COOLER

A play in two acts
By Craig Houk

PERUSAL

© 2023 by Craig Houk
1325 Taylor Street NW, APT 2
Washington, DC 20011
617-515-1838
houk1969@gmail.com

Synopsis

Aging Oscar-winner Jack Dunn emerges from years of self-imposed exile in Alaska to reconnect with his oldest friend, and fiercest rival, Wade Henry, a Tony-winning stage actor weathering his own uncertain season in a well-appointed Connecticut home. What begins as a late-night poker game fueled by expensive whiskey and shared history gradually exposes old resentments, professional jealousy, and the lingering shadow of a woman who once stood between them. As talk turns to a highly anticipated new play that could redefine (or quietly diminish) a legacy, the evening slips from nostalgic to volatile. With egos bruised and memories distorted, Jack and Wade find themselves trapped in a dangerous game where performance and reality blur, alliances shift, and the stakes extend far beyond the cards on the table.

Characters

JACK DUNN (Age Early to Mid-60s, Any Race)
WADE HENRY (Age Early to Mid-60s, Any Race)
WOMAN
    Plays DELIA SABATINI (Age 90s, Italian American)
    Plays JUDITH WILLIAMS (Age 30s, Any Race)

Character Notes

Jack and Wade are actors from a different era; they've been professional artists nearly their entire lives. And, as with many if not all actors, they're always performing.

Setting

Wade's home, in an affluent Connecticut neighborhood. His den is comfortably appointed, anchored by a large window. A Tony Award sits in plain view, surrounded by other theater and film awards. Shelves are lined with playscripts and screenplays. Instead of doors, a large archway opens into a hallway that leads off in one direction.

Time

The present. After midnight.

Note About the Play Title

In the game of poker, a cooler refers to a situation in which a strong hand, usually played correctly, loses to an even stronger holding. In a cooler situation you lose, not because you were outplayed, but because of the luck of the draw.

PERUSAL

ACT ONE

Mid-September. After midnight. Thunder in the distance. Occasional flashes of lightning. Lights rise slowly on the den.

(The room bears the aftermath of a poker game: empty glasses, bottles, plates, scattered snacks. Jack stands alone, finishing a drink, studying a lineup of awards.)

WADE

(Off.)

Hey, Charlie! Take it easy! Watch where you're going there! Holy Christ and down he goes! Can one of you guys help Charlie out of the bushes, please? Unbelievable! Thank you! And don't let him drive! And don't just dump him on the lawn; get him inside his house this time! I mean it! Alright, we all sorted now? Good! Get home safe, fellas!

(Sound of cars peeling off. Silence. Then Wade enters.)

That was a goddam shitshow.

(The phone rings.)

And there she is, right on cue.

(Wade picks up the receiver.)

Hello…? Ah. Mrs. Sabatini. What can I do for you at this late hour…? Uh-huh… Well, technically those bushes are on my property, so… I'm sorry, what…? Oh, shit. I see. And how much fencing are we talking…? Okay. Well, that's a lot. Alright. I'll write you a check, and I'll bring it over first thing in the morning… Okay, okay, I'll make it a blank check but don't go crazy, you hear me…? No, no. Everyone's gone. Quiet as the grave, I promise… Yes, and a very good night to you too, Mrs. Sabatini.

(He hangs up.)

We'd better keep it down, Jack.

JACK

I suppose we'd better.

WADE

Otherwise, we're asking for trouble.

JACK

Last thing we need.

PERUSAL

WADE

Ain't that the truth. Oh, hey. I put your bags in the guest room. Top of the stairs, end of the hall on the left. Fresh sheets, towels… It's got a private bath–

JACK

That's very nice. Thanks, Wade.

WADE

Otherwise, if you're not too tired, maybe we could have a nightcap. What do you think?

JACK

A nightcap?

WADE

Yeah. I mean, if you're up for it.

JACK

Guess I'm still a little wired, so what's one more drink?

WADE

Excellent. I'll get the good whiskey.

JACK

What? No, no. You should save that for something special.

WADE

What're you talking about? This is special. It's been way too long, Jack.

JACK

Yeah, it has, but–

WADE

No "buts." We're celebrating.

JACK

If you say so.

WADE

I do say so.

PERUSAL

JACK

Alright then.

(Wade retrieves a bottle of nice whiskey and pours two drinks.)

It really is good to see you, Wade.

WADE

You too.

JACK

And I appreciate you putting me up for the night.

WADE

Wouldn't have it any other way. Oh. And sorry about the, uh… impromptu poker game. Word got out you were in town, and… well… anything short of a get-together would've likely ended in a riot.

JACK

Charlie was especially fucked up tonight.

WADE

Yeah. I don't know what was going on with him. One minute he's fine, running his mouth as usual, the next he steps out for a smoke, and when he comes back, he's all of a sudden a different man. Barely a peep out of him after that.

JACK

He seemed spooked.

WADE

Who the fuck knows? He's an idiot. They're all idiots.

JACK

You and me included.

WADE

Fair enough. Anyway, now that they're gone, it'll give the two of us the chance to catch up on things.

JACK

Good.

PERUSAL

(Wade hands him a drink. Jack takes both, sets them down, opens his arms.)

WADE

What the hell are you doing?

JACK

Bring it in, my friend.

WADE

You're kidding me, right?

JACK

No. Come here.

WADE

This is very unlike you, Jack.

JACK

Maybe I'm getting a little soft in my old age.

WADE

I doubt it.

JACK

You want a hug or not? It's a very limited-time offer.

WADE

Alright. Why the hell not?

(They hug. It may be sincere or awkward. Perhaps both.)

Okay. That's enough of that.

(They grab their drinks.)

Cheers.

JACK

Cheers.

(They drink.)

I was just taking a look at your trophies over here.

PERUSAL

WADE

Oh, yeah?

JACK

Still got that Tony front and center.

WADE

Yeah, well… you've got plenty of your own, right?

JACK

Never won a Tony.

WADE

Maybe not, but you've got an Oscar.

JACK

That I do.

WADE

You see one of those here?

JACK

I do not.

WADE

So, then what's the problem?

JACK

No problem. Just… always thought of myself as a stage actor. Always wanted a Tony.

WADE

Well, you're not dead yet. So, there's still time.

JACK

Fair point.

WADE

So, what the hell happened to you? Huh? You just fuck right off to the North Pole and don't tell anyone? I have to hear about it on the news?

PERUSAL

JACK

Alaska's not the North Pole, Wade.

WADE

Close enough.

JACK

I was up in McGrath.

WADE

Okay. Why?

JACK

No one knows me there.

WADE

And?

JACK

And that's it. I bought a cabin there years ago.

WADE

First I'm hearing of it.

JACK

Well, it was meant to be a secret. Just somewhere I could go when I needed time to myself.

WADE

And what the hell do you do up there?

JACK

I don't know. Some reading, some fishing. Also, a lot of drinking. Other than that, I try to keep to myself.

WADE

Well, no offense, Jack, but that sounds shit awful. Please tell me you at least get laid once in a while.

JACK

I may have a lady friend.

PERUSAL

WADE

Or two.

JACK

Or two.

WADE

Okay, well there's that. Do they at least have a full set of teeth?

JACK

Come on, Wade…

WADE

Do they?

JACK

Of course, they do. Smart ass. And even if they didn't, I'm in no position to complain. At our age, you take what you can get.

WADE

Fair enough. Three years, Jack.

JACK

Almost four.

WADE

That's a long time.

JACK

You saying you missed me, Wade?

WADE

Of course I missed you. Everyone did. Mostly I worried, though. Thought you might just wander out onto the ice and, I don't know, wait for it to melt.

JACK

You're kidding me, right?

WADE

What?

PERUSAL

JACK

Are you serious?

WADE

What're you talking about?

JACK

You thought I'd kill myself?

WADE

What? / No.

JACK

/ Are you out of your fucking mind?

WADE

No, that's not what I meant / at all.

JACK

/ Wait for the ice to melt? Like if I didn't freeze to death first, I would just what? Let myself drown? That's fucking morbid, Wade. Jesus.

WADE

Now hang on a second–

JACK

I went away for some solitude. Okay? Not to off myself. Jesus Christ, what's the matter / with you?

WADE

/ Take it easy, Jack. It's not what I– It just came out wrong. I wasn't trying to suggest that– Look, just forget I said it. Okay? Jack, I'm sorry. Are we good?

JACK

Yeah, we're good. Though I did think about killing you once or twice while I was up there.

WADE

You're an asshole.

JACK

I'd argue you're the asshole, but I generally prefer not to argue.

PERUSAL

WADE

Me neither.

JACK

(Holding out his glass.)

I'll have another.

WADE

Same?

JACK

Keep 'em coming.

(Wade pours two drinks.)

Hey. So, how's Kate doing?

WADE

Oh. Well… she's… good.

JACK

Didn't want to ask in front of the guys.

WADE

Yeah. No, she's good. She's, uh… over in Europe. Shooting a film.

JACK

Oh, yeah?

WADE

Prague.

JACK

Beautiful city.

WADE

It is.

JACK

Thought she was taking a break from directing.

PERUSAL

WADE

Yeah, well, she talked about it. And then of course she took one. Spent a few months alone with me and then she went back to work. Guess she decided she had better things to do with her time than to hang out with a useless old fart.

JACK

She loves you, Wade.

WADE

When she's not threatening to leave me.

JACK

She's young. She'll figure it out.

WADE

Or she'll file for divorce.

JACK

That's what I meant.

(He smiles.)

WADE

I'm guessing you didn't spend your time away working on your genial disposition.

JACK

Oh, come on, Wade. What is it? Your third marriage? It's not like I'm wishing you bad luck. I just figured you'd be used to it by now.

WADE

Says the guy who's never had a wife. Sorry, that's not fair. You almost had one once. Till you scared her off.

JACK

Yeah… I think maybe I deserved that.

WADE

No. You most certainly did not. I'm sorry, Jack. I crossed a line.

JACK

No, no. I'm the one who should be sorry.

PERUSAL

WADE

You know what? Fuck it. No apologies. You're my friend. And I appreciate the honesty.

JACK

Likewise.

WADE

We keep each other honest.

JACK

Agreed.

WADE

So, why'd you come back then? Got something lined up?

JACK

Pfft. No. God, I wish.

WADE

Then what? Just visiting? Or maybe thinking about moving back? Plenty of people around here who'd like to see more of you.

JACK

And plenty who wouldn't.

WADE

We all have enemies. Comes with the territory.

JACK

I suppose.

WADE

Alright. So, you're here. What's next?

JACK

I don't know yet. I do miss acting. Which is crazy. Wasn't that long ago I couldn't wait to get away from it.

WADE

I know the feeling.

PERUSAL

JACK

So, yeah. Just a visit. For now.

WADE

Right.

JACK

What about you? How've things been?

WADE

Ah, shit. Pretty dry. Not much work. A few nibbles here and there, nothing worth talking about.

JACK

Yeah?

WADE

Yeah. I try to stay optimistic, but who the hell knows. I mean, at our age… the last job might very well be the last job. You know?

JACK

I do.

WADE

So, I'm just trying to enjoy what's left of the rest of my life. That's about all you can do, right.

JACK

Except who's to say what the rest of your life's gonna look like. Unless you have a plan. Unless you're willing to do something about it.

WADE

Hm. And are we talking about me? Or you?

JACK

Just talking in general.

WADE

Of course you are.

JACK

So… what do you think? Wanna play another hand?

PERUSAL

WADE

Another hand? Oh, I don't know. It's late. You sure?

JACK

I'm the one who suggested it.

WADE

Fair enough. Alright. Why not?

JACK

Good. Have a seat. You deal.

(They move to the table and sit.)

WADE

Okay. So… what'll it be?

JACK

Five Card Draw.

WADE

Easy enough.

(Wade reaches for a deck.)

JACK

You got a fresh deck?

WADE

Yeah. As a matter of fact, I do. Right over here.

(Wade grabs a new deck from a drawer. Jack pours them both another drink.)

Alright. Here we go.

(Wade sits, starts unwrapping the deck.)

Listen. I don't mind opening a new one, I've got plenty. Just seems a little odd, is all. I mean, I'm the guy who lost his shirt tonight. So, I'm thinking maybe the one we've already been using ought to bring you better luck.

JACK

Exactly. So, we start fresh with a new deck. Level the playing field.

PERUSAL

WADE

That's very generous of you, Jack. And if it helps me win some of my money back, I'm all for it.

(Wade adeptly shuffles the cards.)

JACK

What's the ante?

WADE

Let's, uh… start with a C-note.

JACK

I can manage that.

(Both toss in a chip. Wade shuffles, offers the deck to Jack to cut. Jack taps it. Wade deals five cards each, sets the deck down. They study their hands. Jack tosses in another chip. Wade follows with a chip.)

WADE

Call.

(They look over their cards.)

JACK

My Dad taught me how to play.

WADE

Oh, yeah?

JACK

Yeah. He was a master at it. Always raking it in at the casinos.

WADE

Well, shit. Of course, he did. And now here I am playing against the goddam apple.

JACK

I'll take one.

(Jack discards one. Wade burns a card, deals the next card to Jack.)

WADE

Two for me.

PERUSAL

(Wade discards two, deals himself two. They study their hands.)

JACK

I was just fourteen when he passed.

WADE

Jesus. I'm sorry.

JACK

Long time ago.

WADE

You never mentioned it.

JACK

Not my favorite memory.

WADE

Still… that's rough.

JACK

Yeah. Barely a hair on my chin, and then suddenly I'm the man of the house. And I remember thinking, this is bullshit. I mean, I loved my Dad, of course. We were close. I was… devastated. But I was also pissed off that he left me in charge. You know? I mean, what the hell did I know about taking care of my mother? She was a mess – which, fair enough – but I was the last thing on her mind. Neighbors dropping off food. Family dropping off food. Everyone dropping off food. Most of it garbage. Half of it rotting away on the counter because she needed time to grieve. Everything else just… waited. And if one more person told me my dad was "in a better place," I swear to God I was gonna find something sharp and force it through their fucking skull. A better place for him would've been with us. Not in the ground.

(He looks at his cards.)

Check.

WADE

Check.

(Jack lays his hand down.)

JACK

Flush.

PERUSAL

WADE

Son of a– Are you fucking kidding me right now?

JACK

Hey. At least I didn't go all in. You know, because I happen to be a generous man.

WADE

(Quiet, irritated.)

Goddamit. Alright. One more hand, and then that's it, Jack. I mean it. Double or nothing.

JACK

You're a masochist.

WADE

Piss off.

JACK

Alright, Wade. One more.

WADE

(Offers the deck to Jack.)

Here you go.

JACK

No, no. You deal.

WADE

You sure?

JACK

Not even a little. Matter of fact, I've lost track. But go ahead.

WADE

Alright then.

(Wade shuffles again. Offers the deck. Jack cuts it this time. Wade deals five each, sets the deck down. They study their hands.)

JACK

I'll take three.

PERUSAL

(Jack discards three. Wade burns a card, deals three.)

WADE

Two for me.

(Wade discards two, deals himself two. They study their hands.)

JACK

Patrick McKinney.

WADE

What's that?

JACK

Patrick McKinney. The playwright. You familiar?

WADE

Of course, I am. What about him?

JACK

Hard to say exactly. Except I've heard some rumblings.

WADE

Oh, yeah? What about?

JACK

Heard he's working on something new. Or maybe he just finished it. Sounds like they're gearing up for a workshop. Not sure how far along it is.

WADE

Mm-hm.

JACK

And I hear there might be a role in it for, uh… a mature actor. Male. Our age. The kind of role that might… I don't know… reignite a fizzling career.

WADE

Right.

JACK

McKinney ain't no slouch. Chances of one of his plays being a flop are slim to none. Right, Wade?

PERUSAL

(Wade looks up from his cards.)

WADE

You have something you want to discuss with me, Jack?

JACK

Tell you what. Let's forget the money. Let's make this hand interesting.

WADE

Oh, yeah? How?

JACK

Anything of mine. Whatever you want… it's yours.

WADE

Get outta here.

JACK

If you win.

WADE

No way, Jack.

JACK

Why not? You afraid?

WADE

Afraid? What is this, grade school? Of course I'm not afraid. It's a stupid idea. And when a stupid idea presents itself, the smart guy in the situation, that being me in this case, feels obligated to call it what it is: stupid. And I don't get the sense you actually care what I want. So, why don't you just say it, Jack. What are you after?

JACK

I want that role. In McKinney's play.

WADE

And what makes you think I can help you with that?

JACK

Because you're the one who has it.

PERUSAL

WADE

Right. Okay. I think it's time for you to go to bed.

JACK

I'm serious, Wade.

WADE

I know you are. That's why I'm telling you, you can't have it.

JACK

Bullshit.

WADE

It's done, Jack. Contracts are signed. Money's in place. Everything's locked in. You remember how this works, right?

JACK

Contracts get broken every day. You've had a good run, Wade. A great run. You're already heading out on top. So why not, just this once, step aside and let your old friend have it?

WADE

Unbelievable. You actually think you're owed that role. Because of what? Your need to prove something? Even if I did step aside, which I am not doing, what makes you think they'd give it to you? You think you're better than me? You think they'd choose you over me? You're the coward who ran away because you couldn't hack it anymore. And now you show up, suddenly you've found your balls, and you think you get to take something from me that I earned? Fuck you, Jack. That role is mine. And you stay the hell out of my way, or I will / take you out.

JACK

/ All I'm asking for is a chance to / win it from you.

WADE

/ You're not listening.

JACK

So, there's nothing I have you'd / want?

WADE

/ Are we even having the same conversation?

(A standoff.)

PERUSAL

JACK

Wade–

WADE

Your property. In Goshen.

JACK

I'm sorry?

WADE

You asked what I want. That's it. Your place in Goshen.

JACK

You serious?

WADE

Dead serious.

JACK

Why the hell would you want that? It's a rundown cottage on three shitty acres. It's worth nothing.

WADE

You said anything, Jack.

JACK

Yeah, okay. But–

WADE

You want to play this game? You want to settle this with a poker hand? Then that's the wager.

JACK

I won't do it.

WADE

No? Why not?

JACK

You know why.

PERUSAL

WADE

I don't give a shit about that place anyway. I'd probably tear it down and build something nice.

JACK

Fuck you.

WADE

Good. And fuck you too. So, are we done here? Because I don't want to hear another word about that play. You're not screwing this up for me. You understand? No one tells me how or when I finish my career. No one. And certainly not you.

(The phone rings. Wade grabs it.)

Hello?

(Quietly, aside.)

Jesus Christ.

(Into the phone.)

Mrs. Sabatini! What can I do for you, my dear…? I did say the fellas went home, yes… I'm sorry, you can see what…?

(Quietly, aside.)

Ah, fuck.

(Into the phone.)

Yeah, well hang on a second.

(He sets the receiver down, crosses to the window, pulls the curtains shut, then returns and picks up the phone.)

I've closed the curtains. So, I'm thinking maybe you tuck your fancy little opera glasses back in their fancy little case, go to bed, and mind your own damn business… Okay, so maybe I'm just over here waving my arms into the abyss. You ever think of that…? There's no one here but me… Right. Well. Then I'm a whackadoodle who talks to himself. And you're a nosy cow whose eyes and ears don't work so well. So, moo to you and good night.

(He hangs up.)

That woman's got nothing better to do.

(Jack has poured drinks. He hands one to Wade.)

JACK

We agreed. No apologies.

PERUSAL

WADE

Wasn't planning on one.

JACK

Cheers.

WADE

Cheers.

(They drink.)

JACK

I was just taking a look at your trophies / over there.

WADE

/ We've already done that, Jack.

JACK

What?

WADE

We've already covered the trophies.

JACK

We have?

WADE

We have.

JACK

Right… So, where are we? Ah. Yeah. The, uh… the zesty tomato next door. So, what's her deal?

WADE

Oh, don't get me started on Delia. Though you best not call her by her given name if you know what's good for you.

JACK

She sounds like a hard-ass.

PERUSAL

WADE

She's in her nineties, except you wouldn't know it. Hates everyone in this neighborhood, but she's got a special place in her heart for me. Also fancies herself a medium. Just the other day she warned me about "a mysterious visitor, someone no longer of this world, a somber spirit on its way here, but not of its own volition." Her words. Verbatim. She's out of her mind.

JACK

Jesus. I'd never answer the phone.

WADE

Wouldn't matter. She'd be right there at the front door.

JACK

Christ. It's mostly industry people around here, though, right?

WADE

Yeah. Why?

JACK

I don't remember ever hearing the name Sabatini.

WADE

Oh. Yeah, no. The, uh… the Sabatini's made their money renting goats.

JACK

I'm sorry, what?

WADE

Goats. Yeah. They had a farm nearby, and if you had a shit ton of weeds to get rid of, you could rent a herd. They'd clear the place out and fertilize it while they were at it. Between that and the milk, the Sabatinis did very well for themselves. And when Delia's husband "passed," she sold the business and the farm, moved here, and I had the good fortune to buy the house next door.

JACK

Uh-huh. Well, the upside is, she'll be dead soon.

WADE

That's not very nice, Jack. Appealing, but not nice. Maybe we should keep that one to ourselves, huh? Hey. I gotta take a piss. Be right back.

PERUSAL

JACK

Take your time.

(Wade exits. Jack pours another drink, takes his glass to the window, parts the curtain slightly, peers out. Nothing. He lets the curtains fall closed. He turns back, studies the awards again, then drifts to the shelves. He pulls out scripts, replaces them until he finds one he recognizes. He sits. Studies the cover. Turns it over. Flips through pages and then stops. He finds a photograph tucked inside. Removes it and looks at it intently. Wade re-enters.)

I poured you another.

WADE

Thanks.

(He takes the drink, moves in, looks over Jack's shoulder at the photo.)

Wow. I forgot how red her hair was. And she had a lot of it. She was beautiful, Jack.

JACK

She was. And kind. Honest to a fault. Not timid, though.

WADE

No, she was not.

JACK

She had opinions. And she wasn't afraid to share them. She was smart–

WADE

That was a long time ago, Jack. No offense, but I never understood why you couldn't just let her go.

JACK

Are you serious? I had to chase her. She had no interest in me. Didn't give a damn I was a movie star. I mean, I had women throwing themselves at me–

WADE

And you weren't exactly turning them away.

JACK

Neither were you.

PERUSAL

WADE

Yeah, well, we were young.

JACK

But Judith. She was… something else.

WADE

She was playing hard to get.

JACK

No. No, that's where you're wrong. And I know you're wrong because "playing hard to get" is the only thing you've ever experienced. Judith was different. If she was gonna be with me, I had to earn it. I had to prove there was something… redeemable in me.

WADE

Well, you must've convinced her.

JACK

Maybe. Except she didn't go through with it. That cottage? That was for her. For us. But you already knew that, didn't you? That's where I was gonna retire. And I thought… maybe she and I'd spend the rest of our lives there. Alone. Together.

WADE

Alright, listen. There's no way to say this without sounding like a complete asshole but come on. Nothing good came out any of that. The publicity, the rumors, what it almost did to your career… The best thing that could've happened to you was her leaving.

JACK

Jesus, Wade. You make it sound like she ran off with someone.

WADE

Maybe she did. Who the hell knows? Either way, it's been a long while, Jack. Might be time to find some closure.

JACK

Oh, Christ. "Closure." Everyone's favorite fucking buzzword. Never thought I'd hear that coming out of your mouth. And you know, it's funny. You thinking three marriages is somehow better than none.

WADE

I never said that.

PERUSAL

JACK

In so many words, you did.

WADE

Alright. Well, if I did, I misspoke. Truth is… I like being married. Or maybe I don't. Maybe I just need to be. You know, because for me, divorce… well, it's failure. Just another one to add to the pile. And those stretches in between – those times away from my wife, my kids – they were awful, Jack. You think I drink a lot now? And the drugs… barely holding it together. Couldn't sleep. Depressed. And the guilt–

JACK

All this from the guy who suggested he wouldn't sleep with a woman unless she had a full set of teeth.

WADE

Yeah. And there it is. I figured that might come back to bite me in the ass. And you're right, Jack. My credibility's shot.

JACK

Relax, Wade. You're a man. And in my experience, despite what people like to say, we're at least as complicated as women. Maybe more. All that posturing we do. And for what? We're already idiots just by being male. So sure… why not bottle it all up? Just pack every bit of anger, frustration, disappointment into every crevice of every internal organ until our bodies just fucking break down and we drop dead. That should do wonders for the self-image, right?

WADE

Sounds like you've given it some thought.

JACK

More than most.

(He looks back down at the photo.)

Where'd you get this?

WADE

No idea. I've had it for years.

JACK

Who's the other woman?

PERUSAL

WADE

Oh. That's, uh… shit, what was her name? She did that film with us. Over in Beijing. I think this was taken on set.

JACK

(Holding up the script.)

"For Fear of Nightmares".

WADE

Oh, Jesus. Yeah. That's the one. Terrible title.

JACK

Terrible movie.

WADE

Box office hit.

JACK

Somehow.

WADE

Boosted both of our careers.

JACK

Bought me that Ferrari.

(Back to the photo.)

Judith flew in for a visit.

WADE

Krista Van Blair.

JACK

What's that?

WADE

The actress. Krista Van Blair. That was her name.

JACK

Right, right. Whatever happened to her?

PERUSAL

WADE

She's probably asking the same thing about us.

(A sudden knock at the window. They both turn, caught off guard.)

What the hell's that woman up to now?

JACK

Jesus. She always like this?

WADE

No. This is new.

(Wade crosses to the window.)

Okay, Delia, you're really starting to piss me off–

(He pulls the curtains open. Looks out. Then left. Then right. Quietly.)

What the fuck?

JACK

What?

WADE

There's no one out there.

JACK

She's screwing with you.

WADE

No. No, that's not how she operates. I'm gonna take a quick look outside.

JACK

Go get 'em, tiger.

(Wade exits. Jack sips his drink. He takes out his cell phone and taps it.)

Lorraine, it's Jack… Jack Dunn… Yeah, I know, it's been a while. Listen, I'm sorry. It's late, I know, but I just… No, no, no. I'm not looking for representation. That bus has definitely left the terminal. No, I'm just calling to ask you… What's that…? Oh, come on, Lorraine, you've gotta be kidding me. I thought we cleared that up… Yeah, well, nobody likes getting shit-canned from a show, least of all me. And I said I was sorry for the trouble it caused you, but… Jesus, Lorraine, can you just give me a break here? Please. Just listen. You're the best agent in New York, alright? I'm not just blowing smoke; I need your help. And I'll pay you… No, no. You're

PERUSAL

not hearing me. This is a one-time thing. And I won't bother you again. Just give me one minute. That's all I need. One minute. Please… Thank you. You don't know what this means to me.

(He takes a breath. Steadies himself.)

Okay. So, listen. Patrick McKinney has this play that he's– Hello?

(He hurls the phone. It shatters.)

Oh, fuck.

(He stands there, head lowered, fists clenched, breathing hard. Wade enters.)

WADE

I don't know what's going on. Delia's nowhere in sight. You alright, Jack? You look like you're about ready to go off.

JACK

My last play. The one I got fired from?

WADE

Yeah? What about it?

JACK

I couldn't remember my lines.

WADE

Okay. Well, so what? We've all been there.

JACK

No. This was different, Wade. We'd just started previews. I was making my first entrance. And I was feeling pretty fucking confident in that moment. There I was backstage, I was warmed up, I was limber, loose, ready to go, I was like a fucking freight train rolling on to that stage. Except that as soon as I hit my mark, my mind went blank. My body went hot. And I just stood there, in a haze. I could hardly make out what was in front of me. I could hear the other actors breathing and the audience muttering. Outside of that, it felt like someone'd just dropped a metal box over me. I couldn't move, there wasn't much air, and I had no goddam idea what I was supposed to do or say. Seemed like forever before I could pull myself together. But I did. Eventually. And then we moved on. We got through it. And then the next night? Same shit happens but at a different spot, later in the show. And then the third night? Same as the first, except this time I… I walked off. I fucking walked off. I left everyone standing there. I went to my dressing room, chugged some water, took a look at the script, steadied myself, and then went back onstage like nothing happened. But something did happen. I wasn't some cocky young actor anymore. I was a seasoned actor who was suddenly dealing with the gravity of the situation at hand, with the real

PERUSAL

responsibility of performing for an audience, of honoring the work, of sharing the stage with others who were depending on me. And I failed.

WADE

I had no idea.

JACK

Call it stage fright. Call it a panic attack. Whatever it was… it damn near ended me.

WADE

That's rough, Jack. I'm sorry.

JACK

You know why I became an actor?

WADE

Because your ego outweighs your fear of rejection.

JACK

Yeah, well that may've had something to do with it. But mostly… I just wanted to live an extraordinary life. You know? I wanted something most people might never have. A chance to leave a mark.

WADE

You've done that, Jack. We've both done that. But just like me, it's never gonna be enough for you, is it?

JACK

Wade…

WADE

Yeah?

JACK

You're gonna get me that role in McKinney's / play.

WADE

/ Okay. I figured that's where this was / going.

JACK

/ Don't patronize / me.

PERUSAL

WADE

/ Yeah, so listen. I think it's time for you to go. Plenty of hotels / nearby.

JACK

/ I'm not going anywhere until we settle this.

WADE

There's nothing to settle. And what exactly are you gonna do about it?

JACK

I'm gonna kick your ass.

WADE

Oh, yeah? And that solves it?

JACK

No. But I'll enjoy it. And, you know, I can't let things end like this.

WADE

End like what?

JACK

With you… stealing my thunder. Taking something that's mine. Something I earned.

WADE

Something you earned? You're a fucking idiot. You know, I am curious, though. Maybe you can run me through your little thought process here. Seriously. Explain to me how you think you're gonna get from where you are now, which is essentially out to pasture, to getting a role on a Broadway stage. My role. So, what? So, you're gonna kick my ass? You think that'll clear a path for you, big guy? I suppose I can be replaced; I'll give you that much. But you, Jack? Nobody wants to work with you anymore. You do know that, right? No one wants to work with you. Which means you're done, my friend. So, take the loss and move the fuck on.

(Jack takes a swing at Wade. Whether it lands or not, it ignites a full physical fight. They crash into furniture, struggle, grapple. It's messy, desperate. At some point, Jack grabs Wade's Tony.)

JACK

This is the end of the road for / you, Wade Henry.

WADE

/ Don't be so dramatic, Jack. You're embarrassing yourself. And put the fucking Tony down.

PERUSAL

(Jack advances, Tony raised. Wade backs up.)

Jack. Jack, don't. You need to calm down. You hear me? You're out of your fucking mind. Jack, don't!

(Jack swings. They disappear into the hallway. A loud crash off. Then silence. The phone rings. And rings. Stops. Silence. It rings again. Stops. Wade reappears. Disheveled. Breathing hard. He crosses to the phone. Rips the cord out. A louder knocking at the window. Wade crosses to the window, closes the curtains. He snaps.)

Enough!

(A crack of thunder. Flash of lightning. Lights go black. A power outage. In the darkness...)

Oh, for fuck's sake.

(End of Act One.)

PERUSAL

ACT TWO

Continuous from Act One. A crack of thunder. Lightning. Lights flicker, then come up full.

(Wade stands at the window. As he turns, Jack appears from the hallway.)

JACK

You okay?

WADE

Did you just ask me if I was okay?

JACK

I did.

WADE

You just tried to crack my skull open with my Tony, Jack.

JACK

Yeah, well… normally I'd apologize, but we agreed: no apologies.

(He shrugs.)

WADE

Right. Well, for what it's worth, I'm a little concerned about my wellbeing at the moment.

JACK

Understandable.

WADE

Is it?

JACK

So, what are you gonna do then? Call the police?

WADE

I thought about it. Pretty sure I busted the phone, though.

JACK

Yeah, well I busted mine too. You don't have a cell?

PERUSAL

WADE

No. Because I'm an old man and I hate cell phones. Though I'm starting to reconsider it.

JACK

Fair enough. You've got another phone in the house, though, right?

WADE

I do.

JACK

Well, I won't stop you if it's what you want to do.

WADE

It'd be a lot easier if you just grabbed your shit and left.

JACK

Or we could talk. Clear the air.

WADE

You really think that's gonna help?

JACK

I do. Because, you know, it feels like maybe we got off on the wrong foot.

WADE

One of us might need stitches, so I'm inclined to agree.

JACK

So, we start over then. What do you say?

WADE

Start over?

JACK

Yeah.

WADE

From where, Jack? Where exactly do you suggest we start? Because I'm not even sure how we got here. It's like we've been moving around on some fucked up carousel, and we've been jumping off and then right back on again in random spots.

PERUSAL

JACK

Yeah. Well, it's called "life", Wade.

WADE

Maybe. But it's no way to live.

(A doorbell rings.)

Oh, Jesus. Let's put a pin in this. I'll be right back.

(Wade exits. The moment he's gone, knocking at the window. Jack turns. Moves slowly to the window. Peers out. Nothing. Wade, off.)

Alright. Listen, Delia–

DELIA

(Off.)

Don't you call me Delia, / piccolo Bastardo!

WADE

(Off.)

/ I'll call you whatever I damn well feel / like calling you!

DELIA

(Off.)

/ I want to know what the devil's going on / over here!

WADE

(Off.)

/ It's none of your damn business. And I'm sick and tired of having to explain myself to you. I'm a grown man!

DELIA

(Off.)

A grown man? Please! You're a ragazzo!

WADE

(Off.)

You need to go!

PERUSAL

DELIA

(Off.)

I'm not going anywhere! All I hear is yelling and fighting and / things breaking.

WADE

(Off.)

/ Go get yourself some earplugs then! And then go back to bed!

DELIA

(Off.)

I'm old; I don't have time for sleep!

WADE

(Off.)

So, what then? You're gonna spend what's left of your miserable life nagging the hell out of / me?

DELIA

(Off.)

/ I'm coming in!

WADE

(Off.)

Oh, no you're not!

DELIA

(Off.)

Who's gonna stop me?

WADE

(Off.)

I'm gonna stop you!

DELIA

(Off.)

You better not lay a finger on me, / stronzo!

PERUSAL

WADE

(Off.)

/ I'm not kidding, Delia! Don't take another / step!

DELIA

(Off.)

/ Keep your hands / to yourself!

WADE

(Off.)

/ You gotta stop pushing me, okay? You're gonna get yourself / hurt!

DELIA

(Off.)

/ Get out of my / way!

WADE

(Off.)

/ Delia, stop!

(A thud – a body hitting the floor. The lights flicker. Silence.)

JACK

Wade?

WADE

(Off.)

Stay where you are, Jack! I'll be right there!

JACK

Everything okay?

WADE

(Off.)

Just give me a goddam minute!

(The lights flicker again. Jack pours two drinks. Wade enters. Jack hands him a glass. They drink quietly.)

PERUSAL

JACK

What happ–?

WADE

She fell.

JACK

Right. And she's–?

WADE

She's dead.

JACK

Mm hm. And you–?

WADE

I put her in my office. Any more questions?

JACK

Just one. Who's the idiot now?

WADE

Go to hell.

(They drink.)

JACK

So, what are you gonna do?

WADE

I don't know yet, Jack. I need a minute to think. Okay? And maybe to calm down, if that's alright with you. I just killed a woman. And it's a little hard to unwind something like that. She's been dead all of a minute and you're asking me for a plan? It's not like I've got experience here. So, if you've got suggestions, I'm all ears.

JACK

Right. Okay. Well… if you leave her where she is, and given the time of year, you've probably got a couple days before she starts to smell. Keep the AC on, maybe buy yourself an extra day or two.

WADE

And how exactly do you know that?

PERUSAL

JACK

I've been in a couple of detective movies. And I did that episode of Murder, She Wrote awhile back.

WADE

Uh-huh.

JACK

You think the neighbors heard anything?

WADE

How the fuck would I know?

JACK

Jesus.

WADE

No. I'm just… It's a dead-end road. Okay? No one on that side. The Bennetts are across the way, but I think they're out of town. Maybe I just… hell, I don't know… maybe I just take her back to her place. And then just leave her there.

JACK

Make it look like a fall.

WADE

Something like that.

JACK

That scratch on your neck… that's not from me.

(Wade touches his neck or checks a mirror.)

WADE

Oh, shit.

JACK

Here's what I think you should do…

WADE

What's that?

PERUSAL

JACK

You get rid of the body. Bury it. Make it disappear.

WADE

You're not serious.

JACK

What's the alternative, Wade? You leave her, hope it passes for an accident? Maybe you get lucky. Maybe. But that's not how it works anymore. You can't outsmart science. No body, no crime. So, you make it disappear and then you keep your mouth shut.

WADE

And what about you?

JACK

What about me?

WADE

You gonna keep your mouth shut?

JACK

I'll do you one better. I'll help you.

WADE

Oh, yeah? And what do you want in return?

(A script suddenly falls from a shelf. Both men jump.)

JACK

What the fuck was that?

WADE

How should I know? A ghost. Maybe the one Delia was talking about.

JACK

I'm not laughing.

WADE

Neither am I.

(They're both anxious.)

PERUSAL

JACK

Hang on a second.

(He picks up the script.)

This… This is it, isn't it? McKinney's play.

WADE

Like a dog with a bone.

JACK

How much?

WADE

What the hell are you talking about?

JACK

The budget. What are they spending?

WADE

On the show?

JACK

Yes. On the show. What the fuck else?

WADE

We've got a deceased nonagenarian lying on the floor in my office and you're asking about the budget?

JACK

That's right.

WADE

And you think I know?

JACK

I do.

WADE

Six and a half. Last I heard.

PERUSAL

JACK

Million?

WADE

Of course, million.

JACK

That's a lot.

WADE

Yeah.

JACK

And that's a lot of people putting their necks on the line. For you.

WADE

I'm flattered.

JACK

Fuck you, you're flattered.

WADE

Open the script, you goddam idiot.

JACK

Why?

WADE

Because I said so. Open it. Look at the character descriptions.

(Jack hesitates.)

Go on.

(Jack opens the script, flips pages.)

JACK

Alright. So, which–?

WADE

Bottom of the page.

PERUSAL

JACK

Here it is.

(Reading.)

Martin…

WADE

That's the guy.

JACK

Mid-seventies. Spends most of the play seated in a well-worn chair. Recovering from a stroke. Not entirely incapacitated, but unwell. Could speak and move if he chose to… but doesn't.

(He looks up at Wade.)

Ah, shit.

WADE

You anxious to get your meat hooks on that role now? I've got maybe a handful of lines, Jack. The rest? Grunts. Mumbles. The occasional gesture. And I had to audition for that. I had to beg to audition for that.

JACK

Alright. So, it's not ideal, but at least it's work.

WADE

And I am grateful. I truly am. I mean, I get to spend two hours a night drooling and groaning in a chair in front of a live audience. Which is what old people do anyway. Real tour de force.

JACK

Yeah, but it's McKinney.

WADE

Oh, don't get me wrong, Jack. It's a brilliant fucking play. It'll be a hit. And I'll go down as the highest-paid stage prop in theater history.

JACK

Wow. That's… That's rough.

WADE

It sure as fuck is. Sorry to have wasted your time, my friend. You should've stayed in McGrath. Because there's nothing here for you but scraps.

PERUSAL

JACK

Right. So, how about one more drink before we hit the road?

WADE

What do you mean?

JACK

Well, we've got a goat farmer to unload, don't we?

WADE

Now?

JACK

If we want to get there and back before sunrise.

WADE

Wait, wait. Hold on a second. Get where? Where are we going?

JACK

Goshen.

WADE

Goshen?

JACK

Where else?

WADE

And that's where we're leaving her?

JACK

There's a spot in the basement.

WADE

In the basement?

JACK

Yeah. You anxious to get your meat hooks on that property now?

(They both laugh, an uncomfortable laugh.)

So, what about that drink then?

PERUSAL

WADE

I think we're gonna need more than that. Don't you?

JACK

Depends on what you've got.

WADE

Well… when I grabbed that deck of cards earlier, I noticed that one of the guys left behind a little gift.

(He moves to the drawer.)

JACK

Oh, yeah? What's that?

(Wade pulls out a small bag of white powder. Holds it up.)

WADE

Oh… just a small bag of blow.

JACK

Holy / shit.

WADE

/ Charlie, I'm guessing.

JACK

Right. Well, I gotta say, it's been a while.

WADE

Yeah. Same here. But I'm thinking it might help get us through the night. You agree?

JACK

Oh, geez.

(He considers it.)

Yeah. Yeah, alright. Fuck it. Let's do it. But let's be smart about it, Wade.

WADE

Of course. Nothing more sensible than snorting a few lines before hauling a dead Italian woman to Goshen.

PERUSAL

JACK

I mean it. We need to pace ourselves.

(Wade deftly lays out the lines.)

WADE

We'll be fine. Just a little boost of energy. Because what're we looking at here? I mean, what's the plan? We gotta get Delia into the car, right? Oh, shit. Whose car?

JACK

Mine.

WADE

Good. Alright. So, we get her into your car– Oh, man. And we're gonna need shovels, right? What else?

JACK

Everything we need's already at the cottage.

WADE

Oh. Okay then. And what's that gonna be timewise do you think?

JACK

About two hours. Round trip. We'll need to make space in the trunk.

WADE

How much space?

JACK

We'll have to shift things around a bit. It's gonna be tight.

WADE

Why not just leave whatever we don't need here? We can toss it in the garage and then grab it later.

JACK

Because what's in the trunk, we're taking with us.

WADE

Okay. Well, we'll put it in the back seat then.

PERUSAL

JACK

No. It stays in the trunk.

WADE

I don't / understand.

JACK

/ It stays in the trunk.

WADE

Alright, fine. You're in charge.

(Wade finishes setting up the lines. Jack reaches for the "For Fear of Nightmares" script.)

JACK

I'll never understand how this thing took off.

WADE

We took a mediocre script and acted the hell out of it. That's how.

(He snorts a line. Thunder rolls. Lightning. The lights flicker.)

Whoa! This is good stuff. Here, Jack. Give it a go.

JACK

Don't mind if I do.

(Jack sets the "Fear of Nightmares" script aside, leans in, snorts a line. Wade picks up the script, flips through it.)

WADE

And there it is.

JACK

What?

WADE

Our scene. Just the two of us. We nailed this in the first take.

JACK

I remember.

PERUSAL

WADE

And you know… I should probably thank you.

JACK

Oh, yeah? For what?

WADE

You really don't know?

JACK

What are you talking about, Wade?

WADE

My first Oscar nomination. From a movie that never should've been made. And it's because of you.

JACK

Get the fuck outta here.

(He snorts another line.)

WADE

I'm serious, Jack. I looked up to you. Still do. I mean, that director was a fucking joke. Total hack. And you knew it.

JACK

What's your point?

WADE

You coached me through that scene. With everything else you had going on, you took the time. One scene out of what? A hundred? And you showed up for me. I had no idea what I was doing. People don't realize what that kind of thing means. Just… being there. Giving someone your time. It sticks with you. You did that for me, Jack.

JACK

I did it to cover my own ass. And to this day, I'll never understand how you got that nomination. By the skin of your teeth.

WADE

Yeah? Well, you won that year. So, maybe you should be thanking me.

PERUSAL

JACK

Get lost.

(He snorts a line.)

(NOTE: The following underlined dialogue indicates lines from "For Fear of Nightmares.")

WADE

(Reading from the script.)

Something's not right.

JACK

Tell me about it.

WADE

No. Jack. Look at me.

JACK

What?

WADE

(Indicating the script.)

Something's not right.

JACK

Oh. Okay. I see what you're doing there. Yeah, no thanks. I don't want any part of that. So, piss off.

WADE

Come on. It'll be fun. We'll share the script.

JACK

I said, no. And even if I did want to, which I definitely do not, you can rest assured I remember every fucking line from that scene. It's burned into what's left of my brain.

(A sudden knock at the window. They freeze.)

Okay. Well, that's not Delia. Right?

WADE

There's no way.

PERUSAL

JACK

So, then who's–?

WADE

I don't know.

(Wade goes to the window, takes a breath, and pulls the curtain open. Judith is standing outside, her red hair catching the light. Thunder. Lightning. Wade quickly shuts the curtain and turns to Jack, shaken. Lights shift.)

Something's not right.

JACK

(Compelled to perform, he rises.)

What do you know about right? Holed up in this broken-down shack. All alone for… Jesus, how long has it been?

WADE

I don't know. But it's not safe out there.

JACK

So, what're you gonna do then? You just gonna keep yourself hidden away?

WADE

It's all I know. Everything outside these walls… everything out there… it's not real.

JACK

Oh, it's real alright. Maybe not what it used to be… but it's real.

WADE

No. I think I just fell asleep one night and never woke up. I don't even think you're real. This is all just some nightmare that won't end. I've seen others. Not fully formed, though. Just shapes. Something in the corner. Behind a chair. Under a table. Watching through the windows… And then you show up. And you seem real. I want you to be real. But something's not right.

JACK

There are others.

WADE

Where?

PERUSAL

JACK

Half a mile that way. Small clearing in the woods. We've set up camp.

WADE

How many?

JACK

Nine.

WADE

Children?

JACK

Not yet. But we have the means to make it happen.

WADE

That'd be an awful thing to do.

JACK

Why do you say that?

WADE

To bring a child into this world. The way things are.

JACK

If none of it's real, then what difference does it make to you?

WADE

You're right.

JACK

Alright. So, if you want to grab a few things, whatever you can carry, I'll wait outside. And when you're ready, I'll take you to the campsite.

WADE

I can't. I appreciate it. I do. But I just… I can't.

JACK

Okay. Well, if you change your mind, we're heading out in the morning.

PERUSAL

WADE

I've lost track of mornings. Could be one. Could be a trillion. I'm not a religious man. But every night I pray, to whatever's in charge of this mess, that morning doesn't come. At least not for me. Safe travels… to you and your friends.

(A sudden gust, the window slam open. Wind tears through the room. Lights flicker and shift. The phone rings.)

And what do you know? There she is, right on cue.

(Wade crosses to the phone, picks up the receiver.)

Hello, Mrs. Sabatini!

DELIA

(Through the phone.)

You think you're gonna get rid of me that easily?

JACK

Wade…

DELIA

(Through the phone.)

Because I'm not finished with you. Not just yet, tu piccolo stronzo…

JACK

Wade…

DELIA

(Through the phone.)

I've got my eye on you.

JACK

Wade!

(Wade turns. Jack crosses to him.)

Give me the phone.

(Wade hands the receiver, with its cord clearly torn, to Jack. Jack looks at it, then sets it aside.)

Sit down.

PERUSAL

(Wade sits.)

You comfortable?

WADE

Not particularly.

JACK

Good. There's a question I need to ask you. But I'm gonna give you a chance not to answer it.

WADE

Oh yeah? And how's that gonna work?

JACK

We've got an unfinished hand of Five Card Draw sitting over there.

WADE

So?

JACK

So, here's what I'm proposing: if you've got the winning hand, I don't ask the question. We just take care of what we need to in Goshen, come back here, and I get out of your hair… for good. Simple as that.

WADE

Jack–

JACK

But if I've got the winning hand, you answer my question. And you answer it truthfully.

WADE

And if I say no?

JACK

Then I ask it anyway.

WADE

Alright. I'll take my chances with the cards then.

JACK

Good.

PERUSAL

(Jack moves to the table, picks up his hand.)

What the fuck is this?

WADE

What?

JACK

You having a good time, Wade?

WADE

What are you talking about?

JACK

You've been messing with me all night.

WADE

I haven't been messing with you.

JACK

Then explain this.

WADE

I don't even know what you're looking at.

(Jack flips a card, shows it.)

JACK

This.

WADE

Is that a joker?

JACK

Yeah. It's a joker. It's a fucking joker.

(Jack flicks the card at Wade. Wade rises.)

WADE

Hey! Take it easy.

(Jack flips another card, shows it.)

PERUSAL

JACK

Here's another one.

(He flicks the card at Wade.)

WADE

Cut it out, Jack.

JACK

And another.

(Flicks card.)

And another.

(Flicks card.)

And another.

(Flicks card. Jack grabs Wade's hand, turns it over, spreads the cards, and then sweeps them off the table.)

Every last one of them. Jokers!

WADE

Alright! Just calm down. I had nothing to do with that.

JACK

Bullshit. If not you, then who?

WADE

Maybe you, asshole. Maybe you've been fucking with me all night.

JACK

Oh, no. No, no, no. You're not gonna gaslight / me.

WADE

/ Gaslight you? Oh, come on–

(Jack moves in tight on Wade.)

Whoa, whoa, whoa. What're you gonna do, huh? What's this? Round two?

JACK

Yeah. Only this time, one of us goes down. And he stays there.

PERUSAL

WADE

Bring it on.

(A standoff. They hold their positions, seething, unmoving. Jack exhales. Breaks. Sits.)

So, listen, Jack. I'm just gonna go ahead and answer your question. And then maybe we can finally put this to rest. Judith and I never slept together. Alright?

JACK

That's not what I was gonna ask.

WADE

No?

JACK

No. My question isn't "if", Wade. It's "why"?

WADE

And I just told you, it didn't happen.

JACK

And I'm telling you, that's a baldfaced lie.

WADE

I'm a lot of awful things, Jack. But I'm not a rat bastard. I've got at least an ounce of self-respect. More importantly, you're my friend. And that's not something you do to a friend.

JACK

Bullshit.

WADE

Alright. Believe whatever you want. But your first mistake was buying into those goddam tabloids all those years ago. I never responded to any of that nonsense because I didn't have to. I knew the truth. And that was enough. If you had doubts… if you thought for even a second I'd betray you, you should've asked me straight out. Instead, you just let it fester. For years.

JACK

I have to believe you and Judith had an affair.

WADE

Yeah. Well, that's just fucked up.

PERUSAL

JACK

You spent a lot of time together in Beijing.

WADE

So, what? You were on set for hours on end, and Judith and I had time to kill. What the hell else were we gonna do?

JACK

There were photos.

WADE

Yeah. No shit.

JACK

A lot of them. And you two looked pretty damned cozy in them.

WADE

We were having a good time.

JACK

Fuck you, you were having a good time.

WADE

Nothing happened!

(Softer tone.)

Jesus, Jack. I don't know how else to say it. What do you want from me? Would it help if I told you we were screwing around behind your back while you were busting your nuts trying to spin straw into gold?

JACK

It might.

WADE

It must be really dark and lonely in there. Inside your head.

JACK

I confronted her.

WADE

No doubt. How'd that go?

PERUSAL

JACK

Not good. I went at her. Full tilt. Screaming, throwing things around… like a goddam hurricane. And she just stood there. Scared, maybe. But mostly steady. She didn't argue. Didn't try to stop me. She just let me burn myself out. And when I finally had nothing left in me, nothing left to throw, nothing left to say… she said, "I'm here, Jack. I love you. There's nothing to worry about." And then she smiled. Soft. Kind. The sort of smile that could put out a fire. And I guess she was being honest. Because that's who she was. But it didn't matter anymore. I'd already gone to a very dark place. And I wasn't coming back.

WADE

You can't blame her for leaving you, Jack.

JACK

She didn't leave me.

WADE

No?

JACK

No. She's been up in McGrath all these years.

WADE

McGrath? What are you talking about?

JACK

I'm talking about where I kept her.

WADE

Kept her?

(Jack goes silent.)

Come on. Every time we get to this point, you clam the fuck up. I need you to push through. You hear me? Where, Jack? Where did you keep her?

JACK

In an icebox. Under the back porch.

(A crack of thunder. Lightning. The lights flicker.)

PERUSAL

WADE

(Quietly.)

Jesus.

JACK

And a few months ago, I thought… maybe it was time to bring her home. To the cottage. Where she belongs.

WADE

I see. And that's where she is now? Please, Jack. Tell me that's where she is.

(Jack looks to Wade. Says nothing.)

Yeah. I don't know why I asked. Of course. She's in the trunk. Stupid of me to think you might've handled that on your own before dragging me into it.

JACK

I came here because I needed to hear the truth from you.

WADE

The fuck you did. You already knew the truth. You came here to unpack your guilt. To shift blame. To bury your problems. Literally. And you figured… what? I'd feel sorry for you? Hand over that role in McKinney's play? Maybe even be stupid enough to go to Goshen with you, where you'd get rid of me. Dump me next to her. Alongside a woman who was way too good for you.

JACK

It was Judith's idea to go for a hike.

WADE

I don't want to hear / this, Jack.

JACK

/ Up Noir Hill.

WADE

No, no, no. We need to stay / focused.

JACK

/ Some bad weather was coming / through.

PERUSAL

WADE

/ I've got my own business to attend to / in Goshen now.

JACK

/ She insisted. Said it would be good / for us.

WADE

/ We're in this together / whether we like it or not.

JACK

/ The fresh air, the views…

WADE

I'll be watching you. / Make no mistake.

JACK

/ Said we wouldn't be out for / long.

WADE

/ Assuming we get out / of here, of course.

JACK

/ It gets dark early that time / of year.

WADE

/ Because it feels to me like we should've been / gone by now.

JACK

/ The ground was slick.

WADE

Jack, please!

JACK

It was an accident, Wade.

(Wade relents.)

I was, I don't know, maybe a few feet in front of her when she lost her footing. She grabbed at my sleeve and jerked me sideways, but she wasn't able to get a good grip, so she just went over the edge, down this steep ravine. I fell too, but I was able to get my hands on a tree root on the way down. Kicked my feet until I could find a ledge to steady myself. Took me a minute to get

PERUSAL

turned around. When I finally did, I looked down, and there she was. There was a puddle of blood behind her head, but I could see she was breathing. Her legs were all twisted. I called out to her. She turned her head a little and opened her eyes. And I swear to you, Wade… I swear to you she smiled at me, like she was happy to see me, happy to see that I was okay. I don't think she had any idea how hurt she was until she tried to move. And when she realized how bad it was, I could see the panic in her face. I, uh… I didn't know what to do. I couldn't just leave her there and go for help; there wasn't time. It would've been easier for me to climb back up, but when I looked to my left, I could see that it was maybe a mile, mile and a half before the ravine sloped up toward the path. It might've taken me a half hour, possibly more, before I could get there and back to her. I mean, she could be dead by then, you know? And the snow had just started falling. So, the quickest way for me to get to her was to go straight down. So, that's what I did. I let go of the root and pushed my feet forward off the ledge… and I just fucking slid down, grabbing for anything I could get my hands on to try and slow my fall. I hit the ground pretty hard. But I was okay. The snow was coming in strong, and the ground was wet and soft from the river. And as I moved toward Judith, I could see she was… oh, man… I could see she was partly underwater. I didn't want to move her, but I had to. I needed to get her somewhere dry, somewhere where I could get her warm. So, I put my arms under her as carefully as I could. And Jesus, Wade, the blood, and her legs… I had no goddam idea how I was gonna be able to move her without making it worse. But what the hell else could I do, right? So, I picked her up, and… Oh, Christ… I had never in my entire life heard a human make the noises she made. It was fucking awful. So, we, uh… we made it maybe ten feet before I… Jesus… before I tripped and fell forward on top of her. She went quiet. I boosted myself up, my legs and arms on either side of her, straddling her, my face close to hers. And I whispered to her, "Judith… Judith, look at me." Her mouth opened, she took a deep breath, and then she opened her eyes.

(Judith enters carrying a cooler of beer. She sets it down. Moves to Jack. He turns to her, speaking directly.)

I love you. And I want to believe you. But I don't think I can. I just can't shake it. The two of you together. You were mine. And that was reason enough for Wade–

WADE

Jack–

JACK

And it hurts. It fucking hurts. So maybe it's time we put an end to it, huh? Because I need closure.

WADE

What'd you do, Jack? Look at me.

(Jack looks at Wade.)

What'd you do?

PERUSAL

JACK

I… I laid on top of her. Put my head on her chest. Then I covered her mouth and nose with my hands. And I just stayed there. Listening to her heartbeat. Until it stopped.

(To Wade.)

I'm so goddam tired. Of you. Of this endless, epic fucking kick in the teeth.

WADE

Yeah. Well, the feeling's mutual. You know, I used to be one of those people who believed in fate. That it didn't matter what we did or didn't do: what path we took, who we met, how we lived, what we achieved… we'd end up exactly where we were meant to be. No choice in the matter. You want to go right, so you go right. Maybe you change your mind, or you think you have, and you decide to go left instead, so you go left. Christ, you could do that all day long. But eventually, there's only one direction you can go. You can spend hours bouncing between left and right like an idiot, but you still end up over here and not over there, because you can't be in two places at once. You think you're in control. You think you've made a choice. But you haven't. That's fate. But in this case… in this completely fucked up case, I have to believe that what's been done can be undone.

JACK

We're being punished.

WADE

Of course we are. Question is… how do we stop it?

JACK

Maybe we don't. Maybe we can't.

WADE

Maybe. But as long as I'm conscious and breathing – or at least conscious, the breathing's debatable – I'm gonna keep trying. One thing I do know: Godot's not coming. It's just you and me. And, of course, the lovely Mrs. Sabatini… who, I'll have you know, nearly took me down this time around.

JACK

And now Judith.

WADE

And now Judith.

(Jack's eyes are fixed on Judith.)

Alright. Listen to me.

PERUSAL

(He snaps his fingers.)

Jack.

(Jack looks at Wade.)

We're gonna grab this thing by the balls. Okay? And we don't let go until it does. But for that to work, we need to be honest with each other. We need to stay grounded. We need to stay sharp. And maybe, just maybe, we try being a little kinder to each other. And if we're lucky, we come out of this better men. If that's even possible.

JACK

And if not?

WADE

Well, there's always the booze and the coke to look forward to.

(They share a laugh.)

JACK

I'd like to think that if my dad was here… and I mean, why the hell not, now's as good a time as any for him to show up, right? I'd like to think he'd sort all of this out in no time. Just grab me by the hand and pull me the hell out of here. Put me in the back seat of the Pontiac GTO and take us to the drive-in, same as he used to on summer weekends all those years ago. That's where I fell in love with movies. First one I remember was The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance. Great film. I was more of a James Stewart fan than a John Wayne one, but I kept that shit to myself because my dad wouldn't have it. And, you know, I never minded the static over the speaker, or that I didn't get to pick which movie to see. I was just happy to be there… popcorn, cherry cola, the three of us… watching what felt like pure magic. Yeah. So, anyway… if he was here.

WADE

Right. Well, until your dad shows up, we're just gonna have to hunker down. Make the most of it. Because right now, that's all we've got.

JACK

Fair enough. So… what do you think? Wanna play another hand?

WADE

Another hand? Oh, I don't know. It's late. You sure?

JACK

I'm the one who suggested it.

WADE

Fair enough. Alright. Why not?

PERUSAL

JACK

Good.

(They move to the table and sit.)

WADE

So, what'll it be?

JACK

Five Card Draw. No, wait. Blackjack.

WADE

Blackjack it is.

JACK

You got a fresh deck?

WADE

Yeah. Right over here.

(Wade starts for the drawer, but Judith is already there. She pulls out a fresh deck and hands it to him. Jack grabs two beers from the cooler. Sets them down. Reaches for an opener but Judith already has it. He takes it from her without a word. Wade returns to the table with the deck. Sits. Jack follows.)

Alright. Here we go. Again.

(Wade unwraps the cards. Jack opens the beers.)

JACK

Hey, Wade…

WADE

Yeah, Jack?

JACK

I think I deal this time.

WADE

Okay. Works for me.

(Jack hands Wade a beer. Wade passes him the deck.)

PERUSAL

What do you say we throw in a wild card?

JACK

A wild card?

WADE

Yeah.

JACK

That's not exactly standard blackjack, Wade.

WADE

Oh. Right. Well… I mean, none of this is exactly standard, is it?

JACK

Fair point. Alright. Wild card it is. What do you suggest?

(Judith steps forward. Reveals a card: the Queen of Hearts. Places it on the table between them. Thunder cracks. Lightning flashes. Lights snap to black.)

WADE

(In the darkness.)

Hey, Charlie! Take it easy! Watch where you're going there! Holy Christ and down he goes!

(End of play.)

PERUSAL