

# Surprise

A party in one act

Written by Deborah Pades

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**Characters:**

BLISS: *mid-twenties, Warren Sutherlands's assistant*

MR. BRYAN NORMAN: *early 60's, bank manager, Warren's boss*

MRS. JULIETT / JEWELS NORMAN: *early 60's, does not know Warren*

PAGE: *early 40's, Warren's massage therapist*

DOMINIC: *late 30's, archer, Warren's friend*

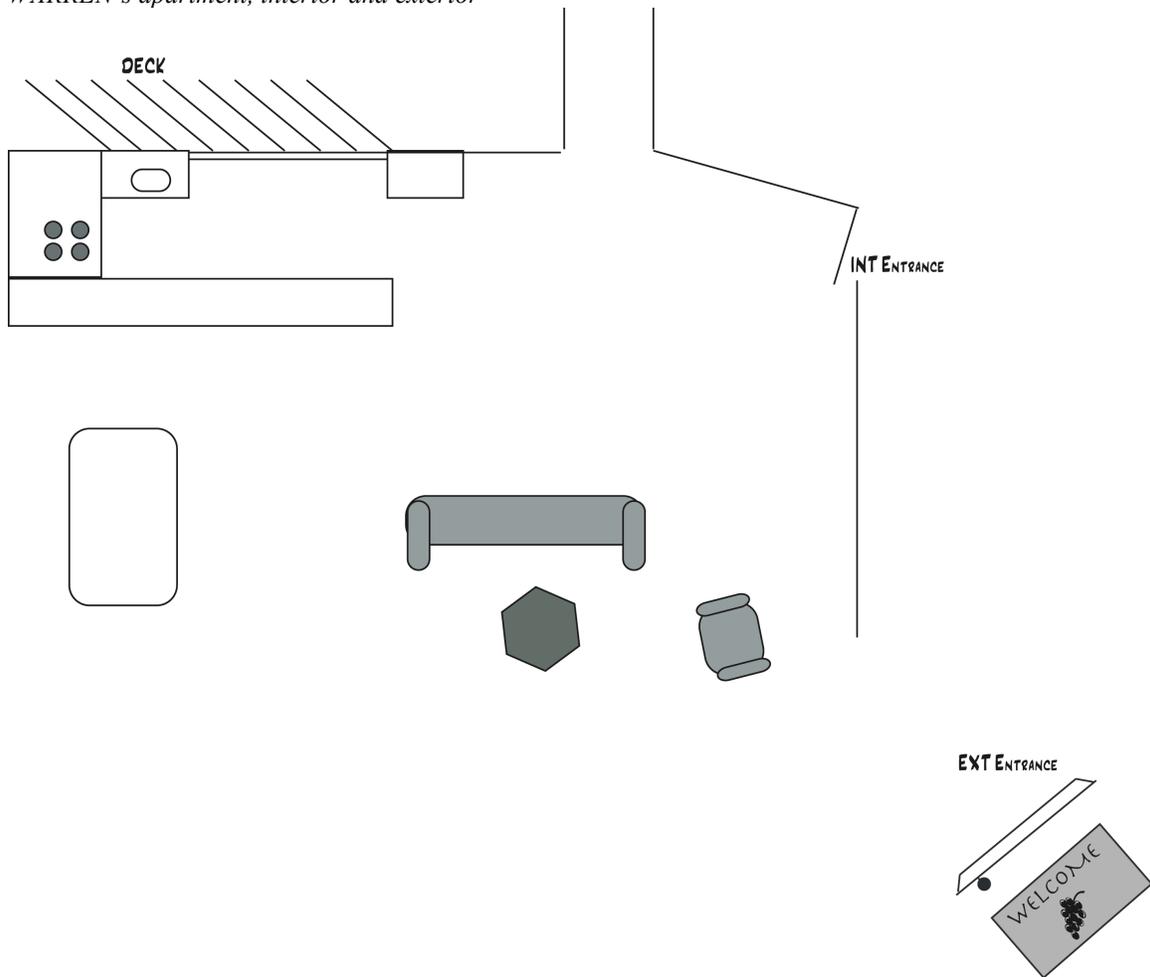
BRIGITTE: *late 50's, author, Warren's mother*

WARREN: *36, investment banker*

***San Francisco. Spring. Modern Day.***

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*WARREN's apartment, interior and exterior*



*Lights up only on EXT. door of a modern apt. Enter BLISS, 24 year old energetic girl WARREN's assistant. She's on a cell phone while rummaging through her bag.*

BLISS: OH...oh! He sounds awful...Yeah, tell him 'when pigs fly' you will. ...No, when hell freezes over is good too. So I'll let you know how tonight goes...yeah, I'm looking for his keys right now... Yeah... I'll call...he will be....totally. You know he will be...ok...Bye.

*Places cell phone back into her bag. She locates a set of keys and is about to open the door when the cell phone rings. She rummages to find it.*

BLISS: Bliss speaking...oh, Hi Mr. Norman... Yes, I expect Warren will be here around 8 o'clock, just after he swims....yes...I'm here now....so I'll see you soon then...great, Mr. Norman. *(hangs up)*

*BLISS opens the door, enters unseen foyer of building. We hear a second door open. Lights stay up on exterior while dim lights go up on main stage to reveal silhouette of BLISS in INT. APT of WARREN SUTHERLAND. Clean, modern, sparse. We see kitchen that opens to a living room and dining room table with no chairs. Behind kitchen is a sliding [glass] door, with reveal of small deck and backdrop view of urban San Francisco.*

*BLISS feels around / looks for a light switch. With no luck, she opens the refrigerator, shining some light onto the set. FRED the CAT is concealed from audience by counter of kitchen. SQUEAL of CAT is heard.*

BLISS: *(while bending down behind the counter)* Oh, you must be Fred.

*We hear angry FRED HISS. BLISS shoots to standing.*

BLISS: *(holding her scratched hand)* Hey – what'd you do that for? *(She opens the door to the deck. We can't see her feet or the cat, but we see her body upper shove the cat our the deck door.)* Have some deck time, Fred. Go think about your lives.

*BLISS continues to look for the light switch.*

*EXT apt, DOMINIC arrives carrying a present. He's dressed casual, jeans, nice shirt. He rings the buzzer and listens into the monitor.*

*INT. Doorbell rings. Fridge still only source of light. BLISS moves towards open apt. door)*

BLISS: It's too early! *(screaming out the door)* Coming...

*BLISS runs out the door, off stage. DOMINIC hasn't heard BLISS call. He waits a beat and is about to ring again when the downstairs door opens. BLISS stands in the doorway with her hand on her hip, catching her breath.*

BLISS: (without a smile) Hi. You're Dominic. And you're way early.

DOM: You must be Bliss. You called me this afternoon—

BLISS: Dominic, the archer. I think that's cool.

DOM: (curious) Thank you.

BLISS: I never met an archer before. Warren tells me that you're a champion archer. Good thing, because I doubt there's even work out there for non-champion archers. Who'd want to pay money to see a non-champion archer when they could see you, a champion archer?

DOM: Well, there's—

BLISS: I strive for excellence too, you know.

DOM: No, I don't know.

BLISS: (suddenly looks around) You should come inside in case Warren gets here early. Come.

*BLISS pulls DOM into the door out of site. They enter the apt, fridge still open.*

DOM: What's with the lights?

BLISS: No lights. I can't find them.

*DOM walks behind the open door (he knows where the light switch is) The lights go on. DOM walks out from behind the open apt door, then closes it.*

BLISS: Oh good. I was beginning to think that Warren had some weird thing about lights.

DOM: No, but the light switch should be here on the left as you come in. Not on the right.

BLISS: Yeah, no kidding.

DOM: I suppose he could switch it.

BLISS: He's probably thought about that.

DOM: I don't know. He's had this place for a while now.

BLISS: Things take Warren along time. Things like this – like changing a light switch from one side of the doorway to the other. Tough for him to actually *do*. To actually get done.

DOM: I don't know about that—

BLISS: Look, you may be his friend but you don't watch him everyday like I do.

DOM: No, I suppose I don't.

BLISS: You don't.

DOM: I don't have that luxury.

BLISS: I would never call it a luxury really. It's my job. It's far from being a luxury job. I suppose a luxury job? That would be more like working for a limo service. You know, luxury. Banking is about the stuff that affords luxury, I suppose. I suppose...so it's sort of in the realm of luxury.

*There an uncomfortable beat. DOM studies BLISS.*

DOM: *(a bit accusingly)* Who else is coming to this?

BLISS: *(distracted, looking around the apartment)* Just like I imagined it.

DOM: You mean you've never been here before?

BLISS: Nope. I'm Warren's executive associate as you know. Not his girlfriend. Or his lover. Or his slave. And *not* his secretary. So no, I've never been here before.

DOM: But you obviously have keys.

BLISS: Copied them. Like a spy in a spy movie.

DOM: *(cautiously)* I see.

*BLISS and DOM share awkward silence. EXT. apt, THE NORMANS, AN ELDERLY COUPLE, arrive at the same time as PAGE, who is carrying a massage table. She's wearing a medical scrub top and jeans. The NORMANS nod at her silently. MR. NORMAN rings the bell.*

*BLISS bolts out the INT apt. door.*

DOM: *(calling after her)* There's a buzzer system, you know. *(He shrugs and sits on the couch.)*

*EXT. apt, BLISS appears, opening the door.*

BLISS: Hello, Mr. Norman. And you must be Mrs. Norman.

BRYAN: Hello, Bliss. Yes, this is my wife, Juliette. *(then gestures to PAGE)* And, uh, I don't know who...

BLISS: Yes, who are you?

PAGE: I'm Page. I'm actually going to apartment 1. No matter. I'll just let myself in.

BLISS: We're having a party in apartment 1.

PAGE: A party? Hey - I recognize your voice. You're Warren's secretary.

BLISS: Executive associate. And I called you, Page Benson, massage therapist, to cancel his massage this week.

PAGE: Your voice mail confirmed the appointment.

BLISS: No, I confirmed that his schedule had changed.

PAGE: You did not.

JEWELS: Ladies, perhaps Bryan and I can go on inside?

PAGE: I'm here to give *someone* a massage.. Someone is paying for my time.

BLISS: Yes, Mr. and Mrs. Norman, why don't you two head up and I'll be right there.

*The couple enters the building, into Warren's apt. They greet DOMINIC stiffly. He takes their coats and the three eventually sit in the living room. They MIME a conversation of pleasantries. Meanwhile,,. BLISS and PAGE remain below.*

BLISS: So where were we?

PAGE: You were explaining the situation.

BLISS: You seem agitated. *(thoughtfully)* Are you just mad because you're not invited?

PAGE: Invited? I'm here to do a job and get paid.

BLISS: If I had officially invited you, I would have had to invite his dentist and his vet and his tailor and his life coach.

PAGE: He has a life coach?

BLISS: Beverly.

PAGE: I don't believe it.

BLISS: It's not public knowledge.

PAGE: High maintenance.

BLISS: He gets help where he needs it.

PAGE: What is he, not even 40?

BLISS: 36. Today.

PAGE: Today? Oh, I get it.

BLISS: The party...?

PAGE: You think I'd want to be invited to Warren's 36<sup>th</sup> birthday party?

BLISS: And why not?

PAGE: A million reasons.

BLISS: You want to come, don't you...

PAGE: No.

BLISS: I'll only let you come if you give us all a mini massages.

PAGE: You're kidding, right?

BLISS: Mine has to be the longest.

PAGE: There's no massage happening for anybody.

BLISS: (*looking around*) Jesus, you better come in. He might surprise us before we surprise him.

PAGE: You mean Warren doesn't know about the party?

BLISS: Of course not.

PAGE: His back will spasm, I guarantee it.

BLISS: That's why you were invited.

PAGE: I was not invited.

BLISS: Yes you *are*.

*BLISS pulls PAGE into the door, along with the massage table. They enter the apt.*

BLISS: This is Dominic.

*Dominic rises and extends his hand. PAGE shakes it after leaning her table against the wall*

BLISS: And I believe you've met Mr. and Mrs. Norman. Mr. Norman is Warren's boss at the bank.

JEWELS: Pleasure. Bliss dear, do you think we could mix up some cocktails?

BLISS: If by *we* you mean me, I only make one kind of cocktail.

BRYAN: (*intrigued*) And what kind is that?

BLISS: It's called A Hell – a - Hickie

DOM: (*quickly standing*) I'll see what he has. (*walks into the kitchen area*)

JEWELS: What exactly is in a Hell – a –Hickie?

BLISS: Brown sugar, lime, Vodka, Rum and one hot, chili pepper.

DOM: (*rising up from searching through some lower cabinets, holding a bottle of wine in each hand*) Red wine.

JEWELS: (*to BRYAN, hushed*) Not strong enough. (*BRYAN pats her on the knee*) You've never even mentioned Warren to me. Why are we even here? (*BRYAN pats her on the knee again. She moves his hand off impatiently*) It's odd.

BLISS: What's odd?

JEWELS: Nothing.

BLISS: Page, are you going to guard the door all night?

PAGE: I'll stay until he comes. When's he coming?

*EXT. Apt building. BRIGITTE arrives. She's attractive, cool, smartly dressed. She opens the door with a key.*

DOM: And who else is coming?

BLISS: Why is everyone so uppidy?

DOM: No one is uppidy.

*The door opens, Brigitte walks in. Utterly shocked at the room full of strangers.*

BLISS: God, you scared me. I thought you were Warren.

BRIG: And who are you?

BLISS: You're Warren's mother.

BRIG: I know who I am. *(looking around in horror)* What are you all doing in Warren's apartment? How did you get in?

*Dom walks towards her with a glass of wine*

DOM: Bliss let us in. I'm Warren's friend, Dominic. Would you like a glass of wine?

*Stunned, BRIGETTE takes the glass. She looks around the room. PAGE silently waves hello..*

BRIG: *(to BLISS)* Bliss? His secretary Bliss?

BLISS: Executive Associate.

*BRYAN clears his throat, rises to address BLISS. JEWELS also rises.*

BRYAN: Bliss, dear, you're his secretary. There's nothing terrible about that.

BLISS: Mr. Norman, my duties are that of an executive associate.

PAGE: *(hushed)* Oh, spare me.

BRIG: Who are you people?

BRYAN: (*extending his hand*) Bryan Norman. I work with Warren. And this is my wife, Juliette.

JEWELS: Pleasure. Call me Jewels.

BRYAN: There obviously seems to be a misunderstanding, Mrs. Sutherland.

BRIG: (*cautiously*) Brigitte is fine.

JEWELS: Well, Brigitte it seems that Bliss is throwing your son an impromptu surprise birthday party.

BLISS: I don't know about impromptu. I don't have that kind of cash.

*The ENSEMBLE pauses a beat, confounded.*

BRIG: But I just spoke to you on the phone today, Bliss. You knew I was taking Warren to dinner. Why on earth didn't you tell me?

BLISS: You called at something like 9 in the morning. I hadn't thought about this until after lunch.

DOM: That makes me feel better. I thought I was an afterthought.

BLISS: No, you were right there in the first thoughts. You're his only friend.

DOM: No I'm not.

*PAGE has crossed over the room and is standing at the dining room table.*

PAGE: Where are his chairs? He used to have six black leather chairs.

BLISS: We sold them on eBay.

BRIG: Warren sold his chairs? What on earth for?

BLISS: Not sure. But they sold fast. He shipped them just this Monday.

BRIG: Well, did he order new ones?

BLISS: I'm not his personal shopper. I don't know.

PAGE: But you knew he *sold* his chairs and when. So it would follow that as his secretary, you'd know...

BLISS: Well I don't. And I'm not his secretary.

PAGE: Well ok then. (*condescendingly calming down*) No biggie.

JEWELS: You are his secretary, dear.

BRYAN: (*hushed, to JEWELS*) Semantics are apparently important to her generation.

DOM: (*walking over the Brigitte*) Well, can I ask you, Mrs. Sutherland—

BRIG; Brigitte is fine.

BLISS: Dominic is an archer. A professional archer.

JEWELS: Are you really?

DOM: (*reluctantly*) Yes, yes I am.

BRYAN: You mean you make a living at it?

PAGE: Like cupid, right?

BLISS: Cupid gets paid?

DOM: (*to the Normans, proudly*) I am a third generation archer. I was born in Spain, and trained with my grandfather.

JEWELS: I don't believe I've ever met an archer.

BRYAN: Yes you have dear. Our son's an archer.

JEWELS: He's a fencer.

BRYAN: Oh, that's right. (*to DOM*) Sorry. Yes, you're the first archer we've ever met.

BLISS: Born in Spain? Then where's your Spanish accent?

DOM: I moved here when I was 11. Lost most of it.

PAGE: Yeah, I hear it a little.

BLISS: You hear his accent? In what word?

PAGE: Not in any particular word. It's just a faint accent.

BLISS: *(to DOM)* Speak.

DOM: What.

BLISS: Just say something.

DOM: *(annoyed, turns to the others)* Well I was wondering since this *is* a supposed party, whether there's a cake or something.

BLISS: I don't hear it.

PAGE: I do.

BLISS: You're probably just highly suggestible. I bet if he said he was from Denmark, you'd suddenly hear a faint Dutch accent.

BRIG: No, she'd hear a Danish accent.

BLISS: See? You'd start hearing all sorts of accents.

JEWELS: *(to move things along)* Yes, Dominic, a cake would be great.

PAGE: *(grumpy)* Perhaps we can all bake a cake.

BRIG: There's no time to bake a cake.

BLISS: Hey, do you all think I'd plan a party without a cake?

DOM: Well where is it?

BLISS: I ordered it. It's at the shop.

PAGE: Shop?

BLISS: The cake shop.

JEWELS: The bakery, dear.

DOM: Well, what good does it do us there?

BLISS: I forgot to pick it up.

PAGE: When did you realize that?

BLISS: Just now.

BRIG: It was a nice gesture, Bliss.

JEWELS: Shame.

BRIG: This whole idea was a nice gesture.

PAGE: A bit odd, I'd say.

BLISS: What's odd about it?

PAGE: It was last minute, for one thing.

BLISS: What's wrong with last minute? Does it make it any less wonderful?

PAGE: There's no cake, for instance. With a bit more planning...

BLISS: With a bit more planning this sort of party would never happen. God, you've got holes.

PAGE: Excuse me?

BLISS: This is outside your scope.

PAGE: Oh, really?

BLISS: You're probably all about scheduling things. That's all. Some of us work off the grid a bit.

PAGE: So massage therapy is inside the grid and banking is off the grid.

BLISS: In San Francisco, yes.

BRIG: Ladies, no need to argue. It's my son's birthday. Not some kind of ... tournament.

JEWELS: *(from the couch)* Tell us about your son. I've never met Warren.

BRIG: You've never met Warren?

BRYAN: No, she's just come along for the ride. *(He pats Jewels on the leg again. JEWELS moves his hand off, like she's done that for years.)*

BRIG: He was a breech birth.

BLISS: Really? That sounds awful. Was it awful?

BRIG: No, not really. But breech babies are different.

JEWELS: Really?

BRIG: *(sitting on an armchair facing the NORMAN'S couch)* When you enter the world with your behind first instead of your head, that's got to have repercussions later in life.

BRYAN: So it's more of a theory than a fact.

DOM: I was an only child. It's very rare in Spain to be an only child.

BRIG: *(looking at DOM concerned for a moment, but ignoring his comment)* I could tell you things about Warren that I believe correlate directly to his being a breech baby.

PAGE: I've worked on Warren's behind. I could tell you a few things too.

BRIG: I beg you pardon?

BLISS: Page is Warren's massage therapist.

BRIG: I see.

JEWELS: *(to PAGE)* You two must be quite close since you're here celebrating his birthday.

PAGE: *(glaring at BLISS)* I misunderstood his secretary's message, actually.

BLISS: You were invited on the same day everyone else was.

JEWELS: Tell me, Page. I've always been curious, been dying to ask someone like you. Do you mind?

PAGE: Mind what?

JEWELS: Mind if I ask you a question?

PAGE: No.

JEWELS: Good.

*Awkward pause, like Jewels forgot to ask the question.*

BRIAN: Well, ask away!

JEWELS: Oh, yes. I was just thinking about *how* to ask it.

PAGE: Ask.

*Beat*

DOM: Ask me and I'll ask it.

JEWELS: Maybe that's what I should do.

BRIAN: Oh, nonsense. Ask Page the question.

JEWELS: No, now I couldn't possibly.

BLISS: Why?

JEWELS: Well alright.

*Beat*

JEWELS: When I was much younger – In fact, I was in my early 20's working at a community center just outside Chicago – I worked in the membership office there, a lovely job getting people all set up to enjoy the center, what will all the activities they had...concerts and classes. I signed them up, kept the records and those sorts of things. Anyway, that's what that was, but my question for you is about something I wondered about since back then.

*Pause.*

PAGE: Please, Mrs. Norman. Ask the question.

JEWELS: Well, the community center did not offer massage back then of course, even though they did offer stretch classes for seniors. But there was a gal that came in one time and left fliers that advertised massage work. She really had no right leaving the fliers around, but by the time I went to collect them, they had been snatched up one by one and all quite rapidly, clearly showing an interest – a demand in fact – for massage work. And I've always wondered about that young lady who left those fliers...and I guess about you – now, I also wonder about you.

PAGE: Wonder.....what?

JEWELS: The question is: Can you say no after having said yes?

PAGE: I don't understand your question.

JEWELS: Well, someone asks you for a massage, and you agree, and they get undressed, lay on the table and you suddenly realize that it's just not possible for you to *touch* them.

PAGE: Based on what? Why wouldn't it be possible?

JEWELS: Based on...based on just a visceral gut reaction... a repulsion.

PAGE: No. (*emphatic beat*) I'm a professional practitioner – my work is medicinal. A Body is a body

BLISS: Oh come on. If someone was just gross, you'd have to figure out plan B.

PAGE: No plan B.

DOM: You just remove yourself – in your mind. You disassociate, I would think.

PAGE: To an extent, yes. But you have to still show up and do what you came there to do.

BLISS: It's like the first night of an arranged marriage.

*BRIGETTE'S cell phone rings in her bag. She finds it, shoots up to standing.*

BRIG: This is Warren calling – everyone hush. (*She opens the cell phone and walks downstage, away from the others*) Hello dear...yes, I got in fine, the keys worked fine...how was your swim? Oh, you haven't yet....Oh...Oh, yes, I see...oh....yes....Oh, dear...Really! Is everything alright...Well, good then. That's good...No, I think you should still get a swim in....sure! ... especially today, dear....or we could even order in....ok, fine ...no, going out late suits me, always has...yes, I'm fine here. Got my laptop. I can write to my heart's content...yes, it *is* so quiet here. (*glaring at the group*) Not a peep...Fred, your cat? No, I haven't see him yet...will do...see you in about what – 45 minutes? ... Within the hour's fine. That'll be fine. Bye, dear.

*BRIGETTE closes the phones and breathes a sigh.*

BLISS; Well, what did he say? What's that about him being late?

PAGE: Good. I can go now and he'll never know I was here.

BLISS: Wait.

DOM: Is he ok?

BRIG: Yes.

BLISS: Why's he's so late?

BRIG: He went to pick up a suit.

DOM: A suit?

BRIG: He said he had a suit ready at the tailor's and when he got there to pick it up, the tailor's wife was having breathing problems.

JEWELS: Oh dear.

PAGE: Warren is no doctor.

BRIG: No, but he drove the tailor and his wife from Chinatown to St. Mary's Hospital.

BRYAN: Why didn't they call an ambulance?

BRIG: I didn't ask.

JEWELS: Well, is she ok?

BRIG: I don't know.

DOM: That's just like Warren.

BLISS: He's not such a great driver.

DOM: He's a fine driver.

BRIG: My son has always been helpful.

PAGE: Breech babies statistically are helpful.

DOM: (*to BLISS*) When did you ever drive with Warren?

BRIG: (*to the NORMANS*) Bordering on heroic actually. He loved comic books as a kid.

BLISS: Plenty of times.

DOM: Under what circumstance? I'm just curious.

BLISS: And under what circumstances have *you* driven with Warren?

DOM: I asked you first.

PAGE: No one asked me. But I'll tell you. I've never driven with Warren.

BRIG: So he's going to get a quick swim in anyway. I insisted.

JEWELS: (*heavy sigh*) So we heard.

BRIG: It's his birthday. He should be able to do exactly what he wants.

BLISS: I don't think he's done that so far today.

PAGE: What? Driving a wheezing old lady across town sounds like a birthday wish to me.

BLISS: This morning he looked mad, or angry or something.

BRIG: Did he?

BLISS: Yeah, he did.

DOM: How so?

BRYAN: I didn't sense that when I saw him.

BLISS: He just had a scowl.

BRIG: Like what?

BLISS: (*making a scowling face*) Like this.

JEWELS: Ooh, that's not very good.

PAGE: Well, did you ask him if something was wrong?

DOM: Did you wish him Happy Birthday?

BLISS: Why would I ruin the surprise by doing that?

DOM: How would wishing him Happy Birthday ruin the surprise?

BLISS: I used reverse psychology. I read about it in a magazine. He thinks I totally forgot that it was his birthday, or better yet, that I didn't even care that it was his birthday. Ha!

PAGE: And that accomplished what?

BLISS: So tonight, he'll be double surprised, realizing that I cared a lot about his birthday.

PAGE: Genius.

DOM: That's mean.

BLISS: Mean?

DOM: You said yourself he looked sad.

BLISS: He looked something. I said I wasn't quite sure of the exact emotion.

PAGE: The magazine article you read should have covered that.

BLISS: Covered what?

PAGE: How to read faces.

BRIG: Bliss, if you saw that my son looked...disturbed...perhaps a Happy Birthday wish would have done the trick.

BLISS: I couldn't take that risk.

DOM: I shot him an e-card around noon.

JEWELS: What's an e-card?

DOM: It's an electronic greeting card.

JEWELS: God, no wonder he was distraught. There's no envelope to rip open. Nothing to touch, to hold.

BRYAN: It's all the rage, you know.

DOM: I wouldn't call it a rage but it is quite convenient.

JEWELS: It should have nothing to do with convenience. When you're making an effort to show someone you care about them, it's not a matter of what's

convenient – it’s a matter of what sends the best message. What feels good. Does clicking on your computer feel good? I should say not.

DOM: Did you send him a card today?

JEWELS: I’ve never met the boy in my life!

BLISS: Boy? He could almost be my father.

PAGE: He’s 36. That would put you at – oh God! are you that young?

BLISS: I’m 24.

PAGE: Why am I here?

BRIG: I’m sad that he was sad.

BLISS: I didn’t say he was sad.

BRYAN: He did seem perfectly fine to me when I spoke with him today.

BRIG: Did *you* wish him a Happy Birthday?

BRYAN: Well, no I didn’t. I didn’t actually know it was his birthday until Bliss called to invite me over here tonight. I had no idea. How could I?

BRIG: Doesn’t your bank staff have some kind of group calendar for things like this? Most companies do. It keeps up the moral.

BRYAN: No, I don’t believe we do have a group calendar to mark birthdays specifically.

PAGE: I wouldn’t do banking at a bank that had no group calendar.

JEWELS: You’re joking, dear, I hope. Banking is a serious matter. Don’t base your choices on those merits alone.

PAGE: Oh, but I do.

BRYAN: Maybe I should introduce some kind of birthday calendar.

DOM: We do it.

JEWELS: Who’s we, dear? Your archer friends?

DOM: I'm part of a team. We compete. Internationally. *And* we have a community calendar.

PAGE: Do you wear team tights?

DOM: Well, whatever we wear pales in comparison to that faux nursing get up you have on. That's lovely.

BLISS: No, really. What do you wear as an international archer?

BRIG: Can we get back to my son, please? It's his birthday.

DOM: The usual athletic attire. Some of our members are on the Olympic Team. We compete in regular athletic clothes. Sweats suits, stuff like that.

JEWELS: I'd like to watch you some time. I love the Olympics. So dramatic.

BRIG: Bliss, honestly, what were you thinking today?

BLISS: What do you mean? I was thinking a million things today.

BRIG: Inviting these people here. What kind of party did you have in mind?

BLISS: I told you. I spaced on the cake. I'm sorry, Mrs. Sutherland.

BRIG: I'm not talking about the cake. And call me Brigitte. I'm not your math teacher.

BLISS: No, you're not. You're an author, so you'd be more like my English teacher.

JEWELS: Oh, you're an author?

DOM: (*to PAGE*) Aren't you going to ask her if *she* wears tights?

PAGE: No need.

BRIG: Yes, I'm a writer.

BRYAN: Our son is a writer.

JEWELS: No he's not dear.

BRYAN: He's not?

JEWELS: No, but we did give him that stunning Monte Blanc pen for his graduation.

BRYAN: That must be it.

BRIG: Well, when Warren walks in here, what's he going to discover, other than a bunch of you sitting around his house drinking his wine. What's your plan, Bliss?

PAGE: First, we're going to ask him why he sold his chairs on eBay.

DOM: To the tune of 'Happy Birthday', of course.

BLISS: Oh!

DOM: (*singing*) "why did you sell your chairs on Ebay, why did you—"

BRIG: If my son has already had a bad birthday, this party isn't going to make it any better.

BRYAN: Do you really think so?

BRIG: It might make it worse.

BRYAN: How so?

BRIG: Mr. Norman, forgive me for saying this, but it's already bad enough that my son is having dinner with his mother to woop it up on his birthday. But to knock a few back with his boss—well, that's just not a crowning moment.

JEWELS: Well, in referring to my husband...you're sorely mistaken. Bryan is a party animal, as they say. I don't know what young man would want to miss the chance of learning from a master.

BLISS: Mr. Norman! Is that true? I had you all wrong. Dead wrong.

BRYAN: I wouldn't go bragging, Jewels. Cut that out, now. (*he pats her on the knee. JEWELS stops his patting, as usual*)

BLISS: People are never as they seem. (*she starts to pace*) I'm telling you, it's true. Mr. Norman? Turns out he's a partier. You just never know. Back at the office, there's tons of people and they all have secret lives. All neat and clean during the day. Making deals, counting money. Then....they come home at night, take off their masks, put new ones maybe. Then they go out...and move through their underworlds, breaking rules, breaking hearts. They take on new personas. The men wear dresses, the women—who knows?. They borrow accents and blow rings of smoke in your face.

And all this, you never know from just meeting them during the day, at work, pecking at their keyboards like a bunch of caged hens. You never know. What you do know is that people are never as they seem. Never, never, never, never.

*(The ESEMBLE is silent for moment, curiously staring at BLISS.)*

PAGE: Well you got my number.

BLISS: You joke but you know.

PAGE: Of course I know. I see people naked everyday. That's a window into the *real* world.

DOM: *(like a zombie)* I see naked people.

BLISS: People pay to be naked with you. That's different. They have their guard up still.

JEWELS: *(hushed to Bryan)* Makes her sound like a prostitute.

BRYAN: *(hushed back)* She's not dear. I feel certain we've established that.

BRIG: To your point Bliss, thank god we're not all one drab thing all the time. That's a dreadful scenario. *(thoughtfully distracted)* Although I fear that Warren might be a bit drab these days.

BLISS: Your son is a very nice man.

BRIG: My son is an extraordinary man. I know that.

BLISS: So what are you worried about?

BRIG: A mother's instinct.

JEWELS: From one mother to another, instinct is everything.

BRIG: *(not quite feeling the kinship)* I know it is. I've never been very meddlesome in Warren's life. I'm independent and so is he. We chat. I love him. I'm just not getting his pulse rate these days.

BLISS: Page, you must know Warren's pulse rate?

BRIG: I didn't mean literally.

BLISS: Well, since Page happens to be here, it wouldn't hurt to know it.

PAGE: I don't take his pulse. I'm not a nurse.

DOM: Then why do you dress like a half-nurse?

BRYAN: What's a half nurse? Is there such a thing? I imagine they get even lower pay than the nurses do... shame.

PAGE: I'm not going to defend the way I dress. It suits my needs.

BLISS: A woman should never defend her style of dress. Clothes are the last frontier.

*The ESEMBLE is confounded for a moment.*

DOM: Another theory of yours?

BLISS: Civilization is all about control. We don't even know it. We've just accepted that cereal is for breakfast, that news is on the hour, that cars need wheels to go. Everyone behaves inside this hologram - punks and priests alike. BUT! What we put on our bodies, the clothes we choose to wear – now that's very personal! No one should be able to touch that.

PAGE: What are you – living under a rock? Fashion is pounded into us by civilization. You've just completely contradicted yourself.

DOM: But it was another nice speech.

JEWELS: And cereal is certainly not just for breakfast, dear. I'm surprised at you.

BRYAN: When Jewels and I were newlyweds, we used eat corn flakes at the oddest times. Mostly after sex. (*He pats her on the knee...*)

PAGE: Please, Mr. Norman.

BRYAN: What, you think cereal should only be eaten for breakfast?

PAGE: No, I was referring to your most intimate details.

JEWELS: Page, what we eat after sex is hardly over-sharing. Over-sharing would be telling you what we eat *during* sex.

PAGE: You got me there.

BRIG: (*abruptly to all*) Well, let's have it then.

BLISS: Have what?

BRIG: Do you think *Warren* is having sex?

*(The ENSEMBLE falls silent for a beat. DOM moves towards BRIGETTE)*

DOM: I personally don't know, Brigette. I think you should ask Warren that question directly, if you think it would be appropriate.

PAGE: What...more appropriate than asking his secretary and his boss?

BRIG: I have no idea if Warren is ok in that department these days. I don't know if he's dating anyone seriously. He's certainly not with her tonight.

JEWELS: Maybe he's gay!

BRIG: I'd know if he's gay . He's my son.

BRYAN: I didn't know that our son was gay.

JEWELS: Paul isn't gay!

BRYAN: I know. But I didn't know until he confirmed that by bringing home Meagan in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Before that I just didn't know.

JEWELS: *I* always knew he was straight as an arrow.

BLISS: No one is straight as arrow.

PAGE: Is that true, Dominic? Since you know arrows...

DOM: I'm no authority.

BLISS: Sexuality sits along a spectrum.

PAGE: Are *you* an authority?

BLISS: I happen to have taken 'Power, Sex and Poetry' in college. It's a course that covers everything – including the spectrum of sexuality. We all have the potential in us to sleep with anybody at anytime.

JEWELS: That's only in college, Bliss. As one ages, she hopefully becomes more discriminating in terms of who, when and where.

BLISS: Maybe that's Warren's problem.

BRIG: So you *do* think he's having a problem.

BLISS: Well I think he might discriminate too much maybe. Like for example, a few months ago, I had a temp worker replace me when I had to spend 3 days at home. I had a teeth whitening accident. Anyway—

JEWELS: Oh dear ! What was that like?

BLISS: Well, I bought this teeth whitener over the internet—

PAGE: First mistake.

BLISS: It was from Canada. Canada has the safest meds.

PAGE: The cheapest. Not the safest.

BLISS: Whatever....so I used the stuff and my teeth turned olive green.

BRYAN: So you stayed home three days because your teeth turned green?

BRIG: Please get back to my son and the temp.

BRYAN: I would just like to point out, Bliss, that green teeth are hardly a reason to call in sick.

JEWELS: Oh don't be silly, dear. You stayed home when your hair-weave didn't take and you had all those bumps and holes.

BRYAN: True...

BRIG: So what about this temp?

BLISS: Well when I got back, there was a note in my drawer from this temp. Her name was Tabitha. I love that name.

PAGE: That's a cat's name.

BRIG: Where *is* Warren's cat?

BLISS: Now Fred *isn't* a cat's name.

BRIG: Warren named it after his late father.

BLISS: (*looking worried, glancing quickly back to the sliding doors in the kitchen*)  
Oh.

BRIG: What about Tabitha's note – what did it say?

BLISS: Right, so the note said something like...oh, I think I remember exactly what it said. It said: 'To the person who sits here, this might sound weird, but Warren is such a mysterious, dreamy guy. If you could give him my phone number, I'd appreciate that.' And then she wrote her number down.

BRIG: Did you give the note to Warren?

BLISS: Right away.

BRIG: And do you know if he called?

BLISS: He threw the note away - right in front of me.

PAGE: That was wise probably.

DOM: I knew about that note.

BRIG: Why? What did he say?

DOM: Well, we were at a NERT meeting and—

BRIG: My son is part of NERT? I didn't know that.

JEWELS: What's NERT? It sounds dreadful.

DOM: It's hardly dreadful. It stands for Neighborhood Emergency Response Team. That's how I met Warren a few years ago. We're part of the same NERT team.

BRYAN: Well, what do you do at these NERT meetings.

DOM: It's not a club or anything. It's a training program. We talk about safety measures. What to do in case of all kinds of natural disasters. How to organize – things like that.

BRIG: I'm so proud of my son.

PAGE: Maybe your breech baby theory is right. That's kind of heroic.

DOM: I wasn't a breech baby.

PAGE: You're Spanish. That could be it.

BRIG: So you were at one of these meeting when Warren told you about the note.

DOM: Yes. He was wondering whether to call her.

BLISS: But he threw *out* the note.

DOM: In front of you, maybe. But he must have kept it in the end because I saw it. He pulled it out of his pocket.

BLISS: That's horrible. What - does he not trust me? Does he think I don't understand the complexities of the heart? Does he think I would have judged him or something? Why would he hide his true intentions? Who am I to him?

JEWELS: You're his secretary, dear. Calm down. Dominic – did he ever call her?

DOM: No, but I did.

BRIG: What?

DOM: Well, in the end he chose not to and after hearing him describe her, I asked if I could call her. He had no problem with it.

BRIG: And?

DOM: I have been seeing Tabitha from time to time. We're dating.

BLISS: No shit! You're not a good man.

DOM: What are you talking about?

BLISS: Stealing another man's woman.

DOM: Tabitha was hardly Warren's woman. She was his temp for three days.

BRIG: I'm just curious why in this Tabitha's eyes, you and Warren were interchangeable.

DOM: It was fate that brought us together. Warren was the conduit. He wasn't interchangeable. He was integral to the plan, I suppose.

BLISS: That's a sad, sad story - on every level. There's deceit, betrayal. It makes me question everything.

BRIG: (*ignoring BLISS*) Dominic, I'm curious. What were Warren's reasons for not calling Tabitha himself? Was she just not his type?

DOM: He didn't like the whole note thing. He thought it was too forward or something.

PAGE: Oh, Warren has got to get over himself.

BRIG: (*defensively*) How so?

PAGE: Well, that's a control issue if I ever saw one. I mean, writing a note is too forward? No, walking into his office, closing the door and stripping naked is too forward. Writing a little note to admit a crush is just fine. It's endearing.

DOM: Well, not to Warren. I remember we were giving CPR to a dummy and as he was pushing down on the dummy's chest, he was sort of breathing out this diatribe on (*pushing on a pillow rhythmically, as if giving CPR*) how nothing... happens... organically... anymore,... and that everything... seems... pushed and... awkward... people... using... post-its... to communicate... feelings...

BRIG: Poor Warren.

PAGE: What'd the dummy have to say?

DOM: Warren's ok, Brigitte.

PAGE: He asked the dummy out, right?

DOM: (*glaring at PAGE*) No.

BLISS: (*snidely*) So where's Tabitha tonight?

DOM: We're seeing each other on and off. We're not married.

BLISS: How do you know she's not still leaving notes everywhere? Looking for Mr. Goodboss

DOM: (*lightly*) She might be.

BRIG: Well, I'm happy for you, Dominic. Warren's loss is your gain.

JEWELS: I think that's a very romantic story.

BRYAN: Reminds me of our beginnings, really. Jewels wrote me poems.

JEWELS: No I didn't, dear.

BRYAN: You did so! I'll never forget the first one you left in my shoe. It said simply: "Your sole needs mending. Let me take care of it"

JEWELS: That was our housekeeper.

BRYAN: No!

JEWELS: Of course it was. She left notes everywhere, reporting rips and stains...

BRYAN: For all these years, I thought those were from you!

JEWELS: I'm sorry to say...

BRYAN: Isn't life strange.

*(There's a reprieve from conversation. DOMINIC tops off wine glasses. BRIGITTE flips open her phone and dials a number.)*

BRIG: *(to the phone)* Yes, I had a reservation under Sutherland for 8:15. Can I make that for nine, please. Great, thanks. *(she hangs up)*

BLISS: Hey, what'd you do that for?

BRIG: I think going back to plan A is best. A quiet dinner.

JEWELS: I'm up for that. Where are we going? I hope its not sushi. I know it's all the rage but I don't think it's right.

DOM: *(gently, to JEWELS)* I don't think Brigitte meant we'll all be going with her.

BLISS: But what about the party? Are you just going to blow us off, after we've all made such an effort?

BRIG: Oh, don't be so dramatic, Bliss. You only thought of doing this today.

BLISS: But still. We're all here now.

PAGE: I understand where you're coming from, Brigitte. I was just leaving anyway. And I came here to give a massage, not to have a party.

BLISS: *(aggressively)* Don't you take another step. This isn't right. Warren deserves a party and we're going to give him one. And mothers don't always know best.

BRIG: I beg your pardon, Bliss. There's no question on the table about who knows best. Please don't drag you own mother issues into this. I simply want dinner with my son on his birthday – alone.

JEWELS: Bliss, dear, if you have mother issues, you should deal with them. They're dreadful to carry around.

BLISS: I do not have mother issues!

PAGE: You're not defensive either, which is good.

BLISS: Why are you all ganging up on me? All I want is to make Warren happy on his birthday. You're all so ingrateful.

JEWELS: Ungrateful, dear. Not ingrateful.

BLISS: So you admit it.

BRYAN: You could have also referred to us as ingrates. That's the noun form.

BLISS: *(in a new tone of epiphany)* You're all a bunch of hypocrites. It's so clear. You pretend to be concerned about Warren's happiness but you're all just really here for...Well, I don't know why you're all here. Why are you even here? Why did you come when I asked you? You could have told me the truth – that you had no interest in celebrating Warren's birthday at all!

DOM: Warren's my good friend.

BLISS: Yes, I know that, Dominic. That's why I invited you.

DOM: So what are you freaking out about?

BLISS: So why are you leaving?

DOM: I'm not leaving.

PAGE: I'm leaving.

DOM: Page, actually I think you should stay. Brigitte, I think this little surprise party will make Warren happy. Especially after the day he had.

BRIG: Look, I think all of you had the best intentions. Even you, Bliss. But what kind of party is this anyway? There's no food, no music, no festive anything. It's quite depressing.

PAGE: We could have played musical chairs, if your son hadn't sold them.

DOM: *(walking around like a foreman)* Who needs chairs? Look, we'll order food, for starters.

JEWELS: Bryan and I can make party hats out of napkins. We've been doing that for years.

PAGE: My dad has a barn. We could put on a show!

BLISS: Must you always be so negative? I can't believe you give massages. You're just a wicked lady.

JEWELS: Here come those mother issues again.

PAGE: Wicked? Bliss, I'm just about done with you.

DOM: Will you two just shut it for one second. Let's focus.

JEWELS: Yes, I think we should focus on Bliss.

DOM: What??

JEWELS: Now hold on a minute, Dominic.

*(DOMINIC throw up his hands and leans against the kitchen counter, facing the couch)*

Bliss, you come sit right here, next to me. I want to talk to you. *(BLISS reluctantly sits on the couch)* There's no time like the present. First off, I think it was a lovely gesture for you to organize this evening.

BLISS: Thank you.

JEWELS: I think I speak for all of us when I say that. Isn't that right?

*(She motions to everyone and they acknowledge with nods, etc)*

But you seem all out of sorts. Brigitte's wanting to spend time with her son is not about rejecting you or your lovely party. So if we land up not having the party, that won't be because of you or anything that you didn't plan or do right. Though, forgetting the cake was a bit of mess up, I suppose. *(to Bryan)* It threw a spanner into the party pretty fast, I'll say that.

*(Bliss looks confused. There's a beat of fidgeting)*

DOM: *(gently but urgently)* How about those paper hats, Jewels.

*(JEWELS gets up excitedly. BRIGITTE intercepts her, in a hushed voice)*

BRIG: What was that?

JEWELS: What was what?

BRIG: What you just said to Bliss?

JEWELS: Oh that? That was a heart to heart.

BRIG: It was an aborted heart to heart.

JEWELS: I get tired easily these days.

*(PAGE has been listening in and interrupts)*

PAGE: If you want my opinion, I think Bliss needs this party more than Warren does.

BLISS: *(from the couch)* Why are you whispering about me?

*(All three turn towards BLISS and say: We're not)*

BLISS: Ever since I was a kid, people have been talking about me. You think I don't know? Please...

PAGE: Bliss, you're not that interesting.

BLISS: Oh yeah? Then why the huddle?

BRIG: My god, Bliss. You need to take a breath and listen to your tone.

BLISS: You're upset about the cake too, aren't you?

BRIG: Bliss – breathe. It's not about the cake,

PAGE: Though a cake would be great right about now.

BRIG: Page...

PAGE: I think I *will* bake that cake.

DOM: Are you serious? There's no time.

PAGE: There's time. And you're helping.

*(PAGE prods DOM up into the kitchen)*

DOM: I doubt he's even got the right ingredients.

PAGE: We'll manage. I can make cake out of anything.

DOM: Don't threaten.

*(DOM and PAGE busy themselves, looking for ingredients with which to bake. JEWELS and BRIGITTE have rejoined Bliss on the couch. BRYAN is squished in the corner of the couch, looking on like a pet.)*

BYRAN: Well, if they're baking a cake then I guess the party's on.

BLISS: So now it's *their* party.

BRIG: *(resigned)* It's Warren's party.

BLISS: Whatever.

BRIG: You've been insisting on it.

BLISS: Things never turn out like you plan them.

JEWELS: That's very true.

BRIG: But Bliss, you hardly planned for this.

BLISS: Why are you so critical of me?

BRIG: I'm just trying to help you see.

BLISS: See what, that I shouldn't get a job as a party planner?

BRIG: I never said that. Are you considering that?

JEWELS: We hired a wedding planner. She was a little person.

*(BRIGITTE and BLISS stop and stare at JEWELS)*

BRIG: Your point being?

JEWELS: That the field is wide open...all kinds of people become professional planners...even people vertically challenged.

BLISS: Well, it doesn't matter because I have no interest in becoming a party planner or a wedding planner. I'd rather die.

BRIG: That's great then. At least you can rule that out.

BLISS: It was never a point of contention.

JEWELS: Then why are you so contentious, dear?

BLISS: I'm not. I'm just annoyed at all of you people for thinking that you know more than younger people, just because you're older. It happens all the time.

BRIG: Younger, meaning...you?

BLISS: Yes. I mean, I spend everyday with Warren, and all of you seem to think that I don't know what he'd like on his birthday. As if I'm not in touch with his needs on a daily basis unlike any of you.

PAGE: *(from the kitchen)* Well, I'll tell you what he needs: eggs, milk, butter. Jesus, the man only eats batteries. *(holding up a 24 pack from the fridge)* Plenty of them.

JEWELS: Bliss, you feel underappreciated.

BLISS: Not by him. By all of you.

BRIG: And your mother.

BLISS: My mother is not here.

BRIG: Yes she is.

PAGE: *(from the kitchen)* Have Bliss yell at a chair. That always works. *(looks at the dining room table)* Or in this situation, you can use Mr. Norman.

DOM: Why should Bliss yell at Mr. Norman?

PAGE: She could transfer her feelings about her mother towards him. It's cathartic.

BRYAN: *(switching to the chair across the couch)* Go ahead, Bliss. Pretend I'm your mother.

BLISS: You look nothing like my mother.

BRYAN: *(sucking in his cheeks, lifting his chin)* How's this?

BLISS: You're all nuts.

BRYAN: Hello, my daughter. What a lovely party you're having.

BLISS: This party sucks.

BRIG: That's not your mother's fault.

BLISS: I never said it was.

BRIG: But you blame other stuff on her, right?

BLISS: Why are you acting like a shrink? I thought you were an author.

BRIG: I am. I get inside my characters' heads all day though, so—

BLISS: Well, I'm not one of your characters.

JEWELS: What books have you written? Would I know them?

BRIG: I've written eight so far. They're domestic thrillers mostly.

JEWELS: Is that a genre?

PAGE: *(from the kitchen)* Domestic Thrillers...aren't they published on boxes of laundry detergent?

BRIG: I've never liked the name either. It's a sub-genre. My latest book is called "Bending Heaven".

DOM: *(to PAGE)* That was a rude comment.

PAGE: *(to DOM)* That was not a rude comment.

JEWELS: *(thrilled)* "Bending Heaven"!

BRYAN: *(curiously)* "Bending Heaven"....

BLISS: Warren didn't like it.

BRIG: What?

BLISS: Well, I saw him carrying the book for a week, but he never mentioned it. Usually, when he likes a book, he tells me about it. He tells me to read it.

BRIG: So he didn't say he didn't like it. He just didn't say anything *about* it.

JEWELS: That's quite different from him saying he didn't like it.

BLISS: I know Warren.

BRIG: We've established that.

BLISS: If he liked the book, he would have lent it to me.

*DOMINIC walks down from the kitchen holding a can of peaches*

DOM: Warren isn't that predictable, Bliss.

BRYAN: Oh, I love canned peaches.

DOM: Good because I think this is our cake. I'm going to stick a candle in one these.

PAGE: *(still searching around in the kitchen)* Batteries and rice. Lots of instant rice.

DOM: I like "Bending Heaven". The part I've read so far. I still haven't finished

BRIG: Thank you, Dominic. That's very kind.

JEWELS: Do you plan to finish it?

DOM: Yes, of course.

JEWELS: What's it about?

DOM: I'll let the author speak...

BRIG: Well, it's set in a Pleasantville kind of town, a very idyllic suburb. There's a priest. He's new. He gets involved with a family who has a troubled dog.

BRYAN: Did you say dog?

BRIG: Dog. The dog has behavioral issues that cause the father of the family to think it's possessed and he wants to kill it. So the story is about this drama between the father and his family and the priest. There are many layers to it.

DOM: It's very dramatic – the part I've read so far. Very intense. It's all about the evils of projection really. When you project onto other people what's really inside of *you*. Isn't that right, Brigitte?

BLISS: Projection? Is it really about projection? That explains it.

BRIG: Explains what?

BLISS: You see me as that possessed dog.

BRIG: On nonsense, Bliss. You're more like a...caged bird.

*PAGE walks slowly from the kitchen down stage. Her eyes are big. In her hands is what looks like a piece of black cloth. On top of it lies a shiny handgun. ENSEMBLE sees her and the gun and huddles around her in silence.*

DOM: It's beautiful. I never knew he owned a gun.

BRIG: Beautiful! What the hell is it doing in my son's house?

*Page walks over to the couch and places the gun and the cloth gently on the coffee table. BRIG, JEWEL, BRYAN, PAGE sit on couch. Dom sits on chair across. BLISS stands near side of couch.*

BRYAN: Where exactly did you find this?

PAGE: I was feeling around the back of last cabinet there on the bottom, where the fire extinguisher is.

JEWELS: A fire extinguisher?

DOM: For kitchen fires.

JEWELS: But he doesn't cook.

BRYAN: More the reason to have one. *(to PAGE)* So, Page, the gun was being hidden, then?

PAGE: Well, obviously.

DOM: I didn't know he had a license for a gun. I'm telling you, that Warren is full of surprises. *(to BLISS)* And you think he's predictable.

*BLISS just looks at DOM and rolls her eyes. She's remains silent.*

DOM: Maybe he's becoming a marksman. He's never mentioned it. *(thoughtfully)* Maybe all these years of watching me do archery have inspired him. I wonder why he never told me?

PAGE: Maybe now he'll join your a merry band of thieves.

BRIG: Don't even joke about such a thing. This is so disturbing. So it was just lying there?

PAGE: *(sliding the black cloth from beneath the gun)* Yes, it was just wrapped in...this....*(her sentence trails off as she hold up the cloth and sticks her fingers between two eye holes and a nose hole)*

JEWELS: *(gasping)* It's a robber's mask! Bryan, your employee is a bank robber!

BRIG: What's he doing with a mask?

BRYAN: He's not a bank robber, I assure you.

DOM: Maybe he's training for something.

PAGE: The Navy Seals?

JEWELS: Bryan, dear, how do you know he's *not* a bank robber? I mean really – the boy has a mask and a gun and works inside your bank. Maybe he's planning a job – a heist!

BRIG: *(very upset)* Now, hold on. My son is not a criminal. I'm sure there's a perfectly fine explanation for this.

PAGE: We're assuming it's real. Is it real?

BRYAN: Is it loaded is the more important question.

DOM: *(picking up the gun)* It's real and it's loaded. So no one touch it.

BRIG: Then put it down!

DOM: Ok. Don't be so jumpy.

BRIG: Don't be so jumpy? My son has been hiding a loaded gun and a mask and you expect me to be calm? I am as open as mother's come but this is a bit disturbing, don't you think?

BRYAN: Our son never had a gun.

BRIG: Oh enough about your son. I'm feeling a bit sick.

DOM: Brigitte, please. Don't jump to the worst conclusions.

BRIG: I'm not. Of course I'm not. I know my son.

PAGE: Maybe he's holding it for a friend.

BRIG: Do you think?

PAGE: Sure. Friends do things for friends.

BRIG: No, no.

PAGE: Why?

BRIG: It doesn't work that way. Remember, I'm a writer. People don't hide guns and masks for their friends.

PAGE: Sure they do.

BRIG: No they don't. *(to BLISS, who's been standing quietly)* You're awful silent.

BLISS: I have nothing to say.

PAGE: I doubt that.

BLISS: I don't!

PAGE: No theories to offer?

BRIG: Bliss, do you know anything about this gun?

BLISS: So *now* you all suddenly value what I have to say?

BRIG: Cut it out, Bliss. This is no time to drag in your issues. This is about the well-being of my son.

BRYAN: Bliss, this is quite a serious situation.

BLISS: You're not my mother anymore.

PAGE: *(to BRYAN)* It appears that you've been fired as her mother. I'd keep this whole episode off your resume.

DOM: Bliss, did you know Warren owned a gun?

BLISS: *(proudly)* I helped Warren purchase that gun.

*The ENSEMBLE falls silent. BRIGITTE rises from the couch and walks towards BLISS, who eventually lands up sitting on the dining room table, as there's no more room to avoid BRIGITTE. BRIGITTE stands very close to her.*

BRIG: You helped Warren buy a gun.

BRYAN: Was this on company time?

*With her back to him, BRIGITTE shoots her hand up to silence BRYAN. He's gets the message)*

BRIG: Why don't you start from the beginning, Bliss.

BLISS: We all need to protect ourselves.

BRIG: No theories! I just want the details. When and where and why and how did you help my son buy this gun?

BLISS: I'm sorry but I don't think this is fair. I—

BRIG: *(nose to nose)* Tell me!

BLISS: I don't appreciate how aggressive you're being.

BRIG: I swear, Miss Bliss, you have no idea who you're dealing with. Now just take a breath and start talking.

BLISS: *(after a long huff)* My brother happens to be a licensed gun dealer. It's really no more complicated than that.

BRIG: Keep talking.

BLISS: Around Christmas of last year, Warren was about to go on vacation. I had only been working for him since September, but I could tell he liked me, he trusted me. Anyway, he was about to go on vacation...

BRIG: I didn't know he went on vacation last year.

BLISS: Well, he didn't. I said he was *about* to.

BRIG: Continue.

BLISS: So I'm not sure of the details, but his plans fell through and he seemed upset.

BRIG: What kind of 'upset'?

PAGE: Here we go again...

BLISS: Just upset. I mean if you were planning a vacation and then for whatever reason you couldn't go...you'd be upset. That kind of upset.

BRIG: I get it. Go on.

BLISS: That same week, I happened to notice on his desk a magazine about guns – like a gun catalogue. I grew up with those so it didn't phase me. And that's when I told him about my bother.

BRIG: That your brother sells guns.

BLISS: Right. And I asked if he wanted a family discount.

BRIG: A family discount.

BLISS: Yeah, because even though I'd only been working for him since September, I already knew that he was a good guy. And I figured it was a nice gesture.

BRIG: So he said yes.

BLISS: He was uncomfortable at first.

BRIG: About buying a gun.

BLISS: No, about the family discount.

BRIG: But eventually that didn't seem to stop him.

BLISS: Right, because soon after, I put Basil and Warren in touch.

PAGE: Basil? Poor kid. No wonder he deals in guns.

BRIG: Then what happened?

BLISS: I guess they got along fine. Now Warren's got a gun.

BRIG: So you never spoke about it after that.

BLISS: No. I didn't.

BRIG: And never since.

BLISS: Nope.

BRIG: So it's been a year and half and you or him haven't mentioned it once?

BLISS: Remember I grew up with guns.

PAGE: How peaceful.

BLISS: *(getting off the table and walking away from BRIGITTE)* I think it's no big deal to own a gun and have it in your house. It's the 1<sup>st</sup> amendment.

DOM: Not unless that's your idea of freedom of speech.

BLISS: And why not?

PAGE: Jesus.

BRIG: I'm not done questioning you, Bliss.

BLISS: Am I under arrest?

BRYAN: Bliss, Brigitte is just trying to figure this out. It's very disturbing. For me too. He's been my employee at the bank for many years.

BRIG: Bliss, do you have any idea why he bought the gun? What reason did he give?

BLISS: He didn't and I didn't ask. It's gun etiquette.

BRIG: Gun etiquette? What an oxymoron.

BLISS: I'm not a moron!

BRIG: *(walking away from BLISS in frustration)* I didn't say you were a moron.

PAGE: *That's* etiquette.

BRIG: *(sitting on the couch)* This is frightening.

PAGE: Dominic, you're his friend. Why don't you know anything?

DOM: I'm as surprised as the rest of you. This is highly unusual.

PAGE: Highly unusual? It's creepy.

JEWELS: It's not creepy, dear. It's criminal. Your son is obviously engaging in criminal acts.

BRIG: How dare you?

JEWELS: Please. It's staring us all in the face.

BLISS: He's innocent until proven guilty. Possession is 9/10 of the law.

PAGE: Oh, Bliss, please don't become a defense lawyer.

DOM: Or a masseuse.

BRIG: There's an explanation for the gun and there's an explanation for the mask.

JEWELS: I'm sure there are but I'm not certain you'll want to hear them.

BRIG: I can't believe you're incriminating my son. Just like that. You're sitting in his home. You're attending his party!

JEWELS: This is hardly a party, dear. At least not yet. And *I'm* not incriminating your son. The gun and the mask are.

BRYAN: I think you're misinterpreting my wife.

JEWELS: No she's not. I'm not one to sweep truth under the rug.

BYRAN: Dear, there's evidence here, but no truth per say. We haven't concluded anything yet.

DOM: That's because this is not a court of law. We're not a jury and there are no judges. Let's just put the gun back and forget about it.

BLISS: *Everyone* here is acting like a judge. It's like Lord of the Flies. Did any of you read that book? It's not about flies, I'll tell you that.

PAGE: Look. Dominic is right. Let's just put the gun and mask back.

JEWELS: What? And pretend you never found them?

PAGE: Exactly. It's not against the law to own a gun.

BLISS: For once I agree with you.

PAGE: Don't Bliss, because regardless of the gun and where we put it, I still think you're holding something back about Warren - and if he's in trouble and you know about it - that means you're in trouble.

BRIG: (*to PAGE*) Do you think he's in some kind of trouble?

BLISS: (to PAGE) Don't you threaten me.

PAGE: (to BLISS) I am (to BRIGITTE) and yes, I think he's in trouble, but I don't think confronting him at his surprise birthday party is the best approach to helping him.

BLISS: I agree.

PAGE: Don't keep on agreeing with me.

BLISS: I'm trying not to.

DOM: Actually, I do think a small gathering like this is perfect for an intervention. If that's what this is heading for.

BLISS: Intervention? Interventions are for drug addicts. Oh, so now you think Warren is a drug addict in addition to being a criminal. What's next? Are you going to look at that green vitamin powder he uses and think he's an alien?

*The ENSEMBLE stares at BLISS in silence.*

DOM: What green vitamin powder?

BLISS: You mean he hasn't sold you some? I'm sure he has.

DOM: No, he's never told me about any green vitamin powder.

BLISS: He's part of this club. He uses it and he sells it.

JEWELS: That's sound like drug language to me!

BLISS: It's just vitamins.

BRIG: Green vitamin powder?

PAGE: He would have told me about it. I'm always pushing him to have some supplements for his back. He confuses supplements with condiments.

DOM: How come none of the powder is in the kitchen? We would have seen it.

BLISS: I don't know. I only mentioned it because you're all jumping to conclusions about everything else. See? You're jumping to conclusions about this. What could possibly be wrong with Warren selling some vitamins? They're good for you.

BRYAN: Does he sell it during work?

BLISS: Yes. It's part of the service he offers some clients.

BRYAN: We're an investment bank. Not a health food store.

BLISS: Holistic living incorporates all aspects of life. How can you be secure financially if you're not secure nutritionally? You should appreciate Warren's commitment to your clients.

BRYAN: (*agitated*) This is not good. No side businesses are permitted. It's an FDIC violation. He could be jeopardizing the whole bank.

JEWELS: And what if someone were to die from this green alien powder? What then?

BRIG: Everyone calm down.

BRYAN: Brigitte, what your son is doing at my bank is unacceptable.

BRIG: Until you hear it directly from my son, I'd appreciate you withholding judgment.

JEWELS: As if the gun and mask are not enough to go on?

BLISS: They have nothing to do with the green vitamin powder. It's not as if he force feeds people at gun point, while wearing a mask

BRIG: Mr. Norman, I assure you, this whole evening is one convoluted mess.

DOM: That's one way to put it.

BRIG: (*to DOMINIC*) And you know nothing about this powder?

DOM: Nothing. Nothing about the powder or the gun.

PAGE: Or the gun powder.

BLISS: (*impatiently*) They've got nothing to do with each other!

PAGE: Why are you so sure of that?

BLISS: I just am.

BRIG: (*leading into BLISS*) What do you know?

DOM: Brigitte, I think Bliss doesn't know what she knows.

BRIG: What do you mean?

PAGE: He means you're giving her too much credit.

BLISS: I deserve credit where credit is do.

DOM: (*putting his arm around her*) Exactly, Bliss. So since you know Warren really, really well, I'm going to ask you some questions...questions that are only directed at you, so you can get *all* the credit for supplying us with the answers. Ok?

BLISS: Fine.

PAGE: I'll take Things related to the Mafia for \$1000.

*JEWELS hums the Jeopardy music.*

DOM: (*to JEWELS*) Please.

BLISS: See? I get no respect.

DOM: I respect you tremendously. I respect the pressure that you're under everyday to support Warren at work. You're an exceptional *executive associate*.

BLISS: Why, thank you.

DOM: So serving in that capacity, you've done extraordinary things for Warren. For instance, you've helped him purchase a gun.

BLISS: Yes I did. You know I did. Give the first question please. And it can't be one that someone already asked. That's wrong.

PAGE: Ask her where she was the night of—

DOM: Page... (*to BLISS*) Let's go back to last Christmas. You said Warren was planning to go on vacation, but then he landed up not going. None of us here even knew he was planning one. Did you file some kind of vacation request form for him? Do you remember if you did that?

BRYAN: Good question. I could find that out.

BLISS: See? Everyone just bulldozes over my rights, who I am...

DOM: Bryan, It's for Bliss to answer.

BLISS: Unbelievable.

DOM: Did you file a vacation request?

BLISS: No, I don't think I did that.

DOM: So it wasn't an official vacation.

BLISS: Whatever that means.

DOM: Meaning that it was kind of a spontaneous vacation...unplanned.

BLISS: I told you that he was *planning* to go on vacation but then he couldn't.

DOM: Do you know to where? With whom?

BLISS: I had no idea. All I know is that he said, "Bliss, I was planning on going on vacation this Christmas but now I'm not." That's what he said.

DOM: Well in what context did he say that?

BLISS: I don't remember. I just remember that he was bummed during that whole Christmas and New Year's time.

DOM: And that's when you helped him buy a gun.

BLISS: That's when I put him in touch with my brother, Basil, who is a licensed gun dealer.

DOM: So come January, did Warren's spirit lift any? Because you talk as if he was upset during the holidays specifically.

BLISS: Yes, the holidays were pretty bleak. But then things got better for him come the New Year.

DOM: Better how?

BLISS: He had his ups and downs – don't get me wrong. Warren is complicated.

DOM: Yes, and you know that better than anyone here.

BLISS: Are you making fun of me?

DOM: No, I'm reassuring you that you've made it clear that if anyone knows anything about Warren's life – with all its complexities – it would be you. That's all.

BLISS: Finally, some respect.

DOM: So it would follow that you could help us speculate if things aren't so great in Warren's life. Like, if there was any trouble – you'd know it.

BLISS: I'd know it. Duh....

DOM: So after the New Year, when his spirits lifted. That's a good thing, of course. What was going on for him?

BLISS: Well, I'd been there for nearly 6 months. That's a factor.

DOM: And what else?

BLISS: Well, I do know that his clients were happy. The market was performing well, as far as I could tell.

PAGE: Oh, now you're a market analyst too. I'm confounded.

BLISS: It's not rocket science. The market is just like the human heart. The heart—

BRIG: Please don't, Bliss. Dominic, what's your tactic here?

BRYAN: Bliss, enlighten me just for a moment. Tell me about your take on the market being like the human heart.

JEWELS: Do!

BRIG: *(in frustration)* Honestly!

BLISS: The heart has valves that help take in blood and pump blood out. The market's got that same system too. Right? In and out. The heart weakens when areas around the valves get to thick – not enough fresh healthy blood pumping in it at the right rate. In the market, when the rate fluctuates, you have a perpetual market arrhythmia – I learned about arrhythmia on ER. Anyway, it's all about flow.

*Pause. Eyes roll.*

I don't expect any of you to get this first time around.

PAGE: Thank you for your patience.

BLISS: And you probably won't ever get it.

PAGE: Don't limit my potential.

DOM: (*forcefully*) Back to Warren. Tell me about his clients.

BLISS: I don't really know them.

DOM: Well, what about Warren's relationship with them.

BLISS: It's good.

DOM: You said that he provides some of his clients with this vitamin powder. Tell me how that works.

BRYAN: This is what I want to hear. I could wring that boy's neck. Imagine the audacity of him—

BRIG: Please, let Bliss answer. You're not making things any easier.

JEWELS: Why does Dominic get to do all the asking?

DOM: (*ignoring JEWELS*) Bliss, tell me about the vitamin powder and Warren's clients.

BLISS: People never get the right balance of vitamins and enzymes and earth minerals. The powder provides all that.

DOM: I meant tell me more about how the powder gets to the clients. Do you ship it to them?

BLISS: I've got nothing to do with that. Do I look like some kind of warehouse clerk?

PAGE: Yes.

DOM: But you're aware that his clients receive the powder.

BLISS: What happens is Warren orders the powder from Alan Petsky.

DOM: Who's Alan Petsky?

BRYAN: Alan Petsky works in our Sacramento branch!

BLISS: I know that.

BRYAN: Why's he dealing with green vitamin powder?

BLISS: I actually think the product originates in Egypt or something. It's part of a pyramid club.

PAGE: A pyramid scheme you mean.

JEWELS: What's that? It sounds bad.

PAGE: It means that some vitamin-pumped godfather makes money every time Alan sells to Warren and Warren sells to his clients. People lose their shirts in pyramid schemes everyday.

JEWELS: It sounds like a scam.

BRIG: So Warren is part of some elaborate scam? Is he being taken for a ride? Maybe he doesn't understand. Page, how do you know this?

PAGE: The health craze of the 80's spawned a bunch of these operations. I can't believe you haven't heard the term. Most pyramids originate in either Nevada or Utah. The place our nation's moral fiber come from.

BLISS: Warren isn't part of any scam! Least of all a fiber scam. What are you talking about?

DOM: So Alan Petsky takes Warren's orders and then does he ship the powder?

BLISS: No, it's nothing like that. God, do have to explain the whole thing to you people?

BRIG: That would be lovely.

BLISS: Don't you know anything about how small business works? Ok. I'll make it simple for you.

PAGE: Oh, please do because you usually speak in such complicated terms.

BLISS: I can't help it. It's my mind. It's a bit faster than yours.

PAGE: Yes, because it's got less space to travel...

DOM: (*glaring back at PAGE*) I'd love you to explain, Bliss. It's really confusing. Thank you.

BLISS: Ok. The more powder Warren buys at one time, the cheaper each powder container is. So then the more money he makes when he sells to his clients. Like if he bought one unit of powder and sold one unit of powder, he'd make nothing and then he'd actually owe money because he most likely wouldn't have made his monthly quota.

BRIG: What?

BLISS: You can't run a business without setting standards – sales goals. So Warren – in order to be part of the group – has to pay a monthly membership fee to get access to the product at the wholesale price. But if he meets his sales goals, he makes back the money he spends on the membership fee plus he makes a profit on what he sells.

BRIG: I need to sit down. (*She sits*)

BLISS: I think some months are better than others for him. Like this month, for example. I think he might not have made his quota.

*Pause. ESEMBLE shows increased interest.*

DOM: Why do you think that?

BLISS: Because I know Warren. He was bummed and I think that's why.

DOM: Go on.

BLISS: Well it's not directly his fault. The cool thing about the pyramid club is that everyone share's in the profits but they also share in the losses. So Alan Petsky might not make his monthly goal if Warren doesn't make his.

BRIG: Bliss, so if my son didn't meet his quota this month, what does that mean exactly?

JEWELS: I've got it all figured out now. Warren robs health food stores! He steals their vitamin powder and then he re-sells it.

BLISS: Warren has nothing to do stores. They're retail. He deals in wholesale.

BRIG: What about having a bad month? What does that mean?

PAGE: It means that Warren has to shell out cash that he hasn't yet earned. And if he can't foot the bill, he pays penalties...similar to exorbitant interest rates.

DOM: Bliss, do you deal with these people directly?

BLISS: I take messages. That's it.

BRYAN: On company time.

BLISS: You don't hear them calling now, do you?

BRIG: I wouldn't be surprised if they did. They sound like a bunch of thugs. Is my son messed up with thugs?

PAGE: I'm sure they're very healthy thugs.

DOM: Bliss, did Warren pay out this month even though he didn't make his quota?

BLISS: I don't know. But I'm sure he did. He's in the banking business. He knows how silly it is not to leverage your assets.

BRYAN: What assets specifically?

BLISS: Assets. You know. Things that are of value that you own. Like those chairs, for instance.

PAGE: He sold those chairs to pay for vitamin powder?

BLISS: No of course not. I'm just using them as an example.

BRIG: Well why did he sell those chairs?

BLISS: I don't know.

DOM: Are you sure you don't know?

BLISS: I don't know. All I know is that they're assets.

PAGE: It's where Warren's ass sat.

DOM: Did Warren refer to them as assets?

BLISS: He says everything and everyone is potentially an asset.

JEWELS: How dreadful. To think that we're all just assets.

BRIG: My son is not so unfeeling. Please.

JEWELS: I've never had the pleasure of meeting your son, Brigitte. But I must say based on the goings on at his birthday party, I've gotten a pretty strong impression of him.

PAGE: Oh, he's a wild thing.

JEWELS: I don't doubt that for a minute. And I think he's gotten mixed up in something bad. And it's a shame.

BRYAN: It's illegal is what it is.

BRIG: We don't know that! Please, Mr. Norman.

DOM: What I can't understand is how come Warren never tried to sell this green vitamin powder to *me*?

BLISS: Maybe he didn't think you needed it. Do archers take supplements?

DOM: There's no rule against it.

BLISS: I know steroids get a bad rap.

DOM: Yes, but unless this vitamin powder has steroids, I'd be fine to take it.

JEWELS: Do you suppose it does?

DOM: Have steroids?

BLISS: It doesn't have steroids.

JEWELS: Well, how do you know? Do you take it?

BLISS: No. I've never even seen the stuff.

BRIG: Then how do you know it's green?

BLISS: I don't really, I suppose. *(pause)* I've just only imagined it to be green, since it's filled with all that natural stuff.

PAGE: So all you know is that Warren is selling something that he *calls* vitamin powder.

BLISS: Yes.

*ESEMBLE shares and long, uncomfortable pause.*

BRIG: I'm going to be sick.

BLISS: What?

DOM: Don't jump to conclusions. Any of you.

PAGE: It's hard not to.

DOM: Don't.

BRIG: Dominic's right. It's ridiculous.

JEWELS: What's ridiculous?

PAGE: Bliss, did Warren tell you about the pyramid club because you asked...or did he bring it up voluntarily?

BLISS: Well I asked because of some of the messages he would get.

PAGE: The messages referring to the vitamin powder?

BLISS: Yes. There wasn't a ton of them, but over the months I got curious.

PAGE: And did Warren seem uncomfortable when he told you about this vitamin powder pyramid club?

BLISS: No. In fact, when I asked him to tell me what all this vitamin powder was about, he offered to take me to lunch for the first time ever. We went to Pony's, this pizza place down from the bank. He treated me to lunch that day. So cool. He carefully explained how the club worked. Because I really wanted to understand. I value knowledge. It's how I get smarter. He told me not to ever be bothered by the goings on with it, and that it wasn't really bank business...just a side thing that wouldn't get in the way.

BRYAN: Then how do you know his clients use the powder?

BLISS: He told me that some of the customers for his vitamin powder I would recognize as clients of the bank. I figure over the years, he's gotten friendly enough with some of them to offer this side service as well. He said it's a perk-- to offer health as well as wealth.

PAGE: Oh I'm sure they're quite grateful to get *this* particular perk. Christ.

JEWELS: Well, if the clients are happy and staying with the bank, then I suppose a little vitamin powder isn't such a bad thing.

BRYAN: What are you thinking, Jewels? It's against bank policy for one thing.

PAGE: Is selling drugs really against bank policy? Shocking...

BRYAN: Who said anything about drugs?

BRIG: *(cutting in quickly)* No one.

BRYAN: What about drugs?

BRIG: I think we're all about done playing Sherlock Holmes.

PAGE: Nancy Drew for me.

JEWELS: *(to PAGE)* Do you think Warren is into drugs instead of vitamin powder? You see? I knew it! I knew it!

BRIG: *(in a rant)* You know nothing. None of you do. This is getting completely out of control. Warren is not into drugs or crime or anything of the sort. We shouldn't be sitting around his house coming up with these crazy theories. We shouldn't have been snooping around his kitchen. We shouldn't have been discussing his business as if we had any rights to his privacy. This whole party shouldn't have happened. Bliss, what on earth were you thinking? Is this your way of..of..what? Trying to get a promotion? Buttering up your boss with a surprise party?

*ENSEMBLE stares at Brigitte when she's through. She stares back at them.*

BRIG: What? What are you expecting me to do? Stand here and watch you all pathologize my son?

BLISS: A promotion? I hadn't really thought of it.

DOM: *(gently)* Brigitte, we're all here because we love Warren. Don't forget that.

JEWELS: Love's a strong word, dear. I don't think it fits in my particular case.

DOM: I'm just saying there's no ill will here. We didn't choose a topic and say "go!". We didn't say, "Hey, let's discuss Warren's dark side."

BLISS: I don't get the drug connection, Page. Why would you say that?

PAGE: Forget it, Bliss.

BLISS: Forget it? If my boss is running a drug ring, I want to know about it. I know drugs. In college, I tried drugs.

PAGE: I can't imagine you on drugs. It must be awful.

BRIG: He's not running a drug ring!

DOM: (*gently*) Let's suppose he's not *running* a drug ring. Maybe he's just gotten caught up with some bad people who are.

BRIG: It's all total conjecture. This whole thing has spiraled out of control.

PAGE: It might be conjecture. (*cautiously, regretfully*) But Bliss has never seen this green powder and Dominic and I haven't been asked to buy it. And that along with the elaborate pyramid scheme explanation he gave to distract Bliss—

BLISS: Distract me? I'm not easily distracted. Never on the job. I'm as focused as they come.

PAGE: All the details point to something that's just off, and...combined that with the gun...

DOM: He might actually be in some kind of trouble.

BRYAN: Yes, it's safe to say he's in big trouble.

BRIG: Mr. Norman, I—

BRYAN: Brigitte, it's unfortunate for your son.

BRIG: No, it's sad for all of you, actually.

BRYAN: I beg your pardon?

BRIG: Look at you? You're all latching onto these half-truths like you're on Court TV.

BLISS: May I say something?

*ENSEMBLE looks at BLISS annoyed but yield to her, out of lack of anything better to do.*

BLISS: Maybe Dominic is right about sitting down with Warren. Tonight, sitting down with him and telling him the truth. Telling him that all of you – not me – think he's a gun-toting drug dealer. And then we'll see how he responds.

PAGE: So it'll be more like a theme party than a surprise party.

JEWELS: *(holding up the mask)* More like a masquerade party.

BLISS: No, we go ahead and surprise him,. We yell ‘*Surprise!*’, have some wine, open presents, hear about the choking Chinese woman and then... show him the gun. I’m sure he’ll take it from there.

BRYAN: I doubt there was any choking woman.

BRIG: What, now you’re calling my son a liar?

BRYAN: Do you really think Warren got waylaid by an heroic dash to the hospital?

BLISS: Of course he took that woman to the hospital. You can’t make up stuff like that – it’s too real.

JEWELS: Dear, you should really read Shakespeare.

DOM: Warren helps people all the time. I don’t think we should bring his entire person into question here.

BLISS: All Warren ever wants to do is help people.

JEWELS: What’s this turned into now? A toast to Warren’s virtue?

BRIG: Why do you have it in for my son so much?

JEWELS: Oh, I don’t have it in for your son at all. You need to start thinking clearly, Brigitte, and stop being so defensive. It’s not going to help your son any.

BRIG: I beg you pardon, but kindly tell me how you would act with the tables turned. Let’s just say we were all assassinating the character of your wonderful son. What his name? Paul?

JEWELS: Oh, please. Is this all for your next book? I don’t think so... although this would make a great story.

BRIG: Let’s say this is one of my stories, and you’re the mother of a boy....let’s call him Paul.

BRYAN: Our son is hardly material for one of your books.

BRIG: How do you know? Have you even read one of my books?

BRYAN: No.

BRIG: Let's just say this character Paul is having a gathering at his home. He runs out...to..to pick up a friend at the airport. The guests remain, and one of them starts looking for something in Paul's closets. This guest, lets call her ...Patty, comes across, of all things, a handgun. She brings it out to show everyone. They all react the same way – with shock and horror. *'What's Paul doing with a gun? How wrong! How dark! He must be a criminal. We've had him all wrong.'* But you, the mother, surely know that your son is not a criminal at all. You protest. *"There must be a good reason for my son to have a gun,"* you say. *"A perfectly good reason."* But all the guests look at you, shaking their heads. *"Wake up, honey. Your son's no angel. Look, proof is staring you in the face. Look at the gun."* And that's it. They all turn on him. In an instant, your precious Paul has been reduced to being a criminal...to being not a good man at all. Now he's a bad man. Paul is incriminated, but guilty of what? Guilty of stirring everyone's worst imaginings, perhaps? Guilty of waking in them all those lazy stereotypes that start dancing around in their small, pathetic heads, conjuring up Paul doing all sorts of horrible, criminal, bad things. Things that have nothing to do with Paul and everything to do with this compulsion people have... to jump all over each other when given the chance.

*ESEMBLE pauses entranced by the story.*

BLISS: Go on! And then what happens?

BRIG: I don't know. Mrs. Norman, what happens next? Do you defend your son until the end or do you join the mad mob mentality? When Paul walks through that door, are you shaking your head in judgment with the rest of them?

JEWELS: Agatha Christie you are not. According to your story, the reaction of the guests makes no sense. If a gun was found hidden in my Paul's home, everyone's first and final assumption would be that he bought it for protection. Why? Why? Because, in the story you just told, the gun was not found wrapped in a black mask!

BRYAN: Good for you Jewels! That was excellent. This is quite fun, actually.

BLISS: Tell it some more!

PAGE: Is it bed time for you already?

DOM: *(to JEWELS)* I don't think the mask is such incriminating evidence anyway. What would you wrap a gun in?

JEWELS: I wouldn't wrap a gun because I wouldn't own a gun.

BRYAN: You do own a gun, dear.

JEWELS: I do not.

BRYAN: Oh, we own a little hand pistol. We've had it for years...it's a sweet little Texas Derringer. Barely 5 inches long... I don't remember where it is, actually.

PAGE: Probably wrapped up nice somewhere .... under the sink maybe....in a nice woolen mask.

BRIG: *(to JEWELS)* You hypocrite!

JEWELS: I'm no hypocrite!

BRIG: You're a liar.

JEWELS: *(glaring at BRYAN)* I forgot we owned a gun.

BRIG: Well if you own a gun, you must be a criminal and a drug dealer!

JEWELS: I don't own a black ski mask!

DOM: About the ski mask—

BRIG: Enough about the ski mask. We—

DOM: No, I think we should consider the fact that Warren is a huge skier. He has a time-share in Tahoe! Do you know how many ski masks he owns? He's a wimp about the wind. I've skied with him. I know.

PAGE: *(musing)* He does have very sensitive skin.

BLISS: Don't tell us that. I'm sure Warren wouldn't appreciate you telling us the details of what you know about his skin.

DOM: It's helpful actually, because Warren owns tons of ski masks for that very reason. He brings 4 or 5 up with him every trip. When he gets sweaty, he puts a new one on.

*DOMINIC walks to a closet door and opens it.*

BRYAN: What's this got to do with anything?

DOM: *(producing an entire bag full of scarves and ski masks of all colors, including black)* See? He got tons and tons.

BRYAN: What's your point?

DOM: It was your wife's point, actually. Without finding the mask along with the gun, we might have all concluded that Warren simply bought the gun to protect himself, or maybe to develop his shot, as a sport. And that's it. I don't go around shooting people with arrows. Just like you with your Texas Derringer. I'm assuming. But the mask – that's what made everyone jump to conclusions.

BRIG: The mask was just probably the first thing that Warren pulled out of his closet to wrap the gun in. Of course! He opened his closet, pulled out a mask and wrapped the gun. You see?

*BLISS has been sifting through the masks. She now has a neon orange one completely over her head.*

BLISS: These things are hot. *(taking it off)* Who wants to commit a crime while sweating in one these? I'd pass out. There must be better ways of concealing your identity.

PAGE: White collars usually do the trick.

BLISS: That just covers your neck.

BRIG: Thank you, Dominic. But you could have pulled these masks out a little earlier in the evening.

JEWELS: Warren owning several masks hardly absolves him.

BRYAN: He could wear different ones for different type crimes.

JEWELS: Perhaps. That could be his trademark.

BRIG: Maybe you two should write a book. You seem to have marvelous merged imaginations.

BRYAN: I think, given the circumstances, you should feel very lucky we're not calling the police.

BRIG: The police? Why on earth would you call the police?

PAGE: Have we disturbed your peace?

BRYAN: Your son will have to be investigated by the bank. There's no doubt in my mind about that.

BLISS: On what grounds?

BRYAN: And so will you.

BLISS: Me?

BRYAN: (*reserved*) Whether we're talking about the selling drugs or green vitamin powder or guns or even chairs -- it's all been going on during business hours using bank resources and involving bank customers. I'd say that's grounds for an investigation.

BLISS: Investigate away then! You'll find nothing. I'll never talk. I won't ever reveal my sources.

PAGE: It's a bit late for that, Bliss.

DOM: (*with hand on BRYAN's shoulder*) Mr. Norman, can I talk with you? Man to man?

JEWELS: I'd like to hear the other options.

BRYAN: (*to DOMINIC*) Yes, you may.

DOM: Warren has worked for you for what? Nine years, right?

BRYAN: Yes, that's right.

DOM: And before tonight, you've considered Warren to be one of your top portfolio managers. Isn't that true?

BRYAN: Yes, that is true. That's why tonight is—

DOM: Tonight is a strange night. Don't you think?

BRYAN: Yes. Quite strange.

DOM: I didn't expect this at all.

BRYAN: Nor had I.

DOM: I didn't even know about the party until 3pm today.

BRYAN: Nor had I.

DOM: And now I've spent an hour with 5 people I've never met before.

BRYAN: That's not so unusual for parties, though.

DOM: True, but the person we all have in common isn't even here. That's a bit unusual, don't you think?

BRYAN: Turns out to be, yes.

DOM: I mean usually the host is present.

BRYAN: True.

DOM: Usually, the host joins in on the conversation.

BRYAN: If he likes.

DOM: But tonight, Warren hasn't been here to join the conversation. Yet we've managed to talk about the goings on of Warren's life anyway, in quite a bit of detail.

BRYAN: And it's a good thing.

DOM: Not really.

BRYAN: I might not have ever known about the drug dealing.

BRIG: (*exploding*) How dare you continue to insist that my son is involved in drug dealing? Don't you see Dominic's point? This is all a bunch of hearsay instigated by a...a little girl!

BLISS: Are you calling me a little girl?

BRYAN: This little girl is an employee of my bank.

BLISS: Stop calling it 'your bank'. You're not Mr. First Federal!

JEWELS: Don't speak to my husband that way!

BLISS: Don't you speak to me at all!

BRIG: You two shut up!

(*BLISS and JEWELS look wounded*)

BRIG: (to BRYAN) I refuse to allow my son's reputation and career to be ruined by a bunch of convoluted stories told to you by his secretary. It's preposterous.

BLISS: Executive—

(PAGE puts her hand over BLISS's mouth)

BRYAN: Do you actually expect me to ignore everything that I've heard tonight?

BRIG: No I don't, Mr. Norman. But before you go ahead and instigate a formal investigation, I fully expect you to sit down with my son calmly, without confronting him with a litany of unfounded accusations. You have the right to ask him anything you'd like to as long as you do so with decency, respect and an open mind. You don't know any answers yet, Mr. Norman.

JEWELS: Are you insinuating that my husband would do it any other way?

BLISS: You're husband's got a gun – he admitted it himself. He can't quite remember where he put it, though.

BRYAN: I will follow bank procedures. There's strict protocol I have to follow. Internal investigations are quite thorough. If there's a need to bring in the federal investigators, we will.

BLISS: The FBI?

BRYAN: If necessary, yes.

BRIG: You lazy son-of-a-bitch. Hiding behind "strict protocol". How cold! Let someone else to do the dirty work, right? Didn't you just hear my plea? Sit down with him first – one to one – and there may be no need to go any further.

BRYAN: I can't do that.

BRIG: What can't you do? You can't look at this situation from any other place than from behind your desk? Who are you, Mr. Norman, besides your banking title.

BRYAN: Drama is clearly your forte, Mrs. Sutherland. And frankly, I'm sorry if you feel like I lack the ability to take this emotional ride with you just now. I might seem limited in your eyes, but I have responsibilities, and yes – they do define me quite a bit. That's not a bad thing.

JEWELS: Bryan is between a rock and hard place if you must know.

BRIG: No, I don't know.

JEWELS: He can't turn a blind eye.

BRIG: I'm not asking him to. I'm asking him to consider the idea that he might be man enough to deal with my son on his own – without humiliating him with an official investigation. That's what's on the table here.

JEWELS: My husband is man enough to make the right decisions – I assure you.

BRIG: I hope you're right.

*BRIGITTE walks away from the others towards the far side of the dining room table. She leans against it, revealing a deep fatigue and sadness. ENSEMBLE is quiet, all looking away from one another. After some stillness, DOMINIC picks up the empty wine bottle and walks back towards the kitchen. PAGE picks up the gun and wraps it back inside the mask.*

JEWELS: What are you doing with the gun?

PAGE: I'm putting back where I found it.

JEWELS: Why on earth for? It's evidence.

PAGE: *(snapping back)* Evidence for what? What's the crime here?

JEWELS: Your friend Warren is under investigation.

PAGE: By whom? You? Then you'll need a court order first. Then you can come in here and discover the gun yourself.

*(PAGE walks up into the kitchen, bends down behind the counter to place the gun back, then stands back up to join DOMINIC, who's now leaning against the back sliding doors to the deck. PAGE decides to slide open one of the doors.)*

PAGE: *(while sliding the door)* How about some air?

*(FRED the cat comes in. PAGE picks him up.)*

PAGE: Hey, you're cold. Who left FRED out on the deck? He's not an outdoor cat.

BLISS: He tried to bite me.

PAGE: That doesn't mean you should lock him outside. He could have gotten lost.

DOM:           *(disinterested)* There's nowhere he could have gone. The deck is enclosed.

PAGE:           Cats jump.

DOM:           Not Fred. He's afraid of heights.

PAGE:           How do you know?

DOM:           He never jumps on anything. He stays on the ground all the time.

BLISS:          Maybe he's a special needs cat.

DOM:           I'm just saying that I doubt Fred would jump off the deck.

PAGE:           Well it's a good thing he didn't. That's just what Warren needs.

BLISS:          Yeah, as if we've got anything better to offer him. I wish I remembered that stupid cake.

BRIG:          *(slowly, irritated)* Cake? Are you still thinking about cake?

BLISS:          I'm just saying...

BRIG:          I think you should all just go. I'll have dinner with Warren on my own, like we had always planned.

JEWELS:        Yes, I think that's best.

BRIG:          I'm sure you do.

BLISS:          I'll never invite any of you to anything again.

*ENSEMBLE stares and BLISS for a beat.*

PAGE:           I, in particular, am saddened to hear that.

BLISS:          Well, don't be.

PAGE:           But I am.

BRIG:          Let's just leave his home the way we found it.

*In silence, the ENSEMBLE starts slowly fixing pillows, chairs, collecting glasses etc. After a few silent moments, BRIGITTE stands next to BRYAN. She stares into his eyes.*

BRIG: *(quietly, slowly, and calmly)* I'm going to talk with Warren tonight. I'll not have him come into the office unprepared tomorrow. Like some kind of trap.

BRYAN: *(as quiet and calm)* I have no doubt that you'll speak to Warren.

BRIG: There's a lot of time between now and start of business tomorrow. Nearly 12 hours.

BRYAN: True.

BRIG: I'll make sure he takes full advantage of those hours.

BRYAN: No doubt you will.

BRIG: My son is extremely efficient.

BRYAN: I'm aware of how efficient your son is.

BRIG: I'm just reminding you. So you have a good, long sleep tonight in bed with your wife. Don't you think about work for one second.

*BRIGITTE and BRYAN stare each other down.*

BRYAN: I will try.

BRIG: Thank you.

*After a few beats of stillness, BRIGITTE'S cell phone rings in her bag. She looks at the others sternly. ENSEMBLE knows that it's WARREN on the phone.*

BRIG: *(into the phone)* Hi....You're downstairs? No, no...I'll just lock up here and come on down. Yes, I'm hungry...alright....see you in a second.

*(BRIGITTE hangs up the phone and starts collecting her shoulder bag and coat.)*

BRIG: I'm going to meet Warren downstairs. When you see that we're gone, I'd appreciate you all leaving immediately. Bliss, you have the key, I presume?

BLISS: Yes.

BRIG: *(at the door)* Well,...thank you for coming to my son's birthday party.

*BRIGITTE closes the door. The ENSEMBLE moves down stage and looks out onto the audience (implying a wall of windows to street below) BRIGITTE walks out of EXT. of*

*apartment, waves off stage to WARREN and exits. ENSEMBLE continues to look out. They clearly see BRIGITTE getting into the car. We hear CAR DOOR SHUT.) The others start to walk up stage to leave. PAGE remains, peering to the car as it drives away.*

PAGE:           *(as if out to Warren)* Surprise.

*Lights fade to black*

*The end*

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