

TERMINALLY SÉANCED

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FADE IN:

INT. OLD FARMHOUSE - NIGHT

On a pitch-black fall night, in a dilapidated, musky parlor rests a round wooden table on an antique Persian carpet. Five polished wooden armchairs sit around the table, with a black foot-mat beneath it. A single oil lamp flickers in the center of the table, along with a butler's bell. There is one open window. A fire burns in a stone fireplace, where soot-covered fireplace tools stand idly by. A small table for snacks stands in the corner with bottled water, a teapot, silver coffee pot, a plate of cookies, and a half-dozen antique teacups and saucers. A larger portrait of stuffy, old banker, Mr. William Benson (80) hangs by the fireplace.

CHRISTI Benson (28), an attractive, trophy-wife blonde in a sleek black blouse and matching skirt with pockets. The blouse shows off her distracting cleavage. She paces while she awaits her first guest.

We hear the murmur of a sports car pulling up to the house.

Devastatingly handsome and smooth JOHNNY MACK (40), a Tom Cruise look-alike in a tight, short-sleeve black silk shirt and slacks, enters the house like he owns it. Christi swoons at the sight of him, star-struck, then regains a sad look.

Christi puts out a hand for a shake, but Johnny moves in for a hug.

JOHNNY

I'm Johnny Mack. Mrs. Benson, honor to finally meet you.

Christi remains star-struck, but acts reserved, as Johnny stares at Mr. Benson's portrait.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

Your dear husband and I met several times: Las Vegas, Los Angeles, New York...

A gust of wind blows through the open window and startles Christy and Johnny.

CHRISTI

He didn't take me on his banking trips. Insanely jealous.

Johnny looks around the room.

JOHNNY
With good reason.

Christy turns away to hide her blushes.

CHRISTI
I'm honored you took the time out
of your busy recording and show
schedule.

JOHNNY
Your husband was so very close to
joining our community, Mrs. Benson.

CHRISTI
(smiling)
Please, call me Christi. My husband
was going to schedule a trip for
both of us to meet you for a tour
of your church.

Johnny is giddy.

JOHNNY
Our community makes everyone
welcome! You'll love it! I would be
glad to give you a tour and
introduce you to our leaders!

Johnny paces as he delivers a well-rehearsed recruiting
speech.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)
Everyone has a mind. We have the
owner's manual: the handbook to
mental health. Your husband, like
so many others, was unfulfilled by
wealth.

He pauses, and gets face-to-face with Christi.

CHRISTI
Yes, unfulfilled. That's me!

JOHNNY
No one can tell you what is true.
It must be true for you!

CHRISTI
My favorite saying is, 'It is what
it is.' It's everything you need
to know!

He softens his voice.

JOHNNY

Exactly! You don't like chaos
either, do you, Christi?

Christi takes a step back.

CHRISTI

Not especially. See, I could use a
friend like you.

Johnny smiles and takes a half-step closer to her.

JOHNNY

Everyone needs us! We're like the
non-chaos team. But, this is not
the time and place to talk about
chaos or ruin.

Christi turns to hide developing tears, and takes one more
step toward her husband's portrait.

CHRISTI

Ruin? My life was far from perfect,
but I loved my husband more than
anyone knew. I believed in him.

Johnny glides to her back and gently touches her shoulders.
Johnny whispers into her ear.

JOHNNY

Please don't think me insensitive.
I wished only to comfort you in
your hour of need.
(whispers, looks around)
We are being taped, aren't we?

We hear a rickety Jeep approaching the house. Christi and
Johnny separate and turn toward the door.

BUCK STENSON (40), a rugged South African trophy hunter
dressed in a khaki shirt and pants, and crocodile belt, and
an Indiana Jones fedora, stomps in on a mission.

BUCK

Mrs. Benson, I'm...

CHRISTI

Buck Stenson. My late husband
cherished his hunting trips with
you.

She puts out a hand, and he shakes it vigorously. Buck
extends a strong handshake to Johnny.

BUCK

Willie, Mr. Benson that is, was my favorite client. He was more than that, he was my friend.

CHRISTI

He spoke fondly of you.

BUCK

Loved my ghost stories! Treated me like a son he never had in Africa.

Christi looks away. Buck turns to Johnny.

BUCK (CONT'D)

You must be the non-priest bloke mentioned in the will.

Johnny grimaces at the long, strong handshake.

JOHNNY

Johnny Mack, singer,
(smiles)
And I used to be able to play piano with those fingers.

Johnny twists his face like he doesn't recognize him.

BUCK

Singer, huh? Don't get much music in the bush.

Buck releases his vice-like grip. Buck eyes Christi like a predator. Johnny is jealous of Buck.

BUCK (CONT'D)

Willie didn't take you on his African trips! I thought he trusted me!

CHRISTI

Worried about my safety, I guess. But he told me every ghost story you told. I couldn't get enough.

They all turn toward the door as FATHER PAULO CERONI (80), a Nigerian Catholic priest in dress robes enters.

CHRISTI (CONT'D)

You must be Father Paulo Ceroni. Didn't hear you drive up.

FATHER CERONI
 Hybrid Prius, or Pious, as I call
 it. His Holiness sets the bar high.

Everyone chuckles warmly, as Christi shakes his hand.

CHRISTI
 How was your trip from Rome?

FATHER CERONI
 I pray Heaven isn't as far away.

CHRISTI
 Father Ceroni, this is Johnny Mack.

Johnny and the priest shake. Johnny bows.

FATHER CERONI
 The recording star! You must play
 the real palace someday.

JOHNNY
 Pleasure to meet you, Father
 Ceroni.

Christy turns to Buck.

CHRISTI
 This is Buck Stenson.

BUCK
 Howdy, Padre.

The Priest barely shakes and turns away, as a gust of wind
 enters in a spooky fashion.

FATHER CERONI
 I Googled you. You kill many of
 God's creatures.

BUCK
 We all gotta make a living, Padre.

The four people stare in silence at the five chairs around
 the table.

CHRISTI
 We're waiting on Madam Verona, the
 medium.

Johnny scans the room with a worried look, and Buck sees him.

JOHNNY
 Perhaps she's already here?

BUCK

Knew you were scared of ghosts, you weirdo Scientologist.

Everyone glares at Buck.

BUCK (CONT'D)

Oh, I Googled all of you! Child bride, Scientologist, and a creepy exorcist!

Buck slaps Father Ceroni on the back.

BUCK (CONT'D)

Isn't that right, Padre? Couldn't take it anymore. Devil finally got to you! So, they put you in the Vatican Bank!

CHRISTI

See here, Mr. Stenson. What others believe is no concern to you!

JOHNNY

I'm sure we all read that part of the will. Mr. and Mrs. Benson believed strongly in séances.

FATHER CERONI

And, we all must attend the séance, or be automatically disinherited.

BUCK

Didn't say we had to believe this nonsense, or even enjoy the damn thing. Just attend.

CHRISTI

I implore you all to keep an open mind, as Will did, and I do. This was very important to us, and Will was very important to each of us.

FATHER CERONI

But why a séance, and why here?

Christi paces to her husband's portrait.

CHRISTI

This was Will's childhood home.

BUCK

This dump?

CHRISTI

This house and practically all the land in the county.

(beat)

His father died in a Japanese POW camp, and Will's mom and grandma held a séance with this very table, right here, to contact him.

JOHNNY

What...what happened?

CHRISTI

Will was ten years old, and watched from that fireplace.

(beat)

The medium communicated with Will's father, and Will's mother died of a heart attack right in her chair. Horrifying experience.

FATHER CERONI

The poor boy was raised by his grandmother?

CHRISTI

Great-grandpa, who, coincidentally, attended the séance Mary Todd Lincoln held in the White House for her son, also named Will.

JOHNNY

President Abraham Lincoln attended a séance?

CHRISTI

Of course he did! With several of Washington's finest in 1862.

(beat)

Anyway, after his mom died, Will's great-grandpa sold everything but this house, so Will could go to college. Became a banker. The rest is history.

A gust of wind blows in from the window. Everyone turns toward the window. Everyone looks worried.

CHRISTI (CONT'D)

That happens all the time here. Scares me every time.

Standing in the doorway is MADAM VERONA (60), covered in colorful gypsy cloaks and a veil to hide her eyes and nose.

Some of her scraggly gray hair escapes the veil. She startles everyone.

CHRISTI (CONT'D)

You must be Madam Verona. I'm sorry. Didn't see you standing there.

The other guests take a step back, as Madam Verona shuffles like an old woman to the table. She's in a bad mood from the start.

MADAM VERONA

I don't care for pre-arranged seat assignments.

CHRISTI

I'm sorry, Madam Verona. It was specified by my late husband's will. I have your fee.

Christi secretly hands Madam Verona a stack of bills, which she quickly puts in her bra.

MADAM VERONA

Where am I, then?

CHRISTI

Your back is to the fire. I'm to your right. Mr. Stenson is to my right. Then Father Ceroni, and Mr. Mack.

Everyone reluctantly takes their seats. Johnny hesitates before finally sitting down.

FATHER CERONI

Why such detail?

Christi snaps at the priest.

CHRISTI

Will Benson didn't make a billion dollars by being sloppy.

(calming quickly)

I'm sorry, Father Ceroni. This whole thing has me edgy.

Buck points to the butler's bell and chuckles.

BUCK

What's the bell for? Room service? I could use a cocktail or three right about now.

Madam Verona gets up, and starts to shuffle toward the door.

CHRISTI
Madam Verona, wait!

BUCK
Just joking! Relieves the tension.

A gust of wind blows through the window. Madam Verona gasps. She stares at the fireplace as the wind stops. Madam Verona turns in anger, and glares at each of the four people.

MADAM VERONA
There is one non-believer here.

FATHER CERONI
Only one?

MADAM VERONA
Yes. One.

They examine one another more critically.

CHRISTI
Please rejoin us, Madam Verona.

MADAM VERONA
I want five times my agreed-upon fee!

Now everyone's eyes are on Madam Verona, who shuffles over to Christi to get in her face.

MADAM VERONA (CONT'D)
My task to communicate with your late husband is made much more difficult by the presence of a non-believer.

CHRISTI
Agreed. Five times the fee. We must do this. Scheduling conflicts don't permit us getting back together as a group before the year is up. We would all lose out.

Madam Verona scowls at the others, before retaking her seat.

MADAM VERONA
I don't know which one of you is the non-believer, but I will soon.

BUCK

For Christ's sake, let's get on with it.

MADAM VERONA

It's customary to introduce yourselves to me before we begin.

CHRISTI

I'll begin. The four of us are listed in my late-husband's will. We all knew him, but not each other. I'm Christi, with an "i," Benson. Will married me when I was nineteen. He was in his late sixties. I loved him very much.

FATHER CERONI

(to Christi)

Fifty years' difference?

(to Buck and Johnny)

I work in the Vatican Bank. You are killer of innocent animals in South Africa, and Mr. Johnny Mack, the famous singer,...

Johnny smiles. Buck glares at Father Ceroni.

JOHNNY

(interrupts)

Is never in one place for more than a week!

Christi and Father Ceroni are star-struck with Johnny. They can't take their eyes off him. Johnny takes it all in. Christi bats her eyes and flirts as she speaks to Johnny.

CHRISTI

And I've settled in Aspen. But a condition of the will was to hold one séance before one year after Will's death, and this is the first time we could get together!

BUCK

Aspen? But we had to hold the séance way out here, fifty miles from anywhere, in Will's boyhood farm where he watched his mother die of a heart attack at this very table. Creepy, if you ask me!

A gust of wind blows through the open window, then stops.

MADAM VERONA

An empty soul is anchored here.
Spirits say the time is right to
begin!

The butler's bell on the table slides six inches towards
Madam Verona. Everyone's eyes are glued to the bell.

Christi looks under the table. She's angry.

CHRISTI

I will not stand for parlor tricks!
Your letters to me said nothing of
this. Where's the magnet?

All but Madam Verona look under the table and shrug.

BUCK

I'll be damned. No magnet.

Christi picks up the bell and examines it.

CHRISTI

No strings. Nothing!

MADAM VERONA

If we may proceed in silence, arms
on the chairs. Feet flat on the
floor. Eyes closed. No exceptions,
as I stated in my instructions.

Everyone conforms. Johnny's phone buzzes. Christi is furious.

CHRISTI

My husband stipulated no phones, no
photography, and no video or you'd
be automatically disinherited!
Madam Verona also forbade phones.

Johnny shakes in fear.

JOHNNY

So sorry. I'll put it my car.

CHRISTI

I'll take it. Anyone else? May I
remind you, billions of dollars are
at stake here!

Johnny, Buck, and Father Ceroni turn over their phones.
Christi violently throws them into the stone fireplace.

Johnny, Buck, and Father Ceroni stare in disbelief. Madam
Verona is angry.

MADAM VERONA

The spirits are angry. Arms on the
chairs. Feet flat on the floor.
Eyes closed. No exceptions, or
you're out!

Everyone complies.

Madam Verona rings the butler's bell, then sets it back down.
No one opens their eyes. Another gust of wind enters the
window and stops.

They all HEAR the butler's bell scraping across the table.
Only Johnny opens his eyes. He SCREAMS as the bell stops.

The others, except Madam Verona, open their eyes, and stare
at Johnny. The areas around his eyes are red. He pushes his
chair back and looks under the table. He gets up and picks up
the bell and examines it closely. He's petrified.

JOHNNY

What the hell is going on here?

Christi looks under the table and comes up worried.

CHRISTI

The wind?

Johnny paces frantically.

JOHNNY

It didn't come through the window!

Buck snickers at Johnny.

BUCK

Singers!

Johnny reluctantly sits back down.

FATHER CERONI

Old floor may not be level. Or the
table legs uneven.

Christi looks to Johnny with sympathy and understanding.

CHRISTI

Or, more likely, it could be my
husband!

JOHNNY

I don't like this. I don't like
this at all.

Christi reaches across Madam Verona to rest a hand on Johnny's hand.

CHRISTI

I need this. Will needs this. He must have something important to tell us.

Madam Verona glares at Christi.

Johnny pushes Christi's hand away. He scratches his arms.

JOHNNY

I don't need Mr. Benson's money! I'm out of here. I tried to recruit him a few times! That's all! These evil spirits will kill you all!

FATHER CERONI

Recruit him?

Johnny is defensive.

JOHNNY

To our community.

FATHER CERONI

Scientology isn't a community. It's a cult.

JOHNNY

Odd statement coming from the Church of the Spanish Inquisition! Thousands killed? Burning witches, Jews, and Muslims?

FATHER CERONI

That was in the distant past.

JOHNNY

Was it, Father Ceroni? How about today in the Middle East? The Crusades are in full swing again. We just won't admit it! Our community accepts all religions. Can your community claim the same?

Johnny pushes out of his chair, angry and scratching.

CHRISTI

Please, Father Ceroni, reserve judgment. And try to calm down, Mr. Mack.

JOHNNY

I won't calm down! Something or
someone is very evil here!

Johnny grabs at his throat.

CHRISTI

Oh, my God, it looks like a panic
attack. Are you okay? Have some
water. There, on the corner table.

Christi races to bring Johnny a bottled water to comfort him.

Johnny spins off the top of the bottled water, and chugs much
of it.

Christi moves in for a hug, but he pushes her away.

Johnny's voice gurgles as he speaks softly.

JOHNNY

What's going on? Evil spirits? I
can't speak. I can't breathe.

Johnny looks terrified. He breaks out in hives, and in a mix
of panic and embarrassment, but he pauses at the door to look
down at the doorstep.

He looks back one more time, his face reddened and swollen
with developing hives.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

What...have...I...done?!

He races out screaming in a muffled voice and holding his
throat.

Christi races to the door frantically.

CHRISTI

Are you going to be okay? Call me
when you are safely home. I'd like
to meet again! For the tour?

Christi shuts the door and slowly returns to the table, as
Buck snickers.

BUCK

Sissy panicked! More in it for us,
hey?

CHRISTI

Sadly, yes. Mr. Mack is automatically disinherited by leaving on his own accord. However, I'm even sadder that he left so distressed. I hope he's okay!

BUCK

Scared to death! Face sure was puffy and red. Looked like a pimple ready to pop! Can't handle stress.

FATHER CERONI

He was the most peculiar one, from what I read. Top Scientologist. Mr. Mack believes many impossible things: Xenu, a galactic ruler millions of years ago, memories from past lives, Thetans, eight dynamics -- all nonsense!

Christi snaps at the priest.

CHRISTI

He was rude to suggest that your Catholic Church is the same community today as it was during the Inquisition, and you are equally rude not allowing his community to evolve and learn over the next five hundred years. And, neither rudeness is more important today than conducting this séance.

The whole table shakes! Everyone stares at the shaking table in disbelief. The table stops shaking, but Madam Verona is so angry her voice cracks.

MADAM VERONA

The spirits say none of us are without unfounded beliefs. You, Father Ceroni, believe in a virgin birth, that a man is the son of God, and that a book written by men and only men, is God's Word!

Father Ceroni begins to twitch in his seat.

FATHER CERONI

I'm here only because Will Benson was my friend. His international banking skills brought him to the Vatican on many occasions.

Madam Verona shakes her head in disbelief.

MADAM VERONA

The spirits say Mr. Benson funded
your entire office of exorcists!
The funding stopped when he died.

BUCK

Busted, Padre!

Madam Verona scowls at Buck.

MADAM VERONA

The spirits tell me you all came
here for the same reason!
(beat)
Greed.

Buck scoffs directly at Madam Verona.

BUCK

This from the gypsy who raised her
fee to five times the going rate.
How much are you pulling from the
rich widow today? Five thousand?

CHRISTI

(to Buck)

It's an additional four-hundred
thousand today!

Christi yells at Madam Verona.

CHRISTI (CONT'D)

I'm determined to fulfill my
husband's dying wishes! Now, can we
please communicate with my husband?

MADAM VERONA

In due time. In due time.

BUCK

(mumbles)

Five-hundred-thousand dollars?

Father Ceroni nods 'yes' to Buck.

Madam Verona sits again, but twitches in discomfort. She
glares at each person as she slowly speaks.

MADAM VERONA

The spirits tell me there remains
one non-believer in the room!

Everyone looks suspiciously at each other.

A gust of wind blows through the open window. Father Ceroni stands, stomps to the window, and closes it. He returns to his seat looking smug.

Christi gets up and closes the window, while scolding the priest.

CHRISTI

The window must remain open to create the draft for the fireplace, or this whole place would fill with smoke in seconds!

FATHER CERONI

Sorry. Forgive me.

Christi sits and Madam Verona begins again.

MADAM VERONA

Arms on the chairs. Feet flat on the floor. Eyes closed.

Everyone complies.

MADAM VERONA (CONT'D)

We may continue.

(beat)

William Benson, we beseech thee.
Let your presence be known.

Silence.

Madam Verona speaks louder.

MADAM VERONA (CONT'D)

William Benson, we beseech thee.
Let your presence be known!

Silence, then the fireplace tools shake and rattle, causing everyone to stare at them. They stop shaking. Everyone is worried.

CHRISTI

I didn't feel the wind?

BUCK

Me neither.

FATHER CERONI

Not me.

MADAM VERONA

(yells)

But do you feel his presence?

Father Ceroni shakes with fear, stands, and yells.

FATHER CERONI

I need air. I need air.

He pushes out of his chair, and heads to the front door. He opens it. All eyes are on him as he stares at the doorstep.

Christi pleads softly with the old priest.

CHRISTI

Please, Father Ceroni! If you go through that door you will be automatically disinherited.

The priest trembles at the open door, but doesn't leave. He turns, and ambles slowly to the fireplace.

FATHER CERONI

The presence I feel may not be that of Mr. Benson.

There is an awkward silence as the priest trembles slightly.

FATHER CERONI (CONT'D)

As a novitiate at twenty, and ordained at twenty-one, I was totally unprepared for my first exorcism.

CHRISTI

Please, Father Ceroni, we must proceed.

The priest turns and glares at Christi.

FATHER CERONI

Do not take this advice lightly!

Christy looks down. Madam Verona looks with pity at the old priest. Buck smirks.

FATHER CERONI (CONT'D)

It was 1958. A young man, my age, already torn by life and beaten by the bottle, was tied to a post in the basement of his parent's house.

(MORE)

FATHER CERONI (CONT'D)

He was swearing, spitting, and having convulsions when I was brought to him by his younger sister. The devil himself was tearing at his soul.

Buck leads him on, excitedly.

BUCK

What'd ya do, Padre?

The priest paces as he recalls the terror.

FATHER CERONI

Purification with salt was of little use. Purification with water did nothing. My prayers fell on empty ears.

Buck is sarcastic.

BUCK

Oh, no! Oh, no!

FATHER CERONI

I called on our Lord, Jesus Christ, but the young man kept swearing, and thrashing about.

Buck is more sarcastic.

BUCK

Oh, no! All is lost. All is lost!

FATHER CERONI

St. Michael the Archangel abandoned me.

The priest slumps over. Christi slowly gets up to return the old priest to his seat. He sits, exhausted. Buck is unsympathetic.

BUCK

Probably just had Asperger's Syndrome, you idiot!

(beat)

You're way worse than a traditional African healer -- they help people!

CHRISTI

Yes, I believe they cured Will's gout.

FATHER CERONI

(scoffs)

With magic herbs and rattles? Witch doctors, all of them!

The old priest smirks. Everyone is silent, until Madam Verona stands and scolds Father Ceroni.

MADAM VERONA

The term "witch doctor" is a derogatory colonial term used to vilify traditional African healers and herbalists. Their term is a Babu, or grandfather, a learned elder who has witnessed many illnesses in his lifetime.

The priest mumbles.

FATHER CERONI

I was twenty-one. An immigrant to Italy. I barely spoke English, let alone, Italian and Latin.

BUCK

I've seen those healers work their magic and cure the sick. Yes, they wear frightening masks, wave rattles, and sometimes they scream for the evil spirits sent by witches to leave your body. How is that any different than an exorcism, Padre?

CHRISTI

You are missing the point, Mr. Stenson.

BUCK

I think you're all missing the point. African healers work! I'm proof they work.

(beat)

I'm not the crazy bird who hired a freakin' gypsy for five-hundred thousand dollars!

Madam Verona steps behind Buck and holds out her arms. But rather than choking him, she gently rubs his shoulders.

MADAM VERONA

You'd think I found the one non-believer.

Christi and Father Ceroni look up at Buck.

MADAM VERONA (CONT'D)

But that isn't true, is it, Mr. Stenson. You were a child. Something tragic happened.

Buck looks away.

BUCK

A black mamba, the most poisonous snake in South Africa, bit my Mum.

MADAM VERONA

It killed your Mum.

BUCK

Yes, in twenty minutes. Before we could get help.

(beat)

We used that campsite hundreds of times. I was eight years old, and cuddled next to Mum in an old cotton sleeping bag -- open all around on a warm, summer night.

Christi reaches a hand out to comfort Buck's hand.

CHRISTI

You don't have to say anything more.

BUCK

We cuddled all night. It was the closest I ever felt to Mum my whole life.

Tears form in Buck's face.

CHRISTI

Please, Buck, stop. It's okay to stop.

BUCK

At dawn, I felt a warm arm hug my feet.

MADAM VERONA

I know. I know.

BUCK

As Mum stirred when she woke, her leg must have twitched.

MADAM VERONA

And the snake bit your Mum instead
of you.

BUCK

Pops cut his head off with a
machete. Ten-feet-long, and thick
as my leg at the time.

FATHER CERONI

God bless her. I know the snake.

Everyone fights back tears.

BUCK

I had nightmares for weeks, maybe
months. The doctors couldn't help.
Pops was battling the grief in his
own way, killing things: elephants,
lions, and lots of snakes.

MADAM VERONA

So, your father took you to a
traditional healer.

Buck turns to Madam Verona with a weak smile.

BUCK

How could you possibly know?

MADAM VERONA

The nightmares were fewer, but you
still have them, don't you, Mr.
Stenson.

Buck places his free hand on Madam Verona's hand.

BUCK

I needed to believe. I needed to.

Madam Verona pats Buck's hand, and returns to her seat.
Christi pulls her hand back slowly with a smile.

CHRISTI

We all need something to believe
in.

Father Ceroni stands unsteadily.

FATHER CERONI

Except Scientology!

Madam Verona covers her veil with her hands.

CHRISTI

Let it go, Father Ceroni. We have a séance to conduct.

FATHER CERONI

Fine. But, I need to get things off my chest about this séance idea.

Christi covers her face with both hands.

BUCK

Let the old Padre vent.

Father Ceroni nods a "thank you" to Buck.

FATHER CERONI

The bible, God's Word, is very clear on the subject of séances.

Buck eggs on the priest.

BUCK

Ooh! What's it say? What's it say?

FATHER CERONI

There shall not be found among you anyone who practices divination, a soothsayer, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or a medium, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord!

BUCK

Yeah, Baby! What's a necromancer?

The priest glares and points his finger at Madam Verona.

FATHER CERONI

Someone who speaks to the dead!

Christi stands, flustered.

CHRISTI

With all due respect, Father Ceroni...

BUCK

(interrupts)

People who say 'With all due respect,' don't mean it.

Christi glares at Buck.

CHRISTI

I mean it, Mr. Stenson.

(beat)

You came here on your own accord,
Father Ceroni. I know my husband
gave millions to the Church over
the years.

The priest sits like a scolded school child.

FATHER CERONI

He was a friend to the one true
Church.

CHRISTI

But, he not only funded your
exorcism office, he also gave
millions to Jewish charities,
Muslim charities, and even the
Mormons!

The priest pouts.

FATHER CERONI

He remains a friend to the one true
Church.

CHRISTI

Now, if we're all through venting,
can we please conduct the séance!

Christi sits down, puts her arms on her chair, and closes her
eyes. Buck and Father Ceroni follow suit.

MADAM VERONA

Eyes closed, arms on chairs, feet
on the floor.

(beat)

William Benson, we beseech thee.
Let your presence be known.

Silence.

Madam Verona speaks louder.

MADAM VERONA (CONT'D)

William Benson, we beseech thee.
Let your presence be known!

Silence.

A gust of wind blows through the window, and stops.

They all turn their heads slightly toward the window, but they keep their eyes shut.

MADAM VERONA (CONT'D)
William Benson, is that you?

The fireplace tools rattle.

They all turn their heads slightly toward the fireplace, but they keep their eyes shut. However, they cling tightly to the arms of their chairs. Their heads lean back, frightened.

MADAM VERONA (CONT'D)
William Benson, is that you?!

The entire table begins to shake, slowly at first, then more, and more, until it suddenly stops.

Christi, Buck, and Father Ceroni open their eyes, and gasp in fear.

MADAM VERONA (CONT'D)
Mr. Benson, you had unfinished business. You required this séance to draw your affairs to a close.

The priest now shakes uncontrollably. Buck looks worried.

Christi leans and rests her hand on Father Ceroni's hand.

CHRISTI
Relax, please, Father Ceroni!

Father Ceroni shakes violently in his chair. He glares at Madam Verona, and points a finger at her.

FATHER CERONI
I performed exorcisms for decades!
I know the Devil when I see...

Father Ceroni shakes less, but grabs his left arm and heart.

BUCK
Christ! He's having a heart attack.
Call 9-1-1. Call 9-1-1.

Madam Verona stares at the fireplace and sees the pieces of broken phones. Buck and Christi turn to stare.

Christi jumps up and checks Father Ceroni's pulse. She yells.

CHRISTI
He's dead! We must end the séance,
and send for help!

BUCK
Get him in on the floor and start
CPR!

Christi and Buck move the priest to the floor, but neither begins CPR.

CHRISTI
Don't know how.

Silence.

BUCK
Me either!

Buck and Christi look back to Madam Verona, who shakes her head 'no.'

Silence.

BUCK (CONT'D)
If he's dead, he can't be helped,
and I'm not going anywhere! The
Padre don't need the money no more.
You may not need the money, but I
do! We're gonna finish this thing!

Christi sadly walks toward a hallway.

CHRISTI
I'll get a sheet to cover him.

She returns with a sheet, and covers him. Madam Verona makes the sign of the cross.

Buck and Christi take their seats at the table. They close their eyes, and rest their arms on the chairs.

Another gust of wind pours through the window.

Then, it stops, and the fireplace tools rattle and stop.

Then, the butler's bell on the table moves a few inches and stops.

Then the entire table begins to tremble.

Christi, Buck, and Madam Verona look sincerely frightened.

We see the portrait of Mr. Benson glaring at them.

INT. OLD FARMHOUSE - NIGHT

Father Ceroni lays in the corner, covered with a white sheet. Christi stands by the open front door, staring at the doorstep. Buck paces in front of the fireplace.

Madam Verona pushes past Christi to get through the door, and into the parlor.

MADAM VERONA

No phone in Father Ceroni's rental car.

BUCK

Plenty of broken phones in the fireplace.

CHRISTI

I'm sorry. That was my mistake!

BUCK

Really?

Christi stares at her husband's portrait, while Madam Verona sits back down at the table, ignoring the dead priest.

CHRISTI

We've got to call the séance off. It's over. It was the only time we could all get together, and we obviously can't all get together again.

BUCK

Padre's dead and that singer's too scared to come back here, that's for dang sure.

Christi stares at the fire.

CHRISTI

We have to report a death to the sheriff. It's our duty. To hell with the money. It's the right thing to do!

Christi storms toward the front door. She stops when she sees Buck blocking the doorway.

BUCK

Why can't we finish this séance thing real quick like, then go to the sheriff? We'd all do what you and your husband wanted us to do.

CHRISTI

And get the larger inheritance? Is that right, Mr. Stenson?

BUCK

The Padre can just sit there for an hour. He don't have to talk.

MADAM VERONA

My fee is paid either way.

Christi turns and glares at Madam Verona.

CHRISTI

You're okay sitting here with a dead man?

MADAM VERONA

We're not communicating with him!

Christi stands by her chair.

CHRISTI

Are you crazy?

MADAM VERONA

If we communicate with your late husband, we can conclude the séance, and send Mr. Stenson to fetch the Sheriff.

CHRISTI

He'll never go to the Sheriff!

Buck stomps over to Christi.

BUCK

Why wouldn't I go for help?

CHRISTI

It's clear you're after the money. After the séance, you would have nothing more to gain.

Buck sits down in his seat, questioning himself.

BUCK

The cops will want to ask questions? To hear from all of us on the stuff we seen: gusts of wind, rattling fireplace tools, bell moving across a wooded table without a magnet or strings, and the shaking table.

CHRISTI
No one will believe it.

BUCK
I do. And I want my money, so I can
hold one of these for my Mum!

Christi and Madam Verona sigh towards Buck. Then Buck turns
mean again.

BUCK (CONT'D)
I came all this way! So, let's
finish this one up and move on with
our lives.

Madam Verona speaks softly.

MADAM VERONA
Arms on the chairs. Feet flat on
the floor. Eyes closed.

Everyone complies.

MADAM VERONA (CONT'D)
We may continue.
(beat)
William Benson, we beseech thee.
Let your presence be known.

Silence.

Madam Verona speaks louder.

MADAM VERONA (CONT'D)
William Benson, we beseech thee.
Let your presence be known!

Silence.

Madam Verona angrily slams her fists on the table.

MADAM VERONA (CONT'D)
We've lost him.

Christi is angry.

CHRISTI
What do you mean, you lost him?

MADAM VERONA
It's not like a direct phone line.
I lost him. He's not responding.

BUCK
So, I don't get my money.

MADAM VERONA
We never confirmed a communication.

BUCK
Confirmed? What about the wind and
the shaking things?

CHRISTI
(to Madam Verona)
Nothing out of the ordinary? Is
that it?

BUCK
I'm counting the shaking table as a
sign!

MADAM VERONA
Could have been Father Ceroni had
the shakes with a knee hitting a
table leg! Is that it?

CHRISTI
Yes, sadly, it could have been. But
I thought we were close. Very
close.

BUCK
Try again, damn it!

Buck stares over at the dead priest.

BUCK (CONT'D)
The Padre can't have the shakes
now!

MADAM VERONA
It won't work! There is an excess
of negative energy in the room.

CHRISTI
Negative energy?

MADAM VERONA
Comes in many forms. Excess worry,
excess greed, and non-belief are
the most common causes.

Buck gets up and paces.

BUCK

I ain't worried 'bout nothing
except not getting what's coming to
me.

MADAM VERONA

Worry and greed in spades. What
about non-belief?

Buck stomps over to Madam Verona.

BUCK

Early on, you said there was one
non-believer in the group, and I
thought you might have been talking
about me, 'cause I'd never been to
a séance. But I believe in 'em now,
and I want one for my Mum!

CHRISTI

Then?

Buck turns to Christi.

BUCK

Then, I thought it must have been
Johnny Mack!

MADAM VERONA

Mr. Mack?

BUCK

I pretended like we hadn't met.
(beat)
But we did. On a safari, I led with
your late husband, Willie, outside
Kruger National Park.

CHRISTI

Johnny didn't remember you?

BUCK

The rich never remember the poor!
Hell, they don't even see 'em! They
look right past you, like invisible
servants or slaves.

MADAM VERONA

So sorry.

BUCK

Johnny was kissing ass with Willie
the whole time.
(imitating Johnny)
(MORE)

BUCK (CONT'D)

Be a better you. Become clear about who you are. Surrender yourself to the community!

(beat)

Rubbish!

CHRISTI

He honestly didn't remember you?

BUCK

I was less than the animals we was huntin'.

Christi stands as Buck collapses into his chair.

CHRISTI

I know what's that like. For one month it was a honeymoon, then he told me what to read, what to watch, and what to say for nine years. But it was okay, really!

Christi stares at the portrait of Mr. Benson, as Buck and Madam Verona look on in pity.

CHRISTI (CONT'D)

He wanted a son, but the child never came. He wanted a real heir to his fortune. I got depressed.

MADAM VERONA

Did you seek professional help?

CHRISTI

I couldn't. He wouldn't go for it. He put his trust in faith-healers, and pretty soon, I did too. Magic herbs. Rituals. Unusual massages. Prayers to a dozen gods.

BUCK

And that helped your depression?

CHRISTI

Sure did. He sacrificed a goat once for me! It worked for a while! I liked it, actually, and he bought me nice gifts.

Christi puts her head down, depressed.

Madam Verona gets up to comfort Christi, but Christi turns from her.

MADAM VERONA

Poor thing.

CHRISTI

I loved him and would do anything for him. I did his research on Bigfoot, the Loch Ness monster, faith-healers, everything! It's all I did for nine years!

BUCK

Yeah, but you had money, a roof over your head, and never missed a meal.

Christi turns to Buck with a loving look.

CHRISTI

I was his invisible secretary, Mr. Stenson, without the carnal benefits.

Buck's voice softens. He flirts with Christi.

BUCK

Eight years without, you know, that's a long time.

CHRISTI

I cried for eight years. When I read his will, I cried all over again.

MADAM VERONA

Why? Because he asked for a séance?

Christi turns angry at Madam Verona.

CHRISTI

He and I both demanded a séance, but he was a control freak. He left me the Aspen home and modest living expenses until we held it! He froze all his other assets in a trust. More than a billion dollars just sitting there. After I held this séance, the funds are to be released to each of us in equal shares.

Buck goes wild, hopping up and down, and around the room!

BUCK

Equal shares! I'll be as rich as King Solomon! Quarter of a billion dollars!

CHRISTI

More because Johnny Mack abandoned us on his own.

MADAM VERONA

(mumbles)

In a panic attack.

BUCK

That means I get a third of a billion dollars! Oh, my God!

Buck stares at the dead Padre.

BUCK (CONT'D)

What about the Padre's share?

MADAM VERONA

He's here in spirit.

Christi looks away.

CHRISTI

According to the exact instructions, if he's deceased, his share goes back in the pot.

BUCK

That makes it an even half-billion dollars for me!

Buck screams as he runs around the room.

BUCK (CONT'D)

I hoped for a hundred thousand dollars, nothing more, honest! I can't believe it!

MADAM VERONA

You should have told Mr. Mack.

Buck snickers and laughs.

BUCK

Makes him the best singer and biggest idiot in the world! Let's see who's invisible now!

(beat)

(MORE)

BUCK (CONT'D)

Gullible idiot just went clear all right!

Madam Verona turns serious.

MADAM VERONA

What did you say, Mr. Stenson?

BUCK

I said, 'Gullible idiot just went clear.'

Madam Verona speaks slowly and seriously.

MADAM VERONA

You believe in ghosts and faith-healers casting out evil spirits, but chastised the good Father Ceroni and Mr. Mack as gullible?

Buck twitches uncomfortably.

CHRISTI

I'll remind you, Mr. Stenson, that we all believe in something.

Buck turns on Christi.

BUCK

But maybe everybody believes stupider things than you, so it's okay?

CHRISTI

That's not what I said. Besides, you seem pretty smart at times.

BUCK

At times? Before every safari, I check out the guests that signed up on the Internet. They pay a lot of money to be pampered. I make more on tips than fees.

CHRISTI

How does that work?

BUCK

I find out if a big fat trophy hunter likes good scotch, chocolate bars, and native women, and he gets them.

MADAM VERONA

Disgusting!

CHRISTI

Repulsive!

BUCK

They seem to like it!

(beat)

Then I track big game radio collars to see where they're gonna be -- and when they might wander from the protected national park.

CHRISTI

Equally distasteful.

MADAM VERONA

Sound illegal.

BUCK

My hunts are always successful. My tips are huge.

CHRISTI

What if the animals don't leave the national park?

BUCK

We bait them or go in after them. Pay off a few game wardens to turn their backs, take a day off.

CHRISTI

I'm leaving to go get the sheriff.

Christi gets up and storms to the door, but Buck stops her by squeezing her arm so tightly she winces in pain.

CHRISTI (CONT'D)

Ow! You're hurting me!

BUCK

I know we have to conclude this séance or everything is off the table, right?

Christi shakes her arm free in desperation.

CHRISTI

Maybe!

Buck grabs Christi's arm again. He lifts his other hand and forms a fist. He threatens to punch her.

BUCK

What happens if we don't complete
the séance?

Christi is silent. Madam Verona stands, but seems paralyzed.

CHRISTI

That provision is quite clear.

(beat)

In the event the séance is not
completed, I keep the Aspen house
and my stipend for life, and the
rest is split evenly to one hundred
pre-selected charities and
organizations.

BUCK

So, you're willing to cross that
doorstep, and miss out on half-a-
billion dollars?

(beat)

Makes you a bigger idiot than
Johnny Mack!

MADAM VERONA

Mr. Stenson, can you be certain
that Mr. Mack isn't happy with the
money he has, or the life he's
chosen?

BUCK

He's a nut job like the others. One
day, he'll wake up and discover how
gullible he's been -- about
practically everything, and he'll
be as miserable as the rest of us!

They all pause to reflect on Buck's words.

CHRISTI

So, you propose that gullibility
may lead to happiness, but it's
shallow, temporary, and
unfulfilling in the long run?

BUCK

People who die believing in heaven
get eaten by the same worms as the
people who don't. I've seen
thousands of Christians, Muslims
and natives die of starvation
across Africa. The same bacteria,
maggots, scavengers, and worms get
'em all!

MADAM VERONA

You're an atheist, then, Mr. Stenson?

BUCK

Didn't say that!

CHRISTI

An agnostic then?

BUCK

Didn't say that either. There have been thousands of gods made up by humans over the past two-hundred thousand years -- I looked 'em up. So, the difference is: an atheist believes in one less god than your typical agnostic, according to my mathematics.

CHRISTI

That's a cynical way to view things.

BUCK

What kind of God allows a boy's Mum to be killed right next to him?

(beat)

What kind of God allows his finest creations, man, to be murdered, slaughtered in wars, or left to starve? Have you watched babies starve? Either of you? Slowly over the long dry season?

CHRISTI

Your entire career is killing God's most glorious creations? You must believe that's okay?

BUCK

Don't ride your high horse now, Mrs. Benson. You get probably twenty-mill if you leave of five-hundred mill if you stay to the end?

CHRISTI

Mathematics is your specialty.

BUCK

That's the difference of being a prostitute for under three-mill a year to over fifty-mill a year.

Christi slaps Buck across the face.

CHRISTI
I loved my husband, you ungrateful
pig!

BUCK
That right?

CHRISTI
He left me alone a lot, and he
hated that I didn't give him a son,
but I loved him as much or more as
you loved your Mum!

Buck stops cold. He puts his fist down, and opens his hand.
Madam Verona coldly looks at the two of them.

MADAM VERONA
You have both forgotten that this
séance ends when I write a note
testifying that it was successfully
completed.

Christi and Buck saunter back to their seats.

MADAM VERONA (CONT'D)
That's what my written instructions
said!

CHRISTI
That's true, but your full fee is
paid only after a completed séance.

MADAM VERONA
Economically speaking, you two have
much more to gain from a completed
séance: half a billion dollars.

Buck speaks to Christi, while pointing at Madam Verona.

BUCK
That gypsy witch is putting the
squeeze on you!

CHRISTI
Madam Verona?

MADAM VERONA
I'm doing no such thing. Five-
hundred-thousand dollars is more
than I will ever use.

CHRISTI

Then why bring up the amounts of our inheritance?

MADAM VERONA

You two brought the amounts to the table. Only two of the original four remain. It's fair to wonder what happens to the money if only one of you survives the evening?

Buck looks suspiciously at Christi.

BUCK

I see your point. If something happens to you, I bet I get nothing, and everything goes to charity.

MADAM VERONA

Then treat her nicely and with respect, Mr. Stenson. Apologize for your recent outbursts and vicious behavior.

Buck ponders his options.

BUCK

I'm terribly sorry, Mrs. Benson. My behavior stinks. I was all keyed up by the goings-on tonight. I'm truly sorry.

CHRISTI

I am a bit keyed up as well. Apology accepted.

MADAM VERONA

(smirks)

That was a half-billion-dollar apology if I ever heard one.

CHRISTI

Let's take a short break before we resume. I need some water.

Christi points to the small table with bottled waters, tea, coffee, and cookies.

Buck races to the table. Madam Verona shuffles like an old lady to the table. Christi observes them before sauntering over.

BUCK

I could use a coffee and a cookie.

He pours coffee into an antique teacup.

MADAM VERONA

I'll have tea, if you don't mind.

(beat)

Cups are beautiful.

CHRISTI

My husband's grandmother's.

MADAM VERONA

Works of art.

BUCK

Too small for coffee mugs!

MADAM VERONA

Gold leaf trim. Early-1800s?

CHRISTI

Don't know much about them, or the other belongings in his six or seven estates.

Buck hesitates to grab a cookie. Madam Verona sees this.

BUCK

I don't think so.

CHRISTI

They're not poisonous, if that's what you're thinking.

BUCK

Did the Padre eat any?

Christi quickly grabs a cookie and takes a bite.

MADAM VERONA

Did Mr. Mack have one?

Christi is furious.

CHRISTI

No one has eaten a cookie. They're chocolate chip. Store-bought! Don't eat one if you don't want one!

Christi huffs back to her seat.

Buck smells his coffee and puts it down. He returns to his seat with nothing in hand.

Madam Verona sips her tea and eats a cookie by the small table, as Christi and Buck look on.

MADAM VERONA

Mrs. Benson, were you curious why your husband quarantined you in Aspen while he trotted around the globe?

CHRISTI

I stayed out of his business.

MADAM VERONA

Do you know if he had mistresses? Many powerful men...

CHRISTI

If you were any good at being a medium or a fortune-teller or whatever, you'd know!

MADAM VERONA

I know.

(beat)

I was inquiring whether you knew.

Christi stands and saunters over to Madam Verona in a self-confident manner.

CHRISTI

You knew? You told me in your first letter that you didn't own a computer, didn't have a website or a one-nine-hundred number, no cellphone, and never advertised on social media.

MADAM VERONA

All true. I just know.

Buck chimes in from the table.

BUCK

Country bumpkin, huh! No computer?

MADAM VERONA

Rented a car to get here because my old workhorse, Babble, was too sick for the trip.

BUCK
You shittin' me?

MADAM VERONA
I live in a horse-drawn wagon, west
of Boulder, in the mountains.

Christi turns to Buck.

CHRISTI
It's why I picked her. I wanted the
real thing.
(turns on Madam Verona)
But I'm curious how you knew about
my husband's affairs.

Madam Verona guides Christi back to the table.

MADAM VERONA
Sit, and I'll tell you the story of
my gift.

Christi sits down, apprehensively. Buck leans in, curiously.

CHRISTI
Keep it short. I want to get done
with this.

MADAM VERONA
A few hundred years is short in the
grand scheme of things.

Madam Verona varies eye contact between Christi and Buck as
she speaks.

MADAM VERONA (CONT'D)
Our people, the Romani, originally
from northwest India, were invited
by the King of Persia -- to teach
music to the poor. Each of our
families was given a cart and ox.
Seeing the poor starving people, we
cooked the ox, shared the meat, and
were exiled forever as travelers.

BUCK
Ate the ox? Then you hand to pull
your carts.

MADAM VERONA
We stole horses, and a few
necessary items. We were a proud
but opportunistic people.

CHRISTI

Can you fast-forward?

MADAM VERONA

My extended family ended up in Czechoslovakia. We blended in, learned several languages, and many converted to Catholicism. Some families became Jewish, some Islamic, some stayed Hindu to the end.

(beat, louder)

But they all stayed Romani forever. Married within. Always within!

BUCK

Gypsies! Huh! I told you!

MADAM VERONA

Gypsies is a derogatory term used by Europeans to justify killing us.

CHRISTI

Killing you?

MADAM VERONA

Hitler had tens of thousands of Romani slaughtered in their villages or sent to the camps.

BUCK

Didn't know that.

MADAM VERONA

Heads of European states had them killed, deported, or sterilized.

Christi sits up straight.

CHRISTI

Sterilized?

MADAM VERONA

One night in 1973 in Prague, my Mama forced me to pack my things and go to America. I didn't know why. She knew what was about to happen. She saw the future. The next day, Mama was captured, and held for coercive sterilization, but I never saw her again. I was twenty-one when I fled the country.

CHRISTI

She saved your life.

MADAM VERONA

Everywhere I went, I warned people what would happen to them tomorrow, or the next week. What to look out for! And a few days later, they would help me get a passport, or a plane ticket to New York, or food or shelter.

CHRISTI

You were that good?

MADAM VERONA

Some were very expensive gifts.

BUCK

When did you know you were a medium?

Madam Verona stares at Christi.

MADAM VERONA

Some lives are bigger than others. In my experience, the spirit of a miscarriage has only a little to tell me.

Christi turns away. Buck leans in.

BUCK

But...

MADAM VERONA

But the spirit of a man more than seventy who has made millions and traveled the globe, and mistreated many, has much to say.

Christi stands and walks to her husband's portrait.

CHRISTI

And much to apologize for?

MADAM VERONA

Exactly.

CHRISTI

You mentioned in your first letter that you have successfully completed hundreds of séances.

(MORE)

CHRISTI (CONT'D)

I never thought to ask about how you define the term 'successfully completed.'

Madam Verona doesn't look back.

MADAM VERONA

A legitimate question.

(beat)

I wrote and described my needs: a single round table and armchairs, with a single oil lamp and a butler's bell.

CHRISTI

Yes, you described that well, and I complied. But success and completion?

MADAM VERONA

It's more of the process of self-realization.

Christi is unsatisfied. She sulks and paces angrily.

CHRISTI

That's unacceptable. Self-realization can't be measured or quantified.

MADAM VERONA

You'll know it when I see it!

BUCK

(confused)

Like the gusts of wind? The rattling fireplace tools? The moving bell?

MADAM VERONA

It's the winds of change that calm your heart that matter most of all.

BUCK

Huh?

MADAM VERONA

It's when the clanging in your mind comes to rest.

CHRISTI

Does that happen often?

MADAM VERONA

No. For some, their hearts never calm, and minds never rest, until the 'bell tolls for thee' as Hemingway says.

Buck looks to Father Ceroni.

BUCK

Until they die?

MADAM VERONA

I'm afraid so.

Another gust of wind blows through the open window and stops.

Madam Verona turns to Buck in a low, deep voice, as Christi moves behind her.

MADAM VERONA (CONT'D)

I spoke to your Mum before coming here tonight.

Buck backs up in his chair. He looks away, then back to Madam Verona.

BUCK

What? What did she say?

MADAM VERONA

Your keepsake. Shirt, blanket, or article of your mother's clothing. From that night. You can let it go.
(beat, deep)
Let it go.

Buck pushes away his chair. He stands and paces.

BUCK

My blankie. How could you know? I was eight. Way too old to sleep with a blankie! Pops hated it. Mum said it was okay. No one knew! No one!

A gust of wind bursts through the window, and Buck races to his seat. He closes his eyes, rests his hands on the chair, and places his feet flat on the mat below him.

Christi sits down, and the entire table shakes again. This time, Madam Verona glares at Christi before turning to Buck.

MADAM VERONA

The spirits tell me you were more than Mr. Benson's safari guide and fellow trophy hunter!

Buck squirms in his seat.

MADAM VERONA (CONT'D)

The spirits tell me you were a poacher and an ivory smuggler! And worse, you believed you were doing the elephant, lion, and rhino populations a service by killing the strongest males of each species! The opposite of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution!

Buck squirms more. He yelps in pain, holding his left side.

CHRISTI

Mr. Stenson, what's the matter?

BUCK

Something bit me!

Buck stands, and rips off his shirt. We see three black widow spiders on his torso. He swipes the spider that just bit him. A red blotch forms instantly on his skin.

Buck screams again, and slaps off another spider.

CHRISTI

Oh, my God!

MADAM VERONA

Don't kill them. Put them outside.

He can't locate the third spider on his body. Then, he screams a third time and lifts his arm to find it under his armpit.

CHRISTI

Check the other chairs!

Christi panics. She removes a shoe and quickly kills the three spiders. Madam Verona checks the other chairs, while Buck continues yelping in pain.

CHRISTI (CONT'D)

I'm taking you to the hospital!

MADAM VERONA

And forego a half-billion dollars?
And if Mr. Stetson goes to the
hospital, they'll run a security
check on him. He'll go to jail!

CHRISTI

He'll die if he doesn't get medical
attention!

Buck starts to run out the door. He pauses at the doorstep,
struggling to choose between life and money.

BUCK

One of these black widows can kill
ya! Three! I had three!

Christi gets in Madam Verona's face.

CHRISTI

I've got to get this man help! I've
had enough self-realization! This
séance is over.

Madam Verona turns cold and angry.

MADAM VERONA

It's not over. You can't help Mr.
Stenson.

BUCK

I'll get my own help! You people
are insane!

Buck races out of the house in severe pain.

Christi follows him to the open door.

CHRISTI

He won't last thirty minutes. He's
forty-five from the Urgent Care!

She stares at the doorstep.

Madam Verona speaks in a deep voice.

MADAM VERONA

Come. Sit down. Let's finish this
once and for all.

A gust of wind blows through the window as Christi shuts the
door and reluctantly retakes her seat. Christi is angry.

CHRISTI

Finish this? How can you be so
cruel?

MADAM VERONA

Eyes closed, arms on chairs, feet
on the floor.

(beat)

William Benson, we beseech thee.
Let your presence be known.

Silence.

MADAM VERONA (CONT'D)

William Benson, we beseech thee.
Let your presence be known.

Silence.

Suddenly, the fireplace tools begin to rattle.

Christi is more startled this time.

Madam Verona stares at the fireplace tools, then glares at
Christi, then the fireplace tools again.

MADAM VERONA (CONT'D)

William Benson, are you there? What
do you have to tell us?

The fireplace tools stop rattling, but the table begins to
shake.

CHRISTI

Be done with this! Be done!

Madam Verona glares at Christi.

MADAM VERONA

The spirits tell me there remains
one true non-believer in the room.

Christi looks shocked.

CHRISTI

This cannot be.

MADAM VERONA

It is true.

CHRISTI

But the gusts of wind?

MADAM VERONA

Yes, I know.

CHRISTI

The rattling fireplace tools?

MADAM VERONA

Yes, I know.

CHRISTI

The shaking table?

Suddenly, the butler's bell begins to move ever so slowly across the table with Christi as surprised as ever.

However, Madam Verona is not surprised.

The fireplace tools rattle again, longer this time, but they stop.

Christi looks alarmed. Madam Verona is calm.

The table shakes again, longer this time.

Again, Christi looks alarmed, but Madam Verona is calm.

The butler's bell moves in the opposite direction across the table, and Madam Verona ignores it.

Madam Verona rips off her veil and her gray wig. She uses the outer gypsy robe to wipe off thick makeup, designed to make her appear 30 years older.

Christi is stunned!

Madam Verona begins tipping up the table and chairs and examining them.

MADAM VERONA

Wasn't this your plan, Ms. Christi
with an "i" Benson!

Now Christi is really shocked! She stands in terror.

CHRISTI

What the hell?

MADAM VERONA

I'm Professor Ruth Ramirez. I am of
Romani descent, but I teach
critical thinking and philosophy at
the university.

(MORE)

MADAM VERONA (CONT'D)

In my spare time, I debunk mediums, fortune-tellers, faith healers, and religious charlatans. You found me after my newspaper ad in the Aspen local newspaper!

CHRISTI

A week after my husband died.

MADAM VERONA

I saw the obituary online.

CHRISTI

You said you didn't have a computer!

MADAM VERONA

I said Madam Verona didn't have a computer.

CHRISTI

Madam Verona is a fake? A fraud?

MADAM VERONA

Aren't they all? You know better, don't you, Christi with an "i" Benson? You're no dummy. In fact, you're as devious as they come.

The professor races to the fireplace tools, and turns the holder upside down. The box at the bottom has four screws holding on a base plate.

CHRISTI

Get away from those!

MADAM VERONA

These screws have been removed recently. Threads are worn. Suppose I'd find a small wireless motor inside that shook the box, then caused to fireplace tools to rattle.

CHRISTI

Don't be ridiculous!

The professor gets in Christi's face.

MADAM VERONA

Your husband was as gullible as they come.

(MORE)

MADAM VERONA (CONT'D)

He believed in Loch Ness Monster, went hunting for Bigfoot, almost became a Scientologist, and kept ties to the Catholic religion and many others as a kind of after-life insurance.

CHRISTI

He and I believed what we wanted!

MADAM VERONA

No. He believed many things that other people wanted him to believe! And you went along at first, didn't you? At first?

CHRISTI

We insisted on a séance after his death, and I gave him one.

MADAM VERONA

You gave him a full Catholic funeral and burial, too.

CHRISTI

He insisted a séance would never work if he was cremated.

MADAM VERONA

(laughs)

You think buried bodies talk more than burned ones? That's something only a true Romani believes.

CHRISTI

I gave him a séance as instructed. You must sign the paper.

MADAM VERONA

Not a real séance! No one can communicate with the dead. I think you know that! There's no such thing as a real séance.

CHRISTI

Real enough. You'll sign the paper for five-hundred thousand dollars, won't you, Professor?

MADAM VERONA

That's a lot of money.

CHRISTI

It certainly is. You'd have to teach for ten years to make that kind of extra money.

MADAM VERONA

How did you do it? Move the bell? Gusts of wind? Shaking table?

CHRISTI

Don't know what you're talking about.

Madam Verona/Professor Ramirez looks out the window.

MADAM VERONA

Sure, you do! I researched you like I did the others: newspapers, social network postings, videos. Search engines get smarter every day! You acted like you believed this crap! But you had to be sure the others got scared away!

CHRISTI

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

MADAM VERONA

I can't figure this out. Table must be metal and wired on the inside.

CHRISTI

I do not command the wind! I did nothing to the fireplace tools, the table or the bell. Maybe one of the others was fooling us! Ever think of that?

MADAM VERONA

You think Father Ceroni and Mr. Stenson tried to frighten off Mr. Mack?

CHRISTI

I don't know, but I didn't do it!

MADAM VERONA

Mr. Mack was frightened, no doubt.

CHRISTI

See!

MADAM VERONA

The priest probably had a heart attack, but there will be an autopsy.

CHRISTI

I hope so! I mean, I'm so sorry he died, but he was old. Very old!

MADAM VERONA

And what of the black widow spiders?

CHRISTI

Every old farm in the county has them. I didn't check the chairs. That was my fault.

MADAM VERONA

I've never checked my chairs at home. You might be right.

CHRISTI

And we held a séance! I've fulfilled the requirement in the will. That's all I needed.

Christi pulls out a smartphone from her skirt pocket. The professor is surprised.

MADAM VERONA

You had a phone all along?

CHRISTI

And a tiny digital voice recorder for proof.

The professor paces as she recalls the events of the evening.

MADAM VERONA

Of you sounding convinced that I was legitimate? Of you sounding surprised when the wind blew, the fireplace tools rattled, and table shook? Of you sounding concerned and compassionate when Johnny took ill, when Father Ceroni died, and Buck Stenson was bit by black widows.

Christi uses a threatening voice.

CHRISTI

Put the wig and veil back on. Let me take a photo of you signing the paper, and you'll be handsomely rewarded!

MADAM VERONA

And not having to share with Johnny, Father Ceroni and Buck, you'll be filthy rich!

Christi sounds moderately annoyed.

CHRISTI

Won't you sign the paper?

The professor pauses, causing Christi to get angrier.

MADAM VERONA

I'm in a tough spot. I can't accept the five-hundred thousand, a generous sum, don't get me wrong, as a university professor without paying overhead -- a large fee every university charges for doing research.

CHRISTI

I could pay you in cash as Madam Verona! Just sign the paper!

MADAM VERONA

But then you could turn me into the IRS -- since Madam Verona doesn't have a social security number!

CHRISTI

Or I could turn you into the sheriff for fraud! Sign the goddamn paper!

MADAM VERONA

I should just pay the university overhead, and call it a night.

CHRISTI

Good then! Sign the paper!

MADAM VERONA

I was going to publish this as another case study about gullible Americans.

Christi is livid!

CHRISTI

Deceiving people! Making them feel stupid afterward!

MADAM VERONA

It's what I do. Expose uncritical thinking. Those who believe in pure nonsense.

The professor throws her arms up in the air and acts like a professor in front of a classroom of students.

MADAM VERONA (CONT'D)

I wish I could explain why 52% of Americans believe in psychic or spiritual healing.

CHRISTI

My husband did, I do, so did Buck.

MADAM VERONA

42% believe people can be possessed by the Devil.

CHRISTI

Father Ceroni did. I think Johnny did too.

MADAM VERONA

32% of Americans believe in ghosts. I know that Father Ceroni believed in the Holy Ghost, and Mr. Stenson told ghost stories because he believed they exist as they do in many African cultures.

CHRISTI

My husband and I believed very strongly in ghosts.

MADAM VERONA

You see, there's no proof ghosts exist! No evidence! Astrology, Bigfoot, the Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny, Santa Claus -- all myths! Zero evidence!

The professor turns her back on Christi and doesn't see her take out a small two-barreled derringer from her other skirt pocket.

MADAM VERONA (CONT'D)

That's why so many Americans can't distinguish between what's real from the world of make-believe. We believe so many things for which there is no real proof!

The professor turns and sees the gun. She gasps, puts her hands up, and begs for mercy.

MADAM VERONA (CONT'D)

Don't shoot! Don't shoot. I'm just a professor doing my job!

Christi is deranged. She points the pistol at the professor's head.

CHRISTI

All you had to do was take a photo and sign the paper! I'd be a billionaire!

MADAM VERONA

What about Mr. Mack and Mr. Stenson?

CHRISTI

If my husband's attorneys contact them, they'll tell them exactly what happened!

MADAM VERONA

That they left on their own accord, because one was scared to death, and one got bit by three black widow spiders?

CHRISTI

Exactly! Now put on the wig and veil, and let me take a selfie with you signing the paper.

MADAM VERONA

And the photo will be date and time stamped, corresponding to tonight.

CHRISTI

And my husband's attorneys will have no choice but to release his fortune to me.

MADAM VERONA

You've thought of everything!

CHRISTI

I think so?

MADAM VERONA

Except, if I go to the sheriff.

Christi looks at the pistol in her hand, then to the professor. Christi smiles, as Madam Verona puts on her wig and veil.

CHRISTI

No. I thought of that, too.

(beat)

Pose for me, and sign the paper, and I'll let you live. You can teach many more years at the university.

MADAM VERONA

Or you'll expose my deception to the university, tell them I tried to cheat them out of overhead?

CHRISTI

And that you tried to extort five times the agreed-upon fee. I have it all on tape.

MADAM VERONA

Extortion?

CHRISTI

I have witnesses and audio-recording evidence on you, but you have no evidence on me.

The professor pauses. She speaks convincingly while taking the seat at the table closest to the fireplace tools.

MADAM VERONA

You're right. You're right. I'll sign the paper, and take the silly photo.

Christi keeps the gun on her at all times, pointed right between the eyes.

CHRISTI

Good. Let's get it done.

MADAM VERONA

Got a pen?

Christi searches her skirt pockets for a pen, but takes her eyes off of the professor for a moment.

The professor puts on her wig and veil, grabs the pen, and signs the paper. Christi snaps a selfie of her and Madam Verona.

CHRISTI

Smile!

Madam Verona smiles weakly.

Christi folds up the paper and puts it in her skirt pocket. Christi turns to the professor and snickers.

Christi purposely turns her back on the professor, and steps across the room.

The flustered professor picks up the fireplace poker, and lunges at Christi.

Christi, anticipating the move, turns, and fires her pistol into the professor's stomach.

The professor oozes blood from the upper-right side of her torso. In shock, she falls lifelessly to the floor.

Seconds later, creepy SHERIFF ELLIE MAY LYONS (35), dressed sloppily in her uniform with an untucked shirt, and her tilted sheriff's hat, bursts through the door, with no gun, but handcuffs dangling behind her. She sees Christi standing over Madam Verona/Professor Ramirez ready to fire again.

CHRISTI (CONT'D)

(yells)

Help! Help! This crazy woman, disguised as a gypsy, robbed me of a hundred-thousand dollars! She tried to kill me with that fire poker!

SHERIFF

I saw it all through the window on my way to the door! She looked crazy to me, all right! I'm Sheriff Ellie May Lyons.

The Sheriff races over to check Madam Verona's pulse, while pointing to the body of Father Ceroni on the floor in the corner. She paces like a crazy woman.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Who's under the sheet?

CHRISTI
 Father Paulo Ceroni from Rome.

SHERIFF
 You shoot him, too?

CHRISTI
 Heaven's sakes, no! He died of a
 heart attack an hour ago. The
 séance was too much for him.

The Sheriff races to Father Ceroni and checks his pulse.

SHERIFF
 Getting cold. Hour sounds right.
 So, he didn't witness the robbery
 attempt, obviously.

CHRISTI
 (annoyed)
 Obviously!

SHERIFF
 How come you didn't report the
 priest's death right away?

Christy is more annoyed, the Sheriff looks demented.

CHRISTI
 We had to complete the séance!

SHERIFF
 That makes no sense at all.

CHRISTI
 My late-husband's fault!

The Sheriff scratches her head in disbelief.

SHERIFF
 Let me call for the coroner and an
 ambulance, while we sort this all
 out.

Christi moves shoulder-to-shoulder with the Sheriff.

CHRISTI
 I can't tell you how scared I was.

SHERIFF
 You can tell me all about it, while
 we wait. Put the gun down.

Christi is hesitant. Her hand is shaking.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Put it down.

(beat)

It's all over. You're safe now.

Christy puts the pistol on the séance table and collapses in her chair. The Sheriff looks like a killer, herself.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Bet you're sorry you called me?

CHRISTI

I...I...think so.

SHERIFF

Good, then get me some towels from the bathroom, and I'll stop the robber's bleeding from getting all over your house!

Christi reluctantly exits to the bathroom.

The Sheriff checks the pulse of the professor, who slowly regains consciousness. The Sheriff whispers to her.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Don't move or speak. Keep your eyes closed and relax. Breathe. Breathe.

Christi returns with the towels, and hands them to the sheriff.

The Sheriff presses the towels to the wound, using the victim's arm to hold them in place.

Christi shakes in fear.

CHRISTI

You think she'll be okay?

SHERIFF

I doubt it! Probably be dead before the ambulance gets here!

Christi looks on, while the Sheriff points her gun at Christi.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

You have the right to remain silent...forever!

INT. OLD FARMHOUSE - NIGHT

Christi sits in her chair as the Sheriff more closely examines Father Ceroni. Her gun is trained on Christi.

SHERIFF

I don't get any of this! While I was at home in my trailer watching reruns of *'Murder She Wrote,'* you were up here holding a séance with Johnny Mack, my favorite singer, a trophy hunter, and a dead priest from Rome?

Christi, annoyed, stares at the pistol on the table.

CHRISTI

He wasn't dead when we started the séance, Sheriff!

The Sheriff takes her smartphone and shows it to Christi.

SHERIFF

This here's gonna take my entire crime scene investigation team! One lousy smartphone. Budget cuts.

The Sheriff takes a photo of the priest.

The Sheriff gently unbuttons Father Ceroni's robe and shirt. She sees a surgery scar on his chest, and feels his heart area.

The Sheriff takes a photo of the priest's chest scar.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Male, African-American, about eighty years old, evidence of past heart issues.

CHRISTI

Don't you want a photo of that phony Madam Verona?

SHERIFF

Neither of them are going anywhere!

The Sheriff opens a "Metal Detector" app on her phone.

CHRISTI

What's that?

SHERIFF

Metal Detector" app! Used it to find a stolen rare coin once. Kid at the Elementary School hid it in cornbread in the cafeteria like a treasure hunt for classmates. I found it before someone choked on it.

Christi remains annoyed. The Sheriff seems demented.

CHRISTI

Good for you!

The Sheriff moves her phone over Father Ceroni's heart, and she reads the output.

The Sheriff is perplexed.

SHERIFF

Maybe I can't read this thing.

The Sheriff reverently covers him with a sheet again.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

What time did the priest die?

CHRISTI

I don't know. Around ten PM. We didn't have our cell phones.

SHERIFF

Right! 'Cause you threw them in the fireplace.

CHRISTI

My late-husband's insistence for his séance. No phones or cameras!

SHERIFF

This whole thing confuses me!

The Sheriff examines the broken phone pieces. The fire burns lower. Several phone pieces are on the side of the fire, barely burnt.

The Sheriff takes a photo.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Let's not add any more wood!

CHRISTI

That's why we couldn't call about Father Ceroni's heart attack, but Mr. Stenson, Madam Verona, and I saw it. Nothing we could do!

The Sheriff glances at the professor.

SHERIFF

Looks like you'll be the only witness soon. I'll need some kinda statement from you for the coroner, if you don't mind.

Christi fidgets in her chair impatiently.

CHRISTI

How long before the ambulance and coroner get here?

SHERIFF

Thirty-five minutes tops, unless they wanted to finish the '*Murder She Wrote*' re-run. Maybe a little longer, I suppose. My backup's coming too.

CHRISTI

We were holding the séance, and first Mr. Mack got scared and left. Then, Father Ceroni...

SHERIFF

How did you know Johnny Mack was scared?

CHRISTI

You should have seen him. Eyes puffy and bulging out, nervous twitching, and very agitated speech. He grabbed his throat, he was so scared!

SHERIFF

Sounds terrified. Didn't he know your Madam Verona over there was a professor?

CHRISTI

I told you, nobody knew!

SHERIFF

Drivers license in her pocket clearly says Ruth Ramirez.

CHRISTI

She didn't show us her driver's license! And, she wore the wig, veil, and gypsy robes to deceive us! You can see that!

SHERIFF

Yes, I guess I can.

The Sheriff checks her smartphone.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

She's a professor. Imagine that!

The Sheriff scrolls on her phone, while Christi fidgets.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Guess they don't pay professors well anymore. Turns 'em into nighttime robbers! Huh? Imagine that!

Christi is silent.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

So, Johnny Mack left the séance first? Is he as handsome in person as he is on TV?

Christi shakes in anger.

CHRISTI

Yes, and yes, when he's not agitated!

The Sheriff apologizes meekly.

SHERIFF

I'm sorry. I'm just getting details for my report.

(beat)

Imagine, Johnny Mack sitting right here? Was he in this seat?

Christi points as she answers the annoying questions.

CHRISTI

No, Buck Stenson was there. Johnny sat there. What does it matter?

The Sheriff examines Johnny's seat. She sees the arms are slightly shinier than the other chairs.

The Sheriff takes a photo of the chair.

SHERIFF

Johnny Mack sat here. Imagine that!

Then the Sheriff sees the cookies on the table in the corner of the room? She gets excited and races over to them.

Christi looks relieved.

The Sheriff takes a photo of the cookies. She giggles.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Are these peanut butter cookies! My favorite!

CHRISTI

No! Chocolate chip. Eat all you want!

SHERIFF

I've been eating all I want for years. I don't have your figure, Mrs. Benson.

The Sheriff examines the cookies.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Eleven left. I take it only one was eaten?

CHRISTI

The robber ate one.

SHERIFF

So, Johnny Mack didn't eat a cookie?

CHRISTI

No, Mr. Mack didn't eat a cookie!

SHERIFF

Last time you called him, Johnny. This time, Mr. Mack. Had you met him before?

CHRISTI

No! Tonight was the first time I met all these people.

(beat)

You wanted to know about Father Ceroni?

SHERIFF

Sorry, I forget. All this going on tonight has my little head spinning.

(beat)

Give me the blow-by-blow of the priest's life and death.

CHRISTI

He spent most of his life at the Vatican performing exorcisms.

The Sheriff cringes.

SHERIFF

Exorcisms? Casting the devil out of someone's body? Creepy!

CHRISTI

He was very successful by all accounts, until they moved him into the Vatican bank, where he had business dealing with my husband.

SHERIFF

So, your husband put him in his will, but he had to come to the séance to collect.

CHRISTI

We all did!

SHERIFF

Looks about eighty. Surprised he traveled all this way. Why did you think it was a heart attack?

CHRISTI

He started shaking and yelling things about the devil, and chastising Madam Verona. Shook more violently, and collapsed dead. That's it!

SHERIFF

Which was his seat?

Christi points to the seat, but before the Sheriff can examine it, a gust of wind blows through the window and startles the Sheriff, who quickly turns to face the window.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Just like my trailer! Change in the wind up-canyon and I get burst of a breeze in my west-facing windows! I can see how that might frighten a stranger to death.

CHRISTI

It frightened all of us.

SHERIFF

Sure, it did!

The Sheriff peeks under the sheet at the priest.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Too much strain on an already weak heart. Makes no sense.

CHRISTI

Already weak heart? Because he was old?

SHERIFF

Giant scar on his chest. Probably a pacemaker in there. Didn't keep pace, I guess!

Christi fidgets again.

CHRISTI

Had no idea.

SHERIFF

So, time of death, ten PM. Chest looks like an open-and-shut case!

Christi glares at the Sheriff.

CHRISTI

Not funny!

SHERIFF

Right! Sorry.

The Sheriff ambles to the front door, opens it and shuts it.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Ambulance, coroner, and backup should be here any minute.

The Sheriff returns to sit in Buck's seat.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

What happened to the trophy hunter?
Buck Stenson?

CHRISTI

He was sitting right where you are,
and he got bit by black widow
spiders.

The Sheriff doesn't budge. Christi looks curiously at the Sheriff.

CHRISTI (CONT'D)

Most people would be jumping out of
that chair after hearing that.

SHERIFF

If you stay calm, a black widow is
very unlike to bite.

CHRISTI

There were three of them crawling
on him!

SHERIFF

That's irony. Killer of big wild
animals frightened by little tiny
spiders? They have many more
dangerous spiders in South Africa:
the sand crab spider, violin
spider, button spider...

CHRISTI

These three were on his body!

The Sheriff gets up very slowly and examines the underside of the chair.

SHERIFF

So odd. They're highly territorial,
more than one under a chair would
be highly unlikely.

CHRISTI

A poisonous snake killed his mom,
when he was eight years old. Scared
to death of poisonous creatures.

The sheriff puts the chair back and sits in it calmly.

SHERIFF

I hate snakes! There are so many
poisonous snakes in South Africa.

CHRISTI

It was a black mamba. He was sleeping next to his mother at the time.

SHERIFF

Saw a National Geographic show, and they got black mambas, puff adders, Cape Cobras, all kinds of deadly snakes. All we have here...

CHRISTI

(interrupts)

Any sign of the ambulance, Sheriff?

The Sheriff goes to the front door, looks out, and shuts it.

SHERIFF

No lights coming up the road yet?

Christi is startled when her smartphone RINGS, but she doesn't reach for it in her skirt pocket.

CHRISTI

I'll get to it later.

SHERIFF

No, answer it, by all means.

Christi peaks in her skirt pocket, pulling out the phone just far enough to see a photo of Johnny Mack.

CHRISTI

Just my mother. I'll call her tomorrow.

SHERIFF

Probably curious how it all went tonight. Go ahead and get it.

CHRISTI

No, no. That's okay.

Christi is relieved when the phone stops ringing.

The Sheriff stares over at the professor.

SHERIFF

Why did you hire the professor? Out of all the psychics in the world?

Christi is agitated, and gets out of her chair to pace. The Sheriff watches her closely.

CHRISTI

She wasn't a psychic with broad mystical powers. She was a medium who communicated with the dead.

SHERIFF

Just medium powers then?

CHRISTI

She did her job. My husband was in contact with us, but he didn't say anything, but we were validated.

SHERIFF

Like parking. Was she paid tonight?

CHRISTI

Ten thousand dollars!

SHERIFF

For one night? That's more than I make in a few months!

CHRISTI

Hard to get good help.

The Sheriff looks over at the professor, who remains lifeless.

SHERIFF

I can see that. Did you find her, or the other way around?

CHRISTI

I found her. And why are you asking me all these questions?

SHERIFF

For my report. Madam Verona is unable...and...

CHRISTI

Okay, okay! We exchanged letters and details two months ago.

SHERIFF

Your husband died when?

CHRISTI

Almost a year ago. This is the first opportunity everyone had to get together. I told you!

SHERIFF
And you hadn't met any of them?

CHRISTI
I told you! No!

They hear the rumble of a sports car outside. Christi's eyes open widely. She races to the door, angry.

SHERIFF
Ambulance?

CHRISTI
No!

SHERIFF
Coroner?

CHRISTI
No.

SHERIFF
My backup?

CHRISTI
No! It's Mr. Mack.

The Sheriff jumps out of her seat, and begins tucking in her shirt, and straightening her hair and hat.

SHERIFF
Oh, my God? Oh, my God. What's he doing here? How do I look?

Christi meets Johnny half-outside the door.

The Sheriff sees Johnny's arms go low around her, but she pushes him back.

JOHNNY (O.S.)
Hey, Chri...

CHRISTI
(interrupting)
Please come in, Mr. Mack. The Sheriff's here. There's been an accident.

Johnny bursts in smiling like a movie star.

The Sheriff, star-struck, almost faints.

JOHNNY
Howdy, Sheriff! I'm Johnny. Johnny
Mack.

The Sheriff holds out a hand to be shaken, but Johnny moves in for a hug.

SHERIFF
I...I...

JOHNNY
I'm a hugger, Sheriff.

SHERIFF
Oh, my God. I'm Ellie May Lyons,
County Sheriff. You were here
tonight. I'm so nervous. I came in
earlier and saw that robber over
there bleeding from a gunshot
wound...

Johnny is shocked.

JOHNNY
Gunshot? Madam Verona?

SHERIFF
And I ran right over to her.

The Sheriff runs over to the professor, and shakes a finger at her.

JOHNNY
(mumbles)
Gunshot?

SHERIFF
And just like on TV, I read the
Miranda Rights. You have the right
to remain silent. Anything you say
can and will be used against you in
a court of law. You have the right
to an attorney. If you cannot
afford an attorney, one will be
provided for you. Just like that!

The Sheriff stands proudly over the professor.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)
But I don't know if she understood
them, because she's in shock.

The Sheriff giggles and turns to Johnny and Christi.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

But she is a psychic! You two would have understood them, right?

JOHNNY

Yes, you did a great job. Just like TV, but...

CHRISTI

(interrupting)

Yes, but Mr. Mack, why did you come back?

JOHNNY

I called to tell you I was okay. Not afraid anymore. You didn't pick up.

CHRISTI

I was...busy.

Johnny starts to get agitated again.

JOHNNY

You shot Madam Verona? Where's Father Ceroni?

The Sheriff nods her head toward the corner of the room.

Johnny freaks out when he sees a body covered by a sheet.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

You shot the priest, too!

He paces faster.

CHRISTI

(to Johnny)

No! Died of a heart attack! He was eighty years old. Old people die!

(to the Sheriff)

When Johnny left, on his own accord, he said he would call me to tell me he was okay.

JOHNNY

I was pretty freaked out. The gusts of wind, the rattling fireplace tools...

CHRISTI

(interrupting)

It's okay, Mr. Mack.

SHERIFF

Go on, Mr. Mack.

JOHNNY

The moving bell across the table,
the shaking table...I was
horrified.

The Sheriff goes to hug and comfort Johnny.

SHERIFF

Who wouldn't be?

Christi comes and nudges them apart.

CHRISTI

But we can all go after the
coroner, ambulance, and your backup
get here, right, Sheriff?

SHERIFF

Yes, of course, unless you want to
come back to the station and help
me fill out the report of robbery
by the professor over there.

Johnny is confused, but Christi tries to shut him up by
standing between them.

JOHNNY

Professor? She said...

CHRISTI

Yes, that she was Madam Verona, a
medium. Maybe she moonlights as a
professor to make extra money.

JOHNNY

Five-hundred...

CHRISTI

(interrupting)

A lot of money for one night.

The Sheriff eyes Christi, then eyes Johnny.

CHRISTI (CONT'D)

We had to get the séance conducted
within a year after my husband's
death.

SHERIFF

Or what?

CHRISTI
The money would all go the charity.

SHERIFF
How awful!

CHRISTI
Except for the Aspen house and a
small stipend for me, of course.

Johnny counts the bodies on the floor.

JOHNNY
What happened to the trophy hunter?

CHRISTI
He left on his own accord.

JOHNNY
Scared, like me?

SHERIFF
Black widow spiders attacked him!

Johnny jumps back. He's paces the room, more agitated than
ever.

JOHNNY
Black widow spiders?! How? How?

The Sheriff points to Buck's chair.

SHERIFF
Came right out of his seat and bit
him!

JOHNNY
Oh, my God! Is he okay?

Christi looks uncertain.

SHERIFF
He'll be fine.

Christi twitches, but forces a smile at the Sheriff.

CHRISTI
I'm so happy he's okay. How did you
know?

The Sheriff goes to the door, opens it, and looks out.

SHERIFF

Urgent Care. Way out by the
Interstate. Only thing open this
late.

CHRISTI

They called you?

SHERIFF

Receptionist ran his name. Came up
on a watch list. Ivory smuggler.
Sent me his photo to verify. I did.

CHRISTI

But he's okay, I hope?

SHERIFF

One black widow actually bit him.

CHRISTI

But we all saw three black widows
spider bites!

SHERIFF

Only the females bite. Two must
have been males. Wimpy males.

CHRISTI

He was lucky.

SHERIFF

He'll be on an IV and muscle
relaxers overnight. Then I'll pick
him up.

Johnny stops pacing and turns to Christi in anguish.

JOHNNY

What happened here tonight? We have
a dead priest, one guy in the
hospital, and Madam Verona is shot.

Christi tries to comfort Johnny an arm's length away.

CHRISTI

I told the Sheriff everything. We
held the séance with Madam Verona.
It went fine. You left on your own
accord, Father Ceroni had a heart
attack, Mr. Stenson got bit by a
spider, and Madam Verona robbed me,
so I shot her.

SHERIFF

That's how I see it. All so the professor could rob you after.

CHRISTI

Check her bra! I had ninety-thousand dollars, plus the ten I gave her for conducting the séance.

Johnny looks puzzled, as the Sheriff checks Madam Verona's bra. She pulls a plastic evidence bag out of her back pocket, and carefully removes the one-hundred thousand dollars in one stack, bound by a rubber band.

SHERIFF

Looks like a hundred grand, like you said, Mrs. Benson.

The Sheriff notices a puzzled look on Johnny's face.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

You look puzzled, Mr. Mack.

JOHNNY

No, no. Just thinking.

SHERIFF

I was just thinking too, Mr. Mack. What was Mrs. Benson doing with all that money?

CHRISTI

I was going away for a few days when this was all done. It's been very stressful.

SHERIFF

I imagine it has been.

JOHNNY

Stressful and scary.

The Sheriff and Christi stare at Johnny for a moment. Johnny, bewildered, stares at Christi.

Johnny twitches nervously. Christi forces a smile toward the Sheriff.

CHRISTI

Mr. Mack, thanks for stopping by. He can go now, right, Sheriff?

The Sheriff shakes her head, 'no.'

SHERIFF

I'd like him to stay, if he doesn't mind. I like to go over the things I've learned tonight, to see if I've left out any important details for my report on the robbery.

CHRISTI

Mr. Mack wasn't here for the robbery.

SHERIFF

(to Christi)

I'd value his opinion.

(to Johnny)

Mr. Mack, if you don't mind. Ten minutes, max. The ambulance, coroner, and backup will be here by then, and we can all go.

Johnny puts on his Hollywood smile.

JOHNNY

I'm all yours for the evening, Sheriff!

The Sheriff is giddy.

SHERIFF

If only that were true!

CHRISTI

Is this necessary, Sheriff?

SHERIFF

I think you'll enjoy it too, Mrs. Benson.

The Sheriff looks around the room.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Mrs. Benson, sit in the chair you sat in, but Mr. Mack, please sit in the chair Madam Verona sat in.

They sit down nervously. Johnny looks for spiders.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

At first, I'll be Mr. Mack. Okay. We all show up at nine PM. Why nine PM?

(MORE)

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Because Johnson's gas station closes at nine PM, so the nearest phone to call for help is all the way down to the interstate, by Urgent Care, forty-five minutes away?

Christi and Johnny are stone-faced.

CHRISTI

Nine was convenient for Madam Verona.

SHERIFF

Imagine that. Okay, everyone's here because if they stick it out, they get equal shares of the billion-dollar prize money.

Johnny gets flustered.

JOHNNY

Equal shares?

CHRISTI

It's unimportant. That's how the will was written.

Johnny glares at Christi.

SHERIFF

Everyone is shocked when the wind gusts through the window. Not me. But when the fireplace tools rattle, everyone got rattled?

The Sheriff gets up and examined the fireplace tool set. She tips over the set to see four brass screws holding a plate on. The screws look recently scratched.

Christi and Johnny turn their heads briefly, but turn them back. They remain stone-faced.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Mr. Stenson and Mr. Mack said the fireplace tools rattled, then stopped. I spoke briefly on the phone with Mr. Stenson, before I got here. He assumed it was Mr. Benson sending a sign.

JOHNNY

So did I.

SHERIFF

I'm not so sure.

(beat)

Then the butler's bell was said to move under its own power across the table?

The Sheriff examined the underside of the table, then grabs the bell and examines it.

JOHNNY

No magnets or strings! What about that?

SHERIFF

I'm thinking. Imagine that?

(beat)

Then the entire table shook. I don't need to look below, but I do have that pesky metal detector app on my phone.

Johnny is genuinely curious.

Christi twitches nervously in her seat.

The Sheriff holds her smartphone behind her little, and gets no reading, but as she moves the phone over the table, the meter goes wild. Along straight lines.

JOHNNY

What?

SHERIFF

Electro-magnets. Not very strong, but strong enough to move a bell.

Johnny glares at Christi, then turns back.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

I bet if I check the legs of the table, I'd find more metal. Maybe little vibrator motors like...

Christi stands and yells.

CHRISTI

All conjecture on your part! I was the victim of a robbery here tonight! That should be your only concern!

The Sheriff stands, but calmly responds.

SHERIFF

Please, sit down, Mrs. Benson. I'm snowballing here. I'm confused.

Christi sits down.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Mr. Stenson said you left here with red, puffy eyes, and maybe developing hives, Mr. Mack?

JOHNNY

I was scared out of my wits!

The Sheriff points to Johnny's original chair.

SHERIFF

That was your chair?

Johnny smiles, hiding his torment.

JOHNNY

Yes.

SHERIFF

Nerves could have done it, but it sounds more like an allergic reaction.

The Sheriff steps over to Johnny's original chair. She swipes her finger along the length of one arm. She smells her finger.

CHRISTI

I don't have time for this.

Christi stands.

SHERIFF

It's not furniture wax. Peanut oil? You allergic to peanuts, Mr. Mack?

Johnny Mack glares at Christi but doesn't speak.

Christi eyes the derringer on the table.

CHRISTI

Nonsense.

SHERIFF

Was the plan for Mr. Mack to appear to be so scared, that he willingly ran out of the house, despite being disinherited?

JOHNNY

I don't know what you're saying.

CHRISTI

(to Johnny, angrily)

Don't say anything!

The Sheriff circles the table as she speaks, lifting each empty chair briefly, then setting it down.

SHERIFF

He doesn't have to. The rest is obvious. He ran out to his car, where an EpiPen was waiting to combat his peanut allergy. He went for a drive. He phoned you, Mrs. Benson, before coming back, but you didn't answer the phone. When you opened the door for Mr. Mack, he called you Christi, and puts his arms around you for a hug. He's a hugger, I know.

JOHNNY

I like to hug.

SHERIFF

But in most hugs with strangers, the arms are wrapped high on the back, like when you hugged me.

Johnny's eyes open widely, as the Sheriff speaks to him.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

But with familiarity, comes increased indiscretion, where the arms drop lower and lower.

The Sheriff demonstrates the hugs arms held high (no expression on her face), arms in the center of the back (slight smile), and arms held low, around the butt (she looks seductively taunting).

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Your arms suggested a deep familiarity.

JOHNNY

I...

SHERIFF

And you saw my Sheriff's car parked out front. What were you thinking?

(MORE)

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

That reminds me, I should go turn off my dome light so my battery doesn't wear down. Back in a minute.

The Sheriff starts out the door, and turns back to them.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Don't go away, now!

The Sheriff exits.

Christi immediately turns to Johnny and whispers angrily.

CHRISTI

Don't say a word. My lawyers will destroy her.

JOHNNY

I told you I was allergic to peanuts! You knew that!

CHRISTI

Just shut up!

The Sheriff returns with a smile. She walks over, grabs a cookie, and eats it. She speaks while chewing.

SHERIFF

You see, if you brought peanut butter cookies instead of chocolate chip, it would have looked like an accident.

Johnny glares at Christi. Christi glares at the cookies.

The Sheriff picks up her phone from the seat across from Christi.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

There's my phone! Stuck on record again!

Johnny's eyes widen. Christi is cool as ice.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Then the poor priest dies of a heart attack. But he was old?

The Sheriff looks with sympathy at the priest in the corner, still covered with a sheet.

JOHNNY

Can we put him in the bedroom?

SHERIFF

Best we don't move him. Coroner
will be here any minute.

CHRISTI

Fine! Get it over with.

SHERIFF

I'll return to the priest in a
minute. I'm trying to figure out
Mr. Stenson's back luck with black
widow spiders.

Johnny jumps out of his chair! He as frightened as can be.

JOHNNY

Spiders! I hate spiders!

SHERIFF

Black widow spiders! Three in one
chair!

Johnny paces the room like a madman.

JOHNNY

Oh...my...God!

SHERIFF

Coming out as if on cue.

CHRISTI

Old farmhouse, old furniture.
Spiders come with the territory.

SHERIFF

That's just it. Black widows are
highly territorial, and commonly
solitary creatures.

Johnny plugs his ears.

JOHNNY

Don't like this. Don't like
spiders.

SHERIFF

Defies the odds, don't you think?

The Sheriff pauses to think as she paces calmly, avoiding
Johnny and his mad pacing.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

What if there was a way to release three small traps, each containing a black widow, to a hole in the chair?

Johnny stops and glares at Christi.

JOHNNY

No, no, no, no, no!

CHRISTI

(to the Sheriff)

Don't know what you're talking about.

SHERIFF

That would have solved the inheritance issue. The others would have left, or died, leaving you with the whole enchilada.

Johnny returns to his chair, and slumps down.

CHRISTI

A séance can be a scary thing for some people. A spider makes it more so. End of story.

The Sheriff nods 'yes' to Christi

SHERIFF

It's a possibility. But with so much time to prepare for this particular séance, one with such great rewards, you might not have wanted to leave anything to chance.

CHRISTI

You don't know...

JOHNNY

(interrupts)

Let her finish. I want to hear it!

Johnny tries to hold Christi's hand, but she pulls it away.

SHERIFF

The priest. Something went terribly wrong with Father Ceroni, didn't it Mrs. Benson?

Johnny looks sympathetically at Christi.

CHRISTI
I'd like to call my attorney.

SHERIFF
Please do. Please tell her or him
that you've been advised of your
rights.

Christi pulls out her phone.

CHRISTI
Nonsense. You advised the robber,
not me!

SHERIFF
All of you, actually. I have it
recorded.

Christi is angry.

CHRISTI
You were talking to her!

SHERIFF
Suspects make that mistake all the
time, so I asked you if the Miranda
rights were understandable, and you
said, 'Yes.' It's all on my phone.

Christi points to a tiny cop-cam on her lapel.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)
And full video on the cop-cam.

Johnny covers his face with his hands.

Christi screams at her phone.

CHRISTI
To a message service! Got to be
kidding!

SHERIFF
Father Ceroni had me stumped at
first, but I think I got it now.

JOHNNY
Got what?

CHRISTI
Shut up, Johnny.

The Sheriff stands behind Father Ceroni's original seat.

SHERIFF

Let's say you just wanted to scare people into leaving the séance on their own accord. Mr. Mack looked scared to death with his peanut reaction and general fear of everything.

JOHNNY

I'm not...

CHRISTI

Shut up, Johnny!

SHERIFF

To scare the priest, I think you wanted to send his weak heart a message, not to kill him, just to scare him, and Mr. Stenson.

Christi presses "redial" on her phone.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

I suspect the rattling fireplace tools, moving bell, shaking table, the black widow spiders, and Father Ceroni's death have one thing in common.

Johnny looks around, trying to figure it out.

Christi glares at the Sheriff.

The Sheriff whispers to Christi.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Your late husband, fifty-years your senior, was a control freak. He told you where to live, how to dress, what to believe, everything!

JOHNNY

That's him!

CHRISTI

Shut up, Johnny!

SHERIFF

You probably grew to hate that about him, more and more each day.

The Sheriff begins to pace in the room.

Christi stares at the pistol.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

You had many years to plan this séance. You may have dreamed about how the outcome of the séance might work out best for you. Perhaps all the billion-dollar prize money.

(beat)

We call that a motive.

Johnny looks away.

JOHNNY

I don't think...

CHRISTI

Shut up, Johnny!

SHERIFF

Getting everyone all in one place, at one time, must have been difficult.

Johnny turns to the Sheriff.

JOHNNY

My schedule...

Christi slaps his shoulder.

SHERIFF

Everyone together in one spot, on one evening.

(beat)

We call that opportunity.

The Sheriff paces, looks up, and speaks to herself.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

The means? How did she do it?

The Sheriff spins quickly and startles Johnny and Christi.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Mrs. Benson, may I see your phone?

Christi stands, looks at her phone, and smiles.

The Sheriff holds out her hand.

Christi yells.

CHRISTI

I don't think so!

Christi throws her phone violently into the fireplace. It breaks completely apart.

SHERIFF

I can get the phone records later.

(to Johnny)

Mr. Mack, may I see your spare phone? I know Mrs. Benson smashed your primary phone in the fireplace earlier. Mr. Stenson told me.

Johnny reaches for his pocket.

CHRISTI

Don't you dare!

SHERIFF

(to Johnny)

The court may go easier on you!

JOHNNY

She was gonna spilt it with me! I didn't do anything wrong!

SHERIFF

Then you have nothing to be afraid of.

CHRISTI

Lawyer-up, Johnny, don't be a fool!

Johnny glares at Christi.

SHERIFF

Interesting choice of terms. Fool. From the old French, fol, a madman, insane person, or idiot.

Johnny paced madly.

JOHNNY

I hate that! The press always calls me a fool. Mostly for staying with Scientology, but I hate that!

SHERIFF

She used you, Mr. Mack. She needed you to get scared and leave first tonight. If her parlor tricks didn't scare you, the peanut allergy would.

Johnny yells.

JOHNNY

Parlor tricks? What parlor tricks?

SHERIFF

Computer-controlled parlor tricks. Occam's Razor, Mr. Mack. The simplest explanation is usually the right one. Objects don't move on their own, so something is causing them to move.

The wind gusts through the window. Johnny turns.

JOHNNY

See that! See that!

SHERIFF

Occam's Razor: that's just the wind changing directions in the canyon. As for the rattling fireplace tools, moving bell, and shaking table. All wired, is my guess!

JOHNNY

Wired?

SHERIFF

Her phone could have sent...

The Sheriff pauses. She looks at the floor mats. She pulls hers up and flops it on the table. Christi ignored her.

The Sheriff pulls out her phone, recalls the Metal Detector app, and scans the mat. No response.

She throws the mat aside, and picks up another. No Response.

She picks up the mat under Madam Verona's seat.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Madam Verona sat here.

No response.

She grabs the mat below Christi's seat. The metal detector goes crazy.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

It's a wireless keyboard. Not very sophisticated.

The Sheriff looks at Christi's shoes.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)
Metal toes?

Christi looks away.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)
A small laptop computer in the back
room supplemented by a small
battery would do the trick.

The Sheriff grabs a handful of silverware from the corner
table with the cookies, and returns to the mat on the table.

She moves the silverware like a tapping toe over various
parts of the mat.

The fireplace tools rattle. They soon stop.

Johnny gasps. Christi ignores them.

The butler's bell moves across the table, and stops.

Johnny turns and gasps again.

We hear a siren in the distance.

Christi grabs the bell and tosses it violently into the fire.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)
Harmless parlor tricks meant to
frighten the simple-minded.
(beat)
Until one of those tricks ended up
being a murder!

JOHNNY
Murder?

SHERIFF
(points to the priest)
Actually, one murder.
(points to the professor)
And three attempted murders.

Christi gets violently angry.

CHRISTI
Father Ceroni was old with a bad
heart, and Madam Verona tried to
rob me. It was self-defense.

The siren is a little louder.

SHERIFF

When I lifted Father Ceroni's chair earlier, it felt a little heavier than the others. I'm guessing there's a strong magnet in the back cushion.

JOHNNY

What for?

SHERIFF

Weak magnets are sometimes positioned over heart pacemakers to reset their pace. But a powerful magnet nearby can disrupt the number of beats per minute, causing agitation and distress.

Johnny glares at Christi. He yells.

JOHNNY

No! No! No!

CHRISTI

Shut up, Johnny.

SHERIFF

Too strong a magnet can stop it completely.

Christi looks away.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Just read a report of a cardiologist checking a graveyard, and found many pacemakers kept on ticking. Father Ceroni's stopped cold.

The siren is a little louder.

Johnny is furious with Christi.

JOHNNY

You made me an accomplice! Why?

SHERIFF

Greed, Mr. Mack. Greed.

The siren is right outside.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

My backup is outside. Do us all a favor and come peacefully.

JOHNNY

You dragged me into this! I'm
telling 'em everything!

Christi is livid.

CHRISTI

You had the right to remain silent,
you fool!

The Sheriff takes out her handcuffs and puts one cuff on
Johnny, and one on Christi.

The Sheriff goes to check on the professor. The professor
opens her eyes, weakly smiles, and winks.

SHERIFF

You're going to be fine. Ambulance
is here.

The Sheriff stands and faces Johnny and Christi.

JOHNNY

This whole night was a trap?

SHERIFF

Don't you get it, Mr. Mack? She
tried to kill all of you! It was a
trap!

Christi screams like a deranged killer. She grabs for the
derringer. She aims in at the Sheriff's gut.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

(calmly)

No. Don't shoot.

Christi fires into the Sheriff's belly. The Sheriff is
unfazed by the bullet.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Does this bulletproof vest make my
butt look fat? Holds two rounds, I
think. The 22-derringer works well
if the victim is shot in the head
at close range. The bullet rattles
around in the brain causing all
sorts of damage. Amateur killers
never shoot in the face. I don't
get it!

Christi aims the derringer at the Sheriff's face, but it's
out of bullets.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Yep. Two rounds.

Christi screams and throws the derringer at Sheriff who dodges out of the way.

Then Christi throws the oil lamp to the floor, and a harmless, small, fire starts and goes out.

She pulls Johnny to the window and slams it shut.

The room begins to fill with smoke, as Christi pulls Johnny out the door to escape.

The Sheriff goes to help the professor up.

SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Let's get you out of here. I'll need your statement.

They hear Christi scream and the thump-thump of two people falling down.

MADAM VERONA

What was that?

SHERIFF

A foot-snare trap. For bears. I call it my backup!

They help each other out, holding their stomachs.

MADAM VERONA

She was killing them in the order of their gullibility.

SHERIFF

It's a wonder there's any of us left! Who would go last, you or me?

The Sheriff has an evil look in her eyes.

Moments later, the fireplace tools rattle and the table shakes.

We see the portrait of Mr. Benson smiling.

FADE OUT.

THE END