICK: But I'm her husband. . .

LUCRETIA: This is my moment, Glick. HA! Get off the stage.

(They exit reluctantly through the center split in the curtain. JANE follows.)

MAUDE: Oh, dear. Oh, dear. They are so angry.

BENTON: It's all right, Maude. They'll get over it. (*Wiping his forehead*) So, Lucretia. Congratulations. Sorry about all that.

LUCRETIA: It's alright, Benton. They're all just jealous. And jealousy is the highest form of flattery. HA!

JANE: *(Returning, without her gun. Determinedly.)* They're backstage and they're gonna behave.

BENTON: Good. That's good. Would you like to say a few words, Lucretia? Thank some people?

LUCRETIA: Sure would. But first I want that spotlight. *(She gets it. There is total darkness except for it.)* That's better. First of all, I want to thank you, my wonderful fans, for buying my books and writing me all them swell letters. And I want to thank the Fish here. And I even want to thank all my fellow nominees for sharing the stage with me tonight. I wish I could share this award with all of them. But since I can't - well, I guess I won't. HA! *(The spotlight flickers and goes out. It is totally dark. We hear the voices of MAUDE, BENTON, and JANE as they ad-lib confusion, consternation, etc. A single shot rings out. MAUDE screams. BENTON yells "What the hell?" Screams from backstage, etc. The spotlight returns to LUCRETIA, still standing, a dazed look on her face. Slowly, she staggers and turns and we see the bloody bullet hole in her back. She collapses dramatically to the floor. BENTON yells for lights as he, JANE and MAUDE rush to the body. The lights come up. The rest of the characters poke their heads out from between the curtain split and then rush onstage. There is great deal of ad-libbing - shock, fear, etc. which ends with JANE'S line.)*

JANE: Get back, everybody. *(She examines the body.)*

MITZI: Shouldn't we call an ambulance?

GLICK: Yes, yes. Is there a doctor in the house?

DENIS: Oh, I say, this is coming up a cropper, eh what, Mums?

LADY DOROTHY: Oh, Denis, turn your head. Don't look at her. It's bad luck.

JANE: Well, it's really bad luck for her. She's dead. *(There is even MORE ad-libbing, expressions of shock, etc.)*

PRISCILLA: Oh, my stars! How horrible.

VERONICA: Simply horrid. A horrid accident.

CHET: Don't look like an accident to me. Accidents is when you fall down steps. Bullets are deliberate.

MITZI: Ooh, Chettie, that sounds like a good title for a book.

GLICK: By the way, Mr. Fish, Hattie won the \$50,000 before she died, right?

BENTON: *(In shock, not “registering” what it is that GLICK has just said.)* Right. We need a doctor. A priest? The police? Hell, I need a drink. *(To GLICK who’s question has just “registered”.)* What? Did you just ask me something?

GLICK: I said, Hattie won the 50 grand before she died. So it’s mine now. That and the award, right.

BENTON: I don’t know. . . *(Stunned.)* I don’t know anything. Do you think they keep any scotch around here? For medicinal purposes? *(He exits offstage through the center split.)*

JANE: That’s an odd question, Mr. Glick, for someone whose wife was murdered two minutes ago.

MARTHA: Well, I think since she’s dead, the award and prize money should go to the runner-up. Which has to be my Edith.

MITZI: I don’t think so, lady. Not with Eduardo The Drag Queen.

EDITH: HE WASN’T A DRAG QUEEN!

DENIS: Well, I for one think that the Mums here is due for that award. Not to mention the 50,000, as you Americans say, “Big ones”.

(They begin to argue among themselves, rising in volume and intensity. JANE goes for her gun to quiet them. It is gone. Finally, she yells.)

JANE: BANG! *(They quiet and look at her.)*

PRISCILLA: *(To the audience)* Did she just say “bang”?

VERONICA: Somehow it’s just not the same.

JANE: Quiet, all of you!! And which one of you has my gun??? *(They all deny, ad-lib, etc. BENTON returns holding the gun.)*

BENTON: Is this it?

JANE: Someone must have slipped it from my holster backstage. In the blackout.

MARTHA: And then used it on Lucretia. Don't think I'd put this on my resume, Forthright.

MITZI: And now it's got Mr. Fish's fingerprints all over it!

(BENTON immediately passes it to the next person, who passes it to the next, to the next, etc.)

BENTON: Not anymore it doesn't!

MITZI: Now it has everybody's fingerprints on it. The coppers will not be happy. But you found it, Fish. Better get yourself a good mouthpiece.

BENTON: What? Look, I was out here when the old bag - I mean - Lucretia - was shot. It couldn't have been me. . .or Jane - Miss Forthright. . .

MAUDE: Or me. Though, actually, it would be rather exciting to be a murder suspect. *(Lost again in one of her romantic reveries.)* Just like Lady Porcine in Night in Capricorn. *(Really "notices" the body for the first time.)* You know, I'm gonna cover her up. *(She exits backstage to "find" a sheet.)*

CHET: Cheez, lady, this is for real. Maybe we oughta call the cops.

MITZI: I don't believe you said that, Chettie.

GLICK: Is there any reason, really, to involve the police? I'm with the Bureau - FBI - and I should be able to handle this. Of course, homicide isn't my department. I'm with the Witness Relocation Program.

BENTON: Jane, is there any way we can avoid involving the police, do you think? Murder just doesn't fit in too well with the Heartthrob image.

PRISCILLA: Oh, my heavens! Our fans simply wouldn't understand, would they, Ronnie?

EDITH: I thinking - "What would Dijon do in this situation?"

CHET: *(To whoever is besides him.)* She needs a vacation, y' know?

(MAUDE returns with a sheet and proceeds to cover up the body.)

JANE: Alright, alright. Look - we've got a group of people here who witnessed the whole thing. Let's let them do a little investigating, a little questioning, a little detective work. Then, if we can figure out whodunit, we'll just hand the murderer over to the authorities.

MAUDE: I found a clue, I found a clue!!! *(She holds up a piece of paper.)* This was in Lucretia's hand.

JANE: *(Reading)* "To my favorite auther. Pay up and I'll shut up". It's written in purple ink. Sounds like Lucretia was being blackmailed. Alright, this is what we're gonna do now. We're going to take a break so all of you can talk to the suspects. As you leave, the ushers will give each of you a ballot. After you have interrogated the suspects and examined the evidence, you can write down the suspect you believe to be guilty of this murder. At the end of intermission, the lights in the lobby will blink. As you return to the theatre, cast your ballot.

MAUDE: Oh, yes. And yoo-hoo, everyone. I know it doesn't exactly fit in with murder, but we've got some wonderful goodies - desserts - out there, too. *(This line can be cut if refreshments are not served.)*

JANE: Ladies and gentlemen, I am counting on your assistance. Thank you.

Mystery helpers/ushers will distribute ballots. As soon as the theatre is clear, LUCRETIA can make a discreet exit to the green room.

SCENE THREE - INTERMISSION

The suspects are available throughout intermission. All will, if questioned, admit that they have a little secret. They will tell this "in confidence" and try to throw suspicion on someone else. All will show the blackmail notes they've received, written in Lucretia's hand, using the ubiquitous purple pen.

CHET and MITZI are together. When pressed, they'll that MITZI is in the Witness Protection Program. They beg people to keep it quiet or they will be responsible when Lenny the Tooth shows up and rubs out MITZI. CHET thinks everyone should take a closer look at LADY DOROTHY and that kid of hers. He's heard some rumors that she isn't really British. And there's been some questions about the kid's father.

LADY DOROTHY and DENIS circulate separately. LADY DOROTHY will confess, if pressed, to being a “phony” and will tell the sordid tale of her past. And, of course, since dear, dear DENIS doesn’t know his true background, she will die if he finds out. DENIS, of course, knows all about Mummy’s past and really doesn’t care. Unless, it affects her income. He really needs to make some money, fast. Both will attempt to divert suspicion from themselves. They’ll say that they overheard LUCRETIA talking to the EMBERLY sisters. Something about a CALIBAN STERN.

PRISCILLA and VERONICA circulate together. If pressed, they will admit that they did write some other books, when they needed money, a long, long time ago, under the name CALIBAN STERN. There was nothing wrong with them, not really. The books are out of print now and the sisters think they bought all existing copies. They are worried about EDITH. Her unrequited love for BENTON has obviously unhinged her.

EDITH and MARTHA circulate separately. EDITH is desperate to confide in someone. And that certainly can’t be her mother. Yes, she does love that Mr. Fish, but he doesn’t even know she’s alive. And that’s just the way she wants it. In fact, someone has been threatening to reveal her secret. She won’t say who.

MARTHA is busy campaigning for EDITH to be the new Loveknot winner. Yes, she knows that EDITH loves BENTON, and doesn’t care - unless her obsession prevents her from churning out those Dijon books. If that’s the case she should snap out of it. She may look for other potential suitors for EDITH.

Both EDITH and MARTHA think that MR. MAYNARD GLICK may have more to do with this than meets the eye.

MAYNARD GLICK is busy campaigning to have the Loveknot be part of poor HATTIE’S obituary. He had no reason to kill her. She was making good money - a lot better than when she was a cleaning lady at a medical building. He doesn’t know what anyone would “have” on HATTIE that would be worthwhile blackmailing her - she was pretty much an open and shut. . .er. . .book. He will attempt to divert suspicion

to CHET and GINA. . . he means MITZI.

An evidence case can show the gun used to kill Hattie and the note that was in her hand. Or, Jane can exhibit it during circulating.

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SCENE FOUR - SOLUTION SCENE

At a pre-arranged signal, audience will be called back into the theatre. As they enter, they will cast ballots in the ballot boxes.

MAUDE will introduce the final specialty act. This will give the stage manager time to count the ballots, determine the guilty party and inform the cast so they will know which scene to play.

PART I (SAME FOR ALL CHARACTERS)

JANE: Well, some very interesting things came to light during the intermission. Each of you had a dirty little secret. Skeletons in the closet. Lucretia wasn't the only one being blackmailed.

DENIS: I say, I do believe that's stretching it a bit, Janie, dear girl.

JANIE: Is it? Perhaps you'd care to tell us about your mother's past. She isn't British, you know.

LADY DOROTHY: (*Panicked.*) How perfectly ridiculous. Why I am as British as crumpets and tea.

DENIS: Mummy, dear. It's alright. I know.

JANIE: You know that she was really born Billy Sue Barlow of Gator Junction, Arkansas? And that your father wasn't Lord Knolls of Wynchley? DID YOU KNOW THAT THERE IS NO LORD KNOLLS OF WYNCHLEY?

DENIS: (*Easily.*) Of course, I know. I've known for ages. (*To LADY DOROTHY*) I eavesdropped on one of your session with your shrink, Dr. Ramon.

LADY DOROTHY: Oh, darling! Then you know that you were born "on the wrong side of the blankie."

MITZI: Oooh, that sounds messy.

DENIS: (*Proudly*) She means that I'm a bastard.

LADY DOROTHY: You know that we're not really British?

DENIS: (*Nodding.*) Uh, huh.

LADY DOROTHY: You know that you're illegitimate?

DENIS: (*Nodding.*) Uh, huh.

LADY DOROTHY: You know that I dated most of the men in Gator Junction and I haven't the foggiest idea who your father is?

DENIS: Well, I didn't know THAT.

JANE: Someone else knew as well - and used that information. Just as he - or she - was blackmailing the Emberly sisters.

CHET: Those two had something to hide? Geez, what'dya do, ladies? Have some overdue library books?

JANE: A little more than that, Mr. Farquirk. Tell me ladies - does the name CALIBAN STERN mean anything to you?

MARTHA: Caliban Stern! Now there was a writer. He got my loins stirred, I'll tell you that!

EDITH: Mother, we've been all through this before. . .you don't have loins.

MARTHA: Well, whatever. I loved that guy's books! It was a damn shame he quit writing.

JANE: He didn't. Or, rather, they didn't. The Emberly sisters were Caliban Stern.

MARTHA: Well, talk about your cold showers.

(The following follows quickly as each one "finishes" the other's sentences.)

PRISCILLA: We were very young.

VERONICA: We knew we could write.

PRISCILLA: We just hadn't found our "voice" yet.

VERONICA: It was either write trash or. . . telemarketing.

(Everyone shudders and looks horrified.)

PRISCILLA: It was our most closely guarded secret.

JANE: But someone knew. The same someone who knew about Edith's most closely guarded secret.

MARTHA: Nonsense! Edith doesn't have any secrets from me.

JANE: I'm talking about her apparently unrequited love for Mr. Benton.

ALL: Oh, that.

EDITH: *(Panicked)* OH, please! Stop! Don't tell him. I'll die. I'll just die! *(Catching on that they know.)* Wait a minute. You knew? You all knew? *(To BENTON)* And, did you. . .???

BENTON: Are you kidding? Of course I knew! And, Edith, I was very flattered.

EDITH: Flattered? You were? REALLY. Flattered? Mr. Fish. Benton.

Bentie. . .do you think we could ever. . .??

BENTON: Nah, not a chance. But I was flattered.

EDITH: And I thought no one knew except. . .

JANE: Except who? The same someone who knew something about . . . Chet?

DENIS: I say, this ought to be good.

MARTHA: Oooh, yeah.

VERONICA: I'll bet he's a bastard, too.

MITZI: Watch your mouth, sweetheart. Beltin' old ladies don't bother me none.

JANE: Only you weren't being blackmailed directly, were you, Chet?

CHET: Put a cork in it, will ya, Janie?

JANE: It was Mitzi, wasn't it?

CHET: This doesn't have anything to do with her. . .

MITZI: It's okay, sweetie. (*Dramatically*) Yeah. It's me. I'm in the Federal Witness Protection program. I testified against the mob. And there's a contract out on me.

CHET: Geez, Mitz, don't say anymore. Lenny the Tooth and his goons have connections everywhere.

JANIE: So, you were all being blackmailed. Even Lucretia. What was her big secret? Glick?

GLICK: Hattie?? She didn't have any secrets. Couldn't keep 'em. Never could.

BENTON: So why was she being. . .???

MAUDE: (*Jumping up*) I get it!! She wasn't being blackmailed. She was the one doing the blackmailing!!! The note in her hand wasn't one she'd

received. It was one she was going to send!

BENTON: By golly, Maude, you're right. They were all written in purple ink - just like the purple pen she's holding in her picture.

MAUDE: And she couldn't spell at all. *(To audience)* Did anyone get her autograph? *(Hopefully, someone will volunteer that they did and note the misspelling and the fact that it's written in purple ink. You can have a "plant" as a back-up if no one does.)*

BENTON: So, if Lucretia was the blackmailer. And all of you were the...the blackmailees. She must've been bleeding you dry.

JANE: You all had motives. Blackmail. You were all paying her off to keep her quiet. She must have gotten a pile of cash and. . .

BENTON: *(Interrupting)* Wait a minute! I don't think she took payment in cash!

JANE: What do you mean?

BENTON: It just hit me - All her books were so different. Different styles, different atmosphere, different everything. I think each of you paid her off - WITH A BOOK!

MAUDE: Oh, my. I get it! Each of them wrote a book which she passed off as her own.

(General disagreement, arguing, etc.)

BENTON: Well, I guess one thing is settled. Lucretia will be disqualified from winning the Loveknot. The award will be taken away and the committee will choose another. . .

(The AUTHORS immediately cheer up and start ad-libbing. Maude's line cuts through them and cuts them off.)

MAUDE: Well, I am not disappointed about that. As the number one fan of romances, I gotta tell you, Benton, Passage to Savannah should NOT have won. I loved Lucretia's - or rather your - other books. But that one was. . .well, I'm just going to have to come out with it. Boring. It was really boring.

(All but GUILTY ONE agree. Again, they ad-lib among themselves.)

GUILTY ONE cuts this off.)

GUILTY ONE: Boring??? Now, I hated Lucretia as much as the rest of you, but I thought Passage was wonderful.

JANE: I don't usually comment on the novels, but even I thought it just wasn't that well written. You know. Kind of . . . amateurish.

(All again start talking, agreeing, etc., except GUILTY ONE who cuts them off.)

GUILTY ONE: AMATEURISH!! I don't think so. I think it was. .

BENTON: *(Interrupting)* Actually, even I was surprised that it was selected. Certainly not in the same league with the others.

(General reaction "No, it wasn't. Couldn't understand why she won!" Etc.Etc. EXCEPT GUILTY ONE.)

MAUDE: To tell you the truth, I never finished it. Kept falling asleep.

GUILTY ONE: What are you talking about! Lucretia was a bitch, but Passage to Savannah was brilliant. Absolutely brilliant!

JANE: You think so? Why?

GUILTY ONE: It had everything a good romance should have - passion, intrigue, a beautiful heroine, a mysterious hero. That exciting scene where Bliss and Chance are trapped while waiting on the levee, . . .that scene alone was worth the Loveknot.

(General disagreement, arguing, etc. (From here go to the PART TWO of the GUILTY ONE .) makeover. (GO TO PART THREE.)

PART THREE - SAME FOR ALL

JANE: *(Stepping forward and addressing the audience.)* Thank you, ladies and gentlemen for your assistance in this case. I think we'll let the judicial system take over now. Our work is done. And as I leave here tonight, I'll breathe a sigh of relief. The same sigh I breathe every time a murderer is caught. The sigh that goes along with the tingle in my breasts and the trembling of my thighs. That goes with the racing of my heart and the numbness in my hands.

BENTON: Jane. That's it!! That's love!! That's passion!!

JANE: Maybe, Fish, maybe. Or maybe it's just the flu. Thank you all and goodnight.

END OF PLAY

APPENDIX

PROPS

Portraits of each AUTHOR on easels. These are mounted on poster/foam boards with their names, pen names and titles of their nominated books. These are standard color studio shots, each giving an idea of the character's personality through pose, props, costume, etc. Lucretia's picture shows her sitting at her desk, holding a purple pen.

A purple pen and small notebook for Lucretia's autographs.

Five "reserved" signs for the audience seats.

The envelope with the winner's name.

The Loveknot Award (plaque, trophy)

Stage gun, holster & bullets.

Ballots (I'll provide a "master")

Ballot boxes.

The note in Lucretia's hand.

A sheet to cover the body.

Blackmail notes, in purple, from Lucretia to the Authors.

The "readings" in portfolios.

ROMANCE "TITLES" & CHARACTER NAMES (for Maude to mention during scene one. Have some fun and add your own!)

"Southern Mist", "One Night in Cairo", "Sweat and Tears", "Sabre Dance", "Journey to Valpairiso", "Moscow Spring", "Flanagan's Folly", "Paradise on Hold"

Chartreuse, Joelle, Aveda, Cheyenne, Sydney, Cachet, Bandeaux, Chinette, Mikasa, Cardemon, Longchamps, Tiempo, Keno, Melanoma, Arrow, Zircon, Tiramisu, Poncho, Rancid, Gouda, Chlamydia

AUTHOR “BIOS” - PROGRAM NOTES

EDITH CRUMPOWSKI , writing under the name “Ivana”, is a child prodigy. She published her first romance while still in her teens and watched it become an instant best-seller. Edith quit high school to write full time, although she’s currently working on her GED. Miss Crumpowski lives with her mother, Martha, who manages her career, personal appearances, travel arrangements, laundry, calendar, writes her bio and doesn’t ask a thing for herself and has sacrificed anything resembling a real life to take care of Edith. The nominated Ivana novel is “Dijon in Danger” which she dedicates to a “special friend who proves that love means never having to say anything.” The Crumpowski’s live in the Chicago area.

PRISCILLA & VERONICA EMBERLY write under their own names. Priscilla Emberly was 3 when she ate an entire bottle of baby aspirin. When she woke up four days later, she was convinced that she had a twin sister. To keep her fragile mental state from deteriorating any further, Priscilla’s parents bought a puppet and Veronica was born. Together the sisters have written a string of best-sellers, including the Loveknot nominee, “Love’s Sweet Ransom” which they dedicate to each other. The Emberly sisters live in a restored Victorian mansion just outside of Chicago.

HATTIE GLICK, writing under the name “Lucretia DeWitt” is a success story for aspiring novelists. She wrote her first book, “Paradise on Hold”, while working as a cleaning lady at a medical building only to watch it rise on the bestseller lists. She dedicates her Loveknot nominee, “Savannah Passage” to her husband Maynard, and all the other authors at Heartthrob Books “without their inspiration, she couldn’t write a word”. Hattie and Maynard live in downtown Chicago.

CHET FARQUIRK, writing under the name “Alyssa Wentworth” is a Loveknot nominee for his book, “The Pit of Passion”. In addition to romances, Chet has self-published several detective stories, three full-length novels, and a variety of do-it-yourself books. While these have not exactly lit the fire of the literary world, his books as “Alyssa Wentworth” certainly have. He dedicates “The Pit of Passion” to “his

little chickie-baby, Mitzi”. He lives with Mitzi in a top security, tightly guarded high rise condo on Chicago’s lakeside.

LADY DOROTHY KNOLLS OF WYNCHLEY who writes as “Portia St. Regis” is the only nominee to hail from Britain - which some believe to be the “home” of the romance novel. Lady Dorothy, the widow of Lord Basil Knolls of Wynchley, hails originally from Worcester-Staffordshire-Manchester-on-the-Thames, but now makes her home in a secluded farmhouse outside of Chicago with her son, Denis. Her nominated book, “The Yancy’s of Yorkshire” is dedicated to her son. “To my dearest Denis, a scamp, a rascal, a scalawag. And while I personally will no longer be responsible for your debts and will not cover your bounced checks, please know it’s only because your Mums loves you, darling.”

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