BOUND

By Ann Bauer

Characters:

**Angela**, 54, a sturdy once-pretty woman with thick hair and a tired face; urban earth goddess type; purple streak in her hair, long earrings, big rings

**Sam**, 57, Angela’s husband, tall but stooped; bearded but starting to bald; he wears a blood-stained Jesus shirt through most of the performance

**Ezra**, 29, son of Angela, even taller than Sam and bulky; a young man with messy hair who tends to stare at the ground

**Cherry**, 25, Angela’s daughter, pretty and statuesque, looks like her mother but fresh and without the wear

**Roman**, 27, Cherry’s fiancé good-looking in a slightly preening way, stock straight posture, neat with a Marine buzz cut

**Theo**, 52, Roman’s father, solid with the well-oiled look of a laborer who is now the boss, wears casual but expensive clothes

**Beth**, 51, Roman’s mother, a petite movie star blonde who appears young for her age, dressed in a pastel sweater set

**Dr. Goodman**, 40-55, surgeon, race, gender and appearance up to director

Angela and Sam’s place, a cheap midcentury house in some middle American city — possibly Chicago — with a living area and dining room that flow together so characters can move easily from the couch to table. Furnishings are large and comfortable with a blanket puddled over the edge of the couch.

The dining table is set for 5 with colorful dishes and water tumblers, nothing fancy. There are tea candles lining the middle of the table. Colorful modern art hangs on the walls giving the air of an experimental museum installation. There is at least one hanging Chihuly-style sculpture.

A kitchen area can be seen off to the side, but it is mostly in shadow.

Angela enters the dining room wearing the sort of diaphanous, flowing dress you might expect of a medium. She begins lighting the candles with a long match.

Angela: Sam! Are you almost ready?

(She moves to the couch where she plumps up and positions cushions)

SAM (wanders in, dressed in jeans and an old shirt, reading a book; he has a pair of glasses on and another pair propped on his head): I’m right here. I’m ready!

(Angela stops and looks him up and down)

Angela: Is that what you’re wearing?

SAM (looking down in an exaggerated way; startles a little): God no! Of course this isn’t what I’m wearing. This is terrible! (lowers his book and looks to his wife) What am I wearing, love?

Angela: I ironed your Jesus shirt. You know, the one you wore for Halloween a couple years ago? Put it with a (looks directly at his knees) *cleaner* pair of jeans.

SAM (puts book down and walks toward Angela who has returned to plumping): Ah, yes. Jesus at 55. That was a great costume. (Nuzzles Angela’s neck.) You were a very sexy middle-aged Mary Magdalene.

Angela (chuckles): I was born to play that role. (she straightens) OK, enough of that heathen talk. They’ll be here soon and I’m pretty sure he’s a Christian.

SAM: What kind of Christian?

Angela: I’m not sure. I think that kind that owns guns and votes pro-life but only goes to church on Christmas and Easter.

SAM: Mmmmm. OK, tone down the sacrilege. Got it. (heads toward the exit then stops) But wait a minute! Does he know I’m a….Jew. That might, you know, fuck up the whole arrangement.

Angela: You’re the stepfather, sweetheart. I think that means your genes are irrelevant.

(Sam looks at the ceiling, folds his arms slowly over his chest)

Angela: (hesitantly) Oh. I’m sorry.

SAM: No, no….It’s true. As far as Cherry is concerned I’m definitely, ah, irrelevant.

(They hold for a beat, as if holding some silent negotiation.)

SAM: (softening and smiling) I’m going to go change, my love. I’ll make sure Ezra is ready too.

Angela: (quietly) Thank you. (As Sam wanders out, dreamily, she talks to herself) *Such a good man. God, if you’re there, I appreciate your sending me Sam after that parade of losers you delivered early on. (makes a too-familiar gesture upward, such as a kiss or wave)*

(Lights dim in Angela’s section; upstage, spot shines on Sam and Ezra. Sam is dressed in his ‘Jesus shirt’, a flowing white linen garment. Ezra is standing, arms firmly clenched at his sides.)

SAM: C’mon dude. It’s just a clean shirt. Your mom is making me put one on too. (laughs) We’re in this together. Tell you what: You do this for me now and we’ll split a beer later.

(Ezra remains clenched)

SAM (sighs): Alright, alright, you can have your own beer. But just one, OK? (holds up one finger with the hand that isn’t holding the shirt)

(Ezra slowly peels his shirt off, takes the clean one Sam hands him and buttons it.)

SAM: (reaching up) And maybe we could do something about your hair?

(They struggle with a hairbrush for a moment.)

EZRA: (a little menacing, swats Sam away) Don’t.

SAM: OK, OK, fine! I mean, who am I to talk about hair?

(Ezra slings an arm over Sam’s shoulder and kisses his bald spot awkwardly. The two men slump against each other for a few seconds.)

(Doorbell rings. Light shifts back to Angela’s section, but it’s dim candlelight and shadows. She reanimates and walks slowly toward the door, breathes, opens it.)

Angela: Sweetheart! It’s so good to see you.

(She reaches out her arms. CHERRY, walks uncertainly into them. She is wearing a bright red coat over a smart, fitted, buttoned dress, hair done up. Roman is right behind her in a crisp shirt and slacks and one of those expensive outdoor sports coats with tons of zippers and pockets. Cherry looks back at him as her mother hugs her.)

CHERRY: Hi, Mom. (Bends and gives a tentative, bent-arm hug then turns.) This is Roman.

Angela: Roman! (She walks to hug him but he shoots a hand out to shake.)

ROMAN: Thank you for having me, Mrs….(looks at Cherry who mouths CO-HEN)

ANGELA: Angela! Please call me Angela. And in a minute you’ll meet my husband Sam.

ROMAN: Oh, OK, certainly. Angela (pronounces it carefully). It’s very nice to meet you.

(awkward pause)

ANGELA: Well, come in! Let’s go in by the fire. It’s cold out there today. (they start shuffling toward the living room)

CHERRY: Really? You think so? We ran 12 miles this morning, starting at 5 a.m. The sunrise over the lake was amazing. (Looks at Roman) Wasn’t it, Rome?

ROMAN: You have no idea. Here! (fishes phone from one of his zippered pockets) I took a few pictures. (stops and punches things in, then thrusts the phone in front of Angela but holds onto it and swipes) There…there….see how the light started to creep up there?….and there.

ANGELA: Gorgeous (takes a step as if to keep walking)

ROMAN: And there…there…And there’s one of Cherry because she’s so cute when she gets impatient.

CHERRY: Well, I had to shit like a wild monkey and he wouldn’t stop taking pictures.

(Angela stops, touches her hair nervously)

ROMAN: (leaning in as if to confide in Angela) I’m just lucky she didn’t fling it at me when we finally found some tall bushes.

ANGELA: (flustered) Haha, yes, well, she always has been kind of stuck in the anal stage.

CHERRY: (stop very suddenly, turns to look at Angela) What was that?

(Sam and Ezra appear in shadow at the threshold to the living room, but no one notices yet. Sam is wearing a flowing linen shirt with ties and/or fringe.)

ANGELA: You know? Freud. Toilet training. (voice is fading with uncertainty) The fascination with the bowels and need to (almost a whisper) control…

CHERRY: Jesus, Mom. You are unbelievable. We don’t even have our coats off yet! And you start saying the most inappropriate things.

(There is a fraught pause. Cherry rolls her eyes at Roman; he rubs her back with one hand. Angela fusses with her dress.)

SAM: (big, cheerful voice as he steps into the light) Hello! Sorry we’re late. Ezra was helping me pick out a shirt.

CHERRY: (to Roman under her breath) Well, that explains it.

(She extends a hand to shake. Sam moves in for a hug. There’s an awkward moment echoing the one Roman and Angela had at the door.)

CHERRY: Rome, this is my mother’s husband, Sam.

ROMAN (stands very straight): Sir, it’s very good to meet you.

SAM: And this is Ezra, Cherry’s brother.

(Sam prods Ezra forward and gestures for him to offer a hand. Cherry takes a step back, looking sick.)

ROMAN (takes a breath): Hello, Ezra. Good to meet you! (pumps Ezra’s limp hand too heartily)

SAM: Let me take your coats, please! (Cherry and Roman remove their coats and hand them to Sam, as if he’s the valet. He turns and hangs them on a coat tree by the door)

ANGELA: Why don’t we sit? (gestures at couch and chairs)

(They sit — Roman and Cherry side by side on the couch, Angela in a rocker, Sam in a chair on the very edge of the tableau; Ezra stays standing and hovers; a heavy silence falls)

SAM (tentatively): So—Rome, do you go by Rome?

ROMAN (nodding): Rome or Roman, either way.

SAM: So, Rome, how’s work? You’re in school security. Am I right? Isn’t that how you and Cherry met?

ROMAN (leaning forward): Everything’s going really well, sir. In fact, this latest incident brought in more business than we can handle. I’m hiring six new people this week!

SAM: Incident? I’m not sure I know…

(Ezra is rocking from one foot to the other, humming a little; once his arm shoots out toward Cherry and she moves closer to Roman on the couch)

ROMAN (using a voice that’s obviously been coached): The Highland Hills situation. Such a tragedy, and ultimately so avoidable. That’s why we created our business—to help prevent, or at least minimize, this type of massacre. Schools are beginning to understand that they need to be better prepared for these events.

ANGELA (sharply): How do you “prepare” for someone to break into a middle school strapped down with automatic weapons and murder 14 children?

ROMAN (smiling amiably): Semi-automatic.

SAM (also trying to be amiable): Excuse me?

ROMAN: They were semi-automatic weapons. Fully automatic weapons have been banned for civilians since 1986. And he murdered 15 children. Another one died this morning. (Shakes his head) We have new service requests from schools in 37 states. I’m telling you, business is crazy!

ANGELA: That is crazy. Who is “we?”

SAM (popping up): Drinks! Who’d like something. I’m going to have a beer. Rome?

ROMAN: Just water for me. Lots of ice.

CHERRY (as if she’s speaking to a waiter): Same.

SAM (looking at Angela, a little pleadingly): Glass of wine, love?

ANGELA (a little shrill): Sure, why not celebrate?

SAM: Ezra? Would you give me a hand?

(Sam and Ezra go to the kitchen area and a dim light comes on so they can be seen and heard softly clattering in the kitchen.)

SAM (far-off): Ice first, bud. Otherwise it’ll spill the wa….

(Ezra fills glasses, then joyously flings ice in and water spatters in every direction.)

SAM (murmuring): Oh, OK, my friend. OK. That’s good… (light in kitchen fades)

CHERRY (a little smug): Roman was a very successful financial planner, Mom. But after the Lakeland shooting he went into business with his dad. They started a year ago, just the two of them, and now they have almost 100 employees.

ANGELA: And what’s the name of your business?

ROMAN: SASS. Successful Active Shooter Strategies. Dad wanted to call it Active Shooter Strategies. He thought it was more, you know, confident and to the point. But then the acronym would have been…

CHERRY: ASS!! (dissolves into laughter)

ROMAN: We teach kids how to take more control in active shooter situations. Rather than just hide under their desks we want them to band together, strength in numbers. Stay and fight and protect what’s yours. There’s dozens, sometimes hundreds, of good kids and usually one or two shooters, max. They’ve got enough manpower to fight back! Or at least create distractions and throw the shooter off his game.

(Sam enters, carrying a glass of wine and two beers, Ezra trailing behind with two waters)

ANGELA: The Warsaw Uprising sort of solution.

ROMAN: The what?

ANGELA: Warsaw Uprising. A group of Jews from Poland that fought back against the Nazis.

ROMAN: Exactly. Like that. So what happened to those folks?

SAM (handing the wine to Angela, laughs drily): Ah, wiped out. Tortured, shot, bodies thrown out into the streets. The ghetto they’d been sent to burned to the ground.

CHERRY (under her breath): Oh, God. Here we go…

ANGELA: Those who don’t know history are doomed to repeat it.

CHERRY: I knew we shouldn’t have…

(She cringes a little as Ezra shoves a water glass toward her, spilling a little on her lap. Ezra sets Roman’s water down on the table in front of him, precisely, then backs away. Sam gives the wine to Angela, waits until Ezra is finished and hands over one of the beers.)

ROMAN (takes Cherry’s hand): Hold on a minute, babe. (He sits forward.) So these people in Warsaw, they outnumbered the Nazis?

SAM (matter of fact): Oh, no. By the time of the Resistance, most of them had been killed or shipped off to prison camps. It was a pretty small number, relatively, that tried to fight. And it was an admirable effort, but eventually…. (shrugs) German army decimated them.

ROMAN (excited): So if they’d fought at the beginning, when the Germans first moved in, before a bunch of them were killed or shipped off to the…the camps. What about that?

SAM (gently): But they didn’t know. Things were bad but they were told they were being sent to work for the Germans. It wasn’t until months later that anyone understood whole groups of people were being exterminated. Not just Jews but Romani…gypsies….Catholics, homosexuals.

ANGELA (quietly): People with disabilities.

(Ezra rocks foot to foot, ‘stimming’ with one hand, tapping pinkie finger repeatedly against the pad of this thumb.)

ROMAN (incredulous): Really?

ANGELA (putting her wine on the coffee table): Didn’t you learn this in school?

ROMAN: No Ma’am. Not this part. I mean we learned about the Americans’ role in World War 2 and the heroes who stormed Normandy Beach. (pauses to think) There was a piece about the nuclear (he says nuke-you-lar) bomb and Japan. But that was it, as I recall.

SAM: Where did you grow up, Roman?

CHERRY (under her breath): Not here, by the grace of God… (surreptitiously picks up her mother’s wine glass and takes a swig)

ROMAN: Mostly on base, sir. My dad was in the Army from the time I was born so we lived all over. Texas, Georgia, Kansas. We were in Germany for a couple years.

ANGELA: Wasn’t it hard to move so much? You kept having to make new friends…

ROMAN (shrugs): My mom made it work. Dad always says she’s the real sergeant of the family. Somehow, she always found the family that had a kid my age and made sure I had fun. I don’t remember ever being lonely.

ANGELA (picking up her glass, looking at how little is left, speaking softly) Oh. She sounds amazing. (slugs back the dregs)

ROMAN (heartily): Yep, she is. That’s my mom!

(Ezra turns slowly in the corner, rocking a bit.)

SAM (rising to put a hand on Ezra’s shoulder that Ezra bats away, speaking to Angela): What do you say, love? Is dinner ready?

ANGELA: Yes, I think it should be. Here (extends her glass). You refill this and get everyone to the table and I’ll bring in the food.

(They move in a messy herd toward the table, straggling awkwardly. Light amplifies in the dining room and dims in the living room. Ezra stays mostly on the fringes, in shadow.)

SAM: Roman, why don’t you sit here? Cherry, you know your usual…Oh, sure that’s good, too. Ezra, you can sit by mom for a change.

(Ezra pauses, stiffens.)

SAM (quietly, near Ezra): Hey big guy, this’ll be fine. How about an extra half hour of Fortnite later? (Ezra stiffens even more, leaning back. Sam chuckles.) Alright, one hour. I’ll play too, OK?

(Everyone sits as Angela enters with two very large misshapen crockery bowls.)

ANGELA: I made a curry, but not too hot. There’s extra chili sauce in that pot for those who want more spice. (sets the bowls down) And a salad! (a little desperate)

CHERRY (guilty voice): Oh, I forgot to tell you, Mom. This is totally my fault. I’m sorry. Rome doesn’t eat food that’s mixed up.

ANGELA: Mixed up?

CHERRY: You know. Like, the meat, the sauce, the vegetables. (gestures at the curry) And plain salad. No, uh (looks into the salad bowl) well, pieces of fruit or nuts.

ROMAN (heartily): It’s fine! I’m sure it’ll be great.

SAM: How about some bread? No one has a problem with bread, do they?

CHERRY (distracted): Well, I’m doing Whole 30, so…(looks up) You know what? I think it’s day 31. I’m due for some bread.

(they pass dishes; Roman takes the tiniest possible serving of everything and cuts three enormous pieces of bread)

ANGELA (nervously): We’re eating off Ezra’s dishes, you know.

(Cherry and Roman stop eating and look at each other)

ROMAN (aside): Does he mind?

CHERRY (Running her fingers around the uneven edges of a bowl): No, I think he made them. Didja, Ez? (her voice changes, gets lower) Did you make these in your day program?

Ezra (low): Yes

CHERRY: They’re nice. I like the blue…

(pause while they eat; Roman reaches for more bread)

SAM: So how’s student teaching?

CHERRY: I, um, decided not to finish the year. It’s just not for me.

ANGELA (puts her fork down, picks up her glass): What do you mean? (drinks, almost gulps) You had three months left!

CHERRY (suddenly petulant): Three months to qualify for a job I hate.

SAM: But, all that time getting your master’s…

CHERRY: If it’s the money you’re worried about, I’ll pay you back.

SAM: No, of course it’s not….

ANGELA (under her breath): But it did cost an enormous amount.

CHERRY: I dreaded every day in that school…

ANGELA (holds up her glass): I could have been drinking $40 bottles every night, instead of this box crap…

CHERRY: The kids were so noisy and twice, I got punched. One day, a kid threw up ALL over my desk. (gags) And their feet smelled, Oh, God, who knew little feet could smell so bad? And they wouldn't stop touching me! All day (puts her hands out, fingers wiggling and grasping) So I decided to go to work with Rome and his dad. (says this last sentence very fast)

(tense pause, that Roman breaks)

ROMAN: Cherry’s bringing that critical inside-the-classroom piece to us. Especially with the younger kids, she can tell us where they can hide as a group to surprise the shooter, how they might think…

CHERRY (overlapping): I’m just glad I was student teaching when Rome came in to do our introductory seminar.

ROMAN (sales voice): We offer a one-hour seminar for teachers, absolutely free, to schools that are interested in improving their safety and security.

CHERRY: And afterward, we started talking. I told Rome that I wanted to major in criminal justice in college but my mom said it wasn’t….(glances at Angela, who is frozen, watching them) Not that that’s important.

ROMAN (leaning forward): I believe God brought us together. He put Cherry in that school and then He led me there.

ANGELA (unblinking): Really? God is your matchmaker? And it’s a HE?

CHERRY (paying no attention, gazing at Roman): It’s true. And you, too, Mom. You insisted I focus on my education and get a job where I could do some good in the world, and it worked! You put me right in the path of Rome and his family.

ANGELA (slightly drunkenly): I did?

CHERRY: Now I have the relationship I always wanted and a great career that uses my education to do real good in the world. And instead of working with sticky, whiny little kids, I’m taking firearm training.

ROMAN: This girl is a marksman! Unbelievable shot.

ANGELA: You’re spending your time shooting? But why? Isn’t that what your business is all about: fighting people with guns?

ROMAN: Fighting BAD people with guns. (reaches back into his waistband)

SAM (quietly): Ah, fuck…

ROMAN (pulls out a handgun; Angela and Sam shrink back; Ezra leans forward, interested): The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is….

ANGELA: Don’t say it…

ROMAN (proud, as if he originated the saying): A GOOD guy with a gun.

(Roman holds the gun loosely and gestures with it throughout this conversation, while Angela and Sam shrink back and Ezra tries to get closer)

ANGELA (quietly): Please put that away.

ROMAN: This? This is nothing. An inert object. But if you know how to use it, it becomes a powerful tool.

CHERRY (to Rome): My mother is one of the people who wants to take away your 2nd amendment rights.

ANGELA: Not yours, specifically. I just don’t see the need for people to be carrying guns and bringing them to, ah….

SAM (alarmed): Dinner?

ROMAN (relaxed): But why is that? You’ve got nothing against…(he scans the table and picks up the bread knife) knives. You’re perfectly comfortable with that dangerous weapon sitting right here on your table.

ANGELA: That’s an insane comparison. Guns kill far FAR more people than knives.

CHERRY: That’s exactly…

ROMAN (interrupting, putting the hand not holding the gun on Cherry’s arm): No, I want to answer your mom. Lots of people look at things that way. But a gun has no intent. It doesn’t kill people. One of the problems we see is that people *don’t* have guns, they don’t use them, they don’t know how. In fact (he points at Sam and Angela with the gun) they’re afraid of them. Which makes no sense, because right now this is just a hunk of metal in the hand of someone who wants to protect people, not hurt them.

ANGELA (reaches for her wine then thinks better of it and pulls her hand back; speaks carefully): I understand that’s how you feel. But I would prefer that you put the gun away, or even put it in the car for the rest of the evening.

ROMAN (reholsters gun behind him and leans back): OK, I understand. But don’t you see? What you just asked me to do? It makes no sense. Why would it be safer for me to put this in a car on the street for some random person to find? That would be irresponsible.

SAM: *This* makes no sense to me. Police officers, soldiers…no one else needs to be carrying a gun.

ROMAN (amiably): And your Warsaw people, the ones who got massacred?

SAM: What about them?

ROMAN (again, only trying to help): Maybe if they’d been armed, sir. Maybe if they’d felt like they had some power. (shrugs) They might have been able to fight back. Wasn’t it soldiers who had the guns in that situation?

SAM (puzzled): Yes, you have a point.

ANGELA: No, no, he does not have a point. This is not World War 2 Europe. It’s the United States in a time when we have a new mass shooting every couple weeks.

ROMAN (nodding): Which has very little to do with guns and everything to do with mental health. What we have to do is start identifying and locking up the crazies who commit these crimes, before they pick up a gun.

(There is silence at the table. Cherry looks from Angela to Roman to Sam. Finally she turns to Ezra, who is rocking in his seat.)

EZRA (suddenly): Hahahahahahahaha. Lock up the crazies.

ANGELA (standing, voice shaky): I, uh, need to whip some cream for dessert. You finish up here and I’ll be back in a….(trails off and looks into the distance)

(Angela goes to the kitchen where she can be seen in silhouette, leaning her forehead against a cupboard, shoulders shaking as if she is crying silently.)

ROMAN (waves bread knife in the air): Pass that bread back my way?

SAM: Sure. (does so; looks toward the kitchen then back at Roman and Cherry, who are eating and flirting) So tell me, ah (glances toward the kitchen again, where audience can see Angela pulling herself together, standing straight, wiping her eyes) *Rome* (Cherry sighs) What does your mother do?

ROMAN and CHERRY (together): She works with us! (they laugh)

ROMAN: It’s a real family business. Dad says my mom is the CEO and he’s the chief bottle washer (laughs mechanically).

SAM: Is she? The CEO?

ROMAN (looking confused): No, of course not. He is. She’s….I don’t think we have a title for her. She does so many different things.

SAM: Ah. Do you have a title?

ROMAN (sitting straight): I’m vice president of operations.

SAM: And you, Cherry?

CHERRY: I’m the strategy coordinator. I map the school and figure out where students can gather and barricade themselves in, and where they have the advantage if they choose to fight.

SAM (looking toward the kitchen, distracted): You were always good with maps. (lost in memory) I remember from when I taught you to, uh, drive…

(Sam stands)

SAM: I’m going to go see if I can help your mom in the kitchen.

CHERRY (to Roman, as Sam walks away): He always does that.

ROMAN: What?

CHERRY: Talks about my childhood like it was some normal thing. Like ‘Oh! Remember when I taught you to drive?’ As if he’s my dad.

ROMAN: Did he?

CHERRY: Did he what?

ROMAN: Did he teach you to drive?

CHERRY: Yes. It was terrible. He was all fussy and spastic about it. He screamed like a girl when I went through a red light once. And he made me learn on a stick shift in case I was ever stranded somewhere with a guy who got drunk or something.

ROMAN: I don’t know, babe. He seems like a nice guy to me.

CHERRY: Nice. (shrugs) Sure. But in this weak femmy gross way. I’ve never understood what my mom saw in him. My dad may be an asshole who cheated on her, but at least he acts like a man.

(light dims in the area where Roman and Cherry sit at the table with Ezra who is staring at them intently; lights go up in the kitchen area where Sam has his hands on Angela’s shoulders as she cries)

SAM: What’s wrong?

ANGELA (thickly): You know I hate that question.

SAM: (sighs) Yes, I know. And I can never figure out exactly why.

ANGELA: Because if you don’t see it you’re never going to understand. (sigh) And, and, it’s everything and…this family just doesn’t *work*, no matter what I try. And I don’t want to talk about it!

SAM (slips his arms around her): OK, OK. Shhhh. (rocks her for a moment) Should I whip the cream?

ANGELA (snorts): Yeah, I don’t think Butch Sundance deserves any cream. (stands up straight) The Mentally Ill.  (takes the cream out of the refrigerator) God, I cannot stand when people say it that way. As if they’re not….human. Like people with problems are…disposable. Like garbage to be gotten rid of. And who the fuck gets to decide (pours cream into bowl and spatters it all over the counter and Sam) who else is THE mentally ill?

(Sam begins wiping the counter; Angela gets a hand mixer from the cupboard)

ANGELA: And in front of Ezra! What if he thinks they mean him? (drops the mixer she just picked up) Why is Cherry so awful to him, Sam? It didn’t used to be that way. Early on, before you met them, I swear, she was so good to her brother. (leans against the counter and speaks dreamily) I remember this card she made, after her Siblings group — that was for kids who had brothers and sisters with autism — and it said ‘Dear E - You’re weird and I love how weird you are. I also love that you can fart any time you want.’

SAM (laughs): That is one of his special skills. It still takes me by surprise.

ANGELA (begging): What happened? What did I do wrong? Ruth’s kids are so good to their brother. He was just best man at Jack’s wedding. They care about him and she….

SAM: (picking up the mixer, turning it on low) Their relationship is complicated, love. You know that. Hard things have happened in Cherry’s life.

ANGELA (sharply): Hard things have happened in all of our lives.

(Lights glow on the other side of the stage, showing Ezra pitching forward toward Cherry and Roman; she recoils and Roman moves in front of her. Ezra keeps advancing, trying to grab behind Roman. They scuffle.)

SAM: That’s true. But she’s a kid. (finishes whipping cream and sets mixer on the counter) Cherry needs time. Just be patient, love. It’s going to be OK. (He puts his arms around her.)

(Almost simultaneously. Ezra lunges, Cherry gasps, Ezra reaches behind Roman and they struggle as first Ezra gets Roman’s gun and then Roman takes it back. Ezra lunges again and the gun goes off but his body is blocking the audience’s view so they don’t know who was shot. In the kitchen, Angela and Sam startle as one. They rush toward the dining room. Slowly, Ezra falls.)

SAM (rushing forward, making a guttural cry): Noooooooo! (Picks up Ezra and holds him getting blood on his clothes. Angela is paralyzed, in a spot of light. Cherry hugs herself and rocks on her heels. Roman calmly calls 911.)

[lights dim; scene change]

Ezra is in a hospital bed far stage left, Angela in a chair next to his bed, with a curtain set up next to act like a door. They are in shadow. Sam, Cherry and Roman are center stage in a room like a waiting area with seven chairs. Sam, hunched over, and Cherry are seated; Roman is standing, holding his head. To the right, in shadow, is the hospital chapel. Occasionally, throughout the remainder of the play, until Angela and Beth’s scene there, random people enter the chapel to pray in shadow next to the action. They are white, black, Muslim, Jewish, Asian, in a wheelchair…

ROMAN (pacing): He went for the gun. It was nuts. He just went for it! I wasn’t expecting that. One minute everything was fine and the next, he was acting crazy. He went for the gun. I was only trying to take it back. Keep everyone….safe.

CHERRY: You did. This is not your fault, Rome.

ROMAN: I don’t know what happened! I keep going over it in my head. One minute we were talking and then, bam!, I felt this movement toward my back.

CHERRY: You were just protecting me. My brother is batshit! Everyone knows it. There are records going back…

SAM (low and beaten): Protecting you? (Sam rises and now it is clear that his white Jesus shirt is streaked with blood) Protecting you from what? Your brother?

CHERRY (angry): Yeah, Rome was doing what you and mom never would.

SAM: Cherry, that is…(shakes his head) I have no idea what you’re talking about.

CHERRY (snorts): Oh, for fuck’s sake, ask David if you want to know what I’m talking about. Call him! It’s the middle of the night, but he’s family, right? He won’t mind.

ROMAN: Who’s David?

CHERRY: My stepbrother, Sam’s son. The only good thing I got out of their marriage. But he could only stand it for a couple years. First chance he had, David ran away from this shit show.

SAM: He went to college.

CHERRY: In England! He had to put an entire ocean between him and us. Probably still isn’t enough. (turns to Roman) David went to Oxford for undergrad, then he got his master’s in Edinburgh, and he just happened to get a great job in London. (shrugs) He was lucky. He was so smart, the best colleges were begging for him. He could get away. Me? Elementary Ed at the U.

SAM (puzzled): I talk to David once a week. We’re close!

CHERRY (softly): David loves you. He admires you. But he didn’t want a crazy brother any more than I do. He spent his last couple years of high school studying like crazy and looking out for me. He tried to be Ezra’s friend. Then when that didn’t work, he just made a break for it. I don’t blame him. (shakes her head) Not at all.

ROMAN: Ezra was threatening, you know. (gaining confidence) Certainly unpredictable. (losing it again) Probably capable of violence.

SAM: I don’t think that’s…(more quietly) fair.

(Roman’s cell phone rings. He pulls it out of his pocket and looks down.)

ROMAN: I have to get this! Sorry. (sticks one earbud in and walks to the side holding phone and talking)

CHERRY (to Sam): Fair? None of this is fair. Growing up with an older brother I had to take care of when Mom was working? Not fair. Getting guilted into coming over for dinner on a perfectly nice Saturday night? Not fair. Talking about how we need to elope so my mentally ill brother doesn’t destroy our wedding, because my mom and stepdad would make me feel like the worst person on earth if I didn’t invite him? Totally. Not. Fair.

SAM: No, no. You’re right. Those things are not…

ROMAN (speaking louder now): Yes, 8th floor. You’ll have to be escorted through the double….Yes, leave it downstairs, it’s the only way….I know, I know. But because there’s PSYCH up here….OK (presses end and stares at his phone for a moment, then speaks to Cherry) They're on their way up.

SAM: Who?

ROMAN: My folks. They’ll be here any minute. (paces, jingling something in his pocket) My mom’ll know what to do. You’ll see. She always does.

Angela rises from her chair next to Ezra’s bed, puts her hand to his forehead and then to his cheek, sighs, leans down to kiss him, then walks out and into the waiting room where the others are.

SAM (standing): How is he, love?

ANGELA: He’s still, ah…resting. Or whatever this is.

ROMAN (to Angela): I’m really sorry. I thought he was…

ANGELA: Stop! (holds her hand up, palm flat) I really can’t.

CHERRY: What happens now?

ANGELA: The doctor says there are three options. (like a schoolteacher) One, they can open him up his abdomen and remove the bullet, like it’s Civil War days. Two, they can take some full body x-rays to find the bullet, then do laparoscopic surgery. Three, they can leave it in there and watch him and see how he does.

SAM: Leave it in there? Because…?

ANGELA (shrugs): Sometimes doing nothing is the best way to go. That’s what they said. All sorts of people live with bullets inside them, and if you can avoid major surgery, you do. The problem is (laughs) they need him to communicate with them, tell them if and where he’s in pain.

SAM: Ahhh (he laughs, too and they share an almost sweet moment) How’s that working out?

ANGELA (drily): Like you might expect.

ROMAN: Can he not? Speak, I mean? There was that one thing he said — at the table…

CHERRY (softly): Oh, Ezra can speak.

SAM: About twice a year he decides to talk and we can’t shut him up. He says everything he’s stored up over the months and it all comes pouring out.

CHERRY: Stuff everyone else has forgotten all about.

ANGELA: Words you never imagined he knew.

(It’s like they’re a family for the first time, explaining this together to Roman.)

SAM: But it’s always on his time. You might ask him a question and six weeks later he’ll come and find you and shout the answer, like you’d just asked him a couple seconds ago. But by that time, you’ll have forgotten…

CHERRY: But he keeps saying it and saying it until you remember. (proudly) I’m better than Mom or Sam. I usually know what he’s saying.

SAM: Yes you are, honey. I, on the other hand, just pretend to know what he’s talking about, which is dangerous because if Ezra realizes I’m humoring him…ugh, that does not go well.

ROMAN: Oh.

(they sit, almost friendly for a moment)

CHERRY: So if Ez won’t talk today, what happens?

ANGELA: I make the decision. We (she gestures at Sam) make the decision.

Cherry pulls out her phone and begins to punch in a number.

ANGELA: What are you doing?

CHERRY: I’m calling Dad. Don’t you think he should know?

ANGELA: NO! (Roman startles, instinctively reaches for where his gun should be) You may choose to have brunch and spend holidays with him, but Jeff opted out on Ezra 20 years ago. He has no part in this.

ROMAN: But wait, this is his father! You can’t….

ANGELA (menacing, almost hissing): Oh, but I can. You don’t ditch your son because he’s too much trouble then sweep back in when your daughter’s boyfriend shoots him over dinner and start making Major. Medical. Decision!

(Turns and walks away, her back to them.)

CHERRY (standing, trembling and angry): Dad got out. He escaped from the crazy house. Well, good for him! He made the decision to leave and live his life instead of becoming a martyr.

(Angela turns and stalks back.)

ANGELA (low, menacing voice): Stay and fight and protect what’s yours. (turns to Roman) Isn’t that what you said? (turns back to Cherry) Isn’t that what you believe? Or are you working for this *Active Shooter* cause simply because your boyfriend’s there? Or because it’s easier than teaching? You’ve always liked ‘easier,’ haven’t you? You got that from your dad. (shakes her head) You’re a smart girl. How do you ignore the fact that he also left *you*? Just ditched you, a little girl, to live in the crazy house. Good for him! Too bad for you.

Cherry stands, shaking a little, looking as if she’s about to cry. Sam walks toward them and looks from woman to woman.

SAM (reaches out; it’s unclear to whom): Listen, honey…

CHERRY: Aaagghhh! (walks away and into Roman’s arms) Don’t touch me!

(Theo and Beth burst in, dressed like they were at a party. She is tiny and pretty and perfectly composed. He is short but has the wide shoulders and walk of a man who leads people.)

ROMAN: You’re here! (Drops Cherry abruptly. Runs to hug Beth. Shakes hands formally with Theo.) Sam, Angela, these are my parents, Theo and Beth Costas.

SAM: Hello, so nice to meet you. (steps forward to shake hands; Theo and Beth stop short when they see all the blood on his shirt, then shake carefully — Beth moves to the dispenser to disinfect during the following exchange)

ANGELA (waves): Hi. (to Sam, under her breath but audible) What are they doing here?

BETH (to Angela): Rome called us. He was so upset. We decided to come and see if there was anything we could do.

ANGELA (brightly): Are you surgeons?

THEO (chuckles): No, but we’re parents. We love your daughter. She’s like one of our own!

BETH (coming from the dispenser, rubbing her hands): So where else would we be?

SAM: That’s very (glances at Angela) kind of you. Why don’t you sit? We (gestures at Angela) were just about to check on our son.

BETH (devoutly): We have been praying for him.

ANGELA: Ah, that will hel….

SAM (taking her arm): C’mon, love. I hear Ezra calling us. (to Cherry) I’ll give your dad a call and tell him what’s going on.

(Sam and Angela walk into Ezra’s room where he is moving a little but settles back down. Angela sits at his bedside. Sam dials his phone and begins to speak quietly.)

THEO (to Rome): You didn’t say anything, did you?

ROMAN (a little frantic): I said a lot of things. Like what?

THEO: Like you’re sorry…or you made a mistake. You didn’t call it an ‘accident’ did you?

ROMAN (quite frantic now): I don’t know. I can’t remember! But it was an accident. And I am so (takes a breath) so sorry.

BETH (firmly): We’re all sorry for the situation, honey. But you did not create it and you have nothing to apologize for. There was a problem here long before you came into the picture.

(Cherry watches the exchange, but particularly Beth and she nods emphatically. Roman pulls out his phone, scrolls to find a number and calls. An expensive watch flashes on his wrist when he puts the phone to his ear. He moves to the side of the group, talking fast but low.)

CHERRY (touching Roman): Your mother’s right. It’s not your fault. I should never have brought you into this crazy situation. I didn’t want to. (Starts to pace) I wish it was possible to divorce your family! I’ve wanted that since I was a kid. Married people get to do it. They walk away clean and start over. (Sighs) Oh, that would feel so good.

BETH (watching Cherry): Are you sure? She is your mother.

CHERRY: What does that even mean? She gave birth to me. *Maybe*. (eagerly) I’ve wondered for years if that’s even true. She had Ezra already and she knew there was something wrong with him. My dad was practically out the door. I can’t imagine them….(gagging motion) So. (gathers herself) I’ve always thought maybe she stole me from a grocery cart or something. You know, so she’d have another kid who could be there for Ez.

ROMAN: I don’t know, babe. You look A LOT like…

BETH (interrupts): What’s important for your to know is, you always have a family with us. We feel lucky to have you. (opens arms)

Cherry walks in for a hug and crouches to lie her head on Beth’s shoulder

CHERRY: Really? Oh me too. I love your family.

BETH: And we love you. (She gestures to Roman behind Cherry’s back that he should come and take her into his arms. He is confused at first, then understands and jumps up to do so.)

THEO (concluding call): Thank you, Ray. No…yeah….sure, I’ll tell him. (presses end and puts phone in his pocket) Ray says he’s really sorry you're in this mess and you should feel good about protecting your girl. He also said you need to keep your mouth shut. No talking to the family if possible. (Roman and Cherry are slowly untangling to face him. She gestures toward herself.) Haha. Of course, he can talk to you, sweetheart. (turns back to Roman, sternly) But not the parents. And never the doctors or police. Sooner or later, they’re gonna be called. If it wasn’t a Saturday night—crawlin’ with junkies and weirdos—they’da been here already.

BETH: Look! (she points up) What’s that?

THEO: Rome! See if there’s a remote to turn that up, willya?

Roman walks to the corner and reaches way up to feel along the edges of a TV, either virtual or a prop.

ROMAN: I can’t find one. They must not want people messing with….

BETH (pulling an iPad in expensive cover out of her handbag): Never mind! It’s CNN, right? (taps a few times) Here! (taps once more, for speaker. Everyone gathers around, like it’s an old-fashioned radio.)

NEWCASTER’S VOICE: ….mass shooting in a dormitory at Dexter University. At least nine students are dead, possibly more. It appears the two gunmen armed with semi-automatic weapons went into a third-floor lounge area where there was a party going on and opened fire. Then they went up and down the halls on floors three, four and five, making noise and shooting as students opened their doors to come out and investigate. Here are the facts, in case you’re just tuning in: There was a shooting tonight around 8:40 at Dexter University in Hemworth Hall, which massive. U.S. News called Hemworth the eighth-largest dormitory in the country, with almost a thousand students under one roof. I’m joined now by our FBI correspondent, Pete Buckley. Pete, what can you say about the situation at Dexter?

PETE BUCKLEY VOICE: It’s early on, Jeff, so we can’t say for sure. But this is looking to me like the reenactment of some fantasy FPS game.

NEWSCASTER: That’s first-person shooter, right? For our non-gaming viewers at home.

PETE BUCKLEY: Exactly right. Now, first-person shooter games usually involve a puzzle of some sort, a quest or maze that the player has to complete and the killing they do is just collateral damage. The real goal is to solve the, you know, the challenge of the puzzle. But lately, we’re seeing more ‘body count’ style games, where the competition is simply for the highest number of people killed. So it’s just a hypothesis at this point, but it looks like these two gunmen were playing a game with each other, competing to see who could rack up the highest score.

(Theo hits button — we assume mute or end.)

THEO: Hahahaha, Fuckin’ idiots. (glances at Cherry) Sorry, dear. It’s just hard to believe these guys are still harping about video games. For 20 years, they’ve been trying to pin violence on fantasy games and not on the mentally ill individuals where it belongs.

CHERRY: I think my brother plays those games…

THEO: Yeah? Well, I probably wouldn’t recommend it for someone with your brother’s problems.

CHERRY: Mom hates it but sometimes it’s the only way to get him to stop perseverating. (the others stop and look blank) You know, doing the same thing over and over.

(Theo is on his phone, punching things in, not listening.)

THEO (to Beth): Do you know Dexter is only three hours and eight minutes from here? It’s right over the state line.

BETH: You should go. And take Roman.

ROMAN: Mom, I really feel like I should stay…

BETH: What good are you doing here, honey? In a waiting room with the women?

CHERRY (muttering to herself): Well, I mean, we happen to be women, but that’s not really the point.

BETH: You have a job. There are people at that school who could use your expertise. And it’s a university of….how many people, dear?

THEO (pokes his phone a couple times): 17,430 students

BETH (calmly): We’ve been waiting for this. High schools are fine, but if we can break into four-year colleges? They have endowments. They house students which is a higher level of liability. This is where the opportunity is. Go!

ROMAN (to Cherry): Will you be OK? Is this alright with you?

BETH (moves to put her arm around Cherry; pushes Rome away): She’ll be fine.

THEO: What are you going to tell the cops when they show up? And eventually, they will.

BETH (steely): I’ll handle it. Don’t worry. Go.

(Roman hugs Cherry and kisses her and Theo does the same with Beth in a more perfunctory married way. They gather their things and leave, just as Sam and Angela enter from the doorway to Ezra’s room. Sam kisses Angela and moves to a corner with his phone to his ear.)

ANGELA: Where are they going? (to Cherry) I was hoping you and Roman could pick up some things we need at home.

CHERRY: I’ll go. Rome is needed….uh, he’s going….

BETH (brightly): There’s been a terrible incident at Dexter University and the boys are going to see if they can help.

ANGELA: They’re leaving?

BETH: Yes, but don’t worry. I’m going to stay and make sure you and Cherry are taken care of. Oh, and your husband, too. Sam, is it?

ANGELA (a little robotic): Yes, he’s calling David, our son — he lives in, ah (vague, as if she can’t remember) London.

BETH: Another son? Funny. Cherry never mentioned him.

CHERRY: David is my stepbrother, technically. (Theo and Roman are scuffling and readying themselves as the women talk. Moving a little noisily toward the exit.) So I mean, not really my mother’s….

(Theo and Rome exit and Cherry sees her mother stagger a little, unsteady and teary. Angela is holding onto the back of a chair.)

CHERRY: Son.

ANGELA: I always thought of him as mine, or I wanted to. That works in some families you know (she is looking at Beth, beseechingly). People blend. They don’t care who’s related by blood. They just love each other. (pleadingly) I’ve seen that happen. (Roman and Theo leave)

BETH: Of course. When my uncle’s wife died….

ANGELA (suddenly stalking across the room): But not ours. Nope. The lines are drawn. Tight! And you can’t cross them. Someone calls Sam their dad in a restaurant, when he’s paying the bill, and my kids will correct them. He’s not my father! Like it’s a point of pride. Ezra, well, that’s part of his whole thing. He likes facts. Doesn’t understand nuance. But Cherry, now. (as if to herself) That’s a different story.

CHERRY: Mom, I have a….

ANGELA: Father, yes. Of course. A father who never paid child support or took care of you when you were sick or stayed up when you were out with your friends, worrying you’d been in a car accident. A father who (Angela takes a huge breath and begins speaking with intensity) cannot be bothered to come to the hospital where his son is lying in a bed, shot by his daughter’s boyfriend, because said father is IN COLORADO, skiing with his wife and their two perfect, normal children, and there might be a change fee on his ticket to come back early. (finishes in a shout) But you know what? (laughs) There probably wouldn’t be. I think the airlines would understand if you said, “Hey, my disabled son was shot in the abdomen and they’re leaving the bullet in, hoping it doesn’t destroy any vital organs, so I need to get home to see him before he possibly dies.” I THINK the airline would waive the fucking $300 fee for that. At least they would if I were the one to call.

CHERRY (to Beth): She is really nasty with customer service people. That’s how she gets deals on things. You’d think she was the Jew.

(Both Angela and Beth turn to Cherry in horror, looking almost alike for a second.)

CHERRY: I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to say that. I don’t know why I….

BETH: We’re all upset, dear. It’s been a very stressful day. Don’t worry; you’re fine.

ANGELA: No, no (as if to the heavens), I don’t think anti-Semitism is fine, no matter what kind of day you’re having. Am I crazy? (imploring Beth now) Is it just me? Did the rules change while I wasn’t paying attention? (sinks back into chair, nearly crying) What in Christ’s name is going on?

CHERRY: Mom! I really hate when you talk like that. It’s so disrespectful.

ANGELA (still murmuring): Yes, terribly disrespectful. I suppose I am. So sorry. Don’t know what’s gotten into me.

Sam comes out of the shadows in the corner, putting his phone away. Walks to Angela and puts his hands on her shoulders from behind.

SAM: David says hello.

ANGELA (tilting her head so it’s lying on Sam’s hand): I’m sorry we woke him.

SAM: He didn’t mind. He said he’ll come if we need him. He’s checking on flights, just in case.

BETH (to Cherry): Honey, you look so tired. Why don’t I take you home?

CHERRY (hopefully): Mom?

Angela pauses and we can see her struggle. She wants her daughter to want to stay. But eventually she gives in.

ANGELA: Go ahead. I think we’re here for the night.

Beth and Cherry gather things and depart.

ANGELA: What did David say? You talked to him for a long time.

SAM (staring ahead): He said a lot of things.

ANGELA: Is she telling the truth? Did Ez hurt her….? (swallows) Abuse her somehow? Was I just not paying enough attention?

SAM: He doesn’t, uh, know for sure. He said there was a period back when they were teenagers. Cherry might have been about 12. Ezra went through this phase where he (Sam winces) he masturbated a lot. In front of people. He would….(very quietly) laugh. Especially if he….(steels himself), you know…got some on someone.

ANGELA (sighing): Yeah, I got called to the school many times.

SAM: You KNEW? Why didn’t you tell me?

ANGELA (sighs, then groans): We were just brand-new. The first call I got was on the second to last day of our honeymoon.

SAM: Florence.

ANGELA: I never thought I’d get to Europe. Once the kids were born, Ezra started having his problems, Scott left… I thought all those possibilities were done for me. Then I met you. I just wanted to have a normal honeymoon with this (strokes his hand) miraculously wonderful guy.

SAM: And later? Did it happen again?

ANGELA: Yes.

SAM: So why didn’t you tell me then?

ANGELA: I don’t know! (pause) No, that’s not true….I do. I was afraid you’d leave. I would have left, if I could have! I’d have packed a bag and been out of there so fast! (looks up at him) I just couldn’t. We were so sure, you and I, that having a father for Ezra would change things. It made so much sense! Scott left and Ez just seemed to get crazier and more alone. I really believed that you coming into our family, you loving him like a father should. I really believed that would be the answer. That would cure him. (pleading) I wanted to give it some time.

SAM (stiffly): I wouldn’t have left. This is perfectly understandable behavior. He was just curious! I would have tried to teach him…

ANGELA: I know. I know that now, because that’s who you are. But I’d already had one husband walk out. And back then…God, you were dealing with Cherry’s tantrums and all the terrible things she said. We were trying to put this family together and I just wanted…..(thickly) I didn’t want to think about what was happening. So I didn’t. (pauses to breathe) I never told anyone.

SAM (choking a little): David. He’s felt responsible all these years.

ANGELA (alarmed): Responsible for what?

SAM: He left. Remember, he took that senior year co-op in Boston. Then college. (gazing off) In London. Cherry was 12, 13. He feels like he abandoned her. He was terrified of what would happen, but he told me he couldn’t bear to stay and watch either. He couldn’t let himself get (softly) trapped.

ANGELA: So this happened with Cherry? Ezra did… (makes vague hand gestures in her lap, unable to say what she means, then begins to cry)

SAM: David doesn’t know. He thinks maybe…once.

ANGELA: And it’s my fault.

SAM (too slowly): It’s not….

ANGELA: Stop! (puts hand up) Just stop. Yes, this is my fault. It was my choice. I could have sent him away. I could have sent *her* away. I could have told you and made it your problem too. Then we might have figured it out (he takes her hand from behind) together.

(Sam is behind her, hands on her shoulders. She tilts her head to rest on one of his hands.)

ANGELA: I just didn’t want it to be true. And talking about it would have made it more….real. So I didn’t.

SAM: I’m real.

ANGELA (laughs): Sometimes that’s even harder to believe.

SAM: Ezra’s real. And he’s necessary. He did not know what he was doing. That’s the wonderful thing about him! He was only noticing something new and trying to use it. The world doesn’t work for him but he’s always willing to try. And there’s not a drop of malice in him.

ANGELA: But the choices he forces me to make….

SAM (crouching to put his arms around her): US to make.

ANGELA (melting into him): Yeah. (pause) Did David say anything else?

(The next several lines are spoken almost like the traded lyrics of a song, each to the audience, overlapping, not looking at each other but rather toward the sky.)

SAM: He did. (clears throat) He said he thinks the threat Cherry perceives from Ezra isn’t physical. It’s about the fear that she’ll get stuck taking care of him. And that she might have a child like him one day.

ANGELA: Ruth’s boys want to take care of their brother. One of them asked to be his guardian, when she dies.

SAM: Either way, she feels trapped.

ANGELA: I gave her “Of Mice and Men” to read. That was another mistake.

SAM: She feels like her whole life has been defined by this.

ANGELA: She didn’t remember that George took care of Lennie, that he was his best friend. That he loved him.

SAM: She wants to be free.

ANGELA: She only remembered that George killed him in the end.

(They stop and breathe, clenched together. Dr. Goodman enters holding an iPad in a case, sees them, pauses momentarily, then walks forward and pulls a chair up to face them. Doctor sits.)

DR: Mr. and Mrs. Cohen?

SAM: Sam, please. (he gestures) Angela.

DR (leans back): Casey. (shake hands all around, as if at a cocktail party)

ANGELA: Is Ezra alright? I mean, still….

DR: Doing pretty well, all things considered. He asked our nurse to get him some lasagna (chuckles) and a beer.

SAM: He spoke?

DR: Since you two left the room, he's been quite talkative. Told us all about his high scores on some game. Sonic Siege, uh…something.

SAM: But he doesn’t…

ANGELA (to Sam): This happens. Trauma, pain, attention. Something about it agrees with him. (Dr. Goodman sits up, interested.) He broke his arm when he was nine and talked nonstop for a week. He seemed completely cured. At first, I thought it was the narcotics. But I couldn’t get any more. The surgeon said he was past the worst part; I should just give him Tylenol. So I bought some Vicodin from this guy Linda knows.

SAM: Love, I don’t think…

DR: No, no, it’s fine. (to Angela) So what happened?

ANGELA: Nothing. He was dopey and drool and slid off chairs. But he didn’t talk. He didn’t look at me and say ‘Thanks, Mom. I’m normal now!’ (Dr. pats her knee and sits back) It was the pain. That’s what I decided. That and the rush of people and all the excitement. He didn’t talk tonight ’til we were gone because he likes the pain and the newness of everything. It clears his mind.

DR: Wow. That’s….fascinating.

ANGELA (slumped): Same thing happened whenever he ran a fever. 104 degrees? Ezra turns into Winston Churchill. Full sentences, clever as hell. Way beyond grade level. I told his pediatrician and there is NO QUESTION he thought I was crazy. And you know what? (Angela leans forward, fiercely) You know what??

DR (wary): No, what?

ANGELA: Two years ago I read an article about this strange phenomenon where nonverbal children run fevers and suddenly they can speak. SOME SCIENTISTS GOT A BIG FAT GRANT TO STUDY IT! (pause) Two decades after I got booted out of some asshole’s office and told to get some counseling. “Counseling!” (laughs a little maniacally) Yeah, buddy, that definitely would have helped.

(There is a pause while the doctor pulls out iPad, clears throat and reassumes a professional demeanor.)

DR (pointing with one finger): So you can see on this x-ray there’s a single bullet that just missed Ezra’s left kidney. It’s lodged here (makes a circle on the screen) in some soft tissue. Nothing terribly functional there, just some muscle and fat. This is a pretty remarkable shooting, really. There were a lot of major organs in the path and hitting any one of them would have been…(looks at Angela worriedly) uh, really bad. But this? It’s one in a million. Best case.

SAM: Best case?

DR: The shot caused a lot of bleeding, some discomfort. It’s not ideal, of course! But the bullet hit basically nothing. The most conservative course of treatment is to leave it alone. Monitor Ezra for a few days, give the body a chance to develop some scar tissue in that area, then send him home.

(Expectant pause)

DR: But….

ANGELA: But?

DR: Some trauma experts believe leaving a bullet in the body can lead to toxic lead absorption down the line. Doesn’t always happen. In fact, we’re not sure it *does* happen. Maybe it’s only a problem with multiple bullets. We just don’t know. Research on this has been mostly blocked by the NRA.

ANGELA (muttering): The fucking NRA…

DR: Yes, ah…Effects of lead in the blood might include some cognitive trouble — loss of reasoning skills. Given that your son already has, ah, difficulties, we decided, our team, that we should mention this and let you make the decision. If we go in and try to remove the bullet, it should be done in the next 48 hours, before tissue forms around it. Ezra is on Medicaid? (Sam nods) You might want to reach out to his case worker. It’s possible, I would say likely, the state will deny the cost of the surgery because it’s not the recommended course of treatment.

ANGELA: Because of the fucking NRA…

SAM (reaching to grab her hand): Thank you. Let us talk about…

ANGELA (to the doctor): Where are the police?

DR: Did you call the police?

ANGELA: No, no! Were we supposed to? (laughs hysterically) Wait a minute! Did we forget to do that? We were so focused on getting Ezra here, on him not dying, that we forgot to call the police! (pulls herself upright and focuses on the Dr. again) But don’t YOU call the police, when someone comes in with a gunshot wound? Isn’t that, I don’t know, standard practice?

DR: We were given information that a security firm and licensed responder was on site and would be reporting through their channels.

ANGELA (sputtering): A wha? You mean, Roman? What is…?

DR: Also. (putting away iPad) WE were focused on treating your son. (rises)

ANGELA (shrinking): I’m sorry.

DR (pats her shoulder): You’re fine. I’m sorry this is so hard.

(To their right, Beth enters the chapel and lights a candle. The little room flares into view. She then sits in a pew and bows her head.)

DR: I’ll leave you to talk. Let me know what you decide.

(Dr. Goodman exits)

ANGELA: So we need to decide whether to have our son’s gut ripped open so doctors can take out the bullet our daughter’s boyfriend put there — and probably pay out half of our retirement savings to do it. (laughs again) Just another fun Saturday night!

SAM: I think I want to (glances toward Ezra’s room) go talk to Ezra.

ANGELA: You want to ask his opinion about the surgery?

SAM: Kind of. Does that sound crazy?

ANGELA (softly): No. No….You’re the only other person I know who understands how much he knows. Underneath all the…You know.

SAM: This temporary human condition?

ANGELA (smiles): Yeah.

(Sam takes a few steps. Stops.)

SAM: Are you going to come with me?

ANGELA: I don’t think so. (looks at something - her hands? The ceiling? - intently) You go, have a whole conversation with Ezra. Enjoy. It’s a trippy experience. I’ve had it…(counts silently) four times in 29 years. (settles back, almost happily) And they’re some of the best memories of my life.

(Sam looks at her for a solid half-minute, then turns and slowly goes through the door. He can be seen, stage left, approaching Ezra’s bed carefully. Then the two men begin talking animatedly and after a few sentences Sam launches forward to hug Ezra. He backs off, clearly apologizing and asking if he’s hurt him. Then the two begin an animated conversation that continues through the rest of the action.)

ANGELA (looking up): OK, God. Goddess. Yahweh. Whoever you are! (pauses) What the fuck…?

(She gets up and walks toward the chapel. Opens the door to see someone from the back, kneeling.)

ANGELA: Sorry, I…

(Beth turns)

ANGELA: Hey, what are you doing here? I thought you were taking Cherry home. That’s at least an hour round-trip, even at this time of night.

BETH (rising): I took her to our home. It’s about ten minutes from here.

ANGELA: Of course you did.

(pause)

BETH (uncomfortable): I was just in here…

ANGELA: I saw. (Both women sit but they’re diagonal from each other, not side by side.) I wish I could. (Briefly puts her hands together.) Pray.

BETH: Why do you say it that way?

ANGELA: What way?

BETH: Like it’s…childish?

ANGELA (shrugs): Didn’t realize I was. But that’s an accurate description of how I feel. (pause) What were you praying for — or is that a rude question?

BETH: Your son, my son. (looks at Angela) Cherry.

ANGELA: Praying for her to marry your son and give you loads of grandchildren.

BETH: Us.

ANGELA: Excuse me?

BETH: If Cherry and Rome have children, they’ll be our grandchildren. Mine and Theo’s. Yours and…?

ANGELA: Sam’s? (stares) Oh, no. You mean the sperm donor from 25 years ago. Mr. King of the Mountain?

BETH: Cherry’s father.

ANGELA: He left us.

BETH: That wasn’t Cherry’s fault.

ANGELA: It wasn’t mine, either.

BETH: Well… (waits; pulls out a tube of something and rubs lotion on her hands — offers it to Angela who waves it away) Who’s fault was it, then?

ANGELA: His, I’d say. He couldn’t handle Ez… (stares into the distance) He couldn’t cope with our situation.

BETH (brightly): So it’s Ezra’s fault?

ANGELA: God, no. (glances up) No. Their father was weak.

BETH: You were strong.

ANGELA: Someone had to be.

BETH: And you think that’s different from anyone else’s marriage?

ANGELA (stunned, sits up, starts to say something and stops, pauses): That’s the first interesting thing you’ve said.

BETH (high schoolish): I didn’t realize I was being graded.

ANGELA (without shame): Always.

(They sit in silence for a moment, recalibrating.)

ANGELA: I’ll take some of that lotion now.

(Beth passes the tube over and Angela rubs some on, sniffs her hands, takes more, rubs it in thoroughly and passes the lotion back to Beth.)

BETH: I’ve never understood women like you.

ANGELA (snorts): What does that mean? Women like me?

BETH: So….earthy. All about the natural world. But you keep fighting it—Nature. Females stay with their babies. The males leave if they can. They fly around the world; they go kill things and eat them. They go make more babies. They basically do everything except stick around and take care of women and children. This is not new! (getting shrill) It’s every species including ours. But you think because you’re a feminist, biology doesn’t apply to you. Why spend your whole life fighting a basic fact of nature? (slumps back as if she’s exhausted from this exchange) Seriously, accepting it is so much easier — for everyone.

ANGELA: Sam isn’t like that. He sticks.

BETH: Sam’s a Jew.

ANGELA: Yes?

BETH: Jews are different. They’re more…loyal. Less likely to chase around or do, you know, sexual things. It’s cultural.

ANGELA: Oh, sweet Jesus! (looks up) I kind of mean that literally. (takes a breath) Harvey Weinstein? Woody Allen? Jeffrey Epstein? Any of those ring a bell?

BETH (annoyed): OK, fine. But those are famous Jews. Or rich ones at least. I’m talking about the regular Jews.

ANGELA (breathing): The Regular Jews. (tilts her head back) Not a bad band name. They’d make one album then get picked up by Senakot or Metamucil.

BETH (confused): I don’t….

ANGELA: Never mind.

(They sit in silence for a bit, but it’s more comfortable. The candle Beth lit flickers. This single flame mirrors the candles from the first scene.)

ANGELA: Do you think Cherry is happy?

(Beth looks at Angela, wary. She takes off her sweater, showing perfectly gym-toned arms in a sleeveless blouse. She’s emerging as a blazing paradox of sexy yet repressed.)

BETH (just when you think she’s not going to answer): No.

ANGELA: Why?? (this comes out desperate and bleating) We love her. We sent her to a good school. She has a boyfriend who seems crazy about her. A (swallows, looks at Beth) good job.

(Beth remains silent, smoothing her sweater.)

ANGELA: She got everything, Cherry did. She’s beautiful, she’s smart, she’s funny. (again, silence) She’s TALL. (Beth laughs) So what is her problem? What did I do that’s so bad?

Beth: She feels trapped.

ANGELA: Trapped? There’s that word again. But we did everything to give her independence. She could have gone anywhere she wanted for school — it was her choice to stay in town; she chose elementary ed. We told her she could live off campus or on. Sam paid for it all. We’re still paying half her rent.

BETH (sighs before she speaks): That has nothing to do with it. (raises her head to meet Angela’s eyes) Your money has nothing to do with it. Or actually…maybe it does. Maybe she sees it as a bribe. You’re paying her off.

ANGELA: Phffffft. For what?

BETH: For taking over. For being bound — for the rest of her life — to your son.

ANGELA (wheedling): But she’s his only…

BETH: Sibling. Yes. She’s aware. In fact, it’s one of the first things she told us. Rome brought her over for dinner a few months ago. Oh, we loved your daughter right away! But Theo asked her some really basic question about her family, and she spilled out the whole story of Ezra like it was…shameful. Her fault. Like she was warning us that Roman being involved with her would dump this trouble on us.

ANGELA (standing, sputtering): You see? That’s the problem! She’s ashamed of her brother. Ashamed of us for doing the right thing and sticking by him.

BETH (standing to face her; equally forceful): YOU have no choice. Mothers stay, it’s what we do. You got a really tough job and I’m sorry. But it’s no one’s fault. And no one else has to be stuck there with you. Not his father! Not his sister! They’re all free and you’re not, BECAUSE YOU’RE THE MOTHER. (sniffs, pulls herself together) You are so lucky Sam is offering to be bound up in this with you. I wouldn’t be so self-sacrificing. (chortles) And I guarantee you, Theo would head for the hills sooooo fast.

ANGELA: What about SASS? Strength in numbers. Take a hit for the team. Band together to protect the group. All for one! (pumps the air with her arm)

BETH: Mmmmm. Hahaha. It’s a lovely pitch, isn’t it? Schools eat it up. Students love it—makes them feel all heroic and Normandy Beach. But that’s before the gunfire. Once an active shooter appears (magician hands, making something disappear), it’s all out the door. Doesn’t matter if you’re a kid or a cop. Everyone protects themselves. Except…(musing) the odd teacher. Every once in a while you get one who sacrifices themselves, like a mom. I’ve never quite been able to figure that out.

ANGELA: So I’m supposed to sacrifice myself?

BETH: Absolutely. (pauses, almost hissing the next few words) And if I were you, I’d stop complaining and just thank God for Sam (Beth raises her arms above, like an evangelical preacher) every single day.

ANGELA (inaudibly): I do.

BETH (irritable now): Excuse me? I couldn’t hear you.

ANGELA: I said, I do. It’s the only thing I’ve ever thanked God for. Sam.

(In Ezra’s room, in silhouette, Sam is leaning toward the bed and the two suddenly laugh out loud, joyfully. Sam takes Ezra by the shoulders and looks straight into his eyes.)

BETH: Well, good.

(Beth straightens, puts her sweater back on and buttons it, sorting out her clothes and smoothing her hair.)

BETH (glances at her watch): It’s time for me to head home. Cherry will be needing breakfast in a couple hours. I have some of that Pepperidge Farm cinnamon toast she likes.

ANGELA (looking down): So, you think Cherry will be staying with you for a bit?

BETH (sighing): Oh, good lord. Did nothing get through to you? Angela? (tilts her head up and stares at Angela) Let. Her. Go. Am I being clear? You are destroying her, undoing all the good work you and God put into creating that beautiful girl.

(Beth moves out into the aisle.)

BETH: Let one of your children be free and happy. Let her go. That is your job.

(Beth walks out)

ANGELA (sits, slumps, looks at the makeshift altar): So that’s IT? That’s what this come to? I’m supposed to let her go.

(pause)

ANGELA: What am I, the self-sacrificing Virgin Mary? That was not my part! Remember? I played the other one, Mary Magdalene. I had sex with the savior, for Christ’s sake.

(sits, fitful and stares; in Ezra’s room, Sam smooths the blankets and walks to a chair; he and Ezra both put their heads back and sleep)

ANGELA: C’mon, show me a sign. (Does a double take, surprised) Wow! I cannot believe how cliché that sounded, coming out of my own foul mouth. (laughs) As if you, whoever….whatever you are, reach down and guide we stupid, doomed mortals.

(Angela begins to pace, slowly)

ANGELA: OK, let’s just say. Let’s pretend. If you WERE to show me a sign, what would it….

(She stops, draws in a breath)

ANGELA: Oh, I see! (laughs) Oh, yeah, that’s very clever. Who knew you could be so…ironic. (starts walking again) If this were a movie or a play or one of those, you know, sappy shows that Christians watch, SHE would be the sign. Ms. Perky Tits who wants to make my daughter toast. That was it. (shakes her head) So vapid, I almost missed it.

(stands for a moment)

ANGELA: So was she right? Am I supposed to let Cherry go into her happy, brainwashed life?

(waits)

ANGELA (questioning): Was she right?

(waits)

ANGELA (softly): Oh, God, was she right?

(waits, then clears her throat)

ANGELA: Fine! I uncast the spell of motherhood. *Semper Liber*! (mutters) I think that’s right. (then shouts) I’m letting you go. Be free!!

(stands, closes her eyes, opens them)

ANGELA: I mean it! You’re no longer bound. Go live your own life. Have a fucking labradoodle and a chemically-treated lawn for all I care!

(winces, stands, shifts her feet, then turns very slowly toward the door/audience)

ANGELA (gently): Be free, baby girl. (swallows, then goes on) Be happy. Please, be happy. I will love you forever. Be…(her voice breaks) Be free.

CURTAIN