

The Sonoma Murder Mystery

“Well, that’s certainly not what I expected,” said detective Laura Miller. Three hours earlier, David Bancroft, an English professor at Berkeley, had invited eight guests to his Victorian estate in Sonoma for a murder mystery dinner party.

“If only we had paid more attention to the clues,” agreed Robert Warren, an attorney. “The solution was right in front of our face.”

Laura shook her head, “the guys in the precinct are going to give me hell for missing this one.”

David had carefully selected the diverse guest list to create a most spontaneous evening, like a fine chef who mixes seemingly incompatible ingredients and comes up with a masterly meal.

In addition to Laura and Robert, there was Elizabeth Ashley, a 28-year-old debutante turned socialite from Alabama. Her naturally golden hair, quiet elegance and refined grace were as intoxicating as her accent. Jim Palmer was a rookie police officer from Los Angeles, but his clean cut looks and baby face belied his intelligence and maturity. Dr. Jenny Song, a neurologist from Boston, looked more like a model than a brain surgeon. She was tall and athletic, with long straight black hair and a graceful gait. Which brings us to Father John Lopez, a Franciscan monk from San Diego and descendent of the original Spanish missionaries who settled California. John was not only a priest; he had a degree in philosophy from Harvard. Switching from the cerebral to the creative, Nancy Lee was a caterer from Marin, with a who’s who list of wealthy clients from the golden county north of the Golden Gate Bridge; she was also very attractive with short hair, bangs, a button nose and sparkling eyes. To round out this gathering was Antonio Marini, a magician from Las Vegas. Antonio packed them in at the Desert Palm, with his incomprehensible illusion of making audience members disappear from the stage and show up seconds later at the back of the theater.

You might have noticed the one trait these people had in common, their refined looks. In fact, the guest list was as resplendent, alluring and beautiful as the mansion itself. Even Steven, the butler, was a tall, distinguished man with thick beard and mustache and Maria, the maid, a striking Latina in a French maid’s outfit; perhaps these two were quiet, but significant characters in David’s plans or merely servants. David never mentioned them in his bio of guests.

The last character was David’s Victorian house, magnificently settled in his vineyard, an odd architecture for California. Unlike the homes in New England, this home was just a few years old, with hidden electronics behind a décor of old fashioned wallpaper, carpet, furnishings, artwork and adornments. David even infused an artificial, slightly musty smell into the rooms, another realistic but diverting element for the night. It would take a qualified appraiser more than a little while to uncover the veneer; exactly the way David had designed it.

The guests were all gathered in the library now, relaxing in leather chairs and soft sofas, looking each other over. Steven and Maria were serving drinks.

“So David” said Elizabeth, “when are you going to tell us about tonight’s game?” David had sent out invitations that mentioned a mystery dinner party, but had not revealed much about the complexities to come.

“Certainly,” said David. “We are here to solve a make believe murder that will occur sometime tonight. Each of you has received background information on the others, although none of you have ever met before. I have spent considerable time and money to insure that everyone here is an honorable person, not likely to cheat or otherwise ruin the game. Each of you will get one true and private clue to the identity of either the victim or the murderer, along with the clues that all of you may see or hear.”

Elizabeth smiled and stroked her hair, Robert adjusted his glasses, Laura rubbed her palms together and Jim took out a pad to take notes. John sipped his wine and nodded in appreciation, loving the entertainment so lacking at the monastery.

“To win, you will have to uncover the identity of the murderer, the victim and how the murder was accomplished. The one who does that will also win \$10,000 in cash. Oh yes, and I’m the only one who knows who the murderer and victim are.”

Antonio rubbed the felt of his top hat, so common a home for doves in a magician’s act. Nancy straightened her chef coat, not sure why she was asked to wear it. Jenny held her stethoscope in her white lab coat, and then asked the question they were all thinking. “David, why are we all dressed this way?”

“Ah, yes doctor. You are all dressed in your work attire. Nancy is a chef, John is a priest, Robert is a lawyer, Laura a detective, Elizabeth is a socialite, Jim is a police officer and Antonio is a magician, all of you at the top of your profession, destined for great lives and accomplishments. But tonight will challenge all of your creative and intellectual skills.”

David adjusted his tweed deerstalker, the hat Sherlock Holmes made famous. “As I am the host of the game and a professor, I’ve selected this hat and pipe from my favorite detective. Now listen carefully to a few rules. You may go anywhere in the house, attic or basement and you must leave the company of the group at least once during the evening. But you may not leave the house. That would automatically disqualify you.”

Robert pointed to the large rectangular frame, maybe 80” in diameter, above the library entrance. “And what is this, an empty picture frame?”

David held up a remote control. “That, my dear barrister, is a video monitor, another source of clues for everyone. There is a smaller monitor in each of the rooms, usually above the entering door.” David pushed a button and the monitor revealed a view of the outside grounds, then the upstairs rooms, then the first floor rooms and finally the wine cellar. “The house may look old, but the electronics are state of the art. At various random times, the monitors will show you what is going on in different parts of the house, where others may be exploring for clues. Each room is also equipped with speakers, adding to the ambiance and providing audio clues. You see I have an obsession with murder mysteries, especially the sights and sounds of dark and stormy nights.”

David pushes another button and a loud clap of thunder comes through the speakers while lightning reflected on the guests.

Robert was the first to comment on the weather anomaly. “I see, because we don’t get storms up here.”

David nodded. “Yes Robert, I may have saved some money if I bought my house in Seattle.”

Jenny held up a Bluetooth earpiece. “And this, David?”

David pointed to the device. “Yes Jenny, each of you has one. During the night, you each will get a clue to the identity of the victim or the murderer.”

Laura spoke up. “Are the clues private for us?”

David liked the way his guests were engaged. “No one else will hear your personal clue, but if you choose to share it, you are more likely to become the victim than the one who solves the crime.”

The doorbell rings and a deliveryman hands Steven a shoebox-sized package wrapped in plain brown paper. “I’ll just put this upstairs sir,” said Steven.

David nodded. “Very good Steven. That package won’t be needed tonight.”

Jim offered his first question. “Are there any other restrictions David?”

David took out his notes and replied. “You may ask anyone anything, work together or by yourself. If a door is locked you must find a key or another way in, but remember, you can’t leave the house.” Another flash of lightning, the sound of thunder and a woman’s scream is heard.

John jokes. “That wasn’t Steven, was it?” There is laughter all around, and then the lights go out for 30 seconds. When they come back on, Antonio and Laura are missing.

Jenny was most concerned. “Maybe we have already learned who the murderer and victim are.”

Nancy, realizing that this was just a diversion, bubbled. “Sounds like a delicious evening. I can’t wait to start.” Steven comes down the stairs; he joins Maria in the kitchen to begin serving. A grandfather clock rings six times.

“That’s our cue for dinner” said David. As the guests meander from the library to the dining room, the monitor shows Antonio and Laura upstairs talking, but only Jenny notices this.

The guests find their place card and sit down. Laura returns to the dining room.

“Where were you?” said Jim.

Laura replied. “I heard footsteps; I thought it might be the killer.”

Robert excuses himself. “Before we eat, I need to be excused.”

Elizabeth puts her drink down. “I think I will step out for a minute too.”

As they leave, Antonio comes back in and John questions him. “So you’re back. What did you hear Antonio?”

Antonio points to his arm. “Nothing, somebody pulled on my arm when the lights went out and I ran after them.”

A spotlight highlights a drapery sash and a chime is heard. The sash looks like a rope, but not everyone notices this clue. Jim makes a quick note on his pad, out of view.

Then Jim leaves the table. “I need to see where that scream came from.”

Jenny joins him. “I’ll go with you.” They head upstairs.

David states the obvious. “Well, it looks like everyone is getting their time away from the group done early. Maria, you may start serving the soup.”

Laura compliments David. “I think you have created one hell of a mystery David.” The dining room monitor shows a male and female figure kissing, but in silhouette.

“More than you can imagine Laura. May I remind you, don’t trust anyone.” Spooky owl sounds emanate from the speakers, then the lights go out again and another scream is heard. A full minute passes in darkness. When the lights come on, Robert, Elizabeth, Jenny and Jim have returned.

Elizabeth speaks out as if she had never left. “What was that?”

David points them back to their seats. “Oh nothing, let’s sit down everyone. The first course is ready, French onion soup.” As Maria serves the soup, Steven pours dinner wine, a selection from David’s own vineyard.

“Absolutely gourmet David” said Antonio; “did Steven or Maria make this?”

With a wink to Nancy, David explained. “Actually this feast is courtesy of our resident chef, Nancy. Don’t worry; she made sure that no one’s allergies would be affected.”

A spotlight shines briefly on the candlestick of the centerpiece accompanied by a soft chime. Everyone at the table sees this clue and eyes the others.

With worried looks around the table, Nancy says, “It was prepared at my restaurant and brought here.”

Antonio says what most of them are thinking. “You mean we have been eating food prepared by someone who could be the murderer?”

Elizabeth agreed. “That is outrageous! Why didn’t you say something?”

Robert punctuated the point. “Bad form David. We may have missed a valuable clue.”

David countered. “Actually, you have all missed several clues already. You didn’t think this was going to be easy, did you?”

Just as John was about to speak, he heard a chime in his earpiece and his personal clue to the murder.

AS A MAN OF FAITH, YOU KNOW THAT WHAT IS VISIBLE MAY NOT BE TRUE. PEOPLE WILL TRY TO FOOL YOU WITH LIES AND DECEPTION. HAVE FAITH! YOUR CLUE IS THAT THE VICTIM PLAYS A PROMINENT PART IN THE GAME.

With this information, John realizes that Steven and Maria are probably not directly involved. He compliments Nancy. “This is excellent Nancy. Where is your restaurant?”

Nancy was happy to oblige the privileged guests. “In San Francisco, near Ghirardelli Square. I made the dessert especially for you Padre.”

Laura jokes. “A Peach Bomb Surprise?”

Nancy continued. “Not quite. Alternate layers of angel and devil’s food cake. I call it *The Devil’s Orchestra*.”

John smiles. "I can't wait. I'll finally be able to separate good from evil."
Everyone laughs.

Jim kids him, "You mean play God, John?"

John was enjoying this. "I thought that was something you did son. Serve the good and punish the wicked."

Robert added his twist. "Well, Jim stops them, Laura investigates them and I put them away. You could call us a crime team."

Antonio adds his opinion; "your team seems to have an advantage in this game, being expert investigators."

Robert turns the accusation back to Antonio. "And you are an expert at misdirection and disguise. Do you have a weapon up your sleeve?"

Antonio couldn't resist. "No, just a rabbit;" and he pulls a rabbit out for everyone's enjoyment.

Jim has a fake look of concern. "What kind of soup did you say this was?"
Antonio frees the rabbit and it runs out of the room.

"Will he be all right?" said Elizabeth.

Antonio reassured her. "Oh yes, he'll find some warm spot and go to sleep. Rabbits are very good pets, you know."

"What do you say David?" said Robert. "Does anyone here have an advantage in solving the mystery?"

David is glad this question came up. "Not in the least. In fact, our expert investigators will probably think too much, making their conclusions faulty."

At this point Antonio gets up, takes Maria aside and asks "excuse me dear, where is the rest room?"

Maria responds politely. "The door next to the kitchen is closest sir."

Antonio puts his arm around her waist, whispers something, winks and then walks to the bathroom. Out of sight from the others, he sees a lead pipe in the kitchen spotlighted with that soft chime sound. "This may be an extra clue just for me," he says to himself.

Everyone is impressed by the soup and congratulates Nancy. "This tastes Mediterranean. Is that the region of your cuisine?" said Elizabeth.

“Well, it’s a fusion restaurant combining Mediterranean with Asian flavors. Even though I was trained in China, I also spent two years in Italy and that’s when I decided to blend these heavenly foods into one cuisine.”

David agreed. “Eating at your restaurant has elevated my palate Nancy. This is one reason I invited you to the game, to show these guests that we have world class chefs in the bay area.”

Jenny hears a chime in her earpiece but places her hand over it secretly in order to hide the fact that her personal clue was coming.

DO NOT JUMP TO CONCLUSIONS. DON'T TRUST YOUR EYES OR EARS. TO WIN THIS GAME YOU WILL NEED TO FIND FACTS. REMEMBER, PEOPLE LIE AND FORGET. YOUR CLUE IS THAT THE MURDER WEAPON WILL BE FOUND.

Her clue finishes just before loud thunderclaps resonate through the house. The lights go out again for another minute. A gunshot is heard along with the sound of a body hitting the floor. When the lights come back on, Steven is lying motionless on the floor. The rabbit has snuggled under his leg and there are hairs on Steven’s trousers. Then we see Antonio return from the kitchen.

Elizabeth screams, points and says, “Look, it’s the butler.”

Jenny rushes over to check his vital signs. As everyone comes closer, Jenny holds a card up that says VICTIM, truly a sign of relief. “Well, I guess this means the butler is dead. You are dead Steven, aren’t you?”

Steven looks up and replies “yes doctor. Thank you for confirming it.” The butler looks at David. “Since my part of the game is done sir, would you mind if I went to my room to take a nap? I don’t think I can lie still for five hours.”

Everyone looks at David and in unison says “Five hours?”

David ignores their complaint. “Of course not. Quite right Steven. Buttle off to your room.” He leaves with the VICTIM card and the rabbit under his arm to his upstairs room.

Expecting this interruption, David announces. “Let’s return to dinner. Maria, I’m afraid you’re going to have to serve by yourself.”

Nancy volunteers. “Nonsense, I am glad to help you. I believe the crabmeat stuffed in lobster mushrooms are next.”

Maria curtseys to Nancy. “Thank you for your help Maam” and they go into the kitchen.

Jenny says, “I believe lobster mushrooms are poisonous.”

David tries to reassure everyone. “Really Jenny? I can guarantee you that no one will really die tonight.”

Elizabeth adds, “Well, at least we know that the butler didn’t do it.” Laughter breaks the tension.

While Nancy and Maria serve the appetizers, Robert wants to hear more about the mushrooms. “Nancy, someone is concerned about the lobster mushrooms.”

Nancy clarifies. “No, these are porcini mushrooms, cut in the shape of a lobster. They’re perfectly safe,” then winks at everyone cheekily.

A spotlight shines briefly on a hypodermic needle on the sideboard, then that soft chime sounds. Only a few of the guests notice it.

Jim saw the hypodermic needle and was watching the others. “Since we are part of a murder mystery, I’d like to ask John about the nature of good and evil.”

John gestured with his hand. “Well, I certainly believe in good and evil. You see all sorts of unimaginable crimes against people because of anger, greed, envy and lust.”

Jenny inquires “the deadly sins padre?” then John continues.

“That’s right Jenny, along with gluttony, sloth and pride, but those three don’t usually lead to violence.”

As Maria and Nancy serve the appetizers, Laura shares her experience. “I think drugs are the problem. Nearly every violent criminal I have investigated was involved with illegal substances, either using or selling them.”

John adds “yes, but before that. What sends a person down that path to drugs and violence?”

Jim had his opinion. “Lack of education, poor parenting, drug use at home. It all begins in the home. If parents take care of their children and raise them right, drugs or gangs won’t tempt them. And it’s not limited to the poor. I know many poor families doing a great job at raising children.”

John kept the topic philosophical. “But what about faith? What about a person’s conscience? Why do some people resist the temptation of crime while others succumb to it?”

David notices that wineglasses are empty. “Maria would you please go to the wine cellar and get us another couple bottles?”

Maria nods and says “right away sir.” Jenny offers to go with her. They exit through the basement door.

Elizabeth brought them back to the conversation. “Are you saying that some people are born good and some are born bad?”

John answered, “What I am saying is that we have free will. We all have choices to make. Those who make bad choices follow a path that leads to crime, or in extreme cases, even eternal damnation.”

Laura agreed. “So everyone is responsible for his or her own actions.”

John nodded. “Remember, people don’t choose evil for evil’s sake. They are mistaken into thinking they are choosing happiness. This is how Satan deceives man.”

Robert wonders what happened to Maria and Jenny. “I think I’ll see what we have for a wine selection.”

“Aren’t some people pushed beyond their limit, their ability to make good choices? What about someone who steals to feed his family” said Elizabeth?

John added. “Yes, that seems like a paradox, stealing to feed your family. The fault lies in trying to understand the will of God. We are limited in our capacity to do so. Certainly the injustices of the world are one of those mysteries.”

A spotlight flashes briefly on a dagger hidden into the wallpaper, only the men hearing the chime in time to see the dagger. “What was that?” said Elizabeth, “what clue was shown?” No one was willing to answer.

Laura asked, “So why do good people fall out of God’s grace?”

John responded. “Man is an imperfect being, subject to sin throughout his life here. This is not the kingdom of Heaven. This world is where Satan’s lies and deceptions lead men astray. Only a focus on Christ and the word of God can repel the power of Satan.”

“But how many people can do that?” Laura asked John.

“Actually, no one can. That’s where grace comes in. Sometimes we are being protected without realizing it. But if you know something is wrong, then you have an obligation to resist it.”

Jim agreed. “I’m with the Padre. If you resist evil, you’ll get help from above. Maybe angels, maybe something else. But if you look for trouble, you will certainly find it.”

John was slowly winning over the others. “Very true Jim. How many of us can say they haven’t looked for trouble now and then?”

Laura asked John. “Even you Padre? Have you looked for trouble?”

John paused, remembering a time in his life when he was troubled. “Before I entered the seminary, I was almost lost to the dark side. My friends robbed a bank. Unfortunately, I was in the getaway car. The police caught them before they got to the car. When I heard gunshots, I took off out of there.”

Jim didn’t think John could have been involved. “So you didn’t know they were going to rob a bank?”

John was relieved to clear this up. “No and my friends never gave me up. They either wanted to protect me or knew it wouldn’t help them, maybe both.”

“You’re lucky Padre. Today, with DNA, we would have brought you in,” said Jim.

At this point, Maria, Jenny and Robert return, each straightening their clothing. Jenny and Robert take their seats while Maria pours new wine.

“So that’s when you decided to join the priesthood?” said Laura.

“No, things got even worse for me. A drunk driver killed my sister. She had just gotten engaged and was coming home from her shower.”

Jenny was visibly upset. “That’s terrible John. I’m so sorry.”

“Between escaping the bank robbery and the injustice of my sister’s death, my world was turned upside down. That’s when I started looking for answers.”

Laura asked “but you must have known that these circumstances had nothing to do with you.”

“I know,” said John. “But in my mind, you can either believe in free will or fate?”

“Can’t you believe in both” said Laura.

John thought for a moment. “Maybe. I personally think that man has free will, except for the important things in life.” The discussion was interrupted when Elizabeth hears her clue coming.

SOCIAL PARTIES ARE YOUR HOME FIELD. YOU KNOW HOW TO READ PEOPLE. DON'T BE FOOLED BY FIRST IMPRESSIONS. YOUR CLUE IS THAT THE MURDERER'S NAME HAS FIVE LETTERS.

“My friends and that drunk driver had free will. They decided to do what they did. But their decisions affected me greatly and after my sister’s death, I started to drink. It was only a year later when I realized I was self-destructing.”

Jim asked. “You mean you were falling victim to Satan?”

“Yes. That’s when I joined the seminary. I knew I needed a lot more than my own will power to survive. The order showed me how to protect myself and to help others.”

Although Robert understood the subtleties of John’s philosophy, he worked in a world where judgments were made in a black or white manner that is guilty or not guilty. “I can’t afford to make such distinctions. It doesn’t matter whether or not someone had free will, only that they understood the difference between right and wrong.”

Nancy and Maria bring out the main course: Asian duck marinated in a marsala sauce, risotto and finely cut vegetables inside of mu shu pancakes with hoisin sauce. Nancy announces “Bon appetite everyone!” The main course was a most welcome way to lighten the ambiance with more carnal pleasures. There was applause and pleasant comments as the food was set in front of everyone. The seriousness of John’s good and evil sermon was replaced with small talk and gentility.

As they were finishing their dinner, the grandfather clock struck seven times. The sounds of owls, thunder and rain are audible throughout the house now. Most of the guests had not heard their personal clue and their senses were heightened as they prepared to solve the mystery. Was John’s loquaciousness an attempt to divert attention from his true role as the murderer? What about the long absence of Maria, Jenny and Robert in the basement? How long could it take to find a couple bottles of wine? Antonio slipped out of sight for a while; and who brings a rabbit to a dinner party? Is it possible that the murderer has an accomplice? The only undisputable clue was that Steven was the victim. Finding the murderer will indeed be more difficult, as David had warned. Speaking of David, could he be the murderer?

With dinner finished and dessert to come later, the guests return to the library. The video monitor is now a focal point for clues. Maria is doing double duty, serving after dinner drinks and cleaning up the dining room table.

Elizabeth was the first to reiterate appreciation for the meal. “That dinner was divine Nancy. You can expect me at your restaurant before heading home.”

Nancy was humbled. “Just let me know; I’ll get you a table with a view of the bridge.”

Robert made a suggestion. “I say we all gather there for a celebration with the winner picking up the tab.”

Nancy liked the idea. "I'll even give you the murderer's discount."

None of the guests needed (or in John's case wanted) the \$10,000, so the atmosphere was generally convivial and more a friendly test of intellect, a game rich people play for amusement between their careers and obligations. As everyone settled down with their cognac and other aperitifs, Robert heard a chime in his earpiece and his clue.

AS A LAWYER, YOU SEE LIARS EVERYDAY. SOMEONE WILL TRY TO DECEIVE YOU. TREAT THEM AS YOU WOULD AN ADVERSARY. DO YOUR OWN RESEARCH AND DON'T ASK ANY QUESTIONS YOU DON'T ALREADY KNOW THE ANSWERS TO. YOUR CLUE IS THAT THE MURDERER IS NOT AFRICAN-AMERICAN.

Robert looked up, muttered to himself "Really?" and surmised that he wasn't being given as much help as the others.

"Did you get your clue Robert?" said Laura.

"Yes, but it wasn't that enlightening. Does anyone want to share their clues?" There were general smiles and silence all around. "That's what I thought. Then I'll just keep mine to myself too."

Laura couldn't contain her detective instincts. "While we're waiting for dessert, I think we should start exploring the house, looking for evidence. Jim, would you like to join me?"

Jim readily agreed, comfortable working with a detective. "Sure Laura", pulling out his small notepad, "I need a lot more information." Laura and Jim went upstairs.

A spotlight shows a wrench in a toolkit in the corner of the room, and the sound of the soft chime. Only Nancy and Antonio seemed to see the wrench and subtly look in another direction. "Did anyone see what the chime announced?" said Antonio, diverting attention away from him while trying to finesse information from the others. Shaking heads and silence were the response.

"Nancy, would you like to explore with me?" he said. Having completed her kitchen duties, she agreed.

"Sure, sounds like an adventure." They take the other stairway upstairs, on the opposite side of the house behind the location of the video monitor.

Robert decides to stay and make notes on his tablet. "I think I'll just consider the facts from here for now." He discovers that the house has a high-speed Wi-Fi connection as well, not at all surprising, but something that may be useful in his research.

Elizabeth gives Jenny a flirting glance, and then asks. “Jenny, you’re kind of a detective, examining patients and looking for clues for a diagnosis.”

Jenny replies to Elizabeth but addresses everyone. “I suppose so. But I’m not sure of anything except that Steven is the victim.” Then turning to David. “Do you think that there could be more than one murder?”

David stroked his chin. “It certainly is possible, but I won’t say any more than that.”

At this point, the silhouetted figures of two people kissing are visible in the monitor. “Look” said Robert, so that everyone would get this clue.

John then decides he would like to go upstairs. “I think I’ll explore by myself. This is one time I don’t trust anyone” laughing at his own comment. He starts by going into the kitchen, although there are stairs to the basement and second floor from there.

Robert looked at David. “Aren’t you going to search the house?”

David replied “no need. I’m sure I’m not the murderer and I can’t win the game.”

Elizabeth walks by Jenny and whispers something into her ear. “Yes, I would like to find out what’s going on upstairs too. Jenny, would you like to join me?”

Jenny makes eye contact and smiles. “Certainly, at least to keep an eye on the others.” They take the stairway. Halfway up the stairs, Elizabeth takes Jenny by the hand, although only Robert noticed this fact.

David asked Robert, “You don’t seem to be in a hurry to explore.”

Robert looked up from his tablet. “I think the answer to this mystery lies in watching others, listening to what they say and do and what they don’t say, like in court.”

David smiles. “You may have the right strategy Robert. Good luck.”

Laura comes back downstairs holding a bloody dagger with a gloved hand. “You might be interested to see what I found in the attic.”

Robert asks nervously “David, I hope that isn’t real blood.”

David replies “of course not, just a piece of the puzzle.” Before they could continue positing about the significance of the dagger, the lights go out. We hear thunder and footsteps. There is the shadow of a person running outside, past the first floor window.

Although still in darkness, Robert points it out to Laura. “Did you see that?”

Laura quickly deduced the significance. “Yes. That person was outside the house. If it were one of us, they would forfeit the game. We should be able to detect rain on their clothing.”

The lights come back on and Nancy returns as well announcing another discovery. “I found a clue. This rope was under a bed upstairs.”

Forgetting that she was involved in a game, Laura responded in her normal role as a detective. “Give that to me. There may be skin cells on it.”

Robert contradicted her theory. “Come now Laura. You can’t believe there has been an actual murder here, do you?”

Laura took a yard size white cloth out of her pocket, laid the dagger and rope on it and said “I’ll just keep an open mind until we have some answers.”

Nancy hears a chime in her earpiece and listens for her clue.

YOUR SEARCH HAS BEEN REWARDED. YOU FOUND A CLUE TO THE IDENTITY OF THE VICTIM. THE ROPE WAS PLACED UNDER THE BED BY THE MURDERER TO DISTRACT YOU. YOUR CLUE IS THAT THE VICTIM WAS POISONED.

Not wanting to let anyone know she got a clue, she quickly changed the attention back to Laura. “By the way, wasn’t Jim with you?”

Laura responded naturally. “Yes, but we split up to cover more rooms. Wasn’t Antonio with you?”

Nancy gave her answer quickly. “He pulled a disappearing act. I turned around and he had just vanished. Ironic for a magician, yes?”

Robert tried to put in a puzzle piece. “We saw the shadow of someone run across that window. It could have been Antonio.”

Laura added “or Jim, John, Elizabeth or Jenny. We will know more when everyone returns.”

Just as his name was mentioned, John returned from the kitchen, holding a small bottle of liquid labeled *Aconitum*. “I found this hidden in a kitchen cabinet. Nancy, is there any reason this would be used in cooking?”

Nancy had never heard of the substance. “Not that I know of. David, is this a clue?”

David took the bottle, read the label and then opened it. “Well, let’s see” and he took a sip, shocking his guests. “Well, I guess it’s not real poison.”

Laura realized the same fact. “Let’s put it on the table with the dagger and rope.” Then she heard the chime in her earpiece and her personal clue.

JUST BECAUSE YOU ARE A DETECTIVE, DO NOT ASSUME THAT YOU ARE ABOVE SUSPICION. IN FACT, SOMEONE IS TRYING TO LEAD OTHERS IN YOUR DIRECTION. YOUR CLUE IS THAT THE MURDERER IS A MAN.

Robert summed it up. A dagger, rope and poison, but no gun. Wasn’t Steven killed by a gunshot?”

Laura assumed so. “He must have been shot. I heard the gun. Let’s look for it.”

Robert held up his hand. “Wait a minute. Jim’s in uniform and I think he’s armed.”

Jim returns to find the others staring at him. “Jim, we think your gun was used to kill Steven.”

Jim is shocked. “No, it wasn’t,” showing his gun. Jim empties the bullets out and one is missing. “Someone is trying to frame me. This gun hasn’t been fired.”

Then Laura says, “Let me see your gun officer.” Jim hands her the gun. “He’s right. This gun hasn’t been fired.”

Jim was relieved to hear Laura defend him and now he hears a chime with his clue.

AS A POLICE OFFICER, YOU PROBABLY EXAMINED ALL OF THE EVIDENCE, BUT WHAT YOU DIDN’T KNOW WILL HELP YOU SOLVE THE CRIME. YOUR CLUE IS THAT THE VICTIM IS A MAN.

“But this one has” said Jenny as she comes into the room. “I found this one upstairs and it’s still smoking.”

Robert’s expression is incredulous. “A smoking gun. Really?”

Jenny hands Laura the gun. “Well, this may be smoking, but it’s not a real gun. It’s a starter pistol, but it sounds like the real thing.” Laura puts the gun on the table with the dagger, rope and poison.

Antonio and Elizabeth return. “What’s going on?” said Antonio. Then he hears the chime in his earpiece.

YOU ARE PROBABLY WONDERING WHY IT TOOK SO LONG TO GET YOUR CLUE, BUT YOUR PATIENCE WILL PAY OFF. YOUR CLUE IS THAT THE MURDERER LEFT THE HOUSE DURING THE GAME.

Steven enters the library with a bag of money, the kind you saw in the old monopoly game with an oversized dollar sign on it. "Here you go sir."

David took the bag. "Thank you Steven. It's time for each of you to guess the name of the murderer."

Jim was first to guess. "Well, let's look at our clues. We have a dagger with blood on it, a rope, a bottle of poison and a gun." I think it is Antonio. He was missing at some key times and he's the only one I can't account for."

Jenny agreed. "Yes, I think it was Antonio too."

Laura was the only real detective here. Surely her guess would be correct. "I think it was Jim. Even though we ruled his gun out as the weapon, he could have used the starter pistol earlier." Antonio and Nancy readily got on board with Laura's guess.

Robert added his thoughts. "But what about the person we saw running across the window? And why didn't anyone have rain on his or her clothing? I think it was Elizabeth. She was out quite a bit."

John agreed with Robert. "Yes, Elizabeth. She was out a couple times."

Elizabeth was surprised to hear she was being accused. She knew she didn't murder Steven. "Well, I happen to know the murderer's name had five letters. It was my personal clue, so I think it had to be Nancy. After all, there was poison in the kitchen."

David gave everyone the answer they had been waiting for. "You're all wrong! Actually, Steven was the murderer. He poisoned ME with the soup. But since I am required to manage the game, I could not divulge my secret until now. Remember the directions I gave you in the beginning. Only personal clues are accurate; whatever else you see, hear or infer could be misleading. You are likely to see and hear many things. Don't trust anyone."

Elizabeth objected. "Wait, my clue was that the murderer's name had five letters."

Then David explained. "Yes, Steven has five letters. S T E V and N. The E is used twice."

David points to Steven. “He doesn’t have rabbit hairs on his trousers anymore because he changed clothing when he came inside from the rain. His clothing was dry and there weren’t any rabbit hairs from when the rabbit cuddled up against him earlier. This means that no one here was correct and this money will go to charity.” The guests applauded David for his generosity and asked about having another game next year.

Nancy’s refined sense of smell alerted her. “Something smells funny.”

Robert looked up. “It’s coming from upstairs.”

Jim heads upstairs and returns with the package delivered earlier. “The smell is definitely coming from this package.” While Jim took a note out from brown paper wrapping, the guests looked at each other, while grimacing with the increasingly putrid smell.

“What does it say Jim?” People are holding their noses now, making exaggerated sounds of disgust. Jim reads the note out loud.

“To our detectives. I know you have all done your best to solve our mystery. Here’s some final food for thought.” Jim opens the box to show everyone the rotting contents. “I hope you enjoyed the red herrings.”

With no winner, the guests finish their drinks and have dessert. During the evening, acquaintances became friends and promises were made to keep in touch. A date to get together at Nancy’s restaurant was confirmed. David joins the others in an oversized limousine and Steven drives everyone to a jazz club in San Francisco.

Mozart’s chamber music emanated from the room speakers. The ominous sounds of owls, thunder and footsteps are gone. The sound of rain has been replaced by the swishing of washing dishes and the wind gusts by the vacuuming of carpets. Although no one was ever in danger, the house has taken on a peaceful, if not sedate, demeanor. Finally, Maria has finished putting away the dishes and is wiping down the excess water around the sink when she hears a chime. She pauses and looks at the speaker above her head when a voice comes on.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO JOIN ME FOR A DRINK?