

**ACT I**

**Scene 1**

SETTING: Stella's condo. Hallway off one side, kitchen visible, up left. The front door is up center, a single window, covered by blinds, to one side of it. Essential furnishings are a sofa, flat panel TV set facing up in front of it.

AT RISE: **STELLA MARBER**, 40s, stands by the kitchen entry, wearing potholders, talking generally toward the TV, from which we hear the voice of Pamela.

STELLA

So, wait a minute. Run that by me again --

PAMELA (V.O.)

It's a minor change, darling. Just a shift of location.

STELLA

I wouldn't call going from 1920s Egypt to 1930s France a minor change. I'd have to --

PAMELA (V.O.)

That's what the publisher wants. And change the hero's name.

STELLA

Pamela --

PAMELA (V.O.)

Do you think you could move over on camera range, please? So I can at least see that you're looking at the galleys?

(Stella moves to center, in front of the TV.)

STELLA

What's the point right now?

PAMELA (V.O.)

So you will make the changes. Good. I knew you'd understand.

STELLA

They didn't have a problem with my hero in Cross and Crescent.

PAMELA (V.O.)  
Times change, sweetie.

(Stella sniffs.)

STELLA  
Oh... shit.

PAMELA (V.O.)  
Language!

STELLA  
No, no, sorry. Lunch is burning. Call you later.

PAMELA (V.O.)  
Stella, Nathan's here, and he'd like to --

(But Stella moves to the TV, detaches her cellphone from a socket on the top and the line goes dead. She hurries to the kitchen, where she has set the table for two. She places a covered dish on the table and is about to start dishing out the food when there's a timid KNOCK on the door. She freezes.)

(She looks toward the door nervously, not moving. The KNOCK repeats, louder. STELLA grabs the extra dishes and shoves them in the cupboard, then crosses to the door, looking back to see if she's forgotten anything.)

(She looks out a peephole in the door, then relaxes, quickly undoes the chain and several deadbolts. She opens the door just long enough for **DUSTIN CRUZ**, 20s, to squeak in. He fidgets as she re-locks the door.)

DUSTIN  
Hi. Hate to be a pain. Can I borrow your phone again?

STELLA  
Knock yourself out.  
(She hands him her cell phone.)  
You've really got to go and --

DUSTIN

No, no.

STELLA

It's not that difficult. Fill out a few forms and --

DUSTIN

I'd rather not.

STELLA

You can't go on like this. No phone, no license --

DUSTIN

I manage.

STELLA

You haven't been driving again, have you?

DUSTIN

I'm careful.

STELLA

If they pull you over --

DUSTIN

I'm very careful. I wear a condom when I drive.

STELLA

Dustin, this isn't a joke. I worry, that's all. You're illegal. You could get evicted.

DUSTIN

My landlady's cool about it.

STELLA

If it came down to it, you think she'd risk her job for you? Does she have kids? Grandkids?

DUSTIN

She... it wouldn't get that bad. Would it?

STELLA

I'll take you down to the post office myself if you want, so --

DUSTIN

No! Er, no. Thank you, but... no. I... I like my freedom.

STELLA

Is it freedom? I worry about you, Dustin. Really. I do.

DUSTIN

Thanks. Hey, so... how are you doing? Met anyone new yet?

STELLA

No, and I'm not looking.

DUSTIN

Live a little. It's been six months since he left.

STELLA

Eight, and I'm perfectly fine.

DUSTIN

Yeah, but it must get lonely.

STELLA

I like my freedom... How about you? Seeing anyone?

DUSTIN

No.

STELLA

Come on. All these phone calls --

DUSTIN

I'm fine. Give me an online connection and a bottle of lotion, I can have sex all over the world. I'm seeing people in Spain, Hong Kong, Holland --

STELLA

I meant in real life.

DUSTIN

No, nobody. It's just... kind of hard to meet someone real. With the... and all, you know.

STELLA

Another reason to get legal.

DUSTIN

Exactly the opposite. Haven't you been watching the news?

STELLA

Too much.

DUSTIN

Anyway, it'd be kind of hard sneaking anyone past those vans.

STELLA

Vans?

DUSTIN

Yeah, they're back. Always at least two of them --

STELLA

Since when?

DUSTIN

A couple of weeks. I bet it's that old guy on my first floor. Probably building bombs in his bathtub or something.

(But Stella has edged toward the front window, peeks out sideways)

Hey -- stay away from the window.

(She gestures him to be quiet, then moves from the window, concerned.)

STELLA

Are you sure they're not watching you?

DUSTIN

I don't really exist.

STELLA

Maybe that's why.

(Pause.)

Go make your phone call.

DUSTIN

Right.

(He starts for the hall.)

STELLA

Dustin. Take it over to your place, I'll come by for it later.

DUSTIN

Don't you need it?

STELLA

There's no one I want to call right now.

DUSTIN

Really...? Thanks.

(He crosses to the door. She repeats the unlocking routine and opens it. Dustin peers out furtively.)

STELLA

Dustin -- act naturally.

DUSTIN

Right. Sorry. Bye.

(He exits. She shuts the door and locks it, then moves to the window, casually checks the blinds to make sure they're closed. She goes to the kitchen, gets the second set of dishes out and resets them, then goes to the front closet and opens the door. She uses a broom to knock on the closet ceiling -- a very specific, patterned knock. A beat, then the KNOCK repeats from above. She reaches up into the closet, pulls a panel down from the ceiling, revealing that it's false. There's a trap door above, and we hear the sound of several LATCHES being undone. Then, the panel lifts away, a ladder lowers and a figure climbs down.)

(This is **AMIR MARBER**, 40s, swarthy, bearded, dressed simply. He and Stella embrace and kiss.)

AMIR

Susie learned a new trick today.

STELLA

You taught her how to type?

AMIR

Silly. No. She sat up.

(off her look)

Maybe for a dog, easy. For a possum, not so easy.

STELLA

What about Dexter?

AMIR

Like most males of any species, he lacks in brains what he makes up for with stubbornness. Hard enough to get him to notice that I've got a treat for him.

STELLA

Maybe males are the smart ones, then.

AMIR

Susie does amaze me, though. Well, both of them. They managed to lose their natural fear of humans. If only humans could do the same...

STELLA

Sometimes, you do worry me. You're not talking to the possums, are you?

AMIR

Yes, but they don't talk back, so I must still have my sanity.

STELLA

You're bored up there, aren't you?

AMIR

Eh... I've read everything ten times. We can't get something new, can we?

STELLA

They've banned all the books you like.

AMIR

I'd love to take a nice walk. Just around the block, that's all. See outside again, even for only a minute.

STELLA

Outside would get you inside pretty fast.

AMIR

Yes, I know. But I hate living like this.

STELLA

We don't have to.

AMIR

I'd love not to.

STELLA

I talked to Barbara today.

(Amir pulls from her, jolted.)

AMIR

No.

STELLA

You like living like this in your own home?

AMIR

Not as much as I'd hate running away.

STELLA

It isn't running away. We have to do something, Amir. We can't keep this up forever.

AMIR

You think I want to? I belong here, with you.

STELLA

But why does it have to be here?

AMIR

Because otherwise, they win.

STELLA

Is winning the only important thing?

(He gives her a look; subject closed and his mind isn't going to change.)

Fine. Eat.

(They sit and eat through the following.)

I'm worried about Dustin. He came to borrow the phone. Again. I have no idea whom he could be calling so much.

AMIR

He still doesn't have his own?

STELLA

He refuses to do the paperwork.

AMIR

Just like Dexter. Stubborn and stupid.

STELLA

Tell him that.

AMIR

His luck will run out. At least he could pretend to play by their rules. I never had that chance.

STELLA

My sister --

AMIR

No.

STELLA

It would be nice to see her again. Like a vacation. It's been... I haven't seen her in five years.

AMIR

You'd have to make the trip without me.

STELLA

Since when do you hate my sister?

AMIR

I don't. But what can you do -- hide me in your suitcase and smuggle me over the border?

(They look at each other, then embrace, Stella trying not to cry. Then, their moment is interrupted by a KNOCK on the door.)

(In a flash, they snap into a well-rehearsed routine. Amir springs across the room in silence and scurries quickly up the ladder, which he pulls up behind himself. Before he even closes the trapdoor, Stella puts the false ceiling in place, closes the closet. They've managed all this before the second KNOCK.)

STELLA

Coming.

(She checks out the peephole again, then opens the door. Dustin re-enters and she shuts the door quickly. He returns her phone.)

DUSTIN

I'm done. Figured you wouldn't want to be stuck without this.

STELLA

(ready for him to leave.)

Thanks.

DUSTIN

Ah. That smells good. What is it?

STELLA

Ghormeh sabzi. Uh -- stew. Herbs, vegetables.

DUSTIN

You know, I knew your cooking before I met you. I could always smell it in the street, thought it smelled great.

STELLA

It's nothing. I think I found that in a book.

DUSTIN

Wow, you made a lot of it.

STELLA

It keeps well.

DUSTIN

God, I haven't seen this much food since my father's Sunday afternoon tamale fests. Feeding an army, or something?

STELLA

No. Why?

DUSTIN

Nothing. I've just pretty much gotten used to Ramen and Easy Mac.

(Stella continues getting ready. Dustin stares at the food. Finally;)

STELLA

You want to join me?

DUSTIN

Thanks.

(Dustin sits, then notices the two place settings.)

Oh. You're not alone?

STELLA

No I... I figured you'd be hungry, so I set up for two.

DUSTIN

But... you didn't ask before.

STELLA

I assumed. I mean, look at how skinny you are.

DUSTIN

Thanks. But if you were seeing someone, I'd never tell.

STELLA

I'm not seeing anyone.

DUSTIN  
Have you even heard from --

STELLA  
I like my freedom. Eat!

DUSTIN  
Okay.  
(They eat in silence a while.)  
This is pretty good. Thanks.

STELLA  
I do like having the company. It gets lonely here.

DUSTIN  
Tell me about it.  
(They eat some more. Then)  
But how did you know I was coming back?

STELLA  
I just figured...

DUSTIN  
Oh.  
(Dustin picks up the roll next to his plate, notices there's a bite out of it. He looks at it strangely. Stella is already backing away behind him, reaching for a table lamp.)  
Gee, momma bear. Someone's been eating my roll.

STELLA  
I'm sorry, Dustin.

(As Stella hits him with the lamp...)

**BLACK OUT**

**END OF SCENE.**