

La Comédiathèque

# *The Deal*

*Jean-Pierre Martinez*

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# The Deal

**Jean-Pierre Martinez**

Alex, a struggling playwright, contemplates abandoning his theatrical career as his comedies fail to garner interest. Just as he contemplates a shift to a more conventional job, a renowned Parisian producer contacts him, expressing eagerness to stage his latest play. It's a golden opportunity for Alex to finally gain recognition. The producer plans to visit soon for him to sign an exclusivity contract.

However, this unexpected phone call is immediately followed by another. Fred, Alex's friend who already holds the rights to the play, informs him that he is finally going to stage it. He has invested all his savings in renting a small theatre.

How can Alex delicately navigate the situation, persuading his amiable but less successful friend to abandon the project without it appearing as a betrayal to their longstanding friendship?

## **Characters**

Alex

Clara

Fred

Victoria

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*A sparsely furnished living room, with a sofa at its centre. Alex, in his thirties, is playing a video game on his laptop. His smartphone rings. Totally absorbed in his game, he takes a moment to answer the call.*

**Alex** (*distracted*) – Yeah... Chloe...? (*Suddenly coming back to reality*) Oh, Chloe...! Yeah, yeah, sure, but... I don't recall giving you my number. Nicolas gave it to you, right?... Oh, it's fine, not a problem, it's just that... I'm still at work, and... Well... at my agent's office. We're about to sign a major deal, and... Right, he's here, I'll need to wrap this up... Yeah, I'll get back to you... Most likely tomorrow, okay? Alright... I'll give you a kiss too... (*He puts away his smartphone*) Damn it, Nico... He's going to hear about this...

*The front door opens, and Clara, also in her thirties, enters, carrying two fully loaded and apparently heavy shopping bags.*

**Clara** – Hey...

**Alex** – You're already here?

**Clara** – Try to contain your excitement...

**Alex** – No, no, it's just that... You said you'd be back a bit later.

**Clara** – My audition got canceled... I took the opportunity to do some shopping. What about you?

**Alex** – Still searching for inspiration for my new play...

**Clara** – And then?

**Alex** – And then, nothing much...

**Clara** – Do you think ideas will come to you by staying cooped up in here...?

**Alex** – If you know a place where good comedy ideas can be found, let me know... I'll go there right away...

**Clara** – I don't know... Maybe in real life... Have you ever tried pushing a shopping cart in a crowded supermarket at rush hour? Who knows? Maybe around a corner... Between the fish sticks and the toilet paper...

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

**Clara** – Don't bother, I just did it... We're set for at least a week. By the way, I'll put this in the fridge before the frozen items start dripping onto the toilet paper.

**Alex** – Well... Thanks, then...

**Clara** – You're welcome, but next time, when you see the fridge is empty, and we're running out of essentials, try to remember...

*She exits. He tidies up the room a bit, then goes back to his game on his laptop before snapping out of it.*

**Alex** – I need to stop with this... (*He puts away his laptop, takes a bottle from the bar, and fills two glasses, while Clara returns*) I poured you a drink, darling...

**Clara** – Are we celebrating something?

**Alex** – No, but... I often see this in American TV shows... The head of the family comes home exhausted, just in time to kiss the kids goodnight... And his wife serves him a drink to relax a bit... before being taken passionately on the living room sofa.

**Clara** – Maybe in American shows from the sixties...

**Alex** – Yeah... And we don't have kids...

**Clara** – You're not exactly a housewife either... At least you don't have all the options. You don't do the cleaning or the shopping.

*He embraces her with a desire to go further.*

**Alex** – But I'm always at your disposal for the warrior's rest.

*She gently pushes him away.*

**Clara** – Stop it, you'll wake up the kids...

*They sip their drinks for a moment in silence.*

**Alex** – You know, I've been on a bit of a downward spiral. I gave up acting a decade ago to pursue writing, but breaking through as an author has been a challenge.

**Clara** – Well, your first comedy did have a bit of success.

**Alex** – Yeah, it had a three-week run in a suburban theatre. Just long enough for all my friends to catch it. My other plays never made it to the stage.

**Clara** – I don't understand why... When you see the mediocre stuff playing in the top theatres in Paris...

**Alex** – It seems I don't know the right people or being part of the right club. I never figured out how to sell myself.

**Clara** – Me neither, unfortunately.

**Alex** – At least you're working...

**Clara** – You say that... Stupid commercials, TV silhouette roles, dubbing...

**Alex** – Dubbing, again... That's interesting, isn't it?

**Clara** – It pays the bills... But as for recognition... You know, no one at the hairdresser ever said to me: "I recognize you! You're the voice of Inspector Derrick's wife. Can I have your autograph?"

**Alex** – Probably because Derrick's wife never appears in the series. Neither does Columbo's, for that matter...

**Clara** – No, doing dubbing, for an actress, is like stripping in a club for the blind. You're less exposed, sure, but you're doomed to stay in the shadows.

**Alex** – If you're tired of it, just quit...

**Clara** – Really? And who's going to cover the rent? You?

**Alex** – I sense a subtle reproach...

*She kisses him.*

**Clara** – I've always had faith in you, Alex, you know that. Fortune will change in due time.

**Alex** – I'm beginning to think about throwing in the towel. I'll give it one more year, and then I'll start hunting for a regular job.

**Clara** – A regular job...? You're not exactly skilled in anything...

**Alex** – Thanks for the uplifting words about my career shift.

**Clara** – The world of theatre will acknowledge your writing talent one day, I'm confident.

**Alex** – Maybe after I'm gone...

**Clara** – Come on... The phone will ring eventually, you'll see...

*He embraces her, but just then, the landline phone starts ringing. A ring reminiscent of phones from the past.*

**Alex** – That ring always startles me. Who still has a landline phone at home these days?

**Clara** – It's the only number my mum managed to memorize. I prefer to keep it...

**Alex** – Plus, she's probably the only one who still remembers our landline number. I doubt it's a big-shot producer calling for a major contract...

*Clara answers.*

**Clara** – Hello, Mum... Yes, yes, everything's fine, why? Yeah, I know, I usually call you around seven, but it's not even seven yet... (*Looking at her watch*) It's barely six. But come on, Mum, it's Friday! The time change wasn't yesterday, it's tomorrow. Like every year, in the night from Saturday to Sunday. And you didn't notice? OK, I'll call you back in an hour, alright? But otherwise, how are you? Alright... Alright... Oh, poor thing... Alright... I'll call you back later... (*She hangs up*) That was my mum...

**Alex** – Yes... So you'll call her back in an hour then...

**Clara** – Well yeah, as usual...

**Alex** – Just like she just called you...

**Clara** – And so what?

**Alex** – Nothing... I've always wondered if it's really necessary to call your mum three times a day to ask her how she's doing. With all her health issues... You know darn well it's not going well.

**Clara** – What does it matter to you? Are you the one paying the phone bill?

**Alex** – No, indeed... It's very delicate of you to remind me.

**Clara** – Do I ask you how many times a day you call your mistresses?

**Alex** – "My" mistress?

**Clara** – So, there's only one? You're reassuring me...

*The landline phone rings again.*

**Alex** (*sarcastic*) – Oh, joy... Who could it possibly be?

*Clara shoots him a dark look before picking up the phone.*

**Clara** (*pleasantly*) – Hello, Mum? Oh, my apologies, I assumed... Yes, of course, I'll get him for you right away. (*She hands the phone to Alex*) It's someone named Victoria... Must be a girl you met a long time ago, back when mobile phones didn't exist yet...

**Alex** – Victoria? I really have no idea who she might be, I assure you... (*He takes the landline phone with its long cord and goes offstage*) Hello... Yes, speaking...

*He exits. Clara seems annoyed. She tidies up the room a bit. Then she takes out her smartphone to call her mother.*

**Clara** – Yes, Mum, so how are you... You're not doing well? Oh, darn it... Did you manage to schedule a doctor's appointment...

*She exits too. Alex returns, still holding the landline phone in one hand and the handset in the other.*

**Alex** – OK... Alright... Yes, yes, of course... Hold on, let me check my calendar... (*He waits a few seconds*) No, no, that's perfect. So let's do that... See you tomorrow, Victoria...

*He slumps onto the sofa, looking visibly upset. Clara returns, still on her smartphone.*

**Clara** – Okay... Definitely, I'll give you a ring tomorrow morning. Love you, Mum... (*She puts away her phone and glances at Alex*) So, who was that ghost from the landline?

**Alex** – You won't believe it...

**Clara** – Spit it out...

**Alex** – Victoria de Casteljarnac.

**Clara** – No...? "The" Victoria de Casteljarnac?

**Alex** – The very same, orchestrator of the biggest Parisian hits in the last decade. That's her. Victoria de Casteljarnac.

**Clara** – And you know her?

**Alex** – About ten years back, I auditioned for a play she was directing. I didn't get the part, by the way. Haven't heard from her since then...

**Clara** – And today, out of the blue, she rings you up on the landline to offer you a role?

**Alex** – Even more unbelievable! She wants to produce my play!

**Clara** – Your play? Which one?

**Alex** – "The Deal." She says she loved it.

**Clara** – That's insane...

**Alex** – She was in search of a new comedy and somehow stumbled upon mine. I'm not entirely sure how...

**Clara** – Remember last year, I printed the script and sent it to all the production companies in Paris. You even told me it was pointless...

**Alex** – I had lost all hope... No producer reads the plays they receive, anyway.

**Clara** – I didn't remember sending it to her directly. Someone must have forwarded it to her...

**Alex** – Anyway, she read it, and she's absolutely smitten with it!

**Clara** – And she's going to stage it?

**Alex** – She's already in the casting process. She's keeping the details under wraps for now, but it's going to feature some big names. She only works with stars!

**Clara** – Did she mention the venue?

**Alex** – You know how it is... As long as it's not signed. But yes, it's definitely going to be one of the top theatres in Paris.

**Clara** – I find it hard to believe.

**Alex** – Me too. Initially, I thought it might be a prank, but no! She's planning to premiere the play in Avignon, then hit a major theatre in Paris and embark on a nationwide tour.

**Clara** – But that's fantastic!

**Alex** – It could really catapult us into the big leagues.

**Clara** – And then?

**Alex** – She wants a face-to-face. I've got a meeting at her place tomorrow afternoon to ink the deal. She's quite determined and wants to move quickly.

**Clara** – Tomorrow? Oh yes indeed, she doesn't waste any time. She seems tough, but...

**Alex** – Why do you say that?

**Clara** – It's because of her reputation in the industry, isn't it?

**Alex** – Of course, she wants exclusivity. I can sense the winds of change, Clara! This calls for a celebration, don't you think?

**Clara** – I'm exhausted right now, but let's plan to go out to dinner tomorrow, I promise!

**Alex** – Okay.

**Clara** – How about we go to bed instead?

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

**Clara** – No, I meant... if we go to bed.

**Alex** – Oh, okay... But with all this, I think I'll have trouble sleeping. And I'm not used to going to bed before seven.

**Clara** – Who mentioned anything about sleeping? You're not very lively tonight...

**Alex** – I'm sorry... I'm a bit disturbed...

**Clara** – Me too... considering how long I've dreamt of sleeping with a successful author.

**Alex** – Don't tell me you've never had such an offer...

**Clara** – Who knows, I might even land a role...

*They begin to share an intimate moment on the couch.*

**Black.**

*The landline phone rings again.*

**Light.**

**Clara** – Again...

**Alex** – We could just let it go...

**Clara** – If it's my mother... it might be an emergency...

**Alex** – For emergencies, there's 999, right? It's not that hard to remember...

**Clara** – It might be Victoria...

**Alex** – She'll call back if it's important...

*Clara gets up.*

**Clara** – You should answer, Alex.

**Alex** (*resigned*) – You're right... It's been years since we wished for a phone call that wasn't from your mother. We shouldn't complain that it's ringing too often already...

**Clara** – It's the price of success... We'll have to get used to it.



*He answers. She exits.*

**Alex** – Hello, yes...? Who? Oh, hi, Fred...! It's been a while, indeed... Well, listen, I'm okay... I might have some good news, but it's a bit early to talk about it... And you? Oh yeah... (*He seems to falter*) No...? Yes, yes, I remember. Well... honestly, it had slipped my mind... Oh yeah? No...? Yes, yes, fantastic, absolutely... Listen, I'll have to cut this short. We just kicked off a game of... That's right, they're waiting for me for the second half. Okay, Fred, can we catch up tomorrow morning?

*Clara comes back.*

**Clara** – Who was it?

**Alex** – It was Fred.

**Clara** – Fred?

**Alex** – Fred, you know! We used to play together... back when I was still an actor. I had my last audition with him, by the way... With Victoria, precisely...

**Clara** – Another blast from the past... Really, it's like Night of the Living Dead... So what? Does he want to offer you a role?

**Alex** – Worse than that...

**Clara** – Worse?

**Alex** – He wants to stage my play...

**Clara** – Which play?

**Alex** – "The Deal"!

**Clara** – No...?

**Alex** – Completely slipped my mind. I never thought the project would actually come through. He messes up everything he undertakes.

**Clara** – So what?

**Alex** – He claims he just inked a deal with a theatre in Avignon for the festival.

**Clara** – This must be a joke.

**Alex** – No, unfortunately...

*Alex is devastated.*

**Clara** – Did you grant him the rights to the play?

**Alex** – Yes, apparently. I didn't even remember. Back then, I wasn't drowning in proposals...

**Clara** – Damn...

**Alex** – It's a disaster. Victoria insists on exclusivity, which is reasonable. If the play is already set for Avignon, she won't want to stage it anymore.

**Clara** – Can't you just ask Fred to drop the project?

**Alex** – He just landed a deal with a theatre! He poured all his savings into it. It actually surprised me when he mentioned that. Fred isn't the type to have savings...

**Clara** – Still, check the authorization on the Society of Authors' website...

*Alex types on his phone.*

**Alex** – Yes, unfortunately... I granted him authorization for three years, and it's still in effect...

**Clara** – Let me see... (*He hands her his phone, and she looks*) Yes... But it doesn't cover Avignon...

*Alex takes the phone back to confirm.*

**Alex** – Oh, yes, you're spot on...

**Clara** – The authorization! It explicitly states "Excluding Avignon"...

*He looks at the phone again.*

**Alex** – Oh, absolutely, you're right...

**Clara** – To take part in the festival, he'd require an extension of the authorization. Avignon is always treated separately...

**Alex** – So what?

**Clara** – Well... you could deny him permission for Avignon...

**Alex** – But he'll maintain the right to perform in Paris.

**Clara** – It expires in six months... We're in March... Almost the end of the season. If he skips Avignon, no theater will pick up his play in Paris for the fall. Just don't renew his authorization come September.

**Alex** – Yeah... But it's Fred... He's a buddy. A bit of a dead weight, but still a buddy. He went broke to deal with this theatre...

**Clara** – That's his problem... He should have asked you first. And broke... You tell me he didn't have a penny, anyway. The only upside of being poor is you're less likely to go broke...

**Alex** – Unless he's in debt... Do you know how much a 50-seat theatre costs during the festival? Not to mention accommodation and everything else. He staked everything on this. He even sold his car.

**Clara** – Even if he had sold his mother...

**Alex** – I don't recognize you anymore, Clara...

**Clara** – We've been waiting for an opportunity like this for years, Alex! It might never happen again...

**Alex** – I can't do this to him.

**Clara** – Then the only way is to persuade him not to go to Avignon...

**Alex** – How?

**Clara** – He can still cancel the contract with that theatre...

**Alex** – You know how it goes. They asked to be paid as soon as the contract was signed.

**Clara** – Yeah, of course...

**Alex** – He's a friend, Clara. He was so thrilled to share the news with me. And just yesterday, I would've seen it as good news too.

*Alex's mobile phone rings, and he checks the screen.*

**Alex** – It's Fred... Apparently, he found my mobile number... *(He takes the call)* Hey, Fred... Oh really? No...? Yes, yes, I'm very happy, of course. It's just that... Yeah, what an adventure, huh! Sure, sure, we're here... Now? Alright, I'll be waiting... *(He puts away his mobile)* That was Fred... He's downstairs... He's on his way...

**Clara** – At this hour?

**Alex** – It's not even seven yet!

**Clara** – Oh, right...

**Alex** – What am I going to say to him...?

**Clara** – There might be cancellation insurance...

**Alex** – Cancellation insurance? Fred? Last time I saw him, he wasn't even covered by social security anymore...

**Clara** – I don't know... He might have some obstacle.

**Alex** – What kind of obstacle...?

**Clara** – Like if he broke a leg... he wouldn't make it to Avignon.

**Alex** – He would still need to break a leg. That's not the most likely scenario.

**Clara** – You could help him a bit...

**Alex** – Financially, you mean?

**Clara** – To break a leg!

**Alex** – Are you kidding?

**Clara** – You're right... Poison is more discreet...

**Alex** – You're freaking me out, Clara...

*The doorbell rings. Alex remains frozen.*

**Clara** – Well, go ahead and open...

*Alex opens the door, ushering in Fred, a friendly loser about the same age as them, holding a rolled-up poster secured with an elastic band.*

**Fred** – Nice place you got here...

**Alex** – Have you met Clara?

**Fred** – Clara...! Oh, yeah, I think so. It's been a while, but...

**Clara** – If it's been a while, it probably wasn't me...

**Fred** – Right... And... are you also involved in the theatre scene?

**Clara** – I'm more into dubbing.

**Fred** – Oh yeah? I was thinking... Your voice sounds vaguely familiar...

**Clara** – My voice...? I barely said a couple of words...

**Fred** – Aren't you the voice behind the lawyer character in that Netflix series? She's out there defending gangsters by day and pulling off burglaries by night.

**Clara** – Between dusk and dawn...

**Fred** – That's the one!

**Clara** – Yes, that's me. I thought no one noticed...

**Alex** – Fred's always had this knack for picking out voices...

**Fred** – Call it a sixth sense.

**Alex** – Unfortunately, with him, it's all the other senses that go haywire..

**Fred** – Always the joker, Alex... You should've pursued a career in writing.

**Alex** – Take a seat, please...

**Clara** – Can I get you something to drink?

**Alex** – It's cocktail hour, after all...

**Fred** – Thanks... I've actually quit drinking.

**Alex** – Oh, really... But when you say "quit drinking"...

**Fred** – I've quit smoking too.

**Alex** – Well, well... So, um, you haven't quit the theatre.

**Fred** – I went through a tough period... That's why I've been out of touch... But since then, I started therapy... I got back into sports... And now, I'm all in...

**Alex** – All in...?

**Fred** – I know I'm not twenty anymore. I figured it was now or never. After all, what do I have to lose?

**Clara** – Twenty thousand euros... (*Fred looks a bit surprised*) That's roughly what this festival is going to set you back, isn't it...?

**Fred** – You might even say thirty... With all the extra expenses...

**Alex** – And you've chosen to bet it all on my play...

**Fred** – I've always believed in your writing talent, Alex, you know...

**Alex** – Until now, you were pretty much the only one.

**Fred** – I'm confident this comedy can be a hit. So, I took the plunge. Sold whatever I could, borrowed a bit from my brother-in-law, and booked a spot at a theatre in Avignon.

**Clara** – Ah, yes... Which one?

**Fred** – The Dead End Theatre.

**Clara** – The Dead End Theatre...?

**Fred** – It's in a dead-end street. That's probably why they called it that.

*An awkward pause.*

**Alex** – I'm starting to wonder if quitting drinking was the best call for you...

**Clara** – So, is everything finalized now?

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

**Clara** – Dead End Theatre... Can't say I've ever heard of it.

**Fred** – It just opened. This will be their inaugural festival this year. That's why there were still a few slots available. Before, it used to be a hair salon.

**Clara** – A hair salon... So, we're talking about a small theatre...

**Fred** – 32 seats... and 4 standing. I'm kidding... I mean about the 4 standing spots...

**Alex** – And what's the check amount?

**Fred** – € 10,000 for the venue and a small room just upstairs... But, of course, there's everything else to consider.

**Clara** – Oh yes, that's quite pricey... to get a haircut in a hair salon.

*An uncomfortable silence.*

**Alex** – What Clara's getting at is that you're diving into quite a gamble, aren't you? In Avignon, with over 1000 shows vying for attention each day, there's no assurance of packing the house. Even in a hair salon...

**Clara** – Especially when the playwright isn't well-known.

**Alex** – And I bet the actors aren't either. So, who's in the cast, by the way?

**Fred** – It's not set in stone just yet... You know how it goes? Until everything's nailed down, I'd rather keep quiet about it... But I assure you, they'll be top-notch!

**Clara** – Of course...

*Another awkward silence.*

**Fred** – But it doesn't seem to make you happy, Alex...

**Alex** – No, no, it's not that... It's just that...

**Fred** – Oh, don't worry, I'm not asking for anything, okay? No cash, at least...

**Clara** – Well, that's a relief, then...

**Fred** – Of course, if you want to lend a hand to the project in any way, feel free. You know Avignon. You can never have too many people handing out flyers. Having the author's support always adds something extra...

**Alex** – That's understood...

**Fred** – I'm picking up on some unease here... Yet, Avignon was your dream too, right? We talked about it a lot. I thought you'd be more excited about it...

**Alex** – Yes, yes, I'm happy, obviously... It's just that...

**Clara** – We're concerned about you, that's all... We wouldn't want you to go broke either...

**Alex** – And, between us... It's not my best play, huh... Are you sure you don't want to consider another one?

**Fred** – I've been working on this project for almost three years. I'm not about to switch up the play now... Is there an issue?

**Alex** – No, no, not at all...

**Clara** – A bit, Alex.

**Fred** – What?

**Clara** – I'll leave you to it...

*Clara exits.*

**Fred** – Oh, by the way, I forgot... Here's the poster!

*Fred unrolls the poster he brought.*

**Alex** – Oh, yes...

**Fred** – What do you think?

**Alex** – Fantastic...

**Fred** – Of course, it's just a mock-up... My sister did the design.

**Alex** – Is your sister a graphic designer?

**Fred** – A beautician, but she's always had a talent for drawing.

**Alex** – If you say so...

**Fred** – The only thing missing is the names of the actors. It's something, right?

**Alex** – Yes... (*Embarrassed*) After all these years of dreaming about it...

**Fred** – I know I'm taking a risk, but well... You only live once! When my girlfriend left me last year, I admit I even thought about ending it all. This project pulled me out of that dark place. I think without it...

**Alex** – Oh damn...

**Fred** – So, what's up with you? Any troubles? Health issues, perhaps? Please don't tell me it's something serious like cancer...

**Alex** – No, no, nothing like that...

**Fred** – Okay, so is it about Clara? Are you breaking up? I must say, I've never seen you with the same girl for more than a week...

**Alex** – No, no, everything's fine on that front... Actually, it's kind of great news. At least for me.

**Fred** – Well, spill it...

*Alex hesitates.*

**Alex** – Well, I...

**Fred** – What is it?

**Alex** – I'm getting married, that's what.

**Fred** – To Clara?

**Alex** – Well, yes, to Clara...

**Fred** – That's fantastic...

**Alex** – Yeah...

**Fred** – So, why do you look like that?

**Alex** – It's just that... With the new responsibilities I'm about to take on...

**Fred** – Is she pregnant? Is that why you're marrying her?

**Alex** – No, no, what are you talking about... We're not in the 19th century, buddy. People don't get married just because someone's pregnant.

**Fred** – So, what's the issue? Concerning Avignon, I mean...

**Alex** – It's just that... For the past ten years, it's been a struggle, you know? I feel like I've been living off Clara. I was on the verge of giving up and searching for a real job... I was just starting to get used to that idea. And then, all of a sudden, everything happens at once.

**Fred** – Hold on, don't get too excited too soon... It's a tiny theatre, you know... But there's something about it this time; I can sense it. I truly believe we're onto something here.

**Alex** – I'm not as optimistic, Fred...

**Fred** – Don't give up on your dreams, Alex. Regret lasts a lifetime. I have faith in this! I'm diving into this venture not just for me but for you as well. So, what do you say? Are you in?

**Alex** – Absolutely, Fred...!

*Fred's phone rings, and he answers.*

**Fred** – Hello? Oh yes! Sure... Okay... Right, I'll head over right away. (*He puts away his phone.*) I need to go...

**Alex** – Everything okay?

**Fred** – Yeah, no problem. It's an actress I need to meet for the role, you know?

**Alex** – That's great.

**Fred** – In a way, it's also for her that I'm doing the play. But I'll keep you in the loop, alright?

**Alex** – Sure.

*Clara returns.*

**Fred** – Hi, Clara... and congrats!

*He leaves, forgetting his poster.*

**Clara** – Congrats...?

**Alex** – I'll fill you in...

**Clara** – So, is everything sorted?

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

**Clara** – What do you mean?

**Alex** – He was so excited to show me his poster. Take a look...

**Clara** – This poster is downright awful! It's like his little sister doodled it...

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

**Clara** – Are you kidding me? I've invested everything in you for years! I cover the rent, stock the fridge, handle everything at home... just to give the genius space to work. And now, you're going to let this golden opportunity to have your talent recognized slip away? All just to avoid disappointing that loser you hung out with before you met me. The good old times, old friends, adolescent dreams – they're all well and good. But that's not real life! You need to grow up a bit, Alex!



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

*She is stunned.*

**Clara** – Go to hell!

*The doorbell rings again.*

**Alex** – That must be him... He forgot his poster...

**Clara** – Okay... If you don't have the guts, I'll tell him...

**Alex** – Please, Clara, don't do that... (*She leaves*) Well, go ahead if you want, it'll save me from doing it...

*Clara returns with Victoria, who appears a bit older than them or carries herself that way. She is an exuberant but authoritative woman.*

**Alex** – Victoria...? I thought we had a meeting tomorrow afternoon at your place?

**Victoria** – Hi, Alex! I happened to be in the neighbourhood, so I thought I'd drop by; it's easier this way... Hello, Miss. I apologize for showing up unexpectedly like this to talk business.

**Clara** – No worries. I'm in the same industry, an actress actually...

**Victoria** – Oh really...? Your face doesn't ring a bell, though...

**Clara** – Lately, I've been doing a lot of dubbing.

**Victoria** – I see... (*Sententious*) The dubbing actor is to the movie stars what the unknown soldier is to the war hero. Nothing is possible without them, but it's the others who get the medals. I hope at least that Alex occasionally rekindles the flame... (*Clara doesn't seem to appreciate this remark*) So, Alex? How have you been since we last met? Remind me, when was that?

**Alex** – It was an audition. You didn't choose me, by the way...

**Victoria** – But of course, I remember! It was for those two lead roles in that smash-hit play. You came with that guy there...

**Alex** – Fred.

**Victoria** – Exactly... Anyway, I think I did you a favour. If you had pursued acting, you might never have written this absolutely brilliant comedy.

**Alex** – Well... Thanks, I guess...

**Victoria** – But I didn't come to talk about the good old times, don't worry. I'm here to discuss the future... Your future!

**Alex** – So, you enjoyed the play...?

**Victoria** – Oh, I adored it!

**Alex** – And you're interested in staging it.

**Victoria** – You know me... I don't do things halfway. I have big ambitions for this play.

**Clara** – Can you share some details...?

*Victoria appears annoyed by Clara's interruption.*

**Victoria** – I read the script just the other day. It's all still in flux, of course. But it's going to be an exceptional endeavour. We're aiming for a grand venue, naturally. The finest director in Paris. Me! A stellar cast...

**Clara** – So, I'm guessing there's no part for me...

**Victoria** – Everyone has their own calling, my dear. My aim is to assemble the finest talents for this venture. Once I secure the exclusive rights to the play, anyway. That's actually why I'm here. *(She produces a document from her bag.)* I brought the contract. You don't have an agent, do you...

**Alex** *(pointing to Clara)* – My agent, right here...

**Victoria** – Indeed; agents, apart from taking their ten percent...

**Clara** – We'll still take our time to read it, okay Alex? A few days won't make a difference...

**Victoria** – Of course, absolutely... And by the way, Alex? Are you involved in any other projects currently?

**Alex** – Well, yeah...

**Clara** – We've got a film project in development. And a TV series.

**Alex** – But you know how it is... Until it's signed...

**Clara** – Can I get you something to drink?

**Victoria** – I won't keep you any longer. I just happened to be passing by...

**Clara** – Let me escort you out.

**Victoria** – Until next time, Alex. I'm truly excited about our collaboration. And I have high hopes for the play...

**Alex** – Yes, me too... I mean... Hi, Victoria... I have a feeling we're going to accomplish great things together.

*Clara exits with Victoria and promptly returns.*

**Alex** – Pinch me, I need to make sure I'm not dreaming... Victoria de Casteljarnac...

**Clara** – She's a bitch, but whatever...

**Alex** – Why do you say that?

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

**Alex** – You're the one who told me sometimes you have to make compromises.

**Clara** – Absolutely. By the way, I need to remind you we still have an issue.

**Alex** – Which one?

**Clara** – Fred! How do you expect us to sign this exclusivity with Victoria? He's already booked a theatre in Avignon!

**Alex** – That's true. I almost forgot...

**Clara** – This is our chance, Alex... I understand the value of friendship, but some opportunities are too important to let slip by.

**Alex** – On the other hand... Fred also intends to take the play to Avignon...

**Clara** – You said it yourself. He's a flop. You can't rely on him to make your play a success.

**Alex** – You're right...

**Clara** – Why did he say "congrats" by the way?

**Alex** – I mentioned to him that we were getting married...

**Clara** – Without consulting me first?

**Alex** – I didn't know what to say to him... I improvised...

*She gives him a dark look. The doorbell rings.*

**Clara** – If this keeps up, we'll need a waiting room and a receptionist...

**Alex** – I'll get it...

*He comes back with Fred.*

**Fred** – Sorry, I forgot the poster design... What do you think, Clara?

**Clara** – Looks good... *(In a whisper to Alex)* You need to tell him this time, or I'll do it, alright...? I'll leave you two...

*She exits.*

**Fred** – What's going on? Did you guys have a fight?

**Alex** – Listen, Fred, I don't know how to say this, but... Victoria just paid us a visit.

**Fred** – Victoria...?

**Alex** – Victoria de Casteljarnac.

**Fred** – No way? Did you hook up with her? Is that why Clara is upset?

**Alex** – No! Well, yes, but... it was ages ago. That's not why Clara's upset though. She doesn't even know... Please, don't bring it up with her, okay?

**Fred** – Sure...

**Alex** – Remember the audition we had with her like ten years ago.

**Fred** – Yeah...

**Alex** – We didn't land the role...

**Fred** – No...

**Alex** – That's partly why I decided to focus on writing. I believed in that role. I thought it would launch my career...

**Fred** – If Clara doesn't know about you and Victoria, why is she upset?

**Alex** – She wants to produce one of my plays.

**Fred** – No kidding! Which one?

**Alex** – "The Deal"...

**Fred** – "The Deal"...?

**Alex** – She wants to premiere the play in Avignon this summer.

**Fred** – Fantastic! A second run of "The Deal" in Avignon! I'm guessing it'll be a buzz-worthy production. It'll give us some great exposure too!

**Alex** – Yes, but of course... she's seeking exclusivity.

**Fred** – Exclusivity?

**Alex** – It's understandable... She's putting a lot into this project.

**Fred** – But come on, Alex... I've been working on bringing this play to the stage for three years.

**Alex** – Three years, yes... That's kind of the issue... I thought it was off the table. In fact, it slipped my mind completely...

**Fred** – And?

**Alex** – I'm really sorry, Fred...

**Fred** – But I can't back out now, Alex! I've already signed, I told you!

**Alex** – You should have mentioned it sooner.

**Fred** – I wanted to catch you off guard. No one else is staging your plays!

**Alex** – Thanks for pointing that out.

**Fred** – And besides, nothing was set in stone yet...

**Alex** – I'm really sorry.

**Fred** – Anyway, I have the authorization, right?

**Alex** – For Paris, yes... But not for Avignon...

**Fred** – Alright... So, that's how it is...

**Alex** – I'm sorry.

**Fred** – And I'm disappointed... Very disappointed...

*He gets up.*

**Alex** – Hold on a second...

**Fred** – I never thought you'd do this... Not you, not a friend...

*He's about to leave.*

**Alex** – Please, don't leave like this...

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

**Alex** – Let's not exaggerate...

**Fred** – Screw you...

*He exists. Clara returns.*

**Clara** – Well, at least the problem is solved...

**Alex** – I'm not sure... But I'm not exactly feeling proud of myself...

**Clara** – I understand. But sometimes, tough decisions need to be made... This could be a once-in-a-lifetime chance for you to kickstart your career... and for both of us to finally step up to the big leagues...

*The doorbell rings again. Clara goes to answer it. Fred comes back.*

**Alex** – If it helps, you can punch me in the face. I'd understand...

**Fred** – I didn't come back for that...

**Clara** – I'll leave you two to talk...

*She exits.*

**Alex** – Right now, I'm struggling to even cover my rent, but if this production turns profitable, I promise I'll reimburse you for the Avignon expenses.

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

**Alex** – I'm truly sorry.

**Fred** – If you say you're sorry one more time, I might actually punch you in the face.

**Alex** – I'm listening...

**Fred** – Remember that audition we had a decade ago? With Victoria, precisely...

**Alex** – Yeah...

**Fred** – We were shortlisted for a play at a major theater.

**Alex** – It was after that last flop that I called it quits on my acting career. And that's exactly why I can't afford to let this second chance slip through my fingers...

**Fred** – What you don't know is that I actually landed the role.

**Alex** – Oh really...? Then why didn't you take it?

**Fred** – I insisted that you be my partner. I made it clear it was both of us or nothing. In the end, they opted for neither.

**Alex** – No...?

**Fred** – I've never regretted it. Even if it may have cost me my career...

**Alex** – You never told me...

**Fred** – Because for me, friendship comes above all, Alex. That's why today, I feel betrayed.

**Alex** – I didn't know, I swear.

**Fred** – For you, it led you to writing, and it turned out pretty well. Look where you are now. For me, it feels like a betrayal. I've poured my entire being into this project. I don't think I can bounce back from this...

**Alex** – Hey, can't you find another play?

**Fred** – You're a real asshole, Alex. I don't know how I didn't see it back then. If I had known, if I had thought about myself first, about my career, the story could have been very different... Maybe it would be me today offering you an opportunity.

*Clara comes back.*

**Clara** – Still don't want anything to drink?

*Fred remains silent.*

**Fred** – I used to admire you a lot, Fred. For your integrity, precisely. So, is this who you're becoming? Someone who betrays his friends for success. Just like everyone else...

**Alex** – I'm lost for words, Fred...

**Fred** – Tomorrow you might be rich, but you'll still be a poor guy.

*He exits.*

**Clara** – I heard what happened...

**Alex** – I'm sacrificing a friend to kickstart my career, when he sacrificed a golden opportunity to support mine.

**Clara** – Are you sure that's true, at least?

**Alex** – Friendship means something, you know...

**Clara** – Anyway, it's too late.

**Alex** – I haven't signed the contract yet...

**Clara** – Think about it, Alex. Opportunities like this don't come knocking twice for an author. If you let it slip through your fingers, I'm not sure I'll have the courage to continue...

**Alex** – To continue... You mean, with me...?

*The doorbell rings.*

**Clara** (*exasperated*) – Him again? I can't stand him with his beaten-dog look. It makes me want to commit murder...

**Alex** – I'll handle it...

*Alex opens the door. He comes back with Victoria.*

**Victoria** – Sorry to bother again... The producer is applying some pressure. He wants to ensure everything's squared away before kicking off the project. Standard procedure. Have you gone through the contract? Signed it?

**Alex** – Not yet, to be honest...

**Clara** – Listen, Alex, it's kind of urgent. If I want to start approaching A-list actors, we need to move fast. You know how it is, their schedules are packed. If we don't kick things off now... The festival is just four months away. We're already cutting it close.

**Clara** – I'll dive into it right away.

**Victoria** – It's a standard contract, you know...

*Clara starts reading the contract.*

**Alex** – Still no drinks?

**Victoria** – It's alright, I'm a bit pressed for time. I've got a meeting with a major actor to discuss the project... and he's a big name, trust me. If he takes the role, the rest will fall into place... People mainly flock to the theatre for the big names, you know...

**Alex** – Yes... regardless of the play, you mean?

**Victoria** – If the play is good, it's still a bonus. And yours is fantastic, I assure you.

**Clara** – So, you're asking for exclusivity...

**Victoria** – Naturally... Is that an issue?

**Clara** – No, no, not at all...

**Victoria** – Obviously, we'll need to make a few adjustments...

**Alex** – Excuse me?

**Victoria** – The plot is remarkable, but the dialogue feels somewhat dated, doesn't it?

**Alex** – I wrote this play four years ago...

**Victoria** – Everything moves so fast now... (*Laughing*) Or perhaps it's just you who seemed a bit outdated four years ago...

**Clara** – I notice you also want to change the title...

**Victoria** – "The Deal" doesn't sound particularly comedic, does it?

**Alex** – It does tie into the play's theme...

**Victoria** – People go to the theatre to relax! To chuckle! To have a good time! "The Deal"... It evokes work...

**Alex** – And what title are you suggest?

**Victoria** – I was thinking of... "Ménage à trois".

**Alex** – "Ménage à trois"...?

**Victoria** – It already sounds more like a comedy, doesn't it?

**Alex** – But that's not relevant to the play...

**Victoria** – For now...

**Alex** – What do you mean, "for now"...?

**Clara** – It's stipulated in the contract that Victoria will revise the play's dialogues.

**Victoria** – To modernize them. To inject some fun. And I'll also enhance the vaudeville aspect a bit. It justifies the title...

**Alex** – "The Deal"?

**Victoria** – "Ménage à trois"!

**Alex** – So, essentially, you want to rewrite the entire play.

**Victoria** – We prefer to call it an adaptation...

**Alex** – And of course, you'll take rights for that...

**Clara** (*looking at the contract*) – 50%.

**Alex** – I see... (*Ironically*) But at least my name will be on the poster, right?

**Victoria** – Not as prominently as the actors', obviously. They're the ones who draw the crowds, you know... And you're familiar with their oversized egos.

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

**Alex** – You mentioned it was a standard contract... You didn't mention you intended to rewrite the entire play...

**Victoria** – "Rewriting" might be a slight exaggeration... Let's just call it... "refining".

**Alex** – And by "refining", you mean scrubbing away anything distinctive or potentially controversial, to transform this play into a vaudeville like so many others.



**Victoria** – We also need to consider the audience! And the theatre audience in Paris today... Those who can shell out 50 euros for a prime seat in a plush, comfy theatre... It's mostly elderly bourgeois and their widows...

**Alex** – Well, with the outdated comedies we see in these theatres year-round, it's no wonder we're not attracting the younger crowd...

**Victoria** – Listen, Alex... If you were aiming for avant-garde theatre, you shouldn't have sent me your script...

**Clara** – You have to see his perspective too... He'll be giving up half of his rights.

**Victoria** – If that's the main issue, I can compromise and drop it to 40%. Because I genuinely believe in this play...

**Alex** – I need some time to think this over.

*Victoria seems offended.*

**Victoria** – Alright... But don't take too long... You know, I have other play proposals waiting on my desk...

**Clara** – I'll walk you out.

*They exit. Alex looks dejected. Clara returns.*

**Alex** – So...?

*Clara seems uneasy as well.*

**Clara** – We knew she could be difficult... But it seems she's open to negotiation... We also have the right to make demands.

**Alex** – I just feel like I'm making a deal with the devil...

**Clara** – It's up to you to decide if it's worth it...

*She exits. Alex looks at the contract. He signs it. He exits.*

*Blackout.*

*Lights up.*

*Clara returns with a coffee pot and two cups. She glances at the contract before settling on the couch. Pouring herself a cup, she stares into space, lost in thought. Alex reappears with an unlit cigarette dangling from his lips.*

**Clara** – You had quit smoking...

**Alex** – I really need it.

*He's about to light his cigarette. She gets up and stops him.*

**Clara** – Have some coffee instead. Did you have a rough night?

**Alex** – I'm just... feeling uncertain, Clara... I don't even know what I want anymore.

**Clara** – Look, Alex, I've been thinking about it too. Before Victoria came into the picture, things were good between us, right?

**Alex** – Definitely... You said you had a crappy job. I was not working. You've been the one keeping us afloat...

**Clara** – Yeah, but ever since that witch came into our lives to produce your play, it's been non-stop arguments.

**Alex** – I'll do whatever it takes to make you happy, Clara. I don't want to lose you...

**Clara** – I won't let you down, Alex. Whatever you decide...

**Alex** – I'm right here, Clara... I'll always be here for you... Even if I do become a successful playwright.

**Clara** – What I'm trying to say is... I don't want to lose the man I fell in love with. The one I met a few years back. I don't want you to change, Alex. I don't want you to become someone who sacrifices themselves or betrays a friend just to get ahead... I could never ask that of you.

*Clara takes the contract and tears it.*

**Alex** – Are you sure about this?

**Clara** – Absolutely.

**Alex** – This is insane. I've been dreaming of this contract for years. But seeing you tear it up... it's like a weight lifted off my shoulders.

**Clara** – That's what matters. You have to follow your gut. And mine tells me not to undervalue your talent.

**Alex** – You're right. And as long as you believe in me, I know we'll make it eventually.

*He kisses her.*

**Clara** – What about you? Does your marriage proposal still stand?

**Alex** – What proposal?

**Clara** – You mentioned a marriage contract.

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

*They kiss again.*

*Blackout.*

*Clara is seated on the couch. Alex comes back with two shopping bags.*

**Clara** – Everything alright? Not too heavy?

**Alex** – It's crazy to think some folks pay to sweat in a gym... When for the cost of a membership, you can lug around two shopping bags.

**Clara** – Would you like a drink? To unwind...

**Alex** – With pleasure...

*They embrace. The doorbell rings.*

**Alex** – Looks like things are picking up again...

*Clara opens the door and comes back with Fred.*

**Fred** – I just received your authorization for Avignon... With exclusivity... I don't know what to say... Thank you!

**Alex** – I thought it over. We both did. In the end, we decided it was better to persist in the mistake...

**Fred** – Thank you for having faith in me... You won't regret it, I promise...

**Alex** – No need to worry about that. I'm already regretting it as it is...

**Clara** – But we're here to support you, Fred. Now, we're all in the same boat.

**Alex** – Or rather, in the same mess...

**Clara** – And you can finally introduce us to the rest of the team.

*Fred seems hesitant.*

**Alex** – Who have you got lined up for your cast?

**Clara** – We're not expecting any big names, but still, we might know a few...

**Fred** – Well, actually... my cast isn't entirely set yet. Except for myself, of course, and the girlfriend I mentioned...

**Clara** – Everyone else turned you down, didn't they?

**Fred** – You know how it goes in this business. We start by claiming we have a director even if we don't, just to get some well-known actors on board. And once they're in, we start looking for a famous director, claiming we already have some big stars.

**Alex** – So, you don't have anyone. And probably no producer either...

**Fred** – Well, why don't both of you join me in the play?

**Clara** – Wasn't that your plan all along?

**Alex** – Well, sure... And since I'll be in the play, you won't even have to pay me royalties...

*Fred looks a bit embarrassed.*

**Fred** – Well, yeah, it did cross my mind.

*An awkward silence.*

**Alex** – Alright, let's tackle this Avignon festival together... I owe you that much, after all. It's my way of thanking you for what you did for me ten years ago...

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

**Alex** – Chloe...?

**Fred** – Remember the girl I mentioned? Yeah, her. It's also for her that I'm putting up this play. She's just starting in the business, you know...

**Clara** – Oh, I see... So, in a completely altruistic gesture, you've decided to give a beginner a chance. That's very noble of you.

**Alex** – Well, it's not a menage à trois, it's more like a square... But is she any good...? I mean, as an actress...

**Fred** – I'll give her a call to share the good news. And how about we all grab a drink together? That way, you'll get to know her...

*Alex doesn't seem very comfortable with this idea. Fred dials a number on his mobile.*

*Black.*

*The room is empty. The landline phone rings. The answering machine kicks in.*

**Alex (off)** – You've reached Alex and Clara. We can't answer right now, but you can leave us a message on our landline answering machine. One of the last ones still in operation in the world. We'll get back to you as soon as possible via carrier pigeon...

**Clara (off)** – Mum, if it's you and there's an emergency, use the emergency number I've saved on your phone...

*Beep sound.*

**Victoria (off)** – Yes, it's Victoria. I heard that you're going to do the play with Fred after all... He must have played on your feelings. I bet he told you that pathetic story about the casting. He gave up a leading role out of friendship for you... He tells everyone that when he's drunk, but I can tell you firsthand that it's a lie. I was the casting director, and I definitely didn't want to work with that has-been. In fact, if I didn't pick you, it's because I didn't want Fred, and he told me you'd refuse to do the play without him. Anyway, I still wish you the best of luck with the project. Hope you won't regret your decision... (*Sounds of frying on the line*) What a jerk... He sleeps with me just to get me to read his dumb play, and the moment I say yes, he's off with someone else... Damn, I hadn't hung up yet...

**The End.**

## *About the author*

Born in 1955 in Auvers-sur-Oise (France), Jean-Pierre Martinez was first a drummer for several rock bands before becoming a semiologist in advertising. He then began a career writing television scripts before turning to theatre and writing plays. He has written close to a hundred scripts for television and as many plays, some of which have already become classics (*Friday the 13th*, *Strip Poker*). He is one of the most produced contemporary playwrights in France and in other francophone countries. Several of his plays are also available in Spanish and English, and are regularly produced in the United States and Latin America.

Amateur and professional theatre groups looking for plays to perform can download Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays for free from his website La Comédiathèque (<https://comediatheque.net/>). However, public productions are subject to SACD filing.

For those who prefer reading or working from books, printed versions of his plays can be purchased from Amazon for a price similar to that of photocopying this document.

**Other plays by the same author translated in English:**

**Comedies for 2**

EuroStar  
Heads and Tails  
Him and Her  
Is there a pilot in the audience?  
Last chance encounter  
New Year's Eve at the Morgue  
Not even dead  
Preliminaries  
Running on empty  
The Costa Mucho Castaways  
The Joker  
The Window across the courtyard

**Comedies for 3**

A brief moment of eternity  
A simple business dinner  
An innocent little murder  
Cheaters  
Crash Zone  
Fragile, Handle with care  
Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>  
Ménage à trois  
One small step for a woman, one giant leap  
backward for Mankind

**Comedies for 4**

A Cuckoo's nest  
A hell of a night  
Back to stage  
Bed and Breakfast  
Casket for two  
Crisis and Punishment  
Family Portrait  
Family Tree  
Four stars  
Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>  
Gay friendly  
Is there a critic in the audience?  
Is there an author in the audience?  
Just a moment before the end of the world  
Lovestruck at Swindlemore Hall  
One marriage out of two  
Quarantine  
Strip Poker  
Surviving Mankind  
The perfect Son-in-Law  
The Smell of Money

**Comedies for 5 to 6**

All's well that starts badly  
Christmas Eve at the Police Station  
Crisis and Punishment  
Critical but Stable  
In lieu of flowers...  
King of Fools

**Comedies for 7 or more**

Backstage Comedy  
Check to the Kings  
Christmas Eve at the Police Station  
False exit  
In flagrante delirium  
Just like a Christmas movie  
Miracle at Saint Mary Juana Abbey  
Neighbours' Day  
Open Hearts  
Save our Savings  
Special Dedication  
Stories and Prehistories  
The Jackpot  
The Performance is not cancelled  
The Worst Village in England  
Welcome aboard!  
White Coats, Dark Humour

**Collection of sketches**

Him and Her  
Lost time Chronicles  
Open Hearts  
Sidewalk Chronicles  
Stories to die for

**Monologues**

Like a fish in the air

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