

THE WHOLE IS GREATER

by
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THE WHOLE IS GREATER

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THE WHOLE IS GREATER

For David, Nora & Leo

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CAST: 4 Women, 1 Man, plus offstage voices (men and women)

MARGUERITE NAVARRE	50s. Former Vice Chair of French Department at Carlyle Community College. Stylish, creative. Friends and family call her Marg, with a hard G. Definitely not a “Marge.”
FRANCES FURST	50s. High school classmate and nemesis of Marguerite. City Council Chair. Conniving, corrupt, slippery.
CARMEN, A.K.A. KATIE	28. Pretty, perky, motivational guru. A true show-woman who dazzles you into believing she can make your wildest dreams come true. Has a secret, checkered past.
SHELLY LAUERMAN	Late 40s. Carmen’s estranged mom. Working class and not ashamed of it. Wry sense of humor.
KEVIN ADAMS	30s. Looks younger. Nerdy personal assistant to Frances. And something else, too.
ANNOUNCER	Voice only. Sexy male voice used to "rev up" the crowd at Carmen's extravaganza events. Could be double cast with Kevin.
CLIENTS	Three female clients of Carmen’s. They "testify" at her event via video. Could be voiced by actors playing Shelly and Frances.
CROWD	(SFX only) Attendees at Carmen’s event, City Council press conference, etc.

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ACT 1 SCENE 1

A conference hotel in the greater Washington, D.C. area. The present. Friday, late afternoon. Lights up on the downstage playing area. We see the lobby outside of the ballroom/function space. We hear the thump thump of uptempo Muzak versions of current pop hits coming from inside, punctuated by cheering and applause. We see a lobby chair or two, signs to the bathrooms, and a coffee cart. MARGUERITE flings open the door from the auditorium, very angry/distraught/overwhelmed. She is one second away from exploding. She lets it all out in one expression of pent-up anger, perhaps tearing up her conference binder or flinging to the four winds any brochures or promotional signs in her path. She kicks a chair.

MARG. AAAARGH! Merduh! *Que des conneries!* (*Beat.*) Marguerite, for God's sake, get a grip! (*Rummages around in purse, looking for anything to help with anxiety. Finds a small swag bag with "It's Carmen!" emblazoned on it, dumps out pens and magnets, and breathes into it. SHELLY enters. Wears casual clothing that vaguely suggests a uniform, i.e, khakis and polo shirt. Looks like she might work at the hotel. She crosses to coffee cart and starts quietly stacking cups. Marg puts bag down, takes a deep breath, closes her eyes, relaxes. Then she starts to look for aspirin in purse. Shelly starts softly humming.*) Oh. Hello. (*She pauses, then crosses to coffee cart.*) Mind if I...?

SHELLY. 'Swhat's it's here for.

MARG. (*Pours coffee, swallows aspirin.*) Thanks.

SHELLY. So. (*Beat.*) Loud in there, huh?

MARG. That music has given me a headache.

SHELLY. (*Nodding.*) Those younger ones aren't bothered by it like we are.

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MARG. Oh? They're not all that much younger.

SHELLY. Well, maybe not...*(Peering at her name tag.)* Marguerite.
(Pause.) So—you enjoying it? Carmen and her show? She's somethin', isn't she?

MARG. All afternoon I've waited to see her...*(Picking up a brochure nearby and reading.)* "extra-ordinary motivational genius." But I haven't.

SHELLY. Really? Well maybe you just need to—ya know—go in and listen a little harder.

MARG. I think not.

SHELLY. You sure? I can tell somethin's eatin' you. Carmen can help! She's helped lotsa people. They come back year after year.

MARG. Unless she can help me find a tenure track position, I will not be among them.

SHELLY. Oh, you're a teacher! Then you're in the right place! Carmen'll help you redefine your goals and adjust your viewpoint so you can pivot right over and dive into your dream job.

MARG. I had my dream job. Still do until the end of the semester. And yes, I've looked, and no one else is hiring. *(Beat.)*

SHELLY. Whatja think of Bronco?

MARG. Bronco? With his little act about "Walking Tall with Confidence?"

SHELLY. Didn't grab you, huh?

MARG. The man is a former professional basketball player. Of course he can walk tall with confidence! But I cannot imagine how his story in any way applies to those women.

SHELLY. Most of 'em love him, though. *(Beat.)* Hear that? It's quietin' down. Carmen's back. If you want to get your money's worth you should go. It's time for her big "reveal."

MARG. *(Sighing as she turns to go.)* Why not? Might be good for a laugh. Besides, Elaine's in there. She's my ride home.

SHELLY. Sometimes it just takes folks a little longer to feel Carmen's magic.

MARG. OK. Well. Thanks, um...*(Looking at Shelly for a name tag.)*

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Sorry, it's just that you don't have a name tag.

SHELLY. *(Sticking out her hand.)* Shelly. I do the cleanin' up.

MARG. Oh. Then you are with the hotel? And not with...uh, this Carmen circus?

SHELLY. Oh, I'm with Carmen all right. I'm her mother. *(As Marg and Shelly exit, the stage is transformed, and we find ourselves inside the auditorium of Carmen's show. We see a large projection screen at the rear that reads in big, bold letters "Power Up with Carmen!" A high stool is center stage, next to a small table with a gorgeous, large floral arrangement, a box of designer tissues, and a tall glass of water. Loud rock music begins, heavy on the bass. Lights dim and a spotlight hits the stage as we hear ANNOUNCER offstage.)*

ANNOUNCER. And now, ladies, once again: Put your hands together for your leader of empowerment, your Number One guide to living your best life, your personal transformation specialist: the fabulous, the truly original, the one and only... Carmen! *(SFX of audience wildly "woot-wooting" and applauding as CARMEN bounds onstage. This continues for some time as she waves and blows kisses, adjusts her headset mic, etc.)*

CARMEN. So, how many of you just LOVED Bronco? *(Sounds of affirmative enthusiasm, maybe a whistle or cougar growl or two.)* Isn't he fabulous? I know I can really relate to his story of triumph over adversity! And how many of you signed up for his workshop next year in Desert Hot Springs Spa and Resort? *(Appreciative sounds and applause.)* Lucky you! Super! *(Sitting down on her stool, sipping from her water glass as the crowd quiets down.)* Now, the time has come to talk about something very important, something that is going to change the way you see yourself and your future. Forever. *(Screen changes to a big question mark. Soft music begins to play underneath as she speaks.)* You're all here because you want to transform your life. But it is important to know why you want this transformation so badly. Because—I'm not gonna lie. It is going to take some hard work. But it will be worth it! and I know you will do it because I see before me a group of ambitious, powerful, kick-butt, ready-to-rock women! *(Pause.)* But, before I reveal the secret to your future success, you need to be

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absolutely sure of the reasons you are doing it. *(Screen image changes to a boy, aged 4 and a girl, aged 6, a gorgeous husband and a beautiful large dog.)* These are my reasons. My beautiful family! *(Pause. Goes to tissue box and quietly—but obviously—dabs at her nose and eyes.)*

Sorry. Sometimes I am so full of pride it just kinda spills out my eyes! *(A few more snuffles.)* They are the reason I do what I do. So, I ask you to think for a minute: what will keep you going? What will the money—that three to five hundred per cent increase in your annual bottom line—what will it do for you? *(Beat.)* Now, I want you to say it out loud, so we all can share in this magical moment: I will start. I am doing this for Olivia, Mason, Mark, and Honey. And now you all. *(SFX of individual voices saying quietly "I am doing this for Howard and Natasha." "I am doing this for Luke and Jake." "I am doing this so my mom can get out of the trailer." "I am doing this to send Elizabeth to college." After a few seconds this subsides, and we see Carmen once again dabbing at her nose and eyes.)* That was just so wonderful! It feels so empowering, doesn't it? To know that we...we have the power within us to make those dreams come true. *(Pause as she switches gears.)* So. Now that we have super-clarity around our motivations, we can proceed. *(Beat.)* I love my clients. Do you know what they tell me? *(Screen shows a video montage of CLIENT testimonials.)*

CLIENT ONE. When I began to work with Carmen my income doubled in just a four-month period!

CLIENT TWO. When I partnered with Carmen, we redefined my USP, revamped and powered-up every single one of my modules and went after the really big fish.

CLIENT THREE. If anyone asks me the secret to my success I say one word: Carmen!

CARMEN. Let me help you. Just like I helped them. *(Beat.)* The time has come to give you what I have been promising: the key to unlocking your own success. *(Pause.)* Visualize your goal. Make your plan. Go after it. And Become the Most Powerful YOU You Can Be! *(Pause.)* It's not just a motto. It's my successful business philosophy... You need to ask yourself: what is my secret sauce? What makes me stand out from the crowd? Only you can answer that question. *(Beat.)* And when you're

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ready to take that next tremendously empowering step, you're ready for my signature Dream Big, Aim High weekend seminar. That's right! I will work one-on-one with those lucky few who sign up to revamp your business model and refresh your mindset. *(Beat.)* And, just for today, I am making a special offer. I am offering you, my Washington-area friends, my exclusive signature workshop for....Forty percent off the regular price! That's right. Isn't that super? But this offer for my exclusive Dream Big, Aim High spa weekend workshop is only good for today! So think about it, ladies! I hope to see as many of you gals there as I can. You all have been such a wonderful audience. *(Loud "exit music" starts as she moves offstage, waving.)* Thank you, thank you all so much! You are the best! I hope to see you soon! *(Carmen exits. The stage transforms to the lobby again, as at the top of scene. Marg enters.)*
MARG. *Brava Carmen!* You got your hooks into me and I stayed! And for what? An anxiety attack and headache that won't quit. And a couple of free pens.

SHELLY. Whoa! You OK? You look all red in the face!

MARG. *(Pause as she recognizes Shelly.)* What? Oh... Shelly? Sorry. *(She sits and takes some deep breaths.)*

SHELLY. Listen. Can I ask a question?

MARG. You may.

SHELLY. Why'd you come to this shindig anyways?

MARG. I've spent the past four hours asking myself the same thing.

SHELLY. Did you get an answer?

MARG. Only that I need. . . something to hold onto. Recently I have become....unmoored.

SHELLY. Sorry 'bout that.

MARG. Elaine said it would be good for me. Coming here last year changed her life, apparently. *(Beat.)* Elaine and I view things very differently.

SHELLY. But you stayed.

MARG. I know. *(Beat.)* You said some people take longer to feel the magic. I didn't. But I hoped I could. And then I got angry at myself for hoping. The whole experience reminded me of the last time I rode a rollercoaster.

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SHELLY. That's cuz you don't fit the profile.

MARG. I can see that. Everyone else was so enthusiastic. I felt like an amateur next to them. They're champions, those terminal hoppers.

SHELLY. The who what?

MARG. Terminal hoppers. You know, people who hope so much for something that it almost kills them? The people who will try anything to get what they want? Their hope can destroy them. Not me.

SHELLY. So. You never hope for anything?

MARG. Sure I do. But I'm a realist. I know the way the world works. And I know my limitations.

SHELLY. Yeah, I get it. You're not the type. But those others, the airport people?

MARG. What?

SHELLY. The ones killed from hoping.

MARG. Terminal hoppers...? Oh, I see.

SHELLY. She helps make their wildest dreams come true. They want it so bad—and she tells 'em if you want something hard enough and work your butt off, you'll get it! And for some of 'em, her magic works!

MARG. And the others?

SHELLY. They get a nice spa weekend. They feel part of something bigger. Next year, they'll be the VIPs.

MARG. You're kidding! They keep trying? Coming back for more? (*Shelly nods.*) But she's just playing them! Taking their money! Filling them with unattainable hope.

SHELLY. Maybe some of 'em need it.

MARG. It's a racket! They can't control all the forces around them! Don't they see how...how cruel that is? Don't you?

SHELLY. Cruel?? Well, no...well—(*Beat.*) Huh.

MARG. How can you work for her? For this? You don't fit the profile, either.

SHELLY. I need the money. Plus it's the only time I get to see her.

MARG. Why?

SHELLY. You saw her picture-perfect family, right? See me up there? Nope. I'm not picture perfect. I remind her of her past. Which she wishes would just disappear.

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MARG. I see. Carmen's own mom is not "on brand."

SHELLY. *(Chuckles.)* Her real name is Katie. *(Beat.)* Before the kids, Mark came to surprise her at one of these things. I saw 'em talking, put two 'n two together, and stuck out my hand. Said I was glad to finally meet my son-in-law. He looked like he'd seen a ghost. Thought he had, too. Cuz she'd told him I was dead.

MARG. Ouch.

SHELLY. Yeah, it was awkward, but he was just a real nice guy. He liked me, too. Which is why she let me get closer for a while I guess... Not anymore. Now I have to call her assistant to get the gigs. She tolerates me that way. But she's cut me out of her life every other wise. *(Beat.)* I'm thinking I may just stop. *(Carmen enters, preoccupied. She stops short when she sees Shelly.)*

CARMEN. Oh! Shelly! They didn't tell me you'd be here. What a surprise! And who is your friend?

SHELLY. Oh, this is....Marguerite. Her and I're havin' quite a talk.

CARMEN. Fantastic! Lovely to meet you, Margaret! *(To Shelly.)* I'm headed up to the rooftop lounge for thirty minutes of power networking with my VIPS. But would you care to join me in my suite for a light supper in thirty-five? I'm sure we could squeeze you in. Before we move on to our senior staff debrief.

SHELLY. No thanks. It's been a long day.

CARMEN. *(Awkward pause.)* Well, then. Hope you have a truly wonderful evening. *(She turns to go.)*

SHELLY. I am sure I will....Katie. *(Carmen stops in her tracks. Her whole body stiffens. For a split second a look of panic flickers across her face. She shakes it off, takes a breath, and walks off. Shelly smiles to herself, turns to Marg.)*

SHELLY. Yep. Think it's time to call it quits here. Stop putting my dignity in my pocket. I could use more free time anyways. Got a fridge to defrost. *(Sticks out hand to shakes Marg's.)* You gonna be OK?

MARG. Probably. As soon as I shower off the stink of today. *(Pause.)* It was good talking to you, Shelly. Thank you.

SHELLY. *(She turns to go.)* So long, Marguerite. Hope you find what you're lookin' for! *(Lights out.)*

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SCENE 2

Lights up on an office in City Hall. FRANCES sits at her desk. The space is large and luxurious for a bureaucrat's office, reflecting Frances' image of herself as so much more. Noon Saturday.

FRANCES. *(Picking up phone.)* Show her in. *(Puts down phone. KEVIN enters. He has recently been assigned to Frances as a temp. He brings with him a heavily disguised Carmen who crosses to window opposite door and looks out.)* Did anyone see her?

KEVIN. No, Council Chair. We're the only ones here. It's Saturday.

FRANCES. Good. Thank you, uh—Kevin, is it? *(Pause.)* You may go home now.

KEVIN. Oh I can stay. The temp agency said to do whatever you asked.

FRANCES. I have no further need of you. Thank you. *(She shuts door in his face. Carmen takes off scarf, sunglasses, etc.)*

CARMEN. Hello, Frances. It's been a long time.

FRANCES. *(Pause. She looks at Carmen.)* It has been a long time. Ten years?

CARMEN. Yes. *(She looks Frances up and down.)* It's good to see you still looking so...well.

FRANCES. And you cleaned up nicely. I understand you've made quite a little career for yourself.

CARMEN. Yes! My strategies for success have resonated with clients all over the country. My signature Dream Big, Aim High weekend seminars sell out every time! Why just yesterday---

FRANCES. *(Impatiently.)* Oh, who are you kidding??

CARMEN. Excuse me?

FRANCES. I know you, Katie. I know you from 'way back. You might even say I made you.

CARMEN. I have no idea what you are talking about. Everyone knows I am a self-made success.

FRANCES. Oh my God, you're serious!

CARMEN. I started out small, but in my first year, business took off

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like a rocket! And by Q 4 ---

FRANCES. Oh please! You started off with quite a nice little chunk to invest in yourself. Watching you negotiate that settlement at such a young age made me admire you even more. *(Carmen protests.)* No, no, it's all right. Your secret's safe with me. I'll never breathe a word. That's why they call it "hush" money, isn't it?

CARMEN. What do you want?

FRANCES. Remember when I first ran for City Council? You really did help me then. I look back on it now, and it astonishes me: you had this amazing gift! A sense of what people wanted to hear. You taught me the art of the subtle un-truth, the helpful re-direct. A skill that continues to serve me well. Truly, I owe much of my success to you! *(Pause. Looks at her closely.)* I watched you, you know. In Juvenile Court. You were good. Bone-chillingly good. I thought, if I can keep her out of jail, she could be very useful to me.

CARMEN. I prefer not to dwell on ancient history.

FRANCES. And now I need your skills again. Higher stakes, a bigger playing field, one that calls for even more....subtlety. *(Beat.)* I want to run for governor.

CARMEN. Good for you, Frances! That's what I always say: Dream Big and Aim High!

FRANCES. *(Pause. Moving closer to her, looking her squarely in the eyes.)* Oh my dear...I was the one who advised you to Dream Big and aim somewhere else. And it was good advice, wasn't it? After all, you never did see the inside of a cell. *(They lock eyes. Carmen blinks.)*

CARMEN. It will take some doing but we can definitely refresh your image. But reframing your message—that will be a challenge. How much have you budgeted for my professional services?

FRANCES. We'll get to that in a minute. *(Pause.)* Let me just ask: You still have a talent for finding—shall we say...creative solutions?...to complicated issues, don't you?

CARMEN. Why yes! Just ask my Platinum VIPs. They tell me---

FRANCES. Of course. You'll need that particular skill set. Your work for me will be confidential, and I'll be asking you to carry out some rather... delicate transactions. Difficult conversations.

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CARMEN. No. I don't do that anymore. I have to protect my brand. I cannot jeopardize Carmen. (*Gathering up her things.*)

FRANCES. I called you because I need the best! (*Beat.*)

CARMEN. (*Stands up and crosses to door to exit.*) Find someone else to do your dirty work. It won't be me.

FRANCES. (*Crossing to door and slamming it shut.*) I am afraid you don't really have a choice, Katie. I know too much about you, you see.

CARMEN. (*She stiffens, closes her eyes, takes a deep breath, waits a beat. Turning to Frances, she flashes her brightest professional smile.*)

Well, then. We have a deal. (*Beat.*) You know, Frances, I've seen some coverage of you lately that puts you in a most unflattering light. We will—well, we will try—to fix that! (*Turning to door to exit and speaking over her shoulder.*) Have Kevin send me a tentative schedule and I will get back to you. (*Exits.*)

FRANCES. (*To the closed door.*) I know where you came from, Katie. Be sure you don't double-cross me. Or I will make you pay. (*Lights out.*)

SCENE 3

Hospitality Table, a free breakfast outreach mission of Carlyle Presbyterian Church in the basement of the women's shelter. Monday morning, nine a.m. Marg and Shelly are in a corner of the dining room, putting napkins away, folding tablecloths, generally doing the last bits of cleaning up throughout the scene. Shelly, comfortable with this routine, is showing Marg, who seems a bit uneasy, what to do. It is quiet. The other "guests" have gone, and the other volunteers are in the kitchen putting breakfast items away and restocking for next week.

MARG. Funny running into you this morning...

SHELLY. Funny? Why?

MARG. I didn't know you came to Hospitality Table.

SHELLY. I could say the same.

MARG. Oh, well, I was on the committee that got this outreach started five years ago. I could never make these early mornings, had to be at work, you know, and now I---

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SHELLY. Oh, right. You were f---

MARG. Let go. My contract ends with this semester. So it was easy to say “screw the Monday morning office hours.”

SHELLY. Uh huh.

MARG. What’re they going to do? Fire me?? HA! *(Beat.)* They’re getting rid of the whole department. Seems Modern Languages are no longer “bankable” for a community college. *(Pause.)*

SHELLY. You make the coffee today? It was super-strong. But good. Not what I’m used to. I’m a Dunkin’ gal. *(Pause.)*

MARG. Do you mind if I ask...

SHELLY. Shoot.

MARG. Well, what I wonder is....you obviously work. Why do you need to come here, to Hospitality Table?

SHELLY. The regulars call it H Table.

MARG. Sure. OK.

SHELLY. Lots of us “guests” are what you call the “working poor.” Work minimum, maybe better, still have a hard time makin’ ends meet. Some of us only come at the end of the bad months.

MARG. I see.

SHELLY. I won’t come next month cuz I’ll get my check—my final check, by the way—from Carmen. That’s kinda been my cushion. My regular job is I’m a cashier at Dollar Tree. But they told me I’m under consideration for Manager, so that’ll be good.

MARG. But why don’t you—? I mean, she’s so successful...can’t she, um, financially help you?

SHELLY. She would. If I asked. I don’t. I’m too stubborn. And she wants to forget me and forget where she came from. She had it tough growin’ up and she’ll be damned if she’s ever goin’ back.

MARG. So how did she get there? From here—I mean...Sorry—that sounds so....personal.

SHELLY. Maybe I didn’t raise her up as well as I shoulda, I was workin’ so many hours. But she was always real smart, so I thought it’d be alright. I kinda think that was the problem, though. She was too smart for her own good.

MARG. What did she do?

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SHELLY. Well, for one thing, she developed a talent for walking off with stuff that wasn't hers. And for another, she figured out how to always get what she wanted. From complete strangers! A coupla times she went too far and got taken to court by someone who said she was scammin' 'em.

MARG. Wait. She went to jail?

SHELLY. Nope. Always got off. Seems there was this woman—Katie said her fairy godmother—lookin' after her at the Juvie-nile Court. *(Sighs.)* Soon's she turned 18 she went off to New York to "reinvent herself." I don't know with what money, but I guess she made do, cuz when she breezed back into town four years later as "Carmen," she looked like a million bucks. Huge engagement ring. Big plans. Sounded too good to be true. But that's Carmen's speshialitay. Making somethin' outta nothin'. Me, I make my life better as I can, but don't have her—what some folks call her gift.

MARG. You call being a con artist a gift?

SHELLY. Here's the thing: so many people have told her she saved 'em that she believes it, too. Now she really does think she can control what happens in life.

MARG. I'm living proof that's not---

SHELLY. Yeah. I don't believe that any more 'n you do. So she thinks I'm lazy. Doesn't want me 'round her kids. Coupla years ago we had it out and I said what she has is worse than laziness. It's blind ambition and pride. Stubborn pride.

MARG. But when I saw you Friday...?

SHELLY. When I was workin' for Carmen, I had to talk her up. Thank God that's done. *(Pause.)* Harry's takin' away the coffee. Want a warm-up before it goes.

MARG. Sure. Thanks. *(Shelly exits to get coffee, Marg stares into space, actively thinking. Shelly returns with two cups, gives one to Marg.)* Shelly, something's really bugging me and I think you can help.

SHELLY. Not sure what I can do. But go ahead.

MARG. Neither am I, but I have to tell someone: it's really making me mad! *(Shelly gives her a doubtful look and is about to speak.)* It's about Hosp—H Table.

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SHELLY. OK. I guess I can hear it.

MARG. Last night the committee that oversees this outreach mission got an emergency call from Martha—

SHELLY. I love Martha.

MARG. Yes, and...well, this is just...unbelievable! *(Beat.)* The city's going to demolish the women's shelter. Next month. Which means our space here is gone, too.

SHELLY. Huh. *(Beat.)* Carlyle has become such a stingy place. Didn't useta be that way.

MARG. We were stunned. How could they do this—now? We've had so much success addressing the---

SHELLY. They don't care!

MARG. Yes, that's quite evident. But why? I needed to know. So after I hung up I hopped online and did some research, looking at minutes of recent City Council meetings.

SHELLY. Not sure I follow...?

MARG. I found out that JRK Development has been trying for months to convince the city to sell them this very site. To build more of their luxury condos.

SHELLY. It's that damn Frances Furst. That witch of a City Council Chair. It's her behind all this, isn't it?

MARG. Yep. And we'd been meeting for months with her to make sure this—exactly this!—wouldn't happen. We trusted her! What a mistake!

SHELLY. You got that right. She never meant to help you.

MARG. Really? What do you know about it?

SHELLY. Last Thanksgiving she was here, at H Table, you know like they "do charity" on the holiday? I was helping serve, all dressed up, so she musta thought I was one of the volunteers. Anyhow she gave me an earful. I wrote it down best's I could after. But I remember this---*(Doing Frances imitation.)* It's too bad these people are hungry but it's their own fault. And as my favorite philosopher, Jesus, said, 'The poor will always be with us.' *(Reverting to her own voice.)* And she smiled and waved to no one in particular and said "Happy Thanksgiving!" and left.

MARG. She is truly an evil woman. How stupid to think she'd ever change! *C'est Françoise, le diable! Quelle cochonne!*

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SHELLY. Yeah, well, I don't speak Spanish, but I think I feel the same way. *(Pause.)* And what'll happen to the women who bunk up there at the shelter? I'll just be out my Monday breakfast, but they'll be out on the streets.

MARG. The City is obligated to find another space, but it won't be as convenient to transportation. And you can be sure it'll be substandard in other ways.

SHELLY. God bless those poor women.

MARG. But it won't stop here. Now that she's opened the floodgates, other developers will be salivating over city center real estate: the Free Clinic. The Old Library. Good God, I wouldn't put it past her to sell City Hall's air rights!

SHELLY. It's not just her. She's been reelected. Twice. The upstanding citizens of Carlyle love her: they'd be just as happy if we all disappeared.

MARG. That's a bit harsh, don't you think?

SHELLY. Nah! I mean, there are some good souls left like Martha, and—I dunno—some of the rest of you, but most of the town is too many Carmens!

MARG. I'm not sure---

SHELLY. Oh c'mon! You've seen 'em! They all think their success is their doin'. As if their upbringing and money and plain old luck had nothin' to do with it!

MARG. Well some of them did work hard to achieve---

SHELLY. No! Nobody does it on their own. They don't get it: even the ones who aren't Richie Rich—especially them—they see us strugglin' and think we musta done something wrong not to be so successful like them. *(Beat.)*

MARG. You never had their opportunities.

SHELLY. Yeah, but see—underneath all their boasting—we remind 'em of how small the difference is between us. That's why they push us back in the shadows.

MARG. And I guess it's worse now, with the safety net fraying---

SHELLY. Shoot! That's got nothin' to do with it! People've always

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hated you if you're two or three ladder rungs below 'em. They need to. Helps 'em feel superior to somebody at least.

MARG. I never thought---

SHELLY. Yeah. You never had to. *(Beat.)* Oops. Shift starts in ten. Lemme know if you figure any way outta this. And thanks for—uh—trusting me with...the news. I guess.

MARG. No, thank you! You made me realize---*(Beat.)* I'm done complaining. Time to get off the sidelines and do something.

SHELLY. Huh. Give me a holler if I can help.

MARG. Do you still have what you wrote — after last Thanksgiving, with Frances?

SHELLY. Oh sure. Yep. I put it in my safe deposit box.

MARG. Good! *(Shelly shoots her a look.)* Oh. *(Beat.)* Do you think you could...find it? It could help us.

SHELLY. I'll see if I can put my hands on it. I'd really like to see this place stay open.

MARG. I have an idea. But we'll have to move fast. If this works out—we can expose Frances, maybe even get rid of her.

SHELLY. You know what they say, “you can't fight City Hall!”

MARG. Just watch me. I'm takin' her down!

SHELLY. Promise me you won't do anything stupid.

MARG. I never do.

SHELLY. You know, I truly believe that. I really do. *(Lights out.)*

SCENE 4

Stage divided into two playing areas. Downstage right is a hallway just outside the auditorium in City Hall. A chair or two, sign to the bathroom and elevators. Stage left is the auditorium, with a podium up front, flanked by potted plants and flags of the United States, State of Virginia, and City of Carlyle. Tuesday evening. Lights up on downstage playing area. Marg and Shelly meet in the middle of the hallway, Shelly with the latest edition of the local paper, The Carlyle Mirror, in hand.

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SHELLY. This? This was your idea?

MARG. Yep.

SHELLY. How'd you get it in the paper?

MARG. A former student, a particularly hungry young investigative reporter for *The Carlyle Mirror*.

SHELLY. So you—whattaya call it, like in the movies?—tipped her off?

MARG. I told her to get in touch with Martha.

SHELLY. And? (*Marg gestures to the paper*) Now what?

MARG. When my reporter called Frances for comment, she panicked. First thing this morning I started doing some digging, found out stuff you won't believe. Going to drop a bombshell tonight. So buckle up! (*Lights dim on them. Lights up on the auditorium with Kevin busily arranging papers at the podium. He exits as Frances enters, crosses to podium to rearrange what Kevin has already done. Checks mic position, etc. Carmen enters.*)

FRANCES. Why are you here?

CARMEN. I wanted to see how you deal with adversity. I didn't expect it to happen so soon!

FRANCES. I will handily avert this crisis and emerge triumphant. Watch and learn.

CARMEN. Yes, I'm curious to see how you'll contain this. Tonight. (*She makes one final tweak to the set-up. They exit. Lights up on downstage right playing area.*)

SHELLY. D'ya think Furst is gonna wiggle outta this? She's such a slippery one.

MARG. She'll try.

SHELLY. She's been screwing the people all along, hasn't she?

MARG. Absolutely. But it all ends. Tonight. (*Lights dim on them as they walk into the auditorium space. Kevin enters.*)

KEVIN. (*Grandly, like an MC.*) Ladies and gentlemen, fellow citizens of Carlyle, thank you for coming. Council Chair Furst is delighted so many of you could be here tonight. She has a statement she would like to read, and then she will take your questions. Council Chair Furst. (*He claps as she enters. Smattering of applause from the crowd.*)

FRANCES. Thank you, thank you. I am so happy to see so many

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concerned citizens of Carlyle here tonight. Let me just say that these past twenty-six hours have been difficult for me. An erroneous report in *The Carlyle Mirror* has caused quite a stir. I want to assure you that we are not closing the Southeast Women's Shelter or Hospitality Table. In fact, as you can see from this morning's press release---(*Pause, looking at crowd. She continues into the hot mic.*) Kevin, I told you to pass out those press releases! Do it now! Incompetent idiot! (*Resuming, in her best politician voice.*) As you can see, the City Council is planning to build a new state-of-the-art shelter on a much larger parcel. This new shelter will house fifty percent more homeless, as well as a new facility for feeding the food insecure. Ground-breaking will happen at a future date, to be determined. The city is receiving this site in a land-swap deal with JRK Development Corporation, an arm of local business giant JR King Industries. As a mere formality JRK will acquire the land downtown that the shelter currently occupies. (*Crowd murmurs. Tepid applause.*) Those of us on the Council have always taken very seriously our commitment to the less fortunate among us. The press and other agitators did not know of these confidential negotiations with JRK. If they had asked, we might have told them. But they would rather hurl accusations than have a reasonable conversation. (*Kevin enters and places standing mic center stage, slightly to the right of the podium.*) Now I will take a few questions. Please advance to the microphones on either side so everyone can hear you.

MARG. OK. It's showtime. (*To Shelly.*) Ready?

SHELLY. As I'll ever be! (*Steps to the mic.*) Council Chair Furst, hello. You don't remember me, do you?

FRANCES. Well... I serve so many citizens I can't recall all their names.

SHELLY. Well, see that's just it! We served together on Thanksgiving last year.

FRANCES. Excuse me, I don't...

SHELLY. (*Taking out a napkin with notes on it.*) Last Thanksgiving you were with me, serving breakfast, puttin' pancakes on plates at H Table.

FRANCES. Ah, yes. Now I remember. It was a lovely occasion, wasn't it? I am always honored to be asked to help serve our neediest citizens

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on such a truly American holiday. (*Turning away.*) Next question?

SHELLY. We were standin' together servin' the sausage patties. After the guests filed by, you said, "If the City of Carlyle insists on doing so much for the homeless, the homeless will keep coming. Businesses will leave. And we can kiss our tax base goodbye. But I'm going to make sure that never happens." I played along and asked how you figured you'd do that. Your face just beamed with pride, and you whispered to me, "I'm closing the shelter." (*Gasps and murmurings from the crowd.*)

FRANCES. I would never say... You have completely mischaracterized what I said, Ms.---

SHELLY. Lauerman. Shelly Lauerman. (*Carmen peeks out from behind the curtain at the side of the stage, looks at Shelly in horror. Shelly does not see her*)

FRANCES. Well, Ms. Lauerman, I assure you, in spite of what you may have written on your napkin there, that I would never---

MARG. (*Stepping to mic, taking a deep breath*) I'd like to...uh... corroborate her story. Um... I'm Professor Marguerite Navarre..?

FRANCES. Yes. Professor. So good to see you and thank you for your interest. Next question?

MARG. This land swap news seemed to come out of the blue, so I spoke to JRK's Board Secretary...Bill Farrelle? This afternoon. What he said was pretty troubling.

FRANCES. Well, I hope whatever is bothering Mr. Farrelle will pass soon. (*Turning to other side of room.*) Now, does anyone over---

MARG. (*Nervously looking at notes.*) He---he told me that three weeks ago JR King himself informed the board in a memo that they were getting a—and I quote: "sweetheart deal from the city to buy the desirable downtown parcel on which a dilapidated homeless shelter now sits." (*Murmurs of disapproval and surprise from the crowd.*) JR described it as a gift from you to keep JRK Industries in town. Said it was "a boon to the city to have leadership that knows the importance of keeping business happy."

FRANCES. I don't know where Mr. Farrelle would get such a document. It is obviously fabricated.

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MARG. No, it's real, all right! (*To crowd.*) But see for yourselves: I'll be posting it on *The Carlyle Mirror's* website tonight. And it'll be printed in tomorrow's early edition.

FRANCES. I assure you all, this alleged memo is a fake. As to the false accusation of---

MARG. Let's face it, Frances. There is no land-swap. Only a giveaway to corporate interests. Sweetened with a quid pro quo donation to your reelection campaign.

FRANCES. Not true! I have always worked for the people of Carlyle.

MARG. You're selling us out to JRK. (*Turning to crowd.*) I have watched this woman claw her way to the top for thirty-five years. I know her. So believe me when I say: she is incapable of ever doing anything for anyone but herself. (*To Frances.*) The fact is you are a selfish, power-hungry b---

FRANCES. This is an outrage!

MARG. All you care about is getting ahead and grabbing more power!

FRANCES. That is not true! I... I have always—always!—had the public's best interest at heart! (*Murmurings louder from the crowd. One boo, followed by more. They are getting restless.*)

MARG. (*At the mic, shouting over the crowd.*) Really?? Is it really *us* that you are serving?

FRANCES. Order! Order, I say! (*Sputtering in rage, banging her hand on the podium.*)

MARG. Because I don't think you really care about us, do you? And if you don't care about us, the voters, the tax-payers, how can we possibly trust you to care for the homeless, the hungry, the poor?

FRANCES. That's enough! Security!

SHELLY. That's right. Call for your goons. Let everyone see the true Frances Furst in action.

FRANCES. I need order!! Security will escort you two out. (*Under her breath.*) Where the hell are they?

MARG. You are a ridiculous woman, Frances. And soon the whole town will know what I've known for years. You have no heart.

FRANCES. (*Getting very red in the face. She looks like she may be seconds away from a medical catastrophe.*) I. Will. Not. Stand. For---

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KEVIN. *(Being pushed out onstage by Carmen, who remains mostly hidden.)* Thank you so much, the Council Chair is finished here. Thank you and goodnight. *(Frances stands frozen at podium. Marg and Shelly lead audience in chants of "Justice for the poor" and "Down with Furst." Kevin gently pushed Frances from behind to get her to move but she remains catatonic. He glances helplessly to the side of the stage, where we now see Carmen frantically gesturing to him to move Frances offstage.)*

MARG. Shelly, that was wonderful! |

SHELLY. Yes, but---

MARG. Thank you!

SHELLY. Uh, Marguerite?

MARG. Let's go celebrate. I'm buying! What is it? You look like you've seen---*(Carmen crosses to podium, shoves Kevin out of the way and slaps Frances on the face to snap her out of her trance. Frances looks at Carmen in astonishment. Carmen glares at Shelly. The crowd goes silent.)*

SHELLY. Carmen! *(They lock eyes for a moment. Lights out.)*

END OF ACT 1

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