

WIDE OPEN LIVING

A play about Strictly Enforced Freedom

THE SCENE

At the entrance to a rural Colorado retirement community, POA president Marlene Briggs has gathered residents to ceremonially unveil an expensive new entrance sign. Long-standing tensions between the rule-conscious “Ridge” residents and the more rebellious “Valley” residents are already simmering. Unfortunately, no one has yet seen the finished sign.

CAST IN THIS EXCERPT

MARLENE BRIGGS — POA president. Polished, controlling, procedural, and determined that everything be done properly.

CECE WHITAKER — Valley resident. Warm, irreverent, socially confident, and delighted to puncture Marlene’s authority.

RAY MERCER — Dry, unflappable resident and resident truth-teller.

WARREN PIKE — Retired engineer. Literal, precise, and relentlessly technical.

EARL DUTTON — Retired military/law enforcement. Believes every gathering requires order and preferably a perimeter.

CAROL ANN BEASLEY — POA secretary. Dutiful keeper of minutes with an increasingly rebellious sense of humor.

LINDA PORTER — Sweet, seemingly innocent resident with an unexpected talent for saying alarming things.

MAGGIE SOTO — Practical resident primarily concerned with bears, trash, and people following basic instructions.

PETE ALVAREZ — Local opportunist who can smell a business opportunity before anyone else realizes there’s a crisis.

NATE & ALLISON REED — Prospective/new residents who have unfortunately arrived at Coyote Ridge on a particularly memorable day.

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CECE

At least somebody here is eating well.

PETE ALVAREZ enters, looking around with the alert nervousness of a man who profits from chaos before chaos officially exists.

PETE

Did I miss it?

MARLENE

No, Pete. We have not unveiled the sign.

PETE

Great. Good. Excellent.

He pulls out his phone.

MARLENE

No phones during the ceremony.

CECE

Ceremony?

PETE

I'm just documenting community history.

CAROL ANN

That's my job.

PETE

Yours has fewer filters.

PETE

I just like to know which way the wind is blowing.

RAY

Pete's always looking for the next big idea.

PETE

One of them's bound to hit.

RAY

One of these days, you're gonna scare us by being right.

MARLENE

Phone. Away.

PETE

That's where the margins are.

A small beat. Everyone looks at PETE for half a second.

MARLENE

Phone. Away.

PETE

Away-ish.

EARL

Away.

PETE pockets the phone, not convincingly.

MARLENE

Neighbors. Thank you for gathering today for this important moment in the life of our community.

CECE

All seven of us.

MARLENE

Others will arrive.

RAY

Not if they heard there'd be speeches.

MARLENE

The new entrance sign represents months of careful planning, fiscal responsibility, and respectful collaboration. We have worked a long time to make this place something people can be proud of.

A brief beat.

RAY (quietly)

She'll probably sleep better after today.

MARLENE

It reflects who we are.

CECE

That's what worries me.

WARREN

The reflective coating also exceeds state visibility standards.

RAY

She wore Warren out.

WARREN

I did become fatigued.

MARLENE

A community rooted in beauty, privacy, stewardship, and shared standards.

RAY

We all wanted a better entrance.

CECE

Shared by some. Enforced on others.

EARL

This is not a comment period.

CECE

Then why am I inspired?

WARREN

The sign is western red cedar with a weather-resistant sealant, powder-coated steel brackets, and low-voltage solar-ready illumination.

MARLENE

It is about unity.

CECE

Well, good. Nothing unites people like a spending decision half of us complained about.

NATE and ALLISON REED enter cautiously. They are new residents or prospective buyers. They carry a welcome folder, coffee cups, or real estate paperwork.

ALLISON

Hi. Sorry. Are we in the right place?

NATE

We're the Reeds. Nate and Allison.

MARLENE

Of course. Welcome. We're delighted you could join us.

CECE

Fresh meat.

MARLENE

CeCe.

CECE

I mean neighbors.

ALLISON

We were told there was a strong sense of community.

A tiny beat. Everyone looks at everyone else.

RAY

You got here on a strong day.

NATE

Great.

ALLISON

Is there really a Ridge side and a Valley side?

RAY

Only geographically, socially, emotionally, and at potlucks.

MARLENE

It is one community.

CECE

That's what the Ridge says when it wants help carrying tables.

EARL

Please stand outside the unspoken perimeter.

ALLISON

The what?

MARLENE

Ignore him.

EARL

That is how perimeters fail.

MARLENE picks up the oversized scissors or unties the ceremonial ribbon.

MARLENE

Today marks a new chapter...

WARREN straightens.

CAROL ANN writes.

CECE raises her phone slightly.

MARLENE

A place of natural beauty.

MARLENE

A place of neighborly respect.

CECE

And approved exterior finishes.

MARLENE

A place where wide open living can coexist with thoughtful standards.

RAY

That's one way to say "rules."

MARLENE takes the rope with both hands.

MARLENE

On behalf of the board, the Signage Excellence Task Force, and all residents committed to preserving the dignity and character of this community--

CECE

This is a lot of foreplay for cedar.

MARLENE

--I am proud to unveil the new entrance sign for The Preserve at Coyote Ridge.

She pulls the rope.

The tarp drops cleanly.

The sign is revealed:

THE PERVERSE AT COYOTE RIDGE
Wide Open Living. Strictly Enforced.

A long, dead silence.

CECE looks at the sign, then at MARLENE. For one instant, she sees how much this has cost her. Then the absurdity wins.

WARREN

Technically--

MARLENE

No.

Another silence.

RAY

Well.

A beat.

RAY

That's not nothing.

ALLISON

Is it supposed to say--

MARLENE

No.

NATE

Because it says--

MARLENE

No.

CECE

It says Perverse.

MARLENE

CeCe.

CECE

What? We were all reading it.

MAGGIE

How did nobody catch that?

WARREN

We had a proofing process.

RAY

Maybe don't brag.

MARLENE

Nobody take a picture.

Everyone looks at PETE.

PETE

What?

EARL

Hand me the phone.

PETE

This is America.

EARL

This is a POA event.

PETE

So not America.

MARLENE

Warren, find the approved proof.

WARREN

It's in my folder.

MARLENE

Do not open it here.

CECE

Ah. The autopsy gets refreshments.

RAY

And minutes.

MARLENE

Emergency meeting. Community room. Twenty minutes.

CECE

Twenty minutes? Some of us have lives, Marlene.

LINDA

I have a roast in the crockpot.

ALLISON

My granddaughter is at the house.

NATE

And we have a contractor coming at eleven.

RAY

A roast and a contractor. That's two emergencies already.

MARLENE

Fine. Two hours.

LINDA

Should we bring refreshments? Or is this more of a whips-and-chains situation?

A stunned beat.

MARLENE

Linda.

LINDA

I'm only asking because of the sign.

WARREN

The sign is not an invitation.

CECE

Not with that attitude.

MARLENE

Community room. Two hours. No phones. No comments. No speculation. No one speaks to anyone from town.

A beat.

RAY

You know we can all hear that not working, right?

MARLENE

Two hours.

She exits with as much dignity as can be managed beside a sign that says PERVERSE.