

Trimming the Truth
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Characters:

Ron Bennett- President and co-owner of *Tight Trim Landscaping and Tree Service*. He is married to Renae. He has a good eye for design and space, but has always lacked in a business sense. He is also obsessed with musical theatre, often bursting into show tunes without warning... He is the business partner of Jack Holsten. Although they are neighbors and “friends”, he has begun to suspect Jack of illicit dealings in their business.

Renae Bennett - Wife of Ron. She’s the success behind the man. Well organized and attentive to details (perhaps to an annoying degree), she warrantied the launch of his company, *Tight Trim*, and was the early overseer of its success. As the company evolved, she backed off to raise children. She may have engaged in an affair with Jack Holsten, 30 years ago...an affair which has remained a secret to some.

Horace Bennett — The Bennett’s son. He’s a Rutgers U. graduate with a degree in business administration. He thrives on being dominated by his wife, Louise. He works for the family business. Although highly competent and with a record of excellent achievement, he’s never been his father’s favorite.

Louise Bennett - Horace’s wife. She’s not particularly well-liked by the family... considered a cradle robber and gold digger. She is a social media “influencer.” in the area of sadomasochism. She tends to bully her husband...and he likes it.

Phyllis Bennett The Bennett’s daughter. She’s a free-spirit, hippie type. Anti-establishment and anti-capitalism. Believes in peace, love and happiness. Lots of four letter words. She’s the black sheep of the family but happy to help with her parent’s anniversary party.

Jack Holsten He’s Ron Bennett’s neighbor, business partner and “friend”. They own a Landscaping and Tree service, *Tight Trim*. The firm has recently encountered legal issues centering around possible fraudulent business practices and sexual harassment. He’s rumored to be a very “well equipped” fellow. He may have engaged in a sexual affair with Ron’s wife, Renae.

Mona Holsten Jack's wife. She's a neighbor and friend of the Bennetts. She and Renae have known each other since high school and have always been close. She sells sex toys on the internet. Her marriage has been on the rocks for quite some time. She may have a drinking problem.

Florence Fellaesha An independent accountant/attorney appointed by the court to investigate the business practices of *Tight Trim Landscaping*. She speaks with a slight frontal lisp. She has been taking online courses through the Hoboken Institute for The Criminal Arts.

Charlie Chunkahunk Handsome head-landscaper for *Tight Trim*. Very good with his hands and in the operation of power equipment, but a little slow upstairs. He's a very nice guy but can be easily manipulated.

Mabel Marmalade Tight Trim customer who reported the extortion threats to the police. Her husband is often out of the country on business. She's quite manipulative and convincing as a victim. But there might be more to her story.

Denise Caldero Former *Tight Trim* Office Manager. Smart. Watchful. She ran billing, payroll, and accounts during the company's most aggressive growth. She knows the "ins" and "outs" of the company better than anyone. Tends to over-think and over-talk. Although she officially left "voluntarily," she maintains she was pushed out. Carries a quiet, simmering resentment — especially toward Ron and Jack.

Cameo Kenny Audio technician who occasionally transforms into various AI generated spirits and personas.

Co-hosts- Scotti Sincerely and Vinny Viagoraro— Competitive DJ's- in the spirit of Abbott and Costello.

During the cocktail hour, the cast is circulating the audience engaging in "table talk" Cast should try to connect their faces with the names on the program. Also, float the rumor that the company is being investigated.

Vinny: Greetings ladies and gentlemen and welcome. I am your host with the most, Vinny Viagoraro, heard every weekday from 4 to 7 on AM 1580, WCRV radio..playing all the country hits from Conway to Zach. ... (SFX) As you know,

we are all gathered here at the Curtainsville Inn for a lovely surprise party, celebrating the 40th wedding anniversary of our dear friends, Ron and Renae Bennet.

Scotti rushes in out of breath. He trips and awkwardly recovers.

Scotti: Woah..Woah... Sorry Vinny...I'm here. I'm here.

Vinny: You're late, Scotti. I had to start without you.

Scotti: Sorry. So sorry ladies and gentlemen. I'm your co-host Scotti Sincerely—listen to me every weekday from 4 to 7 on J-11.75 WNRJ— playing all your 40's Big Band favorites (SFX).

Vinny: Well, Scotti, my favorite afternoon drive radio competitor... I'm sure we're all glad you finally made it. What the heck happened?

Scotti: I had a little accident....with the car...

Vinny: Oh, no. Were you hurt?

Scotti: No...no... I'm fine. Thank goodness.

Vinny: Yes, that's fortunate... So as I was saying ladies and gentlemen, we're here to celebrate the ruby anniversary of the Bennetts—

Scotti: Vinny...I guess I have something else to tell you. My car wouldn't start tonight. So I had to borrow a car.

Vinny: Oh? Why wouldn't your car start?

Scotti: It didn't have any gas.

Vinny: Oh, geez. Well, whose car did you borrow?

Scotti: I...I had to borrow your wife's car?

Vinny: Oh...I see...(Double-take or maybe even a spit-take) My wife's car?! Oh, my God! You borrowed my wife's car and you crashed it?

Scotti: Well, yes...a little bit. I'm so....so.. sorry about that. I flipped it over and it landed in a ditch. Between you and me, I don't think your wife is gonna be too happy about that.

Vinny: No! I don't imagine she — You mean you haven't told her yet?

Scotti: No...I can't tell her. I can't.

Vinny: What do you mean, you can't tell her? She deserves to know you flipped her car over!

Scotti: Yeah...I know...but I can't.

Vinny: Why? Why can't you tell her?!

Scotti: She's under the car.

Vinny: *SHE'S UNDER THE CAR!?!?* (Beat) Oh...no... is she in a coma??

Scotti: No...she's in a pants suit.

Vinny: You idiot. (He exits quickly)

Scotti: Yikes! I'm sure he'll be back. Anyway....Ladies and gentlemen...on this joyous occasion, it appears that all is not well. In fact, if you've spoken to any of the employees or family members of *Tight Trim Landscaping*, during the cocktail hour, you may have sensed an air of greed, jealousy and even, perhaps, conspiracy! Please, take note of your resolution forms. Make notes if you wish. Later on you'll have the opportunity to become involved in the investigation. But, as for now, take heed, for you are surely in for an evening/afternoon of mystery, mayhem, and maybe even *murder*! (Beat- SFX) And now on with the show.

Scene 1

Morning at home with Renae and Ron Bennett. Both seem jovial.

Renae: Good morning, you. Did you sleep well?

Ron: Not bad... not bad at all. How about you?

Renae: Great! You do realize what's coming up on Saturday, don't you?

Ron: Of course, it's our monthly poker night with the Holstens.

He sings:

"Politics and Poker
Politics and Poker.
Shuffle up the cards
And find the Joker.."
(He chuckles)

Renae: (She punches him playfully) C'mon...you know, right?

Ron: That's from the musical, *Fiorello*. Sung by Howard DeSilva...1959. I *love* that show.

Renae: That's wonderful, darling. (maybe an eye roll) But that's not what I'm talking about.

Ron: Of course! I know, Babe. Saturday is our 40th wedding anniversary.

Renae: Ah, so you *do* remember.

Ron: Of course. And, believe me. I have a special night planned to mark the occasion.

Renae: (All smiles) You do?

Ron: (singing very dramatically)
"Some enchanted evening
You may see a stranger,
You may see a stranger
Across a crowded room."

Renae: (Forcing a laugh) That's lovely sweetheart. But...

Ron: That's from *South Pacific*.

Renae: I know. (Losing patience...then a forced smile) So we're going to Hawaii for our anniversary?

Ron: Uh, no. I wish! Things at the company are all over the place. Crazy! I'm not sure what's happening. But I know we can't get away right now.

Renae: (Surprised) What do you mean... "all over the place"? What's going on?

Phone FX : Denise enters on cell.

Ron: (Tentative) Well, uh ...(looks at phone...recognizes the number) Oh, geez! Hold on...I'd better take this. (answers the phone) Denise??? Wow! Hi! Long time— How are you?

Denise: Don't give me any of your happy horse manure, Ron. You know dog-gone well how I am.

Ron: Now, Denise...

Denise: I'm pissed! I'm pissed as a badger in a blender, Ron. I'm pissed as a bee in a bottle. (Very loudly) I'm pissed as hell, AND I'M NOT GONNA TAKE IT ANYMORE"

Ron: Denise-

Denise: I'm pissed at you ...I'm pissed at Jack. I'm pissed at the whole blasted/bloody/buggering/banal/bogus company.

Ron: Denise, I don't really understand your anger.

Denise: Okay, you dim witted warbler.... I'll spell it out to you. Get out your dictionary, buddy....because here it comes. Ready!? *YOU OWE ME MONEY, RON!* I worked hard for *Tight Trim* for fifteen years.... I covered up for all your idiotic mistakes and threw myself under the bus on numerous occasions. I was a good soldier. And you knew it. But then, when things got tough, I was tossed me out like a worn dishrag. I'm done! I want what I deserve! I want my severance, Ron! *I want my severance!*

Ron: Denise...you resigned...you weren't fired. We owe you nothing.

Denise: Horse manure (stretching it out: MAA-NNNNN-URRRRRRe!))! You better watch yourself, Ron. I know where the bodies are buried. All the bodies.

I'm already penpals with Judge Haller's investigator over at the courthouse. Soooo-don't test me Ron. You'll be sorry- (hangs up and exits)

Ron: Denise...wait. (sfx dial tone)

Renae: What was that all about?

Ron: (shaken) Oh....oh, nothing.... really.

Renae: All right. So you were about to tell me what was going on at the office-

Ron: You know...I don't want to burden you

Renae: Burden me?! I helped you start *Tight Trim*, remember? I was there at the beginning, when you didn't even know how to *start* a lawnmower! I got the business off the ground! If we're in trouble, I'm entitled to know what's going on.

Ron: I know, Babe, but....

Renae: (Quite annoyed) Please don't call me *Babe*....darling....okay? (Deep breath) Now, tell me... what's the problem at *TightTrim*.

Ron: All right.... All right. We're being investigated.

Renae: Investigated?! Who's investigating us?

Ron: The local police, I guess...

Renae: You guess?!

Ron: Yes...the police definitely...but even the Feds might be getting involved. One of our customers has accused us of blackmail. A judge has ordered an independent investigator to look into our business practices. We're having a meeting this morning.

Renae: *Blackmail!?* Ron! *What's the heck's the matter with you?!* Why didn't you tell me? Sometimes I think you have the brain of a pea. It's amazing that in forty years I haven't *killed you!*(SFX)

Ron: Hey— That's harsh! (Beat) I was afraid.... At first I thought it was just a misunderstanding. (She turns away) To tell the truth...I think Jack may be sinking us.

Renae: Jack?!...(incredulous) Jack Holsten... your partner for 30 years? Tell me exactly what is happening.

Ron: Well, one of our female customers is suggesting someone in our company was inappropriate with her and then blackmailed her.

Renae: How inappropriate?

Ron: S-E-X

Renae: Oh, geez! Grow the hell up, Ron. Sex?! C'mon! There's no way this can be legitimate. *Can it?*

Ron: I'm telling you, it's *gotta* be Jack. It's the only thing that makes any sense. (looks at his watch) I'm late. I've gotta get going. (pecks her cheek) I'll see you tonight.

He's gone.

Renae: (pulls out her phone) Hey... we've gotta talk. *Today!*

MUSIC SFX

Scene 2

Horace and Phyllis on phones. Sound tech & co-hosts ready their clown horns. They will honk on every "F" bomb.

(SFX- Phone ring)

Horace:(answering) Hello. This is Horace Bennett.

Phyllis: Hey Big Bro! Howzit hangin' ?

Horace: Phyll! Hello. Well.....I'm glad you're still among the living. What's it been? Six months?

Phyllis: Who knows! That sounds about right. I been shacked-up with a bunch of Frenchy lumberjacks in Alberta. It's cold as **fuck** up here...really cold as **fuck** ...

Horace: Oh, lovely, Sis.

Phyllis: ...but these guys are artistes when it comes my lady parts.
(She purrs) So, Brother Horace...your message was that it was important that I call you, so here I **fucking** am.

Horace: So you are. Do you have any idea what this Saturday is?

Phyllis: Uh...you got me. Is your wife starting her fifth cycle of the month?

Horace: What?! No! Phyllis, I wish you wouldn't be so crude!... And why are you so mean to Louise. She's my Goddess.

Phyllis: Of course she is. All right, I give up. What's going on Saturday?

Horace: It happens to be our parents' 40th anniversary.

Phyllis: Really? Mom's been banging Dad for 40 years?

Horace: *Phyllis!*

Phyllis: Sorry. Wow! That is un-**fucking**-believable.

Horace: I was thinking we might throw them a little surprise anniversary party.....nothing too crazy...just a few friends. What do you think?

Phyllis: Yeah! I'm definitely up for it. I'll start home right away. Honestly, it'll be good to get out of this Godforsaken hell hole for a while. What do you want me to do?

Horace: If you could just check-in with the Holstens, that would be great. We'll need them to distract Mom and Dad while we set up the surprise party.

Phyllis: Okay, sure. “While *we* set up the party?” You mean your bitch wife is actually gonna help you?

Horace: Will you stop!?

Phyllis: Well, is she?

Horace: Uh...I haven’t asked her yet.

Phyllis: Well, what are you waiting for? Will you grow a set of balls for **fuck** sake.

Horace: Uh...you don’t know Louise. She is totally capable of being a warm and generous woman. But she has to be in the right mood....you have to get her on a good day...and she’s so busy right now, you know?

Phyllis: Oh, yeah. I forgot she was a big time “internet influencer.” How’s her S&M Channel going? What’s it called again? *Mistress Mercy*?

Horace: (embarrassed) No...uh...*Whip Me! Mistress Mercy!*

Phyllis: OMG! *Whip Me! Mistress Mercy!* Big Bro...you are indeed a lucky mother **fucker**.

Horace: All right. All right. Just call me when you get in.

Phyllis: Okay. (Closes phone) Henri...Pierre....Andre... I have to leave for a few days. Can we **fuck**?

Scene 3

Charlie on headphones, smiling. We can hear what he’s listening to. He doesn’t notice Florence’s entrance.

(Louise VO: “Listeners... You and I both know what you’re capable of...don’t we? There’s a forcefulness inside you that can be readily realized...you just have to put your mind to it.... Remember achieving total satisfaction is our goal. We’ll take that up again next week. That’s enough for today. Thanks for listening. We’ll talk again soon.”)

Florence exhibits a slight, reoccurring frontal lisp.

Florence: Excuse me! (No answer) Excuse me... hello there. (She moves closer to him; Louder...) Hello!

Charlie: (takes off headphones) Oh...Hi. I'll be dog-gone if I didn't see you there. Come on in. I was just a'catchin' up with uh..... the Ezra Klein podcast. I love me my Ezra Klein. How can I help you, ma'am?

Florence: Yes...Hi. I'm Florence ...Florence Fellaesha. I'm a Federal Investigator. I'm here on a court order to interview this firm's administration and staff.

Charlie: Woah! Oh...well, gee...gol-ly...I....uh...I...don't know nothin' 'bout that. I just trim the hedges and chop down the trees, you know. (Laughs) Charlie's my name...Charlie Chunkahunk. They say I'm very good with my hands. (He laughs nervously)

Florence: Okay. Anyway...who's in charge here?

Charlie: Uh...that would be Mr. Bennett and Mr. Holsten....but they aren't in just yet. And of course there's Mr. Bennett's son, Horace. He kinda oversee's the office, ya' know? He's not in yet neither.

Florence: Hmm... when to you expect them?

Charlie: Oh...any time now. Uh...would you like me to show you around 'till they get here?

Florence: (a little flirty) Well, that might be nice....(then more serious) but.....I'd like to ask you a few questions first, if you don't mind.

Charlie: Well, sure, ma'am. Customer service is my speciality.

Florence: Hmm...customer service...that's interesting. Do you have a lot of personal contact with your customers...particularly female customers?

Charlie: (unintentionally sensuous.) Oh, for sure, for sure. First. I ask them how I can service them.

Florence: Service?

Charlie: Yep. Then they guide me through their specific needs. When I'm sure I understand exactly what they want.... I start a'mowin'.

Florence: A'mowin'?

Charlie: Yep. I jest mow and I mow and I mow. I really enjoy that. I take my time. I'm never in a rush to finish, ya' know? I move up and down and all around. I *preform* the job with whatchacall *vigor*. I take a lot of pride in my work.

Florence: (Shows a little heat) Umm ...Are...are...are your customers usually satisfied?

Charlie: Gol—ly, ma'am! I sure do hope so.

Florence: Well, it sounds like you're a valuable employee to the company.

Charlie: Thank ya', ma'am.

Florence: Tell me, Mr. Chunkahunk, when the job is finished, is there ever any quid pro quo?

Charlie: Quid pro *who*?

Florence: Quid pro quo. Do you receive anything in exchange for your... exceptional service.

Charlie: Gee, no ma'am. I'm sure I don't know what in the wide, wide world 'a sports you're a'talkin' about. (Kind of a long beat) Oh...wait—do you mean do any of them ever offer to have sex with me? Is that what you mean.?

Florence: Well....now that you mention it ...uh...yes. I guess that's exactly what I mean. Has that ever happened?

Charlie: Well, as a matter of fact...yes, it has.

Florence: I see.

Charlie: It's very rare, ma'am...very rare indeed. Whenever such a rare occurrence might take place, I'm supposed to tell Mr. Holsten right away.

Florence: Mr. Holsten, the boss?

Charlie: That's right. I tell Mr. Holsten, and he takes it from there.

Florence: I see. And how exactly does Mr. Holsten "take it from there"?

Charlie: Now, that's a mystery ma'am. I got no idea. How 'bout if I give you that tour now.

Florence: Why...yes, Mr. Chunkahunk. That would be great. I need to get an overview of the whole operation.

Charlie: I'm at your service, Miss....uh...is it Miss or Mrs.?

Florence: Miss.

Charlie: Mith??? Well, okay then. I'm at your service, Mith Fellaesha. Follow me!
(They're out)

Scene 4

Morning for Mona and Jack Holsten at home. Mona has already had a few.

Mona: (On her phone/ A little slurry.) Oh, Phyllis, Sweetie, that sounds wonderful. Such a nice thing to do for Mommy and Daddy. Of course we'll be glad to help with the surprise... Now Phyllis, you shouldn't stay on the phone too long when you're driving. What?! What?! What happened! Some yuppie just cut you off? You rolled down the window and said, what? Oh...well, yes. I guess I would have told him to do that to himself too. Bye dear..... Safe travels.

Jack: Who was that?

Mona: Phyllis, darling. (She wraps her arms around him)

Jack: (He unwraps them.) Phyllis? Phyllis who?

Mona: Phyllis Bennett. (she's slurring and staggering.) The feisty daughter of your business partner....our Goddaughter?!

Jack: Oh, Phyllis! What a hot mess! Someone needs to tell that girl the '60's are over. What did she want?

Mona: Well.... (she momentarily forgets where she is and drifts)....

Jack: Mona?!

Mona: (She throws her arms around him again) Yes....darling...

Jack: (He again unwraps them) What did Phyllis want?

Mona: Oh, right. She and Horace are throwing a surprise anniversary party for Ron and Renae and they want us to help with the surprise.

Jack: (sarcastic) Oh, great! ... But, I've gotta tell you something. Ron has been acting very strangely of late. I don't know what's up his butt, but I don't like it. He's making it seem like all the company's problems are *my* fault. The court is sending in a special investigator, for God's sake.

Mona: Really? What kind of problems?

Jack: Mmm, oh it's nothing really. To tell you the truth, I think the problem is Ron. He may be a nice guy, but when it comes to business, he's definitely not the sharpest tool in the shed....It...it just pisses me off.

Mona: (again throwing her arms around him) Well, if it "pisses you off", it "pisses me off too." (Big laugh) But...can I tell Phyllis we'll help distract the Bennetts while they set up the party?

Jack: Yeah...I guess we can do that. Poor Renae, she's the one I feel sorry for. She is a truly amazing woman. *Amazing!*

Mona: (A beat) Oh, she sure is. (Very loudly) *She's just fantastic.* Good old Renae. I hope she's improved with age. Back in high school her name was plastered all over the locker room walls.

Jack: Hey...she's your friend!

Mona: Oh, 'course she is! We're (hiccup) close.

Jack: Are you soused already? It's not even 8 a.m. I think your drinking problem is getting worse, *dear*.

Mona: Oh, shushy- shush- shush. I have *noooo* drinking problem. I can get as much booze as I want whenever I want it. (another big laugh)

Jack: Maybe so. But, take it easy, huh? Slow down. I've gotta go. (A quick kiss on her cheek) Bye-Bye Deary! I'll see you tonight.

He's gone.

Mona: Bye-Bye... and try to keep it in your pants for a change. *Deary!*

Scene 5

Louise is self-recording a video for her Internet channel on her iPhone. Horace walks in as she's finishing up. When she becomes aware of his presence she becomes annoyed.

Louise:And that's going to wrap it up for another episode of *Whip Me! Mistress Mercy!* I'm your goddess, Mercy Mia. Don't forget to subscribe and hit that *Like* button. And remember, as a Super Subscriber to my Patreon campaign, you'll get ad free videos and specialized tutorials. I mean...*very* specialized. That's enough for today. Thanks for listening. All of you...be strong— We'll talk again soon. *(She turns off the phone)* God, Horace! Do you have to stand there gawking at me like that. I could barely concentrate.

Horace: Oh, sorry. honey.

Louise: (Angry) WHAT?!

Horace: I mean.. sorry... *Mistress*. It's just that I need to talk to you about something and you never seem to have any time for me.

Louise: Oh, please!!! Do you still not understand? This channel has become a full time job! My time is at a premium. I'm up to 200-thousand subscribers now and they're demanding new content every day. And it's a good thing too, since *your* pathetic self is such a complete and utter failure.

Horace: (Meekly turning away for a humiliated beat. Then..quietly..) Of course... I'm very proud of you...*Mistress*.

Louise: You'd better be. Now, I've got a full schedule. What do you want!? And make it quick, huh...you're good at that. No offense.

Horace: (Feeble laugh) ... Well, Saturday is my parents' 40th wedding anniversary. I was hoping you would help me throw a little surprise party for them.

Louise: (More aggravated) You're kidding right? A surprise anniversary party? I have no time to plan an anniversary party for your judgmental mother and your truly, freaky father.

Horace: No...no...no...no! You don't have to plan it. I'll do all the planning. Louise. I'll do all the work. It's just that, I think my father might be in some kind of trouble at work, you know? And I thought the party would take his mind off things for a while. I don't always see eye-to-eye with him, but he *is* my father. And I know my mother would enjoy the distraction. You just have to help me set up, over at the Manor House. I've rented the back room for the evening.

Louise: (Feigning sympathy) Listen...Horace. You're my husband. And I know you worship me. (She starts yelling) *But this is not what I signed up for.*

Horace: Louise, please!

Louise: Shut up! Your parents have never welcomed me into this family . They have always been rude and impertinent toward me. Your Mother can't help herself. She's just stupid. But your father is a slimy, skeevy, chauvinistic rodent. I am highly insulted that you're wasting my time with this. You're a little twerp just like your old man. God I hate him! (Maybe she cracks a whip)) *Now!*... what have you got to say for yourself.

Horace: (Quietly) I'm sorry.

Louise: What?!

Horace: (Louder) I'm sorry.

Louise: That was just lovely. Now get out of my sight.

Horace: Will you at least come to the party?

Louise: *GET OUT OF HERE!*

He runs out.

Scene 6

Jack: Hey there.

Renae: Jack!

They hug

Jack: You sounded very serious on the phone.

Renae: I know. First of all...that thing you borrowed from me?— I need it back.

Jack: All right—no problem...I've got it. (He hands her a small brown box)

Renae: Good. (Slightly panicky) Now I've got to sneak it back before anyone knows it was gone.

SFX Door bell

Renae: Oh, geez. Jusy a minutę....

Renae exits to answer the door. Denise enters followed by Renae-

Denise: Well, well, well..isn't this cozy. You two are still "at it" huh?

Jack: Denise...what are doing here?

Renae: What do you mean, "at it". Jack was just returning something he had borrowed from me. That's all.

Denise: Hmm...very interesting. (She takes the box from Renae. Shakes it.) "Shake, shake,shake....shake shake shake...(KC and the Sunshine Band)) You know the rest, Renae!

Renae turns and steps away.

Denise: Mind if I have a look?

Jack: (Takes the box from her) Now, look Denise. None of this is any of your business.

Denise: (Giggle) Okay....but I'm pretty sure I know exactly what's in that box.

Jack: Denise, I'd like you to leave!

Denise: (As if talking to a child) Aw....you want Auntie Denise to leave? Oh, poor baby! Jacky wants his favorite auntie to vamoose! Really!? Well, think again, Jacky boy! I'm not going anywhere until I get my money. I already had a "talk" with that sniveling partner of yours. You both are well aware of what you've done to me. Well, listen pal, I've got the goods on both of you. So you'd better cough it up and pay up quick!

Renae: What? They still owe you money?

Denise: Oh...they sure do Renae. I've been bussing tables at the Manor for the past six months just to get by. (Click) Honestly, it's not a bad place to work. They've got a wonderful bakery department. Oh....just the aroma drives me crazy. Not that I've ever been that big on sweets, you know. But.... I do like a cup cake every now and then, like everybody else. You know I like it when they have a little cream on the inside, it's a surprise. That's good, plus the chocolate ones are good too. Sometimes I just can't make up my mind. A lot of times I'll mix the two together, make a vanilla fudge. (Inhale and exhale with joy) Anyway, I guess your croaker of a husband doesn't tell you much about what's going on at the office, huh?

Jack: Hold on! Hold everything. We don't owe you a cent, Denise. You quit... without notice. You're entitled to *no* severance....*no nothing!*

Denise: I didn't quit, Jack. You and Ron pushed me out because I was on to all your shenanigans...and you knew it. After fifteen years....not even a thank you.

Renae: Oh—

Jack: But Denise...

Denise: But now...the jig is up. I've been on the phone with the New Jersey Federal District Court. And we're gonna talk again, soon. Toodle-oo, you two. Don't do anything I wouldn't do. (She exits)

Renae: Well....that's just great. What did you and Ron do to make her so mad. I think we're in big trouble.

Jack: Oh, she'll talk the talk. But she'll never walk the walk...believe me.

Renae: But Jack—

Jack: C'mon, take it easy. Everything is under control. (He hugs her) You've missed me, haven't you?

Renae: Well, I— Oh, Jack...of course I have.

Jack: I can't stand to see you with that crooning clown.

Renae: Jack, he's been my husband for forty years. What am I supposed to do?

Jack: I know what *I'd* like to do. (SFX)

Renae: Jack...stop. (She moves away from him) It sounds like we've got a big problem at the company.

Jack: Yes. We sure do. And it's all Ron's fault.

Renae: That's funny... because he says it's all your fault.

Jack: ... no surprise there.

Renae: Jack, I'm worried.

Jack: No need. We're meeting with the so-called investigator today. I'm sure I'll be able to charm her.

Renae: Her? It's a woman?

Jack: That's what I hear. So, you understand why there's nothing to worry about?
(Laughs)

Rena: Egotist! (smiles)

Jack: Leave it to me. (Another hug) And...happy anniversary.

Scene 7

Charlie: That's about the long and short of it Mith Florence. All those new mowers are a'battery powered, ya' know?—just takes a whistle and a stomp to recharge onc't in a while and I'm straight up and a'ready to go again. Full force... Ya' know?

Florence: Oh, yes. That is just fascinating, Charlie. I do appreciate your showing me around.

Ron and Jack enter

Charlie: Aw, shucks, Mith Florence. It 'tweren't a'nothin. Oh... look who's cheer!
Ron...Jack...this here's Mith Florence Fell...

Florence: Fellaesha. (She moves to shake hands with Ron and Jack) Florence
Fellasha....Federal Investigator.

Ron: Very pleased to meet you, ma'am.

Jack: (Casanova) Well, you...my dear...are not at all what I expected. I was sure you'd be some old man with swollen ankles and lots of nose hair. Instead...here you are... a lovely dish indeed.

Florence: Mmm- I really don't think....

Charlie: Well, if'n it's okay with everybody...I'm gonna get on back to work.

Ron: Sure, go ahead Charlie.

Jack: Yes..and try to behave yourself, Charlie.

Charlie: Huh?

Jack: Never mind. You know what I mean.

(Charlie looks puzzled.)

Florence: Uh...Charlie (moving to him) You've got my number right? (Jack takes notice of this exchange)

Charlie: Yes, ma'am. Right cheer in my phone.

Florence: Great. Maybe I'll see you later?

Charlie: Yes, ma'am.

Florence: He's quite.....a good mower.... it would seem.

Ron: Oh, yes indeed. Charlie is one of our best mowers. Quite the handyman.

Jack: Although he sometimes tends to provide a little (clears throat) too tight a trim. (SFX)

Florence: As you know, I'm here on the order of Judge Chamberlain Haller of the New Jersey Federal District Court.

Ron: Who?

Florence: Judge Haller.

Jack: Hmm....I don't believe I'm familiar with him. What's his name again?

(Steve appears)

Steve: The name is Haller... Judge Chamberlain Haller. And I'll bet I'm more familiar than you think. I'm probably best known for my appearance in the 1992 award winning film, *My Cousin Vinny*, in which I was brilliantly portrayed by the late, great character actor Fred Gwynne. In it, my most famous quotation was....anybody? ...anybody?" Give up...all right. "Two yoots?" What is a yoot?"

(Steve retreats)

Florence: Gentlemen, Judge Haller is particularly interested in the situation regarding a Miss Mabel Marmalade .

Steve: Indeed (exits to sound table)

Ron: Mabel Marmalade? Who's that? I never heard of her either.

Jack: Hmm, Mrs Marmalade, huh? She's one of our best clients.. Yes...Mrs. Marmelade, 13 Willow Glen. We've been servicing her all season. (Feigning) But, I wasn't aware of any...*situation*.

Florence: She's filed a complaint with law enforcement that alleges someone from this firm, seduced her into a highly compromising position, and then threatened to tell her husband if she didn't pay \$500.

Ron: That is absurd. Who seduced her?

Florence: That's the problem. Her deposition was flimsy...inconclusive. She stated a name, but...she wasn't exactly credible in that regard. That's why I'm here...to get to the bottom of this. Her husband is out of the country on business for the next six months and even though she's paid the initial \$500- she believes the blackmailer will be back for more.

Jack: This is nothing more than a witch-hunt....a hoax.

Ron: Indeed.

Florence: Here's her cancelled check. On the back it's been endorsed with both of your signatures.

Ron: That's a signature stamp. All our checks are endorsed with a stamp. It's a common business practice.

Florence: I see. And who has access to that stamp?

Jack: Just Ron.

Florence: Only Mr. Bennett?

Jack: Right, oh, well...Ron and his son, Horace.

Florence: But not you?

Jack: No, ma'am. Not me. Not my department. Obviously, I've had nothing to do with it.

Ron: But...but...wait...

Florence: Well, Mr. Bennett...how about that?

Denise enters

Denise: Well, hello everyone. Surprise! Denise Caldero....Former office manager of *Tight Trim Landscaping*—with the emphasis on the *former*. How do you do Ms. Fallaasha...we've spoken on the phone a number of times (shakes hands with Florence) I know all about that signature stamp. I know where it's kept and I know who has access. I can tell you all about it—I'm free right now if you'd like to chat. There a lovely little tea room down the street that features delightful butter croissants and a Quiche Lorraine to die for. I'm sure I can fill you in on anything you might want to know about *Tight Trim Landscaping*. (She locks arms with Florence and exits, scowling at Ron and Jack on the way out.)

Jack: (Jack and Ron stand flabbergasted) Well, Ron?

Ron:(Shaken) I...I... excuse me. I'll have to speak to my son about this. I...I'll get back to you.... I...I...(sings softly)

"I whistle a happy tune
And every single time
The happiness in the tune
Convinces me that I'm not afraid.
(He whistles as he exits)

Scene 8

Horace Phyllis and Louise are setting up the balloons and banner for the party— Louise is pointing...Phyllis and Horace are moving things around. The sound tech re-assumes her/his position at the microphone.

Louise: Okay, so let's put the banner right here. And let's put some balloons here....and some more here and a few more here. Okay, I guess that'll do. It's better than your narrow-minded parents deserve.

Horace: Thank you so much Louise. Umm, can you help us go over the menu with the kitchen staff?

Louise: I suppose so. Let's get it over-with...(She exits)

Horace: Phyll, do you have your speech ready?

Phyllis: Speech? What speech?

Horace: Your speech congratulating Mom and Dad on 40 years of marriage?

Phyllis: You expect me to make speech?

Horace: Of course. This party is in their honor isn't it? So...we should both pay tribute to them.

Phyllis: A speech. **Fuck** no! No way Jose! No **fucking** way!

Horace: Come on Phyll...they're our parents. Can't you take a minute or two to publicly congratulate them and thank them for everything they've done for us.

Phyllis: Everything....? Like what? Mom is totally judgmental and always expected me to grow up to be Betty **Fucking** Crocker. (Beat) But at least I always felt Mom was on my side. With Dad, I never got any attention. When I didn't grow up to be a great student or a **fucking** cheerleader, he wanted nothing to do with me. That really hurt, you know? In reality....the only thing I can thank him for is my excruciating dislike of Broadway musicals. All that wallowing "OOOOklahoma where the wind comes sweepin' down the **Fucking** plains" **Fuck! Fuck! Fuckity, Fuck!**

Horace: Hey! You think you've got it bad?! You see him twice a year. I spend every waking day of my life with him. Talk about humiliation. Oh....God forgive me...But...sometimes.... I truly hate him. (SFX)

Phyllis: Wow!

Horace: Yeah, wow! But, Phyll, he's our father. And I'm gonna find a few nice things to say about him.

Louise: (re-entering) C'mon you two. The Chef is waiting)

Horace: All right. (They start out.)

(Ron enters. He's on his phone. Phone SFX. Horace looks at the ID)

Horace: Speak of the devil. (Horace answers) Hi Dad, I was just talking about you. Louise and Phyll are here. I've got you on speaker.

Ron: Son, have you cashed any checks recently for someone by the name of Mabel Marmalade.

Horace: Gee...Dad, I'm not sure. I know she's a client but... a recent check? I just can't say. What's this all about?

Ron: Apparently, she's the customer that's got us all in hot water with the Feds. (Beat) All right. Now...this is awkward, son. Have you had any... "unsavory" dealings with her?

Horace: What?

Ron: You know...(He sings)

"Toucha, toucha, toucha, touch me,
I wanna be dirty!"

Horace: Dad? What the hell are you talking about?

Ron: Cut the crap, Horace! You and I are the only ones with access to that signature stamp. I know *I* didn't cash Marmalade's check....so it had to have been *you*!

Horace: (Blowing up) Are you nuts! Dad! No! No!!! My God, Dad! It sounds like you've totally gone off the deep end!

Ron: All right. All right. Settle down. What is the exact date of her last payment to us.

Horace: I have no idea.

Ron: Well, can't you check?

Horace: I don't have my ledger or my computer with me right now. I'm...uh... not at the office. I'm at ..uh ...somewhere else.

Ron: Where? Why aren't you at the office. Are you goofing off again? I swear... just because you're my son, don't think you can slide. And don't think you can blackmail clients in the name of this company.

Horace: Blackmail! Dad...you're talking *crazy*!

Ron: Don't play dumb with me, son! When the chips are down, it's not going to be me who goes to prison, it'll be you!

Horace: Prison? Dad...

Louise: Give me that. (Louise takes Horace's phone) Now you just listen to me, dirtbag. I don't know who the hell you think you're dealing with, but I assure you it's not that dickwad you call a son. Get this and get it good. Horace doesn't know anything about any check, any marmalade or any toucha-toucha-toucha— He works hard for your two bit company and the fact that you don't appreciate him is your problem...not his. He might be a limp dick...but he's my limp dick...and I won't let anybody push him around...but me. So go **fuck** yourself!

(She closes the phone, hands it to Horace and exits.)

Ron: Horace...Horace....What about the check?. I need to know about the check... Horace....Horace.... (He's gone)

Horace:. (Sotto voce) God...I hate him. (To Phyllis) C'mon. (exits)

Phyllis: Okay, big bro, good idea— we sure don't want any screwups with the Cordon **fuckin**g Bleu!

Scene 9

Jack is on the phone. Mabel enters.

Jack: Yes, Mr. Willis. I'm afraid \$1,000 per tree take-down is the going rate... Yes sir,... You have a good day too. (He closes his phone) Well, hello there, Mrs. Marmalade.

Mabel: Hello, there yourself.. (She moves to him and embraces him) I got tired of waiting for your call-back, so I decided to take matters into my own hands.

Jack: You're causing quite a stir around here. You know that?

Mabel: Hey....if a certain someone hadn't ...had his wicked way with me...and then threatened my marriage....there wouldn't be a "stir".

Cameo Ken enters (Chatsworth Osborne Jr.)

Cameo Ken: Mabel? I can't believe my A.I. induced eardrum? You cheated on me?....with this guy? Oh, Mabel I'm shocked and dismayed. After 10 glorious years....I know I haven't been around much lately. But, Mabel the deal I'm working on would have set us up for life. Now I guess I'll have to be content to share my sorrows with my assistant, Angelique. Surprisingly though 30 years my junior, we have so much in common....uhh...for example... we both like....soup. Steve retreats

Jack: Now Mabel... I'm a married man and you knew that from the start. What we had was lovely...but it was purely a physical convenience. Nothing more.

Mabel: Maybe nothing more to you ...but Jack, I love you! You said you would leave your wife and we'd go away together.

Jack: Mabel...those things were said in the throes of passion. But you threatened to tell my wife.

Mabel: So in return you blackmailed *me*?.... Don't you care for me at all?

Jack: Of course I do (embrace) you know I do.

Mabel: So what can we do about it?

Jack: All right. First of all, I want you to tell that federal investigator.... Florence Fellaesha, that I had nothing to do with any of this.

Mabel: I can't do that. I swore out a deposition... and they have your cancelled check.

Jack: Tell them you were mistaken. Tell them Charlie was the man who seduced and blackmailed you. You were confused as to who it was. Blame it on him.

Mabel: I'm supposed to say I wasn't sure who I was sleeping with? Jack, that seems..... And Charlie...oh, I don't know... he's such a nice guy.

Jack: Yes...nice and dumb. That works for us. Do this for me, Mabel...(Beat—both pace) Mabel! If you do this for me.... maybe we'll be able to be together after all.

Mabel: Really?

Jack: (Another embrace) ...Maybe....

Mabel: Oh, Jack! All right, I do love you. I'll do whatever it takes.

Jack: Good girl. Now what are you doing tonight?

Mabel: Tonight? (Smiles) Nothing, why?

Jack: Grab an apron. You're going to be a server at a very special anniversary party at the Manor House.

Mabel: Huh?

(They're out)

Scene 10

The anniversary party

Dancing- Horace/Louise, Jack/Mona, Charlie/Florence. Phyllis is dancing with Scotti, Denise is dancing with Steve. Mabel is circulating with a drink tray.

30-40 seconds into the song, Charlie and Florence move to the center of the space. Other couples “give” them the focus.

During the following exchange Jack summons Mabel to where he is dancing. Mona is already in the bag and totally oblivious. Jack points out Florence to Mabel and indicates her need distract and talk to her.

Charlie: Are you havin’ a good time Mith Fellaesha?

Florance: Just lovely, Charlie. It was so nice of you to invite me. Although some might think it inappropriate for me to be dancing at party for the company I’m investigating.

Charlie: Oh, don’t you give that another dad-gum second thought. Everybody deserves to have a good time onc’t in a while. Will you excuse me for just a minute ma’am. I gotta go see a man about a horse.

Florance: A horse?

Charlie: I gots to pee, ma’am.

Florance: Oh, a horse...of course. I see. (Both laugh)

Charlie: I’ll be back in just two shakes of lambs tail.

Florance: Certainly.

Charlie exits— Mabel approaches Florence. Denise moves within earshot.

Mabel: Excuse me. Are you the investigator?

Florence: Yes, that’s right. I’m Florence Fellaesha and you are...?

Mabel: Mabel Marmalade, ma’am. I’ve been in contact with your office.

Florence: Yes...of course. (She looks at Mabel with surprise)

Mabel: Oh...I’m not really a restaurant server. I’m here undercover, so to speak.

Florence: I see.

Mabel: I need to tell you something ma'am. It's very important that you understand that Jack Holsten, was *not* the man who seduced and blackmailed me.

Florence: He wasn't?! But....

Mabel: No...it wasn't Jack. You see...I was very confused. I had spoken to Jack on several occasions and mistakenly identified him as the man who was in my bed.

Florence: Huh?!

Mabel: It's an honest mistake ma'am. I'm sure it happens to everybody from time to time. (Looks to audience) Right?!

Florence: Oh, I don't think—

Mabel: Oh, ma'am. I was weak and vulnerable. It was a matter of mistaken identity.

Florence: Wow! Mistaken identity. I see. Then, pray tell, do you happen to know who the *real* culprit was.

Mabel: Yes....yes...I remember now...very clearly. It was Charlie. Charlie Chunkahunk....the man you were just dancing with?

Florence: (Stunned) Well....that is certainly a surprise. Thank you, Miss Marmalade. I'm so glad you finally figured out with whom you were copulating.

Mabel: Oh, you're welcome, sweetie. Glad I could help. Oh...one more thing. I got the definite impression that Charlie's accomplice in this whole blackmailing conundrum was none other than our anniversary boy...

Florence: Ron? Ron Bennett?....the co-founder of the company?

Mabel: Yes..isn't that crazy?

Florence: Crazy...yes, that would be the right word. (Florence steps away)

Mabel: Bye Bye.. Enjoy the party.

Denise: Excuse, me. Miss Marmalade? You don't really think anyone is going to believe that story do you?

Mabel: Who are you? How do you know my name?

Denise: Oh, I know a lot about you, *Mabel*! My name is Denise Caldero. I used to work at *Tight Trim*. Believe me, I also know Jack Holsten...*very well*. You are letting yourself in for a big fall.

Mabel: You're mistaken, whoever you are. Jack loves me and I love him. And what I told that investigator is going to fix everything.

Denise: You're very naive, my friend. (Click) Listen, do yourself a favor and try the stuffed mushrooms. I watched the chef make them this afternoon. He dices little bits of pepperoni in the filling. "MMMM...to die for" Anyway...Mabel... you can't say you haven't been warned. (they separate)

Cameo Ken: Better listen to her, darling...before it's too late! And...if you can... please grab me a couple of those stuffed mushrooms.

Charlie re-enters.

Charlie: Well, I'm back Mith Fellaesha. Ready to cut another rug?

Florence: (Serious) Come with me, we have to talk!

Charlie: Huh?

Florence: This way (formal) Mr. Chunkahunk. You've got some explaining to do.

Horace: (At microphone) Okay, folks. The time is almost here. Mom and Dad just parked the car and are on their way in. So we're gonna turn out all the lights. As they're walking in, everybody stay real quiet until we turn on the lights. Then we'll all yell "Surprise!" Okay? All right...here we go. Lights, please!

Lights go out.

Renae and Ron enter. Ron is using the flashlight on his phone to illuminate his way.

Ron: Why is it so dark? Are you sure this the right place?

Renae: Mona said to meet them in the back room of the Manner at 7:00

Ron: (Laughs) This reminds me of “Springsteen on Broadway.” Remember? (He sings)

“You can't start a fire without a spark
This gun's for hire
Even if we're just dancin' in the dark”

SFX Gunshot

Lights up

All: Surprise!

Ron swerves around the space until he finally falls dead. Renae screams. All cast move in around him.

Charlie listens to his heart.

Charlie: Gol-ly...I think he's dead.

Renae screams again.

Horace: Dad...no!

Louise: Please tell me he had a will.

Phyllis: Oh...Daddy. I'm so gonna miss you. Anybody know how long his credit cards will work?

Mona: Where' the woman with the champagne?

Denise: I don't suppose he left a check for me, did he?

Jack: R-I-P Ron.. What a great guy.

Mabel: (To Renae) Did you get a selfie with Bruce?

Jack: Maybe we ought to call someone....the police or someone.

Florence: There is no need to call the police. As a federal investigator and a recent graduate of the Hoboken Institute for The Criminal Arts, I am fully accredited by the New Jersey State Police Homicide Unit. Therefore, I am, initiating an investigation into what appears to be the cold-blooded murder of Ronald Bennett. Now...did anybody see anything suspicious....anything at all? ...All right then. I ask that no one leave the premises. The first order of business is to remove the body to the office of the medical examiner. Now let's get *Don Quixote* out of here.

The cast stands Ron up to his feet. A "Dead" placard is placed around his neck. All exit.

Scotti: Ladies and gentlemen, there is a murderer among us. Trust—

Vinny rushes in

Scotti: Oh, good, you're back. How's your wife?

Vinny: Well, she's going to be all right....thank goodness. But it's no thanks to you...you jackass! You are a reckless driver and her car is totallydemolished. What do you propose to do about it?

Scotti: Look, Vinny. I can't deal with this now. We have a murder here.

Vinny: Well, all right. But you're not off the hook, Pal. Not by a long shot. You mark my words.

Scotti: Ladies and gentlemen, there is a murderer among us. Trust no one and, oh yes...enjoy your dinner.

Hosts argue as they exit.

Dinner is served.

Act II

As dinner starts to wind down, cast re-enters for table-talk. "Dead Ron" sits prominently in view. Florence enters.

Florence: Ladies and gentlemen. I apologize for interrupting this lovely anniversary party. I hope you've enjoyed your dinner. Anyway, a horrific murder has been committed here tonight and it is my desire and my duty to bring the criminal or criminals responsible, to justice. One thing is frighteningly clear. Whoever did this is somewhere in this room. Therefore, no one is leaving until we discover the identity.

Cameo Ken: How do you do, ladies and gentlemen. Quincy M.E. here-, that's Medical Examiner, of course, to report the following: Ronald A. Bennett, a 57 year old male, succumbed by way of homicide due to the penetration of a .38 calibre bullet to the upper chest perforating the heart and lungs, causing massive hemorrhage. His final known words were...

Ron: Owwww!....OWWW!

Cameo Ken: Additional information may be forthcoming, That it for now. 'Till next time, take care of yourself and thanks for tuning in.

Florence: Thank you doctor. Now I will begin the questioning of my primary suspects. Will the following individuals prepare for interrogation: Jack Holsten, Horace Bennett, Mona Holsten, Louise Bennett, Denise Caldero, Charlie Chunkahunk, Renae Bennett, Mabel Marmalade....and Phyllis Bennett. Please understand, these are not my *only* suspects, but merely the suspects that I consider to be *major* at this time. After I have completed my preliminary questioning of each suspect, you in the audience, will have the opportunity to ask questions. Together, we're sure to solve this case and bring a ruthless murderer or murderers to justice.

Now then....to begin, I call Horace Bennett for questioning. (Horace comes forward.) How do you do, Mr. Bennett. Please accept my sympathies on the death of your father.

Horace: Thank you. I just can't believe he's gone. To think, I'll never hear his heroic rendition of "One Day More" from *Les Miz* again. It brings a tear to my eye. (He shows emotion as he sings a bit of it)

"One day more
Another day, another destiny
This never-ending road to Calvary
These men who seem to know my crime will surely come a second time

One day more”

Florence: (cutting him off) Yes, or course. Thank you Horace. Your father was well known for his love of show tunes, wasn't he?

Horace: Oh, yes. Honestly, it could be quite annoying at times. But the thought that his Broadway voice is forever silenced is— (full breakdown)

Florence: (Sympathetic, she pats him on the back) There, there, Mr. Bennett... Horace...—(Harder tone) Isn't it true that your father wasn't particularly nice to you....especially at work.

Horace: (He calms) Well..yes.. it's quite true. In fact, my father and I didn't get along particularly well.

Florence: Might it be said that you ...resented your father, Horace?

Horace: ...yes. So what? I suspect there are disagreements in many family businesses.

Florence: Disagreements? The fact of the matter is, you *hated* your father. Didn't you, Horace!? *Didn't you!?*

Horace: “Hate” is a very strong word, Ms. Fellaesha. I don't think I hated my father.

Scotti: Excuse me! Excuse me, Ms. Fellaesha! Do you mind if I chime in here?

Florence: Well, it's not exactly the way we do things around here.

Scotti: I know...but I think I can shed some important light on the case. Please, Ms. Fellaesha. Please!!!!

Florence: All right, Mr. Sincerely. Knock yourself out—

Scotti: Mr. Bennett...according to my new friends here at table #_____, you were heard to say “I hate him” earlier this very evening. “I hate him” Huh?! Huh?! Huh?!

Horace: (Glaring) Busybodies!

Scotti: Aha!

Florence: So, in fact...you resented your father to such an extent that you shot him dead.

Horace: That is pure nonsense. I did not kill my father. If you think I did, I dare you to *prove it*. Good luck with that!

Florence: Well! We'll see, Horace. We'll see. Are there any questions from the audience for Horace Bennett?

(Audience questions Horace.)

Thank you Mr. Bennett. You may step down. Mona Holsten, will you come forward please.

(Mona takes the hot seat)

Florence: Hello, Mrs. Holsten. We haven't met yet. My name Florence Fellaesha.

Mona: (She's quite tipsy-and she knows it. Trying to disguise it, her words are overly pronounced) How do you do, Florence. Florence FellatioFellatio? (Big laugh)

Florence: (She's heard the joke before) That's Fellaesha.

Mona: Whoops! Oh...sorry. (Still giggling)

Florence: Now Mrs. Holsten. You and your husband are good friends of the Bennetts. Isn't that true?

Mona: You bet, honey. I've known Renae since high school. (Happy reflection) We were rally-girls together. We would bake cookies and cupcakes and deliver them on game day to all the hunky football players. Renae and I had some wild adventures in those days....let me tell you....Remember Nae-Nae? (tone change...sour) and then she married Ron. (SFX)

Florence: In fact, your husband Jack became business partners with Ron Bennett. Isn't that true?

Mona: Yup. The Holstens and the Bennetts have been... “close” for many years.

Florence: It’s my understanding that Mrs. Bennett was instrumental in getting the *Tight Trim* Landscaping business off the ground.

Mona: Yes, that’s right. Renae has always been a very sharp and savvy woman.... (very quiet) sometimes too savvy.

Florence: What was that?

Mona: Oh, nothing. Renae is a sharp cookie. (She swigs from a flask)

Florence: Mrs. Holsten. Are you involved with the *Tight Trim* business?

Mona: Me? Oh...no. I’m self-employed...(drifting) I’m employed myself...self... selfie-employedee ! (takes selfie photo)..I myself am employed...(She again swigs from the flask)

Florence: Mrs. Holsten. Do you have a drinking problem?

Mona: Me? Noooo. No problem at all. (She offers flask) Here....would you like a belt, honey?

Florence: No thank you. Now, may I ask the nature of your self- employment?

Mona: I sell, honey.

Florence: Oh, I see... and what do you sell?

Mona: Toys.

Florence: Toys. Oh, how nice. Children’s toys...for Christmas?

Mona: (Hearty laugh) Not exactly. More for the lady of the house...if you know what I mean. My top seller is the *Enigma Double Sonic*. That’s the Rolls Royce of the industry, in case you didn’t know. I have a hard time keeping it in stock. But I also sell plenty of *Pink Cherries*, *Love-Honeys* and *We-Vibes*. Would you like me to send you a catalogue (over-enunciating) *Miss Fellatio*?

Florence: (impatient) That's Fellaesha.

Mona: Oh, right. (Laughs) If you say so.

Florence: (Showing some resentment) How would you describe your marriage, Mrs. Holsten.

Mona: My marriage?! How dare you! (Very defensive) My marriage is none of your business.

(Vinny and Scott race to center. Vinny wins the race.)

Vinny: Excuse me, Ms. Fellaesha, I have an important point to make. (Florence nods permission)... Mrs. Holsten, as the result of my audience chitter-chatter, it's come to my attention, that your husband may have a history of philandering.

Mona: What? That is utter nonsense. Rumors and gossip! Philander... philipposki...Oscar weiner. My beloved husband is well-known for his very large member.....

Florence: Oh?

Mona: ...ship. *Memberships*. Kiwanis...Lions...Rotary....Elks... very large. Humongous.. But never a...phil...phil...what you said.

Florence: Are there any questions from the audience for Mona Holsten. (Audience questions Mona) Thank you Mrs. Holsten, you may step down. Charlie Chunkahunk, will you come forward please.

Charlie steps up to take his turn.

Florence: Now...Mr. Chunkahunk....in the interest of transparency ...you are my date here this evening. Are you not?

Charlie: Oh, yes, ma'am. That surely is keerect.

Florence: But...the fact is, we only just met today...right?

Charlie: Yup...you moved right in on me like a jack rabbit in heat. (goofy laugh)

Florence: Excuse me!!! I am not a jackrabbit in anything.~

Charlie: (apologetic) Oh, yes, of course, ma'am. Sor-ry!

Florence: How did we happen to meet.

Charlie: Welp...you came into our office this a'mornin' as I was a'wrappin- up my podcast episode, a' lookin' to do some investigatin.' Since neither Mr. Bennett nor Mr. Holsten was in yet, I gave you a quickie...

Florence: Excuse me??!

Charlie: (realizing)...a quickie... *tour* of the *Tight Trim* facilities.

Florence: Yes, that's right...and during our tour, you mentioned the fact that some of your women customers offered to reward your trimming service with a quid pro quo.

Charlie: Uhhhh...yup...yup...I do remember you a' talkin' about that quid pro thing. Yup. I remember. That's when the lady customers offer to have sex with me. Right?

Florence: Yes, that's right. Did you ever take any of the ladies up on such an offer?

Charlie: Oh, no ma'am. Like I told ya'. Mr. Holsten said that in such a happenstance, I was to tell him immediately and he would handle it.

Scotti: So, to clarify. You haven't had relations with any of your customers?

Charlie: Uhh...(long pause) Mmm...no ma'am.

Scotti: (Suspicious..stepping in) Are you sure?

Charlie:.....Yes, indeed, little buddy. Absolutamento!

Florence: Are there any question from the audience for Charlie Chunkahunk.
(Audience questions Charlie) Thank you, sir. You may step down. Denise Caldero, will you come forward please. Hello Ms. Caldero, how are you?

Denise: I'm coping, under the circumstances. Murder is an unsettling thing, Ms. Fallaesha.

Florence: Yes it is. Now...although you and I only just met today, we've conversed on the phone and corresponded by email in the past, haven't we?

Denise: Yes....I've been attempting to be highly cooperative in your investigation. You see I am in possession of an incredible amount of inside information regarding the *Tight Trim Landscaping Company*. I was the office mangle at the firm for many years and I know the location of all the skeletons...every one of them. Did you enjoy our brunch this morning at Tito's cafe?

Florence: Yes I did. Thank you for the recommendation. Now, Ms. Caldero, You left *Tight Trim* under difficult circumstances, did you not?

Denise: Yes. You could certainly say that. I was a loyal employee Ms. Fellaesha and I was forsaken. (Click) Just like Sam was forsaken by Diane on *Cheers*. Remember when she left him at the altar. I cried for days. I love *Cheers* don't you? As mad as I was at Diane, I liked her much better than Rebecca. Were you Team Diane or Team Rebecca? ... Anyway...it doesn't matter. What matters is I was told to resign from *Tight Trim* or take responsibility for financial practices I didn't authorize.

Florence: And who did authorize them?

Denise: Ron signed the checks. Jack decided where they went.

Florence: How about, Ron's son, Horace. How was he involved.

Denise: He also had access to the checkbook. Horace has a good business sense, unlike Ron or Jack. When he was allowed to administer accounts payable, the company ran pretty well. Unfortunately....

Florence: Unfortunately?

Denise: Unfortunately, in recent years, Horace was distracted. Bookkeeping became hit or miss. There were some questionable payments. That's when I smelled a rat...and....that's when I was asked to vamoose....without cause, without severance.... without a thank you. *Gone!*

Florence: Are there any questions from the audience for Denise Caldero. (Audience questions Denise) Thank you Ms. Caldero you are excused. Jack Holsten, will you come forward, please. Mr. Holsten, how long had you been acquainted with the deceased.

Jack: Well, let's see. As I recall, I met Ron shortly after I returned from the Persian Gulf...probably around '93. We actually sat next to each other at a Mets game. We got to talking and eventually became friends.

Florence: Is that when you also met Mrs. Bennett?

Jack: Yes, that's right. It was through Renae Bennett, that I met my wife, Mona. Renae and Mona had been high school friends. So she fixed us up...and it worked like a charm.

Florence: And when did you and Ron go into business together?

Jack: Hmm...I'm not exactly sureBut I've got to say...that was primarily Mrs. Bennett's doing. She had been a business-admin major at Rutgers and was anxious to utilize her education. Frankly, Renae never thought her husband possessed much in the way of business acumen, so she encouraged me to become his partner in the enterprise.

Florence: Well, that sounds kind of harsh.

Jack: Maybe...but true, Miss Fellaesha. I don't think poor Ron would disagree, if he were here. But of course...he's not here (He breaks down, then looks at Dead-Ron) Well, not really.

Florence: Are you all right, Mr. Holsten. Can you continue?

Jack: (Composing) Yes, ma'am. I'm all right.

Florence: Mr. Holsten do you recognize this box?

Jack: Yes, ma'am. I believe that's the box containing the company's signature stamp.

Florence: That's right. (She removes the stamp from the box) This stamp contains both your signature and that of the deceased. It's used to both sign and endorse company checks....is that right?

Jack: That's right. I rarely had access to it. The financial responsibilities of the company were those of Ron and his son, Horace.

Florence: But...you did have access to this stamp recently, didn't you.

Jack:(slight panic) I did? Hmmm.. I don't recall.

Florence: Yes...When I returned here from the medical examiner, I had occasion to follow up on a tip from an audience member. I stopped at 94 West Caldwell avenue...the address of Bucco's Sharpening Service. There I questioned the proprietor, Mr. Artie Bucco. Mr. Bucco said you paid him for an over-due invoice by writing a check for \$375. and signing it with this stamp.

Jack: Ah, yes. That's right. I had forgotten. Mr. Bucco had been pressuring us for payment. Since I was unable to contact Ron, I borrowed the signature stamp and paid Bucco myself.

Florence: How did you get access to the stamp.

Jack: I went to Ron's house. Renae gave it to me.

Vinny: (appearing from thin air) Did you utilize the stamp for any other purposes...like *blackmailing Mrs. Marmalade*.

Jack:not likely, as I can recall, you giant tater tot!

Vinny: Why, I outta...

Florence: (Cutting him off) Very well. It seems this has been an emotional night for everyone. Just one more area to discuss, Mr. Holsten. You heard Mr. Chunkahunk's testimony, did you not?

Jack: Yes, I did. Look, Charlie is a nice young man. And he is a great worker....and very good with his hands.

Florence: But....

Jack: ...But he's not happy living at the bottom of the food chain. He saw a chance to advance himself and he took it. .

Florence: Mr. Holsten...*did* you or did you *not* instruct him to refer any sexual advances that he might have received from customers....to you, sir.

Jack: Well, the short answer is yes.

Florence: That's the one I'm looking for. Are there any....

Jack: Wait...the longer explanation is that Charlie is a strapping, virile, young man...eye candy for many a vulnerable older woman. He may have referred the quid pro quo offers to me at first. But, as time went on...and the offers increased....I believe he took personal advantage.

Florence: Mr. Holsten...isn't it true that you engaged in an extra-marital affair, some 30 years ago... with Renae Bennett.

(Cast reaction. Mona wails.)

Jack: Miss Fellaesha, this is small town. And small towns cultivate big rumors.

Florence: Yes or no?!

Jack: II....I refuse to answer that question out of respect for Mr. and Mrs. Bennett.

Mona: Hey!

Jack: *And my wife!* I refuse to answer out of respect for Mr. and Mrs. Bennett and my wife, Mona,

Florence: Hmmm. Are there any questions from the audience for Jack Holsten.
(Audience questions Jack) Thank you Mr. Holsten, you may step down...*for now!*
Louise Bennett, will you come forward please. Now, Mrs. Bennett, you are married to the son of the deceased....is that correct.

Louise: Yes, your honor. My husband, Horace, is the sole male offspring of Ronald Bennett.

Florence: I see. Well, there's no need to address me as your honor, ma'am. I'm not a judge. You may simply address me as Miss Fellaesha

Louise: Oh, thank you. And you may simply address me as *Mistress Mercy Mia*.

Florence: Mistress! Oh...yes...I've been told you are quite a successful internet influencer in the area of sadomasochism.

Louise: That's right. *Whip Me, Mistress Mercy*... Subscribe and like, folks... subscribe and like. (She stands up) And for those of you who are really into it, consider joining our Patreon Membership—45 dollars a month for specialized videos, tutorials and personalized attention.

Florence: Yes...I'll make a note of that.

Louise: You really should. Who knows? You might have a future as a dominatrix.

Florence: (uncomfortable laugh) I think not. Please sit down. Now...*Mistress*...in terms of your late father-in-law, Ronald Bennett.

Louise: Yes.

Florence: You didn't like him much did you.

Louise: No.

Florence: Why not.

Louise: Neither of Horace's parents ever accepted me. For some reason, they had a problem with my lifestyle. Can you imagine? Just look at me? What's the problem? It's not like I'm a *llll...liberal*. —. And Pappa-Ron was particularly vile toward me.

Florence: How so?

Louise: He was a chauvinistic pig. He believed a woman's place was in the laundry room. And he resented me for my strength and initiative.

Florence: Was your husband aware of your feelings toward his father?

Louise: Oh, sure. Believe me, lady, I'm not the type to hold back. If it enters here (indicate head)...it comes out here (indicate mouth).

Florence: How did Horace feel about that?

Louise: Unfortunately, my husband is a very weak man. Pathetic really. I'm sorry Horace, but it's true. His mother babied him and his father humiliated him to the point of psychological castration.

Florence: Wow! You really *don't* hold back, do you?

Louise: No, I don't. But... because Horace is so weak, our marriage is top shelf. He loves being dominated by me and I'm happy to oblige. I can punch him (SFX), kick him (SFX), and whip him (SFX) to a blackened pulp, and he'll thank me... and then he'll come back and ask for more. We go together *like a ramma-lamma-lamma-ka-dingity-dinga-dong!*

Scotti: Mrs. Bennett...I mean (shy smile) *Mistress Mia*...has Horace ever shared his feelings with you about his father.

Louise: Horace respects his parents. That's why he wanted to have this facacta party for their anniversary. But deep down....I don't think he appreciated the way his father treated him.

Florence: Really?

Louise: Oh, God no. Horace was the son of the owner of *Tight Trim*. He was called on to do all the company's grunt work but when it came to policy decisions, he was treated like a glorified coffee boy. He was hurt by that. I would be too.

Florence: Are there any questions from the audience for Louise Bennett aka Mistress Mercy Mia. (Audience questions Louise) Thank you Mrs—Thank *Mistress*. You may step down. Mabel Marmalade...will you come forward please. Mrs. Marmelade, are you a customer of the *Tight Trim Landscaping and Tree Service*?

Mabel: Yes, I am...and have been for the past three years.

Florence: And have you been satisfied with the service?

Mabel: Well, I had been up until a few months ago.

Florence: Please tell us what happened to change your mind.

Mabel: (Takes out a handkerchief and begins to weep) Oh, dear...this is very difficult for me to talk about.

Florence: Well, just take your time Mrs. Marmalade. This is important. Your experience with the company may have significant relevance to the murder that took place here tonight.

Mabel: All right. Everything was going fine. My lawn looked great. The trees were trimmed to perfection. Then one day....(tears...nose blow) I was cruelly seduced into a very compromising position.

Florence: By a compromising position you mean....

Mabel: I was enticed into a vigorous and acrobatic sexual *liaison*.

Florence: Hmm...a liaison, huh? You poor thing.

Mabel: Oh, it was terrible. We did it in my bed and on my sofa and on my kitchen counter and in my bathtub and on my dining room table,...and on the dog cushion in the basement.

Vinny: The dog cushion?

Mabel:...in the basement.

Florence: Table and sofa and tub....oh, my!

Mabel: (More tears) Please understand. I am not ...

Vinny: A whore?

Mabel: What!? No! I was going to say I am not promiscuous by nature.

Florence: Oh, no?

Mabel: No...it's just that my husband, Phil...has been out of the country on business and I became particularly...

Florence: Horny?

Mabel: Vulnerable.

Florence: I see.

Mabel: ...a vulnerability that the *Tight Trim Landscaping and Tree service* took total advantage of.

Florence: Yes...and following this incident... was it just the one incident, Mrs. Marmalade?

Mabel: Hmm...well, no. It happened sixteen times.

Florence: Oh...and after the sixteenth incident, you filed your complaint.

Mabel: Yes....I had no choice. I was blackmailed.

Florence: Blackmailed. Now...in your deposition you stated that the individual who inflicted all these...liaisons on you may have been Jack Holsten—co-founder of the company. But earlier tonight, you told me that you had been mistaken about that.

Mabel: Yes...it's true. I was confused. It wasn't Jack...it was.... Charlie Chunkahunk.

Charlie: (Stand) What?!!

Mabel: Sorry Charlie...I'm so sorry. I was confused and in my damaged state of mind...I made a mistake. I made a huge mistake. It was not Jack Holsten...it was Charlie.

Charlie: No!!

Florence: I think we're all quite shocked. You also told me that you believed Mr. Chunkahunk was taking orders in this nasty business from Ron Bennett, our murder victim here tonight.

Mabel: That is correct.

Florence: Are there any questions from the audience for Mabel Marmalade. (Mabel is questioned by the audience) Thank you, Mrs. Marmalade, you may step down. Phyllis Bennett, will you come forward please. Miss Bennett, you don't live here in town with the rest of your family, do you.

Phyllis: No ma'am.

Florence: Where do you reside.

Phyllis: I'm a nomad ma'am. I live wherever the road takes me. For the last few months I've been living in the beautiful forests of Alberta, Canada.

Florence: Oh, I'm sure that must be lovely. Rather remote though isn't it?

Phyllis: You ain't just a whistlin' Dixie...remote and cold as **fuck**.

Florence: *Miss Bennett!*

Phyllis: Oh, pardon my French, ma'am.

Florence: Miss Bennett, let me remind you that this is a formal homicide investigation. You are expected to conduct yourself with a modicum of decorum... if you don't mind.

Phyllis: Yes, ma'am.

Florence: I'm very sorry about the death of your father.

Phyllis: Thank you.

Florence: Were you and Dad close?

Phyllis: Well, first of all, I never referred to him as "Dad." We didn't have that kind of relationship. He was Ron to me and I was Phyll to him. And...no I guess we weren't particularly close. I kind of regret that fact now.

Florence: What was the problem?

Phyllis: I never lived up to his expectations. You see, I've always marched to my own drum....I know that's corny,— My brother Horace did what was expected of him. He obeyed all the rules. Not me. My father didn't like that. That's why I moved out.

Scotti: How about your mother?.

Phyllis: Oh, Mom's fine. She's been there for me when I needed her. I've appreciated that.

Scotti: And your brother...Horace?

Phyllis: Yeah, what a handle huh? Horace! What were they thinking? No...Horace is a good guy. He deserves better.

Florence: What do you mean by that?

Phyllis: Huh? Oh...nothing.

Florence: Has your brother ever expressed to you any dissatisfaction regarding your father?

Phyllis: Oh...gee...no...I can't recall any circumstance like that.

Florence: (Doubting) Miss Bennett?!!

Phyllis: Hey...Horace works hard at that company. He's a smart guy and from what I can see, he keeps the **fucking** place afloat. But in spite of that, he's at the bottom of the pecking order. I just think he deserves better.

Florence: So...then he *has* expressed resentment toward your father.

Phyllis: I didn't say that, *bitch*! Am I done here?

Florence: Not quite. Are there any questions from the audience for Phyllis Bennett? (Audience questions Phyllis) Thank you Miss Bennett, you may step down.

Phyllis: You can all go **fuck** yourselves!

Florence: Renae Bennett, will you come forward please.

Renae takes the chair.

Florence: I'm very sorry for your loss, Mrs. Bennett.

Renae: Thank you very much, I'm sure.

Florence: Mrs. Bennett, are you aware of any enemies your late husband may have had?

Renae: No...not really. Ron is...*was* ... a great guy. He was kind and generous . He was funny too. He knew how to make everyone laugh . Of course...

Florence: Yes, Mrs. Bennett?

Renae: Well, there was the one thing. He had a tendency to break into show tunes at the drop of a hat. Some people found that to be disturbing.

Florence: Disturbing to the extent he was murdered for it?

Renae: I hardly think so.

Cameo Ken: (Freud) Wie geht's Ihnen! A person obsessed with show tunes likely possesses or has developed a high degree of empathy and emotional intelligence, finding it easier to process complex human emotions through music and narrative. For men, who may have been socialized to mask their emotions, the raw experience of musical theatre suggests a person who does not fear vulnerability. Danke schön!

Florence: Mrs. Bennett, I'm told you were instrumental in getting the family business started.

Renae: Well, yes, I guess you could say that. Call me anal-retentive...

Louise: *That's what I'm talkin' about Mama!*

Renae: Oh, please! I just mean, I could never stand to see things done half- way. I've always obsessed in attention to detail. I felt that if we were going to invest our lives in a landscaping business, I wanted to be sure everything was done correctly.

Florence: And the business became a big success.

Renae: Yes, it did.

Florence: Yet, shortly after the launch you backed off and let your husband run the business with his partner, Jack Holsten.

Renae: That's right. Once *Tight Trim* was established, I decided to devote myself to raising my children.

Florence: Mrs. Bennett, I couldn't help but notice that both your son and daughter seem a much bigger fan of yours than they were of your husband.

Renae: Well, I don't think that's particularly so. I think all families display varying degrees of affection, depending on what else is going on in the world. Doesn't that make sense Miss Fellaesha?

Florence: Yes, I guess it does. Now, your daughter, Phyllis is quite the maverick, it would seem.

Renae: Oh, yes...she's always been that way. It's her way or the highway. Her father had a problem with that. She and Ron were like oil and water.

Vinny: What about your son, Horace.

Renae: He's a good son. He's done all that he's been asked. He's mature and responsible. Yet.... I know Ron.... resented him.

Vinny: Is that so? Why? Why did your husband resent his son.

Renae: (Beat...deep breath...sigh) It's complicated.

Florence: I'm a patient investigator, Mrs. Bennett. Take your time. Explain to me why your husband resented your son.

Renae: I can't say.

Florence: Can't say...or *won't* say, Mrs. Bennett.

Renae: There's always been a gulf between them. I think they both tried hard to bridge that gulf...but they could never quite make it work.

Florence: Are there any questions from the audience for Renae Bennett? (Audience question Renae.) Thank you Mrs. Bennett, you may step down. And now, ladies and gentlemen...through the magic of *MurderMysteryDinner Theatre*...I will conduct my final interrogation ... I give you the murder victim himself....Ronald Bennett. (SFX) Mr. Bennett, can you hear me? Can you hear me, Mr. Bennett....Mr. Bennett?

Ron:

I can hear the people sing?
Singing a song of angry men?
It is the music of a people
Who will not be slaves again

Florence: Ah...very good. I'm so glad you're with us, sir. We've been talking about you all night. How are you feeling?... Sir, I know it might be difficult under the circumstances, but can you tell us how you're feeling right now?... Sir?....

Ron:

Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious
Even though the sound of it is something quite atrocious
If you say it loud enough you'll always sound precocious
Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious
Um-dittle-ittl-um-dittle-I
Um-dittle-ittl-um-dittle-I
Um-dittle-ittl-um-dittle-I
Um-dittle-ittl-um-dittle-I

Florence: Hmm. Okay. I'm starting to understand why everyone was so annoyed by you, sir. May you and all the rest of us, R-I-P. Mr. Bennett, I'll cut right to the chase....can you tell me who killed you?

Ron:

I don't know who 'twas shot me
I don't know how he got me
I'm a man. I'm just a man.
But I'm dead...I'm dead
I bled and bled.

I swear that if I knew
I would tell you

Florence: I see.... All right. Mr. Bennett....Think. Think carefully. If you had to guess....why do you think you were murdered?

Ron:
I had it coming, I had it coming
I only had myself to blame
If you'd have been there, if you'd have seen it
I betcha you'd have done the same

Florence: Well, I was, in fact, here when it happened sir. I assure you it wasn't me. Now, Mr. Bennett...in the event we have to contact you with any follow-up questions....where might we locate you?

Ron: (smiling broadly)
Heaven, I'm in heaven
And the cares that hung around me through the week
Seem to vanish like a gambler's lucky streak
And I never-ever need to take a leak.

Florence: Ladies and gentlemen, I believe I now know who murdered Ron Bennett. I will be back shortly with my resolution.

Vinny: Ladies and gentlemen...it is now your turn to solve the murder which has been committed here tonight (today)

Scotti: Who do you think murdered Ron Bennett? Please refer to the resolution form you received earlier.

Vinny: Feel free to provide your hypothesis regarding the murderer or murderers—

Scotti: —The motive and or motives.

Vinny: —As well as the modus operandi

Scotti: Huh?

Vinny: Well, the means..the opportunity...the murder weapon...etcetera.

Scotti: Oh, I get it...etcetera. We will choose one winner from all the correct solutions submitted.

Vinny: We will also choose one winner based on the most creative solution. May the best detective win.

Scotti: And now...please enjoy your dessert.

Vinny: (To Scotti) Now, you need to arrange to get my wife's car out of that ditch right away.

Scott: Why should I?! It's not my car.

Vinny: What do you mean? You landed it in the ditch....you better get it out...you idiot.

Scott: Don't call me an idiot, you idiot!

The ad lib out

Act III

Actors have returned and are engaging in table talk with the audience. Sound tech and co-hosts are at the ready with clown horns.

Horace: Attention ladies and gentlemen, attention please. Although this evening certainly didn't turn out as we planned, I would still like to pay special tribute to my parents on the occasion of their 40th Anniversary.

Phyllis: Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Big brother...what the **fuck** are you doing?

Horace: I'm making my anniversary speech. I put in a lot of time on it and I want to deliver it.

Phyllis: Horace...Daddy is dead. We're all under murder investigation. The whole night is a disaster. Nobody wants to hear your speech.

Horace: I disagree. And I think you should give your speech too.

Phyllis: Not until the ghost of Elvis **fucks** me tender.

Horace: You are so crude! Louise...you're a neutral party. What do you think?

Louise: As much as I hate to agree with my nimrod husband. Perhaps listening to his speech would be a welcome distraction from all the chaos.

Phyllis: That's such bullshit, Louise. You are the most self-righteous bitch on God's good earth....you **fucking** weirdo!

Louise, Horace and Phyllis argue. Soon all principals jump in, taking sides on the prospect of Horace making his speech. Everyone's yelling at the same time.

Florence enters and struggles to get attention.

Florence: Ladies and gentlemen...Ladies and gentlemen...Hello!....Attention please!...attention! (She shouts) SHUT UP!!!! (All calm down) Ladies and gentlemen, I am ready to deliver my resolution to this horrific crime. (Actors return to peripheral) Ron Bennett was ruthlessly murdered on the occasion of his 40th wedding anniversary. But, who *was* Ronald Bennett? On the surface ...the ideal!a faithful husband, a loving father, an astute business-owner. The American Dream, really! But...things are not always as they appear on the surface. Isn't that right Phyllis.

Phyllis: Oh, absolutely. I've found that in the grand scheme of things, very little is as it appears on the surface.

Florence:(clear her throat) In fact, you and your father were not exactly close, were you?

Phyllis: No we were not.

Florence: You always felt totally ignored by your father, correct?

Phyllis: That's right. So what?

Florence: Perhaps by murdering him you finally got the attention you felt you deserved.

Phyllis: Oh, come on, Columbo. You can do better than that. Of course I was hurt when I didn't live up to Daddy's 1950's expectations. But, Sweetie, this isn't exactly *Leave it to fucking Beaver!* I grew up. I got over it. I moved out. And I moved on. I'm a big girl Ms. *Fellaesha*. You're barking up the wrong tree. I did not kill my father.

Florence: Perhaps not. But you and your brother will surely receive a financial infusion from your father's passing....be it through his will or insurance benefit. Isn't that right Horace?

Horace: I suppose that's true, but that certainly doesn't mean I'm celebrating his death....that's sick.

Florence: Is it, Horace? Is it really? You've been heard to complain about how badly your father treated you at work. Now that's he's gone, maybe you'll be better appreciated for your efforts at *Tight Trim*.

Horace: Yes, you're right. Dad didn't appreciate me. I can't really tell you why. For whatever reason, he seemed to resent me. But I loved my father and I always tried to make him proud of me. I expect my mother to be the prime financial beneficiary of his death. I have no interest in any of that. My father is gone forever. And I miss him. (He breaks down)

Florence: But *you* don't miss him, do you Mrs. Holsten. You intimated how you and Renae Bennett were the closest of friends until she met the deceased.

Mona: (Swigging from her flask) What are you talkin' about? I never said anything of the sort. We and the Bennetts have always been as tight as a nun's nasty. (She giggles)

Florence: But, Mrs. Holsten, earlier we discussed the rumors of philandering on the part of your husband, Jack.

Mona: Rumors is right. My Jack would never stray from me. Never?

Florence: I see. According to court records you filed suit against your husband in 1995 for irreconcilable differences.

Mona: So what?! For your information, we reconciled.

Florence: I know. I see here, that the suit was dropped. But Mona— isn't it true that, at that time, your husband was engaged in a stormy affair with your good friend, Renae Bennett?

Mona: Shut up, you! Shut up!

Florence: Admit it, Mona. Admit it. And all these years later, that hurtful wound is till unhealed.

Mona: (Crying) I know. I know. Jack...you bastard.

Florence: And so, for retribution, you killed Ron Bennett tonight. You, Mona Holsten, are a murderer!

Mona: (halts the water works) Huh? Murder? That makes no sense, Sherlock! If I wanted retribution I would have killed my prick of a husband...or maybe Renae. But not Ron. He was as much a patsy as I was.

Florence: Hmm! Oh...yes...right. You've got a point there.

Mona: (takes a belt from her flask) Geez!

Florence: Ms. Caldero....you've suggested on several occasions that you knew where all the bodies were buried, when it came to *Tight Trim Landscaping*. Exactly what did you mean by that?

Denise: Oh, well. I knew the business better than anyone. I knew the good things and I knew the bad things. And there were plenty of bad things Ms. Fallaesha. I felt it was my civic duty to step forward and do the right thing.

Jack: *Horse Manure!*

Florence: But, Ms. Caldero, isn't it also true that you believed the company still owed you a significant amount of money.

Denise: Oh...gee.... I forgot about that. It's terrible....I've become so forgetful lately.(Click) Last week I went to the Shop-Along to buy groceries. Just a few things you know. It wasn't a major trip. I picked up some produce and some ground beef. They were having a sale on the meat, so I didn't want to miss out. And...some lemonade and Dr. Pepper...some raspberry yogurt.... And

strawberry-brickle ice cream. Umm, yummy. Anyway, when I went to check out, I realized I had forgotten my reusable shopping bags. In New Jersey we have to bring our own bags. What a nuisance...anyway—

Florence: Ms. Caldero! (claps her hands to bring her back)_Ms. Caldero! How much money are you owed by Tight Trim

Denise: Huh? Oh... \$5000.

Florence: \$5000.—That's quite a large amount. And because you held Mr. Bennett responsible for your ouster and ultimately your owed severance....you took it onto yourself...to murder him. C'mon Denise...own up to it. I'll help you find a good lawyer and you could be out in just few years.

Denise: Are you out of your cotton-pickin' mind? Yes...I was pissed at Ron and I told him so. I wanted my money and I was willing to be a whistle- blower if I had to, in order to get it.

Jack: *RAT!!!!*

Florence: Mr. Hoslten...*please!*

Denise: I'm not a murderer, Ms. Fellaesha. I couldn't murder Ron. He was a nice guy most of the time. I didn't do it.....(Click) I hate having to bring my own shopping bags to the grocery store. Don't you?

Florence: Well, then. Moving on... Ms. Marmalade....you perhaps had the clearest motivation to murder Ron Bennett.

Mabel: Who? *Me?! Whatever* do you mean? I never even met the poor fellow.

Florence: Maybe not, but you were told that Ron Bennett was the brains behind the blackmailing scheme.....a scheme in which you had already paid out \$500. and feared further implications.

Mabel: I...I....

Florence: You infiltrated this anniversary party in the guise of a server. You stood ready when the Bennetts entered the room and you fired the gun. You're a murderer, Mrs. Marmalade. Tell the truth. You'll feel better.

Mabel: You're bananas lady! It's true I'm here under-cover. But that's because Jack wanted me to clear him of the blackmailing business with you.

Florence: So...you're saying that you were lying about that whole thing?

Mabel: Is the Pope Polish? Bite me, Jack! Yes, Ms. Fellaesha. It was Jack all along! He's the one who seduced me on 16 different occasions. And it was Jack who tried to blackmail me. I'm ashamed to admit it. But..yes, I'm a liar and.... I might be a teeny-tiny bit frisky too. But...I didn't kill Ron Bennett.

Florence: So your claim earlier regarding Mr. Chunkahunk being your violator was also a lie.

Mabel: Yes...sorry Charlie.

Florence: Well, That certainly clarifies my investigation into *Tight Trim Landscaping*. But it doesn't resolve the murder of Ron Bennett. How about that Jack.

Jack: I still maintain it was you, Charlie, who seduced Mrs. Marmalade and blackmailed her afterward.

Florence: But *she* was quite emphatic that it was *you*.

Jack: Let me give you a tip Ms. Fellaesha. Marmalade and Chunkahunk are in cahoots. They've souped up this crazy plot against me for their own benefit. But I'm a respected member of this community and I am just as emphatic when I say I had nothing to do with any of it. It's my word against theirs.

Florence: All right. Let's stick a pin in that for now, sir.

Vinny: A pin...Scotti, she needs a pin.

Scotti: A pin? I don't think I have a pin? Why does she need a pin?

Vinny: I don't know. But she needs a pin. Do you have a pin or not?

Scotti: No, I don't. Do you have a pin?

Vinny: Now why would I have a pin. You idiot.

Scotti: Stop calling me an idiot.

Vinny: Stop acting like an idiot and get me a pin.

Scotti: I don't have a

Florence: *SHUT-UP!!!!* Mr. Holsten, what is your current relationship with Renae Bennett?

Jack: Renae and I are close friends. I intend to stand by her now in her hour of need.

Florence: But you do admit that in the past you've been intimately involved with her ?

Jack: That was many years ago. I barely remember. Look, Ms. Fellaesha, I'm not an angel. You may well be able to prove that I've been involved in some underhanded dealings. But Ron was my friend. I did not kill him.

Florence: Hmmm, we'll see about that. Mrs. Bennett....how would you characterize your marriage to Ron.

Renae: It was good. Solid. Oh, we had our ups and downs like any married couple. But Ron was a good provider and a loving husband and father.

Florence: You just heard Mr. Holsten admit that he had an affair with you some 30 years ago.

Renae: Yes....well... I'm not proud of that. I was a lot younger then and impatient. As wonderful as Ron was, he lacked initiative and charisma. I saw in Jack everything that was lacking in Ron. But it was a mistake.

Florence: Mrs. Bennett, why did Ron resent your son, Horace?

Renae: (Beat)...please don't make me do this.

Florence: Renae....

Renae: (Beat) Uhm...because Ron was not Horace's father. (To Horace) I'm so sorry son. So sorry. (To Florence) But I did not murder my husband. You have to believe me.

Horace exits the room. Louise follows.

Florence: Hold your horses, Louise!

Louise: Hey, bitch! My husband is in distress. He needs me.

Florence: Maybe you should have thought of that before you murdered his father.

Louise: Oh, please. If I had wanted that *crooning cavalier* eliminated, he would have been gone a long time ago.

Florence: I don't know about that, Louise. I noticed there was an R.B. on your local list of Patreon subscribers. R.B.... Ron Bennett? Were you tutoring your father-in-law in the lost art of sadomasochism?

Louise: (Laughs - She imitates Florence's lisp) First of all, Miss Fellaesha, sadomasochism is not a lost art. It's alive and well and thriving...at *WhipMeMistressMia.com*. Secondly, my client list is private...confidential. But in the interest of justice I can assure you that my deceased father-in-law was not a client.

Florence: I didn't hear a denial of murder there.

Louise: C'mon, lady. Of course I didn't murder him. I hated him. He was awful to my husband and now we all know why. He was a creepy, vicious son-of-a-bitch. But he was my husband's father...sort of. How could I have, in good conscience, murdered him.

Florence: I'm still not hearing a denial, Louise. All right, *Mistress*...don't leave town..

Horace returns. Louise goes to him and comforts him.

Florence: Charlie Chunkahunk. Oh, Charlie, you must be so relieved that Mrs. Marmalade admitted she was lying about you.

Charlie: Oh, fer' sure, fer' sure! I'm mighty glad about that, *Mistress*.

Florence: What?...Charlie, did you just call me *Mistress*?

Charlie: Oh, heck, ma'am. I get confused sometimes. I meant to say Mith— that's right, Mith Fellaesha. You wanna dance again, Mith.

Florence: Wait a minute Charlie. (She looks at the Patreon list) C.C.— Charlie Chunkahunk- Charlie are you a follower of *WhipMeMistressMia.com*?

Charlie: Oh, gee...I'm not sure. I subscribe to so many different things on those internets.

Florence: (softening as she leads him on) C'mon Charlie. This is me. You like me, don't you?

Charlie: Well, sure...I like you fine, Mith.

Florence: I like you too, Charlie. You're a fun guy. And you're a real handy guy to hang out with. You didn't shoot and kill Ron Bennett tonight, did you.

Charlie: Uhh....umm..well, let's see. I didn't *want* to...I...I...I didn't *mean* to... But somethin' just took a hold of me and before I realized what was a'happenin', I squeezed that old trigger.

Florence: Something took a hold of you? What took a hold of you, Charlie? What took a hold of you?

Charlie: I— I—uhh— I—

Florence: I think I know Charlie. It was your *Mistress Mia*...Louise Bennett... wasn't it Charlie! You *are* her Patreon subscriber, aren't you?...you *are* devoted to her.

Charlie: Uh...I guess so. Yes, ma'am.

Florence: She provided you *personal attention*, didn't she?

Charlie: Uh...Yes, ma'am.

Florence: You enjoyed how she abused you, didn't you.

Charlie: Hmm...well...Yes, ma'am.

Florence: She knew you were good with your hands....a handyman, right?

Charlie: Uh-huh.

Florence: Louise Bennett, aka *Mistress Mia*...ordered you to murder Ron Bennett and in your devotion to her....you carried out her request.

Charlie: (Beat).....Yes. I'm so sorry.

Florence: You're a patsy Charlie. And you're under arrest for the murder of Ron Bennett... As are you...Louise!

Louise: (She brandishes a gun and grabs Mona) Yes, I did it. *And I'm glad I did it!* Ron Bennett was a self-righteous, holier than thou, off-key slaughterer of the American Songbook. I hated him. But most of all I detested how he took my husband for granted. I couldn't stand that, so I did what any self-respecting dominatrix would do. I shriveled him down to a pile of bones. Now...I'm off to Budapest and my new international home-office. If anybody gets in my way, Selina Smirnoff, here is gonna buy the farm. Sorry Horace...about everything.

She starts out. Horace grabs her—Mona fights her off (Gun fires) Jack subdues her and takes the gun.

Florence: Good work everyone. Let's get these two murderers off to jail. Sorry Charlie, it could have been sweet. Good night, everyone. Have a safe trip home.. And...happy anniversary, Renae.