

The Black Book

By: Phil Blechman

Phil@ijbproductions.com

845.234.0915

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Characters:

Axel Cooper - male, early 30's.

Arthur Chase - male, early 30's.

Collin Archer - male, early 20's.

Julie Edwards - female, late 20's - early 30's. Should look similar to Nicole.

Riley Andrews - female, early-mid 30's.

Nicole - female, early 20's. Should look similar to Julie.

Cecilia (C.C.) Archer - female, teens.

Michael Andrews - male, early 20's.

Note: 'Snap' in stage directions is the sound of someone snapping their fingers.

Note: "212" when used as a room number should be pronounced "two-twelve".

Note: The chess game played in C.C.'s cell is the following sequence:

1. e4 e5 // 2. Nf3 Nc6 // 3. Bb5 Nge7 // 4. c3 d6 // 5. d4 Bd7 // 6. O-O // Ng6 // 7. Ng5 h6 // 8. Nf7 Kf7 // 9. Bc4 Ke7 // 10. Qh5 Qe8 // 11. Qg5 hg5 // 12. Bg5#

Note: The play should be performed at a high velocity. These are intelligent characters that can think and speak quickly.

The following is written on a piece of paper with burned edges and placed in every playbill:

Complicated. Confused. Complex.

Uncertain of what you'll do next.

Tension. Pressure. Stress.

Holding so many secrets yet to confess.

As this burden crushes down...

You find yourself asking questions.

Why? When?

When will that moment finally come?

I've been holding out for so long but your feelings won't succumb.

Only one answer.

Time... defines us all.

Whether we slow down or speed ahead...

It's not long before I'm...

~Collin Archer

Lights are down; the theatre is black. We hear voices. (all singing through voiceover).

(singing) I am slowly going crazy... **ARCHER**

(singing) 1... **ARTHUR**

(singing) 2... **ARCHER**

(singing) 3... **ARTHUR**

(singing) 4... **ARCHER**

(singing) 5... **ARTHUR**

(singing) 6... **ARCHER**

(singing) Switch. **AXEL**

(singing) I am slowly going crazy... **ARCHER**

(singing) 1... **ARTHUR**

(singing) 2... **ARCHER**

(singing) 3... **ARTHUR**

(singing) 4... **ARCHER**

(singing) 5... **ARTHUR**

(singing) 6... **ARCHER**

(singing) Switch. **AXEL**

(singing) Slowly am I going crazy... **ARCHER**

(singing) 1... **ARTHUR**

(singing) 2... **ARCHER**

(singing) 3... **ARTHUR**

(singing) 4... **ARCHER**

(singing) 5... **ARTHUR**

(singing) 6... **ARCHER**

Beat.

(v.o.) It's 11:11. **ARCHER**

(v.o.) C.C., what's happened to you? **AXEL**

Snap/Dim over-light hits an oversized white queen chess piece. A young girl (C.C.) emerges from the shadows; wearing a loosed straight-jacket and a dog tag around her neck. She approaches the white queen; turns it to reveal blood smeared across its crown. She tilts her head up at us and smiles.

C.C.

Snap/Blackout on C.C./Dim over-light hits a man (Axel) wearing a black dress shirt with red suspenders; he stands center, facing upstage, holding a recently used shovel. Near him is an over-

It's our little secret.

sized white king chess piece covered in small circular burns; lit by a similar dim over-light. Axel flicks open a lighter with his right hand and lights it. His light fades until only the lighter is lit. He flicks it closed/Snap/Dim light hits an oversized white bishop chess piece. A man (Arthur) stands next to the white bishop facing upstage holding a lighter in his right hand. He turns to face us. He is holding an oversized black bishop chess piece. He sees the white bishop. He sets the black bishop down so that he stands between the bishops. He lights the lighter and touches his upper chest; something is missing. Lights fade out until only the fire from the lighter lights his face.

Across the stage, a lighter is lit by a young man (Archer); unkempt semi-formal attire; loose tie, dress shirt, blazer. Arthur looks towards him and flicks his lighter closed. Archer lights a cigarette and holds a black book. He takes his time, looks at us, and smiles.

ARCHER

(to aud.) I'm an English major. I had a book of poetry published a few years back. But that's about as interesting as it gets.

We hear a school bell sound.

Goddammit! Time for class...just as we were getting to know each other...

Snap/Blackout.

Snap/Lights up on a small college classroom. The blackboard reads, 'Advanced Poetry. Rm 212'. A man stands facing his desk: very professional; sweatervest. He turns to face us.

ARTHUR

(to aud.) Good morning everyone. My name is Arthur Chase. Welcome to advanced poetry!

Hoping to break the ice...awkward.

Alright...I'm new here to United University, so go easy on me.

...

Huh... tough crowd. Well, uh, okay, something about myself, um, I've had a book of poetry recently published titled 'Re: Living'. Get it? Like in regards to living...re:...

...

Okay, well it's a compilation of my best work and it's on your syllabi under suggested reading. So if any of you are interested, that would be...helpful -- Okay, class, let's get this game started...

He reaches for the clipboard on his desk.

Alright, when I call your name, please raise your hand. My memory is a bit shaky so forgive me if it takes some time for me to remember everyone. Alright, Cassell Abrams...

Arthur acknowledges her, marks her present.

Casey Adams...

Arthur acknowledges him, marks him present.

Carson Anto...

Arthur acknowledges her, marks him present.

Collin Archer...

Archer, sitting with the audience, raises his hand.

Collin Archer...

Archer is still raising his hand.

Anyone? Going once...

Archer, intrigued, puts his hand down.

going twice...(puzzled) okay...

Marks him absent.

Snap/Blackout.

Snap/Dim light up on Archer. Smoking, holding a black book.

ARCHER

(to aud.) Confusion. It's so obnoxious. Pure uncertainty.

Beat.

If you're certain that you're living in a state of uncertainty; how are you supposed to know what is and what is not certain? You can't! You cannot... Or can you? I don't know. It's confusing. Confusion. Con-Fusion. Like a combination of everything negative jumbled up into a big fat pile of what the fuck. But I keep coming back to it. Why? Because confusion... is an addiction. An uncontrollable, irrational, desirable addiction. What I hate about addiction, is that with it, is this relentless craving to escape it. Cause addiction is bad, right? Escape addiction. It makes sense. No one wants to be dependent. Confusion creates addiction. Addiction demands answers. Answers define reason. And reason remedies confusion. But the craving... the craving never goes away. Ever. It's always there. Disguised as desire's shadow. Quietly hiding out in the depths of your mind, waiting for the right moment to lash out...

Snap/Flash of light hits C.C. and fades black.

...and it will lash out.

Beat.

The craving can't be ignored. We are confused. And we *need* a reason.

Snap/Blackout.

Snap/Dim light hits C.C. holding two chess pieces: a white pawn and a black pawn. She looks at us; smiles.

Snap/Blackout.

(v.o) (whisper) White moves first.

C.C.

Snap/Lights up. The University Cafe. Arthur sits at a table; writing something metered or rhythmic; a poem, but he can't seem to get it right; crossing out lines and starting again. Axel enters.

Professor Arthur Chase, my man.

AXEL

Axel, hi.

ARTHUR

How we doin' amigo, how's your first day treatin' ya?

AXEL

Rough.

ARTHUR

It'll get better.

AXEL

You look exhausted.

ARTHUR

I haven't been sleeping well.

AXEL

I'm headed for the same problem.

ARTHUR

First days are tough. It'll get easier.

AXEL

I just can't seem to get my head straight.

ARTHUR

Then get your head out of those pages and take in where you are.

AXEL

The cafe?

ARTHUR

You're in a place where people open their mind to new discoveries; to reinvent themselves. What college is meant to be; a time when you discover who you truly are.

AXEL

ARTHUR

You're a glass half full kind of guy.

AXEL

The air is always fresher on the first day, Art. You just gotta clear your head, get your routine down, and focus.

ARTHUR

I once read that life's greatest lessons come from taking a breath and simply noticing.

AXEL

Then take a breath and notice.

ARTHUR

Notice what?

AXEL

Whatever's distracting you.

ARTHUR

But I'm not certain of what's distracting me.

AXEL

After living on this campus the majority of my life, I promise taking your own advice can do you a world of good.

ARTHUR

The majority of your life?

AXEL

Yeah, I went to school here.

ARTHUR

You never wanted to leave?

AXEL

Criminal always returns to the scene of the crime.

ARTHUR

And you became the head of drama this fast?

AXEL

The head? I wish. More like a leg. Which is almost as good, I think. Granted you're dead without a head, but you're in really bad shape without a leg.

Clever.

ARTHUR

It's the fresh first day air.

AXEL

I'll try to start breathing it in.

ARTHUR

Beat.

It's really good to see you again.

AXEL

Yeah, you too.

ARTHUR

Thanks for taking this job by the way. Sorry about the short notice.

AXEL

Anything to help.

ARTHUR

Well, let me know if you need anything, alright?

AXEL

Beat.

Should I be worried if a student skipped class earlier?

ARTHUR

A jumper on the first day?

AXEL

I might be over-analyzing it, but when I was a student here, I never would have done that.

ARTHUR

Wait, you came to U.U. too?

AXEL

Surprise.

ARTHUR

Get outta here. What'd you major in?

AXEL

English.

ARTHUR

AXEL

Of course. To think we went to college together and didn't even know it.

ARTHUR

Crazy right?

AXEL

You're telling me.

ARTHUR

It's unsettling being back, though; reliving old memories. They're blurry, but everywhere on this campus seems to remind me of something.

AXEL

I know exactly what you mean.

ARTHUR

And having this student skip class is making me rather self-conscious.

Beat.

AXEL

You like baseball, Art?

ARTHUR

Mets fan.

AXEL

Get outta here. You bleed the orange and blue?!

ARTHUR

Are there any other colors to bleed?!

AXEL

Arthur Chase! My man! I knew you were the underdog type.

ARTHUR

Piazza was the greatest.

AXEL

Oh my god, the greatest of all time!

ARTHUR

It hurts though.

AXEL

Being a Mets fan?

ARTHUR

Yes!

AXEL

What?! How can you say that?!

ARTHUR

Because! The beginning of every season they look great -- They hit well, their pitching staff is consistent; they stabilize well into mid-season; they even argue on ESPN if the Mets are the best team in baseball; but then they *collapse*! Every year! They win seventy-one of the first hundred games, hopes get raised remarkably high, but then it all crumbles. And each year you think it's going to be different, but *the collapse is inevitable*.

AXEL

Art, fresh first day air, c'mon...

ARTHUR

But it's true!

AXEL

Winning pennants isn't everything.

ARTHUR

It sure would be nice though.

AXEL

You remember when 9/11 happened?

ARTHUR

Not a fan of segues huh?

AXEL

The city was in shambles. Peoples' spirits completely shattered, but when the baseball season picked back up, there was that one moment that changed everything.

ARTHUR

Piazza's home run.

AXEL

Slider, low and away -- Piazza buckles his right knee and cracks the ball over the left field wall; thousands of people in the stands brought to tears -- and Piazza just jogs around the bases like it was any other day at the office. I turned to my dog and I swear to god he smiled at me.

Arthur smiles.

In the midst of the worst tragedy, he created unity. And at that moment, you knew everything was going to be fine.

ARTHUR

I'm not sure what you're getting at, Axel.

AXEL

Everything happens for a reason.

Snap/Blackout.

Snap/Dim light hits Archer; smoking; holding the black book.

ARCHER

(to aud.) I fuckin' hate college. "A time when you discover who you truly are". If stress hasn't consumed your life from pulling all-nighters seven days a week, you're just another asshole in some clique shunning out anyone else who's somewhat different, because it would question your public image. I'm sick of the constant stereotyping cliché fake smile bullshit. A world where everyone acts like somebody different every day. Oh no, I have to act like this around this person because that's what's expected of me. Oh, I want to be viewed like this, so I'm only going to speak to these people. And the whole time, you're bouncing from one clique to another, and another, and another. Emotions start toying with your mind, you start contradicting what you say, second-guessing your actions, and you're constantly searching, and searching, and searching for an outlet to relieve the pressure, to relieve the feelings. But you can't find one. You're afraid of the response. You're afraid of the rejection. You're afraid of being hurt.

He looks at the black book.

You're afraid of hurting somebody else.

Beat. Back to us.

Fear. That's all it is. Those feelings keep straining on you, and straining on you, and straining on you until you...

Snap/Quick dim flash of light finds C.C. and goes black.

But you don't share those feelings. You don't. Because you don't know what will happen next.

Snap/Blackout.

Snap/Lights up on Arthur's classroom. We hear a school bell.

ARTHUR

(to aud.) Umm, before you are dismissed, does anyone have any word on Mr. Collin Archer?

No response.

Anyone? Going once...going twice...alright, thank you everybody, enjoy your afternoon.

Everyone exits. Arthur returns to his desk to collect his things. He stops; picks up a piece of paper with burned edges; slowly sits down; reads to himself. Snap/Dim light up on Archer. He is sitting with the audience; holding the black book.

ARCHER

(to aud.) Please take out your playbills if you would be so kind.

Snap/House lights come up. Archer stands; waits for everyone to pull out the poem inserted in their playbills. As if the audience is following along, he opens the black book and reads.

Complicated. Confused. Complex.
Uncertain of what you'll do next.
Tension. Pressure. Stress.
Holding so many secrets yet to confess.
As this burden crushes down...
You find yourself asking questions.
Why? When?
When will that moment finally come?
I've been holding out for so long but your feelings won't succumb.
Only one answer.
Time... defines us all.
Whether we slow down or speed ahead...
It's not long before I'm...

He closes the black book, shapes his hand to appear like a gun. He holds it up to his temple and 'pulls the trigger'.

Blackout – both house and stage.

We hear him from the dark.

(v.o.) Collin Archer.

Pause.

(v.o.) (singing) Going crazy, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, switch.

Snap/Dim light up on Arthur. He is on his cell phone. We hear a cell phone ringing.

Snap/A separate dim light up on Axel as he answers his cell phone. He is smoking a cigarette.

AXEL

Mr. Met.

ARTHUR

Hey Axel, are you free right now to meet at the cafe?

AXEL

Yeah, everything okay?

ARTHUR

I have a problem I need a second opinion on.

AXEL

Good problem or bad problem?

ARTHUR

I'm hoping you can help me answer that.

Snap/Blackout on Arthur and Axel.

Snap/Dim light hits Archer answering his phone.

ARCHER

Hello?

Snap/Dim light hits a man, broad shouldered, preppy attire.

MICHAEL

What up, stud?

ARCHER

Mike Andrews. My man. What's going on?

MICHAEL

Nothing too much, man. What's this I'm hearing about the Lyric Lounge?

ARCHER

Yeah dude, I'm gonna read my latest. It should be good.

MICHAEL

That's awesome! Congratulations.

ARCHER

Thanks.

MICHAEL

When were you gonna tell me about it?

ARCHER

Apparently news travels faster than I do.

MICHAEL

Dude, The Lyric is a big deal, that's like next level shit.

ARCHER

I know, right? It hasn't really hit me yet.

MICHAEL

Were you going to invite me?

ARCHER

Oh, you don't need an invitation; it's an open thing. You just go.

I'm just saying...

MICHAEL

What are you saying?

ARCHER

That's fucked up, man. I want to be there.

MICHAEL

Then be there.

ARCHER

Why didn't you invite me?

MICHAEL

Because you don't need an invitation.

ARCHER

Do you not want me there?

MICHAEL

Did I say that?

ARCHER

It seems like you don't want me there.

MICHAEL

It seems like you're seeing a problem where there isn't one.

ARCHER

I don't want to miss it.

MICHAEL

Good, I don't want you to miss it.

ARCHER

Good, cause you know I wouldn't.

MICHAEL

Good, then don't.

ARCHER

Good.

MICHAEL

Great. **ARCHER**
Beat.

Is it cool if Nicole comes? **MICHAEL**

If Nicole comes? **ARCHER**

Yeah. **MICHAEL**

If Nicole comes where? **ARCHER**

To the Lyric. **MICHAEL**
Pause.

Bro? **ARCHER**

Yeah? **MICHAEL**

Is it cool if I bring Nicole? **ARCHER**

She already told me she was going to be there. **MICHAEL**

Sweet. Alright, we'll see you there then. **ARCHER**

Wait. **MICHAEL**

Yah. **MICHAEL**
Beat.

ARCHER
Sorry I didn't mention the Lyric. I just wanted to test out my poem before we put it to music. I was struggling over this one and I don't know if it's ready.

MICHAEL

It's all good, bro. My B for going aggro on you. I'll get a feel for it when you read. What's it about?

ARCHER

Are you and Nicole going as a date?

MICHAEL

I'm not totally sure. But I'm hoping.

ARCHER

You're hoping it's a date.

MICHAEL

I don't know yet. But I think so.

ARCHER

You think so like yes, or you think so like you're not sure if you do or not?

MICHAEL

We're seeing where things go.

ARCHER

What happened to Hannah? Or Meghan? Or Lisa?

MICHAEL

What about them?

ARCHER

Are you seeing any of them?

MICHAEL

I'm not-not seeing them.

ARCHER

So you are seeing them.

MICHAEL

I mean I'm seeing them but I'm not *seeing* them.

ARCHER

But you and Nicole are back together.

MICHAEL

No. I mean almost. Shit, fuck dude, I don't know, we're getting there, it's...

ARCHER

Why try it again?

MICHAEL

Why are you being so uptight about it?

ARCHER

Uptight? Dude, I'm just looking out for you. After what happened last time and the time before that, it is really a smart thing to do?

MICHAEL

I don't know, dude, it's like...she's...what can I say, man? It feels like we're...

ARCHER

Still a coup...

MICHAEL

Soul mates.

Beat. Michael realizing what he just said.

ARCHER

Right.

MICHAEL

Uh, congrats again on the Lyric, man. Later.

Michael hangs up/Snap/Blackout on Michael.

ARCHER

Soul mates...

Archer closes his phone/Snap/Blackout on Archer.

Snap/Dim light finds C.C. petting the oversized black knight chess piece.

Snap/Lights up. The University Cafe. Arthur sits at a table reading over Archer's poem. Axel enters.

AXEL

Hey Art.

ARTHUR

Axel, hey, thanks for coming. Sorry about the short notice.

AXEL

No no no, not at all. Talk to me. What's the story?

ARTHUR

Do you remember that student I told you about? The one who's been skipping.

AXEL

Yeah, the jumper.

ARTHUR

In class today, he wasn't there, but this was.

He hands Axel Archer's poem.

It's very bizarre. He never stepped into the room, but somehow left this on my desk.

AXEL

Collin Archer.

ARTHUR

(referring to the poem) Heavy words, huh?

AXEL

Do you have any idea what he means?

ARTHUR

No. It's too ambiguous.

AXEL

It's a cry for help.

ARTHUR

Think so?

AXEL

It's gotta be. "your feelings won't succumb"...

ARTHUR

Whose feelings?

AXEL

Probably a family problem or something. Mommy and daddy issues.

ARTHUR

But he left the poem unfinished. He could be referring to anybody.

AXEL

Another drama queen; not hugged enough.

ARTHUR

You don't skip two classes and then leave your professor this kind of poem unless you've got some serious issues you need to sort out.

AXEL

Like social issues? Self-loathing validation issues? What?

ARTHUR

I'm asking you.

Beat.

AXEL

Let me take this to Jules.

ARTHUR

Jules?

AXEL

Julie Edwards. U.U.'s psychologist. Maybe she'd know what to make of it.

ARTHUR

If you think it's a good idea.

AXEL

Can't hurt to get a third opinion.

Snap/Blackout.

Snap/Dim light hits Archer; smoking; holding the black book.

ARCHER

(to aud.) Mommy and Daddy issues?! Validation problems?! Are you fucking kidding me?! See, this is what I'm talking about! They are unbelievably quick to judge me based on *one* poem. Arthur doesn't even know me yet! He only knows *of* me, yet Axel deflects it making me look nuts!...or socially awkward.

Beat.

In the grand scheme of things, *everyone* is insane. We just haven't come to terms with it yet. Self-loathing validation; gimme a fucking break!

Snap/Blackout.

Snap/Two separate dim lights hit Michael and Nicole; cute, slim build. Both are on their cell phones.

MICHAEL

I didn't!

NICOLE

You did! You ignored my existence all night!

MICHAEL

C'mon.

NICOLE

I don't understand why you would completely ignore your girlfriend!

MICHAEL

Nicole, I have no idea what you're talking about.

NICOLE

That doesn't feel good, Michael! To not matter...

MICHAEL

Would you stop! Everyone was at the party. We were together all night.

NICOLE

I left because I felt out of place at my own party.

MICHAEL

I thought you said you weren't feeling good.

NICOLE

Yes! Being ignored doesn't feel good!

MICHAEL

Nicole, if I were ignoring you, why would I be calling right now?

NICOLE

Why do you hate being seen with me?

MICHAEL

That's not...

NICOLE

I can feel it when you pull your hand away when we're around other people.

MICHAEL

Is that what this is about?

NICOLE

I'm not okay with that Michael.

MICHAEL

Not okay with what? I didn't do anything.

NICOLE

I'm not okay with my boyfriend making me feel repulsive.

MICHAEL

Nicole, you're being dramatic. I needed my hand; I wasn't pulling away from you.

NICOLE

Do you want to be with other girls?

MICHAEL

Are you kidding me?!

NICOLE

Just tell me. Instead of making me feel like I'm worthless.

MICHAEL

Nicole, stop being paranoid! I haven't done anything wrong! You're accusing me over nothing!

NICOLE

Have you?

MICHAEL

Have I what?!

NICOLE

Have you been with anyone else?

Beat.

MICHAEL

You're seriously asking me that?

NICOLE

Mike...

MICHAEL

I have not been with anyone else, where did you hear that?

NICOLE

Every time you do this is like you're reopening a wound.

MICHAEL

Goddammit, Nicole, would you fucking stop!!! I haven't done anything wrong!!! Fuck!

Beat. Nicole closes her phone. Nicole's light fades dimmer.

Fuck, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to yell at you like that. Can I just come see you, please? Nicole. Nicole? Fuck...

Tries calling her back.

C'mon, pick up the phone...

Nicole sees the call and does not answer. Michael taps the phone against his hand. Beat.

(realizing) Axel...

Snap/Blackout on Michael.

Lights up. U.U. Psychologist's office. We see a woman sitting at her desk handling paperwork. Axel leans his head through the open door.

AXEL

Knock, knock.

JULIE

Oh, look who's back.

Axel enters.

AXEL

The proper response is "who's there".

JULIE

Did you fall off the stage again?

AXEL

You never let me forget that.

JULIE

No, I don't. Because that, my theatrical friend, was priceless.

AXEL

Yeah, so was the concussion.

JULIE

I'm sure.

AXEL

It was close to being a concussion.

JULIE

And a motorcycle is close to being a wheelchair.

AXEL

Oh, that wheelchair was awful.

JULIE

I agree. Someone who actually needed that wheelchair could have probably made better use of it.

AXEL

Am I interrupting something?

JULIE

You entered without knocking.

AXEL

Anything interesting?

JULIE

Nothing but college students unable to deal with their insecurities. What else is new?

AXEL

I brought something I think you might like.

JULIE

What's that?

AXEL

Me.

JULIE

Try again.

Axel hands her Archer's poem.

What's this?

AXEL

A poem.

JULIE

Another love poem?

AXEL

You never let me forget that.

JULIE

It was really cute.

AXEL

You hated it.

JULIE

Hate is a strong word.

AXEL

It's fine, you hated it. I'm not worried about it. You shouldn't worry about it cause I'm not worried about it.

JULIE

You seem worried about it.

AXEL

I'm not worried about it.

JULIE

Good.

Beat.

AXEL

Should I be worried about it?

JULIE

No.

AXEL

Good, I'm not worried about it.

JULIE

Good.

AXEL

Good. ...Great.

She opens it and reads.

JULIE

Collin Archer?

AXEL

Yeah. Kid in my buddy's poetry class who's way off his cycle; jumping classes and what not, but left this poem. Super creepy if you ask me.

JULIE

Is this the only one?

AXEL

As far as I know. Arthur, the kid's teacher, said that he might have some social issues. And when I think of social issues, I think of you.

Cute. **JULIE**

Yes you are. **AXEL**

No points. Do you know where I can find him? **JULIE**

Arthur? **AXEL**

No Collin. **JULIE**

Apparently not in class. **AXEL**

I'll search his file. **JULIE**

Mind if I join? **AXEL**

It's confidential. **JULIE**

Beat.

Does it get lonely? -- not being able to share secrets? **AXEL**

Beat.

I find knowing the secrets outweighs the temptation to share them. **JULIE**

Ever search my file? **AXEL**

Worried? **JULIE**

Nope. **AXEL**

You asking the question leads me to believe otherwise. **JULIE**

AXEL
Well, you might find something interesting in there.

JULIE
Like what?

AXEL
Like an invitation to dinner.

JULIE
That was good.

AXEL
Good enough to have dinner with me?

Beat.

JULIE
I can't date someone I work with.

AXEL
Can't or don't want to?

JULIE
It's irresponsible.

AXEL
It's just dinner, Jules.

JULIE
There has to be a line between work and play.

AXEL
You've never wanted to cross that line?

JULIE
Axel...

AXEL
Jules, would you please stop trying to date me! I don't want my personal life to interfere with my work. Thank you.

JULIE
I'm sorry. I'm just...can't.

Beat.

Can you at least tell me his name? **AXEL**

Who? **JULIE**

The guy you dated at your last job. **AXEL**
Beat.

What are you talking about? **JULIE**

Can I guess? **AXEL**

No. **JULIE**

One guess. **AXEL**

No. **JULIE**

Mike? **AXEL**

Stop! **JULIE**
Beat.

Sorry. **AXEL**
Beat.

Didn't mean to press. *Beat.*

I just want you to know... *He moves next to her.*

I'm not like other guys... *He leans closer to her.*

I make the workplace more fun... *The look at each other, they are close. Beat. Axel leans in. Julie turns away. Axel attempts to recover.*

This is a really... really nice desk.

Yup. **JULIE**

Really solid framework on this thing. **AXEL**

Uh huh. **JULIE**

Craftsmanship is just...mmm. **AXEL**

Okay. *Beat.*

Hey, don't worry about checking the kid's file. He'll show up on his own soon. *Beat.*

How do you know that? **JULIE**

Kid leaves a twisted poem for the professor whose class he's skipping; he's looking for attention. He'll show up. Thank you for your help though. And I'll let you know about your dinner offer. **AXEL**

You are really persistent. **JULIE**

I'd say I'm tough to understand. **AXEL**

Oh, you're the mysterious type. **JULIE**

I heard the mysterious type is your type. **AXEL**

Nice try. **JULIE**

I don't know, you turned away. **AXEL**

Beat.

Look, it's not that... **JULIE**

AXEL

Hey, I get it. I mean, I don't get it, but I get it.

JULIE

Always one step ahead aren't you?

AXEL

It's a complicated thing I do.

JULIE

Or compensating for something.

AXEL

Whoa Jules, I don't have to compensate for anything...

JULIE

Oh really?

AXEL

Look Miss 'all of a sudden I'm gonna be super flirtatious', what you see is what you get. And what you see is off limits.

JULIE

Oh all of a sudden you're off the table huh?

AXEL

You just don't understand me, Jules. I'm more than my looks.

JULIE

Well, I guess I'll have to figure you out then.

AXEL

As long as it won't make you come on to me. Cause I don't date colleagues...as you know.

JULIE

Me neither.

AXEL

I didn't realize we had so much in common...

Axel reaches for a pen and pad on Julie's desk.

This is Arthur Chase's cell number. If you figure out anything at all on this kid, give him a call to ease his nerves, would ya?

They are once again close. Riley enters holding papers.

RILEY

Hey Julie, whoa, sorry, did not mean to interrupt something.
Julie steps away from Axel.

JULIE

No, Riley, you're fine. C'mon in. What's up?

RILEY

Sorry. Axel, please don't hate me. Real quick, I'm adjusting my lecture schedule and wanted to give you the heads up. Just in case anyone from my class today comes to talk to you.
She hands Julie an updated class schedule.

JULIE

Oh sure, no problem.

AXEL

Hey Rye.

RILEY

Hey Axel. You good?

AXEL

Yeah I'm good. Almost the 14th, are you good?

RILEY

Yeah, I'm good.

AXEL

Good. Let me know if you want to talk about it.

RILEY

You say that every year.

AXEL

I figure eventually you'll need to.

Riley nods. Beat. She turns to Julie.

RILEY

Thanks Julie.

Riley exits.

JULIE

Did something happen on Valentine's day?

Snap/Blackout.

Snap/Dim light hits Archer; smoking; holding the black book. He takes his time, blows some smoke rings then looks at us.

ARCHER

(to aud.) If you haven't been able to tell yet... I like to smoke. So here's what's going on right now! I leave one simple poem and people freak the fuck out. You know how much fun it is to string people along? So much fun. Tons of fun. *(makes a gesture)* This much fun! Cause it's not that they don't understand the poem, they just aren't letting themselves understand the poem. Which is really annoying. But Arthur can't let it die; he's got the craving. Which is fantastic! How fantastic? *(makes a gesture)* This fantastic! Because I know where he stands. *(points to the palm of his hand)* Right here. Just hanging out. Being all Arthur-like and what not; new and naive. Waiting for me to give him something else to tag on to. Power seat, people! Who's in it? This guy. -- Feels good. Feels really good.

Beat.

I'm also starting to like our relationship a lot. You all sitting in chairs, watching and stuff. It's like I could say anything right now and you'd actually listen to it.

Beat.

Feels weird. -- Feels really weird.

Snap/Blackout.

Snap/Lights up on Arthur's classroom.

ARTHUR

(to aud.) Attention everyone! Does anyone know the whereabouts of Mr. Collin Archer? I've received a note from him recently, but am uncertain of where to find him. Anyone? Going once...

ARCHER

(sitting with the aud.) (to aud.) Nobody knows who I am?

ARTHUR

Going twice...

ARCHER

Wait, seriously, you don't know who I am?

ARTHUR

Alright everyone, class dismissed!

Archer remains seated. Arthur moves to sit back down at his desk; frustrated; starts writing.

ARCHER

Oooo, a slight temper problem. This should be interesting...

Pause.

Why did you dismiss class?

Arthur looks up; surprised to see someone still in the room.

ARTHUR

...Mr. Collin Archer?

ARCHER

No. Archer! Just Archer!

Arthur moves in front of his desk.

ARTHUR

Nice to finally meet you.

ARCHER

Charmed.

ARTHUR

Why have you been skipping class, Mr. Archer?

ARCHER

I haven't.

ARTHUR

This is the first time I've seen you.

ARCHER

No, Professor Chase, I've sat here for every class you've taught so far.

ARTHUR

And I never saw you?

ARCHER

You didn't choose to see me.

ARTHUR

"I didn't choose to see you." I've never heard that one before.

ARCHER

You don't like my poem. Why?

ARTHUR

How did you leave it on my desk?

ARCHER

Because there is *a lot* behind that poem.

ARTHUR

What do you mean?

ARCHER

Why are you getting in the way? Stringing this out is unnecessary.

ARTHUR

Mr. Arch...

ARCHER

(cutting him off) You know as well as I do what that poem means, Arthur! Why are you refusing to accept it!

ARTHUR

Accept what?! You saying it doesn't make it true!

ARCHER

I put my heart and soul into that poem. I give it to somebody who I *know* I can trust, but what do you do? You dump it back off to Axel to give to some look-a-like shrink?! She is a lie! She is not her! I gave the poem to *you* for a reason. So *we* could work together. So *we* could end this *together*. *(pointing to his head)* I'm not the only one in here who needs the fucking therapy!

ARTHUR

Mr. Archer, calm down, I don't know what you are trying to say through your poem, but I'm sure if you explain it to me...

ARCHER

I thought if I left you the poem, it would remind you.

ARTHUR

Remind me of what?

Snap/Dim light hits C.C. looking on. Archer becomes paranoid.

ARCHER

What move are you trying to make?

ARTHUR

I'm not trying to do anything, I just want to understand.

ARCHER

No, no, no! This isn't right!

Archer opens the black book and reads/flips frantically through pages.

This isn't the right sequence! It's supposed to remind you! Why didn't it remind you?

Remind me of what?!

ARTHUR

Stop.

ARCHER

Mr. Archer, talk to me, please!

ARTHUR

Stop!

ARCHER

Mr. Archer!

ARTHUR

A cell phone rings/Lights shift to a lone spot on Arthur. He touches his head as if fighting off a headache; takes a moment regain composure. The phone continues to ring. He answers it.

Hello?

Snap/Light up on Julie.

Professor Chase?

JULIE

Yes...

ARTHUR

Arthur rubs his eyes; sleep deprived.

Hi, Julie Edwards.

JULIE

Oh yes, Axel was going to talk to you about the poem.

ARTHUR

That's why I'm calling. I feel this poem is a bit more serious than it seems.

JULIE

How so?

ARTHUR

There are trends in it that lead me to believe it's a possible suicide note.

JULIE

A suicide note?

ARTHUR

JULIE

I would like to discuss it with you in person if that's possible.

Pause.

Professor Chase?

ARTHUR

No, Arthur! Just Arthur!

Beat.

(catching himself; headache) I'm sorry. That was rude.

JULIE

It's fine.

ARTHUR

I'm sorry. I haven't been sleeping well since that poem. I didn't realize it was that serious.

JULIE

Can you meet me in my office? It's in the main building.

ARTHUR

Yes, certainly. I'll be there as soon as possible. Thank you.

Snap/Blackout on Julie.

Lights shift back to the classroom. Arthur sees Archer sitting, writing in the black book. Arthur abruptly stops.

ARCHER

My poem's been keeping you up?

ARTHUR

You're still here.

ARCHER

You're the one who's new. I've always been here.

ARTHUR

That's bad?

ARCHER

I'm still determining that.

ARTHUR

Based on what?

ARCHER

Do not talk to her about me.

ARTHUR

You're out of line, Mr. Archer.

ARCHER

You're out of line, Chase!

ARTHUR

You don't show up to class for days, eavesdrop on me, bark orders, and I'm supposed to simply roll over?!

ARCHER

(as if speaking about a different topic) You really have no idea do you?

ARTHUR

Idea about what?

Beat.

ARCHER

Psychologist thinks I'm going to kill myself.

ARTHUR

Are you?

ARCHER

What does it matter to you?

ARTHUR

It's my responsibility to make sure you're safe.

ARCHER

Is it?

ARTHUR

It is.

ARCHER

You're not my parents.

ARTHUR

They aren't worried about you?

ARCHER

They're dead.

Beat.

I apologize.

ARTHUR

As if you didn't know.

ARCHER

Smoke?

Archer pulls out a cigarette.

I don't smoke.

ARTHUR

(amused) Of course you don't.

ARCHER

Mom died from lung cancer when I was thirteen.

Lights the cigarette.

And your father?

ARTHUR

Guess.

ARCHER

Overdose.

Beat.

Poetic really. He didn't handle her death too well, and there just wasn't enough to numb it.

Beat.

Sound familiar?

Beat.

When?

ARTHUR

Four months after mom died. Left just me, my sister, ...and my dog.

ARCHER

Where is she?

ARTHUR

C.C.? In a mental institution.

ARCHER

Can you still see her?

ARTHUR

If I want to.

ARCHER

You don't want to?

ARTHUR

It's complicated.

ARCHER

What about your dog?

ARTHUR

Archer looks directly at Arthur.

Yeah. Mr. Artie.

ARCHER

Beat.

You know, it's unbelievable that we're talking like this.

ARTHUR

Why's that?

Beat.

ARCHER

I buried him under thirty-six shovels of dirt last week.

ARTHUR

I'm sorry to hear that.

ARCHER

Yeah, me too. I had to switch grips every six shovels; I just couldn't keep my hands still.

Beat.

I sent C.C. his dog tag.

ARTHUR

Has she tried reaching out to you?

Beat.

ARCHER

You're a questions guy. I'll have to remember that.

Archer gets up to leave.

ARTHUR

Are you referring to a lover?

Archer stops; tense. Snap/dim light finds C.C.; holding the black knight chess piece.

ARCHER

A lover?

ARTHUR

In your poem. "...your feelings won't succumb." Are you referring to a lover; a girlfriend?

Archer turns and grabs Arthur by the throat.

Snap/Blackout.

We hear singing.

ARCHER

(v.o.) (singing) I am slowly going crazy, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, switch. I am slowly going crazy 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, switch.

Snap/Lights up. A bedroom; feminine. Archer is in the room setting up a chess board; he is on the side of the black pieces. Arthur; out of the scene; is watching. After some time, Nicole walks in.

NICOLE

Sorry about that.

ARCHER

You okay?

NICOLE

Yeah, I'm fine. Just a little drunk.

Nicole reaches for the box of tissues on her bedside table but it's empty.

Fuck.

Archer wipes a tear off her cheek.

ARCHER

Hold on.

Archer darts out of the room. Nicole fiddles with her phone. She looks at the chess board, smiles, and makes a move; pawn to E4. Archer comes back in with a roll of toilet paper. Nicole laughs.

I get it's not really tissues but...

NICOLE

Thanks. I feel like shit so this is fitting.

She blows her nose. Archer sits back on the other side of the chess board and sees she's made a move.

Thanks for walking me back.

ARCHER

Of course. That cab would've made you feel sick.

He moves pawn to E5.

Did you know if we only make one move each, there are four hundred different combinations of what the board could look like?

NICOLE

Crazy.

Nicole fiddles with her phone.

ARCHER

Do you want to talk about it?

NICOLE

(Seeing on her phone) It's 11:11, make a wish.

Nicole and Archer close their eyes to make a wish.

He opens his first.

Pause.

She opens hers.

ARCHER

Okay. Well, you know talking is one of my favorite things to do, so if you want to, I'm down.

Beat.

NICOLE

I just don't get it.

ARCHER

Why I love talking?

NICOLE

Why he does this.

ARCHER

Mike?

NICOLE

Michael.

ARCHER

Why he does what?

NICOLE

Why sometimes he's a perfect gentleman and other times he's a fucking asshole.

ARCHER

He's always been a back and forth kind of guy. Ask him what his favorite flavor of anything is and it changes every time.

NICOLE

But it makes no sense to throw me a party, invite all of the people from the world, and then ignore me.

ARCHER

What'd he do?

NICOLE

After you bought me that drink at the bar, I'm sitting next to him in the corner booth and tried holding his hand. That's all. Just hold his hand and he pulls away.

ARCHER

He was never one for PDA.

NICOLE

I wasn't trying to jump in his mouth, I just wanted to hold his hand. People hold hands in church. We're in a bar. He's completely different when other people are around and it's stupid.

ARCHER

Yeah there's definitely a difference between when he and I hang out vs when the three of us are together.

NICOLE

Do you really think he's seeing other girls?

ARCHER

I wouldn't be surprised if he was, Mike's a flirt. But I honestly don't know.

NICOLE

The thought of him with other girls is nauseating.

ARCHER

Why don't you try dating someone else? I mean if this sort of thing keeps...

Nicole's phone rings.

NICOLE

One sec. It's him.

She moves to exit. Archer gets up to stop her.

ARCHER

You shouldn't answer it! We're all drunk. Nothing is getting solved tonight; it'll just make things worse.

Archer takes Nicole's phone and hangs up.

NICOLE

You think he's a shit-head don't you?

ARCHER

You two are my closest friends and I don't want you to get hurt again. And unless history's gonna suddenly stop repeating itself, I don't know what keeps drawing you back to him.

NICOLE

You know what, you're right. Fuck him. Fuck him and his stupid face. My move.

She moves her Knight to F3.

ARCHER

You're picking up the moves fast.

NICOLE

Cause I got skills, brah.

ARCHER

For a rookie.

NICOLE

I didn't move my rook, I moved my knight. Ha! I'm funny tonight.

ARCHER

So funny.

NICOLE

Don't you be a sassiffrass.

ARCHER

I am not being a sassiffrass.

NICOLE

Such a sassiffrass tonight.

ARCHER

Okay doof troop.

Archer moves his Knight to C6.

You want some water or something?

NICOLE

You know what he did tonight before we went out?

ARCHER

Not - whatever he said he was going to do?

NICOLE

He cooked me dinner.

Visceral reaction from Archer.

ARCHER

Sorry. I just vomited in my mouth a little.

NICOLE

Yeah I definitely threw up when he said he was cooking dinner. But it was ridiculous. Like it was so good I had to reevaluate everything I've ever believed.

She moves her Bishop to C5.

ARCHER

What'd he cook?

NICOLE

Chicken caesar.

ARCHER

Salad?

NICOLE

Stupid.

ARCHER

The dinner he 'cooks' for you is chicken caesar salad?

NICOLE

Riley told him about this "incredible" recipe, and I was like pfft, yeah, okay. But turns out it was actually insane and I was heinously wrong. I admit my faults.

ARCHER

Recipe? What recipe? It's five ingredients you put into a bowl and stir.

NICOLE

It's my favorite though. That says something doesn't it?

ARCHER

No! It says actual nothing except that Mike's sister somehow knows your favorite food is chicken caesar.

NICOLE

I've never had chicken cooked that way before.

ARCHER

You mean turning a knob and placing it on a skillet?

NICOLE

He did more than that, it was so juicy.

ARCHER

I don't understand anything anymore.

NICOLE

You can't blame me for liking a homemade recipe.

ARCHER

Riley tells him how to make salad and that earns him brownie points?

NICOLE

Ugh, I wish he made brownies. Brownies are so sexy.

ARCHER

That is the most disturbing thing you've ever said.

He moves his Knight to E7.

NICOLE

The truth is real. Sorry not sorry.

ARCHER

Who are you? What are these words you're saying?

NICOLE

Yes I get that salad isn't five-star. But it was really nice. Usually he has this sort of reluctance about him, like he's just not sure what he wants, but tonight was different.

ARCHER

Reluctance?

NICOLE

Usually, but this time he was, I don't know, steadier I guess. I liked it. After we were done playing chess...

ARCHER

You were playing chess with him?

NICOLE

Your chess addiction has spread to me, okay, I've accepted it, stop judging me. You would have been so proud; mid-game, I bait him into capturing my queen so I could win on the next move, and he fell for it so hard! It was awesome! I was like uhg! Get some bitch! And I start doing my

happy dance like a baller cause I may or may not have been tipsy, and he walks over, grabs my face, and kisses me.

Beat.

But you're right, I don't want to fall into the same thing that we have before. I'm sick of feeling bad and worrying about what he's doing all the time but maybe he really isn't good at the whole boyfriend-girlfriend thing...

ARCHER

That's not fair. Not good at the "boyfriend-girlfriend *thing*"? What are we talking about? Nicole, I know you don't always think so, but you deserve someone who loves you; who truly loves you; and isn't afraid or reluctant about it. I mean, cooking is nice, sure, yes, but still being reluctant after everything? Fuck him. Seriously. You deserve so much better. He's my best friend, I love him to death, really I do, but he doesn't appreciate you enough. He just doesn't. Okay? He doesn't.

Beat.

Here. I want you to have this.

He hands her the black book.

NICOLE

Your black book?

ARCHER

Yeah. I wanted to get you something special for your birthday, and I care about that book more than anything. So I want the person I care about most to have it.

She looks into his eyes, then back at the book. She gently moves one hand across the cover.

Snap/Blackout.

We hear singing.

ARCHER

(v.o.) (singing) I am slowly going crazy, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, switch. I am slowly going crazy 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, switch.

Snap/Lights up on Archer who has Arthur by the throat. He releases Arthur and steps back. They face each other for a moment. Archer exits. Arthur makes eye contact with C.C.

Snap/Blackout.

Snap/Lights up on Julie's Office. Julie is focused on Archer's poem. Her phone rings, but she silences it. A voicemail tone goes off; she silences that as well. After a few moments, Axel leans his head in.

AXEL

Knock-knock.

Julie smiles.

JULIE

I really wish my job had as much free-time as yours.

Axel enters; holding two chicken caesar salads and a container of brownies.

AXEL

Well, at least both of our jobs have lunch breaks.

He places the caesar salads and the container on her desk.

JULIE

This is not a date!

AXEL

Whoa! Why would you think this is a date? There's no candles, no moonlight, no...

JULIE

Axel!

AXEL

Jules!

JULIE

I thought we talked about this.

AXEL

Yes. Right. We did. I remember. ...This is lunch.

JULIE

Just lunch.

AXEL

Yes.

Beat.

Stressed?

JULIE

No.

He sits.

AXEL

Of course not, why would I think that?

Julie pushes the food away.

Sheesh, that kid's poem must have been daggers to wind you up this tight.

JULIE

He's like any other student. It's all insecurities.

AXEL

You think it's that simple?

JULIE

"your feelings won't succumb".

AXEL

Favorite line?

JULIE

Love interest.

AXEL

Love interest?

JULIE

Yes. He's talking about a love interest isn't he?

AXEL

Are you unsure?

JULIE

Why would someone write this kind of poem?

AXEL

You really aren't gonna let me forget I wrote you a love poem one time are you?

JULIE

Random inspiration?

AXEL

No. Yes. I wrote it out of a sudden bout of passion. So what?

JULIE

You wrote it because you felt insecure.

AXEL

That's a pretty fast conclusion to jump to don't you think?

JULIE

Fast? I ask why anyone writes a poem like this and you immediately assume I'm talking about the one that you wrote me. Which although you don't believe me, I did think was very nice.

AXEL

I'm not worried about it.

JULIE

Not to say this student's poem isn't serious, but it all files in under the same category I see students dealing with every day.

AXEL

Insecurities?

JULIE

Romantic insecurities. Girls have breakdowns over their ex-boyfriends all the time.

AXEL

They want what they can't have.

JULIE

No, they've already had it. Boys come into my office and collapse over the same issue. Girlfriend dumps them; they don't understand why, and they breakdown.

AXEL

Hurts to not feel desired.

JULIE

On who's part?

AXEL

The guy who just got dumped.

JULIE

Wrong. The girl who dumped him.

AXEL

What? No. Then why would she dump him at all.

JULIE

Someone's flaws are what make them attractive right?

AXEL

I think there's more to it than that.

JULIE

Being physically attracted spikes your initial interest, but it's the unique flaws that you fall in love with, right?

AXEL

So?

JULIE

So?! The girl hates her flaws.

AXEL

What are you talking about, everyone hates their flaws.

JULIE

Yes, but if the boy loves the girl for her flaws, he loves something she hates.

AXEL

Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. Are you saying that a girl who's insecure about her flaws can't love the guy who's in love with her because that means he's in love with the flaws that she hates?

JULIE

And therefore she hates him for loving her.

AXEL

What are these words you're saying?

JULIE

Girls with those kinds of insecurities don't think they deserve to be treated as well as they are by the boys in love with them.

AXEL

That's insane!

JULIE

It's my theory!

AXEL

So the guy loses the girl if he falls in love with her?

JULIE

She's insecure. So in her mind, she's thinking, 'why does this guy love me? He must be nuts.'

AXEL

It's a paradox.

JULIE

Yes!

AXEL

Your theory is a paradox.

No, the paradox is my theory. **JULIE**

You're crazy. **AXEL**

I'm a psychologist. **JULIE**

Beat.

Well, I think you're flawless. **AXEL**

We all have flaws... nice try though. **JULIE**

Beat.

Thank you for lunch. **AXEL**

Cooked them myself. **JULIE**

You cooked salad? **AXEL**

Hey! This chicken didn't just suddenly become grilled to juicy crisp perfection. **JULIE**

Look at you Mr. Chef. **AXEL**

I hear chefs are your type. **JULIE**

A lot of rumors these days. **AXEL**

I also made brownies for dessert. *Beat.*

So, how's Mr. Artie? **JULIE**

Beg your pardon? **AXEL**

Your dog, Mr. Artie?

JULIE

Yeah... Yeah, I buried him last week.

AXEL

Oh no, I'm so sorry.

JULIE

How'd you know about him?

AXEL

Checked your file...

JULIE

Snap/Archer appears; he goes unnoticed as if out of the scene. He is holding the black book and is pissed.

You did?

AXEL

Axel gets up.

Don't worry, I only looked at the general information. I thought it was cute that you listed your dog.

JULIE

Did you look at the kid's file?

AXEL

Yes, but it was very strange. There was a lot of required information missing.

JULIE

Archer is restless. Axel tenses.

Huh.

AXEL

It's very odd.

JULIE

Sounds like it.

AXEL

Arthur is meeting with me in a bit to discuss it.

JULIE

AXEL

Why would you do that?

JULIE

Do what?

AXEL

You actually looked at my file? Without asking if that'd be okay with me?

JULIE

I only looked at the basic...

AXEL

I don't care if you looked at the first page or the entire fucking thing! I don't understand why you did it without talking to me first. I was being playful when we joked about it. I didn't say it was okay to actually do it!

JULIE

I'm sorry; I didn't think it would be...

Axel throws his chair.

AXEL

What the fuck could you have thought?! You're always pressing me away and pressing me away, and all of a sudden you have a change of heart?! I need a reason, Julie!

JULIE

Axel, it's just me.

AXEL

I need you to never do that again.

JULIE

Why are you so upset?

Axel lunges for Julie's throat.

AXEL

JULIE!

JULIE

Okay!

Pause. Axel looks, for a moment, as if he doesn't know where he is; his hands almost around Julie's neck.

AXEL

I'm sorry.

Axel sees the room; the thrown chair; moves to pick it up and place it back where it originally was.

Are you okay?

Julie holds; stunned.

I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me.

JULIE

I've never seen you like this.

AXEL

I can usually control it.

JULIE

Control what?

AXEL

Nothing. Nothing, don't worry about it.

JULIE

Are you okay?

Archer releases a bit. Axel seems dazed.

AXEL

Yes. Nothing is going on. I don't know where that came from. I buried him last week.

Axel and Archer are both hit with a sharp pain and grab their heads.

JULIE

Axel?

No response. Axel and Archer grab their foreheads.

Axel, what's wrong?

Arthur enters; out of breath. He does not acknowledge Axel, who although still present, seems to be removed from the scene. Archer, not expecting to see Arthur, is once again very alert.

ARTHUR

Miss Edwards?

JULIE

What?

ARTHUR

Arthur Chase.

He drops his bag and pulls out his pad and pen.

JULIE

(confused) What about him?

ARTHUR

Apologies if I skip introductions, we shouldn't waste time. Collin Archer; the poem. Have you found any word on him?

JULIE

Yes... I told you I looked at his file, but information was missing.

ARTHUR

Was there anything useful?

JULIE

Can we talk about what just happened?

ARTHUR

Yes. Sorry -- I'm a little winded. I just...the poem; a suicide note. I take that very seriously. Anything you can tell me would be extremely helpful.

Beat.

JULIE

He's only enrolled in two classes.

ARTHUR

He's not a full time student.

JULIE

No.

ARTHUR

What's the other class?

JULIE

Abnormal psychology.

ARTHUR

Riley's class? Why psychology?

JULIE

Whoever he is talking about in the poem...

ARTHUR

(cutting her off) He's *still* trying to figure out what they were thinking.

JULIE

That's what I was pointing out before. He wants to understand what she was thinking.

ARTHUR

She?

JULIE

Whoever's 'feelings won't succumb'.

ARTHUR

OH.

JULIE

Oh what?

ARTHUR

Well until recently he was skipping class...

Archer and Axel grab their heads; struggling...

JULIE

Yes...

...struggling...

ARTHUR

I mean, he never skipped.

JULIE

I thought you said he'd been skipping.

ARTHUR

He was.

JULIE

Wait, was he or wasn't he?

...struggling...

ARTHUR

(referring to the poem) There's nothing in here about a black book.

JULIE

So?

ARTHUR

I met him. I met him today. He had a black book with him.

JULIE

Why would he write about that in his poem?

ARTHUR

His girlfriend...

JULIE

So you think he is referring to a girlfriend too?

...struggling...

ARTHUR

No, no, not his girlfriend. They were friends. The black book... okay: there's a girl, named Nicole...

JULIE

What does she have to do with a black book?

ARTHUR

You.

We hear the voicemail tone from Julie's phone.

...should check that voicemail.

JULIE

What did he tell you about her?

ARTHUR

You...

JULIE

Me?

Beat.

ARCHER

...should check that voicemail.

Arthur delves into the poem; starts writing in his notebook. Julie reaches for her phone; dials. We hear the voicemail:

ARCHER

(v.o.) Hi Jules. I hope you don't mind me calling you that. This is Collin Archer. You might've heard of me. I know all about you. Can't say I'm a fan, though. Oh shit, did I say that out loud? Woops. Listen closely; Go to room 212 in the English building *right now*. Look in the second drawer from the top of the desk. There will be a lock on the drawer. The combination to the lock is 2-1-2. Go *alone*. Do not tell *anyone* about any of what I just told you, what you find, or that tomorrow, you will be at the Lyric Lounge at eight o'clock *sharp*. If you want me to continue to play nice, don't be late. I'm watching you... K, bye!

Julie closes her phone and rushes back to her desk.

JULIE

I'm sorry, I have to go.

ARTHUR

What? What happened?

JULIE

An emergency came up I have to take care of. But we'll talk again later okay?

She kisses Arthur on the right cheek. Axel and Archer freeze. Dim light separate from the scene comes up on C.C.; agitated. Julie exits.

ARTHUR

Okay...

Archer, with his hand on his right cheek, is focused on Julie. Julie closes the door behind her. Arthur sees Archer.

Archer!

Arthur moves away, thrusting the chair between him and Archer. Archer falls over the chair, dropping the black book.

ARCHER

That's her!

ARTHUR

Who?

ARCHER

That's her! That's Nicole!

ARTHUR

That's Julie.

ARCHER

No! That's Nicole! But she's dead.

ARTHUR

Dead?

ARCHER

Nicole! I saw her die with my own two eyes, but that's her, that's Nicole walking down the fucking hallway!

ARTHUR

Archer, that woman's name is Julie Edwards and she is very much alive.

ARCHER

Where's my black book?

ARTHUR

Archer, you're not making any sense.

ARCHER

Where is my black book?!

ARTHUR

Just calm down!

ARCHER

Where the fuck is my black book?!

He sees it; dives for it; glides his hand across the cover. Arthur kneels to the floor. Archer is the most vulnerable we've ever seen him.

ARTHUR

Archer...

Archer ruffles Arthur's hair.

ARCHER

Hey buddy, what are you doing here?

Arthur treads carefully.

ARTHUR

Where do you think we are, Mr. Archer?

ARCHER

Don't be silly, bud. Where's your tag?

Beat.

ARTHUR

Can you tell me what happened to Nicole?

Beat.

ARCHER

The dream.

ARTHUR

What dream?

Axel pushes against his head. C.C. looks as if she is coming up for air.

Snap/Blackout except for spots that delay on Axel and C.C., then warp to black.

We hear Archer from the darkness.

ARCHER

(singing) (v.o.) I am slowly going crazy 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, switch. I am slowly going crazy 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, switch. Slowly am I going crazy, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, switch.

Snap/Lights up. Nicole's room. Nicole and Archer sit in the same places as before. Nicole glides her hand across the cover.

NICOLE

Your black book?

ARCHER

Yeah. I wanted to get you something special for your birthday, and I care about that book more than anything. So I want the person I care about most to have it.

She looks into his eyes, then back at the book. She extends it back to him.

NICOLE

I can't accept this...

He pushes it back to her.

ARCHER

Happy Birthday.

She opens the black book and sees a picture inside the cover.

NICOLE

Really? Of all the pictures?

Dim light fades up on C.C.; looking over her shoulder.

ARCHER

What, you don't like it?

NICOLE

I look like the cover model of stupid face magazine.

ARCHER

Where do you think I got the picture?

She hits his arm.

Hey!

NICOLE

Rude.

ARCHER

Turn the page.

She does. She pulls up another picture.

I got that one from the cover of most beautiful girl magazine.

NICOLE

I'm gonna throw up.

ARCHER

It's cute!

NICOLE

I don't know, you're in the picture too.

ARCHER

Rude.

NICOLE

Sassifrass.

ARCHER

Doof-troop.

NICOLE

Sassifrass.

Beat.

I love this picture of us.

She kisses him on the right cheek.

Thank you.

ARCHER

Of course.

Archer looks at her as if trying to say something but can't get it out.

NICOLE

What?

ARCHER

Can I tell you something?

Nope.

NICOLE

Beat.

Okay, now you can.

ARCHER

It's out there.

NICOLE

Can you bring it in here?

ARCHER

Funny.

NICOLE

Man, I sure do wish you would tell me something.

ARCHER

I had a dream last night.

NICOLE

Best time to have one.

ARCHER

And you were in it.

NICOLE

Sounds like a good dream.

ARCHER

But you were dead.

NICOLE

I take it back.

ARCHER

No, no, I know that's weird. I do.

NICOLE

It's not weird.

ARCHER

It's not?

NICOLE

No it's definitely weird; you just seem troubled by it. But weird shit happens in dreams all the time.

ARCHER

Yeah, I just haven't been able to get it out of my head, you know?

NICOLE

What happened?

ARCHER

Well, I was looking for you...

NICOLE

Wait, you didn't see me?

ARCHER

No, I couldn't find you.

NICOLE

Then how'd you know I was dead?

ARCHER

I could sense it. I just knew. So I began searching for you. Searching and searching and searching and I kept thinking that I was going to wake up without knowing where you were. My heartbeat hit like a sledgehammer and suddenly I'm at this door that looks like a giant chalkboard on door hinges with your name scribbled all over it in different sizes and angles...so I open the door...and you're lying there; gun in hand, circular burns all over your arms, blood streaming down your face, and I woke up.

NICOLE

Whoa.

ARCHER

Yah.

NICOLE

What do you think it means?

ARCHER

I don't know...But I have an idea. It made me realize that waiting to...

NICOLE

Waiting to what?

ARCHER

I've wanted to ask you something for a long time, but I always seem to wimp out.

NICOLE

Well, don't wimp out.

ARCHER

You're sure?

NICOLE

When you're having dreams where I'm dead behind chalkboard doors? Yes, I'm sure.

ARCHER

Alright. Do you...

NICOLE

What?

ARCHER

Am I at all... a romantic interest to you?

Beat. She kisses him on the right cheek.

NICOLE

I love you as a person. I respect your opinion so much. You are so important to me, and you'll always be in my life. But I would hate to jeopardize what we have.

Archer moves away.

ARCHER

Yeah. I umm...I just...yeah... I always wanted to ask you.

He stumbles over the chess board, scattering the pieces. C.C. is now holding the white queen chess piece with blood smeared across its crown. Archer attempts to place the pieces back on the board, grabs the white queen, and moves away; his back to Nicole.

NICOLE

Well...I'm happy you did.

Archer grabs his head; an odd pain. Nicole, unsure of where they stand with each other, slowly approaches him.

Hey...

ARCHER

(softly) Stop...

She reaches for the black book, then back to Archer.

Can you look at me, please?

NICOLE

(a bit louder) Stop...

ARCHER

She moves towards him; touches his shoulder.

STOP!!!

As if he isn't controlling himself, Archer turns and backhands Nicole across the face.

Snap/Blackout.

We hear singing from the darkness. (all voiceover).

ARCHER

(v.o.) (singing) I am slowly going crazy...

ARTHUR

(singing) 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6...

AXEL

(singing) Switch.

ARCHER

(singing) I am slowly going crazy...

ARTHUR

(singing) 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6...

AXEL

(singing) Switch.

ARCHER

(singing) Slowly am I going crazy...

ARTHUR

(singing) 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6...

C.C.

(v.o.) It's our little secret.

Snap/Lights up on Michael punching Archer across the face; it hurts.

ARCHER

C'mon Mike...

Michael hits him again; it hurts more. Archer falls to the ground.

Ah fuck! Would you stop!

MICHAEL

What did you say to her?!

ARCHER

She's hasn't spoken to me either! I haven't seen her since her birthday!

MICHAEL

You were with her?

ARCHER

Suddenly she matters to you?

MICHAEL

Shut the fuck up!!

Michael kicks Archer in the stomach. Gasping for air; he unclips his belt in attempt to breathe easier.

I don't know if this has to do with the little crush that you have on her or if you're trying to get back at me for something, but you need to stop making me look like a dick cause it's starting to piss me off!

ARCHER

Let's be honest here Mike, you don't really care about her.

MICHAEL

That's horse shit and you know it!

ARCHER

Is it?! When her mom died, she went to you. Not me, not anyone else, you. And you told her to get over it!

MICHAEL

What the fuck are you supposed to say to someone who just lost their mom? It's not like there's a magic word that makes it all better.

Beat.

You of all people should know that. I tried to make her feel better. I just didn't know what to do.

ARCHER

Cheating on her isn't helping.

MICHAEL

I'm not doing anything! Stop trying to create something that doesn't exist!

ARCHER

Stop seeing her.

Michael grabs him by the shirt and lifts him up. Snap/Dim light hits C.C. holding the white knight chess piece, Archer does not seem intimidated anymore.

You look real tough now, don't you?

MICHAEL

My relationship with Nicole is none of your business. So why don't you back the fuck off.

Michael turns to walk away. Once his back is turned, Archer pulls off his belt, rushes towards Michael, and kicks the back of his knee. Michael's leg buckles. Archer wraps the belt around his neck, and pulls tight. Michael struggles.

ARCHER

Finally it's my turn! You have no idea how hard it is to get a word in these days.

Michael is still struggling.

You'd think it'd be easier when you start throwing punches, right?!

Still struggling.

Am I right?!

Michael's body goes limp.

Now, here's what we're going to do Mike. You're going to stop seeing her because I said you're going to stop seeing her. Understand? Do you understand?!

No response.

You're gonna have to speak up Mike, my ears are still ringing from that right cross of yours.

No response. Archer releases the stranglehold on Michael and finds eye contact with C.C. Archer grabs his head; collapses to the ground. He reaches for Michael's hand.

I'm happy we were able to talk about this calmly.

Archer rolls over to Michael; pulls a lighter out of Michael's pocket.

Nicole thinks smoking is disgusting and you just never could kick the habit could you?

Archer pulls off Michael's necklace.

Well, isn't this lovely? The Andrews' family necklace. It's like I'm part of the family now, Mike! How exciting! You've always been a glass half full kind of guy. Made everything seem so simple. Always admired that about you.

Beat.

Now, let's go climb a tree.

Archer drags Michael.

Snap/Blackout.

We hear singing.

ARCHER

(v.o.) (singing) Going crazy, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, switch.

We hear C.C. from the darkness.

C.C.

(v.o.) It's our little secret.

Snap/Lights up on Riley's classroom. Riley is writing on the blackboard. When she's finished, it reads, 'Commit'. Archer is sitting among the students in the classroom. Riley wears a necklace identical to Michael's.

RILEY

(to aud.) Today we're talking about suicide. The clinical definition: The intentional taking of one's own life. My question to you: Is suicide justifiable?

No response.

Do you feel it's selfish? Brave? A combination of the two? Maybe something else entirely?

No response.

Don't be shy. This is a safe room. I'm interested in your opinions.

Archer raises his hand. Riley acknowledges him.

ARCHER

It's an escape from reality; allows you to abandon who you are.

RILEY

So it's an escape?

ARCHER

Yes. It's an escape from pressure.

RILEY

Okay. So relief.

ARCHER

Yes; from guilt.

RILEY

Or responsibility. Think deeper. You can do better than that.

Beat.

The common belief is that severe depression causes a feeling of suffering that leads to sense of hopelessness that the victim doesn't feel they can escape from. Does that sound sufficient?

Beat.

Those of you nodding your heads yes; bullshit. I just said a bunch of generalized words that don't mean anything. What constitutes 'severe' depression? Is the threshold for seemingly 'inescapable suffering' the same for every person? What specifically does 'hopelessness' mean? It's not wrong, but it's sure as hell not right. Could suicide be a message? A form of expression?

Is it moral? Careless? Reckless? What are the most common forms of suicide? -- Fast and painless? Drawn out and excruciating? Does the method one chooses tell us anything? -- Who's fault is it? Is it anyone's fault? Is suicide is more painful for the person committing it or for those who lose the committed?

ARCHER

What do you think?

Beat.

RILEY

I think it's easy to use an answer we don't understand for a problem we don't understand.

Beat.

The expression is "commit suicide". Not "give in to suicide", not "collapse or fold to suicide", not "fall victim to suicide", one "commits suicide". By definition, it's intentional. Suicide is a *decision*.

Beat.

We've all had hard times, traumatic events, difficult circumstances; hell, I would be hard-pressed to believe if anyone in this room hasn't questioned their mortality at some point. But at what moment does a person legitimately decide to end their life?

Beat.

There was a chilling story in the news a decade ago about a young man who got home from school one night. He goes into his front yard with a knife and cuts down the tire swing he and his sister used to play on when they were kids. Holding the tire's rope, he climbs the tree.

Beat

Imagine looking through his eyes; the distance from the ground; how it seems to move further and further away. Suddenly, this tree he's known his whole life is taller than he ever remembered it. He wraps the cut end of the rope around his neck and massages its coarseness against his skin; the texture of the branch under his feet as the ground slips away. His lifeline tethered to this tree; he loses feeling in his hands; his legs; the ground falls further away. His concrete pulse; his shallow breath; he thinks about the people who care about him; those who love him;

Beat.

And he jumps.

Pause.

His sister comes home to her baby brother dangling in the front yard. She climbs the tree and uses the knife to cut get him down.

Beat.

And the only thing she found -- was a note with burned edges --

She pulls out Michael's note; its edges are burned.

pinned to the trunk of the tree that reads, 'Hope I chose the right branch'.

Beat.

So, let me rephrase my question: What compels a person to *murder themselves*?

Snap/Blackout.

Snap/Lights up on Axel's office; spacious. Axel sits in a chair at his desk. Arthur is pacing in diagonals. We join them in the middle of conversation.

AXEL

He assaulted you?!

ARTHUR

He aggressively grabbed me.

AXEL

Are you gonna report him?

ARTHUR

I can't.

AXEL

I don't know, student grabs his professor by the throat while having a breakdown...I'm pretty sure you can.

ARTHUR

It's my responsibility to help him, Axel.

AXEL

He's dangerous, Art! He implied it and now he's proven it. For all we know, he's stalking you; by reporting it, you are helping him.

ARTHUR

He's deeply troubled, Axel. And he asked me personally to help him. If we get police involved he'll take it as a betrayal.

AXEL

What the hell is wrong with him anyway? Other than a slight temper problem.

ARTHUR

I don't know. But I have an idea; before he...aggressively grabbed me, I was able to find out some of his background.

AXEL

Any of it explain why he's being a nut-job?

ARTHUR

He has no stable family; no friends that I'm aware of; a crazed history with what I assume to be his former girlfriend...

AXEL

(cutting him off) Suicidal kid with a bad dating history. That's original.

ARTHUR

He gave her that black book, which he is abnormally obsessed over. I saw it fall out of his view, and he went completely berserk.

*Snap/Dim light hits Archer holding the black book.
Axel and Arthur freeze.*

ARCHER

(to aud.) Obsession?! Really?! What exactly is obsession? Attachment? Closeness? Need? This is all I have left. This is it. If I lose this, I lose everything. Is that what defines obsession?

Beat.

I knew it would happen. I saw it. I *saw* it. I'm responsible. *(referring to the black book)* This is not an *obsession*. It's a *responsibility*.

Snap/Blackout on Archer. Focus shifts back to Axel and Arthur.

ARTHUR

But for some reason he trusts me. And I know I can help him, Axel, I know it. I just don't know how.

AXEL

Did he tell you to do anything?

ARTHUR

He said I keep getting in the way. I just don't know what I'm getting in the way of.

AXEL

Well, if he's as dangerous to himself as his poem implies, then it's a good thing that you're in the way.

ARTHUR

I suppose so.

AXEL

You're doing the kid one hell of a favor.

Beat.

ARTHUR

Maybe you're right. Maybe I should just step aside. I'm apparently oblivious to what's going on.

AXEL

You can't step aside, Artie! Don't ever let yourself think that! Whatever you're doing, it's stopping him from doing whatever his sick mind is telling him to do.

ARTHUR

She's a lie. She is not her. That's the thing that I still don't understand.

AXEL

She who?

ARTHUR

Julie. She's a lie.

Beat.

AXEL

Arthur, I don't know what this kid is trying to do, but you do not stop what you're doing. If he does anything to her...

ARTHUR

He won't.

AXEL

After what he did to you, how can you be sure?

ARTHUR

Because...*she is not her.*

Snap/Blackout.

Snap/Dim light finds C.C. with the black queen chess piece.

Lights fade up on Arthur's classroom; desolate. The blackboard reads, 'Nicole' written in the center.

Julie enters. C.C., unnoticed, watches her. Julie takes notice to the board; cautiously moves to the desk; sees the lock; enters the combination.

JULIE

2. 1. 2.

It opens. She opens the drawer; pulls out a book with a black cover.

"Re: Living" by Arthur Chase?...

She looks back in the desk; pulls out a note with burned edges; opens and reads it. Puzzled. She looks back at the board.

Snap/Blackout.

We hear singing.

ARCHER

(v.o.) (singing) 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, switch.

Snap/Dim light hits Archer holding the black book. This place is different; like a cryptic prison cell.

ARCHER

(to aud.) The Power.

Pause.

The Power is an extraordinary thing. Because it exists. But has no definition. Some people, have the Power. Some people, do not have the Power. And some people, have some of the Power. ‘Some’ is undefined. Except that it is more than not having the Power, yet less than the complete Power. With me so far? Now, there’s no way to prove if one has the Power or not. But it’s there. Everyone is on the spectrum somewhere. Where specifically is impossible to know for sure unless you either have it completely or lack it completely.

Pause.

Example: Mike.

Snap/stark over-light hits Michael upstage; a noose around his neck with a cut end. He is a vessel appearing there motionless.

He had the Power. He could say anything, do anything, get any girl, get whatever he wanted, and no matter how nice or how much of a dick he was, everyone still liked him. Or at least acted like they did.

Snap/stark over-light hits Nicole, upstage, who is also vessel-like; blood streaming down her face; her sleeves are rolled up revealing small circular burns.

Nicole was infatuated with him. I will never understand it. He put her through hell and back, over and over, and over again. He cheated on her, stood her up, humiliated her, and was just a straight up fuckin’ dick to her, and yet she was still infatuated with him. When her mother was in the hospital with breast cancer, she went to him for comfort, and he told her to get over it. Are you kidding me?! How can someone fucking say that?!?! (back to us) But at the snap of his fingers, she would be right there, undressed, on her knees, despite everything he put her through! How the fuck does that happen?!

Beat.

The goddam Power.

Beat.

What was even more ridiculous was that Nicole had the Power too. She had it! I don’t understand how someone with the Power, the fucking Power, could be so easily manipulated by a cheating prick whose narcissism was only surpassed by his goddam fucking ego!! Fuck!!

Snap/Blackout on Nicole and Michael.

That’s a poor description of the Power. There’s a lot more to it. It’s a status thing. Social proof. Knowing where you stand, where everyone else stands, and where everyone else *thinks* they stand.

Beat.

I think that’s why she chose him...

Beat.

...over me.

Beat.

I don’t have the Power.

Beat.

That’s the only explanation I can think of.

Snap/Blackout.

Lights up. Riley's classroom. Riley is pacing forward-back\side-to-side; holding/examining a note with burned edges.

RILEY

(reading Michael's note) I hope I *chose* the right branch. I hope I *chose* the right branch. Why past tense?

Julie enters.

JULIE

Hi Riley, is it a good time?

Riley quickly puts the note away.

RILEY

Yeah, come on in. What can I do for you?

JULIE

I need your expertise.

RILEY

What on?

JULIE

A student of yours named Collin Archer.

RILEY

I don't recognize the name.

JULIE

He was listed on your roster for abnormal psychology.

RILEY

There's no one in that class named Collin Archer.

JULIE

Are you sure?

RILEY

Yeah. I had that class today. Are you sure he's a student of mine?

JULIE

He should be.

RILEY

Maybe he dropped it before the semester started.

JULIE

No, he's skipping.

RILEY

That's a shame. Today's class was a heater.

JULIE

He left this on his poetry professor's desk. But neither you nor the professor he left that for knows who he is.

Julie hands Riley Archer's poem.

RILEY

Burned edges...

JULIE

I think it's a threat.

Riley finishes reading the poem.

RILEY

No, you think it's a note.

Beat.

JULIE

Yes. Yes I do. And Axel told me about...look, I don't mean to...

RILEY

Listen, Julie, if this is legitimate, I'm not interested in formalities. Cut to the chase; how can I help?

JULIE

We have to figure out what he's going to do next.

RILEY

If this is his note, he might already be dead.

JULIE

No he's alive.

Julie takes out Arthur's book.

RILEY

How do you know?

JULIE

Because he gave me this.

Julie hands Riley Arthur's book.

Help me find the connection to it. Whatever it is, it's vital.

Riley takes the book. Julie moves to exit.

RILEY

Where are you going?

JULIE

Hopefully to meet him.

Julie exits. Riley pulls out Mike's note; she has the note, the poem, and the book.

RILEY

Of course this would happen today.

Blackout.

Snap/Lights up. Axel's rehearsal. Archer sits alone in a chair; center stage; writing in the black book. He is whistling the tune of 'Going crazy, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, switch'. Axel arrives. Archer checks his watch; smiles; doesn't let Axel see the black book.

AXEL

Can I help you?

ARCHER

Yes. Surprisingly enough, it turns out you're the only person who can. I cancelled rehearsal. I hope you understand.

AXEL

And who are you?

ARCHER

I should ask you the same thing. Did you like my poem? Arthur didn't like my poem.

Beat.

AXEL

What're you doing here?

ARCHER

Answer the question.

AXEL

Whoa, what's with the hostility?

ARCHER

Stringing this out is fucking stupid.

AXEL

Oooo, you got some lip on you. No wonder everyone's on your case.

ARCHER

Long time, Axel.

Archer slides the black book towards Axel. Axel doesn't look at it, moves away.

AXEL

Artie know you're here?

ARCHER

Wanna see something cool?

Archer snaps his fingers. Axel stops and as if not controlling his own body is pulled back and flung towards the book.

ARCHER

Something special about my book?

AXEL

Why are you here?

ARCHER

Because you've kept me here.

AXEL

Kept you?

ARCHER

Feigning ignorance is annoying, Axel.

AXEL

Why come to me now?

Axel, not controlling himself, gets up.

ARCHER

To help.

Archer mimes wrapping a noose around his neck. As he does, Axel does the exact same movements.

AXEL

What's happening?

ARCHER

You must understand, I'm the only person who can help you.

AXEL

I thought you said I'm the only person who can help you.

Archer and Axel clap three times.

ARCHER

You're a good listener.

AXEL

Stop.

ARCHER

Oh, don't tell me you're not having fun yet.

AXEL

Stop!

ARCHER

Do not pass go. Do not collect \$200.

AXEL

How the hell are you doing this?!

ARCHER

Stop pretending! You can't resist anymore. Whether you're willing to accept that or not. Arthur was a clever move. Despicable. But clever. You can't win this game, Axel. Not without me.

AXEL

I want you gone.

ARCHER

Julie is not a way out.

AXEL

I swear to god, if you hurt her...

ARCHER

She is not her!

AXEL

You're lying!

ARCHER

Said the man to the mirror.

Archer and Axel snap their fingers. Axel regains control of himself. Archer flips open the black book to a section marked by Mike's necklace.

We have to work together, Axel. We have to end this together. Please.

Archer steps away from the black book as Axel approaches.

Work with me. And I'll go away.

Axel pulls the necklace out of the black book. Snap/Blackout.

We hear C.C. from the darkness.

C.C.

(v.o.) Now, let's go climb a tree.

We hear Nicole crying.

NICOLE

(v.o.) *(crying)* I want her back, Michael.

MICHAEL

(v.o.) I know.

NICOLE

(v.o.) How could this happen? She was fine. She was getting better.

MICHAEL

(v.o.) I know.

Beat.

(v.o.) You'll find a way to get over it. I promise. And I'll be right here with you.

Pause.

Lights up. Riley's office. Riley is aggressively pacing side to side\forward and back. At her desk are the book – "Re: Living" by Arthur Chase and Archer's poem. Axel is standing in the room. We arrive in the middle of conversation.

RILEY

Wait, you met him?!

AXEL

Briefly.

RILEY

What did he want?

AXEL

I don't know. I'm still trying to figure him out.

RILEY

He's reaching out to us.

AXEL

What're you talking about?

Riley pulls out Michael's note.

RILEY

Burned edges.

AXEL

Holy shit. I can't believe the police actually released this to you.

RILEY

I'd prefer having his necklace.

AXEL

You think he's copycatting Mike?

RILEY

Yes. The way Collin's poem and Mike's note are burned -- they're identical; the paper, the ink color, hell, even the handwriting looks the same. He knows me, Axel.

AXEL

He knew me too. But I don't know how.

RILEY

Arthur Chase, do you know him?

AXEL

Yeah, we grew up together.

RILEY

This is unbelievable.

AXEL

What does Artie have to do with any of this?

RILEY

Did you know he's a published poet?

She holds up Arthur's book of poetry.

AXEL

Yeah, I think he mentioned that.

RILEY

Collin's poem isn't his words. They're Arthur's. Structure, rhythm, word choice – identical; stripped from Arthur's book; like he was giving Arthur a ransom note out of his own poetry.

AXEL

So you don't think it's a suicide note?

RILEY

No. I think it's more than that.

AXEL

More than a suicide note?

RILEY

Yes. He registers for my class and Arthur's class, raids Arthur's book to emulate Mike's note, and has all of us trying to piece it together.

AXEL

You think he planned this?

RILEY

Do you have any idea why he wants to kill himself?

AXEL

No.

RILEY

Maybe he doesn't either.

AXEL

You think he's trying to get us to figure out why he wants to kill himself because he doesn't know why he wants to kill himself?

RILEY

Maybe that's why he's trying to copycat Mike's suicide. Maybe Michael wanted to kill himself but didn't know why. Like he was searching for something but couldn't find it. Couldn't find an answer or a reason or a purpose or a something, and eventually it just became overwhelming. Maybe he didn't murder himself for a reason. He murdered himself because he couldn't find one.

Beat

AXEL

But he did.

What do you think it was?

RILEY

Axel dangles Michael's necklace in front of her.

The right branch.

AXEL

Axel wraps his arm around Riley's neck. She struggles but fails to break the stranglehold.

Snap/Blackout.

We hear a voice from the darkness.

(v.o.) Check.

C.C.

Snap/Lights fade up. The Lyric Lounge. A cafe/bar setting. Julie enters and sits in the audience. Archer steps up on the stage. He takes his time, opens the black book.

(to aud.) Life.

ARCHER

Beat.

What is it?
We spend all of it trying to define it.
To define our purpose.

Beat.

Reason.
Do we have it?
We have fabrications.
We have ideas.
We have beliefs.
We have thoughts.
But is there any substantial reason?
A believable reason?
Because if there isn't, are we wasting our lives looking?

Beat.

Maybe it's different with each of us. Some people find it,
He snaps his fingers.

like that.
While others never find it at all.

Beat.

Does God have the answer?
Does He really decide everything that happens to us?
Giveth and taketh away.
Or did He leave that responsibility on our shoulders.

For us to decide for ourselves.
Is He fair?
Does He always do the right thing?
Or is He just a fabrication himself.
A collective idea of what we might call the soul.
Do we even have souls?
Or is that just a thought?
A scapegoat for all the inexplicable actions we take.
Why is the expression *taking* action instead of *giving* action?
The constant need to have.
Do we have soul mates?
Is it possible that someone is your soul mate, but you're not theirs?

Beat.

When someone is charitable and good, they are a kind soul.
But when someone is misguided or evil, they are a lost soul.
Why are they lost?
Where did they lose their way?
Do we know?
Will we ever know?
I don't know.
But I have an idea.

Beat.

What if you're one of the few who do find your reason?
What if, you're one of the few who then lose your reason?
Is that when someone loses hope?
Is that why we have faith in the first place?

Beat.

Life.
What is it?

Beat.

I think life is like this tree.

*Lights shift to reveal the shadow of a tree growing;
filling the Lyric.*

It has thousands of branches.
We have thousands of paths to choose from.
More and more branches grow every day.
We simply have to ask ourselves -- did we choose the right branch?
I don't know if I have.
But I have an idea.

Beat.

Maybe life itself is the question.

Beat.

At the base of the tree are roots.
Without roots, there are no branches.
But there are only two paths at the roots.
Two ideas.

Life.
And the absence of life.
Wound in a paradox of purpose.
You choose your path.
You choose your path.
What if you chose for somebody else.
How do you handle that kind of responsibility?

Beat.

I don't know.

He locks eyes with Julie; closes the black book.

But I have an idea.

Snap/Blackout.

Snap/Dim light hits Arthur flicking open a lighter.

He lights it.

Snap/Dim light hits Axel. He's smoking.

ARTHUR

Axel.

AXEL

Mr. Artie.

ARTHUR

Something's off isn't it?

AXEL

Archer's losing control.

ARTHUR

So we can go?

AXEL

We can't.

ARTHUR

We can.

AXEL

I can't.

ARTHUR

You can if you want to.

AXEL

She won't want to see us.

ARTHUR

But C.C.'ll know what he's going to do next right?

AXEL

What if he changes his sequence again?

ARTHUR

Can't hurt to get a third opinion.

Arthur closes the lighter/Blackout on Arthur.

We hear a phone ringing.

*Snap/Lights up on Julie on her phone.
Axel answers his phone.*

AXEL

Hello?

JULIE

Axel?

AXEL

Hi.

Axel checks his watch.

JULIE

I found Archer's dorm room.

Axel hangs up.

AXEL

Right on time.

Snap/Blackout on Axel.

JULIE

Are you with Arthur?

No response.

Axel, I need to know who Arthur is.

No response.

Axel? Axel?!...

Snap/Blackout.

ARCHER

(v.o.) (singing) Slowly am I going crazy, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, switch.

We hear the faint sound of someone snapping their fingers over, and over, and over, and over, etc.

Snap/Shadows fade up on C.C.'s cell.

AXEL

(v.o.) I don't recognize this place.

ARTHUR

(v.o.) It's been a while. Things have changed.

AXEL

(v.o.) Do you know where we're going?

ARTHUR

(v.o.) Cell 212.

AXEL

(v.o.) I can't do this.

ARTHUR

(v.o.) We'll do it together. Teamwork.

AXEL

(v.o.) I'm worried.

ARTHUR

(v.o.) About what?

AXEL

(v.o.) She likes to play mind games.

Lights fade to black.

We hear a faint song that sounds like a child's music box that's broken. Over and over the tune repeats. Over and over and over and over and over...

Snap/Shadows fade up on C.C.'s cell.

This place is different. The walls have 'Nicole', '11:11', '212', 'Make a wish', 'Reason', 'Why?', 'Why did I do it?', 'The Dream', 'What did she wish for?', 'I knew it would happen', 'Explanation', 'The Power', pictures of chessboards, chess pieces, trees, etc. written/drawn on them, as does the ceiling. It's as if someone etched their entire mind onto the walls -- in chalk.

The only difference is the floor; which is checkered to resemble a chess board. C.C. is playing with/setting up oversized chess pieces. Arthur darts in holding an oversized white rook chess piece and immediately begins looking for something. His demeanor is entirely different.

ARTHUR

Hey Miss C.C. Can I have my tag?

C.C.

You're too close! *(tic)* Check. Thirty-six shovels of dirt. *(tic)* Check. We made a promise.

ARTHUR

Yeah. Duh. I know. If he comes back I can have my tag right?

C.C.

Lies are bad Mr. Artie! He locked me away. "Locked away, but never alone." He said that. But he lying because he's a liar. I love you, but he won't come here.

ARTHUR

I'd really like to have my tag. I just think that maybe if I could have it...

C.C.

Don't touch me! *(tic)* Check. Gimmie.

Arthur puts the white rook down. C.C. grabs it in a stranglehold.

Riley. Why? *(tic)* Check.

ARTHUR

"Teamwork."

C.C.

Guilt. *(tic)* Check. Why?

Axel enters tentatively.

AXEL

Cecilia?...

C.C.

No! C.C.! Just C.C.! *(tic)* Check. Axel?!

She frantically starts setting up the chess board.

ARTHUR

I promised.

C.C.

(tic) Check. He never comes here. Axel would never come here. Why would he come here? *(tic)*
Check.

Touching the white rook.

Ohhhhhhh. Collin changed his sequence.

ARTHUR

His sequence! Yeah. He said his poem was supposed to remind me just like you said he'd say.
Hey Miss C.C., where's my tag?

C.C.

Take a breath and simply notice.

AXEL

C.C., what's happened to you?

C.C.

"C.C. if I ever come back here, promise to play chess with me." *(to Axel)* You made me promise
and *we don't break promises.*

Axel moves opposite C.C.

White moves first.

Axel begins to play.

ARTHUR

Hey Miss C.C., if I can't find it, should I...

C.C.

You're choosing not to see it.

ARTHUR

I'm not choosing not to see it! I choose very much to see it! Archer said the same thing. I don't
get it.

C.C.

Adapt.

ARTHUR

(referring to Axel) He's here! I got him here. Just like we agreed.

C.C.

He lies.

ARTHUR

"She's a lie. She is not her."

C.C.

(tic) Check. Do not talk about Nicole in my cell!

ARTHUR

“She is not her.” I’m sorry. I just don’t,

C.C. shoots him a look.

okay, adapt.

C.C.

(to Axel) “It’s crazy that we’re talking like this.”

AXEL

I need him, C.C.

C.C.

It’s cruel.

AXEL

Archer is losing control, what was I supposed to do?

C.C.

Mr. Artie, come here.

ARTHUR

Did you find my tag?!

AXEL

Wait! Mr. Artie!

Arthur stops.

ARTHUR

Yeah, Axel?

AXEL

How ya doin’ bud?

Arthur moves to Axel.

ARTHUR

Awesome. I’m awesome. You’re awesome. I’m fine. I just...are you good? I just really want my tag.

AXEL

Just take it easy. Sit.

ARTHUR

Okay.

Arthur sits.

AXEL

I'm gonna find your tag okay?

ARTHUR

Great! I'll just stay right here? Actually maybe I should help. Teamwork.

C.C.

You're not handling his death too well.

Arthur moves to C.C.

ARTHUR

Who's death? Somebody died? Who died?

C.C.

You died.

C.C. pets Arthur.

AXEL

C.C.!

Arthur's demeanor changes. Beat.

ARTHUR

I died.

AXEL

Mr. Artie?

ARTHUR

No Arthur! Just Arthur!

AXEL

Goddammit C.C.!

C.C.

This isn't a place for liars, Axel. "Locked away but never alone." *(tic)* Check.

AXEL

Lies? We're talking about lies huh? Why does Archer have the black book?

C.C.

(tic) Check. The poem.

ARTHUR

The poem! He left it unfinished. It could be referring to anybody.

C.C.

He'll finish it. *(tic)* Check. There's a lot behind it.

AXEL

What's the ending of the poem, C.C.?

C.C.

Memories. Lots and lots and lots and lots and lots of memories. *(tic)* Check. Locked away but never alone.

AXEL

I know you know! You had the book.

C.C.

Locked away but never alone. *(tic)* Check.

AXEL

You promised me you'd take care of it. Why did you give it to him?

C.C.

That's what you said. You said, "Locked away but never alone. But I am alone, Axel. I am.

AXEL

To work togeth...

C.C.

You left me here!

Beat.

You left me here with *everything!!!*

Beat.

You left! Like mom left! Like dad left! You left me!

C.C.

"Locked away, but never alone, C.C., I promise." But you left. You don't remember but I remember, Axel. I remember everything. I wanted to stay together.

ARTHUR

Teamwork.

C.C.

Because memories *hurt*. *Memories...*

She touches her chess pieces.

...hurt...a lot. Don't read what you wrote. Lock it away; it's our little secret. But the memories change, Axel. They're always fighting each other. You can never play the same game twice. Memories lie. They're all lies. Archer has the book, but the book changes. The sequence changes. The memories always change.

AXEL

What's he going to do, C.C.?

C.C.

Right. Always playing chess. We're always playing chess. Never the same game twice. Emotions start toying with your mind, second guessing your actions, constantly searching and searching and searching and searching – "Knock-knock"

"Buried him under thirty-six shovels of dirt."

"You can't come in here, Collin."

"I want the black book."

"This is not a place for liars."

"C.C., if I ever come back here, promise to play chess with me."

"It was supposed to remind you, why didn't it remind you?!"

"What drives a person to murder themselves?"

"Life."

"It's all I have left."

"I'm responsible."

"She is a lie. She is not her."

Collin is searching for the dream...

Recreate the dream.

Lying there.

Burns.

Blood streaming down her face.

Burns.

"Stop."

Blood.

"Stop!"

Gun.

"I love you as a person."

One move ahead. Always one move ahead. It's all in the book. *(tic)* Check. All in the book.

Axel moves the white queen to a spot where it can be captured.

AXEL

Check.

C.C.

(tic) Check.

C.C. surveys the board.

ARTHUR

(to Axel) It's really good to see you again.

AXEL

Get your routine down and focus.

Arthur takes a breath.

Fresh first day air...

ARTHUR

Do you remember what day it is?

AXEL

February 12th.

ARTHUR

Nicole's birthday.

C.C.

C.C. captures the white queen, turning it to reveal the blood on its crown. Axel nods Arthur in the direction of the white bishop wearing Mr. Artie's tag.

C.C. moves towards Axel away from the board.

My tag!

ARTHUR

He moves to it; places it around his neck. His demeanor changes. He analyzes the board and begins to move the white bishop.

C.C.

"You would have been so proud of me."

"While we were playing..."

"You deserve someone who loves you and isn't afraid or reluctant about it."

"... I sacrificed my queen..."

ARTHUR

"...and won on the next move."

*Arthur places the white bishop.
Snap/everything goes black except two separate stark over lights; one on Arthur, the other on Axel and C.C. C.C. looks up at Axel.*

AXEL

Hi. C.C.

Snap/Blackout.

Snap/Dim light hits Archer with the black book downstage.

ARCHER

Hi.

Snap/Dim over light hits Nicole, shadowed, upstage.

NICOLE

Hi.

The sound of her voice relaxes Archer.

I had a dream about us last night.

ARCHER

Sounds like a good dream.

NICOLE

I've wanted to ask you something for a long time. But I always seem to wimp out.

ARCHER

Don't wimp out.

NICOLE

Do you...

Nicole's light fades. Silence is held. Archer waits for her to finish. The silence mounts on him.

ARCHER

Nicole?...Do I what?...

No response. He grabs his head.

Nicole?!... NICOLE?!?!

Snap/Blackout.

Snap/Lights up. Archer's dorm room. The walls, ceiling, chair, etc. are similar to those in C.C.'s cell. Riley sits in a chair tied up; sock in mouth. A folder lies on the floor in front of her; its edges burned, '2-1-2' is written on it. Julie cautiously enters.

JULIE

Riley?!

Julie rushes to her,

RILEY

Oh thank god.

JULIE

What happened to you? Shit it's a combination lock.

RILEY

2-1-2. Axel wrote it on that folder.

JULIE

Axel did this to you?

Julie enters the combination and unshackles Riley.

RILEY

He had to. Collin Archer's threat. Axel said you'd come get me.

JULIE

Wait, what threat?

RILEY

To hurt me because I had his poem and that book you gave me.

JULIE

I'm so sorry. I didn't mean for this. I should have showed you this before.

Julie hands Riley the note.

RILEY

Room 212. 11:11. Make a wish. Collin wrote this?

JULIE

He's how I found it. But Room 212 is Arthur Chase's classroom. ...Axel's file?

Riley pulls a photo out of Axel's file.

RILEY

Burned edges. That's Archer's pattern. Oh my god...

JULIE

What?

RILEY

In this picture with Axel, she looks so much like you.

JULIE

Who?

RILEY

This girl's name is Nicole. She committed suicide ten years ago today.

Julie bolts to the door.

Julie!

Riley runs after her.

Snap/Blackout.

Snap/Dim lights up. Room 212. We see Arthur sitting at his desk; now stage right of the chalkboard as opposed to directly in front of it with a second chair next to it. He is wearing a black dress shirt, red suspenders, and his dog tag; writing in the black book. We see C.C. stage left, surrounded by the oversize chess pieces. Archer is at the black board, writing feverishly. The black board resembles the walls in C.C.'s cell. After some time, he sets down the chalk, turns, and walks in L-patterns towards us. Snap/Light shifts to a lone spot on Archer down center and two dimmer spots on Arthur and C.C.

ARCHER

(to aud.) Everything happens for a reason. I can't say I believe that any more. I've spent nearly ten years searching for that reason. And it's not here. It's not here because it's not real. *There is no reason.* There's no explanation for why certain things happen. Why certain things happen to certain people. But the repercussions, the repercussions of those unexplained things exist. And they never leave you alone.

Beat.

Why don't we have control? Is it simply a chemical imbalance in the mind that drives a person this far? Or is there something else? Why do we dream? Just wave patterns deep in the psyche? Or are they there to reveal something else?

Beat.

What do you do if you *don't dream anymore?*

Beat.

I don't know. But I have an idea. Everything works out in the end, huh? Let's find out.

He claps twice/Lights up. He strips off his blazer. He is in the exact same attire as Arthur; black dress shirt and red suspenders. Archer's sleeves are rolled up to reveal his forearms covered in small circular burns. He's checks his watch. Archer turns around and L-patterns back toward the blackboard, throwing his blazer off to the side. He resumes writing on the board and sings.

(singing) I am slowly going crazy, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, switch. I am slowly going crazy, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, switch. Slowly am I going crazy, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, switch.

He continues to sing. Eventually Axel enters.

ARTHUR

(without looking up from his writing) Hey Axel, thanks for coming. Sorry about the short notice.

Axel!

ARCHER

Archer looks at his watch.

(to Axel) It's our little secret...

C.C.

Welcome back!

ARCHER

Always one move ahead.

C.C.

I held up my end of the promise; I took out Riley.

AXEL

Archer checks his watch.

Yes. And for that I thank you.

ARCHER

Now I want you gone.

AXEL

Come now Axel, you know I'm always one for a good role reversal, but I don't think aggressive is the right move for you.

ARCHER

Archer rushes to Axel, grabs him by the shirt, and throws him up against the door. Archer follows towards him and stops.

Hit me.

(while writing) Archer...

ARTHUR

(to Archer) Don't.

AXEL

Adapt.

C.C.

You've been wanting to do it! Hit me, Axel!

ARCHER

Whoa, what's with the hostility?!

ARTHUR

(pushing Axel again) Fucking hit me!

ARCHER

Axel backhands Archer across the face. Archer, Arthur, Axel, and C.C. all move as if they each got backhanded across the face.

Beat.

Archer laughs. Axel grabs his head; splitting pain.

I always wondered what it must have felt like.

Archer gets up.

You sick fuck.

ARTHUR

You promised no violence!

C.C.

We don't break promises.

Archer pulls out a cigarette and a lighter.

ARTHUR

You need to calm down.

ARCHER

Calm? I am calm. This is me calm. ...Smoke? No, you probably shouldn't. What are you up to now, three packs a day?

ARTHUR

I don't smoke.

ARCHER

Roll up your sleeves.

C.C.

Check.

AXEL

Arthur...

Arthur hesitates.

ARCHER

We have a deadline! Roll up your sleeves!

Arthur rolls up his sleeves.

C.C.

(tic) Burns. Check.

His forearms bare small circular burns identical to Archer's.

ARTHUR

(as if this is the first time he's ever seen them) What the hell are these?

ARCHER

Let me show you.

Archer puts out his cigarette on his left arm. Arthur, Axel, and C.C. grab their left arms. Axel falls to his knees. Axel takes off his blazer; he is wearing a black dress shirt and red suspenders. He rolls up his sleeves to reveal small circular burns identical to those of Archer and Arthur. C.C. rolls up her sleeves to reveal identical burns on her arms. Archer returns to the blackboard and resumes writing.

(singing) I am slowly going crazy, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, switch. I am slowly going crazy, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, switch. Slowly am I going crazy, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6,...

AXEL

How did Nicole die?

Archer drops the chalk and turns back to Axel.

ARCHER

Why don't you tell me?

C.C.

Don't talk about her! *(tic)* Check.

AXEL

I don't know.

ARCHER

Oh, but you have an idea.

Archer swings out the chair from Arthur's desk.

Take a seat.

ARTHUR

Axel...

Axel doesn't move.

ARCHER

Why must we fight?

He approaches Axel.

Why are we fighting? Why can't we all just get along? I don't understand.

Teamwork.

C.C.

Archer leans over and looks directly at Axel.

If you continue to argue with me...

ARCHER

He gently slaps Axel on the cheek.

I will not hesitate.

He moves back to the chair.

No more violence.

ARTHUR

Archer checks his watch.

You hear that? No more violence, Axel. You wanna take a seat?

ARCHER

Axel moves to the chair and sits down. Archer moves to Arthur.

(referring to the black book) Mind if I borrow this?

Arthur hands Archer the book.

(before letting the black book go) Calm. You promised.

ARTHUR

Arthur releases. Archer drops the black book in Axel's lap. Axel is mesmerized by it.

Nicole.

AXEL

Don't talk about her!

C.C.

That's her book.

ARTHUR

You gave it to her.

ARCHER

Your means of expression.

ARTHUR

Quite beautiful.

ARCHER

(tic) Check.

C.C.

I don't remember.

AXEL

Think a little harder.

ARCHER

Axel becomes teary.

It's our little secret.

C.C.

I don't remember.

AXEL

No. You're choosing not to remember.

ARCHER

I remember.

C.C.

Archer starts checking his watch more frequently.

C.C. remembers! Thank you C.C.!

ARCHER

Memories change.

C.C.

The dream, Axel. The dream.

ARCHER

No...

AXEL

They always change.

C.C.

Archer, enough.

ARTHUR

Who was in that dream, Axel?

ARCHER

...Nicole.

AXEL

Don't talk about her!

C.C.

ARCHER

And what was she doing?

AXEL

I don't remember.

ARCHER

(losing patience) Axel...

ARTHUR

She was smoking.

ARCHER

Yeah. She was. But she would never smoke.

ARTHUR

She thought it was disgusting.

ARCHER

What did she do when she finished the cigarette, Axel?

AXEL

I don't know.

ARCHER

I beg to differ! I think you know exactly what she did.

C.C.

Burns. Check.

AXEL

(looking at his forearms, remembering) She put in out on her arm.

ARCHER

Blackout! Oooo yeah! Just like a good suspense horror flick. What happened next, Axel?

C.C.

It's our little secret.

AXEL

I don't remember...

Archer backhands Axel across the face. Axel, Arthur, Archer, and C.C. all move as if they were all hit the same. Arthur stands up.

ARCHER

(to Arthur; firmly) Sit down!

Arthur slowly sits back down.

(to Axel) How's about we don't fuck with me right now. Open the book to section two, page twelve.

Axel follows the instructions. Archer checks his watch.

C.C.

Wrong move.

ARCHER

Read it.

ARTHUR

Axel...

AXEL

(reading) She was dead.

C.C.

(tic) Check.

Axel stops reading.

ARCHER

Read it, Axel.

AXEL

She was dead. I don't know how I knew, but I could sense it. I could sense that she wasn't with me anymore.

ARTHUR

Archer...

AXEL

Mr. Artie and I searched and searched, but found nothing. Panic consumed me. C.C. kept screaming for me...

C.C.

Stop.

AXEL

...and screaming for me...

C.C.

Stop!

AXEL

...and screaming for me...

C.C.

STOP!!!

AXEL

...but I couldn't find Nicole. Blurred vision. I thought I woke up. But I was still sleeping. I lost my sense of reality, and she wasn't there.

ARCHER

(hearing enough) No more.

AXEL

When did I wake up?

ARCHER

The following day, genius, what the fuck do you think?

Axel abruptly stands up.

AXEL

Where's Mr. Artie?

Arthur stands.

C.C.

Thirty-six shovels of dirt.

Archer, as if knowing Arthur would stand, motions for him to sit. Archer sits Axel back in the seat.

ARCHER

The next day you were with her.

AXEL

No, I was with Mr. Artie!

ARCHER

You were with her and you confessed your love for her, alright?! Ring any bells?!

ARTHUR

You gave her the black book.

ARCHER

You hit her.

C.C.

Memories change.

AXEL

I kissed her.

ARCHER

You hit her like you hit me!

AXEL

No!

Archer backhands Axel again. All four move as if hit the same.

ARTHUR

Archer, stop!

ARCHER

Why did you hit her?!

AXEL

I don't know!

Archer pulls out a gun and places it against Axel's temple.

ARCHER

Why did you *murder* her?! I need a reason! You loved her! Why did you kill her?! I need to know!

AXEL

I didn't mean to!

C.C.

I didn't mean to!

Archer hits Axel with the butt of the gun. All four start bleeding from the mouth.

ARCHER

Ah fuck!

ARTHUR

(standing up) Archer, put the gun away!

Archer redirects the gun towards Arthur. Arthur can't believe it.

ARCHER

Sit down! Sit the fuck down and do not speak! You cannot protect him anymore. Don't you understand that?

C.C.

Blood. *(tic)* Check.

ARCHER

We have to finish this. We have to finish this *together!*

C.C.

Teamwork.

Arthur sits back down; complete awe. Archer places the gun back against Axel's temple.

ARCHER

She's dead, Axel.

AXEL

No...

ARCHER

She's dead!

C.C.

It's our little secret.

ARCHER

Your dream came true. You knew it would happen. You kn...

Julie and Riley barge in.

No!!

Archer checks his watch.

It's too soon!

JULIE

Axel!

C.C.

Adapt.

AXEL

(looking at Julie) Nicole?

ARTHUR

She's a lie, Axel.

RILEY

Axel, put the gun down.

ARCHER

We're not really here...surprise!

Archer places the gun in Axel's hand so he's holding it against his own temple.

JULIE

Axel, who's not really here?

AXEL

I don't know.

ARCHER

Ohhh come on! We're the best idea you've ever had!

ARTHUR

With us you're never lonely.

C.C.

Locked away but never alone.

JULIE

Axel, where are they? Are they both here?

Axel, as if he's not controlling his arm, takes the gun and points it at Julie.

ARCHER

Shut up! Shut the fuck up! Don't move. You are not Nicole!

Archer pulls his lighter back out of his pocket.

C.C.

Don't talk about her!

RILEY

We're here for you, Axel. Lower the gun.

AXEL

(looking back at Julie) I killed you.

JULIE

No Axel, I'm right here.

Archer places the lighter in Axel's lap.

ARCHER

(to Axel) Burn it. Burn the book!

AXEL

Riley, I'm so sorry about Mike, I don't remember. I swear. I would never...

Axel redirects the gun back on himself.

ARCHER

Burn the book or I will put a fucking bullet in your head!

AXEL

Why?! Why do you want me to burn her book?!

ARCHER

Because it's all we have left of her! If you burn the book, maybe it won't hurt so much!
He looks at his watch.

C.C.

Memories hurt.

RILEY

Axel, everything will be fine if you just lower the gun.

ARCHER

Time is running out, Axel!

Everyone freezes. The stage goes black except for a separate pool of light stage left. Archer slowly steps out of the scene into that separate pool of light. He looks around and then towards the audience.

ARCHER

(to aud.) (looking at his burns) I hate these. Each one is a constant reminder. I still don't know why I did it. Why did I have that dream? How did I see it before it actually happened?

He turns and looks at Axel.

I admire his will to try and forget. It would make everything so simple if he didn't remember.
(referring to the burns) It's just kind of hard not to.

Arthur gets up and walks out of the scene towards us, stage right, into his own pool of light. He is holding the lighter.

ARTHUR

I couldn't protect him anymore.

Snap/Dim light hits C.C.

C.C.

Adapt.

AXEL

(to aud.) I still wonder what she wished for.

Axel lowers the gun, gets up, and walks out of his scene towards us into his own pool of light, center stage; holding the gun and the black book. He has enough distance from Archer, Arthur, and C.C. Archer, Axel, and Arthur now face us. Axel looks at Archer and Arthur.

I understand that there is something wrong with me.

Complicated. **ARCHER**

I just didn't want to see it. **AXEL**

Confused. **ARTHUR**

I've known for a long time. **AXEL**

Complex. **ARCHER**

Uncertain of what I'd do next. **AXEL**

I saw it. **ARTHUR**

The dream. **AXEL**

Stop. **C.C.**

Tension. **ARCHER**

Going once... **ARTHUR**

(singing) 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, switch. **ARCHER**

Pressure. **ARTHUR**

Kept straining on me, and straining on me, and straining on me. **ARCHER**

Going twice... **ARTHUR**

I hit her.	AXEL
I didn't mean to.	C.C.
Stress.	ARTHUR
I never saw her again.	ARCHER
I never saw her again.	ARTHUR
I never saw her again.	AXEL
It's our little secret.	C.C.
Why did I have the dream?	AXEL
Stop!!	C.C.
I don't know.	ARCHER
I knew it would happen.	AXEL
I had to confess.	ARCHER
I just didn't know how.	AXEL
As this burden crushes down.	ARCHER
Logic.	ARTHUR

I find myself asking questions. **AXEL**

Re: Living. **ARTHUR**

Why? **ARCHER**

I killed her. **AXEL**

Memories change. **C.C.**

When? **ARTHUR**

I love you as a person. **AXEL**

Not afraid or reluctant. **C.C.**

Maybe sometime down the road. **ARCHER**

When will that moment finally come? **ARTHUR**

I've been holding out for so long. **ARCHER**

Forgiveness. **ARTHUR**

Reason. **ARCHER**

Jealousy. **C.C.**

I've wanted to ask you something for a long time. **AXEL**

Your feelings won't succumb.

ARTHUR

Only one answer.

ARCHER

The dream...

AXEL

Stop!!!

C.C.

I didn't choose to see it.

ARTHUR

I knew it would happen.

ARCHER

I ignored it.

ARTHUR

I lost sense of reality.

AXEL

Time defines us all.

ARTHUR

Memories.

C.C.

Life.

ARCHER

Whether I slow down...

ARTHUR

Or speed ahead...

ARCHER

It's not long...

AXEL

Beat.

There isn't a day that goes by that I don't think about you.

ARCHER

Nicole.

AXEL

I miss you.

ARTHUR

“I love this picture of us.”

C.C.

Archer and Arthur have crossed to stand opposing angles, almost shoulder to shoulder with Axel. Archer on Axel’s right. Arthur on Axel’s left.

I love you.

AXEL

Arthur opens the lighter and lights it.

Life...

ARCHER

...is the most beautiful poetry.

ARTHUR

Beat.

But how can I live it without you?

AXEL

Axel, Arthur, and Archer reenter the scene and assume the same positions they were in before they left. Archer snaps his fingers...

Time is running out, Axel!

ARCHER

Julie moves slowly toward Axel.

Axel...

JULIE

Stop.

ARCHER

Nicole?...

AXEL

She’s a lie, Axel.

ARTHUR

It's our little secret.

C.C.

Julie moves closer. Axel stands.

(a bit firmer) Stop...

ARCHER

Julie stops. Archer checks his watch.

It's just me.

JULIE

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry...

AXEL

Axel, please. Lower the gun.

RILEY

You left the poem unfinished, remember? Don't end it now.

JULIE

Axel extends the black book to Julie.

Happy birthday.

AXEL

Julie reaches for it. Archer checks his watch.

It's 11:11.

ARCHER

Make a wish.

AXEL

Axel, Arthur, Archer, and C.C. close their eyes as if making a wish.

Blackout; except for an over-light on Julie and Axel.

I understand.

JULIE

Axel opens his eyes; inhale...

Blackout.

We hear from the darkness...

(v.o) It's our little secret.

C.C.

NICOLE

(v.o.) Checkmate.

End of Play.