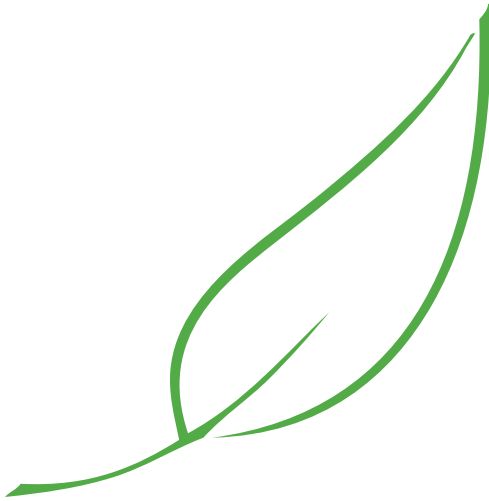


Where On Earth Is Maxwell Long?

By Pat Cook



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SYNOPSIS: Scarlet Ribbon is a government town where Phoebe Long is trying to find her brother. Before she can get very far in her investigation, her fingerprints are checked by Jynx, the owner of the Meaning of Lyfe Café, proving that she has two different identities. To complicate matters, Phoebe also uncovers a spy and her mother is arrested. Phoebe continues to look for her brother, even though she gets little help from Harriett, a smuggler, or from Lou, a forty-six year-old secret agent who looks nine. Along the way, Phoebe finds out the real secrets behind everything from crop circles to slow drivers in traffic with their left blinkers on. Not knowing which way to turn, Phoebe finally runs into Amelia, who is “something of the town gossip.” She answers all of Phoebe’s questions but the answers don’t seem to lead anywhere. This maze-like mystery is full of twists and turns, with a few pages from the “X Files,” and complete with a surprise ending.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(5 female, 4 male, 0-1 either; gender flexible, doubling possible)

JYNX (m).....	Worldly café proprietor, around 50. (228 lines)
PHOEBE LONG (f).....	Determined woman, in her late 20s. (266 lines)
SANCHEZ (m)	Sinister spy-type. (16 lines)
HARRIETT (f).....	Flustery, nervous woman, around 25. (64 lines)
MARCUS (m).....	Haphazard, luckless type, mid-30s. (95 lines)
LOU BRONZE (f)	46 year old spy, looks 9. (May double cast with LLOYD) (15 lines)

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OFFICER CHANEY (m).....	Town policeman with pronoun trouble. (48 lines)
MAYSIE LONG (f)	Bewildered mother to Phoebe, 50ish. (89 lines)
AMELIA TURNBUCKLE (f)	“The Major,” amiable but deadly. (111 lines)
LLOYD (m/f).....	A stranger in town. (May double cast with LOU) (1 line)

SETTING: The Meaning of Lyfe Café in the town of Scarlet Ribbon.

TIME: The present.

ACT ONE, SCENE 1

AT RISE: *The setting for this story is the MEANING OF LYFE CAFÉ, belonging to HAMILTON JYNX. It's a very clean and comfortable place, but unspectacular in a determined way, as though it doesn't really wish to be noticed.*

There are three doors in the floor plan. The first, or 'front', door is upstage right. The second door, upstage left, leads into the kitchen while the third door, downstage right, leads to the restrooms and back area. The upstage wall boasts two large windows looking out onto the town. Both windows are masked with Venetian blinds and a valance.

The furniture in the establishment is just what you'd expect. A serving counter runs parallel to the stage left wall between the two doors, behind which is the usual serving window through which JYNX sends in his orders. In the serving window is an order holder and bell. Behind the counter is a bank of shelves, which contain a coffee dispenser, a telephone, a radio, a computer and cash drawer, and other miscellaneous items. Around the rest of the room are various, mismatched tables and chairs for the paying clientele. There are salt, pepper and sweetener dispensers on each table, propping up a "Meaning of Lyfe Café" menu. On one table there are plates and glasses, left over from a recent dinner.

Before the LIGHTS come up, rather saccharine music is heard, then static, then a news reporter's voice.

REPORTER'S VOICE: . . . and while the whole event is, of course, tragic, we here cannot help but wonder why such a thing had not happened before. To recap, two days ago the corporal was assigned his orders, took his post as sentry duty outside the compound front gate and was given orders to 'Shoot first and ask questions later'. As we now know, he wanted to ask his superior why, so he shot him. (*LIGHTS come up. JYNX is turning the dial on the radio,*) On to local sports . . . (*Static and then music begins playing.*)

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JYNX: (*Shaking his head.*) Another day, another statistic. When will it all end? And when will that bread truck get here?

PHOEBE enters through the front door, looking a bit bedraggled, and looks around.

PHOEBE: I have GOT to sit down! (*She drops her purse on a table.*)

JYNX: (*Turns and see PHOEBE.*) Ah, fish on. (*He turns off the radio, picks up a pad and pen and moves to her.*) Good morning.

PHOEBE: Oh, hello. I hope you don't mind, but I just wanted to rest a while.

JYNX: No, no, of course not. I get that a lot. (*He pulls out a chair and PHOEBE sits.*) Too much lately, it seems.

PHOEBE: Thank you. I will order something, I promise.

JYNX: Be careful of what you wish for, you may get it. (*He smiles.*) You're new in town, aren't you?

PHOEBE: Matter of fact. Oh, Phoebe Long.

JYNX: Hamilton Jynx. Everyone likes to call me, "Hi," but I usually slap them when they do. I own the Meaning of Lyfe Café.

PHOEBE: Cute spelling, by the way. "L Y F E."

JYNX: Yes, it stands for "Let Your Frustrations Evaporate." That, in case you didn't guess, is the "meaning" thingy.

PHOEBE: Lot of frustration around these parts.

JYNX: Of course. This is a government town.

PHOEBE: (*Looks out, a bit startled.*) Really! Oh, I didn't know that.

JYNX: And yet she's still here. (*He holds up his pad and pen.*) Anything for you?

PHOEBE: No, I – oh! Coffee right now, please.

JYNX: Coming up. (*He moves behind the counter, pulls out a mug and fills it with coffee.*)

PHOEBE: As you guessed, I have never been to Scarlet Ribbon before.

JYNX: Another cute title.

PHOEBE: What?

JYNX: Scarlet Ribbon. Just another way of saying "Red Tape." Irony. Higher-ups just love irony. (*He crosses to her carrying the mug and a spoon.*) Any cream or - ?

PHOEBE: Kind of hard to find, isn't it?

JYNX: Not for me. I just wake up and – wham – it's all around me.
(*He looks around.*) And if that doesn't wake you up, nothing will.

PHOEBE: (*Shakes her head.*) I mean, well, it's interesting that Scarlet Ribbon is not on the map.

JYNX: Say, maybe you're not here. (*He puts the mug and spoon on the table.*)

PHOEBE: (*Smiles.*) Funny.

JYNX: No, that's the way they like it.

At that moment, SANCHEZ, wearing a trench coat and wide brimmed hat, enters through the front door. He nods to JYNX, who nods back, and makes his way to a window. Once there, he takes the blinds cord and opens and closes the blinds several times, obviously as a signal to someone. He looks out through the blinds, then turns, nods to JYNX again, and exits out the DSL door.

PHOEBE: What was . . . was he signaling to someone?

JYNX: Trust me on two things. Ignorance is not only bliss around town, but goes to the highest bidder.

PHOEBE: Huh?

JYNX: People pay you not to know things, but you have to know who not to charge and just how much you don't want to know.

PHOEBE: (*Not sure.*) Okay. Wait, you said to trust you on two things, what was the other?

JYNX: The other? Don't trust anyone. (*He taps a menu on the table.*) Anything to eat?

PHOEBE: Oh, certainly. Ahm . . . (*She quickly scans the menu.*) A chicken salad sandwich.

JYNX: (*Moves behind the counter.*) Right. (*He calls through the serving window.*) Otto? One cluck. (*To PHOEBE.*) How do you want that?

PHOEBE: On white bread and with mustard and mayonnaise.

JYNX: (*Calls out to his cook.*) Undecided Caucasian!

PHOEBE: With chips.

JYNX: Send it to Vegas. (*A white gloved hand comes out of the service window and makes an "okay" sign. JYNX moves to the table with the dirty dishes and begins clearing it.*) I take it you don't work for the government?

PHOEBE: No. No, I don't.

JYNX: That you know of. As I said, most everyone around here does. I used to be in R and D myself.

PHOEBE: Research and development?

JYNX: (*Shakes his head.*) Ramifications and Diversions. Ramifications was my post – started it myself, really, about a hundred years ago. The actual need for such a position wasn't fully realized until after the Flatiron/DeRossett case.

PHOEBE: I'm not up on my trial cases.

JYNX: Wouldn't matter if you were, they hushed it up. Short version, Melvin DeRossett worked in a large Savings and Loan. He pulled the first of the "decimal diversion" scams, which is roughly this: so many depositors got their cash-flow from large oil or stock revenues so the aforementioned Melvin DeRossett reasoned that, since most of these deposits were very, very large and then trailing off into the umpteenth decimal point, he reprogrammed the bank's master computer to reroute all those lovely decimals, the one-tenth of one-eighth of a cent, to be placed in an account he had opened under a phony company name. (*He carries the dishes out the USL door.*)

PHOEBE: (*Calls to him.*) But if they were only one-tenth of one-eighth of a cent –

JYNX: (*Re-enters.*) Listen, when you have millions of dollars coming in on thousands of accounts, it adds up. Who's going to miss a tenth of an eighth, right, Melvin thought. Before long he was millionaire. He could've gone on from there had not he been caught by a breakfast cereal statistician with a Christmas Club account. This statistician found, through checking and rechecking, that his balance didn't.

PHOEBE: Didn't what?

JYNX: Balance. Well, Melvin was brought up before Judge Horatio Ironside, known as “Old Eye For An Eye” Ironside. He also looked a little like Raymond Burr, come to think of it. (*He picks up the glasses and cutlery.*) Well, old “Eye for an Eye” decides that Melvin should have to return all the money to each and every individual that he originally stole it from. Fair enough. Toward that end, Melvin’s sentence ran this way: he was given a ponderous list of all his victims and began, from that day, to write check after check to each one of them.

PHOEBE: He had to write individual checks for - ?

JYNX: For one-tenth of one-eighth of a cent, right, to every one. I heard his carpal-tunnel syndrome is now written up in a medical journal as a case study under the title of “This is What You Get and Didn’t We Try to Tell You.”

PHOEBE: But I don’t understand. He got what he deserved, if you ask me.

JYNX: Uh huh, and that’s exactly what Judge Ironside thought. Unfortunately, he failed to take into consideration what such a sentence would involve. The ramifications. See, even working from eight to five, with an hour off for lunch and a three-thirty water cooler break, be fair he’s only human, Melvin could only manage to get out checks totaling approximately three and a half cents a day. Meanwhile, smarty-pants Melvin had deposited all his money in a reputable bank – and he would know which one to choose there – where his interest netted him approximately one hundred and eighty five dollars and seventeen cents a day. The consequence of this being, he was richer at the end of a year than when he began serving his sentence. So to hush this all up, he was given a new identity and moved here. His name is now Fernandel Underwood.

PHOEBE: Under the witness protection program?

JYNX: No, he’s under the “E C R P” – Embarrassing Crimes Relocation Program. The government has a lot of those, trust me. And a lot of them end up right here in town. (*He exits into the kitchen again.*)

PHOEBE: You mean there are a lot of people with new identities? In Scarlet Ribbon?

JYNX: (*Offstage.*) We got more aliases than a cheap motel. (*He re-enters.*) Some have dozens of aliases, what with either being in some program or as an agent, that kind of thing. We had a guy last year who passed away and all his aliases were listed in his obit. That thing ran a page and a half.

PHOEBE: But –

JYNX: His tombstone is two feet wide and fourteen feet tall.

PHOEBE: I see.

JYNX: Keeps falling over.

PHOEBE: But this Melvin guy, he got away with the whole thing, didn't he? I mean, that's not unheard of.

JYNX: Oh, I'm not finished. Due to Melvin's writing so many checks on his own bank, inside of a year THEY, meaning his bank, went bankrupt, due to their amiably giving Melvin a "Free Checking" account.

PHOEBE: Couldn't they sue him?

JYNX: (*Shakes his head.*) Melvin pleaded, quite rightly under the law, that HE didn't give himself that sentence. So his bank sued Judge Horatio "Eye For An Eye" Ironside, who was immediately removed from the bench, disbarred and also assigned a new identity under the same program. Well, now it gets tricky.

PHOEBE: NOW it gets tricky?

JYNX: Some higher- - up thought old "Eye For An Eye" should really be taught a lesson, so they gave him the identity of "Fernandel Underwood, Junior" and moved him here as Melvin's son. So NOW, as legal heir to Melvin – pardon me, Fernandel Senior - - Judge Ironside has to spend his days writing checks for one- - tenth of one- - eighth –

PHOEBE: Of a cent. That's . . . that's . . .

JYNX: Irony. The higher- - ups DO love irony. And don't feel sorry for the judge. If his father, aka Melvin DeRossett, dies before him, he gets all that money. (*He sits in a chair at PHOEBE'S table.*) It was decided - - well, I originally came up with the idea and was rewarded for it by being saddled with it, thank you very much - - that a good idea for an occupation should be established whereby all sentences handed down by the bench should be fully researched before sentencing to avoid further and unbearable ramifications.

PHOEBE: And you're in Ramifications.

JYNX: I was. I finally got fed up with the whole lot and opened up this place.

PHOEBE: Just out of curiosity, how does one go about finding someone here, say, if they've been assigned a new name and such?

JYNX: *(Leans in to her.)* Why do you want to know?

PHOEBE: *(Leans back.)* Oh, no reason.

JYNX is about to continue when OTTO'S hand puts a plate containing the sandwich and chips on the serving window shelf and rings the bell.

JYNX: That'll be your chicken salad. *(He rises and moves to the window.)*

Just then, SANCHEZ enters from the DSL door and moves to the front door. He stops and looks at PHOEBE.

SANCHEZ: *(Evenly.)* You don't know me.

PHOEBE: *(Not sure.)* That's true.

SANCHEZ: It may be right . . . but I'm not sure if it's true. *(He thinks. JYNX, carrying the sandwich, moves up behind him.)*

JYNX: *(In SANCHEZ' ear.)* The longer you pause, the more she'll figure out.

SANCHEZ: That's true!

JYNX: It may be right, but –

SANCHEZ: Say no more! *(He bolts out of the front door.)*

JYNX places the plate in front of PHOEBE.

PHOEBE: Suddenly I feel like Alice in Wonderland.

JYNX: That's required reading at the high school.

PHOEBE: I'm sure, especially for English majors.

JYNX: *(Shakes his head.)* Pre- - law. Mr. Dodgson sure knew his potatoes.

PHOEBE: Who?

JYNX: Oh, sorry. Lewis Carroll. His real name was Charles Dodgson. Even HE knew the value of using an alias. Now, where were we? Oh, yes, why are you so curious about finding someone here?

PHOEBE: No reason, really. You mentioned you were part of Ramifications and Diversions. What's Diversions?

JYNX: Well, that question for one.

PHOEBE: No, it wasn't! (*JYNX picks up the plate again.*) Okay, it was.

JYNX: (*Replacing the plate.*) Glad you're not one of our spies. (*He sits.*)

PHOEBE: You have those here, too?

JYNX: All sorts.

PHOEBE: Yeah, what kind? (*She starts eating her sandwich and chips.*)

JYNX: Diversion, diversion, diversion!

PHOEBE: Okay! (*She leans in to him.*) I'll have to ask someone if I'm ever going to get anywhere.

JYNX: You are looking for - - ?

PHOEBE: My brother. Maxwell Long. He joined the service some time ago and yesterday my mother received a wire, saying they regret to inform us that there had been an accident and Max - -

JYNX: I get the idea.

PHOEBE: But then, last night, we found out that the wire may have been a phony. I called his headquarters and got the runaround. So I came here looking for him.

JYNX: And you figure if you can't find someone and you go to someplace that's not on the map, he'll be there?

PHOEBE: No, he . . . (*She looks around.*) . . . he sent Mother a note. Last night.

JYNX: From here?

PHOEBE: (*Nods and leans in again.*) There was a map, giving the name of this place and directions on how to get here, taped to the inside lid of an Altoids tin and lobbed through Mom's kitchen window.

JYNX: (*Leans back and smiles.*) Boy, that sounds like one of our boys, doesn't it?

At that moment, HARRIETT enters through the front door. She looks out the door and then closes it. She is wearing a long overcoat and is obviously pregnant.

PHOEBE: So it was decided that I come here and find him. Or at least - -

JYNX: *(Stops her.)* Hang on. *(He puts a finger to his lips and then turns to HARRIETT.)* Harriett?

HARRIETT wheels around and clutches her throat.

HARRIETT: What? I don't have anything, I swear!

JYNX: *(Rises.)* Relax, Harriett, it's just me. *(He moves her to another table. PHOEBE resumes eating her sandwich.)* Now, take it easy.

HARRIETT: Easy for you to say. You're not . . . *(She pats her stomach.)*

JYNX: Oh, not again!

PHOEBE looks over at them. The two smile at her and lower their voices.

HARRIETT: I'm sorry! I can't help myself.

JYNX: You know how illegal that is?

HARRIETT: I don't care!

JYNX: Obviously. What is it this time?

HARRIETT: An iguana. Taped to my stomach.

JYNX: You're smuggling an iguana into Scarlet Ribbon?

HARRIETT: Shhhh! *(She pats her stomach.)* His name is Bert.

JYNX: Why on earth did you come here? Why didn't you just go home?

HARRIETT: Because I think they're on to me. There are no cars around my house.

JYNX: Not a good sign.

HARRIETT: Can I get a cup of coffee? If anybody saw me come in here, I had better make it look good.

JYNX: *(Disgusted.)* Fine. *(He moves to the counter.)*

HARRIETT looks over at PHOEBE and smiles. PHOEBE smiles back. Just then, HARRIETT jumps and grabs her stomach.

HARRIETT: YeeeOWWW! *(She looks at PHOEBE, sheepishly.)*

Sorry. He's starting to kick.

PHOEBE: He must be due soon.

HARRIETT: Oh, I hope so.

PHOEBE: You sure it's not twins?

HARRIETT: Oh, it would've been but I ran out of tape. *(JYNX clears his throat loudly as he brings her a cup of coffee.)* I mean, no, it's just the one.

JYNX: Nice recovery. *(He puts the cup down in front of HARRIETT and nods toward PHOEBE.)* She's trying to find her brother.

PHOEBE: Hey! When I told you that I didn't mean for you to - - !

JYNX: Oh, she's all right. *(Pointedly at HARRIETT.)* After all, she has her own little secrets.

HARRIETT: What ever do you mean by that? *(She flinches again.)*
Ohh!

JYNX: Anyway, she may know something.

HARRIETT: *(To PHOEBE.)* It's not what people know, it's what they tell.

JYNX: And they don't always tell all they know.

HARRIETT: Or know what they're telling.

JYNX: They may be telling to find out what YOU know.

HARRIETT: Then they'd end up telling not what they know but what you know. You know?

PHOEBE: Do tell.

JYNX: Harriett works over at the Compound. *(He indicates the street outside the windows.)* If you came to town on that road you'd have passed it; it looks like a Whataburger.

PHOEBE: I did see it. Oh, I see. You disguised it to look like a Whataburger for security reasons?

HARRIETT: No. We just took over the building when they closed.

JYNX: She's their whip.

HARRIETT: Parliamentarian, thank you very much.

JYNX: She keeps them following the rules, dots their 'i's and crosses their 't's and toes the line.

HARRIETT: And it's a real hassle at times, let me tell you.

JYNX: So every so often, she goes a little crazy. (*HARRIETT elbows JYNX.*)

HARRIETT: Never you mind.

PHOEBE: Just out of curiosity, what is this Compound researching right now?

HARRIETT: Oh several things. For instance, we've been looking into the cause and effect of road rage on the American automobile operators. Toward that end, we've had many of our researchers out in the field, in many major cities, for some time now.

JYNX: What's it been now, twelve years?

HARRIETT: Fourteen. (*She looks at PHOEBE.*) We had a setback two years ago when our chief supervisor left in the middle of the night, absconding with all his data and turned it into a major motion picture. We'd prosecute, but –

JYNX: They'd have to change his name and –

PHOEBE: He'd end up back here.

JYNX: Say, you're catching on fast.

PHOEBE: How do you research road rage? You have people doing surveys, like that?

HARRIETT: Oh, no. We just put them in traffic and see what happens.

JYNX: Their researchers are real easy to spot. They're usually slumped down in the front seat of a ten- - year old car, driving fifteen miles an hour, with their left blinker on.

HARRIETT: Watch out for them, you never know what they'll do.

JYNX: One thing you can be sure of. (*HARRIETT and PHOEBE look at him.*) They won't be turning left.

PHOEBE: But . . . they're EVERYwhere!

HARRIETT: Your tax dollars at work. (*She flinches again.*) OW!

PHOEBE: (*Moves to HARRIETT.*) You sure you don't need to go to the hospital?

HARRIETT: No! (*She gets up.*) No, I'm fine really. (*She turns to JYNX.*) Has Mother been in here today?

JYNX: I haven't seen her. Listen, we're trying to find a Maxwell Long.

HARRIETT: Long? (*She looks at PHOEBE.*) Odd she'd turn up looking for her brother just now.

PHOEBE: Why do you say that?

HARRIETT: (*Quick smile.*) No reason.

At that moment, MARCUS enters, hobbling on a cane. He is dressed in tweeds and is wearing a bad gray wig and beard.

JYNX: (*To HARRIETT.*) You better go out the back.

HARRIETT: Right. (*She nods to MARCUS.*) Good afternoon, stranger.

MARCUS: (*Fake old man voice.*) Hmph, yes, good afternoon.

HARRIETT scurries out the downstage left door.

JYNX: Can I get you something, sir?

MARCUS: Yes, young man. A nice cuppa tea, if you please. (*He hobbles over and sits at a table near the windows.*)

JYNX: Yes sir, right away. (*He moves behind the counter.*)

PHOEBE stares at MARCUS, amazed at his appearance.

MARCUS: (*Looks at her.*) And just what are you staring at, young woman?

PHOEBE: Huh? Oh, nothing. Really. (*She moves to a stool in front of the counter.*)

JYNX: (*Quietly to PHOEBE.*) Don't mind him, he's a spy. (*He picks up a cup.*)

PHOEBE: But . . . that's such an obvious disguise, bad wig, phony beard.

JYNX: I didn't say he was a good spy. (*He plops a teabag in a cup and picks up a pot of hot water. He then moves over to MARCUS.*) Here you are, sir. (*He pours hot water into the cup.*)

MARCUS: (*Waving his cane.*) No need to shout, young man! (*In broad gestures, he taps his ear and his chest pocket as if adjusting his hearing aid.*)

JYNX: Sorry, sir. Will – (*MARCUS holds up a finger and JYNX lowers his voice*) – will there be anything else?

MARCUS: Thank you, no. (*At that moment, the telephone rings and JYNX moves behind the counter.*) Pompous pup, you'd think he'd have more respect.

JYNX picks up the receiver.

JYNX: The Meaning of Lyfe Café, Jynx speaking.

VOICE: (*Elvis Presley.*) Aaahhello, Jynx. Ahhhd lak three peanut butter aaaand banana sandwiches. Aaaaand a hunka- - hunka- - chocolate cake sent over rat away. 'Hankyouverymuch.

JYNX: I'll get them over to you as soon as possible, El – (*PHOEBE turns and looks at him.*) – MacPherson. (*He hangs up and writes out the order. He looks up at PHOEBE.*) Probably not her real name.

PHOEBE: I'll bet.

JYNX places the order on the order wheel in the service window. A hand inside spins it and takes down the order.

Just then, LOU enters through the front door. She sizes up the place and then moves to the counter.

JYNX: (*To PHOEBE.*) You might want to move back to your table.

PHOEBE: Why?

LOU: (*At the counter.*) Afternoon, Jynx. (*Bluntly, to PHOEBE.*) Who're you?

PHOEBE: Phoebe Long and I –

LOU: I need a word with Jynx here and it's none of your business, IF you don't mind!

PHOEBE: Say, you're awfully pushy, you ought to have some respect.

MARCUS: (*Waving his cane.*) No respect! Nobody had any respect any more!

PHOEBE: And just what are you doing here, this is a school day, isn't it?

LOU: It's . . . uh, teacher's appreciation day. And the teachers told me they'd appreciate it if I skipped the day. Beat it.

PHOEBE: Excuse me. (*She moves back to her table as LOU mounts a stool.*)

JYNX: (*Leans in to LOU.*) A little hard on her, weren't you, Lou?

LOU: She'll live. Harriett's been in here, hasn't she?

JYNX: Just missed her.

LOU: I was afraid of that. What is it this time?

JYNX: An iguana, taped to her stomach. (*LOU lowers her head and slaps a hand to her forehead.*) Be right back. (*He writes out a check.*)

LOU: People still can't smoke in here, right?

JYNX: That's right. (*He moves over to PHOEBE.*)

LOU: Geez, I hated the nineties!

JYNX: (*Hands PHOEBE her bill.*) Here's your check.

PHOEBE: Thank you. (*She leans in.*) What's with the mad munchkin over there?

JYNX: Oh, she's looking for Harriett. She's her mother.

PHOEBE: Harriett is her mother? And she's going to have ANOTHER one?!

JYNX: (*Shaking his head.*) No, Lou there, she's Harriett's mother.

PHOEBE looks at JYNX for a long pause.

PHOEBE: But . . . but she's only about nine years old!

JYNX: I know, but she's Harriett's mother.

PHOEBE: (*Looks at LOU.*) But she's only nine years old!

JYNX: Yes, but she IS Harriett's mother.

PHOEBE: But she –

JYNX: Are we stuck in a time warp again? I HATE it when they fool around with those things.

PHOEBE: What things?

JYNX: Time mach – nothing! Look, that lady is Lou Bronze and she's forty- - six years old. In fact she's one of the best industrial spies in the business.

PHOEBE: Got into some bad chemicals, did she?

JYNX: It's like this. Some time back Lou got to be too well known, even as a spy, so she did only what she had to do to stay in the business. And, after several sessions with noted technicians in liposuction, Botox injections and plastic surgery, she looks like that now. (*He looks at LOU.*)

PHOEBE: You're kidding!

JYNX: (*Shaking his head.*) Last I heard she was also consulting a bone specialist. Her next incarnation may be as a German Shepherd.

At that moment, OFFICER CHANEY enters through the front door. He swaggers around the area, looking at one person then another. He finally stops and stares at PHOEBE.

CHANEY: Don't believe we know your name, stranger?

PHOEBE: Phoebe Long. But I wasn't doing anything, Officer, I just –

CHANEY quickly leans over the table and glares at her.

CHANEY: Just answer the questions, shall we? (*He tries to correct himself.*) Shall I? Shall you?

JYNX: Pronoun trouble, he always has pronoun trouble.

CHANEY: Never we mind! I mind –

JYNX: (*Leans in to CHANEY.*) You.

CHANEY: Never you mind, I got it! (*He looks back at PHOEBE.*) The thing is, whenever a stranger comes to town it's always a good idea to find out what we're up to, THEY'RE up to.

PHOEBE: Me? Why pick on me? What about that guy over there? (*She points to MARCUS.*) Wearing the phony beard and hairpiece. He's a suspicious character if ever there was one.

MARCUS: (*His real voice.*) What? (*He jumps up.*)

CHANEY moves to MARCUS.

CHANEY: So, a phony, eh? (*He pulls off MARCUS' beard.*) Ah HA!

MARCUS: (*To PHOEBE.*) Thanks a lot, lady. Now my cover has been blown!

CHANEY: (*Grabs MARCUS' arm.*) Let's go down to the stationhouse for a little Q and A.

MARCUS: All right, I'm going. (*He glares at PHOEBE and exits out the front door.*)

CHANEY: (*Looks at PHOEBE.*) And don't plan on leaving town. We'll get back to you.

JYNX: We?

CHANEY: (*Furious.*) In the collective sense! Ah! (*He exits out the front door.*)

JYNX: Well, everybody will know you're in town now.

LOU: This ought to start something. (*She nods toward the downstage left door.*) Harriett went out that way?

JYNX: Right. (*LOU nods for JYNX to come over.*) Excuse me a sec.

PHOEBE: Sure.

JYNX crosses to LOU, who speaks to him quietly.

LOU: You know, of course, Major Turnbuckle won't like this.

JYNX: Her? She's no problem. Just a coincidence, her being here right now.

LOU: Coincidences make me itch.

JYNX: Maybe that's just diaper rash. (*LOU starts to speak.*) Here, she went out here. (*He opens the downstage left door. LOU exits, followed by JYNX.*)

PHOEBE watches them leave and she pulls a cell phone from her purse. She looks around and then dials.

PHOEBE: (*Into the phone.*) Hey. It's me. I'm here in the café. This place is a zoo. You wouldn't believe me if I told you. What? No, they bought it. That's right. Don't worry, they don't know who I am.

BLACKOUT.

ACT ONE, SCENE 2**AT RISE:**

Later that afternoon. All the dishes have been cleared from the table. JYNX is again behind the counter and is on the phone.

JYNX: *(Impatiently.)* Yes, I'm still waiting.

JYNX turns to the radio and turns it on. Music plays. He moves the dial until a talk show comes on and turns back to the phone.

REPORTER'S VOICE: . . . and now to the "You Tell Me" segment of our show, we've had several people call in to say that a woman, obviously pregnant, was sprinting across the city park when suddenly she tripped, fell to the ground and gave birth! *(JYNX turns to the radio.)* Startled, several people stopped to render aid. According to several callers, the baby was approximately twenty seven inches long, reptilian and sporting a tail. The woman fled the scene so no identification on her as yet. However, the baby then climbed up a nearby tree where it managed to claw the three firemen who rescued the little tyke. *(JYNX shakes his head and smiles.)* One caller, who also wouldn't give us her name, said the baby took after the husband's side of the family . . . specifically his mother. And now, back to some music. Here's an oldie but a goodie. "Help me Rhonda, help me get her out of my car."

JYNX turns off the radio as he speaks into the phone.

JYNX: What? Well, have him call me at his earliest convenience. Right.

JYNX hangs up the phone and, thinking, moves around the counter. He then looks at his watch. He smiles, as if getting a rather naughty idea, and moves to the Venetian blinds. He looks out the blinds and then, using the pull cords, "signals" a few times. He then moves back behind the counter.

A moment later, SANCHEZ enters through the front door. He and JYNX exchange nods and SANCHEZ moves to the same Venetian blinds, where he, too, sends out several "signals." Then, after stopping, he looks through the blinds casually. Then he looks through the blinds more vigorously. Then he pulls up the blinds and looks out the window. He turns to JYNX, who shrugs. He then sprints out the front door. After he leaves, JYNX giggles to himself.

PHOEBE, a bit tired, drags herself through the front door.

JYNX: No luck?

PHOEBE: That's putting it mildly. *(She falls into a chair at the nearest table and throws down her notepad on the tabletop.)*

JYNX: *(Moves to her.)* I told you they wouldn't be of any help.

PHOEBE: Any help? These people go out of their way, rambling on and on in order to set up roadblocks, which lead people to a detour into a dead end. *(Amazed.)* And they seem so proud of it, too.

JYNX: You have to understand, it's what they do best. They work at it, sort of a nurtured ignorance. I call it bureaucra- - logic. You want to understand people here? Use this as an example. *(He leans over to her.)* "All generalizations are wrong."

PHOEBE: Right, I've heard that one before.

JYNX: But what's wrong with it?

PHOEBE: Huh?

JYNX: "All generalizations are wrong," what's wrong with that?

PHOEBE: I don't know, it's . . . well, the statement itself is a generalization.

JYNX: Right. Which means?

PHOEBE: Uh, I guess what you want me to say it means that all generalizations AREN'T wrong.

JYNX: But if they aren't all wrong then the statement is wrong. But all generalizations ARE wrong . . . but if the statement is right it can't be a generalization . . . but it IS a generalization, so –

PHOEBE: *(Hands over her ears.)* I get it.

JYNX: Around here, it's a sane bet to just pick a spot on the chain and set up shop there. Wait, I'll get you a glass of water. *(He exits out the upstage left door.)*

PHOEBE: How can I ask questions around here if I can't understand the answers?

Just then, MARCUS, now without his disguise, enters through the front door.

MARCUS: Ah, THERE you are! *(He stomps over in front of her.)*
You ruined me for good and all, you know that?

PHOEBE: I am SO sorry, I wasn't trying to get you into any trouble. I was only trying –

MARCUS: I don't care WHAT you were trying to do! *(He sits and leans in to her.)* You blew my cover, is what you did!

PHOEBE: I did not. EVERYbody knew who you were. Jynx told me so.

MARCUS: Right. *(He looks around and then lowers his voice.)* That was my cover.

PHOEBE: Here we go again. Your cover was for everyone to know who you really were?

MARCUS: Exactly. Look, I wasn't trying to find out any fresh information, any scoops. My job was to find out what was real and what wasn't

PHOEBE: I know I'm going to regret this, but what are you talking about?

MARCUS: There are tons of personnel in this town to bring in raw data but the higher- - ups need to know what is genuine and what's not.

PHOEBE: So?

MARCUS: So? So they hired me. And I made sure I used bad disguises. That way everybody would know I was a phony and they'd fill me with all the phony information they wanted to get around. I'd take back to my chiefs what I had discovered and we could eliminate those cover stories from the real McCoys.

PHOEBE: You were supposed to look like a phony?

MARCUS: To get phony information, right. *(He leans back.)* But you had to expose me in front of everyone, Officer Chaney, Jynx and all, so now I can't even do that any more. *(He looks out, sentimentally.)* Why didn't I stay in Commercial Research? *(Proudly.)* I was the one who invented the "clothing reclamation" washer and dryer, you know.

PHOEBE: The what?

MARCUS: Soft goods industries were always needing to know who was buying what, how many and what style. So I came up with a washer/dryer combination, which would, when in a private home, snatch an article of clothing for study, say one sock or a T - shirt.

PHOEBE: Wait a minute. You mean your group would come into my home and steal something of mine?

MARCUS: It wasn't stealing. We would always reimburse you, if we took anything.

PHOEBE: How?

MARCUS: We'd leave loose change in your couch.

JYNX enters with a glass of water and a bottle of aspirin and moves to the others.

PHOEBE: Look, if you people need to know this sort of stuff, why not just conduct surveys?

MARCUS: *(Almost laughing.)* That never works. Especially when it was discovered that people don't give out their real opinions when asked. Nor do they tell us what they think is the right answer. They would answer in a way they always THOUGHT the survey- - taker wanted them to answer. Or take the shortest answer in order to get rid of both the survey and survey- - taker in one fell swoop.

PHOEBE: Uh huh. How'd you find that out?

MARCUS: We took a survey.

Frustrated, PHOEBE looks up at JYNX.

JYNX: See? All generalization are wr –

PHOEBE: *(Irate.)* I get it! Listen, I don't care how this town works. I don't care what games you people play here. All I care about is finding my brother. I'm –

MARCUS: *(Pulls out his notepad.)* You're Phoebe Long and arrived here this morning. *(He checks his notes.)* You're twenty nine years old, you live in Detroit at one hundred seventeen Adams Street, never been married and you missed your dentist appointment last week.

PHOEBE: What? *(She looks out.)* I forgot all about that. *(She looks at MARCUS.)* How'd you find out all that?

MARCUS: We ran the fingerprints of the steering wheel of your car, *(Back to his notes.)* which you rented from the "Sneak- - A- - Ride" car rental agency in Detroit. You've had two speeding tickets this last year, and in high school you dated Darryl Lawson for a year and a half, and the two of you tee- - peed the coach's house twice during your senior year.

PHOEBE: *(Astounded.)* You go all the way back to high school?

MARCUS: *(Puts up his pad.)* Don't you know that all that stuff goes on your permanent record?

PHOEBE: I was framed! *(She leans back and puts a hand to her head.)* I am getting such a head- -

JYNX: I brought you some aspirin.

PHOEBE: *(Looks at the bottle.)* - - ache.

JYNX: We get a lot of that. *(To MARCUS.)* Anything for you?

PHOEBE takes the glass and bottle from JYNX. She takes an aspirin and gulps it down with several sips from the glass.

MARCUS: Nothing right now, thank you.

JYNX: Why is it nobody comes here to eat? I'm thinking of charging a two- - sandwich minimum.

MARCUS: And you're no help, Jynx!

JYNX: *(Hand out, sarcastically.)* I'm sorry, I don't believe we've met.

MARCUS: You're worse than that Long kid.

PHOEBE almost chokes swallowing the pill.

PHOEBE: What?!

MARCUS: *(Meekly.)* I didn't say anything.

PHOEBE: Yes, you did! *(She grabs MARCUS.)* You said, "That Long kid." What Long kid? Was his first name Maxwell?

MARCUS: Yeah, so what?

JYNX: So what? She's looking for him!

PHOEBE: *(Grabs MARCUS.)* What did you hear? Where is he?

MARCUS: I don't know. Look, all I was told that this Maxwell Long was recently enrolled into some astronaut training program.

JYNX: Astronaut?

PHOEBE: Max?

JYNX: (*To PHOEBE.*) Why not?

PHOEBE: Well, don't get me wrong. I love my brother, but he barely made a ripple in the gene pool, if you know what I mean.

MARCUS: Anyway, he was scheduled for some secret mission, at least that's what I heard. Take that for what it's worth.

PHOEBE: What do you mean?

MARCUS: Haven't you been listening to me? Everything I've heard is bogus.

JYNX: (*Leans in.*) What I said about the two- - sandwich minimum wasn't.

MARCUS: Okay, okay, gimme a Caesar salad with croutons.

JYNX: (*Calls out to the window.*) Otto! Tossed toga with toast!

The gloved hand comes out of the service window and gives an "okay" sign.

MARCUS: Wait, you may have ONE thing to go on.

PHOEBE: What?

MARCUS: Well, this Maxwell Long guy, he must be involved in something big.

JYNX: How do you figure that?

MARCUS: Why else would they have invented a phony cover story for him . . . unless he needed one?

JYNX: That makes sense.

PHOEBE: (*Stares at him.*) Oh, puh- - LEASE!

MARCUS: (*Suddenly, to PHOEBE.*) Listen, you better leave town, I don't like the sound of this.

PHOEBE: Leave town?

JYNX: He's got a point.

PHOEBE: Not until I find my brother.

MARCUS: (*Brightly.*) Hey! I can be your brother!

PHOEBE: What?

MARCUS: Really! I can finally get out of this place. (*He grabs her hand.*) You don't know what it's like to live here!

PHOEBE: I'm getting a pretty good idea.

MARCUS: (*Jumps up.*) No, you're not. The town's set up so that nobody knows. (*He paces around as he rants.*) EVERYbody runs around, hiding stuff from everybody else. And everybody changes their names and records at the drop of a hat – not THEIR hat, of course, but whose hat nobody will tell you. This town single- - handedly put paper shredders on the map. Our main export is waste paper. (*He points off.*) The high school mascot is an eraser! (*He sits again.*) Take me with you, won't you? I don't eat much, and I won't try to manage things.

JYNX: (*Equally gleeful.*) And on the way, you can also pick up the Tin Man and Cowardly Lion and then it's off to see the Wizard.

MARCUS: Well, you know what's going to happen next, right? She's here so they'll go after her family next!

JYNX: No, they won't.

PHOEBE: They wouldn't do that . . . would they?

At that moment, OFFICER CHANEY enters through the front door, pulling MAYSIE with him.

CHANEY: Okay, it's about time we got around to some questions, little lady. Know anything about - - ?

PHOEBE: (*Jumps up.*) Mom!

MAYSIE: There you are! (*She breaks from CHANEY'S grasp and she and PHOEBE hug.*)

CHANEY: I thought you might know him.

MAYSIE: (*Looks at CHANEY.*) Him?

JYNX: Don't ask.

CHANEY: Let's go. Down to the stationhouse.

PHOEBE: But –

CHANEY: Resisting arrest? (*He rubs his hands together.*)

PHOEBE: We're being arrested?! On what charge?

CHANEY: Not arrest. Wait. (*He looks at JYNX.*) What's the phrase for taking in suspects for questioning?

JYNX: Taking in suspects for questioning.

CHANEY: I was close.

JYNX: They're coming. (*To PHOEBE.*) Just answer his questions; he can't hold you on anything. (*PHOEBE starts to protest. JYNX speaks to her quietly.*) Just tell him anything you've heard that you think he'll believe

PHOEBE: (*To CHANEY.*) I have nothing to say!

CHANEY: Just get in the car!

PHOEBE and MAYSIE move to the front door.

MAYSIE: Have you found out anything?

PHOEBE: I'll tell you later . . . but it'll take about a half a day.

CHANEY: Outside. (*MAYSIE and PHOEBE exit. MARCUS moves to the door. CHANEY grabs him.*) Where do you think we're going?

MARCUS: (*Smiles.*) It's okay, Officer Chaney, I'm her brother! (*He exits.*)

CHANEY: Oh, so NOW you're gonna' talk. (*To JYNX.*) Now you're getting somewhere.

JYNX: No, YOU'RE getting somewhere.

CHANEY: Will you STOP THAT?!

As CHANEY exits in a huff, the café phone rings. JYNX picks up the receiver.

JYNX: The Meaning of Lyfe Café, Jynx speaking. What? You ran those fingerprints. And? (*He looks at the front door.*) So . . . she's NOT Phoebe Long. Curiouser and curiouser. Thanks, that's all I needed to know. (*He hangs up the phone. At that moment, a Caesar salad with croutons appears in the service window.*) Oh, cancel that order, Otto.

The hand comes out, snaps his fingers as if to say "Missed another one" and retracts the dish.

BLACKOUT.

ACT ONE, SCENE 3

AT RISE:

This scene may be played either on the apron in front of the curtain or on a side downstage area.

It is that night. Two flashlights emerge from stage right and shine out. PHOEBE and MAYSIE are holding the flashlights.

MAYSIE: I tell you, this is nuts.

PHOEBE: That's why I know we'll blend right in around here. *(She shines the light on MAYSIE.)* Look, Maxwell is tied into something big and nobody is talking.

MAYSIE: And you think we'll find him by peeking in windows in the middle of the night?

PHOEBE: Without any leads, this is all I could come up with. *(She shines her light out.)* Somewhere, out there, somebody knows what's going on.

MAYSIE: *(Also shines her light.)* And you think this person, out there, is just going to volunteer information, just like that?

PHOEBE: Hey, around here EVERYBODY volunteers information! You can't stop them!

MAYSIE: Still, I can't help feeling that we're being watched. Even now.

PHOEBE: I know, I've had that same feeling the minute I got here.
I - -

Just then a VOICE is heard offstage.

HARRIETT'S VOICE: Here boy! Come to Momma.

PHOEBE: Shh! Listen!

HARRIETT walks onstage, also carrying a flashlight and aiming it downward.

HARRIETT: Bert. Bertie. Where ARE you?

PHOEBE shines her light on HARRIETT.

PHOEBE: Harriett?

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HARRIETT quickly hides her light.

HARRIETT: No! I wasn't doing anything! I don't know anything about anything! Just ask anybody!

PHOEBE and MAYSIE move to HARRIETT.

PHOEBE: It's me, Phoebe Long. This is my mom.

MAYSIE: Call me Maysie.

PHOEBE: We met today at Jynx's place. I'm looking for my brother.

HARRIETT: Oh! Oh, you gave me such a scare!

PHOEBE: Sorry, I – *(She shines her light on HARRIETT'S mid- - section.)* Wait, I thought you were pregnant.

HARRIETT: Good, my cover held!

MAYSIE: What? What did she say?

PHOEBE: Don't ask. Around here it's not what you know, it's what you don't know and who you don't know it about.

MAYSIE: *(Medium pause.)* Huh?

PHOEBE: Oh no, I'm starting to sound like one of them.

HARRIETT: Listen, about your brother, this Maxwell Long guy?

PHOEBE: Yeah?

HARRIETT: Well, this may be nothing, but I DID hear they had enrolled some new members into the Universal Soldier Program.

MAYSIE: Universal Soldier Program? What's that?

HARRIETT: One of those hush- - hush operations, top secret, so of course everybody knows about it. They experiment with the men, giving them various regiments and chemicals, which make them ten times better than the average soldier. Ten times more alert, ten times stronger, ten times more stamina, ten times everything. Problem is, they've run into a bit of a snag along the way.

PHOEBE: You mentioned chemicals, what kind of chemicals?

HARRIETT: Oh, all natural things, of course. In fact, they got the stamina and strength strains from the ambrosia plant.

MAYSIE: I never heard of –

HARRIETT: You know it as ragweed. And the snag being a lot of the guys are allergic to the stuff. They get stronger and all, but wow, you should hear them sneeze!



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