

(DRAFT: 04 Jul 2021)

Brute Farce

A play in two acts

By Craig Houk



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CHARACTERS

Alistair McHugh	An Exacting Theater Critic
Killian Black	A Disgruntled Actor
Deirdre Shepherd	A Hardened Stage Manager
Reggie Brimble	A Precocious Stagehand
Fiona Bainbridge	An Absent-Minded Actress
Vivian Pruitt	An Egocentric Actress
Quinn Ponsonby	A Cynical Actor

CASTING NOTES: The actors playing Alistair and Quinn should if possible be similar in stature. Reggie can be played by any gender (any needed pronoun changes in the script are pre-approved). Racially diverse casting strongly encouraged.

LOCATION

A careworn, scarcely professional, Provincial Theatre in England.

SETTING

A cramped and unkempt Trap Room which has been converted into a crude Dressing Room. A concrete or brick tile floor, wooden posts & beams, and a concrete block or brick wall. Two sets of stairs rise upwards, one situated stage left and the other stage right. Various items from previous theatrical productions are being stored here but are tucked out of the way.

Above the Trap Room is the Stage. On the Stage sits a posh 1920s Study, which serves as the set for the play within. Imposing double doors, a sizeable desk, a built-in library bookcase, a large window with opulent drapery, an ornate rug, and a closet. A trap door on the floor opens into the Trap Room below.

Reggie's Workstation and Deirdre's Stage Manager Station are visible in the wings on opposite sides of the Study.

TIME

Present

ACT 1**Scene 1**

(Lights up on the Trap Room. Alistair is stretched out on the floor. He has just regained consciousness. He moans, looks about, and tries to take in the space. He then slowly rises to his feet. Once upright, he attempts to move forward, but quickly realizes that he's been bound by chains. He inspects the restraints. Killian enters with a horseman's pick. He is in costume and is ready for the impending performance. He strikes Alistair over the head with the knob of the pick. Alistair collapses.)

KILLIAN

We're not ready for you.

(Deirdre enters.)

DEIRDRE

House opens in thirty minutes, Killian.

(Referring to the horseman's pick.)

And bring that with you. We'll need it for fight call, won't we love?

KILLIAN

Has Vivian arrived?

DEIRDRE

She's in hair and makeup. Do you know she's gone through three stylists since we've started the run? And Quinn phoned to say he'll be late. Again. Fiona just got here. She's in the loo.

KILLIAN

Is she stoned?

DEIRDRE

Not this time, no.

KILLIAN

Good to hear.

DEIRDRE

She's coked up.

KILLIAN

Coked up!?

DEIRDRE

Well, I can only assume it's cocaine. I mean, I'm no expert. Perhaps I'll take an occasional nip from the bottle of Macallan's that I keep at my station, but otherwise I most assuredly wouldn't know the difference between nose candy and nose drops.

KILLIAN

Bloody hell.

DEIRDRE

Relax. I went through her things and got rid of anything that looked remotely suspicious, including some prescription pills.

KILLIAN

Well, she may need those.

DEIRDRE

Oh, I don't know. Might be interesting to see how it affects her performance without them.

KILLIAN

I expect it could only be an improvement.

(Alistair stirs. Deirdre kicks him.)

DEIRDRE

That's enough out of you.

(She checks the time.)

Okay. Make that twenty-eight minutes before we open the house. Fight call at a quarter past.

KILLIAN

Thank you, Deirdre.

(Deirdre exits. Reggie enters carrying a wooden panel on which are mounted a line of colored light bulbs, and below that a line of clear light bulbs, and next to the collection of bulbs, a

small buzzer. Loose wires hang from the back of it.)

REGGIE

(Referring to Alistair.)

He's still here?

KILLIAN

Well, of course he's still here. Why wouldn't he be?

REGGIE

I was thinking maybe you'd come to your senses by now.

KILLIAN

Never mind that. What have you got there?

REGGIE

Deirdre asked me to install it.

KILLIAN

All right, but what is it?

REGGIE

Well, since we're holding this bloke hostage under the stage, I needed to find another way to let the actors know when they're due their entrances. I mean look, I can't be running back and forth between here and up there as well as managing the props and moving the furniture, now can I?

KILLIAN

So?

REGGIE

So, after I get this panel wired and mounted, we'll test the system.

KILLIAN

Which is?

REGGIE

Right. Well, about one minute before any of you are due to be onstage, you'll hear a buzzing sound followed by one of these bulbs lighting up. Each color represents a different actor. The line of clear bulbs below the colored ones will remind you what scene you're in.

KILLIAN

I see. Quick question.

REGGIE

Mm hm?

KILLIAN

Wouldn't it be a whole lot simpler if you just shot us a text on our mobiles?

REGGIE

It would be, yes.

KILLIAN

So, then why are we not doing that?

REGGIE

There's no service down here.

KILLIAN

Oh, for fucksake. All right then. And which colors have you assigned to whom?

REGGIE

I haven't. I thought maybe you could sort that out amongst yourselves.

KILLIAN

More than half of us is incapable of sorting our own knickers. Just assign the colors. All right?

REGGIE

Certainly. Okay. You...

KILLIAN

Killian.

REGGIE

Right. Mr. Black. You will be blue.

KILLIAN

Fine. Mr. Black is blue.

REGGIE

Miss Pruitt will be red, Miss Bainsbridge will be green, and Mr. Ponsonby will be yellow. Have I missed anyone?

KILLIAN

No, Reggie. You haven't missed anyone. There are four actors in this production. There have always been four actors in this production. And that's been the case since when we started rehearsals three months ago. And even on opening night last weekend. And it's all due to the simple fact that there are four characters identified in the script.

REGGIE

I never understood why they didn't bother to hire understudies.

KILLIAN

Any proposed budget for understudies was immediately sucked up by Vivian's demands for a higher salary.

(Beat.)

All right. Just so I have this in order. I'm blue, Vivian's red, Fiona is green, and Quinn is yellow.

REGGIE

I'm more familiar with your surnames.

KILLIAN

Oh, for fucksake. Black - blue, Pruitt - red, Bainbridge - green, Ponsonby - yellow.

REGGIE

I should write that down. I'll grab a pen and paper after I've put this up.

(A trapdoor above them drops open, startling Killian.)

I'll need to fix that as well.

KILLIAN

I should think so.

(Reggie installs the panel during the following. Fiona enters carrying a garment bag, a makeup case, and a handbag. She is not yet in costume.)

FIONA

Good evening everyone.

(She settles somewhere and begins to unpack her things.)

REGGIE

Hallo, Miss Bainbridge.

KILLIAN

(Flatly.)

Fiona.

FIONA

I've had better days, thank you both for asking.

REGGIE

Is she all right?

KILLIAN

Not likely.

FIONA

This morning I awoke to the smell of smoke, only to discover that my bed had been set on fire.

KILLIAN

On fire!?

FIONA

Well, I wasn't in it at the time.

REGGIE

Well, that's lucky.

FIONA

The man I brought home last night was.

KILLIAN

Oh, dear God.

FIONA

Oh, he's fine. Just a minor first-degree burn on his backside. We'd lit some candles late in the evening for some ambiance and then fell asleep after a massive shag. I must've gotten up at some point, perhaps to get a glass of wine, who knows really. Except then I woke up on the floor several feet from the bed in a cloud of smoke and to the smell of burning flesh.

(Beat.)

Has someone been going through my things?

KILLIAN

Why do you ask?

FIONA

There are some items that have gone missing.

KILLIAN

Like what?

FIONA

I'm not sure that's any of your business, Killian.

KILLIAN

Well then, I suppose I'm in no position to assist.

FIONA

I suppose not.

(She spots Alistair.)

And who do we have here?

REGGIE

That's Mr. McHugh.

FIONA

Who?

KILLIAN

Oh, for fucksake, Fiona. Alistair McHugh.

FIONA

The theater critic?

REGGIE

From the Daily Telegraph.

FIONA

Well, what's he doing here? And why is he being restrained?

KILLIAN

Are you...? Have you gone completely...? I mean honestly, Fiona, just the other day, we spent hours discussing this.

FIONA

Did we?

KILLIAN

Yeesss. Never mind. I will go over it again.

(During the following, Fiona begins to powder her face, and then happily discovers that she has replaced the face powder with cocaine. She discreetly sets up several lines to snort.)

You see, this mustachioed Billy no-mates right here is, without equal, the single largest threat to the sustained existence of the whole Actors' Guild of Great Britain. He has been relentless in his efforts to undermine and, at times, completely shut down any production that doesn't suit his impossible standards. And he's been particularly vicious as it relates to various actors in those productions, repeatedly castigating them in his reviews, and thereby ultimately putting an end to their stage careers. And because of that, we all agreed - I know you agreed, Fiona, because you were in the room when it was all decided - we all agreed that this bastard right here is finally going to get his comeuppance!

(Deirdre enters.)

DEIRDRE

Five minutes to fight call.

ALL

Thank you, five to fight call!

(Deirdre starts off.)

KILLIAN

Wait. Where's Quinn?

DEIRDRE

I've already told you. He's phoned to say he'll be late.

KILLIAN

Well, we can't have fight call without Quinn, now can we.

DEIRDRE

Oh, I don't know. I wouldn't mind watching you thump yourself for a change.

(Deirdre takes the horseman's pick from Killian and exits. Vivian enters. She is fresh from hair and makeup and is in

full costume. She carries a bag or purse.)

VIVIAN

This place is filthy.

(She spots Alistair.)

Oh God. So, we're actually going through with it, are we?

KILLIAN

Yeeeeeeesssssss!!!

VIVIAN

You seem on the fence, darling.

REGGIE

I promise you, he's not.

VIVIAN

You know, it took me forever to find my way down here. I'm not certain I'll be able to find my way back.

KILLIAN

Oh, for fucksake, Vivian. It's just a single flight of stairs. I need all of us together in the same location.

(Referring to Alistair.)

We need to keep a close watch over him at all times. And since the green room is currently being occupied by a feral cat and her filthy kittens, this is the only option available to us. Do you understand? I mean honestly, were any of you listening when we decided all this just a few days ago?

VIVIAN

I get paid to talk, darling, not to listen. And I'll have you know that my being compelled to wait my time out in this bedraggled den of ineptitude is in direct violation of my contract, which clearly states that I am to have my own dressing room with swift and unobstructed access to the stage.

REGGIE

Not to mention your own bathroom to include toilet paper that matches your complexion.

(Fiona guffaws, blowing coke powder into the air.)

VIVIAN

And speaking of complexions. Fiona, darling, you should really be using a darker shade of powder. Whatever that is, it's far too pale for your skin.

(Fiona's head falls to her makeshift dressing table.)

KILLIAN

Oh, for fucksake.

(He crosses to Fiona.)

Fiona? Fiona!

(He lifts Fiona's head and checks for a pulse. He lowers her head.)

VIVIAN

Is she...?

(Deirdre enters.)

DEIRDRE

Quinn's arrived.

ALL

Thank you, Quinn!

DEIRDRE

What's happened with Fiona?

VIVIAN

She's expired.

DEIRDRE

What!?

REGGIE

She's pegged out.

KILLIAN

No. No. No, no, no. She is not dead.

REGGIE

Well, she's not moving, now is she?

KILLIAN

She's breathing.

VIVIAN

Then what's the matter with her?

KILLIAN

(Killian moves closer to Fiona.)

She's... Well, it appears that she's...

DEIRDRE

She's what, Killian?

KILLIAN

She's asleep.

DEIRDRE

Asleep?

KILLIAN

Yes.

REGGIE

Hardly seems possible considering the amount of blow she's done.

KILLIAN

(He turns to Deirdre, accusingly.)

Deirdre?

DEIRDRE

What? What have I done?

KILLIAN

Fiona's prescription pills.

DEIRDRE

What about them?

KILLIAN

Where are they?

DEIRDRE

I've thrown them out.

KILLIAN

Can you get them?

DEIRDRE

Perhaps I misspoke. What I meant to say was that I flushed them.

KILLIAN

You flushed...? Do you really think that was...? I mean, are you intentionally trying to...? Never mind. Listen, do you at least remember what they were for?

DEIRDRE

No. No wait, yes. Yes, I do remember. Er um... one of them was for anxiety and the other for psychosis; I know this because most actors are on those. There was a third one, though. Sodium something. Sodium... Ox bite. Or maybe Ox bait.

REGGIE

Sodium Oxybate.

DEIRDRE

Isn't that what I just said, love?

REGGIE

It's nearly what you just said.

DEIRDRE

Well, I said "Ox bait", didn't I, love?

REGGIE

Correct. But that's incorrect. Because the word is ox-y-bate. Three syllables, not two. One word, not two. And it's got nothing to do with an ox.

VIVIAN

Sounds a bit like a tomato/tomato [to-may-to/to-maw-to] thing to me.

REGGIE

No, it's not like that at all.

KILLIAN

I couldn't care less how it's spelled, or how it's pronounced, or whether it's got two syllables or three. I just want to know what the fuck it means.

REGGIE

She's got narcolepsy.

KILLIAN

(Quietly, agitated.)

Oh God no.

(Fiona's head pops up.)

FIONA

...Except then I woke up on the floor several feet from the bed in a cloud of smoke and to the smell of burning flesh.

(Quinn enters with the horseman's pick. He is already in costume. He does not notice Alistair.)

QUINN

Can anyone here perchance explain to me why I've been standing all alone on an empty stage holding on to this for the past five minutes?

VIVIAN

(To Quinn.)

Have you been drinking, darling?

DEIRDRE

(She checks the time.)

Fight call.

ALL

Thank you, fight call!

KILLIAN

What about Fiona?

FIONA

What about me?

DEIRDRE

I'll deal with her presently. In the meantime, I need you and Quinn onstage for fight call.

KILLIAN

Well, we can't just...

DEIRDRE

...I'll deal with Fiona, okay? And I need Reggie -

(To Reggie.)

Reggie?

REGGIE

Yes?

DEIRDRE

(Referring to the panel.)

Have you finished with that, love?

REGGIE

Just.

DEIRDRE

Good. Now I need you to go and set up for act one, scene one.

REGGIE

Straight away.

(Reggie exits.)

DEIRDRE

Right. Okay everyone. Ten minutes 'til house open.

ALL

Thank you, ten 'til house open!

DEIRDRE

Quinn and Killian follow me. Fiona and Vivian make yourselves comfortable. And keep a close eye on him.

(Deirdre, Killian, and Quinn exit. Fiona freshens up, fixes her makeup, and, in due course, gets into costume. Vivian tries to settle in, but the place is filthy, so it'll be a challenge. Alistair regained consciousness during the previous but has remained silent until now.)

ALISTAIR

I'm a theater critic who lives for bad theater. What can I say? It's my one weakness.

VIVIAN

Is he permitted to speak? Are you permitted to speak?

ALISTAIR

I exist because there are actors out there who are profoundly self-aware and who are grateful to hear the truth. And I persist because there are actors out there - like you lot for example - who take me too seriously when you shouldn't.

VIVIAN

Oh, is that a fact? Do you know, mental institutions are full to the gills with actors who have taken critics seriously?

ALISTAIR

On behalf of reviewers all over the globe, I'm honored. But you exaggerate. And so, what? So, a trifling few of my criticisms have been a smidge unflattering at times.

VIVIAN

A smidge!?! A smidge!?! Do you have any idea the damage you've done?

ALISTAIR

Damage?

VIVIAN

Yes. I mean, take poor, daft Fiona here for example.

(To Fiona.)

Fiona, darling, what vice is it this week?

FIONA

I've no idea what you mean?

(Her head drops to the table.)

VIVIAN

(To Alistair.)

You see? She's been reduced to a hopeless, hackneyed, slavering nitwit.

FIONA

(Her head pops up again.)

That's a bit hurtful, isn't it?

ALISTAIR

(To Fiona.)

Only a smidge.

VIVIAN

(To Fiona.)

Well, it's not your fault, darling. It's not your fault.

FIONA

I suppose not, but whose fault is it then?

ALISTAIR

I expect I'm the culprit.

VIVIAN

Indeed, you are, Mr. McHugh. Indeed, you are. You're like the living, breathing, looming Brexit of the theater world. And none of us are likely to survive the next decade intact.

ALISTAIR

And what are your plans for me if I may so inquire?

FIONA

That's a terrific question. I'd like to know as well.

VIVIAN

Well, If I'm to be honest, I have no idea as to our plans for you. Admittedly, I got a bit weary nearly five minutes into the conversation. I mean, Killian is quite famous for droning on and on without ever really coming to the point. Or perhaps he does come to the point and it's just that by the time he gets there, everyone's lost interest.

FIONA

And he's generally like that offstage as well, isn't he?

VIVIAN

Well, what difference does it make anyway? We've come this far now, haven't we? We can scarcely turn back. And I'm sure whatever Killian has planned for you will be appropriate.

ALISTAIR

Appropriate to what?

VIVIAN

To your aggressions, Mr. McHugh. Your reviews are unreasonably harsh. And I'll accept that though it is the responsibility of theater critic to be critical, it doesn't mean that the critic should take pleasure in being cruel.

ALISTAIR

I don't take pleasure in being cruel. It's simply a by-product of years and years of exposure to dreadful scripts, second-rate productions, and vomit-inducing performances.

FIONA

He's been particularly harsh with you, hasn't he, Vivian?

VIVIAN

He has indeed.

FIONA

I'm honestly surprised you're still able to find work. And in fact, I was shocked to see your name on the casting announcement.

VIVIAN

What an awful thing to say.

FIONA

Well, it wasn't meant to be.

VIVIAN

I'll have you know, there isn't a single director or producer in the whole of England who wouldn't kill for the chance to work with me. And at least I'm not compelled to go horizontal for the privilege.

(Vivian stares hard at Fiona before finally pulling a piece of paper from her bag or purse. She unfolds it and hands it to Alistair.)

Read that.

ALISTAIR

(He squints.)

I would, except I can hardly make it out.

FIONA

Oh dear. Well, I've a pair of reading glasses right here.

(Fiona retrieves a pair of bejeweled glasses and places them on Alistair's face.)

Better?

ALISTAIR

I suppose. Except the words are all smudged. Almost as if someone had been crying into them.

VIVIAN

(She pulls the paper from Alistair's hands.)

It's the review you wrote about my performance as Rosalind in *As You Like It*.

ALISTAIR

Well, I can't read it, not in that condition.

FIONA

Not to worry. I've got a copy of it here.

(Fiona pulls a framed copy of the review out of her bag.)

VIVIAN

You've framed it!?

FIONA

Well, it's practically a work of art, isn't it?

VIVIAN

Hand it over.

(Before Fiona can, Vivian seizes it and looks at it in disgust.)

Unbelievable.

(She passes it to Alistair. He looks at it admiringly.)

Well, go on. Read it.

FIONA

I've highlighted in yellow the bits about Vivian.

VIVIAN

(To Fiona.)

I'll deal with you later, darling.

(To Alistair.)

Go on.

ALISTAIR

(He squints a bit more and is hesitant to read. He clears his throat and presses on.)

Vivian Pruitt, as heroine and protagonist, Rosalind, seemed rather long in the tooth as she grappled with a role typically reserved for an actress whose face hasn't yet been narrowed beyond recognition. Miss Pruitt's advanced years only became more apparent when she endeavored to disguise herself as the meant to be young and handsome, Ganymede. Was it her decision to go minimalistic with the foundation and blush or was it simply the aftermath of an embittered makeup designer out for revenge? To her credit, nonetheless, Miss Pruitt successfully tapped into her inherent masculine qualities in a manner that will most assuredly win her the coveted role of Brutus in the National Theatre's upcoming winter production of Julius Caesar. "But what of her actual performance?" one might ask. It was, in a word, noticeable. As noticeable as a ring bearer toddler, shuffling down the church nave and pinching his willy determined to get to the altar without wetting himself.

(Reggie's arm reaches down from above and pulls the trapdoor closed. Quinn enters holding a sack and a length of rope. He is followed by Killian who carries the horseman's pick.)

QUINN

You nearly put an end to me this time 'round, do you know that? I mean, you can't just go changing things. We've been blocking this fight for weeks and just when we've mastered it, suddenly I've got you coming at me from the wrong direction. You nearly took my head off. And I can hardly see a thing as it is with this sack over my head.

KILLIAN

I'm sorry, Quinn. I was trying something different.

QUINN

You were trying something different? Like what? Decapitating one of your castmates? That would be different, wouldn't it?

KILLIAN

You're overreacting.

QUINN

Am I?

KILLIAN

Well, it's certainly nothing to lose your head over.

QUINN

Oh, I see. This is funny to you, is it?

KILLIAN

It's becoming less so the more you go on about it.

QUINN

You know, you should count yourself fortunate you haven't yet been excommunicated from the actors' union.

KILLIAN

Oh, is that right?

QUINN

Yes. I mean, are you really that out of touch, Killian? Are you so full of yourself that you actually have no notion of the magnitude of your insidious misconduct?

FIONA

Listen, perhaps we should..

VIVIAN

(To Fiona.)

Hush. It's about to get good.

(Deirdre enters.)

DEIRDRE

House is open!

ALL

Thank you, house open!

FIONA

Haven't we already had 'house open'?

DEIRDRE

That was the ten-minute warning, love.

FIONA

Was it?

DEIRDRE

I ought to know, oughtn't I?

(Fiona's head falls to the table.)

KILLIAN

Oh, for...!

(To Deirdre.)

Did you or did you not say that you were going to take care of that?

DEIRDRE

I did.

KILLIAN

And?

DEIRDRE

I did not.

(To everyone.)

Oh, and by the way, my bottle of Macallan's has gone missing. I don't suppose any of you lot has taken it.

(All are silent, except Quinn who lets out a belch.)

No? All right then.

(Deirdre exits. Reggie enters and spots the horseman's pick, still in Killian's hand.)

REGGIE

There it is. I've been looking all over for that.

(Reggie takes the horseman's pick from Killian.)

And I'll need those as well.

(He takes the sack and length of rope from Quinn. He exits.)

QUINN

Where was I?

VIVIAN

You were just about to share with us the titillating details of Killian's reprehensible conduct.

KILLIAN

Oh, yes. Full steam ahead, Quinn. We're all waiting with bated breath.

QUINN

Your reputation precedes you, Killian. Countless claims of unprincipled behavior, mostly concerning considerable transgressions as it relates to the fairer sex.

VIVIAN

What you mean to say is, he's molested nearly every woman he's been on stage with.

QUINN

That's precisely what I mean to say.

VIVIAN

Well, the role does call for a sadistic, predatorial, paranoid narcissist, so I might agree that Killian was the only suitable choice. Except that he's an actual danger to women!

KILLIAN

Not to worry, Vivian. Both you and Fiona are quite safe.

(Fiona's head pops up.)

VIVIAN

And what pray tell do you mean by that?

KILLIAN

Not. My. Type.

(Fiona rises, crosses to Killian, and slaps him across the face. Killian scarcely balks.)

Is that all you can muster?

(Fiona punches Killian between the eyes. Killian yelps and stumbles back. Alistair laughs. They all turn to him.)

QUINN

Alistair McHugh? What's he doing here?

KILLIAN

(Pinching his nose with a handkerchief.)

You can't be serious! Is there not one person in this room who's at all listened to a word I've said!? Is there no one here who remembers what we agreed upon!?

ALISTAIR

Well, I know I wasn't privy to those conversations.

(Killian moves pointedly to Alistair.)

KILLIAN

No. No you weren't, were you?

(Reggie enters.)

REGGIE

Well, from what I can recall of the plan, Mr. McHugh will have gone belly up by the end of act one, scene two.

ALISTAIR

Beg pardon.

REGGIE

You'll have carked it. Taken a dirt nap. Assumed room temperature.

ALISTAIR

Yes, all right! I get it!

REGGIE

I'll be off then.

(Reggie exits.)

ALISTAIR

(To Killian.)

You mean to have me killed!? Is that your plan then? That seems a bit drastic, doesn't it?

FIONA

It does, doesn't it?

VIVIAN

(Overlapping Fiona.)

I did not agree to that, darling.

QUINN

(Overlapping Vivian.)

I need a drink.

(Quinn plucks a bottle of Macallan's from his coat jacket. He opens it and drinks from it. During the following, he will pull the bottle out occasionally for a drink.)

KILLIAN

Enough! Not another word! From anyone! Now listen to me. Very carefully. We need to face facts. We are all of us nearing the end of our theatrical careers. And indeed, some of us have already surpassed our expiry date. And surely none of you - and let's be honest with ourselves here - not one of you could possibly be ignorant to that indisputable truth. I mean, we can all certainly pretend that there might be - hidden somewhere in the splintered cracks of the deeply worn floorboards upon which we have tread many times over - a tinder of hope for a reignited career; for a final chance to shine; for an opportunity to go out on top. But it's only just that... pretend. Otherwise, we're just putting off the inevitable, aren't we? So, this is it, folks. This is our time. As a collective. This is how we're all going out. We will make our way to the stage, and we will put in the best performances of our lives. And by the end of act one, scene two, this bloated twat right here will have met his untimely demise.

(The buzzer on the wooden panel goes off. Vivian bellows. Quinn belches. Fiona's head falls to the table. Alistair and Killian look to the panel. The colored bulbs light up slowly and in sequence followed by the clear bulbs.)

QUINN

What the hell is that?

KILLIAN

(Quietly to himself.)

Oh, dear God.

(Dreading the explanation.)

That apparatus there will serve as an electronic cue caller.

QUINN

Sorry, what?

KILLIAN

Yes. Since Reggie is sadly unable to be in two locations simultaneously, and since Deirdre is compelled to work without an ASM due to budgetary restrictions, the pair of them decided to find another way to give the actors their entrance cues.

VIVIAN

And this is what their collective brains have come up with, darling?

KILLIAN

Yes.

VIVIAN

Well, how does it work?

KILLIAN

Well, if memory serves, each of the colored bulbs represents one of the four actors. The clear bulbs below those will tell us which scene we're in.

QUINN

And how do we know which act we're in?

KILLIAN

Say again?

QUINN

How do we know which act we're in? We've got bulbs for actors, bulbs for scenes, but no bulbs for acts.

KILLIAN

How many acts are in this play, Quinn?

QUINN

Two.

KILLIAN

Yes. Correct. There are two acts. Just two.

QUINN

I don't think you're getting my question.

KILLIAN

Quinn. Dearest Quinn. Are you trying to say that you're incapable of differentiating between act one and act two without being prompted by a filament!?

QUINN

I get your point.

KILLIAN

Excellent. So, then with all due respect, shut the fuck up.

(Fiona's head pops up.)

FIONA

(Referring to the wooden panel.)

What the hell is that?

VIVIAN

I'll explain later, darling.

(To Killian.)

Oh, and Killian?

KILLIAN

Yes, Vivian?

VIVIAN

May I ask which color is assigned to whom?

(Reggie enters.)

REGGIE

Very good question. Mr. Black is blue, Miss Pruitt is red, Miss Bainsbridge is green, and Mr. Ponsonby is yellow. And it looks like the system is working brilliantly.

(Reggie gives a thumbs up. The trapdoor above them drops open. Reggie frowns and then exits.)

KILLIAN

Everyone got it?

(Murmurs of confusion.)

Oh for... I'm blue, Vivian's red, Fiona's green, and Quinn is yellow.

(He points to himself and then to the others as he lists the colors.)

Blue. Red. Green. Yellow.

FIONA

(Repeating and pointing.)

Blue. Red. Green. Yellow.

KILLIAN

Very good, Fiona.

VIVIAN

Red is not a good color for me, darling.

KILLIAN

(Sardonically.)

Isn't it?

VIVIAN

No. Not at all right for my skin tone.

KILLIAN

Oh. Well, I wasn't aware you were planning on wearing it or perhaps that you were considering carrying it around as an accessory.

(He gestures emphatically to the bulb.)

VIVIAN

Don't be ridiculous, darling.

QUINN

I'd be happy to switch with you.

FIONA

Oh, good idea! Let's all switch.

KILLIAN

No! No one is switching. It's all been settled. Vivian will just have to make do. You will all have to make do.

(Deirdre enters with a costume bag.)

DEIRDRE

Twenty minutes 'til places.

ALL

Thank you, twenty 'til places!

DEIRDRE

(She hands Killian the costume bag.)

Here it is.

KILLIAN

And not a moment too soon.

DEIRDRE

Well, you can't expect the costumer to immediately pull together another outfit on such short notice, now can you, love? I mean, I get that we're down to the wire here, but at this point, there's no sense in debating the timing of its arrival?

KILLIAN

I wasn't debating it.

DEIRDRE

As well you shouldn't. I mean, there you have it, in hand, and with twenty minutes to spare.

KILLIAN

Thank you?

DEIRDRE

Just doing my job, love.

(Deirdre exits. Reggie's arm reaches down from above and pulls the trapdoor closed.)

VIVIAN

And what do we have here?

KILLIAN

(He unzips the garment bag and pulls out a costume.)

This, my dear addlepatented artistes, is a replica of Quinn's costume.

FIONA

Oh, very nice.

QUINN

(Overlapping Fiona.)

Well, isn't that thoughtful.

(Tugging at the costume he's wearing.)

This one's a bit threadbare already.

(He reaches for the costume.)

KILLIAN

(He pulls the costume back.)

No. No. No, no, no. This is not meant for you.

QUINN

Well, if not for me, then for who?

KILLIAN

For Mr. McHugh, that's who.

ALISTAIR

Me?

KILLIAN

Yes.

ALISTAIR

Why?

KILLIAN

Well, didn't you hear? Didn't any of you hear? The celebrated critic of the Daily Telegraph, Mr. Alistair McHugh, will be making his acting debut this evening here at the Dudley Hackham Theatre in Stockton-on-Tees. And in this very production.

VIVIAN

Over my dead body.

(Fiona's head falls to the table.)

KILLIAN

On the contrary, my dear Vivian. Over his dead body.

QUINN

Hold on a damn minute!

KILLIAN

What is it, Quinn?

QUINN

You mean to tell me that this... this... this plug-ugly tosser will be going on in my place tonight?

KILLIAN

Yes.

ALISTAIR

I hardly see how that's possible.

QUINN

(To Alistair.)

You shut up.

(To Killian.)

And how do you plan to pull that off?

KILLIAN

He will be going on for you tonight. But only for the fight scene.

VIVIAN

Have you lost your mind, Killian?

KILLIAN

Well, I'm certainly on the verge of it. Now, look, I need everyone's undivided attention, please. And that includes you, Fiona!

(Fiona's head pops up.)

FIONA

Do I smell smoke?

VIVIAN

Yes. And it's presently coming out of Killian's ears.

KILLIAN

For those of you who aren't the least bit interested in what's taking place onstage when you're not in fact standing on it... At the end of act one, scene two, my character and Quinn's character have a bit of a tussle, during which Quinn, who has been fitted with a sack over his head and strapped to a wooden chair with a length of rope, manages to free himself by throwing his body to the floor. At which point, I come after him brandishing a horseman's pick. And, after a carefully choreographed series of head slams, hair pulling, punches,

kicks, slaps, grappling, and falls, both Quinn and I crash through a breakaway door.

(Beat.)

Any of this sound vaguely familiar to any of you?

(Quinn raises his hand reluctantly.)

Quinn, yes, I would hope so. And the rest of you?

(Heads shaking, looks of puzzlement, murmurs of confusion.)

Seems about right. Anyway, after a count of five, I return to the stage and reach for the horseman's pick, which had been cast-off during the fight. I then pick it up and turn back to the door at the same moment Quinn reappears, still wearing the sack over his head. I then lunge at him, thrusting the pick through his midsection. Quinn falls backwards out the door again and expires offstage.

(Eyes blinking, vague looks.)

Except... Except tonight... When Quinn reappears in the doorway with the sack still over his head, it won't be Quinn. It'll be Alistair dressed as Quinn. Or, more precisely, dressed as Quinn's character.

ALISTAIR

Oh my God.

(Reggie enters with the horseman's pick.)

REGGIE

All right, here you go.

(He hands the pick to Killian.)

KILLIAN

(He inspects the pick.)

Yes. Looks good. Looks very good.

REGGIE

Well, I did what you asked. I cleaned and polished it. And then I sharpened the edges. And this pointy bit at the top is no longer retractable. So, it should go through Mr. McHugh like a hot knife through butter.

ALISTAIR

You can't be serious.

REGGIE

Well, it was quite simple really. I just replaced the spring mechanism with a small metal rod.

ALISTAIR

No! What I mean is, you can't be serious about killing me.

REGGIE

Oh. Right. Well, I know nothing about that, so I guess I'll be on my way then.

(Reggie exits with the pick.)

ALISTAIR

(To whomever.)

All right now listen to me. Please. This is ridiculous. You clearly haven't thought this through. I mean, do you honestly believe you'll actually get away with it? Even if you're successful in your endeavor to... exterminate me, it's all sure to unravel in due course.

(Deirdre enters.)

DEIRDRE

Fifteen minutes to places.

ALL

Thank you, fifteen to places!

DEIRDRE

Oh, and Killian.

KILLIAN

Yes, Deirdre.

DEIRDRE

The costumer is demanding reimbursement for materials on the additional garment. And including her usual fee for labor.

(Fiona's head falls to the table.)

KILLIAN

Oh, for fucksake. And how does she expect us to pay for it?

DEIRDRE

I've no idea, love.

VIVIAN

Well, it's certainly not coming out of my salary, darling.

QUINN

Well, I for one think it should come out of Killian's fucking salary. I mean, all of this was his big fucking idea. So, he should fucking pay for it.

DEIRDRE

Are you drunk, Quinn?

QUINN

No.

DEIRDRE

Are you sure, love? I only ask because I've yet to find my bottle of Macallan's.

QUINN

I'm not drunk.

(He's drunk.)

And I am offended by your assertion that I am...

(A gas bubble pops up in his throat.)

...drunk.

DEIRDRE

All right then. I'll take your word for it. I suppose I'll just dash across the street for another bottle then. I won't be long.

(Deirdre exits.)

ALISTAIR

Listen, everyone. I think I have an idea.

(Killian moves pointedly to Alistair.)

KILLIAN

I'm sorry, what? You have an idea? No, I don't think so, Alistair. As you can clearly tell, this group is not interested in ideas. In fact, I don't think anyone here has any room left in their pea-sized brains for another idea. And besides, it's all been settled. You die tonight.

QUINN

I'd like to hear what he has to say.

KILLIAN

Absolutely not, Quinn. There's nothing left to consider. And we won't negotiate.

VIVIAN

(To Killian.)

Honestly, darling, don't you think this is all a bit much? I mean, I suppose I get it. We're all actors. We love drama. And we all have a shared hatred for this mound of tainted cabbage over here. But it all seems problematic and perhaps even a bit convoluted, don't you think...?

ALISTAIR

...Oh, thank God someone has come to their senses...

VIVIAN

...I mean, couldn't you just kill him now and get it over with?

ALISTAIR

What? No.

VIVIAN

Frankly, I'm just bored to tears with the whole situation. I'd be content to step away for a few minutes while you do whatever it is you need to do. I could freshen up in the loo, do some vocal warmups... Just let me know how much time you need, darling. In any case, I don't want to be here when you put this old dog down.

KILLIAN

We will not deviate from the plan, Vivian.

VIVIAN

All right, darling. You're in charge. But if this show gets shut down for any reason - and especially if that reason happens to be that this colossal sack of fetid lard over here has been skewered to death in front of an audience onstage - I can assure you; you will not hear the end of it from me.

KILLIAN

Well, I don't like the sound of that. Not hearing the end of it from you is surely a fate worse than death.

ALISTAIR

I beg to differ.

KILLIAN

What is it you want, Vivian?

VIVIAN

Perhaps we could speak privately, darling? Hm? Over here?

(Killian reluctantly follows Vivian.)

Listen. Killian. Darling. I've been thinking about what you said earlier. That all of us here need to accept that our careers are coming to an end. And that any notion that we might be able to - in some way - extend our shelf life is really just an illusion.

KILLIAN

Mm hm. I also said that at least one of us has already exceeded their expiry date.

VIVIAN

Yes, but I'm not speaking about Quinn, darling.

KILLIAN

Ah.

VIVIAN

Anyway, if this show closes, there's a good chance I won't get paid. Or that any of us will get paid for that matter. But mostly I'm thinking about me.

KILLIAN

Of course, you are. And?

VIVIAN

And if I don't get paid... Well, there are a few very important things that I simply won't be able to afford, darling. Things that I need right now. Things that might help me to stay fresh and relevant.

KILLIAN

I see. And would these be 'from the neck up' things or would they include your tits as well?

VIVIAN

Don't be vulgar, Killian. It won't be anything drastic. Just some minor alterations. A nip here, a tuck there. A bit of a revamp if you will.

KILLIAN

So, you're getting another facelift.

(Fiona's head pops up.)

FIONA

Thank you, places!

QUINN

Places!? Already!?

KILLIAN

No. No. No, no, no. We are not at places. I said 'facelift'.

FIONA

Oh. Well, I highly recommend it, Vivian. And while you're at it, you ought to get your tits done as well.

(Vivian shoots Fiona a look.)

VIVIAN

Killian.

KILLIAN

Yes, Vivian?

VIVIAN

Perhaps I could see you over here?

(They have nowhere further to move, but they give it a go. Elevated whispers.)

Listen, darling. I don't take any pleasure in doing this. Nevertheless, show or no show, I'm going to have to rely on your generosity right now.

KILLIAN

My generosity?

VIVIAN

Yes, well the procedures I need aren't cheap.

KILLIAN

Hold on. Are you suggesting that I...? Do you mean to tell me that you...? No fucking way, Vivian.

VIVIAN

I hardly think you have any choice in the matter, darling.

KILLIAN

I won't do it.

VIVIAN

You most certainly will. Because if not, I can't promise I'll be able to stay silent about what's been going on here.

KILLIAN

Oh, I see. So, extortion is your game now, is it? I appreciate your determination, Vivian. I really do. Except there's one teensy weensy flaw in your little scheme. You're an accomplice.

VIVIAN

An accomplice to what, darling? Until just a few moments ago, I had absolutely no idea that you had planned from the start to slaughter that pugnacious pig over there. So, I'd hardly consider myself an accomplice to any of it.

(Killian stews.)

So, do we have a deal?

KILLIAN

(He starts off.)

I need some air.

(Reggie enters.)

Reggie! Oh, there you are. Do you have the key?

(Reggie produces the key.)

Good.

(Referring to Alistair.)

Now, as soon as the curtain goes up, I need you to come back here and get this knob head into costume. Do you understand?

REGGIE

Well, English is my native language, so yes.

KILLIAN

Piss off.

(Killian pushes Reggie out and follows him off. Vivian gives her hair and makeup a final check. Fiona finishes dressing and preparing for curtain.)

Quinn clumsily grabs a chair and pulls it over to Alistair. He sits.)

QUINN

(Blotto.)

Spill it, Alistair.

ALISTAIR

I beg your pardon.

QUINN

You said you had an idea. And I want to hear what it is.

ALISTAIR

What difference would it make now? Killian's mind is set.

QUINN

No. No, he's all bluster and no follow through. He's just trying to terrify you.

ALISTAIR

Trying to terrify me? Trying? Well, he's been bloody well successful at it up to this point, now hasn't he?

QUINN

Ok, now listen. I may be able to help you, but I need to hear what you have to say first.

ALISTAIR

(This is his chance to escape.)

Oh. Oh, I see. Yes. Yes, of course. Well, as you know, Quinn, I have an extraordinary amount of influence in this industry.

QUINN

Yes, I know.

ALISTAIR

So, all it would take is one stellar review of this production in its entirety, and of all your performances...

QUINN

No, no. Shh, shh, shh, shh. I'm going to stop you there, Alistair. Now, listen. I don't really give a good goddam about this production or the other actors. So, here's what I want you to do: I want you to completely pan this show. All right? And I

want you to bestow upon the other three the single worst review of their entire careers. Do you understand?

ALISTAIR

Yes, of course. I can do that, except...

QUINN

I haven't finished. In that same review, you will then single me out as the one, notable, redeeming element in the play; the only sign of life in an otherwise barren desert of walking, talking, utilitarian meat puppets. Have I made myself clear?

ALISTAIR

Perfectly.

QUINN

Good. And in return, I will get you out of here.

ALISTAIR

But Reggie has the key.

QUINN

Now don't you fret. I can handle Reggie.

ALISTAIR

How?

QUINN

You see, long before I became an actor, I was once - among other things - an especially gifted street magician; sort of a legend you might say, but also one of the best kept secrets in town. And I was widely considered to be the best in my circle at one particular trick, which was to pinch small treasures from people's jackets, pants, purses, wrists, necks without their knowing it.

ALISTAIR

A pickpocket.

QUINN

I prefer the term 'finger-smith'. I worked efficiently and imperceptibly, with a timid allure that belied my talent for larceny.

ALISTAIR

A thief.

QUINN

No. Now listen carefully. Yes, I took things, but then I returned them.

ALISTAIR

I don't understand.

QUINN

All right, look. I'll concede that magic by itself has many of the hallmarks of thievery. I mean, you lie, you cheat, you try not to get caught, but it's part of the entertainment. You see? I simply turned a minor criminal offense into an art form. And in the end, I'd undo what'd been done by returning the stolen item to its owner. And in response, people would hand me a quid or a fiver, sometimes more.

ALISTAIR

I see.

QUINN

So, with a bit of misdirection and some sleight of hand, I'll have that key in my possession and Reggie will be none the wiser. And you'll be free just after curtain up.

ALISTAIR

I don't know how I'll ever be able to repay you.

QUINN

I've given you your instructions. Do what I've asked and never, ever implicate me.

ALISTAIR

You have my word, Quinn.

(Quinn stares intently at Alistair.)

QUINN

I am curious, though.

ALISTAIR

What?

QUINN

How do you honestly regard me? As an actor, I mean.

ALISTAIR

Oh. Uh... Well, I uh...

QUINN

...I mean, you've reviewed a dozen or more shows that I've appeared in and yet you've scarcely mentioned me in any of them.

ALISTAIR

Well, yes. Yes, that's true.

QUINN

So, go on. Don't be fearful. And don't hold back. I can handle it.

ALISTAIR

I'm not sure that now is the appropriate time...

QUINN

Tell me.

ALISTAIR

All right. I suppose I would describe you as... serviceable.

QUINN

Serviceable?

ALISTAIR

Yes.

QUINN

Keep going.

ALISTAIR

Well, I generally feel that you tend to give the minimum - in terms of acting - to your characters. But that's not entirely your fault since you're generally cast in roles that are somewhat generic in nature; roles that are functional per se rather than compelling or integral to the plot.

QUINN

Yes, and...?

ALISTAIR

And if I may be so bold...

QUINN

Of course.

ALISTAIR

Your emotional range is... relatively... narrow. And your arsenal of expressions - as a rule - runs virtually on empty. Now, I'm not saying that you haven't earned your success; your name alone sells tickets. And I expect that you're hardworking, and that you're professional, but what I am saying is that your skills as an actor are limited.

(Silence.)

QUINN

I see.

ALISTAIR

Listen, Quinn. The only reason I rarely mention you in my reviews is that you're neither remarkable nor unremarkable. And frankly, that puts you in the majority.

(Deirdre enters holding a bottle of Macallan's.)

DEIRDRE

Five minutes 'til places!

(Startled, Fiona spills a jar of face cream onto the floor.)

ALL

Thank you, five 'til places!

FIONA

Bloody hell!

DEIRDRE

Everything all right, love?

FIONA

Actually, no. I've just spilt my face cream all over the floor here.

DEIRDRE

I see. Well, I'd ask Reggie to clean it up, but he's got his hands full at the moment. And I'm a bit pressed for time myself.

FIONA

Yes, of course, you are. Well, don't worry. It's fine. I'll manage.

DEIRDRE

Are you sure, love?

FIONA

Yes. Yes, of course. You go on. I'm sure I can sort it out.

DEIRDRE

All right then.

(To everyone.)

Everyone excited for the show?

*(Murmurs and uninspired responses.
Fiona's head falls to the table.)*

That's the spirit.

(Deirdre exits.)

ALISTAIR

(Quietly, to Quinn.)

I'll understand if you've changed your mind.

QUINN

I have changed my mind, Alistair. Which is precisely why I'm committed to helping you escape.

*(Reggie enters with an additional sack
and length of rope.)*

REGGIE

(To Quinn.)

Right, here we go then. Mr. Black asked me to supply you with an added sack and rope on the off chance you might need them. So, I'll just leave these with you.

(Reggie hands them to Quinn.)

QUINN

Yes, of course.

(Reggie starts off.)

Oh, and Reggie.

REGGIE

Yes, Mr. Ponsonby?

QUINN

May I speak with you for a moment? Just outside here?

REGGIE

Can it wait?

QUINN

I'm afraid not.

REGGIE

All right then. But we need to be quick.

QUINN

Of course.

*(Reggie exits followed by Quinn.
Killian enters. He calls after Quinn
and Reggie.)*

KILLIAN

Where are you two off to? We're nearly at places.

(Fiona's head pops up.)

VIVIAN & FIONA

Thank you, places!

KILLIAN

(Quietly to himself.)

Oh, for fucksake.

FIONA

Shouldn't you be heading to the wings, Killian?

KILLIAN

Sorry?

FIONA

Oh honestly. Are you that daft? You have the first entrance.
Have you forgotten?

KILLIAN

No, I haven't forgotten.

FIONA

Well, then what are you waiting for?

KILLIAN

We still have a few minutes.

FIONA

So, we're not at places?

KILLIAN

No.

FIONA

So, then who called for places?

KILLIAN

No one.

FIONA

Are you sure?

KILLIAN

At this point, no.

FIONA

Oh, dear. Well, then as far as we can tell, the curtain's up, the lights are on, and no one's there.

KILLIAN

Art imitating life.

(Quinn enters. He is tucking something into his breast pocket.)

QUINN

(Off to Reggie.)

Thank you, Reggie. I am so sorry to have bothered you. I honestly don't know what we would do without you..

(Quietly to himself.)

...Cocky little bastard.

(He looks to Alistair, pats his jacket, and winks. He then takes a swig of the Macallan's.)

KILLIAN

Quinn!

QUINN

What?

KILLIAN

I think you've had enough.

QUINN

Truer words were never spoken.

KILLIAN

I'm talking about the whiskey, Quinn. I need you to be clear-headed out there tonight.

QUINN

Oh, is that right?

KILLIAN

Yes. We all need to be clear-headed, but especially you.

QUINN

And why is that?

KILLIAN

(He moves pointedly to Quinn.)

Because this time 'round, it'll be a matter of life and death, now won't it? Do you get my point?

QUINN

Yes.

KILLIAN

Good.

FIONA

You know, you should really make the most of it, Quinn. Have a little fun with it tonight. Perhaps try something different. Let yourself go. Especially considering this'll be your last week of performances...

KILLIAN

...Fiona...!

QUINN

...What? What do you mean my 'last week of performances'?

FIONA

Oh, dear.

VIVIAN

Oh, Quinn. My darling, Quinn. I don't think there's really an easy way to say this. Actually, there is. You've been replaced.

QUINN

Replaced?

VIVIAN

That's right, darling.

QUINN

By whom?

VIVIAN

By someone better. They plan to escort you from the theater after the Sunday matinee. And quite frankly, I'm surprised you didn't see this coming.

(Silence.)

QUINN

Ah.

(Quinn finishes the whiskey by guzzling it. He smiles dimly at the empty bottle. He then breaks the bottle over Killian's head. Fiona shrieks.)

VIVIAN

Oh my God.

(Killian drops to the floor. Quinn crosses to Alistair.)

Quinn! What're you doing?

QUINN

I'm putting an end to this madness right now. I'm letting Alistair go.

(Quinn digs into his breast pocket and pulls out a sardine.)

VIVIAN

So, your plan is to free him with a sardine?

QUINN

I don't understand.

VIVIAN

Do you intend to skin it and use the bones to pick the lock, darling?

QUINN

This makes no sense.

(Reggie appears.)

REGGIE

Are you looking for this?

(Reggie displays the key.)

QUINN

Reggie! How did you...?

REGGIE

And perhaps you'd like your wallet and watch as well.

(Reggie displays the wallet and watch.)

QUINN

(Steaming.)

You. Little. Rat-arsed... Ahhhhhhhhh...

(Quinn charges at Reggie. An extended fight ensues, during which Vivian attempts to clear away, but slips on the face cream and falls to the floor. The fight ends with Quinn and Reggie both on the floor. Deirdre enters.)

DEIRDRE

Places!

(Fiona's head falls to the table. The trapdoor above them drops open. Alistair is gobsmacked. Lights to black.)

(End of Act 1.)

ACT 2**Scene 1**

(Fifteen minutes later. The trapdoor above them is closed. Deirdre has just finished wrapping Reggie's hand. Some of the others are bandaged in one way or another. Killian has two black eyes. Fiona has a contusion on her brow. Otherwise, various cuts, abrasions, lacerations, etc. Alistair, still chained, is now dressed in a replica of Quinn's costume.)

DEIRDRE

Okay, now listen up, my lovelies. It appears that perhaps things have gotten a wee bit out of hand back here. And while I would like nothing more than to cancel tonight's performance and to toss every last one of you out on your arses, I can't. Because we have a sold-out show; God knows how. So, we go on as planned, albeit fifteen minutes behind schedule.

VIVIAN

Are you mad?

DEIRDRE

I'm a little pissed off, yes.

VIVIAN

What I mean is, have you gone mental? Not one of us is in any condition to perform.

DEIRDRE

So, business as usual then. Now look, you're all going on even if I have to attach you to a meat hook and move you in and out on a fly system. Do you understand?

(Objecting murmurs and groans.)

Reggie.

REGGIE

Yes?

DEIRDRE

Can you let the house manager know that we're at places? Again...

ALL

(Lackluster.)

...Thank you, places again...

REGGIE

...Certainly.

(Reggie exits with urgency, but also with difficulty.)

DEIRDRE

Right. Now I realize that not one of you actually gives a rat's arse about a sold-out show. And I completely understand. I honestly do. I mean as a whole, audiences haven't especially earned the respect that they demand, now have they. They tend to be an unpleasant lot, don't they? And are wont to behave badly, am I right? I mean, most of them show up sozzled; talking out loud; talking to the stage; falling asleep; snoring; unwrapping candies; taking photos; chatting on their mobiles; coughing up a lung... Just last week, a group of them were passing a pot roast up and down the third row while some bloke in the row behind was getting a jobby by one of our premier platinum season subscribers. So, when it comes down to it, audiences are generally a raging nuisance, aren't they? But... but... the only thing worse than a badly behaved audience is no audience at all. Do you get my point?

(Uninspired agreement among the group.)

Good. Now, I've only one thing to add.

QUINN

And what's that?

DEIRDRE

Places!

ALL

Thank you, places!

(Deirdre exits. The buzzer on the cue calling apparatus goes off. The blue bulb lights up followed by the first clear bulb. This means Killian is due onstage for act one, scene one. No one moves. Silence. The buzzer goes off again. The blue bulb lights up followed by the first clear bulb. General uncertainty. Silence. The buzzer goes

off repeatedly and urgently. The blue bulb lights up followed by the first clear bulb. Fiona's head falls to the table. Silence. Reggie races in.)

REGGIE

Mr. Black!

KILLIAN

What?!

REGGIE

You're on.

KILLIAN

Am I?

REGGIE

Top of show!

KILLIAN

Right. Let's get this over with.

(Killian pushes past Reggie and exits. Reggie follows him off.)

Scene 2

(Continuous from Scene 1. Lights come up on the Stage Manager Station. Deirdre settles in and puts on a headset. She pulls out the fresh bottle of Macallan's and pours herself a double. Lights come up on Reggie's Workstation. Killian passes through to take his place "onstage". Reggie puts on a headset and readies himself for top of show.)

(NOTE: *Deirdre executes the light cues and Reggie executes the sound cues.)*

DEIRDRE

(On her headset.)

Reggie.

REGGIE

(On his headset.)

I'm here.

DEIRDRE

Is Killian at places?

REGGIE

(He looks off.)

Yes. Just.

DEIRDRE

Right. Good.

REGGIE

What could possibly go wrong?

DEIRDRE

Well, I mean things could hardly get worse, now could they, love?

REGGIE

I suppose not.

DEIRDRE

That's the spirit. And so, then off we go. Stand by sound cue one and light cue one. Sound cue one, curtain music, go.

(Music appropriate to a 1920s melodramedy comes up.)

Light cue one, go.

(Lights come up on the Study. The horseman's pick is prominently displayed and easily reachable.)

Stand by sound cues two and three. Sound cue two, music fades, go.

(The music fades out.)

Sound cue three, telephone ring, go.

(Reggie hits the cue triggering the phone. A cradle phone on the desk rings. And rings. And rings. And rings.)

Reggie.

REGGIE

Yes, Deirdre?

DEIRDRE

I thought Killian was at places.

REGGIE

(He looks off.)

He is.

DEIRDRE

So, why hasn't he made his entrance?

REGGIE

(He looks off again.)

Looks like he's asking us for more time? Perhaps a couple of minutes? No. No, that's wrong. He's actually giving me the two-finger salute. I think he means to taunt me.

DEIRDRE

And what do you plan to do about it, love?

REGGIE

I plan to kick his arse.

(Reggie ends the phone ringing cue and then rushes off after Killian. We see them scuffle "backstage" before Reggie pushes Killian through the Study doors and onto the "stage" floor. As Killian struggles to get up, Reggie returns to his station and replaces his headset.)

He's made his entrance.

DEIRDRE

I see that. We've all seen that. All right. And again. Sound cue three, telephone ring, go.

(Reggie hits the cue triggering the phone to ring. Killian crawls to the desk and uses it to brace himself as he rises to answer the phone.)

(NOTE: The underlined dialogue indicates lines from the play within.)

KILLIAN

Hallo...? Yes, this is he... I'm sorry, and who is this please...? Ah, yes, of course, I've been waiting on your call, detective...

(He winces in pain.)

Yes, well listen, this is actually not a good time. I'm in a great deal of pain and I think I may need medical attention, so I'm going to hang up now...

(Killian replaces the receiver.)

DEIRDRE

...No. No. That's not in the... [script]

(Killian starts for the Study doors.)

...Reggie!

REGGIE

I'm on it.

(Reggie hits the cue triggering the phone to ring and then races for the Study entrance. Killian looks back to the phone and grimaces. Reggie comes charging through the Study doors. He quickly realizes he's visible "onstage".)

Shite.

(He improvises.)

Good evening, sir...

(He's stuck.)

KILLIAN

(Amused.)

Good evening. And who pray tell are you?

REGGIE

Ah. Well... I am... your new... manservant.

KILLIAN

I see. And your name?

REGGIE

My name?

KILLIAN

Yes. You do have a name, don't you?

REGGIE

Well, of course I have a name.

KILLIAN

Which is?

REGGIE

Which is... Bromley... Bromley Shufflebottom.

KILLIAN

Mm hm. Well, Bromley Shufflebottom, regrettably, I had not been informed of any changes in my staff. As a rule, I make every effort to meet with all applicants myself.

REGGIE

Yes. I'm sure you do. However, your previous manservant...

(He's stuck. The phone continues to ring.)

KILLIAN

Go on?

REGGIE

Your previous manservant is... Well, I regret to tell you that he is deceased.

KILLIAN

Deceased?

REGGIE

Dead.

KILLIAN

Yes, I know what deceased means. Seems sudden, though, doesn't it? Gregory was the picture of health. When did this occur?

REGGIE

Only minutes ago.

KILLIAN

Indeed?! And here you are, just minutes later.

REGGIE

Yes, well... Prior to my profession as a manservant, I was a, uh... a messenger.

KILLIAN

I see. And I suspect that what you're wearing is the approved uniform for messengers?

REGGIE

Yes... And that...! That, sir, is how this all came about.

KILLIAN

Really? How so?

REGGIE

Well, you see... I was on my way here to deliver a letter to you on horseback... and as I approached your stately manor, I mistakeably... crushed your manservant under the weight of my steed's hooves... And now his corpse is resting under your grand portico as we speak.

KILLIAN

Oh dear. That's awful.

REGGIE

And here's the sad part...

KILLIAN

Sadder than what you just described?

(The phone continues to ring.)

REGGIE

Yes indeed! Because with the advent of phones, I did not need to come. Which means your former manservant died in vain. And in fact, the individual who sent you the letter, which I endeavored to deliver to you directly, is calling you at this very moment. On that phone right there.

(He gestures emphatically to the phone.)

KILLIAN

Truly? You think so?

REGGIE

I know so.

KILLIAN

My God. So, in addition to being a messenger and a manservant, you're also a clairvoyant?

REGGIE

That's right.

KILLIAN

Impressive. And do you have the letter on you?

REGGIE

Say again?

KILLIAN

The letter. The one you were sent to deliver to me. I'd like to read it.

(Silence.)

REGGIE

Look, just answer the bloody phone, all right?

(Reggie exits, closing the Study doors behind him.)

KILLIAN

Absolutely disrespectful.

(He answers the phone.)

KILLIAN

Hallo...?

(The phone continues to ring. Killian replaces the receiver. Reggie reaches his Workstation and ends the cue. Killian picks up the receiver.)

Hallo...? Yes, this is he... I'm sorry, and who is this please...? Ah, yes, of course, I've been waiting on your call, detective. Your messenger, who is now employed as my manservant, failed to deliver your correspondence, so I am pleased that you were able to reach me by telephone... Yes, so is there anything you can tell me about Hubert, my accountant, who went missing nearly a fortnight ago? I've been ever so worried about him... Mm hm... I see. And on a hunch, you paid a visit to my financial institution...? Oh, is that so...? Yes, well he is my accountant after all, so I suppose that makes sense. Though I'm not entirely sure what my bank account has to do with my accountant's disappearance...

(His eyes widen. He puts his hand over the receiver and turns front.)

Oh my God..

DEIRDRE

..Reggie.

REGGIE

I'm here.

DEIRDRE

We're going to need Fiona onstage.

REGGIE

Right. Of course. Straight away...

(Reggie pushes some buttons or manipulates some controls. Back in the Trap Room, the buzzer on the cue calling apparatus goes off. The green bulb lights up followed by the first clear bulb. This means Fiona is due onstage.)

VIVIAN

...Oh dear. The uh... the whatsit just went off, darlings. It appears that one of us is due for an entrance. Quinn?

QUINN

Yes?

VIVIAN

Is it you?

QUINN

Is what me?

VIVIAN

Are you onstage, darling?

QUINN

No, I'm not onstage. What do you think you're speaking to? A hologram?

VIVIAN

No, darling. What I mean to say is, "Are you expected onstage?"
The whatsit just went off.

QUINN

Yes, I know. I have a pair of functioning ears, haven't I?

*(The buzzer goes off. The green bulb
lights up followed by the first clear
bulb.)*

VIVIAN

And there it goes again.

QUINN

I don't make my entrance until scene two. And I scarcely think
we've made it that far in under five minutes.

(He tilts forward.)

Oh. I'm not feeling well.

*(The buzzer goes off. The green bulb
lights up followed by the first clear
bulb.)*

VIVIAN

Well, if it isn't you and it isn't me, then perhaps it's Fiona?

QUINN

Well, let's hope not.

VIVIAN

(To Fiona.)

Fiona, darling...?

QUINN

She's in a very sorry state at the moment.

VIVIAN

You're right. Let's just leave her be then. I suppose the little
tart needs her rest...

ALISTAIR

It's Fiona! For goddsake! Fiona is due onstage! Killian is blue,
Vivian's red, Quinn is yellow, and Fiona is green! Fiona is due
onstage for act one, scene one! My God! If Killian doesn't
murder me soon, I swear to you I'll take care of it myself!

VIVIAN

All right, darling. There's no need to get upset.

(Reggie races into the Trap Room. He retrieves Fiona and carries her off. Back at the Study, Killian has just finished his call. He replaces the receiver.)

KILLIAN

Blast! I'm broke. I'm ruined. He's taken everything. What am I to do...?

DEIRDRE

...Sound cue four, doorbell ring, go.

(Nothing. Killian waits.)

Reggie? Reggie, are you there?

KILLIAN

(Louder and slower.)

Blast! I'm broke. I'm ruined. He's taken everything. What am I to do...?

DEIRDRE

..Reggie!

(Reggie arrives at his Workstation with Fiona over his shoulder. By some means, he manages to trigger the doorbell cue.)

KILLIAN

A visitor? And at this time of night? I certainly hope it's not more bad news. Perhaps it's an ordinary passerby who's stumbled across my previous manservant's remains. What a sight that must be.

(Killian starts for the Study doors. As he does, Reggie arrives on the other side. He puts Fiona down and props her up standing against a flat. He then slaps her lightly on the face. Killian pulls open the doors and calls out.)

Bromley?!

(He sees Reggie struggling with Fiona. Quietly to himself.)

Oh, for fucksake.

(He calls out.)

Bromley?! Could you please answer the door? It appears we have an unexpected guest this evening.

REGGIE

(He takes a step and loses his grip on Fiona. Fiona begins to slide down the flat to the floor.)

Yes, all right! Keep your trousers on!

KILLIAN

Utterly impudent.

(Killian closes the Study doors and waits. Reggie catches Fiona and pulls her into him tightly. Fiona rouses.)

FIONA

Reggie! You naughty little minx! I mean, yes, of course I'm interested, but now is not the time, dear. I have an entrance to make.

(She kisses Reggie on the mouth and then make her entrance through the Study doors.)

Kenneth!

KILLIAN

Dolores! What are you doing here?

FIONA

How absolutely uncivil. Is that any way to welcome your mistress?

KILLIAN

I didn't realize there was a proper way in which to greet the woman with whom you're having an affair.

FIONA

Well, I suppose there's no need to be formal about it, but you could have at least offered me a little reverence.

KILLIAN

I'm sorry, my dear. You know how much I adore you. It's just that I've had such a difficult evening. I've lately received some terrible news. And frankly, I would like nothing more than to slither into bed.

FIONA

Sounds like a splendid idea.

(She caresses Killian.)

KILLIAN

Oh, no. Not tonight, my love. In any case, it's doubtful I'll be up for it.

FIONA

(She moves in closer.)

You misjudge my talents.

KILLIAN

Delores, please. I am profoundly serious. I have way too much on my mind. And so many things that I need to sort out. I simply don't have the appetite right now.

FIONA

Rubbish. I won't hear it. Your wife is due back from Biarritz late tomorrow, correct?

KILLIAN

Yes, but what of it?

FIONA

Are you that callous, my dear? Tonight, will be the last night we have together until Priscilla's next excursion.

KILLIAN

Excursions that I afford her.

FIONA

And who knows how long it'll be until she travels again? So, unless you're able to evade her watchful eye, it could be weeks before we see one another again. And frankly that's more than I can bear.

KILLIAN

(Resigned.)

I'm sorry, Delores.

FIONA

So, that's it then? There's nothing I can do to persuade you.

KILLIAN

I fear not. I'll ask my manservant to drive you home. Unless of course you prefer to travel by horseback.

FIONA

(Baffled.)

I'm sorry, by what...? By horse...?

(Fiona turns front and stares blankly.)

DEIRDRE

...Damn it, Killian. And just when things were going smoothly. Come on, Fiona. You can do it, love.

REGGIE

I have my doubts.

DEIRDRE

Shut up, Reggie. The wheels are turning. She'll sort it out.

(Fiona's face contorts.)

You're nearly there, Fiona. Don't give up now...

FIONA

(She presses forward.)

...So, you propose to send me away at this late hour. Is that your plan then? Absolutely insulting. And how would it look to my neighbors if I arrive at my Bloomsbury flat in the middle of the night? Especially on horseback... what with all the... clopping... and the... nickering...

REGGIE

...Well, I'll be damned...

FIONA

...And furthermore, I went through the trouble of packing an overnight bag. So, I'll be staying here whether you like it or not, my dear. And in one of your superior guest rooms at that. So, I propose that you ask Gregory to...

KILLIAN

Bromley.

FIONA

Come again...?

DEIRDRE

...Damn it, Killian...!

KILLIAN

...Bromley. His name is Bromley.

FIONA

Whose name is Bromley?

KILLIAN

My manservant.

FIONA

No. No, that's not... Are you sure? Because that's not how I remember it.

KILLIAN

Gregory has recently passed away, I'm afraid. And in fact, I'm astonished that you did not spot his corpse under the grand portico on your way in.

FIONA

I'm sorry, his... his what? His corpse? You know what, never mind. Perhaps you could just ask... Bromley is it...?

KILLIAN

That's right.

FIONA

...Yes, well... I would be ever so grateful if you could instruct... Bromley... to fetch me some fresh linens and to make up my room immediately.

KILLIAN

Of course, my love. And so, where is it?

FIONA

Where's what?

KILLIAN

Your overnight bag.

FIONA

Well, it's right there by the... Oh dear...

(Fiona looks about and then back to Killian. She scowls.)

REGGIE

..Bloody hell!

(Reggie races behind the set. He reappears with the overnight bag. He reaches for the Study doors, but then stops.)

No. No. I'm not going back out there. What to do? What to do?

(He pauses and then looks up.)

Ah...

(He hurls the bag over the top of the set. It lands with a thud onto the "stage" floor.)

FIONA

..There it is.

(Reggie races back to his Workstation. Fiona retrieves the bag and sets it on the desk. She opens it and begins to rummage through it.)

Oh, and Kenneth.

KILLIAN

Yes, Delores?

FIONA

In the event your mood improves later, I should let you know that I'll be wearing this to bed...

(She pulls out a negligee. Reggie reaches his Workstation.)

DEIRDRE

..Reggie...

REGGIE

Yes, I know, I know. Vivian is due onstage. I'm cueing her now.

(Reggie pushes some buttons or manipulates some controls. Back in the Trap Room, the buzzer on the cue

calling apparatus goes off. The red bulb lights up followed by the first clear bulb. This means Vivian is due onstage.)

VIVIAN

You look awful, Quinn.

QUINN

I feel awful. I'm soaked through, my hands are shaking, I'm nauseous...

VIVIAN

Then by all means, keep your distance. I want no part of whatever you got going on over there.

QUINN

I'm not contagious.

VIVIAN

I'd rather not take any chances, darling. So, it's best you stay put.

ALISTAIR

Vivian...

VIVIAN

Yes, I am quite aware that my entrance is forthcoming, Alistair. It's insulting enough that I should receive prompting from a two-by-four beset with bulbs. Shall I also be subjected to nudging from a decaying swine?

(The buzzer goes off. The red bulb lights up followed by the first clear bulb.)

And so off I go into the fray...

(Back in the Study, Fiona still holds the negligee.)

FIONA

...So, what do you think, Kenneth? Perhaps I should try it on for you?

KILLIAN

Try it on? The negligee? Now? You can't be serious, Delores. Here in the study?

FIONA

Well, either here or out in the foyer. Your choice.

KILLIAN

You're making this very hard for me, my love. Very hard indeed.

FIONA

Nonsense. It's a simple process really. I'll just remove what I'm presently wearing and replace it with this exceptionally delicate and exceedingly sheer bit of clothing.

KILLIAN

Indeed, I should like to see that. I should like to see that very much.

FIONA

So, it's settled then?

KILLIAN

All right, yes. Yes, I suppose so. It would certainly take my mind off recent depressing developments.

FIONA

Oh, splendid!

(Fiona starts to undress. Vivian passes by Reggie's Workstation and gives him a shove before crossing behind the set to take her place at the Study doors.)

KILLIAN

Hang on a moment. I should lock the study doors first. In case Gregory pops in unexpectedly.

FIONA

You mean Bromley.

KILLIAN

Yes. Right. Bromley. Oh, poor Gregory. We should really do something about that. We can't just leave him rotting away out front.

(Killian locks the Study doors and then turns back to Fiona.)

FIONA

Do I have your full attention now, my love?

KILLIAN

You most certainly do. Please. Carry on.

(Fiona continues undressing. Vivian jostles the door handles.)

KILLIAN

Damn it, Bromley! Go away! Your timing is absolutely awful!

(To Fiona.)

Go on, Delores.

(Vivian knocks on the Study doors.)

Did you not hear me? I said, "Go away!" I should not need to say it again!

(To Fiona.)

Wait, Delores. Allow me to avert my eyes while you undress. One cannot fully appreciate the gift if one is not given the opportunity to unwrap it first.

(Killian turns and faces the Study doors and covers his eyes. Vivian knocks again.)

VIVIAN

("Off".)

Kenneth!

KILLIAN

Oh no. It's my wife.

FIONA

Priscilla's here? How can that be? We were certain she wasn't due back until tomorrow evening.

KILLIAN

Something's amiss.

VIVIAN

("Off". Knocking again.)

Kenneth! Unlock these doors this instant! What on earth is going on in there?

KILLIAN

(He crosses to Fiona.)

Quickly, Delores. Conceal yourself.

(Fiona collapses. Killian catches her.)

Oh God, no. No. No, no, no. Damn it, Fio... er, um... Dolores. Now is not the time, my dear.

(He tries to wake her but is unsuccessful. He leans in close.)

What's that, my love...? Wherever shall you hide? Why in the closet, of course. Here, I shall endeavor to assist you.

(Killian props Fiona up and then carries/drops her to the closet. Vivian knocks again.)

VIVIAN

("Off".)

Your refusal to answer is causing me to think that something untoward might be occurring on the other side of these doors.

(Killian clumsily places Fiona in the closet. He then retrieves the overnight bag and negligee. He tosses those into the closet with her and shuts the door. Vivian knocks again.)

I am fast losing my patience, Kenneth. This is your last chance before I summon Gregory to...

KILLIAN

(As he crosses to the Study doors.)

Bromley! For goddsake! His name is Bromley Shufflebottom! Gregory is deceased; he has hopped the twig! That's been established and reestablished several times over! His lifeless body lies under the grand portico out front! And Bromley, a former messenger and occasional clairvoyant, has taken his place! Have I made all of that perfectly clear!? Because I don't want to have to say it again!

(He unlocks and opens the Study doors.)

Hallo, my darling. Did you have a lovely trip?

VIVIAN

(She pushes by Killian and enters the Study.)

Don't try to distract me, Kenneth. I heard a lot of frenzied chatter and then some knocking and thrashing about in here. Something's afoot.

(She surveys the room.)

KILLIAN

You're absolutely right. You see, I've lately received some awful news, Priscilla. News that impacts both of us greatly. So, what you overheard, my darling, is me throwing a terrible tantrum.

VIVIAN

Awful news? What sort of awful news?

KILLIAN

I think you should sit down, Priscilla.

VIVIAN

Oh! That sort of awful news.

KILLIAN

(He crosses to the settee.)

Yes, I'm afraid so. Perhaps you should join me here on the settee...

(There is no settee. Killian stops. He looks around.)

VIVIAN

Is something the matter?

KILLIAN

Nooooo... No, I suppose not. Except that I just asked you to join me on the settee, but I regrettably cannot locate the settee...

DEIRDRE

...Reggie, where's the settee?

REGGIE

Good question.

(He looks off.)

It's in the wings.

DEIRDRE

And where should it be, love?

REGGIE

Onstage, I expect...

(Reggie runs into the wings.)

VIVIAN

...Well, it's hardly important, my darling.

(During the following, Reggie will drag the settee from the wings.)

KILLIAN

Hardly important? Hardly important? A missing settee? Are you serious? Now, think about that for a moment, yes? I mean, it does defy logic, though, doesn't it? My suggesting that you join me on a settee that's no longer there. A settee that ought to be there because it has been there without fail for weeks. I mean, why on earth would I recommend that the two of us sit down for an especially critical conversation on a settee that doesn't exist!? It's presumably my home, after all, isn't it? My study. And for those reasons, I think that I might notice if a sizable piece of furniture just up and vanished! Wouldn't you agree?

(Reggie has arrived at the Study doors with the settee.)

VIVIAN

Never mind all that. It's scarcely worth giving yourself a migraine over. Now listen, I'll just have a seat in your desk chair. Hm? What do you say to that? So, problem solved then?

KILLIAN

All right then. Yes. Of course. Why didn't I think of it?

(Reggie begins dragging the settee back to the wings.)

So, you'll just have a seat in my desk chair. And that will be appropriate, won't it?

(Killian crosses behind the desk to retrieve the chair but discovers that it's missing.)

Appropriate, yes. Except, my darling... Except... that there is no desk chair!

(Reggie leaves the settee where it is and runs to the wings to retrieve the desk chair.)

VIVIAN

Well, admittedly it's all very curious. But frankly speaking, don't you think we should just move on?

KILLIAN

Move on?

VIVIAN

Yes. Perhaps we should just resign ourselves to the fact that we will need to remain upright for the duration.

KILLIAN

But I've asked you to sit down.

(Reggie appears from the wings with the desk chair.)

VIVIAN

Yes, I know. But as you can see, there's no place to do it. And in fact, I am just now noticing that the pair of side chairs is also missing.

(Reggie leaves the desk chair where it is and runs off to retrieve the side chairs. Fiona enters from the closet.)

FIONA

Priscilla's here? How can that be? We were certain she wasn't due back until tomorrow evening.

KILLIAN

We've already done that bit!

(He pushes Fiona back into the closet and closes the door. To Vivian.)

A deceased manservant, vanishing furniture, and a half-nude woman in my study closet! It's certainly been a day, my darling. It's certainly been a day.

VIVIAN

Indeed.

KILLIAN

(He gestures pointedly to the closet.)

Shall I explain the, uh...? [woman]

VIVIAN

I've no idea what you're talking about, Kenneth. Moving on.

KILLIAN

Right. Moving on. And that's not the worst of it. You see, I've lately received some awful news, Priscilla. News that impacts both of us greatly.

VIVIAN

Awful news? What sort of awful news?

(Reggie enters from the wings with the side chairs.)

KILLIAN

Perhaps you should sit...

VIVIAN

No! I will not sit. And you will not sit. We will stay put and we will press on. Do you understand?

KILLIAN

Yes.

(Reggie tosses the side chairs into the wings. He then places the desk chair on top of the settee and pushes them off. During the following, he returns to his Workstation.)

VIVIAN

Good. So, go on then. What sort of awful news?

KILLIAN

Right. Well, you see, I received a phone call earlier this evening. From a detective...

VIVIAN

A detective?

KILLIAN

Yes. Well, as you know, Hubert...

VIVIAN

Your accountant?

KILLIAN

My account, yes. He went missing nearly two weeks ago...

VIVIAN

...It's awful, to be sure...

KILLIAN

...So, I hired a detective to find him.

VIVIAN

Well of course, you did, my darling. You must've been worried sick.

KILLIAN

I was, yes. And two weeks prior to his disappearance, he and I met here to go over my financials for the year.

VIVIAN

Yes, I recall. I was just that morning packing my bags in preparation for my getaway to Biarritz.

KILLIAN

That's also the very morning you took a nasty fall down the east wing corridor stairs, my dear.

VIVIAN

Oh, I think you may be overstating things a bit, my darling, when you say I took a nasty fall. I had sent Gregory to run some errands, terrible timing on my part. And because of that, I had no choice but to carry the luggage down on my own. It was a minor stumble, really. And fortunately, I escaped with only a few scrapes and some minor bruising on my ankle.

KILLIAN

Well, I hardly think I was overstating things. I mean, I heard a terrifying scream and then it sounded like an avalanche of hats and shoes crashing into the rear foyer.

VIVIAN

I did give you a bit of a fright, didn't I?

KILLIAN

You most certainly did. I have no idea why you didn't call for me to assist you with your bags instead of compelling me to come to your rescue after the fact.

VIVIAN

Why would I, my darling? You were busy with Hubert. I didn't want to bother you.

KILLIAN

I was so distraught; I scarcely took the time to examine the paperwork I was signing. So many forms and documents and numbers... And I simply couldn't focus, having been so worried about you.

VIVIAN

I'm so sorry...

DEIRDRE

...Stand by sound cue five.

REGGIE

Sound cue five, standing by...

KILLIAN

...Oh, it's all right. It isn't your fault. Except I suspect that was the precise moment Hubert chose to take advantage of me. Of us. I must have signed away our entire fortune, Priscilla.

VIVIAN

Oh, Kenneth...

KILLIAN

...What an absolute fool I was. And to make matters worse, afterwards, I allowed Hubert to escort you to the train station instead of waiting for Gregory to return, so that he might drive you there himself. How betrayed you must feel, Priscilla. I know that's exactly how I feel.

(Resigned.)

Hubert took everything. Everything of value that is. Except of course for you, my darling...

DEIRDRE

...Sound cue five, telephone ring, go.

(The phone rings.)

KILLIAN

Now who could that be, calling so late in the evening?

VIVIAN

I'm leaving you, Kenneth.

KILLIAN

Well, don't go too far, Priscilla. I won't be long.

(He reaches for the receiver.)

VIVIAN

No. What I mean to say is, I want a divorce.

KILLIAN

A divorce!?

VIVIAN

Yes. And I would greatly appreciate it if you didn't make things difficult in the process. Now, if you'll excuse me, I will be spending the night in one of our superior guest rooms.

(Vivian exits through the Study doors, closing them behind her.)

KILLIAN

Will this nightmare never end?

(Fiona enters from the closet wearing the negligee).

FIONA

(Elevated whisper.)

Kenneth...!

KILLIAN

Not now!

(He pushes Fiona back into the closet and closes the door. He returns to the desk and picks up the receiver.)

Hallo...? Oh, hallo, detective... No. No, it's no trouble at all. I'm wide awake... Say again... Really...? Well, that's wonderful news! So, Hubert's been captured, has he...? Oh. Sorry, I misunderstood; he's been located. So, it's now just a matter of reaching him.. I see. And so, where is he now...? My apologies, detective, it seems we have a bad connection; he's where...? Oh, he is? Well, what a strange coincidence. My wife, Priscilla, just this evening returned from Biarritz...

(His eyes widen. He puts his hand over the receiver and turns front.)

Oh my God...

(Back to the phone.)

Uh... Yes. Er, um... Sorry, detective... Yes. Yes, I'm here... No, no. No. Nothing's the matter. It's just that... Well now listen to me, detective. I've changed my mind, you see. I think we should just drop the matter altogether... Yes... Yes, I've just this minute had a change of heart... No, there's nothing more you need do... I'm very certain. After all, it's through nobody's fault but my own that I find myself in this dreadful predicament... Yes... Thank you for your time, detective... Yes, of course. If anything changes, I'll be sure to call you directly... Bye now.

(He replaces the receiver. Silence. He turns to the closet. He waits. Nothing. He crosses to the closet door. Fiona enters from the closet, hitting Killian with the door.)

FIONA

(Elevated whisper.)

Kenneth...!

(Killian is concealed by the door. Silence. Elevated whisper.)

Kenneth...!

(Fiona steps downstage. The closet door closes slowly behind her, revealing Killian. He is pinching his nose with a handkerchief.)

Ken...!

(Fiona turns to see him.)

Oh, dear. Are you all right?

KILLIAN

Do I look all right?

FIONA

Compared to what?

KILLIAN

(Sardonically.)

Compared to a diseased badger.

FIONA

You've looked worse.

KILLIAN

How kind of you.

FIONA

Is it safe to come out, my dear?

KILLIAN

Right. Of course. By all means, let's just carry on, why don't we. Never mind that my nose has been twice busted and that I've likely cracked a half dozen ribs.

FIONA

Hm... Yes... That's all very troublesome, Kenneth. Except that what I'm really concerned about at the moment is whether it's safe to come out.

KILLIAN

Yes, it's safe to come out. Priscilla's gone to bed. And I've just finished speaking with the detective.

FIONA

I overheard. Is it true that you've signed away your entire fortune?

KILLIAN

By all accounts, yes.

FIONA

And that your wife is leaving you?

KILLIAN

Indeed. And to compound matters further, it seems she's been having an affair with Hubert. I fully believe that they conspired together to rid me of my worldly possessions. Except, of course, my most valuable possession.

(Killian moves in close to Fiona.)

FIONA

(Rebuffing him.)

Is that how you regard me, Kenneth? As one of your possessions?

KILLIAN

No! I, uh...

FIONA

...Do you wonder why I've gone ahead and changed into my negligee?

KILLIAN

The timing is peculiar, Delores. Though I assure you, you will not hear any complaints from me.

FIONA

And do you like what you see?

KILLIAN

I've said as much, haven't I?

FIONA

Indeed, you have. So, if you'd like to see more, or for that matter, if you'd like to see me at all, ever again, I suggest you sort out your fiscal dilemma at once.

KILLIAN

Right. Of course. Well, I'm already ahead of you on that point, Delores.

FIONA

I'd hardly consider calling off the hunt for your crooked accountant a proper start.

KILLIAN

Yes, but you see, that's the brilliant part, my dear. I need the detective out of the way, so that I can employ my more sinister plan.

FIONA

Oh! I see. Which is...?

(Back in the Trap Room, Quinn paces. He is unwell.)

ALISTAIR

..Are you all right, Quinn?

QUINN

I need a drink.

ALISTAIR

That's the last thing you need.

QUINN

I don't think you understand, Alistair. I'm going through withdrawal here. I expect perhaps a little hair of the dog

should do the trick. Otherwise, I don't think I'll be able to go on.

ALISTAIR

Well, I hope you'll forgive me when I say, I cheerfully support you missing your entrance. I'm not the slightest bit eager to shuffle off this mortal coil, and especially onstage in a third-rate production, written by a third-rate playwright, and being performed by a pack of third-rate actors.

QUINN

I'm sorry, what?

ALISTAIR

Except for you, of course.

QUINN

(Resigned.)

No, no, no. You're right. Of course, you're absolutely right. Honestly, this whole production has been a disaster from the start. And it's only been made worse by Killian's inexorable desire to have you snuffed out.

(Beat.)

But listen, Alistair. It's imperative that I go on. I realize now that my entire career has been - well, to put it bluntly - a failure. Or, as you've already eloquently expressed, unremarkable...

ALISTAIR

Quinn...

QUINN

...No, it's true. I've always been overly cautious. I've never allowed myself the chance to play on those impulses that aren't rational, never daring to show the audience who I really am as an artist, as a performer. Never truly honoring the character I've been entrusted with portraying. Always playing it safe and insisting that I get things exactly right. And now, all these years later - and perhaps too late - I'm finally understanding that 'right' doesn't exist. Not in the theater in any case. A thespian's greatest achievement in life is finding the courage to be vulnerable. So, that's precisely what I'm going to do this evening onstage.

(Alistair starts to interject again.)

Now don't misunderstand, Alistair. I am fully aware of what's at stake for you. But you'll have to trust me. I have a plan.

ALISTAIR

Does your plan involve a petite, fatty scavenger fish?

QUINN

I don't think you're in any position to poke fun, Alistair.

ALISTAIR

Fair enough.

QUINN

So, no it does not involve a sardine. As it happens, I intend to employ a more sinister plan.

ALISTAIR

Oh! I see. Which is...?

(Back in the Study, Killian and Fiona are on top of the desk, in the throes of passion.)

DEIRDRE

...Stand by sound cue six.

REGGIE

Sound cue six, standing by..

(We see Vivian in the wings. She wears an exceedingly modest yet elaborate nightgown and carries a small and delicate decorative throw pillow. She is mildly distracted as she approaches the Study Doors. She enters.)

VIVIAN

Kenneth...!

DEIRDRE

...Sound cue six, teacup breaking, go.

(Vivian drops the pillow. We hear the sound of porcelain shattering. Vivian sneers.)

KILLIAN

...Priscilla! What have you done? That... small decorative throw pillow... is from my grandmother's priceless Turkish teacup and saucer collection!

VIVIAN

Yes, and speaking of antiques... It appears you're presently attempting to smother one.

FIONA

How dare you?

(Killian climbs off Fiona and, hence, the desk. Fiona follows suit.)

VIVIAN

How dare I? How dare you?

FIONA

How dare you?

VIVIAN

How dare you?

KILLIAN

That's enough!

VIVIAN

Are you honestly that stupid, Kenneth? Is it your intention to make it easier for me to divorce you?

KILLIAN

Rest assured, Priscilla, I will not challenge your efforts to put an end to our marriage. What I will not tolerate, however, is your attempt to relieve me of my entire fortune and to force me into poverty.

VIVIAN

I hardly think there's anything you can do about it.

KILLIAN

I sincerely disagree. I know what you've been up to, Priscilla. You and Hubert.

VIVIAN

Hubert!? I've no idea what you're talking about.

KILLIAN

Is that so? Do you recall I mentioned earlier that I spoke with the detective?

VIVIAN

Yes, I recall.

KILLIAN

And do you remember what he uncovered?

VIVIAN

Yes, I remember.

KILLIAN

Good. What you are not aware of, however - my darling - is that he made a further discovery. It seems that Hubert was just recently spotted in Biarritz.

VIVIAN

Oh, dear.

KILLIAN

And he was not alone.

VIVIAN

Wasn't he?

KILLIAN

No, Priscilla. As a matter of fact, he had a lady friend with him.

VIVIAN

I see. Well, he is unmarried you know. So, I hardly think it's inappropriate for him to be courting a young and attractive woman.

KILLIAN

Yes, well this woman was anything but young and attractive.

VIVIAN

How dare you!

FIONA

How dare you!

VIVIAN

How dare you!

KILLIAN

Aha! So, you admit the affair!

VIVIAN

I admit nothing.

KILLIAN

Drop the pretense, Priscilla. We have photographs of you and Hubert together.

FIONA

We do?

KILLIAN

(Emphatically.)

Yes, Delores! We do. Of course, we do. Taken by... the detective himself.

FIONA

Truly?

KILLIAN

Perhaps you should remain silent and leave the details to me, Delores. Hm? What do you say?

FIONA

If you insist.

KILLIAN

I do.

VIVIAN

Photographs, you say. Sounds dubious. And where are these alleged photographs?

KILLIAN

In my solicitor's possession. Sealed in an envelope and... locked away... in a safe.

VIVIAN

Is that so? I'd like to see them.

KILLIAN

You can't.

VIVIAN

Because they don't exist.

KILLIAN

They most certainly do.

VIVIAN

Prove it.

KILLIAN

All right then. One of them... contains an image.. of.. you and Hubert... drinking champagne on the terrace... of the Imperial suite... at the Hôtel du Palais... as he nibbles your exposed shoulder!

VIVIAN

Blast! We've been found out.

KILLIAN

Indeed, you have...

DEIRDRE

...Stand by light cue two, end of scene one, and sound cue seven, exit music.

REGGIE

Standing by...

VIVIAN

..And what is it you want from me, Kenneth?

KILLIAN

Now, listen carefully, Priscilla. I will not contest the divorce. And I will make absolute certain that you are financially solvent once everything has been finalized. However, I require that you to do one thing for me first.

VIVIAN

I knew there'd be a catch. And what is it I'm expected to do, my darling?

KILLIAN

You will telephone Hubert straight away and you will insist he return to London immediately. To this very house.

VIVIAN

And for what purpose, Kenneth?

KILLIAN

So that I may exact my revenge of course.

VIVIAN

That's ridiculous. Hubert's expecting me to travel back to Biarritz in three days' time. So, what do you propose I tell him to convince him to return here?

KILLIAN

You'll think of something.

VIVIAN

And if I refuse...?

DEIRDRE

...Light cue two, sound cue seven...

KILLIAN

...Gregory won't be the only corpse resting under the grand portico tonight...

(Killian offers the telephone receiver to Vivian.)

DEIRDRE

(Quietly to herself.)

...Damn it, Killian...

(Perhaps too loudly with the cue.)

...Go!

(Dramatic music plays as the lights fade on the Study.)

Reggie.

REGGIE

Yes, Deirdre?

DEIRDRE

Retrieve Alistair and to bring him to the stage, please.

REGGIE

Right.

DEIRDRE

Before you go, cue Quinn. Best to have him waiting in the wings ready to go on for scene two.

REGGIE

Got it.

(Reggie pushes some buttons or manipulates some controls. This time, there comes a loud pop and a flash, followed by smoke. Back in the Trap Room, the cue calling apparatus pops and flashes and smokes as well. Everyone, including those "onstage", is startled; mixed audible reactions from each of them. All action comes to an abrupt stop as lights go dark. Total blackness. A long moment passes before the lights begin to flicker. We see Quinn standing behind Deirdre. He is swigging her latest bottle of Macallan's. She is unaware of his presence as she futzes with the light board.)

DEIRDRE

(Elevated whisper.)

Reggie? Reggie, are you there? It seems we're having a problem with the electrical, love.

(Lights go dark again. Another moment passes before they begin to flicker. Killian, Fiona, and Vivian stand confused still in the Study.)

KILLIAN

(Elevated whisper.)

What the hell is going on now!? I mean seriously, is this really...!? Are we expected to just...!? Oh, for fucksake...

VIVIAN

(Elevated whisper.)

All right, darling. Calm down and keep your mouth closed. They'll hear us.

KILLIAN

(Elevated whisper.)

Who will hear us!?

VIVIAN

(Elevated whisper.)

The audience.

KILLIAN

(Elevated whisper.)

Fuck the audience!

FIONA

*(She has made her way to the closet.
Elevated whisper.)*

Vivian. Killian. I've found the way out. Follow me.

*(She exits into the closet. We hear a
thump.)*

Bloody hell.

*(We hear a thud. Fiona has fallen
unconscious to the floor.)*

VIVIAN

*(She crosses to the closet and looks
in. Elevated whisper.)*

She's out yet again.

KILLIAN

(Elevated whisper.)

Oh, for fucksake.

*(Lights go dark again. Another moment
passes before they begin to flicker. We
see Quinn, who is just pulling the key
to Alistair's restraints out of
Reggie's back pocket.)*

REGGIE

(Elevated whisper.)

Dierdre? Deirdre, are you there? It seems we're having a problem with the electrical.

(Lights go dark again. Silence.)

Scene 3

(Nearly continuous from Scene 2. All lights come sputtering up. Everything is back to "normal". Vivian and Fiona are in the Trap Room. Alistair is noticeably absent; his restraints are on the floor. Reggie and Deirdre are at their stations. In the Study, someone - presumably, Quinn - is tied to a chair with rope. He wears a sack over his head. Killian stands over him.)

KILLIAN

I underestimated you, Hubert. You weren't just my accountant; I considered you a friend. A close friend. And you know, there's a part of me that feels as if I don't have the right to be furious with you. I should in fact be furious with myself for having been so naïve. And not only should I not be furious with you, but I should also perhaps congratulate you as well. On a job well done. A master of deception. Except that you failed. Miserably.

I remember the day I interviewed you for the position. You arrived wearing a blue suit. And I thought to myself, "Well, that's a bold color choice for an accountant." And then I asked you to have a seat - as it happens, the seat you're sitting in at this very moment. And I offered you tea and biscuits, which Priscilla was kind enough to deliver herself. And which you devoured in short order. And after a bit of amiable small talk, you and I decided it was time to get down to business.

Do you recall, Hubert? I asked you one simple question; a question that any middling bookkeeper might take offense at. But not you. I asked you, "Can you tell me what two plus two equals?" I was pleased to see that your demeanor had not changed. And in fact, I saw a bit of a twinkle in your eye. You paused a moment and then you answered, "What would you like it to equal?"

And that's the moment I knew - This is the man for the job. I mean, you don't really fit the accountant stereotype, now do you, Hubert? You aren't a man who gets excited over unexciting things. You aren't a man who has all the charms of an undertaker. And you certainly aren't a man whose personality functions like a contraceptive. What you are, however, is a man who craves a challenge; a man who craves adventure.

And therein lies the rub of course. Because when you boil it all down, you're really nothing more than a swindler, Hubert. A despicable swindler who happens to possess a dazzling array of

despicable swindler tricks. But never once did I believe you would actually use those tricks against me. You've betrayed me, Hubert. And for that very reason, you will now pay with your life.

(Killian crosses to and retrieves the horseman's pick. As he does, the man in the chair throws himself to the floor, breaking the chair and freeing himself of the ropes. The sack over his head remains fixed. The extended fight which follows will be like what Killian described in Act 1, except different enough that Killian will appear rather unprepared throughout. At some point, the horseman's pick will be cast off and the two men will crash through the breakaway Study door. As soon as that occurs, Killian returns to the Study, picks up the horseman's pick, and turns to face the Study doors. At the same time, we see Reggie race into the wings. A moment passes before we see another man - presumably, Alistair with a sack over his head - rush into the Study. But before he can meet his demise at the pointy tip of the horseman's pick, he falls through the trapdoor, landing with a thud on the Trap Room floor. Vivian and Fiona shriek. Lights to black.)

Scene 4

(A few minutes later. Back in the Trap Room, a man - presumably, Alistair - lies on the floor. Vivian and Fiona stand over him.)

VIVIAN

Is he dead?

FIONA

I don't think so.

(She leans in.)

Alistair? Alistair, are you all right?

(The man moans.)

Oh, thank God. He's breathing, at least.

(Killian and Reggie race into the Trap Room.)

REGGIE

Has he popped his clogs?

VIVIAN

Sadly, no. It appears he's survived the fall.

KILLIAN

All right then. Let's get him to his feet. Come on, Reggie.

(Killian and Reggie cross to help the man off the floor.)

FIONA

Don't you think he's suffered enough, Killian?

KILLIAN

Yes, Fiona. As a matter of fact, I do. So, there's no need for further concern. I'm not going to hurt him.

(To Reggie.)

Come on then. Let's get him upright and into a chair.

(Fiona retrieves a chair and brings it to them. Killian and Reggie lift the man and place him carefully in it. Deirdre enters.)

DEIRDRE

The paramedics are on their way.

ALL

Thank you, paramedics!

DEIRDRE

And the audience has been sent packing.

VIVIAN

They must've been utterly confused.

DEIRDRE

Actually no. Most everyone loved it. Some of them were overwhelmed; said it reminded them of the works of the late Sarah Kane.

FIONA

She's quite depressing.

DEIRDRE

Indeed. And several left in tears, though it's hard to pinpoint what drove them to it.

(Beat.)

Oh, and as a matter of note, the actor who's slated to replace Quinn next week was in the audience tonight as well.

FIONA

Oh, well that's lovely. Did he have any thoughts on the performance?

DEIRDRE

Yes. He thought he should set fire to his contract and then toss it into one of the lobby bins.

FIONA

Oh, dear.

DEIRDRE

Exactly. So, we're stuck with Quinn in the short-term.

(The man in the chair - who is not Alistair - removes his sack.)

QUINN

No, you're not. I quit.

ALL

Quinn?!

QUINN

That's right. Quinn Ponsonby. The maestro of mediocrity. The human punching bag. The man who has failed miserably at everything in life, except for having - just moments ago - survived a one story drop onto a concrete floor. Though who knows, really. I may be suffering a concussion and some internal bleeding that could lead to my death within minutes. I mean, one can only hope.

KILLIAN

I'm so sorry, Quinn. This is all my fault.

QUINN

(Sardonically.)

Is it?

KILLIAN

Yes. I take full responsibility.

QUINN

(Sardonically.)

Do you?

KILLIAN

Well, of course.

QUINN

Excellent. So, then with all due respect, shut the fuck up.

(Killian clears away.)

FIONA

Hold on. Haven't we forgotten someone?

QUINN

Do you mean Alistair?

VIVIAN

Yes, of course she means Alistair, darling. What's become of him?

QUINN

He's escaped, you imbeciles. I mean, honestly. Did you expect he'd stick around for the after party?

FIONA

Oh! Have we got one scheduled? How nice.

KILLIAN

No. No. No, no, no, Fiona. There is no after party.

(Beat.)

Oh my God. What have I done? I've made an absolute mess of everything. Alistair must have spoken to the authorities by now.

(Alistair enters.)

ALISTAIR

As it happens, I have not...

ALL

...Alistair...?!

ALISTAIR

...That is to say, I haven't spoken to the authorities just yet. Though I am preserving it as an option, my dear Killian.

KILLIAN

I see. Right. Understood. Okay, so what is it you're after, Alistair? Because listen, I'll do anything you ask. I mean it. Anything at all.

ALISTAIR

Truly? Anything?

KILLIAN

Yes, of course. Whatever it takes to undo what's been done; to expunge this entire evening from our collective memories.

ALISTAIR

Hm. I see. Well, I do suppose there is one thing you could do for me that I believe might set everything straight.

KILLIAN

All right then. Call it out, Alistair. There isn't anything I won't do.

ALISTAIR

So, I have your word then?

KILLIAN

Unquestionably.

ALISTAIR

Good.

(With great pride and gusto.)

So, listen. I'm very excited to announce that I've just completed my first full length, three act historical drama, based on the life and tragic death of Button Gwinnet, an American founding father. You see, Button was relatively unknown until he signed the Declaration of Independence on August 2nd, 1776. And his autograph is highly sought after by avid collectors, since there are only fifty-one known samples to exist. And why so few samples you ask? Well, because shortly after he signed the Declaration, he was shot and killed during a

duel with his political and military rival, Lachlan McIntosh, who blamed Button for his failed invasion of British-controlled East Florida.

KILLIAN

Sounds absolutely riveting, Alistair. And you'd like my feedback on the script, is that it?

ALISTAIR

Oh, dear God, no. What a terrible thought. An actor being permitted input on a playscript? Have you gone stark staring mad, Killian? No. No. No, no, no!

(Beat.)

Though I'd be honored to have you perform the title role.

KILLIAN

(He turns front.)

Oh, for fucksake.

(Lights to black.)

(End of play.)