

# THE THIRD CHAIR

A Play in One Act

By Richard Ehrlich

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## CHARACTERS

**SAM MORRISON** — 62. Retired Army Sergeant Major (22 years). Owns Morrison Construction. Raising his 8-year-old grandson Tyler. Lost his son Michael (gay) fifteen years ago when he couldn't affirm his sexuality. Christian conservative who believes moral order must be enforced.

**ALEX HARPER** — 49. Associate Professor of Political Science at State University. Married, one child (age 7). Secular progressive who believes pluralism is democracy's only defense against tyranny. Fears his child will grow up in Sam's America.

**MS. CHEN** — Court administrator. Brief appearance.

## SETTING

A municipal mediation room. Windowless. Fluorescent lighting. One table, three chairs arranged in a triangle. Present day.

## TIME

70 minutes. Real time. Late afternoon into early evening.

\* \* \*

## LIGHTS UP

*(The mediation room. SAM MORRISON sits in one chair, stiff and controlled. ALEX HARPER sits in another, tense. The third chair is empty. They've been here about two minutes. Haven't spoken. Hostile silence.)*

*(MS. CHEN enters with a folder.)*

**CHEN:**

Good. You're both here.

*(Neither man looks at her.)*

**CHEN:**

I'm Ms. Chen, court administrator. You both signed agreements acknowledging the terms of the mediation agreement. Twelve days ago—October 17th—you were involved in a physical altercation at a school board meeting. You were arrested and charged with disorderly conduct and assault. The prosecutor offered this mediation agreement: complete this mediation session or proceed to trial.

*(Beat.)*

**CHEN:**

Dr. Reeves, your assigned mediator, called an hour ago. Family emergency. She won't be joining you today.

**SAM:**

So we reschedule?

**CHEN:**

No. The session proceeds. You have until 6:00 PM to produce a jointly signed written statement outlining your future conduct. If you complete it, charges are dropped. If you don't—or if you leave before 6:00—charges proceed to trial tomorrow morning. Seventy minutes.

*(Sam and Alex exchange a look—first time they've looked at each other.)*

**ALEX:**

Without a mediator.

**CHEN:**

The court requires the attempt. Whether you succeed is up to you. There's paper and pens on the table. I'll be down the hall if you need me.

*(She exits. The door clicks shut. Long silence. Sam stares at the table. Alex stares at the empty chair.)*

**SAM:**

Seventy minutes.

**ALEX:**

Yes.

*(Silence.)*

**SAM:**

You hired a lawyer.

**ALEX:**

I saw you at arraignment. You had one too.

**SAM:**

Mine said mediation agreements almost never work.

**ALEX:**

Mine said the same.

*(Beat.)*

**SAM:**

But we're both here anyway.

**ALEX:**

Because a trial means a conviction. And a conviction means I lose my job. Morals clause in my contract.

**SAM:**

I lose my concealed carry permit. Which means I lose my business. Can't work construction sites without being able to carry.

*(Silence. They both look at the table. The blank paper.)*

**ALEX:**

So we write something.

**SAM:**

Something safe.

**ALEX:**

Generic.

*(Beat.)*

**SAM:**

"We agree to respect each other's perspectives and maintain civil discourse."

**ALEX:**

No.

**SAM:**

That's exactly what they want.

**ALEX:**

I don't respect your perspective.

*(That lands.)*

**SAM:**

I don't respect yours either.

*(Longer silence.)*

**ALEX:**

Maybe we should talk about what happened. At the board meeting.

**SAM:**

I know what happened.

**ALEX:**

So do I. But maybe if we—

**SAM:**

You called me a fascist.

*(Beat.)*

**ALEX:**

You called me a traitor.

**SAM:**

Because you stood up in front of two hundred people—parents, teachers, kids—and said America was founded on white supremacy.

**ALEX:**

I said the founding documents protected slavery. Which is a fact.

**SAM:**

And I said we're teaching children to hate their own country.

**ALEX:**

You said I was poisoning their minds.

**SAM:**

You're telling eight-year-olds that their country is evil.

**ALEX:**

I'm telling them the truth. That the Constitution counted enslaved people as three-fifths of a person. That's not opinion. That's history.

**SAM:**

And you stop there. You don't tell them what came after. That we fought a war to end it. That we've been expanding rights ever since.

**ALEX:**

Because people like you fought every expansion. Every single one.

*(The hostility is thick.)*

**SAM:**

And then you stepped toward me.

**ALEX:**

You grabbed my arm.

**SAM:**

You shoved me.

**ALEX:**

You grabbed me first.

**SAM:**

Yes. I did.

*(Beat.)*

**ALEX:**

And I shoved you.

*(Silence. They're both sitting with that.)*

**SAM:**

There were kids in that room. My grandson was there.

**ALEX:**

My son was there too.

*(Long silence. They're both sitting with the weight of that.)*

**SAM:**

How old?

**ALEX:**

Seven.

**SAM:**

Mine's eight. Tyler. My grandson.

*(Beat.)*

**ALEX:**

You're raising him?

**SAM:**

Five years now. His father—my son Michael—gave up custody when Tyler was three. Drugs. Bad relationship. My ex-wife couldn't handle it alone. So I took him.

*(Beat.)*

**ALEX:**

That's hard.

**SAM:**

Twenty-two years in the Army. Sergeant Major when I retired in 2005. I know what discipline looks like. What structure looks like. What happens when standards slip.

*(Beat.)*

**SAM:**

Started Morrison Construction in 2007. Small operation. Three crews. And every year since, I've watched this country forget what made it strong.

*(Silence.)*

**ALEX:**

I teach political science at State. Constitutional law. Democratic theory. I spend my days explaining to eighteen-year-olds why the system works the way it does. Why restraint matters. Why process matters.

*(Beat.)*

**ALEX:**

And then I watch people like you try to dismantle it.

*(That hangs in the air.)*

**SAM:**

I'm not dismantling anything. I'm trying to save it.

**ALEX:**

By destroying democracy?

**SAM:**

Democracy requires a foundation. Moral foundation. You can't have a country where anything goes.

**ALEX:**

And you get to decide the foundation?

**SAM:**

The people who built this country decided it.

**ALEX:**

Dead people? Or people who look like you?

*(Sam's jaw tightens.)*

**SAM:**

Here we go.

**ALEX:**

I'm serious. Who decides?

**SAM:**

A civilization needs standards.

**ALEX:**

And you get to enforce them?

**SAM:**

Someone has to.

*(Silence. They're approaching something.)*

**ALEX:**

That empty chair. That's who you want sitting there. Someone who's certain. Someone who knows what's right.

**SAM:**

Yes.

**ALEX:**

And if I sit there and I'm certain the opposite is right?

**SAM:**

Then you're wrong.

**ALEX:**

And that's the problem. You don't just think I'm mistaken. You think I'm wrong. Morally wrong. Which means I shouldn't be allowed to participate.

**SAM:**

Not if you're going to destroy everything.

**ALEX:**

I'm not destroying anything. I'm defending pluralism. The idea that we can disagree about fundamental things and still coexist.

**SAM:**

Pluralism is surrender.

**ALEX:**

No. Certainty is surrender. When you're certain, you stop thinking.

**SAM:**

When you're uncertain, you stop standing for anything.

*(Long silence. They're staring at each other.)*

**ALEX:**

My son came home from school last month crying. Another kid told him he wasn't a real American because we don't go to church.

**SAM:**

Tyler came home asking why some families have two dads when the Bible says that's wrong.

**ALEX:**

And what did you tell him?

**SAM:**

I told him the truth.

**ALEX:**

Your truth.

**SAM:**

There's only one truth.

**ALEX:**

And that's why your son left.

*(That stops everything. Silence.)*

**SAM:**

What did you say?

**ALEX:**

Michael. Your son. He's gay, right? That's why he gave up custody. That's why you have Tyler.

**SAM:**

How did you—

**ALEX:**

You mentioned it at the board meeting. When you were yelling at me. You said, "I lost my son to this ideology."

*(Long silence.)*

**SAM:**

Michael came out when he was twenty-three. I told him I loved him. I told him he'd always be my son. But I couldn't tell him what he was doing was okay. Because I don't believe it is.

**ALEX:**

So you chose your belief over your son.

*(After a long beat, Sam's voice shaking)*

**SAM:**

And you're raising your son to be terrified. Every day. Of me. Of people like me. Of half the country.

*(Silence.)*

**SAM:**

He's seven years old and you've taught him the world is full of monsters. And I'm one of them.

**ALEX:**

That's not—

**SAM:**

He came home crying because another kid told him he wasn't a real American. You told me that. Why was he crying, Alex? Because you taught him that mattered. You taught him to be hurt by it.

*(Beat.)*

**SAM:**

I lost my son because I couldn't lie about what I believe. You're teaching yours that fear is wisdom. Which one of us is the better father?

*(Devastating silence. Both men are shaking.)*

**SAM:**

I chose truth.

**ALEX:**

Your truth.

**SAM:**

God's truth.

**ALEX:**

And he left.

**SAM:**

Yes.

*(Beat.)*

**ALEX:**

Do you miss him?

**SAM:**

Every day.

**ALEX:**

Have you called him?

**SAM:**

No.

**ALEX:**

Why not?

**SAM:**

Because nothing's changed. I still believe what I believe. And I won't lie to him.

*(Silence.)*

**ALEX:**

My son is seven years old. He asks me if people like you think he's bad. If people like you think our family is wrong. And I have to tell him that yes, some people do. And those people vote. And those people run for office. And those people are trying to make laws that will hurt us.

**SAM:**

I'm not trying to hurt anyone.

**ALEX:**

You're trying to enforce your moral code on everyone. That's tyranny.

**SAM:**

No. Tyranny is what happens when there's no moral code at all. When everything is permitted.

**ALEX:**

Who said everything is permitted? I'm saying people should be allowed to live according to their own conscience. Not yours.

**SAM:**

And if their conscience tells them to do something destructive?

**ALEX:**

Then we have laws. Democratic laws. Made through process. Not religious edicts enforced by people who think they speak for God.

**SAM:**

I don't speak for God. But I know what He said.

**ALEX:**

And so does every other religion. And they all say different things. That's why we have separation of church and state.

**SAM:**

This country was founded as a Christian nation.

**ALEX:**

No. It wasn't. The founders explicitly rejected that. "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion."

**SAM:**

And you use that to strip every reference to God from public life.

**ALEX:**

We use it to protect everyone's religious freedom. Including yours. Including the freedom to not be religious at all.

**SAM:**

Freedom FROM religion isn't freedom. It's erasure.

**ALEX:**

No. Being forced to follow someone else's religion is erasure. You're free to believe what you want. Worship how you want. Raise Tyler in your faith. But you can't force me to live by your rules.

**SAM:**

And you can force me to accept things I believe are wrong?

**ALEX:**

No. You can believe they're wrong. You can say they're wrong. But you can't make laws that punish people for disagreeing with you.

**SAM:**

We make laws based on morality all the time.

**ALEX:**

Based on shared secular morality. Don't kill. Don't steal. Don't harm others. That's different from "you must believe in my God" or "you must carry a pregnancy you don't want."

**SAM:**

Life begins at conception.

**ALEX:**

You believe that. Others don't. And you're trying to force women to live by your belief.

**SAM:**

We're protecting innocent life.

**ALEX:**

You're controlling women's bodies. Forcing them to carry pregnancies they don't want. Forcing them to give birth even in cases of rape or incest or when their health is at risk.

**SAM:**

A child is a child.

**ALEX:**

—and even if it were a person, you don't get to force someone to use their body to sustain another life. We don't force people to donate kidneys even to—

**SAM:**

*(Cutting him off)*

When?

**ALEX:**

What?

**SAM:**

When does it become a person? You keep saying "if it were a person." So when does it become one? The moment it's born? One second before? One day? When?

**ALEX:**

That's not—

**SAM:**

No. Answer. Because if you can't tell me when it becomes a person, you don't get to be certain it's not one now.

*(Silence.)*

**SAM:**

You're asking me to trust your timeline. Your definition. And if you're wrong? If that line you drew was arbitrary? Then what we're talking about is—

**ALEX:**

*(Fierce)*

Don't.

**SAM:**

—millions of—

**ALEX:**

Don't you fucking say it.

*(They're both standing now, shaking)*

**SAM:**

*(Quiet)*

You can't even let me finish the sentence. Because you know what it means if you're wrong.

*(Long, brutal silence)*

**SAM:**

They made a choice when they had sex.

**ALEX:**

So pregnancy is punishment for sex? That's what this is about?

**SAM:**

It's about responsibility.

**ALEX:**

It's about control. You want to control women's sexuality. Control their bodies. Control their futures. All in the name of God.

**SAM:**

In the name of life.

**ALEX:**

What about the life of the woman? What about her health? Her future? Her existing children? You don't care about any of that.

**SAM:**

Of course I care.

**ALEX:**

Then why are you forcing a twelve-year-old rape victim to carry her rapist's baby? Why are you forcing a woman with a dying fetus to carry to term? Why are you letting women die because doctors are too afraid to provide care?

**SAM:**

Those are rare cases.

**ALEX:**

They're not rare. They're happening right now. Women dying in hospital parking lots because your laws won't let doctors treat them. Women traveling hundreds of miles to get care. Thirteen-year-old girls forced to become mothers.

**SAM:**

The Constitution doesn't protect abortion.

**ALEX:**

The Constitution protects liberty. Privacy. Bodily autonomy. You're violating all of that in the name of your religious belief.

**SAM:**

It's not just religious. It's human. A fetus is human life.

**ALEX:**

And a woman is a full human person. Not an incubator. You treat women like vessels. Like their only purpose is to reproduce.

**SAM:**

That's not—

**ALEX:**

It is. You're willing to let women die to enforce your belief about when life begins. That's theocracy.

**SAM:**

And you're willing to let babies die because it's inconvenient.

**ALEX:**

Inconvenient? You think pregnancy is inconvenient? You think forcing someone to carry an unwanted pregnancy for nine months, go through labor, either raise a child they can't afford or give it up for adoption—you think that's inconvenient?

**SAM:**

I think it's better than killing a child.

**ALEX:**

It's not a child yet. And even if it were, you don't get to force someone else's body to sustain it.

*(Silence. Sam stands. Walks to the table. Pours water.)*

**SAM:**

You want to know what I'd do if I could sit in that chair and make the rules? Fine. I'll tell you.

*(He drinks.)*

**SAM:**

Immigration. We have somewhere between ten and twenty million people in this country illegally. People who broke the law to get here. People who undercut wages for American workers. People who use services they don't pay for.

**ALEX:**

People who pick our food. Who build our houses. Who care for our children.

**SAM:**

People who broke the law.

**ALEX:**

Most of them overstay visas. They came here legally and stayed.

**SAM:**

Which is still illegal.

**ALEX:**

So what would you do? Deport twenty million people?

**SAM:**

I'd enforce the law. Workplace raids. Verification systems. Deportations.

**ALEX:**

You mean tearing families apart. Children separated from parents. People who've been here for twenty years suddenly ripped from their communities.

**SAM:**

They knew the risk when they came.

**ALEX:**

Some of them were children when they came. They've lived here their entire lives. This is the only country they know.

**SAM:**

Then they should have become citizens.

**ALEX:**

They can't. There's no path. You've made it impossible.

**SAM:**

There's a legal process.

**ALEX:**

That takes fifteen years and costs thousands of dollars and has quotas that exclude entire countries. You've made legal immigration nearly impossible, then you punish people for coming illegally.

**SAM:**

We have a right to control our border.

**ALEX:**

And we have a responsibility to treat people humanely. But your version of enforcement looks like raids where ICE shows up at schools and workplaces and disappears people.

**SAM:**

We're not "disappearing" anyone. We're deporting criminals.

**ALEX:**

You're calling them criminals because they're here. That's circular. And you're doing it with military force. Armed agents. Detention camps. Children in cages.

**SAM:**

Those facilities were built under Obama.

**ALEX:**

And expanded and weaponized under people who think like you. You're creating a police state.

**SAM:**

It's not a police state to enforce immigration law.

**ALEX:**

It is when enforcement requires surveillance, raids, detention camps, and deployment of federal agents into cities. When does it stop?

**SAM:**

When the border is secure.

**ALEX:**

The border will never be "secure" enough. You're creating permanent emergency powers. Permanent justification for federal force.

**SAM:**

Better than lawlessness.

**ALEX:**

This isn't lawlessness. These are people trying to survive. Trying to work. Trying to raise their children in safety. And you're treating them like enemy combatants.

**SAM:**

They're not supposed to be here.

**ALEX:**

Neither were your ancestors. Unless you're Native American.

**SAM:**

My ancestors came legally.

**ALEX:**

Your ancestors came when there were almost no restrictions. When you could show up at Ellis Island and walk in. Now you've made legal immigration almost impossible, then you punish people for being desperate enough to come anyway.

**SAM:**

We can't take everyone.

**ALEX:**

I'm not saying we take everyone. I'm saying we create a humane system. A path to legal status for people who are already here. Who've been here for years. Who work. Who pay taxes. Who contribute.

**SAM:**

You mean amnesty.

**ALEX:**

I mean acknowledging reality. These people are here. They're our neighbors. They're part of our communities. We can either create a path for them to become legal, or we can turn ourselves into a police state trying to hunt them down.

**SAM:**

Or we can enforce the law and they'll leave on their own.

**ALEX:**

They won't. They have nowhere to go. Some of them fled violence. Fled cartels. Fled poverty. You're not sending them home. You're sending them to die.

**SAM:**

That's not our responsibility.

**ALEX:**

We created some of that violence. Our drug war. Our foreign policy. Our economic policy. We destabilized those countries and now we're shocked that people are fleeing.

**SAM:**

So America is responsible for everything wrong in the world?

**ALEX:**

No. But we're responsible for our own choices. And choosing to tear families apart, to detain people indefinitely, to separate children from parents—those are choices. Cruel choices.

**SAM:**

Families get separated when parents break the law.

**ALEX:**

We don't separate families when parents commit misdemeanors. Illegal entry is a misdemeanor. You're treating it like terrorism.

**SAM:**

Because unchecked immigration is a threat.

**ALEX:**

To what? To your vision of what America should look like?

**SAM:**

To American workers. To American culture. To American sovereignty.

**ALEX:**

America is immigrants. Always has been. The idea that there's some pure American culture being threatened is a fantasy.

**SAM:**

There's an American identity. English language. Shared history. Shared values.

**ALEX:**

Which values? The ones that protected slavery? The ones that excluded Chinese? The ones that interned Japanese Americans? We've always been fighting about what America means. And the answer has always been inclusion. Not exclusion.

**SAM:**

Inclusion of people who assimilate.

**ALEX:**

And you get to decide what assimilation looks like.

**SAM:**

It's not complicated. Learn English. Follow the law. Respect American traditions.

**ALEX:**

And if their traditions are different? If they speak Spanish at home? If they worship differently?

**SAM:**

At home, fine. In public, they should assimilate.

**ALEX:**

Why? Why can't America be multilingual? Why can't we have different traditions coexisting?

**SAM:**

Because that's not a country. That's a collection of separate groups who don't share anything.

**ALEX:**

That IS a country. It's what we've always been. E pluribus unum. Out of many, one. Not out of many, one that looks like you.

*(Silence.)*

**SAM:**

I had a worker. Good guy. Been with me eight years. Jose. Best framer I ever had. His sixteen-year-old daughter was killed three years ago. Drunk driver. Hit her while she was walking home from school.

*(Beat.)*

**SAM:**

Driver was here illegally. Third DUI. Been deported twice. Came back. Got drunk. Killed her. And Jose looked at me and said, "Why was he here? Why did they let him back?"

*(Silence.)*

**SAM:**

And I didn't have an answer.

**ALEX:**

That's terrible. But you're using one case to justify—

**SAM:**

One case? It happens every day. Crimes committed by people who shouldn't be here. And we're told we can't talk about it. We're told it's racist to mention it.

**ALEX:**

It's not racist to talk about crime. It's racist to use isolated cases to demonize an entire population. Illegal immigrants commit crimes at lower rates than native-born citizens.

**SAM:**

But they shouldn't be here to commit any crimes.

**ALEX:**

And what about your crime? Your violence? Should we deport you?

*(That lands hard.)*

**SAM:**

That's different.

**ALEX:**

Why? Because you're a citizen? You still committed assault. In front of children. Including your grandson.

*(Silence.)*

**ALEX:**

I have a colleague. Maria. She's been here for eighteen years. Came on a student visa, overstayed. Married an American citizen. They have two kids. Both born here. Citizens. She teaches chemistry at the university. Pays taxes. Contributes.

*(Beat.)*

**ALEX:**

Last year, her husband died. Heart attack. Forty-one years old. Left her with two kids, a mortgage, and no legal status. Because her status was through him. Now she's facing deportation. And her kids—American citizens—will either go to a country they've never been to, or go into foster care.

*(Silence.)*

**ALEX:**

That's what your enforcement looks like. Not just criminals. Families. People who've built lives here.

**SAM:**

She should have applied for citizenship.

**ALEX:**

She tried. The process takes years. Costs thousands of dollars. She's a chemistry teacher, not a lawyer. She couldn't navigate it alone. And now she's being punished for it.

**SAM:**

She broke the law.

**ALEX:**

*(Voice breaking)*

Her daughter is nine years old. She asked me last week: "Dr. Harper, if my mom gets taken away, will you tell her I love her?" Nine years old. Planning for her mother's deportation.

**SAM:**

*(Quiet)*

Jose's daughter was six.

*(Silence - both men with their dead/threatened children between them)*

**ALEX:**

You want me to look at that nine-year-old and tell her: "Your mother should have thought of you eighteen years ago"?

**SAM:**

I want you to look at Jose and tell him: "Your daughter's death doesn't matter because compassion."

*(They're both barely holding it together)*

**ALEX:**

She overstayed a visa eighteen years ago. And now you want me to tell that child her mother deserves to be taken away.

**SAM:**

I want the law enforced.

**ALEX:**

Even when enforcing it is cruel? Even when it tears apart families? Even when it punishes people who've been contributing for decades?

**SAM:**

Yes.

*(Long silence.)*

**ALEX:**

Then you and I have very different definitions of justice.

**SAM:**

Justice is enforcing the law. Not picking and choosing based on sympathy.

**ALEX:**

Justice is mercy. Proportionality. Recognizing that humans are complex and circumstances matter.

**SAM:**

And that's why we have chaos. Because you make excuses for everything.

**ALEX:**

I'm not making excuses. I'm saying we should have a system that's humane. That recognizes reality. That doesn't treat people like criminals for trying to survive.

*(Silence. Sam sits back down.)*

**SAM:**

Voting. Let's talk about voting.

**ALEX:**

Okay.

**SAM:**

You think requiring ID to vote is suppression.

**ALEX:**

I think making it impossible to get ID is suppression.

**SAM:**

Everyone can get an ID.

**ALEX:**

Not everyone. People without birth certificates. People without permanent addresses. People who can't afford to take a day off work to go to a DMV that's only open during business hours.

**SAM:**

You need ID to drive. To buy alcohol. To open a bank account.

**ALEX:**

Those aren't constitutional rights. Voting is.

**SAM:**

And voting should be secure.

**ALEX:**

It is secure. Voter fraud is almost nonexistent.

**SAM:**

You don't know that.

**ALEX:**

Yes, I do. Study after study. Investigation after investigation. There's no evidence of widespread voter fraud.

**SAM:**

Because we don't investigate it.

**ALEX:**

We do. Your side investigates it constantly. And finds nothing. Because it doesn't exist.

**SAM:**

The 2020 election was stolen.

*(That hangs there.)*

**ALEX:**

No. It wasn't.

**SAM:**

Millions of fraudulent votes.

**ALEX:**

No. There weren't.

**SAM:**

Ballot dumps in the middle of the night.

**ALEX:**

Those were legal votes being counted. Mail-in ballots. Which were counted last because your side made it illegal to count them early.

**SAM:**

Suitcases of ballots being pulled out after observers left.

**ALEX:**

That video was investigated. Those were legal ballots. Stored in normal containers. Nothing was pulled out after observers left—the observers left early on their own.

**SAM:**

*(Beat.)*

**SAM:**

You trust institutions. Courts. Officials. The people who decide what gets called 'evidence.' I don't. So your facts don't move me.

Dead people voting.

**ALEX:**

A handful of clerical errors. Not massive fraud. And every single claim was investigated. By Republican officials. By Republican judges. And they all said the same thing: there's no evidence.

**SAM:**

The system is rigged.

**ALEX:**

Then why do Republicans win sometimes? If it's rigged, wouldn't Democrats always win?

**SAM:**

They're rigging it where it matters.

**ALEX:**

So when you win, elections are legitimate. When you lose, they're stolen. That's not democracy. That's authoritarianism.

**SAM:**

We're trying to protect democracy.

**ALEX:**

By saying elections are only legitimate if you win? By purging voter rolls? By closing polling places in minority neighborhoods? By making it harder for students to vote? By making it harder for elderly people to vote?

**SAM:**

We're making it harder to cheat.

**ALEX:**

You're making it harder to vote. That's voter suppression. That's Jim Crow.

**SAM:**

Don't compare this to Jim Crow.

**ALEX:**

Why not? You're using the same tactics. Literacy tests became ID requirements. Poll taxes became exact-match signature requirements. You're excluding the same people.

**SAM:**

Requiring ID isn't the same as lynching.

**ALEX:**

I didn't say it was. I said you're using the same logic. The same justifications. "Protecting election integrity." That's what they said then too.

**SAM:**

And you want no security at all.

**ALEX:**

I want security that doesn't exclude legitimate voters. You want security that makes it as hard as possible for certain people to vote.

**SAM:**

Certain people who shouldn't be voting.

*(Beat.)*

**ALEX:**

Say that again.

**SAM:**

People who aren't citizens. People who aren't eligible.

**ALEX:**

But you're not just targeting people who aren't eligible. You're targeting anyone you think might vote against you. That's why you're closing polling places in Black neighborhoods.

That's why you're purging students from voter rolls. That's why you're making it impossible for working people to vote.

**SAM:**

If you can't get to a polling place, you're probably not informed enough to vote anyway.

*(Silence. That landed hard.)*

**ALEX:**

You don't actually believe in democracy, do you?

**SAM:**

I believe in a republic. Representatives chosen by informed citizens.

**ALEX:**

And you get to decide who's informed.

**SAM:**

The Constitution did that. They limited the franchise for a reason.

**ALEX:**

To white male property owners. And we've spent two hundred years expanding it. Because that limitation was wrong.

**SAM:**

Was it? Look at what universal suffrage has given us. Uninformed masses voting for whoever promises them the most.

**ALEX:**

You mean Black people. Women. Young people. You mean democracy.

**SAM:**

I mean chaos.

**ALEX:**

You mean people disagreeing with you. That's what this is about. You're losing. Your vision of America is losing. So you're changing the rules.

**SAM:**

We're not changing the rules. We're enforcing them.

**ALEX:**

By making them impossible to follow. That's not enforcement. That's exclusion.

**SAM:**

And your side wants to flood the country with people who'll vote for you.

**ALEX:**

My side wants citizens to be able to vote. That's it. We're not flooding anything. We're defending the franchise.

**SAM:**

By fighting voter ID. By fighting signature verification. By fighting every attempt at security.

**ALEX:**

Because your attempts at security are designed to exclude. That's their purpose. Not protecting elections. Protecting your power.

**SAM:**

We're protecting the country.

**ALEX:**

From what? From people voting? That's democracy. That's how it works. And if your ideas can't win in a fair election, maybe your ideas are the problem.

**SAM:**

Our ideas built this country.

**ALEX:**

Your ideas enslaved people. Your ideas excluded women. Your ideas interned Japanese Americans. Your ideas segregated schools. And every single time, you fought against expansion of rights. Every single time, you lost. And you're losing again. So you're trying to rig the game.

**SAM:**

We're trying to save it.

**ALEX:**

You're trying to end it. Because democracy means you don't always get what you want. And you can't handle that.

*(Beat.)*

**ALEX:**

Georgia. Texas. Arizona. You want specific examples?

**SAM:**

Sure.

**ALEX:**

Georgia: They closed polling places in majority-Black precincts. Reduced early voting hours. Made it illegal to give water to people waiting in line. People waited eight, nine, ten hours to vote. In Black neighborhoods. Not white ones.

**SAM:**

They were securing the vote.

**ALEX:**

By making it physically painful to vote? By dehydrating people standing in line for ten hours?

**SAM:**

No one forced them to wait.

**ALEX:**

You did. You closed their polling places. You understaffed the ones that remained. You created the long lines. Then you made it illegal to help them.

**SAM:**

We can't have people campaigning in line.

**ALEX:**

Giving someone water isn't campaigning. It's human decency.

*(Beat.)*

**ALEX:**

Texas. They closed hundreds of polling places in majority-Latino areas. Made mail-in voting almost impossible. Required exact signature matches—and hired people to reject ballots. My neighbor's ballot was rejected because her signature looked different. She's seventy-eight years old. Her hands shake.

**SAM:**

Security requires verification.

**ALEX:**

Security requires excluding the elderly? The disabled? People whose signatures change as they age?

**SAM:**

They can vote in person.

**ALEX:**

She can barely walk. You want her to stand in line for ten hours?

**SAM:**

Absentee ballots exist.

**ALEX:**

Which you're also making impossible to get. You require excuses. Documentation. Witnesses. All to vote from home.

**SAM:**

To prevent fraud.

**ALEX:**

Fraud that doesn't exist! You're solving a problem you invented to justify excluding people.

*(Silence.)*

**SAM:**

I know people who voted twice in 2020.

**ALEX:**

No. You don't.

**SAM:**

I do. I know for a fact—

**ALEX:**

You know nothing. You've heard rumors. Stories. Third-hand accounts. But you have no evidence. No proof. No actual cases.

**SAM:**

Because they won't investigate.

**ALEX:**

They did investigate! Sixty court cases. Dozens of audits. Recounts. Your own Attorney General said there was no evidence of fraud. Your own Homeland Security Secretary said it was the most secure election in history.

**SAM:**

They're part of the system.

**ALEX:**

So everyone who disagrees with you is lying? Republican judges. Republican election officials. Republican governors. They're all lying?

**SAM:**

Or they're cowards.

**ALEX:**

Or you're wrong.

*(That hangs there.)*

**SAM:**

I'm not wrong.

**ALEX:**

You lost. That's all. Your candidate lost. And rather than accepting it, you're inventing a conspiracy that requires hundreds of thousands of people to be in on it. Election workers. Judges. Governors. All lying. All coordinating. All hiding evidence perfectly. That's not skepticism. That's delusion.

**SAM:**

It's vigilance.

**ALEX:**

It's denying reality. And you're using that denial to justify restricting voting. If the election was stolen, then we need more restrictions. And if you lose again, it'll be stolen again. So you need more restrictions. It never ends.

**SAM:**

Until elections are secure.

**ALEX:**

Elections ARE secure. You just don't like the results.

*(Long silence. Sam stands. Walks toward the door. Stops.)*

**SAM:**

If we can't do this here, then no one can do it anywhere.

*(Alex looks up.)*

**ALEX:**

What?

**SAM:**

That's what you said. At the board meeting. Right before we fought. You said, "If we can't talk about this here, in front of our kids, then no one can talk about it anywhere."

**ALEX:**

Yes.

**SAM:**

And then we couldn't. We tried. And we ended up here.

*(Beat.)*

**SAM:**

So maybe you're wrong. Maybe some things can't be talked through. Maybe some gaps are unbridgeable.

**ALEX:**

Maybe. But we're here anyway.

**SAM:**

Because we have to be.

**ALEX:**

Yes.

*(Sam sits back down.)*

**SAM:**

You want to take my guns.

**ALEX:**

I want to keep children safe.

**SAM:**

By disarming law-abiding citizens.

**ALEX:**

By regulating weapons of war.

**SAM:**

The Second Amendment—

**ALEX:**

Says "well-regulated militia."

**SAM:**

Says "shall not be infringed."

**ALEX:**

And we regulate it. We always have. You can't own a machine gun. You can't own a rocket launcher. There are already limits.

**SAM:**

And you want more limits. You want to take AR-15s.

**ALEX:**

I want to take weapons designed to kill as many people as possible as quickly as possible. Yes.

**SAM:**

Those weapons are used for sport. For hunting. For self-defense.

**ALEX:**

For mass murder. Uvalde. Parkland. Sandy Hook. Las Vegas. Orlando. Every single mass shooting uses those weapons.

**SAM:**

And every single one happened in a gun-free zone. If someone had been armed—

**ALEX:**

"Good guy with a gun." That's the fantasy, right? That if everyone's armed, we'll all be safer?

**SAM:**

Armed citizens stop crimes every day.

**ALEX:**

And untrained armed citizens shoot bystanders. Escalate situations. Get themselves killed. The data is clear: more guns equals more gun deaths.

**SAM:**

Correlation isn't causation.

**ALEX:**

Every other developed country has figured this out. They have strict gun laws. And they have almost no mass shootings. We have more guns than people and we have a mass shooting every day.

**SAM:**

Because we have a culture problem. Not a gun problem.

**ALEX:**

We have both. And you're using "culture" as an excuse to do nothing while children die.

**SAM:**

I'm saying the problem is broken families. Violent media. Lack of moral education. Not guns.

**ALEX:**

Other countries have violent media. Other countries have broken families. They don't have mass shootings. Because they don't have unrestricted access to weapons of war.

**SAM:**

We don't have unrestricted access.

**ALEX:**

An eighteen-year-old can buy an AR-15 but can't buy beer. That's unrestricted.

**SAM:**

With a background check.

**ALEX:**

That doesn't include mental health. Doesn't include domestic violence. Has loopholes for private sales and gun shows. It's barely a restriction at all.

**SAM:**

So what do you want? To ban all guns?

**ALEX:**

I want universal background checks. I want red flag laws. I want assault weapon bans. I want waiting periods. I want to treat guns like we treat cars—registration, licensing, insurance.

**SAM:**

Cars aren't a constitutional right.

**ALEX:**

Neither are AR-15s. The Second Amendment doesn't give you unlimited access to any weapon you want.

**SAM:**

It says the right to bear arms shall not be infringed.

**ALEX:**

And "bear arms" in 1791 meant muskets. Single-shot weapons that took a minute to reload. Not semi-automatic rifles that fire thirty rounds in seconds.

**SAM:**

So you're an originalist now?

**ALEX:**

I'm pointing out that the founders couldn't have imagined the weapons we have today. And if they had, maybe they would have written it differently.

**SAM:**

Or maybe they would have wanted citizens to be as well-armed as the government.

**ALEX:**

The government has drones. Tanks. Nuclear weapons. You're not going to fight them with AR-15s.

**SAM:**

Afghanistan did. Vietnam did.

**ALEX:**

Is that your plan? Guerrilla warfare against the US military?

**SAM:**

If necessary.

*(Silence. That landed.)*

**ALEX:**

You're fantasizing about armed rebellion.

**SAM:**

I'm preparing for tyranny.

**ALEX:**

You're creating the conditions for tyranny. When everyone's armed and everyone's afraid, you don't get liberty. You get chaos.

**SAM:**

An armed society is a polite society.

**ALEX:**

Is that what we have? Politeness? We have the highest gun death rate in the developed world. Thirty thousand deaths a year. Mass shootings weekly. Children doing active shooter drills.

**SAM:**

And the answer is to disarm the people who could protect them?

**ALEX:**

The answer is to stop making it so easy to get the weapons in the first place!

*(Beat.)*

**ALEX:**

My son had to do an active shooter drill last month. He's seven. Seven years old. And he had to practice hiding in a closet while the teacher locked the door and turned off the lights. He came home terrified. Crying. Asking if someone was going to come to his school and kill them.

*(Silence.)*

**ALEX:**

And I didn't know what to tell him. Because yes, someone might. Because in this country, any angry person can walk into a store and buy a weapon designed to kill dozens of people in minutes.

**SAM:**

And if that person comes, you want his teacher unarmed?

**ALEX:**

I want that person to not have the weapon! I want universal background checks so he can't buy it. I want red flag laws so his family can report him. I want waiting periods so he has to think about it. I want licensing so he has to prove he knows how to use it safely.

**SAM:**

None of that would have stopped any mass shooting.

**ALEX:**

Some of it would have. And even if it only stops one, isn't that worth it?

**SAM:**

Not if it violates the constitutional rights of millions of law-abiding gun owners.

**ALEX:**

Your right to own an AR-15 is more important than children's lives?

**SAM:**

My right to defend myself and my family is more important than your fear.

**ALEX:**

My fear? Children are dying!

**SAM:**

And making me defenseless won't bring them back.

**ALEX:**

You're not defenseless. You can have a handgun. A shotgun. A hunting rifle. You don't need a weapon of war.

**SAM:**

I need whatever I think is necessary to protect my home.

**ALEX:**

From who? We don't live in a war zone.

**SAM:**

We live in a country where police response time is twenty minutes. Where home invasions happen every day. Where I'm responsible for my own safety.

**ALEX:**

And you think an AR-15 makes you safer?

**SAM:**

I know it does.

**ALEX:**

The data says the opposite. Guns in homes are more likely to be used in suicides or accidents than in self-defense.

**SAM:**

I'm not suicidal. I'm trained. I keep my weapons secured.

**ALEX:**

Tyler is eight. He's curious. He's going to find them.

**SAM:**

They're locked. He doesn't know the combination.

**ALEX:**

Every parent thinks that. And every year, hundreds of children die because they found the gun their parents thought was secure.

**SAM:**

That won't happen to me.

*(Long silence. Sam looks at his hands.)*

**SAM:**

*(Quietly, almost to himself)*

Michael was afraid of me after Parkland. Fourteen years old. Saw me cleaning my guns and... looked at me different.

*(Beat.)*

**SAM:**

Never said anything. Just... looked at me like I might...

*(He stops. Can't finish. Silence.)*

**ALEX:**

That's what they all say.

*(Silence.)*

**SAM:**

I need my weapons for work. I work construction sites in rough areas. I carry because I need to protect myself and my crew.

**ALEX:**

From what?

**SAM:**

Theft. Assault. We've had tools stolen. Workers threatened. One of my guys was jumped in a parking lot.

**ALEX:**

And if he'd had a gun?

**SAM:**

He could have defended himself.

**ALEX:**

Or he'd be dead. Escalating a robbery into a gunfight doesn't make you safer.

**SAM:**

It gives you a chance.

**ALEX:**

It gives you a chance to die. Most self-defense gun uses don't stop crimes. They escalate them.

**SAM:**

That's not what the data shows.

**ALEX:**

That's exactly what the data shows. You're more likely to be killed if you have a gun. More likely to have it used against you. More likely to shoot someone by mistake.

**SAM:**

I'm trained.

**ALEX:**

So are cops. And they still shoot innocent people. Tamir Rice. Philando Castile. Breonna Taylor. Trained people with guns still make deadly mistakes.

**SAM:**

And if they'd been armed—

**ALEX:**

They were armed! Philando Castile had a legal concealed carry permit. He told the officer. He followed all the rules. And he was shot anyway. Because the cop was scared. Because the cop saw a gun.

*(Silence.)*

**SAM:**

That's different.

**ALEX:**

How? How is that different?

**ALEX:**

*(Quiet, almost confessional)*

I bought a gun last year. After my son's school did the active shooter drill. Didn't tell my wife. It's locked in my office. I've never fired it.

*(Beat.)*

**ALEX:**

I don't even know why I bought it. To protect him from what? A shooter with an AR-15? What am I going to do?

*(He laughs - broken, not amused.)*

**SAM:**

You're like me.

**ALEX:**

*(Fierce)*

I'm nothing like you.

**SAM:**

You're terrified. You bought a gun because you're terrified. You're exactly like me.

*(Silence. Neither can look at the other.)*

**SAM:**

That was a bad cop.

**ALEX:**

And what about bad gun owners? What about people who snap? Who get angry? Who make mistakes?

**SAM:**

You can't punish everyone for the actions of a few.

**ALEX:**

Then why do we punish everyone for terrorism? We take our shoes off at airports because one person tried to put a bomb in his shoe. We banned box cutters because of 9/11. But guns kill tens of thousands and you won't accept any restrictions.

**SAM:**

Because guns are a right. Air travel isn't.

**ALEX:**

And children's safety isn't? Children's lives aren't?

**SAM:**

Of course they are.

**ALEX:**

Then do something! Support background checks. Support red flag laws. Support safe storage requirements. Do something instead of offering thoughts and prayers while children die.

**SAM:**

Those laws won't work.

**ALEX:**

They work in every other country! Australia had one mass shooting, banned assault weapons, and hasn't had one since. It works.

**SAM:**

Australia is an island. We have borders.

**ALEX:**

So we do nothing? We accept that children will be murdered in schools because you refuse to give up your AR-15?

**SAM:**

I refuse to give up my constitutional right because you're afraid.

**ALEX:**

I'm not afraid for me. I'm afraid for my son. For every child. For every person who goes to a concert or a movie or a grocery store and doesn't come home because someone with a legally purchased weapon decided to kill them.

*(Long silence.)*

**SAM:**

And I'm afraid of a government that can disarm its citizens. A government that can control who has weapons and who doesn't. That's tyranny.

**ALEX:**

We have that now. Felons can't own guns. Domestic abusers can't own guns. We already have restrictions.

**SAM:**

And you want more.

**ALEX:**

Yes! Until children stop dying!

**SAM:**

And when children still die—because they will—you'll want more restrictions. And more. Until no one except the government has guns.

**ALEX:**

That's a slippery slope fallacy.

**SAM:**

It's reality. Give an inch, they take a mile.

**ALEX:**

We've given nothing. We've gone backwards. We had an assault weapons ban in the '90s. It expired. Now we have more mass shootings.

**SAM:**

Because the ban didn't work.

**ALEX:**

It did work. Mass shooting deaths went down. Then it expired and they went back up.

**SAM:**

Correlation isn't—

**ALEX:**

Stop saying that! The evidence is overwhelming. More guns equals more deaths. Stricter gun laws equal fewer deaths. It's that simple.

**SAM:**

Then move to Australia.

*(Silence.)*

**ALEX:**

This is my country too. And I'm not leaving because you refuse to admit that your hobby is killing children.

**SAM:**

It's not a hobby. It's a right.

**ALEX:**

And children have a right to live.

*(Long silence. Sam stands again. Paces.)*

**SAM:**

Federal force. You think it's tyranny.

**ALEX:**

When it's deployed against American citizens exercising constitutional rights? Yes.

**SAM:**

They were burning cities.

**ALEX:**

A few buildings. In isolated incidents. During protests involving millions of people. You're using that to justify occupation.

**SAM:**

To restore order.

**ALEX:**

To crush dissent.

**SAM:**

To protect property.

**ALEX:**

By violating rights. Federal agents in unmarked vans grabbing protesters off the streets. Beating journalists. Tear-gassing peaceful demonstrations.

**SAM:**

They weren't peaceful.

**ALEX:**

Most were. And you treated them all like enemy combatants. You deployed military force against your own citizens.

**SAM:**

Because local governments wouldn't act.

**ALEX:**

Because local governments were managing the situation. You didn't like their approach, so you sent in federal troops.

**SAM:**

To save those cities.

**ALEX:**

To intimidate protesters. To create fear. To send a message that dissent will be met with force.

**SAM:**

To send a message that lawlessness will not be tolerated.

**ALEX:**

Protesting is not lawlessness. It's the First Amendment.

**SAM:**

Rioting isn't protected speech.

**ALEX:**

And you treated everyone like a rioter. That's the problem. You can't tell the difference between protesting and rioting. Or you don't care.

**SAM:**

When a protest becomes violent, it's a riot.

**ALEX:**

And when federal agents show up in body armor and start beating people, what is that?

**SAM:**

Restoration of order.

**ALEX:**

Fascism.

*(That word hangs there.)*

**SAM:**

You keep using that word.

**ALEX:**

Because it fits. When you deploy federal force against protesters. When you call the press enemies. When you say elections are only legitimate if you win. That's fascism.

**SAM:**

Fascism is lawlessness. Fascism is chaos. We're trying to prevent that.

**ALEX:**

By creating a police state.

**SAM:**

By enforcing order.

**ALEX:**

And when does the enforcement stop? When everyone agrees with you? When dissent is crushed? When opposition is illegal?

**SAM:**

When the rule of law is restored.

**ALEX:**

You keep saying rule of law. But you mean rule of you. Your law. Your values. Your vision. And anyone who disagrees is the enemy.

**SAM:**

Anyone who's destroying the country is the enemy.

**ALEX:**

And you get to decide who's destroying it.

**SAM:**

I can see it.

**ALEX:**

You see what you want to see. Threats everywhere. Chaos everywhere. Because that justifies force. That justifies control.

**SAM:**

We need control.

**ALEX:**

You want control. There's a difference.

**SAM:**

Civilization requires order.

**ALEX:**

And freedom requires restraint. From the government. That's the whole point of the Constitution. Limiting government power. But you want unlimited power to enforce your vision.

**SAM:**

Emergency powers. Temporary.

**ALEX:**

Emergency powers never end. Once you grant them, they become permanent. Every emergency extends them. Every threat justifies them. Until you live in a permanent state of emergency.

**SAM:**

If the threat is permanent, the emergency is permanent.

**ALEX:**

And there's always a threat. Always an enemy. Always justification for more power. That's how authoritarianism works.

**SAM:**

We're not authoritarian. We're protecting freedom.

**ALEX:**

By restricting it.

**SAM:**

By protecting it from those who'd destroy it.

**ALEX:**

From who? From protesters? From immigrants? From people who disagree with you?

**SAM:**

From people who hate America.

**ALEX:**

We don't hate America. We're trying to make it better. More inclusive. More just.

**SAM:**

By tearing it down.

**ALEX:**

By living up to its promises. Equal protection. Due process. Freedom of speech. You're the one trying to tear those down.

**SAM:**

To protect them.

**ALEX:**

You don't protect freedom by destroying it.

**SAM:**

Sometimes you do. Sometimes freedom requires force.

**ALEX:**

Not against your own citizens. Not in peacetime. Not for political dissent.

**SAM:**

This isn't peacetime. We're at war.

**ALEX:**

With who?

**SAM:**

With everyone who wants to destroy us.

**ALEX:**

And who decides who wants to destroy us? You?

**SAM:**

Anyone who can see what's happening.

**ALEX:**

I see what's happening. You're creating an enemy where there isn't one. You're calling half the country traitors. You're justifying authoritarian power in the name of freedom. And you don't even see the contradiction.

*(Long silence. They're both breathing hard.)*

**SAM:**

You're terrified of me.

**ALEX:**

Yes.

**SAM:**

Because you think I want to hurt you.

**ALEX:**

I think you want to create a country where my family can't exist.

**SAM:**

Your family can exist. Just not as equals.

*(Beat.)*

**ALEX:**

There it is.

**SAM:**

What?

**ALEX:**

The truth. Finally.

**SAM:**

I didn't say—

**ALEX:**

Yes, you did. "Not as equals." You want hierarchy. You want some people on top and other people below. And you want to decide who goes where.

**SAM:**

I want a society with standards.

**ALEX:**

You want a society where you're in charge.

**SAM:**

I want a society where God is in charge.

**ALEX:**

Same thing. Because you speak for God. You enforce God's rules. So it's you. Always you.

**SAM:**

And your society has no God. No absolute truth. No standards at all.

**ALEX:**

My society has constitutional standards. Secular standards. That protect everyone.

**SAM:**

Protect everyone from nothing. You've stripped away every foundation. Every boundary. And now you're shocked when people want to restore them.

**ALEX:**

By force.

**SAM:**

If necessary.

**ALEX:**

That's tyranny.

**SAM:**

That's leadership.

*(Silence. Alex stands. Walks to the empty chair. Looks at it.)*

**ALEX:**

Someone will sit here eventually.

**SAM:**

Yes.

**ALEX:**

Someone with certainty. Someone who knows they're right.

**SAM:**

Someone who can make a decision.

**ALEX:**

And everyone else has to obey.

**SAM:**

Yes.

**ALEX:**

That's what you want?

**SAM:**

That's what we need.

**ALEX:**

Even if that person is me? Even if I sit here and enforce my vision?

*(Beat.)*

**SAM:**

You won't.

**ALEX:**

Why not? Why am I less likely to sit here than you?

**SAM:**

Because you don't believe in anything.

**ALEX:**

I believe in pluralism. I believe in process. I believe no one should sit here with certainty.

**SAM:**

Which is why you'll lose.

**ALEX:**

Maybe. But if I do, democracy loses. Because whoever sits here with your certainty destroys everything else.

**SAM:**

Or saves everything.

**ALEX:**

From what? From freedom? From difference? From people living lives you don't approve of?

**SAM:**

From chaos.

**ALEX:**

Your version of chaos is my version of freedom.

**SAM:**

And your version of freedom is my version of chaos.

*(Beat.)*

**ALEX:**

You know what terrifies me most? It's not that you're wrong. It's that you might win. That someone like you will sit in that chair and use state power to enforce your vision. And half the country will cheer. Because they're as certain as you are. As scared as you are. And they'll sacrifice freedom for order. Democracy for certainty.

**SAM:**

And you know what terrifies me? It's that no one will sit there. That we'll descend into permanent chaos. That there will be no standards. No boundaries. No truth. Just everyone doing whatever they want. And the country will collapse.

*(Long silence.)*

**ALEX:**

So we're stuck.

**SAM:**

Yes.

**ALEX:**

We're not going to agree.

**SAM:**

No.

**ALEX:**

Ever.

**SAM:**

Probably not.

*(Beat.)*

**ALEX:**

Do you think I'm evil?

**SAM:**

No.

**ALEX:**

Then what?

**SAM:**

Misguided. Dangerous. Wrong.

**ALEX:**

But not evil.

**SAM:**

Not evil.

*(Beat.)*

**SAM:**

Do you think I'm evil?

**ALEX:**

No.

**SAM:**

Then what?

**ALEX:**

Frightening. Destructive. Certain of things that aren't certain.

**SAM:**

But not evil.

**ALEX:**

Not evil.

*(Silence.)*

**ALEX:**

Then maybe we can write something.

**SAM:**

Not what they want us to write.

**ALEX:**

No.

**SAM:**

Something true.

**ALEX:**

Yes.

*(Sam picks up the pen. Thinks. Starts writing. Alex watches.)*

**SAM:**

"We do not agree on matters of moral authority, governance, or national identity. We believe the other's political positions are harmful to the country."

*(He looks up. Alex nods. Sam continues.)*

**SAM:**

"We acknowledge that physical escalation in public settings violates civil order. We will maintain physical separation at future public meetings."

*(Beat.)*

**SAM:**

"This is not reconciliation."

*(He looks at Alex. Alex nods.)*

**SAM:**

"This is compliance with a court order."

*(He looks up again. Alex is silent for a moment. Then:)*

**ALEX:**

"We remain in fundamental moral conflict. That is the full extent of our agreement."

*(Sam writes it. Then sets down the pen. Pushes the paper to the center of the table. They both look at it.)*

**SAM:**

That's what we have.

**ALEX:**

Yes.

*(Beat.)*

**SAM:**

It's not much.

**ALEX:**

No.

**SAM:**

But it's true.

**ALEX:**

Yes.

*(They both sign. Sam stands.)*

**SAM:**

I still believe what I believe.

**ALEX:**

So do I.

**SAM:**

You're still dangerous.

**ALEX:**

You are too.

**SAM:**

This won't last.

**ALEX:**

No.

*(Beat.)*

**ALEX:**

But it happened.

*(Sam looks at him. Then at the paper. Then at the empty chair.)*

**SAM:**

Someone will sit there eventually.

**ALEX:**

I know.

**SAM:**

And when they do—

**ALEX:**

We'll still be here. Both of us.

*(Long silence.)*

**SAM:**

I should go first.

**ALEX:**

Okay.

*(Sam walks to the door. Stops. Turns back.)*

**SAM:**

**SAM:**

Tyler asked me yesterday if you were a bad person.

**ALEX:**

What did you tell him?

**SAM:**

*(Long pause, voice breaking)*

I told him you were wrong. But I don't know if I believe that anymore.

*(Silence.)*

**SAM:**

I still believe what I believe. Nothing you said changed that.

*(Beat.)*

**SAM:**

I think maybe you're right about me. And I can't... I can't live with that. But I can't change it either.

*(He's shaking.)*

**ALEX:**

*(Barely audible)*

I'm going home tonight and my son is going to ask me if we're safe. And I'm going to lie to him. Because of you. Because of people like you.

*(Beat.)*

**ALEX:**

I'm going to tell him we're safe. And I'm going to check the locks. And I'm going to think about the gun in my office. And I'm going to hate you. And I'm going to hate myself for hating you.

*(Long silence. Both men are barely holding it together.)*

**SAM:**

*(Whisper)*

I should go.

**ALEX:**

*(Whisper)*

Yeah.

**END OF PLAY**