

Arrangement for Murder, No. 2

a full length play

by

Eric Appleton

Cast: _____

Richter male, thirties
Anne female, late twenties
Valerie female, forties
Fred male, forties

Time: _____

The Present

Place: _____

Act One:

Scene One: A room with a painting
Scene Two: A car
Scene Three: A room with a painting
Scene Four: A coffee shop
Scene Five: A room with a painting
Scene Six: A coffee shop

The play may be performed with or without an intermission.

Act Two:

Scene One: A room with a chair
Scene Two: A room with a painting
Scene Three: A room with a painting
Scene Four: A room with a painting
Scene Five: A park bench

Note on the staging:

To keep scene changes fast and minimal, all that's really needed is a portion of the stage that is not integrated into the room with the painting. The car, the coffee shop, the room with a chair should all be kept simple enough that one or two pieces of furniture are brought out and it's done. It's probably not best to leave these areas set during the scenes in the room with the painting, as it will create the expectation that we will be returning to those places.

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Act One

Scene One

A painting. It is sublime.

*Richter and Anne, standing, with drinks.
There is a small drinks cart or table. Maybe
a chair and small end table.*

They regard the painting.

RICHTER

I need that.

ANNE

You need that.

RICHTER

What I said.

ANNE

In your life in general, or as a personal possession specifically?

RICHTER

Yes.

Beat.

ANNE

Why?

RICHTER

A visceral need isn't enough?

ANNE

I haven't known you long enough to know your visceral needs.

RICHTER

What do you need?

ANNE

Another drink.

RICHTER

Bottle's out. Help yourself.

ANNE

(Low whistle. Looking at the bottle) It's a frightening to think I'm drinking scotch that old and didn't know it.

RICHTER

Nothing but quality there.

ANNE

Think they'd mind?

RICHTER

They'd insist.

ANNE

Does it say something about me that I can't taste the difference?

RICHTER

How often do you drink scotch?

ANNE

Not often enough to know what I'm drinking, obviously.

RICHTER

When in doubt, look at the label. Then act accordingly.

ANNE

Seems like the label would have a definite bias toward the product it's on.

RICHTER

Then listen to me. The scotch is good.

ANNE

Where'd you get your information?

RICHTER

From people who've read a lot of labels.

ANNE

Kind of emperor's new clothes-y, if you ask me.

RICHTER

Do you like this scotch?

ANNE

I liked it better before I was obligated to like it.

RICHTER

Are you going to have another?

Beat.

ANNE

Yes. Yes, I am.

Anne pours a drink.

ANNE

What would you do with it if you had it? That?

RICHTER

Hang it on a wall and look at it. Hang it on a wall and live with it.

ANNE

That's all?

RICHTER

It's beautiful. How often to you get to see great art up close, in person?

ANNE

I've been to museums.

RICHTER

Think about waking up, seeing that first thing, every morning.

ANNE

Get a poster.

RICHTER

It's not the same. There's a difference. A huge difference, when you see, something like – that. In the flesh. That you've only ever seen in books. Or on coffee mugs. The real thing –

ANNE

You've seen this in books? It's that well known?

RICHTER

Well, no. I know of the artist. But –

ANNE

Love at first sight.

RICHTER

Why not?

ANNE

And not just the label speaking.

RICHTER

It doesn't move you?

ANNE

Think it's an expensive painting?

RICHTER

I don't see how it couldn't be.

ANNE

But you've never seen this one. It's never been on a coffee mug?

RICHTER

Not that I'm aware of.

ANNE

Most people would make do with the poster. Or the coffee mug.

RICHTER

Don't you ever get tired of being most people?

ANNE

Most of my life, I haven't been given much choice in the matter.

RICHTER

Look at it. Tell me it would be better to have the coffee mug instead of the real thing,

ANNE

It would be easier.

RICHTER

Why settle for easy?

ANNE

How about practical.

RICHTER

That's what I like about you. You're grounded. Very, very grounded.

Beat.

ANNE

So you need it. Viscerally. What are you going to do about it?

RICHTER

Get it.

ANNE

It's not like they'll just hand to you.

RICHTER

You'd be surprised what you can get by just asking nicely. But you're right. They wouldn't just give it to me.

ANNE

Stalemate, then. Your love goes unrequited.

RICHTER

Ever steal a painting?

ANNE

It's generally considered bad manners to steal from friends and hosts.

RICHTER

It's bad manners to steal, period. Once you acknowledge that, from whom you steal is irrelevant.

ANNE

Do your second dates always get so weird, so fast?

RICHTER

I thought – we had – well, I thought we shared some viewpoints on the matter.

ANNE

Why would you think that?

He takes a small object out of his pocket.

Richter tosses it to Anne.

Spooked, she tosses it back.

Valerie enters; where Richter and Anne have made an effort to dress nicely for the occasion, Valerie's default setting is very smart fashion.

Richter sets the object on a table.

VALERIE

Sorry about that. Fred needed a second pair of hands to get the roast out of the oven. Refill, anyone?

RICHTER

Already there.

VALERIE

I poured one for myself, didn't I?

RICHTER

Could have sworn you did.

VALERIE

I must have left it –

Fred enters, a drink in hand.

FRED

You need to stop leaving your drinks everywhere. The help might start talking. *(he hands the drink to Valerie)*

VALERIE

I should hope so. We don't produce nearly enough gossip or scandal. Especially for our socio-economic level. When did we get help?

FRED

Oh, that's right. That's how we've avoided scandal this far. No witnesses. *(he pours himself a splash of a drink)* Is everyone set? The roast needs to rest, and then we eat. Anne, right?

ANNE

Yes. Anne.

FRED

So bad with names. I'll forget it several more times this evening. Anne. Just to warn you. I do it to everyone.

ANNE

No problem.

FRED

You're new, right? Richter hasn't brought you around before?

VALERIE

Fred.

ANNE

No, we met last week. He and I. He actually chatted me up in a coffee shop. This is a date. Our second date.

FRED

Oh, dear. Richter, you could have done so much better by her.

RICHTER

I wanted to show off my impressive friends. Continue the relationship, and you too, can vicariously experience a lifestyle I personally will never be able to offer you.

FRED

We're having a roast with vegetables. It's hardly a lifestyle.

RICHTER

You have bottles of scotch that could be mortgage payments on a New York penthouse.

Anne almost does a spit take.

FRED

Those are locked away. You did not just drink someone's mortgage payment. Anne.

VALERIE

You'll be happy to know we're having a quite serviceable, moderately priced bottle of wine with dinner.

FRED

We rather have to, after that. (*indicates the painting*)

VALERIE

It did not put us in the poor house, and you know it.

FRED

It still hurt like the dickens.

VALERIE

Only because you have a very low pain threshold.

RICHTER

We were just admiring it. It's amazing.

ANNE

It's nice.

VALERIE

The first time I saw it, I – I didn't have choice. I knew I had to own it one day. Gut reaction.

RICHTER

Visceral.

VALERIE

Yes.

RICHTER

Love at first sight.

VALERIE

You could say that. It's almost like I married Fred just to be sure that I could own it one day.

RICHTER

The long game, huh?

FRED

Her nefarious scheme worked. It finally came on the market three months ago.

VALERIE

Owner died.

FRED

I had to remind Valerie that dancing on someone's grave was bad manners.

VALERIE

I did not dance on his grave.

FRED

You danced around the kitchen waving his obituary in the air.

VALERIE

He died in bed of old age and natural causes with umpteen adoring great-grandchildren surrounding his bed. I feel no shame over my behavior in the kitchen.

FRED

Anyway, when it finally came on the market, she was very happy about it.

VALERIE

I was on pins and needles waiting to see if it would be auctioned off. Otherwise I might've had to climb over the dead bodies of some of those adoring great-grandchildren.

FRED

But instead of resorting to murder, I drained a stock portfolio and sold some real estate to procure that piece of lovely. Did not have to sell the lake house, though. A small mercy.

VALERIE

See how much he loves me?

FRED

Despite being merely a cog in her machine for art procurement. Though it was a good exchange. The artist is dead, so it will remain rare, and the small circle who value his work will, in turn, keep its value high. Which makes it immune from any foreseeable art bubbles.

VALERIE

Fred insists on seeing it as an investment.

FRED

When you die, I cash it in. Bigger, better lake house.

VALERIE

When you die, I spend the insurance money on a second painting. We are so lucky to have this.

FRED

Hardly. Luck just means you diligently laid a solid foundation so you could fling yourself upon opportunity when it arrives.

VALERIE

Cheers to Fred, my diligent foundation.

FRED

Is that a snuff box?

VALERIE

Where?

FRED

There on the table. Valerie. Are we suddenly collecting snuff boxes, too?

RICHTER

Mine. A young lady I know found it in an antique store a few weeks ago and I told her I would see if I could get your take on it.

VALERIE

We're not really authorities on snuff boxes, you know.

FRED

This young lady?

RICHTER

Oh, no. Not Anne. Another young lady.

FRED

Should you be talking about other young ladies in front of this young lady?

VALERIE

You can stop saying "young lady" now. Even I'm started to get insulted.

RICHTER

Oh, they don't know each other.

FRED

Really. Richter.

ANNE

It's okay. You don't expect a catch like him to date one woman at a time, do you?

VALERIE

There is that.

FRED

Sorry, old fashioned me.

VALERIE

We're very strict about gender expectations here. Which is why he's wearing the apron.

FRED

Hey, carving. Meat juices. I like this sweater. Anyway, you know who does snuff boxes? Mort. Mort does snuff boxes.

ANNE

Mort Fleming?

FRED

Huge collection

VALERIE

You know Mort?

ANNE

If he's a Mort with snuff boxes, yes. Well, barely. A friend took me to a party, like. . . three months ago. There were a lot of snuff boxes. I think he showed me every single one of them, too.

FRED

Mort does like the pretty gir -- women.

VALERIE

And he's too old to understand that snuff boxes are not the way to their hearts.

ANNE

No, no, he was charming. It's just -- that was a lot of snuff boxes. And I wasn't the only -- pretty girwoman.

VALERIE

Mort, Mort, Mort. Hope spring eternal.

FRED

Even with a walker, the man can work a room.

ANNE

I wonder if we were at the same party.

RICHTER

She didn't say. You think he could give me some sense of value on this one?

FRED

If anyone could, it'd be him.

ANNE

You don't really want to bother him with that, do you? How valuable could it be? What'd she say she paid for it?

RICHTER

Not much. A steal at the price.

VALERIE

Just because it doesn't have much bling going on doesn't mean it's not valuable. Aside from that (*the painting*) you probably can't guess what's the second most expensive thing in this room.

RICHTER

Fred and Valerie are tasteful, yet understated.

FRED

It's the difference between having something because you enjoy it and having something simply to make other people feel inadequate.

VALERIE

Warren Buffet versus Donald Trump.

FRED

Though we're no match for either. This really is a rather nice little piece. I find it hard to believe it was just lying around an antique store.

RICHTER

She's got a great eye for bargains.

FRED

She does indeed. Well, if you want to leave it with us, we could ask Mort over for drinks and have him take a look at it.

RICHTER

That would be dandy.

A timer goes off in the kitchen.

FRED

And there's the roast, all rested and ready to carve.

VALERIE

Shall we, then?

Valerie and Anne exit. Fred detains Richter.

FRED

That is one of Mort's boxes, isn't it.

RICHTER

Silly thing, she thought he was handing out souvenirs. She didn't know how to return it, gracefully.

FRED

Definitely not this Amy you brought tonight?

RICHTER

Anne. If she'd nicked it, I doubt she'd've had regrets.

FRED

Should I do an inventory after you two leave?

RICHTER

Only if it makes you feel better.

FRED

Your choices in women, Richter. You need to start looking below the surface.

RICHTER

Anne's surface goes way down, I think. Would you mind getting the box back to Mort?

FRED

Discretion is my middle name. Avanti. Dinner awaits.

Black.

Scene Two

Later that evening.

*Two chairs to create a car.
Richter and Anne.*

Richter drives.

RICHTER

They don't know you took the box.

ANNE

"A young lady I know." Right.

RICHTER

You're not all that young, and I barely know you.

ANNE

Damn straight you don't.

RICHTER

You put on a good show. You had a stronger reaction to the cost of the scotch.

ANNE

And to think I didn't even miss it until you tossed it to me in there.

RICHTER

You're more angry about that?

ANNE

I need to pay more attention to my possessions.

RICHTER

Yours. You stole it from Mort Fleming.

ANNE

I found it at a flea market.

RICHTER

I have a hard time believing an eighteenth century Limoges enameled snuff box was just lying about in a flea market.

ANNE

Treasures in the attic and all that.

RICHTER

French attics, maybe.

ANNE

Suddenly you're an expert on snuff boxes?

RICHTER

I'm fully capable of looking things up.

ANNE

Maybe the guy at the flea market should have looked it up. It was a steal at the price.

RICHTER

Maybe I should have grabbed that little jade dragon out of your bathroom.

ANNE

I'd have noticed that. It's right next to my toothbrush. And I brush regularly.

RICHTER

I bet you floss, too. Where'd that come from? The dragon.

ANNE

Antique store. It was also a bargain.

RICHTER

You're a better thief than liar. In fact, I think you're a really good thief.

ANNE

Just wait until I start telling you the truth.

RICHTER

The truth is not that you nick valuable trinkets from rich people kind enough to invite you to their parties and functions?

ANNE

Prove it.

RICHTER

If we go back to your place, I could probably give you the provenance of most of the treasures you have scattered about.

ANNE

One date and you managed to thoroughly toss my apartment? Did you check under the kitchen sink, too? My sock drawer? Did you find the string of pearls I keep in the toilet tank? Jesus Christ, you honestly think I'm letting you back into my apartment?

RICHTER

I did notice you kept everything you – collected. A visceral need? You can't brush your teeth without seeing that dragon first thing in the morning?

ANNE

I'm not helping you steal that painting.

RICHTER

Silver ashtray.

ANNE

Antique store.

RICHTER

Wedgwood dish.

ANNE

Antique store.

RICHTER

Ivory handled letter opener.

ANNE

Gift.

RICHTER

Scrimshaw pipe.

ANNE

You're kidding me.

RICHTER

And I would very much like to know how you got that Lalique vase – the one with the seahorses? – out of Carl and Dave's house. Not small. Not discreet. Not all that easily missed.

ANNE

You know Carl and Dave?

RICHTER

I know them all.

ANNE

Shit.

Black.

Scene Three

The room with the painting. A party will begin shortly.

Valerie pours drinks.

Richter enters with a bowl of nuts.

RICHTER

Fred said this is the last bowl of nuts

VALERIE

Over there.

*Richter sets the bowl of nuts on a table.
Valerie hands him a drink.*

RICHTER

Thanks. Anything else?

VALERIE

If Fred says that's the last bowl of nuts, it's the last bowl of nuts.

RICHTER

Although I have no idea if there's anything beyond the nuts.

VALERIE

What's he working on?

RICHTER

Something involving the extrusion of creamy material onto insanely crisp rounds of toast.

VALERIE

Put a pastry bag in that man's hands and he's lost to the world. You're safe for at least ten minutes.

RICHTER

There's a lot of very elaborate food going on in there.

VALERIE

I always dread giving parties because of all the work involved, and then I remember, oh wait, Fred does all work.

RICHTER

Caterers are a thing, you know.

VALERIE

Fred's very protective of his kitchen.

RICHTER

People in bow ties drifting about with trays can give an event that certain – je ne sais quoi, you know.

VALERIE

It's a cocktail party, not a soiree. Or a shindig.

RICHTER

A bartender, then.

VALERIE

Parties get so much more interesting so much faster when people get their own drinks. Which is why after these two, the really good stuff gets locked back away.

RICHTER

This isn't the penthouse scotch, is it?

VALERIE

Skol.

RICHTER

Well. What did I do to deserve this?

VALERIE

You picked up the flowers, you did not grumble when I asked if you would run a duster around the place, you spent the better part of the afternoon in the kitchen with Fred, which is no small feat, and, you set out the nuts. You allowed me to do virtually nothing all day in the face of an impending social event. I salute you.

RICHTER

(raises his glass) To cheapest rich people I know.

VALERIE

Oh, and didn't you vacuum the hall rug?

RICHTER

I did.

VALERIE

Our secret to wealth. Fred's secret to wealth. Exploiting the little people. I'm just along for the ride, having once been a little person myself.

RICHTER

You?

VALERIE

This is not my natural or original state. Mind you, I always expected to get here, but believe me, I understand the ladder you're climbing very well.

RICHTER

I never said I was climbing a ladder.

VALERIE

You're content to stand at the bottom and stare at the people at the top?

RICHTER

I like being a guest.

VALERIE

A guest that sets out nuts and vacuums the rug.

RICHTER

Easier than being the one that throws the party.

VALERIE

And we circle back to my role for the evening.

RICHTER

Did Fred work his way up the ladder, too?

VALERIE

Heavens, no. He is the ladder. Fred is ridiculously, aggressively self-made. I was the lowly assistant project manager who caught the executive's eye. I had no idea that inviting him to come over and go over the drawings at my place would end up – here.

RICHTER

He really expected to look at drawings.

VALERIE

I invited, he arrived. Does it matter what he expected?

RICHTER

I hope he at least chased you around his desk a few times.

VALERIE

My apartment. My desk. I did the chasing.

RICHTER

That I would have liked to see.

VALERIE

Even then, he wined easily. Half a lap.

RICHTER

And all these years later, here you are. Not bad for ‘come up and see my etchings.’”

VALERIE

Well, business was also discussed. If you’re trying to land the man who will eventually you buy you art, there has to be a little more than a good time on the table.

RICHTER

Literally.

Beat.

VALERIE

Fred told me about the snuff box business. Has that all been sorted out now?

RICHTER

He said took the box back to Mort, Hadn’t even missed it.

VALERIE

Kind hearted old man with a weakness for the ladies and a habit of indiscriminate, uncatalogued collecting. Your friend lucked out.

RICHTER

She’ll be much more careful when an overly attentive gentleman hands her a snuff box.

VALERIE

It wasn’t Anne, was it? Though she seemed too smart to simply walk off with something like that.

RICHTER

She is. That’s why we had a second date.

VALERIE

Third? Fourth?

RICHTER

We’ve been in contact.

VALERIE

It's a shame you couldn't bring her along this evening.

RICHTER

She had a date to go see a movie with her sister and said she was in the mood for gratuitous violence and explosions. Neither of which are on offer here tonight.

VALERIE

If the liquor flows, you might be pleasantly surprised. I should have you hide all the breakables.

RICHTER

Speaking of breakables – what is the second most valuable thing in this room?

VALERIE

The second most valuable?

RICHTER

After the painting. A few weeks ago, when I brought Anne for dinner, you said I'd be surprised by what was the second most expensive thing in this room.

Fred enters with a small plate.

FRED

Now don't go giving away all of our secrets.

VALERIE

Oh, speaking of secrets, here's one I think you'll appreciate.

RICHTER

Tell me nothing you don't want blabbed everywhere.

VALERIE

You're the first person we're telling. In a few months everyone will know.

RICHTER

You're pregnant?

Valerie laughs.

RICHTER

You're adopting?

FRED

Here. Eat this while Valerie composes herself.

RICHTER

What is it?

FRED

I would think it's rather apparent. Don't you look at your food before you eat it?

RICHTER

Creamy. . . cheese. On a piece of lettuce. With a . . . nut. On top.

FRED

Tell me again why we let the philistines through the gate?

VALERIE

He helped you all afternoon. And dusted. He's been a very helpful philistine.

FRED

Gorgonzola in Neufchatel on Belgian endive with a candied walnut. I candied the walnuts myself, I'll have you know.

RICHTER

It's good.

VALERIE

You win again, dear.

FRED

Creamy, crunchy. Sweet, sour. Balanced, yet exciting.

VALERIE

Every time someone eats one, a Tibetan monk gets his wings.

RICHTER

So what's this secret I'm the first to know?

VALERIE

It's a forgery.

RICHTER

What is?

FRED

The painting.

RICHTER

That?

VALERIE

A fake.

RICHTER

Shit. Wow. How'd you find out? Are you suing the dealer or anything?

VALERIE

Oh, we knew it was a forgery when we bought it.

RICHTER

You bought a fake on purpose?

FRED

Despite emptying stock portfolios and putting a dent in our real estate holdings, the real thing remains incredibly out of reach. Warren Buffet out of reach.

VALERIE

So instead we bought a forgery by the twentieth century's greatest forger.

FRED

Which still cost a ton. I asked her – why not get something real. But she insisted.

VALERIE

It's real. It's just not the original.

RICHTER

Wow. Could have fooled me.

VALERIE

That's the point of a forgery. It may be a reproduction, but it's got all the – tactile qualities, vibrancy. . . it's still an actual painting. It's alive. Far better than having a poster.

RICHTER

Where's the original?

VALERIE

Private collection somewhere in Europe. Royalty's involved. We'd have to kill off a lot of dukes and baronesses to drive it to market. Do you still like it?

RICHTER

Why wouldn't I?

VALERIE

You tell some people something's not – real – and they suddenly decide they can't like it after all. I think that's why it came up for auction. The heirs didn't understand why their grandpapa would hang onto a forged painting.

FRED

Weirdly enough, his forgeries are just as good investments as a lot of other top of the line art. And cost just as much to insure.

VALERIE

“Top of the line art.” Who’s the philistine now.

FRED

Lines, shapes, colors. It’s your world, not mine.

VALERIE

He’s not as heartless as he makes himself seem. He collects African violets, you know.

RICHTER

That’s a sign of being fully human?

FRED

Better than orchids. Those people are nuts.

The kitchen timer is heard to ding.

FRED

No rest for the wicked. I could use you again in, say, ten minutes?

RICHTER

With bells on.

Fred exits.

RICHTER

Why do I have the honor of being the first to know?

VALERIE

Someone has to be first. Don’t you enjoy keeping secrets?

RICHTER

Depends on the secret. Depends on the cost of the secret. When do you announce this to the world?

VALERIE

We’re loaning it to a museum in a few months. They’re putting together a touring exhibit of the forger’s work. It’ll be on the road for a year.

RICHTER

But you just got it.

VALERIE

The curator has been very attentive. And persuasive. And the list of other participants is quite impressive. The visibility will increase its value, which is something that Fred likes. He's one of these people who think that art should work for its keep. Play your cards right and you could be our third wheel for the opening gala.

RICHTER

Will they allow rented tuxedos?

VALERIE

That will depend on where you rent it from. You might want to let me set that up. Though perhaps it's time we got you a nice suit.

RICHTER

I couldn't afford anything you might term a nice suit.

VALERIE

You won't fit into any of Fred's cast-offs.

RICHTER

Tux rental it is. Besides, won't the introductions be awkward? Mr. and Mrs. Guggenheim, I'd like you to meet our friend, a social climber in a rented tux.

VALERIE

I'll introduce you as my gigolo. People will be so fascinated they'll forget to look at the label on your tux.

RICHTER

How will Fred feel about that?

VALERIE

Maybe I'll just leave him at home. Lines, colors, shapes. He acts like he doesn't really care about art, but deep down, he really doesn't care about art. You're the only person amongst our friends and acquaintances who has – the same appreciation of this painting as I do.

RICHTER

This forgery.

VALERIE

This really good forgery of a work that stirs my soul.

RICHTER

Does that mean your soul is forged, too?

VALERIE

You loved it before you knew it wasn't the original. Remember that.

RICHTER

Just how good is it?

VALERIE

Fun story. Our master forger picked his subjects well. Exceptional artists whose small body of work largely tended to be privately held so not all that many experts knew the paintings. And kind of like you, he tended to make himself a welcome guest to gain access to the originals. He painted this one for an unscrupulous Parisian art dealer who faked the provenance and sold it for a tidy sum. It changed hands a few times and ended up on loan to the Baltimore Museum of Art, where it hung for a year before – twist of fate – the owner of the real one saw it on a trip to the U.S. and kindly let the museum know they had a fake. Scandal, and the owners unloaded it on dear old grandpapa, who at the time was assembling a collection of forgeries. Because he did stuff like that.

RICHTER

How'd you ever see it in the first place? To even know it existed?

VALERIE

I was a young woman, footloose and fancy free in Baltimore at just the right moment. I bought a museum membership just to be able to see it as often as possible, which turned out to be for only three months. After it was yanked, I kept track of it. Who knows, maybe someday. . .

RICHTER

You'll find your Fred and he'll buy it for you.

VALERIE

I was little young for thoughts like that. Though I will admit that once I landed Fred, returning to my first love became a little more plausible. I still have the coffee mug I bought from the museum gift shop. (*pause*) Now that I have the real thing, would you care to have it?

RICHTER

I – sure.

VALERIE

Remind me at the end of the night and I'll get it for you. Top off before I put it back in the vault?

RICHTER

You have to ask?

VALERIE

Sometimes people say no. They think they're being polite.

RICHTER

They are fools.

Valerie pours.

VALERIE

You – tend to act upon your appetites, don't you?

RICHTER

No more than anyone else, I imagine.

VALERIE

What about your parade of women?

RICHTER

I wouldn't call it a parade.

VALERIE

Anne. Lila. Trina. There's at least four beyond that since we've known you. You rarely come to a party with the same woman on your arm. A girl could get jealous.

RICHTER

Okay, it's a parade.

VALERIE

How's it going with Anne?

RICHTER

Well enough. We'll see what happens.

VALERIE

Where'd you say you met her?

RICHTER

There's this coffee shop. Turns out it's down the block from the place where she works. She bought a latte. I bought a latte. She said hello. I said I liked her necklace.

VALERIE

You do know you way around women, don't you. Did you actually like it, or was that just your standard opener?

RICHTER

Hey, if a woman says hello first, you better have a hook to keep her talking.

VALERIE

How many women do you juggle at a time?

RICHTER

Only as many as I can handle. Where's this going?

VALERIE

See, you're lucky. You have a – freedom, and no one expects you to not act on that freedom.

RICHTER

By dating women?

VALERIE

By being so open about it. It's just part of you. What you bring to the table. Expected. I wonder who Richter will show up with this time?

RICHTER

Are you trying to tell me you're a lesbian?

VALERIE

(laughs) That would make life so much easier, actually. No. I like men.

Beat.

RICHTER

Are you inviting me over to see some drawings?

VALERIE

I'm inviting myself over to see yours. I'm the executive here. We can do one turn around my desk if it makes you feel better.

Pause.

RICHTER

What about Fred?

VALERIE

You see, that's that freedom issue. Fred is, after all, the ladder upon which I stand. Still – a woman needs more than good cooking and a lake house, and it is not an easy task to find a replacement who offers the full range of goods and services. I have – visceral needs – that Fred, quite frankly, has never been all that much at fulfilling, which means I am looking for someone

VALERIE (cont'd)

to provide the services, rather than the goods. Therefore, discretion. Therefore, a certain amount of trust, and a definite amount of power to back up that trust.

RICHTER

Trust but verify?

VALERIE

I'm not saying it's a permanent thing. When it gets stale, it gets stale. You are allowed to move along, free and clear. No strings.

RICHTER

Power, but no strings. I'm confused.

VALERIE

To trust someone, I need to know them. I need to know what they might track into my house on their shoes.

RICHTER

You had someone check me out.

VALERIE

Yes.

RICHTER

You trust me?

VALERIE

I think I can.

RICHTER

Despite what you found?

VALERIE

Because of what I found.

RICHTER

If I say no?

VALERIE

You enjoy our company. You enjoy the company of our friends. I'd say you've worked rather hard to secure our friendship.

RICHTER

It's hardly been work.

VALERIE

I'd say it has. You work hard at being a good guest. And I do like you. I've introduced you around. Despite what I know.

RICHTER

How long have you –

VALERIE

You arrived on our doorstep as Inga's decoration for that evening. That's barely a reference.

RICHTER

I thought Inga was good friend of yours.

VALERIE

That's what Inga likes to think. Have you seen her around lately?

RICHTER

Ah.

VALERIE

I haven't heard much about Inga from your end, either.

RICHTER

She's a one boy toy at time sort of gal. She doesn't multi-task well.

VALERIE

Which we all know, and understand, and while it's a bit tedious, it's harmless, though her taste has declined and a firm set of buttocks seems to be all she's looking for in a man these days. You're more than just a nice ass. Though I do appreciate it.

RICHTER

I'm lucky you took a shine to me.

VALERIE

It was obvious you were not dazzled by her money or disgusted by her wrinkles. And not just putting up with one to enjoy the other.

RICHTER

The money or the wrinkles?

VALERIE

You'd be surprised. In any event, people remember who invited who and who brought who and who was seen with who. People who walk off with two hundred year old snuff boxes don't get invited back, despite their charms.

RICHTER

I didn't take that snuff box –

VALERIE

No, you brought it back. Your anonymous young arm candy trusted you. You trusted us. Discretion prevailed all around. I took it for a sign. Still, I'm sure Mort can put two and two together and despite what I am sure are her other merits, a firm black line will be drawn through her name.

RICHTER

I'm not looking for a lover.

VALERIE

I am. You have tonight to think about it. If your answer is no, I send you off into the night with a coffee mug as a lovely parting gift and we shall not see each other again. My friends will learn you fooled me, and I will share with them the details of your sordid past. Your life will return to what it was before you met us, before Inga picked you up from whatever prison yards and police stations she picks up her playthings – which may or may not be a horrible fate. I like you, but there are others in line.

The doorbell rings.

VALERIE

Guests! Go freshen up. It's going to be a fun evening.

Valerie exits.

Richter swirls his drink. Downs it.

Black.

Scene Four

A coffee shop.

Anne and Richter.

ANNE

I don't like this.

RICHTER

We're having coffee.

ANNE

What if someone sees us?

RICHTER

Drinking our lattes again at our favorite coffee shop? Where we first met? We're dating, remember?

ANNE

Jesus Christ. Blackmail, dating, what's the difference?

RICHTER

Have you told anyone we're going to steal a painting?

ANNE

You're stealing a painting. I'm the unwilling accessory.

RICHTER

Does anyone know you're the unwilling accessory?

ANNE

Not yet.

RICHTER

So would anyone be suspicious of seeing us together?

ANNE

After the fact. When the police start putting pieces together.

RICHTER

It's normal behavior for couples to be seen in public drinking coffee. It'd be more suspicious if we stopped seeing each other immediately after the painting disappeared.

ANNE

Great. You're going to blackmail me forever.

RICHTER

You don't enjoy my company?

ANNE

I'm not interested in stealing a painting.

RICHTER

You stole everything else easily enough.

ANNE

They were small. People didn't miss them.

RICHTER

That vase is not small.

ANNE

Okay, I just wanted to see if I could do it. And I did it. And then I stopped because if I could steal that I could steal other things like that and if I started doing that I'd get caught. And I don't want to get caught.

RICHTER

We won't get caught. It's not like I'm going to sell it. I don't even know where you'd go to sell stolen art. It's going hang at the foot of my bed, and no one who knows what that painting really is ever going to see it. Do you think Fred and Valerie would ever visit me in my sad little apartment? Would you know a stolen painting if you saw it? Unless it's the *Mona Lisa*? And even then, would you expect to see the real *Mona Lisa* in my bedroom?

ANNE

I suppose not.

RICHTER

Garage sale. A thrift store. I paid ten bucks for it because that's the kind of art I can afford.

ANNE

The police will know what they're looking for.

RICHTER

No one will suspect us. Me. You. Amateur art thieves.

ANNE

How much art have you actually stolen?

RICHTER

This will be my first.

ANNE

Christ.

RICHTER

It's a perfect set up. Everyone they know knows they own that painting.

ANNE

Including you. Including me. Tell me again why we won't be suspects?

RICHTER

I know something about that painting no one else knows. Yet. Well, besides Valerie and Fred.

ANNE

I'm dying to hear.

RICHTER

It's a forgery.

Beat.

ANNE

You're blackmailing me to steal a fake painting?

RICHTER

Yes.

ANNE

Why would you want a fake painting?

RICHTER

See? And since I know it's a fake, why would I bother to steal it?

ANNE

What about security? Cameras, alarms. Even if it's fake, I'm sure it's still expensive, and that's not the only thing they have in the house.

RICHTER

Off the shelf house alarm. Keypad by the door. Two minutes before it goes off in case you trip it when you get up in the middle of the night to get a glass of water. Which Fred does all the time. The service calls first to see if everything's okay. They allow a certain number of false

before they start charging, and he's way over the limit. It might not even be turned on.

ANNE

That's it? That's all they have? That sounds pretty – lax.

RICHTER

They assume. They're rich, they have expensive things, so everyone just assumes they have excellent security. It's a bluff.

ANNE

You've decided to call their bluff.

RICHTER

Maybe they deserve it.

ANNE

They're your friends.

RICHTER

Okay, Valerie deserves it.

ANNE

You could just send her an angry text. It's what people do.

Richter says nothing.

ANNE

Wow. What'd she do to you? A couple weeks ago it was like you were ready to hop into bed with the two of them. Now. . .

RICHTER

I get what I want, she gets what she deserves. The end. Everyone wins.

ANNE

You know, revenge doesn't actually mean anything unless the other person knows you're doing it.

RICHTER

It'll make me feel better.

ANNE

(mockingly) Oo, Richter darling, the painting that we both love soooooo much was stolen! Come over this minute and comfort me!

RICHTER

Knock it off.

ANNE

I'm glad I don't like you already. I'd hate to have you turn on me. (*pause*) The cops are going to ask who knows about the alarm system. You seem to know a lot about it.

RICHTER

Ah, but I don't. Not really. I overheard Valerie joking about it at the party two weeks ago. The one you missed. How was the movie?

ANNE

Visceral. Who openly tells other people their alarm system sucks?

RICHTER

People who think it's funny. People who are proud of being cheapskates. People who think everyone else will be fooled.

ANNE

Sounds like you could just walk in, grab it, and walk out. Or do you need me to help clear the place out so it looks like a plain old burglary?

RICHTER

Definitely not. Plain old burglary, smash in, grab everything, run away. Ordinary crime, the work of ordinary thieves. This is an art theft. That's what keeps us safe.

ANNE

It's one painting. You don't need me.

RICHTER

We're alibis for each other.

ANNE

That always works out well in crime dramas.

RICHTER

It's big. I need help getting it down.

ANNE

Do I get anything out of this? Anything at all? Aside from jail time?

RICHTER

You're avoiding jail time. Dave and Carl's Lalique vase, remember? After we pull this off, you'll have something on me and we will be even.

ANNE

Mutually assured destruction.

RICHTER

Something like that.

ANNE

No more 'dates.'

RICHTER

We can break up in a few months. I promise.

ANNE

You are not reassuring.

RICHTER

This is my honest face. Honest.

Beat.

ANNE

When do we do this?

RICHTER

Thursday. She'll be at her whiskey tasting club and he'll be at his African violet society meeting.

ANNE

How do you know these things?

RICHTER

People tend to talk in front of the help.

Black.

Scene Five

The room with the painting. Night.

Noise from the hallway.

Anne and Richter enter, in black, with black ski masks, gloves, etc.

RICHTER

Two minutes until the alarm goes off.

ANNE

A thousand times, yes. Two minutes.

They go to the painting, lift it down, lay it on the floor.

Richter rolls his ski mask up over his face so he can see better, while Anne rolls out a piece of canvas to receive the painting.

ANNE

What are you doing?

RICHTER

Damn eye holes are too small.

ANNE

You bought the damn masks.

RICHTER

I didn't think I'd lose all peripheral vision.

He proceeds to slice the painting from the frame.

ANNE

You didn't try it on?

RICHTER

This is an amateur job, remember?

ANNE

Amateur doesn't mean stupid.

A light goes on in the hallway.

VALERIE

Fred? Is that you?

Anne and Richter freeze.

VALERIE

Fred? Are you okay? You're home awfully early.

*Valerie enters the room, turns on the lights.
She is in a bathrobe.*

VALERIE

Richter. How – expected.

The burglar alarm goes off.

*Richter rises, pulls out a gun and shoots
Valerie. Twice. She falls, is still.*

Anne goes to her.

ANNE

Jesus Christ! She's not breathing!

RICHTER

Move!

ANNE

She's not breathing!

RICHTER

Go! Go!

ANNE

You killed her!

RICHTER

She saw us! We need to go! Now!

He grabs the rolled up painting.

They exit.

A moment. The alarm continues.

Valerie gets up. Winces.

She goes into the hallway and turns off the alarm. She returns and surveys the room.

A phone rings. Valerie answers.

VALERIE

No, everything's fine. My husband tripped it when he got up for some water. False alarm. Yes. I know we'll be changed for it. We'll be more careful next time. Yes. Thanks. Good night.

Beat.

VALERIE

Well, that rather went according to plan.

Black.

Scene Six

Morning.

The coffee shop.

Richter sits alone.

A woman in sunglasses and overcoat enters.

May I?
WOMAN

What?
RICHTER

Mind if I join you?
WOMAN

(the woman takes off her sunglasses) You – but –
RICHTER

Still among the living.
VALERIE

But Anne said –
RICHTER

Naming your accomplices so soon?
VALERIE

Shit.
RICHTER

Yes. Deep.
VALERIE

I didn't kill you. I did not kill you.
RICHTER

VALERIE
Hurray for Kevlar. Some big bruises, but hurray. A relief?

Beat.

Yes.
RICHTER

VALERIE

You look it. But I think the intent was there.

RICHTER

You weren't supposed to be there.

VALERIE

Given the opportunity, you chose to shoot me. Twice.

RICHTER

You called the police?

VALERIE

Breaking and entering. Theft. Assault with a deadly weapon. But. We have things to talk about first.

RICHTER

How'd you know I'd be here?

VALERIE

One of the benefits of employing a private detective is that they create files with details like this.

RICHTER

I'll give it back. I haven't done anything with it. I –

VALERIE

Keep it. It's a copy, anyway.

RICHTER

But you said it was still –

VALERIE

The forgery is. The copy you have is not.

RICHTER

Copy?

VALERIE

Different size, modern materials, the copyist signed the back. . . I like it too much to be without it during the exhibition tour, especially after waiting so long to get it. I had a copy made.
(*pause*) I see wheels turning in there.

RICHTER

You had the copy up last night.

VALERIE

That's how you stole it.

RICHTER

Why did you have the copy up?

VALERIE

Because I didn't want you to steal the forgery. Museums get upset when you switch things on them.

RICHTER

You knew we were coming.

VALERIE

How would I know that?

RICHTER

Anne.

Valerie smiles.

RICHTER

She's a private detective?

VALERIE

No. She's a thief. And now she's my witness.

RICHTER

But you didn't know her before I brought her for dinner --

VALERIE

Months ago, she tried to walk off with the second most expensive thing in the room. Antique Baccarat glass paperweight, which fits neatly into a pocket. Just her speed. Though I still want to know how she got that vase out of Carl and Dave's house. It's not small. I thought you two would be a good match.

RICHTER

But --

VALERIE

It's your favorite coffee shop. You come here a lot. And you are not the sort of man to walk away when a woman says hello. Not that hard.

RICHTER

But Fred didn't know her --

VALERIE

Fred may wear the apron, but on my Ladies Nights the estrogen can be a little much even for him. Friend of a friend brings a friend. Said friend of a friend exercises her sticky fingers and gets caught.

RICHTER

If you wanted me – for your needs—why put me onto Anne?

VALERIE

Her hourly rates are much cheaper than the private detective's. With all the baubles she has scattered about her apartment, I knew you'd put two and two together. I expected you two to become confidants, partners in crime, even if the dating thing didn't quite work out. You know, she actually was looking forward to the second date, if for nothing else, you being a good lay. See, I was looking forward to that. Oh well. I didn't quite expect it all to escalate so quickly, though. Seeing as how you have so little control over yourself, I guess it's only logical that you hate it when someone else calling the shots.

RICHTER

I didn't mean to shoot you.

VALERIE

You were going to sit here, drinking coffee until the cops showed up?

RICHTER

I don't know what I was going to do.

VALERIE

You certainly didn't turn yourself in. Not quite enough remorse for that, huh? Fred calls, tells you I was killed in a botched robbery. Memories, penthouse mortgage scotch, bonding in the kitchen. . .

RICHTER

Fred's not my type.

VALERIE

But he's still a useful ladder, and you've ingratiated yourself well. We were on the verge of inviting you to the lake house. With Anne.

RICHTER

What exactly are we discussing here?

VALERIE

Now, mind you, the offer of taking you on as a lover is off the table.

RICHTER

I'm not sure I'm relieved.

VALERIE

You didn't give me much time to really get the whole thing rolling, thank you, and an affair at this point would probably just end up pointing fingers at me right off the bat.

RICHTER

What do you want, Valerie?

VALERIE

Now that I know you can – that you will pull the trigger. I'd like to restage the whole thing.

RICHTER

I'm not shooting you again.

VALERIE

Of course not. This time, you're killing Fred.

Snap to black.

Intermission

Act Two

Scene One

The room with the painting.

Richter follows Fred into the room, speaking as the lights come up.

Richter sets a tube wrapped in brown paper against a chair.

FRED

She just left about twenty minutes ago. Meeting about the exhibition. It's amazing how much paperwork is involved. Seems like she gets called for a meeting every other day. But then again, she's a woman who, weirdly enough, loves meetings. Can I get you a drink?

RICHTER

I'm fine.

FRED

It's after five.

RICHTER

I don't need a drink. Thanks.

FRED

You force me to drink alone. Did she forget she asked you to dinner?

RICHTER

No, I – didn't tell her I was swinging by.

FRED

You're here to visit me? Well. To what do I owe this singular honor?

RICHTER

It's about Valerie. I –

FRED

Red's her favorite color. She hates brooches, but has a serious soft spot for fuzzy slippers. Already has too many scarves, so avoid those.

RICHTER

No, I'm not – it's not about gifts. I'm not sure how to put this.

FRED

Well, rip off the band-aid and get it over with. Money?

RICHTER

No. I'm – it's not money. Valerie has – asked me to do something. It concerns you.

FRED

Do not go in on a racehorse with her.

RICHTER

What?

FRED

Other than the painting, horses. She's been asking for a racehorse forever. At least with that I don't have to worry about upkeep. Have you ever priced a jockey?

RICHTER

No.

FRED

Every so often someone tells me she's asked them to go in on a racehorse. I tell them to walk away, swiftly.

RICHTER

You trust her?

Beat.

FRED

Exactly how well do I know you, Richter?

RICHTER

I'd like to think we're friends.

FRED

See, that's where many business transactions fall apart. The reason why you should never go in on a racehorse. People mistake being friendly for actual friendship.

RICHTER

I'm sorry?

FRED

You're Valerie's friend. I don't mind having you around, but I can't say that beyond Valerie's interest in you there's much of a basis for you and I becoming fast friends. You ask me if I trust my wife. That's – quite an insult.

RICHTER

Do you? Trust her.

Beat.

FRED

If you're worried about my feelings, I'll just say you're not the first, and you won't be the last.

RICHTER

The first and last what?

FRED

We're both grownups. I know what she wanted you to do.

RICHTER

You do.

FRED

Sleep with her. I don't really care.

RICHTER

I said no.

FRED

Good for you. So we're done here?

RICHTER

You're – okay with that?

FRED

I did just mention you weren't the first. You said no. In a few weeks she'll start grooming someone else. Does this move on to blackmail or something? You'll expose my wife's appetites in exchange for. . . ?

RICHTER

I'm trying to save your life.

FRED

I've survived Valerie dropping other potential lovers.

RICHTER

She asked me to kill you.

FRED

Because I won't let her buy a racehorse?

RICHTER

Will you shut up about the racehorse?

FRED

I beg your pardon.

RICHTER

Is asking all her lovers to kill you such a normal thing you can laugh in my face?

FRED

I was unaware I was laughing.

RICHTER

You've been laughing at me since I walked in. Your wife – Valerie -- wants me to – steal that painting and shoot you when you come down to check out the noise.

FRED

You'd think a late night parking lot mugging after my violet club meeting would be much easier.

RICHTER

We didn't get around to discussing all the options.

FRED

Did she say why? Insurance money? The weeping widow who inherits all. Do you think she's planning to cash out and buy herself the real thing finally? Is that the story you're telling me?

RICHTER

Does it matter?

FRED

Valerie has everything she wants. Paintings, interesting friends, social status. Husband who generally acquiesces to her – hobbies. She might feel I have her on a leash, but even she has to admit it's a pretty damned long one.

RICHTER

Still a leash.

FRED

I die, it all goes into charitable trusts.

RICHTER

I suppose that's one way to provide for her old age, I guess.

FRED

We both make it sixty-five, other arrangements kick into place. She knows the terms. Why am I discussing my finances with you, Richter?

RICHTER

The painting then. The insurance on that. Is that in her name?

FRED

Method, motive, you've nailed it all. You've gone to the police with this information? I mean, it's pretty serious stuff, my wife taking a hit out on me. You should go to the police.

RICHTER

You think they'd believe me?

FRED

You thought I would.

RICHTER

I didn't record anything, there weren't any notes. We – met for coffee.

FRED

Why you? You were not a hit man your previous life.

RICHTER

She thinks I can do it.

FRED

Could you?

RICHTER

I'm here. Doesn't that tell you anything?

FRED

I write the checks, remember? Aside from racehorses and paintings, she has a thing for adopting waifs. I let her walk on the wild side, so to speak, but I make sure I know exactly what the nature of wildness is.

RICHTER

Private detectives.

FRED

You fell within acceptable limits. You served your time. You paid your debt to society. Plus you can hold up your end of intelligent conversation at the dinner table. Maybe our company could be good for your rehabilitation.

RICHTER

Rehabilitation.

FRED

You are the first of her lovers to have actually killed a man.

RICHTER

I said no.

FRED

Potential lovers.

RICHTER

I was out of control. I took responsibility for my actions.

FRED

For that action. Eyewitnesses, security video. You were hardly going to get away with it. Maybe that's why she doesn't want you to kill me in a parking lot.

RICHTER

I served my time!

FRED

You had a good lawyer who talked it down to involuntary manslaughter.

RICHTER

Have I ever done anything against you guys?

FRED

Not that I'm aware of. And I prefer to keep it that way.

RICHTER

I stole your painting.

FRED

I thought you were supposed to steal the painting and then kill me.

RICHTER

I stole the copy.

FRED

Why would you steal the copy? How could you even get to the copy? We haven't even taken delivery of it yet.

RICHTER

(picks up the tube and hands it to Fred) It's right here. This is the copy. Valerie – interrupted me. Stealing it.

FRED

She went down to the studio to check on it and found you making off with it?

RICHTER

No. I was stealing it from here. From that wall.

FRED

Where that painting is.

RICHTER

I thought I was stealing that. She'd replaced it with the copy.

FRED

This is getting complicated.

RICHTER

She knew I was going to steal it, so she replaced it with the copy and I stole that.

FRED

What, you just told her, I'm going to steal your painting, please stop me?

RICHTER

Anne told her.

FRED

Told her what.

RICHTER

That I was going to steal it.

FRED

So you told Anne you were going to steal it, and she went and told Valerie.

RICHTER

Valerie is blackmailing Anne.

FRED

She barely knows Anne.

RICHTER

Anne tried to steal your paperweight.

FRED

The Baccarat? This one?

RICHTER

Valerie caught her. Anne's stolen a lot – stuff from all your friends.

FRED

Like the Limoges snuffbox, which you said Anne definitely didn't walk away with.

RICHTER

Yes.

FRED

And Valerie blackmailed Anne into telling her that you were going to steal a copy of our forgery so that you could kill me.

RICHTER

This is the copy. This is proof that what I'm telling you is true! I don't want your blood on my hands!

Beat.

FRED

It's proof that you're a thief, and think that because you've had your feelings hurt you need to turn me against her. Do I trust her. I trust her enough to let her have a parade of disposable men through her bed if she wants to because I know she still has to come home to me at the end of the day. There's more that keeps us together than the mere exchange of bodily fluids. *(pause)* I've always felt people should have second chances, and I was fine with being part of yours, but it's evident you haven't changed and second chances are wasted on people like you. It's time you leave, Richter, and I don't care to see you again.

Beat.

RICHTER

Have sex with your wife. For once.

FRED

I'm sorry?

RICHTER

You need to see your wife naked. With the lights on.

FRED

Why would I do that?

RICHTER

I shot her. Twice.

FRED

Twice.

RICHTER

She was wearing a bulletproof vest. But there'll still be bruises. Big bruises.

FRED

You shot my wife.

RICHTER

Ask her how she got those bruises.

FRED

And yet you say you don't want my blood on your hands.

RICHTER

I don't hate you.

FRED

How awful it must be for you, walking around, wanting to kill everyone you hate. Did you not think of just – walking away from her?

Beat.

RICHTER

Why doesn't she just – walk away from you, then?

FRED

(does not answer)

RICHTER

Do it your own way. I just want it on record that I tried to warn you.

Black.

Scene Two

A room with a chair.

This time, Richter follows Anne on.

ANNE

I will call the police.

RICHTER

And tell them what? You're an accomplice to an attempted murder?

ANNE

Jesus Christ, keep your voice down.

RICHTER

I called!

ANNE

I didn't answer.

RICHTER

You didn't give me much choice.

ANNE

You could have not come over. You could have not pounded on my door.

RICHTER

I heard you in here.

ANNE

When someone cracks open the door and leaves the chain on, it means they actually, really, honestly want you to go away.

RICHTER

This involves you, too.

ANNE

If I'm lucky a neighbor is calling in a complaint.

RICHTER

Then I don't have much time. I --

ANNE

Go away!

RICHTER

I just want to talk to you.

ANNE

"I just want to talk to you" – Yeah, that's usually how most domestic violence starts.

RICHTER

Domestic violence?

ANNE

We're dating, remember? Seen in public together? You think my 'boyfriend' showing up, yelling, beating on the door doesn't seem – violent?

RICHTER

I'm not – going to hit you.

ANNE

How do I know that?

RICHTER

I just need to talk.

ANNE

You broke the chain off my door.

RICHTER

You need to get a better chain.

Beat.

ANNE

So talk.

Beat.

RICHTER

You told me she was dead. You went over and you looked at her and you told me she was dead.

ANNE

You shot her, remember? What was I to think?

RICHTER

Kevlar. She's alive. And you knew.

ANNE

Last I saw, you shot her, she fell down. She wasn't breathing, I thought she was dead. She in the hospital?

RICHTER

Stop it. Just stop it.

ANNE

You shoot someone, they might be in the hospital. Seems logical.

RICHTER

She told me everything.

ANNE

Who did?

RICHTER

Valerie. Valerie told me everything.

ANNE

I guess you didn't shoot her hard enough.

RICHTER

Sorry, next time I'll go for the head shot. (*pause*) Is that a joke? Shoot her hard enough?

ANNE

What, you didn't want to kill her? Just wing her? You're disappointed she's alive?

RICHTER

I spent a night thinking I was a murderer.

ANNE

You brought a loaded gun.

No response.

ANNE

You brought it, but didn't think you'd use it?

RICHTER

She saw my face.

ANNE

You wanted to kill her. That's why you brought the gun. Stealing the painting was just an excuse. What, you wanted me to be a witness that she stumbled in and it was all an accident? Yeah. You turned me into an accomplice to murder. I'm not happy about that.

RICHTER

She. Told. Me. Everything. Just stop. Just – stop.

Beat.

ANNE

What'd she tell you?

RICHTER

She caught you, stealing that paperweight a few months ago.

ANNE

What paperweight?

RICHTER

The Baccarat paperweight. The second most expensive thing in the room. Again, congratulations on your poker face. Was I the only one in the room not in on the joke?

ANNE

I wish Mort had caught me. Probably would've let me off with a fondle over a glass of sherry.

RICHTER

So, what, Valerie hatched a plot to entrap me the moment she was smacking your hand away from the shiny baubles?

ANNE

She likes to have resources in reserve, in case you hadn't noticed. At first, she was going to play the lover angle, since that's what got you in trouble before. You decided to steal the painting, so it became botched art theft instead of the jealous lover flying into a murderous rage.

RICHTER

You're saying I was supposed to kill Fred in a jealous lover thing? Then why matchmake the

two of us? That'd make her the jealous one. Or you.

ANNE

Yeah, but which one of us is the hot-tempered controlling womanizer trying to sleep his way into high society?

RICHTER

Why didn't she send Fred down? Say his African violet club thing was cancelled? Make sure he was the one who interrupted us?

ANNE

Couldn't really ask Fred to the trial run? Blackmail for attempted murder is more secure than building you up to a jealous rage? Maybe she thought you'd vanish after nicking the painting and she'd have to train up another patsy. Or maybe just the look on your face when she popped up again, alive and kicking? Which I'm sure was precious. So many reasons. Maybe she didn't want to run the risk of having Fred simply knocked out or tied to a chair.

RICHTER

What got me into trouble before.

ANNE

Yeah. She also – told – me – everything.

Beat.

RICHTER

I should've printed brochures and handed them out. Would have been simpler.

ANNE

You spent the night thinking you were a murderer. You already were a murderer. That sort of thing doesn't just fade away.

RICHTER

I did my time. I changed.

ANNE

Christ. What, did you tell yourself that if you shot her in the middle of the robbery it wasn't really your fault? Like a jury would really buy that. Changed, right.

RICHTER

I –

ANNE

I'm just a small time, sticky-fingered girl. You tried to turn me into a monster like you.

Pause.

RICHTER

You're right.

ANNE

I'm what?

RICHTER

You're right. I'm sorry.

ANNE

Lot of good that does now. Does it at least make you feel better?

RICHTER

No.

ANNE

Good.

Beat.

RICHTER

You know what she wants us to do next.

ANNE

Yeah.

RICHTER

And by not opening the door, you were hoping to do what?

ANNE

It's all gone to shit, what does it matter?

RICHTER

We'll go to the police.

ANNE

We tried to steal a painting, only to have the victim ask us to kill her husband. Hm. Since we're laying all the cards on the table, she gave me this. In case you needed extra persuading.

"Fred, I hope that you will never read this, but if you are, it means that Richter has finally

ANNE (cont'd)

done something horrible. I'm going tonight to tell him I don't welcome his attentions, that he's become too much to handle, that I won't give him what he wants. I should never have let him worm his way into our lives, and I am so so sorry that it's come to this. My judgment of his

character was a grave mistake. He's become aggressive and frightening, and I hope that I can end it all without dragging you into it. Reading this means I haven't. . . my hope is that this letter never sees the light of day, and I hope that I can return from our meeting and rip it up. If you're reading this, it's Richter. Whatever happened, he did it. I sent a copy of this to Ted --" that's one of their lawyers " -- and told him to open this and read it in case anything happens, and then do what he needs to do to protect you. I can't see Richter stopping with just me." It goes on. Devolves into pretty convincing almost incoherent panicked blathering. Love, Valerie.

RICHTER

If nothing happens to her, the letter is meaningless.

ANNE

"I can't see Richter stopping with just me." You do it, or she frames you. Jesus Christ, smarten up, will you?

RICHTER

Frame us, you mean. You're in this too. Longer than I've been, apparently.

No response.

RICHTER

Are you going to let her turn you into a monster?

ANNE

What do you suggest?

RICHTER

We walk away. Get air-tight alibis.

ANNE

Because we know the date and time? Do we?

RICHTER

No.

ANNE

How long do we live in public places with constant video surveillance before she loses interest in us?

RICHTER

She'll lose interest. Find some other tools.

ANNE

You could go, finish the job. She can't be wearing Kevlar all the time. You were driven into a

jealous frenzy and murdered her in a blind fit of passion. If I can't have you, no one can. Like last time. Think it'd work again? *(pause)* What'd Fred say?

RICHTER

What'd you mean?

ANNE

I assume you tried to warn Fred.

RICHTER

I'm a hot-blooded, frenzied killer, why would I do that?

ANNE

Because even more than that, you don't like it when other people tell you what to do.

RICHTER

He didn't believe me. I even gave him back the painting. The copy.

ANNE

But he knows now. So if you do go after Valerie, the finger automatically points straight at you. Oh, Richter, you are in such a pickle.

RICHTER

You're in this pickle, too.

ANNE

But I'm not going to pull the trigger, and there's no way in hell you can make me. Hm. You think Valerie would shoot Fred, then wound herself, just to make it look like you did it? She might, you know. She just might.

Black.

Scene Three

Valerie is in her coat, preparing to leave.

Fred enters with a long tubular package, wrapped in brown paper.

VALERIE

Are you going to your violet meeting tonight? What's that?

FRED

It was leaning against the front door.

VALERIE

I didn't hear the bell.

FRED

I went to check the mail and it was just sitting there. No name or anything. Not heavy enough for a pipe bomb.

VALERIE

Were we expecting a pipe bomb?

FRED

How many enemies have we made lately?

VALERIE

You've said your violet meetings get pretty contentious.

FRED

Mrs. Bittersley can be quite partisan, but re-potting is the extent of her technical skills.

Fred opens, rolls it out.

FRED

Kind of a shabby way to deliver it, don't you think? He could have at least called first. What if it rained?

VALERIE

It's not from the studio.

FRED

You ordered a copy from someone else?

VALERIE

It's from Richter.

FRED

Richter made a copy.

VALERIE

I gave the copy to Richter. I guess he's giving it back.

FRED

Why would you give the copy to him, of all people?

VALERIE

He doesn't get to see it every day, like I do.

FRED

When someone admires a plant, I offer them a cutting, not a twenty thousand dollar reproduction. I thought you gave him your prized coffee mug.

VALERIE

You're not settling for a rack of mugs with pictures of African violets on them. No, you have a whole room of them. You get to walk into a room and be surrounded by violets. Frankly, aside from the exhibition curator, Richter's the only person who's expressed any interest at all in it.

FRED

I said I liked it.

VALERIE

Lines, shapes, color. Not objecting to something is not the same as – needing it.

FRED

No one needs a painting.

VALERIE

My day is better every time I look at it.

FRED

If that's the case, what were you going to do once the real one went on tour? I thought that was the whole point of having the copy made. So you wouldn't have to live without it. (*pause*) I didn't even know this was done.

VALERIE

Last week. I could have sworn I told you.

FRED

Did I write the check yet?

VALERIE

Yes. You did.

FRED

You were going to have another copy made, weren't you.

VALERIE

Surprise.

FRED

Without actually telling me.

VALERIE

That had been the plan.

Beat.

FRED

Valerie.

VALERIE

Fred.

FRED

It doesn't grow on trees.

VALERIE

My job is just to make it seem like it does, is that it?

FRED

This is being reckless.

VALERIE

Part of having money is being able to spend it on nice things.

FRED

Like Richter?

VALERIE

He's hardly a nice thing.

FRED

But he is worth twenty thousand dollars. Forty, really, if you count the second copy.

VALERIE

Which you can't because there isn't a second copy.

FRED

Why he'd return it?

VALERIE

Probably because it cost twenty thousand dollars. He was embarrassed. Did he include a note?

FRED

Richter? Embarrassed by a gift?

VALERIE

Pride. You would take him for someone with a certain amount of pride.

FRED

Not after seeing him vacuum the hall rug. And dust the credenza. And no, there's no note. You think he'd really leave a twenty thousand dollar painting sitting on the doorstep, with no note? Why didn't he just give it back to you, politely refuse your exceptionally generous gift?

VALERIE

Are you going to your flower meeting tonight?

FRED

Is there something I should know about Richter?

VALERIE

What do you mean?

FRED

What do you think I mean?

VALERIE

We both like good art?

FRED

I have my violets. You have – him.

VALERIE

You're verging on sordid.

FRED

Say no, and I will drop it here and now and never say another word.

VALERIE

Aside from art, there's nothing going on between me and Richter. Happy?

Beat.

VALERIE

On the other hand, after all these years it's so nice to know how much you trust me.

FRED

(gestures at the copy) Just so we're clear on the semantics – was anything going on between you and Richter?

VALERIE

No.

FRED

He would have been – number four, right? If there'd been anything.

VALERIE

Number four what?

FRED

Ethan. Martin. Durrell.

VALERIE

What about them?

FRED

Richter would have been number four.

VALERIE

I'm limited to four friends per decade? God, Ethan? We haven't seen him in – more than ten years. When he just kind of vanished. Someone said he moved to Seattle. Thought I'd be worth at least a postcard, but well, I guess when some people start new lives there's no room for the old.

FRED

I paid him off, you know.

VALERIE

Paid him off.

FRED

Paid him to leave. Seattle. Martin took the money, too. He was a little more expensive. Durrell skipped before I could make an offer.

VALERIE

You thought I cheated on you? Three times? Four? Jesus, Fred, really?

FRED

The total's eleven, actually. Ethan, Martin, and Durrell were the ones who lasted longer than a week. And it's not that I thought. It's that I knew.

Beat.

VALERIE

Really.

FRED

I have photos.

Beat.

FRED

You were going to monkey with the ledgers – our ledgers – to hide the money for the new, extra copy, weren't you?

VALERIE

Would you have just given me the money?

FRED

You know the home books are off limits.

VALERIE

Should I have found the extra money in the company's books?

FRED

The system is in place for a reason and it's worked very well. You should know better than to mess with it, since you're the one who set it up.

VALERIE

How long have we been doing this, Fred? How long?

FRED

It cuts both ways, Valerie.

VALERIE

No leeway. No loosening.

FRED

We have an arrangement. There are terms. You came to me.

VALERIE

Yeah, because your clumsy attempts at embezzlement were going to bring down your whole company, and take my job with it.

FRED

So you made a deal with devil. I go down, you go down. You must admit, we've been a pretty good team, all these years. Are you having second thoughts, is that what this is all about? You're not happy any more?

VALERIE

Would you have given me the money for a new copy? If I asked for it?

FRED

Is Richter worth it?

VALERIE

Every penny.

FRED

Of course, if you'd ever bothered to tell me about your string of men in the first place, I probably could have saved a lot of money over the years.

VALERIE

You wouldn't have minded?

FRED

Actually, no. It's actually a rather old fashioned arrangement, when you come down to it. You do your thing, I do mine, we keep up the pretenses together and are just careful not to talk in front of the help. Or fuck with the ledgers.

Beat.

FRED

The checkbook is closed. Oh, and I was talking with Ted, and he still thinks insuring the painting under your name wasn't the best thing to do.

VALERIE

But we agreed.

FRED

Ted's right. I'm heading to his office tomorrow to switch the insurance to my name.

VALERIE

It's mine. It's the only thing, in my whole life, I've ever really wanted.

Beat.

FRED

Earn it back, then.

Beat.

VALERIE

Are you going to your flower thing tonight?

FRED

Weather's changing and I'm starting in on a riveting sinus headache. If I have to listen to Mrs. Bittersley natter on about the show next month, bad things will happen.

Valerie exits.

Fred waits to hear the door close, then dials a phone.

FRED

You're right. If she's going all or nothing, I guess she'll have to settle for nothing. Do you have white sneakers?

Black.

Scene Four

The room with the painting.

Night.

Two people, in ski masks, enter. One of them wears white sneakers.

They cross to the painting, lift it down. A certain amount of noise is purposefully made.

Before they start cutting it from the frame, a light goes on in the hall.

FRED

Hello? Valerie? You're home awfully early.

In his bathrobe, he stops in the doorway and turns on the lights. There is a gun in his hand.

Fred he fires, twice.

One of the masked figures falls to the ground.

Fred crosses to the body on the floor, pulls off the ski mask.

FRED

Valerie, Valerie, Valerie. If you buy Kevlar, you should wear the Kevlar. But then, I don't know that I told you I bought a gun for self-defense. Or spent time at the firing range. Ah. (*he extracts a gun from Valerie's belt*) Do it.

He backs up to the doorway. The other figure (wearing white sneakers) straddles Valerie's body, takes aim, and shoots Fred in the lower leg.

He falls to the ground as a phone rings.

The alarm goes off.

*As he talks, the other figure positions
Valerie's gun in Valerie's hand.*

FRED

(answers the phone) Hello – I – yes. Police, yes. Ambulance, yes. My wife – I shot her. She shot me. My leg. My wife was – dressed as an intruder. With a gun. No – she -- I think -- I think just killed my wife. Yes, I'll stay -- on the phone with you until they arrive. *(to the masked figure)* You better go. Call my lawyer and have him meet you at the police station in the morning.

The masked figure exits.

FRED

(into the phone) I'm still here. No, I – don't know if the front door's unlocked. . .

Black.

Scene Five

A park bench.

Anne sits, sipping coffee. There is a wrapped parcel on the bench next to her, and a brown paper wrapped tube leaning against the back of the bench.

Richter enters.

ANNE

I didn't think you'd come.

RICHTER

How come you're not in jail?

ANNE

Fred lent me some of his lawyers. He has really good lawyers.

RICHTER

He's picking up the tab?

ANNE

Pity, I suppose.

RICHTER

I told you to run away.

ANNE

Pity for the stupid, then.

RICHTER

Valerie decided she couldn't wait for me?

ANNE

The timeline changed and you were more stubborn than she'd anticipated. She was still planning to frame you, if that makes you feel better.

RICHTER

Thanks. What are they charging you with?

ANNE

It's complicated. It's sort of breaking and entering, but since Valerie was breaking into her own home. . . Accomplice to insurance fraud, since she was stealing her own painting for the money.

RICHTER

Insurance fraud?

ANNE

Yes.

RICHTER

They believed that.

ANNE

Fred's got their money all tied up in trusts and whatnot. She wanted a new life, with money, and since the painting was insured in her name, well, steal that, gain a nest egg, freedom from Fred and she still gets to live the life she so richly deserved.

RICHTER

That explains why she'd try to kill her own husband?

ANNE

Things go wrong. He wasn't supposed to be home.

RICHTER

And yet she took along a loaded gun.

ANNE

Like some other people we know.

RICHTER

So you're not an accomplice to murder?

ANNE

I didn't know she had a gun. I didn't pull the trigger. And I was blackmailed into being there. Accomplice to armed robbery. . . with extenuating circumstances. And a first time offence.

RICHTER

They find all your treasures?

ANNE

The Lalique vase has gone home to Carl and Dave. They haven't decided yet whether to press charges.

RICHTER

That's it?

ANNE

If you see the *Mona Lisa* hanging in a friend's bedroom, is your first thought it's real?

RICHTER

You're still in a hell of a mess.

ANNE

Thus, Fred's lawyers. I'm only out and walking around thanks to them. The perks of having the pity of the rich and powerful.

RICHTER

What about Fred?

ANNE

Involuntary manslaughter. He thought she was a home invader, and he does have a permit for the gun. She shot first, which makes it self-defense.

RICHTER

How do they know that?

ANNE

I told them she did.

Beat.

RICHTER

Think you'll serve time?

ANNE

I'm not sure how I won't. But they're pretty sure they can make it minimal.

RICHTER

So why haven't the cops been to see me?

ANNE

Do you want them to?

RICHTER

I figured my name would've come up at some point.

ANNE

It hasn't.

Beat.

RICHTER

Why not?

ANNE

Were you part of the insurance fraud plot? Was Valerie blackmailing you too?

RICHTER

Are you wearing a wire?

ANNE

Would I tell you if I was?

RICHTER

Probably not. So why ask me to meet you?

ANNE

I should have taken you down with me. After all, how often does a girl get blackmailed from all directions?

RICHTER

Here's where I thank you for not mentioning me?

ANNE

If it wasn't you, Valerie would have found someone else. You weren't the only man willing to dust and mop for her. That's not to let you off the hook. You're still a jerk. A violent, controlling, impulsive jerk.

RICHTER

I deserve that.

ANNE

You deserve a lot more.

RICHTER

If – Valerie had killed Fred, had gotten away with it. Would you have gone along with framing me?

ANNE

You really want to deal with hypotheticals?

RICHTER

She comes home, finds Fred dead, the painting gone. You come forward, say you couldn't have it on your conscience or something like that –

ANNE

You were willing to put me in that situation the first time around. Never forget that I really don't like you.

RICHTER

Ah.

Beat.

RICHTER

What do you want?

ANNE

You keep running. Far away. Never again to be seen. And this is botched insurance fraud, not something – more complicated.

RICHTER

I was going to leave town anyway.

ANNE

Good. I'd wish you happy travels, but, well. Oh, and get some therapy. You need to learn how to interact with women. (*beat*) One last thing. Fred, in his largesse, said to give you this. (*she offers him the wrapped tube*) He said the lawyers said it wasn't evidence so he's free to do what he wants with it.

RICHTER

No. No. I already gave that back once. Why would he give that to me?

ANNE

Said it was your compensation for not killing him.

RICHTER

That's big of him.

ANNE

You wanted it. You had a visceral need. You were willing to really screw me over for it. I should staple this to your forehead or tattoo it to your chest.

RICHTER

Tell him thanks. But I have the coffee mug.

ANNE

I guess we're done here. Go away now.

RICHTER

Yeah.

Richter exits

Anne glances at her phone, sips her coffee.

Fred enters. He walks with a cane, favoring the leg that was shot.

ANNE

You just missed him.

FRED

Then I timed it perfectly. You gave him the copy?

ANNE

He wouldn't take it.

FRED

Worth a try. One is really enough. I can get money for the real one.

ANNE

You're going to sell it?

FRED

When it's no longer evidence. After it returns from the tour. It will help pay the legal costs. This, though? What will I do with it. Maybe I'll scatter it with her ashes. She did love that painting.

ANNE

You're willing to burn twenty thousand dollars' worth of painting?

FRED

It's a copy of a forgery of a little known painting. The worth is bound up in the labor to produce it, not the painting itself.

ANNE

Maybe after the exhibition tour someone will want it.

FRED

Ooo. Donation to a fund raising auction for the museum. Turns it into a nice little tax write off.

ANNE

I need to get this out there. To be sure we're clear, here.

FRED

Go for it.

ANNE

I could have shot you. Someplace other than your leg.

FRED

I could have shot you. Both.

ANNE

But you didn't.

FRED

No, I didn't. It all went rather according to plan, didn't it.

ANNE

Here. I got this for you.

Fred opens the box and lifts out an African violet.

FRED

EK Scarab. That's lovely. Really lovely. I've been wanting one of these. Where'd you find it?

ANNE

I have my sources.

FRED

I have something for you.

He gives her the snuff box from act one.

ANNE

Mort didn't want it back?

FRED

Mort never knew it was gone. You deserve it.

ANNE

Fred, your fingers are as sticky as mine.

FRED

One of the reasons we make a good team.

They kiss.

FRED

It's not going to be an easy year.

ANNE

It'll be worth it.

Black.

End of Play.