

FABULIST

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Characters

TAYLOR DONOVAN

CURRAN MURPHY

KANE

DANA STERN

LYNTON THICKE

WILLIAM

ACT ONE

Scene One

TAYLOR DONOVAN, an attractive, bestselling novelist in her early 50s, and her long time agent, DANA STERN, sit DOWNSTAGE LEFT at a table in an abstract representation of an upscale Manhattan eatery. Dana is a sharp-dressed power broker in her early 60s, a clever, fast- talking woman with a pragmatic view of the publishing industry that is sometimes in contrast to Tay's romantic ideals about art versus commerce. Tay and Dana are in the middle of a heated conversation.

Tay: What do you mean you can't sell it? You've been my agent for over twenty years, and I've never heard you say those words.

Dana: I've never had to say them.

Tay: It's only the first half. Maybe once it's done . . .

Dana: I would have told you the same thing after the first five pages.

Tay: (*aghast*) Why?

Dana: One of your main characters is black.

Tay: So?

Dana: You can't presume to speak for an African American.

Tay: I'm not presuming to speak for anyone. I made up a fictional character who happens to be black. I'm telling a story not making a point.

Dana: Maybe you see it that way but most people won't.

Tay: Women write in male voices all the time. Men write in female voices.

Dana: It's not the same thing.

Tay: Was Richard Adams ever a rabbit?

Dana: No, and Tolkien was never a Hobbit. It's not the same thing.

Tay: It is the same thing. It's about the freedom to create. A novelist has to be able to inhabit all kinds of people, to portray other genders, ages, ethnicities. You have to imagine what it's like to have a job you never had or live in a place you never lived.

Otherwise, your story can only be about you and people exactly like you. Who wants to write that? Who wants to read that?

Dana: You're talking about writing as an art form. This isn't about art. It's about politics.

Tay: And art should never be politicized.

Dana: Art has always been politicized. There was a time when paintings were only allowed to depict scenes from the Bible, when theater was only allowed to be about royalty.

Tay: Then the audience decided they wanted something different.

Dana: That's what's going on now. People want to hear from writers of color.

Tay: But not solely writers of color. The buzzwords now are diversity, inclusion, tolerance, but that's not what you're talking about. You're talking about intolerance and ostracizing. You're just switching out one color for another. That's not progress, and that's not art.

Dana: I think you need to calm down. You can have black characters in this book, but you can't write in the voice of a teenaged black girl. Write her in third person.

Tay: I can't. It doesn't work.

Dana: Make it work.

Tay: Imagine *To Kill a Mockingbird* if it wasn't told by Scout or *The Catcher in the Rye* if it wasn't told by Holden. You're asking me to write a completely different novel. I can't change one thing without it affecting everything else. A novel's like an eco system.

Dana: We work in the publishing industry not an enchanted forest; the key word being "industry." It's no different than the auto industry except Toyotas don't have to be taken out to lunch and told they're special.

DANA waits for a smile from TAY but doesn't get one.

Dana: Publishers want to make money. They're not going to put out a product they think no one is going to buy. They don't care *why* people won't buy it. Simon & Schuster isn't going to wage a battle against social media.

Tay: So if this book were published I'd be cancelled? That's what's going to scare the houses?

Dana: I think so, yes.

Tay: And no one would support me? No one? Even murderers have people who stand up for their rights.

Dana: Murderers can be sympathetic.

Tay: Are you saying I'm less sympathetic than a murderer?

Dana: You're beautiful, white, successful . . .

Tay: What do my looks have to do with anything?

Dana: It's a shallow world.

Tay: I grew up poor in a trailer park without a father . . .

Dana: No one cares. You grew up white.

Tay: Then what am I supposed to do? Is my career over?

Dana: Be careful. It sounds like you're saying you're being victimized because you're white.

Tay: I'm saying if you've written something good it should be published no matter what you've chosen to write about and no matter what color you are.

Dana: That's nice in theory, but that's never how it's worked. There have been plenty of talented black writers who have been rejected or ignored because of their color. Now people want to read them.

Tay: You didn't answer my question: what am I supposed to do? On one hand I'm told I need to include non-white characters in my novels and on the other hand I'm told I'm not allowed to write them. Should I stop writing altogether because I'm white?

Dana: Keep your voice down.

Tay: (*in a dramatic whisper*) I feel like I'm in Nazi Germany.

Dana: Now you're appropriating *my* culture.

Tay: Very funny. What about that? Can I write in a Jewish voice?

Dana: Please, don't.

Beat.

Dana: Have you given any more thought to this ghostwriting proposal?

Tay: (*disgusted*) The stripper's memoir? You've got to be kidding.

Dana: She has twenty million Instagram followers.

Tay: Why would twenty million people care about some random stripper?

Dana: She's not just any stripper. She's having an affair with a married football player while she's also sleeping with a female hip hop star. She has a reality TV show in development and a multi-million dollar clothing line called Check Me Out. Oh, and a line of adhesive eyelashes.

Tay: I'm going to pretend you didn't just rattle off a stripper's resume like she's Ruth Bader Ginsberg. (*Pause.*) What's her name?

Dana: Velvet Rope.

Tay: (*defensively*) I'm a *New York Times* bestselling novelist. I've been nominated for two National Book Awards. I've been compared to Steinbeck.

Dana: Ask a hundred people and you'll be lucky if two of them know who John Steinbeck is.

TAY takes a sip from a glass of wine and makes a face.

Tay: This is bad.

Dana: You get what you pay for.

Tay: I'm paying eighteen dollars for this glass of wine.

Dana: That's what I mean. It's their cheapest Chardonnay. Are you counting your pennies?

Tay: I'm going broke.

Dana: Stop it. You're far from broke. You're going through a fallow period. It happens to all writers.

Tay: I never thought it would happen to me.

Dana: That's what all writers say when it happens to them.

Tay: I had to sell my house. Now I'm living in a crummy rental.

Dana: You *chose* to sell your house. And I know what that house meant to you. It was one of the symbols of your success and also the place where you raised your girls. How are they taking it?

Tay: They have their own lives now. Ryan's in California and Raven's busy with grad school. They don't know about my financial woes. They think I sold the house because I want to downsize.

Dana: Look, if you're truly worried about money you should do this ghostwriting thing. It doesn't have to impact your artistic integrity. And by the way, you have no right to scoff at Velvet's social media presence when you have basically none.

Tay: Why do I need one? If I wrote the world's greatest novel, couldn't you get me a big advance even though I don't have millions of people on my Facebook page?

Dana: Millions? I'd be happy if you had hundreds. And world's greatest novel according to whom? A literary critic writing for the Times or a Midwestern mommy blogger who also knows where you can find the best deals on peanut butter? The blogger will have more power.

Tay: Power to do what?

Dana: Sell the book. Don't make a face at me. One of the biggest books last year was written by a born-again Christian mommy blogger with a cheating husband who she left for another woman. You must've heard about it. I think it was called, *Jesus Wants You to be a Lesbian*.

Tay: It was called, *Jesus Wants You to Forgive Him*.

Dana: She just inked an advance for three million dollars for her next book.

Tay: You can't compare me to that woman. She's not an artist. She wrote a non-fiction book about herself and it sold because she had a built-in audience. I write novels.

Dana: Then make your novels more commercial. Put a vampire in the next one. Or a disenchanted billionaire. Maybe a transgender character?

Tay: (*oozing sarcasm*) How about a book about a born-again Christian transgender billionaire with a line of adhesive eyelashes who has an affair with a vampire?

Dana: (*softening toward Tay*) I'm sorry. I can see you're not finding any of this funny.

Tay: I guess I can't make you understand. You choose to represent writers, but you could represent anyone. You could sell anything. You're a businesswoman. I can only be a writer. It's not just a job; it's who I am.

Dana: Why don't you travel? Get away for a while. Clear your head. If you want, I could try to throw together an event somewhere. Get one of your foreign publishers to pay for your hotel and airfare. The rest of the trip could be a tax write-off. *(Pause.)* Come on. Cheer up. You never know when something's going to fall in your lap. What about Kate Rodgers and her massive bestseller a few years ago? She was in a similar situation as you're in now, a respected novelist whose sales had plateaued and then she went through that terrible ordeal with her son and his trial and well, you know the story. A fantastic book came out of that awful tragedy. Too bad something terrible hasn't happened to you.

Tay: I could write about this lunch.

DANA picks up her menu. TAY sees the gesture as a dismissal.

Tay: That's it? This conversation is over? Now you're going to order a salad?

DANA says nothing and continues looking at the menu. TAY accepts the reality of her situation. She reaches across the table and takes the menu from Dana's hands forcing Dana to make eye contact with her.

Tay: You said you can't sell it, but you never told me what you think about the book.

Dana: (*sadly, regretfully*) I think it's wonderful.

Lights slowly fade on the restaurant. Lights up DOWN RIGHT to reveal the living room of the lovely house Tay is renting; it's definitely not "crummy" as she described it earlier. We see a sofa and two chairs surrounded by stacks of unpacked boxes. An opened pizza box, a bottle of whiskey, and a Mac sit on a coffee table. TAY walks DOWN CENTER into light focusing on the audience.

Tay: (*to the audience*) The first lie that got me into trouble was when I started telling people my father had been murdered by a bear. I was eight but a precocious eight who spent much of my free time looking up words in a dog-eared dictionary I bought at a yard sale for a quarter. I knew the definition of murder was an unlawful and premeditated act, two adjectives that could never be ascribed to a bear. Animals are governed by no laws and don't sit around planning to kill another animal for reasons other than wanting to eat it or possess its females. Murder was the wrong word, but the budding writer in me loved the grandeur of it. Murder was so much more intriguing and packed with moral implications than simply saying my father had been killed by a bear. Two years had passed since he left my mother and me, and it was obvious he wasn't coming back. I didn't see the harm in my claim. For all I knew he had been murdered by a bear, or a disgruntled co-worker, or his latest

girlfriend. It wasn't lying exactly; it was more wishful thinking. This was just one of the many whoppers I'd started telling in school since Mom and I had been forced to move to the trailer park and she'd started working two jobs and crying a lot in the shower. I didn't realize my stories had made it to the ears of my teacher and once I started talking about murder, she decided it was time to call in my mother for a conference. (*Pause.*) I didn't have any friends in my class. The closest I came to liking anyone was Bethany Mays. She was the only black student in the third grade.

Bethany and I weren't exactly pals then; we were more silent allies recognizing in each other that we were outcasts, her for a glaring reason over which she had no control, me for a hidden one over which I did have control: I hated the world. I liked Bethany, though, because she was neat and clean – nothing like the coal miner's kids – and she was unflappable, a word I read in a book once and looked up in my dictionary. Unflappable: having or showing calmness in a crisis. When I told her my mom was coming in for a conference about the lies I'd been telling at school she coolly asked, "Can they prove they're not true?" Back home after I'd been properly chastised, my mother surprised me by giving me a new notebook and a set of pencils. She said, "From now on when you have stories in your head, you're not going to tell them to anyone. You're going to write them down. But can I make a suggestion? Your stories always center around you. That restricts you. Wouldn't it be more fun to have all the power? To control everything? To be God?" Then she told me about a famous French writer named Flaubert. He once said: the author in his work, must be like God in the Universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere. "Do you understand what that means?" Mom asked me. "When you look at a tree

you know God must be around somewhere. He made it. But you don't actually see God." I took the notebook and pencils from her and for some reason wrote "Bethany Mays" on the first line of the first page. I had no way of knowing she had less than eight years to live. She'd be dead at sixteen. Murdered. I asked Mom to repeat the quote so I could write it down. Then I wrote the author's name the way I heard it: F-L-O-W. (Pause.) B-E-A-R. (in a lilting voice) Flow. (growling) Bear.

Beat.

That was the day I became a writer.

TAY walks into the living room. She pulls an oversized novelty t-shirt and a pair of fuzzy slipper socks out of one of the boxes and changes into them then searches through several other boxes looking for a glass. She finally gives up and settles for a vase. She pours whiskey into it and sits on the sofa with a piece of pizza. Before she can begin eating, her phone pings.

Tay: (to herself) Dana. (reading the text aloud) That Irish wack a doodle I told you about is back on your Facebook page. You should block him. Three exclamation points.

TAY opens her Mac. Simultaneously CURRAN MURPHY appears UP LEFT in shadow. He's an extremely intelligent but troubled, foul-mouthed, antisocial Irishman

in his 20s. For now the audience sees him only as a silhouette of a shady young man in an oversized bomber jacket, skinny jeans, and army boots. He holds a cigarette in one hand. The tip glows like a red jewel in the dark. Curran will narrate his Facebook posts as Tay reads them to herself.

Curran: Why do you post such pedestrian photos, Miz Donovan? Another book signing at a library? Why do you waste your time? You're a coward living a conventional life because you're afraid to be as bold as your writing.

Tay: *(to herself)* What is this guy's problem?

Curran: You resent these fans of yours with steady jobs and retirement funds that send you messages with exclamation points urging you to write more, write faster. They take your books out of the library instead of buying them. They download them for pennies. They crave your words but would let you live homeless on the street if they could find a way to get them for free.

Tay: *(to herself)* Dana's right. He's a nut job. *(She scrolls.)* Where did he find this old interview I did about Russian writers?

Curran: *(mocking)* How did you discover Turgenev, Miz Donovan? A Russian Lit course at university taught by a limp dick professor who slobbered over Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky and made the colossal Ivan a side bar? Or was it an earnest college

beau who cried soulful tears after making love to you? Did he try to impress you with his literary mojo? Which made you want to puke more?

Tay: *(to herself)* He's an asshole but a well-read asshole. He can quote Turgenev. I think this is from *The Borzoi*.

Curran: *(tenderly)* No one else has such a gift for subtly hitting off the petty aspect of a character, no one else has such a power to stigmatize it so mercilessly in the unforgettable word. And that word sears all the more painfully because it comes from fragrant, beautiful lips.

TAY gazes raptly at the screen momentarily seduced by the passage.

Curran: *(suddenly seething)* Yes, I'm talking about you! Crusher of men's souls. Giver of pain and delight. Don't be a stupid bitch!

TAY recoils from her Mac as if bitten, slams it shut, and jumps up from the bed. She drinks from the vase as she paces agitatedly. She returns to the sofa and hesitantly opens her computer.

Tay: *(reading aloud as she types)* Had a disastrous lunch with my agent today. Financial future looking bleak. Maybe it's time for me to quit writing and get a real job.

Curran: Are you out of your fucking mind?!

TAY winces at the harshness of his words then composes herself understanding the gravity of the moment: they're connected.

Curran: (*enraged*) An artist can't quit being an artist. If you're able to stop creating then you're not an artist. You're a liar and a fake who accidentally stumbled into a well of talent and now that you've emptied it you're going to crawl out into the sunshine with the rest of the lemmings and go to Disney World. An artist's well can never be emptied. An artist spends her whole life alone in a cold, dark pit fighting to keep her head above the black water. Not on the fucking "Today Show" talking about where she gets her ideas. You don't have enough money? Welcome to the human race. Get out on the street and sell your ass if you have to.

Tay: (*reading aloud as she types*) If you know so much about artists then you also know that making a living selling your art is no different than selling your ass.

Curran: Selling your ass is easier. Don't you agree, Miz Donovan? Which makes your skin crawl more, the thought of diluting and debasing your work in order to make it more palatable for the moronic masses or having your naked body pawed and violated by fat, sweaty strangers?

Tay: (*reading aloud as she types*) I think you know the answer.

Phone pings.

Tay: (*reading Dana's text*) Don't respond to this guy. Four exclamation points. Have you been drinking? Do not drink and post.

TAY takes another gulp of whiskey.

Tay: (*reading aloud as she texts*) I'm not drinking.

Phone pings.

Tay: (*reading text*) Do not engage this potentially dangerous perv. Anyone can Google a passage from a Turgenev novel.

Tay: (*reading aloud as she texts*) But it was an apt passage.

Dana: Get off your page. All caps. Six exclamation points. Head exploding emoji.

TAY sets her phone aside and takes a jittery breath realizing she's become aroused by the combative exchange with this vulgar stranger who seems able to read her darkest thoughts.

Curran: Are you still there?

Tay's fingers hover over her keyboard.

Curran: You're an artist trapped in a woman. I'm a man trapped in your art.

CURRAN takes a final drag off his cigarette and drops it to the floor. Lights out on Curran. TAY lies back on the sofa with her eyes closed and slips her hand between her thighs as lights slowly fade to black.

Scene Two

A cozy bar in an old-fashioned but still fashionable hotel in Ireland. Irish music plays softly in the background. WILLIAM, a middle-aged bartender, stands by drying glasses. He wears a uniform of a starched white dress shirt and a gaudy green and gold vest. TAY enters in a sophisticated dress and high heels. She carries copies of one of her books and places them on the bar as she takes a seat.

William: What can I get for you, Miss?

Tay: Thank you for the Miss. I'm feeling very much like a Ma'am tonight.

William: Why is that now?

Tay: Feeling old. Foolish. Undesirable.

William: Nonsense. You're a beautiful young woman. Maybe you're a fool. I can't speak to that.

Tay: I am. Trust me. Your best whiskey on ice. A double.

William: Our best or most expensive?

Tay: Your best.

William: Shall I put this on your room, Miss . . ?

Tay: Donovan. Taylor Donovan.

William: Ah. Of the County Cork Donovans.

Tay: You know my family?

William: You can't throw a stone around here without hitting a Donovan.

Tay: My grandmother was originally from Skibbereen. She used to make this delicious Irish currant cake. What was it called? A holiday cake with little prizes in it.

William: Barmbrack. My mother made it with currants, too. Most use raisins. I haven't had it since she passed. Bakeries make a poor version of it. So does my wife.

Tay: What was the meaning of the prizes? I remember a ring meant you'd get married that year.

William: Lucky at love. A coin meant riches. A bean meant poverty. (*studying Tay*) If you don't mind me saying, you look familiar.

Tay: You've probably seen my poster in the bookstore window across the street. I'm an author. I'm here doing a few speaking events.

William: That's it. My wife. She's a fan of yours. She was at your talk at the uni tonight. You probably signed a book for her.

WILLIAM reaches beneath the bar and produces a pen and cocktail napkin.

William: Would you sign it for me? She'll get a big kick out of it. Name's William.

TAY signs the napkin and slides it back to WILLIAM. She drains her drink.

Tay: Another double, please.

William: (*somewhat concerned*) I don't mean to pry but it seems like something might be troubling you. Unless, of course, you're a raging sot. Then this type of drinking is perfectly normal.

Tay: I'll let you in on a secret. I threw together these events in Cork in order to meet a man who I know nothing about, and who might not even know I'm here, and might not want to meet me.

William: You've lost me.

Tay: There's this man on my Facebook page. All I know about him is that he lives here. I've become interested in him.

William: If you don't mind my asking, how can you be interested in someone you know nothing about?

Tay: I'm attracted by his words.

William: Ah, he's a romantic type. Writes you poetry and such.

Tay: Not exactly. A lot of what he writes is mean and vulgar.

William: I'm still lost but keep talking.

Tay: The problem is I agree with a lot of his criticism of me even though I'd never own up to any of it. Did you ever see one of those cartoons where the character's conscience was an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other?

William: This man is the devil on your shoulder?

Tay: Or maybe the angel. I don't know. It's crazy that I wanted to meet him. He could be a hundred years old. He could be twelve. He could look like Quasimodo. He could be a serial killer. I've been posting about this trip on my social media. I know he must know I'm here. If he wanted to meet me, I've given him every opportunity. He never showed.

William: Maybe it was for the best.

The red glow of a cigarette tip appears DOWN LEFT as lights come up on CURRAN. He's dressed in the same leather jacket, jeans, and boots from earlier. He's unkempt and scruffy but has a smoldering bad boy sexuality that he doesn't seem to realize. He uses bad manners and outrageous rudeness to cover up his youthful insecurity. He tosses away his cigarette, readies himself and enters the bar. WILLIAM eyes him critically.

William: (*chill in his voice*) Are you a guest here?

Curran: No.

William: Why are you here then?

Curran: Why do you think, genius? To have a drink. The proper response to that would be, "Then what can I get you to drink?" Or didn't you get that far in pint pulling school?

William: (*icily*) We only serve guests of the hotel.

Curran: I'm sure that's a lie. I think you don't want me here. Don't like the look of me. But if you'd prefer to pretend this bar has an exclusionary policy, that's fine with me. I'd like a room then.

William: We don't have any rooms.

Curran: A hotel without rooms? A bar without drinks? (*eyeing William's vest*) A man without a shred of self-respect? Nice waistcoat by the way.

William: Get out.

Curran: (*turning to Tay*) Excuse me, love. Are you a guest here?

Tay: Yes.

Curran: Would you buy me a drink?

Tay: No.

Curran: Would you order me a drink? I can pay for it.

Tay: No.

Curran: Why not? You look like a nice enough sort. The type who holds the door open for old folks and sends money to charities saving pandas and whales. I'm only asking you to order the drink. It won't cost you anything.

William: I'm calling security.

Curran: Ooh! I'm scared. I can't wait to see what kind of security this place has. One of these high and mighty historic inns. St. Patrick took a shite here once. Or was it Bono?

William: Watch your mouth. There's a lady here.

Tay: I won't order a drink for you because you're obnoxious.

Curran: There. See. That's a legitimate reason. Are you American?

Tay: Did my accent give me away or my reasoning?

Curran: Your legs.

Tay: I have American-looking legs?

Curran: Not all American women have beautiful legs, but the most beautiful legs in the world belong to American women.

TAY looks away from the intensity of his stare.

Curran: Why are you wasting your time in a place like this? You should put a crown of shamrocks in your hair and go to the snug around the corner where you can do shots of Redbreast with the boggers and debate whether Brendan Behan or Dylan Thomas was a more tragic loss to the bottle.

Tay: Behan was the bigger loss. Dylan Thomas wasn't Irish.

Curran: You won't buy me a drink, not even to toast the mighty Mr. Behan?

Tay: *(to William)* Pour him a shot. Just one.

WILLIAM glares daggers at CURRAN as he pours the drink and sets it in front of him. Curran holds his drink aloft.

Curran: In the words of himself: America produces writers with drinking problems .

..

Tay: I am a drinker with writing problems.

TAY and CURRAN clink glasses. Curran throws back his shot as she watches him closely.

Tay: You're Curran.

Curran: Guilty as charged.

TAY stands without finishing her drink.

Tay: Good night, William.

William: Good night, Miss.

Curran: That's it? This is how you treat one of your biggest fans? You won't even have a drink with me or a bit of conversation? What a bitch you are.

William: I said watch your mouth.

Curran: If I were some fawning, fat-assed book club lady or a mindless, tweeting soccer mom who rates your novels with emojis, you'd be chatting up a storm with me.

Tay: *(falsely sweet)* Would you like me to sign a book for you?

TAY signs one of the books while CURRAN watches her, enraged. He says nothing when she hands it to him then throws the book behind the bar where it crashes against glasses and bottles.

William: That's it! Now it's a matter for the Garda. Security!

WILLIAM hurries out from behind the bar and exits. CURRAN gives TAY an angry, desperate look then bolts over the bar, retrieves the book, and exits up center at a run passing a stunned Tay. Hold on Tay for a beat. She turns and follows the path of Curran's exit. Lights to black.

Scene Three

Curran's flat consists of an unmade bed, a secondhand sofa, a grime-streaked window, a door suggesting a bathroom, and a kitchenette with the counter covered in take out containers, dirty dishes, and empty bottles. Books are stacked everywhere, on the floor, in shelves. The overall feel is messy and cluttered but also barren due to the lack of anything personal.

CURRAN and TAY enter through the door. Tay hesitates while Curran takes off his jacket and tosses it on the bed. He wears a tight t-shirt and Tay appreciatively eyes the youthful leanness of his muscles. Curran crosses the room and forages in the kitchenette until he comes up with two acceptably clean glasses and a half-empty bottle of whiskey.

Curran: Americans are strange. They're full of talk and bravado. Roaring like lions. But they're all lambs inside. So concerned about what other people are going to think about them.

CURRAN plunks down on the couch and digs between the cushions where he finds a crushed pack of cigarettes.

Curran: Hollow swagger. It's your country's worst quality. Even worse than the greed, the violence, the obesity, the fake tits. Take now for instance. You want to sit with me and have a drink. You wouldn't have come with me from the hotel if you didn't. But instead you're going to stand there feigning . . . what? Distaste at the humbleness of my abode? Shock that a man like me would presume to have social relations with a woman like you?

Tay: You really hate Americans.

Curran: I love Americans. You should hear me talk about the French.

CURRAN lights a cigarette.

Tay: Please don't smoke.

Curran: Christ.

CURRAN goes to the window and tosses out the cigarette.

Tay: Can you leave the window open? It smells like an ashtray in here.

Curran: Anything else I can do for you, milady? Would you like some disinfectant and rubber gloves?

CURRAN returns to the couch. TAY joins him sitting as far away from him as possible. He pours them both a drink. She declines hers with a shake of her head.

Tay: So, what do you do for a living? Or do you go to school?

Curran: Seriously? Is that all you got? Why do you think you're here?

Tay: I'm not sure.

Curran: You're here because you want me to fuck you.

TAY is taken aback but recovers quickly.

Tay: I am not going to sleep with you.

Curran: Why not?

Tay: We just met.

Curran: We just met isn't a valid excuse. If you find me repugnant, that's an excuse. Of if you don't like sex, that's an excuse. Or if you just had sex earlier and don't feel

like having more — “no, thank you, sir, I’m full” — that’s an excuse. But we just met isn’t acceptable.

Tay: You’re an expert on the subject?

Curran: It’s common sense. If you don’t want to fuck someone within the first ten minutes of meeting him, you should never fuck him.

Tay: Well, I don’t want to fuck you.

Curran: Then why did you follow me home?

Tay: I didn’t follow you home. I went after you to apologize. Even though you have a rather crude, abrasive way of expressing yourself, you’re still a fan of mine and I shouldn’t have treated you that way.

Curran: That’s what you said. I’m not buying it.

Tay: Did you really think I was going to meet some guy who I know nothing about other than he likes to harangue me on my Facebook page and instantly fall into bed with him? You think I’m that desperate to get laid?

Curran: I think the only reason you came to Ireland was to meet that guy and the only reason you wanted to meet him was in the hopes that once you did you'd want to fuck him and now that you have met him, you obviously do want to fuck him or you wouldn't have gone home with him.

Tay: An answer like that isn't going to convince me to have sex with you.

Curran: I'm not trying to convince you. You either want to fuck me or you don't. That's between you and you. I'm not involved. I'm just pointing out the flaw in your reasoning.

Tay: *(smiling in spite of herself)* How old are you?

Curran: Twenty-five.

TAY stands to go.

Curran: You think you're too old for me? Do you know how stupid girls are at my age?

Tay: Not as stupid as boys are at your age.

Curran: I've shagged plenty of them, but they're boring as hell.

Tay: And why do you want to shag me? Because I'm an American? Because I'm a bestselling author? Or do you have a thing for women old enough to be your mother?

Curran: My mum's dead. Died when I was six.

Tay: I'm sorry. Your father?

Curran: I got one.

Tay: Are you close?

Curran: I try to never be closer than an arm's length.

TAY sits down next to CURRAN who takes advantage of Tay's sympathy and slides next to her.

Curran: I know you're disillusioned.

Tay: What are you talking about?

Curran: You think the world doesn't appreciate you anymore.

Tay: You don't know anything about me.

Curran: I know everything about you. When you were young, you tired quickly of the mono-syllabic, blue-collar Neanderthal boys who only wanted to paw you. You were brilliant. You were dazzling and magnificent in a bleak, backward, soot-covered town where no one could appreciate you.

As CURRAN talks, he maneuvers TAY into the corner of the couch. She lies back, mesmerized, while he pushes her dress up her hips and pulls her legs apart, positioning himself in between them.

Curran: You wanted to talk about books and the authors you'd discovered. The outside world you wanted to see. You were aroused by ideas and art. They were aroused by your tits. Now you'd give anything for those boys and their silence, their focus, their uncomplicated commitment to the simple act of doing you. You want a man who can ram you, fill you up. What you get is fumbler, talkers, cocks that can no longer rise to the occasion. You want to scream at them, "I don't care about your high blood pressure or how your ex-wife took everything in the divorce."

CURRAN takes Tay's hand and places it on his crotch.

Curran: You know what that is? A big, hard, young dick. When was the last time you had one of these inside you?

Tay: *(breathing heavily)* 2003.

CURRAN strips off his shirt while TAY fumbles with the zipper of his jeans. Lights fade slowly with the clear intent that the ensuing "sex" is to be assumed rather than viewed. Lights to black.

Lights come up on Curran's flat. Time has passed. Tay's domestic presence is now evident: the kitchen is spotless, the window is clean, a brightly colored throw covers the back of the sofa, a vase full of flowers stands next to a stack of books. TAY enters from the bathroom dressed casually.

CURRAN enters from outside carrying a bag of groceries with a cheap, red foil heart-shaped candy box sticking out of the top. He walks to the kitchenette and sets down the bag. TAY joins Curran and they engage in a passionate kiss then Tay pulls away.

Tay: *(still playful)* Okay, enough. I'm not in the mood. I have a lot on my mind.

Curran: It's not your mind I require at the moment.

Tay: You'd be okay if I just laid back and was completely uninvolved in the act? It wouldn't bother you if I was busy thinking about something else and you were just a physical annoyance?

Curran: (*mood souring*) An annoyance, am I?

Tay: I'm sorry. That was the wrong word.

Curran: You've never picked the wrong word in your life.

CURRAN takes a can of beer out of the refrigerator and pops it open.

Curran: So what's on your mind?

Tay: It's time for me to head back to America.

Curran: Why?

Tay: I live there.

Curran: Why? Your daughters are grown. You sold your house. You don't have a job.

Tay: (*defensively*) Right. I don't work.

Curran: I didn't say that. But you can write anywhere. Why not here?

Tay: I'm not going to live in a pigsty with a boy half my age who scrapes by on money he makes writing papers for spoiled, lazy, corrupt students.

CURRAN walks to the bed gulping at his beer.

Tay: I'm sorry, again. That wasn't a very nice thing to say.

Curran: Truth is I choose to scrape by, as you put it. I could make a bloody fortune writing these papers if I wanted to.

CURRAN reaches for his laptop lying on the floor next to the bed and flips it open. TAY joins him on the bed.

Curran: *(reading from his laptop)* The Social Control of Peasant Labor in Late Imperial Russia: Migration, Mobilization, and Coercion. Some git at Yale paid me eight grand for that. Or how about this one? An Examination of the Victorian Multi-plot Novel and Dickens' Serializing Imitators. Wrote it in a day for a pre-med pisser at King's College. Four thousand pounds. Or this one. Five thousand euros. Trollope, Orwell, Huxley, and Rand: The Evolution of the Political Novel.

Tay: Did you ever think about using your brains for your own good? Why didn't you go to college?

Curran: In order to do what when I was done? This is how I choose to live.

Tay: You're content to do nothing except drink, smoke, live in a hovel, and be angry all the time?

Curran: It's what most people do only most of them also have a job they hate.

CURRAN gets up from the bed and returns to the kitchenette to get another beer.

Curran: You want to get back to your life of luxury.

Tay: I don't live a life of luxury.

Curran: I'm sure you do.

Tay: Why do you think an artist's life has to be an impoverished one?

Curran: Because great art comes from suffering. There's no such thing as a contented, complacent genius.

Tay: And you think the only source of suffering in this world is a lack of material wealth? You're confusing an artist's life with a martyr's life.

Curran: Artist, martyr, whore. Go back to America and be whatever you want. Makes no difference to me. And by the way, this hovel — as you put it — is my home. You don't want to be here, don't be here.

TAY joins CURRAN in the kitchenette. Curran pushes the box of candy out of sight.

Tay: I don't want to fight.

Curran: Fight? Why would we fight? We barely know each other. What would we fight about? We both know what's going on here.

Tay: What's going on here?

Curran: You're a pathetic middle-aged woman who wanted to get fucked by a younger man before her looks go. Good thing you found me when you did. Won't be long now. I noticed some gray in your hair this morning when you were riding me. Some wrinkles 'round your eyes, too. I hear natural light is the harshest thing for women your age. But don't worry. Blokes still might want to do you in the dark.

TAY slaps CURRAN. A tense moment passes as we wait to see how Curran will react. He's more emotionally hurt than physically. He turns away from her and walks to the window where he lights up a cigarette. Tay notices the box of candy.

Tay: I can't remember the last time a man gave me a box of chocolates.

Curran: Don't get too excited. I got them at a petrol station. (*Beat.*) It's our two-week anniversary.

TAY glances at CURRAN, deeply touched.

Curran: (*quietly*) If you don't like it here then come stay at my house on the coast and write. You'll have no distractions.

Tay: (*stunned*) You have a house on the coast?

Curran: It's not much of a house, but the land around it is magnificent. A dangerous, wild Irish coast with cliffs plunging straight into the sea.

Tay: You have a house on the coast?

Curran: My da lives there.

Tay: So there's a catch.

Curran: He's a commercial fisherman. He's gone for long spans of time. He's on a job now and won't be back for months.

Tay: I appreciate the offer but there's no reason to finish this book. My agent doesn't think she can sell it.

Curran: Fuck your agent. What's wrong with it?

Tay: There are three protagonists. One is black. White writers aren't supposed to write black characters anymore.

Curran: Says who?

Tay: Society.

Curran: Ah, society. Can a Chinese writer write a black character?

Tay: I don't know.

Curran: Can a black writer write a white character?

Tay: I don't know.

Curran: Can a Slovenian writer write a Nordic character?

Tay: Enough. I get your point. I don't know. I'm not acquainted with the new rules yet.

Curran: There are no rules in art.

Tay: There are rules for art you want to sell.

Curran: If you're thinking about how you're going to sell the book before you write it then it's not art.

TAY picks through the chocolates. She chooses one and takes a bite.

Curran: Do you want to write this book?

Tay: Yes.

Curran: Why?

Tay: It's hard to explain. I've come too far. The characters are alive inside me now. I'm well into the second trimester of the creative process, and I want this baby. I don't care if there are people out there telling me I should give it up. There's nothing rational about my feelings. They're purely primal.

Curran: What a load of shite.

Tay: (*bursting into laughter*) Oh my God. You're right. What am I saying?

Curran: This isn't a uni event or a TED talk, love. (*gesturing grandly around the room*) We here at Curran's pigsty know the real you. You want to write this book because it's your right to write this book. You have the talent, you have the discipline, you have the magic. You've already proven yourself through your other work. Who are these self-appointed interpreters of society's whims to tell you what you can do?

Tay: (*still amused*) Well, when you put it that way. (*Pause.*) I suppose that's all true, but I also want the money. It makes me feel icky and boojie to admit that. I don't want to be one of *those* people.

Curran: We're all *those* people. We all want more than we have and more than we deserve. It's just different people want different things.

Tay: What do you want?

CURRAN flicks the cigarette out the window and turns toward TAY giving her his full attention from across the room.

Curran: To read this book.

TAY seems baffled by this answer. She goes to CURRAN and tries to kiss him. He stops her by taking her gently by the shoulders and holding her body away from him.

Curran: I read one of your novels for the first time when I was thirteen. You've been in my life for half my life and you never knew of me until a few weeks ago. It's like a relationship with God. A man spends his life worshipping God while God doesn't know the man exists because God has better things to do. Then one day God notices him.

Tay: And then what happens?

Curran: She either saves him or destroys him.

Blackout.

A scrim descends as TAY walks DOWN CENTER in one into light.

Tay: *(to the audience)* Bethany and I were best friends by fifth grade. We bonded over our love of books. My mom and her grandmother were also avid readers. Bethany's grandma had a hard cover set of the Ten Greatest Novels of All Time she'd won in a contest sponsored by *Reader's Digest*. My mother's novels were secondhand paperbacks stacked in wobbly towers next to her bed. We snuck books from both collections. Because of Bethany's grandma we read *Anna Karenina*, *Great Expectations*, and *Don Quixote*. Because of my mom we read *Valley of the Dolls*, *The Exorcist*, and *Looking For Mr. Goodbar*. I remember being obsessed by *The Exorcist*. After my mom and I moved to the trailer park, my route to school went past the Catholic cemetery and I used to cut through it to save time and was constantly on the look out for demons and moody priests. Eventually I took Bethany there and it became one of the places we hung out. It was serene and lovely but we couldn't help noticing a definite divide down the middle of the tombstones marked by park benches with their backs turned to each other. On one side of the path was Bertolino, Donatelli, Spatafore. On the other, O'Donovan, Mulroney, Flaherty. To an outsider looking in these people were exactly the same: small town, working class, white, Catholic Americans. Same values. Same politics. Drove the same cars and watched the same TV shows. And yet deep down they hated each other so much they didn't want to be near each other even in death. Bethany and I were both fascinated by this segregation. We understood epic hatreds. Black. White. Christian. Jew. Steelers. Cowboys. They were tribal, ingrained, and fueled by mob mentality. It was these micro hatreds we didn't understand. We looked at the world from a space ship point of view guided by a child's naivete and a reader's open mind. We believed

people may have seemed different up close, but if you moved far enough away from the world and looked down we were all the same with the same basic needs and desires and the same end. Why be enemies? *(Pause.)* Bethany and I shared a love of books but poverty brought us even closer together. We knew green was a color that mattered more than black or white. Our shabby homes, our growling stomachs, our overworked, used up mothers defined us more than our skin and we both knew who was to blame: hers was a violent reality, mine was a cowardly ghost.

Lights out on TAY as she exits DOWN RIGHT. The scrim flies out.

Scene Four

The kitchen of the Murphy home in rural County Cork has changed little since the death of Curran's mother. It's outdated and has an air of eerie stillness to it like a playground without children. An old scarred wooden table with matching chairs is the centerpiece of the room. The interior wall features a crucifix and a set of dinner plates hand painted with birds. Outside the kitchen the distant sound of crashing waves and shrieking coastal birds suggests the cliffs plunging into a stormy sea.

TAY sits at the table typing on her Mac. CURRAN enters the kitchen through a back door. He's dressed for cold weather in a Fisherman's sweater and cap that makes him look very young. He carries two bottles of champagne and is in a buoyant mood.

Curran: Just saw a sandwich tern. You can tell by the beak. Black with a yellow tip. The common tern has a solid yellow beak. They don't usually come this close to the house.

TAY joins CURRAN. They kiss and linger in an embrace.

Tay: You're lucky to have access to so many birds since you like them so much.

Curran: Not really so many of them. These are just coastal birds. I'd like to do some serious bird watching someday. Go on a hunt for the seldom seen: a green-winged teal, a jack snipe, a wood warbler.

Tay: A corncrake?

Curran: Now that would be a feat. They're practically extinct in Ireland.

Tay: And they're notoriously timid.

Curran: (*pleased*) You have been paying attention.

Tay: Why haven't you done any of that serious bird watching?

Curran: I was supposed to do it with my mum. We always talked about doing it when I got older. I got older. She didn't. It seems wrong, now.

CURRAN falls into a sad reverie for a moment.

Curran: Have I told you about the time we saw an albatross?

Tay: No.

Curran: Have you ever seen one?

Tay: Maybe a picture in a book.

Curran: They have the largest wingspan of any bird in existence. Up to twelve feet although most of them never get past six or seven. Do you know how they fly?

Tay: *(smiling at his enthusiasm)* I'm afraid I don't.

CURRAN jumps up on a chair and extends his arms, mimicking the flight of an albatross.

Curran: They have a tendon in each shoulder that locks when their wings are fully extended. Then they rise into the wind and stay there riding the breezes. They can cover almost a thousand miles a day barely moving. Without ever flapping their wings. Dynamic soaring it's called. We saw one on the cliffs. We knew it had to be Albert, this legendary vagrant albatross who got blown off course in the Argentines and ended up in the UK. For years he'd been spotted trying to mate with gannets.

Tay: Gannets?

Curran: Another large seabird. There are lots of colonies of them in The Shetlands.
But, of course, gannets only want other gannets.

Tay: Of course.

Curran: The poor bastard. He was destined to be alone for the rest of his life. He'd never find a mate so far from home.

Tay: That's a heartbreaking story.

CURRAN jumps down from the chair and takes Tay's face tenderly in his hands.

Curran: That bird was the most incredible thing I'd ever seen in my life until I saw you in my bed.

CURRAN suddenly grabs up TAY and swings her around jubilantly. He pops the cork from the bottle of champagne and takes a swig straight from the bottle. He hands it to Tay who does the same.

Curran: It's bloody brilliant! It's the best thing you've ever written. I can't stop thinking about it.

Tay: You really think it's good?

Curran: *(gazing at her with love and awe)* Stop with the humility. You know it's amazing.

TAY smiles at CURRAN then turns away uncomfortably showing to the audience something is wrong. She takes a seat at the table.

Tay: *(subdued)* I'm happy with it.

Curran: What is it? What's wrong?

Tay: I heard back from Dana while you were out. She can't sell it.

Curran: You've got to be fucking kidding me. Can't or won't?

Tay: It doesn't matter.

Curran: She's not God, this woman.

Tay: She's pretty close to it.

Curran: There are other agents.

Tay: I told her I'd look for a new agent and she said to go ahead. She's that confident no one will risk publishing this novel with cancel culture sniffing around it. Half a dozen books were taken off the shelves last year because someone somewhere found something offensive about them, and the houses refused to stand behind their authors.

Curran: Cowards.

Tay: They're not cowards. They're part of a machine that only exists to make money. You may know a lot about books, Curran, but you don't know anything about the publishing industry.

TAY gets up from the table and walks away from CURRAN.

Curran: I know you're not one of the cogs. You're an artist. You don't answer to anyone.

Tay: There's no art anymore; there's only the internet.

Curran: That's it, then? One phone call and it's over? You're going to give up that easily?

CURRAN grabs TAY roughly by the arms. She struggles to break free.

Curran: This is a stunning book. You can't just throw it away. How can you be so cold hearted?

Tay: Let me go! You don't know what I'm feeling! You don't know what it's like to think this was all a waste of time!

Curran: Are you talking about the book or me?

Tay: I'm talking about my life! I'm talking about the book! You! Everything! It doesn't matter. Nothing matters. It's over. Everything's over.

Curran: That's it, then? You're done with me, too?

Tay: You said your father's coming back soon. What did you think we were going to do? Live in your flat? I have to go home. Christmas is coming. I have to see my girls.

TAY breaks free. CURRAN rushes after her and grabs her again.

Tay: You're hurting me.

Curran: Those are your plans, Miz Donovan? Back to the states with you? Book clubs and bake sales? Find yourself a safe old man in a business suit to fuck? Sell your ass to Velvet Rope?

CURRAN throws TAY to the floor but immediately looks repentant. He reaches to help her up but she waves away his hand.

Curran: I'll fix this.

CURRAN slams out the back door leaving TAY on the floor. A car engine is heard over the sound of the birds and the waves along with the sound of tires spitting gravel as the car races away.

Lights shift evoking the passage of day into night. When the cue is finished, we find TAY sitting at the kitchen table in the dark, drinking. A car pulls up outside, jovial voices are heard, and car doors slam rousing Tay from her thoughts. CURRAN enters through the back door with KANE, a polished, attractive, well-dressed young black man around thirty. Curran carries six-packs of beer and grease stained brown bags of fish and chips. He flicks on the lights and is surprised to see Tay.

Curran: What are you doing sitting in the dark?

TAY isn't in any condition to respond right away. She watches CURRAN and KANE move about the kitchen. It's obvious Kane has been here before. He gets himself utensils and a plate and glass. Kane will eat and drink with practiced manners while Curran will gulp his beer from the cans and eat his meal with his hands.

Curran and Kane take seats at the table before either realizes Tay and Kane haven't been introduced. Kane stands and extends a hand to Tay.

Kane: *(in an upper class British accent)* I'm Kane. If I wait for Murphy to introduce us, we'll never meet. The boy has no manners.

Tay: I'm Tay. Nice to meet you. *(Pause.)* Is that Cain like Cain and Abel? Or Cane like candy cane?

Kane: Kane as in a substitution for my real name that Europeans have a dreadful time pronouncing.

Curran: Kane's an immigrant. And an orphan. And a computer genius. His math skills are what got him into college. That's how we met.

Kane: A friend at uni put me in touch with the professor, here, when I needed an English Lit paper. I found him intriguing. I'd never met anyone of our generation so technologically backward.

Tay: *(to Curran)* I guess you are a bit of a technophobe.

Kane: A bit? He has no social media except for the Facebook page he uses to cyber stalk you. He's never taken a selfie. He's afraid of microwaves. He has a CD player . . .

Tay: *(in a whisper)* He has a wind up alarm clock.

KANE laughs. CURRAN scowls. TAY begins to perk up. She helps herself to some fish and chips.

Tay: *(to Kane)* You don't sound Irish.

Kane: I'm not. I'm here on holiday. I have a benefactor who has a second home here. He lets me use it when I feel the need to get away from London.

Curran: Kane read your book.

Tay: My new book? *(giving Curran an incredulous look)* My new unpublished book I haven't given anyone permission to read?

Curran: I sent it to him earlier today after I left here. He's a fast reader.

Kane: I've only read half. It's very good.

Tay: Thank you.

Kane: I don't read a lot of novels, but this one is riveting.

Tay: Thank you, again. Can I ask you something? Do you think the black characters are realistic?

Kane: Why are you asking me specifically about the black characters?

Curran: It's pretty obvious.

Kane: Is it? How would I know if her black characters are realistic? Because I'm black? But I don't know anything about being black in America. I'm Nigerian. And I live in England. I've never even been to America.

Beat.

Kane: (*to Tay*) You probably have more in common with a black American because you're both American than a black American has with an African even though they share the same skin color.

Curran: (*with his mouth full*) Good point.

Kane: The foundations of bigotry are fascinating, don't you think? What makes people decide to shun and abuse other people? It all seems so random to me. For instance, do I have more in common with Murphy than I do with you because — despite our skin colors — we're both men? Or do you and Murphy have more in common because you're both white? (*smiling at Curran*) Or do you and I have more in common because we both know how to use a fork and knife?

Tay: What do you do in London, Kane?

Kane: Live.

Tay: And work?

Kane: Yes, but I could work anywhere.

Tay: What do you do?

Kane: Let's say I employ my computer security related skills and knowledge to creatively overcome the limitations of software systems and networks.

Tay: You're a hacker?

Kane: I work for legitimate companies and individuals.

Curran: But never for anyone who expects him to work in an office or wants to see his face.

Tay: Sounds a little sketchy.

Curran: INTERPOL's not looking for him, if that's what you mean.

Kane: If they were, I assure you they could never find me.

Curran: He's perfect.

Tay: Perfect for what?

Curran: He has no family. No co-workers. He's never been to America. No one's going to recognize him as somebody else. *(Pause.)* Meet the author of your latest novel.

Tay: My novel? I don't understand.

Curran: You say no one will publish the book if it was written by a white author.

Let's see if someone will publish it if it was written by a black one.

TAY takes a beat as she considers the audacity of Curran's suggestion and for a brief second, she also considers the appeal of it.

Tay: Are you out of your mind?

Curran: Isn't there a part of you that would like to see if we could get away with it? To prove the hypocrisy of agents and publishers saying this book isn't worth printing if a white woman wrote it. If a black man wrote it, I guarantee it would be a bestselling sensation.

Tay: But I couldn't expose the hypocrisy so what's the point? I could never publicly admit what I'd done. I'd be crucified.

Kane: *(to Curran)* She's right, you know. We should probably forget the whole thing. *(goading Tay)* I'm sure you'll come up with an idea for a new novel soon. Then all you have to do is write it. I suppose that could take years. Then you have to sell it and even if you do there's no guarantee it will make you a lot of money. Murphy told me your last two books didn't do very well. What a shame you have this fantastic completed novel you can't sell. That no one will ever read.

Tay: We could never get away with it.

Curran: Why not? Why would anyone suspect he didn't write it?

Kane: The bigger the lie, the easier it is to pull off.

Tay: What about Dana? She's read the book.

Curran: So?

Tay: Do you really think she's not going to notice my latest novel has been published under another author's name and not ask me about it?

Curran: What could she do?

Tay: Tell the world, rat me out.

Curran: Why would she do that?

Tay: She has her ethics.

Curran: Ethics? She's an agent. Let her sell it. He's going to need an agent.

TAY gets up from the table overwhelmed by the conversation and unsteady from the drinking.

Tay: Excuse me. I need to use the facilities.

TAY exits.

Curran: What do you think?

Kane: Not bad.

Curran: What do you mean, not bad? She's fuckin' gorgeous. And she's a gorgeous fuck. You have no idea what you're talking about.

Kane: She's old enough to be your mother. It's an acquired taste, I guess.

Curran: Fuck you.

Kane: It is a crazy idea, Murphy.

Curran: So was the wheel. So was flying to the moon.

Kane: You say you're doing this because you love her, but I wonder if your intentions are as pure as all that. It sounds to me like you want to trap her, tie her to you forever with your knowledge of this hoax. Nothing can happen to me if this goes awry. Or you. But her. This can destroy her. Are you sure you're willing to take that risk?

Curran: Nothing's going to happen.

Kane: What if something does?

Curran: I'll take care of her. It won't change anything between us.

Kane: My God, man. You know nothing about women.

Curran: I know something about books.

Kane: The woman *can* write. I'll give her that. If I'm going to do this I'll need a nom de plume.

TAY enters and stands inside the doorway to the kitchen. KANE and CURRAN don't notice her.

Curran: Let's use initials. T for Tay. K for Kane.

Kane: T.K. I like it. What about Black for a last name?

Curran: Too on the nose. What about White?

Kane: Also too obvious. What about Green?

Tay: *(joining the conversation)* For Ireland?

Kane: *(fixing Tay with a dazzling smile)* For money.

Ten-count fade to black.

Act Two

Scene One

The same restaurant where the play began. Some holiday touches should be evident. Christmas Muzak plays in the background. TAY and DANA are lunching in a public place but talking to each other as if they're having a clandestine meeting.

Dana: You're insane. Do you know what would happen if you got caught?

Tay: How would I get caught? No one knows about this book except you and me. No one will have any reason to suspect he didn't write it.

Dana: You really think he can pull it off?

Tay: I don't see why not. He does a great American accent. He's smart. Charming. Good looking. He's not that well read but Curran is a walking Cliff Notes. If Kane has to do an interview, he can wear an earpiece and Curran can help with the answers.

Dana: The old Cyrano de Bergerac ploy.

Tay: And the world will be our Roxane.

Dana: What do you know about this Kane person?

Tay: Not much.

Dana: You can't possibly know much about Curran either if you only spent a few months with him.

Tay: All I need to know about Curran is he's in love with me. Not just me. He's in love with the book. He wants it to have a life.

Dana: Why would you trust these two men with your career? Your entire future?

Tay: There would be no reason for Kane to reveal the truth. He only makes money if people believe he wrote the book.

Dana: People turn on each other for reasons other than money. (*Pause.*) You're okay sharing the money with them?

Tay: 100% of zero is zero. That's what I'll make if I don't do this.

Dana: You know there's no guarantee it will make any money.

Tay: You've read the book. Imagine if a black man wrote it.

DANA takes a moment to consider this.

Dana: If we were exposed, we'd both be ruined.

Tay: Or not. Remember James Frey? Remember Oprah ripping him a new face on her show? Remember the outrage?

Dana: None of us had ever seen a media frenzy like that over a book before.

Brillstein-Grey dropped him. Riverhead canceled his two-book, seven-figure deal.

There was a class action lawsuit against Doubleday from readers claiming they'd been defrauded.

Tay: And his book ended up selling over two million copies. It outsold any other book featured on Oprah's book club, including mine. The scandal helped him. It didn't hurt him.

Dana: This is a different kind of scandal. He made up a story and said it was true. He was a liar. You'll be a liar and a racist.

Tay: I'm not a racist. This is about censorship.

Dana: A privileged white woman using a black man . . .

Tay: (*hotly*) I am not privileged. I grew up poor.

Dana: (*interrupting*) I know, I know. I've said it before and I'll say it again: You still grew up white. I'm sorry, Tay. I think you're out of your mind.

LYNTON THICKE enters carrying several shopping bags. He's a heavyset, effete older man dressed with a flamboyant air who speaks with a trace of a southern drawl.

Dana: (*noticing Lynton*) Don't look now, but I think that's Lynton Thicke.

Tay: Is he coming over?

Dana: Yes. You should say hi. I'll go freshen up. He hates me.

Tay: Why?

Dana: I turned down one of his novels years ago.

Tay: Hasn't every agent turned down one of his novels?

LYNTON makes his way toward TAY as DANA exits.

Lynton: As I live and breathe. Taylor Donovan.

Tay: Lynton Thicke. What are the odds?

Lynton: I was just thinking about you the other day. Where's the next novel? We've been waiting forever.

Tay: It's almost done.

Lynton: Wonderful news. I thought maybe you'd given up. I know it's very tough for writers like you these days.

Tay: Writers like me?

Lynton: A middle-aged, straight, white woman? It's hard to get more irrelevant than that. Unless of course you're a middle-aged, straight, white man.

Tay: And how are you? I read somewhere ThePlotThickens has surpassed even Goodreads and BookBub.

Lynton: Over twelve million users. I have more power now to make or break a writer than I ever had at The Times.

Tay: Don't sell yourself short. You had plenty of power to hurt a writer, even then.

Lynton: Oh, Tay. Are you still holding that grudge? After all the success you've had?

Tay: (*quoting from memory*) There's been a recent appalling trend where major houses are publishing novels written by women who have no talent and look like they've just come off the pole.

Lynton: I can't believe you can still quote it word for word. Blame your publisher. Your first book jacket photo looked like a Cosmo cover.

Tay: You wrote that piece without ever reading the novel.

Lynton: I read it eventually. By then Oprah had come calling and it didn't matter what I said. Haven't I made it up to you? Don't I always rave about your books?

Tay: How's your own writing going?

Lynton: Not well. I've been writing this latest novel for ages. I don't know why I keep at it considering my previous failures. I guess because it's my dream.

Tay: Too bad your dream wasn't to own a stable of race horses.

Lynton: Oh, yes. Mother.

Tay: How is she?

Lynton: Still riding, horses and men. How about you?

Tay: In and out of the saddle.

Lynton: Interesting. Call me sometime. We should have drinks. Maybe I can convince you to give me a teaser about the next novel.

Tay: Maybe.

LYNTON exits. DANA rejoins TAY.

Dana: What did he say?

Tay: He wanted to know when my next novel is coming out.

Dana: What did you tell him?

TAY gives DANA a severe look.

Dana: I know how hard this must be for you.

Tay: No, you don't.

Dana: It's a great novel.

Tay: And it's going to be a major bestseller that makes millions of dollars. I hope it's not going to be too hard on you watching some other agent walk away with that fifteen percent.

Dana: How do you know I won't expose you?

Tay: Why would you? You're still my agent. You still want Taylor Donovan's backlist to sell, and you want her to write more books in the future. Besides, who are you to judge anyone's ethics? You represent Velvet Rope.

Dana: There's nothing unethical about that. Sleazy, maybe.

Tay: You asked me to ghostwrite her memoir which is by definition, lying.

Dana: But it's acceptable, established, contractual lying.

Lights to black on the restaurant.

TAY appears DOWNSTAGE RIGHT in one while DANA appears DOWNSTAGE LEFT in one. Dana takes a phone from her purse and holds it to her ear. A phone rings. Tay answers.

Tay: Hello? Dana?

Dana: That thing we discussed when we were having lunch before the holidays . . .

Tay: Yes?

Dana: I'm in.

Blackout.

Scene Two

Tay's living room from earlier in the play. The boxes have been unpacked long ago. The room is immaculate, comfortable, and modern, completely opposite in look and feel from Curran's house and flat in Ireland. The set should have three distinct areas accented by different lighting where the actors can move to have private conversations with each other. It should be understood by the audience that the other actors on stage don't overhear these exchanges.

It's late summer. The book has been published and is a huge success. CURRAN lies stretched out on the sofa reading a book. He's in a faded white tank top, ripped jeans, and bare feet. TAY and DANA stand DOWN RIGHT next to a wet bar. Dana has come from work in the city and wears a summer power pantsuit. Tay's dressed in a casual summer outfit. Dana has a glass of wine in her hand and is carefully watching Curran.

Tay: He's a person. You look at him like he's a potentially deadly animal. Like I have a wolf or a tiger for a pet.

Dana: He's more canine than feline. Cats do whatever they want. He has a dog-like devotion to you. He followed you home, didn't he? All the way from Ireland. I feel like you could kick him every morning, and he'd still lick your toes at night.

Tay: He's in a terrible mood. Raven's delivering a paper next week at a conference nearby, and I wanted her to spend a few nights with me. I asked him to go to a motel. He blew up.

Dana: Of course he did.

Tay: You think it's wrong of me to want to hide him from my daughter?

Dana: Frankly, yes. You hide him from everyone. Even a dog gets a walk in the park now and then.

The doorbell rings. TAY leaves DANA and crosses STAGE LEFT to greet KANE. He enters with his newfound affluence and celebrity in full display in the way he's dressed and carries himself. He wears expensive sunglasses and jewelry. He hands Tay a bottle of wine and a beautifully wrapped box of artisan chocolates. CURRAN notices the candy but says nothing.

Tay: Right on time. Dinner will be ready soon.

Kane: Do you need any help?

Tay: No but thanks for asking.

Kane: (*glancing at Curran*) I assume the professor hasn't made the same offer. I told you before the boy has no manners.

Tay: He didn't have a mother to teach him any.

Kane: Don't make excuses for him. I lost my mother and father, and I know how to say "please" and "thank you." Although I guess I shouldn't be so hard on him. I lost my parents when I was an adult. I was already formed.

Tay: I'm sorry. About your parents.

Kane: And a sister. I lost my sister, too.

Tay: Can I ask what happened?

Kane: I don't like to talk about it.

Tay: I understand.

Kane: It's one of the things Murphy and I bonded over. Being orphans. Although technically he's what he calls a half-orphan.

Tay: He won't talk to me about his father.

Kane: In America he's what you'd call a mean drunk.

Tay: What would you call him in England?

Kane: An Irishman.

TAY and KANE both glance at the sullen CURRAN and give up on getting any response from him. They cross STAGE RIGHT to the wet bar where DANA acknowledges Kane with an air kiss then moves to a chair where she takes a seat and begins scrolling on her phone. Tay fixes Kane a drink.

Kane: *(continuing his conversation with Tay)* I met the man once. Murphy's father. We were out one night and we literally ran into him coming out of a bar. Murphy was kind. Even offered him money. Then he said something I didn't catch and his father punched him in the face. Knocked him to his knees. That night Murphy told me how he used to fantasize as a child that his father would stumble down to the cliffs by their house and fall into the ocean. He said there were so many times the man would disappear on a bender when he was a boy and he'd walk over to the

cliffs and hope he'd see him bobbing away. Sometimes he even thought about luring him out there and giving him a shove. I told him, why not? You'd never get caught. Even if his body were found, no one would ever be able to prove it was murder.

Tay: That's pretty cold.

Kane: You've never met the man.

Tay: I guess in a way I'm a half orphan, too. My father left when I was very young and we never heard from him again. I don't know if he's dead or alive.

Kane: I wonder how the three of us would've turned out if we'd been able to keep them? If Murphy had been raised by his loving mother who taught him about books and birds? If your father had stayed in your life? If my family hadn't been . . . erased?

TAY and KANE join DANA and CURRAN. Kane sits in the other chair. Curran remains stretched out defiantly on the sofa so there's nowhere for Tay to sit. Rather than make a scene with Curran, she sits on the floor.

Dana: (*reading from her phone*) I can't get enough of these quotes. "Intense emotion, rich pathos." – BookBub. "Sensitive insights and luminous prose." – Chicago Tribune. "A no-holds-barred, page-turning, perfectly crafted thriller." – Lynton Thicke. "What a book." – USA Today. "Relentless in its humanity." – Publisher's Weekly. And the

Times: "T.K. Green's ability to write in a female voice is nothing less than transcendent."

Tay: Transcendent, my ass.

Dana: This is upsetting you.

Tay: Of course it's upsetting me. Those amazing reviews are for my work!

Dana: It was your idea. The whole thing.

Tay: Because you couldn't sell the book.

Dana: No one could have sold it.

Curran: *(breaking his silence)* We don't know that for sure.

TAY, DANA, and KANE all look at CURRAN who doesn't look up from his book.

Kane: *(to Tay)* I understand why you're upset. To think that the same editors who raved about the book and threw tons of money at it would've passed if they knew who really wrote it.

Curran: Dana says they would have passed. We don't know that for sure.

Tay: What's worse is that I was told I'm not allowed to write in a black voice but no one has a problem with T.K. Green writing in a white voice.

Curran: He's been praised for it.

Kane: Or writing in a female voice.

Curran: I hear he's fucking transcendent.

TAY stands up from the floor agitated by Curran's comments. He's trying to get under her skin and he's succeeding.

Curran: *(to Kane)* I noticed Taylor Donovan gave your novel a very nice quote.

Tay: Dana provided that quote on my behalf. I never agreed to do it.

Curran: I suppose if you can't get your name out there as the author of a bestseller, a quote on a bestseller is probably the next best thing. *(to Kane while continuing to ignore Tay)* By the way, congratulations on that interview you did last week. How many listeners does that woman's podcast get? 15 million?

Kane: 15 point 2.

Curran makes a low whistle.

Kane: (*switching to his American T.K. accent*) I have to admit all this media attention has been a lot to handle, but it'll be over soon so I've decided to enjoy it while I can.

Curran: Why will it be over?

Kane: You know how it is for writers. We get some attention when we have a big book but then it goes away until we write the next one.

Curran: Are you writing the next one?

Kane: It's almost finished.

Curran: What's it about?

Kane: I don't like to talk about my work in progress.

Curran: Sure, sure.

Tay: (*shutting them down*) Stop it! (*to Kane*) You're telling people you're writing another book?

Curran: Isn't that what writers do? Write one book after another?

Tay: (*to Dana*) Have you and Kane been discussing a second novel without including the person who will have to write it?

Dana: No. All right, maybe. He is hot right now. This book is a bestseller. His next novel will have momentum.

Tay: And one written by me wouldn't have momentum. Go ahead. Say it. You'd rather I write another T.K. Green novel.

Dana: Tay . . .

TAY rushes away from the others visibly upset and stands alone DOWN LEFT.

CURRAN joins her.

Curran: So T.K.'s writing another book. Good for him.

Tay: Go to hell.

Curran: I think someone's jealous of another writer.

Tay: It's impossible to be jealous of yourself.

Curran: Apparently not.

Tay: There's not going to be another T.K. Green novel. He's going to be a one-book wonder. It's not that unusual.

Curran: True, but most authors have a good reason for why they never got around to writing that next novel. Margaret Mitchell. Hit by a car. Sylvia Plath. Killed herself. John Kennedy Toole. Killed himself before his book was even published.

Tay: Well, T.K.'s going to quietly disappear without dying and without any scandal.

Curran: What if he won't disappear?

Tay: What do you mean?

Curran: Kane's making a lot of money for doing very little, and he's enjoying it. All of it. Not just the money. He likes the attention. He likes talking about your brilliant book using my brilliant words. He's not going to want it to end.

Beat.

Tay: I'm sorry about the Raven thing.

Curran: No, you're not.

Tay: You're the same age.

Curran: This is news to you?

Tay: She wouldn't understand.

Curran: And I do? I understand why you'll fuck me and live with me but you won't be seen with me? I've had enough.

Tay: What do you mean?

Curran: I'm going home.

Tay: To Ireland?

Curran: That's the only home I got.

Tay: You can't.

Curran: You don't want me here. In Ireland it was fine but here I embarrass you. I've known it for a while, but I was hoping it might change.

Tay: You can't leave me now. I have a bad feeling. I'm beginning to think this was all a terrible mistake. I should've never listened to you.

Curran: Listened to me?

Tay: It was your idea. You talked me into it. You told me everything you knew I wanted to hear in order to trap me. You found Kane. You knew this secret would tie us together forever.

Curran: Is that really what you think?

Tay: Yes!

Curran: Good. Because it's true.

Tay: What?

Curran: It was true. Past tense. I would've done anything to keep you. Let you use me or abuse me. I didn't realize there was something worse. You could ignore me.

Tay: I don't ignore you. You've disappeared. You don't belong here. Watching you sitting in this nice house with its nice furniture eating a nice sandwich: it's been like looking at a Matisse with all the color drained from it.

Curran: And this is my fault?

Tay: It's nobody's fault.

Curran: This is how you wanted it. A year ago I thought I was manipulating you. Now I realize you've always been the one in control. (*Pause.*) Good luck with Kane doing his own interviews without me in his ear. He won't be as intelligent and his knowledge of literature and world history will plummet, but no one wants to hear him talk about any of that anyway. He's a cause celebre now. They want to know what rap star designed his hoodie.

Tay: They also want to hear him talk about the issues the novel addresses: teen pregnancy, the divide between rich and poor, racism.

Curran: (*stunned*) You think your book is doing anything to fight those issues? Do you hear yourself? This isn't about activism or art. You did it for the money. And another thing . . .

Beat.

Curran: Fuck racism. I'm so tired of hearing about it. All people are racists. Just to varying degrees. Since the beginning of time tribes of people have enslaved other tribes. But let's not stop at slavery. What about genocide? Everybody knows about Hitler and the Jews but what about the Khmer Rouge wiping out the Cambodians? What about two million Armenians slaughtered in Turkey? Ever hear of the Circassians? Probably not because the Russian Empire exterminated them. Then there's my personal favorite, The Irish Potato Famine. A million Irish starved to death. A million. Dead of starvation while the English continued to take food out of our country to feed their own and fat Americans slept in soft beds at night and turned a blind eye. Can you imagine a worse death than starvation? Do you know how long it takes? Can you imagine watching your children waste away first?

Beat.

Curran: Do you know how Kane's parents died? Have you heard of the Boko Haram?

Tay: (*quietly*) No.

Curran: What about the Chibok schoolgirls kidnapping?

Tay: No. (*defensively*) Don't look at me like that! We can't all be geniuses like you!

Curran: You don't have to be a genius to care about what's going on in the world more than you care about what's going on with the Kardashians.

Beat.

Curran: The Boko Haram are an Islamic insurgent group that's been fighting the Nigerian government for over a decade now, terrorizing the countryside, killing civilians, not only Christians but even other Muslims who aren't pure enough in their eyes. In 2014 they attacked a girls' secondary school in Chibok and kidnapped almost three hundred students who were taking a final exam in physics. Some of them managed to escape but ten years later there's well over a hundred of them still missing. They're presumed dead or sold into sexual slavery. Kane's sister is one of them.

Tay: (*genuinely upset*) I'm sorry. I can't imagine what that must be like for him.

Curran: Oh, wait. It gets better. His parents were some of the more vocal ones standing up against the Boko Haram trying to get the government to do more to find

the girls. One night their home burned down with them in it. At least their bodies were in it. Their heads were found in the trunk of their car.

Beat.

Curran: The human animal is a horrifying creature.

TAY takes a moment to feel for KANE and his family but her own concerns quickly overwhelm her. She lashes out at Curran.

Tay: (*angrily*) So what if that's true? So what if some people are monsters? What are you going to do about it? Your response is to opt out? Shun everyone?

Curran: And yours is to become one of the worst of them? A hypocrite. A liar. A user.

Tay: What's Kane's?

Curran: (*ominously*) Revenge.

CURRAN returns to the others while TAY remains alone DOWN LEFT. Lights dim on Tay showing her isolation. After a beat, lights to black on the set while Tay remains lit.

Tay: *(to the audience)* My mom was a pretty woman who wasn't going to stay pretty for long. She seemed to know this and set about dating with the frantic intensity of a woman grabbing up her most precious belongings as a fire began to rage through her house. I learned from her if a woman wasn't picky she could find an endless supply of men who were willing to spend money on her in exchange for her company. When my own female charms began to develop I refused to adopt this mercenary view of the opposite sex; I wanted to fall in love. So did Bethany and she did at sixteen with a white boy. I was the only one who knew she got pregnant. I was the only one who knew she told him she was having the baby and things turned ugly, and he said he'd kill her before he'd let her spill their interracial secret. I was the only one who knew the night she was murdered she had planned to tell her family, and she was especially afraid of how her father might react. I also knew there had always been a cast iron skillet sitting on her grandmother's stove and now it had gone missing. I didn't say anything to anyone because nobody asked because nobody cared. Rural Pennsylvania in the '80s. They didn't perform an autopsy. There was no DNA testing. She was a poor black girl who'd been found with her head bashed in on the floor of her grandmother's kitchen. They tried to pin it on her father, but he had an alibi. They never knew about the pregnancy or the boyfriend because I kept my mouth shut. He threatened to hurt me and I believed he would. *(Pause.)* I've spent my entire life grappling with my conscience since then. I've told myself it didn't matter that her killer went free; sending him to jail wouldn't have brought her back. But what about justice for her? For her child? From the moment she found out she was pregnant she never wavered in her insistence that she would

have the baby even if she had to do it entirely on her own. I admired her for that.

Unflappable: having or showing calmness in a crisis.

Blackout. Silence. A phone rings repeatedly in the dark. When it's answered, lights up on TAY who stares at it with apprehension before speaking. The disembodied voice of LYNTON THICKE is heard sounding like a bigger than life presence (think the Wizard of Oz.)

Lynton: *(offstage)* Lovely Tay.

Tay: Lyn, how are you?

Lynton: *(offstage)* I'm well. And you?

Tay: I'm great. Just great.

Lynton: *(offstage)* Where's that latest novel of yours? It seems to be taking an awful long time.

Tay: You can't rush genius.

Lynton: *(offstage)* I suppose not. Speaking of genius, T.K. Green was just on Janelle's podcast. Did you catch it?

Tay: No.

Lynton: (*offstage*) I thought you might be following his career. You gave him such a glowing quote. I thought you might even be mentoring him.

Tay: I've never met him. I think he's . . .

Lynton: (*offstage*) Tay, dear. I don't care a whit about T.K. Green or whatever his name is. I want to talk to you because I know you wrote that book.

Blackout.

Immediate restoration of light suddenly revealing LYNTON sitting on a plush settee representing a decadent hotel lobby. TAY sits in a nearby chair.

Lynton: I like to sit in luxurious overpriced hotel lobbies and watch the people come and go and try to figure out if they actually have money or are pretending to have money. (*Beat.*) How are you dealing with it? It must be killing you to see the attention this novel is getting and you can't take any of the credit.

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

Lynton: Come on, Tay. Cut the crap. I've read all your novels multiple times. I've reviewed them. I've blogged about them. I recognized your voice right away. You tried to hide it with your first person narrators, the black girl and the white girl. But it was on full display in the third person narrative told through the broken down cop. Your sensibilities. Your insights. Your turn of phrase. Your way with a metaphor. Your setting: coal town Pennsylvania. And this thing you have about bears.

Tay: Bears?

Lynton: Writers sometimes unconsciously use certain images or symbols over and over again in their work that they're not even aware of. You had a taxidermied bear in one of your earliest novels. You had a child who was obsessed with finding Smoky the Bear and apologizing for starting the fire that burned down his neighbor's house. You had a dog named Bear. You frequently use the expression, "Mama Bear." In this book, one of the girls tells everyone her missing father was murdered by a bear.

TAY says nothing.

Lynton: So you're not going to admit to any of this? Then let me ask you something: can your fake author take a lot of scrutiny? What if people really start digging? The smoking gun kind of digging? Can he produce a birth certificate, a high school diploma, an electric bill? *(Pause.)* I don't want to make you feel bad, Tay. I'm a fan. I

just don't get it. I'm sure most white authors can't write convincing black characters and vice versa. A lot of writers simply aren't very good writers. You've been blessed. You have a gift. Why couldn't that have been enough? Why did you have to try and prove a point no one wants proven? And now that you've proven it, you can't even let anyone know you've done it.

LYNTON sits back, sighing, tired of trying to get a confession out of her.

Lynton: Right now you're trying to think about how you can get rid of me. If you can pay me off? The answer is no. I have plenty of money.

Tay: If any of this was true — and I'm not saying it is — what would I have to do to convince you to keep quiet about it?

Lynton: I want you to write a novel for me. Like you did for T.K. I want you to write a novel I can put my name on.

Tay: Are you crazy?

Lynton: You know I've always wanted to be an author.

Tay: But without doing the work.

Lynton: I've done the work. I've written four novels. They were all bad.

Tay: You can't possibly believe I'll go along with this.

Lynton: I'm not going to presume anything about you. Not after what you've done.

(*Pause.*) Poor Tay. Master fabulist that you are. Let me tell you a story. My mother was a selfish woman, but men never noticed because she was generous with her body. If I had been the son she wanted, the one she thought she deserved — slim, handsome, athletic — I would have been destroyed by her as easily as she destroyed all of them. Instead she hated the sight of me: a fat, effete boy who was afraid of anything with hooves. In a way being like this saved my life, it made her not care about me, it left me to find my own way and it wasn't easy. I can assure you of that. I want to tell this story – my story – but I want to novelize it. I don't want to be shackled to the truth.

Tay: Who does?

Lynton: It should be a sweeping saga that begins at an idyllic horse farm in the deep South. Our hero is a brilliant, misunderstood young man burdened by an irresistible appeal to both men and women alike. He makes his way to New York City to become a writer but is forced to do all kinds of unsavory things in order to survive before he becomes a ruthless publishing mogul who is also beloved.

Tay: Ruthless *and* beloved?

Lynton: Be nice, Tay. You're not taking this seriously.

Tay: Of course not. You want to make a deal with me where I not only write an entire novel for you to claim as your own but you want me to write a bad one?

Lynton: This isn't a deal; it's extortion. And the book won't be bad. You'll see to that. I don't need an answer today. Go home and think it. Just keep in mind, I can be a powerful ally if you give me what I want or I can end you. And it will be the end of you, darling Tay. There will be no getting back on this particular horse. Or pole.

Tay's phone rings. Lights down on LYNTON as TAY moves DOWN CENTER to take the call. Lights up on KANE standing DOWN LEFT with his phone to his ear.

Kane: (*American accent*) Hey, Girl. It's T. K. Why don't you come over tonight and let me show you my crib?

Tay: Is this a business meeting or are you asking me out?

Kane: Baby, I'm asking you in.

Scene Three

TAY and KANE admire a spectacular view of New York City at night from a penthouse apartment. Kane blends in perfectly with the upscale surroundings. Tay wears a little black dress and has an evening bag hanging from her shoulder containing her phone.

Kane: Apparently writers can make a lot of money. When Dana told me she had a client whose flat was empty for the summer I never expected something like this. I'd never heard of the owner.

Tay: He's a crime suspense writer. I know you're not much of a reader. You probably haven't heard of a lot of authors.

Kane: I've been doing my homework. John Grisham, \$400 million. Nora Roberts, \$390 million. Stephen King, \$500 million. J.K. Rowling, a billion.

Tay: So you've studied what's most important about novelists. Their net worth.

Kane: I was surprised to find out the bloke who wrote *Game of Thrones* is only worth \$65 million.

Tay: Yes. Poor George Martin.

Kane: What about you?

Tay: What about me?

Kane: Did you ever live like this?

Tay: Not quite.

Kane: Would you like to?

Tay: I could get used to it.

Kane: What's the professor doing tonight?

Tay: He's on his way back to Ireland.

Kane: I'm surprised he lasted this long. I have to head back across the pond in a few weeks, too, when my visa expires. But I'm returning as soon as I can. I think I might settle in the states.

Tay: And do what?

Kane: Don't worry. I'm not going to ask you to write any more T.K. Green novels. I've come to my own decision to walk away. It's time for me to be Kane again. Time for me to write my own book.

Tay: But you're not a writer.

Kane: I'll get one of those — what are they called? Ghostwriters.

Tay: What will you write about?

Kane: You.

Tay: Me?

Kane: You. How you seduced and slept with a boy half your age. How you couldn't get your novel published. How you came up with this scam. How you used my black ass to sell your white book about black people. How you lied to the world. How you disrespected your own industry. Your own race. All races. This will be much juicier than any novel.

Tay: (*trying to control her panic*) What about your role in all this?

Kane: I was manipulated and misled.

Tay: And Curran?

Kane: He was an innocent pawn. Nothing bad will happen to him.

Tay: But something bad will happen to me. You don't think that will hurt him?

Kane: You said he left. Besides, we all knew you were going to dump him one day and break his heart.

Tay: I don't understand. Even if you disagree with what I've done, I haven't hurt you. I haven't treated you badly. Why would you do this to me? You'll ruin my life. Do you really think I deserve to be destroyed?

Kane: Yes.

Tay: Excuse me.

TAY begins to walk DOWN RIGHT.

Kane: (*calling after her*) If you're thinking of finding a razor in the bathroom and slitting your wrists in the tub, go ahead. It'll make a great last chapter.

Lights fade to half on KANE as TAY walks DOWN RIGHT dialing her phone. She can't seem to catch her breath. She's about to have a full blown panic attack.

A phone rings. It's answered by DANA as she enters STAGE RIGHT.. The scene progresses using a theatrical device that they are on the telephone but literally face to face.

Tay: (*frantically*) Kane just told me he's going to go public about what we're doing. He wants to write a book about it and expose everything.

Dana: I know.

Tay: You know?

Dana: Yes.

Tay: That's all you have to say? Dana, what's going on? Why aren't you freaked out?

Dana: I guess you're going to find out. It might as well be now. I'm going to represent the book.

Tay: What!?

Dana: If I don't sell it, someone else will. I don't want to say I told you so . . .

Tay: But you're culpable, too. You were part of this.

Dana: All the more reason for me to have some control of the content. And to make some money from it. Do you think I'm going to sit back and let some other agent make a commission on a book that's going to ruin me?

Tay: I can't believe you'd do this to me.

Dana: I'm not doing anything to you. Kane is doing this. I'm just trying to make the best of a bad situation.

Tay: Is there anything I can do to make you change your mind?

Dana: Bring me a bigger book.

Blackout on DANA leaving TAY crushed. TAY regroups as lights are restored on KANE and she joins him.

Kane: Are you okay?

Tay: I'm fine. Just a little surprised. You understand.

Kane: Certainly.

Tay: Let me bounce something off you. This scandalous tell-all you want to write; it would probably be a best seller. You'd have your fifteen minutes of fame but that would be it.

Kane: What do you mean?

Tay: I mean you'd be just one more act in the ongoing carnival freak show that is American pop culture. Have you ever heard of John Bobbitt?

Kane: No.

Tay: He was the most famous person in all of America at one time because his wife cut off his penis. He parlayed that notoriety into some money, but that money is long gone and so is his so-called fame. What I'm trying to make you understand is ego wise and money wise, you'd be much better off having a career as a literary superstar. Not only will you have an ongoing source of income with multiple novels to sell but you'll have respect. Your books will be made into films. You'll hang out

with movie stars. People will admire you for your talent. Not gape at you because something stupid happened to you once.

Kane: You said you weren't going to write any more T.K. Green novels.

Tay: That was before. Now I don't really have a choice.

Kane: I appreciate the offer, but I don't think you fully understand what's going on here. I have things to say and I want the world to hear them. Now I have a salacious story to sell that will give me the platform to tell the story that matters.

Tay: The one about your parents. Your sister.

Kane: (*temper rising*) The one about me.

Beat.

Kane:(*adopting his American T.K. accent*) Take off your dress.

Tay: Don't do this.

Kane: You said it before, you don't really have a choice.

Tay: Come on, Kane. You're too slick to use such a predictable plot twist. Make me sleep with you so you'll keep my secret.

Kane: I'm not making you do anything. It's not my fault your other choices have brought you to a place where you don't have any more choices. You feel trapped but you're not. You can leave any time.

Tay: You're disgusting.

TAY takes a moment to make her decision. She takes off her dress and stands before KANE in lingerie. She goes to him and kisses him. He pushes her away.

Kane: (*repulsed*) Who's disgusting? Put your dress back on.

KANE exits. Lights remain on TAY as she gets dressed.

Blackout.

Scene Four

Lights up on Curran's house in Ireland in late summer. The outside is now revealed suggesting a field leading to cliffs plunging into a rough sea below. Shrieking of shore birds and the crash of waves is heard. CURRAN is found alone staring skyward at the birds. TAY joins him and they engage in a comfortable embrace. They've been reunited for several weeks.

Tay: What a gorgeous morning.

Curran: We do get a few good days now and then.

Tay: This land must be valuable. Who wouldn't want to put a vacation home here with this amazing view?

Curran: You're kidding, right? This climate? That coastline? People want their islands to be hot and sunny with white sandy beaches. This is why the Irish have been able to keep Ireland to themselves. We've been invaded by everyone from Barbary Coast pirates, to Vikings, to dot-com billionaires but after the initial

penetration, no one's wanted to stay. They're attracted by the beauty but can't abide the temperament.

Tay: I feel like you're talking about me.

Curran: I think I've proven I can weather the storms.

Tay: So far. But will you be able to in the future?

Curran: What do you mean?

Tay: Would you do anything for me?

Curran: Within reason.

Tay: Within reason? Wow. Things really have changed between us. The boy I met a year ago would've never said that. He would've jumped off the world's highest building if I asked him to.

Curran: I'm not a boy; I'm a man. And aren't you glad I'm not that boy anymore? What good would I be to you splattered on the pavement somewhere?

TAY walks away from CURRAN taking in the stunning view.

Tay: (*enchanted*) This place. It's like the outside world doesn't exist. When I'm here with you I can actually forget about my real life for a while.

Curran: I don't like the sound of that. Where does that leave me? Trapped in your latest work of fiction? (*Beat.*) What's been going on with you these past few days? I can tell something's wrong.

Tay: (*after a moment's hesitation*) I've been putting off telling you this because I didn't want to think about it, but I can't avoid it anymore. It's about Kane and since we're seeing him later today . . .

Curran: What's going on?

Tay: Before I came back to Ireland I saw him in New York. He told me he's going to expose me and the novel. He's going to write his own book, a tell-all.

Curran: (*brushing it off*) He was having you on. I'm sure he didn't mean it.

Tay: He definitely meant it.

Curran: Why would he do something like that? If he exposes you, he exposes himself.

There will be no more T.K. Green, and he likes being T.K.

Tay: He's decided he likes being Kane more. (*Pause.*) I don't know what I'm going to do. I'll never be able to show my face in public again. I'll have to go into hiding.

Curran: You can hide with me.

Tay: My daughters might turn against me.

Curran: Then what kind of daughters are they? Fuck 'em.

Tay: I'll kill myself.

Curran: Don't say that.

Tay: I will. I mean it. I have a bottle of sleeping pills in the house. I'll take the whole bottle. I swear.

Curran: Calm down. I still can't believe this. You tried talking to him?

Tay: It doesn't do any good. His mind's made up.

Curran: Let me talk to him.

Tay: It won't make any difference. The worst part is I'll never write another book as long as I live.

Curran: Why would you say that?

Tay: I'll be a pariah in the literary world. I'll be cancelled. I'll be hated.

Curran: You could still write.

Tay: Curran, please! Do you think I'm going to sit around writing books solely for you to read? Or write under a pen name? Don't you understand? I want to write Taylor Donovan novels. I want to *be* Taylor Donovan again. I want my work to live and breathe, and I want credit for it. I know that's what you want, too.

Curran: I still think I can reason with him.

Tay: Even if he agrees to stay quiet for now we can never trust him again. Unless T.K. Green disappears I'll always be looking over my shoulder.

Curran: What are you saying?

Tay: What do you think I'm saying?

An extremely tense beat.

Curran: (*in complete disbelief*) Are you out of your mind?

Tay: Kane told me you used to fantasize about pushing your father off the cliffs. You said his body would never be found and even if it was, it would look like an accident. Who would report Kane missing? Who would be able to trace him to us?

Curran: You're talking crazy.

Tay: There's nothing else we can do.

Curran: Stop it! You're not going to kill yourself, and we're not going to kill Kane. I'm going to pretend you never said any of this to me.

CURRAN wanders away from TAY deep in thought. TAY watches him closely, gauging his feelings, trying to figure out how far she can push him. She shifts from being calm to suddenly collapsing on the ground in hysterics.

Tay: Then it's over! It's all over! Oh, God.

CURRAN rushes to her and tries to take her in his arms to comfort her. She pushes him away.

Tay: I should throw myself off the cliffs.

Curran: Calm down. Please. We'll figure something out. Just stop this madness.

TAY gives in and lets CURRAN hold her as she cries on his shoulder. She eventually calms down but her grief and desperation is so great Curran begins to reconsider his opinion of Kane. TAY and CURRAN get to their feet.

Curran: I can't believe Kane would do this. (*anger mounting*) What the fuck does he think he's doing? We had an agreement. He gave us his word. Who does he think he is?

Tay: (*regaining her composure*) I'm okay. It's going to be okay.

Curran: (*perplexed*) It is?

Tay: There's another option I've been considering. There are only two ways to get rid of a blackmailer: kill him or confess your crime so he no longer has anything to hold over you. I could go public first. Beat him to the punch.

Curran: Ten seconds ago you were ready to kill yourself rather than let anyone know what you did. Now you want to hold a press conference?

Tay: We did accomplish something amazing. We did prove the hypocrisy of an entire industry, of an entire society. We proved art should be judged on its own merits; the artist should be left out of it. Everywhere present, nowhere seen. Maybe I should take credit for it before Kane gives the world his version that will be skewed and mostly lies. The problem is I don't have an ending yet.

Curran: What do you mean an ending?

Tay: To this story.

Beat.

Tay: You're right. Let's talk to him. See what he has to say for himself. We'll act like nothing's wrong and see what happens. (*strangely calm*) I think I'll make a cake.

Baking relaxes me. I think I'll make a barmbrack.

Blackout. Three beats. Lights restored. TAY stands at the kitchen table in front of a hill of flour surrounded by ingredients needed to make a cake.

Tay: (*talking to herself*) Sugar, butter, the zest of one lemon. (*cracks an egg into the mixture*) One egg. Cinnamon, nutmeg, ground cloves, ginger. Whiskey. (*adds a healthy splash, then another.*) Candied orange peel. (*looking skyward*) I don't have currants so we're using raisins. Forgive me, Grandma.

Tay's phone rings. TAY answers the call and puts LYNTON ON SPEAKER. During the course of the call she will take the dough out of the bowl, put it on the floured tabletop, and vigorously knead, stretch, and punch it mercilessly.

Tay: Hello, Lyn.

Lynton: (*panicked, enraged*) How could you do this to me? Do you think this changes anything?

Tay: I'm sorry, Lyn, but I have no idea what you're talking about.

Lynton: I don't know how you did it, but I know you're behind it.

Tay: Are you talking about those unfortunate photos and those obscene emails? Although I have to say the emails were exceedingly well written.

Lynton: You're a monster!

Tay: Such stunning imagery. And the metaphors . . .

Lynton: You're not going to get away with this!

Tay: But, Lyn . . . little boys, whips and chains. So derivative.

Lynton: This doesn't change anything. I'm going to tell the world what you did!

Tay: I don't think anyone's going to care much about the insane ravings of the pedifile du jour.

Lynton: You did this!

Tay: That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. I know nothing about AI and Deepfakes and hacking into email accounts. I can barely post on Facebook. Ask anyone.

Lynton: (*anger becoming desperation*) Please! Please don't do this!

Tay: I told you I didn't do it, but I may have some idea who did, someone who didn't want the book exposed – at least not by you. But he's not going to talk. I can guarantee that.

Lynton: (*sobbing*) I didn't mean it. I wasn't really going to do it. I've always liked you, Tay. I never wanted to hurt you.

Tay: Yes, you did.

TAY ends the call. She takes a bottle of sleeping pills out of her pocket, empties the pills into a mortar and pestle, crushes them, and adds them to the dough.

Blackout. Three beats. Lights restored. CURRAN and KANE sit at the kitchen table in front of empty plates and mugs of tea. The three of them are drinking whiskey now. TAY refills their glasses. KANE and CURRAN yawn repeatedly. The pills and alcohol are taking effect.

Kane: That was delicious.

Tay: Have another piece. You, too, Curran.

Kane: I couldn't possibly. I'm stuffed.

Tay: I'll make them little pieces. Neither of you got a prize yet.

Kane: I've heard about these barmbracks. Who puts a prize in a cake? Isn't that a choking hazard?

Curran: We Irish like to live dangerously.

TAY moves to the counter where she slices slivers of cake.

Tay: *(to Kane)* I've told Curran what you're planning to do.

Kane: What's that?

Tay: Your plans to ruin me.

Kane: He already knew.

TAY is taken aback but quickly recovers her composure.

Tay: *(to Curran)* That was quite a performance out there.

Curran: I think you gave a bit of a performance, as well.

Tay: What do you mean?

Curran: *(to Kane)* She talked about killing you. Throwing you off the cliffs.

Kane: I'm disappointed in you, Tay. That's pedestrian, predictable. Killing your blackmailer. You can do better than that.

Tay: Did the two of you plan this all along? I hope not. I admire a good plot twist.

Kane: This all started innocently. Curran genuinely wanted to help you get your book published and now . . . he's just seizing on a way to get you back. Permanently.

Tay: (*smiling*) Nothing's permanent. Maybe I'll throw *him* off a cliff.

TAY serves them the cake.

Tay: I think there's something you should know about the book before this all blows up. It's not a novel; it's true. Every word. I'm the white girl. Bethany was my best friend.

Kane: My God. Your best friend was murdered at sixteen?

Curran: And it's true her grandmother did it? A killer granny?

Tay: In real life they never caught Bethany's killer. Pinning it on her grandmother was artistic license on my part. No one knows who did it. But you have to admit you didn't see my ending coming. My murderer was much more interesting than an abusive alcoholic father or a white boy baby daddy.

Kane: Why didn't you write it as a true story?

Tay: That would have meant giving up control. I wanted her story to turn out the way I wanted. I wanted her killer to be caught. I hate ambiguity.

CURRAN takes a bite of cake and pulls a ring from between his lips.

Tay: *(delighted)* A ring. You'll be lucky in love.

TAY gives CURRAN a kiss. They watch as KANE pulls a small slip of cloth from his mouth.

Kane: Ugh. This is disgusting. What is it?

Curran: *(laughing)* It's just a piece of cloth. It won't kill you.

Tay: *(dead serious)* It means you're going to have bad luck.

TAY and KANE lock eyes. She looks triumphant; he shows the first inkling of fear.

Blackout. Three beats. Lights restored. KANE and CURRAN are fast asleep in their chairs. TAY pokes and pinches each one making it clear to the audience that they're both unconscious. She steps back and studies the scene as a director might. Lights slowly fade to black.

Lights restored to a specific area where only Curran and Tay can be seen. The rest of the stage is in darkness. The lighting is not naturalistic as it has been throughout the play. CURRAN is awake sitting on the floor rocking back and forth with his face buried in his hands. A bloody knife lies next to him and there's blood on his clothing. TAY approaches him cautiously like she would a wounded animal. She pries his hands from his face.

Curran: (*hysterical*) He's dead! I killed him! I must have done it but I don't remember anything.

Tay: You don't remember anything at all?

Curran: I woke up on the floor and had a knife in my hand. And he was laying there. And I'm covered in blood . . .

CURRAN breaks into sobs. TAY remains eerily calm.

Tay: The two of you got into a fight. You decided you couldn't let him expose me after all. You went crazy and grabbed a knife. You did it for me. To save me. Because you love me.

Curran: No, no! I couldn't have done that! Why don't I remember?

Tay: You're in shock.

Curran: You have to help me.

Tay: Of course I'm going to help you.

Curran: Remember what you said before? No one will report him missing. No one even knows he's here. We can throw him off the cliffs. He'll never be found.

TAY stands and walks away from CURRAN. She picks up her phone as if about to make a call.

Tay: Don't worry. I'll take care of everything.

Blackout.

Scene Five

The original set from the top of the play. TAY and DANA are having lunch at the same restaurant where they met almost two years earlier when Dana told Tay she couldn't sell her latest novel. There's an air of wealth and contentment about Tay. A champagne bottle in an ice bucket and two flutes sit on the table.

Dana: Are we jinxing things by drinking champagne already? There's still one more week before the official release date.

Tay: I don't believe in jinxes. I believe we make our own luck.

Dana: Is this the same woman I had lunch with almost two years ago who was sure her career was over?

Tay: It is that same woman and that same woman turned her luck around.

Dana: You definitely did. This book is a monster bestseller and it hasn't even been published yet. I've never read anything like it.

Tay: Nobody has.

Dana: I know you had to get in front of the story that was going to come out, but it was still brave of you to expose everything. It gives the book such power. It's so raw. I think most people will be on your side.

Tay: There shouldn't be sides.

Dana: There will be sides. Interesting, isn't it? If Kane had written his book it would've destroyed you. You would've been the villain in the story. You reveal the exact same information in your book, and you're a kind of hero.

Tay: It's called controlling the narrative.

TAY and DANA clink their glasses in a toast.

Dana: Some people are going to say you planned this from the beginning. You knew all along you were going to reveal you wrote the novel.

Tay: Maybe. But they can't possibly think I knew everything that was going to happen.

Dana: No! Definitely not. It is tragic your good fortune had to come at the expense of Kane and Curran.

Tay: But it was sort of inevitable. Wasn't it?

Dana: What do you mean?

DANA stares with encroaching fear at this woman she thought she knew but is now wondering if she ever did.

Dana: *(becoming alarmed)* What was inevitable? Murder?

Tay: Not necessarily but did they really think I'd let them choose my ending? *(with a shrug)* Men.

TAY stands and walks DOWN CENTER into a spot light while lights slowly fade to black on the restaurant.

Tay: *(to the audience)* My mother had a harder time dealing with Bethany's death than I did. She wouldn't let me go out at night for months after it happened believing there was a crazy man running around preying on teenage girls. My mom was considered a loose woman, but she had a prudish side, too. She would've lost her mind if she knew I had read books like *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*. The sex wouldn't

have bothered her as much as the violence. She didn't care if I knew about violence against men. It was portrayed in books and TV shows as straightforward and sensible: barroom brawls, alley way gang fights, soldiers shooting soldiers, cops shooting bad guys. But brutality against women was something altogether different; it was blood-soaked and carnal and usually for no good reason. Bethany and I never cared that she was black and I was white and as we grew older we began to understand why. We were connected by something that went deeper than race; we were both doomed to be women. (*Pause.*) Her father had nothing to do with her death. He wasn't even alive when it happened. A drunk driving accident. She was never pregnant at sixteen. That was me. There was never a boyfriend who abandoned her and treated her like dirt. That was me, too. I ended up having an abortion. (*Pause.*) The last time I saw her was in her grandma's kitchen late at night. I had just found out what was going on behind my back. I asked her how she could betray me like this. I knew how he could do it. He was a boy; a man in the making. They knew nothing about fidelity and trust. They only cared about themselves. But she was my friend, my sister. I reminded her how close we'd been, how we saw the world the same way, how we cherished the same books. Her answer could have been shrugged off as nothing more than a childish taunt, but I knew the true meaning behind her words. I knew what they said about me, about her, about him, about the world I had to live in. That's why I picked up the cast iron skillet from the stove. I had to use both hands. I can still feel the surprising weight of it. She said, "He likes me best."

Beat.

Curran likes me best.

Beat.

I will miss him. I will miss that magnificent albatross of a boy who lost any chance at love because he was blown off course. I will miss his foul mouth, his young smell, his keen, wasted intellect, his fiery adoration of me. I will miss that he understood me on a level no one else ever has. He knows me well; but not well enough. *(Pause.)*

There's going to be a trial. He'll be convicted. There will be scandal and scorn. There will be people who will condemn me for my role in all this and others who will stand by me, legions of strangers who won't be able to get enough of our story, none of them able to decide if they should be outraged, repulsed, envious, thrilled, or possibly awed by me.

TAY takes two steps UPSTAGE as if to leave then reconsiders. She stops her exit and returns to the light.

Tay: I made two calls the day he murdered Kane. The first was to the police. The second was to my agent.

TAY stares down the audience.

Tay: I don't care what you think about me as long as you buy the book.

Hold tight on TAY for a beat or two. Blackout.

Curtain.