

ELSBETH

Written by

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OUT OF THE DARKNESS COMES...

...a woman: knife thrust out, stabbing a woman on the floor beneath her. Their faces inches apart. As intimate as murder gets.

LANA BERLIN (20), pretty, horrified by what she's doing, stands up with the bloody knife and immediately the scrim behind her explodes in crimson red. And we realize it's...

...a play at Lincoln Center-- an all-female MEDEA-- the audience gasping at the lighting cue as--

INT. LINCOLN CENTER - LIGHTING BOOTH - NIGHT

--the director, in the lighting booth, grins. Loves the reaction, loves his job, loves what theatre can do.

ALEX MODARIAN (50). A top Juilliard teacher/director, a younger Lee Strasberg in an older James Dean jacket, loved by every student, but especially women. Sometimes he loves them back, which is why he's about to commit murder.

To a LIGHTING TECH:

ALEX MODARIAN
...the slides...

The Tech nods. TODD RITTER (21), quirky-handsome student, hits a button and the stage is overtaken by slides from January 6th... Ukraine... (it's that kind of play.) Alex whispers:

ALEX MODARIAN (CONT'D)
I wanna congratulate the cast. You got this?

TODD RITTER
Yep. Congrats.

Alex starts out of the booth--

INT. LINCOLN CENTER - VARIOUS HALLWAYS, ROOMS - DAY

--pulling from his pocket his iPhone, covertly tapping the stop watch... 4 minutes... 3:59... 3:58... We're not sure what this countdown is about, but it seems crucial because...

...Alex rushes down the aisle into the dark theatre.

We follow him as he makes a right turn through a "No Admittance" door, as we hear...

...the tragic music coming from the stage, the play nearing its end. Alex cuts across the stage behind the scrim, hurrying. There--

--the dressing room door. He shoves in, finding...

INT. DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT

...the dressing room, as expected, empty. Everyone on stage.

Good. He rushes down the dozens of make-up stations to Olivia Cherry's station: the actress "murdered" on stage. Her photo and headshot tucked in the mirror.

Alex checks his stop watch. Under 2 minutes. He needs to pick up the pace.

There-- her purse under the counter. He pulls on latex gloves from his pocket. Opens her purse, finds...

...a PRESCRIPTION PILL BOTTLE. Ativan. He spills out the contents. Counts the pills. Twelve. He slips them into a zip-lock bag from his jacket pocket, saves them, then--

--he reaches into his other pocket: another bottle of Ativan pills. Stronger. Counting out the same number-- 12-- he slips them into Olivia's pill bottle.

APPLAUSE!

Uh-oh. Alex sees on the closed circuit monitor overhead the play coming to an end. He'd better get out of here quick! But nice applause.

He slips Olivia's pill bottle back in her purse. Done. He rushes toward the dressing room door, when--

--fuck, no-- he's still wearing the latex gloves. He yanks them off just as actors rush past--

ACTORS

Mr. Modarian, get out there!/
Curtain call!/ They loved it!

Alex acknowledges them all. The well-loved prof:

ALEX MODARIAN

Amazing job, guys! Good modulation.

But then the actress who was "murdered" on stage shows up, her gown covered with blood. OLIVIA CHERRY (21), a pretty but frustrated actress. Alex smiles, comforting:

ALEX MODARIAN (CONT'D)
Great job, Olivia.

OLIVIA CHERRY
(disgruntled)
You mean with my one line?

Alex tries to pull her away from the door:

ALEX MODARIAN
Are you going to the wrap party?

OLIVIA CHERRY
NO. It's over.

ALEX MODARIAN
Shhh.

OLIVIA CHERRY
Don't shhh me. I don't care what
you say; I'm going to the dean.

Alex keeps his voice low, talking to her calmly:

ALEX MODARIAN
Olivia, I'm not the enemy. If you
go to the dean, I'll be cancelled--

OLIVIA CHERRY
Don't put it on me! You're the one
sleeping with his students. You
canceled yourself--
(before Alex can argue)
Look, I'm sick of talking about it.
Send me my keys. I don't want you
near my apartment anymore.

And Olivia pushes into the dressing room, gone. Alex
considers it: his dye cast. And--

EXT. MANHATTAN SKYLINE - NIGHT

--BOOOM-- thunder roars, lightning bursts over nighttime
Manhattan. We focus on one SKYSCRAPER. Out front is...

...Alex Modarian. In his leather jacket. In a Covid mask. He
heads toward the tower's lobby. No doorman.

INT. SKYSCRAPER ELEVATOR - NIGHT

Alex waits alone in the elevator, looks up at the floor
numbers charging crazily upward. He checks his pocket for
latex gloves, pills. Good.

INT. 86TH FLOOR HALL - NIGHT

Alex gets off. Only one door on the 86th floor. He goes to it, knocks loudly, but we see...

INT. OLIVIA CHERRY'S APARTMENT - BATHROOM - NIGHT

...Olivia on the floor of her beautiful and elegant bathroom, unconscious, pills spilled out beside her.

INT. 86TH FLOOR HALL - NIGHT

Alex, no answer to his knock, slips on his latex gloves, takes out a key, carefully lets himself into Olivia's apartment where...

INT. OLIVIA CHERRY'S APARTMENT - VARIOUS - NIGHT

...he gets to work, seeing her body sprawled unconscious on the floor. He crosses to her purse, pulls from it...

...her CELLPHONE. Using a paperclip he pops out her SIM card, slips it into a SIM CARD READER taken from his pocket-- it's the size of small drive. He starts the download, reading on the LCD screen on the side: 4:30 seconds to download.

[This murder, like all the murders that open our show, should play like a well-executed heist.]

Multi-tasking, Alex takes the zip-lock bag from his pocket, collects her spilled pills from the floor-- one by one-- the stronger dosage. He slips them into his pocket, then...

...he takes out her original lower-dosage pills, pours them on the floor in imitation of her fall.

In the kitchen, Alex opens a drawer (as her ex-lover, he knows where everything is), grabs a trash bag, a roll of MASKING TAPE. Then...

...psyching himself up, he pulls the trash bag over Olivia's head, wraps the masking tape tightly around her neck, three, four, five times. And he watches...

...her die, gasping, her unconscious body spasmodically fighting. Behind him...

...the storm roars outside the massive apartment windows. Alex looks toward it. Feels fitting. Operatic.

He stands taller in front of the storm: a Marlon Brando pose from MUTINY ON THE BOUNTY. As Olivia dies...

...Alex crosses to her laptop, types in "Suicide options." A website pops up with a pictorial of how to kill yourself (FINAL EXIT-esque).

Alex returns to SIM CARD READER-- "Done Downloading." He pops out Olivia's SIM card, slips it back into her phone.

Done, Alex takes the apartment key from his pocket, plops it into Olivia's purse. The last loose end. And...

...he leaves the apartment. And we DISSOLVE from Alex, our antagonist, to...

EXT. TOUR BUS TOP DECK - NIGHT

...ELSBETH TASCIONI, our protagonist.

As different as two people can be. Alex is Goliath to Elsbeth's David. And like all Davids, Elsbeth wears a foam Statue of Liberty visor. Her second visit to New York. A thrilled tourist to the core. Think Sherlock Holmes as a kooky, kitschy stream-of-consciousness Chicago lawyer.

Right now, she's bundled up in a down jacket alone on the top deck of a double-decker tour bus. On the side is printed: "HIPHOP TOUR OF NYC." The rain has stopped, but a shivering RAPPER raps through clenched teeth on a microphone:

HIPHOP TOUR GUIDE

*Yo, the upper east side.
You can take a trip-- check the Frick
or the Guggenheim Frank Lloyd Wright,
yo we got the architects--*

He interrupts his free-style rapping:

HIPHOP TOUR GUIDE (CONT'D)

*You sure you don't want to go
downstairs? It's warmer there.*

Elsbeth grins. The only tourist riding on top:

ELSBETH TASCIONI

*I want the whole New York
experience. You go down. I'm fine.*

HIPHOP TOUR GUIDE

*No. It's my job. So who's here from
out of town?*

Elsbeth eagerly raises her hand. The guide sighs, points to her (the only option):

HIPHOP TOUR GUIDE (CONT'D)
Where you from?

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Chicago.

HIPHOP TOUR GUIDE
Business or pleasure?

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Well, both I guess. I mean, I'm
here for business. It's a temporary
job, but I want it to be permanent.
Because I really love New York.
I've only been here once before,
but I love--

HIPHOP TOUR GUIDE
Okay, hold it, that's all I need--

The Rap Tour Guide starts the beat going on a boombox to
accompany his freestyle rap:

HIPHOP TOUR GUIDE (CONT'D)
*Ayo, we ridin' the bus and I'm
bussin a rhyme, My girl fresh--
from the chi-- here to get a job--*

But Elsbeth looks off to the side, sees TWELVE COP CARS in
front of a skyscraper. Standing:

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Oops, this is my stop. Thanks for
the ride. I'll come by for the rest
later--

Elsbeth rushes toward the stairs as the HipHop guide sits
back-- thank god-- frozen solid.

EXT. 63RD STREET - NIGHT

Twelve cops chat in the cold out front, steaming coffees in
their hands. Elsbeth approaches the shortest cop:

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Hi, sorry to interrupt. I'm
supposed to meet with-- Oh, that's
a pretty scarf.

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE (34). Black, stoic, ethical, marches to
her own drum, a RED TARTAN SCARF wrapped tightly around her
neck. She eyes this lady and her Statue of Liberty crown:

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE

Thank you.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

It looks warm too.

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE

I know, but I'm not supposed to wear it on duty.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

I won't tell anyone. I'm meeting with Detective--

(reads a note)

"Smullen." I called Captain Wagner's office, and they said he was here.

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE

Is Smullen expecting you?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

I don't think anyone's expecting me. I decided to come a day early to see New York. I'm Elsbeth Tascioni. I'm part of the... thing. The thingy-thing.

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE

The "thingy-thing?"

Elsbeth pauses, looking for the word. Finally:

ELSBETH TASCIONI

"Consent decree." I'm the outside observer. The wrongful arrest lawsuit.

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE

Right. This way. But I think you should...

She points toward the tourist crown.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Oh my gosh, I didn't remember I was wearing that.

Elsbeth laughs her quirky laugh, takes off her visor as Officer Kaya lifts the police tape, letting her through.

ELSBETH TASCIONI (CONT'D)

What is this?

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE
A suicide.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
With all these officers?

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE
Special Investigations Unit. They
come out for a VIP suicide.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Is it someone famous?

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE
No. Olivia Cherry. Her parents own
the Hudson Yards.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
I don't know what that means.

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE
Money.

INT. OLIVIA CHERRY'S APARTMENT - VARIOUS - NIGHT

Olivia's apartment is busy now. Ten COPS. Uniformed,
plainclothes. Elsbeth pauses in the doorway, peering in.

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE
You alright?

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Yes. This is my first crime scene.

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE
You can wait in the hall. I'll get
Smullen.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
No, no. I'm just saying-- I'm a
lawyer, so I mostly see crime scene
photos. This is very different.
Better.

Kaya eyes Elsbeth: an odd duck:

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE
This way.

Kaya leads her across the elegant apartment, as Elsbeth
watches two CORONERS lifting Olivia's body onto a gurney. A
FORENSIC PHOTOGRAPHER in the bathroom takes pictures.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Have you ever gone to Open Houses,
just to go see them?

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE

No.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

I'd do it on Sundays. I think I
like looking at how other people
live-- That's a pretty fabric, on
the wall, isn't it? What is that,
purple.

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE

Looks like it.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

I wish I had an eye for things like
that.

Kaya eyes Elsbeth.

INT. OLIVIA CHERRY'S APARTMENT - KITCHEN - NIGHT

In the kitchen, DETECTIVE BILLY SMULLEN, Bronx-accented tough
cop, straight from the "just the facts" era, questions
Olivia's fellow student, Lana Berlin:

DETECTIVE SMULLEN

So you were at a party?

LANA BERLIN

The rap party, yes, sir. At Pub 18.

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE

Detective, this is--

But Smullen raises a finger at Kaya-- one second.

DETECTIVE SMULLEN

And Ms. Cherry was supposed to be
at the party too?

LANA BERLIN

Yes. But then she texted. She was
depressed; she worried about what she
might do to herself. So we told her
to call the Hot Line.

DETECTIVE SMULLEN

Suicide hot line? Do you have the
text?

LANA BERLIN

Yes.

And Lana shows him the iPhone as a curious Elsbeth peers over their shoulders. Smullen eyes Elsbeth suspiciously:

DETECTIVE SMULLEN

Excuse me.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Don't worry, I can see it.

DETECTIVE SMULLEN

(eyeing her)

Could you step outside please, ma'am.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Yes.

Elsbeth steps out of the kitchen as Smullen shoots a look toward Officer Kaya: who the fuck was that?

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE

The Consent Decree. She said Captain Wagner wanted her here.

INT. METROPOLITAN CLUB - NIGHT

On his cellphone:

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER

I didn't want her there. City Hall wants her there.

C.W. WAGNER (55). Black police Captain who owns every room. A bit of a showpiece for the department: always heading from one fundraiser to another. The opposite of Elsbeth: statuesque where she is diminutive; certain where she is flighty. He glides through the Metropolitan Club:

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER (CONT'D)

It's the lawsuit from last year. Your team arrested that valet for murder instead of the Money Manager.

INT. OLIVIA CHERRY'S APARTMENT - VARIOUS - NIGHT

DETECTIVE SMULLEN

That wasn't our fault, Captain. He had a record.

INTERCUT with Detective Smullen:

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
Doesn't matter. Judge ordered us to
hire an outside lawyer for police
oversight: to observe our
investigations for a year.

Smullen looks across toward Elsbeth talking with the Coroner.

DETECTIVE SMULLEN
So what am I supposed to do with
this lady?

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
Let her observe. Her D.O.J. boss in
Chicago says she's easily amused.

DETECTIVE SMULLEN
Well, she's easily amusing herself
all over my crime scene--

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
Bill, it's a suicide. Just humor
her. Tell her some war stories.
She'll get bored and move on.

INT. OLIVIA CHERRY'S APARTMENT - BATHROOM - NIGHT

Elsbeth, far from bored or wanting to move on, chats with the
Female Coroner, AILUNE (34), stolid, dry, a pragmatist.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
How many Ativan would it take to
knock her out?

CORONER AILUNE
Probably around ten, fifteen. But
that's not what killed her. She
taped a plastic bag over her head.

Elsbeth peers into the bathroom's trash. Sees four strips of
adhesive white there.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
What's that in the garbage?

CORONER AILUNE
Who are you again?

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Elsbeth Tascioni. What's your name?

CORONER AILUNE
Ailune.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
That's a pretty name. I always
hated mine. Have you ever heard of
a woman using Old Spice?

Ailune eyes Elsbeth oddly-- what the hell?-- until Elsbeth
points toward a RED STICK DEODORANT in the medicine cabinet.

CORONER AILUNE
No.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Have you ever noticed, you can
learn a lot about a person by
looking into their medicine
cabinet? Was the victim dating
someone?

CORONER AILUNE
I don't know.

Elsbeth takes a pen from her pocket and taps a pink small
plastic CASE in the medicine cabinet. No rattle.

CORONER AILUNE (CONT'D)
What are you doing?

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Diaphragm case. It's empty. Have
you ever been to the Statue of
Liberty?

CORONER AILUNE
(really weird)
No. Why?

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Just curious. I'm looking for
places to go in New York while I'm
here.

Ailune eyes her. Finally:

CORONER AILUNE
I like the High Line. And the
noodle shops in Chinatown--

DETECTIVE SMULLEN
What's going on here?

The Detective arrives to break it up.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Just talking. I'm Elsbeth--

DETECTIVE SMULLEN

Yes, I know. I would rather you stay in the hall, ma'am. I'll be right out.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Sure. By the way, I'm not sure this is a suicide.

DETECTIVE SMULLEN

Just in the hall, please--

CORONER AILUNE

Why do you say that?

Elsbeth points toward the strips in the trash:

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Teeth whitening strips. I'd check her mouth. I don't know anyone who whitens their teeth just before they commit suicide. And if she had her diaphragm in, she was probably expecting someone to have sex with.

Elsbeth heads toward the apartment exit. The Detective and Coroner trade a look. What the heck?

INT. 86TH FLOOR HALL - NIGHT

Elsbeth steps out into the hall, seeing three crying Juilliard students there, comforting each other: Lana, CARLEEN (21), MAXINE (19): actresses loving the drama. Then--

--ding-- the elevator opens, and the actresses see their teacher getting off. Alex. Tearful, trying to remain strong.

ALEX MODARIAN

Oh my god, oh my god.

The three rush to him, hugging: *"Can you believe it?/ I just saw her today."* Alex comforts them all:

ALEX MODARIAN (CONT'D)

I know, she was so happy. She was talking about doing a one-woman show about Shakespeare's women--

Elsbeth watches this all. Like she's watching a play.

THE ACTRESSES

Had you heard anything from her? / No, I knew she was upset about her career, but that's all--

ALEX MODARIAN

She was crushed about my casting--

THE ACTRESSES

No, no--/ She had good parts last year.

MAXINE

Alex, you did nothing wrong--

ALEX MODARIAN

We need more counseling on campus, that's the real crime here. We treat students like paychecks.

And Alex chokes up. Hugging the actresses when--

ELSBETH TASCIONI

You all knew the victim from school?

They turn to see an overlooked Elsbeth:

CARLEEN

Yes.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Why do you think she did this--

ALEX MODARIAN

Who are you?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Elsbeth Tascioni.

ALEX MODARIAN

Are you with the police?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

I think so. I'm not sure yet. I'm either with the police, or watching the police. You said she was crushed about the casting, what does that mean?

CARLEEN

It wasn't his fault--

ALEX MODARIAN

It's okay. I was her director at school, and I cast the shows.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
 Okay, so she wasn't getting the
 parts she wanted?

ALEX MODARIAN
 That's just my guess. She was upset
 about having only one line in the
 play tonight. Should I be talking
 to you or--

DETECTIVE SMULLEN
 No. You shouldn't. And Ms.
 Tascioni, could you wait over
 there?

Elsbeth nods, heads there.

DETECTIVE SMULLEN (CONT'D)
 I'm Detective Smullen, in charge of
 the scene. I want to talk to you
 all individually, but it's my
 understanding, you all got texts
 that Olivia was having difficulty?

INT. SKYSCRAPER ELEVATOR - NIGHT

Alex gets on the elevator, checks his iPhone, when--

ELSBETH TASCIONI
 Hold the doors please.

Alex does and Elsbeth gets on. The two side-by-side:

ELSBETH TASCIONI (CONT'D)
 So you're a director at this acting
 school?

ALEX MODARIAN
 Yes.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
 Can I ask you a question?

ALEX MODARIAN
 Sure.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
 I'm in New York for a week. I'm
 thinking of seeing CATS. Should I?

Alex eyes Elsbeth. Clearly someone beneath his intellectual
 level.

ALEX MODARIAN
I don't know. Is that your taste?

ELSBETH TASCIONI
I guess. I like that song, what is it?

ALEX MODARIAN
"Memories?"

ELSBETH TASCIONI
No... I think the cat's going to heaven and sings it. Something like... "I'm raising a glass to...
(realizes)
Oh my god, you're right. It's "Memories." I like that song.

ALEX MODARIAN
Yes, many people do.

Ding. They arrive in the lobby.

EXT. 63RD STREET - NIGHT

Alex arrives at the curb, typing on his cellphone, waiting for an UBER BLACK as Elsbeth comes up beside him:

ELSBETH TASCIONI
So what about LION KING?

Alex looks toward her:

ALEX MODARIAN
Yes. That seems right for you.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Did you like it?

ALEX MODARIAN
Well, I think theatre can be more than one thing to people.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
What was theatre to Olivia?

Alex eyes Elsbeth. How innocent and naive are these questions.

ALEX MODARIAN
I think it was a religion, like to a lot of us.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
I don't understand.

ALEX MODARIAN

Well, so much of theatre is about spectacle these days-- movies and TV. Superheroes and the like. But a lot of us who make this our lives, think back to Shakespeare and Euripides. We want to honor them.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

You liked her? Olivia?

ALEX MODARIAN

I thought she was... an amazing talent.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Why would an amazing talent commit suicide?

ALEX MODARIAN

Why would an amazing poet like Sylvia Plath kill herself? Because she was depressed.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

And you think Olivia was depressed?

ALEX MODARIAN

I don't know. I didn't think so until she texted.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

So she texted you?

Oops. Alex pauses, talking too freely.

ALEX MODARIAN

No. But she texted the other students. And I was at the wrap party with them.

An Uber SUV pulls up. Alex opens the door, gets in:

ALEX MODARIAN (CONT'D)

Well, this is me. Good night.

But Elsbeth stops him from closing the door:

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Do you know of anyone who would want Olivia dead?

Alex stops, eyes her:

ALEX MODARIAN

Why?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

For when the police start investigating it as a murder.

ALEX MODARIAN

Are they investigating it as a murder?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

No. But Olivia's diaphragm case was empty. I think she was preparing to see someone she was dating.

Alex starts to close his door, stops:

ALEX MODARIAN

That doesn't mean anything.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

What do you mean?

ALEX MODARIAN

I mean, maybe she was waiting for someone, and they didn't show up.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

And she was upset?

ALEX MODARIAN

Maybe.

Elsbeth pauses, thinks about it.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

I guess that could be. Do you know who she was dating?

ALEX MODARIAN

No.

Alex starts to close the door.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Actually, do you have time for one more question?

ALEX MODARIAN

No.

And Alex closes door, and--

INT. UBER BLACK - NIGHT

--the Uber Black rushes off, Alex sitting in the backseat. A bit on edge. He reaches into his pocket and takes out the incriminating SIM card reader. He considers it, as...

EXT. 63RD STREET - NIGHT

...Elsbeth stands alone on the street watching the Uber rushing off. She breathes in the New York air, loving it. When of course a bus rushes by, splashing gutter water onto her. Officer Kaya passes:

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE
Welcome to New York.

Undaunted, Elsbeth puts on her Liberty Crown, and starts down the street.

ACT TWO**INT. POLICE STATION - DAY**

Captain Wagner sits at his impressive desk in his impressive office, facing Detective Smullen and Officer Kaya:

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
So where are we?

DETECTIVE SMULLEN
We were investigating a suicide.
Now the Consent Decree lawyer has
the coroner looking into it as a
murder.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
And is it?

DETECTIVE SMULLEN
Well, it wasn't until this morning.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
So... are we saying she found
something we didn't?

DETECTIVE SMULLEN
Captain. That isn't fair. A lawyer
will always find something. And
this is a rich family looking for
any straw to grasp at.

Wagner considers it. Looks toward Officer Kaya:

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
What do you think of her?

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE
What do you mean?

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
You seem to be a friend of hers?

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE
No. She came to me on the street,
that's all.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
Bottom line, the judge insists we
have a lawyer from outside the city
observing us, but it doesn't have
to be her. So I want to know what
kind of nuisance this lady is going
to be before I request a switch.
Officer Blanke, you stay with her.

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE
Captain, I have patrol--!

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
No, you have lawyer patrol. If she
colors outside the lines, call me.
That's it.

And a disappointed Kaya and Smullen start out as Wagner picks
up his phone, dials a number. An operator come on:

OPERATOR (O.S.)
Department of Justice.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
Agent Celetano please. Tell him,
it's Captain Wagner.

Line connects, then...

AGENT CELETANO (O.S.)
Celetano.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
So what the hell?

INT. CHICAGO DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE - DAY

INTERCUT with a laughing D.O.J. Field Agent, FRED CELETANO:

AGENT CELETANO
Elsbeth Tascioni, right?

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
So you screwed me?

AGENT CELETANO
No, no. You'll get used to her.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
Tell me about this other lawyer,
the other one you mentioned?

AGENT CELETANO
Cary Agos. Tough lawyer. But I
don't think you'll like him. Try
her out for a week. She'll grow on
you.

Wagner frowns incredulously.

EXT. JUILLIARD CAMPUS - DAY

The New York campus. A lot of low buildings near Lincoln
Center. Inside one, we find...

INT. DRAMA CLASS GROUP 52 - DAY

...a steep lecture hall, twenty students spread about. Great
performance space at the front. An actress and an actor mid-
performance, yelling at each other. Maxine and Todd Ritter:

TODD RITTER
IT IS NOT MY FAULT--!

MAXINE
YOU COME IN HERE AND YOU SAY YOU
CHEATED ON ME, AND THEN YOU WANT TO
TURN IT ON ME--

Elsbeth enters at the back, startled by the screaming. They
sound so real. She stands, watching, a bit amazed.

TODD RITTER
OH MY GOD, YOU'RE GOING TO CRY NOW--

MAXINE
(crying)
WHY DO YOU ALWAYS BLAME ME?

And Alex jumps in, stepping on the stage:

ALEX MODARIAN
Very good. Some tough emotions
there. Only one note. The dreaded
"M" word.

He points to the class, and they all answer: "Melodrama."

ALEX MODARIAN (CONT'D)
That's right. And how do we avoid it?

MAXINE
Pull it out of ourselves?

ALEX MODARIAN
Right. Have you had a friend die? A
lover broken up with you?

Elsbeth looks down toward the students. 60% of them young women. And almost all of the women are leaning forward watching Alex intently.

ALEX MODARIAN (CONT'D)
Those emotions you felt then were real. Those tears were real. That punch to the stomach, real. And that was not just acting-- up here. The face. We don't just act with our faces. We act with our whole bodies.

Elsbeth is intrigued as Alex pauses only a second before picking up the same performance lines. Almost a whisper:

ALEX MODARIAN (CONT'D)
*"It is not my fault."
"You come in here and you say you
cheated on me, then you want to
turn it on me--"
(gasps in pain)
"How dare you?"*

And he breaks down. In tears, real tears. Quite effective.

Elsbeth eyes him, surprised, even a bit moved. Alex falls to his knees on the stage in pain, and the students all applaud-- the female students most of all. Alex stands.

ALEX MODARIAN (CONT'D)
Thank you. The way to recognize fake acting: look at the face, then the body. If they are in disagreement, you are watching bad acting. That's--

But Alex pauses, sees Elsbeth at the back. She waves at him. Oy. He moves on:

ALEX MODARIAN (CONT'D)
That's the key. Face and body in unison.

(MORE)

ALEX MODARIAN (CONT'D)

Before we break up here, I want to observe a moment of silence for our classmate, a favorite student, Olivia Beth Cherry.

And the room falls into silence.

Alex lowers his eyes, then peers up to see Elsbeth at the back. After a second, she glances up to peer at him too. Their eyes connect. She smiles.

INT. JUILLIARD CAMPUS - HALLWAY - DAY

Alex rushes hurriedly through the crowded halls of the campus when he hears a yell behind him:

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Mr. Modarian! Hello!! Hi!

The students all stare at the declassé' voice as an embarrassed Alex tries to rush on, but Elsbeth puts on more speed and catches up with him:

ELSBETH TASCIONI (CONT'D)

Mr. Modarian, it's me from last night! Elsbeth. Remember?

Alex frowns as an out-of-breath Elsbeth runs up:

ALEX MODARIAN

Oh yes. How are you?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Good. Sorry, out of breath. I saw the end of your class. It was so amazing.

ALEX MODARIAN

Thank you.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

I loved how you cried and then fell down. It was so real. How do you do that?

ALEX MODARIAN

I'm just heading to my office, Ms.--

ELSBETH TASCIONI

You can call me Elsbeth. I'll come too.

(following him)

So when you cry real tears, how do you do that?

ALEX MODARIAN

Just like I said in class: you have to think of something that makes you feel that way.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

So, maybe I don't have enough sad things happen to me, I could never cry. Look.

ALEX MODARIAN

You know, I'm in a bit of a rush. I have rehearsal.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Yes, and I just have a few questions--

INT. JUILLIARD CAMPUS - ALEX'S OFFICE - DAY

A very nice wood-lined office, great view of New York, and photos of every famous actor who went through Juilliard. Elsbeth looks up at the walls in awe:

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Wow. Are these all your students?

ALEX MODARIAN

Many of them.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

I think I know a lot of them. I think she was in CATS.

ALEX MODARIAN

Possibly, I have to collect my things.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

And I think she was in WICKED. I only know that because I have the cast album. I play it all the time.

ALEX MODARIAN

How can I help you, Ms. Tascioni?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

I uh-- that's a nice picture. I was thinking about what you said last night. Maybe the person Olivia was dating didn't show up and that's what--

ALEX MODARIAN
I was just hypothesizing.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Yes, but that's all I do. I guess that's how we're similar. We make up possibilities. Anyway, the police are looking for who Olivia was dating-- What deodorant do you use?

ALEX MODARIAN
What?

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Anti-perspirant. Do you use Old Spice?

Alex stares at her like she's insane.

ALEX MODARIAN
No.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Oh. It's just that we found Old Spice deodorant in Olivia's medicine cabinet. And her parents--
(pointing)
Is that Meryl Streep?

ALEX MODARIAN
Probably.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Her parents said Olivia didn't use Old Spice.

ALEX MODARIAN
So you're looking for a murderer who uses Old Spice?

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Ha, ha, you're right. It's like a Sherlock Holmes story, but with scratch-and-sniff. We could put that together and sell it.

ALEX MODARIAN
I'm sorry if I don't find this funny. One of my students was killed--

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Or committed suicide.

ALEX MODARIAN

(eyes her: fuck)

Yes, or committed suicide. So I'm sorry if I can't treat this like a game--

ELSBETH TASCIONI

You don't have to apologize.

ALEX MODARIAN

I have to make a call, and get to class. So if you don't mind.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Sure, sure.

Elsbeth moves closer to Alex. He eyes her, realizes:

ALEX MODARIAN

You want to sniff me, don't you?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

No-no-no-no, I'm just--

Alex raises both his arms:

ALEX MODARIAN

Go ahead. Smell me. Come on, Ms. Tascioni.

(a sailor's voice)

"I am a man of the sea. I live for the spice."

ELSBETH TASCIONI

(laughs)

Alex, you are so funny. No, I don't need to smell.

But Alex goes right up to her, offers his arms.

ALEX MODARIAN

I am a Ralph Lauren man. So when you're looking for a victim with a Ralph Lauren scent in the air...

(offers his wrists)

...cuff me. Now, Ms. Tascioni, I really need to make my call.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Yes, I'm sorry. Thank you. I have taken too much of your time.

(pointing to a last photo)

I love that. Your shirt. I like Mariachi shirts.

And Elsbeth pushes out the door. Gone. Alex exhales, leans against his desk. What a fuckin' nuisance. He picks up his cellphone, dials.

ALEX MODARIAN

It's me. Let's not meet tonight.
No, it's this police investigation.
I'll call you. No, Lana, I'll call--

But Alex's door pops open again. Elsbeth leaning in, hearing the end of his call:

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Oh, sorry, go ahead and finish your call. I think I left my phone in here.

ALEX MODARIAN

Call you back.
(to Elsbeth)
What do you need, Ms. Tascioni?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

You can call me Elsbeth. I'm always leaving my stuff around. Sorry, it's my phone.

ALEX MODARIAN

You sure you left it in here?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

I'm not sure of anything. I'm so sorry to-- AH! There it is.

She finds her phone on the floor.

ELSBETH TASCIONI (CONT'D)

It must've slipped out of my pocket. You know, I'm glad I caught you.

ALEX MODARIAN

I'm sure you are.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

This was an odd thing I found. Do you mind if I show you?

ALEX MODARIAN

Does it matter?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

(laughs)
Yes, it matters.

(MORE)

ELSBETH TASCIONI (CONT'D)

This is a copy of the text Olivia wrote to her classmates a few minutes before she killed herself or was murdered.

ALEX MODARIAN

How did you get it?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

A very nice officer; she sent it to me. Do you see it there, on my screen?

ALEX MODARIAN

Yes, I do.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

It says "*I'm so sick of performing for idiots who don't understand what I'm doing.*" That's sad, isn't it?

ALEX MODARIAN

Yes, it is.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

And then she writes "*I'm done with it. The hiding who I really am. Tell my parents I love them.*" Do you see that?

ALEX MODARIAN

I do.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Do you see after every line, there are a few spaces. After every period. Two spaces after every period.

ALEX MODARIAN

Okay?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Did you know that's something older people do, not younger? Two spaces. Younger people, like Olivia, do just one space after every period.

Alex eyes her.

ELSBETH TASCIONI (CONT'D)

And so what I did was go back through Olivia's old texts.

(MORE)

ELSBETH TASCIONI (CONT'D)

And, you know what, she always did one space.

Silence. The two look at each other.

ALEX MODARIAN

Why are you telling me this?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Just wondering if you knew who puts two spaces after the text-- after the period?

ALEX MODARIAN

Why?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Because I don't think Olivia Cherry texted those texts.

ALEX MODARIAN

Because one space verses two?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Yes. I know silly, right?

ALEX MODARIAN

So you want me to keep an eye out for someone who smells like Old Spice and types with two spaces instead of one?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

(grinning)

Yes. If you don't mind. I think Olivia didn't send those texts. I think it was someone trying to make it seem like she was depressed.

ALEX MODARIAN

(smiles incredulously)

So they could kill her?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Yes. I know, weird.

Alex eyes Elsbeth, smiles. Starting to enjoy the chess match.

ALEX MODARIAN

You're a funny one.

Elsbeth grins, liking him:

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Not as funny as you.

The two smile. A grudging respect for another performer.

ALEX MODARIAN
How would you like some tickets to
THE LION KING?

ELSBETH TASCIONI
How would I like? I'd love them.

ALEX MODARIAN
I have a friend producing the show.
I'll get them for you.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Oh my god, what a nice gesture! I
love the movie, but I heard the
play was even better.

ALEX MODARIAN
Yes, it's quite something. I'll
send them to you. In the meantime,
I have to get to rehearsal.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
I thought you had a call.

ALEX MODARIAN
(smiles)
I did, and now I don't.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
I don't want to interrupt your
life.

ALEX MODARIAN
(smiles incredulously,
seeing through her)
Ms. Tascioni, how do I put this?
You must've acted at one point in
your life.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
No, no. I wish I had.

ALEX MODARIAN
Well, you seem to be doing a good
job acting now.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
(laughs)
What a sweet compliment.

Alex squeezes her shoulder and goes. Elsbeth smiles, watching him go. She's liking this, and him.

INT. JUILLIARD CAMPUS - HALLWAY - DAY

A doorway reading: **"Work Study IT Lab."** A person pushes through it. It's...

INT. JUILLIARD CAMPUS - IT LAB - DAY

...Alex. He locks the door, crosses to the closest of ten desktop computers. No one else in the room. He sits at a computer and starts typing. The words pop on our screen:

"Why won't you answer my calls? I know where you live..."

Alex pauses, considers it, types in a name at the end:

"Trevor."

He smiles. A chess master moving his Queen into position. He hits "print" on the screen, and the laser printer starts to churning away, printing out the document.

ACT THREE

EXT. LOAB BOATHOUSE - CENTRAL PARK - DAY

Captain Wagner. Impressive in his uniform, sits at a white tablecloth at the Central Park boathouse, scrolling texts, ignoring the beautiful tourist view.

[By the way, the look of the show is beautiful New York. Not gritty, not grey. The tourist New York Elsbeth sees.]

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Captain Wagner!

Elsbeth rushes, happy, looking out at the boats on the lake:

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER

Ms. Tascioni. I'm glad you could meet me here.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Oh my god, how could I not? What a beautiful spot.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER

Yes, Officer Blanke said you wanted to experience the real New York.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
(looking out at the lake)
We have to go out on a rowboat!

Wagner laughs: not in a million years.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
So... I wanted to talk about how we
work together. You've been having
quite a time with our officers.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
They're so nice.
(sees his medals)
What does that one mean?

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
I don't know. It means I have a red
medal.

Elsbeth laughs, liking him.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER (CONT'D)
So I was reading the language of
the consent decree. And you have a
great deal of freedom in
questioning who you want and going
where you want--

ELSBETH TASCIONI
I know, it's wonderful.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
Yes, but the intent is more to
follow our officers. Instead they
appear to be following you.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
(smiles)
Captain, can I tell you a little
bit about why I took this job?

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
I can't wait.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
I spent thirty years being a lawyer.
And I sometimes knew the person I
was defending was guilty. But then
this D.O.J. agent, Celetano, he
mentioned this job, and three
magical words-- actually four.

(MORE)

ELSBETH TASCIONI (CONT'D)

"New York." I've always wanted to live here. I was in Times Square last night. Have you ever been there?

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER

Yes.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Everybody seems to hate it. But all those lights. It's magical. It's like Oz.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER

The other two?

(off Elsbeth's confusion)

You said four words.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Oh. "The truth." Agent Celetano said I didn't have to lie anymore. I could have my work be all about finding the truth, not just a better way to tell a lie for someone I was defending.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER

Why are you hounding Professor Modarian?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Alex? I'm not hounding him. I like him. He gave me tickets to a play tonight.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER

Elsbeth. Come on. You just talked about "the truth." So please be truthful with me.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

(smiles)

You're right. As a lawyer, I defended a lot of guilty people. And I always judged their guilt by how much they talked. Men who have something to hide talk a lot. Not women. I'm not sure why. Also Alex came to the crime scene. Guilty men want to be there. They are impatient.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER

So you think he killed his student? Why?

ELSBETH TASCIONI
I don't know. That's what's
bothering me. I have ideas, but no
proof.

Wagner eyes her.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
You know you're not guaranteed this
job, Ms. Tascioni?

ELSBETH TASCIONI
What do you mean?

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
I mean, I must have an outside
lawyer to satisfy the consent
decree. But it doesn't have to be
you.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Who else would it be?

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
Another lawyer from Chicago:
someone Celetano suggested.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
You don't like me?

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
This isn't personal. You talk about
the truth, Ms. Tascioni. But
there's more than one truth.
There's the truth of the ultimate
goal.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Which is?

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
Serving the public. Not just
serving one case. Sometimes you
have to let a case go-- do the best
you can-- then help the next
person. Do you understand?

ELSBETH TASCIONI
You want me to move on?

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
I want you to help my officers, not
get in their way.

Elsbeth eyes Wagner. Then smiles:

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Okay. I'll do that.

INT. JUILLIARD CAMPUS - HALLWAY - DAY

Elsbeth rushes toward Alex's campus office. She pushes through the open door and finds...

INT. JUILLIARD CAMPUS - ALEX'S OFFICE - DAY

...Alex leaning against his desk...

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Mr. Modarian, I didn't know if you--

But Elsbeth pauses, sees he's being questioned by Detective Smullen and Officer Kaya, both turning to her:

ALEX MODARIAN
Ms. Tascioni, hi, come on in. We were just talking about you.

Elsbeth eyes Smullen, venturing into the middle of a police questioning:

DETECTIVE SMULLEN
Did Ms. Tascioni ever ask you about this, sir?

ALEX MODARIAN
No, she's been curious about my deodorant use. But she never asked me about a Trevor James. Did you?

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Who is Trevor James?

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE
Someone stalking Olivia. We haven't found him yet.

Kaya offers Elsbeth several typed letters in Evidence bags. Elsbeth eyes them incredulously.

DETECTIVE SMULLEN
What do you know about this man?

ALEX MODARIAN
Not much. The students all have fans. But some fans turn toxic. It's one of the dangers of being an actor. Even a student-actor.

Elsbeth eyes the top typed letter. *"Why won't you answer my calls? I know where you live. --Trevor."* It's the one we saw Alex type up.

DETECTIVE SMULLEN

And you don't remember if Ms. Cherry ever mentioned this stalker?

ALEX MODARIAN

No. There are people coming to the dressing room all the time, all hoping to score an autograph from the next Meryl Streep.

Elsbeth counts the spaces between each sentence.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Two spaces.

They all look toward Elsbeth.

DETECTIVE SMULLEN

I'm sorry. We'll talk outside, Ms. Tascioni.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Have you questioned the person who wrote these?

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE

Not yet.

DETECTIVE SMULLEN

Let's talk outside. Thank you for your help, Mr. Modarian.

INT. JUILLIARD CAMPUS - HALLWAY - DAY

Elsbeth steps out with Smullen and Kaya, students flowing around them:

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Where did these letters come from?

DETECTIVE SMULLEN

The dressing room. Olivia Cherry's make-up station.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

And did Mr. Modarian find them?

DETECTIVE SMULLEN

Let it go. Forty students saw Alex Modarian at the wrap party at the time of Olivia's death. How did he manage that?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

I don't know yet.

DETECTIVE SMULLEN

And what's his motive?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

I don't know yet.

DETECTIVE SMULLEN

Then stop hounding him. What I'm doing is police work. I have a suspect, and I have a motive--

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Stalking?

DETECTIVE SMULLEN

Yes. Let me do my job. Come in afterwards if you want and criticize me.

And Smullen charges off. Elsbeth watches him go, a bit humbled. She looks over and sees Officer Kaya staying behind.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Are you staying?

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE

I've been ordered to follow you.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

I like that shade of lipstick. What is it called?

Officer Kaya stares at her:

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE

Red.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

(smiles)

Who found these stalking letters?
Was it Mr. Modarian?

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE

Yes.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Did you notice two spaces after each sentence?

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE

I'd rather not say. I think I'm s'posed to just observe.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

I think it's time to find some writing of Mr. Modarian to see if he leaves two spaces after each line--

But Elsbeth suddenly--

--stops. Freezes. Something on her mind. Gears turning inside. Kaya watches her.

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE

What?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

I don't know.

Elsbeth suddenly turns toward the walls of the hall. All along both sides are framed STUDENT PLAYBILLS going back decades.

She looks at the latest. MEDEA. On the cast page the top name listed for Medea is: "Lana Berlin." A photo next to it.

INT. DRESSING ROOM - DAY

Lana Berlin. She sits in the dressing room, applying make-up, getting ready for a performance:

LANA BERLIN

No, Mr. Modarian has been a perfect gentlemen.

Elsbeth sitting beside her:

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Yes, I like him too. But I'm just wondering-- and I love that scene you did in class--

LANA BERLIN

The scene I'm being cheated on?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Yeah. It was great.

LANA BERLIN

I was worried I went too big.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

No, no, I like big. So are you two dating?

LANA BERLIN

Excuse me?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

You and Alex, are you dating?

Lana shoots a look toward a uniformed Officer Kaya behind Elsbeth.

LANA BERLIN

Is he in trouble?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

No, no. It's just a simple question.

LANA BERLIN

I would never date a teacher.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

It's just-- I was in Alex's office--
Oh, I like that broach--

LANA BERLIN

Thank you. It's costume jewelry.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

I think I like costume jewelry more than real jewelry. I was in Alex's office, and I heard him on the phone with a "Lana."

LANA BERLIN

It must've been another Lana.

Elsbeth eyes her. Lana is very convincing, holding Elsbeth's stare, not looking away. But Elsbeth looks down at...

...Lana's hands in her lap, holding a make-up brush tightly.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

You know what was so great in that class I saw. It was how Alex said--
Is this a syllabus from class?

A piece of paper beside Lana.

LANA BERLIN

Yes.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Can I take it?

LANA BERLIN

Sure.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

I loved how Alex said acting was only convincing if you could do it on your face and your body at the same time. I never thought of that before. I think it's true.

And Elsbeth looks back down at Lana's hands and Lana realizes she's giving herself away with her tense hands. She quickly lets her hands relax.

ELSBETH TASCIONI (CONT'D)

If you're dating Alex, it's no big deal. I'm just curious.

Lana stares at Elsbeth, becoming defiant:

LANA BERLIN

I know what you're thinking, but I got these parts on my own. I didn't sleep with him for them.

INT. JUILLIARD CAMPUS - LONG THEATRE HALL - DAY

Elsbeth rushes back into the long theatre hall, Officer Kaya behind her.

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE

You're looking for motive?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Yes. Alex looks to every new semester for a pretty replacement. Lana replaced Olivia, and that means Olivia must've replaced... let's see.

Elsbeth heads toward the framed playbills, moving back through a plaque reading "2022." Landing under a "2021" plaque.

ELSBETH TASCIONI (CONT'D)

Olivia got the lead in ten plays in a row. Who did he cast in the lead before her?

She stops on the first playbill under "2021." And she runs her finger to the first name on a cast list. A name is there and a photo. Another pretty undergraduate:

ELSBETH TASCIONI (CONT'D)
Beatrice Bruni.

EXT. SHUBERT THEATRE - DAY

A TAXI pulls up to a Broadway theatre, Elsbeth getting out. And right behind it, Officer Kaya pulls up in her squad car.

INT. SHUBERT THEATRE - MAIN STAGE - DAY

A pretty actress dressed as a nun hangs from a harness at some kind of technical rehearsal for a Broadway play. BEATRICE BRUNI (25). Caustic, funny, a Broadway vet.

BEATRICE BRUNI
So are you asking if I was dating
Alex, or are you asking if I was
sleeping with him to get parts?

Elsbeth smiles, eyes this suspended nun like it's the most normal thing in the world:

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Well, both. But the second question
is more interesting, isn't it?

BEATRICE BRUNI
(laughs)
Yes, it is. But I'm a nun now, so I
don't kiss and tell.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Even if this could really help--
Why are you a nun now?

BEATRICE BRUNI
The musical. Flying Nun mixed with
the Singing Nun.
(sings "Dominique")
*"Dominique-nique-nique S'en allait
tout simplement Routier--"*

And Beatrice is suddenly lifted ten feet in the air. Elsbeth yells up:

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Do you know the actress, Olivia
Cherry?

BEATRICE BRUNI

Oh god, I heard. That was awful.
She was a good actress.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

I saw your last semester your parts
got smaller as hers got bigger.

Beatrice gestures to the stage hands to lower her down again.
Whispers:

BEATRICE BRUNI

Yeah. Alex has his favorites. The
wider you spread your legs, the
bigger the part.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

And will you sign a statement to
that effect?

BEATRICE BRUNI

No.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Even if it stopped a killer.

BEATRICE BRUNI

Alex isn't a killer. He's just a
scumbag.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Unless he was worried about being
cancelled.

Kaya shoots a look toward Elsbeth. The first time the "c"
word is mentioned.

BEATRICE BRUNI

Do you know that for a fact?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

No. That's why I need you.

BEATRICE BRUNI

No, no. Prove it, then come back to
me and I'll sign your statement.
(yells off)
Ready!

And the stage-hands whip her up in the air again as she
sings: "*Dominique-nique-nique--*" Elsbeth sighs, turns to
Kaya:

ELSBETH TASCIONI
That's the motive.

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE
Only if it's true.

ACT FOUR

INT. PLAZA HOTEL - BALLROOM - NIGHT

Some kind of police award ceremony in a large ballroom. Applause for an OFFICER having a badge pinned on him, but we're backstage with Captain Wagner meeting with Smullen and Kaya.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
Okay, fast, where are we?

DETECTIVE SMULLEN
Investigating this stalker. But he has an alibi for the death. He was at a comedy show in Brooklyn.

Wagner frowns, turns to Kaya:

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
And, you?

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE
I've been following Elsbeth Tascioni.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
And?

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE
She thinks the acting teacher was sleeping with the victim.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
Is this true?

DETECTIVE SMULLEN
We have no evidence to that effect, Captain.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
Officer?

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE
Tascioni has gone back through the plays for the last three years, and found the acting teacher features a new actress every six months. It's her theory that that's because he's sleeping with that student.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
What do you think?

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE
I don't think it's my position--

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
Officer! Just say it.

Kaya pauses, considers it.

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE
I think... There's a chance she's right.

DETECTIVE SMULLEN
So he kills her because he's sleeping with her? That makes no sense.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
Officer?

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE
Tascioni thinks he killed her because he was afraid she was going to the school to get him fired.

DETECTIVE SMULLEN
Captain, this is just nonsense intuition. We need proof--

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
Then get it! I don't care who's right and who's wrong. So either follow her leads or come up with your own. And you--
(to Kaya)
Keep on her. Where is she now?

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE
A play reading.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
Then why are you here?

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE
Because you asked me here.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
Go.

INT. JUILLIARD CAMPUS - SOCIAL ROOM - NIGHT

The end of a play reading. The students all standing, socializing at a impromptu bar with wine. Alex is in the middle, telling war stories, Lana right next to him, their arms pressed against each other:

ALEX MODARIAN
And right in the middle of the soliloquy, she whispered: "I gotta pee."

The students all laugh. But then Alex and Lana look across the room seeing Elsbeth waving, approaching.

ELSBETH TASCIONI (O.S.)
Mr. Modarian!

Lana frowns, slips away, as Alex smiles at an approaching Elsbeth:

ALEX MODARIAN
Ms. Tascioni, it's so good to see you. It sounds like you've been a busy little bee.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Bzzzt-bzzzt. How was your play reading?

ALEX MODARIAN
Not perfect. Thank you for asking.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
I'm sorry, but I got you a present. I thought you deserved something for all your patience.

She pulls from a plastic bag a small SOUVENIR TONY AWARD.

ALEX MODARIAN
Ah, a Tony, how nice.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
See. I even got your name on it. "Best Director."

ALEX MODARIAN

I will cherish this. My guess is that's not the only reason you're here, Elsbeth.

Elsbeth looks up at him.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

You used my name.

ALEX MODARIAN

It feels appropriate. Let me get another drink, and we can talk. Can I get you anything, Elsbeth?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

No, no, I'm kooky if I drink. You really don't want to see that.

ALEX MODARIAN

Oh, sure I do.

Laughing, Elsbeth sets several documents in front of him at the bar as he pours himself some wine:

ELSBETH TASCIONI

So here's the syllabus from your class. And here are copies of Olivia's texts-- the ones from the night of her death, remember?

ALEX MODARIAN

I do remember.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Olivia sent twelve texts to friends saying she wanted to kill herself. I made some hard copies. Can you read them?

ALEX MODARIAN

I can.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Do you know there's a typo on your syllabus? See, you typed "deceive," but you accidentally switched the "e" and the "i." Do you know that's the most common spelling mistake in English?

ALEX MODARIAN

Really?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Yes. Now look over here. On Olivia's texts. She writes: "I'm sick of forfeiting my career" but she switches the "e" and the "i" too.

Silence. Alex stares at Elsbeth.

ALEX MODARIAN

And what do you deduce from that, Sherlock?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

(laughs)

Well, I deduce, Watson, that you wrote those texts to supply yourself with an alibi.

ALEX MODARIAN

And how did I send those texts from Olivia's phone?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Well, I have a friend at Kinkos who told me all about this thing called a SIM card cloning thing. I think that's how you say it. You copied Olivia's SIM card so you could text from her phone whenever you wanted.

Alex. He stares at Elsbeth. Drinks.

ALEX MODARIAN

Have you been right all your life, Elsbeth?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

No, no, hardly. Once I guessed the numbers of the lottery. But I hadn't bought a ticket so it didn't really matter.

Alex looks up, calls to somebody:

ALEX MODARIAN

Todd. Do you have a minute?

Todd Ritter, the quirky-handsome tech guy, looks up from drinking with other actors. Rushes over.

TODD RITTER

Yes, sir?

ALEX MODARIAN

This is my T.A., Todd Ritter. This is Elsbeth Tascioni. She has something to do with the police department, but no one knows what.

TODD RITTER

Hello.

Elsbeth eyes him: no idea where this is going.

ALEX MODARIAN

Todd, who types up my syllabuses?

TODD RITTER

I do, sir.

ALEX MODARIAN

And is that your typo there?

TODD RITTER

Oh, I'm sorry, sir. Is it?

Todd leans in toward the syllabus, confused, as Alex shoots a look toward Elsbeth who frowns.

ALEX MODARIAN

Don't worry. It's the most common mistake in the English language. One last question, Todd. Sorry to get personal. But Elsbeth was commenting on how much she loved your cologne. What is it?

TODD RITTER

I don't use cologne.

ALEX MODARIAN

But your deodorant?

TODD RITTER

Old Spice. I like their commercials.

ALEX MODARIAN

Thank you, Todd. I think Elsbeth might have some further questions. Anything, Elsbeth?

Elsbeth stares at Alex. Beaten.

ALEX MODARIAN (CONT'D)

Maybe you should go see THE LION KING, Elsbeth.

ACT FIVE**INT. POLICE STATION - INTERROGATION ROOM - NIGHT**

Todd Ritter. In tears. He sits in a tiny police interrogation room being question by Detective Smullen:

TODD RITTER
I didn't kill her. I didn't. I
loved her.

DETECTIVE SMULLEN
But you admit you were in her
apartment that night?

TODD RITTER
No, I was heading to her apartment,
but no one answered the door.

DETECTIVE SMULLEN
Did you write these texts?

TODD RITTER
No. I didn't. Oh god.

DETECTIVE SMULLEN
But you wrote this syllabus.

TODD RITTER
Yes, but that's not my typo.

And Todd breaks down crying as...

INT. POLICE STATION - BULLPEN - NIGHT

...a frowning Elsbeth sits with Smullen watching the video. Now her friend, he offers his hand to Elsbeth:

DETECTIVE SMULLEN
Good job, Miss Tascioni.

Surprised, she takes the handshake.

DETECTIVE SMULLEN (CONT'D)
Captain said it shouldn't matter
which of us is wrong or right. We
need to listen to each other. So
thank you. Forensics found some DNA
on a hair on the deodorant. It
belonged to him. Todd Ritter.

Elsbeth eyes the video incredulously.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Why would he do it?

DETECTIVE SMULLEN
He was jealous of her. Olivia was seeing other people. He got there that night, they fought, he killed her, then made it look like suicide.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Did he confess?

DETECTIVE SMULLEN
No, not yet. But he wants to. He blames himself. So good job. Nice working with you.

He pats her shoulder and starts off. Elsbeth frowns, sees Officer Kaya again sitting nearby to follow her. Elsbeth looks back at the video of a crying Todd Ritter:

TODD RITTER (ON VIDEO)
Look, I just cut and paste parts of the syllabus from the notes on Mr. Modarian's computer. It's not my typos.

Elsbeth trades a look with Kaya, and jumps up.

EXT. POLICE STATION - NIGHT

Elsbeth rushes to pursue Captain Wagner heading toward a limo for another one of his events, in his full uniform dress:

ELSBETH TASCIONI
It's not him.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
Ms. Tascioni, unlike apparently you, I have 286 other ongoing homicide cases. So you have to specify--

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Todd Ritter. He didn't kill Olivia Cherry.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
Ms. Tascioni, here's a thought: take "yes" for an answer. This kid was sleeping with Olivia. He lied about going to her apartment that night.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
People lie about a lot of things.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
And guilty people lie about even
more. This is our job, Elsbeth. Let
us do our job.
(opening the limo door)
Now I have to go--

ELSBETH TASCIONI
I'll go with you--

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
No, no. You go apologize. This
acting teacher is bringing charges
against you and the department for
harassment. So go to him and
grovel, and we'll talk about your
future.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
What does that mean?

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
I want you to stay. You want to
stay. But I need you to know when to
stop. You solved this. Now move on.
Or I'll be calling Cary Agos.
(off Elsbeth's look)
You know Cary?

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Yes, from Chicago.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
You know he's good?
(Elsbeth nods)
Then take the win and move on. You
solved a case.

But Elsbeth keeps him from closing the limo door:

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Did you find the SIM card reader?

Wagner stares at her, frowning.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
Go apologize. Now let go of the
door or I'll shoot you.

Wagner closes the car door, and the limo pulls away.

Elsbeth pauses there, turns to see Officer Kaya behind her. They stare at each other:

ELSBETH TASCIONI
What do you think?

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE
I think if you want to stay in New York, you should go apologize.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
And if I can't?

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE
Then prove Ritter doesn't have the SIM card reader.

Elsbeth eyes her, considers it.

EXT. LINCOLN CENTER - NIGHT

Lincoln Center at night. Fountain exploding. Again beautiful New York. Inside...

INT. LINCOLN CENTER - LIGHTING BOOTH - NIGHT

...Alex stands in the lighting booth, like a captain of a ship, looking down at the stage. Ready for a performance--

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Mr. Modarian.

Alex smiles. The chipper ever present voice. He turns, grinning, starting to like the battle:

ALEX MODARIAN
Elsbeth.

The two study each other, like Tango partners. (Do Tango Partners study each other?)

ALEX MODARIAN (CONT'D)
What are we up to tonight?

ELSBETH TASCIONI
An apology. And cookies.

Elsbeth has a plate of homemade cookies.

ELSBETH TASCIONI (CONT'D)
I found a book on baking, and I thought I'd give it a try. I want to be a different person in New York.

ALEX MODARIAN

Thank you.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

They're supposed to be Halloween cookies, but I put in too much food coloring, so they're a bit red. Try one.

Bright red cookies.

ALEX MODARIAN

Maybe later. Thank you.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Let me say, Mr. Modarian, you have been so nice to me, and I have to apologize.

ALEX MODARIAN

No, you don't.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Yes, actually, the Captain says I do.

ALEX MODARIAN

(laughs)

So they heard about my complaint?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Yes, and all I want to say, sir, I'm a great admirer of your craft. And I've enjoyed our little jousts--

ALEX MODARIAN

Yes, occasionally I did too. Someone's gesturing to you.

Elsbeth turns to see Kaya at the door, on her cellphone.

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE

Captain Wagner.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

(apologizing to Alex)

I'll be right back.

Elsbeth goes to Kaya at the door, whispering.

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE

Captain Wagner got a search warrant for his dorm room.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

It's not going to be there. I told him. Todd Ritter had nothing to do with her SIM card--

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE

That's why Wagner wants you there. He wants you to observe the search.

Alex, his back turned, hears their conversation, not turning.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

It's a waste of time. Is Mr. Ritter still denying it?

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE

We had to let him go. We could only hold him for 24 hours.

A depressed Elsbeth turns back to Alex:

ELSBETH TASCIONI

I have to go, Mr. Modarian. It was very nice meeting you.

ALEX MODARIAN

You seem sad, Elsbeth.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

No, no, I'm good.
(turns to him)
Do you think the truth is worth giving up your dream job for?

ALEX MODARIAN

Definitely. My art is nothing without the truth. Stick to your guns.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

Thank you. I'll miss New York. Enjoy the cookies.

And Elsbeth is out the door. Gone. Alex eyes the empty door and whispers to himself:

ALEX MODARIAN

Good-bye, Miss Tascioni.

INT. LINCOLN CENTER - STAGE - NIGHT

A tech rehearsal. Lana Berlin playing Lady Macbeth:

LANA BERLIN
 Come to my woman's breasts, and
 take my milk for gall, you
 murdering ministers--

On the scrim behind her, a series of devils and angels appear and swirl past her. A nice effect that...

INT. LINCOLN CENTER - LIGHTING BOOTH - NIGHT

...Alex in the lighting booth, approves of, nodding. Beside him in the booth sits the lighting tech, Todd Ritter.

ALEX MODARIAN
 They just let you go?

TODD RITTER
 Yeah, "not enough evidence." But they want me to come in tomorrow for questioning.

ALEX MODARIAN
 Are you nervous?

TODD RITTER
 I guess. I think they think I did it.

ALEX MODARIAN
 They're fishing, I'm sure.

TODD RITTER
 Yeah, they keep asking how I sent texts for Olivia. But I didn't. And I think those typos were yours, from when I cut-and-pasted your class notes.

ALEX MODARIAN
 Well, I'm glad you can do the tech rehearsal tonight. It's been nuts around here. Can you hold down the fort. I have to use the restroom.

TODD RITTER
 Sure.

Alex starts out of the booth, again--

INT. LINCOLN CENTER - VARIOUS HALLWAYS, ROOMS - DAY

--pulling from his pocket his iPhone, tapping 4 minutes on the stop watch. 3:59... 3:58.

Alex rushes down the aisle of the dark theatre, making a right turn through an exit, and down a narrow passageway, through a "No Admittance" door, as we hear...

...all the actors on stage, playing Macbeth, the death of King Duncan. Alex cuts across the stage behind the scrim, hearing the Shakespearian lines backstage: "*I have done the deed. Didst thou not hear a noise?*"

Alex checks his stop watch. Just under three minutes. He'd better hurry. He shoves in the dressing room door, finding...

INT. DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT

...the dressing room, as expected, empty. Everyone on stage. Their voices coming from the closed circuit TV above.

Alex rushes down the dozens of make-up stations to--

--Todd Ritter's station. His photo tucked in the mirror. He needs to hurry. He pulls on his surgical gloves, grabs Todd Ritter's DUFFEL BAG. Zips it open. And--

--takes from his pocket the SIM CARD READER. He drops it in the bag when--

DETECTIVE SMULLEN (O.S.)
Mr. Modarian.

A new voice. Confused, Alex looks up at the closed circuit TV, but realizes the voice is coming from behind him.

He turns, finding Detective Smullen. Beside him is a formidable group: Captain Wagner, Officer Kaya, and three other uniformed cops. All staring at him.

ALEX MODARIAN
Ah. I was just...

But Smullen steps forward, takes the Sim Card Reader, places it in an evidence bag. And--

--Alex sees Elsbeth Tascioni off to the side. Alex starts to laugh, caught red-handed. He turns to Elsbeth and...

...slow-claps.

ALEX MODARIAN (CONT'D)
Nicely played.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
You too, Alex.

ALEX MODARIAN
 No, no. Your performance in the
 lighting booth. Good acting.
 (to Kaya)
 Both of you.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
 You're just being kind.

Alex sits in a dressing room chair, crosses his legs. Now
 that it's over, he's light as a feather.

ALEX MODARIAN
 How did you know? All this time
 what was my give away?

ELSBETH TASCIONI
 Acting.

ALEX MODARIAN
 You weren't convinced by my acting?

ELSBETH TASCIONI
 No, I was. People in life don't
 act. Here, have a cookie.

She slides a plate of Halloween cookies toward him. Alex
 smiles, takes a very red one. Takes a bite.

ALEX MODARIAN
 Not bad.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
 Thank you.

OFFICER KAYA BLANKE
 Please stand, sir.

He does and Kaya cuffs him.

ALEX MODARIAN
 Did you see CATS?

ELSBETH TASCIONI
 Tonight.

ALEX MODARIAN
 Think of me. Memories.

And Alex is led off. Tascioni whispers:

ELSBETH TASCIONI
 I will.

EXT. LINCOLN CENTER - NIGHT

Outside, Elsbeth stops by the Lincoln Center fountain, a little sad watching Alex being helped into a patrol car.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
Oh, don't be such a hypocrite. You won.

Elsbeth sees Captain Wagner approaching:

ELSBETH TASCIONI
I can still feel sad. I liked him.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
Now how are we going to make this work? You and the department.

Elsbeth turns to him, touched:

ELSBETH TASCIONI
You want me? You don't want Cary Agos?

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
No. The department wants you.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
But you want me too.
(tearful)
Here. We need to hug.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
No, no, we don't.

And before she can reach, the Lincoln fountain explodes in a geyser behind them. Elsbeth turns toward it, impressed.

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Wow. Wow.

CAPTAIN C.W. WAGNER
Yes, we did that just for you.
Welcome to New York.

Elsbeth's cellphone rings. She frowns, seeing who it is. Answering:

ELSBETH TASCIONI
Yes, sir.

AGENT CELETANO (O.S.)
Is he there?

ELSBETH TASCIONI

No.

INT. CHICAGO DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE - DAY

We INTERCUT with the D.O.J. Offices:

AGENT CELETANO

Ready to get started?

Elsbeth watches Captain Wagner get in a town car:

ELSBETH TASCIONI

I think you're wrong about him,
sir. Captain Wagner's been nice to
me.

AGENT CELETANO

Nice people can be corrupt too.

ELSBETH TASCIONI

I'd rather not do this.

AGENT CELETANO

Too bad. You're not a defense
lawyer anymore. The truth means
putting people in jail. Call me
when you're alone.

And Celetano hangs up.

Elsbeth hangs up too, frowning, watching Wagner take off.

THE END