

KATE AND COMET

A full-length play

By Jason Half

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KATE AND COMET by Jason Half

CAST: (4M, 2F)

KATE SAMPSON, early 30s

CHARLIE HANLON, 40s

RAY GILLETTE, 30s - 40s

ANNIE RAFFERTY, mid-20s

GUS AVERY, 20s

IRVING SCHRAM, late 20s

[If needed, Gus and Schram can be played by the same actor, with Schram omitted in Act Two, Scene Five.]

PLACE: Chicago

TIME: 1958

ACT ONE:

Scene One - Studio (*Commander Bill* set) and control room
Scene Two - Charlie's office
Scene Three - Costume room
Scene Four - Charlie's office
Scene Five - Costume room
Scene Six - Studio, bare

ACT TWO:

Scene One - Studio (*Kate and Comet* set)
Scene Two - Charlie's office
Scene Three - Costume room
Scene Four - Charlie's office
Scene Five - Studio (*Kate and Comet* set)

Settings can be suggested by a few key props or furniture: desk for Charlie's office, clothes rack for the costume room, etcetera.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

Darkness. Audio clips of happy 1950s television programming. The cues vary in length, as if flipping channels. The clips get shorter and crescendo until:

LIGHTS UP on COMMANDER BILL (RAY GILLETTE) and SPACE ASSISTANT MAX (GUS AVERY) in astronaut costumes. They look out into limbo, cautious. A large moon rock sits nearby, a moon crater rises from the floor.

GUS

I don't believe it!

RAY

Believe it, Max.

GUS

Well, it's hard to believe, sir.

RAY

Terra Incognita, Max. Unknown territory, ready to explore. It's exciting but also very dangerous.

Max consults a flashing gizmo.

GUS

The Atmosphere-o-scope says that the air here is breathable. What a stroke of luck!

Max starts to unfasten his space helmet.

RAY

Wait Max! Let me go first. If the Atmosphere-o-scope is wrong, I'm counting on you to get me back to the ship.

GUS

But Commander Bill!

RAY

No! I'm prepared to take the risk.

Commander Bill nobly removes his helmet, breathes in... and out again.

GUS

Oh sir. It's a pleasure to work with you.

Gus takes off his helmet.

RAY

What a queer little planet. Atmosphere, yet no sign of life.

GUS

Not yet, sir. But we haven't looked behind that rock or in that crater. And I don't like the looks of that crater.

Max approaches a ground crater with suspicion, tiptoeing up to it. With focus on Max, Bill grabs his crotch through his space suit and adjusts himself.

GUS (CONT'D)

What are you hiding there, crater? If there's aliens, I'm warning you. Better not jump out at me.

As Max bends to peer in:

RAY

MAX! Stop fooling around and read me the coordinates.

Bill consults a space map.

GUS

Of course. Navigator reads three hundred light years by fifty thousand vectors....

RAY

Which places us right here, in quadrant five of the nebula system.

GUS

But there's nothing in quadrant five but empty space!

RAY

Tell that to the planet we're standing on.

GUS

(Yelling at planet floor)

You're not supposed to be in quadrant five!!

RAY

Unknown territory. A planet where a planet doesn't belong.

GUS

So what do we do, Commander Bill?

RAY

We call our discovery into the Earth Control Room. They can advise us from there.

Bill takes a bulky radio out and speaks into it.

RAY

(Into radio)

This is Commander Bill of the Space Brigade, reporting to Earth Control Room.

GUS

Also Space Assistant Max.

RAY

Repeat: this is Commander Bill calling Earth Control. Come in, Earth Control.

LIGHTS UP on another part of the stage, where CHARLIE HANLON, in tie and rolled up shirt sleeves, frowns out into limbo.

RAY (CONT'D)

This is Commander Bill! Can you hear me?

Bill pulls at his crotch again.

CHARLIE

What the hell is he doing?

GUS

What's wrong, Commander Bill?

RAY

I can't get through to Earth Control.

GUS

Maybe we're out too far to send the signal.

RAY

Or maybe someone--or some thing--is blocking our communication.

GUS

Commander Bill!

RAY

I don't like the looks of this. Not one bit.

GUS

I'm scared! All these rocks and craters, and now we're cut off from Earth Control... Lets head back to the ship and say goodbye to this uncharted chunk of dirt.

Max starts to leave, but Bill physically stops him.

RAY

No Max! Now listen: we are proud Americans from the Planet Earth, and we have a chance to discover new territory.

It's right here under our feet, Max. You want to be a good American, don't you?

GUS
Of course, Commander Bill.

RAY
We've been in tough scrapes before, Max. And we always come through, the two of us.

GUS
I know we do, sir.

KATE SAMPSON enters, approaches Charlie. Bill pulls on his crotch again.

KATE
Mr. Hanlon, I need to ask you something.

CHARLIE
What the hell is he *doing*??

GUS
According to my space diary, this is our 43rd mission together.

RAY
43rd, huh?

GUS
Yeah. And I hope I live to see the 44th.

KATE
What? Who?

CHARLIE
That! Him! Ray! He keeps grabbing his crotch.

RAY
(As he grabs his crotch)
Well, you will, buddy.

CHARLIE
What the HELL!?!

KATE
Oh, he's-- I don't know why he's doing it, but he knows he's in a shoulder shot, the camera didn't catch it.

RAY
As long as you follow my rules for investigating the unknown.

KATE
He knows what he's doing.

RAY

Do you remember Commander Bill's Rules?

GUS

Sure I do!

CHARLIE

That's all we need, kids seeing that and thinking it was this week's hidden message.

RAY

Rule Number One?

GUS

Learn all you can about the terrain.

RAY

That's right, Max. Learn the terrain. The unknown isn't so scary when you know what you're looking at.

KATE

Mr. Hanlon, we need to talk.

CHARLIE

Is this about your Super Doctor?

KATE

No, it's about your meeting with Ray at three o'clock.

GUS

I'm looking.

CHARLIE

And what about it?

KATE

I want to be there too.

GUS

(Looking around)

It's kinda dark, Commander Bill.

CHARLIE

It's just a meeting. Nothing you need to be a part of.

RAY

Then use your space light.

GUS

(Remembering)

Oh yeah!

Bill and Max scan the ground with flashlights.

KATE

Then let me attend so I can decide for myself.

CHARLIE

Kate, we're discussing business.

KATE

You're discussing the show. The fate of the show.

CHARLIE

Kate...

KATE

And as the writer of 43 episodes of *Commander Bill and the Space Brigade*, I have a vested interest. Wouldn't you say?

Bill and Max are at the lip of the crater.

RAY

Rule Number Two, Max?

GUS

Rule Number Two: Always determine where the danger lies.

CHARLIE

No. What I need to talk about, between Ray and me, it's private.

RAY

That's right. And remember: danger could come from the place you least expect.

Max shines his light in the crater.

KATE

Private?

CHARLIE

That's right. It's about Ray's career.

KATE

Ray's career is handcuffed to my own. Which is not a pleasant thought.

CHARLIE

Listen, I'll meet with you next week when the picture's a bit clearer.

KATE

That's too late. And I'm used to rough drafts.

GUS

(Peering into crater)

Why, there's nothing in there but a bunch of dust!

RAY
You see?

Relieved, Max sits down on the rock.
Bill adjusts himself.

KATE
I'll see you at three.

CHARLIE
Sandy won't let you in.

KATE
I'll have her buzz.

CHARLIE
I won't answer.

KATE
I'll have her call.

CHARLIE
I'll take my phone off.

KATE
I'll pick the lock.

CHARLIE
Kate....

KATE
With a bobby pin. That I'll borrow from wardrobe.

RAY
What did I tell you?

GUS
(Counting on his fingers)
Learn the terrain. Learn where your enemy might come from.

RAY
And Rule Number Three?

KATE
Three o'clock.

CHARLIE
Kate!

Charlie and Kate stare at each other,
obstinate.

GUS
Wait, don't tell me....

CHARLIE

I'll see you at three fifteen. Not a minute before. You know something? You're not attractive when you're pushy.

Charlie exits. Kate looks ahead, watching the show.

GUS

Rule Number Three: if you have to fight, then you--

A large ALIEN-LIKE TENTACLE reaches from behind the rock and grabs Max, pulling him out of sight. As he goes:

GUS

Fiiiiiiiiiiiiighhht!

Max's yell trails off, as if falling down a bottomless crater. Bill hurries to the rock, looks behind.

RAY

MAX! Max!! MAX!!

Ray straightens, looks out determinedly, mirroring Kate on opposite side.

RAY (CONT'D)

(A mantra)

Rule Number Three. If you have to fight, then you fight. And you get rid of your enemy before they have the chance to get rid of you.

SCENE TWO

Charlie's office: desk and chairs.
Charlie stands on one side of the desk,
Ray, still in astronaut outfit, stands
opposite. On the desk sits a tossed
pair of torn white underwear briefs.

RAY

I want her fired, Charlie! Send her packing.

CHARLIE

This is not--

RAY

Terminated. Whatever the procedure, whatever the turn of
phrase...

CHARLIE

Ray, this is not acceptable.

RAY

That's why I'm saying! That's why I'm asking!

CHARLIE

(Gesturing at the underwear)

No, not that. This! Your... On my....

RAY

It's evidence! Exhibit A.

CHARLIE

Get them off.

RAY

(Remembering)

OH!

CHARLIE

Ray.

RAY

You know how I got them off?

CHARLIE

I don't care. I just want them--

RAY

I had to take this-- Where are the...? This pair of scissors
I had to take and carefully run 'em between my leg and
those... Those...

CHARLIE

Yes. Those--

RAY

Those demon briefs!

CHARLIE

All right! Now just get 'em off my desk.

RAY

Yes, all right, we work at a television network.

CHARLIE

And it's not acceptable--

RAY

Which means we work on a network of trust. You and me, we trust each other. We rely on each other. And I trust that, when I change into my Commander Bill costume ten minutes before taping, all of my clothing will fit.

CHARLIE

Why are you still wearing your space suit?

RAY

To make a point. I am making a point.

CHARLIE

Looks like the rest of your suit fits.

RAY

That's not the point.

CHARLIE

Take your shorts off my desk.

RAY

If one piece of clothing doesn't fit, the whole costume suffers.

CHARLIE

Ray...

Through Ray's speech, Charlie uses a pencil to maneuver the underwear into a wastebasket.

RAY

At first I thought, They're a little tight. But there they were, right by the outfit, she knows what she's doing. What's 'er name, Millie, Molly, the costume girl. And I get on the set, get ready, and I think, Geez, a little too close for comfort. Not much room to grow. So I get in front of the cameras, too late now, and the more I move around the more these things cut into me. By the time I'm talking with the Octopus Monster in the crater, act three, forget it, I've lost circulation in both legs.

Finally--Finally!--we're done and I grab those aforementioned scissors and escape my bounds and what'd'ya think I find?

Ray grabs the briefs from the wastebasket, holds out the label to Charlie.

CHARLIE

Aww, Ray!

RAY

See that? What's that say? S! S!! I am an L. Yet here on the label, clearly, is an S.

Ray throws the briefs on the desk in triumph.

CHARLIE

(Reacting to the briefs)

For God's sake.

RAY

She knows I'm L, Millie-Molly, she knows. Has it written down on her little clipboard. No excuse. None. Where's the trust?

CHARLIE

Ray, sit down.

RAY

Exhibit S. She has to go, Charlie.

CHARLIE

We need to talk. You and me.

RAY

Do I have your word?

CHARLIE

What word?

RAY

On the girl. Firing the girl.

CHARLIE

No. Just sit down.

RAY

Charlie...

CHARLIE

Sit!

Ray sits. Charlie gets rid of the underwear again.

Ray. CHARLIE

How ya doin'? RAY

You need to listen to me now. CHARLIE

I always do. RAY

Just now, you talked about trust. CHARLIE

I did. Network of trust, I said. This is a network. RAY

Actually, this is a-- CHARLIE

And you're the program manager. And I'm the on-air talent. RAY

So I need you to trust me when I-- CHARLIE

I always do. RAY

Good. CHARLIE

Now we're talking. RAY

I need--Ray--I need you to trust me on something. We need to be on the same page. CHARLIE

What page? Tell me, I'm there. RAY

This Monday, we've got someone coming to the station, someone important. He wants to talk to you, Ray. CHARLIE

Important. A sponsor? RAY

Yes, a sponsor. Potential. He's not sold yet. CHARLIE

What happened to Sugar Jets? RAY

CHARLIE

They only bought four weeks.

RAY

Then why didn't sales--?

CHARLIE

Sales tried to get them to renew. No dice.

RAY

That's a damn shame.

CHARLIE

It's regrettable.

RAY

It's a damn shame. My boys eat Sugar Jets for breakfast, you know that? They ask for it by name. I'm that good.

CHARLIE

Now comes a new sponsor.

RAY

"Sugar Jets. The triple treat of sugar toasted oats and wheat. So jet up... with Sugar Jets."

CHARLIE

And I need you-- Ray. And I need you to help me sell this potential new sponsor on the show. Make him see it's the right fit.

RAY

Uh-huh. And is it the right fit?

CHARLIE

Well, it's a sponsor.

RAY

What're they selling? What of theirs am I selling?

CHARLIE

First, let me say that we need this guy. To keep the show going, we need this sponsor.

RAY

Is it breakfast cereal?

CHARLIE

The product? It's not cereal per se.

RAY

I do really well with breakfast cereal.

CHARLIE

I know you do. But listen to me here...

RAY
Before Sugar Jets we had Wheat Hearts!

CHARLIE
I know.

RAY
And what about the Post Corn Toasties?!

CHARLIE
Now this sponsor--

RAY
"Fresher, crispier corn flakes with a new toastier flavor."

CHARLIE
--Who we need very badly--

RAY
Who says?

CHARLIE
(Overlapping)
--isn't sold on-- What?

RAY
Who says we need this anti-breakfast non-cereal sponsor?

CHARLIE
I sez! Sales and accounting and program budgeting sez, that's who. Anyone who's actually looking at the bottom line around here, that's who.

RAY
I don't like the sound of it.

CHARLIE
You don't even know what it is yet!

RAY
Then give it to me straight. What are you trying to hide?

CHARLIE
I'm trying to tell you, I've been trying to tell you--

RAY
Then spit it out, man. Who is it? What is it?

CHARLIE
It's a great fit.

RAY
Give it to me.

Let it sink in. CHARLIE

Stand and deliver. RAY

Ray? CHARLIE

I'm here. RAY

It's Schram. CHARLIE

There is a pause.

Ray? CHARLIE (CONT'D)

RAY
(Unbelieving)
It's.... Schram?

Now hear me out. CHARLIE

RAY
Schram? As in...? Waitaminute waitaminute waitaminute....

Kate enters the office, moves to
Charlie.

KATE
Hello, gentlemen. It's three-fifteen.

CHARLIE
What? No, Kate, not yet.

RAY
Schram!?

KATE
What about Schram?

CHARLIE
It's not-- I'm just--

KATE
What's going on, Ray? Is this about the show?

RAY
Kate, I'm glad you're here.

CHARLIE

You need to give us another--

KATE

Because if it's about the show, we should all talk about it.

RAY

Yes, we all should.

CHARLIE

I haven't finished with Ray.

KATE

(To Ray)

Why are you still wearing your costume?

RAY

To make a point. Let me show you something.

Ray moves to the waste basket, starts to retrieve the underwear.

CHARLIE

No, stop! There's more pressing--

RAY

Pressing! Take a look at--

CHARLIE

Now stop it! Ray, put down the trash can. Kate--

KATE

Sandy sent me in.

CHARLIE

And I'm sending you out. I gotta talk with Ray first.

RAY

No. No. I want her here. She'll be writing the spots, she should hear this too.

KATE

Thank you, Ray.

RAY

Well Charlie? What're you waiting for?

A pause, and Charlie gives in.

CHARLIE

The show that taped today. That's your last one sponsored by Sugar Jets cereal.

KATE

That's right. They had a four week contract. What's the problem?

CHARLIE

There's no one signed up after them.

KATE

What? Sales should have lined up a sponsor weeks ago.

CHARLIE

Oh come on. This shouldn't be a surprise to either of you.

RAY

It is to me!

CHARLIE

It's a costly show to budget here at the station.

KATE

It's just one show. 11:30 on Saturdays.

CHARLIE

Multiple sets, elaborate costumes, new creatures every week.

KATE

And the kids tune in to see those new creatures.

CHARLIE

Not enough of 'em.

RAY

My kids do.

CHARLIE

It's the most expensive show we got with the most limited audience to boot, nothing but schoolboys. Not a good combination.

KATE

Then let's talk audience share. How do you expect us to compete with network programs like Buck Rogers? They've got bigger budgets and national distribution. And here we are, stuck in Chicago.

RAY

That's right. What happened to the network of trust?

CHARLIE

That's your phrase. We're a station, not a network.

RAY

We're a network.

CHARLIE

We're a station. A network has affiliates running the same programming.

KATE

And we're stuck in Chicago.

RAY

Then what about the N? W-G-N: World's Greatest Network.

KATE & CHARLIE

(Together)

World's Greatest Newspaper.

RAY

We're not a newspaper.

CHARLIE

No, but the money came from one.

KATE

So we need a sponsor to keep going.

CHARLIE

And sales has tossed us one. Trouble is, he's not sold on the show.

KATE

And that sponsor is--

RAY & CHARLIE

Schram.

CHARLIE

Irving Schram.

KATE

Of Schram's Chicago Cream Cheese.

RAY

And there's our problem.

KATE

Where's our problem?

RAY

He's not the right sponsor.

KATE

He has money and a product to sell! He looks pretty right to me.

RAY

Well not to me! And I'm speaking as Commander Bill now!

CHARLIE

Kate. Bill--I mean Ray.

KATE

Come on, Ray.

RAY

No, you come on! Commander Bill does not sell cream cheese! He sells breakfast cereal, maybe the occasional breakfast drink. But cream cheese, it's too...

CHARLIE

Soft?

KATE

Girly?

RAY

Jewish. You know what I mean. The kids who watch my show, they eat their toast and butter, not bagel and a smear.

KATE

Ray, you're being ridiculous.

RAY

Not just me! Ask Schram. He doesn't think the show's a good fit for his cream cheese and he's right.

KATE

He's the only way you'll be able to stay in that suit, you know that?

RAY

This suit! What's the name of that wardrobe girl downstairs? Millie? Molly?

KATE

What about her?

CHARLIE

Now listen! Both of you. Irv Schram is sending his son to the station on Monday to talk it through. I told him he should at least meet Ray--

KATE

He can meet me too.

RAY

He can meet her too.

CHARLIE

Fine. If you want to save the Space Brigade, take the son around the studio, turn on the charm. Schram Senior is lukewarm on your show.

KATE

Has he even seen it?

CHARLIE

He doesn't have to. He wants to sponsor Kitchen Cooking with Bessie Majors.

RAY

That's a good show.

CHARLIE

It's taken! Gold Medal owns it and since you have nothing else lined up, sales threw the cream cheese to you. Gift horses, Ray. Mouths!

RAY

Bagels, Charlie.

CHARLIE

Listen, you. If you want to keep Commander Bill up in space and on the air, you need to drop this ethnic talk and win him over. Pitchman, sell thyself!

KATE

I'll help you, Ray. We'll work on it. We've got to sell him on this.

RAY

I don't know...

KATE

What don't you know?

RAY

I think we should hold out for someone else.

CHARLIE

There's no one else to hold out for! You don't land Schram and the show gets pulled. We run cartoons in the slot, they're a hell of a lot cheaper than bankrolling new planets.

RAY

And this is how we're treated? Senior Schram sends Schram Junior?

KATE

Maybe that's a good thing. He's young. Ray, maybe if we talk to him together...

RAY

You know what? The news desk.

CHARLIE

Here we go...

KATE

What about it?

RAY

I'm friends with Bob Root in the news room.

KATE

Ray, think about this.

RAY

I just tell him that I'm free, in two weeks' time I wind up delivering the news. Maybe sports.

CHARLIE

Come on, knock it off.

RAY

From outer space to the News at Nine in two weeks.

KATE

Ray, listen, you're the star and I write for you.

RAY

I know. We were good together.

KATE

But I'm saying, I need this Ray. I need to keep writing the show. I'm not like you, I don't have backup plans.

RAY

You can write somewhere else. Come with me and write for the news.

KATE

I'm not a journalist, Ray.

RAY

You know how to type.

KATE

I've been to secretarial school.

RAY

Then write for another show around here.

CHARLIE

Let's get back to the point. We'll plan on meeting Monday, the three of us.

KATE

I'll be there.

CHARLIE

All right, fine. Ray?

RAY

You know me. I'm always looking for a chance to prove what I can do. Maybe this news desk is my opportunity.

KATE

Ray, just look at you. Look at him, Mr. Hanlon. Standing there in his Commander Bill space suit.

RAY

To prove a point.

KATE

For 43 weeks, every Saturday at eleven-thirty a.m., you've travelled through space and you've acted as a hero to a countless number of admiring boys.

CHARLIE

Oh no, we've counted.

KATE

You're a hero to these kids.

RAY

The space brigadiers.

KATE

That's right. They worship you, Ray. Because they know that every week Commander Bill will act as bravely and as justly as they want to be. Think of your two boys. When they grow up, the values that you teach them will shape them into fine young men. So I look at you in your space suit and I think, now that's the point. You're teaching a new generation how to act because of what you do.

A pause.

RAY

Kate?

KATE

Yeah?

RAY

Maybe there's more missions for Commander Bill after all.

CHARLIE

You'll meet with Schram's son on Monday?

RAY

Yeah, I'll meet with him.

KATE

Between the two of us, Ray, we can sell anything.

RAY
There's just one thing left before I agree.

KATE
What's that?

Ray walks over to the wastebasket,
picks out the underwear and holds them
up.

RAY
Her name's Millie. Maybe Molly.

SCENE THREE

The costume room. A rack of clothes, a cluttered sewing desk. A charming little girl ragdoll sits to the side.

Kate enters, purposeful.

KATE

Millie? Hello, Millie?

She looks around. No one else is there.

KATE (CONT'D)

Molly? Great.

Kate notices the doll, picks it up.

KATE (CONT'D)

(Charmed by the doll)

Aaawww... No. Remember why you're here.

Kate props the doll onto a chair and addresses it.

KATE (CONT'D)

Millie, we need to talk. Listen. You made a mistake and it compromised a performer during the show, and that cannot happen again. No, no excuses, I don't want to hear 'em.

ANNIE RAFFERTY enters carrying a bundle of green and white vests. Kate doesn't see her.

KATE (CONT'D)

I'm speaking on behalf of the show, Millie. A lot of people depend on you doing your job so we can do ours. We must all strive to be professional.

ANNIE

Then don't mind me. Keep at it. But her name's Patricia.

KATE

Are you Millie?

ANNIE

No.

KATE

Oh. Molly?

ANNIE

No.

KATE

I need to see Millie or Molly in wardrobe.

ANNIE

There's no one here by that name. Just me and Patricia. And now you.

Annie starts sewing buttons on vests.

KATE

Do you know who I mean?

ANNIE

Not really, no. Before I got here Hazel worked the shop. Her husband got sick and she took a leave of absence four weeks ago.

KATE

That's not who I want.

ANNIE

Wonder how they're doing. Hazel and Mr. Hazel.

KATE

(Trying to stay businesslike)

Tell me your name. Please.

ANNIE

Okay, I'll play. Annie Rafferty.

KATE

Miss Rafferty. I'm Kate Sampson.

ANNIE

I know.

KATE

You do?

ANNIE

Well, I knew you were K.L. Sampson. From the production list. Hadn't heard the Kate part. It suits you. What's your L?

KATE

That's not important. Miss Rafferty.

ANNIE

Annie. A for Annie.

KATE

Did you costume the *Commander Bill* program last week?

ANNIE

That's your show, isn't it?

KATE

That's why I'm here. We need to address a problem.

ANNIE

With the octopus monster?

KATE

The Kryton Five space mutant. No, not with that.

ANNIE

Did it work okay?

KATE

It was fine.

ANNIE

It was a challenge, trying to get all the arms to move at the same time.

KATE

I'm not here to talk about the space mutant. This concerns Ray Gillette, the star of *Commander Bill and the Space Brigade*.

ANNIE

What about him?

KATE

You gave him undershorts that were two sizes too small.

ANNIE

Did I?

KATE

Small, and Mr. Gillette wears a large. He had to perform wearing your mistake. It was very uncomfortable.

ANNIE

Oh dear.

KATE

It was very unprofessional of you.

ANNIE

Unprofessional.

KATE

I think so. Don't you think so?

ANNIE

Well. Four weeks on the job, there's a lot to deal with.

KATE

That's your excuse?

ANNIE

It's an excuse.

KATE

I don't think I like your tone.

ANNIE

Then what tone would you like to hear?

KATE

How about I'm sorry? How about it'll never happen again.

ANNIE

I'll say that. It'll never happen again.

KATE

See that it doesn't.

ANNIE

Okay. My turn. Why were you talking to my doll?

KATE

I wasn't.

ANNIE

When I came in.

KATE

We all talk to dolls. Girls do, anyway. You see a doll, you talk to it. "Hello, how are you?"

ANNIE

Yeah, but this was a dressing-down. Poor Patricia.

KATE

I'm a writer. That's how I think through scenarios, I talk them out by myself.

ANNIE

You should talk them out with someone who can talk back. Start a real conversation.

KATE

I'm doing that now. And you're busy with your buttons.

ANNIE

Three more vests to go for tonight's *Televised Tribute to the Polish*. But I can work and talk.

KATE

That's all I need to say. About Ray Gillette. And the undershorts incident.

ANNIE

Good. New subject. I'm still wondering about that L in K-L, you know.

KATE

Miss Rafferty.

ANNIE

Annie. Please.

KATE

Do you know all the show writers around here?

ANNIE

No. Just you, actually. I needed to deliver some sports jackets to studio four and I saw you rehearsing your show. You caught my eye. So I watched for a bit.

KATE

You can watch Saturdays at 11:30, same as everyone else.

ANNIE

It wasn't the show I found interesting, it was you. There you were, surrounded by men who run the station and call the shots, and you were right in the middle, holding your own. It was nice to see. I didn't expect it.

KATE

I worked to get there.

ANNIE

I'm sure you did.

KATE

43 episodes. Almost a year spent on the show.

ANNIE

But now... I mean, is it true? Your show might get cancelled?

KATE

Where did you hear that?

ANNIE

A secretary in sales...

KATE

Well, it's not true. On Monday, we're talking to an important sponsor--look. Annie. Just do your job and I'll do mine.

ANNIE

Just wanted to talk. Maybe I can help.

KATE

Well, you can't.

ANNIE

You're smart. Are there other things you wanted to write?

KATE

Sure, but we're discussing Commander Bill.

ANNIE

And I'd love to hear about something else.

KATE

Annie.

ANNIE

Kate.

A brief pause. Kate confides.

KATE (CONT'D)

But there is one idea I have, I've been trying to get the station interested. Okay, tell me what you think. There's this doctor, and she's a woman, and I call the show *Vera Reynolds, Super Doctor*. Or maybe just *Superdoc*. So Vera Reynolds gets called in when all the regular doctors are stumped, and she's so smart that she can fix anything. And each week there's a major crisis she has to face, like an evil scientist threatening to freeze the world or a hypnotist who brainwashes his patients to be communists or-- What's the matter?

Annie looks skeptical.

ANNIE

Nothing.

KATE

(Annoyed)

Come on. That's the same look Charlie gives me. Why can't a woman fight crime and catch supervillains, same as a man?

ANNIE

A woman can be strong without having superhuman powers.

KATE

But that's what makes the show so exciting. I can't believe no one sees the potential of this show. Michael was the only other person who got excited about it.

ANNIE

Michael?

KATE

Oh. Michael-from-accounting Michael. We dated for a while.

ANNIE

But no more?

KATE

It didn't work out. He thought I was putting my career first.

ANNIE

There's a surprise.

KATE

Actually, it was a lot of things. Back to the point. Yes or no. Would you watch *Vera Reynolds, Super Doctor*?

ANNIE

No.

KATE

Why not?

ANNIE

I don't have a television. But Kate, listen: that's not my story. I don't recognize myself in it.

KATE

Fine. So what program should I create?

ANNIE

I don't know. How about a show where women actually talk to each other?

KATE

Great. A ratings sensation.

ANNIE

Communicating. Like we're doing.

KATE

Is that what we're doing?

ANNIE

Look at that. With two people, the dialogue writes itself.

KATE

So you see me at that rehearsal but I don't see you.

ANNIE

Maybe you didn't know where to look.

KATE

Anyway. Thanks for listening. It doesn't happen often.

ANNIE

Sure. You get kind of lonely, holding your own.

KATE

It stands for Lillian. The L. Good luck with your costumes.

ANNIE

Thank you. Good luck with your sponsor. Bye, Kate.

Kate starts to leave, looks back at Annie working, decides, and comes back in as supervisor once more.

KATE

But we're clear. This costume thing cannot happen again.

ANNIE

(Surprised)

It won't.

KATE

No matter how busy you are. No excuses now.

ANNIE

Okay, you made your point.

KATE

Yes, we talked, but this is serious. I can't have your mistakes compromising the show.

ANNIE

Okay. Got it. You don't know when to write your own exit.

KATE

I'm doing that right now. Miss Rafferty.

Kate moves to the door.

KATE (CONT'D)

I'll tell Mr. Gillette you apologized, and I hope this is the end of the matter.

Still occupied with sewing, Annie speaks. Kate stands by the door behind, watching her.

ANNIE

(Delivered matter-of-fact)

Thursday afternoon I came back from a rushed lunch. I needed to finish coordinating shoes for a dance show. He was waiting for me in the shop. Ray Gillette. He said he wanted to get new measurements taken, update his chart. I said tomorrow morning would work better, he says it'll just take a minute. So I go through the files, pull out his chart, and he strips down to his undershirt and shorts. Which I didn't ask him to do, by the way. And he keeps the small talk going as I measure the arms, the neck, the chest.

It's when I'm kneeling, taking the in-seam... His leg won't stop rubbing against my breasts. So I move, I tell him to stop it, he says Stop What.

So I get back on the floor and that's when he pushes his crotch against my shoulder. And keeps it there. And then he leaves and I try to go back to work but I'm done for the day. So I punch out early and lose four hours-- which I can't afford-- and that's that.

Just so you know? You're the only person I told this to. One woman to another. Communicating. With you, Kate.

Kate takes two silent steps toward Annie, waits, uncertain. Annie remains facing forward. A pause.

ANNIE

(Quietly)

Are you there?

KATE

I'm here.

SCENE FOUR

Charlie's office. IRVING SCHRAM, a young businessman, sits while Charlie pitches. Ray hovers with a snack tray.

CHARLIE

And I'm telling you it's a good fit.

SCHRAM

And we think there are better fits.

CHARLIE

No, this is-- It's a good fit. Damn good fit.

SCHRAM

How?

CHARLIE

I just told you. *Commander Bill and the Space Brigade* has a loyal audience tuning in every Saturday to watch the show.

SCHRAM

An audience of grade school boys.

CHARLIE

Who tell their mothers to buy whatever Commander Bill is selling.

SCHRAM

But what we're selling is Schram's Chicago Cream Cheese, and we don't want boys, we want their mothers.

CHARLIE

Irv, listen to me...

SCHRAM

Irving. If we have to use first names, at least make it Irving.

RAY

Irving, I notice you haven't tried these things on the side here. Now they are pimento loaf on Ritz cracker, a little cheese spread in the middle, they're very good. Give 'em a try.

SCHRAM

That's all right. I'll pass.

RAY

There's pickles on here. I know they're kosher, I saw the label.

CHARLIE

Ray...

SCHRAM

Mr. Hanlon.

CHARLIE

Charlie. Please.

SCHRAM

Charlie. Am I talking to the right person or am I not?

RAY

You're talking to both of us, you know.

CHARLIE

That's right. You got Commander Bill himself right beside you, ready to fight injustice.

RAY

With a snack tray.

SCHRAM

But you're the program manager. You.

CHARLIE

That's right.

SCHRAM

Then you should be helping me find a show that actually fits our cream cheese.

CHARLIE

This show does!

SCHRAM

Actually goes with our cream cheese.

RAY

It does, you know.

CHARLIE

So it's the program.

SCHRAM

And the talent.

RAY

Now wait a minute.

SCHRAM

We've watched the show. And we think both the show and Mr. Gillette are equally--wrong. For us. For our product. We need a spokesman with broader appeal on a show that's pleasant and wholesome and of interest to women.

CHARLIE

Maybe you didn't see the right episode.

SCHRAM

Gentlemen, this isn't rocket science.

RAY

Is that a jab?

SCHRAM

A wholesome show that actually puts our cream cheese in context.

CHARLIE

All right, context? Toss me some.

SCHRAM

Point one: it's made right here in the city.

CHARLIE

Right! Ray?

RAY

Uh. Uh. "Whenever I go back to earth, I land right here in Chicago so I can get some of that delicious cream cheese."

CHARLIE

See? It'll be better when our writer writes it, but--

SCHRAM

Point two: it's not just for bagels.

RAY

"It's not just for bagels. I also like to spread it on... toast?"

SCHRAM

It's used in frosting, dessert toppings, pastry fillings, pasta sauces, casseroles, stews and meat glazes.

RAY

Well look at that. And I bet it's really good on a cracker.

SCHRAM

Point three:

CHARLIE

Let's just, let's toss around point two for a minute.

SCHRAM

Philadelphia Brand keeps pushing forward. They've got national distribution and advertising to grab onto market share.

RAY

"Schram's. Chicago's own cream cheese."

SCHRAM

And unless we want to lose the city market altogether, we've got to fight back. So my father sent me out here to look into television advertising.

RAY

And why isn't he here himself?

CHARLIE

Ray...

SCHRAM

Because he's not certain, just as I'm not certain, that it's even worth talking to you. Commander Bill.

RAY

At ease.

SCHRAM

Which is why--

CHARLIE

We can sell it!

SCHRAM

Which is why--

RAY

Have a cracker.

SCHRAM

Which is why we want to sponsor *Kitchen Cooking with Bessie Majors*.

A beat. Ray puts down the tray.

CHARLIE

The cooking show?

SCHRAM

It's the audience we need and the program we want.

CHARLIE

Yes, but Bessie Majors has exclusive sponsorship. It's Gold Medal Flour, and they won't let you in.

SCHRAM

But that's what I'm looking for. Not some ill-fitting boys' adventure show.

RAY

Now I'm getting a little frustrated by this round-and-round, Charlie.

CHARLIE

Ray, just wait.

RAY

Sonny boy, I had your number the minute you turned down that drink.

SCHRAM

It's two in the afternoon.

RAY

And I stand here like a useless...hostess in case you want a snack!

CHARLIE

Ray!

RAY

No, you know what? He says he doesn't want Commander Bill, I say Commander Bill doesn't want his cream cheese!

SCHRAM

(To Charlie)

I'm done. I want to talk to sales.

Through this, Kate hurries into the room.

CHARLIE

We've still got options here.

SCHRAM

I know I do. And they involve talking to someone else.

CHARLIE

I'm sure we can find some common ground. Irving, sit down. Ray, get up!

KATE

Well gentlemen, I'm sorry I'm late. So the meeting got moved from three to one-thirty, huh?

CHARLIE

That's right.

KATE

Well that would have been nice to know. Mr. Schram, hello. I'm Kate Sampson, the writer for *Commander Bill*.

SCHRAM

(Shaking hands)

Oh, hello. But there's nothing more to talk about.

KATE

You're going to be our sponsor?

RAY

It's a bad fit. And things were said.

CHARLIE

We're still talking...

SCHRAM

I have very specific advertising goals for my family's product, and these men don't--

KATE

What are they?

SCHRAM

Pardon?

KATE

Tell me what they are.

SCHRAM

Point one: sell its Chicago roots. Point two: sell its versatility. Point three: keep Philadelphia Brand back where they belong.

KATE

Good.

SCHRAM

Yes good. But I can't do all that on your space show.

KATE

Not yet, no.

SCHRAM

So I'm looking for-- What do you mean, not yet?

KATE

Not as the show is, no. As is, it's a pretty poor pairing. Charlie would admit that. And if he hasn't yet, he should.

CHARLIE

Kate, we were still talking. We don't need your thoughts.

SCHRAM

I wanna hear this. Go on please.

KATE

Mr. Schram, what if we wrote the show around your product?

SCHRAM

Explain.

KATE

Certainly. The plot of the show becomes your selling points. Try this: Commander Bill and his assistant Max are docked in Chicago, getting the key to the city for their stellar interstellar work. Now, one of Commander Bill's alien enemies comes down--I'm thinking of Gorto the dark-side moon man--

RAY

Oh, Gorto. He's good.

KATE

So Gorto comes to earth and he has a ray gun that makes cream cheese disappear. Wherever it's aimed, supermarket or supply truck, the cream cheese evaporates-- Fft-FFT! --and reparticularizes on the moon, where Gorto's using it for a project.

RAY

I don't know. I'm fighting over cream cheese?!

KATE

Last week you battled an octopus over a nonexistent planet.

RAY

Because he was threatening America!

KATE

Point is, we pull it into the plot. Cream cheese, moon is made of cheese, something like that. And then when Ray begins his three minute pitch for Schram's cream cheese...

SCHRAM

(Pointing to Ray)

He and the moon man have been fighting over Schram's all along.

KATE

The next week, shelves will be empty. And not because of a ray gun.

SCHRAM

(Impressed)

I like your thinking.

KATE

Thanks.

SCHRAM

Who else have you personalized the program for?

KATE

Actually, you'd be the first.

SCHRAM

Really?

CHARLIE

That's right. This type of thing isn't done. And I don't know if it's the wisest idea...

KATE

It is if it gets us a sponsor. Well, Mr. Schram?

SCHRAM

It's a helluva pitch, Ms. Sampson.

RAY

It's a lousy pitch!

KATE

Ray, stay out of this.

RAY

No, I won't! I'm gonna tell you something. I'll tell you too, Schram Junior.

CHARLIE

That's it. Ray, get out.

RAY

No. Now I've played Commander Bill in 43 episodes--

KATE

That I wrote for you.

RAY

--And in each one I've acted honorably and upheld the Space Code, no matter what my mission. And now you're planning to disgrace my character, AND ME, by making me run around saving cream cheese. I tell you, I'm above that!

KATE

Always acting honorably, huh Ray?

RAY

That's right! Right now those young Space Brigadiers look up to me. I'm not going to turn their hero into a clown!

CHARLIE

Ray, you're done. Get out of my office.

KATE

Let's just calm down.

RAY

I don't need this, you know.

KATE

You do though. We both need this.

RAY

No, you do, not me. Without this show, you'll be back in the secretarial pool.

KATE

And you'll be stripped of Commander Bill and your hero status.

RAY

(Realizing)

Wait a minute. Wait a minute!

KATE

What now?

RAY

I am officially at a crossroads! I could go this way or I could go-- All right. I've decided. You're right, Charlie. I'm done.

KATE

Done? What does that mean?

RAY

Why have I wasted all my time on this children's show? As of now, I am finished with Commander Bill and the Space Brigade. I'm going over to Bob Root's office right now, and by the end of this week I'll be sitting at the Nine o'clock News desk. Or maybe sports. Bobby owes me a favor.

CHARLIE

Oh yeah? Then good luck and get the hell out!

KATE

Ray, wait!

Ray starts to exit.

RAY

No, I should've done this long ago. There are jobs and then there are careers.

SCHRAM

So you're leaving the show then?

KATE

No, he's not. Are you, Ray?

RAY

You bet I am. I'd say good luck to you, Kate, but truth is I don't really care.

Ray exits.

SCHRAM

Now that was a performance.

CHARLIE

You don't know Ray. He'll come back.

SCHRAM

He sounds pretty finished.

KATE

I'm sorry, Mr. Schram. I thought I could help.

SCHRAM

Please. Call me Irving. Now listen: it was a good pitch. I mean that. But even if you get the astronaut back, my answer's the same. We won't take the space show and its audience of boys. We need a wholesome, friendly little show to pair with our product. We need to get our advertising out to girls, and more importantly, to their mothers. We really wanted that cooking show.

KATE & CHARLIE

Gold Medal Flour.

SCHRAM

(Overlapping)

--Medal Flour, I know. But the truth is, I'd make Miss Sampson our spokesman before I'd reconsider Ray Gillette. She wins on personality alone.

CHARLIE

Kate doesn't sell. She writes.

SCHRAM

She's proven to me she can do both.

KATE

Girls and their mothers.

SCHRAM

That's right.

KATE

Then let's talk about how to get them. Let me create a show for you.

CHARLIE

Kate...

KATE

Brand new, one of a kind. We're still talking. All I ask is a four week contract. Give us a one month commitment and I promise you all of female Chicago will be watching your show and buying your cream cheese.

SCHRAM

I'm listening.

KATE

Mr. Schram-- Irving-- Let me introduce you to... Vera Reynolds, *Super Doctor*.

CHARLIE

Oh no.

KATE

Oh yes.

SCENE FIVE

The costume room. Annie brings in some stacked hats, places them on a chair, begins sorting them.

Kate enters, stands inside the room, staring off. She looks dazed and frustrated, like she's trying to process an ordeal.

ANNIE

(Spotting Kate)

Oh no.

(Pause)

Kate? Are you okay? How'd it go?

KATE

Don't ask.

ANNIE

I'm asking. Sit down.

Annie moves the hats off the chair.

KATE

You're busy. Busy with bonnets. Never mind, I should go.
'Bye, Annie.

ANNIE

Kate, sit down.

Kate sits.

ANNIE (CONT'D)

So what happened?

KATE

Schram won't sponsor *Commander Bill*. Flat-out refused. Not the right market. All boys, no girls.

ANNIE

I'm sorry.

KATE

And then Ray left for the nine o'clock news.

ANNIE

He did? Good riddance.

KATE

But you know what? It's funny how you realize things sometimes, right in the moment. Something makes you look at it different.

Someone had to say to me "No more *Commander Bill*." And then I knew. For the first time I had the chance to tell the story I want to tell.

ANNIE

And?

KATE

And I gave my very best pitch for *Superdoc*.

ANNIE

Vera Reynolds saving the world?

KATE

Every Saturday morning at 11:30!

ANNIE

And how did that go?

KATE

I didn't even get started. Charlie kept yelling "Kate, think of the costs!"

ANNIE

In his defense, it's his job to yell that.

KATE

And Son of Schram kept looking more and more unhappy, like I was disappointing him. He couldn't even see the show's potential.

ANNIE

He said no.

KATE

To that. And by then I was getting desperate, 'cause I just played my ace. So I said "Wait wait, I've got one other idea." And he waited. So I gave him my one other idea which, until I said it, I didn't know I had. I must've been thinking of you. And Patricia. And you.

ANNIE

Why?

KATE

Because I just sold a puppet show. I said it was a friendship between two women, best friends. A show that has songs and jokes and puppets and animals and cream cheese-based food items--I don't know, I was saying whatever came into my head.

ANNIE

A puppet show. Designed for girls.

KATE

And their mothers. Four week contract.

ANNIE

Kate, that's fantastic! I'm so happy for you.

KATE

Not so fast. He agreed to it on one condition: I have to perform in the damn thing. Kept telling me I was the perfect face for Schram's cream cheese.

ANNIE

He believes in you! That's great.

KATE

A face for cream cheese. Is that an insult?

ANNIE

It's an honor. He's giving you a great opportunity.

KATE

You take it. You perform with the puppets. Have fun.

ANNIE

You're looking at it wrong. Like you said: you're off the rocket ship and now you have the chance to tell the story you want to tell.

KATE

That was *Superdoc*, and they turned it down!

ANNIE

So let that go for now. You'll be able to reach girls and women and connect with them, each week. You can inspire. You can teach. You can be their friend.

KATE

(Pouting)

Super Doctor.

Annie takes Kate's hands in hers.

ANNIE

Kate. I don't need a woman with super powers. But you. I admire you so much. And Mr. Schram believes in you. I will support you, every step of the way.

KATE

My head's swimming. This is all new to me. I don't know where to start.

ANNIE

It's okay. We'll just take it slow. Together.

Kate gives Annie's hand a squeeze, lets go.

KATE

Thanks. Well. Annie. It's a puppet show.

ANNIE

It's a show about two people: Kate and her puppet friend.

KATE

Kate doesn't even have a name for her puppet friend.

ANNIE

You just need some inspiration. Hang on. How do you usually find your character names?

Annie moves to a box behind the clothes rack, rummages.

KATE

I look through the phone book. But I need a puppet name, not a regular name. The phone book is full of Helens and Donnas and Janes. I need something special--

ANNIE

Agreed.

KATE

But all I can think of is Gwendolyn.

ANNIE

Mmmm. Keep trying. There's a craft circle members list on the table. See if there's a good name there.

Kate pulls out the list, scans it.

KATE

Margaret. Sue. Thelma. Thelma?

(Tries it)

"What have you been up to, Thelma?" Ugh. I don't know, maybe we should go with Gwendolyn.

Annie enters carrying a sweet comic hand puppet of a wide-eyed girl in braids. The doll wears a dull dress and isn't fully adorned.

ANNIE

(in puppet voice)

"We could go with Gwendolyn, except for one thing."

KATE

What's that?

ANNIE

"I hate the name Gwendolyn!"

Kate turns and sees them. She is not sold on the concept.

KATE

Oh my.... Annie.

ANNIE

"No, that's her name."

KATE

Oh my God.

ANNIE

"That one's heretical."

KATE

How..? When..? I mean, what have you got?

ANNIE

She's not a what, she's a who. And she wants you to give her a name.

KATE

How does it-- she work?

ANNIE

Simple. Here. Put your hand in here and you'll find the space to move her mouth.

KATE

It feels awkward.

ANNIE

It just takes a little practice. And you can move her head so she can look around, and that brings her to life even more.

Kate tries, with mixed results.

ANNIE (CONT'D)

There you go.

KATE

Where did you find this... her?

ANNIE

She was stuck high up on a closet shelf, stored way in the back. My heart broke when I saw her, and I took her down and promised to fix her up when I had the chance.

KATE

Does she have a name tag or anything?

ANNIE

No, and even if she did, it's more important that you name her yourself.

KATE

I'm drawing a blank.

ANNIE

So ask her what she wants to be called.

KATE

Oh, okay. "Well hello. And what is your name?" "My name is..." "Yes?"

Kate is at a loss.

ANNIE

Well, you're putting her on the spot. Sometimes she's shy. Here.

Annie takes the puppet and operates her.

ANNIE (CONT'D)

"I need a new dress." "I know." "And you have to fix my hair. My hair's a mess." "I know, hold your horses. Look, it's your best friend."

(Puppet sees Kate)

"Kaaaaaaaaaate! Kate Kate Kate Kate Kate Kate Kate Kate!"

Puppet starts to kiss Kate's face, but Kate pushes the doll away.

KATE

Annie, come on.

ANNIE

(noticing the rebuke)

What's the matter?

KATE

All that kissing. Just silly, is all.

ANNIE

She's your friend. "Hello, Kate."

KATE

Okay. Come here, Friend.

(Puppet leans in)

Tell me a secret.

ANNIE

"What's that?"

KATE

What's your name?

ANNIE

"Oh no! I won't tell! You have to guess."

KATE

I bet you don't even have one.

ANNIE

"Oh, I have one! But you have to tell me rather than the other way around."

KATE

Do you know why I need your name?

ANNIE

"Why?"

KATE

Because in five days we're going to be on television.

ANNIE

"Television?!"

KATE

You know what television is? It's that magical box where people get to watch you and me every Saturday.

ANNIE

"My friend Annie doesn't have a television!"

KATE

Well, those who do will tune in every week to watch us. And they're gonna want to know your name.

ANNIE

"Then tell them."

KATE

Gwendolyn!

ANNIE

"Bleccchh."

KATE

(Some annoyance)

All right then. You tell me.

ANNIE

"You tell me."

KATE

No. Apparently I'm not getting it right. How did you come up with Patricia?

ANNIE

(Thrown)

What?

KATE

Your own little doll. How did you settle on her name?

ANNIE

Oh. It's because there was a Patricia in real life. I made the doll for her.

KATE

Then why do you have it?

ANNIE

She wouldn't take it. That Patricia's not in my life anymore.

An awkward pause.

KATE

Did she-- I mean, do you mean...

ANNIE

Let's not call her Patricia, okay?

KATE

No, sure. Sorry.

Annie gently props the doll up on the table.

KATE (CONT'D)

So do you think you can find our friend a new dress by Saturday?

ANNIE

Certainly. She also needs a place to live and costumes for you and all of her other friends.

KATE

It's too overwhelming.

ANNIE

Just lean on me. What can I bring to this?

KATE

How about you? How about Annie, the person who's easy to talk to. Why couldn't it just be your show?

ANNIE

Because you're the face of cream cheese.

KATE

Yeah, but you're the voice of Comet.

ANNIE

Comet?

KATE
(Gestures to puppet)
My best friend.

ANNIE
(To puppet)
Hi Comet.

KATE
And I can't create this show without the help of my new best friend. I need you, Annie.

ANNIE
Well, you got me. It'll be great. It'll give me a reason to stay here with you, away from my lonely little basement apartment. And as long as I keep up my work in the costume room...

KATE
No. Be my partner on the show. Help me with the writing, performing, everything. It'd be the two of us.

ANNIE
Will the station let you do that?

KATE
They will if they want to keep their sponsor. Come on, Annie. And with more money, you could look for a new place.

ANNIE
I love the idea. The two of us. But Kate.

KATE
What's wrong?

ANNIE
It's about... Ray Gillette. I don't want to be around him. I don't think I can.

KATE
He's gone. I'm only using Gus.

ANNIE
It's just-- It annoys me that it matters, but it does. Promise me.

KATE
I promise. This is our show.

ANNIE
And Comet's.

KATE
Good name?

ANNIE

It's great. Perfect. How did you come up with it?

KATE

I thought of the brightest burning object in the sky. And then I looked at you.

They look at each other, connecting.

Then the spell breaks. They sit at opposite ends of the table.

KATE (CONT'D)

Lots of work to do.

ANNIE

Right.

KATE

But I'm glad we're working together.

ANNIE

Me too.

Kate starts making notes on a pad.
Annie organizes the hats. They share a smile and go back to work.

SCENE SIX

The studio, bare. The puppet box sits upstage, unfinished and facing away.

Charlie walks Schram through.

CHARLIE

So this is the studio. This is where the magic happens. Not much now, but wait till you see it on Saturday when we broadcast live. Look, there you go, they already started the puppet box.

SCHRAM

I saw the doll this morning. It's very cute.

CHARLIE

That's great.

SCHRAM

Named it Comet. I guess it's a tribute to the space show.

CHARLIE

A tribute.

SCHRAM

That's right. Mr. Hanlon?

CHARLIE

Charlie.

SCHRAM

I get the impression that you're not happy with the shape of things.

CHARLIE

No no. Look: you know what you want, and we're making it happen for you. If you're happy, I'm happy.

SCHRAM

I'm happy.

CHARLIE

Well then, ditto.

SCHRAM

Then what's our problem?

CHARLIE

It's nothing. It's just... A writer doesn't come into a sponsor meeting and start throwing around ideas. Super Doctor this, puppet show that.

SCHRAM

I asked her to.

CHARLIE

They submit a show proposal to me, this five-page proposal with a cover page--

SCHRAM

The clock was ticking. You had no one else lined up.

CHARLIE

But it's not the way it works. And if she tries it again with someone else, someone less receptive to her...

SCHRAM

Ideas.

CHARLIE

Charms. Well. It'd be a problem.

SCHRAM

But she sold it. And right now I want to focus on my show.

CHARLIE

Your show.

SCHRAM

Technically.

Kate enters with a hangered red and blue dress.

KATE

Oh good, you're still here.

SCHRAM

I was getting the studio tour.

KATE

Guess what we're planning! Actually, Annie pointed this out. You know how your cream cheese packaging uses blue with red letters?

SCHRAM

I know it well.

KATE

So to remind viewers in a subtle way that Schram's is the proud sponsor of *The Kate and Comet Show*, Annie made this dress for me. See? Blue with a red collar and belt. We'll match.

SCHRAM

Nicely done.

CHARLIE

Except that your show, like *Commander Bill* before it, broadcasts in black and white.

KATE

Yes, and I also know all station programming will broadcast in color starting in 1960.

CHARLIE

Which is two years away.

KATE

And this show will be ready.

CHARLIE

But it hardly matters this week.

SCHRAM

No, but she's thinking ahead, and it's a good way to run a business.

CHARLIE

Or a television show. Hopefully.

SCHRAM

Kate, Mr. Hanlon says he hasn't seen your routines.

CHARLIE

You submit them to me, I submit them upstairs. For approval.

KATE

But we're still working on them.

CHARLIE

I'll take anything. I want to see the wonderful stuff you and Annie will be getting up to.

KATE

And Gus.

CHARLIE

And Ray.

KATE

No, not Ray. He's gone to the news desk. And I don't want to use him.

CHARLIE

That's not your decision.

SCHRAM

If it's anyone's, it's mine. As sponsor.

CHARLIE

Now Irving, let's think this through. Ray can help your show. He's a personality, a force. He'll sell your cream cheese.

SCHRAM

Kate can do that perfectly well. Besides, it's a woman's show.

CHARLIE

Respectfully? You can use a man on a woman's show. Think about it. Do women want to watch women all the time?

KATE

Okay. Charlie, you and I need to talk, right now.

CHARLIE

And I'm talking to your sponsor.

KATE

Mr. Schram, would you give me a minute with Mr. Hanlon?

SCHRAM

I should be present for any discussions about my show.

KATE

What I need to say-- This is old business. *Commander Bill* business. Unresolved.

SCHRAM

Even so. You don't want me present?

KATE

No. Thank you. Old business.

CHARLIE

That's right. The two of us should talk, get some things straight around here. Irving, why don't you go up to my office, ask Sandy to get you some coffee or a drink. I'll finish here and come get you.

SCHRAM

I don't know. Kate?

KATE

Old business. I promise.

SCHRAM

All right. But not too long. You've got my new show to put together.

Schram exits. Kate drapes the dress over the puppet box, returns to Charlie, ready for battle.

KATE

All right. Let's talk about Ray Gillette.

CHARLIE

When you pitched to the cream cheese prince, you said there were two male characters. One for Gus, one for Ray.

KATE

Gus can play both of them.

CHARLIE

Why not give one to Ray? Why are you so selfish?

KATE

Why don't you want to keep the costs down?

CHARLIE

Hey. I'm looking out for my friend.

KATE

And I'm looking out for mine. Ray will do just fine two floors up and out of the way.

CHARLIE

The news desk? He's never gonna get that job.

KATE

Sure he is.

CHARLIE

No. He applied three times already. Auditioned twice. Bob Root's lost his patience with him.

KATE

Why, what's the matter?

CHARLIE

He's not a newsman! He still thinks he's performing for boys, the star of his own show.

KATE

Wait, back up. He auditioned already?

CHARLIE

He's been courting that news department all last year.

KATE

While our show was on? What was I supposed to do if he got that job?

CHARLIE

We'd figure it out. Casting call, new hire. Change the name to *Astronaut Al*.

KATE

That's my show!

CHARLIE

Forget it, it never happened! Point is, the guy doesn't have a job after this week.

KATE

That's his problem.

CHARLIE

Come on. As a favor to me.

KATE

I don't owe you anything.

CHARLIE

Oh no? When your pilot script for the *Space Brigade* was accepted, you remember that? "K.L. Sampson" you wrote as. And when word got out that you were a Katherine and not a Kenneth, I said "Give her a chance. She wrote one good script, she can probably write more."

KATE

I can't work with him.

CHARLIE

Find a way.

KATE

Why are you pushing so hard?

CHARLIE

He's a friend of mine. He's a fellow man, and one in need!

KATE

He's a headache across the board. Aren't you thrilled to be rid of him? I saved you from giving him the talk.

CHARLIE

Enough. Listen to me. As program manager, I make the decisions, not you. Show content, casting, budget, all subject to my approval. What I say goes, and I say you bring him back.

KATE

Then I'll quit. I won't work with him.

CHARLIE

You will.

KATE

There's a reason. You should know. About Ray...

CHARLIE

Know what?

KATE

I know that Ray... I heard...

Kate can't bring herself to say it.

CHARLIE

What? Tell me.

KATE

He... Well he did something.

CHARLIE

What'd he do? Just tell me.

KATE

Something he shouldn't have...

CHARLIE

Yeah, what?

KATE

...and had no right to do.

CHARLIE

(Impatient)

Will you tell me? I have no idea what you're talking about.

KATE

He knows.

CHARLIE

Then talk with him! God Kate, just put it on the table. It's probably not as bad as you're making it out.

KATE

It's between him and me.

CHARLIE

Then talk, the two of you.

KATE

And what'll I say?

CHARLIE

I don't know. You're the writer. Before I have my powwow with Schram, I'm gonna send Ray down so you two can make up. And I want you to think hard about his future. And yours. Stay here.

Charlie exits. Lights change as Kate thinks.

KATE

(Thinking out loud)

Yes. Send him down. We should talk, most definitely.

In bright lights, Annie enters from one side, Ray from the opposite side. Through this, Annie is almost spectral, not reacting to the scene.

KATE (CONT'D)

I can do this. He'll come sauntering in and all I need to say is: What did you do to Annie!

RAY

I didn't do anything. You have a screw loose, the both of you. So don't you dare slander my name.

KATE

Just say, What did you do to Annie?

RAY

(Trying to remember)

What did I do to...

(Remembering, amused)

Oh come on! That was in fun! Guys have been teasing girls forever, it's the way things are. You need to lighten up.

KATE

What did you do to Annie?

RAY

Sure I pushed back. She's rubbing into me every chance she gets, moving her hands up and down my legs, "checking the inseam."

KATE

What did you do to Annie.

RAY

A man is a man, all right? What gets me is whether a frigid bitch like you even belongs here, if you're so delicate you don't even know the rules of the workplace.

KATE

When what I need to hear from you is so far away.

RAY

Oh my God. I didn't know. It'll never happen again.

KATE

Seems too much to hope for.

RAY

(Sincere)

I'm sorry.

KATE

And whatever you say, you'll see that I've stripped myself down, left myself open. And then it'll be your turn.

RAY

Why are you so interested in her? Just what's going on between you two?

Kate looks guiltily to Annie, who looks back. Pause. Then Ray and Annie exit.

KATE

And then it would be my turn to defend.

The lights change back. Kate is alone. A pause, then Ray enters, looks at her.

RAY

Kate. You had something you wanted to ask me?

Kate studies Ray.

KATE

Yes. Ray.

She considers, conflicted. Pause. Then:

KATE (CONT'D)

Will you come back and work on the show?

Sudden blackout.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

SCENE ONE

Loud KIDS' SHOW MUSIC plays as lights rise on Kate.

KATE

Hello, boys and girls! I'm really happy to see you! Who am I? I'm Kate, and this is my show. I'm glad you're here. Kate was getting a little lonely.

A KNOCK sounds.

KATE

Why, someone's at the door.

(Calling)

Who is it?

Gus enters, dressed in safari khakis, carrying a little wood crate.

GUS

Hello, Kate!

KATE

Why, it's Zookeeper Petey! Hello, Zookeeper Petey!

GUS

Hello, Kate! Hello, kids!

KATE

It's good to see you. I was feeling just a little bit lonely.

GUS

You were?!

KATE

Just a little bit.

GUS

Well, I brought a friend along.

KATE

From the zoo?

GUS

That's right. When you're feeling lonely, it's always good to have a friend around.

KATE

That's true.

Gus opens the lid and reaches in, putting on a sock puppet cat.

GUS

Let's bring out my friend... Hey kids, Kate, say Hello to Scratches.

KATE

Scratches! Is that because she scratches?

GUS

Yeah, so never bet on her in a track meet.

KATE

She doesn't run well?

GUS

No, but it's her running shoes. You can always spot her; she's the puss in boots.

KATE

You can't run in boots!

GUS

No, but put some fresh cream in front of her and you'll see her do laps.

KATE

She's purrrrrr-fect.

GUS

The cat's meow. And I've got lots of fun friends from the zoo I can bring to you each week. Would you like that, Kate?

KATE

Oh yes! Then I'll never be lonely.

GUS

You know what? You should visit the family who moved in next door.

KATE

That's a great idea. Thanks, Petey!

GUS

Now it's back to the zoo for Scratches. If the manager finds one of our cats missing, it's claws for alarm.

KATE

Okay. Goodbye, Zookeeper Petey!

GUS

Goodbye, Kate! Goodbye kids!

Gus exits.

KATE

Come on, boys and girls, let's meet my neighbor who lives next door.

Kate moves to the puppet box, which is built like a stylized house. Kate KNOCKS on the frame.

KATE (CONT'D)

Helloooooo?

ANNIE

(As Comet, from inside)

Helloooooo?

KATE

Helloooooo?

Puppet Comet pops up in the box. She is fully crafted and quite cute.

ANNIE

Hellooooooooooooo!

KATE

I'm Kate from next door.

ANNIE

Hello, Kate-From-Next-Door!

KATE

No, it's just Kate.

ANNIE

Hello, Just-Kate.

KATE

I think we're confused.

ANNIE

But I've never felt better!

KATE

And what's your name?

ANNIE

My name is Comet!

KATE

Oooh, that's a lovely name.

ANNIE

My parents say they named me that because my head's in the stars. But my head's right here, above my shoulders!

KATE

Oh Comet!

ANNIE

I guess I'm pretty silly.

KATE

You're not silly. Why would you say that?

ANNIE

'Cuz I don't think the way everybody else does. I see the world upside down.

KATE

(Tilting her head)

Like this?

ANNIE

Even upside downer!

The following is performed in sing-song
or with musical accompaniment.

ANNIE (CONT'D)

I think a stake makes a tent stand up good
When everyone else says a steak is for food!
And I take a pail to the beach for more fun
But everyone else says "too pale, get more sun!"
I always say the wrong thing when others want right
People want to make me dark, but I'm made of light!

KATE

Don't let those people tell you what you should feel
You know and I know together we're real.
You can be what you like--

ANNIE

You can be what you like--

KATE

Silly or savvy or sunny or shocked or--

ANNIE

Mother or daughter or lawyer or doctor,
Just be who you are make the most of you and--

KATE

You can be who you like from beginning to end--

KATE & ANNIE

When you've...got...a friend!

ANNIE

I'm glad you're my friend, Kate.

KATE
(with real affection)
Same here.

Gus re-enters, holding the open crate.

GUS
Oh Kate, there you are!

KATE
Comet, say hello to my friend Petey.

ANNIE
Hello, My-Friend-Petey!

GUS
Hello, Comet. Hello kids. Kate, Scratches has escaped!

KATE
Escaped!

GUS
Crawled right out of her box. She could be anywhere!

KATE
This is a real conundrum.

ANNIE
Ooh, my mom makes those sometimes. Those are delicious.

GUS
Wait, that's it! That's why Scratches left her box. I bet she was hungry.

KATE
But what would she look for?

GUS
Fresh cream!

ANNIE
I bet the bakery has lots of fresh cream.

KATE
Comet's right. And the bakery is right...around the corner!

GUS
Let's go and see if she's there! Goodbye, Comet!

ANNIE
Goodbye, My-Friend-Petey.

KATE
(to Comet)
I'll come back and give you the news.

ANNIE

All right, Just-Kate. Have fun at the bakery. Bring me back some conundrums!

Kate and Gus move away from the puppet house, into a space where Ray faces upstage. When he turns we see him in apron and hat, holding a tray of tarts. Ray is less than enthused.

KATE

Oh look! It's Baker Bob! Hello, Baker Bob!

RAY

Hello, Kate. Hello, Kids. Zookeeper Petey.

GUS

Baker Bob, have you seen my escaped cat Scratches? About yay high and yay long.

RAY

Yay high? Yay long? Nay.

KATE

Baker Bob, can we look around?

RAY

What for?

KATE & GUS

Scratches.

GUS (CONT'D)

She might be kicking around your cream horns.

KATE

Or bothering with your bear claws.

RAY

No need to look.

KATE

Why not?

RAY

Because-- Here, hold this.

Ray pushes his tray into Gus's hands, then picks up the cat puppet, whose head sticks out of a big foam pastry. Ray holds it up as the group moves in for a three-shot.

RAY (CONT'D)

Because she's right here, caught in a conundrum.

The trio holds the pose, then breaks.

KATE

All right. Nice job. Good rehearsal. So. Next up is Comet's Fairy Tales. And the 30-second cream cheese spot starts the show.

GUS

Got it.

Kate spots Ray trying to untie his apron.

KATE (CONT'D)

Ray. Don't take off the apron. We'll start the next segment in fifteen.

Ray leaves the apron alone. Kate moves to Annie in the puppet box.

KATE (CONT'D)

Annie! You're incredible. It's so fun working with you. I thought I'd be nervous performing, but you make it easy.

ANNIE

Can we please talk? In private.

KATE

What's wrong?

ANNIE

I think you know.

KATE

What? Here, come over here.

GUS

(In puppet voices)

"You can be what you like, you can be what you like..." Hey Kate, could you find a puppet for me? 'Cause I can do "LOW" or I can do "HIGH"...

KATE

What? Sure Gus, give me some time to think about it.

GUS

We can talk. I've got ideas.

ANNIE

Kate.

KATE

Yeah. Gus, give me a minute.

From the other side of the stage, Ray calls Gus.

RAY
Ssst! Hey. Hey! Come here.

Gus moves to Ray.

KATE
You are so good with Comet. I feel like I'm talking to you.

ANNIE
Kate, why is Ray here? You said it would be us.

RAY
I don't like it, Max.

KATE
I didn't know some things when I said that.

GUS
Don't like what?

ANNIE
Didn't know what?

RAY
This planet we've landed on. Look at me. Look at you.

KATE
That we had to take him on.

RAY
It's hostile territory. Dangerous.

ANNIE
Had to? I heard you asked him.

GUS
It's not dangerous.

RAY
It is!

ANNIE
Is that true?

GUS
It's not, it's just...different.

KATE
I had to.

RAY
Different.

KATE
Charlie made me take him back.

GUS
So it's not what we're used to. It's not bad, it's not wrong.

ANNIE
For the good of the show.

KATE
That's right. And Mr. Schram agreed.

RAY
But it is bad. It is wrong. The wrong direction.

ANNIE
And what about me?

GUS
I like it. It's nice to move forward.

ANNIE
You know how I feel. You know what he did.

RAY
Hostile territory, Max.

KATE
And he won't do it again. I won't let him.

ANNIE
Why can't it be you and me?

RAY
And you know the rules.

ANNIE
Won't you say something?

RAY
(Ticking off the rules)
You learn the territory...

ANNIE
Stand up for us?

RAY
You identify your enemy...

ANNIE
I don't want this, week after week.

RAY
And you get them before they get you.

KATE

Stop this. Look, I need you. You're great.

GUS

That show's over, Ray.

KATE

You'll never have a scene with him, I promise.

GUS

Commander Bill lost his rocket. Times change. I'm getting a coffee, you want something?

No response from Ray. Gus exits.

KATE

Annie. This is not the time to fight. It's under control. I want to check the props cart. Two seconds.

Kate squeezes Annie's shoulder as she exits. Ray looks over at Annie, Annie warily looks back.

ANNIE

(To break the mood)

Caught in a conundrum, huh?

RAY

I know what you are.

They watch each other.

SCENE TWO

Charlie's office. Ray, not wearing the apron, paces.

CHARLIE

Ray, this is--

RAY

It's humiliating! And it's not right.

CHARLIE

You're being--

RAY

Forced to wear an apron and a puffy hat. They can't do that to me!

CHARLIE

They're not doing--

RAY

And the boys'll tune in. My boys, your boys, boys of all ages expecting to see Commander Bill take them on another space adventure, teach them about life. What'll they learn when they see me in kitchen wear?!

CHARLIE

Ray, don't you see?

RAY

All too well.

CHARLIE

Commander Bill is kaput. He's done.

RAY

Not if I can help it.

CHARLIE

You can't help it. Now shut up and take your lumps.

RAY

How could you, Charlie! I thought you were my friend. I know your wife, our kids play together.

CHARLIE

God, Ray. Why do you have to make everything so hard?

RAY

Because life forces me to! I try to get onto the news desk and what do I hear? "No openings right now, Ray. Sorry." Then the Space Brigade advertisers dry up and the next thing you know I'm holding a tray of tarts and looking for a dopey cat.

CHARLIE

Would you stop and look at it from--

RAY

I blame you.

CHARLIE

Excuse me?

RAY

That's right. You're responsible for this mess of a show. You didn't ride the sales department hard enough.

CHARLIE

Now listen to me--

RAY

You let me down, Charlie, just when I needed you the most.

CHARLIE

I stood up for you, you idiot! Schram didn't want you on the show, Kate sure as hell didn't--

RAY

Yes she did.

CHARLIE

No she didn't! She wanted you out, Ray, over something you did.

RAY

What do you mean, something I did?

CHARLIE

God knows what. You burn bridges right and left, you're lucky I still bother to put out the fires.

RAY

Then don't bother. This show is beneath me.

CHARLIE

Oh yeah? Then quit. Grab another interview for the news desk. Bob Root could use a laugh.

Kate enters with a typed paper.

KATE

Mr. Hanlon, here's the script for the cream cheese spot.

RAY

Well look who's here!

KATE

Hello Ray.

(To Charlie)

You wanted to see a copy so you could approve it?

CHARLIE

(Taking paper)

Right. Thanks Kate.

RAY

And did Charlie also approve my Baker Bob outfit?

KATE

He didn't have to. Schram Senior loved it.

RAY

Oh, the Cream Cheese King loved it! That's all that matters then.

KATE

Hey, I sold them on Baker Bob. It's an easy jump for the viewers to see you and think of their product.

RAY

Well I am an actor.

KATE

Then you should put a little life in your performance.

RAY

Then give me something more to do than hold baked goods! Might as well replace me with a cooling rack!

KATE

Don't give me ideas.

CHARLIE

All right, Kate. Ray, we're done.

RAY

But you know who's really wonderful? That Annie. She can stick her hand up a doll like nobody's business.

KATE

Knock it off.

RAY

No really. She is so good at manipulating things, moving 'em around. From the costume shop to on-air talent in one week.

CHARLIE

Ray, time to leave.

RAY

Boy, I'd like to know her secret.

KATE

Oh you would? Here it is: she and I have created a show that a sponsor loves. I'm talking to them about extending their contract to 24 weeks. 24 weeks. That's six months.

RAY

Charlie, is that true?

CHARLIE

Sales drafted it this morning. It's a lovely thing to behold. We're one Schram's signature away from securing a dedicated sponsor for half a year. Maybe more. Just think.

RAY

I am! Six months as Baker Bob?

KATE

You can always quit. And don't you dare do anything to mess this up. They love what they've seen. You want a lesson, here it is: give 'em what they want and you'll get ahead.

RAY

What happened to the network of trust?

CHARLIE

Again: this is a station.

Ray exits. Charlie scans the script.

KATE

I punched the Made-in-Chicago angle and the versatility of the stuff, which is just what he asked for. We'll use the company tagline of course: "The cream cheese with a difference."

CHARLIE

I'm very impressed with you, K.L. Sampson.

KATE

Thank you, Mr. Hanlon.

CHARLIE

Come on. Call me Charlie.

SCENE THREE

The costume shop. Patricia the doll sits in the room. Kate studies a script while Annie looks through a pile of fabric scraps.

KATE
Sponsor's spot looking good... Comet's house okay... Fairy tales, uh-oh.

ANNIE
Uh-oh what?

KATE
It's the porridge punchline. We need a better one for Comet and the Three Bears.

ANNIE
You're still not sold?

KATE
It's a stretch. And we can do better. "Why Comet, why is your porridge box written in French?"

ANNIE
(in Comet's voice)
"Why Kate, that's because it's foreign farina!"

KATE
See? There's something wrong with it.

ANNIE
Not to your taste? Okay, let's keep thinking.

KATE
Offensive oatmeal? Pretty poor porridge?

ANNIE
Well, she goes through three bowls. What is it about that last one that's juuust right?

KATE
"Why is that one so good, Comet?"

ANNIE
"Because it's just like us. It sticks together!"

KATE
It's a little corny.

ANNIE
But it's sincere. And it takes some trying before you find the right one.

KATE

(writing it)

"It sticks together." I'm adding it. Another Annie Rafferty line. I'm so glad we're working on this. It's a lot of long hours for you, I know.

ANNIE

It's fine. It keeps me busy, away from my apartment.

KATE

It's been great working together. At least for me.

ANNIE

Me too.

KATE

For once, I don't feel like it's me against everyone else, having to sell my work and prove myself. I've got someone in my corner. Just like you have Patricia.

ANNIE

I suppose, in a way.

KATE

Annie. Will you tell me about her?

ANNIE

Patricia? I'd rather not.

KATE

You won't tell me.

ANNIE

No. I wouldn't know how.

KATE

Oh. Okay.

Kate watches Annie sort fabric. Pause.

KATE (CONT'D)

I thought Hazel was coming back.

ANNIE

She is. She will be. The station called her up, told her that if she wanted to keep her job, she'd get back here.

KATE

Her husband's doing better?

ANNIE

I don't know. When you get a call like that, it doesn't matter what else life looks like.

KATE

I can help you. What are you looking for?

ANNIE

Inspiration. Trying to get some ideas for next week's animals. I'll know it when I see it.

KATE

For next week's show? I love that you're thinking ahead.

ANNIE

I learned that from you.

Kate reaches for a pile, and Annie stretches out her hand.

ANNIE (CONT'D)

No, I already did that... pile.

Their hands touch on the fabric, hold for a beat, and then Kate pulls away. Change of subject.

KATE

It's sad. All this beautiful fabric, not being used. Look at that brown muslin. Just right for a little wiener dog. We could call him Doxy.

ANNIE

Or Frank.

KATE

And this tropical print. Who knows, maybe a Hawaiian gorilla.

ANNIE

Yeah sure. King Sarong.

KATE

You're so funny. Your spirit is going to be in every moment of this show. Except maybe the sponsor spots.

ANNIE

I'm there too. Remember?

(Quoting the script)

"Hi Comet!" And Kate leans over and kisses her on the cheek.

KATE

Yeah, I know.

ANNIE

It's the one moment we wrote that we've never rehearsed.

KATE

You wrote it. I never liked it.

ANNIE

Why not? It's a lovely little moment.

KATE

It's not really needed. I want to cut it.

ANNIE

It's so sweet. It's a great start to the show.

KATE

Annie, come on. We're cutting it.

ANNIE

Why? At least give me a reason.

KATE

What does it matter? It's a silly little kiss, it doesn't mean anything. And it has nothing to do with cream cheese.

ANNIE

No, but it's a moment between Kate and Comet.

KATE

This isn't about Kate and Comet.

ANNIE

No?

KATE

No. If it's anything, it's about Kate and Michael.

ANNIE

Michael-from-accounting Michael?

KATE

Forget it.

ANNIE

No. Please. Talk to me.

KATE

It's nothing. It's just... It's when I was with Michael, kissing him... That's when I knew. I knew in that moment that it wasn't right, and it was never going to be, not with him. There was nothing behind the kiss, you know? But that was a problem. I recognized that dead feeling, because I had felt it before. With other men.

ANNIE

I think I understand.

KATE

I shouldn't be saying this. But it's why I don't want to kiss anyone, not even Comet, not on television. I don't want to keep confirming that there's no one to connect with.

ANNIE

Of course there is. You can't look at it like that.

KATE

But my job keeps me busy, so I don't think about it. And then I'm happy.

ANNIE

You're lonely. Like me. You at the station, me in my room.

KATE

Then get a roommate.

ANNIE

I had one. Patricia.

KATE

I didn't know that.

ANNIE

She was only there for three weeks, but that was enough. She needed a place to stay after a big fight with her father-- she wouldn't tell me the details-- so I took her in. I had a second room set up for sewing, just a closet really, but we got my table out and put in a twin bed. I made that doll for her the first night. We'd go to work, we'd come home, and we'd talk a lot. But never about her family. And never about... how she made me feel.

But it was good. For three weeks it was good. I was so happy to have her around, in my life. And then one night she comes back and she's not okay. She's crying and she won't let me near her. Finally I'm able to calm her down, get some words out of her. Turns out her father, more than a little drunk, found the office where she worked and confronted her. What he said-- He accused her of things, called her a lot of names, said she belonged in a mental ward or in jail. And he kept yelling. And everyone else in that office just let it happen, just stared and listened and judged. And as she tells this to me, I just want to hold her, but every time I try to get near, she pulls away. So I sit beside her and wait. And I tell her how beautiful she is, how much she means to me. And her breathing gets calm and it's like she finally lets herself be loved. So I hold her. And I look at her. And she smiles. And then she leans in and kisses me. And then. And then her face clouds, like she realizes what she's done, and she pulls away. And goes to her room and shuts the door. And I wait, but she doesn't come out. Next morning the door's still shut. I wait as long as I can, and then I tell her I have to go to work and we'll talk when I get back. And through the door I hear, in a whisper: "Goodbye." I get through the day somehow, go back to the apartment, and every single thing of Patricia's is gone. Except for the doll. The one thing I gave to her.

KATE

Annie.

ANNIE

You can be afraid of connecting, Kate, I understand that. But keep looking. You've gotta find someone who makes you feel like it's right.

KATE

That's you. You feel right.

ANNIE

You're just saying that.

KATE

I'm not. Annie. Move in with me. Leave your lonely little room.

ANNIE

I can't.

KATE

Sure you can. I want that so much.

ANNIE

What we've been talking about. Just now.

KATE

I know. I understand. I feel it too. Please Annie.

A pause, then:

ANNIE

Okay.

KATE

Okay?

ANNIE

Yes. Okay.

KATE

Okay!

Kate hugs Annie. They look at each other, happy. Then Kate leans in and kisses Annie on the lips.

ANNIE

Kate? How do you feel?

KATE

Alive.

Kate leans in and she and Annie kiss again, holding it.

Ray enters the room carrying his folded apron and hat.

RAY

I was told to take this back--

They break away. Ray stops.

RAY (CONT'D)

The apron and hat. Back to the room here. For the show.

KATE

Yes. Right. Ray--?

RAY

No, that's, that's, that's all I'm down here for.

KATE

We were... working on...

ANNIE

Material.

KATE

Material.

RAY

Right, good. It's fine. I shouldn't even be down here.

ANNIE

No.

KATE

It was really...

RAY

Something.

KATE

Nothing. Nothing really.

RAY

No, I know. It's not, look--

KATE

Ray...

RAY

I-- No, listen. Look. I'm not a bad person. You know? I'm really not. Deep down I think I'm pretty... you know. Worldly.

KATE
(Denying)
It's not--

ANNIE
Kate, don't.

RAY
No, just-- So, because I know we've had some... But the truth is, we're all people. Right?

ANNIE
Yes.

KATE
But it's not--

RAY
And, you know, it's all right. It is. So. But I'm not, you know. So. Don't worry. I guess is what I'm saying.

KATE
You are.

RAY
Because all I did was come down here to bring back my apron and hat. Here you go. That's all. All right?

KATE
All right.

RAY
Okay then. So have a good night.

Ray exits. Pause.

KATE
What happened... I'm sorry.

ANNIE
Don't say that. Say anything but that.

SCENE FOUR

Charlie's office. Charlie, Schram and Ray are silent, waiting.

CHARLIE
Uh, a drink?

SCHRAM
No.

Another pause. Kate enters hurriedly, wearing the red and blue dress.

KATE
All right, Charlie, I'm here but I need time to--

She senses something is not right.

KATE (CONT'D)
What's going on?

CHARLIE
Kate, I'd like you to sit down.

KATE
The show goes live in an hour.

CHARLIE
I know. But sit first.

KATE
I think I'm going to stand. But you can sit.

CHARLIE
Thanks, I'll stand.

KATE
That's that, then.

RAY
Can I weigh in here?

CHARLIE
No.

RAY
Now Charlie, give me a chance.

CHARLIE
(Close to losing his temper)
Ray, I didn't even want you here for this. I only agreed because you said you wouldn't talk.

RAY

I won't.

CHARLIE

You're talking now! Words are coming out of your mouth!

RAY

You're reading me wrong. This is just business about the show. Actor to producer business. It'll just take a minute.

CHARLIE

No!

RAY

If it's okay with you, Mr. Schram?

SCHRAM

Go ahead.

RAY

Thanks much. Now Kate, let me say first that you put on a hell of a show. No, you do. And it's not Commander Bill and the Space Brigade, it's something else. And I see that now. And I'm glad that I'm a part of it.

KATE

Well good.

RAY

Yes, but I think we're still figuring out who we are. Over those first few episodes, you tinker around till you find the right picture where everything fits. And I want to say, with all due respect and it's your show and I know that, but I want to say, what about me and Gus?

CHARLIE

Ray, hurry it up.

KATE

No please, let him talk. What about you and Gus?

RAY

Well here's Gus, this wispy kid who was really good as my space assistant, but you make him a zookeeper. I don't know, but I don't buy him as that, someone in power. He's not a natural ruler of animals, not Gus. He's not built for it.

KATE

You've got a point.

RAY

And on the other end, you know, you're dressing me up to be this baker, and as an actor I'm just not feeling it. And I think my work is suffering.

And that's the thing: I don't want to weaken this great program that the Schrams are paying for. We have to always make the best show possible. Don't you think?

KATE

Ray.

RAY

I'm listening.

KATE

If I switched you and Gus, it would be a better fit, right?

RAY

Stands to reason.

KATE

Gus would be recast as Baker Bob and you would be Zookeeper Petey.

RAY

Zookeeper Pete. Petey's a weak name.

KATE

Zookeeper Pete. As you say, it's still early to make changes.

RAY

We learn as we go along.

KATE

So yes, let's switch that. You're the new zookeeper.

RAY

That's swell, Kate. Thanks.

KATE

No, thank you. For pointing it out. Ray.

CHARLIE

Is that the end of old business?

RAY

Yeah, we're good.

CHARLIE

Then I think we should let our guest talk for a bit. He's been pretty silent so far. Irving?

After a moment:

SCHRAM

(Addressing Kate, not hostile)

My father sent me here because we haven't advertised on television before. Never even considered it. It's always been magazines, coupons, that sort of thing.

And to be honest, Dad was skeptical. But I explained to him that tying our product to a particular program could be very beneficial. And he agreed. All right so far?

KATE

If there's anything in our show that needs a rewrite, or a new approach to sell your product you just tell me...

SCHRAM

No, it's not the content. What I need to talk about, what we need to address, falls under the heading of public image.

KATE

Okay.

SCHRAM

Specifically, I'd like you to tell me about your friendship with Annie Rafferty.

KATE

What about it?

RAY

There have been concerns.

CHARLIE

Goddammit Ray....

KATE

I-- Look, you've seen Annie perform as Comet in rehearsal. She's perfect, Mr. Schram, you know that.

SCHRAM

I'm not questioning her performance on the show.

KATE

Then what specifically are you asking?

SCHRAM

There's behavior that I've witnessed--

KATE

That you've witnessed.

SCHRAM

That's right, behavior that calls into doubt whether you and Miss Rafferty are proper spokespersons for our company.

KATE

First off, there is nothing improper between the two of us.

CHARLIE

Of course not. We're talking here.

SCHRAM

But there's an issue to address.

KATE

No there isn't.

CHARLIE

Irving, it's a false trail.

(To Kate)

Who was it, just a couple months ago? Michael from accounting?

KATE

(To Schram)

You know what? I'd like to hear about this behavior you witnessed.

SCHRAM

Don't get defensive. There's no need.

KATE

I think there is a need.

SCHRAM

Listen: we're not past the point of no return. I still believe in your talents and in the show.

KATE

Then what is this conversation about?

SCHRAM

You need to show me that you're the right spokesman for Schram's Cream Cheese.

KATE

I haven't already done that?

SCHRAM

Maintaining a wholesome image. You just need to answer some questions. Truthfully.

KATE

Irving, look, I'm telling you now: nothing is wrong. You can trust me.

SCHRAM

Could you describe your friendship with Annie Rafferty?

KATE

Describe it? It's a friendship.

SCHRAM

Is it... indecent?

KATE

No. Absolutely not.

SCHRAM

Do you need me to define that?

KATE

No, I don't. And honestly--

SCHRAM

Is the relationship physical? I have to ask.

KATE

You don't.

SCHRAM

For the good of the company.

KATE

And you don't have the right.

SCHRAM

Legally I do. Provisional in the contract with the station is a clause protecting me from adverse representation of my product--

KATE

This is a farce. Let's stop this. Cards on the table. The behavior--

(Looking at Ray)

which you didn't witness, Irving, I know that--

SCHRAM

I was made aware--

KATE

You were made aware. It was a kiss of celebration, okay? I can't explain it more. We had a great rehearsal, we survived pulling a brand-new show for you together in a single week, we were feeling good. And women, we're not like men. It's easier to express emotions, so there was one kiss, it was sisterly and it was nothing.

SCHRAM

You kissed Miss Rafferty.

KATE

Yes, just like I'm sure you were told.

SCHRAM

When was this?

A beat. Kate realizes she said too much.

SCHRAM (CONT'D)

Miss Sampson?

KATE

Yesterday afternoon. You knew that.

SCHRAM

This morning on the set, speaking casually with Miss Rafferty, she said she had been up late packing. I asked why, and she said she was moving. I asked where, and she said to your place. Just small talk, but it worried me.

KATE

She-- I can explain that. She's living in a drafty little place in a bad neighborhood--

SCHRAM

Did you ask her to move in with you?

KATE

To save money. I've got extra room. Come on. Women live with women all the time.

SCHRAM

It's the progression. You made a worker from a costume shop a partner in your show. And you're planning to live with this woman. And now you've admitted to physical contact...

KATE

No. Irving. Charlie, come on. There's nothing between us. Honestly.

SCHRAM

It's enough to cause concern.

KATE

There is nothing improper between Miss Rafferty and myself.

SCHRAM

And I'm saying, it's wise to take steps.

KATE

Are you--? Wait a minute, are you pulling your sponsorship?

CHARLIE

We're still talking here.

KATE

Are you?

SCHRAM

I don't want to. I hope I don't have to.

KATE

Mr. Schram, look at what's in front of you. We're delivering a great show, one that will give you just the audience you want. If you walk away now, sooner or later you're going to lose to the Philadelphia brand. Kraft's already got ads running on the networks.

SCHRAM

But I'd be taking a chance on you.

KATE

And I will not disappoint. Just keep the show going, and I'll make you and your company proud. Mothers and daughters will sit down every Saturday to watch your show. You'll become a weekend tradition.

SCHRAM

I'm asking you to do one thing. Replace Annie Rafferty on the *Kate and Comet* program.

KATE

I-- I can't.

SCHRAM

You know our concerns.

KATE

There's nothing going on.

CHARLIE

Kate. It's early in the show's career.

KATE

I know, but--

CHARLIE

Changes can still be made.

SCHRAM

In light of this... history with a co-worker.

KATE

Annie and I, we really aren't that close.

RAY

Shouldn't be hard to make the change then.

SCHRAM

Public image.

CHARLIE

Look, I'm hearing one casting change, and you--

KATE

She's a perfect fit for the show!

CHARLIE

We'll hold auditions. One casting change, and your sponsor's committed to you.

KATE

Mr. Schram, please. The show won't be the same without her. Annie is Comet.

SCHRAM

I'd like you to find another person.

KATE

I won't be able to replace her.

CHARLIE

Kate, come on. It's early days. We'll make changes.

KATE

What'll I say to her?

CHARLIE

If you want, I can take care of it.

SCHRAM

I think this is the best way to resolve the issue.

KATE

Charlie? Can she get her job back in the costume shop?

RAY

(Quiet)

No.

CHARLIE

I thought Hazel was coming back.

KATE

She is, but they could use two down there.

CHARLIE

(Noncommittally)

Well maybe. I don't know.

SCHRAM

Mr. Hanlon, I don't think that's wise.

CHARLIE

No, you're right.

SCHRAM

Kate, you need to decide this. I need to know.

CHARLIE

She's spent a lot of time getting to this point in the game, hasn't she, Ray?

RAY

Yeah. She's worked hard. And she's good at what she does.

CHARLIE

It's her show. And Schram's Cream Cheese.

SCHRAM

"Proud sponsor of *The Kate and Comet Show*." Your name's right in the title.

CHARLIE

And before that? 42 episodes of Commander Bill?

RAY

43. Of course, Kate can always find another show. If it comes to that.

KATE

Mr. Schram?

(Pause)

I'll let her go.

CHARLIE

That's done then.

SCHRAM

Mr. Hanlon, would you handle this person's termination?

CHARLIE

I'll do it right now.

SCHRAM

Thank you. Kate. You can hold auditions whenever it's convenient for you. And if there's any extra costs incurred, the company should be able to help you.

CHARLIE

That's very generous. We'll make sure you're a part of the process. So unless there's anything else.

No one speaks.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

All right then.

SCENE FIVE

The studio. Only the puppet house and a stool sit upstage. Kate paces.

KATE

(To herself, mumbling)

Sponsor spot, Comet's house, Baker Bob, story time. Sponsor spot, Comet's house, Baker Bob--

Annie enters in a coat, carrying her shoulder bag. She sees Kate, stops.

KATE (CONT'D)

Annie.

No answer.

KATE (CONT'D)

Annie. I fought for you, I really did.

ANNIE

I just want to get Patricia. She's still in the dressing room.

KATE

I can't do this show week after week without you.

ANNIE

Everyone else is betting you can.

KATE

It won't be the same. I need you. You're Comet. You. Comets burn bright.

ANNIE

They also burn out, and then you can't even see 'em.

KATE

I tried getting your job back. In the costume room.

ANNIE

Oh. I don't want it.

KATE

Then I can help you find a new job. We'll look together.

ANNIE

I'm going to leave Chicago. It's time I look somewhere else.

KATE

Don't. You can't. Even--

(Lowering her voice)

Even if you're not at the station, I still want to see you. Be your friend.

ANNIE

It's over. For your sake. Mr. Hanlon made that very clear.

KATE

(Low tone)

We could meet. No one here would have to know.

ANNIE

I don't want to live like this. Terrified of shadows, of what's hiding behind the rock.

KATE

We worked so well together.

ANNIE

We did, didn't we?

KATE

Annie. Don't go away. I need you. Let's stick together.

ANNIE

I want that very much. But it's impossible. You have your career to think about.

KATE

I want both. There's got to be a way.

ANNIE

I need to go, Kate.

KATE

We can still make this work. I can have this show and you. Somehow. Let me find a way.

ANNIE

I wish you well. I really do. I'll be watching from the furniture section of Kressler's department store two blocks away. The first and last *Kate and Comet Show* I'll see. And when I watch, I just hope that I'll recognize the friend who meant so much to me. I'm proud of you, Kate Sampson.

KATE

Don't go. I don't want to be alone.

ANNIE

I don't either. Have a good show. Best wishes from your special fan.

Annie starts to leave.

KATE

Annie... Annie! Don't leave behind Patricia.

ANNIE

(with no anger; simply)

Please keep her. You might need some company. Goodbye.

Annie exits.

KATE

Special fan. Annie...

Kate is shaken up.

Gus enters. He wears the Baker apron and carries Comet and script pages.

GUS

(conversing with the doll)

"Are you all ready, Gus?" I'm ready, Comet! "Are you ready, Kate?" Kate's ready, Comet. Kate, I'm gonna make a great Comet. I'm gonna tack the script up behind the box, my apron's on for Baker Bob, so I'm ready to go.

KATE

Gus. Give me your script.

Gus hands the script over to Kate, who looks at the first page.

GUS

I'm all set. Sponsor's spot, Comet's house, Baker Bob...

KATE

There's a bit of business that was cut at the top of the show.

GUS

Right.

KATE

Well, it's going back in. I'm putting it back in.

GUS

What, this? "Hi Comet!" And Kate leans over and kisses her.'

KATE

That's right.

GUS

Are you sure? Does Mr. Schram know about it?

KATE

It'll be fine. And Gus: for that one moment, don't say anything, don't ad lib. Just let it be a moment between me and her, okay? Gus?

GUS

Okay. You're the writer.

KATE

Have a good show.

GUS

You too. We're live in one minute.

Gus gets behind the puppet box. Charlie and Schram enter, move to Kate.

CHARLIE

Kate! 24 weeks, my dear. That's six months of *Kate and Comet* sponsorship. Half a year.

SCHRAM

I signed up right after the meeting. A good faith gesture.

CHARLIE

You did good, K. L. Sampson.

SCHRAM

The show's going to be great.

CHARLIE

We'll be watching right here from the floor. Exciting, huh Irving?

SCHRAM

I wouldn't miss it.

CHARLIE

Thirty seconds.

Charlie and Schram move downstage.

Ray enters in the zookeeper outfit.

RAY

This is a good day. I can feel it. Look at this safari shirt, look how nice it fits. Comfortable. Hey Kate? "Safari Pete." It's a better name, don't you think? Safari Pete. Think about it. 15 seconds.

Ray moves downstage, the three men now watching and flanking Kate in a half circle, who sits on the stool by the puppet box.

CHARLIE

24 weeks, secured sponsorship.

SCHRAM

It was the right choice.

RAY
She's a smart woman, Charlie.

SCHRAM
Successful too.

RAY
Five seconds.

CHARLIE
We're proud of her.

RAY
We all are.

Lights change bright on Kate. The men
loom in shadow.

KATE
Hello, special fans! I'm so glad you're watching. Before we
begin, Kate has a very special message for you. Okay?

A quick fanfare, and Comet pops up.

KATE (CONT'D)
Hello, Comet!

Kate turns to face Comet, a genuine
smile on her face. She tries to move
towards the puppet, but she's
paralyzed, near tears.

The bright lights burn, the men watch.

KATE (CONT'D)
My very special message...

Pause. Then Kate decides. She turns
forward again, transforming herself
into the smiling, insincere pitchman.

KATE (CONT'D)
My very special message is this. "I wanna talk to you today
about Schram's cream cheese. Schram's is made right here in
Chicago, it's a real Windy City food. And did you know that
Schram's cream cheese isn't just for bagels and toast? It's
true! Although it's delicious as a spreadable topping for all
kinds of crackers and breads, mom can use Schram's cream
cheese for many kitchen dishes, from whipping up yummy
frostings and batters to giving stews and sauces a creamy
kick. Tell your mother to always use Schram's: it's the cream
cheese with a difference!"

KATE AND COMET by Jason Half 100.

As Kate delivers the above pitch, audio of 1950s TELEVISION COMMERCIALS, all men explaining the benefits of their products, begin to overlap, building to a cacophony of male voices. Kate's speech gets swallowed up by the multitude, and she continues selling and smiling as the noise grows and the lights fade.

THE END