

# SCRATCHING THE SURFACE

By Dennis Bush

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## CHARACTERS

RITA	female; late 20s; angry; bitter; her expectations haven't been met
DREW	male; early 20s; despite an incredible view, he has eyes for only one person
OLIVIA MARIE	female; 24; has had a series of jobs since she dropped out of college
SHERRY	female; early to mid-20s; single; works at the Aveda store in the mall
AARON	male; 17; unhappy home life; wants to leave his mark
WYATT	male; late teens/early 20s; a messenger
REGGIE	male; 17; victim of theft
KAT	female; 17; lives with mom, stepdad and stepdad's ex-girlfriend's daughter
KATHY	female; late 20s to very early 30s; mother of a troubled young daughter
MASON	male; late 20s to early 30s; divorced; shares custody of young son
KYLE	male; early to mid-20s; a rebel
NOELLE	female; 19; college student

DOUG	male; 20; having trouble at work
CAMDEN	female; mid-to-late 20s; a voluntary militant
CONNIE	female; 20s to 30s; focused on the future
JEN	female; early-to-mid-20s; in a relationship with her high school sweetheart

## PRODUCTION HISTORY

April, 2008, Premiere Production, (New York, NY) The cast included Melissa Teitel, Nancy Lemenager, Jennifer Zimmerman, Ross Boehringer, Sarah Stockton, Krystal Blackman, Kiki Bertocci, Jennifer Fouché, Edward Manley, Kelsey Torstveit, Alex Knerr, Scott McKown, Jared Sikes, Ben Whitmire, Samantha Ortiz, Alex Rivera, Ariana O’Rafter and Macy Cobb.

## SETTING

A public space. Now.

## SCRATCHING THE SURFACE

by  
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***AT RISE: The actors are scattered around the playing space. Their placement should suggest a location where a variety of different types of people gather—a subway platform, a bus station, an airport, a section of a park, or a similar kind of place. As the lights come up, the actors face the audience. Their gaze should be almost defiant. After a few seconds, they return to what they were doing (reading the newspaper, working on a puzzle, etc.). The effect should be as if, for an instant, their attention is focused on a single thing. When the actors speak, it is to the audience, not to each other.***

***After a moment, RITA's expression changes from defiant to determined. SHE speaks clearly, with purpose, and with a bit of an edge.***

RITA: I want you to understand.

DREW: I want you to know.

OLIVIA MARIE: I want you to look under my bed. . .

SHERRY: (*interjecting*) Look in my eyes.

AARON: Look in the trash.

OLIVIA MARIE: There aren't monsters under the bed. Not any more.

SHERRY: (*insistently*) Look in my eyes!

AARON: (*aggressively*) Look in the trash!

WYATT: (*shouted, holding his hand to his Bluetooth earpiece*) One message at a time, please!

AARON: Looking through a person's trash tells you more about who they are than they'd ever tell you themselves. People are very protective of their personal information. But they'll put credit card bills and the package from anti-depressant medication in the trash. They don't even shred the credit card bills. (*a profound truth*) A grocery store receipt can give you insights you can't get outside of an interrogation room.

REGGIE: It started with a scooter. . . and ended with a gunshot. A lot of stuff happened in between, but that's not important (*quick pause*) Not to you. It's important to *him*. And to *me*. And to the scooter, I suppose. But not to you.

OLIVIA MARIE: Do you hear it?

WYATT: I didn't get any messages this morning and, now, I'm getting one right after another.

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AARON: I'm leaving clues behind. Look in the trash. My journal's in there. I write things down and then throw the pages away. I put them in the trash. (*insistently*) Look in the trash.

OLIVIA MARIE: Do you hear it?

WYATT: (*responding to the voice HE hears in bluetooth earpiece*) I heard you!

KAT: My little sister wanders off.

DREW: We were going in opposite directions.

NOELLE: It isn't something you should announce to a room full of people.

WYATT: I'll do it!

RITA: That's what I expected.

KATHY: I heard her crying.

OLIVIA MARIE: They're laughing. (*pause; exasperated*) The people under my bed. They're not monsters. Monsters don't laugh. But the people under my bed aren't exactly people, either. They're just heads. People's heads. And they're laughing. (*pause*) I wish they'd go away. Just disappear. (*pause*) Sometimes, when I'm laying in my bed, trying to go to sleep, I tell them to leave.

MASON: I told her to get out. (*clarifying*) My ex-wife. (*explaining further*) She bought me a Mickey Mouse umbrella. (*pause*) What kind of a guy does she think I am? When I'm walking down the street in the rain, how am I gonna look carrying a Mickey Mouse umbrella? What kind of message does that send? (*quick pause*) I don't even like Disney cartoons. And a woman who gives me a Mickey Mouse umbrella isn't somebody I want in my life. It's not possible for me to be in a relationship with anyone who would give me a Mickey Mouse umbrella.

SHERRY: He didn't budge. He was persistent.

DOUG: She's there every day.

AARON: She doesn't like me. I know that. She made it very clear. When she married my dad, she actually told me not to call her "mom" because she had no intention of developing a close relationship with me. I thought that was really harsh. (*pause*) I'm documenting everything she says. (*quick pause*) I have a written record of everything she's said and done to me, since she moved in. My dad's gonna find out what she's like. *People* are gonna find out. If they'd look in the trash they'd find out. That's where I put the pages from my journal. (*quick pause*) Most of them. (*quick pause*) Every day, I put one page from my journal into my dad's briefcase. They're never in chronological order. Yesterday, he got page 63. The day before that was page 49. I don't even know if he reads them. He's never said anything to me. Maybe he just throws them away in the trash with the rest of the pages. (*pause*) I wish things could go back the

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way they were, but it's too late for that. It's too late for me. *(pause)* Look in the trash. That's where you'll find my journal. *(pause)* That's where you'll find me.

KYLE: I haven't changed my clothes for five days. *(quick pause)* That's almost a whole week. *(pause)* I have plenty of clean clothes at home, but I'm making a choice not to change the ones I have on. I'm making a choice to be rebellious. I'm rebelling against society's expectation that we all wear clean clothes every day. Society expects too much. So, I rebel. *(quick pause)*. Secretly. *(quick pause)* Nobody knows I'm not wearing clean clothes. Not until now. *(quick pause)* Unless they get really close, they don't know. *(pause)* I'm glad I told you, though. It takes my rebelliousness to a new level. *(quick pause)* But if you *didn't* know. . . if I hadn't told you, you'd think I was just a nice, normal guy with good personal hygiene who changes his clothes every day. You'd never know.

NOELLE: *(almost whispered; not a secret, but not an announcement)* Bodies have odor. They have body odor. *(with an increasing edge)* That's why they call it body odor—because it's *odor* on the *body*. I, personally, don't have body odor, but people around me do. It's often very pungent—their body odor. *(increasingly intense)* Sometimes, inhaling their body odor burns my nose. It's like toxic fumes. *(pause; regaining her composure)* I use antibacterial body wash in the shower. It's actually antibacterial hand soap that I've put into the body wash container. Bacteria is what causes body odor. So, if there's no bacteria, there's no odor. I had a sociology professor who would sweat through his shirt during class. *(gradually building in volume, as the revulsion overtakes her)* He'd be lecturing and the pit stains would get bigger and bigger. If he was wearing a white or light-colored button-down shirt, by the end of class, you could see right through it because it was soaked with sweat. His chest was very hairy. Occasionally, he'd smell his own armpit, during class. One time, he took a long sniff and announced, "I'm ripe." *(pause; with rage)* Fruit gets ripe. Vegetables in your garden get ripe. People do not get ripe. People get body odor. And having body odor isn't something you should announce to a room full of people.

CAMDEN: *(shouted)* I didn't kill the cow!

KATHY: I don't understand it.

KAT: My little sister wanders off. I'm supposed to hold her hand, but I don't like to. Her hands are always kind of sticky. When you're five, sticky hands go with the territory, but when you're eleven, you should be able to wash your hands or, at least, not do things to make 'em sticky. *(pause)* She's not my real sister. She's not even my step sister. She's my mom's boyfriend's ex-girlfriend's daughter. But I'm supposed to call her my sister and treat her like we were really

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related. (*quick pause*) That's what my mom's boyfriend says. He says a lot of things. He says a lot of things to Cheyenne. That's his ex-girlfriend's daughter. She lives with us. Did I mention that? She moved in with us because my mom's boyfriend's ex-girlfriend is in jail. For drugs. And armed robbery. I think it was armed robbery to get money to buy drugs but I could be wrong. She could have done the armed robbery *because* she was on drugs. It's a chicken-and-egg thing. (*back on track*) Anyway, she wandered off. (*clarifying*) Cheyenne. (*pause*) And somehow that's gonna be my fault.

SHERRY: Do I look like I'm kidding? Don't answer. I'll tell you. No.

DOUG: (*angry*) She's there every day.

AARON: Look in the trash!

KYLE: You have to do a little digging to find out what's really going on.

How much you find out depends on how much digging you're willing to do. It's like scratching an itch. Curiosity is an itch. (*pause; directly*) Scratch it.

DOUG: Every day at the same corner. The homeless woman is there. As I'm trying to cross the street, she's there. Standing there with this look in her eye. Like she *knows* something. Like she has some kind of *information*. And she holds up her sign. A little tiny sign not much bigger than an index card. And the print is so small it's impossible to read what's on it. I wanna scream at her. (*HE shouts*) "Get a bigger sign! And stop giving me the evil eye like you have some kind of power. (*pause*) You don't have any power. If you had any power, you wouldn't be homeless and you'd have a bigger sign with bigger writing!"

CAMDEN: "Civilized societies don't eat animals." (*quick pause*) I have a shirt with that on it. I'm not wearing it today, because I'm not on duty. I'm not affiliated with any formal organization or group. I'm a voluntary militant. I'm a one-woman army. And my t-shirt is my uniform. It's a uniform and a warning.

DOUG: (*vehemently*) You don't have any power!

CAMDEN: (*continuing*) People sitting in the food court at the mall shoving a cheeseburger into their faces should heed the warning. (*strongly*) They need to be punished. *Anyone* eating meat in public deserves to be dragged down the street behind a car. (*pause*) I know what you're thinking. How can she be such a veggie-vigilante when she's wearing a fabulous pair of leather boots? (*pause; indignant*) I didn't go shopping for a cow. I went shopping for *shoes*. I didn't kill the cow. The cow was already dead. Using its hide for shoes is a way to give a second life to the animal. It's reincarnation. It honors the past life of the cow. I believe that. It's a fact.

KYLE: You'd think I was a nice, normal guy. But I wanna be more than that. I'm itching to be more than that.

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CAMDEN: (*with resolve*) I have to believe that.

WYATT: I can't ignore the message.

MASON: At what point do I stop being a nice guy?

KAT: When does it stop being my fault?

AARON: I'm documenting everything. . . I have a written record.

CAMDEN: I believe that. It's a fact.

CONNIE: Fortune cookies are more reliable than horoscopes. Anybody can read their horoscope in the newspaper, but a fortune cookie is just for you. Through a complex combination of choices and coincidences, a particular fortune cookie ends up in your hands. (*pause*) It's yours. It's not your boyfriend's. He got his own. The fortune in the cookie you picked or in the cookie that ended up on your plate is yours by destiny. Of course, you can increase your odds of getting a good fortune by taking a couple extra cookies. A couple or a few. Or seven. Seven's a lucky number. Taking seven fortune cookies pretty much guarantees you at least one really good fortune. (*quick pause*) At least one fortune you can believe in. (*quick pause*) At least one fortune you can really get behind. Having confidence in your fortune cookie fortune is crucial to having your fortune come true. It's essential. I keep my fortunes. I group them according to when I got them. I put them on a sheet of paper and rank them according to the quality of the fortune. Some groups of fortunes aren't worth keeping. The fortunes that aren't really fortunes, even though they came in fortune cookies, aren't worth keeping. Like, "The sun can shine on a cloudy heart." Yeah, OK, that may be true, but it's not a fortune! I also don't like them when they're too vague. "You will be in the best position." (*pause*) The best position to do what? And when is this best position going to happen? There was enough space left on the fortune to write "soon" or something else that would narrow down the time frame a little. "Soon" is still vague, but it has a sense of hope, like it's actually going to happen. "You will have a bold and dashing adventure soon." I can get behind that. I can believe that I really will have a bold and dashing adventure. Sign me up for a bold and dashing adventure. If I hadn't gotten that fortune, I'd never have expected to have any kind of big adventure—much less a bold and dashing one. I feel bold and dashing, just thinking about having a bold and dashing adventure. Bring it on. Bring on my fortune. Bring on the adventure. Bring on my destiny.

KYLE: Bring on the rebellion. (*with macho pride*) Five days in the same clothes!

NOELLE: Something smells. It smells like somebody passed gas. Bad gas. Or like some kind of animal that dies in your garage but you don't know it 'til it starts to smell and, then, you can't tell exactly

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where the smell is coming from because it seems like it's coming from everywhere! (*shouted; an announcement*) Something smells!

AARON: Look in the trash.

KAT: It's going to be my fault.

KATHY: Sometimes, my daughter just sits in her room and cries. For hours at a time. I don't understand it. I was never like that, when I was her age. I was always so happy. I was a bundle of joy. I could amuse myself. I think that's an important skill to have. If you can't amuse yourself, how can you amuse other people? We have to look for the silver lining in the clouds. We have to have a positive outlook. We just need to walk on the sunny side of the street. That's the only way to go through life. It really is. For every smile we give, we get a dozen back. It's true. It really is. But my daughter doesn't understand that. She doesn't appreciate the value of a positive outlook. She doesn't grasp the importance of smiling. She is the unhappiest child I have ever met. The sadness is fairly recent. It started about two years ago. It just came over her with no warning at all. Before that, she was fine. She wasn't exactly a laugh riot, but she wasn't so morose. She used to play with other children. (*quick pause*) Well, she played *near* them more than actually playing *with* them, but proximity counts for something. (*pause*) Everything was fine. I'd see her almost smiling and I'd think, "My little girl is happy. Just like me." I think a daughter is a reflection of her mother. There is no closer bond than the one between a mother and daughter. So, the other day when I saw her sitting on her bed crying, I asked her what was wrong. She wouldn't tell me. She said, "It's a secret." I looked her right in the eye and I told her, "Little girls shouldn't keep secrets from their mothers." And she said that she wasn't keeping the secret. . . the secret was keeping *her*. (*pause*) What kind of answer is that?! (*pause*) I just about slapped her. I had my hand up ready to do it. She knew I meant business. But, instead of slapping her, I got down close to her and gave her a sympathetic look. No one can give a sympathetic look the way a mother can. Mixed with the sympathy was an unspoken request that she stop playing games and tell me what was wrong. I was the picture of concern. I leaned in so she could whisper her secret to me, if she wanted to. I don't normally encourage whispering, but I made an exception. And I waited for her to say something. I waited at least fifteen seconds. Finally, I said, "Are you going to tell me what's wrong?" (*pause*) And she burped. (*quick pause*) She burped at me. I don't condone burping.

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