

THE NOVEL CON

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FADE IN

INT. HUDSON'S APARTMENT - DAY

Like the dressing room of a Broadway musical, a small Chicago studio is chockablock with feathers, wigs, swords, gladiator armor and piles of books. A blue, sequined cat suit (a Mr. Fantastic costume) hangs over a closet door.

Next to a large set of leathery wings, a laptop sits on a messy table. Its screensaver shows the first verse of David Bowie's "Changes."

ON THE COMPUTER SCREEN:

"Still don't know what I was waitin' for/ And my time was runnin' wild/ A million dead end streets and/ Every time I thought I'd got it made/ It seemed the taste was not so sweet/ So I turned myself to face me/ But I've never caught a glimpse/ How the others must see the faker/ I'm much too fast to take that test."

The walls are covered in posters of David Bowie, Lord of Rings, Elton John and 80s vintage films - *The Breakfast Club* is in pride of place. Halloween decorations are strewn about.

BYRON (V.O.)

You've asked us who we are. I should have an answer considering how much I thought about it while my mother forgot who she was.

A pair of stockinged feet walk out of the bathroom and sit at a table. They belong to HUDSON FANTASTIC, a larger-than-life, twenty-something Asian man, who would conquer the *Game of Thrones* in drag.

BYRON (V.O.)

When you're a kid, it's easy to define yourself by a stereotype or a clique. Who you hang out with. What you do.

Hudson's tattoo-covered arm reaches for the wings and slings them on his back.

BYRON (V.O.)

What does it mean, who am I?

He sets his phone in a tripod and picks up a remote control.

BYRON (V.O.)

Who you are can surprise people.

On his desk is a print out of an advertisement for a publishing contest. It reads:

"Shaw Publishing Annual Literary Contest

\$250,000 Grand Prize!

Publishing Deal!

Finalist's Weekend at the Moxy Hotel, Chicago on Halloween

BEWARE: TRICKS AND TREATS IN STORE FOR ALL"

Hudson picks up the poster, strikes a heroic pose and snaps a picture.

BYRON (V.O.)

You can even surprise yourself.

Hudson posts the picture to his Instagram account. His caption reads:

"Fans and fanettes - The day has come. My dreams of publishing glory hang in the balance. If I win, I stay with you, my Instagram family! If I lose, I'll be forced back to the drudgery of the day job... Duh, duh, duh! Stay tuned."

EXT. CITY STREET - DAY

MICHELLE SHAW (mid-forties) walks swiftly out of a bank's office onto the street, digging her heavily chewed nails into a leather portfolio embossed with "Shaw Publishing".

Suited and corporate, she wears a stressed expression and makes a call on her cell.

MICHELLE

The fucking bank said no. I need you to call Kelly and tie down the \$250k.

She pauses at an intersection with a residential road and looks around her, unsure.

MICHELLE (CONT'D)

There is no other way. The contest needs the show or I'm going to lose the publishing house and you'll lose your job.

Michelle ends the call and continues across the street.

EXT. OUTSIDE KATHLEEN'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Midway down the residential road on the second floor of a triplex is a balcony covered in vines and filled with plants.

Tucked behind the greenery on a comfy beach chair, KATHLEEN O'MALLEY (mid-thirties) writes on her laptop. If Ellie Kemper and Zooey Deschanel had a baby, it would grow up to be our sweet Kathleen.

Music begins to play across the street. Kathleen sets her laptop down and leans forward, peering between the vines to catch a glimpse of DARREN (early forties), the handsome handyman, who is cutting wood on his driveway.

Lost in reverie, Kathleen does not hear the approach of her roommate and colleague, CAROLYN, a mid-thirties, straight-shooting teacher.

CAROLYN

If your plan is to move in with Darren, you need to start by introducing yourself. A simple hello would do.

KATHLEEN

(startled)

Right, like that would be simple. My much more realistic plan is to win the \$250,000 and the publishing deal, so I can quit teaching and live by myself.

CAROLYN

Hey, I believe in you... do you? You all set for the pitch contest tonight?

Kathleen shrugs and gazes at Darren again. Carolyn sits next to her and watches Darren as he dances and saws.

CAROLYN (CONT'D)

I need to tell you something.

They both smile as Darren takes his top off.

KATHLEEN

Hmm?

CAROLYN

We set a date. We're getting married next month. Georgios needs the green card sooner rather than later.

KATHLEEN

That's wonderful! I'm so happy for... oh wait.

CAROLYN

Ya... I'm really sorry, babe. I'll help you look for a new apartment.

KATHLEEN

I can't live with strangers at my age and I can't afford a place on my own. I actually do need to win this contest, don't I?

An ambulance siren wails as it races down the road and turns the corner heading to the local hospital.

The ambulance parks outside the hospital emergency entrance. The paramedics take the gurney out of the back and race into the building.

INT. HOSPITAL - DAY

The paramedics race by MERIT KAHN, a doctor in her early forties, is usually a well-tuned machine, a properly wound clock.

She steps quickly out of their way, and hurriedly grabs her office door handle, slipping inside, hoping not to be noticed. Exhausted, she slumps into her desk chair and rests her head in her hands.

After a few moments, she opens a website with the banner "Shaw Publishing." Merit checks all her details on a submission form, which reads "Pitch deadline: 3:00 p.m." The computer's reads "12:23 p.m."

DR. WISEMAN, an older man, hurries into the room.

DR. WISEMAN

Merit, we need you.

Merit glances at him.

MERIT

Just a sec.

DR. WISEMAN

Haven't you submitted that yet?  
Press the button already!

MERIT

I can't tell Sanjay unless I win. I  
still haven't told him about  
finishing the book.

DR. WISEMAN

Tell him. He may understand.

MERIT

Not while he's looking for work. He  
needs me to be a doctor.

Dr. Wiseman shakes his head.

MERIT (CONT'D)

Will you cover for me if I get into  
the final next weekend?

DR. WISEMAN

(nods)

But you should tell him. Come on,  
let's go.

Merit turns back to the computer and submits her entry. Then  
hurries out after Dr. Wiseman.

In the hallway, Merit sees a volunteer standing against the  
wall with her phone, looking at Hudson's Instagram post.

MERIT

Phone away, we need your help.

The volunteer looks up guiltily, slips her phone in her  
pocket and follows the doctors.

INT. CARRIE'S HOUSE - DAY

CARRIE EDOGO is a Black, 50-something widow who started on  
the wrong side of the tracks but got off at the right  
station. Proud as she is of her daughter going to university,  
she is not excited about becoming an empty-nester.

She sits on her couch in her modest home by the lake,  
lovingly fingering a signed, first edition of *I Know Why The  
Caged Bird Sings*.

A box of Halloween decorations is ready to be displayed. Otherwise, the room is filled with signs of a warm, loving family. A heart-wrenching photo of Carrie and a seriously ill man in a hospital bed holding hands sits on a table.

Carrie starts to wrap the book in brown paper as her eighteen-year-old daughter SARAH enters the room.

Sarah is reading a text on her phone.

On phone:

"I'm at the hospital. Told off for using phone. But you gotta follow @fantasticfuries. Hilarious!"

She has forwarded Hudson's post.

SARAH

I'm off.

Sarah stops in her tracks as she notices what her mother is doing.

SARAH (CONT'D)

Don't. Seriously Mom, I forbid it.  
What would Dad say?

CARRIE

He'd say a thing is a thing...  
let's get that girl into college!

SARAH

Stop selling stuff. You're going to  
win the publishing competition!

Carrie rolls her eyes.

SARAH (CONT'D)

You did enter, didn't you?

CARRIE

Ya, I entered.

Sarah quickly kisses her head and leaves.

When the door closes, Carrie unwraps the book and takes it with her out to her deck.

EXT. CARRIE'S HOUSE - DAY

Carrie walks over to the rail and leans against it, hugging Maya Angelou's book to her chest. Hung from a nearby tree is a bird feeder, surrounded by chirpy, little birds.

Carrie watches them. In the house next door, a dog barks, causing the birds to fly away.

INT. ETHAN'S STUDIO APARTMENT - DAY

The sound of a dog barking brings ETHAN JONES to his kitchen window. He wears an expensive watch, a freshly ironed shirt and saggy tighty whities.

A sixty-ish man whose good looks have only somewhat faded, Ethan adds birdseed to an empty bird feeder while he talks on the phone.

ETHAN

I really am going to win this publishing deal. Surely, an award-winning author can get a date.

He turns around and grimaces at his small living space. On one side is a fancy desk and bookshelf, tidy and professional, better suited to a grand home. On the other, an unmade bed, clothes strewn across the floor.

Boxes are stacked along the walls - he never intended to stay here long, so he never properly unpacked.

ETHAN (CONT'D)

I'll get that house by the lake and start my life over with money your mother can't take from me.

Ethan turns back to the window.

ETHAN (CONT'D)

I know you love her... but someone's got to be on my side. She cheated and I lost everything - ended up in this shit hole on my own...

Ethan hangs the bird feeder back outside his window.

ETHAN (CONT'D)

No, it's fine Son. If you're working tonight, you're working. More pizza for me... Ya, love you too.

Ethan puts his phone down and watches the bird feeder, but no birds come.



## INT. BYRON'S APARTMENT BUILDING - SAME

A luxury apartment building on the lake. The building manager, DEAN JONES, Ethan's son, hands up his phone and looks up.

Dean waves to passing resident BYRON WILLIAMS, a handsome, Black, twenty-something who brings his British style and civility wherever he goes.

## INT. BYRON'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Byron rushes through the door of his penthouse apartment, while checking his watch - "2:54 p.m."

The apartment is sharp, contemporary, white, with floor to ceiling windows overlooking the lake. Expensive, high-tech gadgets are strewn about and the walls are decorated with a few classic film posters.

On a glass coffee table, looking completely out of place, sits a flowery china teapot next to a vase overflowing with wilted lilies and a funeral card with a picture of a lovely, well-dressed, Black, English woman, Byron's adoptive mother.

Byron strides to his computer, firing it up and turning on the large monitor. He logs onto the Shaw Publishing website, where "3:00 p.m. Deadline" is in bold red.

The clock on the computer reads 2:58. Byron loads his information and attaches his document. He watches the time tick down, while he holds a note in his hand and occasionally eyes his printed manuscript on the desk.

At 2:59 and 55 seconds, he hovers the mouse over submit.

At 2:59:59, he clicks the mouse.

Byron swipes his manuscript off the desk and buries his face in his hands.

## INT. MICHELLE'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Michelle stares out of a panoramic window overlooking the Chicago skyline. She bites her nails.

Behind her at a conference table sits VINNIE VALENTINE, Michelle's late 20s assistant, an intelligent, hard working bookworm who has outgrown her role.

Vinnie taps on a keyboard, a monitor shows a Zoom call initiating. Hosting details are entered.

The same powerpoint slide that Hudson had printed out flashes up momentarily on the screen.

POWERPOINT SLIDE:

"Shaw Publishing Annual Literary Contest

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The slide switches quickly to one that reads:

"Welcome to Pitch Night!"

Vinnie finishes setting up the Zoom call.

Next to Vinnie is JAMES BROCKMAN, a thirty-ish literary agent from Richmond, VA, who fancies himself an aristocratic lord in a rumpled linen suit.

Tiles of participants begin to appear in small squares. Aged from late teens to late seventies, their appearances range from the conventional to the bizarre.

JAMES

Dear god, they've come in costume!

Michelle looks at the screen which shows a number of tiles with people dressed as characters from *Game of Thrones*.

MICHELLE

Game of Thrones again... Read a new book, people!

Michelle sits at the table.

MICHELLE (CONT'D)

Remember, Kelly said the best reality stars are sociopaths... keep an eye out.

Vinnie puts her finger to her nose and points to the clock on the wall, which says 7:30. The screen is full of tiles. Vinnie opens the call.

VINNIE

Welcome to our annual literary contest! I'm Vinnie, Michelle's assistant.

(MORE)

VINNIE (CONT'D)

The esteemed agent James Brockman  
is here on our judges panel...

James gives a wave.

VINNIE (CONT'D)

And here's Michelle...

MICHELLE

Hi everyone... What a way to make  
the most of these crazy times! This  
year's grand prize is grander than  
ever with our first ever cash  
award...

Michelle waits while muted tiles cheer.

MICHELLE (CONT'D)

We're looking for the highest  
quality writing, original plot  
lines and commitment to building a  
career, even if it requires out-of-  
the-box thinking. So give us your  
best pitch and let's get going.

INT. MERIT'S HOME OFFICE - NIGHT

Medical paraphernalia - scrubs and a stethoscope - are laid  
neatly over a chair. A cat ear's headband sits on the desk  
next to a glue bottle.

A post-it note on the screen says "Pitch time: 7:40". Merit  
is practicing her pitch with the Zoom call on low volume.

Her husband SANJAY, a handsome man in his late 40s, opens the  
door without knocking. In a panic, Merit changes to a Youtube  
tab. A video plays of Joyce Carol Oates advertising her  
Masterclass on writing.

JOYCE CAROL OATES (V.O.)

The great enemy of writing isn't  
your own lack of talent... it's  
being interrupted... by other  
people.

Merit punches mute on the keyboard.

MERIT

Thought you'd gone to your mom's.