

(There is a coat rack near the front door.)

(Next to the drinks table is a wastebasket.)

(Next to the sofa is a mending basket.)

*(It's seven-thirty p.m. Friday evening.
September.)*

*(MARGOT and MAXINE are drinking
cocktails. MAXINE smokes.)*

START

MARGOT. So. How would you murder me?

MAXINE. How would you *like* to be murdered?

MARGOT. What are my choices?

MAXINE. Oh, there are so many methods to choose from.
Alphabetically there's asphyxiation, blade, bludgeon,
bullet...

MARGOT. Blow to the head?

MAXINE. Same as bludgeon really.

MARGOT. Sorry.

MAXINE. Drowning. Electrocuting. Garroting. Hanging.
Poison. Strangling.

MARGOT. Isn't strangling the same as garroting?

MAXINE. Garroting is a subcategory of strangling.

MARGOT. I see.

MAXINE. Truth be told, they're both subcategories of
asphyxiation.

MARGOT. God is in the details. Go on.

MAXINE. Shoot. Stab. Erm...

MARGOT. You're up to T.

MAXINE. Tickle to death?

MARGOT. It's been tried.

MAXINE. Yes, I know, you're immune.

MARGOT. *(Beat.)* You're disturbingly good at this.

MAXINE. It's all I've thought about for the past year.

MARGOT. Murder?

MAXINE. Means, motives, killer and killed.

MARGOT. It would defeat me. Having to come up with the motive alone. I mean, how many motives are there, really?

MAXINE. Five.

MARGOT. Five?

MAXINE. Five for murder, yes.

MARGOT. I'll bet I can guess them.

MAXINE. Go on.

MARGOT. Money. Fear. Jealousy. Revenge... Uhm... five you said?

MAXINE. I did, yes.

MARGOT. I give up.

MAXINE. Protecting someone you love. *(Beat.)* Was it all right, my dropping by? I mean, we *had* said we'd meet at the theater, the three of us.

MARGOT. No, this is better, seeing you without Tony.

MAXINE. Why?

MARGOT. There's something I wanted to tell you. When Tony let me know you were coming to London about your book, I knew I couldn't put it off any longer.

MAXINE. Better top this off then.

(MARGOT refreshes their drinks.)

STOP

LESGATE. The fifth step.

TONY. That's the one. Use it to unlock the front door...

(Re-enters, closes front door, moves to French doors.)

...and go straight to hide in the alcove.

LESGATE. What if she's right here?

TONY. She won't be. She'll be listening to a radio program. The radio is in our bedroom. At exactly ten minutes past eight that phone will ring. It will be me, telephoning from the BBC studios across Regents Park. That's my alibi. The radio program's an interview with the female novelist. I shall be there with her.

LESGATE. All right, then.

TONY. I shall use the phone in the control booth. I shall dial this number. There's no extension in the bedroom, so when the phone rings she will come in here to answer it. You stay hidden in that alcove until she answers the phone. When you've finished, pick up the phone and give me a soft whistle. Then hang up. When I hear your whistle I shall hang up.

LESGATE. What happens then?

TONY. Make a mess of things. Upend the coffee table, knock over that cigarette box and those silver trays. But leave it all here.

LESGATE. As if I left in a hurry?

TONY. *(Nods.)* Now the French doors. If they're locked, unlock them and leave them open. Then go out exactly the same way as you came in.

LESGATE. By the front door?

TONY. Yes. And here's the most important thing. As you go out, return the key to the place where you found it.

LESGATE. Under the fifth stair carpet?

TONY. The police will assume you entered by way of the French doors. You thought the flat was empty and went to work. She heard something and came in here. You attacked her. When you realized you'd killed her, you panicked and bolted into the garden leaving your loot behind.

LESGATE. Just a minute. I'm *supposed* to have entered through the French doors. What if they're locked?

TONY. She often takes a walk round the garden before she goes to bed and she usually forgets to lock those doors when she gets back. That's what I'll tell the police.

LESGATE. But she may say...

TONY. But she isn't going to say anything. Is she?

LESGATE. Why can't I just leave by way of the garden?

TONY. There's an iron gate to the street. It's locked at night, so you'd have to climb over it. If anyone saw you, you'd likely be followed.

LESGATE. Right. So, I leave the flat, put the key back under the stair carpet, and go out by the street door. When will you get back?

TONY. About eleven. I'll bring the other woman back here for a nightcap. We shall find her together.

LESGATE. You've forgotten something. When you return, how will you get into the flat?

TONY. I'll let myself in.

LESGATE. But your key will be under the stair carpet. The other woman is bound to see you take it out. It'll give the whole show away.

TONY. No, it won't be my key under the carpet. It will be my wife's. I'll take it from her handbag and hide it out there just before I leave the flat. She won't be going out

tomorrow night so she won't miss it. When I return I'll use my own key to let us in. Then, before the police arrive, I'll find a moment to take her key from under the stair carpet and return it to her handbag.

LESGATE. How many keys are there to that door?

TONY. Two keys. Just hers and mine.

(Telephone rings.)

(TONY goes to the desk and picks up phone.)

(As TONY speaks, LESGATE picks up the cotton gloves and puts them on.)

Maida Vale 0401. - Hullo, darling, how's it going? - Dreadful? - Good. Does Maxine hate it as much as you? - Make a bet on who the killer is, and tell me who wins.

(TONY sees LESGATE start to the French doors.)

Oh, darling, just a minute, I think there's someone at the door. *(To LESGATE, muffling telephone.)* Careful, you might be seen from there. *(Into phone.)* Sorry, darling, false alarm. No, go, go. - Enjoy yourself.

(TONY hangs up.)

Well?

(LESGATE pauses, undecided. Then he looks inside the open briefcase.)

(LESGATE snaps the briefcase shut, and picks it up.)

(TONY smiles.)

End of Scene One

(Sound of street door opening.)

(Running footsteps in passage outside apartment.)

(Sound of key in front door lock.)

(The front door opens.)

(TONY enters, wearing his raincoat, holding his key.)

(TONY takes in the scene, puts the key into his raincoat pocket.)

(He crosses to LESGATE's body. He kneels, turns him over and sees the scissors in his back. He is just beginning to search LESGATE's pockets when -)

(MARGOT enters through the French doors.)

(TONY immediately stands as MARGOT rushes into his arms.)

Oh, Tony!

TONY. It's all right, it'll be all right. What happened?

MARGOT. He tried to strangle me. He got something around my throat, it felt like a stocking.

TONY. But the scissors -

MARGOT. I stabbed him.

TONY. The blades went right through.

MARGOT. Cover him, can't you?

TONY. Yes, of course.

(TONY crosses to the window seat, opens it and takes out a blanket. He covers LESGATE's body.)

(MARGOT goes to her handbag and opens it.)

Did he -?

(TONY sees MARGOT fishing around inside her handbag.)

What are you doing?

MARGOT. Looking for an aspirin. My head's pounding.

TONY. *(Hurries to take the handbag from her.)* Here, let me.

(TONY opens her purse, gets bottle, shakes out an aspirin.)

I'll get you some water.

(TONY pours a glass of water and gives it to MARGOT. She takes it.)

He must have broken in. I wonder what he was after.

MARGOT. When will the police get here?

TONY. Did you call them?

MARGOT. No. You told me not to speak to anyone. Hadn't you better call them now?

TONY. *(Thinking.)* In a minute, in a minute.

MARGOT. I'll get dressed.

TONY. Why?

MARGOT. They'll want to talk to me.

TONY. Right, yes...

(MARGOT starts to the bedroom, then stops, focuses on the radio. We can hear the interview at a lower volume.)

MARGOT. Maxine's still at the studio.

TONY. *(Nods, distracted.)* I told them to tell her there was a minor emergency.

MARGOT. ...Tony?

TONY. Hm?

MARGOT. Why did you phone?

TONY. ...I'll tell you about that later. You said he used a stocking?

MARGOT. I think it was a stocking, or a scarf. Isn't it there?

TONY. No. But I expect the police will find it. Go and change. I'll phone them right away.

(MARGOT nods, then exits into the bedroom, closing the door.)

(TONY hurries to LESGATE's body and resumes his frantic search. Finally, he finds the key in Lesgate's trouser pocket. He takes the key and puts it in Margot's handbag.)

(TONY looks around, then leans down and picks up Lesgate's scarf. He starts to untie the knot. Then he stops. Thinks. He tightens the knot, goes to the phone and dials.)

(Into phone.)

Hello, Operator, give me the Maida Vale Police, quickly. Yes, hello. There's been a ghastly accident, a man's been killed, - Wendice. - 61a Charrington Gardens. - About ten minutes ago. He broke in and attacked my wife.

A burglar, so it seems. How long until you can get here? - Two minutes. Good. - No, we won't touch anything. Good-bye.

(TONY hangs up.)

MAXINE. Are you satisfied?

MARGOT. Not really.

(We hear the front door buzzer.)

TONY. *(Offstage.)* Margot? Can you get it?

MARGOT. *(Calls.)* I'd rather not right now!

(TONY enters from the bedroom, dressed.)

TONY. ...I'll get it, then, shall I?

(TONY opens the front door.)

(INSPECTOR HUBBARD, in a raincoat, stands there.)

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. Mr. Wendice?

TONY. Yes.

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. My name's Hubbard. May I come in?

TONY. Yes, please.

(INSPECTOR HUBBARD enters. TONY closes the front door.)

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. Mrs. Wendice. I'm Chief Inspector Hubbard.

TONY. Errn, Inspector, this is Miss Hadley. A friend of ours.

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. *Maxine* Hadley. You and Mr. Wendice were together last evening.

MAXINE. Yes.

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. Why was that?

MAXINE. Why was what?

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. Why were the two of you together?

TONY. Miss Hadley was being interviewed for a talks program at the BBC.

MAXINE. Mr. Wendice works for my publisher.

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. You're an author?

MARGOT. (*Pointed.*) Miss Hadley writes murder mysteries.

TONY. Erm, what can we do for you, Inspector? We gave your people all the necessary information last night.

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. Yes, I'm sure, but there are a few things I'd like to get firsthand.

(*Re: raincoat.*) May I...?

TONY. Of course.

(**INSPECTOR HUBBARD** takes off his raincoat and hangs it on the coat rack.)

MAXINE. I should be going.

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. Oh, Miss Hadley, we may want to go over the odd detail with you later. Could you give me your address?

MAXINE. I'm staying at the Ritz.

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. (*Hands her his notebook and pencil.*) Write it there for me, would you? Room number, all that.

MAXINE. Okay.

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. Is this your first visit to London?

MAXINE. (*Writing.*) No, I used to live here.

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. For how long?

MAXINE. Three years.

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. Where?

MAXINE. Chelsea. Bywater Street.

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. Off the King's Road.

MAXINE. Yes.

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. That's just down from The Grape and Vine, isn't it?

MAXINE. If you say so.

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. When did you leave London?

MAXINE. A year ago.

(MAXINE hands the notebook and pencil back to INSPECTOR HUBBARD.)

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. Thank you.

MAXINE. I, erm, may drop by later, if that's all right.

TONY. Yes, please do. I'll see you out.

MAXINE. No, I know the way.

(MAXINE opens the front door and exits.)

TONY. Shall we sit?

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. Thank you. That was a very nasty experience you had last night, Mrs. Wendice.

TONY. Erm, do you know yet who the man was?

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. We're uncertain as to his real name. He had several. Pryce-Jones, Asprey, Waterhouse. The one he was going by recently was Lesgate. Had you seen him before, Mrs. Wendice?

MARGOT. No, of course not.

(INSPECTOR HUBBARD produces two snapshots and hands them to MARGOT.)

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. Morgue photographs. Do you recognize him?

MARGOT. Yes.

MAXINE. Have you heard anything?

TONY. Your timing is impeccable. She's at the Home Office. Our lawyer has taken her. He says the chances of the Home Secretary granting clemency are slim to none. I expect someone will call shortly with the decision.

MAXINE. Why didn't you go with her?

TONY. She wouldn't allow it. I wanted to go to the prison this morning to say good-bye, but she wouldn't see me.

MAXINE. She's bad at good-byes.

TONY. Have you seen or spoken to her?

MAXINE. We haven't said a word to each other since she was arrested.

TONY. I suppose you'll be going back to New York now. I must say, it's been admirable of you, staying on after the trial, through the appeals, right to the end.

MAXINE. I'm not much in demand at present.

TONY. Yes. Rough stuff, your book being pulled. I suppose I should say I'm sorry. All those copies they printed before the scandal hit, taken off to the warehouse to be pulped. Oh, I should've offered you a drink. Bourbon on the rocks?

MAXINE. Yeah, sure.

(As TONY speaks, he chops ice with an ice pick, makes MAXINE a bourbon, and gives it to her.)

TONY. What will you do now? Write another thriller, or have you done with that? I doubt I'd know how to sell it to the reading public. Not that I'd have to. I'm out of a job too, you know.

MAXINE. Yes, but you don't have to worry about being comfortable. Not after tomorrow morning.

(MAXINE takes out a cigarette.)

But I am working on something right now, since you ask.

TONY. Is it a mystery?

MAXINE. Yes and no. I'm teasing out the plot, but I don't think some of it holds up. The story's about a woman who kills a man to get back a letter from him. Only she doesn't find it. Even though the police find it quick enough, in one of the dead man's pockets. If you had just killed a man to get a letter, wouldn't you go through every one of his pockets to find it? I know I would. Especially if my husband was hurrying home from the BBC and he was the person I was trying to keep the letter from. Yet she doesn't.

TONY. You're not taking into account panic.

MAXINE. Oh, I'm allowing for panic, confusion, the race against the clock. According to the police, she had the presence of mind amid all that to find a stocking, tie knots in it, then hide its mate. If she had the presence of mind to do all that, why didn't she have the presence of mind to find the letter?

(TONY uses the ice pick to chop more ice, then pours himself a whiskey.)

(MAXINE takes out a box of matches.)

Then there are the stockings. She comes up with the idea to make it look like Lesgate used one of her stockings to strangle her. But then she's got the matching stocking to deal with. She can't leave it in the mending basket, it's the matching stocking that proves the other stocking is hers. She should destroy it. But she doesn't. She hides it in the wastebasket. Badly. So badly the police couldn't possibly overlook it. When the simplest and by far fastest way to get rid of that stocking in an instant would have been to...?

TONY. What?

MAXINE. (*Strikes a match.*) Put a match to it. The stocking would have gone up in a flash. Poof.

TONY. Would it?

MAXINE. Any woman knows that. Men don't though.

TONY. (*Mirthless smile.*) No, I suppose we don't.

MAXINE. I want to show you something.

(**MAXINE** takes out a note and offers it to
TONY. **TONY** takes it.)

TONY. It's the blackmail note.

MAXINE. The second one. Margot gave both of them to me.

TONY. At the trial, you testified that you couldn't find the second one.

MAXINE. I lied. I kept thinking it was a clue, that it would lead to something. I even went to the address on it, 23 Newport Street -

TONY. So did the police. They turned up nothing.

MAXINE. I know, but I still figured I could find a use for it. And I have. My fingerprints are on that note. So are Margot's.

(**MAXINE** takes the note from **TONY.**)

And now so are yours.

TONY. What do you plan to do with it?

MAXINE. Tell the police I found it in a pocket. My fingerprints and Margot's are on it because she showed it to me. Both of us testified to that. But your fingerprints are on the blackmail note because...

TONY. Yes?

(Into phone.) Yes, you too, good-bye.

(Sound of knocking, fast, urgent.)

(The front door buzzer again, more insistent.)

(TONY opens the front door.)

(MARGOT hurries in, dressed in the same clothes she was wearing at the end of the previous scene. Her hair is wild, her face red, she's out of breath.)

(TONY closes the door, stunned. Stares at her.)

(Pause.)

MARGOT. May I have some water?

(TONY continues to stare at her.)

Please?

(TONY comes to, pours a glass of water, gives it to her. She drinks.)

We were at the Home Office. They'd taken me there from my cell just after breakfast. I was kept in a room while they discussed the case. I sat there, thinking "They're not going to hang me tomorrow, they can't possibly. The Home Secretary won't allow it." Then the door opened, and they told me to come in. My solicitor wouldn't look at me. The Home Secretary was very brisk, very efficient. "Clemency denied." But I suppose that was too efficient because he added that only a brazen woman would have the nerve to request clemency after such a sordid trial, called me wanton, a degenerate.

Then it was over. My solicitor still refused to look at me. They took me back to the car. I got in the backseat.

There were only two guards, one in front to drive, the other in the back with me.

"They're going to hang me tomorrow. They're going to hang me and no one will help."

And then I noticed...the door was unlocked. They have no problem believing a woman's capable of committing murder in cold blood but not that she'd try to escape when she's to be hanged the next morning.

The car pulled away and started back to the prison. The streets were crowded. Traffic. "They're going to hang me tomorrow, they're going to hang me..."

I kept looking at the lock on the door, thinking one of them's got to notice, the guard sitting next to me will see, he'll reach over and lock it. But he didn't.

We stopped at a light. Regent's Park.

It was my only chance. I grabbed the door handle, pulled. And I ran, ran across the park.

TONY. Why in God's name did you come here?

MARGOT. Where else could I go? Please, for God's sake you've got to help me!

(TONY continues to stare at MARGOT.)

Tony, say some -

(The phone rings.)

(MARGOT and TONY look at the phone.)

(It rings again.)

(TONY looks at MARGOT, then takes a step towards the phone.)

(MARGOT hurries to him, stops his hand from picking it up.)

MARGOT. Why do you think Tony's gone to the police station?

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. Because he's realized he picked up the wrong coat with the wrong key.

MARGOT. I don't understand.

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. Mrs. Wendice, what I've got to tell you may come as a shock. We strongly suspect that your husband plotted to murder you.

MARGOT. (*Small voice.*) How long have you suspected this?

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. Miss Hadley came to me this morning with, what did you call it, a plot snag?

MAXINE. The key. Call it my writerly obsession with tying up loose ends. It always bothered me that no key was found on Lesgate's body. Not even a key to his flat. Most people carry a key on them. Why didn't the police find one on Lesgate? So I went to see the inspector.

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. Miss Hadley seemed to be accusing Scotland Yard of doing a poor job. Well, I couldn't let that stand, so I decided to search this flat one more time, to see if I could find Lesgate's key. It could have fallen out during the struggle and ended up somewhere we hadn't looked, in the gap between two floor planks, behind a baseboard. But first I had to gain access to the flat. So I went to the station, got your handbag and lifted the key.

MAXINE. Stole it.

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. Then I waited until Mr. Wendice had gone out this morning and tried to get in.

MARGOT. Tried?

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. I never got in. The key I'd stolen from your handbag didn't fit the lock.

MARGOT. Why? Has Tony changed the locks?

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. No.

MAXINE. It wasn't your key.

MARGOT. Where's *my* key then?

MAXINE. It took me just half an hour to find it.

(MAXINE opens the front door, steps into the hall and points to the fifth step of the staircase.)

It was hidden under the fifth stair carpet in the entry hall.

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. Wendice told Lesgate that he would leave your key under the stair carpet and to return it to the same place when he left. But as Lesgate was killed, Wendice naturally assumed your key would still be in one of Lesgate's pockets. That was his mistake. Because Lesgate had done exactly what Miss Hadley suggested. He unlocked the front door, and then returned the key *before* he came in.

MARGOT. And it's been out there in the hall ever since?

MAXINE. It's still there.

(MAXINE closes the front door.)

MARGOT. So the key Tony took out of Lesgate's pocket and put in my handbag was...

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. Lesgate's own key!

MAXINE. We took the key that was in your handbag to a Mrs. Van Dorn's this morning. It unlocked the door to Lesgate's flat.

MARGOT. *(After a beat.)* Does this mean I'm free?

INSPECTOR HUBBARD. Actually, no, this is all supposition.

MARGOT. What?