

Setting

Act I, Scene 1

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It is Barbara's twenty-first birthday and she is having a small garden party in the beautifully tended garden at her mother Virginia's house. Two young men, brothers, Charles and William, have been invited to the party. Barbara has been dating the stable and reliable William for six months to the day now. She had previously dated Charles in a whirlwind romance that ended as abruptly as it began.

The relationship between William and Barbara is... stable. One might say dull. He is calm, assured, considerate, and almost entirely predictable. There is warmth, but more than that, there is security.

The relationship between Charles and Barbara had been anything but sedate. It was dramatic and passionate, an affair of vibrant emotions and hormones. The fights were as heated as the romance, and they eventually led to the break-up.

What is not known to Barbara is that both young men intend to propose to her tonight. William is planning a quiet proposal at the end of the evening. Charles, on the other hand, has decided that the passion he still feels for Barbara is not something he wishes to contain and plans a large and showy proposal on the spot. This will spur on William to act in making his own proposal, not as he would have wished, but in self-defense.

This evening, Barbara will have to decide which of the two brothers she wishes to wed. William offers her someone she can trust, and a predictable and stable life. Charles still ignites her passion, but everything about him is a risk.

With her daughter caught at a crucial turning point in her young life, Virginia hopes to provide support and guidance. Virginia's own marriage while beginning in passion, turned into a loveless thing after a few years. In their day, divorce was not so common and there was Barbara to think about, so they remained together until his passing five years ago. Whether Virginia will try to turn her daughter towards one of the two men or to allow her daughter to make her own decision without influence is up to her.

Barbara Vela

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Something is up. You can tell. William is almost stuttering and Charles has that too-slick grin on his face. You'd recognize that grin anywhere, and it means he knows something or is planning something. You really hope that whatever it is won't ruin your party.

Your mother is also just a little too quiet. You saw her looking at your father Frederick's photographs the other day. Maybe it is just that it is your 21st birthday and she wishes he was here. You do too. It was only a few weeks after your 16th birthday that he passed away of a heart attack. He had been young, but he was always a dedicated worker. He worked so hard you barely got a chance to know him growing up. Still, you miss him.

You and William have been together for six months now and you care for him. He's comfortable to be around and you can always count on him. He cares for you, that much is plain to anyone who just looks at his open face. He's a good man and you're glad to have him in your life. His stability has been a tremendous boon for you, giving you something that you feel has been lacking since your father died. You know that he feels more strongly for you than you do for him and at times that bothers you, but he is happy with it, so you don't question it too much.

William is everything that Charles isn't. You had dated Charles before you dated William, and if there are two men more different it is those two brothers. Charles is a ball of raw emotions and energy. He swept you completely off your feet a few years ago. It was electric, riveting, and dangerous. With him, you felt like you almost had no power. His smile and his hands, they controlled you.

The fights were every bit as passionate as the lovemaking. He just wouldn't accept it when he was wrong, or when something didn't go his way. You had been together for several months when one of the fights led to him disappearing, leaving town, without warning or notice. He was gone for the better part of a month. When he came back, you had mustered up the nerve to tell him it was over, and to stick with it. Whatever the passion, you just couldn't live with the uncertainty from day to day. You broke it off with him, a decision you've wrestled with ever since.

After you broke it off with Charles, you came to be friends with his brother William. The two of you could laugh about Charles and all his antics. William understood how infuriating his brother was capable of being. After the death of their own father when William was 15 and Charles was 13, William had been forced to look out for his brother. William learned all about the importance of the responsibility and stability that Charles lacked.

Six months ago, that spark of friendship became something more with William. He was so obviously in love with you, and you needed that kind of stability at the time. It was such a relief to be in control of yourself with someone. It isn't passionate, but it is... safe. He was there for you when you needed him, and that counts for a lot. Recently, though, you wonder if you're growing beyond it. What's a relationship when there isn't passion, even at the start?

Now you just need to hope that the party goes well. Whatever it is that William is nervous about, or Charles is planning, they had best not ruin your party. A girl only turns 21 once, after all. This is your night, and you mean to enjoy it.

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Charles Gardener

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You know it's wrong, but you still can't stop thinking about Barbara. Barbara and your brother William have been dating for six months. They're good for each other, and you know it, but they don't have what you had with Barbara. They have happiness and stability, but you had passion and true love. The touch of her lips on yours was better than any thrill you had ever experienced. She's the most beautiful woman you have ever met and every moment with her is wonderful, even when you're fighting. And now she's dating your brother.

Your older brother has always been the stable, responsible one. You climbed trees, he played catch. You got in fights and went to parties. He played on the baseball team and got straight As. You studied theater in school, he's going to law school. For all your fights, you have always been close. He took care of you, and he's taken the blame for your dumb ideas more than once. When your father died eight years ago, you were 13, and William was 15. William tried to be father and brother to you. While you chafed under his rules, you love him like a father and a brother both. You wish William only the best. The loss of your father was one of the first things that you and Barbara bonded over. She lost hers when she was 16, only a few years older.

You and Barbara dated first. It was amazing and passionate, but the fights were explosive. After one fight, you left for three weeks without calling or telling her where you went. All you did was hop a train and go, it's not like there was another woman, or anything, but that was the last straw for Barbara. You pleaded with her to take you back, but then William came into the picture. They were happy together, and you didn't want to hurt your brother, so you let it go.

But when he confided last night that he was going to propose to Barbara, you knew you couldn't take it. You couldn't let him marry the girl of your dreams without a fight. That's when you decided that you had to propose to her first. Today, in the middle of her birthday party, you're going to tell her that you love her and can't live without her. That if she still loves you too (as you know she does), she'll leave William and marry you. You went out and spent what little savings you had on the most beautiful ring you could find.

Today, at her 21st birthday party, you're going to propose. You're going to give her the big, flashy, romantic proposal that your brother never would. You're going to take this opportunity to tell her how much you love and need her in front of everyone. Your brother would do things quietly, behind closed doors, all prim and proper. That isn't true love. True love shouts in the face of propriety. True love declares itself openly, and ignores all barriers.

There are two big hurdles. One is your brother. You know this will crush him, but you can't let that determine how you live your life. The other is Barbara's mother, Virginia. Will she even let her daughter marry you after the big scene last time you broke up? You'll need to convince both of them that you have changed, that this time you know what you want, and it's to spend the rest of your life with Barbara. She's perfect, she's beautiful, and if you don't act soon, she'll be gone.

If she turns you down, you don't know what you'll do. How can you handle seeing the woman you love married to the brother who is so important to you?

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William Gardener

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Your palms are sweaty, your chest is tight, and you're trying not to stutter over every word. You don't know how you're going to get through the evening with nerves like this. Of course, it isn't every day that you are prepared to propose to the woman of your dreams.

She will say yes, won't she? Of course she will. You've been together for six months now and it has been pretty close to perfect. She's beautiful, witty, and charming. You've been attentive, caring, supportive, and completely head over heels for her. You'll be a good husband and eventually a father. The two of you can get married in another six months on your one-year anniversary. It will be perfect.

You're worried about your brother, Charles. He's got that too-calm look on his face that always suggests he's planning something. He better not spoil your surprise by blurting it out before you have a chance to propose. That would be all too like him. You almost wish you hadn't told him last night, but you couldn't help it. He's your brother and, whatever your differences, you needed his support. He had a right to know, especially since he had previously dated Barbara.

That had been a disaster, of course. Charles has never had anything like a stable relationship. Charles just feels things, he doesn't think about them. One day everything will be great, the next, who knows? You love your brother, but he's just not grounded in the real world the way you are. It was inevitable that Barbara would leave him after he abandoned her one time, just disappearing after a fight.

It was several months after that you and Barbara got together. At first, you had just been a supportive friend, someone able to understand the ups and downs of your brother. Eventually, it became more. You were the confidante, the stable one, the person she could always rely on to be there. You were the man who understood her, cared for her, and would always be there for her. And you have been, and you will be, for the rest of your life.

You spoke with Virginia, Barbara's mother, last week. Since Frederick, Barbara's father, died five years ago, you couldn't ask him for permission to wed Barbara. So, you went to Virginia. You explained how very much you loved Barbara, how you would care for her, and take care of her. She gave you permission, with a smile. You hope that Barbara's father would have approved as well.

Your own father died 8 years ago. You had been 15 and Charles was 13. It was a hard time for you, for Charles, and for your own mother. You grew up a lot that year, becoming the man of the house. You learned a lot about responsibility, the importance of stability, and dedication to your family. Charles took it much harder than you did and started acting out. You had to watch out for him constantly. You've never stopped watching out for him really. You just hope that he'll stay in control of himself tonight, of all nights.

Now you just have to make it through the party. You will propose at the end. You've got the ring burning a hole in your pocket. You just have to stay calm for a few more hours, and propose just as the sun is going down. She loves the sunset, and it will be perfect. Nothing can go wrong, as long as you just keep breathing and stay calm. By this time tomorrow you'll be engaged and well on your way to the life of your dreams.

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Virginia Vela

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Your little daughter Barbara is all grown up. She's 21 and she seems so happy. For all the troubles in your marriage, you wish her father, Frederick could have lived to see this day. He died while she was still in high school and never truly got to see the beautiful young woman that she has grown into. He died just a few weeks after her 16th birthday, and every birthday since has been hard, watching her growing up and knowing he would never see her. This is one of the hardest. You and Frederick married a month before your 21st birthday.

You remember being 21, newly married and so desperately in love. At that age, everything was perfect between you and Frederick. You were so happy, so passionate. Everything he did was magic. Even when you fought, you knew you could look forward to it being over and resting in his arms.

Of course, it didn't last. After Barbara was born, you and Frederick drifted apart. The passion and the magic faded away. There was no cheating, no blaze of passionate fury. You just drifted apart. As you changed diapers and cared for a baby, he worked longer and longer hours. Soon you had nothing in common except Barbara. At first you resented him being gone so much, then you came to appreciate it. You had plenty of time with just Barbara and your friends. The hardest times came when Frederick was home. Sometimes you fought, but that was less painful than the hours of silence. As much as you would never admit it to anyone, when he died of a heart attack five years ago, it was almost a relief. Finally you were free to live without that silence hanging over you.

Barbara has been dating William for six months now. William Gardener is solid and responsible. He will be a good husband and a responsible father. He came to you last week and asked your permission to propose to your daughter. Since she didn't have a living father to ask, he wanted to ask you. You thought it was sweet, and gave your permission, of course. It's Barbara's decision. Still, you worry. Barbara doesn't look at William with longing, with passion. They don't seem to have the intensity that you and Frederick had. At the same time, maybe that's better. Maybe this is maintainable.

There's only one man you have ever seen Barbara look at the way you remember looking at Frederick. That is William's brother, Charles. Charles is everything William is not: wild, passionate, exciting. They dated before Barbara started dating William, but their relationship ended in a bitter fight, after which Charles left for three weeks. Barbara cried the whole time he was gone. When he got back, she chewed him out and left him. But you know she still pines for him. You've seen the way she still looks at him.

With William, Barbara will have a safe, dependable life, but she will never know the sort of love and passion she could have with Charles. Charles could leave tomorrow, but she would have passion. At the same time, if she does wind up with Charles, will that passion last? Your deep love with Frederick didn't make it past Barbara's infancy. Does love like that always burn itself out? Or is that deep love her chance for true happiness?

Barbara has always been a good girl, obedient to you and her father. You don't want to sway her too much on something this important. At the same time, you want to be sure that she's really ready to settle down with William before she answers his proposal.