

From the Casebook of Elliot Brick:

The Case of the Black Velvet Notebook

by Butch Maxwell

Cast of Characters

Principal Cast

Elliot Brick — Private Detective

A self-proclaimed master detective whose confidence consistently outruns his conclusions. Brick narrates the evening directly to the audience, developing elaborate theories that are usually entertaining, occasionally insightful, and frequently spectacularly wrong. He is charming, quick-witted, and relentlessly optimistic, even when the evidence refuses to cooperate. Cast an actor with excellent comic timing, improvisational confidence, and the ability to build instant rapport with an audience.

Velvet Larue — Socialite

Elegant, poised, and impossible to read. Velvet hires Brick to locate the missing Cordelia Van Dyke, but she always seems to know slightly more than she's willing to admit. She is sophisticated, intelligent, and entirely comfortable controlling a conversation without appearing to do so.

Biff Remington — Cordelia's Fiancé

Handsome, entitled, and perpetually convinced that charm can solve problems money cannot. Biff insists he loved Cordelia, although his financial future appears closely tied to her continued existence. He sweats under pressure while trying very hard not to.

Lester Callahan — Financial Advisor

Cordelia's meticulous financial adviser. Polished, organized, and seemingly incapable of disorder, Lester speaks with the confidence of a man accustomed to being believed. Every answer is technically correct, though not always complete.

Bruno Steele — Bodyguard

A professional whose entire identity revolves around vigilance and procedure. Bruno takes his responsibilities seriously, even when events have already slipped beyond his control. His absolute earnestness makes him an ideal comic foil for Brick's improvisational style.

Cast of Characters

Audience Participants

Audience participation has been a hallmark of Mystery Theatre Unlimited productions for more than three decades. Audience participants are guests, not actors. Performers should always adapt to the volunteers rather than expecting volunteers to adapt to the performance.

Volunteers should be selected for enthusiasm rather than theatrical experience. Their success contributes directly to the audience's enjoyment of the evening.

Three Fingers — Newsboy

Brick's favorite source of information. Provides the detective with neighborhood gossip, rumors, and observations.

Apple Annie — Street Vendor

Offers Brick both fruit and useful information while demonstrating considerably better business sense than Brick possesses.

Blinkie the Stoolie — Informant

Knows far more than is healthy and shares only enough information to remain interesting—and alive.

Lieutenant Cleftjaw — Police Officer

Brick's long-suffering law-enforcement counterpart whose confidence in procedure is matched only by Brick's confidence in ignoring it.

Cordelia Van Dyke — Missing Heiress

Preselected audience participant whose appearance near the end of Act One becomes one of the evening's major surprises.

Setting

A charity gala held in an elegant banquet room. Although the story evokes the atmosphere of a classic 1940s film noir, the production is designed specifically for interactive dinner theatre. The audience shares the room with the suspects, allowing the investigation to unfold around them as though they are guests attending the event themselves.

Performance Structure

Pre-Show Mingle

Audience members meet the characters before the mystery begins.

Act One

Private detective Elliot Brick is hired to locate missing heiress Cordelia Van Dyke. The investigation introduces the principal suspects before the evening takes an unexpected—and deadly—turn.

Dinner Intermission

Act Two

Brick interrogates the suspects, audience members question the cast, and the mystery surrounding the Black Velvet Notebook begins to unravel.

Audience Question Period

Guessing Break

Audience fills out Detective Cards to guess “who done it?”

Act Three

A brief resolution

Fun Facts

Each individual "Fun Fact" clue should be placed on tables, only one clue per table. This will encourage audience members to talk to one another and begin gathering evidence.

The information in the Fun Facts is intended enrich character interactions during the pre-show mingle and throughout the evening.

Most of these details are never spoken during the script itself. They exist to provide background, inspire improvisation, create believable conversations with guests, and occasionally reinforce fair-play clues.

Actors are encouraged to use these details naturally while remaining consistent with the events of the script.

Elliot Brick has been asked to leave fourteen restaurants. He considers this a professional credential. His fedora has been evidence in three separate investigations. He got it back twice.

Velvet Larue knows everyone worth knowing and a great deal about everyone else. She is charming, precise, and several moves ahead of wherever you think you are. She always knows exactly what time it is but rarely tells anyone.

Biff Remington considers himself a romantic. His attorney considers him a client. Only one of them has read the contract. He owns four identical blazers. He calls this "a signature."

Lester Callahan, has never been audited. He finds this statistically remarkable and prefers not to discuss it. He has a second business card. He has never explained why. Also, he irons his pocket squares.

Bruno Steele can identify fourteen different types of exits in any room within thirty seconds of entering. He has catalogued all of them here tonight. He does not make small talk. He has, however, prepared some in case it becomes necessary.

Cordelia Van Dyke the sole heir to a substantial fortune, she has been underestimated by nearly everyone in her life. She has found this useful.

Act One

SFX: "Harlem Nocturne" plays and slowly fades.

BRICK enters slowly, trench coat, fedora. He studies the room like a detective sizing up a crime scene. He pulls out a small notebook.

BRICK

(To audience)

They say every city has two faces. One you see in the daylight. And one that only comes out after dark. The daylight face is respectable. The nighttime face owes me forty-five cents. I'm Elliot Brick, private dick.

In this city, I can read a room in thirty seconds. A man's shoes tell you his income. His hat tells you his character. His tie tells you his wife dressed him.

(Studying the room.)

Tonight I'm reading...

(A long beat)

...a room full of people who eat too fast and trust their accountants.

He studies someone intensely.

That man's a banker. Conservative. Disciplined. Keeps his money in order.

(A beat.)

Unless that's a napkin tucked into his shirt. In which case... he's a threat to himself.

I also see one adulterer, two blackmailers, and a man with weak knees.

(A beat.)

That last one may just be me.

(Testing his leg)

Still attached. That's encouraging. I came up the stairs too fast. Correction — three blackmailers.

(Another beat.)

No, wait — that one just waved. That's enthusiasm. Different crime.

(A beat.)

That's my opening theory. I'll refine it as the evening progresses.

It was a dark and stormy night. I could tell because it was not light. And also... thundery. I don't miss much. The air smelled like rain and bad decisions — two things that have a lot in common when you think about it. It was that kind of night. I say that a lot. Eventually, it has to be true.

I've seen a lot of nights like that one.

(A troubled look)

But on this night, trouble showed up wearing perfume.

SFX: Sultry Music

VELVET LARUE enters. Elegant. Confident. She surveys the room like she owns it. Brick watches her.

(To audience)

She walked into my office like a hurricane in high heels. Expensive high heels.

(A beat)

She was the kind of woman who doesn't knock. The kind of woman who doesn't have to.

(Taking her in)

I'd seen that look before. Insurance adjuster. Here about a water damage claim. Possibly a fender bender involving a very expensive bumper. Or a dentist.

(A beat.)

No. Too elegant for dentistry.

SFX: Music – “Rich Girl”

And then — she broke into song ...I've been wrong before. Once I accused a mirror. We settled out of court.

VELVET

(Singing)

There's a rich girl and she's gone too far

'Cause you know all that money brings trouble anyway
She relied on the old man's money
She relied on the old man's money
She's a lost girl and she's gone too far
And the people who want her gone won't wait anyway
Take my money, Mr. Brick — find her fast
Find her fast

Don't you know? Don't you know?
That it's wrong to let a woman disappear without a trace?
She's so far gone, on her own
She can't get along 'cause the wrong people know
Where she'll go, so —

You're the right man (*right man*)
For this case tonight
Cause they say you always find them anyway (*right man*)
You can follow every dollar
You can follow every dollar
Find this lost girl (*lost girl*) before it's too late
'Cause you know when the money talks,
It talks either way (*right man*)
Say your answer, Mr. Brick — make it fast
Make it fast

SFX: Music stops.

Velvet smiles coolly.

(*Speaking*)
Mr. Brick.

BRICK

Lady, when someone walks into my office singing, one of two things is happening. Either you're in love... or you're in trouble.

VELVET

I'm in a hurry.

BRICK

That's the third possibility.

(*A beat.*)
I try not to rule out expensive mistakes.

(*A beat*)

I've made a few myself.

(A beat.)

One of them is still billing me.

VELVET

A woman named Cordelia Van Dyke is missing. She was supposed to appear at a charity soirée tonight. A room full of donors is currently wondering where their guest of honor went.

BRICK

Maybe she decided not to go.

VELVET

If Cordelia Van Dyke is alive... she'll be there.

BRICK

So, she's not missing; she's late.

(To audience)

Rich people do that. It's how they enter rooms and avoid accountability.

(To Velvet)

You sound confident.

VELVET

Half the city's money is in that room. The seating chart alone took two days to organize. Half the donors refuse to sit next to the other half.

BRICK

That's not a seating chart. That's a hostage situation with appetizers.

(A beat)

Wait a minute. This missing woman – Cordelia Van Dyke. The heiress?

VELVET

The very same.

BRICK

Newspapers say she disappeared this morning.

VELVET

Newspapers say a lot of things. Most of them are written by people who can spell.

BRICK

(To audience)

Last week they said I was retired.

(A beat.)

I read it twice to be sure.

(To Velvet)

Why come to me?

VELVET

Because the police are looking for a missing person. You're looking for the truth.

BRICK

Truth usually costs extra.

VELVET

Money isn't a problem. People are.

Brick studies her.

BRICK

Let me guess. Friend? Relative? Business partner?

VELVET

None of the above.

BRICK

Ah. Then it's worse.

(A beat.)

You like her. Is that why you care that she's missing?

Velvet leans in slightly.

VELVET

If something happens to Cordelia Van Dyke... a lot of very powerful people are going to become very nervous.

BRICK

People like you?

VELVET

Especially me.

BRICK

What's she mixed up in?

VELVET

That's what I hired you to find out.

BRICK

Does she have any enemies?

VELVET

Mr. Brick... She's rich. Everyone's an enemy.

BRICK

Some more competitively than others.

(A beat, to audience)

She had a point. Money doesn't just buy happiness. It also buys motive, lawyers, and a better alibi. And occasionally dinner. If you stay ahead of the motive.

(To Velvet)

All right, lady. I'll find your missing heiress.

VELVET

Good. Because the people already looking for her aren't planning to find her alive.

(Starting to exit, then turning, and pausing, significantly.)

Validate parking?

Brick signs her note and Velvet exits. He watches her go.

BRICK

(To audience)

And just like that...the case was open. A missing heiress. A nervous city. And a woman who walked like she owned the night. The night was full of suspects and bad decisions. In other words... Tuesday.

(A pause)

All I needed now...was information.

(A beat.)

Preferably the correct kind.

(A beat.)

That's been an issue. Not much information. Just enough to confirm the theory I had already formed.

(A beat.)

I hadn't formed one yet, but I like to stay ahead of the evidence.

Brick scans the room. Spots someone in the audience.

Three Fingers the newsboy! If it happens in the city, he knows. Fastest newsman around.

THREE FINGERS

(An audience member)

Fastest because I run after you when you don't pay. Which is always.

BRICK

I pay. Eventually.

THREE FINGERS

You owe me three eventuallys. What do you want?

BRICK

(Producing a coin)

Missing heiress. Cordelia Van Dyke. What do you know?

THREE FINGERS

Never heard of her.

BRICK

Then un-never it.

THREE FINGERS

(Taking the coin)

Looked like she was waiting for someone. Kept looking over her shoulder. Like she thought somebody was watching her.

BRICK

In my line of work, that usually means somebody was.

(A beat.)

Or she was early. Nobody looks guiltier than an early person.

THREE FINGERS

Except you. You look like you still owe me forty cents.

BRICK

One day I'm going to pay off my tab.

THREE FINGERS

And one day I'll sell a paper with good news on the front page. So — never.

Brick turns back to the room.

BRICK

(Prompting applause for the audience participant)

Ladies and gentlemen, let's give ten fingers for Three Fingers. He's borrowed most of them.

So, there it is. The missing heiress isn't missing. She's in Hoboken.

(A beat.)

Rich woman, nervous, waiting for someone — She's caught a ferry and she's not coming back. Hoboken isn't a motive. It's a cry for help. I'd bet my fedora on it. I've seen this a hundred times.

(A beat.)

Well, not this exact case.

(To a particular audience member.)

Hoboken comes up a lot in my wrong theories.

(Renewing)

I decided I needed sustenance. Apple Annie! The finest fruit vendor this side of bankruptcy court.

APPLE ANNIE

You still owe me for the last apple.

BRICK

(Producing a coin)

How much?

APPLE ANNIE

Five cents.

BRICK

Inflation.

APPLE ANNIE

No. You. Inflation wishes.

Brick takes an apple and inspects it like a jewel.

BRICK

Annie, anyone come by tonight who looked nervous? Rich. Possibly missing.

APPLE ANNIE

(Eyeing him)

You mean that girl?

BRICK

Which girl?

APPLE ANNIE

The one who kept turning around like she expected someone to jump out of a cake.

BRICK

What was she doing?

APPLE ANNIE

Writing things down. Had a little black notebook. Kept scribbling.

BRICK

Did she seem scared?

APPLE ANNIE

Not scared. Determined. Like someone who just figured something out.

Brick inspects the apple. Polishes it on his jacket. Does not eat it.

BRICK

(To audience)

A notebook. Small. Black. She was writing in it.

(With total conviction.)

She's a poet. This whole thing is about a sonnet.

(A beat.)

A threatening sonnet. Or —

(Longer beat)

— possibly blackmail. I'm going to pursue both theories and see which one survives dinner.

APPLE ANNIE

You owe me another five cents.

BRICK

For what?

APPLE ANNIE

You're not going to eat that, are you?

BRICK

No...

APPLE ANNIE

Display rate.

Brick sighs and hands over another coin.

BRICK

(Prompting applause for the audience participant)

Apple Annie, folks.

(To audience) The truth was hiding somewhere close by. Probably under the mashed potatoes. But the trail was getting warmer. A nervous heiress. A mysterious black notebook. And somewhere in the city... someone who didn't want that notebook read.

A pause.

Which meant it was time to talk to a man who knew everything... and wished he didn't: Blinkie the Stoolie!

Brick scans the room. Spots another audience member.

BLINKIE

I didn't see nothin'.

BRICK

Blinkie — Missing heiress. Cordelia Van Dyke. What do you know?

BLINKIE

(Sighing)

That girl's been asking questions. About money. Who gets it.
Who takes it.

BRICK

People get nervous when rich people start asking questions.

BLINKIE

Especially when the answers involve city hall.

BRICK

What's – City hall?

BLINKIE

It's the large building where the government keeps its
appointments and its distance.

BRICK

I know what city hall is, Blinkie.

BLINKIE

Then why did you ask?

BRICK

Because men who mention city hall and then explain it
usually keep talking long enough to say something they
shouldn't.

(A beat.)

You stopped just in time.

BLINKIE

...I'm aware.

BRICK

How far up?

BLINKIE

(Leaning in)

There's a name I'm not saying out loud. But whoever's been
making investigations disappear — start with whoever
arranges the room.

(A beat.)

Also, word is there's legal paper on her. Pays out whether she shows up or doesn't.

BRICK

That's not a prenup. That's a menu. Pays who?

BLINKIE

The betrothed.

BRICK

What do I owe you?

BLINKIE

I don't take coins anymore.

BRICK

What do you take?

BLINKIE

Assurances.

BRICK

Of what?

BLINKIE

That none of this is my fault.

BRICK

(To audience)

I preferred him when he had a price.

(To Blinkie)

Aren't you worried they'll come after you?

BLINKIE

I'm going home to forget everything I just told you.

(A beat.)

I've been practicing.

BRICK

(Prompting audience applause)

Blinkie the Stoolie, everybody!

As I reached the venue where the missing heiress was supposed to attend, I looked around. I've seen rooms like

this before. People pretending not to be nervous. Which means... at least one of you is a professional.

I contemplated this new information: A Black Velvet Notebook full of secrets. And city officials who didn't want those secrets read.

(Pause)

In my experience... that's when trouble stops knocking and starts kicking the door down.

A voice interrupts.

LIEUTENANT CLEFTJAW

(An audience member)

Stop in the name of the law!

Brick sighs.

BRICK

Lieutenant Cleftjaw.

LIEUTENANT CLEFTJAW

Look who's here. Elliot Brick, Private Dick.

BRICK

It beats being a public one.

LIEUTENANT CLEFTJAW

What's a broken-down gumshoe doing at a fancy party?

BRICK

I'm on a case, flatfoot. Or maybe it's a crate. Of apples.

LIEUTENANT CLEFTJAW

I've been hired as security at this event and you're interfering with an active investigation.

BRICK

I thought you were still investigating last year's parking ticket.

LIEUTENANT CLEFTJAW

Brick, I've had enough of your bending the law to suit yourself.

BRICK

Cleftjaw, if I stopped bending the law.... it might break from loneliness.

LIEUTENANT CLEFTJAW

One of these days I'm going to arrest you, Brick.

BRICK

Get in line.

Cleftjaw scans the room.

LIEUTENANT CLEFTJAW

Listen up. Nobody moves seats. Nobody switches drinks. Nobody touches anything.

BRICK

I love a party where the fun is pre-approved.

Brick picks up a champagne glass.

Nobody touches anything? Like this?

LIEUTENANT CLEFTJAW

That's yours.

BRICK

Good. Then the crime scene remains contaminated, but consistent.

LIEUTENANT CLEFTJAW

I arranged everything myself, including the seating chart.

BRICK

(To audience)

When a man gives that many instructions about chairs, it's never about chairs.

(To Cleftjaw)

I've seen less control in a prison riot. And they had a warden.

(To audience)

On the other hand, I like a man who establishes order.

(A beat.)

Makes it easier to see who ruins it.

Cleftjaw adjusts one of the champagne glasses on the table very precisely.

LIEUTENANT CLEFTJAW

City events run better when someone competent sets the room.

BRICK

(To audience)

He says that like the room signed a waiver. He's got a power fetish for the seating chart.

Relax, Cleftjaw It's a charity dinner, not the Normandy invasion.

(To the audience, prompting applause)

Lieutenant Cleftjaw. The only cop in the city who could turn a handshake into an arrest warrant. And bill you for the paperwork.

So, if Cleftjaw was already here... maybe this wasn't just a missing-person case anymore. It was something far more sinister.

I had already ruled out three suspects.

(A beat.)

Unfortunately, they hadn't arrived, yet.

(Approaching an audience member.)

You — you've got authority written all over you. Not real authority. Decorative authority. Like a lobby plant.

I scanned the room.

(A beat.)

Nobody looked guilty.

(A beat.)

Which is always suspicious.

BIFF, LESTER and BRUNO all enter, followed by Violet.

Still, one of them was guilty of something.

(A beat.)

Possibly two of them.

(A beat.)

I was willing to adjust upward.

And I trusted them about as far as I could throw a grand piano. Which, unfortunately... I've tried.

(A beat.)

Poorly.

Brick picks up a program from a guest's table.

Let's see. According to my scorecard, we've got the fiancé, Biff Remington. Lester Callahan, the financial adviser. And Bruno the bodyguard. And, of course, Velvet Larue, who hired me. If guilt were money... this room could retire twice.

He sets the program back down.

VELVET

That's conservative.

BIFF

I resent that.

BRICK

(To all four.)

Let's proceed methodically. I'll ask questions and then reinterpret whatever you say.

(To Biff.)

Mr. Remington – Biff – How did you lose your fiancé and why do I sense that you resent everything, except inheritances?

BIFF

Mr. Brick, I love Cordelia!

BRICK

Sure. The way wolves love sheep.

BIFF

(Stiffening)

I don't care for that metaphor.

BRICK

Which part?

BIFF

(A beat.)

The sheep. Cordelia was worth considerably more than a sheep.

BRICK

(To audience)

Romance.

(To Biff)

What have you done with Cordelia?

BIFF

I've given her everything a man in my position gives a woman in hers. Which is to say, the appropriate amount.

BRICK

Cut the crap, Biff. I asked you a direct question.

BIFF

And I gave you a direct avoidance.

BRICK

Yes, but yours had more confidence.

LESTER

Mr. Brick, this is extremely inappropriate.

BRICK

So is losing an heiress. But here we are.

He turns to Bruno, who is still scanning the room. Bruno is standing at attention.

Bruno. You can relax.

BRUNO

I don't relax.

BRICK

Why not?

BRUNO

Security posture.

BRICK

Security posture.

BRUNO

It's in the manual.

BRICK

You're the bodyguard.

BRUNO

That's right.

BRICK

You were protecting her.

BRUNO

I tried.

LESTER

Apparently unsuccessfully.

BRUNO

Careful.

BRICK

The body you were guarding is missing.

BRUNO

That's right.

BRICK

How's that working out for you, professionally?

BRUNO

It's not my best day.

BRICK

Bruno, I've seen revolving doors with better security. And they were open. What happened?

BRUNO

She slipped out. Said she had an errand.

BRICK

An errand.

BRUNO

I thought she meant dry cleaning.

BRICK

Bruno, if a millionaire says “errand,” assume it’s not laundry

BRUNO

She had a bag. A nice one.

BRICK

Nice is not a kind of bag. It’s a price range.

BRUNO

It had a zipper.

BRICK

A zipper.

(A beat.)

Monogrammed?

BRUNO

No.

BRICK

Then we're back to chaos. But at least we’ve narrowed it down to luggage.

(A beat, to Bruno)

Did Cordelia trust you?

BRUNO

Yes.

BRICK

Did she trust anyone else?

BRUNO

No.

BRICK

Why did she hire you in the first place?

BRUNO

She said someone was following her.

BRICK

Following her?

BRUNO

Thought somebody wanted her dead.

BRICK

That's a cheerful thought.

BRUNO

She was scared. Don't know of who.

BRICK

(To audience)

A woman afraid for her life slips her bodyguard and vanishes into the city alone. Either she was very brave... or she was meeting someone she trusted.

(A beat)

Those are usually the most dangerous kind.

Brick turns to Lester.

Lester Callahan. Financial advisor. Walk me through the estate.

LESTER

Mr. Brick, I really don't think this is the appropriate—

BRICK

Cordelia's missing. Appropriate left the building an hour ago. The estate.

LESTER

(Adjusting his cuffs)

Substantial holdings. Properties. Investments. Several charitable trusts.

BRICK

All in order?

LESTER

Completely.

BRICK

(To audience)

He said that the way a man says the books are fine right before the auditors arrive.

(To Lester)

Somebody had to handle the extortion payments.

Lester:

There were no—

BRICK

Of course not.

(Away from him)

They're called "consulting fees."

(To Lester)

She was keeping a notebook. Little black thing. She carried it everywhere. Like insurance. Writing down names. Numbers.

A flicker across Lester's face.

LESTER

Was she?

BRICK

You know anything about that?

LESTER

Cordelia was a very thorough young woman.

BRICK

Thorough enough to notice if someone was helping themselves to her accounts?

LESTER

(Smoothly)

Mr. Brick. If you're looking for irregularities... I'd suggest looking somewhere considerably more obvious.

BRICK

You mean Biff.

LESTER

I'm not pointing fingers.

BRICK

You're practically conducting. What do you know about the engagement contract?

Lester pauses. Just long enough.

LESTER

Only that certain... provisions were included that Cordelia found troubling.

BRICK

What kind of provisions?

LESTER

The kind a woman only discovers when she starts asking the right questions.

BRICK

(To audience)

He was dangling Biff in front of me like a shiny object. The question was whether he was genuinely pointing me somewhere... or just pointing me away from himself.

Brick turns to Biff, who has been very busy pretending not to listen.

Biff. You look uncomfortable.

BIFF

I'm fine.

BRICK

You're sweating through a three-hundred-dollar jacket. That's not fine. That's a financial crime.

BIFF

It's warm in here.

BRICK

Tell me about the engagement contract.

Biff goes very still.

BIFF

My attorney suggested—

BRICK

Your attorney suggested you write a word into a legal document that means you get paid whether she's dead *or* just gone.

Silence.

(To audience)

In my business, when a document covers that many possibilities... it's not protection. It's a plan.

(Definitively)

That explains everything.

(A beat)

I'm just not sure how to read it, yet.

A beat. He studies Biff.

But tonight I'm not cross-examining anybody. Not yet. Right now, I'm just collecting impressions.

Brick turns an apple in his hand.

And here's the impression I'm getting so far. A fiancé with a contract that pays off if the bride disappears. A financial adviser who sweats when you mention notebooks. A bodyguard who lost the only person he was hired to guard.

Bruno has been standing at attention, looking in Velvet's direction.

VELVET

(To Bruno)

You're staring at me.

BRUNO

Yes.

VELVET

Why?

BRUNO

Habit.

VELVET

How long?

BRUNO

Since you walked in.

VELVET

(A pause, then, flattered)

Fair.

BRICK

(To audience)

This was the healthiest relationship in the room.