

UNREDEEMED

A Play in One Act

by

Butch Maxwell

CHARACTERS

DEB MOSS — Mid-40s. A school administrative assistant. Had never set foot in a pawn shop until the day she pawned Frank's knife.

RAY KISTLER — Early 50s. An insurance salesman. Once Duke's business partner.

DUKE TALBOT — 60s. Owner of Talbot Pawn & Loan.

SETTING

Talbot Pawn & Loan, in an economically-declining industrial city in the United States.

TIME

Real time. Late afternoon into evening.

Lights up on TALBOT PAWN & LOAN. A single room. Display cases along one wall — instruments, tools, a shelf of car stereos gone slightly out of date. An analogue clock, prominent, reads 4:09. Upstage, a door leads to a dusty storeroom. Downstage, a heavy manual security gate sits folded back against the wall, not yet a presence in the room.

DUKE TALBOT, 60s, is behind the counter doing something exact and unhurried — polishing a blade, or fitting a new handle scale to one, a small vise clamped to the counter's edge.

Outside the shop door's window, rain falls. The sound of a gentle late afternoon shower can be heard.

The bell over the door goes. DEB MOSS, mid-40s, enters, carrying an open umbrella, like she's not sure the floor will hold her weight. She's holding a pawn ticket in her free hand, the way you'd hold something you were told not to lose.

DEB

Sorry, is it okay if I —

DUKE

Not open. Not in here.

DEB

(Closing her umbrella)

It isn't open, I was just —

DUKE

Bad luck either way.

DEB

That's not a real —

DUKE

It's my shop. My rules.

DEB

Okay, sure. I have a — I called, actually, I think, or maybe I didn't call, I just have this.

She holds the ticket out at arm's length, too far away for him to actually take it.

DUKE

(Not moving yet)

I'm going to need you to bring that a little closer.

DEB

Sorry. Sorry — here.

She crosses. He takes it, glances at it, sets down what he was working on.

DEB

(Pronouncing the name as French)

You're Mr. Talbot?

DUKE

(Flat, a standard correction)

Talbot. That's me.

DEB

I know. I mean — I saw the sign.

(A beat)

I've never done this before. I mean — I did, once, but that was just dropping something off, that's not really the same as doing this. I want to say that up front, in case it's — I don't know if it's obvious, but I've never really been a pawn shop person.

DUKE

You're not required to have experience.

DEB

Right. It was maybe two weeks ago? Three, maybe. I stood right about here, actually — you probably remember me.

DUKE

(Not looking up)

No.

DEB

No, of course not, why would you, I didn't do anything memorable, I just handed it over and left, which I guess is sort of the point of a place like this, you're not supposed to be memorable, you're supposed to just be a person who —

DUKE

Ma'am, I sell fishing reels to men who've never held a fishing pole. Nobody in here has a habit of anything.

That almost lands as a joke. Deb almost laughs. Not quite.

DEB

Okay. Good. That's — good to know.

She looks around for the first time — really looks. The gate folded against the wall. The clock.

Is that thing — the metal — does that come down, like, over the door?

DUKE

Five o'clock. Every day.

DEB

Even if someone's still —

DUKE

Especially if someone's still.

He says it without menace — it's just a fact about how his day works. Deb doesn't know yet whether to find that funny.

DEB

What time is it now?

DUKE

(Not looking at the clock; he already knows)

Quarter past four.

DEB

Okay. Good. Plenty of time.

DUKE

For what?

DEB

(A beat too long)

To — get this back. That's the whole — that's why I'm here.

Duke checks the ticket against a card pulled from a file box, still not touching the felt-wrapped shape on the counter.

DUKE

You're redeeming. Not selling.

DEB

Redeeming. Yes. That's the word, right? Redeeming.

DUKE

That's the word.

He turns the ticket over, checks the date stamped on the back.

This is good through today.

DEB

Today, today?

He pulls a note card and looks around to find the item matching the ticket number.

DUKE

Thirty days from the date on the ticket. Today's thirty.

DEB

Thirty days. Who decided thirty? Is that a law, or is that just a Talbot's thing?

DUKE

It's on the ticket.

DEB

Sure, but who wrote the ticket? Because if it's a law, I feel like more people would know it. Everybody knows the three-day thing for cars.

DUKE

There's no three-day thing for cars.

DEB

There's absolutely a three-day thing for cars. My cousin used a three-day thing on a Camaro.

DUKE

That's not a law.

DEB

It felt very official at the time.

(A beat)

So, okay, I'm here, so it doesn't matter, but if I hadn't made it?

DUKE

Then it's not yours to redeem anymore. Shop's option what happens to it after that. Those are the rules.

He takes a felt-lined item with a ticket number on it and places it on the counter between them.

DEB

Nobody told me that.

DUKE

It's printed on the ticket.

She looks at the ticket like it's suddenly written in a different language.

DEB

I probably should've read the ticket.

DUKE

Most people don't.

He sets the file card down. The felt-wrapped shape is still sitting between them, untouched.

DEB

Can I — is that it? Can I see it?

DUKE

(Already writing)

It's yours to look at. It's not yours yet to take.

He unwraps it. Checks the ticket number stamped on the tag against her copy.

Yep. This is the one.

DEB

You remember it? From when I brought it in?

DUKE

I remember the ticket. I take in maybe sixty, seventy of these a year. I don't memorize the merchandise.

He sets it down. Doesn't turn it over. Doesn't look at the grip. It's just an object with a number on it to him right now.

DEB

It's my father-in-law's. Was. He passed a few years back, and it's just — it's not supposed to be out of the house, is the thing. My husband, Gary, is taking the boys to the camp this weekend. He opens that case when he packs. So, the sooner I can —

DUKE

(Mildly, already tapping at a calculator)

I don't need the reason. Just the ticket.

DEB

Right. Sorry. Force of habit.

DUKE

What habit's that?

DEB

Explaining myself. I do it a lot. My husband says I could confess to a crime I didn't commit just from the momentum.

Duke almost smiles at that — the first real one. Doesn't commit to it.

DUKE

Let's see what you actually owe before you confess to anything.

He pulls the ledger card, sets it beside the calculator. The clock, faintly, is now part of the room in a way it wasn't thirty seconds ago.

Duke checks the knife against the ledger card. He centers it on the felt, with the tag clear of the blade. One corner of the felt has folded underneath; he lifts the knife, smooths the corner, and replaces it before touching the calculator.

DUKE

Eighty at fifteen percent a month, that's twelve.
Ninety-two.

Deb is already reaching into her bag, pulling out a fold of bills.

DEB

Cash, like you said on the phone. I've got it all right —

DUKE

Ninety-five.

DEB

What?

DUKE

Minimum service charge. Flat fifteen, doesn't matter what the percentage comes to.

DEB

Nobody told me there was a — that's not — okay.
Okay, let me just —

She starts counting bills onto the counter. Counts. Stops. Counts them again.

Ninety — sorry — ninety —

She spreads them into a row, making the full amount visible to him.

DUKE

Take your time.

DEB

This is everything. I checked the account twice this morning. There's nothing else in there 'til Friday.

Duke counts the bills once. He gathers them into a square stack and leaves it on her side of the counter.

He opens the receipt book. Writes the date, the ticket number, the amount: ninety-five. The line acknowledging payment remains blank.

DUKE

You're three short.

DEB

I know what I'm short.

She spreads the bills again.

A beat. She looks at the bills as if they have personally betrayed her.

I thought it was ninety-two. That's what I had written down. I had it in my calendar and everything — "knife, ninety-two, after work" — like I was managing a space launch.

DUKE

It's ninety-five.

DEB

Yes, I'm getting that. The problem is I couldn't come earlier. I work at St. Agnes, and the school day goes 'til four, except it doesn't really go 'til four because somebody always needs a form signed or a child has misplaced a shoe or a parent has decided, at three fifty-eight, that the office is where we solve their marriage.

DUKE

You got here when you got here.

DEB

I know, but if I'd known it was ninety-five this morning, I could've figured out three dollars. I could've stopped at my sister's. I could've gone through the couch cushions. I could've asked Linda in attendance, and then she'd have asked why, and then I would've had to move to another state, but I could've done it.

She starts the bills again, though she already knows the count.

I had the ninety-five. Then Liam needed a charger that only works with the school computer — the same school I work at so he can go tuition-free, but that apparently doesn't cover chargers — and I thought I could put it back before Friday. I thought I had time.

She takes out her phone.

I just need to make one phone call.

Deb's thumbs are moving across her phone. Nothing happens.

(To the phone)

Come on —

She holds it up, walks it toward the window.

I had one bar in the parking lot.

DUKE

(Without looking up)

You won't get anything in here. Whole block's like that. Something to do with the old vault wall — my dad used to say the same thing back when it was a payphone in the corner and everybody liked it fine.

DEB

You still have a —

DUKE

Under the counter.

He nods at it without moving to get it. Deb hesitates, then leans over and pulls the phone toward her by the cord. It's absurdly short. She has to crouch a little to dial.

DEB

(Dialing)

I hate asking you for anything right now, so just — this isn't about the money, I just need to borrow the phone for one second, that's a completely separate —

DUKE

It's a phone call.

Duke goes back to the ledger, or seems to — pen moving, eyes not quite tracking the numbers.

SFX: Dial tone

DEB

(Dialing)

I'm not going to be one of those people who talks on speakerphone in public. That's a whole — that's its own problem, that's a societal —

SFX: Outgoing call tones. It's already on speakerphone.

DUKE

It's on speaker.

DEB

It is not.

(She checks. It is.)

Okay, it's on speaker.

RAY

(V.O.)

Kistler Insurance and Financial, this is Ray, how can I make your day a little more secure —

A flash of recognition crosses Duke's previously-ambivalent face, fleeting, but unnoticed by Deb. He listens with masked interest.

DEB

(Into phone, talking over him)

Ray, it's me.

RAY

(V.O.; gears audibly changing)

Oh — hey. Sorry, force of habit. I've said that greeting so many times it just comes out now. Said it to my mother once.

DEB

Your mother?

RAY

(V.O.)

She hung up on me.

DEB

(Into phone)

Okay, don't — I need a favor and I need you to not ask a lot of questions yet, okay?

RAY

(V.O.)

Is this a hospital question or a bail question? Because those go to different people.

DEB

(Into phone)

No, nobody's hurt, it's not — it's money. It's a hundred dollars, it's not even — okay it's three dollars, technically, but I need it in the next —

She glances at the clock.

— twenty-seven minutes. I'm at a pawn shop. On Water Street. It's called — hang on —

She looks around for the name. Finds it stamped on her ticket.

— Talbot's. Talbot Pawn and Loan.

A silence on the line. Long enough that Deb pulls the phone away from her ear to check the call didn't drop.

Ray?

RAY

(V.O.)

— Yeah. I'm here.

DEB

You know the place?

RAY

(V.O., too carefully)

I know it.

DEB

Small world. Anyway, I just need — it's Frank's knife, Ray. The hunting one. There's a little antler stamp on the handle, only it's stamped twice, one slightly over the other. I pawned it, don't ask, I'll tell you later, but I need three dollars and I need it before five or it's just —

Ray doesn't answer.

Ray?

A beat.

RAY

(V.O.)

Deb.

DEB

— and I know how this sounds, I'm not the kind of person who —

RAY

(V.O.)

Deb. Don't leave. I'm coming.

DEB

You don't have to drive all the way, I just need —

RAY

(V.O.)

I'm coming.

The line goes dead. Deb looks at the phone, faintly confused, already moving on.

DEB

(Hanging up, to Duke)

He's weird about phones sometimes. Anyway — thank you. Really.

Duke doesn't answer. He's looking at the knife like he's never seen it before.

Deb goes back to the folded bills, rearranging them as if a different order might produce a different total. Duke sets the receipt book aside and picks the knife back up — unhurried, but for the first time actually looking.

DUKE

(Suddenly, apropos of nothing)

Full tang.

DEB

What?

DUKE

The blade — it doesn't stop at the handle, it runs the whole length, that's why it's heavier than it looks. Cheap ones taper off. This one didn't cut corners.

(A beat. He hears himself.)

Sorry. Force of habit.

DEB

No, that was — that was kind of nice, actually.

DUKE

(Already retreating)

It's not nice. It's just steel.

He turns it over. Finds the doubled antler impression. His thumb passes across the two impressions, then stops.

His hands go completely still on it — not careful, not delicate. Still, the way a held breath is still.

DEB

(Not noticing, still working the math in her head)

— and he never even used it, that's the thing, it just sat in the case since Frank —

DUKE

Mm.

He lowers the knife toward the felt. Stops before releasing it. Looks once more at the mark.

He sets it down across the pad, no longer square to its edges. Reaches over and straightens a stack of pawn tickets that were already straight. His hand catches on the second one — a small, visible shake.

He puts both hands flat on the counter until it passes.

DEB

— anyway. Ninety-five. I've got ninety-two, I just need to figure out —

DUKE

(Already recovered)

I heard you the first time.

He picks the knife up again without checking the tag. Turns the mark toward the light.

Where'd he get something like this?

DEB

Frank? Oh — I don't actually know. It was always just his. Everything in that house was always just his, you didn't ask where things came from, you just — it was there, you know?

DUKE

(Mildly, still looking at the grip)

That mark on the handle. That mark. Did Frank put that on there?

DEB

I don't know. Gary calls it the camp knife. I always assumed he meant their camp. Frank had a story for everything, but not necessarily the story you asked for.

Duke turns the grip toward the light.

DUKE

He ever change the handle?

DEB

Frank? Not that I know of. Why?

DUKE

Just looking.

Silence. Which wracks Deb's nerves.

DEB

Frank used to say — okay, this is going to sound insane —

DUKE

Try me.

DEB

He used to say a knife's not really yours 'til it's drawn blood. Like it wasn't really — I don't know, claimed, until it had actually done something. Which, as a thing to say at Thanksgiving, is a lot.

She laughs. It doesn't quite land.

Anyway. That one has. Drawn blood, I mean. Cut himself pretty bad on it once, apparently, way back — had the scar to prove it, showed it to anybody who'd hold still long enough.

Duke's thumb moves once, slowly, along the flat of the blade. He doesn't look up.

DUKE

Way back when?

DEB

I don't know. Before I knew him. Gary would've been a kid, maybe. Why — is that a pricing thing?

Duke sets the knife beside the felt rather than on it. His attention remains on Deb.

DUKE

No.

He says it too quickly to be entirely true. Deb draws her money slightly away from the knife. Duke doesn't notice.

The bell over the door goes, but nobody comes in right away. RAY KISTLER, early 50s, stands in the doorway for a beat too long — one hand still on the

frame, like his body's checking the threshold before the rest of him agrees to cross it.

His eyes go to the back room first — half a second, gone before it registers as anything. Not to Duke. Not to Deb.

Duke doesn't look up right away either. When he does, something in his face closes.

DEB

(Turning, relief flooding out of her)

Ray. Oh, thank god —

RAY

(Moving toward her, with ease, already performing fine)

Hey. Hey, it's fine, I got it, don't worry about anything —

His eyes go to Duke the entire time he's saying this to Deb. Duke's eyes are already on him.

DUKE

Kistler.

RAY

Duke.

A beat. Neither of them moves toward the other.

DEB

(Not noticing, digging in her bag for nothing in particular)

He's a lifesaver, this one, I swear, he's saved my —

Ray is already reaching into his jacket, pulling out a checkbook, pen uncapped before he's even said the amount.

RAY

How much? Total, I mean, whatever she owes, just —

DUKE

We don't take checks.

RAY

(A half-beat, pen still poised)
Right.

DUKE
Cash only. Always was.

RAY
Right. No, I know that, I just —

*He doesn't finish the sentence. Recaps the pen.
Doesn't put the checkbook away yet, like giving up on
it that fast feels like admitting something.*

*Deb looks between Duke and Ray and for the first
time something faintly registers.*

DEB
Do you guys — know each other?

RAY
We used to work together.

DUKE
(Flatly)
He used to work here.

DEB
Oh — small world.

Nobody agrees or disagrees with that.

*Ray's eyes land on the knife, lying beside the felt pad
between Duke and the ledger. He goes still — the
same stillness the phone call gave him, now with
something to look at.*

RAY
(Quietly, not really to anyone)
So, this is it?

DEB
(Misunderstanding entirely)
That's the whole problem, yeah. Three dollars away
from that being it.

Ray doesn't answer. He's still looking at the knife.

Well, don't you have three dollars on you?

RAY

No, I – I don't carry cash.

DEB

What do you mean you don't carry cash? All men carry cash in their wallets. For – I don't know – tips and things.

RAY

I put tips on the card.

DEB

Not every tip. What if somebody carries something for you?

RAY

Nobody's carrying anything for me.

DEB

Well, not with that attitude.

Ray looks at her.

I just mean — you don't know what's going to happen during a day. You could buy a refrigerator.

RAY

Deb.

DEB

And then two men bring it into your kitchen, and what are you going to do, ask them if they take American Express?

DUKE

I don't.

DEB

I know you don't. We've established what you don't take.

Ray puts the checkbook away.

Wait. You carry a checkbook, but you don't carry cash?

RAY

Usually, a check is fine.

DEB

For three dollars? You were going to write a check for three dollars?

RAY

I was going to pay the whole thing.

DEB

I don't need the whole thing. I have most of the thing. I'm very close to having the thing.

She moves the open receipt book toward Ray, keeping it on the counter. Points to the amount, then to her money.

Ninety-five. Ninety-two. Tell him.

RAY

Tell him what?

DEB

That this is ridiculous.

Duke draws the book back to his working position. Deb keeps her finger on the page until she has to let it go.

Look in your wallet.

RAY

I know what's in my wallet.

DEB

Just look. Sometimes there's a dollar behind something.

Ray opens his wallet. Looks. Deb leans over to look, too.

RAY

Nothing.

DEB

Well, there are certainly a lot of places for it.

He closes the wallet.

What about your car?

RAY

What about it?

DEB

Cup holder. Between the seats. Men have money between the seats.

DUKE

Mostly change.

DEB

Change is money. I'm willing to count.

Ray glances at Duke. Duke is watching him, not Deb.

RAY

Deb. Please.

She stops. A small beat.

DEB

I'm trying to help you help me.