

**This is Not a
Love Story**

Part One

Projected onto the stage wall the headings of each section of the play.

A LOVE STORY IN FIVE CHAPTERS.

PROLOGUE: IN WHICH THE GIRLS MEET SIMON, AND ALL THE TROUBLE BEGINS.

A party. Music up. Initially actors have to shout to be heard. Simon is looking smooth, bottle in his hand. Carrie listens as he talks, captivated.

Simon So the thing is, sorry, I didn't quite catch your name before.

Carrie Carrie. It's Carrie.

Simon Right, I thought you said Marry, the first time. I almost ran away.

Carrie Why? Oh, I see, a joke.

Simon I hoped.

Carrie Sorry, I can't always tell, when people are joking, not when I first meet them. I'm not stupid, I'm quite astute actually. I use words like astute, for instance, I just... Do you mind if we go back to you doing the talking and I just listen?

Simon Carrie. Is that short for something?

Carrie No. I don't think so. Should it be, do you think? Yes, I think you're right. It's not much of name, all by itself is it?

Simon So how are you enjoying the party?

Carrie No, no questions. Then I talk, and you think I'm stupid, and then...

Simon What does it matter what I think?

Carrie How can you even need to ask that? What are you, an alien?

Simon So now you're insulting me?

Carrie I don't think it's an insult. It would be quite special, to be an alien, don't you think?... What's your favourite colour?

Simon I don't know, something ultraviolet. We have no idea just how beautiful flowers really are. Isn't that wonderful?

Carrie I like flowers.

Simon You'd like them more if you were a bee.

Carrie Yes, I suppose I would. Oh this is hard.

Simon What is?

Carrie Small talk. Other people don't seem to have any trouble at all. They just think of a brilliant question, the kind that demands an interesting answer, and then the whole conversation grows from there. But all I can think to ask is what your favourite colour is, and you make a joke about bees, and

then it just dies doesn't it? They should teach this, at school. How to build your own conversation.

Simon You're not doing too badly.

Carrie That's kind of you. Slightly patronising, but kind.

Simon You can't have everything.

Carrie I know that.

Simon It is cheating a little, starting a conversation about conversations.

Carrie I felt that.

Simon But at least you've let me know I'm worth making an effort for. That's the important bit.

Carrie I don't know if I'd go that far.

Simon I'm not?

Carrie Um... Can I phone a friend?

Jess walks by. Carrie grabs her by the arm and pulls her in.

Carrie Jess, this is Simon. Simon, Jess.

Simon Delighted.

Jess *Mouthed silently* Do you need rescuing?

Carrie *Also silent* What?

Simon She wants to know if you need rescuing.

Carrie No, no of course I don't. I just wanted you to meet my friend Jess. She does good conversations. Ask him a question.

Jess Um, alright. If you could redesign the human body, what would you change and why?

Carrie See? That's so much better than what's your favourite colour?

Jess You asked him that?

Carrie It's the pressure. I'm a choker.

Simon I think I'd want an eye in the back of my head.

Carrie Sort of creepy.

Simon But useful. I wonder why we don't have that.

Jess There'd be too much information. You'd be overwhelmed.

Simon The brain filters out the bits it doesn't need. Listen right now to all the different sounds of the party; there's the music, other conversations, traffic noise outside, but you're able to ignore them all in order to focus on what I'm saying. Sort of incredible, right?

Jess That a man would take that long explaining something we all already knew? Not that incredible.

Carrie That's so funny.

Simon What is?

Carrie Ally just told Malcolm if you swallow a live fly it'll come back out when you burp, and he did, but it didn't.

Simon Who's Malcolm?

Carrie No one. I just made that up. It was meant to be a joke.

Simon The funny sort?

Carrie You said I was able to focus on the noise you were making, so I pretended I was listening to someone else, but you didn't get it, and it would've been funny, if you did, but comedy's like sex, it doesn't work if you analyse it, and now I've mentioned sex and we're all feeling awkward...Could you just give me your phone number please?

Simon Sure.

Carrie Jess, give me your cell phone.

Jess Use your own phone.

Carrie No, if I put it on my own phone I'll text as soon as I get home and come across as desperate. This way you can make me wait twenty four hours, which will make me seem independent and intriguing.

Simon You know I'm just here, right?

Carrie I over commentate, it's sort of my thing.

Simon Okay, well the number's...

Carrie Wait a minute, I'm not ready... Okay

Simon 021 462 0305

Carrie Thank you. I'll be in touch.

Simon After an appropriate waiting period.

Carrie You're already looking forward to it.

Lights down. Simon, Jess and Carrie exit.

CHAPTER ONE: IN WHICH WE MEET DAMIEN, OUR LOVETRUCK HERO, AND JOSH TRIES TO BE HELPFUL.

Damien sits alone on a park bench, staring at his phone, as if the screen displays the secret of life. It begins to ring. He does not answer it. The ringing stops. Josh enters, running hard and breathless. He sees Damien, screams to a halt and sits down beside him.

Damien Josh.
Josh Damien.
Damien Why were you running?
Josh When?
Damien Just then.
Josh No reason.
Damien Right.
Josh You expecting a call?
Damien No.
Josh Thinking of making a call?
Damien No.
Josh Texting?
Damien It wouldn't be appropriate.
Josh Fair enough.

There is a prolonged silence.

Josh What are you doing?
Damien I came here to think.
Josh What about?
Damien Love.
Josh Right. Well, yell out if I can help at all.
Damien Thanks. Probably I won't.
Josh No.
Damien I think I might be.
Josh What?
Damien In love.
Josh Who is it?
Damien I can't tell you.
Josh Why not?
Damien You'd mock me.

Josh Going to mock you anyway. When did it happen?
Damien Yesterday. Last night.
Josh Night? So you mean you...
Damien No.
Josh Does she know?
Damien What?
Josh How you feel about her.
Damien Course not.
Josh Good.
Damien I haven't even spoken to her, not properly.
Josh What does she look like?
Damien Alright I suppose. Sort of average.
Josh And you're in love with her?
Damien I think so.
Josh It isn't love. Can't be.
Damien Why not?
Josh You haven't even talked to you.
Damien There's love at first sight.
Josh She looks sort of average.
Damien I like average. Average is beautiful. It wouldn't work out very well, if we all wanted the freaks.

Josh It doesn't work out very well, have you not noticed?...You don't love her.
Damien I think I do.

Silence. Thinking time.

Josh How do you feel? Tell me how it feels.
Damien You can't tell anyone.
Josh Probably I will.
Damien It's hard to explain. I was at a bus stop.
Josh Right.
Damien Waiting for a bus.
Damien Yeah, got that.
Damien And this old guy came along. And you know how last night was really cold, so he was dressed up in all his warmest clothes: scarf, hat, jacket, and he wasn't poor exactly, the clothes weren't ragged or anything.

Josh And what, he was with his daughter?
Damien No.
Josh Nurse?

Damien No. And anyway, nurses aren't always women.
Josh I'd be fine if you fell in love with a man.
Damien I think I would be too.
Josh Maybe not an old man. It wasn't...
Damien No, the old man isn't relevant really. He's more for the background, the texture.
Josh Right. Texture. Excellent. Continue.
Damien Not ragged, but awful. Ugly. The sort of clothes you don't wear until you've stopped caring. Where you've reached that point where you don't check your reflection anymore. Where you see a person looking at you, and you don't wonder what it is that person sees. I stared at him a bit, to be honest, at his clothes and his funny bunched up stomach, the dandruff, the broken veins and the nostril hair, and he didn't even notice. Oblivious, alone, growing older waiting for a bus in the cold, past caring.
Josh That's sort of sad.
Damien Yeah, it was. That's exactly what it was.

Silence

Josh And then...
Damien Yeah, and then.
Josh And then what?
Damien And then she came along, with a friend. They were talking. Arguing actually, about what matters most to men, looks or personality.
Josh It's neither.
Damien Yeah, I don't think they know that.
Josh They're weird, girls. I remember this time I went to a movie with one, and we stopped off at one of those shopping mall, foodcourt, vomitorium things; every country's cuisine represented by a different shade of food colouring. We chose sweet and sour red, tried not to break our plastic forks on the gristle, and -
Damien You're sort of taking over my story.
Josh Sorry. The bus stop.
Damien Well they were talking, and I don't know, I suppose they were like the exact opposite of the old man.
Josh Obsessed with their appearance, no nostril hair. Swings and roundabouts.
Damien You know how you always say it takes me too long to tell a story? I think you're the reason.
Josh Sorry.

Damien They were just so alive. There was an energy about them. The way they talked, the way they laughed. You know how sometimes you catch a glimpse of a stranger living exactly the sort of life you want to be living, and it's both impossibly strange and instantly recognisable? They were confident, they said clever things. They knew people were watching, and they didn't care. There was... what? A vitality. The way she laughs, the way she listens to her friend, the way she can make words do whatever she wants them to do, her smell, just everything. I sat behind her the whole trip, just taking it in, feeling sort of drunk. And then, just before she got off... well, I stole her phone.

Josh You stole her phone.

Damien It's been ringing, on and off all day. I haven't answered. Her name's Jess.

Josh This was your best idea?

Damien The bus had stopped. I had to think quickly.

Josh You stole her phone?

Damien Out of her bag.

Josh Why?

Damien Love.

Josh And that's it there?

Damien Nice isn't it?

Josh You have a plan right? This isn't your idea of a consolation prize - missed the girl, got the phone?

Damien No. That's why I'm here. I'm thinking.

Josh And?

Damien You'll mock me.

Josh I will.

Damien I'm going to text one of her friends, and get her address, so I can return the phone. Then I'm going to leave it on her doorstep... with flowers... and a note...telling her how she makes me feel.

Josh Telling her how she makes you feel.

Damien I thought.

Josh How does she make you feel Damien? Why don't you run it past me? I'll look away. Here look, I've found the phone, left on my front doorstep, excellent, oh I'm so happy, I thought I'd lost you forever, and the flowers, oh, you shouldn't have, they're lovely, they really are, and now I'm picking up the note, I open the paper up, slightly weirded out, but a little bit excited too, and it reads...

Damien ...Dear Jess. You don't know me, but I sat behind you on the bus the other night, and as you were getting up, your phone fell to the floor, but I didn't notice, until you'd already got off. I got your address off one of the friends you had listed on your phone, you have a lot of friends, that doesn't surprise me. So here it is, plus flowers, because, this will sound strange, but you're a beautiful human being. I don't normally do this, I never do this, you'd have to be nuts to do this right, but that's how I felt, when I saw you, a little nuts, and I'd rather make a dick of myself now than spend the rest of my life regretting letting you slip by without ever knowing. So here's my number, if you call it that's cool, and if you don't, well why would you? That's cool too. No pressure. I just wanted you to know what it feels like, to be sitting on a bus, and see a girl like you... Damien

Josh Yeah, that'll work.

Damien You think?

Josh No.

Damien Why not?

Josh You sound like a freak. A desperate, thieving, little stalker.

Damien It's a romantic gesture.

Josh Exactly.

Damien Girls like romantic gestures.

Josh They say they do. Just like people say they want a wider range of healthy snack foods available... But then when they're hungry they buy a super sized muffin and a bowl of curly fries, leaving the quinoa and kale salad wilting and lonely in the display cabinet.

Damien You're a cynic.

Josh And you're a hopeless romantic.

Damien What do you think I should do?

Josh Getting a girl is like buying a car. Confidence is your savings, self-respect your line of credit. Don't blow either on a first impression, and never ever let the seller know you're keen.

The phone rings again. Josh grabs it off Damien.

Josh Hello.

Carrie emerges at the other side of the stage, talking on her phone. Jess is at her shoulder.

Carrie Oh, hello. (Someone's answered.) Who's this?

Josh Damien. My name's Damien.

The characters freeze. Projector up.

CHAPTER TWO: IN WHICH THE GIRLS SET A TRAP.

Back to the action.

Carrie Hello Damien. What are you doing with my phone?
Josh It's mine now. I bought it, this morning, at a garage sale.
Carrie You bought a cellphone at a garage sale?
Josh Yeah, along with a couple of Reggae albums and some underwear.
Carrie You didn't think it might be stolen?
Josh The guy who sold it to me said he found it on a bus, stuck under a seat with chewing gum. He thought it was a bomb, at first. That's not the sort of thing you make up. So you say it's yours?
Carrie Yeah, I left it on a bus.
Josh Well you would say that now.
Carrie Why else would I be ringing this number?
Josh I don't know. I just know I paid thirty dollars for this phone and as far as I'm concerned that makes it mine.
Carrie Okay, look, the phone's not so important. The thing is it's got all my contact numbers on it. There's someone very important I met last night, and his number is saved on the phone.
Josh You should save those to the cloud.
Carrie Let's just say I haven't called for filing advice.
Josh So if I give you the number we'll call it quits?
Carrie No.
Josh Fair enough. Nice talking to you. Goodbye Jess.
Carrie No, no don't hang up. I'll give you the thirty dollars you paid for it... plus another twenty...Come on, don't be an asshole. That's fair....How did you know my name?
Josh People keep texting you, saying hi Jess.
Carrie What people? Who?
Josh Thirty dollars for the phone, plus thirty for my trouble, and you tell me why this number is so important to you.
Carrie Why do you think?
Josh Did you sleep with him?
Carrie No, of course I didn't... I just met...how's this any of your business?
Josh Just interested.
Carrie I'll call the police. They can trace these you know.
Josh Only to the nearest transmitter, and they've got better things to do with their time.

Carrie Just... when am I going to get my phone back?
Josh What do you look like? Are you pretty?

Damien grabs the phone back.

Damien Hello? Hello? Are you still there? Sorry about that. Ignore him. He's lying.
 He didn't buy the phone. I'll bring it back. Where do you live?
Carrie Who are you?
Damien My name's Damien....Oh fuck, she hung up. You're an asshole.
Josh Actually, if you calm down for a moment, I think you'll find I helped you.
Damien She hung up!

Damien storms off. Josh follows.

Josh Yeah, but you've got her curious now. The balance of power has shifted.
 She'll call back.

Jess and Carrie are now left alone on stage. Jess is looking at her phone, stunned.

Jess So? What was that all about?
Carrie I have no idea.
Jess But they're giving my phone back right?
Carrie Since when did your phone become the issue?
Jess How many messages did I miss? Did they say?
Carrie I didn't ask.
Jess You're useless.
Carrie It's your phone Jess. Why didn't you ring?
Jess You're better on the phone.
Carrie Yet useless.
Jess In real life. It's not a contradiction. Oh I miss my phone.
Carrie So get a new one.
Jess It won't be the same.
Carrie I've lost more than you have. You can always save up for a new phone.
 But how many people do you know that end up with a man they're truly
 happy with?
Jess I've never been really happy with a phone. I've liked some, they've been
 good at first, but I've never had one that was so good I didn't find myself
 looking at other people's phones, or wondering about an upgrade. I liked
 the way it felt, in my hand.

Carrie He was lovely wasn't he? You liked him too.

Jess You couldn't fault its battery. There when you need it, no questions asked, and recharged quickly once it was spent. I like that. I need that.

Carrie Smiles are important. I liked his smile.

Jess A good phone is an extension of yourself, fitting as naturally in your hand as your hand fits the end of your arm.

Carrie When he looks at you, he really looks at you, like you're the only person in the room.

Jess The screen resolution was faultless. It was almost like looking at the real world.

Carrie I think he liked me. I watched him with other people, and it wasn't the same. Maybe I'm kidding myself, but...

Jess I won't last another day without a phone. I'll end up buying something second rate because it's all I can afford. Desperation does that, you know. It forces us into unhealthy compromises.

Carrie He said he was single, but he won't stay that way for long.

Jess We have to get that phone back Carrie.

Carrie We do. We absolutely do.

Jess Okay, well look, we're two intelligent, resourceful young women. We can do this right? Let's just take a moment to pose the problem as clearly as possible.

Carrie We've lost the phone.

Jess My phone.

Carrie That's not important.

Jess It might be. Every detail might be important. Now, where did we lose the phone?

Carrie You. You lost the phone. You left it on the bus.

Jess Ah, but did I?

Carrie Yes, yes you did. He said so.

Jess Who said so?

Carrie Damien. Well one of the Damien's. The first Damien.

Jess There's two Damiens?

Carrie There's two Damiens.

Jess Alright, that confuses things. Keep going. What do we know about the Damiens?

Carrie Damien One claims to have bought the phone this morning at a garage sale, for \$30.

Jess What's a garage sale?

Carrie I think it's sort of like a retro Trademe.

Jess And we believe him, about this garage sale?
Carrie No, we think it's a lie.
Jess Yes, we do. What else do we know about Damien?
Carrie He was on the bus!
Jess If he's lying... he was on the bus! Well done.
Carrie Okay, think, who was on that bus? Who sat near us on that bus?
Jess The old guy.
Carrie I liked the old guy. He had a sense of style about him.
Jess He did.
Carrie I want to be like that, when I'm old.
Jess Did Damien sound old? Old people go to garage sales.
Carrie He sounded younger..
Jess Who else was on the bus?
Carrie No one I noticed. No one memorable.
Jess I definitely had it on the bus. At the first stop I saw an ad and I couldn't remember who the actor in the photo was, so I looked her up.
Carrie Who was it?
Jess I don't remember. Who remembers things anymore? You should have used your own phone. When Simon gave you his number, you should have used your own phone.
Carrie You should get a man.
Jess I should. First things first, though. Let's stay focussed on the phone.
Carrie Okay, what else do we know?
Jess What about the second Damien?
Carrie The second Damien came on the phone at the end, and promised to return it. He wanted to know where you live.
Jess But you didn't tell him?
Carrie No, I didn't. I hung up.
Jess Why did you hang up?
Carrie I was taken by surprise. The second Damien was a surprise.
Jess Okay, that's reasonable. Disappointing, but reasonable. I'm not going to blame you for that.
Carrie So what now?
Jess We ring him back. We ring the second Damien back.
Carrie Yes, and we ask him to return the phone.
Jess That's good, I think. But it seems too easy. What are we missing?
Carrie I don't think we're missing anything.
Jess What about Damien One? What if Damien One answers?
Carrie He was after money.

Jess I bet you he's done this before. I bet he steals phones all the time.
Carrie We should teach him a lesson.
Jess Yes, let's do that.
Carrie Let's set a trap. If Damien Two answers we'll set a trap.
Jess What sort of a trap?
Carrie What are our strengths? We should play to our strengths.
Jess We're women.
Carrie Yes, you're right. We're women. We'll set a womanly trap.

CHAPTER THREE: IN WHICH HOPES ARE RAISED, AND DASHED AGAIN.

Damien on stage, staring at the phone. It rings. He doesn't answer. The ringing stops. Pause. It rings again.

Damien Hello.

Carrie walks on to the other end of the stage. Jess is behind her, listening in.

Carrie Hello. Who's this?

Damien Damien.

Carrie One or two?

Damien What?

Carrie Last time I called, did I speak to you?

Damien I don't know. Who are you?

Carrie My name is Carrie.

Damien No, I don't think so.

Carrie And you say your name's Damien?

Damien Yes.

Jess (What's going on?)

Carrie (There's another Damien.)

Jess (What?)

Carrie Sorry about that. Look, I won't beat about the bush, I need my phone back.

Damien It's Jess' phone.

Carrie Alright. Jess' phone. I want Jess' phone back.

Damien Why?

Carrie It has a very important number stored on it.

Damien I could just give you the number.

Carrie Then you'd still have Jess' phone.

Damien You're Jess aren't you? You're just pretending, so you don't hurt my feelings.

Carrie How would me being Jess hurt your feelings?

Damien Who is he? Who's this man you're so desperate to see again?

Carrie Just someone I met.

Damien What's he like?

Carrie Why does it matter?

Damien Tell me about him. If you want the phone back, you have to tell me about him.

Jess (What's happening?)

Carrie Wait a sec. (He wants me to tell him all about Simon. He wants me to tell him why I'm attracted to him. Then he'll give the phone back.)

Jess (It can't be...Oh my God. I see what's happening. Tell him you'll ring him back. We need to talk. Tell him!)

Carrie Ah, can you hold on a sec? Don't go away. I'm going to hang up now, but I'll ring you back in five minutes. You have to promise you'll answer though. Do you promise?

Damien You promise you'll ring back?

Carrie Sure, promise.

Damien Okay, I promise too.

Carrie Talk to you soon.

Damien I'll be waiting.

Both hang up. Josh enters, sits next to Damien.

Josh Let it go man. She isn't going ring you.

Damien She just did.

Josh Told you she would.

Damien She's ringing back, in five minutes.

Josh What did you do? You haven't done anything stupid have you? You didn't tell her how you feel?

Damien No, I just asked her about this mysterious number she's so desperate to get. I told her she has to tell me why she needs it so much.

Josh And what did she say?

Damien She hung up. But she's calling me back.

Josh No she's not.

To the girls.

Carrie So what? What's happening?

Jess I think it's him. It's Simon.

Carrie What?

Jess Now that I think about it, I'm not at all sure I did have the phone on the bus. But I definitely had it at the party. He was there, right, when I saved in his number, and he saw me put it back in my bag, and what say, when we weren't looking, he stole it.

Carrie Why would he do that? He'd just given us his number. You think he regretted it? You think he was trying to get the number back? It's possible isn't it? How was I? Did I make an absolute fool of myself? Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you stop me?

Jess No, think about this. If he was trying to stop you contacting him, he wouldn't have answered the phone would he, when I called?

Carrie So what are you saying?

Jess He stole it as a way of making sure he could talk to us again. God, how romantic is that?

Carrie It doesn't sound like him.

Jess Of course it does. Are you sure?

Carrie Well no, not sure.

Jess It explains all the different Damiens. They're all him. And now he knows how desperate you are to talk to him again. Because you told him. And he's asking why you're so desperate. This is just like a movie. You'll end up marrying him. Something that starts this well, it's got to mean something right? Imagine the stories you'll be able to tell your children.

Carrie What should I do?

Jess Don't let on you know. Ring back. Tell him exactly how you feel.

Carrie You don't think I should play a little hard to get?

Jess Definitely not. Men are frightened by complexity.

Carrie goes to redial, then remembers something.

Carrie Oh.

Jess What?

Carrie There's just one little problem, with your theory.

Jess And that is?

Carrie He thinks I'm you. That's what he said.

Jess What? No, you must have misheard him.

Carrie He definitely did. And the other time he called me Jess as well. He thinks I'm you. He was just using me, getting to know the friend to get to the one he wants. This always happens. This is why I shouldn't be your friend.

Jess I didn't do anything. You were there. You saw.

Carrie Oh no, you didn't do anything. You never do anything. You don't have to do anything.

Jess Carrie, no, don't let this happen. Tell me what I can do. Tell me how I can make it up to you.

Carrie You have to ring him. You have to ring, explain who you are, tell him you know he stole the phone, and that you're not interested, but I am. Will you do that for me?
Jess Of course I'll do that for you.
Carrie Right now?
Jess Soon.

Back to the boys.

Josh So, still think she's going to call back?
Damien Yes.
Josh It's been, ah, more than five minutes.
Damien Five minutes is a figure of speech. It means 'shortly.'
Josh It's been ten.
Damien Five minutes can mean ten minutes.
Josh Welcome to Damien world. You should start a theme park.
Damien What should I do, if she doesn't call back?
Josh You shouldn't have answered when I wasn't there. That was your biggest mistake. Look, I tell you what I'll do, as a friend. If it rings again, I'll pretend to be you. I'll answer it.
Damien Nah, forget it.
Josh Why not?
Damien I don't need your help.
Josh You do.
Damien Okay, but I don't want to need your help. I want to do something for myself.
Josh But you also want the girl.
Damien Why can't I have both?
Josh Don't make me answer that.
Damien But what if you screw up?
Josh I won't screw up. I'll set you up with a date. That's my guarantee to you. You let me answer and I'll get you a date with Jess.
Damien If it rings.
Josh If it rings.

CHAPTER FOUR: IN WHICH THE PHONE RINGS, AND A DATE IS ORGANISED.

Josh at one end, Jess at the other. Jess picks up her phone and dials. The phone begins to ring. Josh waits, one ring, two, three, then answers.

Josh Hello.

Jess Hello. Who's this?

Josh Damien.

Jess Haven't we spoken before?

Josh I don't know. Who are you?

Jess Jess. I feel like I recognise your voice. I feel like we've met before.

Josh We haven't. I've seen you, I'll admit that much, but we haven't met. Not yet.

Jess Look 'Damien', I know what's happening. I know you're not who you say you are.

Josh I don't know what you mean.

Jess I know you stole the phone.

Josh No, not me. I didn't steal it. Damien stole it.

Jess Okay okay, the mechanics aren't important. The thing is you've got it, and I think I know why you've got, and I think you know I know, and it's very sweet, I am flattered that that's how you feel about me, but look, it isn't necessary, all this playing of games. We were going to get in touch with you.

Josh Me, as in Damien me?

Jess Can I just call you Simon? Would that be easier?

Josh Yeah, okay, if you want.

Jess Aha! Right, Simon, the thing is, I don't know if you noticed, but my friend, Carrie, she was more taken with you than I was. That just happens sometimes, it's a chemistry thing. And with girls, well chemistry matters, but boys are more flexible, aren't they? So, well, would you be prepared to give Carrie a chance?

Josh Not you?

Jess Not me, no. Sorry. I know sometimes it can be hard, you see someone and there's just something about them that you can't quite -

Josh No, should be fine.

Jess Oh.

Josh I thought that's what you wanted?

Jess It is. It is what I want.

Josh Excellent.

Jess Great.
Josh Me and Carrie.
Jess You and Carrie.
Josh She's nice right? You're not setting me up?
Jess Well, I am setting you up. That's exactly what I'm doing.
Josh Yes, but I meant -
Jess I know what we meant.
Josh It's a shame. I think you and I could have gotten along.
Jess I think so too.
Josh But no, Carrie it is.
Jess Okay. Well look, she's got this number, so she's going to text you, give you a time and a place. Is that alright?
Josh Excellent. Um, there's just one thing I should probably tell you.
Jess What?
Josh No, doesn't matter. It's already too complicated.
Jess Just say. I promise I won't be angry.
Josh No, but Damien would kill me. Goodbye.
Jess Bye.

Both hang up.

Jess *To herself* Who the hell is Damien?

Jess walks off. Damien enters, approaches Josh.

Damien So what happened?
Josh Okay, the way I see it, that either went really, really well, or really, really badly.
Damien Depending on what?
Josh Oh, a number of things.
Damien What things? You better not have screwed up. You promised me a date. You guaranteed it.
Josh And you've got it. It's on. Sorted.
Damien Definitely?
Josh Definitely.
Damien So what's the problem?
Josh They saw you on the bus. They noticed you.
Damien Okay.
Josh And they know you took the phone, and they know why.

Damien What? How did they... Did you tell them...?
Josh You were listening. I didn't tell them anything.
Damien They just worked it out?
Josh They just worked it out.
Damien Women.
Josh It's impressive. How obvious were you?
Damien More than I realised, apparently. You think they always do that? You think they can always tell what we're thinking?
Josh Maybe.
Damien That terrifies me. So when's the date?
Josh She's going to text you, on this phone.
Damien Excellent. Thanks. There's something else isn't there?
Josh Nothing big.
Damien What?
Josh Well, first we need to keep this in its proper perspective. You know how sometimes, before a test match, a key player gets injured, and everyone gets all down and says 'we'll never win now', but then the replacement, comes on and plays the game of his life, and it turns out he should have started all along?
Damien This isn't a game of rugby.
Josh No, but you get the idea?
Damien Maybe.
Josh Good. Good.
Damien Actually I don't. I don't understand at all.
Josh It's nothing really. Jess doesn't like you much but Carrie does, so it's sweet.
Damien What do you mean she doesn't like me?
Josh She just doesn't.
Damien Why not?
Josh Chemistry.
Damien I haven't even talked to her.
Josh But still you fell in love with her. And all the little chemicals that bounced around in your brain when you saw her, in her brain, they stayed sleeping. But in Carrie's brain, nice name Carrie, don't you think? in Carrie's brain, same chemicals, same little dance of infatuation, you're sorted.
Damien I love Jess.
Josh No you don't. You said it yourself. You said it was the conversation that captivated you, and it takes two to have a conversation. Carrie must be just the same. You told me she seemed lovely.

Damien Jess doesn't like me?
Josh She didn't say she didn't like you. She just doesn't want you.
Damien She's right you know. I wouldn't want me either. Why would anyone want me?
Josh Carrie wants you.
Damien Exactly. There must be something wrong with her.
Josh You're just being fucken unreasonable now. What has happened here is a good thing. You have seen two attractive young women on a bus, who you have absolutely no right to expect to give you so much as the time of day, and one of them, in some sort of hormonal miracle, has noticed you, and thinks you're alright, and despite knowing that you, desperate little bastard that you are, stole her friend's phone, has agreed to go on a date with you. But instead of celebrating this unlikely outcome, you choose to bemoan the fact that the other one doesn't want you too. When exactly did this happen to our species? When exactly did we begin believing we could have anything we wanted, and so sentence ourselves to a lifetime's dissatisfaction? Listen to this, because it's the best piece of advice I'm ever going to give you. In this world, if you find you can't get exactly what you want, exactly when you want it, try her friend.

Lights down.

CHAPTER FIVE: IN WHICH DAMIEN MAKES A BIG DECISION.

Silence. Lights up. An empty park bench.

Boy enters, looks instantly lost. Hesitates, looks back to the door, then pulls down the ladder, noisily, and looks to be considering climbing it when Carrie hurries in, slightly flustered, and sits down.

The boy hovers nervously without speaking.

Carrie Approach my child.
Boy Miss?
Carrie What do you want? Approach when you're told, can't you?
Boy Simon...
Carrie You have a message from Simon?
Boy Yes Miss.
Carrie Well, what is it? Why did he leave me waiting so long?
Boy It's not my fault, Miss.
Carrie And whose is it? Mine?
Boy I was afraid.
Carrie Afraid of what? Of me? Answer me.
Boy A little bit.
Carrie You don't need to be afraid. I'm very kind.
Boy Thank you, Miss.
Carrie Now come and sit down.

Boy edges forward, sits.

Carrie Your message from Simon. What is it?
Boy Simon told me to tell you he won't come today, but surely tomorrow.
Carrie All right. I see. You may go.
Boy What am I to say to Simon, Miss?
Carrie Tell him... tell him you saw me. You did see me, didn't you?
Boy Yes, Miss. And who shall I say I saw, Miss? What's your name?
Carrie My name is... Jess. Tell him you saw Jess.

The boy nods, rises, moves to the stage ladder and, inexplicably, pulls it noisily down.

Carrie What are you doing?
Boy *Panicking completely* Ah... Um... Nothing. Bye.

He clatters noisily up the ladder.

Carrie, perplexed, is about to leave when she receives a message on her phone. She checks it. Sits back down, puzzled.

After a few moments Damien arrives and hovers. Behind his back he holds a bunch of flowers.

Damien Hi.
Carrie Hello.
Damien Mind if I sit down?
Carrie I'm waiting for someone.
Damien Yeah, I know.
Carrie You do?
Damien Of course.

Damien sits. In doing so he is forced to hold the flowers in front of him. Carrie sees them, and is all the more puzzled.

Carrie You don't have a message from Simon, I don't suppose?
Damien Who's Simon?
Carrie The person I'm waiting for.
Damien Oh yeah, right, forgot. That's me. I'm Simon.
Carrie No you're not.
Damien No, I know. I thought you wanted me to pretend.
Carrie No.
Damien Right... Did the messenger arrive? The boy with the message from Simon?
Carrie How do you know about -
Damien It was my idea. I thought you'd think it was funny.
Carrie I thought it was kind of strange.
Damien It's from a play - *Waiting for Godot*. I thought you'd appreciate I'd made an effort... If this were a play, he'd be the amusing cameo.
Carrie Where's Simon?
Damien I don't know who Simon is.
Carrie Simon who I met last night. He stole my phone.

Damien Jess's phone.
Carrie Yeah, okay, Jess's phone.
Damien He didn't steal it.
Carrie He told Jess he did.
Damien Oh... No, no, that wasn't Simon, that was Josh.
Carrie Josh stole the phone?
Damien No, I did. I stole the phone.
Carrie Why?
Damien I just, I mean, I saw, and I just felt, it wasn't planned, it doesn't make sense, but I just saw her, well I saw the both of you, on the bus -
Carrie You were on the bus?
Damien Just behind you. And you were talking, and just saying such interesting things, and you seemed so happy and confident -
Carrie I'm not confident.
Damien Neither am I... But it was so lovely, just listening to you, pretending to be part of your world, so when the bus stopped and you stood up I just couldn't quite bear the thought of it ending, so I...
Carrie Stole Jess' phone.
Damien I was under pressure. I panic under pressure.
Carrie Why didn't you just say something?
Damien Like what?
Carrie Like - I don't know you, but I just want to say, I love the way you think and talk and laugh, and... No, you couldn't say that.
Damien I can't talk to girls. Not properly. My words are so relieved just to make it out of my mouth they rush forward without looking where they're going and trip over each other -
Carrie - and end up in a writhing, embarrassing heap on the floor.
Damien I like you said writhing. It's a good word.
Carrie Yeah, I was kind of pleased with that. I'm the same, with boys. I'm barely coherent.
Damien You're coherent now.
Carrie You're doing quite well yourself.
Damien Yes, that's unusual for me.
Carrie Perhaps it's because there's -
Damien Less pressure.
Carrie To be honest, you're not -
Damien Really who I was hoping would be here.
Carrie No.
Damien No.

Carrie So, I guess we should just go, then.
Damien Makes sense.
Carrie I suppose it was too much to ask.
Damien Life almost never makes it that easy for us.
Carrie No, real life is full of disappointments.
Damien And pleasant surprises.
Carrie Yes, and pleasant surprises.
Damien You seem interesting.
Carrie Yes, I actually think I am. Most people don't notice that.
Damien No, you have to be looking for it.
Carrie You need a generous eye. You have a generous eye, don't you?
Damien Makes mirrors easier.

A moment of indecision. Both feeling it would be too ridiculous, tempted though they are. Carrie stands, offers her hand.

Carrie Well, nice to have met you Damien.
Damien Nice to have met you too, Carrie.

Carrie walks off. Damien, torn with indecision, calls after her.

Damien Excuse me.
Carrie Yes.
Damien I think I made a mistake.
Carrie What kind of mistake?
Damien I think I should have stolen your phone.
Carrie I think you should have too.
Together Do you think it's too late to...
Together Would it be altogether too ridiculous?

They move together as the music swells. They kiss.

They move off stage as the lights dim, and then Carrie turns back in the doorway to deliver her monologue. Damien, back to hers, faces the rehearsal space, and delivers the same(ish) monologue.

Carrie **Don't believe what you they tell you, you know, about happiness.
Fate rolls around in circles you see; just as surely as you're down**

one moment, you've lost your phone, your friendships are satisfying, but not inspiring, one day rolls into the next with not much to distinguish between them save the weather, and that special someone, he hasn't even appeared over the horizon, well, you'll be up the next. **I know, that sounds trite and predictable and what the hell am I making such a fuss about, so life has its ups and downs, big deal, but wait until it happens to you. Then you'll see what I mean. Then you'll see exactly what I mean. Then you'll see exactly how** wonderful it can be.

Do I believe in love? I suppose I do. I suppose I'm a romantic at heart. Oh, I know what they say, it's just some chemical reaction, it can't really last, but sometimes it does you know. And surely those sometimes are worth believing in.

And when it happens, when he's there, looking into your eyes, and that expression on his face tells you that he's thinking and feeling all the same things you are, that he's holding his breath without knowing why, that all the silly little circumstances and misunderstandings that have brought you to this impossible place are making him tingle too, with the impossibility of it all, that's when you know it's all for real. How can a feeling like that be anything but real? What sort of a cold-hearted cynic would you have to be not admit a place for that sort of joy in the world?

And you want to remember moments like that. You want to cling to them. Because as good as it all feels, you understand in your heart, that it's only just beginning.

Damien

Don't believe what you they tell you, you know, about happiness. Fate rolls around in circles you see; just as surely as you're on top one moment, you've found your niche, your friendships are satisfying, life feels inspiring, one day rolls into the next like they're pleased to see each other, and that special someone, she's finally made himself known, well, you'll be crushed the next. **I know, that sounds trite and predictable and what the hell am I making such a fuss about, so life has its ups and downs, big deal, but wait until it happens to you. Then you'll see what I mean. Then you'll see exactly what I mean. Then you'll see exactly how** bullshit it all can be.

Do I believe in love? Of course I don't. What sort of romantic retard would I have to be? It's just some chemical reaction, hitching a ride on the desperate lack of security we call loneliness.

And when it happens, when she's there, looking into your eyes, and that expression on her face tells you that she's thinking and feeling all the same things you are, that she's holding her breath without knowing why, that all the silly little circumstances and misunderstandings that have brought you to this impossible place are making her tingle too, with the impossibility of it all, that's when you know it's already dying.

It's like with fireworks, the bigger the bang the briefer the show. What sort of a soft-headed believer would you have to be not to understand we're all just the victims of nature's reproductive imperative?

And you want to remember moments like that. You want to cling to them. Because as good as it all feels, you understand in your heart, that it's already finished.

Part Two

MEANWHILE, BACKSTAGE

PROLOGUE

Last minute hugs as Simon and Carrie head onto stage and Jess hovers, ready to join them.

The Stage Manager moves through the group, giving little nods of assurance, moving forward to whisper encouragement.

Josh and Damien are playing a game which involves flipping two coins simultaneously and slapping one another's hands.

Boy has a checklist, and is checking the props trolley - phones, a handful of straw, a drink bottle, a bowl of chips...

Stage manager hovers over Damien and Josh.

Stage Manager	What are you doing?
Josh	Hitting each other.
Stage Manager	Why?
Josh	Relaxes us.
Stage Manager	He doesn't look relaxed.
Josh	He'd be worse if I wasn't hitting him... Call.
Damien	Evens.

Both boys flip their coins. Look at the result.

Damien	Damn.
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Josh resumes his slapping, Damien attempting to avoid, but with little success.

Stage Manager	You do understand that's pure chance? Evens or odds. It's fifty fifty.
Josh	So why am I winning?
Stage Manager	You're on in two minutes.
Josh	We'll be ready.
Stage Manager	There's something wrong tonight. I can feel it.
Josh	You said that last night. And the night before. They were both fine.

Boy hovers, concerned, trying to get the Stage Manager's attention.

Boy Excuse me.
Josh You're a worrier. That's your problem. Worrying doesn't change anything.
Stage Manager You know who always say that?
Boy Um, Maia?
Stage Manager What have I told you about using my name? In here, when I'm doing my job, you refer to me as the stage manager? I can't be your big sister in here. Do you understand?
Josh Who always says that?
Stage Manager People who have grown accustomed to other people cleaning up their messes. Well I can't do that, tonight. Once you're out on that stage, you're on your own. Nobody can save you. Not me, not your mother -
Josh What's my mother got to do with this?
Boy Maia! It's the flowers!
Stage Manager I just said... What do you mean the flowers?
Boy They're not on the trolley.
Stage Manager Okay, well don't panic. We don't need them until scene five. That's plenty of time. Take a deep breath and have good look around. When you've done this a few times you'll come to see -
Boy I know where they are.
Stage Manager See, didn't even need me did you? Away you go then.

Boy turns, thinks about following the instructions, but finds his courage.

Boy It's... they're in the lighting box.
Stage Manager What are in the lighting box?
Boy The flowers.
Stage Manager What are they doing in... There's no way of getting into the lighting box. Not while there's a show on.
Boy No.
Stage Manager How did they get into the lighting box?
Boy They were on the stage, from when you ran the last scene, and I picked them up, to bring them in here, and then I went to the lighting box to check that the amp was turned on, for the finale.
Stage Manager And you left them up there?

CHAPTER ONE

Jess and Carrie stay in role, focused and ready for their next entrance. Quietly running lines for the next scene.

Simon, however, is done for the night, and after receiving a nod of congratulations from the Stage Manager, begins to walk off the role, shaking his arms and hands, looking in on the monitor, listening at the door.

Stage Manager approaches him.

Stage Manager It might be better if you find a place to sit quietly.
Simon Sorry. I'm just a bit fidgety.
Stage Manager There's something in the air tonight. I can feel it.
Simon Last night.
Stage Manager No, it's more than that. The show's got a feeling tonight. I can sense it - a gathering storm.

Simon Okay.
Stage Manager Come away from the door.
Simon You wish you were out there?
Stage Manager Stage Manager is just as important as any actor.
Simon I know. Just thought, you know, you might miss the actual acting.
Stage Manager Well I don't.
Simon I remember you in the Year 12 show. You were good.
Stage Manager I don't remember you in the Year 12 shows, sorry.
Simon Didn't do drama. This is my first year. That show is the reason I decided to take it.

Stage Manager I was hoping to be in the other class.
Simon I wish I was out there.
Stage Manager You've just been out there.
Simon As Damien. I auditioned for Damien. Did you see that? I think I did a good audition. I think I did a better audition than he did.

Stage Manager It was good.
Simon I didn't think I'd mind much, getting a smaller role. I didn't, until tonight. Tonight it's really pissing me off, for some reason.

Stage Manager I remember your audition. It was good.
Simon I suppose it's because it's my first year. Mister hasn't seen enough of me.

Stage Manager No, it's just you're not one of his favourites. Nothing you can do about that.

Simon You think Mister has favourites?

Stage Manager They all do.

Simon Teachers?

Stage Manager Drama teachers. It's all about ego with them. It's not their fault exactly, they have to put their work up in public and know that people are judging them. It makes them fragile, so they seek reassurance from their students. Any student who is prepared to do that, to find ways to make the teachers feel better about themselves, gets special treatment.

Simon That's sort of sick.

Stage Manager What are you going to do?

Simon You sad it's the last night?

Stage Manager I'm not anything yet. Not until the show's over. Until then it's all about holding the focus.

Simon I had a moment there tonight, when the lights went down on the scene, and it went well and I was feeling, you know, sort of high. I didn't know it would be like that, being up there on stage, in front of all those people, and you know how Mister is always saying about your energy, how energy is different from volume, or physical force, how you just feel it, and the audience feel it too, and I always thought he was talking shit. I thought he thought he was talking shit too, that it was just the sort of thing you're meant to say, if you're a drama teacher. But I felt it tonight, I really felt it. And then, when the lights went down, I realised I might never have that feeling again. I mean, what are the chances any of us will act after school? So that was it, a lousy cameo at the start of the play, just enough to get a taste for it, like when a beautiful girl talks you to at a party because she's drunk and has mistaken you for someone else, and in that moment before she realises, you allow yourself to believe, you know. And you shouldn't. You shouldn't let yourself do that. Are you alright?

Stage Manager Fine. I'm just concentrating on the timing. Two and a half minutes.

Jess hurries past, phone to her ear, heads through the door to outside. Stage Manager calls after her but is ignored.

Stage Manager Where are you..?

Simon Almost looked like you were crying.
Stage Manager It's the stage lights. I'm meant to wear dark glasses, I have an unusually formed optic nerve.
Simon Are you one of Mister's favourites?
Stage Manager I'm not anyone's favourite.
Simon Sorry.
Stage Manager I used to be. I like this better. You shouldn't feel sorry for me.
Simon Where's your little brother?
Stage Manager Getting flowers.
Simon For Mister?
Stage Manager For the final scene.
Simon But there are -
Stage Manager He left them in the lighting box.
Simon Oh.... Give me a leg up. I can climb through there.
Stage Manager We can't -
Simon Come on. Better than us both standing around pretending we matter.

The Stage Manager has no answer to this and provides the requisite boost. For a moment it is touch and go whether or not Simon will actually succeed. Jess's sudden return, however, sees her collide with the Stage Manager and they all end up sprawled on the floor. The Stage Manager is the first to regain her feet.

Stage Manager What the hell?
Jess Sorry, I didn't -
Stage Manager What were you even doing out there? This is a show, you can't just suit yourself Jess. It isn't all about you.
Jess Is he all right?

Stage Manager turns to see Simon still writhing on the floor. She cuts straight into first aid mode, crouching beside him.

Stage Manager Now Simon, I need you to tell me where it hurts.
Simon I'm fine. Just winded.
Stage Manager No, don't try to get up.
Simon What are you doing?
Stage Manager Something might be broken. I'm going to press down on your bones now, and I need you to tell me if anything hurts.
Simon No, I just -

Stage Manager Stay still.

The Stage Manager begins to very diligently press down on each and every bone in turn. Simon looks to Jess beseechingly, begging her to save him. Jess enjoys his pain for a moment before intervening.

Jess So... Chris has gone.

The Stage Manager turns, her attention immediately with Jess. Simon takes his opportunity and springs to his feet.

Stage Manager What do you mean, gone?

Jess Gone. Home.

Stage Manager For how long?

Jess Years I imagine. He's not particularly independent.

Stage Manager But he's in scene five.

Jess Yeah.

Stage Manager How do you know this?

Jess That was him on the phone. He says he's very sorry, but he can't take the pressure any more.

Stage Manager What pressure? It's the smallest role in the play. It's even less important than Simon.

Simon Thank you.

Stage Manager What are you doing up? I haven't finished.

Simon Yeah you have.

Stage Manager You might have broken something.

Simon What happened?

Jess To what?

Simon To Chris. Someone said something to him, didn't they?

Jess No.

Simon So why did you ring him?

Jess To see where he was.

Simon I don't believe you.

Jess Okay.

Carrie Jess, we're almost on. You okay?

Jess I'm fine.

Stage Manager What's going on?

Jess Nothing's going on.

Stage Manager I can feel it. All night I've been able to feel it.

Simon So what are we doing about Chris?
Stage Manager Not now. I'm listening for the cue.
Simon You know they come through the door right, when the scene's over.
 We don't actually need a cue.
Stage Manager It's so the actors can prepare.
Jess We didn't have that last year.
Stage Manager No, and how did that work out for you?
Jess I had glandular fever.
Carrie I can't believe you'd bring that up now.
Simon We have to do something about Chris. Give me his number. I'll call
 him.
Jess He's not coming back.
Simon And that's it? We're not thinking we need to do something about
 this in, oh, I don't know, the next eighteen minutes? This is why
 you're here you know. You're meant to solve these problems.
Stage Manager I'm listening for the cue.

At this point Boy enters, holding the world's worst array of stolen flowers/weeds.

The others look at his drooping, forlorn presentation, a metaphor now for the dire state of the show. Speechless.

Stage Manager All right. This is it. On in twenty. Chins up. We'll sort out something.

They hover at a crack in the door, waiting for the moment, and then Carrie and Jess are pushed out into the stage.

CHAPTER TWO

Immediately the two actors have left for the stage Stage Manager begins to pace, hands through hair, muttering, in danger of hyperventilating.

Simon She often get like this?

Boy nods.

Boy Yeah. This is pretty bad though.

Simon Does she have an inhaler?

Boy Don't think so... You think we can use these?

Simon No.

Boy They had a dog.

Simon Yeah, a dog wouldn't work either.

Boy Did you hear the barking?

Simon No.

Boy I crouched behind a flax plant, it came round and sniffed me. Just about shat myself.

Simon Thought I could smell something.

Boy No, that's the dog. I think I stood in it.

Simon Reminds me of a joke.

Boy Okay.

A glare from the still panicking Stage Manager. Simon lowers his voice.

Simon There's this old people's home for retired army officers. In England. A little boy comes to visit his great grandfather, and sees a tiger's head, mounted on the wall. 'What's that, gramps,?' he asks. 'Tiger, my boy. Shot it myself. India. Wasn't expecting the thing. Out shooting peacocks. Not very sporting, can't really fly, but you know, great fun. Then this tiger appears out of nowhere, Raarggh! Shat myself.' 'Well yes,' says the boy. 'It must have been frightening.' 'No, just then, when I went Raarggh! Send for a nurse.'... It's polite to laugh, even when you don't find it funny.

Boy No it was funny. I'm just worried about the flowers. And the amp being switched off.

Simon And the missing actor.

Boy That wasn't my fault.

Simon You know where I heard that joke? Friend's brother. And you know who told it to him? Ian McKellan. You know, Gandolf.
Boy I can imagine it being funny, if Gandolf told it.

Stage Manager bustles back over.

Stage Manager Okay, I have a plan.
Simon You don't need a plan. Just cut out the scene. It's a cameo, it doesn't add anything to the story. Oh, sorry. Was that your plan and now I've ruined it?
Stage Manager Of course it's not my plan. You can't just cut chunks out of a play. Think about the playwright. You have to respect the playwright.
Boy I could go around the back and get Mister, see what he thinks.
Simon He's on lights. He won't be able to get away.
Stage Manager I am the Stage Manager. I am to be left with independent charge for the duration of the play. That is an important part of the assessment brief.
Simon You're getting credits for this?
Stage Manager Why wouldn't I be?
Simon I don't know. No reason.
Stage Manager This is a very important role. Without me, the whole thing would fall apart.
Boy So what's the plan?

About this time, or perhaps earlier, Damien and Josh return from the stage.

Stage Manager We have to find somebody else. It's a short scene. How long would it take to learn?
Simon Find somebody else? What, just drag someone out of the audience?
Stage Manager I have someone in mind.
Josh Everything all right here?
Stage Manager We're fine. How's it going out there?
Josh Felt good. A little flat to start, but this guy's ripping it up again.

Look to the still silent Damien, who in this moment looks to be quite incapable of ripping anything up. He stares into space.

Simon We're not fine. The flowers are trapped upstairs in the lighting box, the amp is turned off for the music at the end and Chris has gone home so we don't have anyone to play the Boy.

Stage Manager What are you doing?

Simon Just telling the truth.

Stage Manager To an actor. Are you insane?

Simon I'm an actor.

Stage Manager They have to go back on again in a few of minutes. Now you've upset him.

Simon When have you ever known Josh to be upset about anything?

Josh It'll be sweet. I'll find a reason for my character to climb up the stairs. I'll turn on the amp, pass the flowers back down through that window.

Stage Manager There's no possible moment in the script when -

Josh My character's unpredictable. I can wing it.

Stage Manager Well I forbid it.

Josh Well, I'll be out there, and you'll be in here, so, you know...

Simon Who are you going to get? Who's going to play the boy?

Stage Manager Isn't that obvious?

Looks to her little brother, upon whom the realisation now slowly dawns.

Boy Are you out of your mind?

Stage Manager It's our only option. Come on, there's no such thing as impossible.

Boy This morning at breakfast you said I could come to the show but I couldn't touch anything because anything I do touch I always destroy.

Stage Manager This is an emergency. Different rules apply.

Boy Simon's right. Cut the scene.

Stage Manager You don't even know the play.

Boy I know that having a big long stretch of nothing happening will still be better than me trying to act.

Stage Manager The character's very awkward. It's perfect for you.

Boy Well done. Go for flattery.

Stage Manager Much as I enjoy arguing with you, we don't have time. Here's a script. You're boy, Simon you read Carrie. Let's go.

The three move away and read quietly through the lines, leaving Josh and Damien alone.

Josh You think that'll work?
Damien Dunno.
Josh You're very talkative tonight.
Damien Yeah.
Josh I think it's going to work. Like it's completely ridiculous, and it should fail, but it's just close enough to impossible to become likely. Like Trump for president. Oh, come on. I don't even get a smile for trying.
Damien I'm in love with Carrie.
Josh You want to run lines? Where is that, exactly?
Damien No, I mean, you know... in real life.
Josh Oh, shit. Love? Not just, quite like, circumstances are right, worth a crack, just to see?
Damien Love.
Josh Okay.
Damien I think she feels it too. Like all through rehearsals, I feel like she's been giving me signals. Last nights' finale, there was something there, you know. She feels it too, I'm sure she does. But this is our final show, and I don't know. I wait 'til the party right? I tell her at the party.
Josh Or you could just steal her phone.
Damien Yeah, this is a really good time for comedy, you complete dick.
Josh Okay, sorry. Just trying to relax you.
Damien Yeah, well maybe don't.
Josh Fair enough... Not at the party.
Damien Why not?
Josh You do it here. Backstage.
Damien Yeah, good, after the curtain call. She'll be on a high. It's perfect.
Josh No, not after the curtain call. During the show. Do it backstage during the show. Think what'll add to the final scene. The school will never have seen anything like it. The sexual tension will be... flammable.
Damien Isn't it inflammable?
Josh Same thing.
Damien You sure about this?
Josh Certain of it.

Damien mulls on this.

CHAPTER THREE

Boy walks over to his sister.

Boy I can't do it.
Stage Manager Yes you can.
Boy It doesn't really help, just contradicting me like that.
Stage Manager What do you want then?
Boy I want to not do the scene. I can't do the scene.
Stage Manager Would an incentive help?
Boy I just can't remember all those lines.
Stage Manager We could swap bedrooms. You're always complaining that I've got a better bedroom.
Boy Really?
Stage Manager If it'll get you on stage.
Boy Great. Deal. I would have done it for heaps less than that by the way.
Stage Manager Might still change my mind.
Boy Can't. I recorded the conversation.
Stage Manager Don't you have lines to be learning?

Boy hurries off, most pleased with himself, buries his head in the script. Stage Manager finds herself stranded in a moment of inactivity and in this collapses inwards, her anxiety giving way to sadness. Simon notices and comes to sit beside her.

Simon It'll be all right.
Stage Manager You don't know that.
Simon It's theatre. It always comes together on the night.
Stage Manager That's not true. I've seen some shit shows.
Simon Well, the other two nights were great. Everyone's saying so. If you feel responsible for the disaster tonight, you have to take responsibility for the successes too... You'll get assessed on your best night, right?
Stage Manager I don't care about the assessment.
Simon Since when?
Stage Manager Since two minutes ago.
Simon That'll pass.
Stage Manager I've wasted three years of my life worrying about assessments, pretending like an Excellence matters more than a Merit. Like

anyone else in the world is ever going to notice. What I've been doing all this time, with my awards and my endorsements and commendations, is I've been building this little prison for myself. A prison of expectation. I should have been like Josh. Josh doesn't give shit. He's never on time, when he screws up he just laughs it off, and he's still going to get into university, same as me. We're going to end up in exactly the same place, except he's happy, and has friends.

Simon You have friends.

Stage Manager Name one.

Simon I'm not good with names.

Stage Manager What you said before, about wanting to be on stage more, that's me. I wanted to be on stage too. I love it, you know. I love that feeling, when you lose yourself in the character, and those glaring stage lights, so you can't see the audience, but you can feel them, you know, just sitting there, breathing it in. Listening to you, watching you. It's the quiet moments I like best. The silences. You can hear breathing, sometimes.

Silence

Simon I like the silences too.

Stage Manager Yeah. And the rustling, when they move forward in their seats. If you drop your voice, just a touch, you feel them leaning forward.

Simon So why didn't you?

Stage Manager Didn't I what?

Simon Audition for an acting role?

Stage Manager I'm not a very good actor. I'm all right, and I love it, but I'm not good. I needed one more excellence, to be sure of an endorsement, so I asked Mister, I asked him if he thought I could get excellence for an acting role, and he suggested the management standard.

Simon He could have lied.

Stage Manager No, it's my own fault. I shouldn't have cared. Excellence credits or an experience you'll never forget.

Simon I do get the feeling I'll never do it again, you know. It's like I've only just realised school's full of all these opportunities that you'll never get again.

Boy That you're proud of me?
Stage Manager For crying? Boys do it all the time now, it's nothing.
Boy I'm terrified.
Stage Manager Fear is good for you.
Boy How?
Stage Manager Something to do with hormones. I don't entirely understand. Let's go through your lines one more time.

During this the girls have returned. Jess is clearly distraught. A kind of panic attack Carrie attempting to calm her.

Jess Don't!
Carrie Don't what?
Jess Say what you were going to say.
Carrie You don't know what -
Jess That it didn't matter. That nobody even noticed. That the audience are loving it.
Carrie` Okay, you did know... It was -
Jess Just one line?
Carrie Two, if you count my reply. But you -
Jess Covered brilliantly?
Carrie Adequately.

Jess softens. A small smile.

Jess It was my favourite line.
Carrie It was good.
Jess And they'll never hear it. They'll never know. They'll leave here thinking the writer is just a little bit less funny than he actually is.
Carrie I don't think anybody ever really thinks about the writer.
Jess No, true... Be a bit shit, wouldn't it?
Carrie Could be worse.
Jess Always true.
Carrie You could be him.

Points at Boy, who is now pacing, on the verge of a breakdown.

CHAPTER FOUR

Carrie enters, Damien close behind. Carrie sits. Damien hovers... painfully.

Damien *Whispers* It's going well, I think.

Carrie Yeah.

Damien You've been great.

Carrie Thanks. You too.

Damien Thanks.

Silence

Damien Good luck for the final scene.

Carrie Don't need it, right?

Damien Nah.

Another long pause

Damien It's my favourite scene.

Carrie Okay.

Damien Last night was the best, I think. Apart from... where are you going?

Carrie has moved closer to the door, whether to move away from Damien or simply prepare for her entrance isn't clear.

Carrie You're almost on.

Damien Not quite.

Carrie turns, finger to lips. Leans forward to listen. Mistakes the look on Damien's face for nervousness and smiles.

Carrie Don't worry. Last time you have to kiss me!

Damien pauses. It is now or never.

Damien I hope not.

Carrie What?

Damien I, um, when we're together... I've never felt so happy as I do when I'm with you. There, I've said it.

Simon Saving yourself for the stage. Fair enough.

Nothing.

Simon Approach, my child.

Boy steps forward.

Simon No, it's the line, from the play. Now you say your line back.

Boy Miss?

Simon (Good!) What do you want? Approach when you're told, can't you?

Boy Simon...

Simon You have a message for Simon?

Boy No, I mean you, Simon... I can't do this Simon. I just can't.

Simon turns to Stage Manager

Simon You have to cut the scene.

Stage Manager considers this for a moment. The he moves in front of Boy, puts both hands on his shoulders and looks him in the eyes.

Stage Manager When a person looks back on their life, they find there are precious few moments that would really have made a difference, whichever way they went. Most of the time we are like a life raft tossed on a stormy ocean, completely powerless yet miraculously self righting. We can seek despair in this lack of control, or solace in our bloody minded resilience: which we choose to dwell upon is a matter of temperament. But sometimes, just sometimes, there is a moment in our life that changes forever who we are, it fundamentally redefines the stories we tell ourselves about our puny existence. And it is in those moments alone that we are truly powerful. This is one of those moments, my little brother. Tonight you will learn one of two lessons, either that when things get hard, you are the type to crumple beneath the weight of anticipated failure, or you will learn that no matter what happens, the sky will not fall, the world will not stop spinning, that there is no failure as dismal as the failure to face down your fear. You will learn that it is our imperfections that make us magnificent. The choice is yours.

Boy straightens, sniffs, wipes his eyes, moves determinedly towards the entrance.

Simon That was... amazing.

Stage Manager And you know what's tragic?

Simon What?

Stage Manager There was no one here to see it.

At this point Damien rushes in, Josh close behind. Damien runs straight over to Carrie.

Damien Well?

Stage Manager rushes over.

Stage Manager She's on. Carrie's on.

She looks over to the entrance, where Boy is just now moving into the lights.

Stage Manager You can't leave him out there alone. Not now.

Damien One word. Yes or no? I have to know.

CHAPTER FIVE

Carrie is pained doing this, but can not lie.

Carrie No. Never. Not under any circumstances. Sorry.

Carrie rushes to her entrance. Damien collapses to the floor. Josh rushes over to offer comfort. Damien turns on him, distraught.

Damien Thanks for the advice, areshole.

Stage Manager I don't know what's going on here, and I don't want to know, but I need you get up and -

Damien I'm not.

Stage Manager What?

Damien I'm not going out there. I can't go out there.

Josh It's the big scene. It's the final scene.

Damien The scene where we look into each other's eyes? The scene where we admit our love for one another? The scene where we kiss?

Josh Yeah, that one.

Damien How am I meant to go out there after that? How am I ever meant to look happy again?

Josh Well, act.

Damien I don't know how to act.

Josh What do you mean? You've been killing it all week.

Damien That wasn't acting. I was actually in love.

Josh Okay, well it was effective.

They all contemplate Damien's broken form. Stage Manager clears her throat.

Stage Manager When a person looks back on their life, they find there are precious few moments -

Simon No time. *He turns to Damien.* Harden the f -

The window slides open and a bunch of flowers drops at Damien's feet. Boy leans out and gives a thumbs up. Damien picks up the bunch of flowers, takes a deep breath and walks towards the stage.

Simon Good man.

Jess, Simon, Josh and Stage Manager watch in silence. Boy rushes backstage, all but walking on air, the exact opposite of Damien.

Boy Okay, that was incredible. Seriously, that was the best moment of my life.

He looks about, and realises he has missed something here.

Boy What's happened here?

Josh Damien... Carrie just ripped open his chest, prised the ribcage apart, took out his still beating heart and threw it at his feet, then walked away as if nothing even happened.

Jess Nothing did happen.

Josh Did you not see his tears? Did his pain mean nothing to you?

Jess Nothing happened for her. She didn't have any feelings for him. What are you suggesting, that she just said yes to make him feel better?

Josh There are kinder ways of saying no.

Jess Perhaps if he hadn't asked her in such a high pressure situation. What kind of a moron would think that was a good idea?

Josh Fair point.

Jess You know what I think? I think he deliberately waited until then so that she would feel pressured into saying yes. Here you all are feeling sorry for him when in fact he was manipulating her. And her only crime was to have sufficient confidence to resist.

Josh You're not much of a romantic, are you?

Jess You mean like sitting around helpless in my lonely tower, waiting for my knight in shining armour? No, not really.

Josh Okay. That's reasonable... It was my idea, suggesting to Damien that he tell her during the show. I thought she'd find it romantic.

Jess So, you're an idiot then?

Josh Yep... Well done tonight, by the way. You were great.

Jess So were you.

Josh Thank you... I thought she felt the same. Damien said he'd been picking up signals.

Jess What, like pheromones?

Josh More semaphore.

Jess Yeah, because when I'm into somebody I reach for a set of flags.

Josh Be easier.

Jess What's wrong with just asking?
Josh He did just ask.
Jess And she said no. Simple. Dealt with. Move on. I swear if people
 learned not to take rejection so personally...
Josh It is pretty personal.
Jess You can think highly of a person without feeling anything for them.
Josh Can I?
Jess Everybody can.
Josh That's lucky, because I have a high opinion of you, actually.
Jess Same.
Josh You called me an idiot before.
Jess Funny thing, esteem. Hard to quantify.
Josh But you're not into me, right?
Jess Maybe a little bit... I was going to tell you, after the show.
Josh And if I reject you, you'll be fine with it?
Jess It'll hurt, but I won't make it a big production of it.
Josh Okay. Sort of into you a bit, too.
Jess Cool.
Josh We should...
Jess Yeah, not in front of Damien and Carrie.
Josh Be sort of offensive.
Jess Okay, well, I'll message you.

Stage Manager begins to pace.

Stage Manager Well, this is it. Our last ever scene at Hutt Valley High.

It takes a moment for this to sink in. Still and silent contemplation.

Slowly the five actors move toward the door, one at a time, all hoping to sneak a peek at the final love scene.

They stand together as a group, and the grouping tightens. Near the back, we see Jess slip her hand into Josh's.

Applause, they all back away. Damien storms out, face like thunder. He and Carrie offer up their final monologues.

Carrie

Don't believe what you they tell you, you know, about happiness. Fate rolls around in circles you see; just as surely as you're down one moment, you've lost your phone, your friendships are satisfying, but not inspiring, one day rolls into the next with not much to distinguish between them save the weather, and that special someone, he hasn't even appeared over the horizon, well, you'll be up the next. **I know, that sounds trite and predictable and what the hell am I making such a fuss about, so life has its ups and downs, big deal, but wait until it happens to you. Then you'll see what I mean. Then you'll see exactly what I mean. Then you'll see exactly how** wonderful it can be.

Do I believe in love? I suppose I do. I suppose I'm a romantic at heart. Oh, I know what they say, it's just some chemical reaction, it can't really last, but sometimes it does you know. And surely those sometimes are worth believing in.

And when it happens, when he's there, looking into your eyes, and that expression on his face tells you that he's thinking and feeling all the same things you are, that he's holding his breath without knowing why, that all the silly little circumstances and misunderstandings that have brought you to this impossible place are making him tingle too, with the impossibility of it all, that's when you know it's all for real. How can a feeling like that be anything but real? What sort of a cold-hearted cynic would you have to be not admit a place for that sort of joy in the world?

And you want to remember moments like that. You want to cling to them. Because as good as it all feels, you understand in your heart, that it's only just beginning.

Damien

Don't believe what you they tell you, you know, about happiness. Fate rolls around in circles you see; just as surely as you're on top one moment, you've found your niche, your friendships are satisfying, life feels inspiring, one day rolls into the next like they're pleased to see each other, and that special someone, she's finally made himself known, well, you'll be crushed the next. **I know, that sounds trite and predictable and what the hell am I making such a fuss about, so life has its ups and downs, big deal, but wait until it happens to you. Then you'll see what I mean. Then you'll see exactly what I mean. Then you'll see exactly how** bullshit it all can be.

Do I believe in love? Of course I don't. What sort of romantic retard would I have to be? It's just some chemical reaction, hitching a ride on the desperate lack of security we call loneliness.

And when it happens, when she's there, looking into your eyes, and that expression on her face tells you that she's thinking and feeling all the same things you are, that she's holding her breath without knowing why, that all the silly little circumstances and misunderstandings that have brought you to this impossible place are making her tingle too, with the impossibility of it all, that's when you know it's already dying.

It's like with fireworks, the bigger the bang the briefer the show. What sort of a soft-headed believer would you have to be not to understand we're all just the victims of nature's reproductive imperative?

And you want to remember moments like that. You want to cling to them. Because as good as it all feels, you understand in your heart, that it's already finished.

All through for their final bow, then rush back into the backstage space, whooping and hugging. No speaking, but their joy and pain played out on their faces, in their bodies. They move together for a group hug and then Stage Manager turns on the lights. It is then that they notice the audience.

They look at one another, bewildered. Assemble in a daze, bow, leave the space.

