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## I, Witness

**COMEDY.** When Marliss discovers her boss at Squeaky Cleaners is laundering dirty money instead of clothes, she and her three kids are forced to enter the witness protection program and hide out until she can testify. As the family settles in to their dumpy safe house, elderly Aunt Dora (aka “Killer Chop”) arrives to serve as the family’s “security guard” since she once served as the captain of her high school’s jujitsu team. Keeping three kids—and “Barbie,” an imaginary friend—happy in a new town and school isn’t easy. Then when a picture of one of the kids appears in the local newspaper, the family’s whereabouts are revealed, and two bumbling “enforcers” are tasked with preventing Marliss from testifying by any means necessary. However, the enforcers’ best laid plans may end up in one mammoth madcap mix-up! Easy to stage with one simple set.

**Performance Time:** Approximately 75-90 minutes.

## Characters

(5 M, 10 F)

- MARLISS AMES:** Single mother and bookkeeper who must testify against her former boss at Squeaky Cleaners; female.
- ETHAN AMES:** Marliss's son, a high school student who has a crush on Iris; male.
- ELLIE AMES:** Marliss's daughter, a middle school student who is less than thrilled that she has to live in a dumpy safe house in Barbersville; female.
- EDNA AMES:** Marliss's daughter, a grade school student who has an imaginary friend named Barbie; female.
- AUNT DORA (aka "Killer Chop"):** Marliss's elderly aunt who worked as a prison librarian and was once the captain of her high school jujitsu team; female.
- BEN TWIGG:** Witness protection officer, a man of many disguises; male.
- CYNTHIA SNEDECKER:** Marliss's next door neighbor; star reporter at *The Tattler* newspaper; female.
- SIDNEY SNEDECKER:** Cynthia's husband; owner of Fit Bites Health Food Market; male.
- WYATT:** A bumbling "enforcer" hired to prevent Marliss from testifying; sweats when he thinks too hard; male.
- SCARLETT:** Wyatt's wife, a bumbling "enforcer" hired to prevent Marliss from testifying; female.
- IRIS:** Free-spirited Goth student who befriends Ethan and helps him save a kitten; female.
- LOGAN:** A high school student who has been paired up with Iris on a school project; male.
- NALA:** A high school student who would like to have Logan as her partner on a school project; female.
- COCO:** A high school student and Nala's friend; female.
- BARBIE:** A grade school student who befriends Edna; female.

## Setting

Witness protection safe house, Barbersville.

## Set

**Safe house living room.** The room is cheaply furnished. At SR is a couch, an easy chair, and an old coffee table. At SL is a card table with three folding chairs. There are no decorations on the walls, only stains on the walls where pictures had once been. Wing entrance SL leads to the front door (unseen). An umbrella stand with an umbrella in it sits near the SL entrance. Wing entrance SR leads to the other rooms of the house (unseen). A French door UCS leads to the outside patio. The "rental car" is represented by two benches or four chairs. Other locations set before the curtain can be represented with simple props/set pieces.

## Synopsis of Scenes

### ACT I

**Scene 1:** Before the curtain. Outside the county courthouse, early afternoon.

**Scene 2:** Safe house living room, the following afternoon.

**Scene 3:** Before the curtain. In front of Barbersville K-12 School, the following afternoon.

**Scene 4:** Safe house living room, the following evening.

**Scene 5:** Before the curtain. A park, several days later.

### Intermission, opt.

### ACT II

**Scene 1:** Safe house living room, a week later.

**Scene 2:** Before the curtain. Rental car, shortly after.

**Scene 3:** Safe house living room, the following day.

**Scene 4:** Safe house living room, the following morning.

**Scene 5:** Before the curtain. Rental car, an hour later.

**Scene 6:** Safe house living room, that evening.

## Props

2 Cell phones, for Marliss	Notebook and pen, for Ben
Bubblegum, for Ben	Newspaper
Suitcases	Stack of newspapers
Backpack, for Iris	Canister with a spray nozzle
Tablet computer	Yearbook picture of Ethan
Deck of cards	2 Tiny microphones
Meter-reading device	Bills/paperwork
Book	Feather duster
Dish	Gloves, for Wyatt
Dishtowel	Rubik's Cube
Covered cake platter	Comb
Rounded beige frosted "cake" sprinkled with poppy seeds	3 Lunch bags
Reporter's notebook, for Cynthia	Bathrobe, for Marliss
Camera for cell phone, for Cynthia	Wrinkled pair of dark blue pants, for Marliss
Frying pan	Iron
Kitten (stuffed)	Professional clothes, for Cynthia
Bath towel	<i>Men in Black</i> clothing, for Scarlett and Wyatt
Laptop computer	Dark glasses, for Scarlett and Wyatt
Coat, for Aunt Dora	Professional clothing, for Marliss
Purse, for Aunt Dora	Suit and tie, for Ben
Meter-reader uniform, for Marliss	Birthday balloons
Sandwich	Flowers
Umbrella	Birthday cake
Jeans, suspenders, old hat, fake beard or mustache, and big glasses, for Ben's disguise	Wrapped birthday presents
	Large bag, for Cynthia

## Sound Effects

Explosion  
Knock at the door  
Phone ringing  
Phone pinging  
Crash  
School bus horn  
School bus approaching  
School bus stopping



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“A cemetery  
would be livelier  
than this town!”

—Elie

## ACT I Scene 1

*(AT RISE: Before the curtain. Outside the county courthouse, early afternoon. Marliss backs on SL, nervously. Her phone rings.)*

MARLISS: *(Into phone.)* Hello, is that you, Ellie?...Edna! Oh, you're getting to sound like your sister...I didn't say you sound like a goat with a toothache, just a little like your sister...Okay, you don't sound like her at all. What's wrong? Why'd you call?...What? Oh, no. Don't tell me that! *(Dora enters SR, sees Marliss, and breathes a sigh of relief.)* Look, we're finished, so I'll be home in a little while. How'd it go? Oh, well...

*(Dora snatches the phone from Marliss.)*

DORA: *(To Marliss.)* Which one's this?

MARLISS: Edna.

DORA: The little one. *(Into phone.)* Edna? You there?...Gracious, you sound just like your sister. *(Holds the phone away from her ear. To Marliss.)* Goodness! I say something wrong? *(Into phone.)* Edna, I'm sorry. Be quiet and listen. Get your brother and sister to help mop up the floor around the dishwasher. We'll be home in a little bit, and then we'll call the repairman. You understand? *(Admonishingly.)* Yes, what?...That's right, yes, Aunt Dora. Goodbye. *(Hangs up. To Marliss.)* I'll keep the phone.

MARLISS: What am I going to do?!

DORA: He's just blowing off steam!

MARLISS: Aunt Dora, he said he was going to put me "through the mangler" at his laundry! Have you ever seen what a mangler does to a bed sheet?

DORA: Gets the wrinkles out.

MARLISS: I like my wrinkles!

DORA: He was just saying that to scare you, hon.

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MARLISS: It did the trick.

*(Ben enters SR, popping bubblegum in his mouth.)*

BEN: Out here, huh? Want a piece of gum?

DORA: No, Mr. Twigg, but Marliss, here, would appreciate some peace of mind.

BEN: *(To Marliss.)* What's the matter?

MARLISS: Didn't you hear him? He threatened me if I testify before the grand jury.

BEN: They all do that. Doesn't mean a thing, Ms. Ames.

MARLISS: Mr. Twigg, by telling the police what I know, I've been fired from my job, and I've got three kids with no dad, and now I'm being threatened with bodily harm!

BEN: Bodily harm?

DORA: He did mention something about a mangler.

BEN: *(To Marliss.)* He was just blowing off steam. After all, he owns 15 laundries.

MARLISS: And launders money on the side!

BEN: Thanks to you, he's soon gonna be doing laundry in a federal penitentiary.

MARLISS: If I live that long!

BEN: Oh, now, the grand jury'll be needing your testimony in another month or two, and—

MARLISS: Another month or two?!

BEN: Yeah, you can't rush a thing like a grand jury, for crying out loud.

DORA: So, what's Marliss and her family to do in the meantime?

BEN: Take my word for it. He'd never try anything as stupid as intimidating a witness. He's just a small-time operator, operating a kind of tinker toy crime machine. Sure you don't want some gum? *(Pulls out some bubblegum and offers her some.)*

MARLISS: Oh, my gosh! *(Points offstage.)* Look!

DORA: Marliss, that's your car!

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MARLISS: He set my car on fire! (*An explosion is heard.*) My car!

BEN: Hope you're insured.

(*Blackout.*)

## Scene 2

*(AT RISE: Safe house living room, the following afternoon. Wing entrance SL leads to the front door. Wing entrance SL leads to other rooms. French door USC leads to the outside patio. The room is furnished cheaply, with a couch, easy chair, and an old coffee table at SR. A card table with three folding chairs sits SL. There are no decorations on the walls, but from the stains, it appears pictures were once hanging on the walls. Marliss, Ellie, and Edna are looking around with horrified expressions. Note: Edna has an imaginary friend named Barbie.)*

ELLIE: Mom, this is like a scene from Cinderella...before she meets her fairy godmother.

MARLISS: They sure haven't featured this place in "Better Homes & Gardens."

EDNA: *(Indicating her imaginary friend.)* Barbie says there are crumbs on the couch.

ELLIE: Edna!

MARLISS: Ellie, it's all right. If Barbie says there are crumbs, there are crumbs.

ELLIE: Mom!

MARLISS: Let's just try to adjust without any outside issues.

ELLIE: Why'd you have to see that creep hand over that bag of cash—

MARLISS: Ellie! Never, ever, mention that!

ELLIE: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MARLISS: I mean it. We're all in danger.

ELLIE: It'd be okay if I was in danger for something exciting like the rollercoaster broke at the top or something, but washing money?

EDNA: *(Correcting.)* Money laundering.

MARLISS: Shhh! And where'd you learn that?

EDNA: Barbie explained it to me. That's when Mr. Slaughter takes all the money he steals, juggles the books, and puts it in the bank like it's his.

MARLISS: Edna, how old is Barbie?

EDNA: Ten.

ELLIE: I can't believe you, Mom!

MARLISS: Honey, Barbie knows more about money  
laundering than I ever did!

EDNA: *(To Ellie.)* See?

*(Loaded down with suitcases, Ben and Ethan enter SL.)*

BEN: *(To others.)* I think we got everything.

ETHAN: Where you want it all, Mom?

MARLISS: Oh, Ethan, just set them down. We haven't seen  
the bedrooms yet.

*(Ethan and Ben drop the suitcases.)*

ELLIE: *(To Ben and Ethan.)* We're trying to muster our  
courage.

BEN: Awww, c'mon, this is a great place! Big enough for all  
of you, and for a safe house, it's perfect.

ELLIE: Yeah, nobody would think to look for us in this dump.

MARLISS: Ellie, I'm sure this is the best available place.

BEN: Yeah, the Hilton was all booked. *(Laughs. No response.)*  
Just kidding. So, you all set to go undercover, as it were?

MARLISS: We haven't exactly had time to think about it.

ELLIE: *(To Ethan.)* Yeah...what was up with breaking into our  
house before it was even light?

ETHAN: I've got a biology test today I don't want to miss.

ELLIE: Figures.

BEN: Guess you'll have to. This is all for your own good,  
guys. Mr. Slaughter's made credible threats against your  
mom...and you.

ELLIE: Then arrest him!

BEN: He's already under arrest.

MARLISS: But he's got thugs who'll do his dirty work for  
him.

EDNA: Like laundering his dirty money?

BEN: Right. So, until the grand jury convenes and your mom gives her testimony, this is home, sweet home.

*(Ethan sets a small suitcase on the coffee table. One of the legs of the coffee table breaks.)*

ETHAN: Sorry.

BEN: Always does that. Here, we just put it back the way it belongs... *(Fixes table.)* ...and then just remember not to set anything too heavy on it.

MARLISS: You said that you managed to get me a job?

BEN: Yeah, a lucky break. The gas company meter reader broke his leg skiing, and I got you on at the gas company.

MARLISS: I don't know anything about reading meters!

BEN: You just walk around and write down numbers. The only other option was a dog groomer spot.

MARLISS: Choice between a headache and a stomachache.

BEN: Now, since we're all here, we need to do a couple of things so you're ready with your new identities.

ELLIE: New identities?

BEN: Well, sure. You're hiding in plain sight, so you need to have different names, a different family background, and absolutely no contact with anyone from your old life.

EDNA: I can still have Barbie with me, though.

BEN: Sorry, kiddo, but you can't bring anybody with you. Let's all sit down and hammer out a couple of things. *(Tries to sit in chair.)*

EDNA: Don't! *(Ben halts, half-sitting, half-standing.)* Barbie's sitting there!

BEN: On second thought, I'll stand. *(Stands.)*

ELLIE: What's this about new names?

BEN: You've got to come up with something other than Ames.

ELLIE: I want to be Sabrina.

MARLISS: Sabrina? Don't you like Ellie?

ELLIE: It's a great name for a poodle, Mom.

BEN: No, no, no. You should keep your first names. It's too easy to fail to respond if you go by something you're not used to. Keep your first names, but you need a new last name.

ETHAN: Let's go completely opposite.

MARLISS: "A" to "Z"?

ETHAN: Sure!

ELLIE: Oh, great, I can be Ellie Zook.

MARLISS: Or Ellie Zipp.

EDNA: Or Ellie Zolister.

BEN: Guys, I had to already come up with a name: Ziel.

MARLISS: (*Spells.*) Z-E-A-L?

BEN: (*Spells.*) Z-I-E-L. But it sounds the same.

ELLIE: Oh, great, now I'm named after a vocabulary word.

MARLISS: Marliiss Ziel, meter reader.

EDNA: Barbie doesn't like it.

BEN: Well, Barbie's going to have to play along, or we'll boot her off the island.

EDNA: No, you won't! (*"Kicks" Ben in the shin. Ben flops into the chair. Screams.*) Barbie! You sat on Barbie!

MARLISS: Edna! Apologize!

EDNA: Only if he says he's not kicking Barbie off the island!

BEN: I won't! I was just kidding. But I'll move over here. She can have the chair. (*Moves to couch.*)

ELLIE: You are such a baby, Edna.

MARLISS: Ellie, please. (*Ben makes a face and feels the couch cushion with his hand.*) What's wrong, Mr. Twigg?

BEN: Crumbs on the couch.

EDNA: Told you!

ETHAN: Mr. Twigg, what are we doing about school?

ELLIE: (*To Ben.*) We're not being home-schooled, are we?

MARLISS: (*With terror.*) No way! I...I mean I would love to spend the day with you all, but I've got all those meters to read.

ELLIE: Thank goodness.



BEN: You're all enrolled in [Barberstown K through 12 school]. *[Or insert the name of another school.]*

ETHAN: K through 12?

ELLIE: *(To Ben.)* In one building?

BEN: Small town, saves bucks.

EDNA: Are the teachers mean?

BEN: Nope. They're all former prison guards, so they know what they're doing.

ELLIE: Has anybody ever told you you need to work on your sense of humor?

MARLISS: I'm sorry, Mr. Twigg, but this is all a bit traumatic for us.

BEN: I get it. But it's what's got to be done so you can do your civic duty, Ms. Ames.

ETHAN: You mean, "Ms. Ziel."

BEN: Right. And you've got to be that quick, too. So we needed to come up with a back story so you'll all be on the same page if somebody asks questions about your life before [Barbersville]. *[Or insert another city.]*

MARLISS: Go on...

BEN: All right, you just arrived from [St. Louis] because you inherited this place from your aunt, Ms. Ziel. And that would be Aunt Flora. *[Or insert another city.]*

ELLIE: That's stupid! Mom's got an Aunt Dora already, and, boy, she wouldn't give you a penny if you were starving to death.

BEN: We've got to keep the names familiar, Ellie.

MARLISS: What did we do in [St. Louis]? *[Or insert another city.]*

BEN: You worked for the gas company, of course. Ethan, you and Ellie went to Powell High School, and Edna, you went to Walter Middle School.

ETHAN: [Power High].

EDNA: Walker Middle School.

BEN: *(Correcting.)* "Walter," with a "T", not a "K."

EDNA: Barbie likes "Walker" better.

BEN: Great! Make the change! But if somebody from [St. Louis] catches that, don't come crying to me.

ELLIE: Who else would we come crying to?

BEN: Just a little more gallows humor.

EDNA: Who said anything about gallows?

MARLISS: Kids! Let's listen to Ben.

BEN: Thank you. So, back to your back story. Your dad passed away seven years ago. You're in town so you can fix the house up in order to sell it eventually. You always remember hearing your Aunt Flora talk about what a lovely town [Barbersville] is, and you needed a quieter, more peaceful place to live.

ELLIE: A cemetery would be livelier than this town!

BEN: You'll get used to it once you start school tomorrow.

ELLIE: Tomorrow?!

ETHAN: I wonder if I can take the biology test here.

BEN: Your school records from [St. Louis] have been created and already sent to the [Barbersville K-12].

ELLIE: I hope they changed that "D" I got in math last year.

MARLISS: You got a "D," Ellie?

ELLIE: (*Covering.*) Oh, wait...maybe it was a "C."

MARLISS: Was that on the report card you "lost"?

ELLIE: You know I hate math.

MARLISS: And I hate "D"s.

ELLIE: See? We're even!

BEN: Look, I've got a few other wrinkles to iron out, so before I go, a couple of last minute ground rules. First, there's one phone only. I'm giving it to you, Ms. Ames.

MARLISS: (*Correcting.*) I'm Ms. Ziel.

BEN: And so you are. (*Hands a the phone.*) You may not call anyone but me. No contact with old friends by letter, text, email, anything.

ELLIE: Smoke signals?

BEN: Especially not smoke signals!

ETHAN: But won't they wonder where we went?

BEN: Covered that with another back story.

MARLISS: I hope you didn't put anything in the newspaper.

BEN: Not these days. One post on [Facebook], and then an agent mentioned at the donut shop you won the lottery and have gone into hiding to avoid publicity. *[Or insert another social media company.]*

MARLISS: You're kidding, right?

BEN: Nope. Your house back there is surrounded by media trucks. Good thing you got out when you did.

ETHAN: So everybody thinks we're rich?

BEN: Beyond your wildest dreams.

EDNA: Barbie says she's getting dizzy from this information overload.

BEN: You'll need to just relax, let it all sink in, and then review what we've talked about. Most important thing is to remember this is all to keep you safe, and if you follow the rules, you will be safe. Mr. Slaughter has no idea where you are, and he's not going to find out.

MARLISS: You're sure?

BEN: I defy anyone to locate you.

*(Aunt Dora enters SL, carrying a suitcase. Everyone is shocked to see her. Pause.)*

DORA: *(Sarcastically.)* Good to see all of you, too!

*(Blackout. Curtain.)*

### Scene 3

*(AT RISE: Before the curtain. In front of school, the following afternoon. Iris enters SL, carrying her backpack. Her hair is a bright color and is wearing Goth clothing. Nala and Coco enter SR.)*

NALA: *(To Coco, indicating Iris.)* Look who's here!

COCO: Nice hair, Iris!

NALA: *(To Iris.)* Run into any vampires lately?

IRIS: Okay, Nala, what's your problem?

NALA: I'm not the one with the problem, weirdo.

IRIS: Then see you tomorrow.

*(Iris attempts to pass them, but Coco blocks her way.)*

COCO: Not so fast.

NALA: *(To Iris.)* You're going to do something for me tomorrow.

IRIS: You wish.

NALA: It's real simple.

IRIS: Then you should be able to do it yourself.

COCO: Ooooooh, trying to be smart.

IRIS: That's your job, Coco Puff.

COCO: How many teeth do you want to lose?

IRIS: Okay, Nala, I'll bite.

NALA: Isn't that what all you vampires say?

IRIS: Only if we don't smell garlic.

COCO: Why you—!

NALA: Calm down, Coco. I think Iris will be very agreeable.

IRIS: To what?

NALA: You know that little project in Lit class we have to do with a partner?

IRIS: English poetry of the Romantic era?

COCO: Something you wouldn't know about.

NALA: Girls, girls. We're on the same page!

IRIS: Let me guess...you want to work with my partner,  
Logan.

NALA: Well, you have to admit he's a bit too hot for you to  
handle.

IRIS: You're serious, right?

NALA: I just know for a fact that you're not his type.

IRIS: News flash: He's not my type, either.

NALA: Then let's swap partners.

IRIS: Ah, as I recall, there's an uneven number of kids in our  
class, and you don't have a partner.

NALA: I hate to work alone.

IRIS: Let me think about it.

COCO: What's to think about?

IRIS: It's a big decision.

NALA: Just do it, and your life will be a whole lot easier.

IRIS: It's pretty easy now.

COCO: Sure?

*(Coco grabs Iris's backpack.)*

IRIS: Hey!

*(Coco turns the backpack upside down, dumping everything out.)*

NALA: Stuff like that won't happen if you hand over Logan.  
Bye!

*(Nala and Coco start to exit SL. Ethan enters SL.)*

ETHAN: Hi! *(Nala and Coco give him a once-over glance, roll  
their eyes, and exit SL. To Iris.)* Hey, what happened?

IRIS: Coco Puff dropped my backpack.

*(Ethan helps Iris pick things up.)*

ETHAN: On purpose?

IRIS: (*Sarcastically.*) No, she was just helping me find the Hope Diamond I hid in here.  
ETHAN: Sorry.  
IRIS: No, I am. This isn't your fault. I shouldn't be so snarky.  
ETHAN: What happened?  
IRIS: You're new here, aren't you?  
ETHAN: Ah, yeah.  
IRIS: Where are you from?  
ETHAN: Oh, ah...[St. Louis], I guess.  
IRIS: You're not sure?  
ETHAN: Yeah, yeah, [St. Louis]. Powell High School.  
IRIS: Probably a lot bigger school than this.  
ETHAN: Yeah, I guess.  
IRIS: Okay. Well, if you haven't noticed, I like to march to my own drummer.  
ETHAN: Who doesn't?  
IRIS: Nala and Coco for two. We've never gotten along, and until I get out of this burg and go somewhere cool, I'm stuck with them. So how'd your first day go?  
ETHAN: Okay. Nothing too hard. I've got a lot of reading to do, especially in Lit class.  
IRIS: English poetry of the Romantic era?  
ETHAN: Yeah, the teacher said to make sure I read all the stuff, but I won't have to do a project unless I want to.  
IRIS: Lucky you.  
ETHAN: Why?  
IRIS: I'm gonna work alone on my project, but that's okay...I'm used to it.

(*Ellie and Edna enter SL.*)

ELLIE: (*To Edna.*) Stop following me around!  
EDNA: We're supposed to stick together.  
ELLIE: You are so embarrassing.  
EDNA: Ethan, tell Ellie to leave me alone.  
ETHAN: Ellie, don't bug your sister.

ELLIE: No one's ever proven to me that we are sisters.  
IRIS: Let me guess, you're sisters?  
ETHAN: (*Introducing.*) Ellie and Edna. This is...ah...  
IRIS: Iris.  
EDNA: Like the flower?  
ELLIE: (*To Iris.*) No wonder you want your hair to look like that.  
IRIS: Never thought of it that way.  
EDNA: We're from [St. Paul].  
ELLIE: (*Admonishingly.*) Edna!  
IRIS: (*To Ethan.*) I thought you said [St. Louis].  
ETHAN: (*Covering.*) Well, yeah...most recently from [St. Louis], but Edna was born in [St. Paul].  
EDNA: (*To Iris.*) Yeah, we're a real holy family.  
IRIS: Well, I gotta get going. Thanks for the help, Ethan.  
ETHAN: See you around.  
IRIS: (*Calls.*) Get all those romantic poems read. (*Exits SR.*)  
ELLIE: (*To Ethan.*) You...and her? Mom'll kill you!  
ETHAN: What are you talking about?  
ELLIE: She's weird with a capital "W."  
EDNA: (*To Ethan.*) Barbie says she's nice.  
ETHAN: For once, I agree with Barbie.

(*Dora enters SL.*)

DORA: What are you three doing here?  
ELLIE: Waiting for you, Aunt Dora.  
DORA: The main entrance is over there! (*Points offstage.*)  
ELLIE: But student pick-up is here, where you see all the parents waiting.  
DORA: In my day, we didn't have such silly nonsense.  
EDNA: Did they have cars back then?  
ETHAN: They sure did, Edna. Did you have a nice day, Aunt Dora?  
DORA: Spent it learning to lie since I'm stuck with you till this is over.

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ETHAN: Mom'll be glad for the help.

EDNA: I don't know...Barbie's ambivalent.

*(Edna exits SL. Ethan and Ellie follow her off.)*

DORA: *(To herself.)* What are they teaching kids these days?!  
*(Exits SL. Blackout.)*



## Scene 4

(AT RISE: Safe house living room, the following evening. Ellie is lying on the couch playing a game on a tablet computer. Edna is sitting on the floor playing with a deck of cards. She is attempting to play solitaire.)

EDNA: (Holding up a card.) Where should I put this one, Barbie? Cover the three? You sure? Okay.

ELLIE: Edna!

EDNA: (To "Barbie," indicating Jack card.) How about this Jack guy? Here? Okay.

ELLIE: You're supposed to play in silence!

EDNA: Barbie can't read lips.

ELLIE: Do you know what "solitaire" means? It means, alone. You're supposed to play solitaire alone!

EDNA: Well, there's nothing else for Barbie to do. The TV doesn't even work.

ELLIE: Mr. Twigghead better have it fixed soon!

EDNA: Okay, Barbie, how about this card...a ten?

ELLIE: Edna! Be quiet so I can concentrate!

EDNA: (To "Barbie") On top of the Jack?

ELLIE: (Calls.) Mom! Mom!

EDNA: (Calls.) Ellie's texting with her friends!

ELLIE: I am not!

EDNA: Prove it!

(Marliss enters SR, with her meter reading device in hand and her phone cradled between her ear and shoulder.)

MARLISS: (Into phone.) Hit which key, Ms. Everbever?...The pound key. Right.

ELLIE: Edna's being a pain!

MARLISS: (Shouts.) Quiet! (Into phone.) Oh, no, not you, Ms. Everbever. Punch in 8-6-2-4. Got it.

EDNA: Ellie's texting with her friends.

MARLISS: *(To Ellie, shouts.)* Don't you dare! *(Into phone.)* Oh, no, not you, Ms. Everbever. My Chihuahuas are just being ornery...Right. Now punch in 2-9-4-6-7-0-1-2. Got it...Really?...Okay, well, thank you so much. Sorry to have bothered you. Night. *(Relaxes and slides her phone into her pocket.)* Sorry, guys. I accidentally read the electric meters today, not the gas meters.

EDNA: Did you hear me? Ellie's texting with her old friends.

ELLIE: I am not! *(To Marliss.)* I'm playing [Candy Crush]. And Edna's just being a pain. She keeps talking while she's playing solitaire. *[Or insert another electronic game.]*

MARLISS: I think that's against the rules, Edna.

ELLIE: I was just talking to Barbie.

*(Ellie makes a growling noise and moves SR. Dora enters, drying a dish with a dishtowel.)*

DORA: *(To Ellie.)* And where do you think you're going, young lady?

ELLIE: Anywhere but here!

DORA: Sit down! *(Calls.)* Ethan! Ethan! Get down here!

MARLISS: What's wrong, Aunt Dora?

DORA: Nothing! Nothing at all!

ELLIE: Gosh, when you say nothing like that, the world's probably going to end.

*(Ethan enters, holding a book of poetry.)*

ETHAN: *(From Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," recites.)*

"In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

A stately pleasure-dome decree

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran

Through caverns measureless to man

Down to a sunless sea." *(To Marliss.)* Where's Alph? Mom, you got any idea?

DORA: Don't ask your mother. She got a "C" in geography in the seventh grade.

MARLISS: I did?

DORA: Your parents were beside themselves. *(To Ethan.)*  
And it doesn't matter where Alph is.

ELLIE: Wasn't Alph that guy on a TV show a long, long time ago?

DORA: It wasn't that long ago!

MARLISS: Kids, I think Aunt Dora has something to tell us all.

ELLIE: And it's not Merry Christmas.

DORA: It certainly isn't! Now, since we're all stuck in this mess, you're going to all have to pull our own weight.

ELLIE: Not too hard for some of us.

MARLISS: *(Admonishingly.)* Ellie!

DORA: *(To Ellie.)* You know what I mean, Missy.

ELLIE: I am not—

MARLISS: *(Admonishingly.)* Ellie!

ETHAN: You know something, Aunt Dora? Maybe you ought to clue us in as to how you got mixed up in this mess with us.

DORA: I only wanted to help.

MARLISS: That was very sweet of you, Aunt Dora, but how?

DORA: After the threats I heard, I knew you'd need somebody to be your bodyguard. I am not one to brag, but when I was in high school, I was on the school's ladies' jujitsu team.

EDNA: Isn't that a kind of candy?

ELLIE: Those are Jujubes.

ETHAN: Jujitsu's a martial art.

MARLISS: Aunt Dora?

ELLIE: *(To Aunt Dora.)* Martial art?

DORA: Surprised? I wasn't just on the team, I was the captain. Jujitsu is the art of weaponless self-defense. My nickname was "Killer Chop."

ELLIE: No offense, but that was all a long time ago.

DORA: It's like riding a bike, you don't forget a move! (*Makes a quick jujitsu move and accidentally knocks something breakable over.*)

MARLISS: Well, that was a killer chop.

DORA: Sorry. Sometimes we don't know our own strength. Anyway, I was coming to your house the morning after your car blew up to help keep you all safe, and what do I see? All of you piling into a black SUV with tinted windows with that Twigg guy driving. He might have been kidnapping you, for all I knew.

MARLISS: He's with the D.A.'s office.

DORA: You still can't trust 'em. So I just followed you here, and now we're stuck. But that's not a bad thing. You're in good hands.

ELLIE: Tell that to the [insert broken item].

DORA: Don't worry. After college, I was a librarian for 35 years.

ELLIE: (*Sarcastic.*) So, wow, you're good at collecting fines.

MARLISS: The library was at a federal maximum-security prison.

ETHAN: Wow! What happened if somebody had an overdue book?

DORA: You don't want to know. And does that answer your question?

ETHAN: That's pretty cool, Aunt Dora.

ELLIE: (*To Dora.*) Yeah, that explains a lot.

DORA: Like what?

ELLIE: Ah...ah...ah...why you always wear sensible shoes.

EDNA: (*To Dora.*) How come you never ever told us about being in prison?

MARLISS: Aunt Dora wasn't in prison. She worked there.

EDNA: Understand, Barbie?

DORA: I never told you because one prisoner, nicknamed "Godzilla," swore that if he ever got out, he was going to find me, and, well, it wouldn't be pretty.

ELLIE: What'd you do to him?

DORA: He scribbled on every page of Sigmund Freud's book "The Psychopathology of Everyday Life." He was placed in solitary confinement with another copy of the book, and he had to read every word.

ETHAN: How'd you know he did it?

DORA: He had to pass a test. Took him three times, but he did it.

ELLIE: Wow, you ever thought of teaching school?

MARLISS: So, Aunt Dora, you were telling us something about carrying our own weight?

DORA: Exactly! I'm not a maid around here. I will pull my weight by cooking dinner.

ELLIE: It's not gonna be prison food, is it?

DORA: No worries. I'm a fan of the Food Network. I will make sure the kitchen is cleaned up after I use it. I will make sure I pick up my stuff. And I will make sure I make my bed. Who made their bed this morning? *(No hands go up. They all look at each other.)* At least you're honest. Beds need to be made and bathrooms left clean for the next person, understood? *(No response. Forcefully.)* Understood? *(All mutter "yes," except for Ellie.)* And, Ethan, you're on garbage detail, as in take it out. Now!

*(Ethan salutes and exits SR.)*

MARLISS: Ellie, do you understand Aunt Dora?

ELLIE: This isn't a prison, and I'm not a prisoner!

DORA: You don't have a choice, Ellie. It's for your own good.

ELLIE: No! This is crazy! I'm already sick of it, and it's only been two days. I'm leaving!

MARLISS: Ellie!

DORA: Where are you going to go?

ELLIE: We found this safe house. I'll find another one...all by myself.

EDNA: Don't go, Ellie!

ELLIE: Goodbye!

*(Ellie starts to exit SL. Knock at door.)*

MARLISS: Would you get the door before you leave, honey?

*(Ellie exits SL. Ellie re-enters followed by Sidney and Cynthia, who are carrying a covered cake platter.)*

CYNTHIA: Well, hello, one and all!

MARLISS: *(Bewildered.)* Hello.

CYNTHIA: *(Introducing.)* We're Cynthia and Sidney Sneider, the official [Barberstown] community welcome wagon.

EDNA: I don't see a wagon.

CYNTHIA: That's just what we call ourselves. We're just here to say, "Welcome to the community," and I've brought you a cake. My famous anthill cake!

*(Cynthia lifts the cover of the cake platter to reveal a rounded beige frosted cake sprinkled with poppy seeds.)*

ELLIE: Ugh!

EDNA: *(To Cynthia.)* Are those really ants?

CYNTHIA: Nope! That's the joke. They're poppy seeds. It's delicious, isn't it, Sidney?

SIDNEY: Yes, Cynthia.

MARLISS: Well, we've had dessert tonight already, but we'll sure dig in tomorrow night, won't we, kids?

DORA: I'll take it to the kitchen. *(Exits to kitchen with cake.)*

MARLISS: Thank you, Aunt Dora.

CYNTHIA: *(Taking out a notebook.)* So, you know who we are. Who are you?

MARLISS: I'm sorry. I'm Marliss...Ziel.

CYNTHIA: *(Spells.)* Z-E-A-L?

MARLISS: *(Spells.)* Z-I-E-L.

CYNTHIA: Oh, that's unusual.

ELLIE: It's Elbanian.

CYNTHIA: I've never heard of Elbania.

SIDNEY: It's right next to Olvinia, isn't it?

ELLIE: Close.

MARLISS: *(Introducing.)* Well, these are my children...Ethan, Ellie, and Edna.

CYNTHIA: Lovely! And the lady in the kitchen?

ELLIE: That's not a lady, it's Aunt Dora.

DORA: *(From off SR, shouts.)* I heard that!

ELLIE: *(To Cynthia.)* She's got a great sense of humor.

CYNTHIA: So, what brings you to [Barberstown]?

MARLISS: My job. I...I'm the new meter reader for the gas company.

SIDNEY: You are? Well, I want to report that my bill was wrong last month.

CYNTHIA: Can it, Sidney.

SIDNEY: Yes, Cynthia.

MARLISS: Well, I'll be sure to have someone look into that for you. And what do you folks do?

CYNTHIA: Tell them, Sidney.

SIDNEY: We own Fit Bites Health Food Market. We carry a wide range of fresh and ready-to-eat healthy treats and eats. We're your go-to store for lentils and kale, tofu and chia seeds.

MARLISS: We'll have to start shopping there.

ELLIE: *(Concerned.)* Mom?

MARLISS: We all love kale and lentils, don't we?

ELLIE: We do? Yeah, I guess we do!

SIDNEY: Cynthia, here, is also a star newspaper reporter.

CYNTHIA: Now, Sidney, don't put me on the spot.

SIDNEY: Cynthia's "The Tattler's" top reporter.

CYNTHIA: Hold it! *(Snaps a picture.)*

MARLISS: Why'd you take our picture?

CYNTHIA: I'll put it in "The Tattler" when I run a little story about you.

*(Dora enters, carrying a frying pan.)*

DORA: Nope! No pictures!

CYNTHIA: But I always do a feature on newcomers. It helps folks get to know you. Why, they'll come up to you on the street and say, "I saw you in 'The Tattler.' Welcome to [Barberstown]." Wouldn't that be nice?

DORA: (*Threateningly.*) Don't try it, Ms. Snedecker. Delete that photo now, or face the consequences.

ELLIE: (*To Cynthia.*) And Aunt Dora can dish out consequences.

CYNTHIA: (*Deleting photo.*) Honestly! I'm just trying to be helpful.

MARLISS: That's sweet of you, but we really don't need any help settling into a new community, Cynthia.

SIDNEY: (*To Cynthia.*) I told you people don't like it.

CYNTHIA: I've got a spot that needs to be filled by tomorrow at three.

SIDNEY: There're the grasshopper races. They're always fun.

CYNTHIA: Not much of a photo op, Sidney.

SIDNEY: How about doing a piece on that family that disappeared? It was this time of year 20 some years ago.

CYNTHIA: I suppose I'll have to drag out that old chestnut.

DORA: A whole family disappeared?

SIDNEY: From this very house.

CYNTHIA: Never found a trace of them. (*To Sidney.*) What was their name?

SIDNEY: Periwinkle. Norman and Sandy Periwinkle and two little Periwinkles. I think their names were Peter and Piper.

ELLIE: Peter Piper Periwinkle?

SIDNEY: The police got a notice to do a wellness check 'cause nobody'd heard from the Periwinkle family in days and days. When they got here, they found the family had left everything...even their toothpaste and toothbrushes.

EDNA: Yuck!

MARLISS: (*To Cynthia and Sidney.*) Was their car here?

CYNTHIA: It was...with four flat tires.

DORA: What'd the cops do?



SIDNEY: Declared them all missing persons...asked a lot of questions. But come to find out, nobody knew the Periwinkles very well at all. Here one minute, gone the next.

MARLISS: That gives me the shivers! (*Ethan, his arm bloodied, his shirt torn, races on SL.*) Ethan! What happened!

EDNA: Mom, Ethan's bleeding!

DORA: Ellie, get a towel!

ELLIE: Why do I have to do everything?

DORA: Now!

(*Ellie races off SR. Ethan tumbles into a chair.*)

CYNTHIA: (*To Ethan.*) What happened, young man?

MARLISS: Oh, this is our son, Ethan. Ethan, these are the Snedeckers.

SIDNEY: (*Introducing.*) Cynthia and Sidney.

ETHAN: Pleased to meet you.

(*Ethan passes out. Dora pushes the others aside.*)

DORA: Give him some air! What did you tangle with, young man?

(*Iris enters SL, cradling a kitten.*)

IRIS: A dog! It looked like the Hound of the Baskervilles and it was trying to eat this kitten!

CYNTHIA: Stop the presses! I got my story! (*Starts taking pictures with her phone.*)

DORA: Stop it!

CYNTHIA: You can't squash the people's right to know!

(*Ellie enters with a bath towel.*)

ELLIE: (*Indicating towel.*) This big enough?

*(Marliss takes the towel from Ellie.)*

MARLISS: Thanks, Ellie. *(To Ethan.)* Oh, you poor kid!

Ethan, can you tell us what happened?

ETHAN: I don't know...it was all too quick.

IRIS: *(To Marliss.)* We were just walking, and all of a sudden, this kitten came racing onto the sidewalk and the dog was right behind it.

EDNA: Poor kitty!

IRIS: Ethan grabbed the dog's collar, and that's when it turned on Ethan.

MARLISS: *(To Ethan.)* You poor kid!

DORA: *(To Ethan, examining the wound.)* Looks like it'll need stitches.

SIDNEY: *(To Ethan.)* Very heroic, young man. You should feel very proud.

ETHAN: I feel like I got hit by a truck.

CYNTHIA: What'd the dog look like?

IRIS: Dark brown, pointed ears, about the size of a small pickup.

CYNTHIA: That's the Brewster's dog, Pixie.

IRIS: Pixie?

SIDNEY: It was the runt of the litter.

CYNTHIA: Let's go, Sidney. I'm sure these folks need to get to the ER.

MARLISS: *(To Cynthia and Sidney.)* Yes, well, thanks for stopping.

CYNTHIA: And welcome to [Barberstown].

SIDNEY: Used to be the most boring town on earth.

*(Sidney and Cynthia exit SL.)*

MARLISS: Let's get you to the hospital, Ethan.

ELLIE: *(To Ethan.)* How'd you scare the dog away, bro?

IRIS: Another cat ran across the road, and Pixie chased after that one.

EDNA: Can we keep the kitten, Mom?

MARLISS: Not a good idea right now, kiddo.

IRIS: I'll take care of him.

ETHAN: Thanks, Iris.

MARLISS: Girls, be good. Regular bedtimes, and obey Aunt Flora.

DORA: We won't have any problems, will we, girls?

ELLIE: We'll work on it.

EDNA: Right. *(Marliss, Ethan, and Iris exit SL. Ellie opens a laptop and begins typing.)* Barbie says that dog's causing more trouble.

DORA: If I could handle "Godzilla," I can tackle Pixie, so don't you worry. Ellie, what are you up to all of a sudden?

ELLIE: What was that family's name?

EDNA: The ones who disappeared from this house?

DORA: The Periwinkles.

EDNA: I wonder where they went?

*(A noise is heard off SR.)*

ELLIE: Maybe they didn't go anywhere. Maybe they're still here!

*(Blackout. Curtain.)*

## Scene 5

(AT RISE: Before the curtain. A park, several days later. Arm in arm, Wyatt and Scarlett enter SL.)

SCARLETT: It's such a beautiful day, Wyatt.

WYATT: I know. This park is incredible.

SCARLETT: And you're incredible.

WYATT: No, you're incredible.

SCARLETT: I said it first.

WYATT: But you're incredible-er

SCARLETT: That's not even a word, Wyatt.

WYATT: The only way to describe you is to make up a new word.

SCARLETT: You're so sweet.

WYATT: You're glad you married me?

SCARLETT: Wildly. Are you glad you married me?

WYATT: Absolutely.

SCARLETT: I just wish...

WYATT: What?

SCARLETT: Oh, nothing.

WYATT: Scarlett, our relationship is founded on honesty.

SCARLETT: All right. I just wish we didn't have to work so often.

WYATT: How else would we be able to have such a comfortable lifestyle?

SCARLETT: I know. I love the Mercedes, and the mountain chalet, and our infinity pool. I think I like that the best. But still....

WYATT: I know what you mean. We have all these beautiful things, but can't enjoy them whenever we want.

SCARLETT: It seems like work, work, work. That's all we do!

WYATT: Let's not think about work right now. Let's just watch the ducks over there. *(Points offstage.)*

SCARLETT: They're so cute! *(Counting.)* Six, no, seven...little ducklings following their mama.

WYATT: What's that dog doing?

SCARLETT: Oh, no! He's after them!

*(From offstage SR, "Pixie! Get away from those ducks!")*

WYATT: Oh, no!

SCARLETT: Dirty, rotten bully!

WYATT: Almost makes you want to cry. Animals can be so cruel to one another.

SCARLETT: At least we know better. *(Phone rings.)* Oh, no! It can't be!

WYATT: *(Checking phone.)* It is.

SCARLETT: Don't answer it. We'll say you dropped your phone in the toilet.

WYATT: He'd know we were lying.

SCARLETT: He must have a sixth sense. Whenever we're enjoying life, he's got a job.

WYATT: *(Into phone.)* Hello, sir...Yes, you've reached The Enforcers. Well, sir, we are just enjoying a beautiful day in the park...Yes, I understand you're sorry to intrude, but you'll do it anyway...I see. Yes, I understand. All right, I'm sure we'll be able to take care of that for you...A bonus? Well, sir, you don't have to do that, but it will be greatly appreciated. Thank you, sir. Goodbye.

SCARLETT: You're such a pushover.

WYATT: I'm not.

SCARLETT: You should have hemmed and hawed a bit.

WYATT: I'm not a good hemmer and hawer.

SCARLETT: You should have made him beg.

WYATT: You know I can't stand to see anybody suffer.

SCARLETT: I know. You give to anyone who's got a hand out.

WYATT: Unless, of course, I'm paid not to.

SCARLETT: I heard there's a bonus.

WYATT: Without pushing.

SCARLETT: What? A free meal at [Denny's]? *[Or insert some other restaurant.]*

WYATT: An all-expense-paid trip to Belize.

SCARLETT: So, what's the catch?

WYATT: The client wants us to make sure a witness can't testify before a grand jury.

SCARLETT: That doesn't sound like it deserves a trip to Belize.

WYATT: The client has no idea where the witness is hiding out.

SCARLETT: That's a wrinkle.

WYATT: And the witness has a family with her.

SCARLETT: No wonder it'll cost extra.

*(Phone pings.)*

WYATT: He said he'd send photos. *(Pulls up photos on his phone.)* There. *(Points to photo.)*

SCARLETT: *(Looking at photo.)* All-American as apple pie.

WYATT: Easiest kind to take care of.

SCARLETT: The kids look ornery.

WYATT: I thought you liked a challenge?

SCARLETT: I'm not complaining. Let's go back to the hotel.

WYATT: So soon?

SCARLETT: *(Excited.)* I want to start packing for Belize!

*(Blackout. Intermission, opt.)*

**[END OF FREEVIEW]**