

Stephen / Frank / Ben

ACT TWO

Scene 1

An event in Cedar Rapids later that day. Stephen is standing outside an elementary school gym talking with Frank, a reporter from the Los Angeles Times. Ben is waiting just off to the side. Occasionally we hear the muffled cheers of the event inside the gym.

STEPHEN. Of course they're tightening. That's what happens a week out.

FRANK. And you're not worried?

STEPHEN. No. We've held the lead for three months. Our base is strong. Ninety-five percent of the people who are going to vote have already made their choice. You're just seeing a few undecided going the other way.

FRANK. But your numbers are sliding. This isn't just a few undecideds suddenly —

STEPHEN. Three points? That's hardly a slide, Frank. Like I said, we're a week out. You've covered these things before. The race tightens. That's how it goes.

FRANK. It keeps going like this, you'll be within the margin of error by Friday.

STEPHEN. So let it. We started out as the underdog and proved everyone wrong, we'll do it again. You know and I know that half of this shit is the press. You all want a tight race, so you've been slamming us, and now you're getting your tight race.

FRANK. You can't blame this on us.

STEPHEN. I sure as hell can. When's the last time you wrote an article that had anything to do with one of our events?

FRANK. I write about your events.

STEPHEN. A line. Maybe two, on a good day. Then you regurgitate Pullman's oppo for the next three columns.

FRANK. You're not being fair.

STEPHEN. Don't talk to me about fair, Frank. None of this shit is fair. If you all were being fair, I'd wake up to a much different stack of papers every morning.

FRANK. What's gotten into you, Stevie?

STEPHEN. Nothing's gotten into me.

FRANK. I ask you a few questions — you blow up at me.

STEPHEN. You're missing the event, Frank.

FRANK. Is something going on?

STEPHEN. The event — right through those doors.

FRANK. Off the record.

STEPHEN. Nothing. Really. Now please, go watch this event. I'd still like our line or two in tomorrow's paper.

FRANK. There's only so many ways I can cover a stump speech, Stevie. It's the same speech every time. *(A massive cheer of the crowd is heard within.)*

STEPHEN. You hear that? It's the same speech because it works.

This guy is gonna be the next president of the United States, and you're standing out here talking to me. Go in there and do your job. You oughtta be listening to him instead of hounding my ass about the tracking polls. Don't you think the people of Los Angeles deserve to get a little accurate reportage? Or do they even read the paper?

FRANK. *(He's had enough.)* You want me to soften up on you guys — bitching me out isn't exactly the best way to go about it.

STEPHEN. Well, I'm tired of sucking your cock.

FRANK. Jesus, Steve — you need to get some sleep. *(Frank exits into the event. Ben approaches Stephen.)*

BEN. Steve.

STEPHEN. Why the fuck are you always lurking around? *(Beat.)*

Don't you have press releases to hand out?

BEN. I already did.

STEPHEN. Well, go hand out some more. *(Ben holds up a few sheets of paper.)*

BEN. I was wondering if you'd take a look at this.

STEPHEN. Can it wait?

BEN. I — well, I just —

STEPHEN. Yes or no? We're right in the middle of an event.

BEN. It's a speech.

STEPHEN. What speech?

BEN. For the governor. A new stump speech.

STEPHEN. I didn't put out an order for a new speech.

BEN. I know. I just figured ...

STEPHEN. Figured what?

BEN. I just figured that since the reporters were getting a little ... you know ... a little bored with — *(Stephen grabs the speech and looks it over.)*

STEPHEN. Who wrote this?

BEN. I did.

STEPHEN. You don't change a stump speech a week before the caucus.

BEN. Well, it's more than a stump speech — it's kind of a new approach. A whole new —

STEPHEN. We spent months — *I* spent months perfecting the Governor's speech. Every word. Every gesture. Every pause. You don't up and change your message seven days out.

BEN. I wasn't trying to imply that the Governor's speech isn't good, it's just a matter of how effective it is at this point, since all the reporters —

STEPHEN. Effective? It's put us in the lead for three months straight. *(Ida enters, coming from the event, and approaches Stephen as Ben talks.)*

BEN. Look, Steve — I was just hoping you'd look it over and tell me what you think, even if you don't want to use it.

STEPHEN. I don't.

BEN. You haven't read it, though.

STEPHEN. I just did.

BEN. You skimmed the first page.

STEPHEN. Did you hear a word I said? We're not gonna change the —

BEN. Well, maybe you could at least show it to Paul. I really think there's some good stuff in there, and if we just insert a few things into his regular —

STEPHEN. Another time, Ben. *(Stephen hands the speech back to Ben.)* What's up, Ida?

IDA. If you two are —

STEPHEN. No — not at all. Talk to me.

BEN. Can I just slip this under your door at the hotel and —

STEPHEN. Go away, Ben.

BEN. It'll be there when you get back.

STEPHEN. I said, go the fuck away. *(Ben leers at him for a second*

— his frustration and anger seething — but he keeps his cool. His next line is delivered with confidence and dignity.)

BEN. Alright. We'll talk later then. When you're a little less busy. *(Ben exits.)*

IDA. Wow. Kinda harsh, huh?

STEPHEN. Kid wrote a — ... never mind. It's not important.

IDA. I like, Ben. He's a sweetheart.

STEPHEN. He's an ambitious little fucker.

IDA. Look in a mirror darlin'.

STEPHEN. Hangs around me like a puppy.

IDA. He looks up to you. You're his idol.

STEPHEN. *(Laughs bitterly.)* Whatever.

IDA. So, Stevie ... off the record ...

STEPHEN. No, Ida. I can't tell you what happened in South Carolina.

IDA. That's not what I wanted to ask you about.

STEPHEN. No?

IDA. Well, not right away. There's something else.

STEPHEN. I'm listening.

IDA. You met with Tom Duffy. *(A pause. Stephen doesn't know what to say.)* So it's true?

STEPHEN. Who told you that?

IDA. A little bird.

STEPHEN. Who?

IDA. Did you meet with him?

STEPHEN. Tell me who, Ida.

IDA. Can't do that.

STEPHEN. I'm not fucking around here.

IDA. Neither am I.

STEPHEN. It's not true.

IDA. I *know* you met with him. At a little restaurant in East Des Moines, last night, just before the press conference. Duffy ordered buffalo wings.

STEPHEN. Did Duffy tell you this?

IDA. Anonymous.

STEPHEN. You don't have shit.

IDA. This is a story, Steve.

STEPHEN. The *Times* won't print anything with one uncorroborated anonymous source.

IDA. I can't get it printed at the *Times*, but I could always give