

**NEVER IN A SMALL TOWN:
The Wheeler Community
Theatre Murders**

By
David Jensen

NEVER IN A SMALL TOWN: THE WHEELER COMMUNITY
THEATRE MURDERS

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CAST: 4 Women, 5 Men.

TATE	50 – 60, Male, Investigative Reporter
DELANEY	30 – 40, Female, A seemingly odd woman
JAXTON ZAIRE	35 – 45, A man with talent and secrets
AUDRIANA WHEELER	60 – 70, Female, A lover of the arts
ARLO NIXON	25 – 40, Male and hard to read
WINTER SPRING	30 – 40, A talented woman with baggage
SHERIFF	45 – 60, Male
POLICE OFFICER	25 – 40, Female
MISCELLANEOUS MAN	20 – 30, Male

FedEx DELIVERY PERSON will be played by either actor playing the Sheriff or Police Officer.

TIME: Current Day

PLACE: Cripple Pines, Colorado – A small mountain town.

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ACT I
SCENE 1

Cripple Pines, CO - Population 967 - Fall - Current Day. A sunny day in one of the few, small, remaining Colorado mountain towns without a single stoplight. Before all of what is currently taking place, folks described the town as heaven. Main Street has four stop signs placed right smack dab in the middle. On Main, there is a drug store, City Building, Arco, A Thrift Store and a number of other business establishments. At the north end of Main is the Wheeler Theatre, outside of which is where our story begins and hopefully ends without any further incident, but... anything can and does happen in a small town without stoplights and a history of zero murders... Well, zero murders until recently. TATE LONGSWORD, a 50 - 60's reporter, wearing a suit jacket and business casual attire, enters...

TATE. Cripple Pines, Colorado, current population 967 and dwindling due to a recent string of unsolved murders... the latest, just a week ago. If you asked some people here a few months ago what they thought about their community, most would have told you, "It's a slice of paradise, sorta' like heaven." The town is nestled in the Colorado mountains and is a place that few have experienced. Cripple Pines, as other locals describe the place, "Is *somewheres* between here and there." Finding the place is quite a bitch, actually. Rumor has it that the town was founded in 1827 but you won't find much about this place in the history books. Folks have sworn for generations that the town doesn't even exist. I guess that's how people

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are when they find such a location full of beauty and zero previous homicidal incidences. Tate Longsword, that's me, catchy huh? Name wasn't always Tate. In the entertainment, news and investigative reporter business, one needs a "hook to book." So... early on in my career I went from my birth name, *Dale Dwight Jones* to *Tate Longsword*. -- Very recently my career audience went from television millions to only the inhabitants here in Cripple Pines, Colorado. (*Lights shift as Tate walks towards the Wheeler Theatre stage door. A FedEx DELIVERY PERSON walks past Tate with a delivery box.*) Some things one never escapes, even in a small town... Two months since my arrival and still no suspect or suspects in the recent murders of three Cripple Pines residents. Police and Sheriff are supposed to be following up on all the evidence, well... you'll meet those two people later. Things seem to point right here... The Wheeler Community Theatre, since that's where the dead bodies were found. I should also point out that *Theatre* in this town is spelled the "everywhere else" way with a *t-r-e* at the end and not the American English preference ending with, *h-e-r*. (*DELANEY runs up to Tate, hands him a paper cup of coffee.*)

DELANEY. Mornin' Mr. Tate, sir.

TATE. I don't have anything for you today, Delany.

DELANEY. I brought your mornin' coffee, Mr. Tate like I done ever since you gots yirself here. And guesses what? I've decided to audition fer the play at The History-ic Wheeleree Theatre. I done dreamed of performin' there 'er since I was a childlike.

TATE. Sounds exciting, Delaney.

DELANEY. I don' saw the Sheriff and Police this mornin.' Have they's don' solved anythin' a so of yet?

TATE. Don't know. They haven't spoken to me since I arrived. And you best just focus on being in the town's play if that's what you want.

DELANEY. I have a deep down feelin' you're's gonna' to solve this whole up murderrees 'fore they law people does do, Mr. Tate.

TATE. I hope you're right. Now you better get over to that theatre and *knock 'em dead*.

DELANEY. (*Giggles.*) Oh, just like my Papa used to be with his done

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wrong mis-propriated jokes, Mr. Tate. I know everythin's gonna' work out jus' 'aight and people won't be dyin' no more in Cripple Pines as long as good, honest folk investi-gator reporters like yours' round here now.

(Delaney freezes and Tate steps forward.)

TATE. Now, that there is *Delaney Parsens Rogers*, a little odd and sometimes hard to understand. 34 years old, still holding on to her innocence, I guess. Looks much younger than she claims to be. Must be the mountain air. I keep thinking she's a teenager but she showed me her driver's license and so I have to believe her. When I first arrived in Cripple Pines, Delaney brought me a cup of coffee, and shared how she had moved here from "a place thits not ain't here's else in 'merica," that's how she said it. She arrived in town after her '76 Ford Pinto caught fire, blew up, and killed her only passenger, a pet box turtle named Dale. Dale's death was on the very same day he would have turned 16 years old. That's actually on the low end regarding the life expectancy of a box turtle in captivity. They usually live 50 or 60 years, believe it or not. Anyway, Delaney's Pinto was towed to Cripple Pines and she decided to stay for good after learning that replacement parts were no longer available for that make and model. I'm yet to find the abandon car. *(Tate steps back into the scene, sips his coffee.)*

TATE. You know you don't need to keep bringing me coffee every morning, Delaney.

DELANEY. It's instan.' So, don' not cost much. And I does do need ta'

TATE. Instant. Mmmmm... Never would have guessed.

DELANEY. Momma always used ta' say, "Boilin' water's a good way ta' start a new day."

TATE. Your momma sounds like a smart woman.

DELANEY. "Smart as rocks," Papa said, for he left.

TATE. Well, alright. What else is on your "to do" list today?

DELANEY. Aftir I is gonna' auditin' for the here play at the thetree' then might move to Los Vegas'es ta' be a famous 'tainer 'cause they're always need'n pretty girls ta' sing and dance.

TATE. Audition at the Wheeler and move out of state, all in the same day?

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DELANEY. Yer funnee Mr. Tate. Not all t'day.

TATE. It's tough out there in the world.

DELANEY. I know yir still sad'n all that they done kicked you off those there news 'vestigator shows 'n Niw York'es and Losses Angeels, Mr. Tate. But, yir here now and like moma and papa usta'd to say, "God don't give us any no more than we can pit on a handle an' ev'n though you don't does not know it now, everythin' happens for a reason." Maybe your reason's ta' solve these there here murders in Cripple Pines and then everyone will want you on thir news like shows lick they's did 'fore.

TATE. Ageism is very much alive at the big television networks in New York and LA. Even though the executives all deny it.

DELANEY. Those nitworks peepel just don't know not what a thing they's talkin' about then none.

TATE. I agree.

DELANEY. I really got the likes for you, Mr. Tate.

TATE. I like you too, Delaney.

DELANEY. "You can take the girl out of a Midwest place, but you can't take the pine trees out of in the mountains."

TATE. Well, said. And good luck with your audition.

DELANEY. Papa Paps is said it first. - I knows you's a private man, so I'll leave you nows to yourself. *(Delaney exits. Tate walks to center stage.)*

TATE. As I've continued to interact with Delaney, the more I've wondered if she had possibly suffered a traumatic brain injury, from a fall maybe or due to her Pinto's explosion. Something like that may explain what keeps her locked up in such a state of... cognitive deficits... Anyway, The Wheeler Theatre was the first and oldest permanent structure built on Main Street here in Cripple Pines. The theatre was said to have been constructed in 1922. The Wheeler family donated the building to the town with the stipulation that it would remain a Theatre *in perpetuity* and when eligible, would be declared a historical monument, never to be torn down, and only to be remodeled with the consent and management of a surviving member of the Wheeler family or heir thereof. *(Tate exits.)*

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SCENE 2

The curtains open to reveal the magnificent stage of the Wheeler Community Theatre. Hanging prominently in the theatre is a large painting of Edger Allen Poe. Tate walks in.

TATE. The Wheeler Theatre is adorned with a likeness of *Edger Allen Poe*. Why? Don't know quite yet. -- Ahh, here's the current production's director, Mr. Jaxton Zaire. (*JAXTON ZAIRE, actor/director paces back and forth across the stage.*)

JAXTON. I want to thank you all for showing up today in light of recent distressing events. I assure each and every one of you that the blood splatter in the dressing room has been completely bleached from the walls. Now, regarding casting, I will play no favorites, nor have I ever, and will cast the one individual best suited for the role of *West Messington*; male, female or whatever. *Whatever* meaning just that, what it means. It's about the individual with the most talent and or promise. Now, monologues are to be under one minute, give or take. After today's auditions, a select few to be invited back for call backs... as redundant as it sounds. What it does mean if you are called back is that you will be one step closer to being cast in the show. There are also a few non-speaking roles, please let me know if you are interested in playing one of those, should you not be cast as the lead in, *It's All About Me...* So, let's get started. (*Jaxton walks out into the audience and sits in an empty seat facing the stage.*)

JAXTON. First up we have... Arlo Nixon. Arlo. Arlo you're on. (*From backstage, out walks, AUDRIANA WHEELER.*)

AUDRIANA. (*Audriana acknowledges the Edger Allen Poe painting with love.*) Hold on Arlo. Not to interfere with the process, Jaxton, dear, but I would like to check in and make sure that it's okay if I sit backstage and watch the auditions?

JAXTON. Quite fine, Mrs. Wheeler.

AUDRIANA. Thank you, dear young man. I appreciate your acknowledgment of those much older than yourself.

JAXTON. Absolutely, Mrs. Wheeler.

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AUDRIANA. People with my last name built this damn place and murders or no murders, the show must and will go on, my dears.

JAXTON. Yes, yes! The show *must* and *will* go on!

AUDRIANA. I have graced the stage here in many a show. I shall never forget opening night during our successful adaptation of Poe's, *The Raven*. Yes, it has been a number of years since I played that starring role as well as many other significant roles. Nepotism aside, talent does prevail. When the theatre was burnt to the ground Winter of '96 and people wondered if *she*, meaning the Theatre, should ever be rebuilt... Long story short, she was. She's an iconic, historical and buxom gal, rebuilt to be better and stronger than ever. No pressed wood or particle board in her belly... Oh, those days long gone were the days... we performed midnight shows in our bare feet and usually only had a peanut butter snack and celery in our pockets for when we got hungry. -- The holiday performances will always have a special place in my heart. Be it in rain, snow, sleet, hail, sickness, affairs, weddings, graduation, the town's whooping cough outbreak as well as the death of our beloved patron, *Mildred Miley Jones* in the neighboring town of Mica, Colorado. No show was, nor ever will be upstaged by the unfortunate situations of life or on behalf of a sometimes... unloving God or... whatever else brings these things on... Witchcraft perhaps. Oh, I don't know, maybe modern Witchcraft disguised as a form of Wicca. So many opening nights our announcer, *Don Morrison Carson Johnson* graced this stage before his... departure, citing and making a verbal contract with the audience, reflecting then proclaiming, "Let the show begin!" - How am I doing on time?

JAXTON...

AUDRIANA. Hopefully that wasn't over a minute, dear.

JAXTON. I wasn't keeping track.

AUDRIANA. You needn't patronize me, dear boy. I know my days are numbered, just wanted to belt out a little something I've been working on. Trying my hand at writing all these years later. Never can have too many monologues in your theatre toolbox. How about I do it again, another way perhaps... more *needy* or as an opulent heiress strung out on heroin?

JAXTON. I don't think—

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AUDRIANA. Just messing with you, dear. *Let the auditions begin!*
(Audriana opens up to welcome ARLO as he walks out from backstage.
There's an awkward moment between Audriana and Arlo, then he takes his
place center stage and Audriana disappears backstage.)

ARLO. *(A moment, then...)* Best be to come hither when of thy maiden storm, rock the ages of guilt, shame and pestilence. Fore I, as of mine and thyne of mine own mother as she, she as she, blessed the earth and thine children of elementary education within Hanson Elementary School. And if as is such doth not wane and merry the scent of times in spring than the lullaby of my oats feedith thine sheep of the baby, Jesus. Fore as doth my father's sworn melancholy bring into the world one swine of fear. It by no means of thine own will pass as a ship traveling the waters of thyme and colliander. You may ask, "Oh Dontos, what will become of me, thy son, a product of mis-happenings?" I will flail and float upon mine backside when and if waters which support the ship of my soul set to sailing, then sinkith to the bottom of the planet waters and yet the hover above for unknown amounts of time alongside the circling moon until my maiden be... *bee...* but for one second of psychic maximization pertinent to my perceived lost whereabouts. The honing device of love, nah, thy love, be with me, within the universal thread as I will rest until my or mine untimely demise in the form of my death as it swoons upon...

JAXTON. Thank you—

ARLO. Nay, the breast of mine be not complete, now nor until my body sores into the heavens...

JAXTON...

ARLO. Thank you...

JAXTON. Finished?

ARLO. Yes...

JAXTON. Great. Lovely.

ARLO. ...Thank you..., Yes..., Great..., great only above the heavens forever above thy polluted lands be brought to peace through reversals of thy misfortune of thoughts brought into proclamation of the warming spell encircling not only thine but mine and all-*ine's* inhabiting the globe. And so that of such be not forever damned.

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JAXTON...

ARLO. I'm finished.

JAXTON. Very nice work, Arlo. I will let you know by days end.

ARLO. Yeah. Okay. Sure. Right. *(Arlo exits and on walks Tate.)*

TATE. Arlo assured Jaxton that his monologue was an original Shakespearean piece. - All in all, twenty locals and five individuals from surrounding towns auditioned. As promised, Jaxton notified six "actors" for callbacks. He made the directorial decision to cast a few locals for the non-speaking roles. Unfortunately, Delaney missed her audition time and therefore was not called back. *(Lights shift.)*

SCENE 3

Jaxton and WINTER SPRING jump rope separately outside the theatre.

JAXTON & WINTER. *(Together.)* Apples, Bananas, Grapes, Trees. No one today will skin their *knees*. Jump high up and count out *loud*. Yell a little louder and attract a *crowd*. Hey. Hi. Yo. *You*. Jump again and count by *two*. 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16. *(Jaxton stops counting and jumping.)*

JAXTON. I'm tired. Auditions took it out of me.

WINTER. *(Winter keeps counting and jumping.)* 18, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 32, 34... *(A moment and then Winter stops jumping.)* So, I get the role?

JAXTON. Because you beat me at jump rope? No.

WINTER. Yes. We bet.

JAXTON. We didn't bet the role. Why is everything like that with you?

WINTER. Because life is competition.

JAXTON. I need to give the role to the one who deserves it most.

WINTER. But I won at jump rope. I WON AT JUMP ROPE. So, you owe me.

JAXTON. Look. You do *get* the role. And... it's not because you beat me at jump rope, it's because you were the most talented at the auditions.

WINTER. And... I beat you at jump rope.

JAXTON. *I know that...* and the two events are completely unrelated.

WINTER. How can you say that? They were both competitions. And I

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won. Both.

JAXTON. Alright. You're right.

WINTER. Don't patronize me.

JAXTON. There is no winning with you.

WINTER. You're right. Never. Ever. (*Tate walks in and Jaxton and Winter freeze.*)

TATE. *Winter Spring* has a few issues... quirks, I call them. In the short time I've been in town I continue to see these nuances revealed, too many to count. I'm an investigative reporter and not a psychologist, psychiatrist or neuroscientist. I can only imagine the difficulty she faced as a small child with a first and last name such as hers. Even with all the baggage, she has not been ruled out regarding involvement in the town's murders. -- The Wheeler Theatre production of *It's All About Me* has been cast... The star will be *Winter Spring*. From this point forward, I will attempt to fade into the story and put my investigative reporting skills to greater use and ease off with the heavy exposition. (*Tate exits. Winter and Jaxton unfreeze.*)

WINTER. You son-of-a-bitch. (*Winter slaps Jaxton.*)

JAXTON. Why did you do that?

WINTER. Just in case people think something is going on here.

JAXTON. So, you want to bring more attention to us?

WINTER. Did you really cast me because I was the best? Or... is it because we're related?

JAXTON. Yes.

WINTER. Which question are you answering? I asked two.

JAXTON. Both.

WINTER. Why does everything have to be so difficult with you, Jaxton?

JAXTON. Why did you ask two questions at once?

WINTER. Why are you doing this?

JAXTON. Is this a game to you?

WINTER. Do you think I'm just some toy to play with?

JAXTON. You actually think you're going to win?

WINTER. Do you?

JAXTON. Will you please stop?

WINTER. Was that a question?

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JAXTON. Don't you think I asked it like it was?

WINTER. Were you upward inflecting at the end of the sentence as if it was a question?

JAXTON. You really think this is going to solve the murders?

WINTER. Isn't an interrogation just a series of questions?

JAXTON. You actually think that to be true?

WINTER. Isn't that what a detective would say?

JAXTON. Who actually has jurisdiction in this town?

WINTER. Is it the Sheriff or the Police?

JAXTON. Why ask me that question?

WINTER. *Why not? (Tate walks back in. Jaxton and Winter freeze again.)*

TATE. When I first came to town, I had a similar encounter with Winter much like what is going on right here. All the questions nearly drove me crazy until I learned that Winter Spring was the 2022 U.S. National Questions Game Competition champion. *(Tate exits. Winter and Jaxton unfreeze and continue.)*

JAXTON. *Why not?*

WINTER. I won. You can't ask the same question I just asked you.

JAXTON. Yes, I can, and I did.

WINTER. I still won.

JAXTON. I hate this stupid game. *(Jaxton exits.)*

WINTER. *(Winter calls after Jaxton.)* It's *All About You!* Isn't it, Jaxton?

JAXTON. *(From offstage.)* Fuck Off!

WINTER. Cussing is illegal in Cripple Pines, remember? *(Winter exits. The SHERIFF and POLICE OFFICER walk on and stand facing each other. They silently mouth the word, "Watermelon" back and forth to each other. Jaxton walks back in and passes the two.)*

JAXTON. Watermelon, Sheriff, Officer. *(Sheriff and Police Officer nod to Jaxton.)*

SCENE 4

Audriana is seated backstage at the theatre and Jaxton walks in.

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AUDRIANA. Jaxton, dear. I had a feeling you would show up.

JAXTON. I am the director.

AUDRIANA. The Police nor the Sheriff are saying anything about the murders.

JAXTON. You know the investigation is still pending, don't you?

AUDRIANA. Does that give them the right to be rude and never speak to a fellow citizen?

JAXTON. Have you ever had a run in with either of them?

AUDRIANA. No, dear.

JAXTON. Ah ha. You lost.

AUDRIANA. Do you believe that this is the least bit humorous?

JAXTON. You want to play again?

AUDRIANA. This isn't funny, my dear young man.

JAXTON. I won again. That was clearly a statement. This is fun.

AUDRIANA. I am not playing some silly, elementary school game.

JAXTON. Do you think I am?

AUDRIANA. I'm not exactly sure what you're up to with this form of hullabaloo.

JAXTON. You lost again. It's the *Questions Game*.

AUDRIANA. Your little game is quite irritating. *(In walks Tate.)*

TATE. Is it irritating you enough to commit murder, Mrs. Wheeler?

AUDRIANA. I wouldn't wound even the smallest fruit fly.

TATE. Well, that's quite a specific response if you're referring to the *Drosophila melanogaster*, the absolute smallest fruit fly in current existence. And, you lost once again, Mrs. Wheeler. I only recently learned about the Questions Game. It's strangely fun.

AUDRIANA. *(Audriana rises.)* F-- off, the both of you. Messing with me. *(Audriana exits.)*

TATE. How long have you known each other?

JAXTON. What?

TATE. You and Mrs. Wheeler.

JAXTON. I just won.

TATE. I wasn't playing that time, I'm investigating now.

JAXTON. Are you sure?

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TATE. I know that you're Mrs. Wheeler's illegitimate child.

JAXTON. Oh, do you? -- But, does she?

TATE. You're trying to throw me off with a compound question.

JAXTON. And what does that have to do with the murders?

TATE. I suggest that the next question I ask you be answered with a statement and not a question, do you understand me?

JAXTON. Are you trying to trick me?

TATE. Did you hear what I said?

JAXTON. Don't you think we're quite evenly matched? *(A gunshot! Followed by a woman's scream. Winter runs in.)*

WINTER. Someone's been shot!

TATE. Who or Whom?

WINTER. I always get the meaning of those two words mixed up. -- A random gentleman I've been rehearsing my lines with told me to run out on stage and say the line from the play, "Someone's been shot!" And so...

TATE. Would you jump off a cliff if a random gentleman told you to do so?

WINTER. I don't know. Maybe.

TATE. Has someone actually been shot?

WINTER. Well, it sounded like it. The gunshot did ring out.

TATE. Sounding like it and another actual murder that may or may have not taken place are two distinctly different things now, aren't they?

WINTER. I am in no mood to play the Questions Game right now, okay?

TATE. I'm not playing the game. Gunshots may not always be what they seem.

WINTER. I was still playing the game. I ended with the word, "Okay?" and... upward inflected making it a question. Did you know I was the National Champion?

TATE. Something is very wrong in this town. *(To Jaxton.)* I do however, know your deep, dark secret, Mr. Jaxton Zaire. *(Tate exits. Jaxton walks over to Winter.)*

JAXTON. Do you suppose he suspects anything?

WINTER. Time out from the Questions Game from here on out, agreed?

JAXTON. Agreed.

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WINTER. Sucker. Lost again.

JAXTON. Not playing anymore. Look, you asked if I thought he suspected anything.

WINTER. You're being redundant.

JAXTON. If you were asking as the narrator of a play, which is not your role, my answer would be, probably. But I suspect you're asking as my sister and so I will give you this answer. I understand that he knows something, most likely the root of your competitive nature and how you suffered greatly in elementary school due to your first and last name being representative of two seasons. I doubt he knows we are siblings. However, due to his own admission, he stated to the fact that Mrs. Wheeler is my mother. But, ... I'll take that secret to the grave. It would kill her to know that her son is alive after all these years. Besides, I doubt it's a major plot point, arc of any scene, or part of the rising or falling action. It's just backstory as far as I'm concerned, nothing more. And I'll deny it as well if there is anything more to it. Now, unless you have something to tell me that will move the story forward, I suggest we end this right here, right now.

WINTER. I want the facts to be clear, that I had a different mother.

JAXTON. I know.

WINTER. Perhaps others do not.

JAXTON. Please explain.

WINTER. Mrs. Wheeler had an affair with our father. Well, he seduced her.

JAXTON. I know.

WINTER. Then, why did you ask me to explain?

JAXTON. Implicit sibling rivalry, I guess.

WINTER. Huh?

JAXTON. Look, I'm not aware of all of my challenging behaviors, okay? I do think more explanation is needed regarding the root cause of your competitive nature.

WINTER. My birth mother was a professional tennis player.

JAXTON. Okay. I guess that explains it.

WINTER. Most importantly, Tate knows that people used to make fun of

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me in school for being *bi-seasonal*. I overheard him narrating while I was pretending to be frozen in time. It's called *acting*.

JAXTON. Do you know the freeze response is often due to childhood trauma?

WINTER. Some childhood wounds are never healed and yet they may serve us later in life.

JAXTON. Maybe you should call your therapist.

WINTER. I did, but the only appointment she had available was during rehearsal time. And I will not lose this role for anything.

JAXTON. But I'm the director. If you need to talk to someone...

WINTER. Yes... and, as the director, you would definitely hold it against me.

JAXTON. You're impossible.

WINTER. What do you mean?

JAXTON. I'm not playing that game anymore.

WINTER. I think the rest of the cast is getting suspicious, not to mention the authorities. (*Lights up on the Sheriff and Police Officer, still mouthing the word, "Watermelon," to each other upstage.*)

JAXTON. (*To Sheriff and Police Officer.*) That's enough rehearsing for today. Nice work, both of you. (*Sheriff and Police Officer exit.*)

WINTER. I think we should tell them everything.

JAXTON. It won't do any good. (*Delaney walks in.*)

DELANEY. I is so pleas'd that you is still here, Mr. Jaxton, sir.

JAXTON. What is it?

WINTER. Her. Ugh. She drives me crazy.

DELANEY. I understand not why you's got no likin' t'wards me, but somethin's wrong. Really wrong-in.

JAXTON. What is it, Delaney?

DELANEY. It's Fall season time in Cripple Pines and yet it's a nearly 75 de-grees, Mr. Jaxton, sir, mister. I knows it's an almost *Winter*, but it feels like *Spring*-time up here in the Rockies. Papa always said me ta' "enjoys tha' seasons, be 'um *Winter* or *Spring* or..." I jus can't tell which one I's to enjoy this time right here's now.

WINTER...

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DELANEY. You's two have 'en good 'hearsal. (*Delaney exits.*)

WINTER. Making fun of me, right in front of me. I'll kill that bitch. (*Tate walks in.*)

TATE. Kill, huh? Would you like to tell me more?

WINTER. No, I wouldn't.

TATE. I won. (*Tate exits.*)

WINTER. I lost with *one* question, are you kidding me?

JAXTON. Do you think he was actually playing the game?

WINTER. All of this crap is making me crazy. That Delaney woman is not for real, I know it. I'd bet my life on it.

JAXTON. Beat you, Miss Champion. (*Winter grunts and exits. Tate walks backwards back in.*)

TATE. I suggest that you come clean with whatever it is that I don't know about you.

JAXTON. I thought you left.

TATE. I did and then I walked back in, backwards.

JAXTON. (*Jaxton checks around.*) Okay, look, no one knows I'm gay here. It's a very small town.

TATE. Hiding behind the small-town thing is no reason not to be who you are.

JAXTON. I thought you were an investigative reporter not a therapist.

TATE. That dialog was very "on the nose" followed by previously delivered exposition. You should have responded non-verbally.

JAXTON. Perhaps. (*Jaxton gives an exaggerated smile.*)

TATE. Look, I have a gay cousin, Jeffrey Jackson and he lives in a very small town; Waldron, Kansas. I watched how he struggled. It was in his eyes. I see that same pain in your eyes and I had to say something.

Anyway, Jeffrey came out six months ago and his life has taken a 180-degree turn for the better. Happier than he's ever been. Still single but happy. Maybe when this is all over you two should meet.

JAXTON. If we could keep this conversation between us and off the record for now?

TATE. What are you going to give up in return?

JAXTON. I don't know... two complimentary tickets to opening night.

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TATE. Already have a media pass, what else?

JAXTON. What else do you want?

TATE. Maybe I should regress and offer a bit of backstory... I was in California before I arrived here in town. Got a tip regarding a possible something happening with a guy and a horse on Rodeo Drive. I drove to Rodeo and encountered a woman claiming to be a psychic. She ripped off my macchiato at a Beverly Hills coffee shop in plain daylight. This was right before I sought out to find the man and the horse. I chased her, caught up to her and threatened to feed her expired parking meter, which is a crime in Los Angeles, and punishable by a strict fine and possible jail time. We bickered and then came to an agreement; She would keep the macchiato coffee she stole from me and I'd avoid feeding her expired parking meter. She, the coffee drink thief woman, would then provide me with a lead, a tip, on a worthwhile, potential newsworthy, story to potentially revamp my career. The *lead* she offered was about the very murders happening here. I was initially skeptical because I had never heard of Cripple Pines, Colorado. and then the guy and the horse show up, right outside the coffee shop on Rodeo Drive. They trot up, as we, me and the woman lady were in mid-negotiation, right next to her hybrid vehicle, the one at the expired meter. The guy's *horse* says, "Your destiny isn't on this street, pal." Then, they trot off down the street. Coincidence? I doubt it.

JAXTON. You're telling me that a horse spoke to you?

TATE. Crazier things have happened on Rodeo Drive.

JAXTON. I'll give you this, since my sister and I are related... there is no way either one of us could be the killer. It's genetically impossible.

TATE. That makes no sense whatsoever. And it's redundant when you say, "Since my sister and I are related."

JAXTON. It makes complete sense. All of the victims were shot dead, correct?

TATE. Never assume. First rule of investigative reporting.

JAXTON. Can we agree that all of the victims had bullet wounds somewhere in their bodies that lead them to potentially bleed to death and die?

TATE. Cause of death regarding the last three victims isn't

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conclusionary until the toxicology, powder burns and other pertinent reports come back.

JAXTON. I don't think *conclusionary* is a real word.

TATE. You're absolutely correct. I'm checking to see how intelligent you really are. You passed that test but, you still may be the killer.

JAXTON. I *may* be as in asking permission, but... I *can't* be as in able. Because neither myself nor my sister are *able*.

TATE. You need not educate me regarding the proper usage of the words *can* and *may*.

JAXTON. What I'm getting at is that our entire family lineage is either allergic to sulfur, potassium nitrate and or charcoal. All of which are in gunpowder. I think we can both agree that gunpowder is a prime ingredient in most all bullets.

TATE. Technically, it's in the cartridge of the bullet.

JAXTON. True. But is it as true as a talking horse hanging out on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills?

TATE. True. Yes. Now, how many relatives are we talking about with the allergy?

JAXTON. All of 'em.

TATE...

JAXTON. I apologize. I was gaming with you as well as being a smart ass. Approximately 47 relatives in total... give or take.

TATE. Give or take?

JAXTON. Some estranged, some emancipated. -- Bring a gun, bullet, gunpowder, sulfur, potassium nitrate anywhere near Winter or myself and we will start itching like crazy. It causes a horrible rash and whatnot.

TATE. *Whatnot?* Please refrain from using that word around me. It invites unnecessary backstory.

JAXTON. I apologize. And now that I know what irritates you, I will consider us friends.

TATE. Is there something in the water in this town?

JAXTON. A cliché, nice tactic. I don't lie to my friends is what I'm saying. And if you don't want to be friends, that's okay. But I will still tell you the truth.

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TATE. Maybe you shouldn't meet my gay relative.

JAXTON. Whatever.

TATE. Whatever.

JAXTON. We both say, *Whatever*. Hey, that's pretty cool.

TATE. *Whatever* is a universally acceptable throw away word. (*Jaxton extends his hand.*)

JAXTON. Friends?

TATE. (*A beat.*) Let's go with acquaintances, I don't rush into anything since my divorce. And if I find out that you've lied to me, we will no longer be anything.

JAXTON. Deal. (*Jaxton's hand is still extended.*)

TATE. I'm a semi-germophobe. So, I don't take to shaking. Nothing personal.

JAXTON. I'm codependent and will try not to make it about me. I know it's about you and I accept that fact and will still be your fr-- acquaintance. If, that is okay with you?

TATE. My wife was a codependent and although I loved her until the relationship ended, it was still very challenging.

JAXTON. It's a disease, but help is available as long as the individual wants it.

TATE. Unfortunately, she never wanted any help.

JAXTON. We all have our stuff, don't we?

TATE. Yes, we do. (*Winter walks back in.*)

WINTER. Did you tell him?

JAXTON. We can trust him, Winter. We're acquaintances now.

WINTER. Huh?

JAXTON. We have an agreement.

WINTER. I hate her, that Delaney girl, person. I have a real hard time when I get triggered, and the name teasing brought up a whole lot of unresolved grief and anger with my childhood.

TATE. I understand.

WINTER. Do you understand? Do you really know what it's like? Have you ever been named after even *one* season? Dare two?! Do you know what that does to a child growing up in a mountainous small town?... (*No*

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answer from Tate.) No, I didn't think so. "Oh, Winter now that it's *Winter Solstice* and it's seventy degrees, do you think we should just skip a season and go right into *Spring*? Seems like *Spring* has some boundary issues, don't you think so, *Winter*?" Ha, ha Fucking ha! You have no idea what it's like to be me, you're not even from here and so do not, do *not* tell me that you *understand*!

TATE. I apologize.

WINTER. (*A beat.*) No, I apologize.

TATE. You don't have to be sorry.

WINTER. Yes, I do God-dammit. Jesus, would you just let me have my own fucking feelings.

TATE. I'm going to walk away now. (*Tate exits.*)

WINTER. God, I want to kill him.

JAXTON. You don't mean that.

WINTER. The fuck I don't. Don't you start in on me.

JAXTON. Do you want to get arrested?

WINTER. No one in this fucking town has any boundaries. Why didn't you just tell him you were gay while you were at it?

JAXTON. I did.

WINTER. You're kidding me?

JAXTON. I know you're having some deep something or other going on right now, Winter. But we need to remember what's happening in this town. People are dying... and continuing to say that you want to *kill* people isn't helping clear your name and may implicate those around you.

WINTER. I'm sorry, Jaxton. The truth is... I'm having trouble memorizing my lines. This is what happens when I'm performance stressed and memorizingly deprived. Crazy girl. That's me! Hi... It'll all go away when I'm off book. I promise.

JAXTON. You're sure that's the root of what's going on?

WINTER. Yes, absolutely.

JAXTON. You're positive?

WINTER. Yes. Jesus.

JAXTON. Just making sure. Want to go grab a skinny latte?

WINTER. Now, I'm fat?

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JAXTON. I said nothing about you, physically.

WINTER. You actor-directors... the fucking subtext you weave into everyday normal conversations just to maintain control over people.

(Winter exits. A moment, Jaxton exits.)

SCENE 5

Audriana and Delaney are in the theatre office. Eight unopened FedEx boxes scattered around. Edger Allen Poe memorabilia adorns the entire office.

DELANEY. *(Speaking differently than we know her to speak.)* Looks like you've been getting quite a few boxes from FedEx.

AUDRIANA. It does, doesn't it?

DELANEY. Are you going to open them?

AUDRIANA. Is that any of your business?

DELANEY. I guess not. *(A beat.)*

AUDRIANA. Are you sure no one suspects a thing, dear?

DELANEY. No one suspects a thing. Believe me, I've got the innocent, stupid, small town, naive country girl thing down. Boom!

AUDRIANA. There's still a killer on the loose.

DELANEY. Mrs. Wheeler, all will be fine as long as the plan is followed. No need to be afraid.

AUDRIANA. Afraid? Have I never told you about my fears... of basements mainly?

DELANEY. Basements, huh?

AUDRIANA. Yes, I'm deathly afraid of basements.

DELANEY. Fuck!

AUDRIANA. Why such a strong reaction, dear?

DELANEY. Reaction?

AUDRIANA. I think you need to focus on holding up your end of the arrangement, as will I. And – Never mi—

DELANEY. No, what?

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AUDRIANA. It's a fine line one walks as an actor regarding believability when it comes to playing reality versus a caricature.

DELANEY. Are you saying that my *Delaney* is a caricature? Like, not believable?

AUDRIANA. I'm not saying that at all.

DELANEY. What is it that you are saying, exactly?

AUDRIANA. Even a cactus has flowers.

DELANEY. Huh? Isn't acting about playing multiple dimensions, exposing a character's deepest flaw? *Delaney* is a complete idiot. She's verbally flawed to the core.

AUDRIANA. Maybe take it down a notch.

DELANEY. Says the big theatre lady. I was well trained too, ma'am.

AUDRIANA. Do whatever you wish, dear.

DELANEY. You're testing me, aren't you, Mrs. Wheeler?

AUDRIANA. Takes one to know one.

DELANEY. I have an idea about whom the killer might be.

AUDRIANA. So, do I.

DELANEY. You first.

AUDRIANA. Go ahead, my dear.

DELANEY. No. You. Please.

AUDRIANA. Tell me, dear...

DELANEY & AUDRIANA. Arlo.

AUDRIANA. (*Quickly.*) Jinx. Ten. Pop. Can't speak until I say your name, or you owe me a pop.

DELANEY...

AUDRIANA. Now, my dear, *no* speaking until I say your name. I just love the Copy Game.

DELANEY...

AUDRIANA. My brother used to trick me like I just did you when we were kids and I always lost. I swore that when I met some gullible person, like yourself, I would play with them, win and break the legacy. That was fun, now where were we, dear?

DELANEY. (*A beat.*) Pop is called *soda* where I was raised.

AUDRIANA. You owe me a case of *Pop*. I didn't say your name yet.

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DELANEY. You asked me a question, “Now where were we, dear?”

AUDRIANA. Jinx. Ten. Pop. Much more fun than the Questions Game. I will take a case of Dr. Pepper and I would like it today, please.

DELANEY. Mrs. Wheeler, are you feeling okay?

AUDRIANA. Never felt better, my dear. I feel ten years younger just playing this game. I’m so pleased that I still remember the rules.

DELANEY. Well, I’m also aware of the game, ma’am and I remember the rules to be slightly different. Would you go over them, please? That is, if you don’t mind.

AUDRIANA. I don’t mind at all...

AUDRIANA & DELANEY... dear!

DELANEY. (*Seizing the moment.*) Jinx. Ten. Soda. Can’t talk ‘til I say your name, or you owe me a case of *soda!* Gotcha!

AUDRIANA. I don’t owe you anything. *Jinx. Ten. Soda...* sounds idiotic.

DELANEY. You lost; you’re not supposed to talk.

AUDRIANA. You should have let me get to the rules before you tried to win because you said, "Can't talk ‘til..." And the official rules state, “Can’t talk until.”

DELANEY. Did I?

AUDRIANA. You certainly did, my dear. And... Technically, you shouldn’t be talking because of my previous win. I won the game first.

DELANEY. I want a rematch.

AUDRIANA. It’s not tennis, dear. It’s a spontaneous game.

DELANEY. Fine. Then we will play when you least expect it.

AUDRIANA. Something like murder?

DELANEY. What does that mean?

AUDRIANA. Argo.

DELANEY. How so?

AUDRIANA. His audition piece.

DELANEY. Yes, I remember he said that it went well.

AUDRIANA. He claims to have delivered a monologue from Shakespeare’s lost play, *Cardenio*. The lost play which has only been *claimed* to have been found.

DELANEY. Oh, really?

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AUDRIANA. Lewis Theobald produced a play in 1727 entitled, *Double Falsehood*, which Mr. Theobald *claims* to have been adapted from three manuscripts of a lost Shakespearian play. But... he did not name the specific lost play. He only *claimed* to have done so.

DELANEY. Please stop stressing the word *claim* in whatever form, it's very irritating.

AUDRIANA. My apologies.

DELANEY. Where did Arlo find his monologue if it wasn't from *Cardenio*?

AUDRIANA. He made it up.

DELANEY. It sounded like Shakespeare.

AUDRIANA. Oh, *poppycock*! Do you hear that, my dear?

DELANEY. What?

AUDRIANA. It's a most saddened and decomposed *William Shakespeare* turning over in his grave.

DELANEY. Mrs. Wheeler?

AUDRIANA. Yes, dear?

DELANEY. When it's just you and me and I'm being my most authentic self, like I am right now with just us—

AUDRIANA. Out with it, dear.

DELANEY. The *dear* thing. It really bothers me.

AUDRIANA. What about the “dear” thing pushes your buttons, dear? You just told me that forms of the word, “claim” bother you.

DELANEY. The *dear* thing is different. I know that it's just the way you talk and all, but it really bothers me.

AUDRIANA. What I'm hearing you say, repeatedly is that the “dear” thing bothers you, my dear. Am I correct?

DELAENY. When I'm playing a character like the one, I'm playing here in Cripple Pines, when you and I aren't being real, it's fine. But now, like when we're being real with each other, it feels condescending.

AUDRIANA. I see you and heard you, dear. It's how I speak. I am of a different generation than yourself. And... just to be honest with you, the “ma'am” thing bothers me.

DELANEY. So, you understand?

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AUDRIANA. No, I said, “I see you and heard you, dear.” I did not say understand.

DELANEY. What do you mean, exactly?

AUDRIANA. I mean I “see” you here, right here, right now. And, I “heard you,” past tense. If I had used “on the nose” boring dialogue, I would have, in the moment said, “I hear you.” The “see” thing was only to confuse you a bit.

DELANEY. I do understand, Mrs. Wheeler, however the speaking in quotes is something my mother used to do.

AUDRIANA. So, if I’m now hearing correctly, I remind you of your “mother” and that is why you only italicize my words when you repeat them back to me?

DELANEY. Yes.

AUDRIANA. Or, are you just patronizing an age-ed woman?

DELANEY. Mrs., Wheeler, If I may...?

AUDRIANA. The stage is yours.

DELANEY. I don’t need a stage. I just wish you would refrain from calling me *dear* when it’s just us, could we do that, please?

AUDRIANA. You could.

DELANEY. I *could*?

AUDRIANA. Yes. You asked if “we” could do that and I said--

DELANEY. Mrs. Wheeler, please refrain from calling me *dear* and I will stop calling you *ma’am*.

AUDRIANA. (*A beat.*) No.

DELANEY. *No?*

AUDRIANA. “No...” No is a complete sentence. I just set a hard boundary.

DELANEY. Mrs. Wheeler.

AUDRIANA. Would you like to hear one of the numerous monologues I’m working on?

DELANEY. You just changed the topic.

AUDRIANA. The reason I changed the topic is because you are looping, dear.

DELANEY. *Looping?*

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AUDRIANA. Mind-fucking yourself.

DELANEY. I just thought—

AUDRIANA. Butter, pickles and limes.

DELANEY. What?

AUDRIANA. What, what? Did you fart or something? (*Audriana laughs.*)

DELANEY. Mrs. Wheeler, I'm not sure exactly where this conversation is going?

AUDRIANA. My hearing is very keen, always has been. And this conversation has now come full circle. I was one of the substitute schoolteachers in town for a short time once upon a time.

DELANEY. I don't follow.

AUDRIANA. Arlo Nixon's mother was a teacher in town as well and therefore he cannot be the killer.

DELANEY. Just because his mother was a teacher?

AUDRIANA. I think it will become crystal clear once you hear the monologue, dear. Have a seat. (*Audriana offers Delaney a seat.*)

AUDRIANA. Ready?

DELANEY. Yes.

AUDRIANA. Hello, my name is Audriana Wheeler and I will be performing a short piece from an unfinished play entitled, *PROCRASTINATE* where I will be playing the character, Catri- (*Audriana tilts her head down, clears her throat, then looks up.*) Don't go mama' I would have but with school and all and Papi be'n sick I thought I should wait. I know you're mad, but I don't think you understand why I did it. Why I skipped class. Miss Kettlemen told us to write a paper about our life and since mine is still going on I didn't write my life. It would have been filled with lies. When I went to her and told her about Papi be'n so sick and that they weren't sure about what it was yet, she said, "Just write a little *scoochin*, like a paragraph..." But I didn't want to do less than my best like you usd'ta tell us kids. So, I didn't do it. I know it was wrong, but you leavin' isn't the answer, it's not, Mama' It's not, I swear to you, it isn't, I swear!! I swe- Why am I doing this? I'm doing the same thing you taught us kids not to do. I'm giving up. I've a'ways quit before the "gift arrives"

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like when we was kids and the toilet didn't flush, not because we didn't have one, but because we didn't need one. And you said, "In every situation there is a gift, you just have to be with it long enough to see it..." like before flush toilets..., outhouses never need to flush. And then you said something I forgot... "Be patient." I understand now. I understand about Papi and his undiagnosed illness, the paper I never finished and Miss Kettleman and the toilet and I want to tell you so bad!— (*Audriana grabs her chest, makes some horrible gasping sounds, then falls to her knees and then topples face to floor.*)

DELANEY. Mrs. Wheeler?

AUDRIANA...

DELANEY. Oh my god! (*Delaney rushes to Audriana.*) Mrs. Wheeler? (*Delaney rolls Audriana onto her back.*) Don't die. Nooo! (*A beat. Audriana sits up.*)

AUDRIANA. What did you think?

DELANEY. I thought you were dead. (*Audriana stands up.*)

AUDRIANA. Pretty damn good monologue, huh? *Procrastinate* is a fabulous play. It operates on multiple levels. Unfortunately, the playwright died before it was finished.

DELANEY. You scared me half to death.

AUDRIANA. I still have it, my dear. Still have it.

DELANEY. I just don't understand how this explains Arlo Nixon's innocence.

AUDRIANA. Well, it does and it... doesn't. *Procrastinate* is a play about putting things off.

DELANEY. I understood that much.

AUDRIANA. Judgement. It's also about not judging until we have all the facts. What I'm trying to tell you, dear, is that we do not know for sure that Arlo is innocent. His last name's *Nixon* for Christ's sake. All will work out; we just need to have *patience*. (*In walks Tate.*)

TATE. Sorry to interrupt but there's going to be an all cast meeting here at the theatre in fifteen minutes. Jaxton has a big announcement. (*Lights shift.*)

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SCENE 6

Sheriff, Police Officer, Delaney, Winter, Arlo, and Audriana are gathered in the Theatre. Jaxton walks in, followed by Tate.

JAXTON. I want to squelch any and all rumors that may or may not be going around... I'm *gay!*... It's something I've struggled with for a very long time and now it's out, okay? We don't need to talk about it anymore. *(Silence.)* It's also true that Delaney and I are related. We're brother and sister. And... she got the lead in the play because she had the *best* audition. No other reason. There. Done. *(A Gunshot! An offstage scream. And then, Audriana screams.)*

JAXTON. My god.

TATE. Jesus, that was loud. *(Police Officer and Sheriff mouth the word, "Watermelon.")*

AUDRIANA. Isn't someone going to do something? *(A MICELLANOUS MAN walks on stage and collapses in front of everyone. Tate steps closer and looks down at the fallen man.)*

TATE. Dead. Another murder.

ARLO. I didn't do it. Just because I'm the quiet, quasi-loner guy, you probably all think it was me. Well, I was here, right here, the whole time and the gunshot came from offstage. It proves I'm not the killer.

TATE. For now.

ARLO. I'm also an introvert.

TATE. So are most serial killers as well as people working in theatre. They only pretend to be extroverts. Studies and statistics don't lie.

WINTER. Who is this man? *(Tate rolls the body over.)*

TATE. Just as I suspected.

AUDRIANA. I don't recognize him, dear.

TATE. He's not from here. Just as I suspected.

WINTER. Then, where is he from – what is his name?

TATE. A compound question, and so... legally, I only have to answer one of them.

WINTER. Answering only one of two questions when compounded is not

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the Law.

TATE. I said that to throw off the killer. I suspect the deceased individual is from Central Casting in Hollywood. They supply *extras, background actors* for special bits. Usually for on camera gigs but things are tough all over in the entertainment industry right now.

WINTER...

TATE. Jesus, hasn't anyone here worked in LA?

ARLO. You're treating this man-- this victim as if he was a nobody.

TATE. Welcome to the industry, kid. A more derogatory term would be *human prop*.

AUDRIANA. I'm sure this poor dead man fleshed out his entire character, even with a middle name and backstory before he was killed. To die on camera or stage without one single word of dialog requires an abundance of talent. It's *all* body language. *(Tate picks a wallet out of the back pocket of the dead man and looks through it.)*

DELANEY. Who is he? What's his ID say?

TATE. Don't know... It's a prop. *(Winter exits.)*

JAXTON. She can't leave; we have rehearsal.

ARLO. But someone was just murdered.

AUDRIANA. The show must go on.

JAXTON. Everybody. Help move the body. *(Police Officer, Sheriff, Audriana and Jaxton pull the body offstage. Jaxton and Audriana walk back in.)*

JAXTON. Rehearsal is cancelled.

AUDRIANA. Never in the history of this theatre has one single rehearsal or performance ever been cancelled, young man, dear.

JAXTON. But, Mrs. Wheeler, in thinking it through... and our star is now missing—

AUDRIANA. Call someone who gives a shit. Replace her! This is the theatre.

JAXTON. But—

AUDRIANA. *The show must go on!* *(Winter walks back in with some toilet paper.)*

WINTER. I have seasonal allergies. My nose was running. I apologize.

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AUDRIANA. And Mercury is in retrograde, dear. You don't see anyone else running to the bathroom for toilet paper. You were seconds away from being fired.

JAXTON. Rehearsal in five minutes. *(Everyone exits. Lights shift.)*

SCENE 7

Arlo and Audriana talk outside the theatre. Arlo is smoking.

ARLO. I've been trying to quit for years.

AUDRIANA. I never really started.

ARLO. I'm down to stage cigarettes, but it's still a bitch.

AUDRIANA. Like I said, never really smoked but the drinking was killing me.

ARLO. Cocaine addiction's a bitch and a half.

AUDRIANA. *Meth*, never tried that one. I like my smile too much.

ARLO. Ever try "E?"

AUDRIANA. Ecstasy? MDMA? No, but I always wanted to, dear.

ARLO. You're pretty hip, Mrs. Wheeler.

AUDRIANA. So, you want to do some "E" and fuck like rabbits?

ARLO. Ma'am, I didn't think you were attracted to m—

AUDRIANA. How about a few "Dexies" and we try to hide that sausage you're packing?

ARLO. Mrs. Wheeler.

AUDRIANA. Or a line of "Yayo" and screw for sixteen hours?

ARLO. Mrs. Wheeler, you're turning me on...

AUDRIANA. What about a little "Tango and Cash" and forget we ever reached the "Zenith?"

ARLO. I'm all in, ma'am.

AUDRIANA. Messing with you, dear. I played a strung-out drug addict years ago in an off-Broadway production. Tormenting play, brilliant writing. Lines never left me. That piece of work changed me... deeply, spiritually, forever a different woman. That's what great theatre does.

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ARLO. I'm not quite sure how to respond.

AUDRIANA. I'm flattered. I do know how much you wanted the lead role in *It's All About Me*.

ARLO. I did. I really wanted the part, Mrs. Wheeler.

AUDRIANA. I have little say in casting anymore.

ARLO. But you're producing the show.

AUDRIANA. It isn't like it used to be, dear. Directors have all the power in the theatre these days. Politics.

ARLO. Okay.

AUDRIANA. Why don't you come over to my house after rehearsal. It's more private there.

ARLO. Mrs. Wheeler, I'm getting mixed messages. Are you coming on to me or not? (*Arlo finishes his stage cigarette.*)

AUDRIANA. Oh dear, the fixtures in my house broke down years ago.

ARLO. I'm very confused and... really turned on.

AUDRIANA. I am flattered but the prop department closed down here in the '90's.

ARLO. You're toying with me.

AUDRIANA. I appreciate what it is you're trying to do, dear, but the cast iron skillet got thrown in the trash after my last omelet and I've never looked back.

ARLO. I think I'm falling in love with you.

AUDRIANA. Arlo, sweetheart, I am flattered. But, I'm completely out of firewood and burning restrictions around my cabin haven't been lifted for years.

ARLO. Not so sure what that meant.

AUDRIANA. Some lines work better than others. (*Arlo grabs Audriana and kisses her.*)

ARLO. I have all the firewood we'll need.

AUDRIANA. Arlo. We cannot do this.

ARLO. What? What's the matter?

AUDRIANA. The Play.

ARLO. What are you saying?

AUDRIANA. What if you "were" cast?

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ARLO. Are you saying what I think you're saying?

AUDRIANA. Redundancy isn't a turn on, dear.

ARLO. Are you *verbalizing* what I think you're saying, then?

AUDRIANA. I don't know, am I?

ARLO. I'm really struggling with some of your subtext.

AUDRIANA. If someone had an unfortunate accident and we needed to recast the lead as a male and you were to get that role, then you would be in the play. Am I making myself clear now?

ARLO. I've never killed anyone, ma'am.

AUDRIANA. I'm not talking about murder, dear.

ARLO. But you mentioned someone having an unfortunate accident.

AUDRIANA. I'm sensing that something bad is going to happen and only shared that thought with you. I cannot explain it.

ARLO. If you really think I'm right for the role, I will kill her.

AUDRIANA. I appreciate your dedication to the theatre my dear boy, but you don't need to do anything. And, as far as what is or isn't going on between us, it must wait. A possible subplot of sorts.

ARLO. Whatever you say, Mrs. Wheeler. (*Arlo kisses Audriana for the second time.*)

AUDRIANA. Now go, my young buck. And tell no one of what has transpired here.

ARLO. Yes, ma'am. (*Arlo runs away, exits. Tate approaches.*)

TATE. Mrs. Wheeler?

AUDRIANA. How long have you been there, Mr. Longsword?

TATE. Wouldn't you like to know?

AUDRIANA. Stop with the games. Answer the question!

TATE. No need to get upset, Mrs. Wheeler.

AUDRIANA. I am not the least of a trickle upset. It's something else entirely.

TATE. It wouldn't have anything to do with Arlo Nixon, would it?

AUDRIANA. You have been standing there quite a while, haven't you dear? What can I say? I've had to deal with little crushes many times throughout my lengthy career and although I'm flattered, it just wouldn't work.

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TATE. Wouldn't work how?

AUDRIANA. Not that it's any of your business Mr. Longsword but the six o'clock train has left the station and despite one's best effort, sometimes passengers get left behind.

TATE. I thought the train stopped coming here years ago.

AUDRIANA. That's exactly what I'm saying, Mr. Longsword.

TATE. I don't follow.

AUDRIANA. My private life has nothing to do with the narrative you are trying to construct right now.

TATE. I'm seeking to solve the mystery behind what's happening in Cripple Pines, Mrs. Wheeler. That is the story.

AUDRIANA. Mr. Longsword, do you suppose that all of this; the murders, the chaos in this small mountain town, previously crime free, might be a decoy to goings on much, much, much larger?

TATE. That's quite a few *muches*. Three to be exact.

AUDRIANA. And he can count.

TATE. I was a mathematics major in college and I'm also an eternal optimist as well as an objective thinker. All great investigative reporters look at all sides until the facts point, irrevocably in one distinct direction.

AUDRIANA. Don't you think it rather strange that our most recent murder appeared to be a little stagy?

TATE. A theatre murder, *stagy*. I doubt that's a coincidence, Mrs. Wheeler.

AUDRIANA. Why would someone kill a stranger that seemingly has no ties to this community whatsoever?

TATE. That's something I'm very interested in finding out.

AUDRIANA. I suggest you quit focusing on the murders and focus on looking in other directions. And, I don't just mean what happened a moment ago.

TATE. You're indirectly telling me something, Mrs. Wheeler?

AUDRIANA. I am trying to help you, Mr. Longsword, dear. And, it's nothing I want any credit for in the end. I've had my fifteen minutes many times over.

TATE. Why not come right out and say it, ma'am?

AUDRIANA. What is the fun in that, Mr. Longsword? It's all about

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dramatic tension, subtext and the one's objective. (*Audriana exits.*)

TATE. I hope we will continue this conversation.

AUDRIANA. (*Offstage.*) Time will tell, Mr. Longsword. (*Jaxton walks in.*)

TATE. Mr. Zaire, a timely entrance.

JAXTON. I pride myself on not only being professional and timely but, also being serendipitous in how I live my life, Mr. Longsword.

TATE. What can I do for you?

JAXTON. How long was I standing there, is that the subtext of your inquiry?

TATE. How long were you standing there? How's that?

JAXTON. Boring. But, to answer the first question you asked, I'm not the killer, Mr. Longsword. I take it you're wearing your investigative hat at the moment.

TATE. Always hated hats, most especially when I played little league.

JAXTON. Well, that's neither here nor there—

TATE. Nor anywhere. And if you're trying to arouse me, clichés never were my thing.

JAXTON. I happen to get off on them.

TATE. Yes, I'm sure you do. I'd like to take this conversation in a different direction.

JAXTON. Uncomfortable with your sexuality?

TATE. I never mix business with pleasure. Muddies the waters.

JAXTON. How cliché.

TATE. I've experimented in the past, if that's what you really want to know.

JAXTON. I thought as much.

TATE. It was a chemistry set. My sixth birthday. Mixing vinegar and baking soda always brings about a strong reaction.

JAXTON. I've noticed a little kick in your giddy-up.

TATE. Football injury. Left leg was never the same. Take care of your knees.

JAXTON. Quite the diversion.

TATE. I'll cut to the chase if I may be so manipulative in my re-directive dialogue. You always seem to be where the action is, Mr. Zaire.

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JAXTON. Need I remind you about the role serendipity takes in my life.

TATE. Planned serendipity is nothing more than manipulation.

JAXTON. Good one.

TATE. This conversation is beginning to bore me, Mr. Zaire. Let's do away with the formalities.

JAXTON. Alright, you pompous asshole.

TATE. Now, that's the kind of talk I get off on.

JAXTON. If I give you some important information, will you assure me that it did not come from me?

TATE. I never reveal my sources unless it's a matter of national security, which I am yet to encounter.

JAXTON. Well then, I may not be able to help you.

TATE. What if I make an exception?

JAXTON. I am not the killer. But maybe I might be needing to *possibly* protect myself from *possibly* being involved with a much larger *possible* situation which has the *possibility* of affecting national security as well as other future *possibilities*.

TATE. I've never heard that many variants of the word *possible* in one thought.

JAXTON. I'm glad I've captured your attention. – Have you ever heard of the *Amsterdam Diamond Heist*?

TATE. No. Never.

JAXTON. A double negative.

TATE. Touché.

JAXTON. I'm sure you must have read about it.

TATE. No. I did not. Never heard about it.

JAXTON. Followed with a triple negative, nice. And you call yourself an investigative reporter? February 8, 2005.

TATE. Ahh... I do remember that date, though. 2/08/2005. I was working remotely, undercover with no access to any form of media or electronics.

JAXTON. Why do you say, "Ahh?"

TATE. Because I have a special love of *interjections*. Words like; *ahh*, *alas*, *bah*. My favorite being, *crikey*.

JAXTON. So, you're telling me that you were aware of the heist?

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TATE. No. No. No. How many times do I have to tell you, no? But, to be completely transparent, February 8th of 2005 was the first day of the rest of my life.

JAXTON. What? – Not that I'm still counting but brilliant quadruple negative.

TATE. That exact date was my sobriety birthday.

JAXTON. Congratulations.

TATE. Thank you. Truth be told, I drank the entire 21 days I was at the Betty Ford Center.

JAXTON. That sounds counter to the recovery center philosophy.

TATE. Addictions are tough, Mr. Zaire. I was young and directionless. I decided to stop drinking the day I left rehab because the facility was revamping all of their marketing materials and wanted testimonials and photos of sober individuals. I wanted my fifteen minutes and have always admired model's poses on throwaway brochures. We all have our quirks.

JAXTON. I see.

TATE. Do you now? See?

JAXTON. My entire life. Blessed with 20/20 vision. Excellent eyesight.

TATE. A double positive. Lester Holt would love the *20/20* news magazine show reference. But you're still giving me nothing.

JAXTON. A date. I gave you that much. I suggest you do some homework.

TATE. As much time as we're spending on one calendar day, I'm guessing it's significant to the diamond heist you aforementioned.

JAXTON. This may end up being your biggest story yet.

TATE. Are you foreshadowing an outcome to this story and the murders here in Cripple Pines while thoroughly trying to confuse me?

JAXTON. Let's not get ahead of ourselves.

TATE. *One day at a time.*

JAXTON. You didn't hear it from me. *(Jaxton turns and starts to walk away.)*

TATE. Mr. Zaire? *(Jaxton turns back.)*

JAXTON. Yes.

TATE. If you hadn't turn back around this conversation never would have happened. *(Jaxton exits. Tate exits, the opposite direction.)*

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SCENE 8

Tate sits with Audriana in the theatre office. She is wearing an Edger Allen Poe T-shirt and drinks from an Edger Allen Poe coffee cup. An Edger Allen Poe tote bag on her desk. Unopened FedEx boxes are stacked in the office.

AUDRIANA. 118 million dollars in diamonds were never recovered from the *Amsterdam Diamond Heist*. It was all over the news.

TATE. I had a lot going on that day.

AUDRIANA. Well, Mr. Longsword, one cannot know everything about everything.

TATE. Profound and redundant. I have always prided myself on knowing current events even if they've past, as long as they have something to do with discovering the truth.

AUDRIANA. I am sure that you have more serious business at hand than just analyzing my wisdom.

TATE. I have a few questions to ask.

AUDRIANA. I admire him, always have.

TATE. I didn't ask the question yet.

AUDRIANA. It's everyone's sooner or later. *Edger Allen Poe* was a mysteriously brilliant man and has always intrigued me, more so in death. You know his father was an alcoholic?

TATE. As was mine.

AUDRIANA. Did you know that he was obsessed with cats? He often wrote with one perched on his shoulder.

TATE. It appears that you're the one asking the questions, Mrs. Wheeler. Why did you quit performing?

AUDRIANA. Formalities aside, Mr. Longsword?

TATE. I will if you will.

AUDRIANA. Agreed. You want to know why it is that I stopped performing?

TATE. Quit. *Quit* was the exact work I used.

AUDRIANA. Well, the definition of *quit* has interpretive leeway, as in

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leave, usually permanently and it most often refers to a place. *Stop* on the other hand means to *cease to happen*. “I stopped performing,” sounds much better rather than me spouting, “I ceased to happen performing...”

TATE. Are you trying to confuse me?

AURIANA. Perhaps... perhaps that is why you are yet to solve the murders.

TATE. I don't follow.

AUDRIANA. As you shouldn't, it makes one paranoid.

TATE. Cute. You're very witty. I'm following a story, not stalking people, Mrs. Wheeler.

AUDRIANA. One could argue there being a fine line between following and stalking.

TATE. I doubt either one of us have enough proper legal training to argue this any further.

AUDRIANA. I did play a judge once. Network crime show. The only television work I ever did.

TATE. Congratulations.

AUDRIANA. I disliked it immensely. Too many takes. And the re-writes were atrocious and most, quite unnecessary. My dog could have written for that show. The stage on the other hand... You get it right the first time... end of story.

TATE. A dog? I didn't know you had a pet.

AUDRIANA. I do not. A metaphor.

TATE. The Police and the Sheriff, which of whom is in charge here, I am yet to understand. Shouldn't they be attempting to solve the murders? And yet they do nothing.

AUDRIANA. Everyone in a small town has a part to play. Unfortunately, the Police and the Sheriff's contract negotiators had their own interests at heart, insignificant in the larger picture, I guess. I will play my role in this and let them play theirs.

TATE. As we all should.

AUDRIANA. My third acting role was that of a tree in *The Wizard of Oz*. It was a small nonspeaking role much like the Sheriff and Police Officer both play in this town. I was in elementary school and the rule at the time was

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that no student could ever be the lead in a play more than two years in a row. Fourth grade I was the lead, *Blanche DuBois* in Tennessee William's *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Fifth grade, *Juliet* to my *Romeo*. Sixth grade, a *tree*. An apple tree to be more specific and non-fruit bearing according to the novice director.

TATE. You sound angry.

AUDRIANA. A non-fruit bearing apple tree in *The Wizard of Oz*? Of course, I'm angry! That ignorant directorial choice shattered any hope for the suspension of disbelief among every audience member. (*Audriana sheds a single tear.*)

TATE. You're quite emotional.

AUDRIANA. We must access all emotions if we are to get anywhere in the theatre, my dear. Emotional whores for most, but not me.

TATE. I'm sure playing a tree served your career well.

AUDRIANA. To tell you the truth and I will refute it if I ever see or hear about any of this conversation on broadcast or in print... playing a *tree* in that show was the most horrific and humiliating experience of my entire life. I was the laughingstock of Barker Elementary School. My parents disowned me after the final performance. We arrived home, my mother and father packed me a wrinkled, paper bag full of my belongings and kicked me out of the house.

TATE. I'm sorry to hear--

AUDRIANA. Well, I'm not. It made me the person I am today as well as this very theatre that we grace with our presence. This moment right now would never be happening had I not been given such a meaningless role. At least the Police and Sheriff get to mouth some pretend conversation, using only the word *Watermelon*. I was forbidden to open my mouth as that tree on stage in sixth grade. Mr. Longsword, I'm equity through and through.

TATE. I don't know what to say, ma'am.

AUDRIANA. We had an apple shortage that year and the play coincided with the town's Orchard Pie Days. Due to the late spring freeze, every single remaining apple was needed for the pie contest. I did not drop out of the play, I stood upstage left, practically offstage due to extremely poor blocking, and I played the very best, closed mouth tree that any *Tony*

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award winning actor could have with the limitations presented. And I did it with a frown on my face because that is what the tree character called for, but I was smiling passively aggressively inside because the theatre was and is and always has been and will be my entire life.

TATE. An amazing story. If I may, what did you name yourself as the tree?

AUDRIANA. A clunky transition, Mr. Longsword, but a nice set up. My name you ask when I played the Tree... I named myself *Revenge* with a capital "R." I had made my way eastward and settled in Michigan after the incident. I got a job chopping down Chestnut trees, the ones infected with *Cryphonectria parasitica*, a horrible tree bark fungus. At least the job brought in enough money to pay the much-inflated rent I had to endure. While I was in Michigan, I met a few woodsmen, the lead woodsman, his name was *Silas*, which ironically means woods or forest. Anyway, Silas and his friends taught me about building things made with wood because that is what they did, dedicated their lives to it. Fast forward, with many gaps and resting places in between with my story and I ended up here, in Cripple Pines and applied all that I had learned on my journey to fulfill my life's calling.

TATE. Why did you quit performing, Audriana?

AUDRIANA. I have been the engine behind this theatre for many years, even with the re-build. Fun fact, Mr. Longsword, The Wheeler Theatre's original owners, *The Wheeler's* are of no relation to me other than a sharing of the same last name. A coincidence?

TATE. Quite convenient.

AUDRIANA. As is your interruption to break up the flow of my life story. I want you to know and as much as it was rumored in town that I was the very first lesbian to inhabit Cripple Pines, it's all untruth. Many heterosexual women are interested in woodworking and carpentry. I arrived here when I did, struggled for a while, as all youth do, experimented with my sexuality and finally, years later, married a local and very private man, *Benjamin Jasper Holden*, God rest his beloved soul. His ashes sit in the lighting booth of this very theatre. Oh, how many nights he sat up there and whenever I forgot a line, not that it happened more than

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once. But, that one time it did, Benny was the first to mouth the line to me from the lighting booth. He coughed first to divert the attention of the audience, then rolled a glass wine bottle down the wooden steps, distracting attendees further, then and only then did he mouth that one line I had forgotten.

TATE. And... Why did you stop performing, Mrs. Wheeler?

AUDRIANA. The Truth, Mr. Longsword?

TATE. The Truth is the only thing that has inspired my entire life journey and work. The complete and absolute Truth.

AUDRIANA. Ageism has been alive and well in entertainment long before either of us were born, Tate. A female actor hits 40 and... that's it. Sad but true.

TATE. Ageism is very alive and well in the investigative news world.

AUDRIANA. But, you're not a woman.

TATE. How observant.

AUDRIANA. Sarcasm?

TATE. I'm not often sure anymore.

AUDRIANA. Mr. Longsword, If I may be so blunt?

TATE. As we both are, more times than not.

AUDRIANA. You and I are very much alike. Am I correct in that assumption?

TATE. Possibly.

AUDRIANA. When you discover the truth surrounding the murders in Cripple Pines, it will be quite a story, yes?

TATE. Crikey.

AUDRIANA. An interjection?

TATE. Along with a side of subtext.

AUDRIANA. What is this... this... this... what is happening here, exactly?

TATE. Are you uncomfortable, Mrs. Wheeler?

AUDRIANA. Not that it is any of your business, but I struggle with the word "this" on rare occasions.

TATE. Haven't you sidetracked the conversation long enough, Mrs. Wheeler?

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AUDRIANA. I doubt either one of us is the killer.

TATE. A blanket statement.

AUDRIANA. It's inclusive language. I have fears like most, and I will open up to you a bit more, Mr. Longsword. I cannot be the killer as I fear aggression obsession.

TATE. Thank you for sharing.

AUDRIANA. It is obvious, that we are both living outside our prime occupational years and with that comment I must say that your future dreams and mine may still be graspable.

TATE. *Graspable?* What is it that you want from me, Mrs. Wheeler?

AUDRIANA. I'm not a Cougar. I am talking about an entertainment franchise. Movies, television spin off shows, theme parks, merchandising, the works.

TATE. Based on what, exactly? Murder?

AUDRIANA. You, me, the people in Cripple Pines, the story, and the murders. You do copyright your notes, your stories, your investigations, don't you?

TATE. I take measures to protect myself and my work.

AUDRIANA. So, you have no current or pending contracts for projects with any major networks, producers and the like?

TATE. I had a good career. It happens... someone younger, better hair, whiter teeth, tighter pants, *cheaper*. The courts are riddled with cases like mine.

AUDRIANA. Mine as well, dear.

TATE. I would be quite content at this point in my life discovering the Truth behind what is really happening in Cripple Pines.

AUDRIANA. You have said that repeatedly. Dream with me a moment, Mr. Longsword... What if...? What if every child across the country had a little, a little pull string doll?... A *Tate Longsword* investigative reporter doll. One that when they pulled the 490lb tensile strength polypropylene twine right between the doll's shoulder blades it says, "I would be quite content at this point in my life by discovering the Truth behind what is really happening in Cripple Pines."

TATE. Hmmm. I like the idea of a sound bite doll but, perhaps it says

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something catchier, shorter. More like a true sound bite.

AUDRIANA. I've never been good at Improv, Mr. Longsword. You write your own copy for the doll; I trust you can to it. But what a legacy that would be, wouldn't it? All the way to the First National Cripple Pines Bank.

TATE...

AUDRIANA. Think about it. It's all I'm saying, dear.

TATE. Look at the time.

AUDRIANA. An easy out cliché... Just remember, Mr. Longsword, most die on this earth *wishing* they had lived up to their fullest potential.

TATE. I will ponder that thought. *(Tate turns to leave, then turns back.)*
One more thing.

AUDRIANA. What's that? Tate Longsword L.E.D. shoelaces?

TATE. When you say, "dear," it makes you sound older and less attractive than you really are. *(Tate exits.)*

AUDRIANA. Well... no light up shoelaces, then? *(Lights fade.)*

SCENE 9

Jaxton rehearses with Winter in the theatre.

JAXTON. Let's take five.

WINTER. Can we try the last scene just once more?

JAXTON. Ugh...

WINTER. Please?

JAXTON. Once more. That's it. *(Delaney watches from the wings.)*

WINTER. My alter ego cue, please?

JAXTON. You cue yourself in this scene, you know that, right? One-person show, basically. The other characters don't speak.

WINTER. I know. I need a moment. To prepare. *(A beat, then Jaxton reads from the script.)*

JAXTON. "No, please... one day you will look back on this moment and laugh."

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WINTER. *No, please, one day you will look back on this moment and laugh... No, I won't look back on this moment like that, you know why? Because it's me and this bridge, that's all it's ever been. You think I came here to be found out? No, no, nah, not, never. I came here to take my life, to kill myself, if I need to spell it out, to finally give this life purpose and meaning. In the end, at the last breath, for me, for each and every personality I have come to accept thus far, tells me that, that's really me doing to me the things I'm telling me to do. You want to know why, self? I said, you want to know why, self?! Because, in the end, in that final moment, the one that separates all life from death. There is only one thing that matters... Left parentheses, "Personifying, It's All About Me." (*Winter climbs up on a chair.*) Water flowing below, 200 feet down. Swish. Swish. Swish. Cold wind blowing from upstage left and picking up speed... 10, 12, 13, 14.5 knots, a cold, fast, hard, bitter, wind. (*Winter dramatically jumps off the chair, lands on her feet, then does her own odd thing.*) Ouch. Rock one hit. Ouch. Rock two. Ouch, ouch. Bump. Bruise. Major contusion. Broken femur. Hip dysplasia. Falling, falling, falling. Down, down, down. (*Winter drops to her knees.*) Hung up on a ledge momentarily. Bleeding. Filled with regret. Wondering. Reflecting. Imminent death below. Wind picking up speed. Temperature dropping. Holding on. Barely. Hand slipping. Grasping. Now rain; cold, hard, too much rain. Rocks now slippery. Letting go. One last time. Falling. Plop. Splat. Dead. (*Winter collapses on stage. A beat. Jaxton claps.*)*

JAXTON. Nice. It's... really coming along.

WINTER. You hate it.

JAXTON. It was wonderful. (*Delaney walks in with a pitcher of lemonade and three empty glasses.*)

DELANEY. Looks like two of 'em people could use some cool down time refresher-ments.

WINTER. That is so sweet of you, Delaney. (*Delaney sets the tray down, pours and hands full glasses to Winter and Jaxton.*)

DELANEY. Papa' a'wee's said hard work done deserves a fresh lemon-ade and my mama used to make it up real good. (*Winter and Jaxton drink.*)

WINTER. Tastes minty.

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DELANEY. I put them there mint leaves in ta' gives it a "zip" like 'em Mama did done.

JAXTON. Very sweet of you, thank you.

DELANEY. Either you, Mr. Jaxton or ya' Ms. Star d' play ever hear 'bout da' Amsterdam Diamond Heist?

WINTER. Wow. That's completely random.

JAXTON. A crime never solved. Whomever did it made off with millions worth of fine gems.

WINTER. The little lemonade treat is very sweet and all, Delaney. But you're interrupting our rehearsal.

DELANEY. I'm is so dang sorry, done I did flub you's up?

WINTER. *I'm is so dang sorry, huh?*

DELANEY. I'm is so, so sorry—I jus' thought—

WINTER. Well, maybe you thought wrong.

DELANEY. I was jus' gesturing a good like mama' usta by bringing on in some refresh-ments and stimulat-ing conversa-tions of talk.

WINTER. Well, I'm the Goddamned star and you're still interrupting rehearsal.

DELANEY. I's apolo-gized, Ms.—

WINTER. And who the hell says, "...gesturing a good," Are you trying to be unique or something? You want to be a star, yourself?

JAXTON. Winter? Stop.

WINTER. Fuck the both of you, don't you get it?

JAXTON. Get what? There's nothing to get.

DELANEY. Now, mama' and papa' raised me with some mighty fine manners but— *(Winter laughs.)*

JAXTON. Winter!

DELANEY. I does don't understand why you are not more cord-ial to me. My mama and papa—

WINTER. Fuck your mama' and papa...' You're an idiot. Don't you get it? I do. Jaxton?

DELANEY....

WINTER. Cat got your tongue? *(Delaney exits. A beat. Delaney walks back in.)*

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DELANEY. I waked briskli' away off 'cause both me my mama and papa said, "If you can't say somethin' nice about to someone, so sayz nothin' t'all." *(Delaney walks off stage.)*

JAXTON. That was so rude. I can't—ca— *(Jaxton chokes.)*

WINTER. What's wrong? Ja— *(Jaxton continues choking. His face turns red.)* Jaxton? Help! Someone Help! *(Jaxton falls to one knee, still choking.)*

JAXTON. Hel—

WINTER. HELP! SOMEONE HELP US! *(Jaxton collapses. Silent.)* No. No. No. *(Winter kneels down, feels for Jaxton's carotid pulse.)* No pulse. What do I do?... If I was trained as a first responder, what would I do? *(Winter stands and runs stage left.)* SOMEONE CALL 9-1-1! HEEEEEEELP! *(Blackout.)*

END OF ACT ONE

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