

THE LEGEND OF SALLY B.

A Romantic Fantasy
by Marsha L. Grant © 1995.

CAST OF CHARACTERS (5 women, 2 men)

EMMA MCKENZIE (the self-sufficient widow, age 55)
KATE GARVEY (the frantic divorcee, age 40)
PRUDENCE WILLOBY (the eccentric, age 60)
JENNIFER GARVEY (the tentative pianist, age 16)
SALLY BELL (the legend, age 20)
BILL (the postman, age 45)
ROBERT BURNS (the professor, age 55)

TIME AND PLACE

All action takes place on a single unit set: the front porch and side garden of Emma McKenzie's shingled Victorian house in a small mid-western college town. The time is present. Running time 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

Act I, Scene 1, 4:00 PM on a Wednesday in mid-May
Act I, Scene 2, 10:00 AM, two weeks later
Act I, Scene 3, 8:30 PM the following Sunday evening

Act II, Scene 1, 7:30 PM, a month later
Act II, Scene 2, 11:00 AM, a week later

ACT I, Scene 1

[Front porch of a Victorian style house in a small college town. Porch is furnished with hanging plants, wicker chairs and side tables. At rise KATE is seated in a chair reading a fashion magazine. She is in her early 40's trying to look 25. Through the screen door we hear the Beethoven piano Sonata, Op. 49, No. 2, being played ineptly. It is four o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon in mid-May. SALLY enters. She is about 20 years old. Her attire is reminiscent of the 1960 flower children. She carries a small suitcase in one hand, the ad section of a folded newspaper in the other.]

SALLY: Is this 436 Maple?

KATE: Yes, it is.

SALLY: Are you Mrs. McKenzie?

KATE: No, I'm Kate Garvey, a friend of hers. What can I do for you?

SALLY: *(Indicates folded newspaper)* It says here she has a room for rent.

KATE: I wouldn't know about that. She's busy right now.

SALLY: Okay if I wait?

KATE: I suppose so.

SALLY: *(sitting on porch step)* Piano lesson?

KATE: Yes.

SALLY: Your kid?

KATE: My daughter. *(piano music stops)*

SALLY: Beginner, huh?

KATE: She's in her third year.

SALLY: Really! *(JENNIFER & EMMA enter the porch from the house.)*

EMMA: Jennifer, I'd like for you to have that first section memorized by next week.

JENNIFER: I'll try, Mrs. McKenzie.

KATE: Good lesson?

EMMA: She's coming along nicely, Kate. I want her to play the Beethoven sonata in the recital if she can get it ready in time.

KATE: Jennifer's looking forward to it, aren't you, dear?

JENNIFER: I don't know. It's awfully hard...

EMMA: It's a challenge, but I'm sure you can do it.

KATE: Of course she can. Ready to go, dear?

JENNIFER: You didn't have to wait for me, Mama.

KATE: I thought we'd stop by that little dress shop at the corner of Walnut and Elm...

JENNIFER: Why? Are they having a sale?

KATE: Have you forgotten? Your freshman prom is in two weeks.

JENNIFER: Mama, I wouldn't be caught dead in something from one of your little dress shops. They're for old ladies.

KATE: Jennifer, I may be on the brink of middle age, but I'm certainly not old.

JENNIFER: *(To Sally)* I like your outfit.

SALLY: You don't think it's too dated?

JENNIFER: No, it's really cool.

SALLY: Thanks.

KATE: Let's go, dear. If there's time after supper we'll run out to the Mall. Talk to you later, Emma.

EMMA: Sure thing, Kate. See you next week, Jennifer. *(JENNIFER & KATE exit)*

SALLY: Mrs. McKenzie?

EMMA: Yes?

SALLY: I'm here about the room for rent.

EMMA: What are you talking about?

SALLY: The room you advertised.

EMMA: You must be mistaken. I never advertised about a room.

SALLY: It's right here in the paper. Four-thirty-six Maple. This is the right address, isn't it?

EMMA: Yes, but I haven't advertised any room. The house next door is vacant. Four-thirty-eight Maple. It's probably a typo. I suggest you check with the realtor. *(turns to go into house)*

SALLY: *(running up the steps)* Wait, Mrs. McKenzie. Four-thirty-eight was rented this morning. I already checked. You live here alone, don't you? Widow? Lots of room in these old houses...

EMMA: *(startled)* I don't know where you got your information, but you'll have to excuse me. I don't have time to stand here chitchatting.

SALLY: You're not all that busy, Emma. You don't have another piano student until tomorrow. And you like to do your housework after supper while you watch Jeopardy.

EMMA: When did my private life become public domain?

SALLY: Is it all right if I call you Emma. It's a wonderful, old-fashioned name.

EMMA: *(controlling her impatience)* What you call me isn't relevant, because we have nothing further to discuss. Good day! *(she turns to enter house)*

SALLY: Please wait, Mrs. McKenzie. I didn't mean to be impertinent. Sometimes my thoughts just come tumbling out of my mouth... My mother always said it would get me in trouble someday. About the room...

EMMA: You also appear to have a hearing problem. There is no room...

SALLY: Yes, there is-- the one that used to be your daughter's. She played the piano, didn't she? Your prize pupil, I bet.

EMMA: (*visibly unnerved*) Where did you hear that?

SALLY: Just a lucky guess. I used to play my grandmother's old pump organ, but I wasn't very good at it.

EMMA: (*suspiciously*) I don't recall seeing you around here. What's your name?

SALLY: Sally B.

EMMA: "B"? That's your last name?

SALLY: That's what everybody calls me back home.

EMMA: Where's back home?

SALLY: A little town in Virginia you've never heard of.

EMMA: Young lady, if you're one of those religious fanatics, you're wasting your time. Go proselytize someone else.

SALLY: I'm not a religious fanatic, Mrs. McKenzie. I'm here about the room you advertised.

EMMA: And I told you, I didn't advertise any room. Somebody at the newspaper made a mistake. Now, I'd appreciate it if you'd be on your way...

SALLY: Please, Mrs. McKenzie...

EMMA: You're trying my patience, young lady. If you don't leave right now I'm calling the police.

SALLY: Please, just give me five minutes to explain...

EMMA: (*beat*) All right. If it will speed your departure, you have five minutes. Then you go. Understood?

SALLY: Understood. You used to be a full-time schoolteacher, right? Straight to the point. No crap. I like that.

EMMA: Are you being impertinent again, or just rude?

SALLY: Sorry. I seem to be saying all the wrong things. Mind if I sit?

EMMA: Be my guest. But don't expect a glass of lemonade.

SALLY: *(sits)* If it's this warm next week, I'll do the fixing. I'm sure Jennifer would like a glass after her lesson, and you definitely need something to revive your spirits. Three years and that's the best she can do? Wow! It's depressing, isn't it? Why does her mother insist she continue when she has neither the commitment nor the talent? *(beat)* Oh, I bet you're thinking, "how does she know all this?" Right? I'm a witch, can't you tell?

EMMA: *(looking at her watch)* You now have four minutes, so stop equivocating. I'm too old for fairy tales.

SALLY: Really? I don't think anyone should get that old. Takes the magic out of living, don't you think? *(Emma taps her watch and looks at Sally pointedly)* Okay. I'll explain. I'm a student, a graduate student, here for the summer session, and I need a place to stay. A fellowship pays tuition and fees, but living expenses are out of pocket, so I can't afford one of those fancy townhouses they built for married students and grads. I can't explain about the ad mix-up. Must have been fate that brought me to your door. You see, I do believe in fairy tales, fairy godmothers though, not witches. Anyway, since you do have a spare room, and it's only for a couple of months... I'd be happy to help you around the house for kitchen privileges.

EMMA: Don't push your luck. Is Sally B. your real name?

SALLY: It's kind of complicated.

EMMA: You've been given a reprieve. As you so eloquently phrased it, cut the crap and give it to me straight. You're certainly an audacious young woman, which is not necessarily a bad trait...

SALLY: But I could be one of those crazies you read about, right?

EMMA: Correct. Assuming that I believe you, what does the B" stand for?

SALLY: Bell.

EMMA: Then your name is Sally Bell?

SALLY: Actually, it's Sally Bell Whittington Thorpe.

EMMA: That's a bigger mouthful than McKenzie.

SALLY: I was named after my mother and my grandmother. Three Sally's. So, my grandmother was called Mama Sally; my mother was Sally A., for Adelaide; and I was Sally B. Bell was my grandmother's maiden name, and Whittington was my mother's. I'm not sure if Thorpe is my legal surname, because there was some question about the legality of my parents' marriage.

EMMA: Why is that?

SALLY: They were first or second cousins, I forget which. Anyway, it's all beside the point, because they had me, legally married or not, and here I am--mental faculties intact, and no other defects as far as I can tell.

EMMA: So it appears. Aren't you a bit young for graduate school? What was your major?

SALLY: Psychology. My grandmother taught me at home until I was twelve. I was a college freshman at sixteen, and graduated last year. I guess I inherited all the smart genes.

EMMA: My husband taught biology. He didn't put much faith in the behavioral sciences, because you couldn't dissect them under a microscope.

SALLY: A lot of psychologists now accept the theory that human behavior is determined as much by inheritance as by cultural influence. Since the mapping of DNA shows some diseases can be traced genetically, why not personality traits, talent, spunk, initiative?

EMMA: I hate to think every aspect of our lives is so rigidly predetermined. But it would explain Jennifer's total lack of musical talent. Her mother is completely tone deaf.

SALLY: But she could be outstanding in math or science--you know, predominate left-brain development.

EMMA: This is all very interesting, but we've gotten off the subject. Miss Bell, I live a sedate, well-ordered life. Taking in a boarder would disrupt my routine, and I no longer adjust well to changes.

SALLY: All I need is a place to sleep. You won't even know I'm around.

EMMA: I'm sorry, but you'll have to look elsewhere for a room.

SALLY: Okay. I understand. *(starts down the steps, then turns back)*
Did I tell you, you're getting a new neighbor next door?

EMMA: I hope it's not a family with a passel of snot-nosed kids.

SALLY: You got something against kids?

EMMA: Just other people's. This is a quiet street, mostly seniors and retired couples, and we like it that way.

SALLY: Sometimes a person can get too comfortable and miss the whole point of living.

EMMA: Perhaps, but fortunately most of the young marrieds with babies are buying out in the suburbs--street after street of identical split-levels, springing up faster than dandelions in April. And that's just fine with us. We don't want their rowdy hooligans trampling our flowers and littering our front yards with pop cans.

SALLY: Not to worry, Mrs. McKenzie. I have it on good authority that your new neighbor is male and single. A professor, I believe.

EMMA: In that case, I'll ring Kate this evening and pass on the news. No, on second thought... I'll keep it a secret as long as possible. Ever since her divorce... Well, I shouldn't gossip about my friends.

SALLY: *(laughing)* Maybe you're the one who should be wary, Mrs. McKenzie. Your new neighbor might change the way you think about things and blow your nice, comfortable routine straight to... heaven only knows.

EMMA: You're outrageous as well as impertinent, Sally B. Where did you get that crazy idea?

SALLY: I believe in fairy godmothers, remember? Well, I'll be on my way. *(Emma pensively watches her leave, then reacts.)*

EMMA: Just a minute, Sally... *(Sally turns back)* Would you...uh...like something to eat before you go?

SALLY: I don't want to trouble you.

EMMA: No trouble. I was just going to fix myself a sandwich.

SALLY: It's nice of you to offer, but I need to find a place before dark.

EMMA: Of course. Be careful.

SALLY: I will. *(exits)*

EMMA: *(shouting)* Miss Bell...

SALLY: *(enters)* Yes, Mrs. McKenzie?

EMMA: It is getting late, and I hate to think of you out walking the streets after dark. I suppose I could offer you a bed for tonight, then you can resume your search in the morning.

SALLY: No, I'd rather not. But thanks, anyway.

EMMA: You know, you remind me of my daughter. She was impertinent and self-willed, too.

SALLY: Really? I'd like to hear about her sometime.

EMMA: I expect we'll run into each other. It's a small town.

SALLY: Yes, it is.

EMMA: Well...good luck.

SALLY: Thanks. *(again EMMA watches her cross offstage, then runs down the steps)*

EMMA: Sally?

SALLY: *(stops and turns back)* Yes?

EMMA: You say it's only for two months?

SALLY: Then I'm out of here.

EMMA: Well... I was thinking... that is... maybe we could try it for a couple of weeks... and if it doesn't work out...

SALLY: *(crosses to EMMA)* I find another place. Sure. That sounds good.

EMMA: Will your out-of-pocket change cover seventy dollars a week?

SALLY: How about fifty, and I buy my own food.

EMMA: Sixty, and you eat what I eat. A trial period...

SALLY: For two weeks.

EMMA: Then we'll take it from there.

SALLY: Fair enough. I think I'd like that sandwich now.

EMMA: And some lemonade?

SALLY: And some lemonade. *(she climbs the steps to the porch)*

BLACKOUT

ACT I, Scene 2

[10:00 AM, two weeks later. A power hedge trimmer is heard offstage. EMMA, dressed in a bright colored new jogging outfit, steps out on the porch sipping a cup of coffee. She looks in the direction of the noise, obviously annoyed. Shrub clippings are tossed onstage. She runs over and grabs them up.]

EMMA: *(shouting)* Hey! What do you think you're doing?

ROBERT: *(enters as he turns off the hedge trimmer)* Good morning. Beautiful day isn't it?

EMMA: *(angrily)* You're smothering my flowers!

ROBERT: What flowers?

EMMA: They will be flowers if you don't kill them first. Don't stand there. You're crushing the Coreopsis. *(he steps to one side)* No, not there! *(he steps across the narrow border)* I just transplanted those lilies. If you smash the tops they won't bloom.

ROBERT: Sorry, I was just trying to tame these overgrown brambles and bring nature to heel, as it were.

EMMA: Apparently, your knowledge of horticulture parallels your use of the metaphor.

ROBERT: *(laughs)* I confess to complete ignorance of the former, but I'm usually better with figures of speech.

EMMA: That tool you're wielding is an affront to nature. If you want your shrubs squared into cubes, replace them with painted boxes. It would be more economical, and certainly quieter.

ROBERT: I'll take it under consideration. But how do I clear a path through this jungle without getting into deeper trouble with you?

EMMA: I'll show you how to prune them properly. They're fine specimens of *Viburnum Carlesi*, and you want to preserve their natural shape.

ROBERT: I look forward to my first lesson, Mrs... ?

EMMA: McKenzie. Emma McKenzie.

ROBERT: I'm Robert Burns, your new neighbor. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance... I think. Can we call a truce and start over?

EMMA: Of course. You certainly have an unforgettable name, Robert Burns. Are you a descendant, by any chance?

ROBERT: No, I just teach poetry, not write it.

EMMA: At the college?

ROBERT: Guilty

EMMA: Well then, Professor Burns, after you've bagged these clippings, join me for a cup of coffee on the front porch. And try not to step on my perennials.

ROBERT: *(as EMMA crosses to porch)* If that coffee's freshly brewed, I'm forever in your debt. Instant is a poor substitute. Leaves a lousy aftertaste. *(BILL enters)*

EMMA: Just so happens I have fresh pot brewing. It will be ready when you are.

BILL: Mornin', Miz McKenzie.

EMMA: Morning, Bill. How's the lumbago today?

BILL: Lots better, thanks to you. That young doc you sent me to? He give me some pills that took all the pain away... downright miraculous, if you ask me. *(pulls some mail from his bag)* Let's see, light day for 436.

Just your phone bill and Mature Wisdom. Oh, Miz Cramer got home from the hospital yesterday. Thought you'd like to know.

EMMA: Thanks, Bill. I'll drop by and see her this afternoon. This is Dr. Burns, your new customer at 438.

BILL: Pleased to meetcha. I like puttin' a face with the number. More friendly like, if you know what I mean. What's your specialty, Doc?

ROBERT? Literature, not lumbago, I'm afraid.

BILL: Well, 'spect folks need their heads doctored, too. Nothing' in the bag for 438, but that'll change soon as those mail order places get a-hold of your new address. Have a nice day, folks.

EMMA: You, too, Bill. (*BILL exits L as SALLY enters R, and EMMA goes into the house*)

SALLY: Hi there. You must be Dr. Burns. I'm Sally B.

ROBERT: It's a pleasure to meet you Sally B. You a member of the family?

SALLY: I like to think I am. I see you met Bill. He's our neighborhood watchman... looks out for the people on his route. Let's us know who's sick or in the hospital. I bet you didn't get that kind of service in the city?

ROBERT: Not likely. The Pittsburgh post office thought rain, sleet, and dark of night were official holidays. (*they cross to porch*)

SALLY: Like your new digs?

ROBERT: They're a bit more spacious than I'm accustomed to.

SALLY: Beats a two-room efficiency, doesn't it? Too bad about your wife.

ROBERT: Are you writing my biography?

SALLY: I have a sixth sense about some people.

ROBERT: Does your sixth sense predict the future?

SALLY: Nope. That's where I come in. (*EMMA appears at the screen door with a tray, coffeepot, mug, sugar bowl, cream pitcher.*) Here, let me help you with that.

EMMA: Thanks, I can manage. Just hold the door, please. I thought you had a class this morning.

SALLY: I do. Left a book I need up in my room.

EMMA: Have you met Dr. Burns?

SALLY: Just did. *(sotto voice to Emma)* Not bad, huh? I'll scoot out the back way so I don't interrupt your tête-à-tête. *(to both as she exits into the house)* See you two later.

ROBERT: Your daughter is a very attractive young lady.

EMMA: Impertinent is more like it. And she's not my daughter. Sally's boarding with me while she attends master classes this summer. How do you take your coffee?

ROBERT: Just black, thank you. *(takes his cup and sniffs the aroma)* "My dearest mead, a friend's esteem and praise. To you I sing, in simple Scottish lays..."

EMMA: You're a native of Scotland, then.

ROBERT: Never been there. Born and raised in Pennsylvania, and until recently, on the faculty at Carnegie Tech. But it's on my agenda when I retire.

EMMA: When will that be?

ROBERT: Every year there's a new crop of bright, young grads shoving aside the old to make room for the new. It's only a matter of time 'til I'm one of the casualties.

EMMA: You seem too vital to be toppled so easily, Dr. Burns.

ROBERT: Just an illusion, Mrs. McKenzie. I saw the shadow of the swinging axe, so I pulled up stakes and moved west, where folks have more respect for the wisdom of their elders, I hope.

EMMA: Life may proceed at a slower pace in a small town, but none of us is exempt from the passage of time.

ROBERT: Which finds me more prone to reflection than the exploration of new paths, I'm afraid.

EMMA: I don't believe you're as staid as you sound, Dr. Burns.

ROBERT: Call me, Robert, or Bob, if you prefer. I shed the prefix when I leave the classroom.

EMMA: And I'm Emma. *(laughs)* The day I met Sally, she accused me of being as complacent as you claim to be. Now, she has me jogging with her every morning. Better watch out. Her enthusiasm is contagious.

ROBERT: She won't get this disabled academic out pounding the pavement. *(indicates his knee)* Old soccer injury.

EMMA: For real?

ROBERT: I'll take the Fifth on that.

EMMA: Won't do you any good. Sally has powers beyond human ken.

ROBERT: Does she now. Have you known her long?

EMMA: Just a couple of weeks in which she's managed to turn my whole world upside down. She sparkles with a zest for life so reminiscent of my daughter at that age.

ROBERT: Does she live close by? Your daughter, I mean.

EMMA: *(beat)* My daughter is dead, Dr. Burns.

ROBERT: I'm sorry to hear that. And it's Robert, remember? If you don't mind me asking, how did she die?

EMMA: Sarah was killed in an automobile accident... on the way to California with her husband and new baby.

ROBERT: Recently?

EMMA: Nineteen years ago.

ROBERT: How tragic. What happened to her husband and the baby?

EMMA: Emily lives in California with her father.

ROBERT: I see. *(beat)* What was your daughter like?

EMMA: Beautiful, bright, and talented. She planned to attend Oberlin and major in music.

ROBERT: What happened?

EMMA: She fell in love with a student here at the university.

ROBERT: That's hardly catastrophic....

EMMA: No... but I thought so at the time, and made the mistake of saying so.

ROBERT: And to assert her independence, she married the guy.

EMMA: Yes, and immediately became pregnant with Emily.

ROBERT: Well, it wasn't the end of the world. Married students abound in the halls of higher learning.

EMMA: I know... and we offered to help: money, babysitting, whatever was needed. They were adamant in their refusal.

ROBERT: Stubborn pride however misguided. Ah, yes, I remember it well. So, what did they do?

EMMA: Her husband had a job lined up in Oakland, so after Emily was born they left here for California. Just outside of Ogden, Utah, their car skidded on a patch of ice and crashed into a bridge abutment. Sarah was killed instantly.

ROBERT: Her husband?

EMMA: Only minor injuries. And Emily, strapped into her car seat, blessedly was unhurt.

ROBERT: I can't begin to imagine your sense of loss, but surely your granddaughter has been a comfort. My guess is that you are an extraordinary grandmother.

EMMA: I would have liked the chance to be, and that's another tragedy. For reasons we never understood, Emily's father discouraged us from sharing in her life.

ROBERT: Jealous of your influence?

EMMA: Perhaps. But still, you'd think...

ROBERT: Have you tried to contact your granddaughter recently? She's old enough now that she might want to know her mother's side of the family.

EMMA: I'm afraid she'll reject me, and the heartache will start all over again.

ROBERT: What if you're wrong?

EMMA: I don't even want to think about that possibility. I've learned to live with it, so let's move on to a safer subject, shall we?

ROBERT: *(on a lighter note)* O-K. I haven't seen your husband around. Is he out of town?

EMMA: My husband died several years ago.

ROBERT: Sorry, wrong question. Now I'm at a loss to continue.

EMMA: It's your turn now, tit for tat. What dark secrets are you willing to reveal?

ROBERT: Only the loss of a wife who, after fifteen years of marital boredom, left me high and dry on the banks of the Susquehanna for a demolition derby driver.

EMMA: *(laughing)* You're kidding!

ROBERT: I know it sounds like the plotline from a dime novel, but it's God's honest truth.

EMMA: Any children?

ROBERT: No.

EMMA: Too bad.

ROBERT: Debatable.

EMMA: Not really. Have another cup of coffee.

PRU: *(enters wearing a dirty smock, garden hat and gloves, and carrying a basket of seedlings.)* I'd love a cup, Emma. Been digging in my garden all morning, and I'm plum tuckered out. Before I expired among the Shasta's, I wanted you to have some of this Monardo. There's yellow loosestrife mixed in with it, the ordinary garden variety that spreads like a weed and can't stand up to a gentle breeze. Messy stuff. *(falls into a chair)* Introduce me to your gentleman caller.

EMMA: Pru, I'd like you to meet our new neighbor, Robert Burns.
Robert, this is Prudence Willoby, who lives two houses down from you.

PRU: "O MY LUVE'S like a red, red rose,
That's newly sprung in June:
O my Luve's like the melodie
That's sweetly played in tune!"

ROBERT: I'm impressed.

PRU: You should be. I thought you died.

ROBERT: This is my current reincarnation. I plan to improve upon it in my next life.

PRU: Sense of humor. Good! I like him, Emma. He's a keeper.

ROBERT: Glad you approve. I just got settled in. Don't want to go through the hassle of moving again.

PRU: Oh, that wouldn't be necessary. If we didn't like you, Emma would serve the elderberry wine.

ROBERT: And bury me in the cellar, I presume.

PRU: Clever fellow.

EMMA: Thanks for the divisions, Pru. Keep Robert entertained while I get another cup.

PRU: Better make that two. I see more company coming.

KATE: *(enters carrying an oversized tote)* Morning, folks. Teatime already?

EMMA: Morning, Kate. Have a seat and meet our new neighbor. I'll be back in a jiff. *(exits into house)*

KATE: I'm Katherine Garvey, one of Emma's oldest friends. And you must be the professor she's been hiding from me.

ROBERT: *(extends his hand)* Robert Burns. Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Garvey.

KATE: Call me Kate. We don't stand on ceremony... Robert.

PRU: You don't stand, period, if you can help it. Are we on the brink of world war three? Can't think of anything else that would get you out of bed before The Young and the Restless.

KATE: Don't be silly, Pru. I'm up at the crack of dawn every day. I have a daughter still in school, remember.

PRU: Jennifer's been fixing her own breakfast since she was tall enough to reach the counter top.

KATE: My goodness, Pru, but we're in a feisty mood today. She's such a tease, Robert. I may call you Robert, mayn't I?

PRU: You already have.

KATE: Pru, don't you have something important to do, like oiling your wheelchair?

PRU: Did it before breakfast, Kate. Also washed my pelvic girdle and support hose. You don't happen to have a box of Depends in that feedbag, do you? I'm fresh out.

EMMA: (*enters with two coffee mugs*) Behave yourself, girls. You'll embarrass our guest.

PRU: When you reach my age, you're entitled to speak your mind. But Kate better exercise a little diplomacy, or she'll scare off the latest new man in town before she can sink her canines into him.

KATE: Forgive us, Robert. We forget how rude our good-natured teasing must sound to a stranger.

ROBERT: (*laughs*) I find it enormously entertaining. I don't suppose you ladies would accompany me to the president's cocktail party on Sunday, would you? It's sure to be dreadfully dull, so you must promise to be on your worst behavior.

KATE: I'd love to, Robert.

PRU: Cool it, Kate. It was a rhetorical question.

KATE: A what...?

PRU: He was just making conversation.

KATE: Oh.

PRU: Emma, how's your summer tenant working out?

EMMA: Great! Would you believe, she has me jogging with her every morning?

KATE: I can't imagine what you were thinking, taking a total stranger into your house. With all the ghastly things you read about these days, I'd be afraid...

EMMA: ...that she'll murder me in my bed some night? Or skip town with the family silver? I hardly think so, Kate. She's been the most wonderful company for me. Every day is a new adventure.

PRU: I believe it. You've lost ten years in two weeks. Not even Jenny Craig can do that. Your boarder stays with me next semester.

EMMA: She really is a lovely person. A bit fey at times...

KATE: Fey? I thought her name was Sally something.

PRU: F-e-y, Kate.

KATE: What?

PRU: A touch of the blarney.

KATE: Huh?

PRU: Never mind. I keep forgetting you're functionally illiterate except for ads spelled s-a-l-e.

ROBERT: Well, ladies, I, too, must admit to having some trepidation about Sally.

KATE: See Emma. I told you!

ROBERT: It's a bit eerie when someone you meet for the first time recounts your past history verbatim. But I have to agree with Emma. Sally seems to be nothing short of overtly gregarious and totally engaging.

KATE: What's that supposed to mean?

PRU: She likes people, Kate.

KATE: Oh.

ROBERT: However, if it will ease your mind, Mrs. Garvey...

KATE: It's Kate, remember?

ROBERT: Kate. When I get to my office, I'll pull up her file on the computer. It'll have all the data on her background.

EMMA: I don't want her to think we're spying on her...

KATE: What do you really know about her, Emma? Where's she from? What's her family like? Did she provide any references?

EMMA: I know what she's told me, and I'm satisfied.

KATE: You may scoff, but Mrs. Sims...over on Hickory? Two days dead in her own bedroom before someone found her.

PRU: She died from a cerebral hemorrhage, Kate. Natural causes, not foul play.

KATE: Just the same, you can't be too careful. When we were having that rash of burglaries last summer, I installed an alarm system with outdoor lights...

PRU: Kate's house lights up like a neon circus, complete with a calliope and bagpipes whenever some poor, unwary critter sets foot on her property. Single-handed, she's decimated the entire population of raccoons.

ROBERT: Did they ever catch the burglar?

PRU: No. I think it was just some kids up to mischief. There weren't any actual break-ins, and nothing of real value was taken. Just stuff people left out in their yard: garden hoses, a wheelbarrow, some tools.

ROBERT: Your thief must have been a gardener. Did the police search Emma's tool shed?

EMMA: No comment.

KATE: Well, I think you're entirely too trusting, Emma. I want Robert to check out this Sally person as soon as possible. I'm worried for your sake, even if you aren't. She has such a weird last name-- "B," or something like that.

EMMA: Her name is Sally Bell Whittington Thorpe, and she explained to me why she calls herself Sally B. It's a delightful story, but I'll save it for another day. You'll have to excuse me, dear friends. I have things to do and the morning's about gone. *(starts collecting the coffee mugs)*

PRU: Who wants to go with me to the new factory outlet mall?

KATE: Are you kidding? Sale city, here I come!

PRU: I'll pick you up at 12:30. What about you, Emma?

EMMA: Some other time. Sally and I are going to an exhibit this afternoon. Sculptures made from recycled trash!

KATE: Weird! Very weird!

PRU: Ta, ta, ladies. Nice to meet you, neighbor. *(exits) (ROBERT opens the screen door for EMMA)*

ROBERT: Thanks for the coffee, Emma. By the way, I was serious about the invite on Sunday. I hate going to these things alone, and it's a command performance for new faculty.

EMMA: Let me think about it, okay? I'll let you know. *(exits)*

[SALLY appears at the side of the house, hidden from KATE and ROBERT'S view.]

KATE: *(takes ROBERT'S arm as they descend the steps)* Since we're going in the same direction... By 'alone,' do you mean there's no Mrs. Burns?

ROBERT: That's correct.

KATE: Widower?

ROBERT: Divorced. A long time ago.

KATE: Then I would be honored to have you escort me to the President's party on Sunday. Emma won't go. She never attended university functions when her husband was on staff. While I, on the other hand, look forward to an opportunity to mingle with the distinguished gentlemen of academia... *(they exit)*

SALLY: Damn! That woman could ruin everything. You've got your work cut out for you, Sally B.

BLACKOUT

ACT I, Scene 3

[Sunday evening. 8:30 PM. EMMA is sitting on the porch listening to Vivaldi. The scene is lit from the front by moonlight and backlit through the windows of the house. ROBERT enters from the direction of his house.]

ROBERT: Nice evening, isn't it?

EMMA: Yes, it is.

ROBERT: Full moon.

EMMA: It's the strawberry moon.

ROBERT: Why is that?

EMMA: June is the month you pick strawberries.

ROBERT: Of course. What's that fragrance I smell?

EMMA: Lilacs.

ROBERT: The purple flowers I see everywhere?

EMMA: Hard to miss them this time of year.

ROBERT: Haven't seen you out in your garden recently.

EMMA: Sally's kept me busy doing other things. Come join me.

ROBERT: Thought you'd never ask. *(steps up onto the porch)*

EMMA: May I get you something--a glass of wine, cup of coffee?

ROBERT: No, thank you. I'm intoxicated with the aroma of the night air. Will it give me a hangover in the morning?

EMMA: The best kind. How was the President's party this afternoon?

ROBERT: Dull, as I expected. We left early.

EMMA: Did Kate have a good time?

ROBERT: She seemed to be enjoying herself until a couple of faculty wives threatened to serve her up with the canapés.

EMMA: Her daughter is one of my piano students, but it's an exercise in futility.

ROBERT: Was she the one I heard butchering Beethoven Wednesday afternoon?

EMMA: Sad, wasn't it?

ROBERT: Down right bloody. *(SALLY enters from house with an armload of books)*

SALLY: Hi, Dr. Burns. Great night, huh? Don't let me interrupt anything. I've got to run over to the library, but I'll be back before nine. "An Affair to Remember" is going to be on AMC. Stick around. I'll make some popcorn.

ROBERT: Sorry, but I have to revise some lecture notes.

SALLY: And miss the most romantic movie of the century? Emma, see if you can change his mind. *(exits)*

EMMA: *(laughs)* Subtle, wasn't she?

ROBERT: You're a very pretty lady, Emma McKenzie, especially with the moonlight shining on your face.

EMMA: Don't I wish, but it's kind of you to say so. Every time I look into a mirror I'm reminded of the passing years.

ROBERT: What are you talking about? You're in the prime of life, Miss Emma MacKenzie. Why, you don't look a day over... fifty.

EMMA: Thanks a lot. If you're trying to flatter me, you should have said 40. Kate claims she's only 29.

ROBERT: *(laughs)* With a teenage daughter?

EMMA: Kate and I grew up together. We make allowances for our little vanities.

ROBERT: Somebody ought to clue her in. She's not fooling anybody.

EMMA: Was there a purpose to this visit, or were you just lonesome?

ROBERT: Both. After class on Friday, I pulled up Sally's file on the computer.

EMMA: Oh?

ROBERT: Are you interested in what I found out?

EMMA: I'm afraid you're going to tell me something I don't want to hear.

ROBERT: Nothing you need worry about.

EMMA: That's a relief.

ROBERT: Except that her file is oddly incomplete.

EMMA: In what way?

ROBERT: There's no record of her academic history, and she lists her home address as 436 Maple.

EMMA: That is strange. Maybe she didn't have to furnish that information since she's here just for the summer session.

ROBERT: Students taking master classes are required to furnish a record of their undergraduate work to prove eligibility. Nobody I talked to could explain the oversight.

EMMA: They probably screwed up the paperwork. It happens all the time.

ROBERT: Well, if it's important to you, ask her yourself.

EMMA: I don't have any reason to. You're the one who thinks she's here under false pretenses.

ROBERT: If you recall, it was Kate who questioned her credibility, not I.

EMMA: You went out of your way to accommodate her.

ROBERT: I thought I was doing you a favor.

EMMA: Whatever gave you that idea?

ROBERT: I don't know. (beat) Can we change the subject?

EMMA: Don't you have some lecture notes to revise?

ROBERT: Yes, but I don't think I could concentrate on Tennyson right now.

EMMA: Why? Don't you like Tennyson?

ROBERT: Of course I like Tennyson, otherwise I wouldn't teach it. I also like Shakespeare, and Shelly, and Keats. I'm a fool for all the romantic poets.

EMMA: Me, too. "Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
When I embark;"

ROBERT: Are you planning to go somewhere?

EMMA: No. Those lines by Tennyson gave me some comfort after Sarah died. I'm surprised I still remember them.

ROBERT: Brought to mind, no doubt, by our conversation a few days ago.

EMMA: Which causes me acute embarrassment every time I think about it. I don't usually pour out the story of my life to someone I just met. You must think me a poor Blanche DuBois, relying on the kindness of strangers.

ROBERT: Not even close. What have you and Sally been up to?

EMMA: Yesterday, we drove out into the countryside, picked wildflowers, stopped by a couple of antique shops, had supper at a roadside inn... Can't remember when last I had so much fun.

ROBERT: You make it sound like you didn't have much of a life until Sally appeared on the scene.

EMMA: I guess I didn't.

ROBERT: Then I'm happy for you. But remember, Sally is here just for the summer. She's not a surrogate for your daughter.

EMMA: That was cruel thing to say.

ROBERT: Sorry. I guess it's none of my business.

EMMA: You're right. It's none of your business.

ROBERT: Why should I care if you make a fool of yourself over some slip of a girl who inveigled her way into your home...

EMMA: Now, you sound like Kate.

ROBERT: Kate says what she thinks, because she cares about you.

EMMA: If she really gave a damn, she'd understand why I need someone like Sally in my life.

ROBERT: Emma, you don't strike me as the kind of person who has to have someone to lean on. You seem admirably self-sufficient. What is it about Sally that you think you need?

EMMA: Her youthful energy... her enthusiasm... and simply, her company. I have someone to talk to again.

ROBERT: You have your friends.

EMMA: Not on a daily basis.

ROBERT: And after she leaves, what then?

EMMA: I haven't thought that far ahead.

ROBERT: I'm beginning to think she is a witch. She definitely has you under a spell.

EMMA: If she has, then it's my good fortune. Do you know that I used to look forward to the sameness of each day? My comfortable routine made me feel secure, in control of things. And if nothing changed except the seasons, I could ride out the rest of my life in peace... no risk of being hurt again.

ROBERT: The older I get, the more I subscribe to that philosophy.

EMMA: Then you're the poorer man for it. *(Sally enters from offstage still carrying the stack of books)* That was quick. Weren't they open?

SALLY: I don't know. I turned around before I got there.

EMMA: Something wrong?

SALLY: You and Dr. Burns.

ROBERT: I beg you pardon?

SALLY: Dr. Burns, you came over here tonight to ask Emma out to dinner. I wish you'd do it before the movie starts.

EMMA: *(to Robert)* You did?

ROBERT: It was on my mind...

SALLY: Everything's in turmoil tonight. *(dumps the books in Emma's lap)* Here, take these inside for me. I've got to run over to Jennifer's. She and her mother just had one hell of a row, and I'm afraid she's going to do something stupid. I'll get her straightened out and be back in an hour. That should give Dr. Burns enough time. *(exits offstage)*

ROBERT: How did she know that?

EMMA: You just admitted she's a witch. Well, Dr. Burns, was there something you wanted to ask me?

ROBERT: Mrs. McKenzie, may I have the pleasure of your company at dinner tomorrow night?

EMMA: I don't think that would be a good idea.

ROBERT: Why? Don't you eat dinner?

EMMA: Robert, we're friends, and that's enough for now.

ROBERT: I wasn't suggesting anything else.

EMMA: Your invitation to dinner does.

ROBERT: Since when did a dinner date mean anything but having dinner together? I'm not suggesting we have an affair.

EMMA: But that's how it starts. One dinner, then two, then every other night, then a night spent together...

ROBERT: Is that what worries you?

EMMA: It scares me to death.

ROBERT: Then quit jumping to conclusions.

EMMA: I'm not. I've been through it before.

ROBERT: I see. Well, then...

EMMA: About a year after my husband died I started going out again, dating friends of friends--you know how that goes. There was one gentleman I grew quite fond of, and we began seeing each other on a regular basis. But I didn't want to marry him, and I wouldn't go to bed with someone who wasn't my husband. That ended our relationship abruptly and unhappily. I have no desire to repeat that course of events.

ROBERT: Keep it casual. Is that what you mean?

EMMA: If we don't get involved, we can remain friends.

ROBERT: Emma, I like you. And this is the first time in more than a dozen years, I've had the nerve to ask a woman to go out with me. You're afraid of getting hurt in a serious relationship. I'm petrified I'll blow a simple dinner date.

EMMA: Let me think about it, okay?

ROBERT: You have one minute, then I slit my wrists.

EMMA: Promise you won't make it a habit.

ROBERT: If you're lousy company, it's a moot question.

EMMA: After dinner we come straight home.

ROBERT: Naturally.

EMMA: If I should have too much to drink...

ROBERT: I make it a policy of never taking advantage of inebriated women.

EMMA: That's good to know.

ROBERT: However, if you get soused, where do I dump the body?

EMMA: Right here on the porch is fine.

ROBERT: You got it.

EMMA: I like small, family-owned restaurants, simple food and a good wine.

ROBERT: Are you always this hard to please?

EMMA: I'm also a fool for ambiance, candlelight and roses.

ROBERT: That's precisely what I had in mind.

EMMA: In that case... what time are you picking me up?

BLACKOUT

ACT II, Scene 1

[7:30 PM, one month later. EMMA, wearing jeans and an over-sized man's shirt, is on her hands and knees working in her flower garden. She pulls up a bedraggled specimen and examines it's roots.]

EMMA: Poor little thing. Never had a chance after somebody we know plunked his big foot on you. Well, rest in peace. *(buries the plant and smooths the soil over it)*

SALLY: *(enters from house)* Emma, you're missing Jeopardy.

EMMA: I know.

SALLY: You're just mad because I got the answer to "Genus of Maple trees" before you did.

EMMA: I said Acer. You forgot to say, "What is." *(pulls up another dead plant)* Oh, dear! Another one didn't make it.

SALLY: *(crosses to EMMA)* Want some help burying the dead?

EMMA: Have you seen my weeding fork? I thought I left it on the porch when I came in last night.

SALLY: No. Is it in the tool shed?

EMMA: I already checked. Maybe Robert borrowed it. Bring me that watering can. We could sure use some rain.

SALLY: Why don't you put the soaker hose on them overnight?

EMMA: I can't find it.

SALLY: That's strange. How can you lose a garden hose?

EMMA: Some of my clay pots are missing, too.

SALLY: Pru probably took them and forgot to tell you.

EMMA: I heard that someone over on Ash is missing a leaf blower.

SALLY: You don't suppose....

EMMA: The garden ghoul has returned? My thoughts, exactly.

SALLY: Should I call the police?

EMMA: Waste of time. They have better things to do than stake out the neighborhood for a petty garden thief

SALLY: Where's the professor this evening?

EMMA: Grading papers.

SALLY: Too bad. I thought you might have a date with him tonight.

EMMA: And I thought your field was psychology, not matchmaking, Miss Busybody. Don't you have some studying to do?

SALLY: According to Pru, you and Dr. Burns are an item.

EMMA: Pru should tend her own garden.

SALLY: You like him, don't you?

EMMA: I let him kiss me last night.

SALLY: I know. I saw you through the window.

EMMA: Now you're a peeping Tom.

SALLY: How was it?

EMMA: Titillating.

SALLY: That good, huh?

EMMA: Exciting...like that fluttery feeling you get in the pit of your stomach when the best looking boy in school finally asks you out.

SALLY: Really!

EMMA: Trouble is, I know how it ends.

SALLY: So?

EMMA: So, I'm too old to ride that roller coaster again.

SALLY: Take a chance, Emma. He's worth it.

EMMA: I'll think about it. (*ROBERT enters*)

ROBERT: Evening, ladies. I beheld your fair countenance from yon window, and decided it was time for a break.

EMMA: Watch where you step. If we don't get some rain, all my babies are going to dry up and die.

ROBERT: Then let's invoke the power of the rain god. Come on, you two. We have to get in a circle. Now stamp your feet, pound your chest with your fists, and sing the magic words: "a-wimoweh, a-wimoweh, a-wimoweh, a-wimoweh, oh the lion roars tonight..." (*phone rings*) That's the rain god calling to ask if we want a light drizzle or a raging flood.

SALLY: (*crosses to house*) Keep singing, you two. I'll be right back. (*exits into house*)

ROBERT: (*hands EMMA two theatre tickets*) Look what I got for Friday night.

EMMA: Andre Previn in concert. Oh, you beautiful man.

ROBERT: (*bows and takes her hand*) Thought it would please you, milady. (*kisses it*) Yuk. You taste like mother earth. Get a bath before Friday, or I'll ask Kate to go with me.

EMMA: You wouldn't dare! (*flash of lightning followed by a loud crash of thunder*) Did you hear that? Rain!

ROBERT: I'll be...! It really works. (*gives her a peck on the cheek*) See you Friday, fair maiden. (*exits*)

[EMMA gathers up her tools and crosses to the front porch as SALLY enters from the house. Intermittent rumbling thunder and occasional sheet lightning continue throughout the scene. LIGHT SLOWLY FADES.]

EMMA: Who was on the phone?

SALLY: A friend from back home. *(she appears upset)*

EMMA: What's the matter? Is something wrong?

SALLY: It's Mama Sally. They say she's been taken sick... maybe dying.

EMMA: Oh, Sally, I'm so sorry. What are you going to do?

SALLY: I have to go home.

EMMA: What about school? Your classes?

SALLY: I'll try to get back and finish the semester, but it depends on how long I'm needed.

EMMA: I understand. When do you plan to leave?

SALLY: In the morning. There's a flight out at 9:30.

EMMA: I'll drive you to the airport. Do you need some money?

SALLY: I've got enough, thanks.

EMMA: You'll call me when you get there, won't you? Let me know you've arrived safely?

SALLY: If I can.

EMMA: You know, you never told me what little town in Virginia you call home.

SALLY: Clifton Forge. It's just a cluster of log cabins and old clapboard houses on the side of a mountain. Some don't even have indoor plumbing. But the view overlooking the Shenandoah Valley...

EMMA: I'd like to visit there sometime.

SALLY: I hope you will. Well, I'd better go pack.

EMMA: I wish you didn't have to go. I'm going to miss you.

SALLY: I'm going to miss you, too, Emma. But you don't need me anymore. Dr. Burns...

EMMA: ... will never replace you in my heart, dear girl. You're very special to me.

SALLY: You're special to me, too. I love your house... this town... It was beginning to feel like...

EMMA: ...Home?

SALLY: Yeah. Silly of me, wasn't it. I told you it was only for two months.

EMMA: I was hoping you'd change your mind and stay longer.

SALLY: I don't want to leave, but my family needs me. You understand.

EMMA: Of course. The money you paid me? I deposited it in your name. I was saving it for a graduation present. You might need it, so we'll stop by the bank in the morning.

SALLY: *(hugs Emma)* I'll never forget you, Emma. You've been like a mother to me.

EMMA: If you promise to come back, I'll change my name to Sally-- Sally Emma McKenzie.

SALLY: Sally E. I love it. *(hands her a tissue)* Here, you'd better wipe off the smudges. I see company coming. Don't say anything to anybody, okay?

EMMA: Okay. *(SALLY starts into the house)* Sally?

SALLY: Yes?

EMMA: I love you.

SALLY: I love you, too. *(exits as KATE and JENNIFER enter)*

KATE: You're still up, Emma. Good! I need to talk to you. Sounds like we might get some rain.

EMMA: I hope so. How are you feeling, Jennifer? I'm sorry you had to miss your lesson Wednesday.

JENNIFER: Me, too, Mrs. McKenzie. But I've got an awful cold. *(sneezes and blows her nose)*

EMMA: A summer virus can be the worst kind.

KATE: I wouldn't have dragged Jennifer out of the house, but I was afraid to leave her there alone. You've heard, haven't you?

EMMA: Heard what? Bill usually keeps me posted, but he's on vacation this week.

KATE: Well... it's started again.

EMMA: What's started again?

KATE: Things missing...from people's yards.

EMMA: You make it sound so ominous. Did someone break through the sound barrier, and walk off with one of your pink swans?

KATE: It's not funny, Emma. I bet it's the same man who was working this neighborhood last year.

EMMA: What makes you think it's a man?" It could be more than one person. It might even be a woman."

KATE: Don't be ridiculous. Women don't go around stealing garden tools and things like that.

EMMA: I'm missing some things, too-- my weeding fork, a soaker hose, some clay pots.

KATE: Well, you tell everybody to be on the lookout for strangers in the neighborhood. And be careful, Emma. It's not safe to be outside alone after dark. Where's Sally?

EMMA: She's in her room, but I wouldn't bother her right now. *(slaps at a mosquito)* The mosquitoes are about to carry me off. Let's go inside.

[They enter the house and turn on interior lights seen through the screen door and windows. Exterior light fades out. JENNIFER is silhouetted at the door. EMMA and KATE speak offstage]

KATE: Latch the screen door, Jennifer.

JENNIFER: Okay, Mama. Mrs. McKenzie, have you seen Foo-foo this evening?

EMMA: No. Is she missing, too?

JENNIFER: She didn't come home for dinner, and I'm worried about her.

KATE: She's just out prowling the neighborhood, dear. That's what cats do.

JENNIFER: I hope she's all right. *(A recording of a Chopin etude begins)* That's beautiful, Mrs. McKenzie. Is it Beethoven?

EMMA: Chopin. Van Cliburn is the pianist.

JENNIFER: Wish I could play that good. Sally said I could do anything I wanted if I worked at it hard enough.

EMMA: She's right, Jennifer. Keep practicing, and one day you'll be a superstar.

JENNIFER: *(Giggles)* Do you really think so?

EMMA: Well, maybe not a superstar. But an accomplished pianist is a worthy goal, don't you think?

[Lightning flash followed by loud crash of thunder, then the sound of metal trash cans being knocked over; a cat yowls.]

BILL: *(offstage)* Dammit, where the hell did you come from!

[KATE and EMMA run to the front door and turn on the porch light.]

EMMA: Sally, bring me the flashlight from my nightstand. There's another one in the kitchen. Do you see anything, Kate?

KATE: No. What was that crash? I thought I heard a cat. Foo-foo? Here kitty, kitty. Come to Mama, Foo-foo. Here kitty, kitty, kitty...

JENNIFER: I heard a man cussing... *(EMMA unlatches the screen door and steps out on the porch)*

KATE: Emma! Don't go out there. It's not safe.

EMMA: I'm just checking to see if everything's all right. That bolt of lightning might have brought down a tree limb.

KATE: Stay on the porch where I can see you. *(SALLY enters)*

SALLY: Here's the flashlight, Emma. Do you want me to check around back?

EMMA: Good idea. You go around that side of the house. I'll go this way. Yell, if you see anything.

SALLY: You got it. *(they exit in opposite directions)*

KATE: *(tentatively steps out on porch and peers into the dark)* Emma? Sally? You're crazy to go out there alone. Anybody could be out there-- a murderer, a rapist! Emma? Sally? Can you hear me? *(beat)* Why don't they answer? Oh, my God, they're both dead! I just know it! Help! Help! Somebody help! Jennifer, call 911! Tell them to send an ambulance! Send the police! Send the fire department! Send somebody! Oh dear, I think I'm having a heart attack. We're all going to die! Jennifer, lock yourself in the bathroom! We've got to save the children!

ROBERT: *(entering)* What in blazes is going on over here? Kate? *(crosses to porch)* Where's Emma and Sally? I thought I heard a crash...

KATE: *(throws herself on him and wails hysterically)* Oh, Robert, thank goodness you're here. Emma and Sally have disappeared, Foo-foo is missing, and we're all going to die. Help us, Robert...do something... please...

ROBERT: *(pushes her away)* Kate, snap out of it. *(She grabs him again wailing like a banshee. He slaps her across the face which stops the hysterics in mid-scream)* Now, calm down and tell me what's happened.

KATE: It's too horrible for words...Emma and Sally... I just know they're dead...

BILL: *(offstage)* Ow! Let me up! Ow! You're breaking my arm.

EMMA: *(offstage)* You got him, Sally?

SALLY: *(offstage)* You betcha. Now walk-- slowly. Try anything funny and I will break it.

[SALLY and EMMA enter from behind the house with a man concealed in a trench coat and ski mask. SALLY has his arm twisted behind his back; EMMA prods him with a pitchfork. ROBERT crosses to them and yanks

the stranger front and center. JENNIFER comes out on the porch. PRU enters wearing a bathrobe and sleep bonnet.]

ROBERT: You two all right?

EMMA: Yeah. We're okay. Sally caught this fellow raiding our trashcans.

ROBERT: Let's see who we've got here. *(removes the man's mask)*

PRU: Bill! What are you doing here this time of night? You're supposed to be on vacation.

EMMA: Meet the neighborhood burglar, Pru. Now we know why he was so interested in our comings and goings.

ROBERT: Call the police, Kate.

EMMA: No, wait!

KATE: Jennifer already dialed 911.

JENNIFER: No, I didn't, Mama. You scared me so bad I dropped the phone. Then you told me to go to the bathroom.

PRU: Sounds like something Kate would do in an emergency. Go make the call, Jennifer.

EMMA: No, wait a minute. Please!

ROBERT: For heaven's sake, Emma. Why?

PRU: You caught the burglar. Let's turn him over to the authorities like we're supposed to do.

EMMA: I can't turn him in until I know why he did it. Talk to me, Bill. Why did you rob your friends?

PRU: Good heavens, she's as cuckoo as Kate. You might as well unhand him, Robert. Invite him in for cake and lemonade. I'll bring the candles and we'll have a party. It's not every night I'm roused out of bed to celebrate the apprehension of a felon. Might as well make the most of it. Emma, can we at least move to the porch where it's more comfortable?

ROBERT: Good idea. I'm getting a cramp in my arm.

EMMA: All right. But don't try anything, Bill. Sally's got you covered.
(hands SALLY the pitchfork as everyone goes up to the porch)

JENNIFER: Mama, do you still want me to dial 911?

ROBERT: After detective McKenzie conducts her interrogation, you can make the call.

EMMA: Are you all right, Kate? You're as white as a ghost.

KATE: I'll be fine as soon as my heart stops palpitating.

ROBERT: *(Angrily)* Emma, if you want to talk to the man, do it, so we can call the police and get this over with.

EMMA: Robert, we appreciate your help, but everything's under control now. You may go home, if you wish.

ROBERT: And have Kate in hysterics again if he decides to bolt? No way! Just don't take all night.

BILL: I'm awful sorry, Miz McKenzie...

EMMA: Just tell me why, Bill? Why have you've been robbing us? I thought you were our friend.

BILL: I got my reasons.

EMMA: What reason could possibly justify this kind of betrayal?

BILL: I never took nuthin' that was valuable-- just old things people left out in the yard. Well, I did get into your shed once. M' nephew said he needed some flowerpots, and I figured you wouldn't miss 'em, you got so many.

EMMA: What's your nephew got to do with this?

PRU: Hah! I knew he was covering for somebody. Bill would never have sunk so low without a damn good reason. They're holding your wife hostage, right?

BILL: No ma'am. M' wife's dead. It's m' nephew...

PRU: They're holding your nephew hostage. Was there a ransom note? How much do they want?

EMMA: Pru, would you kindly shut up, and let Bill explain.

PRU: No need to turn on your friends. I want to hear what he has to say as much as you do.

ROBERT: Get on with it, Emma.

EMMA: Then, quit interrupting. Bill, what has your nephew got to do with you robbing us?

BILL: Well...he ain't too smart a fellow, Miz McKenzie. But he wants to do for hisself, an' you gotta give 'im credit for tryin'. Trouble is...he ain't got the money to get started.

ROBERT: Started in what? The landscape business?

BILL: Sorta. He wants to hire hisself out doin' yard work. You know, for folks that don't want to do it theirselves.

EMMA: Sounds like a promising enterprise, but if your nephew couldn't afford to buy the tools he needed, you should have said something. We would have helped him. You didn't have to steal from us.

BILL: It crossed m' mind. But if you'd said no... That boy was so bent on startin' his own business... just couldn't take the chance.

EMMA: But it was all right for you to take chances. Did you think you could get away with it indefinitely? Didn't it occur to you that you might get caught?

BILL: I guess I didn't think...

ROBERT: Didn't think is right. Well, your life of crime has just come to a sudden halt. And now you'll have to pay the consequences.

PRU: Wait a minute, Robert. I have the perfect solution. Bill, tell your nephew that if he'll clean out my garage, he may help himself to anything he finds there. I'll contract him to do all my yard work and prevail upon my friends to do the same. Let him go, Robert. Problem's solved. We can all go back to bed.

ROBERT: It's not that simple, I'm afraid. He's committed a felony. Go call the police, Jennifer.

EMMA: No! I won't allow it.

ROBERT: It's out of your hands, Emma.

EMMA: But if he makes restitution? After all, he wasn't doing it for himself.

PRU: Bill, do you promise to give up your life of crime and just stick to delivering the mail?

BILL: Sure thing, ma'am. I'd lose m' job if I got busted.

ROBERT: You should have thought of that before.

EMMA: If we don't press charges...

ROBERT: Then I will.

EMMA: You can't do that, Robert.

ROBERT: Oh, yes I can. I'm sorry, Emma, but he's made robbing people a seasonal career-- over a two-year period from what you've told me. If you ladies want to appear as character witnesses on his behalf, I'm sure it will help mediate his sentence if he's convicted. But I can't let him go. It's a matter of principle.

EMMA: Fine! Then go live with your principle. But don't expect me to make it a threesome. If you call the police, you'll have to do it from your house. Nobody touches my phone.

ROBERT: Aren't you over-reacting?

EMMA: You're the one who's over-reacting. Bill is not your garden-variety criminal... Oops, I didn't mean that the way it sounded...

ROBERT: Are you trying to say that robbing people is not a crime?

EMMA: That's not what I meant...

PRU: Boys and girls, could we settle this some other time?

EMMA: Don't say another word, Bill. I'll see you first thing in the morning with the best lawyer in town. Excuse me, ladies. I'm going to bed. *(enters house and slams the door)*

SALLY: *(Furious)* Now you've gone and done it, Dr. Burns, and I won't be here to patch things up. *(shoves the pitchfork in ROBERT'S face, and runs into the house)*

ROBERT: What was that all about?

PRU: Who knows. Come on, Robert, I'll help you escort this dangerous felon to the pokey. But we'd better get moving before the storm hits. Don't worry, Bill. I have a lot of influence in this community.

KATE: I wouldn't put it past Pru to bribe the judge.

PRU: Shouldn't be too difficult. There's not a judge in this town who knows his assizes from a hole in the ground.

KATE: As-what?

PRU: Forget it, Kate. I'm not even going to try.

BLACKOUT

ACT II, Scene 2

[11:00 AM, one week later. KATE is sitting in a chair reading a magazine. The Beethoven sonata from I-1 is being played with great skill. PRU enters carrying a plastic bag from a franchise dress shop.]

PRU: Morning, Kate. I'm about to wilt. Heat index must be a hundred and five. *(crosses to porch and sits)*

KATE: Looks like you've been shopping. Find any good sales?

PRU: Only if you're into bikini's and appliquéd cut-offs with lace around the legs. They'd look terrific on Jennifer.

KATE: Jennifer, my foot. What do you think? *(stands and models her cut-off shorts with appliqués and lace)*

PRU: Give it up, Kate. Robert's not available.

KATE: He and Emma still aren't speaking to each other, so I figure he's fair game.

PRU: It's going to take more than your bony knees to catch him. *(pauses a moment to listen)* Who's that on the piano?

KATE: Jennifer.

PRU: You're kidding?

KATE: She's been practicing six hours a day since school's been out.

PRU: That girl has talent. I guess she just needed the right motivation. Who straightened her out?

KATE: Sally, I guess...after the disaster at the prom.

PRU: *(music stops)* What happened at the prom?

KATE: Jennifer and her boyfriend had a fight. She came home in tears, pizza all down the front of her new dress, and swore off boys forever...which is normally a couple of days. But after a week of moping around the house... Well, Sally came over to cheer her up, and ever since then, Jennifer's been obsessive about practicing.

PRU: That blows the genetics theory. Emerson had it right all along.

KATE: Emerson who?

PRU: Ralph Waldo.

KATE: Who?

PRU: You know, 90% perspiration? *(Kate shakes her head)* Never mind.

KATE: Has anybody heard from Sally?

PRU: Emma hasn't said, and nobody's talking to Robert since Bill was arrested.

KATE: I hope we did him some good at the hearing.

PRU: In spite of the awful things I say about you, Kate, you have a good heart. Not even Norman-baby could have marshaled the troops to Bill's defense so quickly.

KATE: Who's Norman?

PRU: You know, Swartz-his-name? *(KATE looks puzzled)* Desert Storm?

KATE: Oh, that handsome general who gave us the play-by-play on CNN. I remember. Is he married?

[JENNIFER holds the screen door open for EMMA who enters with a pitcher of lemonade, glasses, and a plate of cookies.]

JENNIFER: How did it sound, Mama?

KATE: Wonderful! You play all those notes so fast I can't keep up with you.

JENNIFER: Mama, there's more to playing the piano than just hitting the right notes. I've been working on style and interpretation. Can't you tell?

PRU: Jennifer, your mother's tone deaf. The only way she can judge your ability is to count the notes per minute.

EMMA: Jennifer has progressed so rapidly this summer, I don't think she's the same girl I've been teaching for the past three years. You should be very proud of her, Kate.

KATE: I am proud of you, dear. All of my friends are coming to your recital.

JENNIFER: I hope Sally will come. Do you think she'll be back in time, Mrs. McKenzie?

EMMA: I don't know. I haven't heard from her.

PRU: You might give her a call, Emma.

EMMA: I tried.

PRU: And?

EMMA: It was the strangest thing. I called information to get her home telephone number, but there was no listing for anyone named Bell in Clifton Forge, Virginia.

PRU: If you don't have indoor plumbing, it's not likely you'd have a telephone.

KATE: What about Whittington and Thorpe? She's the only person I ever met with three last names.

EMMA: No listing for those, either. I spent twenty minutes listening to recorded messages before I got a live operator on the line. She put me through to the local doctor who supposedly knows everyone who's ever lived in Clifton Forge. He told me that Mama Sally, the grandmother, died seven years ago, and that her daughter and granddaughter left town

six months later after the husband, our Sally's father, was killed in a mining accident. Nobody has heard from them since.

PRU: I'm not sure I understood all that, but if our Sally B. didn't return to Clifton Forge, where do you suppose she went?

EMMA: What really upsets me, is why she left. She said she had to go home because her grandmother was dying... Why did she deliberately lie to me?

PRU: Maybe that doctor was mistaken. Maybe...I don't know. You knew her better than any of us.

EMMA: I thought I did. She was like family...

KATE: She was a stranger you let into your house...

EMMA: I was hoping she'd stay on after she graduated. It's been so long since I've had someone to fuss over and do things with...

PRU: I've got two hell-bent grandsons, and one ex-son-in-law you can have. Take your pick.

EMMA: You know what I mean. I swore I'd never let another human being get close enough to hurt me, again.

KATE: I warned you, Emma. You were a fool to trust her.

PRU: Oh, shut up, Kate. Nobody wants to hear you say, 'I told you so.'

KATE: Time to go home, Jennifer. I will not remain in the company of a certain person who insults me for telling the truth.

PRU: Kate, you don't know the truth about Sally any more than we do, so put a cap on it, will you?

KATE: *(striding off the porch)* Come along, Jennifer.

EMMA: *(stops JENNIFER and hugs her)* My dear, you're the single bright star in my firmament right now. Thank you for coming.

JENNIFER: That's okay, Mrs. McKenzie. *[ROBERT and BILL enter]*

ROBERT: I brought someone to see you, ladies.

KATE: Bill! You're out of jail! How did you do it, Robert?

ROBERT: You're the one that did it, Kate. You and that mob of irate females who petitioned the court for Bill's release. After due consideration, the judge decided he had no chance of being re-elected unless he granted your petition. Bill called me to pick him up and then insisted on coming here.

EMMA: We've been so worried about you, Bill. Did they treat you all right?

BILL: Can't complain. An' that lawyer you got me was real nice. Mighty obliged to you, ladies.

PRU: Bill, my offer to hire your nephew still stands. Just tell him to get his butt over to my house before I find someone else. I've got a list of twenty-five homeowners willing to try his yard service. That ought to keep him in beer for the weekend.

BILL: Yes, ma'am. I'll make sure he gets over today.

EMMA: What about your job at the post office, Bill? Are they going to reinstate you?

BILL: Funny thing 'bout that. I figured I was fired for sure. They got rules 'bout the people that work there. Gettin' busted ain't one of 'em. Then las' night, Miss Sally wakes me up and tells me not to worry. It's all taken care of, she says. I couldn't figure how she got in my cell, so I thought I must of been dreamin'. But... this mornin' the judge's clerk tells me, kind-a confidential like, that her boss talked to my boss, an' I'm supposed to start back to work tomorrow. Don't that beat all? *(Shocked reaction from everyone)*

KATE: That's impossible. She couldn't have...

EMMA: That's wonderful! We're so happy for you, Bill.

BILL: Guess I'd better be gettin' home now, Dr. Burns. *(he & ROBERT turn to leave)*

PRU: Wait a minute, Robert. I'll drive Bill home so I can meet his infamous nephew and arrange a work schedule that suits me. Jennifer, stop by my house this afternoon and I'll model my new bikini for you. *(PRU & BILL exit)*

KATE: Emma, what was Bill talking about? How could Sally visit him in jail? You told me she left town the morning after he was arrested.

ROBERT: Bill said he was dreaming, Kate. An old man's fanciful wish, that's all. Don't you have some shopping to do?

KATE: No, I don't think so.

JENNIFER: *(takes KATE'S arm and starts pulling her offstage)* Yes we do, Mama. I need a new dress for the recital. Let's try that little shop on the corner of Walnut and Elm. I think they're having a sale today. See you next week, Mrs. McKenzie. *(exit)*

EMMA: You did that very well, Dr. Burns.

ROBERT: Did what?

EMMA: Maneuver to get us alone. What happens now?

ROBERT: We could move to the porch where it's more comfortable.

EMMA: All right. *(they cross to the porch)* Have a glass of lemonade? Sally always made it for my piano students. The cookies are my idea.

ROBERT: *(raises his glass in a toast)* To the return of the prodigal postman. And to Sally, and Jennifer, and Pru.

EMMA: You forgot Kate.

ROBERT: No, but I'm working on it. You have exceptional friends, Miz McKenzie: a man-eating shark, a rabid lunatic, and the ghost of Christmas yet to come.

EMMA: Sally's an enigma, I agree. But I've shared so many life experiences with Kate and Pru, I tend to overlook their annoying traits.

ROBERT: Sounds like a good recipe for marriage.

EMMA: It is. I'm sorry you never had the chance to find out.

ROBERT: So am I. But my prospects are looking up. You're talking to me again.

EMMA: Exclusively as a friend.

ROBERT: That's all I ask. Have you heard from Sally since she left town?

EMMA: No, I haven't. I tried to call her, but she wasn't where she said she'd be. After what Bill just told us I'm beginning to think she was a figment of our imagination.

ROBERT: Me, too. I checked with the psych department to see if she could take her exam *in absentia*. But no one I talked to ever heard of her, and none of the faculty could recall seeing her in class.

EMMA: But you said the Registrar's office had her on file.

ROBERT: They did, but not anymore. Six weeks ago she was on the computer. Now, she's not.

EMMA: Oh, the computer! Well, that explains it. My husband hated those things. One glitch, and everything was erased.

ROBERT: The university records are still intact. Just Sally's file is missing.

EMMA: Is it possible that she could have deleted it?

ROBERT: Not without the access code, and that's privy only to faculty and administration.

EMMA: What you're saying then, is that there's no logical explanation.

ROBERT: Not unless Sally's a computer hack, or a witch.

EMMA: No, not a witch. *(smiling)* A fairy goddaughter.

ROBERT: Oh, I almost forgot. Be back in a minute. *(he runs offstage and returns immediately with a large packing box)* Bill's temp delivered this to 438 by mistake. *(gives it to Emma)*

EMMA: Who's it from? There's no return address.

ROBERT: I have no idea. Open it and find out.

EMMA: *(opens box and pulls out a handmade quilt)* What is this? Did you...?

ROBERT: I don't know anything about it. You dropped the card. *(retrieves it and reads)* "Don't let this go to waste." There's no signature. What does it mean?

EMMA: You big, dumb, city boy! Look! It's a wedding ring quilt. (*hugs the quilt and whispers*) Bless you, Sally.

ROBERT: You two had something pretty special.... Wish I knew the secret.

EMMA: Please, don't start anything...

ROBERT: Bad timing?

EMMA: It's been a rough week. I'm exhausted.

ROBERT: Emma, my love...I will wait for you however long it takes.

EMMA: What did I just say?

ROBERT: That wasn't a come-on. It's the naked truth. Throw me off your porch, trample me in the dirt, bury me in the cellar... but I'll still be here...waiting and hoping you'll look kindly in my direction... when you're restored to the bloom of health again.

EMMA: You're hopeless. How about a tuna fish sandwich? Then you go grade papers or something while I take a nap.

ROBERT: I can live with that. Got some potato chips?

EMMA: (*putting the quilt back in the box*) I think there's a bag somewhere. The kitchen's a mess. I've hardly done a thing since Sally left. (*beat*) Do you think she'll ever come back?

ROBERT: I don't know. But I'm sure she'd like us to remember her with affection, and be glad she touched our lives, however briefly.

EMMA: What a lovely thing to say. You have a romantic and sensitive soul, Robert Burns. I think we might have a future together after all.

ROBERT: Thank you, Sally, wherever you are. By the way, I'm going to have to move again. The owner just sold my house out from under me...to a young couple with three kids.

EMMA: I'm sorry to hear that. Do you have another place lined up?

ROBERT: You have a spare room now.

EMMA: Aren't you rushing things a bit?

ROBERT: No. You afraid of tarnishing your reputation?

EMMA: Not particularly. Let me think about it, okay?

ROBERT: You've got four weeks to make up your mind.

EMMA: A young couple with kids, you say?

ROBERT: Uh-huh.

EMMA: I'm glad. They'll bring new life into the neighborhood.

[As EMMA & ROBERT start into the house, SALLY cum Emily enters. She is wearing hiking shorts, a tee shirt, and boots. A knapsack is slung over her shoulder. The cut and color of her hair are in direct contrast to Sally's.]

EMILY: Mrs. McKenzie?

EMMA: Yes? *(turns to look at the girl, breaks into a big smile, and runs to her)* Sally! Oh, Sally, you had me so worried. Where did you go? I was afraid I'd never see you again...

EMILY: Excuse me, but I'm not...

EMMA: I tried to call you, but they said you'd left town years ago...

EMILY: Mrs. McKenzie, you must have me confused with someone else.

EMMA: I was frightened to death that something had happened to you...devastated when I thought that you'd deliberately lied to me...

EMILY: I don't know what you're talking about...

EMMA: But none of that matters now...you're back. I like what you did to your hair. It's flattering, reminds me of Sarah.

EMILY: Sarah?

EMMA: My daughter. Remember?

EMILY: Yes, I know. Sarah was my mother.

EMMA: *(pause as it sinks in and tears come to her eyes)* Oh, my God!

EMILY: My dad always said we looked alike... I'm your granddaughter, Emily.

EMMA: Emily. I can't believe it. Is it really you?

EMILY: Yes, it's really me. Who's Sally?

EMMA: *(finally comprehending)* Someone... very, very special. I'll tell you about her sometime. My goodness, you didn't hike all the way from California, did you? Of course not. How silly of me. My dear I've waited my whole life for this day. I want to know everything about you... so many years to catch up on... *(ROBERT starts to leave; Emma grabs his arm and pulls him back)* Don't go, Robert. Emily, this is Robert Burns, my very good friend and neighbor. Come in... come in, both of you. Let me get you a glass of lemonade?

BLACKOUT