La Comédiathèque

The Deal

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The Deal

by Jean-Pierre Martinez

Translation by the author

Alex writes stage comedies that, so far, nobody wants to produce. He's thinking of giving up playwriting and finding a proper job. Then a famous Parisian producer calls: she's read his latest play, loves it, and is determined to put it on. At last, Alex might get the recognition he deserves! Eager to move quickly, she wants him to sign an exclusive agreement. But no sooner has he hung up than another call comes through. His old friend Fred, who already holds the performance rights, announces that he's finally going to stage the same play. He's poured his entire savings into hiring a tiny theatre. How can Alex talk this lovable failure out of the project without betraying his best friend?

Characters

Alex

Clara

Fred

Victoria

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A sparsely furnished living room, with a sofa in the centre. Alex, in his thirties, is playing a video game on his laptop. His mobile rings. Completely absorbed in the game, he takes a moment to answer.

Alex *(absently)* – Yeah...? Chloe...? *(Suddenly alert)* Oh, Chloe! Yes, of course, but... I didn't remember giving you my number. Nicolas gave it to you? Right... No, no, I don't mind, it's just... I'm still at work. At my agent's office, actually. We're about to sign a major contract and... Oh, here he is. I've got to go... Yes, I'll call you back. Tomorrow would be better, all right? Fine... Kiss kiss. Bye... *(He puts his phone away.)* Bloody Nico. He'll be hearing from me.

The front door opens. Clara, also in her thirties, comes in carrying two heavy, overflowing shopping bags.

Clara – Hi...

Alex – You're home already?

Clara – Don't sound too pleased to see me.

Alex – No, I just thought... You said you'd be back later.

Clara – My audition was cancelled, so I did the shopping. What about you?

Alex – Still trying to find an idea for my new play.

Clara – Any luck?

Alex – None.

Clara – And you think the ideas are going to come to you while you sit here all day?

Alex – If you know where they sell good ideas for comedies, tell me. I'll go straight there.

Clara – I don't know. The real world, perhaps? Have you ever tried pushing a trolley through a packed supermarket at the end of the working day? You never know what might inspire you. Somewhere between the frozen fish and the toilet paper...

Alex – Sorry. I'll do the shopping tomorrow.

Clara – Don't bother, I've just done it. We've got enough for a week. I'd better put this away before the frozen food melts all over the toilet paper.

Alex – Well... thanks.

Clara – You're welcome. But next time you notice the fridge is empty and we're on our last roll of toilet paper, try taking the hint.

She goes out. He half-heartedly tidies the room, returns to his game, then catches himself.

Alex – I've really got to stop doing that... *(He puts the laptop away, takes a bottle from the drinks cabinet and pours two glasses as Clara returns.)* I've poured you a drink, darling.

Clara – Are we celebrating something?

Alex – No, but... You see it all the time in old American television shows. The exhausted breadwinner comes home, kisses the children goodnight, and his wife pours him a drink to help him unwind... before he pounces on her right there on the living-room sofa.

Clara – In American television shows from the sixties, perhaps.

Alex – True... And we haven't got children.

Clara – You're not exactly a househusband, either. You seem to have missed out on the cleaning and shopping options.

He puts his arms around her, clearly hoping for more.

Alex – But there's one household duty I'm always ready for.

She gently pushes him away.

Clara – Stop it. You'll wake the children.

They sip their drinks in silence for a moment.

Alex – I know things haven't exactly been going my way. I gave up acting ten years ago to write, and I've still got nowhere as a playwright.

Clara – Your first comedy did have some success.

Alex – Three weeks in a theatre on the outskirts of Paris. Just long enough for all our friends to see it. None of my other plays has ever been staged.

Clara – I don't understand why. Just look at the rubbish filling the big theatres in Paris.

Alex – I don't know the right people. I'm not part of the club. I've never been good at selling myself.

Clara – Neither have I, unfortunately.

Alex – At least you've got work.

Clara – Some work. Awful commercials, walk-on parts for television, dubbing...

Alex – Dubbing must be interesting, though.

Clara – It pays the bills. But recognition? No one at the hairdresser's has ever said, 'Wait, I know that voice! You're the voice of Columbo's wife. Could I have your autograph?'

Alex – That may be because Columbo's wife is never actually seen on screen.

Clara – Dubbing, for an actress, is like stripping in a club for the blind. You're less exposed, certainly, but you're condemned to spend your career in the dark.

Alex – If you hate it so much, you could stop.

Clara – Oh, really? And who would pay the rent? You?

Alex – I detect the faintest hint of reproach.

She kisses him.

Clara – I've always believed in you, Alex. You know that. Your luck will change.

Alex – Maybe I should give up. I'll give myself one more year, then I'll look for a real job.

Clara – A real job? You don't know how to do anything.

Alex – Thank you for your support during this exciting career change.

Clara – One day the theatre world will recognise your talent. I'm sure of it.

Alex – After I'm dead, perhaps.

Clara – Come on. One day that phone will ring. You'll see.

He hugs her, but just then the landline rings, with the old-fashioned sound of a telephone from another era.

Alex – That thing makes me jump every time. Who still has a landline these days?

Clara – It's the only number my mother has ever managed to memorise. I'd rather keep it.

Alex – And she's the only person who still knows it. So I doubt that's a producer calling with a major contract.

Clara answers.

Clara – Hello, Mum... Yes, yes, everything's fine. Why? I know I usually call at seven, but it's not seven yet... *(She checks her watch.)* It's barely six. Mum, it's Friday! The clocks don't change until tomorrow night, between Saturday and Sunday. They do it every year! And you didn't notice? All right, I'll call you in an hour, shall I? Apart from that, how are you? Right... Right... Oh, you poor thing... Right. Speak soon. *(She hangs up.)* That was my mother.

Alex – Yes. And you're calling her again in an hour.

Clara – Like I always do.

Alex – Even though she just called you.

Clara – So?

Alex – Nothing. I've just never understood the need to ring your mother three times a day to ask how she is. With all her health problems, you know perfectly well she's not fine.

Clara – What's it to you? Do you pay the phone bill?

Alex – No, I don't. Thank you for reminding me so tactfully.

Clara – Do I ask how often you ring your mistresses every day?

Alex – My mistresses? Plural?

Clara – Oh, so there's only one. What a relief.

The landline rings again.

Alex *(ironically)* – Well, well. I wonder who that could be.

She gives him a filthy look and picks up.

Clara *(pleasantly)* – Hello, Mum? Oh, sorry, I thought... Yes, of course. I'll get him. *(She holds out the receiver to Alex.)* Someone called Victoria. Must be a girl you met in the days before mobile phones.

Alex – Victoria? I swear I haven't the faintest idea who that is... *(He takes the long-corded landline phone offstage.)* Hello? Yes, speaking...

He goes out. Clara looks annoyed. She tidies up a little, then takes out her mobile to call her mother.

Clara – Hello, Mum. How are you? Not well? Oh dear... But you've made an appointment with the doctor, haven't you?

She goes out too. Alex returns with the landline phone in one hand and the receiver in the other.

Alex – Yes... All right... Of course. Hang on, I'll check my diary... *(He waits a few seconds.)* No, that's perfect. Let's do that. See you tomorrow, Victoria.

He collapses on the sofa, apparently stunned. Clara returns, still on her mobile.

Clara – All right, I'll call you tomorrow morning. Love you, Mum. *(She pockets her mobile and looks at Alex.)* So who was your visitor from the age of landlines?

Alex – You'll never believe it.

Clara – Try me.

Alex – Victoria de Casteljarnac.

Clara – Not the Victoria de Casteljarnac?

Alex – The woman behind the biggest theatre hits in Paris for the past ten years. The very one.

Clara – How do you know her?

Alex – I auditioned for one of her productions about ten years ago. Didn't get the part. I haven't heard from her since.

Clara – And today she rings our landline to offer you a role?

Alex – Better than that! She wants to produce my play!

Clara – Which play?

Alex – The Deal. She says she loved it.

Clara – You're joking.

Alex – She was looking for a new comedy and somehow came across mine. I don't quite know how.

Clara – Remember? Last year I printed the script and sent it to every production company in Paris. You said I was wasting my time.

Alex – I'd given up hope. Producers never read the scripts people send them anyway.

Clara – I don't remember sending it to her personally. Someone must have passed it on.

Alex – The point is, she's read it and she loves it!

Clara – And she's really going to produce it?

Alex – She's already thinking about casting. She wouldn't give me any details, but there'll be famous names. She only works with stars!

Clara – Did she say which theatre?

Alex – You know what producers are like. Nothing's official until it's signed. But of course it'll be one of the big Paris theatres.

Clara – I can't believe it.

Alex – Neither can I. I thought someone was playing a joke on me. But no! She wants to take the show to the Avignon theatre festival first, then open in a major Paris theatre and tour France.

Clara – That's amazing!

Alex – It would finally put us in the big league!

Clara – So what happens now?

Alex – She wants to meet. I'm going to her place tomorrow afternoon to sign the contract. She knows exactly what she wants, and she wants it fast.

Clara – Tomorrow? She really doesn't waste time. I've heard she's a nightmare to work with, though...

Alex – What makes you say that?

Clara – Isn't that her reputation in the business?

Alex – Naturally, she wants exclusive rights. I can feel things changing, Clara! We ought to celebrate!

Clara – I'm exhausted. But we'll go out for dinner tomorrow, I promise.

Alex – All right.

Clara – What if we went to bed instead?

Alex – Already? *(He looks at his watch.)* It's not even seven.

Clara – I meant... together.

Alex – Oh, right... Though after that phone call I doubt I'll be able to sleep. And I'm not used to going to bed before seven.

Clara – Who said anything about sleeping? You're a bit slow tonight.

Alex – Sorry. I'm still in shock.

Clara – So am I. I've been dreaming of going to bed with a successful playwright for years.

Alex – Don't tell me no one's ever offered.

Clara – You never know. I might even get a part in the play.

They begin making love on the sofa.

Blackout.

The landline rings again.

Lights up.

Clara – Again...

Alex – We don't have to answer.

Clara – It could be my mother. What if it's an emergency?

Alex – In an emergency, she can call an ambulance on 15. That's only two digits to remember.

Clara – It could be Victoria.

Alex – She can call back.

She gets up.

Clara – Answer it, Alex.

Alex *(resigned)* – You're right. We've spent years waiting for that phone to ring with someone other than your mother on the line. We can't start complaining now that it rings too often.

Clara – The price of success. We'd better get used to it.

He answers. She goes out.

Alex – Hello? Who? Oh, hi, Fred! It's been ages... I'm fine, thanks. I may have some good news, but it's a bit early to say... How about you? Really...? *(His face falls.)* No...? Yes, of course I remember. Well, to be honest, it had rather slipped my mind... Oh, really? No... Yes, yes, wonderful, obviously... Listen, I've got to go. We were just in the middle of a game of... Yes, they're waiting for me for the second half. Right, Fred, can we talk tomorrow morning?

Clara comes back.

Clara – Who was that?

Alex – Fred.

Clara – Fred?

Alex – You know Fred! We acted together, when I was still an actor. In fact, we went to the same audition. The one Victoria was directing.

Clara – Another ghost from the past. It's turning into Night of the Living Dead. So? Does he want to offer you a part?

Alex – Worse.

Clara – Worse?

Alex – He wants to produce my play.

Clara – Which one?

Alex – The Deal!

Clara – No!

Alex – I'd completely forgotten about it. I thought it would never happen. Every project Fred touches falls apart.

Clara – So?

Alex – He says he's just signed with a theatre in Avignon for the festival.

Clara – You're joking.

Alex – Unfortunately not.

Alex is devastated.

Clara – And you gave him the rights to the play?

Alex – Apparently. I'd forgotten. I wasn't exactly spoilt for offers at the time.

Clara – Oh, hell.

Alex – It's a disaster. Victoria wants exclusive rights. Fair enough. But if the play's already booked for Avignon, she won't touch it.

Clara – Can't you tell Fred to give up the project?

Alex – He's just signed a theatre contract! He's invested all his savings. I was surprised when he told me that, actually. Fred isn't the sort of person who has savings.

Clara – Check his authorisation on the authors' rights society website.

Alex taps at his phone.

Alex – Oh, no... I gave him permission for three years. It's still valid.

Clara – Let me see. *(He hands her the phone.)* Yes... But it doesn't include Avignon.

Alex – What?

Clara – The authorisation. It specifically says 'Excluding Avignon'.

He takes the phone back and checks.

Alex – You're right.

Clara – He'd need separate permission for the Avignon festival. It's always dealt with separately.

Alex – And?

Clara – You could refuse him permission for Avignon.

Alex – But he'd still have the rights for Paris.

Clara – They expire in six months. It's March already, nearly the end of the theatre season. If he doesn't get to Avignon, no Paris theatre will take the show in the autumn. Just don't renew the rights in September.

Alex – Yes, but it's Fred. He's a friend. A hopeless case, but still a friend. He's practically ruined himself to book that theatre.

Clara – That's his problem. He should have asked you first. And ruined himself? You said he had nothing to start with. That's the one advantage of being poor: there's not much left to lose.

Alex – Unless he's gone into debt. Do you know what a fifty-seat theatre costs during the festival? And then there's accommodation and everything else. He's staked everything on it. He even sold his car.

Clara – He could have sold his mother for all I care.

Alex – I hardly recognise you, Clara.

Clara – We've waited years for a chance like this, Alex! We may never get another one.

Alex – I can't do that to him.

Clara – Then we'll have to persuade him not to go to Avignon.

Alex – How?

Clara – He can still cancel his contract with the theatre.

Alex – You know how these places work. They take payment the moment you sign.

Clara – Of course they do.

Alex – He's my friend, Clara. He was so excited to tell me. And until yesterday I'd have thought it was wonderful news too.

Alex's mobile rings. He looks at the screen.

Alex – Fred. He's obviously found my mobile number... *(He answers.)* Hi, Fred... Really? No...? Yes, of course I'm delighted. It's just... Yes, what an adventure! Yes, yes, we're at home... Now? Fine, come on up. *(He puts the phone away.)* He's downstairs. He's coming up.

Clara – At this time of night?

Alex – It's not even seven!

Clara – Oh, yes. Of course.

Alex – What on earth am I going to say to him?

Clara – Perhaps he's taken out cancellation insurance.

Alex – Insurance? Fred? Last time I saw him he didn't even have health cover.

Clara – I don't know... Something might prevent him from going.

Alex – Like what?

Clara – If he broke a leg, he couldn't go to Avignon.

Alex – He'd have to break it first. That's hardly something we can count on.

Clara – You could always give him a hand.

Alex – Financially, you mean?

Clara – With the leg!

Alex – You're joking!

Clara – You're right. Poison would be less obvious.

Alex – You're frightening me, Clara.

The doorbell rings. Alex freezes.

Clara – Well? Go and open it.

Alex opens the door and returns with Fred, about their age, with the air of a likeable loser. He is carrying a rolled-up poster secured with a rubber band.

Fred – Nice place you've got.

Alex – Do you know Clara?

Fred – Clara! Of course... It was a long time ago, but...

Clara – Then it probably wasn't me.

Fred – Ah... Are you in the theatre too?

Clara – Mostly dubbing.

Fred – Really? I thought I recognised your voice.

Clara – My voice? I've hardly said two words.

Fred – Aren't you the voice of that lawyer in the streaming series? The one who defends gangsters by day and burgles houses by night?

Clara – Between Dusk and Dawn.

Fred – That's it!

Clara – Yes, that's me. I thought nobody watched it.

Alex – Fred's always been brilliant at recognising voices.

Fred – A sixth sense, you might say.

Alex – Pity the other five don't work.

Fred – Always ready with a joke, Alex. You should try writing comedy.

Alex – Have a seat.

Clara – Something to drink?

Alex – It is aperitif time, after all.

Fred – Thanks, but I've given up drinking.

Alex – Really? When you say you've given up drinking...

Fred – I've given up smoking too.

Alex – Oh... But you haven't given up the theatre.

Fred – I went through a rough patch. That's why you haven't heard much from me. But I've started therapy, taken up exercise again, and now I'm giving it everything I've got.

Alex – Everything?

Fred – I know I'm not twenty any more. I thought, if I don't do it now, when will I? What have I got to lose?

Clara – Twenty thousand euros. *(Fred looks taken aback.)* Isn't that roughly what the festival's going to cost you?

Fred – More like thirty, with all the extras.

Alex – And you've decided to put it all into my play.

Fred – I've always believed in your talent, Alex. You know that.

Alex – So far, you've been the only one.

Fred – This comedy could be a smash hit. So I took the plunge. I sold everything I could, borrowed some money from my brother-in-law and booked a theatre in Avignon.

Clara – Which theatre?

Fred – The Dead End Theatre.

Clara – The Dead End Theatre?

Fred – It's down a dead-end street. I suppose that's why they called it that.

An awkward pause.

Alex – I'm beginning to wonder if giving up drinking was such a good idea.

Clara – So it's all signed?

Fred – I sent the cheque this morning. It was the last available slot.

Clara – The Dead End Theatre... Never heard of it.

Fred – It's new. This will be its first festival. That's why they still had slots. It used to be a hairdresser's.

Clara – A hairdresser's. So not exactly a large theatre.

Fred – Thirty-two seats. And four standing places. I'm joking... About the standing places, I mean.

Alex – And how much did you pay?

Fred – Ten thousand euros for the theatre and a tiny room just above it. Then there's everything else, of course.

Clara – That's an awful lot of money to get fleeced at a hairdresser's.

An uncomfortable silence.

Alex – What Clara means is, you're taking a huge risk. With more than a thousand shows competing for audiences every day in Avignon, you can't be sure of filling the theatre. Even one that used to be a hairdresser's.

Clara – Especially when nobody knows the playwright.

Alex – Or the actors, I imagine. Who have you cast?

Fred – It's not quite settled. You know how it is. I'd rather not say anything until it's confirmed. But I promise they'll be good.

Clara – Of course.

Another awkward pause.

Fred – You don't seem very pleased, Alex.

Alex – I am, I am! It's just... At the moment...

Fred – Listen, I'm not asking you for anything. Certainly not money.

Clara – Well, that's a relief.

Fred – But if you want to help in other ways, you'd be very welcome. You know Avignon. You can never have too many people handing out leaflets. Having the playwright there would be a real plus.

Alex – Yes, of course...

Fred – I can feel there's something wrong. Avignon was your dream too, wasn't it? We talked about it so often. I thought you'd be more excited.

Alex – Of course I am. It's just...

Clara – We're worried about you, that's all. We wouldn't want you to lose everything.

Alex – And between ourselves, it's not even my best play. Are you sure you wouldn't rather put on another one?

Fred – I've been working on this for nearly three years. I'm not going to change the play now. Is there a problem?

Alex – No, no, not at all.

Clara – There is a bit of a problem, Alex.

Fred – What?

Clara – I'll leave you two to talk.

Clara goes out.

Fred – Oh, I nearly forgot. Here's the poster!

Fred unrolls the poster.

Alex – Ah, yes.

Fred – What do you think?

Alex – Wonderful.

Fred – It's only a draft, of course. My sister designed it.

Alex – Is she a graphic designer?

Fred – A beautician. But she's always been good at drawing.

Alex – If you say so.

Fred – All that's missing are the actors' names. Makes it feel real, doesn't it?

Alex – Yes... *(Uncomfortably)* After all those years of dreaming about it.

Fred – I know it's risky, but you only live once. When my girlfriend left me last year, I even thought about ending it all. This project gave me something to live for. Without it, I don't know...

Alex – Oh, hell.

Fred – What's the matter with you, though? Is something wrong? Are you ill? Don't tell me it's cancer or something.

Alex – No, nothing like that.

Fred – Trouble with Clara? Are you splitting up? I don't think I've ever seen you with the same girl for more than a week.

Alex – No, everything's fine with Clara. Actually, it's good news. For me, at least.

Fred – Go on, then.

Alex hesitates.

Alex – Well, I...

Fred – What is it?

Alex – I'm getting married.

Fred – To Clara?

Alex – Yes, to Clara.

Fred – That's fantastic!

Alex – Yes...

Fred – Then why the long face?

Alex – Well, with all the responsibilities I'll have...

Fred – She's pregnant! That's why you're marrying her!

Alex – No! What are you talking about? This isn't the nineteenth century. People don't have to get married just because a woman is pregnant.

Fred – Then what's the problem? About Avignon, I mean.

Alex – It's been ten years of struggling, Fred. I feel as though I've been living off Clara. I was just about to give up and look for a proper job. I'd almost got used to the idea. And now suddenly everything happens at once.

Fred – Don't get carried away. It's a very small theatre, remember. But this time I've got a good feeling. I honestly think we're on the verge of something.

Alex – I don't know, Fred.

Fred – Don't give up on your dreams, Alex. You'll regret it all your life. I believe in this. And I'm not doing it just for myself. I'm doing it for you too. So? Are you with me?

Alex – Of course I am, Fred!

Fred's mobile rings. He answers.

Fred – Hello? Oh, yes! Of course... Right. I'll come straight over. *(He pockets the phone.)* Sorry, I've got to go.

Alex – Everything all right?

Fred – No, no. I'm meeting an actress about one of the parts.

Alex – Great.

Fred – Actually, she's another reason I'm doing the play. I'll explain later. I'll keep you posted, all right?

Alex – Fine.

Clara comes back.

Fred – Bye, Clara! And congratulations!

He leaves, forgetting his poster.

Clara – Congratulations?

Alex – I'll explain.

Clara – Well? Have you sorted it out?

Alex – I couldn't bring myself to tell him.

Clara – What do you mean?

Alex – He was so excited about showing me his poster. Look.

Clara – It's dreadful! It looks as though his little sister drew it.

Alex – You're not far off. But I can't do this to him, Clara. He's put everything into this project.

Clara – Are you serious? I've put everything into you for years! I pay the rent, fill the fridge, do everything around the flat, just so the genius can work. And now you're going to throw away the one chance you've had to get your talent recognised? Because you don't want to hurt the feelings of some loser you used to hang around with before you met me? The good old days, old friends, teenage dreams... How lovely. But that's not real life! It's time to grow up, Alex!

Alex – I don't know what to do, Clara, I swear. I... *(An awkward pause.)* Will you marry me?

She stares at him, dumbfounded.

Clara – Oh, go to hell!

The doorbell rings again.

Alex – It'll be Fred. He forgot his poster.

Clara – Right. If you haven't got the courage, I'll tell him myself.

Alex – Please don't, Clara... *(She goes out.)* Though if you want to, it would save me doing it.

Clara returns with Victoria, a flamboyant, commanding woman a little older than the others, or at least giving that impression.

Alex – Victoria? I thought we were meeting at your place tomorrow afternoon.

Victoria – Hello, Alex! I was nearby and thought I'd drop in. Much easier this way. Hello, my dear. Sorry to turn up unannounced and talk shop in your home.

Clara – Don't worry. I'm in the business too. I'm an actress.

Victoria – Really? I can't say I recognise your face.

Clara – I do mostly dubbing these days.

Victoria – I see... *(Grandly)* Voice actors are to film stars what unknown soldiers are to war heroes. Without them, nothing would happen, but someone else gets the medals. I hope Alex still knows how to rekindle the flame occasionally... *(Clara doesn't appreciate the remark.)* So, Alex, how have you been? When did we last see each other?

Alex – At an audition. You didn't cast me, as it happens.

Victoria – Of course! For the two leading roles in that show that went on to be such a huge hit. You came with that chap...

Alex – Fred.

Victoria – That's the one! In a way, I did you a favour. If you'd carried on acting, you might never have written this wonderful comedy.

Alex – Well... thank you, I suppose.

Victoria – But I'm not here to reminisce. I'm here to talk about the future. Your future!

Alex – So you really liked the play?

Victoria – Liked it? I adored it!

Alex – And you want to stage it.

Victoria – You know me. I don't do things by halves. I've got big plans for this play.

Clara – Can you tell us a little more?

Victoria seems irritated by Clara's interruption.

Victoria – I only read it the day before yesterday. Nothing's final yet, of course. But it will be a major production. A magnificent theatre, naturally. Paris's finest director. Me! And a star-studded cast...

Clara – So I suppose there's no part for me.

Victoria – Everyone has their own field, darling. My ambition is to bring the very best talent together. Once I've secured the exclusive rights, of course. That's why I'm here. *(She produces a document from her bag.)* I've brought the contract. You don't have an agent, do you?

Alex *(indicating Clara)* – You're looking at her.

Victoria – Quite right. Agents just take ten per cent for doing nothing.

Clara – We'll take the time to read it properly, won't we, Alex? A few days won't make any difference.

Victoria – Of course, of course. And what else are you working on, Alex?

Alex – Well, I...

Clara – There's a film in development. And a television series.

Alex – You know how it is. Until the contracts are signed...

Clara – Would you like something to drink?

Victoria – I really mustn't stay. I only dropped in for a moment.

Clara – I'll see you out.

Victoria – Speak very soon, Alex. I'm delighted we're finally going to work together. I have enormous faith in this play.

Alex – Yes, me too. I mean... Goodbye, Victoria. I think we'll do great things together.

Clara shows Victoria out and returns immediately.

Alex – Pinch me. I need to know I'm not dreaming. Victoria de Casteljarnac!

Clara – She's a nasty piece of work, though.

Alex – Why do you keep saying that?

Clara – Did you hear the way she spoke to me?

Alex – You told me we had to make compromises.

Clara – Yes. And we still have a problem.

Alex – What problem?

Clara – Fred! How can you sign an exclusive agreement with Victoria when he's already booked a theatre in Avignon?

Alex – You're right. I'd almost forgotten again.

Clara – This is the chance of a lifetime. I know friends matter, but there are opportunities you just can't afford to miss.

Alex – On the other hand, Fred also wants to take my play to Avignon.

Clara – And you said yourself he's hopeless. He's not going to make your play a success.

Alex – True.

Clara – By the way, why did he congratulate me?

Alex – I told him we're getting married.

Clara – Before you asked me?

Alex – I didn't know what else to say. I just blurted it out.

She glares at him. The doorbell rings.

Clara – At this rate we'll need a waiting room and a receptionist.

Alex – I'll go.

He returns with Fred.

Fred – Sorry, I left my poster. What do you think of it, Clara?

Clara – Fabulous... *(Aside to Alex)* You tell him this time, or I will. Understood? I'll leave you two.

She goes out.

Fred – What's wrong? Have you had an argument?

Alex – Fred, I don't know how to tell you this, but... Victoria has just left.

Fred – Victoria?

Alex – Victoria de Casteljarnac.

Fred – No! You slept with her? Is that why Clara's angry?

Alex – No! Well, yes, but years ago. That's not why Clara's angry. She doesn't even know about it. Don't you dare mention it to her.

Fred – All right.

Alex – Remember? We auditioned for her about ten years ago.

Fred – Yeah.

Alex – Neither of us got the part.

Fred – No.

Alex – That was one of the reasons I turned to writing. I'd pinned all my hopes on that part. I thought it would launch my career.

Fred – If Clara doesn't know you slept with Victoria, what's the problem?

Alex – She wants to produce one of my plays.

Fred – No! Brilliant! Which one?

Alex – The Deal.

Fred – The Deal?

Alex – She wants to premiere it in Avignon this summer.

Fred – Fantastic! Two productions of The Deal at Avignon! Hers will get loads of publicity, I imagine. It'll bring attention to ours as well!

Alex – Yes, except she wants exclusive rights.

Fred – Exclusive rights?

Alex – Naturally. She's putting a lot of money into the production.

Fred – But Alex, I've been working on this for three years!

Alex – Exactly. Three years. That's part of the problem. I thought it was never going to happen. To be honest, I'd forgotten all about it.

Fred – So?

Alex – I'm terribly sorry, Fred.

Fred – But I can't back out now! I've signed a contract, I told you!

Alex – You should have spoken to me first.

Fred – I wanted it to be a surprise. Nobody ever stages your plays!

Alex – Thank you for reminding me.

Fred – And nothing was certain until now.

Alex – I'm really sorry.

Fred – But I've got your authorisation, haven't I?

Alex – For Paris, yes. Not for Avignon.

Fred – I see. So that's how you want to play it.

Alex – I'm sorry.

Fred – And I'm disappointed. Very disappointed.

He stands up.

Alex – Fred, wait...

Fred – I never expected this. Not from you. From a friend.

He turns to leave.

Alex – Please don't go like this.

Fred – I've put everything into this project, Alex. And now you've stabbed me in the heart.

Alex – There's no need to exaggerate.

Fred – Go to hell.

He leaves. Clara returns.

Clara – At least that's settled.

Alex – I don't know. I don't feel very proud of myself.

Clara – I understand. But sometimes you have to make choices. This is your one chance to launch your career, and for both of us finally to make it to the top.

The bell rings again. Clara opens the door and Fred returns.

Alex – If punching me would make you feel better, go ahead. I'd understand.

Fred – That's not why I've come back.

Clara – I'll leave you alone.

She goes out.

Alex – I can't even afford my rent at the moment, but if this show makes any money, I swear I'll pay back everything you've spent on Avignon.

Fred – It's not just about the money, Alex.

Alex – I'm so sorry.

Fred – Say you're sorry one more time and I really will punch you.

Alex – I'm listening.

Fred – You were talking about that audition we did together ten years ago. For Victoria.

Alex – Yes.

Fred – We were both on the final shortlist for the leading roles in a big theatre production.

Alex – After that last rejection I gave up acting. That's why I can't afford to miss this second chance.

Fred – What you don't know is that I got the part.

Alex – You did? Then why didn't you do the show?

Fred – I insisted that they cast you alongside me. I told them it was both of us or neither. In the end, they chose neither.

Alex – No...

Fred – I've never regretted it. Even if it did cost me my career.

Alex – You never told me.

Fred – Because friendship comes first for me, Alex. That's why this feels like a betrayal.

Alex – I had no idea. I swear.

Fred – You went into writing, and it worked out for you. Here we are. But for me this is a knife in the back. I've put my whole life into this project. I won't recover from it.

Alex – Couldn't you find another play?

Fred – You really are a bastard, Alex. How did I not see it back then? If I'd thought of myself and my own career, things might have turned out very differently. Maybe I'd be the one offering you a job today.

Clara returns.

Clara – Are you sure you won't have a drink?

Fred ignores her.

Fred – I admired you, Alex. Your integrity, more than anything. Is this what you're going to become? Another man who betrays his friends to get ahead. Just like everyone else.

Alex – I don't know what to say, Fred.

Fred – You might be rich tomorrow, but you'll still be a very small man.

He leaves.

Clara – I heard what he said.

Alex – I'm betraying a friend to restart my career, when he gave up a real opportunity to try to start mine.

Clara – Are you even sure that story's true?

Alex – Friendship does exist, you know.

Clara – Anyway, it's too late now.

Alex – I haven't signed anything yet.

Clara – Think very carefully, Alex. An opportunity like this may come only once in a playwright's life. If you let it go, I'm not sure I'll have the strength to carry on.

Alex – Carry on... You mean with me?

The doorbell rings.

Clara *(exasperated)* – Not him again! I can't stand that wounded-puppy look. It makes me want to kill someone.

Alex – I'll get it.

He opens the door and returns with Victoria.

Victoria – Sorry, it's me again. The producer is putting a little pressure on me. He wants everything settled before he commits, naturally. Have you read the contract? Signed it?

Alex – Not yet, actually.

Victoria – Listen, Alex, we're running short of time. I need to approach some major actors, and you know how busy they are. If we don't start now... The festival's only four months away. We're late already.

Clara – I'll go through it now.

Victoria – It's all perfectly standard, you know.

Clara starts reading the contract.

Alex – Sure you won't have a drink?

Victoria – No, thanks. I'm in a hurry. I'm meeting an actor to discuss the project, and believe me, he's a major name. If he agrees, everything else will follow. Audiences come to the theatre for the stars, after all.

Alex – Right... Whatever the play happens to be.

Victoria – A good play helps, of course. And yours is brilliant. I've told you.

Clara – So you want exclusive rights.

Victoria – Naturally. Is that a problem?

Clara – No, not at all.

Victoria – There will have to be a few changes, of course.

Alex – Sorry?

Victoria – The plot is extraordinary, but the dialogue feels a little dated, doesn't it?

Alex – I wrote the play four years ago.

Victoria – Things move so fast these days... *(Laughing)* Or perhaps you were already a bit old-fashioned four years ago.

Clara – I see you want to change the title too.

Victoria – The Deal doesn't exactly shout 'comedy', does it?

Alex – It's what the play is about.

Victoria – People go to the theatre to unwind! To laugh! To enjoy themselves! The Deal... It sounds like an office meeting.

Alex – What would you call it, then?

Victoria – I was thinking... A Threesome.

Alex – A Threesome?

Victoria – Sounds more like a comedy, doesn't it?

Alex – But there isn't a threesome in the play.

Victoria – Not yet.

Alex – What do you mean, not yet?

Clara – According to the contract, Victoria will rewrite the dialogue.

Victoria – Just to make it more contemporary, more fun. And I'll expand the romantic farce. That'll justify the title.

Alex – The Deal?

Victoria – A Threesome!

Alex – So you want to rewrite the entire play.

Victoria – We call it an adaptation.

Alex – And you'll take a share of the royalties for that.

Clara *(reading)* – Fifty per cent.

Alex – I see. *(Dryly)* My name will still be on the poster, I suppose.

Victoria – Not as big as the actors' names, naturally. They're what sells tickets. And you know the size of their egos.

Clara *(quoting the contract)* – 'Based on an original idea by Alex Dupin. Adaptation and dialogue by Victoria de Casteljarnac.'

Alex – You called this a standard contract. You never said you wanted to rewrite the play.

Victoria – 'Rewrite' is a bit strong. Think of it as... smoothing out the rough edges.

Alex – And by that you mean sanding away anything that might upset anyone, until it becomes just another tired bedroom farce.

Victoria – We have to think of the audience too! These days, the people who can afford fifty euros for a comfortable velvet seat in a Paris theatre are mostly retired middle-class people. And their widows.

Alex – Hardly surprising we don't attract younger audiences when every theatre puts on the same tired comedies year after year.

Victoria – Look, Alex. If you wanted to make experimental theatre, you shouldn't have sent me your script.

Clara – You can see why he's upset. He'd be giving away half his royalties.

Victoria – If that's all, I can come down to forty per cent. I really do want to produce the play.

Alex – I'll need some time to think about it.

Victoria looks offended.

Victoria – Fine. But not too much time. I've got other scripts waiting on my desk, you know.

Clara – I'll see you out.

They go out. Alex looks crushed. Clara returns.

Alex – Well...?

Clara looks uncomfortable too.

Clara – We knew she was ruthless. She does seem willing to negotiate. We're entitled to have conditions of our own.

Alex – I feel as though I'm selling my soul to the devil.

Clara – Only you can decide whether it's worth it.

She goes out. He looks at the contract. He signs it and leaves.

Blackout.

Lights up.

Clara returns with a coffee pot and two cups. She looks at the contract, sits on the sofa, pours herself a coffee and drinks it, lost in thought. Alex comes back with an unlit cigarette between his lips.

Clara – I thought you'd given up smoking.

Alex – I need one.

He is about to light it. She gets up and stops him.

Clara – Have a coffee instead. Didn't you sleep?

Alex – I don't know where I stand any more, Clara. I don't even know what I really want.

Clara – Look, Alex, I've been thinking too. Before Victoria called, we were fairly happy, weren't we?

Alex – Certainly. You hated your job, I didn't have one, and you paid the rent.

Clara – Yes, but since that woman offered to produce your play, we haven't stopped fighting.

Alex – I'll do whatever you want, Clara. I don't want to lose you.

Clara – I won't walk away from you, Alex. Whatever you decide.

Alex – I've signed the contract.

Clara – I saw. I hope you didn't do it just for me.

Alex – You were right. It's time I grew up and faced the world as it is.

Clara – I've been thinking too. I don't want to lose you either.

Alex – I'm here, Clara. I'll always be here for you. Even when I'm a successful playwright.

Clara – That's not what I mean. I don't want to lose the man I met, the man I fell in love with. I don't want you to become someone else, Alex. Someone who can betray a friend and betray himself just to get ahead. I can't ask that of you.

Clara picks up the contract and tears it in two.

Alex – Are you sure?

Clara – Absolutely.

Alex – It's strange. I've dreamt of a contract like that for years. And you can't imagine what a relief it is to watch you tear it up.

Clara – Then we've done the right thing. Sometimes you have to trust your instincts. And mine say you shouldn't sell your talent cheap.

Alex – You're right. And as long as you believe in me, we'll get there in the end. I know we will.

He kisses her.

Clara – What about you? Is that other offer still open?

Alex – What offer?

Clara – You mentioned a marriage contract.

Alex – You're the best thing that's ever happened to me, Clara.

They kiss again.

Blackout.

Clara is sitting on the sofa. Alex enters carrying two shopping bags.

Clara – All right? Not too heavy?

Alex – And to think some people pay to sweat in a gym, when the membership fee would buy you two bags full of groceries.

Clara – Shall I pour you a drink? Help you relax?

Alex – I'd love one.

They embrace. The doorbell rings.

Alex – Business is picking up again, I see.

Clara opens the door and comes back with Fred.

Fred – I've just received your permission for Avignon... Exclusive rights and everything. I don't know what to say. Thank you!

Alex – I've thought it over. We both have. In the end, we decided we might as well stick with our mistakes.

Fred – Thank you for trusting me. You won't regret it, I promise.

Alex – Don't worry about that. I already regret it.

Clara – We're here to support you, Fred. We're all in the same boat now.

Alex – Or going down with it.

Clara – So perhaps you can finally tell us who's coming aboard.

Fred hesitates.

Alex – Who are your actors?

Clara – We're not expecting stars. Don't worry. But perhaps we know some of them.

Fred – Well... the cast isn't quite complete. There's me, of course. And that girl I told you about.

Clara – Everyone else turned you down, then?

Fred – You know how this business works. First you say you've got a director, even when you haven't, so some fairly well-known actors will agree to sign on. Then, once you've got the actors, you go looking for a well-known director and tell them you've already got stars.

Alex – So you haven't got anyone. Let alone a producer.

Fred – Why don't the two of you act in it with me?

Clara – Isn't that what you'd been planning all along?

Alex – Of course! And if I'm acting in my own play, you won't even have to pay me any royalties.

Fred looks a little embarrassed.

Fred – All right, I admit the thought crossed my mind.

An awkward silence.

Alex – Fine. We'll do Avignon together. I owe you that much. If only to thank you for the sacrifice you made for me ten years ago.

Fred – Brilliant! I couldn't dream of a better cast: you, me, Clara and Chloe!

Alex – Chloe?

Fred – The girl I told you about! I said this project was partly for her. She's just starting out in the profession, you see.

Clara – Of course. So entirely out of the goodness of your heart, you've decided to give a beginner her big break. How generous.

Alex – That's not a threesome any more, it's a foursome. Is she any good, at least? I mean... as an actress.

Fred – I'll ring her with the good news. Then we can all have a drink together. You can get to know her.

Alex looks distinctly uneasy. Fred dials a number on his mobile.

Blackout.

The stage is empty. The landline rings. The answering machine picks up.

Alex *(off)* – You've reached Alex and Clara. We can't answer right now, but you can leave a message on our landline answering machine. One of the last of its kind still working anywhere in the world. We'll reply as soon as the carrier pigeon gets back.

Clara *(off)* – Mum, if it's you and it's an emergency, call an ambulance on 15...

A beep.

Victoria *(off)* – Hello, it's Victoria. I hear you've decided to do the play with Fred after all. He must have made you feel guilty. I bet he told you that pathetic story about the audition, how he supposedly gave up a leading role out of friendship for you. He tells everyone that story when he's drunk. But I can tell you it isn't true. I was casting the show, and there was no way I was hiring that hopeless actor. I didn't cast you because Fred told me you wouldn't accept the role unless I cast him too. Anyway, good luck with the project. I hope you don't regret your choice... *(A crackle on the line.)* That bastard Alex. Sleeps with me to get me to read his stupid play, and the moment I say yes, he goes and produces it with someone else... Oh, hell. I haven't hung up!

End.

About the author

Born in 1955 in Auvers-sur-Oise (France), Jean-Pierre Martinez first took to the stage as a drummer in several rock bands before becoming a semiologist in advertising. He then worked as a television screenwriter before returning to the stage as a playwright. He has written around a hundred scripts for television and 123 plays, some of which have become classics (*Friday the 13th, Strip Poker*). His plays have been performed in more than 100 countries and translated into around 50 languages.

Amateur and professional theatre groups looking for plays to perform can download Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays for free from his websites :

https://jeanpierremartinez.net/

https://comediatheque.net/

However, performance rights, which constitute fair compensation for the author's work, are a legal obligation. Whether you are an amateur or a professional, you must request authorization to perform the play and pay the corresponding royalties for the production.

Jean-Pierre Martinez is represented by the Society of Dramatic Authors and Composers (SACD).

To get in touch with Jean-Pierre Martinez and request authorization to perform one of his works, please use the contact form on his websites.

Jean-Pierre Martinez recently returned to music, writing original songs inspired by his poems and plays.

With **Jean-Pierre Martinez Music**, he extends that creative universe through original songs: short stories in musical form, humorous or melancholy, in which each song sometimes becomes a miniature theatrical scene.

https://jeanpierremartinezmusic.com/

Other plays by the same author translated in English:

Monologues

Happy Dogs
Like a fish in the air
Short Stories

Comedies for 2

A Thwarted Vocation
EuroStar
Heads and Tails
Him and Her
Is there a pilot in the audience?
Last chance encounter
New Year's Eve at the Morgue
Not even dead
Pentimento
Preliminaries
Running on empty
Russian Roulette at the Kremlin
The Costa Mucho Castaways
The Dressing Gown
The Joker
The Rope
The Window across the courtyard

Comedies for 3

A brief moment of eternity
A simple business dinner
An innocent little murder
Cards on the Table
Cheaters
Crash Zone
Fragile, Handle with care
Friday the 13th
Horizons
Ménage à trois
One small step for a woman, one giant leap backward for Mankind
The Ways of Chance

Comedies for 4

A Cuckoo's nest
A hell of a night
A Skeleton in the Closet
Back to stage
Bed and Breakfast
Casket for two
Crisis and Punishment
Déjà vu
Family Portrait
Family Tree
Four stars
Friday the 13th
Gay friendly
Hangover
Happy Hour
How to get rid of your best friends
Is there a critic in the audience?
Is there an author in the audience?
Just a moment before the end of the world
Lovestruck at Swindlemore Hall
One marriage out of two
Perfect In-laws
Quarantine
Requiem for a Stradivarius
Strip Poker
Surviving Mankind
The Deal
The Fishbowl
The Perfect Son-in-Law
The Pyramids
The Smell of Money
The Tourists
The Worst Best Man Ever

Comedies for 5 to 6

All's well that starts badly
Christmas Eve at the Police Station
Crisis and Punishment
Critical but Stable
Dead End Boulevard
In lieu of flowers...
King of Fools
The Castaways of New Year's Eve
The President's Draw
The Rebels
Traffic Jam on Graveyard Lane

Comedies for 7 or more

At the bar counter
Backstage Comedy
Blue Flamingos
Check to the Kings
Christmas Eve at the Police Station
False exit
In flagrante delirium
Just like a Christmas movie
Miracle at Saint Mary Juana Abbey
Music does not always soothe ...
Neighbours' Day
Nicotine
Of Vegetables and Books
Offside
Open Hearts
Reality Show
Save our Savings
Special Dedication
Stories and Prehistories
Such a lovely village
The House of Our Dreams
The Jackpot
The Performance is not cancelled
The Most Beautiful Village in France
The Worst Village in England
Welcome aboard!
White Coats, Dark Humour

Collection of sketches

Apocalypse
Backstage Bits
Blackouts
Don't panic!
Dramedies
Enough is Enough
Ethan and Eve
Every Colour under the Sun
For real and for fun
Funny Stories
Him and Her
Killer Sketches
Lockdown Shorts
Lost time Chronicles
Memoirs of a Suitcase
No Sense Off Limits
Now and then
Of Animals and Men
Open Hearts
Open Letters
Park Bench Shorts
Sidewalk Chronicles
Stage Briefs
Stories to die for

All of Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays can be downloaded

free of charge from his websites:

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