

VINCE DINKLE P.I.

by

Steve Saylor and Richard Hathaway

Steve Saylor  
409 Caballo  
Carbondale, Colorado 81623

(970) 963-1846

FADE IN:

EXT. SAN FRANCISCO - DAY

Postcard-perfect views of The City. SKYSCRAPERS and CABLE CARS. SAILBOATS on the bay.

CLOSE IN on a Jaguar convertible as it speeds across the Golden Gate Bridge, leaving the city.

VANCE DARBY, 40's, adjusts his Vuarnet's, power-shifts the Jag in-and-out of traffic. His longish, black hair whips about in the breeze.

The VOICE-OVER has that classic private-eye cadence -- Mike Hammer after a pack of camels and an all-nighter.

VANCE (V.O.)

San Francisco. Many a heart had been left here. Some had been punctured with a knife, others ripped right out of the body. Murder has its motive, and most of the time it's not that hard to figure out. Other times, you gotta dig up some dirt to get to the bottom of it. And that's where I come in.

INT./ EXT. CAR - DAY

Shadows race across the Jag as it breezes along a winding road. Brief glimpses of opulent ESTATES through the lush vegetation.

VANCE (V.O.)

I was tending to one last piece of business which would finally tie up this case. And it involved a woman. But didn't it always? These days, seemed like every case started out with a beautiful woman, and ended with a corpse.

EXT. HOUSE - DAY

A long, winding driveway. Vance pulls forward until the sprawling ranch house comes into view.

VANCE (V.O.)

Her name was Desiree. Desiree Diamond. A looker? Oh, yeah. She could get a second look from a blind man.

Vance uncoils his athletic frame from the driver's seat. A striking figure. Rugged and handsome. Broad shoulders, chiseled features, trendy stubble.

EXT. POOL - DAY

He walks across the courtyard, Gucci loafers treading Italian tile, to where DESIREE DIAMOND, 30's, lounges underneath an umbrella by the pool, reading a book.

Desiree's a Knockout all right. String bikini. Lolita-style sunglasses. Red hair tucked inside a baseball cap.

She looks up, speaks his name with a melodramatic flair.

DESIREE

Darby. Vance Darby. May I interest you in something to drink? A martini, a cup of blood? Or would you prefer something with a nipple?

VANCE

No, thanks. I'm fine.

She lowers her sunglasses, gives him a quizzical look.

DESIREE

What? No snappy comeback?

VANCE

Not today.

Desiree closes her book, reaches for her drink.

DESIREE

Okay then, Vance. What brings you all the way up here? Come to pump me for some information?

(no answer)

Why so glum, cowboy?

VANCE

Desiree... Aw, hell, there's only one way to say it. Your husband's dead.

With nary a shift in expression, Desiree leans back, stares out across the pool.

DESIREE

Well. I guess that's why he didn't come home last night.

(downs her drink)

So...? Who killed him?

VANCE

Uh, I did. Sort of. But I had no choice. It was either him or me.

She edges forward on the lounge, removes her sunglasses.

DESIREE

Oh, really? Why don't you tell me about it.

VANCE

Believe me, you don't wanna know. The police can...

DESIREE

Don't gimme that. My husband's dead. I want to know how it happened.

He nods, takes a deep breath.

VANCE

Okay. He calls me last night, tells me to get down to the factory in San Mateo, pronto, we gotta talk. When I get there, he's waiting for me with a gun.

DESIREE

But why would he want to hurt you? He's the one who hired you in the first place.

VANCE

To investigate his partners. They knew all about his side-ventures. And now I knew. He calls me a traitor, accuses me of double-crossing him, takes a shot at me.

DESIREE

Oh my God!

VANCE

I dive sideways just in time. He starts chasing me down the walkway, the one above all that big machinery. There's no place to hide. So I shoot him in the leg... just to stop him. The force of the bullet spins him around, he falls, begins sliding off the side, toward the machines...

She rises from the lounge, edges toward him.

DESIREE

Oh God, which machine? The Thrasher or the Splitter?!

VANCE

The Splitter. He manages to reach out and catch himself. He's dangling there by one hand just above the blades...

Her cries sound almost orgasmic.

DESIREE

Oh, Jesus, Vance... Those blades are so fucking huge!

Vance rushes toward the climax, wants to finish before she does.

VANCE

I grab hold of his hand just as he falls. I'm down on the walkway, flat on my stomach, can't pull him up in that position. His hand's sweaty, he slips through my grip...

Desiree CRIES out! A few more "oh God's", then her head pitches forward, comes to rest in her hands.

VANCE (V.O.)

I wanted to give her a few moments to sort it all out. What she needed now was a good crying. Then I'd be on my way.

VANCE

I'm sorry, Desiree. If there's anything I can do...

DESIREE

Please, Vance. Just hold me for a moment.

VANCE (V.O.)

I didn't have any choice. She already had me in her arms, pressing her half-naked body against mine, looking up at me with those hypnotic, green eyes that had come so close to forming a tear.

DESIREE

You mustn't blame yourself. You didn't kill Reggie. He did it to himself.

VANCE

Wait, I'm supposed to be consoling you.

DESIREE

Both of us have a lot to deal with right now.

(kisses him, hard)

Make love to me, Vance. Make me forget.

VANCE

Desiree, I don't think we...

DESIREE

You listen to me, Vance Darby. I want you to make love to me. Right now! You owe me that much, dammit!

Desiree maneuvers him backward onto the padded lounge. Like a squid on a beach ball, she's all over him, RIPPING open his shirt, KISSING his neck, his chest.

VANCE (V.O.)

Comforting a grieving widow was always tricky. Every woman had her own way of dealing with tragedy. But I was determined to consume her sorrow, to cleanse her in a pool of passion, and, through a variety of positions, wipe away the awful truth. It was the least I could do.

A RUMBLE. The ground begins to shake.

VANCE (V.O.)

It was an earthquake. Big one. But it would take more than that to stop her now.

Hear DISHES BREAKING, car ALARMS going off, dogs BARKING in the distance. Desiree stands her ground astride her stallion, rides him with one arm waving free.

Her GLASS falls from the table, SPLINTERS at her feet.

VANCE

Desiree, are you okay?

DESIREE

Hush up. I'm fine.

VANCE (V.O.)

I was losing circulation in my arm, but I wasn't about to interrupt her again. Obviously, she was grieving.

INT./ EXT. JAGUAR - DUSK

The Jaguar purrs along the winding road, headed back to the city.

VANCE (V.O.)

The sex with Desiree had been a hang-on-for-dear-life experience. Explosive, electrifying, and only mildly degrading. I knew she'd finally come to terms with the death of her husband when, as we walked to my car, she remarked, "Oh well, at least he was insured".

The VOICE OVER continues, but with a slightly different voice.

It's VINCE DINKLE (the writer of this detective novel) doing the narration now.

VINCE (V.O.)

Vance Darby switched on his headlights as he approached the Golden Gate. He loved this view of the city as it glittered across the bay. A city in darkening shadows, slowly giving way to night. Then another heart would surely be left in San Francisco. Broken, beaten. Lifeless. And, once again, Vance Darby would be back in business.

CUT TO:

INT. VINCE'S APT. - DAY

A small, modest apartment. We meet VINCE DINKLE for the first time (the SAME ACTOR we've just gotten to know as Vance Darby) as he sits in front of his laptop, types the final sentence.

Unlike Vance, this guy's a little rough around the edges. Most noticeably, those long, wavy locks are gone. Hairline in the receding mode. And he looks a little older, a little heavier. Just your Average Joe.

Vince leans back on the couch, sips from his can of Stroh's, big grin, rather pleased with himself.

He reaches for his CELL PHONE, dials.

VINCE

Not bad, Dinkle. Not bad at all.

He snaps out of it when his teacher answers the call.

VINCE (ON PHONE)

Oh, hello there. Mrs. Rulinski?

It's me, Vince.

(pause)

Vince Dinkle? From your class?

Right. Hope I'm not bothering you.

I just had to tell you, I finished my first chapter today.

(pause)

Yeah, and I did what you told me.

You know, just write, don't be too

critical. And it just flowed. I

got it right here. I could read

you the last paragraph. I think

it's pretty good...

(pause)

Oh, I understand. Not a problem.

I'll bring it to class, and we can...

(pause)

Okay. Well... sorry if I bothered

you. Bye now.

He sits back, only slightly deflated, takes another swig.

VINCE

Hey, I had to tell somebody.

He stops suddenly, lifts his nose in the air.

INT. KITCHEN

Vince DASHES into the kitchen. SMOKE oozes from the oven.

He pulls out a tray of BURNT CHICKEN, fumbles with the hot-pads, burns himself, CURSES.

He opens a window for ventilation, reacts to the cold rush of air, sticks his head halfway outside.

VINCE

Oh great! It's snowing. I can't believe I'm spending another winter in Chicago. What is wrong with me?!

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Vince sits on the couch, hunkers over the coffee table, stabs at the charred hunk of meat.

VINCE

When I cook some chicken, I cook some chicken!

He reaches for the TV remote, channel-surfs, stops on an infomercial for Hair Replacement Therapy.

ON TV: A beautiful young WOMAN speaks into the camera.

WOMAN (ON TV)

How many times have you said you'd do just about anything to get your hair back. Well, now you can...

Vince runs his hand gently over his balding dome, checks his fingers for fallout. Damn! There goes a couple more.

The phone RINGS. He flicks the strands onto the floor, then picks up his cell phone.

VINCE

Hello?

INT. OFFICE - DAY

In his cramped and cluttered law office, ALLAN FITZ, 40's, leans back in his chair. Scrawny, gaunt, thin mustache. Fitz looks like a barker at an all-nude review.

FITZ

Vince, it's Allan Fitz. How are ya?

INTERCUT WITH VINCE:

VINCE

I'm good. Couldn't be better. Matter of fact, I've been working on a novel and I just finished the...

FITZ

Yeah, that's great. Now listen up. You told me to call if I had something. Well, I just might. Insurance company, tryin' to weasel out of a payoff.

VINCE

Imagine that. How much we talkin'?

FITZ

A measly hundred grand. Anyway, guy by the name of Fred McNulty. Worked for a chemical company down in Calumet City. Night watchman. Died in a fire on the job.

VINCE

Fire at a chemical company. Sounds nasty.

FITZ

Dude got fried. Burnt to a crisp.

Vince looks at the blackened meat on his fork, puts it down.

FITZ (CONT'D)

At first they say it's an accident. The next day, upon "further investigation", they got another theory. They say he was stealin' chemicals, got careless, started the fire himself. So now they're off the hook.

VINCE

Yeah, sounds a little fishy...

FITZ

So I want you to take a look around the warehouse at Allied Chemical tomorrow, sniff out the fire scene. That's your specialty, right?

VINCE

Sure, Fitz. But if you want me to investigate this, it's gonna take a few days to...

FITZ

A couple days. No more. I'm just doin' this chick a favor.

VINCE

You don't do favors. And which "chick" is this?

FITZ

Frances McNulty, the guy's daughter.

VINCE

All right. A couple days. Two hundred a day plus expenses...

FITZ

A hundred a day. And I don't want to hear about any expenses.

VINCE

Come on, Fitz! I can't work for...

FITZ

Hey, Dinkle! You walk into my office a couple weeks ago, tell me you're no longer a cop, you're a private dick, ask me to throw somethin' your way. So, how's business?

(pause)

That's what I thought. You oughta be thankin' me. Now give this Frances McNulty a call...

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Wearing his leather aviator-jacket and Cubs cap, Vince walks out his apartment door.

In the hallway, he bumps into his next-door neighbors, ROMEO and ANGELA MARINETTI, 30's. They're both short, squat, and hairy, their arms loaded down with BEER, CHIPS, DIP.

VINCE

Angela, Romeo. Still on that health food kick, I see.

ANGELA

Poker party at Ed's. Wanna come?

ROMEO

Jesus... don't invite him. We don't want him up there, and he don't wanna be there.

ANGELA

Karla's gonna drop by. She's unattached now. And... she just got her stitches taken out.

Vince cringes at the thought.

VINCE

Yeah, that's tempting. Maybe another time.

ROMEO

What is it with you, Dinkle? We never see any women over at your place. You a homo or somethin'? I know what you need.

(grabs his wife's ass)

You need some of this...

VINCE

Wow. I don't know if I'm man enough for that.

Vince hurries out the door. Angela calls after him...

ANGELA

Hey, whadaya mean by that?!

EXT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

Vince trudges through the snow to his car -- a vintage, puke-green Corvair. He pulls away from the curb, scraping the inside of the windshield with a credit card.

INT. APT. BUILDING - NIGHT

He enters an apartment building, walks down the hallway, knocks on a door.

It opens. His eyes light up at the sight of FRANCES McNULTY, late-20's, a tall, thin, attractive brunette wearing pleated slacks and a white blouse.

She extends her hand, introduces herself, invites him inside.

INT. APT. - NIGHT

Comfy studio apartment. Quilts, stuffed pillows, antique rocker. Contemporary-art POSTERS on the walls.

FRANCES

Let me take your coat, Vince.

(points to his rear)

You've got something... there...

Vince looks over his shoulder, can't quite see it.

Frances slowly reaches forward, and cautiously peels a wrinkled stub of paper from the seat of his pants.

FRANCES (CONT'D)

I think it's a Lotto ticket.

Vince rolls his eyes, then acts nonchalant.

VINCE

Oh. Must've been on my car seat.

FRANCES

Here you go. Might be a winner.

He nods, shoves it inside his pocket.

FRANCES (CONT'D)

You must be freezing. Let me  
get you a cup of tea.

She moves around the counter to the kitchenette.

Vince notices a PARROT in its cage. He leans in close, moves his head up and down, mimicking the bird.

VINCE

Hey, this is quite a lovely bird  
you have here, Frances.

He sticks his finger between the wires. The parrot RUFFLES its feathers and SNAPS! Just misses!

Vince looks over at Frances. She didn't see it.

FRANCES

His name's Waldo. He was my dad's.  
Don't stick your finger in the cage.  
He can be nasty.

(a beat)

I've got a casserole in the oven.  
Cauliflower, tofu, jicama. Join me?

VINCE

No, thanks. I cooked some chicken  
earlier.

(whispers to the bird)

Cooked the shit out of it. So  
watch it.

Vince sits on the couch, watches Frances reach into an overhead cabinet, her thin blouse revealing a shapely figure. Catching himself, he snaps out of it.

VINCE (CONT'D)

I'm uh... I'm sorry about your  
father.

She walks back around the counter, sets the teacup on the table in front of him.

FRANCES

Thanks. You know, I almost feel guilty that I'm not more broken up about it. We weren't really that close, although that had begun to change since he moved back. Still, when my mother died, it was much more devastating for me.

VINCE

Yeah, I know what you mean. My father died a few years ago, and I kinda felt the same way, like I wasn't sad enough. I thought maybe there was something wrong with me.

SQUAWK! The parrot rudely interrupts Vince's sensitive moment. They both look over, see a load of droppings hit the newspaper.

VINCE (CONT'D)

(sips the tea, winces)

Wow, what is this?

FRANCES

It's an herbal tea. Mongolian Yak Root. Comes from Asia. Very good for you. Stimulates circulation, fortifies the immune system, and cleanses the colon.

Vince nods, uneasy, squirms a little in his seat.

VINCE

Great. Let's talk about your father.

INT. APT. - NIGHT

Vince listens attentively, admires the lovely, young woman as she continues her story.

FRANCES

... and they divorced when I was six. I'd only see him occasionally after that. Birthdays, holidays. He worked as a Merchant Marine in L.A. until he injured his shoulder and moved back to Chicago last year.

Frances reaches for a PACKET of PHOTOS on the table, opens it.

FRANCES (CONT'D)

These were taken last summer.

Vince studies the close-up of FRED McNULTY, 50's, tall and muscular, crew-cut, a face deeply tanned and weathered.

Another PHOTO catches his eye: FRANCES and her FATHER at the beach, standing arm in arm at the water's edge at sunset. Frances wears a BIKINI, looks pretty good.

FRANCES (CONT'D)

Put that one away. I look terrible in that picture.

VINCE

No, you look great. Beautiful. I mean...

An awkward moment. In the birdcage, another load of droppings hit the newspaper. Vince quickly changes the subject.

VINCE (CONT'D)

Do you know if your father had ever been in trouble with the law...

FRANCES

I don't think so, not that I know of.

VINCE

But you do know what they're saying, that he was stealing chemicals from that warehouse, and he was the cause of the fire.

FRANCES

And I refuse to believe that. What if Allied Chemical was at fault, if it was negligence on their part...

VINCE

It's possible. They could face some big lawsuits, not to mention the EPA stepping in with fines, restrictions. And the insurance company... I'm sure they're delighted with this scenario. By the way, did you know anything about the insurance?

FRANCES

No. And he never said anything. I assumed it just came with the job.

VINCE

You're aware that... if he was involved with any criminal activity surrounding his death, there won't be any settlement.

FRANCES

I'm really not that concerned with the money, Vince. If there's some kind of cover-up going on here, I want to know about it. And I'll do whatever it takes to clear his name.

The teapot whistles. Frances gets up, turns off the stove.

FRANCES (CONT'D)

Another cup of tea for you?

VINCE

Thanks, but I best be on my way.

She walks toward the closet to get his coat.

FRANCES

So, how long have you been a private detective, Vince?

VINCE

I left the police department a few months ago, then I got right into this. Basically, it's the same thing I've always done.

FRANCES

And how's it working out for you?

VINCE

Great, couldn't be better. Really.

A little GRUNT from the parrot. Vince gives it a dirty look.

FRANCES

Why did you quit being a policeman?

VINCE

Lots of reasons. Always wanted to give this a try. Have my own business, set my own hours. And I'm taking a writing class, working on a novel.

FRANCES

Really? Good for you. Takes a lot of courage to follow your dream. Right now I'm working as a shipping clerk for a plastics manufacturer. But someday I plan on being a curator at a museum. I majored in Art History at Northwestern.

VINCE

I'm afraid I don't know the first thing about art.

FRANCES

Do you know what you like when you see it?

VINCE

Yeah. I guess so.

FRANCES

Well, that's all you really need to know.

VINCE

Great. You just saved me four years of college.

They laugh. Vince puts on his coat, she walks him to the door.

FRANCES

So, where do you go from here?

VINCE

I'll check out the fire scene in the morning, poke around a little, and I'll let Fitz know what I find. He can get back to you.

FRANCES

I'd like it better if you could keep me up to date.

VINCE

(a smile)  
Yeah, okay. I can do that.

INT. VINCE'S HALLWAY - NIGHT

Vince unlocks his door, pauses in the hallway to soak up the ambience: Raucous MUSIC and LOUD VOICES from a few doors down.

In the other direction, VOICES of a man and woman in a heated ARGUMENT. Vince shakes his head, sighs, and walks inside.

INT. VINCE'S APT. - NIGHT

Vince is back on the couch, beer in hand, the TV on.

Next to him on the couch sits an AIR-GUN. He picks it up, takes aim, FIRES!

A MOUSE scampers along the floorboards, disappears into a hole. He tosses the gun back on the couch.

VINCE

Jesus... What a dump.

ON TV: One of those programs featuring "Amazing, Extreme Homes".

NARRATOR (ON TV)

...this extraordinary residence  
nestled in the hills, with stunning  
ocean-views from the master bedroom.

VINCE

Oh yeah. That's where I want to  
wake up.

He notices his LAPTOP on the table, contemplates, reaches over, switches it on.

We CLOSE IN on the TV. Closer still. Almost inside it...

DISSOLVE TO:

VANCE DARBY

EXT. SAN FRANCISCO - SUNRISE

The narration continues, but now it's a different home: a sleek, circular structure -- looks like a flying saucer -- perched on the highest hill overlooking San Francisco.

NARRATOR (ON TV)

...this architectural masterpiece,  
designed and built by its owner,  
spectacular views from every angle...

INT. HOUSE - SUNRISE

On the top floor of Vance's "spaceship" -- his own Personal Fitness Center. Exercise machines of every size and shape.

Vance Darby feels the burn, and then some, as he battles the "Flexinator 4000". Sweat dripping, muscles rippling, iron weights slapping out a tempo.

VANCE (V.O.)

I always ended my morning workout with a five-minute routine on the uneven bars. It helped to sharpen the senses, focus my concentration.

He prepares to mount the apparatus. A running start, a CARTWHEEL, a backwards FLIP, then PUFFS of resin as his hands SLAP securely onto the top bar.

Vance loops and twirls, becomes a blur of motion.

VANCE (V.O.)

My concentration wavered as I became aware of the scratches on my back -- bittersweet reminders of the lovely Desiree Diamond. But it was time to let go, to put her out of my mind. Easier said than done. Just the thought of her overwhelming anguish, her unbridled sorrow, sent my soul spiraling. Man, she could grieve.

With a final spurt of energy, Vance FLINGS himself into the air, executes an inverted-backward-triple.

He sticks the landing like a human lawn dart, arms extended upward, his muscular body shimmering in the light of dawn.

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

Vance GUNS the high-performance engine of his cold-fusion prototype Hydrocycle, SWERVES in and out of traffic, dressed in his black leather, aerodynamic, cycle-suit.

He says the word "Office" into a microphone inside the soundproof helmet. A voice-activated phone dials the number.

TERI'S VOICE

Good morning. Vance Darby's office.  
May I help you?

VANCE

This is Cardinal Sin calling from the Vatican. The Pope received your picture, and he's very anxious to meet you.

TERI'S VOICE

Well, if it isn't the thing that signs my checks. Try another gear, you're tacking too high. How fast you going?

He checks the digital readout on his helmet visor.

VANCE

Ninety-three.

TERI'S VOICE

I want you to pull over right now  
and give yourself a ticket. I've  
warned you about this before.

(with an accent)

Repeat offenders will be bent over  
my desk and paddled, you svinehoont!

VANCE

Promise? I'll be right there.

EXT. SKYSCRAPER - DAY

Vance hits the brakes outside the Trans-Am building, a.k.a. "The Pyramid", and skids to a halt in his private parking space.

INT. LOBBY - DAY

Helmet under arm, leather jacket unzipped, Vance looks conspicuously out of place amidst the buttoned-down brigades of nine-to-fivers.

As he steps inside the express-elevator, a couple SECRETARIES can be heard to remark, "Nice ass".

INT. OFFICE

Top of the pyramid. Vance enters the spacious reception area. Up-tempo jazz purrs from the Dolby. Fine Corinthian-leather furniture, tasteful art, exotic plants.

TERI NASH, 20's, strolls out of Vance's office, a watering can in one hand, a moisture meter in the other.

TERI

That fiches is on the fritz, and  
I'm afraid your fern is frazzled.

Teri is the quintessential California Girl. Long blonde hair, tall and statuesque, a face from the cover of Outside magazine.

VANCE

We could always go with the  
artificial stuff.

TERI

I don't think so, Vance. Your  
poor brain needs all the oxygen  
it can get up here.

She opens the curtains on a giant picture-window. They're literally above the clouds.

TERI (CONT'D)

So, how did the widow Diamond take it when she found out you killed her husband?

VANCE

She took it well. Surprisingly well, as a matter of fact.

TERI

Yeah, I'll bet.

INT. OFFICE

She follows Vance into his wood-panelled, Persian-carpeted sanctuary.

VANCE

What do we know about this Delaney woman?

TERI

Nothing. She just called, made an appointment, said it was personal. If I remember correctly, she sounded about thirty, rich, and beautiful.

VANCE

You can tell all that over the phone?

TERI

Earth calling Vance. When was the last time you had a porker for a client?

VANCE

Hmmm. I think there was one a few years back. But you're right. One of those ironies of life, I suppose, that the beautiful people suffer more.

WHIRRR! At the wet-bar now, Teri fires up the blender, dumps bananas, strawberries, and protein powder into the mix.

TERI

Okay. Senator Krupt left a message, sends his apologies, no-can-do dinner tomorrow. And that weirdo from NASA called again, said your Gravity Injector's causing quite a stir, could be a major breakthrough in the future of space flight, blah blah blah.

She pours the smoothie into a frosty glass, hands it to him.

TERI (CONT'D)  
Anything else I can do for you?

Vance gives her a helpless look.

VANCE  
Dress me?

INT. OFFICE - DAY

Vance wears an Armani suit, sits alone at his computer.

TERI (ON INTERCOM)  
Ms. Delaney to see you.

He flicks off the computer, walks to the door as it opens, offers his hand.

VANCE  
Vance Darby. It's nice to meet  
you, Ms. Delaney.

FAITH  
Please, call me Faith.

Teri was right. FAITH DELANEY is about thirty, beautiful, and she looks rich. Dark hair, medium length, conservative dress.

(Note: The actress playing Faith Delaney bears a close resemblance to Frances McNulty)

Vance escorts her to a chair, takes a seat at his desk.

He smiles, gives her a moment to make the first move. She looks away, glances around the room.

FAITH  
I like your office, Vance. That's  
an interesting painting.

VANCE  
It's a DeBonet. An original.  
From his Suppressionism Period.  
(she looks puzzled)  
Francois DeBonet, the 18th Century  
Belgian albino, rumored to be one  
of Napoleon's gay lovers.

FAITH  
Yes, well. It's very intriguing.

VANCE

Indeed. I find that those particular parts of the anatomy, when presented in nature as they are here, create a remarkably lucid and uplifting sense of subdued force. A prime example, you might say, of the basic nature of Suppressionism.

Faith can only nod. More silence. Finally...

FAITH

Well, Vance. I um... don't know exactly...

VANCE

... where to begin? That's okay. Just throw any pebble in the pool, and we'll follow the ripples.

FAITH

All right. It's about my sister. Chance Delaney. She was murdered.

VANCE

I'm so sorry, Faith. When did this happen?

FAITH

A month ago. They found her body out in the desert. Death Valley.

VANCE

How did she die?

Faith leans back in her chair, labors on a pregnant pause, then delivers.

FAITH

She drowned.

VANCE

What...? You mean, at one of the lakes?

FAITH

She didn't drown in water. When they found my sister, her lungs were still wet... permeated... with champagne.

VANCE

Drowned in champagne in the desert. That's unusual, to say the least. Did the police have any suspects?

FAITH

A few. Chance was a very beautiful woman. She had her share of suitors.

VANCE

Was she seeing anyone special at the time?

FAITH

I don't think "special" is the word. Marco Fetticino. I'm sure you've heard of him.

VANCE

Sure, he owns a few casinos. Vegas, Atlantic City.

FAITH

The police couldn't find anything to tie him to the murder. There was no weapon, no witnesses, no crime scene.

VANCE

Tell me, Faith. What do you think happened?

FAITH

I don't know. Some man she was involved with killed her? Maybe over another man, or money? Maybe she knew something...

VANCE

Have you seen the police report?

FAITH

I have it right here in my purse.

VANCE

Leave that with me. I'll look it over, make a few calls, see if there's any way I can help you.

INT. FRONT OFFICE

They walk through the reception area, past Teri.

FAITH

Chance was the only family I had left, and I won't have any peace until whoever did this is brought to justice. That's why I came to you, Vance. I don't know if anyone else is capable of solving this crime. You're my only hope.

Behind their backs, Teri sticks a finger in her mouth, pretends to gag.

VANCE

I don't know if you're aware of my fee. It's two thousand a day...

FAITH

Plus expenses. Not a problem.

They say good-bye. Vance studies her rhythmic sway as she walks toward the elevator.

TERI

Already on the case, are we, Vance?

VANCE

Just familiarizing myself with the terrain.

TERI

You mean the "lay of the land", don't you?

VANCE

Touche.

(hands her the report)

Here. Work your magic on this, then tell me how a beautiful young woman ends up dead, in the middle of the desert, drowned in champagne.

TERI

That's where you come in, Darby. I can't do everything around here.

Vance smiles as he watches Teri walk back to her desk.

Then he peeks around the corner, down the hallway, for one last glimpse of Faith Delaney before she gets on the elevator, and...

Wait a minute, she's walking back this way!

Vance blinks, takes a second look. That's not her. Not by a longshot. It's some short, fat, hairy guy wearing a robe...

CUT TO:

VINCE DINKLE

INT. VINCE'S APT. BLDG. - DAY

Vince stands by the mailboxes in the hallway, rolls his eyes when he sees his neighbor, Romeo Marinetti, walking toward him.

Romeo's a repulsive sight with his squatty, hairy body barely contained by the stained, purple-satin, boxing robe.

ROMEO

I see you lookin' at me, Dinkle.  
But don't go gettin' any funny  
ideas. I'm a ladies-man.

VINCE

Oh, I think that's perfectly  
obvious. Look at you. You're  
breathtaking. Or maybe that's  
a gag-reflex... hard to tell.

Vince reaches for his mail, perks up when he sees the BROCHURE:  
Promo-material from The Hair Replacement Laboratories.

Romeo has seen it, too.

ROMEO

Jesus, Dinkleberry. You're going  
bald. Why don't you just accept it?

VINCE

Why should we accept what we have  
the power to change?

ROMEO

(looks at Vince's hair)  
You don't have that much power.  
It's a lost cause.

VINCE

You see there, Romeo, that's the  
difference between us. You're a  
pessimist. Where you might see  
my head as half-empty, I see it  
as half-full.

Romeo steps around him, checks his own mailbox.

ROMEO

Nobody in my family has ever gone  
bald.

VINCE

Always the big wig at the Hair  
Ball, were you? You Neanderthals  
have all the luck. Tell me, when  
exactly did you start walking erect?

ROMEO

The day they put the beer on the  
top shelf, asshole.

VINCE

Ever thought of sellin' your hair?  
Cause you're sittin' on a gold mine.

ROMEO

Yeah, if hair was gold, this'd be  
the Mother Lode.

The little wooly-bully faces Vince, PULLS OPEN his robe!

Oh God... He's naked under there! A forest of fur! Vince backs away from the horrific sight.

VINCE

Jesus, don't ever do that again.

Romeo closes his robe, walks away laughing. Vince mutters...

VINCE (CONT'D)

I gotta get outta this place.

EXT. CHEMICAL PLANT - DAY

A cold, blue sky. The Corvair drives into the industrial compound, stops next to a blackened warehouse.

Vince gets out, puts on his rubber boots, grabs his black box, and walks toward the building.

An unmarked police car comes around the corner, drives right up to him. A young, plain-clothed detective, LARRY SHANKMAN, late 20's, climbs out, introduces himself.

VINCE

Nice to meet you, too, Larry.  
And why exactly are you here?

SHANKMAN

Some of the guys at the station  
heard you'd be taking a look around,  
asked me to drop by, see if I could  
assist you.

VINCE

Or... keep an eye on me?

Shankman doesn't reply. He follows Vince inside.

INT. WAREHOUSE

Shafts of sunlight seep into the ruptured building. Vince steps through the ashes. Stops. Closes his eyes. Breathes deep.

SHANKMAN

What do you think?

VINCE

The eye may lie, but the smell  
will tell.

SHANKMAN

How profound. Is that Confucius  
or Smokey the Bear?

VINCE

McGurk. Oscar McGurk. Ring a  
bell?

SHANKMAN

Sure. They teach a few of his  
techniques at the Academy. Did  
you know him?

VINCE

Yeah. Used to work with him.  
Saved his life once.

SHANKMAN

Really? What happened?

VINCE

He caught on fire. I put him out.

SHANKMAN

You're shittin' me.

VINCE

Yeah, I am. But I did work with  
him for five years.

Vince nudges the ashes with his foot.

SHANKMAN

Whatever happened to McGurk anyway?

VINCE

(dead-serious)  
The same thing that happens to  
every good cop.

SHANKMAN

Oh. You mean he got shot?

VINCE

No. He opened a bait shop in the  
Keys

Vince moves toward the center of the building.

VINCE (CONT'D)

The body was found here, right?

(Shankman nods)

Nitric acid, benzyl chloride. These two chemicals by themselves aren't volatile. Together, they're lethal. They don't just burn conventionally. They fuse in a molecular process, giving off a burst of tremendous heat, just shy of exploding. But you know all that, right, Larry?

SHANKMAN

(unconvincing)

Yeah.

Vince takes something out of his box, kneels, pokes the ashes.

VINCE

These chemicals shouldn't even be in the same time zone. So what were they doing in the same building?

SHANKMAN

It looks like this McNulty guy was stealing the stuff, didn't know what he was doing, and... Boom.

VINCE

Don't tell me that's all you've got, because...

SHANKMAN

We also found small amounts of these same chemicals in his van.

VINCE

In his van? Really? And you don't think someone could've planted those?

The cop takes it as an accusation, doesn't like it.

VINCE (CONT'D)

Hey, lookee here!

Shankman edges forward.

SHANKMAN

What is it?

VINCE

A quarter. I'll flip ya for it.

SHANKMAN

(annoyed)

That's okay. You keep it.

When Vince drops it in his box, we can see it's NOT A QUARTER.

EXT. WAREHOUSE - DAY

Back outside, they walk to their cars.

VINCE

I need to find out which employees  
you interviewed, see the reports...

SHANKMAN

That stuff's downtown. Look, Dinkle,  
I'm kinda limited in what I can say.

VINCE

I know you are.

Shankman has had enough.

SHANKMAN

The guys were right. You are an  
asshole. And it was a pretty shitty  
thing you did to O'Leary and Burke.

Vince SLAMS his black box down on the hood of his Corvair.

VINCE

Screw you! You don't know nothin'!

SHANKMAN

I know you ratted on your fellow  
officers.

VINCE

You're damn right I did. And I'd  
do it again, too. O'Leary and Burke  
set the fire that killed that kid.

SHANKMAN

You were never able to prove it.

VINCE

Yeah, my witness decides to change  
his story the day before the hearing.  
We both know what was goin' on there.  
They set that fire and a few others.  
That was their scam. Insurance  
kickbacks. What's yours?

Shankman turns away, walks toward his car.

VINCE (CONT'D)

You know, Larry, when I started out, I was gonna be a credit to the uniform, make my family proud. Then one day, you see something, and you look away. A little money changes hands. You figure everybody's doin' it. Nobody gets hurt, no big deal.

The cop looks back at Vince, but doesn't say anything.

VINCE (CONT'D)

You just wanna be part of the club, one of the guys, so you go along. The stakes get a little bigger, and the stink gets a little stronger, until you realize it's comin' from you. Well, I finally decided to do something about it. And look what happens. O'Leary and Burke wind up getting promoted, and I lose my job.

SHANKMAN

Well, we all get what we deserve...

VINCE

Bullshit! O'Leary and Burke should be in prison. They sure as hell deserve it. How about you, Shankman? Have you taken sides yet? Because there is no middle ground. You can either be a good guy or a bad guy. Where do you stand?

Shankman takes a moment, then looks away, gets in his car.

EXT. IMPOUND LOT - DAY

Vince drops by the impound lot. A guard points out the van.

Vince walks to it, looks inside, surprised by what he sees. The INTERIOR is in SHREDS: seats ripped apart, upholstery sliced and diced, panels splintered.

EXT. FRANCES' APT. - DUSK

Frances drives up, parks. Vince has been waiting. He opens her door, escorts her to the lobby.

FRANCES

How'd it go? Were you able to find out anything?

VINCE

Yeah, I found out a few things.

FRANCES

Great. I can't wait to hear.

VINCE

Actually, I just came by to see if you have a key to your father's place.

FRANCES

Sure, right here in my purse.  
(gives him the key)  
Tell me what's going on.

VINCE

Have you been over there recently?

FRANCES

Yeah. Day before yesterday. The police called, wanted to meet me there. I packed up some of his stuff while they looked around.

VINCE

Did they tell you what they were looking for?

FRANCES

No. They said it was standard procedure.

VINCE

And did they find anything?

FRANCES

Not that I know of. Tell me what's going on, Vince.

VINCE

(walks to his car)  
I will, don't worry. I'll be back in a little while.

EXT. FRED'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Lower-middle-class neighborhood. Vince parks on the street, walks through the snow in the front yard, unlocks the door.

INT. HOUSE

He flips on a light and... Jesus! The place has been TURNED UPSIDE DOWN: chairs flipped over, upholstery slashed.

Vince pulls out his GUN, begins an inspection of the house. When he's sure he's alone, he takes out his cell phone, dials.

VINCE

Frances, I'm at your father's place. When you said the police were here to look around, did you mean rip up the furniture...

INTERCUT WITH FRANCES' APT.

FRANCES

No, of course not.

VINCE

Well, somebody else has been here. You said you took a few things...

FRANCES

Just some pictures, some personal items.

VINCE

We'll take a look at those later. In the meantime, don't let anyone inside your place.

FRANCES

Vince. Tell me what's going on.

VINCE

Okay. At the fire scene, I found part of a remote-control detonating device.

FRANCES

Wait... You're saying somebody else started that fire?

There's a MOVEMENT at the window behind him. Someone's out there, watching Vince through the slit in the curtains.

VINCE

That's what I'm thinkin'. Also, I stopped by the coroner's office and looked at the autopsy photos. You see, a person standing upright would sustain a certain burn pattern, a person lying down, another. I'm pretty sure your father was lying down at the moment of ignition.

FRANCES

You mean, like he was unconscious...

VINCE

Or already dead. Listen, Frances,  
I'm going to look around here some  
more, then I'll be right over.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Vince drives away from Fred's house, stops at the corner,  
notices a bar across the street with a neon sign: "Dante's  
Inferno". He sits there for a moment, ponders.

INT. BAR - NIGHT

Your classic, alcoholic haven. Dim and dreary, a few folks  
hunched at the bar.

Vince pulls up a stool, speaks to the BARTENDER.

VINCE

I wonder if you can help me. I'm  
lookin' for an old friend, lives  
down the block. Fred McNulty?

BARTENDER

Sure, I know Fred.

VINCE

I told him I'd be in Chicago this  
week. He wanted to get together.  
I've tried to call. No answer.  
Dropped by his house a few times...

BARTENDER

Yeah, I was beginning to wonder  
where Fred's been. Haven't seen  
him in a couple weeks, and he's what  
you might call "a regular" in here.

VINCE

Hmmm. It's not like Fred to... I  
wonder if there's any way I could...

BARTENDER

You could try Wes Pixley. He and  
Fred are pretty good pals, but...

The bartender hesitates. Vince leans in a little closer.

VINCE

But what?

BARTENDER

He's out of commission these days.  
Had some kind of accident, got hurt  
pretty bad.

EXT. BAR - NIGHT

Vince walks quickly to his car, hops inside, drives away.

Across the street, a white CADILLAC ELDORADO turns on its  
headlights, pulls into traffic.

INT. HOSPITAL - NIGHT

Dimly lit hospital room. Vince enters, stops, stares at the  
patient in full BODY-CAST. Looks like a mummy in traction.

WES PIXLEY's head is partially covered with bandages. Face full  
of bruises. Swollen lips, bloodshot eyes.

VINCE

Are you Wes Pixley?

PIXLEY

No, I'm King Tut. Who are you?

VINCE

Vince Dinkle. Private investigator.

PIXLEY

Yeah, I knew sooner or later  
somebody'd come snoopin' around.

Vince plays it cool, but we can see the wheels turning.

VINCE

Really? What made you think that?

PIXLEY

The accident. I know they're  
gonna try to pin it on me. But  
it wasn't my fault.

VINCE

I see. Well, you want to tell me  
about it?

PIXLEY

Okay. It's like this. That  
sonofabitch had been stealin' my  
money... Christ, I figure I lost  
twenty or thirty bucks so far.

VINCE

Twenty or thirty bucks, huh?

PIXLEY

So when I stuck my last three quarters in there and didn't get dick, I kinda went nuts, started kickin' the bastard, and the sonofabitch gets to rockin', falls over right on top of me. Goddam coke machine just about killed me.

Vince is at a loss, wasn't quite prepared for a vending mishap.

VINCE

A coke machine fell on you?

PIXLEY

So you tell those assholes I'm goin' ahead with the lawsuit and... Wait a minute. You didn't know?

VINCE

About the coke machine? Huh-uh.

PIXLEY

Then why are you here?

VINCE

I wanted to ask you about Fred McNulty.

PIXLEY

Fred? What about him? Is he in some kind of trouble?

VINCE

Not anymore. He's dead.

The mummy jerks, cries out.

PIXLEY

Jesus, that hurts. What the hell happened to him? Shit, my neck. He's really dead?

VINCE

Died in a fire on the job. They say it was his fault. I'm working for his daughter. She's due a hundred grand, and the insurance company's tryin' to weasel out.

PIXLEY

Fuckers.

VINCE

Exactly.

Pixley takes a sip from a rubber hose, licks his swollen lips.

PIXLEY

Well, just between you and me,  
I wouldn't be so sure it was an  
accident.

Vince perks up, back in business again.

VINCE

And what makes you say that?

PIXLEY

Look, I don't know much, but the  
last couple weeks, Fred was nervous.  
Told me he was in over his head on  
some deal. Wouldn't tell me what  
it was.

VINCE

I see. Did he say anything else?  
Think back.

PIXLEY

Yeah, there's something. Um... I  
guess I can trust you. Are you  
really workin' for his daughter?

VINCE

Yeah, to get that insurance company  
to pay up. Fuckers.

Pixley takes a deep breath, speaks in a whisper.

PIXLEY

Fred left something with me. A  
package. Told me I should give it  
to the police if anything happened  
to him.

VINCE

And where is this package now?

INT. PIXLEY'S HOUSE - NIGHT

The house is pitch black. A key jiggles in the door. Vince  
steps inside, turns on the light. It's a mess. Has this place  
been ransacked, too? No. Pixley's just a slob.

He walks through the clutter -- clothes, newspapers, pizza  
boxes, beer cans -- and heads down the hallway.

INT. BEDROOM

Vince pulls a dresser away from the wall, reaches behind it, finds the PACKAGE: a shoebox wrapped in duct tape.

He rips open the box and his eyes light up when he sees what's inside: A VIDEOTAPE!

INT. LIVING ROOM

He races back to the living room, shoves the cassette in the VCR, hits "Play". The screen is soon filled with a grainy image. Home video of FRED McNULTY!

Vince is mesmerized as he watches the "dead man" come to life. Fred looks worn, haggard. He sits alone at his kitchen table, looks into the camera, and begins to speak.

FRED (ON TAPE)

My name is Fred McNulty... and I'm making this tape because I believe my life is in danger. For the past year, I've been involved in... in this little scam and uh... now I find myself caught in the middle of something...

Vince moves closer to the screen, studies Frances' father -- the heavy eyes beneath bushy brows, the tired expression. Not much fire left in the old sailor.

FRED (ON TAPE)

The people I've been working with... they think I ripped 'em off. For what it's worth, I didn't. But I'm afraid these people are planning to kill me. And since you're watching this, I guess they did.

Fred pauses, takes a drink from a bottle of beer, then looks back to the camera.

FRED (ON TAPE)

I suppose you'll see this at some point, Frances. I just want you to know that I love you, and I'm sorry I haven't been a better father to you. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me.

Vince shakes his head, frowns, waits for Fred to continue.

FRED (ON TAPE)

Okay. Over the past year, I was able to set myself up as middleman in a pretty sweet deal. I got this old buddy, a guy I thought was a friend, but now I'm not so sure.

VINCE

Get on with it, Fred. Who did it?

Vince is so absorbed in the video, he doesn't see the SHADOW off to one side, the DARK FIGURE creeping toward him.

FRED (ON TAPE)

I met him twenty years ago. We worked the docks together.

VINCE

Come on, let's go. Give it to me...

THWAP! A blunt object STRIKES Vince on his bald spot! He tumbles forward, HITS his head on a table, falls to the floor.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

His eyebrows twitch. Vince hears STATIC, opens his eyes. The TV's still on.

He gently rubs the purple egg on his head, inspects the cut on his temple, then suddenly remembers...

VINCE

The tape...!

He checks the VCR, CURSES when he realizes THE TAPE'S GONE.

Outside, a car door SLAMS, an engine REVS. He hurries to the window, sees a WHITE CADDY pull away from the curb.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Vince runs to his Corvair, BUMPS his head as he scrambles into the driver's seat and fumbles with his keys.

Then he's off! He SCREECHES around the corner, sees the Caddy in traffic at the light.

The Cadillac realizes it's being followed. It JUMPS the curb, drives onto the sidewalk, then turns onto the main boulevard.

Vince gains some ground as they weave through traffic. The Caddy veers onto a freeway ramp. Vince follows, works his way over to the fast lane.

The headlights of a SEMI-TRUCK grow large in his mirror. A BLAST from its AIRHORN lifts Vince out of his seat.

He SWERVES out of its path just in time. The semi sails by, rocking the Corvair in its wake.

Vince sees the Caddy up ahead. He STOMPS on the accelerator, and... BANG! POP! HISS! A red light FLASHES on the dashboard. The Corvair loses power, SMOKE oozes into the car.

Vince maneuvers over to the right, coasts to a stop. He jumps out, YANKS open the hood, and momentarily disappears in a ball of steam and smoke.

VINCE

Aw, crap! What next...?

Hear the SOUND of SCREECHING TIRES.

VINCE

Oh, shit!

INT. FRANCES' APT. - NIGHT

Frances lies on the couch in her robe, reads a book. KNOCK, KNOCK!

She races to the door, peers through the fish-eye lens in the peephole, gasps at the distorted and rather frightening face.

FRANCES

Vince, is that you?

She opens the door. Vince looks almost as frightening without the fish-eye: a bulging knot on his head, dried blood on his temple, grease stains everywhere.

FRANCES (CONT'D)

Oh my... What happened to you?  
Were you in an accident?

VINCE

Among other things.

She leads him into the kitchen, turns on the water. A few slivers of GLASS fall to the floor.

FRANCES

What's this?

VINCE

Pieces of somebody's windshield. My car died on the freeway, and some rubber-necker smashed into a van, not ten feet from where I was standing. Luckily, nobody got hurt...

FRANCES

Thank goodness for that. Were you able to get your car going again?

VINCE

Oh, yeah, but that was the least of my problems tonight. When it died, I was chasing some guy in a Cadillac... the guy who did this to my head. Probably the same guy who killed your father.

Frances stops everything.

FRANCES

What?

Vince takes a deep breath. He looks right at her.

VINCE

Your father made a tape before he died, Frances. Left it with a friend of his. Wes Pixley. Know him?

(she shakes her head)

Well, I saw part of that tape tonight. Your father was afraid somebody was going to kill him.

FRANCES

Oh my God. Who? Did he say...

VINCE

He was just about to. That's when somebody -- whoever was drivin' that white Cadillac -- snuck up behind me and rang my bell.

Vince gently probes the lump on his noggin as Frances leads him to a chair.

FRANCES

I'm going to get a few things from the medicine cabinet, then I want you to tell me everything that happened today.

INT. FRANCES' APT. - NIGHT

Vince sits back in the rocking chair, recounts the day's events, while Frances dabs at his face with a washcloth, applies salve and a bandage to the cut on his temple.

VINCE

My guess is your father told the guy about the tape as a last resort. You know, that it'd be turned over to the police if anything happened to him. So this guy tears your father's house apart looking for the tape. Then I come along and lead him right to it.

Frances is silent for a long moment.

FRANCES

Well then, it's true. The police were right about my father. I don't want to believe it, but I guess I don't have any choice now.

VINCE

I'm sorry, Frances. I know it's not an easy thing to accept.

As Frances leans forward, her robe falls open. Vince is momentarily distracted by the sight of her silky nightgown, until...

FRANCES

Hold still, I see some more glass in your hair.

She picks up a Dust Buster, runs it gently along his scalp. Vince looks slightly humiliated.

VINCE

On the tape, he talked about an "old friend". Someone he'd known for twenty years, that he worked the docks with.

FRANCES

I wouldn't have any idea who that could be. I didn't know any of his friends, and he never talked about...

VINCE

How about Oklahoma? Mean anything?

FRANCES

Oklahoma? I don't think so. Why?

VINCE

That Cadillac I was chasing tonight,  
it had Oklahoma plates.

FRANCES

Wait a minute! I do remember, on a  
phone bill.

(rummages thru a drawer)

My father sometimes made calls when  
he'd visit... Here it is. A two-  
minute call to Bull City, Oklahoma.

She hands him the bill, he looks it over.

VINCE

Is it okay if I take this with me?

(she nods, a pause)

Well, Frances, I suppose this settles  
the case... for Fitz, anyway. There  
won't be any insurance money now.

FRANCES

I don't care about that anymore. I  
have to find out what happened to my  
father. And now we know it wasn't  
an accident. He was murdered. So  
we tell the police about the tape...

VINCE

I'm not so sure we want to do that.

(she looks puzzled)

If we knew exactly what was on  
the tape, that would be one thing.  
Let's hold off on the police.

FRANCES

But why?!

VINCE

Your father talked about being the  
middleman in this thing... but we  
don't know who he was dealing with.

FRANCES

What are you saying, Vince? You  
think the police could be involved?

VINCE

I don't want to rule it out just yet.

FRANCES

Oh my.

(long pause)

Well, I don't know what I'm going  
to do now.

VINCE

Yeah. Maybe we should let this settle, sleep on it, and we'll talk in the morning.

INT. CORVAIR - NIGHT

Vince merges onto the freeway, then SLAMS on the brake, almost rear-ends the car in front of him. It's snowing again, and traffic's backed up.

Frustrated, he WHACKS the steering wheel, turns on the RADIO.

Classic Rock. The Beach Boys. Singing about sun and surf. And California girls.

Vince stares hypnotically at the windshield wipers, and slowly slips away from reality...

CUT TO:

VANCE DARBY

INT./EXT. CAR - DAY

Vance drives a classic '49 Willys Woodie along the Pacific Coast Highway, then inland through the lush hills.

VANCE (V.O.)

The words kept circling around inside my head. "Drowned in champagne in the desert". Chance Delaney had drank of the good life... until she choked on it. I knew the "how". It was time to figure out the "why".

He turns into the driveway of an extravagant home.

VANCE (V.O.)

Perhaps a little "surprise visit" to her sister would prove enlightening, illuminating, and... stimulating.

EXT. HOUSE - DAY

Faith Delaney kneels in a flower bed, looks absolutely gorgeous in her snug, white shorts and knotted blouse, her hair tucked inside a floppy-brimmed hat.

She stands, hits him with a dazzling smile as his Woodie approaches. Vance gets out.

FAITH

Vance Darby. What a pleasant surprise.

VANCE

I was in the neighborhood, thought I'd drop by.

FAITH

I'm glad you did. My husband's out back with the kids. Come on, I'll introduce you...

VANCE

Actually, I was hoping we could talk for a moment.

INT. OFFICE - DAY

Faith leads him into a room filled with bookshelves and posters.

They walk past a row of large, framed PHOTOGRAPHS on the wall, celebrities and V.I.P.'s posing with Faith and her husband, STUART, 40'S.

VANCE

What exactly does your husband do, Faith?

FAITH

Stuart's a financial consultant. As you can see, he's worked with some very influential people.

VANCE

Yes, indeed. Alan Greenspan, Margaret Thatcher, Regis Philbin. Impressive.

FAITH

Stuart's semi-retired, mostly does charity work these days. And we're both very active with the church.

She stands on her tiptoes, straightens a picture. Vance can't help but notice those white shorts tighten around her bottom, her blouse creep upward, revealing the soft, white underside of her breasts.

FAITH (CONT'D)

Here's a picture of my husband with Billy Graham.

Holy shit! Like a bucket of cold water, the smiling Preacher's face looks down on them, snuffing the sexual tension in a sacred heartbeat.

VANCE

Uh... listen, Faith, I was hoping we could talk more in depth about your sister.

FAITH

Of course, what do you want to know?

VANCE

Anything. Everything. Whatever comes to mind.

FAITH

It's hard to know where to begin with Chance. She was a bundle of contradictions. Headstrong, defiant. But underneath all that was a shy, fragile, little girl.

Faith sits at her desk, takes a FOLDER from a drawer. Vance looks over her shoulder.

FAITH (CONT'D)

I've kept some pictures, clippings, and other stuff from Chance's past. These are high school photos, her rebellious years. It didn't surprise any of us when she took off to Vegas on the back of a Harley with some guy named T-Bone. That didn't last long. She went back to school for awhile, studied dance, landed a cheerleading job with a pro-football team.

She turns the page to an 8-by-10 glossy: CHANCE DELANEY wearing a skimpy, blue-and-white cheerleading outfit, one leg kicking up to the side, pom-poms held high in the air, blonde hair falling in waves from underneath the white, cowgirl hat.

VANCE

The Dallas Cowboys. Wow. Can't do much better than that.

FAITH

(sarcastic)  
Can't do much better?

VANCE

I mean, you can't do much better... if you've got your heart set on working with pom-poms.

She hands him a newspaper clipping, the Society Page: CHANCE at a charity ball, dancing with a handsome rogue.

FAITH

Chance used to say she was living in a fairy tale, dating the star football player...

VANCE

Yeah, Brandon Spear. Haven't heard that name in awhile. He had a few great years, then he just lost it.

FAITH

That was about the time Chance left him to pursue a career in Hollywood.

She hands Vance the CENTERFOLD from Playboy, a photograph that reveals CHANCE DELANEY in all her cupcake glory, sitting on the hood of a Corvette, wearing high heels, garter belt, and not much else.

FAITH (CONT'D)

I believe the human body is beautiful, Vance...

VANCE

Oh, yeah. Me, too.

FAITH

But I don't believe in exploiting women in this way.

VANCE

No, no... of course not.

Faith hands him a People Magazine cover: CHANCE romps on the beach with a famous movie star.

FAITH

Chance tried to get into the movies, moved out to Malibu where she met Rod Trunk, the actor. They were married for eight months. Not too bad, I suppose, by Hollywood standards.

VANCE

Yeah, poor 'ol Rod. The alcohol pretty much ruined him. I saw him the other night on some cable-access psychic-hotline. He looked terrible. Overweight, puffy...

Faith seems to brighten at the image of a bloated Rod Trunk hawking the services of fortune tellers.

FAITH  
 Yeah, that's too bad.  
 (a beat)  
 And finally... Marco Feticino.

A newspaper article features MARCO -- 50's, hair slicked back, slick suit -- on the steps of a courthouse. The headline reads: "Casino Kingpin Questioned In Girlfriend's Death".

VANCE  
 Faith, I was wondering... Is there some reason you didn't mention your sister was pregnant when she died?

Faith pauses, chokes back some emotion.

FAITH  
 I knew you'd see that in the police report. It's so tragic. I can't make myself talk about it.

VANCE  
 You figure it was Marco's baby she was carrying?

FAITH  
 I think it had to be his.

VANCE  
 Okay, we don't need to talk about this anymore.

FAITH  
 No, it's all right. If it helps find her murderer.

VANCE  
 It might. It just might.

She swivels in her chair, looks up at him, hopeful.

FAITH  
 Does this mean you're going to take the case?

VANCE  
 Yes, Faith. Yes, I will.

She jumps to her feet, clasps her arms around his neck, kisses his cheek.

FAITH  
 Oh, thank you, Vance. Thank you.

She presses her body against him. Vance pulls her even closer.

VANCE

I can't promise anything, but  
I'm going to give you everything  
I've got.

Vance lets his hands wander down along her waist, her hips,  
until he hears...

VOICE (O.S.)

Hey. Who's Woodie is that?

The voice comes from down the hallway. It's her HUSBAND. Faith  
and Vance quickly separate, look around innocently.

FAITH

Vance Darby's! Be right there!

As they walk out of the room, Vance catches a glimpse of Billy  
Graham in the photo, mouths the word "sorry".

INT. DEN

They enter the den where STUART plays ping-pong with the eight-  
year-old twins, SARA and TIMMY. Faith introduces everyone.

STUART

We're just so glad you're taking  
the case, Vance. If anybody can  
get some answers...

VANCE

Well, I'll do what I can.

Stuart points to the car outside the window, speaks with child-  
like enthusiasm.

STUART

That's one of the big Willys from  
1949, isn't it? I always wanted  
one of those when I was a teenager.  
Never got around to it.

VANCE

Well, it's never too late.

STUART

Maybe when Timmy gets his license.  
(gives the kid a hug)  
How about it, son? Do you want  
a big Woodie when you grow up?

TIMMY

Uh... sure, dad.

EXT. HOUSE - DAY

Vance walks to his car, climbs behind the wheel.

VANCE (V.O.)

I was back on the case, and I could already feel the rush... the thrill, the challenge. Each one was different. You never knew where it would lead, or how it would end. That's what I loved about it. Of course, the money was nice, too.

Faith runs outside with a CHECK, insists that he take it. She gives him a quick kiss on the cheek, then waves good-bye.

INT. CAR

Vance drives slowly away. He looks down at the check and smiles. TWENTY-FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS.

He turns onto the main road, jerks the wheel, SWERVES to avoid an oncoming car.

VANCE

Hey, watch it...!

CUT TO:

VINCE DINKLE

INT. CAR - DAY

Vince SWERVES to avoid a different car.

VINCE

Hey, watch it... asshole!

Vince flips him off, turns a corner, parks in front of Frances' apartment.

INT. FRANCES' APT. - DAY

He sits at the table, sips a cup of tea, as Frances takes some goo from an aloe plant, and applies it to the diminishing knot on his bald spot.

VINCE

I talked to a woman from the Merchant Marine office this morning. Got the names of some people who worked with your father. Recognize any of them?

He hands her a sheet of paper. She looks down the list, shakes her head.

VINCE (CONT'D)

And I called that Oklahoma number  
on your phone bill. It's a pay  
phone outside a liquor store in  
Bull City.

Frances sighs, looks a little discouraged.

FRANCES

That doesn't really help us, does it?

VINCE

No, not much.

She wipes her hands, puts the aloe plant back on the shelf.

FRANCES

Well, Vince. I want you to know  
how much I appreciate everything  
you've done for me. I don't really  
know where I'll go from here, but...

VINCE

Whoa. I'm not finished yet.

She turns around, looks at him, quizzical.

FRANCES

What do you mean?

VINCE

I'm still on the case. You see,  
last night it got a little...  
personal. Now I've got a stake  
in this, too. Or a lump, anyway.

Frances tries to make sense of it.

FRANCES

So... where do we go from here?

VINCE

I'll tell you where I'm goin'.  
Bull City, Oklahoma. And I'm  
gonna bag me an Okie.

(Frances smiles)

And after I get him in the bag,  
I'm gonna hit him over the head  
a few times.

(she laughs)

I'm serious. He won't be hard to  
find. It's a small town, and I  
know he drives an Eldorado...

FRANCES

But what are you going to drive?  
I don't think your car would make  
it. You should fly out there, but...  
Vince, I really can't afford...

VINCE

Don't worry about it. I've got it  
covered. And I'm taking the bus.

FRANCES

Really? The bus? Vince, you don't  
have to do this...

VINCE

Yes, I do. I've been wanting to  
get out of town, anyway. And I  
can use the time to think about  
this case. There's still a few  
things... don't add up.

(a beat)

And, I can work on my novel.

Frances can't believe it. She's ecstatic, big smile. She moves  
closer, looks him right in the eyes.

FRANCES

Vince. Has anyone ever told you  
how wonderful you are?

VINCE

(shrugs, jokes)

Oh, yeah. Sure.

(pause)

But it's been awhile.

She puts her arms around him, gives him a hug. A big one.

EXT. FRANCES' APT. - DAY

Vince gets in his car, fiddles with the key, sees Frances run  
outside, waving at him. He rolls down the window.

FRANCES

Here. I want you to take this.  
It's not much, just a little  
something to help with expenses.

Frances hands him a check, gives him a kiss on the cheek. Vince  
thanks her, then turns the key. The engine sputters, belches,  
backfires, and comes to life.

As he pulls away, Vince looks down at the check, smiles. Fifty  
dollars. Oh well.

EXT. BUS STATION - NIGHT

It's crowded outside the station. A herd of low-rent riders mill about, waiting to board.

Vince notices a fairly attractive WOMAN -- 30's, short blonde hair, shapely figure -- bid farewell to a grandmotherly type.

He smiles to himself, as if... Maybe this bus trip won't be so bad after all.

INT. BUS - NIGHT

The Greyhound streaks down the Interstate. Vince has his own row, middle of the bus. Outside the window, a full moon shimmers on a sea of cornfields.

He turns his head, peeks at the attractive woman sitting five rows behind him. Then he turns back around, scoffs...

VINCE

(to himself)

Yeah, Vince... like you got a chance. Forget about it.

He rests his head against the window, gazes up at the moon. His reverie is soon interrupted by...

Bright HEADLIGHTS coming up on his right. But the bus is in the right lane. Some idiot is trying to pass on the shoulder!

Vince watches in disbelief as the car HAMMERS DOWN the roadside reflectors, SPEWS a stream of dust and gravel.

When it moves alongside the bus, Vince bolts upright. It's a CADILLAC! A white Cadillac Eldorado!

The tinted window on the driver's side rolls down. Vince can't see the face of the driver, just his bright-red cowboy shirt covered with rhinestones and fringe.

The driver sticks his arm out the window, and extends his MIDDLE FINGER directly at Vince.

Now the back window begins to lower, the dome light turns on, and... No! It can't be! FRANCES! She's BOUND AND GAGGED in the back seat! She looks up, sees Vince, struggles desperately.

VINCE

Hey, hey...!! Frances!!

Vince POUNDS on the window as the Caddy pulls ahead, then...

He snaps out of it. Only a DREAM. No Cadillac out there. Just farm houses and cornfields drifting by in the moonlight.

A GUY peers over the seats in front of him.

GUY

Hey, buddy, can you hold it down?  
I'm tryin' to get some sleep here.

Vince takes a deep breath, settles back in his seat.

After a few moments, he turns his head, looks at that WOMAN again, her head cast downward as she reads a magazine.

He faces forward. Ponders. Who knows? Maybe, just maybe...

He stands, walks slowly down the aisle, pauses at her row.

Say something! Anything! Come on!!

WOMAN

(looks up at him)  
Yes?

VINCE

Nothing... just stretching.

Vince has to do some stretching now. He rolls his head around in a circle, twists his upper torso side-to-side. Okay, enough.

He walks back to his seat. Defeated. But all is not lost. The laptop's right there in the next seat...

DISSOLVE TO:

VANCE DARBY

INT. TRAIN - SUNSET

Vance is on the road, too. But not on a bus. He's the sole occupant of the "Spruce Caboose" -- a PRIVATE RAILROAD CAR, furnished with king-size bed, fully-stocked bar, gourmet kitchen, fireplace.

VANCE (V.O.)

The luxury accommodations were courtesy of Milton Railsback, the president of Amtrak. As a favor, I'd been working on designs for a single-rail, gyroscopic, bullet train, and the Spruce Caboose was one of the perks.

Vance, looking dapper in his western shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots, leans back in a leather chair. He swirls a brandy snifter, listens to the clickety-clack of the rails, gazes idly out the window at the desert terrain and colorful sunset.

VANCE (V.O.)

I enjoyed taking the train. It gave me time to think, to formulate, to visualize and analyze such things as... Who killed Chance Delaney? First stop, Dallas.

He downs the brandy, stands, walks toward the door.

VANCE (V.O.)

We were halfway across Death Valley, the same place they'd found her champagne-bloated body, when I suddenly felt restless.

INT. PASSENGER CAR

VANCE (V.O.)

As I made my way down the aisle, I noticed a striking young woman sitting alone by the window. I smiled. She didn't. Maybe I'd fire one across her bow, see if I could get her to heave-to.

As he approaches ANGEL -- 20's, blonde, trim and toned -- she raises her book, avoids eye-contact.

VANCE (V.O.)

She was reading "The Walls Between The Sexes", another Self-Help best-seller from the German psychologist, Dr. Libby Schteubenvurst.

VANCE

Interesting book. I just finished reading it.

She lowers the book, meets his gaze.

ANGEL

Don't tell me how it ends.

VANCE

Oh, it's okay. You turn out just fine.

ANGEL

Ha ha. Now what did you really think?

VANCE

In all truth, I found it to be a somewhat biased interpretation of non-verifiable assumptions. But any attempt to map the intricate terrain of the male-female rift is, in my opinion, just askin' for trouble.

ANGEL

Yeah, I know what you mean. Her logic seems to run contrary to my intuitive sense. Umm... would you care to join me?

VANCE (V.O.)

Arm the torpedoes. Ramming speed. We're goin' in.

Languid and graceful, Vance slips into the seat beside her.

VANCE

Darby. Vance Darby.

ANGEL

Bush. Angel Bush.

EXT. DALLAS TRAIN STATION - DAY

Vance waves good-bye from the depot as the train pulls away. Angel stands on the platform of the caboose, dreamy-eyed.

VANCE (V.O.)

It had been a heavenly night. Angel had answered several of my prayers. An accomplished woman, there was no doubt about that. At twenty-seven, Angel was already a practicing trial attorney and an aerobics instructor. I was impressed. I had a lot of respect for aerobics instructors.

EXT. TEXAS - DAY

An eagle-eye view of a black, Mustang convertible. Vance on the two-lane-blacktop, amidst green pastures and Ranchos-Deluxe.

VANCE (V.O.)

My thoughts turned back to Chance Delaney and the case at hand. Whatever happened to Brandon Spear? Thanks to my secretary, I knew right where to find the former football hero on a Saturday afternoon.

EXT. POLO FIELD - DAY

A blur of THUNDEROUS HOOVES. Mallets flail as a knot of helmet-wearing HORSEMEN gallop along in their black boots and billowy britches.

The Mustang turns onto a shady lane that borders the polo field. Festive BANNERS wave above gaily-colored TENTS as bejeweled REDNECKS mingle in catered comfort.

On the sidelines, alone underneath an awning, stands LACY BLACK, 20's, a sultry siren of the South, wearing a skin-tight tank-top, spandex pants, and spiked high heels.

She sips a drink, watches the little white ball fly by, followed by the pack of polo ponies.

LACY

Yes! Yes! Do it, Brandon!  
Get it!

Lacy becomes aware of a tall, dark stranger ambling up the sidelines. She lowers her sunglasses, raises an eyebrow.

Vance walks by her tent, stops. There appears to be a damsel in distress: Lacy Black in a fierce struggle with a bottle of champagne held, vice-like, between her knees.

LACY

Excuse me, I wonder if you could  
give me a hand here.

With a pleading pout, she holds the bottle out to him.

VANCE

Glad to. These things can be tricky.

LACY

Tricky, my ass. They're downright  
dangerous. Put an eye out easy.  
Look. I think I chipped a nail.

He loosens the cork. POP! The bubbly stuff spews from the bottle. Lacy grabs the neck with both hands, gulps the foam.

LACY (CONT'D)

Bravo, bubba. How can I ever repay  
you?

VANCE

(doing John Wayne)  
Wull, I'm just glad I could help ya  
out, little lady.

LACY

Aren't you just the cutest thing.  
Who's long, cool drink of water  
are you, anyway? You're not one  
of Courtney's stable?

VANCE

No, mam. I'm ridin' alone.

LACY

I'd say that's a waste of a good  
ride.

She offers her hand. They introduce themselves. Lacy prances  
over to a table, gets another glass.

LACY (CONT'D)

Now if you think you're just gonna  
pop and run, forget it. I want you  
to stay right there, have a glass  
of champagne, and you can tell me  
all the things you like about me.

VANCE

Well...

LACY

And don't tell me I have a great  
ass. I already know that.

VANCE

I was about to say, your sense  
of humor and honesty are most  
refreshing. Beneath the gloss,  
I perceive great depths of  
sensitivity, along with an innate  
wisdom which only serves to  
illuminate the eternal mystery.

LACY

Ooh, you slippery little devil you.  
I'm ready to have your children  
right here and now.

The ball whizzes by again, followed by the sweaty pack of mallet-  
wielding country-clubbers.

A red-faced, panting, BRANDON SPEAR, 30's, gives them a long  
look as he trots by. Lacy waves. He doesn't wave back.

VANCE

That guy looks familiar.

LACY

Sports quiz. Who was the only quarterback to lead his team to three consecutive Super Bowl victories?

VANCE

Good 'ol number seven. Brandon "The Surgeon" Spear. Hmm, maybe it's the horse, but I thought he'd be bigger.

LACY

Yeah. So did I.

VANCE

Is he a friend of yours?

LACY

Yeah, we spend quite a bit of time in the saddle together.

VANCE

Really? You do a lot of riding?

LACY

No. How about you?

VANCE

Oh, a little. Mostly parade stuff.

INT. BARN - DAY

Brandon walks between the stalls, looks around. He reaches inside his pocket, takes out a vial. A couple quick snorts.

VANCE (O.S.)

Hay fever?

Brandon spins around, sees the tall stranger leaning in the doorway to the stall.

BRANDON

You shouldn't sneak up on people like that.

VANCE

You got a little on your nose there.

BRANDON

Who are you, and what do you want?

VANCE

Vance Darby. A few minutes of your time.

BRANDON

Hey, look, pal. I'll give you an autograph, but I don't have time to talk about the good old days. And I don't wanna see you sniffin' around Lacy Black anymore.

Brandon moves toward the door. Vance blocks his path.

VANCE

Let's not get off on the wrong foot. I'm not interested in Lacy Black. I want to talk about Chance Delaney.

Vance looks for a reaction. Brandon plays it cool.

BRANDON

You're a cop, aren't ya? No, wait. You're private.

VANCE

Very good, Brandon. I'm looking into Chance's murder. I thought you might be able to help me out.

BRANDON

And what makes you think that?

Vance suddenly ERUPTS, grabs Brandon by the shirt, SLAMS him against the fence!

VANCE

Because you did it, you sonofabitch! And I know it! Why don't you just confess now and get it over with!

Brandon disengages himself from the wild-eyed P.I.

BRANDON

You're nuts, man! You stay away from me!

Vance executes an impressive mood swing, friendly and polite once again. He reaches out, smooths Brandon's shirt.

VANCE

Hey, sorry. I thought it was worth a shot.

BRANDON

What is it with you?! I talked to the police, they have my statement. Why don't you do some of that gumshoein' and go look it up?

VANCE

Oh, I've already done that. As far as I'm concerned, you did it.

BRANDON

Listen, you crazy bastard... you stay away from me...

VANCE

Come on, Brandon, don't get your little polo pants in a puff.

That does it. Brandon takes a mighty SWING! Vance dodges it.

VANCE (CONT'D)

Incomplete, Cowboy. Your timing's way off, and you telegraphed that punch. What you wanna do, hold your shoulder still, and just...

With lightning speed, Vance lashes out and SLAPS him on the cheek! Brandon just stands there, stunned. He reaches up, feels his cheek, then LUNGES!

Vance easily sidesteps him. He shoves Brandon against the wall with a THUD, spins him around, speaks as if scolding a child.

VANCE (CONT'D)

What is wrong with you? Jesus, look what you've become. A flabby, out of shape, coke snortin', candy-ass buffoon. And you're thinkin' it's all Chance's fault, right? And that's why you wanted her dead.

BRANDON

(on the verge of tears)  
No, no... I didn't want her dead. I loved her. I hated her too for what she did to me. I used to be somebody. I was great, man. I was fuckin' great. And you're right, man... You think I don't look in the mirror and see the pathetic, bloated, piece of shit I've become?!

Brandon crumbles to the floor, weeping now.

BRANDON (CONT'D)

Oh man, I'm fucked up. I am, I am. I need help, man.  
(reaches up to Vance)  
I didn't kill her, man... I need help. Will you help me?

VANCE

Sorry, I can't right now. You're gonna have to help yourself... man.

Vance shakes his head at the miserable creature wallowing in the hay. Then he turns, walks out of the barn, and into the sunset.

INT. CAR - SUNSET

Vance in the Mustang. Dallas skyline up ahead.

VANCE (V.O.)

I felt sorry for Brandon Spear. From hero to zero, all because of a pretty gal. She must have been somethin', this Chance Delaney, to pick apart the All-Pro in such dramatic fashion. I was hooked. I had to know more. And seeing as how the Dallas Cowboys would be at home tomorrow...

Suddenly, a shaft of BRIGHT LIGHT shines through the car window. Vance is blinded...

CUT TO:

VINCE DINKLE

INT. BUS - DAY

That bright light is the SUN as it peeks over the horizon.

Vince Dinkle has been sleeping with his face pressed against the window. He looks terrible.

Vince lifts his nose in the air, picks up a scent. By the look on his face, it's not a pleasant one. He peeks over the seat in front of him, sees a YOUNG COUPLE changing their baby's DIAPER.

EXT. BUS - DAY

The GREYHOUND speeds past a colorful billboard: "Welcome To Oklahoma". It takes the exit ramp to a Service Plaza.

INT. DINER - DAY

Crowded inside the diner. Vince finds a two-top, sits down.

A moment later, that attractive woman from the bus, CONNIE, walks through the door, looks around for a seat.

Vince catches her eye, motions to the empty chair. She smiles, walks over, speaks with a Texas twang.

CONNIE

Sure you don't mind?