

EXPOSED

By Dennis Bush

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CHARACTERS

PARKER	Apt. 1, male, early- to mid-20's, observant, a thinker more than a doer
NOELLE	Apt. 2, female, mid-20's, obsessive, germ-phobic, troubled
BRANDY	Apt. 3, female, early 20's, past relationship haunts her, genuinely sweet
CHESS	Apt. 3, female, mid-20s, strong, in control of everything except her own relationship
CJ	Apt. 4, male, early 20's, an actor, witty, charming, still plays with action figures
SKIP	Apt. 4, male, early 20's, struggles to fit in, has strong opinions
JULIA	Apt. 6, mid- to late-20's, female, lonely, filled with longing, quirky
JUSTIN	Apt. 8, male, mid- to late-20's, deep, troubled past, survivor

SETTING

A basement storage room in an 8-unit apartment building in the Hell's Kitchen section of New York City. A few months in the future.

PRODUCTION HISTORY

An August 2008 reading in New York City featured the members of Element 8 Ensemble. The original cast of the October 2008 premiere production in Phoenix, AZ included Alex Rivera, Cera Naccarato, Ben Whitmire, Derek Weber, Nicholas Petrovich, Roxanne Feldhake, Emily O'Brien and Rosemary Zinke.

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With lights at half, we see eight actors scattered around the playing space. PARKER, NOELLE, JULIA and JUSTIN are each holding a piece of paper. BRANDY and CHESS are sharing a piece of paper, as are CJ and SKIP.

PARKER: *(Reading from the paper)* Attention residents of...

ALL: 436 West 49th Street...

PARKER: Apartment 1...

(The apartment numbers are read in quick succession with a beat in place of where a number is skipped.)

NOELLE: 2

BRANDY and CHESS: 3

CJ and SKIP: 4

(A quick beat.)

JULIA: 6

(A quick beat.)

JUSTIN: 8...

NOELLE: You may have been exposed to a...

ALL: Viral agent.

JUSTIN: Due to the potential exposure, the New York City Health Department, in conjunction with the Centers for Disease Control, has issued this...

ALL: Quarantine order.

(A quick beat.)

SKIP: All residents of...

ALL: 436 West 49th Street...

JULIA: Are to be evacuated from their apartments and temporarily relocated to the building manager's storage facility in the basement of your residential location.

BRANDY: That space is not connected to the ventilation system for the rest of the building, which will prevent further dissemination of...

ALL: Viral agents...

(ALL move gradually to the center of the playing space that will serve as the storage facility.)

CHESS: ... If they are present in any of the residential units in the building.

PARKER: A team of...

ALL: Infectious disease specialists...

SKIP: Will be conducting tests to determine if a viral agent is present.

JULIA: Your quarantine status will be lifted as soon as the inspection is completed and any elimination procedures have been conducted and concluded.

(ALL are in place before the end of the next line.)

CHESS: This quarantine order is effective immediately.

(Lights up full.)

NOELLE: *(An announcement)* Something smells in here. *(Pause)* Like body odor. *(Getting louder)* Something smells like body odor in here.

CHESS: I think it's just musty basement smell. It doesn't look like the building manager is down here very much.

NOELLE: They should have given everybody time to take a shower. This is a small space.

JUSTIN: It's only temporary. We're not going to be here long. *(With a laugh)* How much body odor can we work up in a short time?

NOELLE: Bodies have odor. *(Quick pause)* That's why they call it body odor – because it's odor on the body. *(Quick pause)* I don't have it. But other people do – on the subway and and at work – and it can very pungent. Sometimes, their body odor burns my nose. It's like toxic fumes.

PARKER: *(Trying to calm her down and set the tone)* I don't think it's going to be a problem.

CHESS: So, we should all just relax and get comfortable.

NOELLE: *(Getting more agitated)* I use antibacterial body wash in the shower. It's really antibacterial hand soap that I put in the body wash container. *(Quick pause; working up to a frenzy)*

Bacteria is what causes body odor. So, if there's no bacteria, there's no odor.

CHESS: Do I need to slap you?

NOELLE: Why would you do that?

CHESS: To keep you from getting hysterical.

NOELLE: I'm not hysterical. And I wouldn't appreciate being slapped. *(Pause)* I don't know where your hand has been.

PARKER: It's a stressful situation. *(Pause)* We're in a stressful situation. I'm sure we're all a little on edge.

NOELLE: And threatening to slap someone doesn't ease their stress.

CHESS: You need to just sit and relax.

(NOELLE looks at CHESS. CHESS stares her down.)

(To NOELLE) Sit.

(NOELLE sits.)

Relax.

(NOELLE tries to pull herself together.)

SKIP: And, besides, we have more to worry about than body-odor bacteria. The letter said we've been exposed...

JUSTIN: *(Interjecting)* Potentially exposed...

SKIP: To a viral agent.

JULIA: I don't like the sound of that.

CJ: My agent can be pretty viral when he wants to be. But that's how agents are.

NOELLE: Are you making a joke?

CJ: Yeah.

NOELLE: I don't think a viral agent is anything to joke about.

CJ: I'm an actor. It's what we do.

BRANDY: How long do you think we'll have to be down here?

NOELLE: There's mold in here. Basements are moldy.

CHESS: There's mold everywhere – not just in basements.

PARKER: *(Getting them back on track)* It shouldn't take long. I saw a vodcast on the Times website a few weeks ago. They have this new robotic scanning device that moves through rooms and transmits data to handheld computers.

CJ: A guy I did a show with was quarantined in his building's laundry room for three hours up on 86th and Broadway. He said a kid peed his pants but, other than that, it was totally uneventful.

JULIA: My boss was in lock down for forty-five minutes on Park and 73rd.

SKIP: A dude from my gym was quarantined for an hour and a half, last week, on Bleecker.

PARKER: There're only eight units in our building, so it shouldn't take long.

BRANDY: (*Moving her phone around*) There's no reception in here. No signal. (*Quick pause*) None at all. (*Quick pause*) What if I need to call somebody?

JUSTIN: You're out of luck.

BRANDY: Normally – if I wasn't in a room without any phone reception – I'd use that as my status update. "Brandy... is out of luck." In five minutes, twenty of my friends would be commenting on my status and asking what's wrong.

CHESS: I think your friends will manage without being updated on your status every two minutes.

SKIP: What's your profile picture of?

BRANDY: Me. On the beach in Aruba.

SKIP: Just you? You're the only one in the picture?

BRANDY: Yeah, why?

SKIP: I have issues with some people's profile pictures.

CJ: (*Laughing*) Here we go.

SKIP: What?

CJ: (*Teasing*) You know how you get. (*To ALL*) Consider yourselves warned. My roommate, here, has some very strong opinions about things.

SKIP: I just think who or what you have in your profile pic says a lot about you.

JULIA: Like what?

SKIP: Like if you're in a relationship, why do you have to have you and the other person both in your picture?

JULIA: You could be in love.

SKIP: Or you're insecure. Or the other person gets insecure if they're not in your picture. (*Quick pause*) And why pictures of your kids or pets. It's like you don't have your own life, if you have a photo of your kids or your dog or cat or whatever. (*Pause; getting more riled up*) I don't mind seeing pictures of couples or cute puppies or family vacations in the other shots they post, but your profile pic should just be you.

NOELLE: *(To CHESS)* Are you gonna threaten to slap him?

CJ: *(Conspiratorially)* He just had a bad break up. He's been a little crazy.

CHESS: A big bowl of crazy.

SKIP: *(Bitterly, explaining)* My ex threw a huge fit because I wouldn't use a photo of both of us as my profile pic.

CJ: *(Whipping up the drama)* She yelled a lot. With me sitting in the same room.

SKIP: It went downhill pretty quick after that.

CJ: It was ugly.

CHESS: It happens. You just gotta move on.

BRANDY: *(Indicating CHESS)* She talks the talk but when she tries to walk the walk, she trips and falls. Trust me. I've seen it.

PARKER: You two are roommates?

CHESS: Yeah, two years now. We're in #3. You're in #1, right? I've seen you going into your apartment when I was getting the mail.

PARKER: Yeah, I hear everybody coming and going. And some of you are loud.

JUSTIN: So, 1 and 3 are accounted for. I'm in #8.

SKIP: CJ and I are in 4.

JULIA: 6.

NOELLE: I'm in #2 – which I've never liked. The apartment is fine. I just don't like living in number 2. It makes me feel like my apartment is a giant bowel movement. *(Gesturing as if it's all around her)* I live in #2.

PARKER: Where are the people who live in 5 and 7?

NOELLE: I wouldn't be surprised if the woman in #5 is responsible for the virus.

JUSTIN: *(Correcting NOELLE)* Potential viral agent.

NOELLE: Yeah, that. *(Pause, then, conspiratorially)* I've seen her come in at 3:00 in the morning.

CHESS: So, you were up then, too?

NOELLE: I was out with friends and she had just been... out.

CJ: What's that supposed to mean?

NOELLE: It was the way she was dressed.

JUSTIN: So, the way somebody is dressed is an indication that they're gonna be exposed to a virus or bacteria?

NOELLE: I'm just sayin'.

PARKER: People could make assumptions about you, too.

NOELLE: Let 'em. I know I'm not spreading anything around. I have the vacuum with the ultraviolet light, so I'm not just sweeping up dirt, I'm killing germs. And my toothbrush holder has an

ultraviolet light, too, so my brush gets disinfected every day.
Three times a day.

JULIA: What would happen if we stopped using antibacterial soap and hand sanitizer? Would we all become infected?

CHESS: I don't use any of those things and I'm almost never sick.

Exposure to bacteria is what allows our immune systems to get strong. My mother used to say, "Go outside and play in the dirt. Eat a little dirt while you're at it. It's good for you."

NOELLE: That's disturbing.

SKIP: Who lives in #7?

JUSTIN: I think the old lady who lived in there died.

BRANDY: You think?

(A quick beat.)

JUSTIN: I know.

CJ: Then why did you say, "I think?"

JUSTIN: Because I didn't think you'd wanna know the details.

PARKER: So you know what happened?

JUSTIN: Yeah. *(Pause; a simple statement of fact)* The old lady who lived in #7 died.

PARKER: Like a heart attack?

JUSTIN: Stroke. That's what the paramedics said.

SKIP: You called the paramedics?

JUSTIN: I called the building manager, because I smelled something disgusting coming out of her apartment. *(Quick pause)* I'm right across the hall. And when I left for work in the morning, there was a smell that almost made me puke. It was like that for three or four days.

CHESS: You smelled it for three or four days before you called anybody?

JUSTIN: At first, I thought she was cooking something. She used to make cabbage soup and all kinds of foul-smelling stuff.

CHESS: *(Insistently)* But you waited three or four days?!

JUSTIN: *(Defensively)* I think it was three. And I called the building manager. It's more than anybody else did. The building manager called the cops and the cops called the paramedics.

JULIA: And they said the old lady had a stroke?

JUSTIN: Right. *(Quick pause)* And that her dog had chewed off some of her fingers and toes.

(ALL turn to look at JUSTIN, as if he'd done the chewing.)

SKIP: Dude, did you see the body?

JUSTIN: Nah, it was in one of those zip-up bags.

NOELLE: (*From across room; aghast*) A Ziploc bag? They put her in a Ziploc bag?

JUSTIN: No! A zip-up bag. One of those body bags like you see on the crime shows on TV. With the zipper.

PARKER: Did anybody know the old lady?

JULIA: I didn't know anybody in the building until today. I go entire days without speaking to another person. Actual conversation, I mean. I get emails and texts but, sometimes, entire days go by without any in-person human interaction.

BRANDY: How is that possible? We're in New York. There are millions of people here. You can't walk two feet without having somebody bump into you.

JULIA: Just because we're surrounded by people doesn't mean we're interacting with them... having interpersonal communication with them.

SKIP: I go in cycles. Sometimes, I love that there are people everywhere I turn. (*Quick pause*) Like there's something cool about being on a subway car that's so full you don't even have to hold on because there's no room for you to move in any direction. And then, bam, I wake up and feel like I can't breathe because there are so many people and I have no private space – no place that's just mine and only mine. That's when I go in the bathroom and lock the door.

CJ: He totally does that. Usually about the time I have to go to the bathroom.

SKIP: And then he starts a fight.

CJ: I do not.

SKIP: You get a couple of your action figures and you stand outside the door and pretend like they're having a conversation about how long I've been in the bathroom.

PARKER: (*To CJ*) You have action figures?

CJ: They're collectible. They're worth a lot of money.

SKIP: That's only if you leave 'em in the box in mint condition. You play with yours.

CJ: (*Glares at SKIP*) It's like improv. It's like an acting exercise.

SKIP: Standing outside the bathroom door pretending the action figures are talking to each other is an acting exercise?

CJ: Yeah, it is.

SKIP: What about when you get like twenty of ‘em and stage those elaborate battles on the floor in front of the TV? Or when you hold two of ‘em up and growl like an angry dog? That’s improv?

(ALL except CJ laugh.)

(Emboldened by everyone’s laughter) Seriously, he holds ‘em up in front of his face and growls while he shakes the action figures at each other. *(HE demonstrates)* How bizarre is that?

CJ: It’s a healthy way to express anger or frustration.

SKIP: You’re crazy.

CJ: It’s healthier than punching you in the face.

SKIP: *(Moves toward CJ)* Oh really?

CJ: *(Matching SKIP’s bravado)* Yeah, really!

NOELLE: *(Reading the label on a bottle of Liquid Plumber)* If you swallow liquid drain opener, you’re not supposed to induce vomiting.

(ALL turn to stare at NOELLE. A beat.)

You’re supposed to drink massive quantities of milk or water and seek medical attention.

(A beat. ALL continue to stare at NOELLE.)

Good to know.

BRANDY: *(To NOELLE)* You’re not planning to drink it are you?

NOELLE: *(Not completely shutting out the possibility)* I don’t think so.

BRANDY: Good. Because that would be stupid. *(Quick pause)* And selfish.

PARKER: *(Indicating JUSTIN)* And if it was up to him, nobody would get notified for three or four days.

JUSTIN: It was three days, okay?! And I wasn’t in her apartment. I didn’t know the old lady was dead.

SKIP: Or that her dog was chewing off her fingers.

JUSTIN: Right. *(Pause)* And how does her... *(Indicating NOELLE)*

NOELLE: *(Interjecting)* Noelle.

JUSTIN: How does Noelle drinking drain opener end up being about when I did or didn’t call somebody about the old lady?

BRANDY: The dog part really creeps me out. I don’t think I’ll look at a dog the same way, again. I’ll see the potential for finger-eating in their eyes.

JULIA: Any animal that goes without food long enough has the potential to eat your fingers.

CHESS: Even another human. We're all just Donner parties waiting to happen.

JULIA: (*To CJ and SKIP*) I've thought about taking an ax the floor when you guys make brownies. I can smell them baking. It's like a chocolate breeze that wafts up through the floor – through the ventilation system. My kitchen is directly over yours. It's moments like that that I really hate being allergic to chocolate. And brownies are my weakness. Even before I was allergic to chocolate, a good batch of brownies could make me crawl across broken glass to get a plate of 'em, fresh out of the oven. And, now, every nine months or so, when I forget that a chocolate-allergy cluster migraine sends me into a fetal position with my hands squeezing my head like it was a pimple I wanna pop, I think, "What could one brownie hurt? It's just a brownie. People have eaten brownies for hundreds of years, right?" And that's when you guys make a batch. It's like you know when I'm at my weakest and you exploit it.

SKIP: They're just the frozen kind that are already mixed and in the pan and all you have to do is bake 'em for like 30 minutes at 350 degrees.

JULIA: (*In her own world*) I lay on the floor and let the brownie scent waft up through the ventilation grate and swirl around my head. Sometimes I lick the floor. I really do. I lick the floor like I can somehow taste the brownies that way. I could have left that part out but why not tell the truth, right? So, yeah, I lick the floor and I smell the brownies and hear you guys laughing. There always seems to be laughter coming up from your apartment. A lot of different voices. Like there's always a party going on.

CJ: We have a lot of friends.

SKIP: We have a big TV.

CJ: It's a guy thing.

JULIA: I figured, at some point, you'd invite me over. We moved into the building about the same time two years ago. We say "hi" on the stairs and at the mailboxes. Didn't it ever occur to you to invite me over?

CJ: Not really, no.

JULIA: Why not?

CJ: It just didn't. I guess I figured that you have your own friends... your own life.

JULIA: I don't.

NOELLE: Telling people you lick your floor won't get you invited places.

BRANDY: *(To JULIA)* But you're being honest. People respond to that. Letting people see you when you're vulnerable isn't easy. It's like we're afraid the world will come crashing down around us if we let that happen. *(Pause)* I used to try to be perfect. I was the kind of girl who would eat first before going out to dinner with a guy, so I could order a salad and have him think I had a little, tiny appetite. I can eat a pint of ice cream in under three minutes but that's not the kind of thing you let a guy see. Or even your friends. But it's part of who I am. I'm...

CHESS: *(Interjecting)* Strange.

BRANDY: *(Correcting CHESS)* Quirky. *(Getting back on track, to JULIA)* So I say lick the floor. *(To CJ)* And play with your action figures.

CJ: Thank you!

BRANDY: I just wish I'd figured all this out two weeks ago. Then I wouldn't have freaked out in front of the guy from work who wanted to take me to a party on 45th Street.

PARKER: Why would you freak out about a party on 45th Street?

CHESS: She can't...

BRANDY: *(Ready to tell the story herself)* I can't walk down 45th Street. *(Quick pause)* Not the whole street. *(Quick pause)* Just the 300 block between 8th and 9th Avenue. But instead of saying, "I have issues with 45th Street" and leave it at that, I started telling the guy from work about the ghost.

JUSTIN: The ghost?

BRANDY: Of somebody very special. *(Pause)* I met him my freshman year at NYU. We lived on the same floor of the dorm. Right across the hall from each other. And we both had crazy, nightmarish roommates so we hung out in the hallway a lot so we didn't have to deal with 'em. We'd talk about all kinds of stuff. Sometimes for hours. And we'd go for walks in Washington Square Park or take these epic urban hikes, where we'd start at the dorm and go down to Chinatown and, then, all the way up to Central Park – walking the whole time – never taking the subway or a bus. It was like one of those montages in romantic comedy movies, where you see the couple falling in love while music plays in the background. *(Quick pause)* And we were. We were totally falling in love. *(Quick pause)* And in the sweet, innocent way. We held hands and kissed but that was it. *(Quick pause)* It wasn't like those reality show romances where people are all

trashy and disgusting with anyone and everyone. *(Pause)* It was perfect. It was storybook-perfect. We talked about getting married but it was something that was in the future more than the present. He was two years ahead of me so he was putting things in place for his life. He got an internship with a theatre company and moved out of the dorm. He found an apartment on 45th Street that was like two blocks from where he was working. But we still managed to see each other every day. And it was still perfect. For like two years, everything was perfect. And, then, on a beautiful Saturday night in April of my sophomore year, we were having dinner in our favorite restaurant and he told me he was moving back to San Diego. *(Quick pause)* It's where he grew up. *(Quick pause)* And a theatre there had offered him a job – the perfect job – and he said yes. *(Pause)* He wanted me to move with him. He wanted me to marry him and move to San Diego. *(Pause)* And I said no. *(Quick pause)* I couldn't. *(Quick pause)* I had two more years of college and my family and friends all live in the city or on Long Island. My life is here. And he said if I didn't wanna marry him and didn't want to move to San Diego with him, then, he didn't see how I could love him. Because when you love somebody, you rearrange things so you can be with them. You make the person you're in love with your priority and everything else is less important. But it wasn't that simple for me. And it was hard for me to believe that he couldn't at least try to understand how I felt. But he couldn't. He was like, "OK, then, I guess that's it. It could have been perfect but that ship has sailed." And for a few minutes, I just sat there looking at him, trying to figure out what ship he was talking about. I wasn't sure if he meant he was taking a boat back to San Diego or what. He put some money on the table, got up and walked out of the restaurant. And that was the last time I saw him. He was the ship and he sailed out of my life. For two years, I'd seen him every day and, then, it was like he disappeared. *(Pause)* I heard from a friend of his that he moved back to San Diego, got a brain tumor and was dead in like two months. And I know it sounds selfish but I was pissed off that we never got to have any kind of closure. When somebody has been that important – that integral – to your life, you need to have closure when the relationship changes – especially when it ends like ours did. *(Pause)* It was five years ago, but it's like he's still around. Like his spirit or his ghost – whatever you wanna call it – is lingering. And he's everywhere. But especially on 45th Street. At first, when I heard

what happened, I'd stand in front of the apartment building he lived in. Like I was expecting him to come walking out the door. I'd hear his voice and I turn around and I'd get a glimpse of him on the other side of the street – like he was watching me waiting for him. After a couple weeks of that, I couldn't put myself through it anymore. People coming out of his building didn't even react to me as I stood there crying. It was like they couldn't see me. Like I was the ghost. *(Pause)* When I moved up into this neighborhood, my friends told me I was crazy for living so close to 45th Street. But it felt like the right thing to do. Kind of like he could still find me if he was looking for me. If I stop at like the corner of 45th and 9th, I see him sometimes. Just for a second. *(Pause)* I can't walk down his street, but I like knowing he's there.

JULIA: It puts floor-licking in perspective.

CHESS: *(Fondly)* She's good for that.

BRANDY: *(Genuinely grateful)* Thanks, Chess.

NOELLE: Chess? Your name is Chess?

PARKER: Chess like with pawns and knights and queens and rooks?

SKIP: Did your parents name you that or is it a nickname?

CHESS: Why do you need to know?

SKIP: I'm curious.

CHESS: What does it matter?

SKIP: It's... unusual.

CHESS: It's my name. It just is.

PARKER: It's a cool name.

JUSTIN: There's a girl named Lotus who teaches at the yoga studio I go to. It's actually her name – it's on her birth certificate and driver's license – she didn't change it. I think when you have a name like Lotus you're pretty much destined to be a yoga teacher.

CHESS: Don't tell me you're one of those guys who walks around with a yoga mat strapped to your backpack.

JUSTIN: I usually roll up the mat and put most of it in my backpack. Part of it sticks out. But I don't strap it to the backpack. Why?

CHESS: I don't trust them. *(Quick pause, clarifying)* The people who carry around their mats strapped to their backpacks. *(Quick pause)* They're too ready to bust out into downward-facing dog. Or take a nap anywhere they feel like it.

JUSTIN: I only do yoga at the studio. I don't even do it in my apartment.

NOELLE: You don't do that Bikram kind of yoga, do you?

PARKER: What's that?

NOELLE: It's where they do it in a room that's really hot and humid. So they sweat more. You might as well put your face in somebody's armpit for an hour.

CJ: No thanks.

BRANDY: (*To CHESS*) Didn't you date a guy who did yoga?

CHESS: No, he was a weightlifter.

JUSTIN: Big difference.

NOELLE: Maybe it's the building manager who's spreading the virus.

PARKER: Why would you say that? Why would you even think it?

NOELLE: I saw him fixing the shelf beside the mailboxes. He was wearing shorts and it looked like there were things implanted under his skin... like fingers trying to get out from under the skin. Bumps. Shapes like arthritic fingers. So I said, "What's up with your legs?" He told me it was "increased vascularity" from working out a lot. I've seen guys with prominent veins and that's not what the building manager has going on with his legs.

CJ: (*Joking*) Maybe he's the host body for alien babies. Maybe he was abducted by aliens and they implanted a bunch of baby-alien pods under his skin. (*Continuing, with a voice like a sci-fi film narrator*) And when they hatch, they split open the skin of the host human's legs and crawl out and wreak havoc on civilization.

CHESS: Wait a second... Where have I heard that? The "host body for alien babies" bit?

CJ: It's from a show I did last summer at the Fringe Festival. "Alien Invasion. The Musical."

CHESS: My boyfriend was in that.

CJ: No way.

CHESS: Gary Jackson. He dropped out after a couple weeks. He got a national tour.

CJ: I replaced him.

JUSTIN: Small world.

CJ: I didn't think Gary had a girlfriend.

BRANDY: (*Adding her two cents*) Nobody ever does. He likes it that way.

CHESS: (*Explaining*) She doesn't like him very much.

BRANDY: He doesn't treat you right.

CJ: He has a... reputation.

BRANDY: She knows.

CHESS: I know.

BRANDY: And she deserves better.

PARKER: (*To CHESS*) Then why do you put up with it?

CHESS: Because it's not that big a deal.

SKIP: You get ticked off at guys who have yoga mats strapped to their backpacks and you practically bit my head off when I asked about your name, but a guy who doesn't treat you right isn't that big a deal?

CHESS: It's not that he treats me badly. He just doesn't pay much attention to me.

BRANDY: *(As if testifying in court)* He actively ignores her. He will flirt with another woman right in front of Chess – like she wasn't there.

CHESS: Like I'm not important. *(Pause, searching for the right description)* Like I'm... extraneous. I don't want to be extraneous to him, but I am. And not just recently. It's been that way for a while. *(Pause)* For months. *(Pause; she begins to cry)* For almost a year. And maybe that's how it's supposed to be. Maybe people who are treated like they're not important aren't important. Maybe it's as simple as that.

JUSTIN: That's a lot of crap.

CHESS: Excuse me?

JUSTIN: You heard me. You're trying to rationalize why some guy hurts you. That's a lot of crap. You came in here all tough and like you were in charge, but underneath is just a girl who gets hurt and ignored on a regular basis by somebody who's supposed to care about you.

CHESS: It's really not a big deal.

PARKER: Then why were you crying?

JUSTIN: Because she was starting to feel something that she's been trying not to feel. *(Pause)* I know how that is. *(Pause)* When I was a kid, I had some things happen to me. Done to me. And I spent a lot of time... Years... trying to ignore it and pretend like it didn't happen. I ended up doing some pretty bad stuff myself. I talked myself into believing that it wasn't such a big deal. What happened to me wasn't a big deal and what I was doing wasn't a big deal. You can convince yourself of anything if you try hard enough. It's easier if you never let yourself experience the pain. If you put it out of your mind, it didn't happen. And you can't hurt. *(Pause)* After a while, I figured out that I needed to experience the pain. It was important for me to experience the pain. Everyone should. *(Quick pause)* Experience pain. It can be transcendent. It can make you understand what happened and keep you from doing things you shouldn't do. And everyone should experience that. *(Pause)* When I decided to get a tattoo, it

was all about the pain. The design has meaning to me because it's like a map of the journey my life has taken me on. But the design was secondary to the pain. *(Pause)* Placement was critical. Closer to the bone means more pain. A big piece – a big design – on your back can take several hours. Sometimes three or four sessions if there's a lot of color and shading. *(Pause)* I wanted the detail to be intricate. I like color and shading. *(With visceral yearning)* Bring on the color and shading. I need it. I need the color and shading. *(Pause)* The piece on my back is sweet. It's ridiculously cool. And it helps me to feel the hurt of what happened to me and doesn't let me forget the things I did. *(Quick pause)* But I'm not going to show it to you. I won't. It's big and it's on my back. That's all you need to know. Use your imagination. *(Quick pause)* If you really need to know what my tattoo looks like, use your imagination. *(Quick pause)* Because that's the only way you're going to see it. You can't use me to vicariously experience pain. You can't. You shouldn't.

PARKER: *(With an almost-desperate concern)* What if there's no pain?

JUSTIN: Then you're lucky.

PARKER: What if we're not hiding anything? *(Pause)* I don't have any ghosts.

JUSTIN: Then, your life has been a lot easier than mine and you probably sleep better than I do.

CJ: I'm all about exploring the pain – mine and the characters I play. *(Pause)* Before I started taking acting classes, I used to think I'd had a pretty happy childhood. All my memories had a golden glow around them like they took place on a perfectly-lit movie set.

JULIA: It sounds nice.

CJ: Nice, yeah, but not real. When I started to dig deeper into the memories, I found a lot of little details that I'd conveniently pushed out of focus. Like the time my stepdad called me a few really humiliating names in front of his friends at a party we were having at our house. And my mom just stood there and didn't say anything to him. Like it was okay that he talked to me that way. Like she didn't care. And his friends laughed. My mom laughed. The whole thing probably lasted only about two minutes but it felt like it went on forever. I can still remember it like it was yesterday, but that's only because I went looking for the memory. Two years ago, I'd have told you that my stepdad and I always got along and he was a great guy.

NOELLE: Seems like you were better off not remembering it.

CJ: I wasn't better off. I was numb. Disconnected from the stuff that made me who I am. *(Pause)* After the thing with my stepdad, I realized that my mom had made a choice. She was willing to watch me get hurt like that if it meant keeping him happy. That's hard to swallow. But it's real and it's true. So, you accept it, adjust to it and move on. I didn't know that's what I was doing at the time, but I see it now. And it's in those moments – when and how we adjust to what life throws at us – that we figure out who we are. *(Pause)* So, for me, being an actor has been as much about discovering who I am as it is about trying to understand the character I'm playing.

JULIA: But, seriously, how does dredging up all the bad stuff make things better?

JUSTIN: Because you're being honest with yourself. And understanding things instead of ignoring them and pretending they didn't happen.

NOELLE: So you can be ticked off at everybody and feel bad about your life all the time?

CJ: *(With passion)* No, so you can recognize the baggage you're carrying around – the baggage we're all carrying around – and how it affects you. *(Pause; finding an example)* Like, for years after the thing with my stepdad, whenever I was in a room with him, I'd feel sick to my stomach. I never thought about why, I just was. Part of me was remembering what happened and was afraid it was gonna happen again. Don't you see how that can weigh you down? It's like you go through life with all this stuff pulling on you and twisting how you see things.

PARKER: *(Matching CJ's passion)* It's not stuff that's happened to me, it's things that I haven't done that haunt me. I guess I have ghosts of what might have been... what could've been.

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