

"THE CHRISTMAS CONTRACT"

A screenplay by

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FADE IN:

EXT. MALL - DAY

Red lights from an ambulance flash across the mall doors as EMTs burst out with a stretcher carrying the still form of a JOLLY FAT MAN in a red suit.

A nearby sign reads "NORTHBROOK MALL."

Children and their parents crowd the double doors to watch the tragedy unfold.

SHELLY (20), who wears an elf's outfit and has lime-green hair, sobs and pats Santa's hand as the EMTs transport the stretcher to the ambulance.

EXT. ALLEY - NIGHT

JAKE CARSON (46) huddles under a crusty blanket against a brick wall next to a Dumpster. He shivers and coughs into a tattered scarf wrapped around his lower face.

KYLE (19) steps through puddles of blackened snow. His camel-hair overcoat compliments his wavy red hair.

He scans around until his gaze settles on Jake.

KYLE
You poor thing.

He walks over to Jake and squats down to be at eye level.

Jake's eyes are closed. He mutters to himself.

KYLE
Hey there, buddy. It's not safe
living on the streets like this.

Kyle puts a hand on Jake's shoulder. Jake's eyes blink open and he focuses on Kyle.

KYLE
There's no one here to protect
you...

He draws a switchblade from under his jacket and snicks it open. The 6" blade glitters in the moonlight.

KYLE
...from people like me.

Jakes eyes go wide.

Kyle grins as he brings the tip of the knife close to Jake's face.

KYLE
Look at me, street filth.

He pulls the scarf down from Jake's face to uncover a thick, pink, V-shaped scar just under Jake's left cheekbone. He stares in shock.

KYLE
Jake?

JAKE
Hi, Kyle.

Jake thrusts his foot into Kyle's chest and shoves him back into a group of garbage cans.

The knife clatters to the ground.

Jake lets the blanket slide off as he stands up. He wears casual winter clothing and leather gloves.

He tears the scummy scarf all the way off and lets it drop.

Kyle scrambles for the knife.

Jake kicks Kyle in the face. Kyle sprawls back in a puddle. Mud soaks into his expensive coat.

Kyle turns his head and spits out blood and a tooth.

KYLE
You're a dead man. My father...

JAKE
Your father will think one of your victims finally fought back.

He kicks Kyle in the ribs. Kyle falls back, clutching his side and moaning.

JAKE
Sorry this can't be more
professional.

He shrugs.

JAKE
Appearances.

He kicks and stomps Kyle about the head and torso again and again.

He pauses to inspect his handiwork.

Cuts and bruises mar Kyle's handsome face. Blood trickles from his mouth. His breathing gurgles in his throat.

Jake raises his foot and stomps down on Kyle's throat with a crunch.

He bends and puts a finger to Kyle's neck. After a moment, he nods.

Jake feels through Kyle's pockets and pulls out his wallet. He removes the money - four one-hundred dollar bills - and stuffs them into his pocket.

He drags the dirty blanket to cover Kyle's body.

Jake stands up and peels off the gloves. He reaches behind the Dumpster, picks up a half-full shopping bag, and tosses the gloves into it.

He throws the ratty scarf into the Dumpster.

Jake turns and walks toward one end of the alley. He produces a comb and runs it through his hair.

He pulls a new scarf from his pocket and wraps it around his neck and the lower half of his face, concealing his scarred cheek.

EXT. SHOPPING CENTER - NIGHT

Transformed from homeless man to a typical holiday shopper, Jake strolls out of the alley. He turns right and heads down the sidewalk. He flips open a cell phone.

His gaze lingers for a moment on the cell phone wallpaper, a picture of PENNY CARSON (6) taken from an old photograph. Her brown hair and pink T-shirt are faded, but her gap-toothed grin shines across the years.

Jake brings up his contacts list, scrolls down to select a name, and walks with the phone to his ear.

JAKE

It's done.

The rainbow color of Christmas lights bathes his face as he walks down the street. Every store has its decorations up.

JAKE

Just like clockwork. So when will
I see the rest of my fee?

He glances behind him. There are a few other pedestrians and, just like Jake, they all carry their own Christmas shopping bags.

JAKE

I understand that, but I need a
time frame.

He approaches a big department store. A SALVATION ARMY WORKER stands outside and rings his bell.

JAKE

Once Mister Erasmus finds out
about Kyle...

He stops in front of the Salvation Army Worker and sets down his bag as he listens on his phone.

JAKE

What are you trying to pull,
Hiram?

He pulls Kyle's money from his pocket and stuffs it into the slot in the red can.

JAKE

(to Salvation Army
Worker)
Merry Christmas.

The Salvation Army Worker stares at the hundred dollar bills going into the can. He looks up at Jake.

As Jake bends to pick up his bag, a gust of wind blows aside the scarf, exposing his scar.

JAKE
Fine. I'll be there in ten.

Jake folds up the phone and pulls the scarf back into place. He turns and hurries away with the words of the Salvation Army Worker fading behind him.

SALVATION ARMY WORKER
God bless you, sir.

INT. NATALIE'S ROOM - NIGHT

NATALIE (9) sits on the floor and looks through a cardboard box of small treasures. Her long, messy hair straggles down her back.

Cards in bright colors spill out of pastel envelopes. She lifts a necklace by its chain out of the box.

A box wrapped in Christmas paper and topped by a bow sits next to her on the floor.

Across the apartment, the front door slams.

Natalie jumps and drops the necklace back in the box. She shoves it way under the bed and pushes the Christmas present in after it.

ABBY (29) bursts through the door just as Natalie jumps onto the bed and grabs a book.

Abby wears a rumpled grocery store uniform. Her eyes sag with exhaustion and her heavy make-up has settled into the lines of her face.

She takes in Natalie's messy hair, her feet on her pillow, and the clothes scattered across the floor.

ABBY

What are you doing, Natalie?

NATALIE

Reading.

ABBY

Clean up this pigsty.

Abby scrutinizes the room again and spies the gay wrapping of the Christmas present peeking out from under the bed. She swoops down and snatches it up.

ABBY

What's this?

Natalie puts her face into her book and mumbles.

ABBY

What did you say?

Natalie raises her head.

NATALIE

Nothing.

Abby shakes the gift at Natalie.

ABBY

What is this?

NATALIE

It's a present from my daddy.

ABBY

I told you not to call him that.

She turns the present over and over, peering at the box.

ABBY

There's no tag.

Natalie mumbles into her book.

ABBY

What?

NATALIE

He told me to stick it under the tree with the rest of the presents and maybe you wouldn't notice.

Natalie sits up on her bed and holds the book across her chest like a shield.

ABBY

He told you? Have you been sneaking into the library again?

Natalie sets her jaw and stares at her mother from under lowered lids.

Abby brandishes the gift at Natalie.

ABBY

How could you do this to me?

She leaves and Natalie scrambles off the bed.

INT. ABBY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Natalie comes in to find Abby sobbing into her pillow.

The present lies discarded on the floor.

Natalie rubs Abby's back.

NATALIE

I'm sorry, Mom.

ABBY

You know how I feel about him.

NATALIE

But Daddy sent it to me.

ABBY

He's not your real daddy. Your daddy's dead.

NATALIE

It's just a present.

Abby turns her face into the pillow and sobs harder.

ABBY

You hate me.

NATALIE

I don't need the present.

With a heavy sigh, she picks it up.

NATALIE

I'll throw it away.

Abby sits up and rubs the tears out of her eyes before she hugs Natalie.

EXT. PARK - NIGHT

Jake hurries down a path toward a dark area under a group of trees. He avoids the patches of dirty snow on the dead grass as he blends in with the shadows.

JAKE

(soft)

Hiram.

HIRAM POTTER (40's) peeks out from behind a tree. A heavy overcoat can't make his slight frame any bulkier. His glasses glimmer in the little light available.

Jake grabs Hiram and shoves him against a tree.

JAKE

Are you trying to double-cross me?

Hiram pats Jake's wrist with one hand and forces a smile.

HIRAM

I've got another job for you.

JAKE

I just killed Kyle Erasmus. I have to get out of town.

HIRAM

You need money for that.

JAKE

Which you owe me.

HIRAM

I'm prepared to double your fee.

JAKE

Forget it. Just give me what you owe me.

HIRAM

Well, here's the deal--

Jake strong-arms Hiram back into the tree.

JAKE

We had a deal, you son of a bitch. You know what happens to people who stiff me.

HIRAM

I can't pay you from the bottom of the river.

Jake releases Hiram, who brushes himself off and straightens his overcoat.

JAKE

So now you're holding my ticket instead of Mr. Erasmus? You were supposed to help me get out from under him.

HIRAM

Things have changed.

He extracts two pictures from his breast pocket and hands them to Jake.

Jake pulls out a tiny flashlight and aims it at the first picture.

JAKE

Is this...

HIRAM

Barbara. My wife.

JAKE

And this guy isn't you?

HIRAM

Of course not. Can't you tell?

Jake flicks off the flashlight and glares at Hiram.

JAKE
You ever hear of divorce?

HIRAM
You wouldn't understand. You've
never been married.

JAKE
Family is a dangerous distraction.

Hiram shrugs.

Jake briefly switches on the flashlight to study both
pictures.

JAKE
So I do this son-of-a-bitch and
that's it?

HIRAM
Not just him.

JAKE
I'm not doing your wife. You know
my rules.

Hiram grits his teeth and stiffens his shoulders.

HIRAM
I don't care about your rules. I
want that bitch dead. You can
either kill both of them or I'll
tell Mr. Erasmus that Kyle was
your idea.

Jake pulls out his gun and places the muzzle against
Hiram's forehead in one smooth motion.

JAKE
Convince me not to pull the
trigger.

Hiram gulps and his eyes cross as he looks at the gun.

HIRAM

I've made arrangements. If I end up dead or missing, Mr. Erasmus finds out you killed Kyle.

JAKE

You fucking little weasel.

HIRAM

And without the money you won't be able to disappear.

Jake's glare burns out.

JAKE

You're worse than Kyle, you know that?

He sighs and puts the gun away.

JAKE

What do you have on the boyfriend?

Hiram slumps with relief.

HIRAM

All I have are these pictures, and I found out that he works at the Northbrook Mall food court.

Jake leans away from Hiram.

JAKE

Are you crazy? I just killed the crown prince and now you want me to storm the castle?

HIRAM

I wouldn't call it that.

JAKE

Mister Erasmus owns half those businesses. Jimmy and Marcus are there all the time.

HIRAM

You'll figure something out.

Jake locks eyes with Hiram.

JAKE

Try anything like this again--

HIRAM

--and I'm dead. I know, Jake. No more games after this, I promise.

Like a shadow, Jake is gone.

EXT. MR. ERASMUS'S MANSION - DAY

A large, snow-covered garden surrounds a stately two-story building of weathered stone. Several black luxury vehicles sit parked in front.

White lights outline the roof and windows, illuminating the opulence of the place.

On the front door, an evergreen and pinecone wreath with a "MERRY CHRISTMAS" banner hangs above a brass plaque that reads: "TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED."

INT. MR. ERASMUS'S OFFICE - DAY

Albrecht Durer's portrait of Lucrece Borgia looks down on a room filled with rich, traditional furnishings.

Mob boss MR. ERASMUS (50s), bulky and intimidating in an expensive suit, sits behind his desk under Lucrece's portrait.

His head is in his hands. His scalp shows through his thinning red hair.

An open folder lies before him, its contents of crime scene documents spread out over the desktop.

Glossy photographs show many angles of Kyle's beaten body.

MR. ERASMUS

Why wasn't anyone watching him?

In front of the desk stand Mr. Erasmus's hard-faced lieutenants MARCUS (40s) and JIMMY (30s, big and bulky), also in expensive suits.

JIMMY

You know how Kyle was, Mister Erasmus.

Mr. Erasmus fixes Jimmy with a stone-cold stare.

MR. ERASMUS
You telling me my boy deserved this, Jimmy?

MARCUS
What he means is Kyle didn't like company when he did his...thing.

BALD THUG and HAIRY THUG, both muscular and in dark, ill-fitting suits, stand guard by the door.

JIMMY
Yeah. He always made me wait back in the bar.

The sixth man is Hiram, who stands off to the side. His eye tics as he watches Mr. Erasmus.

Everyone else shifts nervously.

Mr. Erasmus glowers at Jimmy. Jimmy looks down with respect and shuffles his feet.

MR. ERASMUS
(soft)
Your job was to keep an eye on him.

He slams his fist on the desk. Everyone jumps.

MR. ERASMUS
(roars)
No matter what! You find the pathetic homeless fuck who did this.

Mr. Erasmus grits his teeth and takes a deep, calming breath. When he speaks again, his voice is quiet and controlled.

MR. ERASMUS
Because I wouldn't want to have to replace you, Jimmy.

Jimmy stares in fear.

MR. ERASMUS

So you get to give Mickey the bad news.

JIMMY

Tricky Mickey?

MR. ERASMUS

You being smart with me?

JIMMY

No. No, sir. I just thought...

MARCUS

Drop it, Jimmy.

Mr. Erasmus grabs up a paper-clipped stack of papers from the folder and thrusts them at Marcus.

MR. ERASMUS

You read the damn police report, Marcus. They got any leads?

MARCUS

No sir, Mister Erasmus. They ain't gonna get the DNA tests back for another week at least...but I don't think they're gonna find anything.

Jimmy glances at Hiram just as he lets out a small sigh of relief. Jimmy does a double-take.

MR. ERASMUS

What? Why the fuck not?

MARCUS

The cops think it was just some bum who got the drop on him. But I checked the place out and asked my own questions.

Marcus takes a deep breath and meets Mr. Erasmus's gaze.

MARCUS

Nobody saw what happened...but one of them bell-ringing charity

workers said someone put a
shitload of money in his bucket
around the time of the murder.

MR. ERASMUS

So?

MARCUS

He said the guy who gave the money
had a big V-shaped scar on his
cheek.

Mr. Erasmus' eyes narrow.

MR. ERASMUS

Jake Carson....

Marcus nods seriously.

Jimmy watches as Hiram's eyes widen in alarm.

MR. ERASMUS

I own Jake. He don't work for
nobody else.

MARCUS

And you know Jimmy didn't tell no
one else but us where him and Kyle
were.

MR. ERASMUS

Who the fuck would be so
stupid...?

Mr. Erasmus looks at everyone in the room.

Hiram holds his breath.

MR. ERASMUS

Marcus, you stay here. Everyone
else, get the fuck out.

Mr. Erasmus takes a seat in his plush leather chair and
picks up a sheaf of papers. Bald Thug opens the door and
everyone but Marcus leaves.

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE MR. ERASMUS'S OFFICE - DAY

Bald Thug and Hairy Thug move to stand guard outside the office door. Hiram hurries off down one side of the hallway and Jimmy heads down the other.

Jimmy pauses and looks back at Hiram. He turns and follows him.

INT. HIRAM'S OFFICE - DAY

Hiram hurries into his office and closes the door behind him.

He opens a briefcase on the desk and rummages through it. An open laptop sits next to the briefcase.

INT. JAKE'S BEDROOM - DAY

The double bed and nightstand barely fit in the tiny bedroom. Jake picks up the only object on the nightstand: a framed picture.

Faded and out of focus, a YOUNG JAKE and Penny stare out of the frame. He leans over her from behind, his thin arms crossed around her neck. Her chubby hands curl around his wrists. Both of them grin at the camera.

The picture of Penny is the same one on Jake's cell phone.

Jake sets the picture down. He lifts the mattress and retrieves a black, metal box from where it rests on the box spring.

Mattress back in place, he places the box on the bed and pulls neat bundles of hundred dollar bills from inside his overcoat.

He tosses the bundles onto the bed next to the black box.

Jake opens the box to find more bundles of cash. He thumbs through them.

He shoves it all into the box and shakes his head.

With a sigh, he pulls out the photographs he got from Hiram.

In the first picture, BARBARA POTTER (38), a large-breasted woman with a thick waist, and a SLIM MAN face the camera in a mirror, both naked.

The flash obscures their features.

The man stands behind the woman, right hand on her breast and the left holding the camera. A tattoo decorates the back of his right wrist.

INT. HIRAM'S OFFICE - DAY

Hiram rummages through his briefcase to find an airline ticket inside its multi-colored folder.

He opens the multi-colored folder and checks the ticket. It's a one-way trip to the Bahamas.

INT. JAKE'S BEDROOM - DAY

Jake looks at the second picture.

It's a close-up of the tattoo on the back of the man's right hand: a biohazard symbol.

INT. HIRAM'S OFFICE - DAY

Hiram folds up the laptop and slips it into the briefcase.

INT. JAKE'S BEDROOM - DAY

Jake throws clothes into an open suitcase.

INT. HIRAM'S OFFICE - DAY

Briefcase in one hand and ticket in the other, Hiram strides to the door and yanks it open.

Mr. Erasmus, Jimmy, Bald Thug and Hairy Thug stand right outside the door.

Mr. Erasmus nods at Jimmy, who snatches the ticket out of Hiram's sweaty fist.

MR. ERASMUS

Going somewhere?

EXT. RATTY MOTEL - DAY

Jake tugs the last corner of a protective cover into place over his car, which sits in the oil-stained parking lot.

Suitcase in hand, he uses a keycard to open his motel room door.

INT. RATTY MOTEL ROOM - DAY

Jake examines his prominent facial scar in the cracked mirror that faces the bed.

He uses his finger to spread concealing makeup over the scar. He inspects the results. It looks like a scar covered with glop.

Jake frowns and uses a towel to wipe off the makeup.

LATER

On the bed, Jake leans back and looks through the want-ads.

He smiles and circles an ad.

Inside the circle, it reads: "IMMEDIATE OPENING FOR NORTHBROOK MALL SANTA POSITION. Call 555-3854."

INT. SANTA'S GROTTO - DAY

Jake stands alone in front of his Santa's throne dressed in a fat Santa suit. He adjusts the thick white beard over the scar on his face.

Behind the throne, a monster tree with enormous ornaments rears up to the ceiling.

INT. ABBY'S APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY

Natalie exits the elevator and glances around the lobby before she approaches the bank of mailboxes.

She unlocks a mailbox, takes out the mail inside, and locks it up again.

She shuffles through the mail as she returns to the elevator.

Among the bills and ads is a pink envelope. The return address shows that "JONATHAN SHERIDAN" of "ELIZABETH, NJ" sent it.

Natalie tucks it inside her shirt and hurries inside the elevator.

The doors close and the digital display shows it going up.

The outside door opens and Abby enters the lobby.

INT. NATALIE'S ROOM - DAY

Natalie sits on the floor next to her treasure box and reads the card.

JONATHAN (V.O.)

Hope you got the present okay. I
wish I could be there to see you
open it. I miss you, kiddo.
Love, Daddy.

Natalie folds the card and slips it into the box with the others.

She hears the front door open and slides the box back under her bed.

INT. ABBY'S LIVING ROOM - DAY

A small, pre-decorated tree sits in a pot on a table and one short strand of lights outlines a window. These are the only Christmas decorations.

Abby hangs her keys on a hook and eases her feet out of her shoes.

Natalie comes in from the hall.

ABBY

Hi, Natalie.

NATALIE

Can we make cookies, Mom?

ABBY

What? I just got in. Give me a chance to get settled.

Abby picks up her shoes and heads down the hall. Natalie follows.

INT. ABBY'S BEDROOM - DAY

Natalie follows Abby in and sits on the bed while she takes off her uniform.

NATALIE

They have those Christmas cookies at the store. All you have to do is put them on the trays and cook them.

ABBY

You know I don't like you using the oven when I'm not at home.

NATALIE

I could do it after you get home from work.

ABBY

And leave a big mess for me to clean up? I don't think so.

Natalie kicks the bed.

NATALIE

I'd clean it up.

ABBY

Get off my bed. I don't need your footprints on it.

Natalie slouches off and glares at Abby, who pulls on a tight blouse with a plunging neckline.

NATALIE

You probably haven't even got me any presents.

ABBY

Come on, Natalie. You know how busy it is at work. They're having me work extra shifts because of all these other people who want to have a good Christmas.

She zips up a skirt that outlines her ass, and slides her feet into a pair of pumps. She inspects her legs in a full-length mirror.

NATALIE

And why can't we have a bigger tree? Or more lights?

ABBY

Because I quit school to help your daddy...

Behind her mother's back, Natalie mouths the words as Abby says them. She's heard it all before.

ABBY

...start his business and then he died and then your stupid, no-good step-father left us all alone.

Abby turns to face Natalie, who snaps her mouth shut.

ABBY

So I can't afford it. Did you say something?

NATALIE

No.

Abby gives Natalie a hard look as she leaves her bedroom.

Natalie follows.

INT. ABBY'S BATHROOM - DAY

Natalie leans in the doorway while Abby touches up her make-up and adds more mascara.

NATALIE

Are you going out again?

ABBY

Yes.

NATALIE
Where?

ABBY
To the mall.

NATALIE
To see Rodrigo?

Abby gives herself a dreamy smile in the mirror.

ABBY
Uh-huh. He's insatiable.

NATALIE
Gross.

ABBY
And you can go see Santa Claus
while I'm with Rodrigo.

NATALIE
That's not Santa. It's just some
guy in a costume. Can't we just
stay home and make cookies?

Abby glares at Natalie.

ABBY
Enough about the cookies. Either
you come to the mall or you stay
home. I don't care either way.

NATALIE
Okay. I'll go.

She frowns at the floor while Abby coats her mouth with lipstick.

INT. GARAGE - DAY

Room for four vehicles, although only a single black luxury car is currently parked here.

Workbenches along one wall display a variety of mechanic, woodworking and gardening tools.

Hiram sits duct-taped to a chair under flickering fluorescent lights.

He stares about with panicked eyes. Sweat stains his shirt and trickles down his face.

The TORTURER stands before Hiram. He wears thick glasses and a butcher's apron spattered with dried blood. He smiles as he looks Hiram up and down.

Marcus leans against one wall, smoking a cigarette. He watches Hiram.

MARCUS

Okay, Potter. Why'd you order the hit on Kyle?

HIRAM

I didn't! Marcus, you have to believe...

Marcus nods at the Torturer.

The Torturer runs his fingers over a selection of tools on a nearby metal cart. He selects a pair of heavy-duty wire cutters.

HIRAM

No, please, Marcus. I didn't...

Hiram's arms are taped to the arms of the chair. The Torturer grasps Hiram's right index finger and positions the cutters around it. He grins as Hiram screams.

HIRAM

All right! I ordered the hit! I didn't want Kyle taking over after Mister Erasmus!

His tone turns pleading.

HIRAM

The business would have gone to shit under Kyle, you know that, Marcus. And Mickey doesn't want to take over.

Marcus shifts uncomfortably. The Torturer looks at Marcus and raises an eyebrow.

Marcus shakes his head. The Torturer's smile falls.

MARCUS

You order any other hits?

Hiram opens his mouth. He hesitates.

Marcus nods at the Torturer. The Torturer grins as he prepares to squeeze down on the wire cutters.

HIRAM

Yes! Two other hits! My wife and her boyfriend! Oh, God!

MARCUS

Your wife? Jake don't do--

HIRAM

I threatened to tell Mister Erasmus who killed Kyle.

Marcus chuckles.

MARCUS

It'd take something like that.

The Torturer glances at Marcus, who shakes his head. The Torturer's smile fades.

MARCUS

(to the Torturer)

Jake's little quirk.

(to Hiram)

He kill them yet?

HIRAM

No, not yet.

MARCUS

When's he going to make the hits?

And where?

Hiram hesitates. Marcus nods at the Torturer.

MARCUS

Quit trying to dick me around, Potter.

The Torturer smiles and again prepares to snip off Hiram's finger.

HIRAM

No! Marcus, I swear, I'm not
dicking you around! I don't know
when! I left that up to Jake.

The Torturer looks at Marcus.

Marcus shakes his head. The Torturer sighs with
disappointment.

MARCUS

We can keep a tail on your wife.
And where's her boyfriend at?

HIRAM

He works somewhere at the
Northbrook Mall food court.
Jake's staking out the place.

Marcus smiles.

MARCUS

Like candy from a baby. Good
thing he's easy to spot.

The Torturer looks up at Marcus with a hopeful expression.

Marcus nods, then turns and exits through an open doorway.

The Torturer gives Hiram a benevolent smile. He grunts
slightly as he squeezes. A fleck of blood strikes his
glasses and Hiram screams bloody murder.

The Torturer grins like a child.

INT. SANTA'S GROTTO - NIGHT

Jake, his scar hidden under the fluffy white beard, sits in
costume on Santa's throne with a TINY GIRL on his lap.

The line of parents and children snakes around the grotto
and down the mall.

Shelly, her elf's hat at a jaunty angle over her hair, which is now purple, carries a clipboard and talks to parents at the head of the line.

Another elf, a SHAGGY-haired youth, organizes and monitors the crowd.

Creepy-looking RODRIGO (30's) mans the camera and leers at the children.

Jake stares at the Tiny Girl.

JAKE

What do you want for Christmas?

RODRIGO

Smile.

Jake and the Tiny Girl smile for the camera, which goes off with a bright flash.

Jake blinks in the aftermath.

ABBY (O.S.)

Hurry up.

As Jake's vision clears, he sees Abby dragging Natalie along by her upper arm. Natalie stumbles and Abby pulls her upright.

ABBY

Slow-poke.

Abby approaches Rodrigo and smiles at him. He greets her with a kiss.

Natalie gazes at Jake in his Santa suit. Her head is a nimbus of tangled hair.

Jake watches her and, for a moment, they hold each other's gaze.

RODRIGO

Hey guys, I'm taking a break.

JAKE

Again? We got a million kids here, Rodrigo.

SHELLY

Don't stress out. It's bad for your heart. I can take pictures for a while.

JAKE

It's okay, Shelly. My heart's in great shape.

SHELLY

I just don't want to lose any more Santas.

Abby rubs up against Rodrigo and he puts his arm around her. They lock lips.

NATALIE

Mom!

Abby breaks away long enough to shove a five dollar bill into Natalie's hand.

ABBY

Talk to Santa and then get yourself a snack.

Natalie glares at her mother, but then catches Jake's eye and switches her glare to him.

NATALIE

Fine.

She flounces to the back of the line.

Jake turns away from the little family drama to look at his elves.

JAKE

Let's try to muster some Christmas spirit for the kids. Your other Santa would have wanted that.

SHELLY

Yeah, Merry Christmas. You ready for the next one?

Jake watches Abby and Rodrigo feel each other up as they hurry away. He turns his attention back to Shelly.

JAKE
Yeah. Bring 'em on.

INT. RESTROOM AREA - NIGHT

Rodrigo drags Abby to the tiled area outside the bathrooms and pushes her up against the wall. She pulls him against her.

He shoves his hips against her and she moans.

They fumble their way into the men's room.

INT. SANTA'S GROTTO - NIGHT

Jake smiles and beckons to curly-haired BOBBY (6), the next child in line. Shelly lets Bobby through.

Bobby grins and runs up to take a seat on Santa's knee.

JAKE
Hello, little boy. What's your name?

Bobby frowns.

BOBBY
I thought Santa knows everybody's name.

JAKE
Nah. Why do you think I have a list that I check twice?

Bobby blinks with concern.

BOBBY
But...if you don't know my name you could bring me the wrong presents on Christmas!

Jake looks up at Shelly, who twirls her hair and mouths the name "Bobby."

Jake's gaze shifts past Shelly. He focuses on Jimmy, who walks through the throng of shoppers. Jimmy wears an MP3 player and nods to the beat as he looks around.

Jimmy looks across the Grotto to somebody on the other side.

Jake follows his gaze and spots SCARRED THUG, who nods at Jimmy.

Jake is in their line of vision, but neither of them glance at him.

Jake forces a smile at Bobby.

JAKE
I'm just kidding, Bobby. Of course I know your name.

Bobby gives Jake a big, relieved grin and settles himself on Jake's lap.

BOBBY
I want a Playstation and a iPod and a electric car...

JAKE
You've got expensive tastes, kid.

BOBBY
...and a soldier gun and a camouflage uniform.

Jake spots Marcus working his way through the crowd. Then he sees UGLY THUG. They don't notice Jake either.

Jake checks the fit of his beard over his face. He twinkles his eyes at Bobby.

JAKE
A camouflage uniform? Like maybe a Santa suit?

Bobby frowns at Jake in confusion.

Halfway up the line, Natalie stands with her arms folded and gazes around. Her head turns in Jake's direction.

On his throne, Jake looks over Bobby's head to see Natalie and gives her a small finger wave.

She glares at him and turns around.

LATER

Natalie makes it up to the front of the line. She smooths her hands over her messy hair, but only flattens it.

Shelly takes a picture of Jake and an INFANT on his lap. It stares in horror at Jake while the flash goes off.

Jake hands the infant off to the INFANT'S MOTHER and Shaggy opens the gate for Natalie.

She edges up to him and they regard each other.

JAKE

What's your name?

NATALIE

Natalie.

JAKE

Do you want to sit on my lap,
Natalie?

She shakes her head.

NATALIE

You're not really Santa.

JAKE

When did kids get so cynical?

Natalie leans on the arm of Santa's throne. Her sleeve slides up and Jake sees the fading bruise of a pinch-mark on her arm.

She follows his gaze and tugs her sleeve down.

JAKE

So what do you want for Christmas?

She leans close and he bends his head down to hear her whisper.

NATALIE

I want people to stop hurting each
other.

Jake stares at her and she holds his eyes with her mouth set in a hard line.

SHAGGY

You ready for the next one?

Shaggy Elf opens the gate and CHUBBY BOY runs through. CHUBBY BOY'S MOTHER is right behind. They stop at the edge of the platform, and the boy dances from one foot to the other.

Jake and Natalie stare at each other.

JAKE

I thought you didn't believe in Santa.

NATALIE

It's still what I want.

Jake looks up at the dancing boy, and then back to Natalie.

JAKE

You like ice cream?

INT. FOOD COURT - NIGHT

Jake and Natalie eat ice cream and size each other up.

JAKE

Where's your Mom?

NATALIE

She's with her boyfriend.

JAKE

Oh yeah. You like him?

Natalie shrugs. She watches as Jake carefully spoons ice cream into his mouth without getting any on his beard and mustache.

NATALIE

How come you don't take your beard off to eat?

JAKE

What if some kid sees me?

NATALIE

I thought all us kids were cynical anyway.

JAKE

Still...

NATALIE

You're gonna get it messy.

JAKE

I'm careful. How long has your mother known Rodrigo?

NATALIE

Awhile. What do you do when you're not playing Santa?

JAKE

I live with my reindeer at the North Pole and make toys.

Natalie rolls her eyes.

JAKE

Where'd you get that bruise?

Natalie pulls her sleeve down.

NATALIE

I don't remember.

JAKE

Is that why you want people to stop hurting each other?

Natalie shrugs.

JAKE

Who hurt you?

NATALIE

I just wanna go live with my daddy.

JAKE

How come you can't?

NATALIE

Well, he's not really my daddy.
He's my step-daddy. But he loves
me.

JAKE

He does?

NATALIE

Yeah.

She looks around her and leans in close.

NATALIE

I e-mail him from the library and
he e-mails me back.

JAKE

But he never adopted you?

Natalie sighs, leans on her arm and kicks her feet.

NATALIE

Stupid legal stuff.

She spoons up more ice-cream and Jake scrutinizes the
teenagers behind the counter at the ice-cream place.

NATALIE

Watcha looking at?

Jake brings his attention back to her.

JAKE

Nothing. Do you ever brush your
hair?

Natalie glares at him.

INT. ABBY'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Abby and Rodrigo engage in a sexual wrestling match on the
couch. The room is dark except for the glow of the TV and
they have the sound turned down.

Natalie gives them a disgusted look as she creeps past and
heads into the kitchen.

The light from the fridge falls across them and they look up.

ABBY
What are you doing, Natalie?

NATALIE (O.S.)
Nothing.

RODRIGO
Get me a beer while you're in there.

NATALIE (O.S.)
Why can't you?

RODRIGO
Because I'm the man of the house.
You gotta do what I say.

Natalie comes back and sets the beer on the coffee table.

NATALIE
Here's your beer.

He smiles at Natalie as she edges past with her can of soda. He reaches for her and she dodges away.

RODRIGO
Hey! Don't be so mean.

ABBY
Oh, leave her alone.

She turns his face to hers and plants her lips on his.

His eyes twist to follow Nat as he kisses Abby.

INT. SANTA'S GROTTO - NIGHT

Abby, who looks like a slutty Christmas ornament, approaches Rodrigo behind the camera. Natalie trails along behind her.

NATALIE
But, Mom, I'm hungry.

ABBY

Later.

She smiles at Rodrigo.

Jake has a CHUBBY CHILD on his lap, but he watches Natalie over its head.

RODRIGO

Why don't we get her some dinner?

He leans down to put his arm around Natalie.

Natalie shies away from Rodrigo and gets behind Abby.

ABBY

We can get dinner later. Right now I need something else.

She pulls at his belt.

The mothers with their children glare at her.

RODRIGO

I gotta work right now. Go wait for me.

Abby pouts.

Jake looks at the line of children. There are only five.

JAKE

Shelly.

SHELLY

Yeah?

JAKE

Put the rope up behind that last kid.

SHELLY

Okay.

She pulls out the bronze posts with the velvet rope between them and plops it behind the last child in line.

Abby has locked lips with Rodrigo and pays no attention to Natalie, who has drifted closer to Jake.

JAKE
(whispers)
How about when I get through here
I buy you a burger?

Natalie's eyes light up and she grins as she nods at him.

INT. FOOD COURT - NIGHT

Jake watches Natalie devour a burger.

JAKE
Your Mom didn't make you dinner?

Natalie shakes her head and swallows her bite.

NATALIE
She had to work late and then she
wanted to get ready to see
Rodrigo.

JAKE
Yeah. You don't like him, do you?

She shakes her head and takes another big bite of burger.

JAKE
Why?

She shrugs.

JAKE
Oh, come on. I saw you with him.
Did he do something to you?

She puts her burger down next to the fries.

NATALIE
I'm full.

She stands up and walks past him.

JAKE
Natalie.

She stops and faces him.

JAKE

I don't want him around the other kids if he can't be trusted.

She stares at him.

JAKE

Are you sure you don't want the rest of that burger?

She sits down and nibbles a fry.

JAKE

What did he do to you?

NATALIE

You promise not to tell?

JAKE

No. If he did something he shouldn't have, I have to report him.

NATALIE

(whines)

Why?

JAKE

It's the law.

She leans back in her chair and kicks her feet.

Jake watches her.

She sits forward and puts her head in her hands.

NATALIE

He touched my butt.

JAKE

Just your butt?

She folds her arms and hides her face in them, as if she's taking a nap.

JAKE

Were your clothes on?

She doesn't move.

JAKE

Did he touch you anywhere else?

He waits but she doesn't move.

JAKE

Okay, if that's all you want to tell me.

She sits up and grabs the burger again.

NATALIE

Good.

JAKE

You feel better?

She nods so hard her messy hair swings forward.

JAKE

Watch out. You'll get your hair in your food.

She pushes it back and takes another bite of burger.

INT. ABBY'S BATHROOM - DAY

Natalie pulls a brush through her hair and grimaces with pain. She looks at the brush.

Fine hair fills the bristles.

NATALIE

Poopy.

She tugs the brush through her hair again.

LATER

Natalie finishes a second braid with a bright red ribbon and looks at herself.

The two braids are uneven, each one starting at a different level and coming off her head at a different angle. Wisps of hair stick out here and there.

She scowls at herself.

EXT. MALL - DAY

Abby tugs Natalie behind her as they approach the mall entrance.

Abby wears another revealing outfit and lots of make-up. Natalie wears a too-small puffy coat with the hood pulled up.

Their breath makes clouds on the air.

ABBY

What's with the hood? Are you cold?

Natalie gives her mom a wary glance and pulls the hood's drawstring tighter.

NATALIE

Yeah, it's like a million degrees below zero out here.

Abby laughs.

ABBY

Good thing we're going somewhere warm.

INT. SANTA'S GROTTO - DAY

Natalie stands in line and smooths her braids. She wears a too-small red turtle-neck with white lace around the neck and sleeves. Her hooded coat hangs over one arm.

Shelly, her hair now hot pink with green highlights, snaps a picture of Jake and the WELL-DRESSED GIRL on his lap.

He sees Natalie and she grins and waves at him.

JAKE

(under his breath)
Oh Jesus.

He hands the girl off to Shelly, who leads her away, and beckons to Shaggy Elf.

SHAGGY

Yeah?

JAKE

See that kid with the braids and
the red sweater? Get her up here.

Shaggy steps over the gate.

He sticks his hand out to Natalie.

SHAGGY

Come here, kid. Santa wants you.

Shaggy boosts her over the gate. She runs to Jake.

SHELLY

(to Shaggy)

Why can't you use the gate like
normal people?

Jake looks at Natalie.

JAKE

What are you doing here?

NATALIE

My Mom came to see Rodrigo, so I
came to see you.

JAKE

People are going to talk, you
know.

NATALIE

You want me to sit on your lap?

JAKE

You ready to ask for a real
Christmas present?

NATALIE

I already asked for my present.

Jake looks at the big clock, and then at his Santa clock.

JAKE

Tell you what. I have a break in
an hour. Meet me in the food
court.

INT. FOOD COURT - DAY

Natalie sets a plate of Chinese noodles on the table in front of Jake.

NATALIE

There.

Jake pushes an Orange Julius across to her and she takes a long drag off the straw as she wrinkles her nose at the noodles.

NATALIE

So what are you going to do with them?

JAKE

I just need a strand of your hair.

He reaches for her head. She jerks away.

NATALIE

You're not pulling my hair out.

He draws his hand back.

JAKE

Nobody's going to notice.

NATALIE

It'll hurt if you do it.

She slurps up some more drink as she thinks. Then she fishes a couple strands of hair from the loose stuff around her braids. She plucks them out and hands them to Jake.

He puts the hairs in the noodles and uses the fork to stir them around.

NATALIE

Oh, gross!

JAKE

Shhh.

He reaches into his Santa suit and brings out the close-up photo of the biohazard tattoo.

JAKE

I want you to get the manager to come out. Check to see if he has this tattoo on the back of his wrist.

NATALIE

Ooohh. Are you like a FBI guy or something?

JAKE

Something like that.

NATALIE

You got a gun in there too?

She peers at his suit.

JAKE

No.

NATALIE

Where is your gun?

JAKE

Honey, let me worry about the gun, okay? You worry about those noodles.

NATALIE

Okay.

She grabs the plate of noodles and hurries over to the Chinese food place.

Jake watches her show the hair in the noodles to the teenage NOODLE SHOP CLERK at the counter. The clerk makes a face and talks to her.

She stamps her foot and sets her jaw.

Jake grins.

The clerk throws up his hands and goes in the back.

Natalie looks at the hands of the people behind the counter while she waits.

The NOODLE SHOP MANAGER comes out. She's a tiny Chinese woman in her fifties.

Jake frowns in disappointment.

Natalie brings a second plate of noodles, with an egg roll on the side, back to the table.

NATALIE

She gave me a new plate of food
and a free egg roll. I don't have
to eat it, do I?

JAKE

No. You did good, Natalie. Here.

He hands her a few bills.

JAKE

Get yourself a cookie.

She takes the bills. She looks at the photo on the table.

NATALIE

Are you sure it's a man you're
looking for?

JAKE

I'm sure.

NATALIE

Is that a close-up?

JAKE

Yes, but I can't show you the rest
of the picture.

NATALIE

How come? Is he killing someone?

JAKE

Something like that.

ABBY (O.S.)

Natalie!

Natalie hunches her shoulders and puts her hands over her braids.

Abby stalks up to Natalie and Jake.

ABBY

What the hell did you do to your
hair?

She grabs Natalie's arm and jerks her out of her chair.

JAKE

Hey!

Abby whirls on him.

ABBY

Stay away from my kid, pervert!

She snatches Natalie's coat from the back of the chair as
she goes, dragging Natalie after her.

INT. ABBY'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Abby drags Natalie by the arm into the unlit room and
throws her onto the couch.

ABBY

This is the last straw.

NATALIE

But, Mom! I brushed it! You're
always telling me to brush it.

ABBY

It looks like shit. There's only
one way to fix this.

Abby yanks Natalie off the couch and out of the room.

INT. ABBY'S BATHROOM - NIGHT

Abby drags Natalie into the bathroom. She wields a big
pair of scissors. Natalie defends her head with one arm.

NATALIE

(screaming)

No, no! I brushed it!

ABBY

I told you this would happen,
Natalie. It was your
responsibility.

NATALIE
(screaming)
I was responsible! I brushed it!

ABBY
Shut up. The neighbors will hear
you.

NATALIE
Good!

She throws her head back and shrieks. Abby waits, scissors raised and open.

Natalie stops and looks at Abby.

ABBY
They'll put you back in foster
care.

Natalie stares at her mother in horror.

ABBY
Where else have you got to go?

NATALIE
I can go live with my daddy.

ABBY
Oh grow up. They didn't put you
with him last time and they sure
as hell won't do it again.

NATALIE
But he didn't...

Abby shoves her face down into Natalie's.

ABBY
He did know. And he asked for
custody. They said no.

Natalie's lip trembles and tears well in her eyes.

ABBY
Don't pull that shit on me.

She yanks Natalie around and shoves her head to the side.

NATALIE

Ow!

The scissors gleam under the fluorescent light as Abby whacks off one braid.

The braid falls to the floor, its ribbon still in place.

Natalie tries to pull her head away. Abby pulls her back.

ABBY

Watch out. These are sharp.

NATALIE

You're the meanest mom ever!

Abby pokes Natalie's shoulder with the sharp tip of the scissors. A bead of blood seeps through her shirt.

ABBY

Watch your mouth. Or else.

Snick. The other braid falls to the floor.

Abby fluffs Natalie's hair up. It falls down in uneven lengths.

ABBY

This piece is too long.

She grabs a clump that hangs down below Natalie's left ear and shears it off close to Natalie's scalp.

The scissors flash in the light. Snick-snack.

Tufts of hair drift to the floor around Natalie's feet.

ABBY

There.

She smiles at Natalie in the mirror. Natalie glares back.

Her hair is a horror show of uneven clumps and tufts. It's long in some places and short in others. One long strand that Abby missed straggles down her back.

EXT. MALL - DAY

Jake, wearing street clothes and a scarf over his scar, approaches the mall entrance.

Rodrigo steps out from behind a wall and pushes Jake up against it.

RODRIGO

You got me fired, asshole.

Jake pushes him off.

JAKE

You got yourself fired, Rodrigo.

Rodrigo pushes Jake back against the wall.

RODRIGO

You stuck your nose in where it don't belong. That kid's practically mine.

JAKE

What kid?

RODRIGO

Natalie Keebler. I know it was her ratted me out.

JAKE

Why? She's the only kid whose butt you've touched?

He whirls around and pushes Rodrigo's arm up behind his back. Now Rodrigo is the one pinned against the wall.

JAKE

You stay away from her. What are you doing here today?

RODRIGO

Came to see Abby. She's meeting me here, like usual. You can't stop me seeing the kid.

JAKE

If you break up with Abby, you can't see the kid any more, can you?

RODRIGO

Why the fuck would I do that?
She's hot and the kid's a sweet
little thing too.

Jake shoves Rodrigo against the wall so hard it scrapes his
cheek.

JAKE

I suggest you find a new
girlfriend.

Keeping a grip on Rodrigo with one hand, Jake whips a knife
out of his belt buckle and holds the point under Rodrigo's
chin. Rodrigo's head goes up to an uncomfortable angle to
avoid the sharp point of the knife.

JAKE

I could kill you right now without
anybody noticing.

RODRIGO

Who are you? Are you FBI?

JAKE

Funny how they all think that.
No, I'm something worse.

RODRIGO

(whines)

Ah shit. I didn't know, man. I'm
sorry. I'll dump the bitch today.
I swear.

Jake lets him go and slips the knife back into his buckle.

JAKE

Sounds like a plan.

He pats Rodrigo's shoulder and Rodrigo flinches away.

INT. MEN'S ROOM - DAY

Jake, now in his Santa suit, approaches a urinal.

A woman's giggle draws his attention. He bends down and
looks under the stalls. He sees two pairs of feet two
stalls down. One pair of feet wears stiletto heels.

ABBY (O.S.)
Come on, baby.

INSIDE THE STALL

Rodrigo slaps Abby's hand away.

RODRIGO
Cut it out.

She pouts.

ABBY
What's wrong?

RODRIGO
Your kid got me fired.

Abby turns pale under her make-up.

RODRIGO
Said I was touching her.

ABBY
That little liar.

She moves to put her arms around Rodrigo.

ABBY
I'm so sorry, baby. I'll make it
up...

He pushes her back against the door.

OUT IN THE BATHROOM

The door shakes as Abby's body hits it.

Jake, now using the urinal, glances in the direction of the stall.

INSIDE THE STALL

Rodrigo grabs Abby's chin.

RODRIGO
We're through, bitch.

He tries to leave, but Abby blocks him. She bursts into tears, or a reasonable facsimile. Her mascara doesn't run.

ABBY

No, baby. Please. I'll do anything. I need you.

RODRIGO

No way. That kid is fucking up your life. I'm not sticking around for that.

ABBY

What if I get rid of her? How about that?

RODRIGO

You mean like send her to that step-father she's always going on about?

Abby steps back, her face sullen.

ABBY

I'm not giving her to him.

RODRIGO

Whatever, Abby. I don't care how you do it. Get rid of her and maybe we can talk.

He shoves her aside and barges out of the stall.

OUT IN THE BATHROOM

Jake washes his hands.

RODRIGO

(To Jake)

You happy now?

Rodrigo stomps out.

Abby hurries after him without a glance at Jake.

INT. FOOD COURT - DAY

A knitted, cerulean blue hat covers Natalie's head.

She drags French fries through a puddle of ketchup.

Across the table from Natalie, Jake watches Abby weave through the crowd toward them. She comes up behind Natalie.

ABBY

Say good-bye to Santa. We're going home.

Natalie gets to her feet with a sigh. Jake puts his hand on her arm.

JAKE

Wait a sec, Nat.

He digs through his Santa suit and comes up with his wallet. He extracts a bill and hands it to Natalie.

JAKE

Go get a drink and let me talk to your mom.

Natalie stares back and forth between them in fear, but finally takes the bill and leaves. She glances back once.

Jake gestures to the chair.

JAKE

Have a seat, Missus Keebler.

Abby plops her butt down.

ABBY

It was you, wasn't it?

JAKE

Me?

ABBY

Who ratted out Rodrigo. He really needed that job.

JAKE

He's a pedophile.

ABBY

You got no proof.

JAKE
I have Natalie.

ABBY
She's a fucking liar. You should
see how that kid--

Jake takes Abby's wrist and squeezes.

ABBY
Hey!

JAKE
I've got formal complaints and a
history of foster care. I've seen
the bruises on her arms.

Abby jerks her hand away and Jake lets her go.

ABBY
What do you want?

JAKE
No. What do you want? Because I
heard you telling Rodrigo you'd
get rid of Nat just to be with
him.

Abby flushes under her make-up as she stares at him.

JAKE
Jonathan Sheridan.

ABBY
No way! That...

JAKE
He wants her. She wants him.
Tomorrow after I turn in this
suit, I'm taking her up there.
You get Rodrigo and everybody's
happy.

ABBY
I am not--

JAKE
Either that, or Rodrigo goes to
jail, Natalie goes back to foster

care, you're all alone, and
nobody's happy.

Abby stands up. Tears glitter in her eyes.

JAKE

And it looks like you did
something to her hair. She hasn't
taken that hat off all day.

ABBY

You fucking bastard.

JAKE

Go home, Missus Keebler. I'll
bring Natalie back later.

Abby hurries away, stumbling once on a high heel.

Natalie comes back with her drink.

NATALIE

Where's my mom?

JAKE

She went home.

Jake's cell phone rings. He drops his wallet on the table
and digs through his bulky suit.

JAKE

You can hang out with me and the
elves today. I'll take you home
later.

Natalie grins.

NATALIE

Cool.

The phone rings again.

JAKE

Wait a sec.

He fumbles around in his suit. The phone rings again.
Finally he gets it out.

Natalie watches him.

He checks the number and deletes the call.

NATALIE

Who was that?

JAKE

Nobody. You want anything else?

NATALIE

Yes, please.

JAKE

How about a piece of fruit from
that Best Fresh place?

Natalie makes a face and sticks her tongue out.

JAKE

I need to check it out again.

NATALIE

Okay. A banana?

JAKE

Deal.

Jake's wallet is on the table. He gets out a few bills and stands up.

He stuffs his wallet back inside the bulky suit and puts the cell-phone in after it.

JAKE

Don't go anywhere.

He leaves Natalie at the table and threads his way through the crowd.

As he turns, the cell-phone drops out of his suit.

Natalie jumps out of her seat to retrieve it and then back into her chair. From her chair, she holds up the phone.

NATALIE

Jake?

He's gone.

She turns the phone over and scans the crowd to check for Jake.

Jake stands in line behind three people.

She places the phone on the table, folds her hands in front of it, and stares at it.

INT. MR. ERASMUS'S OFFICE - DAY

Mr. Erasmus paces in front of his desk.

Marcus stands nervously against the wall. Bald Thug and Hairy Thug guard the door.

Mr. Erasmus snaps his fingers at Marcus.

MR. ERASMUS
You still got Potter's phone?

MARCUS
Yes, sir, Mr. Erasmus.

Marcus brings the phone out of his breast pocket and hands it to Mr. Erasmus.

Mr. Erasmus brings up the menu. He smiles without humor.

INT. FOOD COURT - DAY

Natalie picks up Jake's cell phone. With a furtive glance in Jake's direction, she flips open the phone.

She gazes at the wallpaper picture of Penny.

Nat jumps as the cell-phone bursts into song: Pennies From Heaven. She looks at the caller ID.

It's "H. POTTER."

She answers it.

INTERCUT BETWEEN NATALIE AND MR. ERASMUS

NATALIE
Hello?

Mr. Erasmus raises an eyebrow.

MR. ERASMUS

Hi, honey. Who are you?

NATALIE

Natalie. Who are you?

MR. ERASMUS

Doesn't it say on the phone?

NATALIE

It says H. Potter, like Harry Potter.

MR. ERASMUS

That's right. This is Harry Potter.

NATALIE

Nuh-uh. He's not a real person.

MR. ERASMUS

You're a smart girl, Natalie. Where'd you get that phone?

NATALIE

From Santa Claus.

Mr. Erasmus frowns. Then he smiles like a shark.

INT. FOOD COURT - DAY

Jake reaches the counter.

JAKE

One banana please.

Hiram's wife's BOYFRIEND (17) is a moderately attractive but thin boy, his skin dotted with pimples. He's barely old enough to shave.

BOYFRIEND

Two thirty-nine.

Jake nods and gives him a \$5 bill. The boy makes change and drops it into Jake's open hand.

Jake sees the tattoo of the biohazard symbol on the back of the boy's wrist.

He raises his eyes to look into the boy's young face.

JAKE
How old are you?

BOYFRIEND
I'll be eighteen in a few weeks.
Why?

JAKE
That's a nice tattoo.

The boy grins like a child. He turns his hand this way and that to show it off.

BOYFRIEND
Thanks. It's one of a kind.

Jake looks at the boy with sad eyes, then turns away.

At the table, Natalie sees him coming.

NATALIE
(into phone)
I gotta go.

She folds up the phone and puts it back on the table.

Jake reaches the table and Natalie points at the cell-phone.

NATALIE
That fell out of your pocket.

Jake picks up the phone, lost in thought.

JAKE
We gotta go.

She reaches for her drink, but he shakes his head.

JAKE
Come on.

INT. EMPLOYEE LOCKER ROOM - DAY

Natalie sits on a bench and watches Jake, who stands in front of an open locker and removes his Santa suit.

She tugs her blue hat down over her ears.

NATALIE
What are you doing?

JAKE
Changing.

NATALIE
Aren't you gonna to be Santa no
more?

JAKE
Anymore.

She heaves a sigh.

NATALIE
Anymore.

JAKE
No. I'm cutting my losses while I
can.

NATALIE
But it's not Christmas yet.

JAKE
So they'll find another Santa.

NATALIE
Are you taking me home?

JAKE
No.

NATALIE
You're not?

JAKE
It was supposed to be a surprise
for Christmas, but I have to leave
early. I'm taking you to live
with your step-father.

He turns to look at Natalie, whose jaw has dropped to her
chest.

NATALIE

I wanna go with you.

Jake stops and looks at her. He's down to his undershirt and the Santa pants in stocking feet.

JAKE

Turn around. I don't want you looking.

NATALIE

You gonna take your pants off?

JAKE

Yeah.

She stands up, moves a few feet away, and hides her face in her hands against another locker.

JAKE

I thought you wanted to live with your step-father.

NATALIE

Yeah, but...

JAKE

You don't want to live with him?

Natalie shrugs.

Jake stops with one leg in and one leg out of his trousers.

JAKE

How old were you when he left?

NATALIE

Three.

He pulls up his trousers.

JAKE

You can turn around now.

He sits down and pats the bench. She perches near him.

JAKE

You can't go back to your mom. Living there is bad for you.

She shrugs.

Jake looks at her hat and pulls out his belt knife.
Natalie recoils.

NATALIE
Whatcha gonna do?

JAKE
You want me to fix your hair?

He eases the blue cap off her head. Her botched haircut stands out in static electricity.

Jake steadies her with one hand and uses the knife to shave off tufts of hair.

NATALIE
Don't make it shorter.

JAKE
I'm going to even it up and make
it look better.

He measures her hair with his fingers, like a beautician.

Tufts of hair fall to the floor.

NATALIE
Where'd you learn to cut hair?

JAKE
I used to cut my sister's all the
time, when we were kids.

He cuts the long strand that straggles down her back.

NATALIE
You got a sister?

JAKE
Had. I had a sister.

NATALIE
What happened to her?

Jake slices off some more hair and measures with his fingers.

NATALIE

Jake?

JAKE

She died. Now sit still.

Natalie remains motionless while Jake measures and cuts.

INT. ABBY'S LIVING ROOM - DAY

Jake and Natalie enter quietly.

JAKE

Why don't you go say good-bye and
then we'll go pack your stuff?

Natalie nods and goes down the hall alone.

INT. ABBY'S HALLWAY - DAY

Halfway down the hall, Natalie hears Abby's sobs.

INT. ABBY'S BEDROOM - DAY

Abby lies face-down on top of the bedspread, fully clothed,
sobbing into her pillow.

Natalie creeps up to her.

NATALIE

Mom?

Abby rolls over and holds her arms open for Natalie.

ABBY

Come here, baby.

Natalie cuddles into her arms.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Natalie's ear-splitting shriek jolts Jake into action. He
dashes out of the room.

INT. ABBY'S BEDROOM - DAY

Jake rushes in to find Abby struggling with Natalie on the bed.

Abby holds a pillow over Natalie's face, but Natalie bucks and thrashes to fight her off.

JAKE

Get away from her!

He grabs Abby's arm and hurls her away from Natalie. She bounces off the closet and falls to the floor.

Natalie backs up against the headboard, crying and sobbing.

Tears also streak Abby's face, along with mascara.

ABBY

He said to get rid of her. He said he'd stay with me if she was out of the way.

JAKE

He didn't mean for you to kill her, you stupid bitch.

She comes at him with her nails out. He whips his pistol from under his jacket and points it at her face.

JAKE

I don't think so.

She stops and stares at him in terror.

He turns to Natalie.

JAKE

Go get your things, Nat.

He watches as Natalie heads for the door.

Abby grabs a ceramic lamp from a nearby table.

As Jake watches Natalie hurry for the door, Abby smashes the lamp across the back of his head.

Jake drops his gun and collapses to the floor, stunned.

Abby snatches up Jake's pistol and dashes through the door after Natalie.

Jake blinks his gaze into focus. He touches the back of his head and looks at his hand. No blood.

He staggers to his feet and looks around the floor where he dropped his gun. He runs from the room.

INT. NATALIE'S BEDROOM - DAY

Abby straddles Natalie on the bed. She chokes Natalie while holding Jake's pistol to her forehead. Natalie lies limp, her eyes closed.

Jake rushes into the doorway and freezes when he sees the gun pressed against Natalie's head.

Abby curls her finger around the trigger.

Jake hurls himself at Abby. He slams into her side and carries her over the edge of the bed. Her neck impacts the side of the dresser with a sickening crack.

Jake jumps to his feet.

JAKE

Abby?

Her neck is bent at an impossible angle.

JAKE

Shit.

He turns to Natalie. She lies still on the bed with red bruises on her neck. Jake pats her cheeks.

JAKE

Natalie. Nat.

He checks her pulse and puts his ear to her mouth. Natalie stirs and moans softly.

Jake snatches up his pistol and holsters it under his jacket. He scoops Natalie up and takes her from the room.

INT. SANTA'S GROTTO - DAY

Marcus and Ugly Thug glare at the shoppers who move past the Grotto.

Shelly bustles about, cleaning up the area. Marcus talks to Shaggy, who leans on his broom.

MARCUS

He quit?

SHAGGY

About an hour ago. And on the busiest day of the year.

Marcus glowers at him, but Shaggy doesn't notice.

SHAGGY

He took off with a little girl in a blue cap. I think it was his niece, or something.

SHELLY

Cerulean blue.

MARCUS

What?

SHELLY

Her cap was cerulean blue. She was a big Santa fan.

MARCUS

Huh. You get her name?

SHELLY

Yeah. Her mom was going out with our cameraman.

Shaggy puts his hand on her elbow.

SHAGGY

Who are you anyway?

Marcus forces an ugly smile.

MARCUS

I'm a detective.

Shaggy and Shelly narrow their eyes with suspicion.

SHELLY

Yeah? Where's your badge?

Marcus pulls a switchblade from his pocket and snicks it open. He keeps the knife against his pant leg so only Shelly and Shaggy can see it.

They stare at the knife in shock.

MARCUS

Here's my fucking badge. So you gonna tell me what I want to know? Or do I gotta use my badge?

SHELLY

Keebler. Her last name is Keebler.

MARCUS

What's her first name?

SHELLY

I don't remember. I swear!

INT. JAKE'S CAR - DAY

Natalie sobs against the window in the passenger seat while Jake navigates Christmas Eve traffic.

JAKE

I'm sorry, Natalie.

He touches her arm and she pulls away.

NATALIE

Shut up. I hate you.

Jake flinches.

JAKE

Come on. I didn't mean to kill her.

NATALIE

You did so! You hated her!

JAKE

If I hadn't stopped her--

NATALIE

--then I'd still have a mom!

Jake looks out the windshield. He opens his mouth to speak, then closes it. He shakes his head.

JAKE

Fine. I'll take you to your step-father's and you never have to see me again.

NATALIE

Good.

Jake turns the wheel to make a right turn. He brakes to allow a crowd of pedestrians to cross in front of him.

He looks ahead through the pedestrians at a brownstone building along the rundown street. His eyes shift to a black sedan parked across the street from the building.

EXT. JAKE'S APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY

Inside the black sedan, Scarred Thug looks up at the brownstone building. Jimmy watches an ATTRACTIVE WOMAN walk by as he listens to music on his MP3 player.

INT. JAKE'S CAR - DAY

Jake stares at Jimmy. His gaze darts around to look at all the pedestrians and loiterers on the street.

Natalie notices his expression and looks out the windshield.

NATALIE

What?

Jake turns the wheel to the left and drives off without making the turn. He passes a liquor store and turns right.

EXT. LIQUOR STORE PARKING LOT - DAY

Jake pulls in behind the liquor store and parks.

Broken beer bottles litter the ground and garbage bursts out of bags next to an overflowing dumpster.

INT. JAKE'S CAR - DAY

Jake switches off the engine. Natalie sits up and looks around.

NATALIE
What are you doing?

JAKE
Someone's watching my apartment.

NATALIE
So?

JAKE
And there's something in there
that I need.

NATALIE
Oh.

Natalie surveys the unsavory parking lot and creeps closer to Jake across the seat.

JAKE
And I want you to get it.

NATALIE
You mean walk back there?

JAKE
Look, I know this is a scary
neighborhood, but I really...

Natalie scoots away from Jake.

NATALIE
I'm not scared.

Jake searches her eyes. He nods and takes a key off his ring.

JAKE
Okay. Go around the front of the
liquor store and it's down that
way...

He points.

JAKE

...on the other side of the street. It's number four twenty and my apartment is two-oh-three. Got that?

Natalie cranes her head to see, but all she can see is the parking lot.

JAKE

I need you to get the black metal box under my mattress. It's not under the bed; it's between the mattress and box spring. You know what that is?

NATALIE

Duh.

JAKE

Okay, sorry. Anyway, just get it and come right back.

NATALIE

You're not a F.B.I. guy, are you?

JAKE

No, I'm not. Can you do this for me?

NATALIE

What about the guys casing the joint?

JAKE

Staking it out. Jesus, you watch too much TV. Don't look for them. Just look at where you're going, or else they'll know you know they're there.

NATALIE

Oh, yeah.

She narrows her eyes with suspicion.

NATALIE

And after I get your stupid box,
you'll take me to my daddy's?

JAKE

Of course.

NATALIE

Fine.

She snatches the key and opens the door.

Jake watches her trot across the parking lot. He opens his door.

JAKE

Hey, Nat.

She turns around.

NATALIE

What?

Jake reaches across the seat, grabs the cerulean blue cap, and holds it out the window.

JAKE

Wear this. It's cold.

She heaves a huge sigh of exasperation, trudges back, and takes it from him.

She walks away with the hat in her hand.

JAKE

It won't do you much good if you
don't wear it.

She stuffs it in her pocket.

INT. JIMMY'S CAR - DAY

Scarred Thug sits behind the wheel and blows on his hands while Jimmy scans Jake's apartment building from the passenger seat.

Their breath makes clouds in the air.

SCARRED THUG

We should be waiting inside.

Jimmy pulls out his earbuds.

JIMMY

What?

SCARRED THUG

I said we should be waiting
inside.

JIMMY

He'd make us, stupid. We sit here
and freeze.

Jimmy's gaze wanders over the half-dozen people meandering
along the sidewalks.

EXT. JAKE'S APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY

Natalie looks at the addresses as she approaches Jake's
brownstone.

Inside the car across the street, Jimmy idly watches her as
she mounts the stairs and disappears inside.

INT. JAKE'S APARTMENT - DAY

Natalie lets herself into the dark apartment and closes the
door behind her.

She stands in a tiny living room with a chair and a
television. Off to one side is a miniature kitchen.

She goes through the one doorway.

INT. JAKE'S BEDROOM - DAY

The bedroom is even darker, but Natalie leaves the lights
off.

She goes straight to the bed and heaves at the mattress.
She manages to get one arm underneath. She feels around
but finds nothing.

She withdraws her arm and crosses to the other side. She reaches under the mattress again. She pulls out the flat, black, metal box. She grins with triumph.

As she comes around the bed, a glint of sunlight that has found its way around the heavy curtains falls onto the picture of Penny and Young Jake on the night stand.

Natalie picks it up and looks at the old photo. She tucks it inside her coat, and the box under her arm.

EXT. JAKE'S APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY

Natalie balances the black box as she maneuvers out of the front door.

She pulls up her jacket and hunches her shoulders. A gust of wind chases bits of trash past her on the sidewalk.

She stops and sets the box down. She keeps her foot on it while she takes out her blue cap and pulls it over her ears.

INT. JIMMY'S CAR - DAY

Jimmy chuckles as he watches Natalie's antics with the box and hat.

SCARRED THUG

What's so funny?

JIMMY

Nothing.

His cell phone rings and he flips it open.

JIMMY

Yeah?

EXT. MALL - DAY

Marcus and Ugly Thug head into the parking lot. Marcus talks on his cell phone.

MARCUS

Got some info.

INTERCUT JIMMY AND MARCUS

JIMMY

Yeah?

MARCUS

Jake is with a kid, a little girl.
She's wearing a blue cap.

Down the street, Natalie disappears around the corner with the box.

Jimmy jerks upright in his seat.

JIMMY

Blue?

MARCUS

Yeah. Cereal blue, whatever that is.

JIMMY

Shit! She came out of Jake's place with something: his money, I think.

He snaps his fingers at Scarred Thug.

JIMMY

Start the car.

He talks into the phone again.

JIMMY

I'm on it, Marcus.

He folds up the phone.

Scarred Thug stares at him.

JIMMY

Start the engine, you stupid fuck!

INT. JAKE'S CAR - DAY

Natalie slides into her seat and pulls the door closed.
She hands Jake the black box.

JAKE

Good girl.

NATALIE

What's in it?

Jake opens the box to show her the money and extracts a piece of paper.

JAKE

These guys can create a whole new identity for me.

NATALIE

So you could go into hiding?

JAKE

Yeah.

NATALIE

From the mob?

JAKE

You're too smart.

He pokes through the bundles of bills.

JAKE

But I don't have enough money now.

He forces a smile at her.

JAKE

Guess I'll just have to take my chances, huh?

Natalie takes the picture from under her coat.

NATALIE

I got this too.

Jake's face softens as he looks at the picture.

NATALIE

What was her name?

JAKE

Penny.

He works his mouth as he struggles to express his feelings.

JAKE

Thanks for getting this, Nat.

NATALIE

It doesn't mean I like you again.

Jake hides a smile as he starts the car.

EXT. LIQUOR STORE - DAY

Jake's car pulls out of the liquor store parking lot and turns right, heading down State Street.

Natalie is in the passenger seat, the cerulean blue cap prominently on her head.

Behind them, Jimmy's car pulls up at the intersection. Inside the car, Jimmy leans forward and stares at Jake.

INT. JIMMY'S CAR - DAY

Scarred Thug hunches over the wheel as he merges into traffic, following Jake's car at a discreet distance.

Jimmy punches numbers on his cell-phone and holds it to his ear.

JIMMY

Marcus. We're on 'em. They're crossing the State Street bridge.

INT. MR. ERASMUS'S OFFICE - DAY

Mr. Erasmus works at his desk. Bald Thug and Hairy Thug guard the door.

A knock sounds and Bald Thug opens the door. Marcus hurries in.

MR. ERASMUS

What do you have, Marcus?

MARCUS

Jimmy spotted Jake. He's heading into Jersey.

Mr. Erasmus gives Marcus a victorious smile.

MARCUS

There's something else. Our cop just faxed us a police report. A woman's been killed and her kid is missing.

MR. ERASMUS

So?

MARCUS

The woman's name is Abigail Keebler.

Mr. Erasmus narrows his gaze.

MR. ERASMUS

Why the fuck would Jake kill the kid's mom? What about his stupid rule?

Marcus opens the thick file of faxes on the desk.

MARCUS

I don't know, but the kid's been in foster care.

MR. ERASMUS

Why would Jake give a shit?

Mr. Erasmus raises his eyebrow at the file.

MR. ERASMUS

All that's on the kid?

MARCUS

Her, and some guy who worked with Jake at the mall. He was screwing the mom and might have had his eye on the kid. Got a pretty decent record of sex offense complaints. Never convicted, though.

MR. ERASMUS

Is there a dad in the picture?

MARCUS

Real dad's dead. There was a stepfather but they got divorced a few years ago. Seems there was a big custody battle over the kid.

MR. ERASMUS

Anything on him?

Marcus opens up the folder and flips through a couple of faxed pages.

MARCUS

Naw. Seems okay. He just wanted custody of the kid.

Mr. Erasmus chews the inside of his cheek as he thinks.

MR. ERASMUS

Keep reading. Maybe there's something in there.

Marcus nods and pulls up a chair.

EXT. STATE ST. - DAY

Jake's car navigates Christmas Eve traffic in the right lane.

Five cars back, in the left lane, Jimmy's car tails Jake's.

Christmas lights reflect off all the cars.

INT. JIMMY'S CAR - DAY

Scarred Thug hunches over the wheel while Jimmy squints through the windshield.

SCARRED THUG

Looks like he's heading to Marlton. And then maybe the turnpike?

JIMMY

No shit, Sherlock.

SCARRED THUG

Or maybe he'll take the highway
south.

JIMMY

Fuck.

Up ahead, Jake makes a right-hand turn.

Scarred Thug checks traffic.

EXT. STATE ST. - DAY

Jimmy's car swerves into the right lane and cuts in front
of traffic. Horns blare as Jimmy's car takes the corner
onto Marlton.

INT. JAKE'S CAR - DAY

Jake watches in his rearview mirror as Jimmy's car pulls
into traffic a block behind him.

Natalie watches him.

NATALIE

What's wrong?

JAKE

Looks like Jimmy's smarter than I
thought.

NATALIE

Huh?

JAKE

A guy I know. He's tailing us.

Natalie turns and crouches on her knees to look out the
back window.

NATALIE

Where?

JAKE

Better sit down. If he sees you
looking, he'll know I spotted him.

NATALIE

Oh. Right.

She turns around and faces forward.

NATALIE

What are we going to do?

JAKE

I don't know yet, but I can't take you to your dad's until I shake these guys.

He glances at her.

JAKE

Buckle up, Nat. It'll keep you safe.

She complies with an exaggerated sigh.

Jake checks his rear-view mirror and sees a city bus approaching behind him.

He sees a bus-stop up ahead. About a dozen people, bundled up against the cold, mill about and stamp their feet.

Jake glances into his mirror and sees Jimmy's car disappear behind the bus.

Now the bus is between Jake and Jimmy.

Jake spins the wheel to the right.

EXT. MARLTON AVE - DAY

Jake's car, driving ahead of the bus, turns right at the street before the bus stop.

Jimmy's car pulls into the left lane and passes the bus just before it reaches the intersection.

INT. JAKE'S CAR - DAY

JAKE

Shit. Sorry.

NATALIE

What?

Jake points at a "No Through Street" sign.

NATALIE

Can we go back?

JAKE

No time.

INT. JIMMY'S CAR - DAY

Jimmy cranes his head to look at the traffic ahead as the side of the bus fills the window next to him.

JIMMY

Where'd they go?

EXT. MARLTON AVE - DAY

The bus pulls over and its doors open.

Jimmy's car drives ahead.

EXT. RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOOD - DAY

Jake drives past elaborately decorated houses.

The light gray daylight gives over to dark gray twilight. Some of the houses have their lights on.

INT. JIMMY'S CAR- DAY

Jimmy twists to look behind as Scarred Thug turns the car.

JIMMY

They turned at the bus stop. Turn around!

EXT. MARLTON AVE - DAY

Tires squeal as Scarred Thug pulls Jimmy's car into a tight U-turn.

INT. JAKE'S CAR - DAY

Jake peers at the houses around them.

Natalie watches a six-foot Santa wave from the roof of a house. At the head of his sleigh, Rudolph's nose blinks on and off.

NATALIE

What are you looking for?

JAKE

That.

He spins the wheel.

EXT. RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOOD - DAY

Jake pulls into the empty driveway of a dark house. The animated deer on the lawn stand frozen in position. The lights around the porch wait for electricity to light them up.

INT. JAKE'S CAR - DAY

Jake throws the car into park, pops the trunk and opens his door.

JAKE

Stay here. And don't move.

NATALIE

Whatcha doing?

But he is gone.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - DAY

Jake hurries to the trunk, hauls out the car cover, and unfurls it over the car. He slams the trunk, then pulls the cover down over the car's four corners.

INT. JAKE'S CAR - DAY

Jake lets the cover drop over his door as he gets in and closes it.

The cover shuts out the waning daylight.

Natalie unbuckles her belt and climbs into the back seat.

NATALIE

This is cool. It's like a cave.

She bounces back there.

JAKE

Hey. Don't do that.

NATALIE

Why?

JAKE

Somebody will see the car rocking.

She freezes mid-bounce.

NATALIE

Sorry.

Jake settles down with his head back against the seat and closes his eyes.

JAKE

We have to hide out here awhile
and we have to be quiet.

Natalie stretches out across the back seat.

NATALIE

Can I lie down here?

JAKE

Sure. Just try to keep still and
don't make any noise.

NATALIE

Okay.

She lies on her back with her hands behind her head and stares at the ceiling.

EXT. RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOOD - DAY

Jimmy's car drives down the street.

It passes Jake's car in the driveway, under the car cover.

INT. JIMMY'S CAR - DAY

Jimmy peers out first the right side, and then the left.

JIMMY
I don't see him.

SCARRED THUG
He's gotta be here somewhere.

JIMMY
No shit.

A trickle of sweat runs down his temple.

INT. JAKE'S CAR - DAY

Under the cover, Jake's cell-phone rings.

JAKE
Shit. I mean crap. Oh, never
mind.

He digs in his pocket for his cell-phone.

NATALIE
What's wrong?

JAKE
Jimmy might hear this.

He finally gets the phone out and checks the ID.

INT. MR. ERASMUS'S OFFICE - DAY

Mr. Erasmus smiles his cold smile as he listens on his cell-phone.

MR. ERASMUS
Come out, come out, where ever you
are.

EXT. RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOOD - DAY

From under the cover of the car in the driveway, the cell-phone rings faintly.

At the end of the block, Jimmy's car turns around.

INT. JAKE'S CAR - DAY

Jake turns off the ringing phone.

NATALIE
You gonna answer that?

JAKE
Nope.

NATALIE
Who was it?

JAKE
Nobody.

Natalie sits up carefully so as not to rock the car.

NATALIE
A bad man?

Jake turns his head and gives her a wry smile.

JAKE
Not much gets by you, does it?

NATALIE
No. So why didn't you answer?

JAKE
Don't ever let the bad guys make
the rules.

NATALIE
What are you going to do after you
drop me off at my daddy's?

JAKE
I didn't think you cared.

NATALIE
Are you going to go back to being
a hitman?

JAKE

How do you know what I do?

NATALIE

You work for the mob.

JAKE

Too smart. No, I'm done with that.

NATALIE

Why? You don't like it?

JAKE

I used to not mind it.

Natalie plays with her fingers.

Jake turns his head to watch her in the dim light.

NATALIE

How come you don't work for them anymore?

JAKE

The mob boss isn't happy with me.

NATALIE

Really? What did you do? Whack someone you weren't supposed to?

Jake gives Nat a wry smile.

JAKE

You could say that.

NATALIE

Who did you whack?

JAKE

His son.

Natalie leaves off playing with her fingers and stares at Jake, her eyes getting wider and wider.

NATALIE

Why?

JAKE

He was a dangerous psycho. The world's better off without him.

NATALIE

But I bet his father loved him anyway, right?

JAKE

Right.

Natalie heaves a big sigh.

JAKE

What's wrong?

NATALIE

The mob boss's son was lucky.

Jake reaches to put his hand on her arm.

JAKE

Don't worry, honey. Your step-daddy loves you too. I never even had someone like him.

She pulls her arm away from him and turns her head away.

INT. JIMMY'S CAR - NIGHT

Jimmy pounds on the dashboard.

The sun has set and all the street lights have come on.

JIMMY

Shit. This can't be happening.

He gets out his cell-phone and flips it open.

Scarred Thug raises a quizzical eyebrow at him.

JIMMY

Go back to the office. I gotta call Marcus.

INT. JAKE'S CAR - NIGHT

Jake looks at his watch.

JAKE

Hey, Nat.

NATALIE

Yeah?

JAKE

Time to go.

She sits up, rubbing her eyes.

NATALIE

I fell asleep.

Flashing red and blue lights cut through the car cover. Natalie and Jake stare at each other.

They hear a tap on the window.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - NIGHT

Jake emerges from the covered car and pushes the cover back. The POLICEMAN watches Natalie crawl across the seat to the driver's side and peer up at him.

The flashing lights of the cruiser wash across their faces.

JAKE

Somebody saw us?

POLICEMAN

Concerned neighbor. You mind telling me what's going on sir?

Jake stares at the policeman.

JAKE

This isn't what it looks like.

POLICEMAN

And what is that?

Still on her hands and knees on the seat, Natalie pipes up.

NATALIE

I feel lots better, daddy. Can we go now?

Jake stares at Natalie and rearranges his expression just as the policeman glances at him.

Natalie crawls out of the car and puts her arm around Jake's waist.

NATALIE

I got carsick, so my daddy made a little cave for me, so I could lie down.

She smiles up the policeman with just a hint of flirtatiousness.

The policeman squints at her suspiciously, then turns to Jake.

POLICEMAN

Is that really what happened?

JAKE

We're not breaking any laws, are we?

POLICEMAN

There's trespassing, for one.

JAKE

Look, all we wanted was to pull in somewhere dark and quiet for a while and we didn't have a lot of time to pick a place.

The policeman splits his skeptical glare between Jake and Nat.

She gives him another smile, but a less enthusiastic one.

The policeman looks back at Jake.

POLICEMAN

Carsick, huh?

Jake shrugs.

Natalie's smile drops off her face. She tugs at Jake's coat.

NATALIE

Daddy, can we go see Mommy now?

The policeman looks another question at Jake.

JAKE

I'm trying to get her back to her mother's for Christmas. She's been with me for the last two weeks.

POLICEMAN

You two are quite a team.

JAKE

Come on. It's Christmas Eve.

The policeman taps his nightstick reflectively on his thigh.

Jake waits while the cop comes to a decision.

POLICEMAN

Just get on the road and don't come back here tonight.

JAKE

Don't worry about that.

POLICEMAN

Okay. Get outta here before I change my mind.

He returns to his cruiser while Jake bundles the car cover and tosses it in the trunk.

Natalie scrambles back into the passenger seat and grins at him.

INT. MR. ERASMUS'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Marcus talks on his cell-phone and keeps one arm across the file on the desk.

MARCUS

You're kidding...No, just get back here, Jimmy.

He folds up his phone and looks into the glowering face of his boss.

MARCUS

He lost them on Marlton

Mr. Erasmus slams his fist on the desk.

MR. ERASMUS

Fuck!

MARCUS

But I think I know where they're going.

Mr. Erasmus leans forward in anticipation.

MARCUS

Doesn't Mickey live in Elizabeth?

MR. ERASMUS

Yeah. Why?

Marcus turns the file and pushes it towards his boss.

MARCUS

So does the kid's step-dad.

A slow smile spreads across Mr. Erasmus's face.

MR. ERASMUS

Looks like Santa gave me my Christmas wish after all. Call Mickey and then get a team together. You're going on a little trip.

Marcus flips open his cell phone.

MARCUS

Yes, sir.

EXT. MR. ERASMUS'S MANSION - NIGHT

The garage door opens with a low purr and two black sedans pull out.

The lead one drives under a streetlight. The light washes over Marcus's face as he peers into the darkness.

INT. JAKE'S CAR - NIGHT

Natalie sleeps with her head on Jake's arm.

Outside the snow has thickened into a light storm.

Jake's headlights sweep past a sign that says: NEW YORK 15 MILES.

EXT. NEW JERSEY TURNPIKE - NIGHT

The two black sedans navigate the interchange from SR-73 onto the New Jersey Turnpike.

The pass a sign that tells them: NEW YORK 85 MILES.

EXT. JONATHAN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

A Grinch in a Santa hat decorates the yard and lights frame the roof, but otherwise the house is quiet.

Elsewhere on the street, a party is in full swing. Music and laughter issue from a nearby house. Cars line the street.

A single black sedan purrs down the street and parks between two other cars across the street from the Grinch.

INT. JAKE'S CAR - NIGHT

Jake navigates a residential neighborhood at low speed.

He peers into the snow to read addresses and checks the one he's seeking against the pink envelope in his hand.

He nudges Natalie.

JAKE

Natalie.

NATALIE

Huh? What?

JAKE

We're almost there. Do you know
what your dad's house looks like?

Natalie stares into space as she wakes up and considers the question.

NATALIE

He said he had a big Grinch in his
front yard.

EXT. JONATHAN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

A light snow falls around the two-story suburban house.

The Grinch grins from the snow-covered lawn.

Down the street, the party is still going strong.

Jake's car drives up and parks in front of Jonathan's house, across the street from the black sedan.

INT. JAKE'S CAR - NIGHT

Jake peers out at the number on the door to Jonathan's house. Natalie sits next to him, her blue cap on her head.

Natalie yawns.

JAKE

You've had a big day.

She nods with sleepy eyes.

JAKE

Well, it's over now. We're here.

He opens his door.

NATALIE

What are you doing?

JAKE

I'm going to make sure you get in
safely.

NATALIE

I can go by myself.

JAKE

Geez, Natalie, you'll be rid of me in about five minutes. I just want to make sure you're okay.

She glares at him.

JAKE

Zip up. It's cold outside.

He reaches for her hand and she jerks it away.

EXT. JONATHAN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Jake and Natalie trudge through the snow up to the front door. Jake holds Natalie's hand. He presses the doorbell.

The door opens, bathing Jake and Natalie in warm light. LINDA (33), a good-looking woman with blonde hair, looks at Jake.

LINDA

Hello?

JAKE

We're looking for Jonathan Sheridan.

LINDA

Jonnie's not back yet.

JAKE

And you are?

Linda narrows her eyes with suspicion.

LINDA

His fiancé, Linda. Who are you?

Her gaze drops to Natalie huddled against Jake's leg.

LINDA

What's going on?

JAKE

I'm Jake and this is Nat.

Linda stares at Natalie.

LINDA
Nat? You mean Natalie Keebler,
Jonnie's step-daughter?

Her face softens a bit when she looks at Natalie again.

LINDA
You'd better come in. It's cold
outside.

INT. JONATHAN'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Linda shuts the door behind Jake and Natalie and folds her arms across her chest.

LINDA
What's this all about?

EXT. JONATHAN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Snow dusts the black sedan parked across the street.
The driver is a shadowy shape behind the wheel.

INT. JONATHAN'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Linda regards Jake with her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

LINDA
So what happened to Abby?

JAKE
She's no longer able to care for
Natalie.

LINDA
Last time they put her in foster
care.

JAKE
I, uh, circumvented the system.

LINDA

Oh? But how do Jonnie and I know the system won't find out? That won't help Natalie.

JAKE

I don't think anyone's going to be looking for her.

Linda frowns.

LINDA

I don't know. It's not that Jonnie wouldn't love for Natalie to be here, but he'll want to do what's best for her.

JAKE

What's best for her is to be with someone who loves her.

Linda looks at Natalie and smiles.

LINDA

I'll call him and let him know what's going on. Why don't you come on back and I'll make some hot chocolate?

Jake removes his coat and hangs it on a hook beside the door. Natalie leaves hers on.

They follow Linda out of the room.

INT. JONATHAN'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

Linda picks up the phone and dials.

Jake and Nat take seats at an island in the middle of the kitchen.

While Linda waits with the phone to her ear, she opens a cupboard and gets out some packets of instant hot chocolate powder.

LINDA

Jonnie? You'll never guess who showed up.

She fills a measuring cup with water and puts it in the microwave.

LINDA
Your step-daughter, Natalie! And
there's some guy with her.

She presses buttons and the microwave comes on with a hum.

LINDA
I don't know. I think he's
dropping her off.

She gets some mugs out of the drainer and holds the phone with her head while she rips open the packets.

LINDA
I'll see you soon. Love you too.

She hangs up.

JAKE
So when will Jonathan be back?

LINDA
Soon. He's not far.

NATALIE
Where did he go?

The microwave beeps.

EXT. JONATHAN'S STREET - NIGHT

Snow tires covered with heavy chains churn through the thick snow that covers the road.

Two black sedans creep down the street. Their headlights switch off as they approach Jonathan's house.

INT. JONATHAN'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

Linda watches Natalie slurp up her hot chocolate.

Jake stands in the doorway and glances into the living room behind him.

EXT. JONATHAN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

The two cars park behind the snow-covered sedan down the street.

Marcus, Jimmy, Scarred Thug, Ugly Thug, BEEFY THUG and TWITCHY THUG exit the vehicles. All wear dark, heavy coats.

The door to the snow-covered car opens and TALL THUG emerges. He walks over to Marcus.

TALL THUG
You're Marcus, right?

Marcus nods.

Tall Thug nods at Jonathan's house.

TALL THUG
He's still inside.

Marcus points at Scarred Thug and Ugly Thug, and jerks his thumb at Jonathan's house.

Scarred Thug and Ugly thug draw silenced pistols from under their coats, and move quickly but quietly through the snow up to the front door.

The other mobsters follow at a distance.

Scarred Thug lifts the doormat and picks up a key. He quietly inserts the key in the lock and turns it.

INT. JONATHAN'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The key rattles in the lock.

INT. JONATHAN'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

Jake jerks his head toward the front door. His hand moves toward the gun under his jacket.

LINDA
Ah, good. Jonnie's here.

Jake relaxes and eases his hand away from his gun. He turns back to face Linda.

EXT. JONATHAN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Scarred thug finally gets the key to turn. Ugly thug pulls the slide of his pistol to chamber a round with a metallic snap.

INT. JONATHAN'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

Jake hears the snap of the cycled pistol through the door. His eyes open wide.

He snatches his own pistol from under his jacket and levels it at the door.

JAKE

Linda, get Nat and stay behind me.

INT. JONATHAN'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Scarred Thug and Ugly Thug burst in, pistols held at the ready.

Jake fires two roaring shots from the kitchen. Both thugs drop dead.

EXT. JONATHAN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Jimmy and Tall Thug flatten themselves against the wall on either side of the door.

JIMMY

Idiots.

INT. JONATHAN'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

Jake peers around the doorway to the open front door.

JAKE

We can get out through the back.
Just do what I say.

He hears the soft metallic click of a pistol being cocked.
He whirls around, pistol raised.

Linda crouches behind Natalie, her arm around the girl's
neck and a small revolver pressed against her temple.
Linda looks at Jake with a grim smile.

Natalie stares ahead, wild-eyed.

NATALIE

Jake?

LINDA

Put the gun down, Jake. Nice and
slow.

Jake turns his open palms toward Linda and slowly lowers
his pistol to the floor. He stands with his hands raised.

LINDA

(shouts)

I've got him, boys.

Natalie struggles in Linda's grip.

JAKE

Who are you?

Linda keeps one arm firmly around Natalie while she removes
her blond wig with the other.

Wavy red hair tumbles down. Her resemblance to Kyle and
Mr. Erasmus is striking.

MICKEY

Mickey Erasmus.

Jake shakes his head in dismay.

JAKE

Tricky Mickey. I thought you were
a guy.

MICKEY

Daddy likes to keep it that way.

JAKE

Was there really a girlfriend?

MICKEY

Yeah. Her and Jonathan are both
out in the shed. Popsicle and
Momsicle.

Jimmy, Marcus, Tall Thug, and Beefy Thug enter, weapons at
the ready.

JAKE

(to Natalie)

I'm so sorry, honey.

Natalie bursts into tears. Jake gazes at her with sad
eyes.

Mickey nods at Jimmy.

MICKEY

He killed my baby brother, Jimmy.
Give him a good one.

Jimmy drives his fist into Jake's kidney. Jake grunts in
pain and collapses to his knees. Jimmy punches him in the
jaw, knocking him to his hands and knees. He kicks Jake in
the side, toppling him over.

EXT. JONATHAN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Snow swirls down.

Marcus opens the trunk of one of the black sedans. Jimmy
heaves Jake's battered and unconscious body into the
spacious trunk. Beefy Thug and Twitchy Thug stand nearby.

Mickey stands to the side holding Natalie by the collar of
her coat. She is dressed for the weather and holds her
revolver.

Marcus nods at Mickey. Mickey shoves Natalie toward the
car.

MICKEY

Get in, kid.

Natalie glances back sullenly but she walks to the car. As
she starts to climb into the trunk, Jimmy lifts her and
tosses her inside. She gives a small cry of dismay.

Marcus slams the trunk shut.

INT. BLACK SEDAN TRUNK - NIGHT

In the darkness of the trunk, Natalie listens as muffled footsteps crunch through the snow. Car doors open and slam shut. The engine starts up.

Natalie clutches Jake's arm and reaches out to touch his face.

NATALIE
(loud whisper)
Jake! Are you okay? Wake up.
Please wake up....

Jake remains motionless. Natalie curls up close to him. She grimaces as she struggles to keep from sobbing. She bites her small fist.

NATALIE
Don't die, Jake. Please don't
die.

The trunk jostles as the car drives off. Natalie takes a deep, calming breath.

She reaches down to fumble Jake's belt knife free. She opens her coat and tucks the knife into a breast pocket.

INT. BLACK SEDAN - NIGHT

Mickey sits in the back seat while Jimmy drives and Marcus rides shotgun.

Jimmy yawns and looks out at the road ahead with tired eyes. He plugs in his earbuds and bobs his head in time to the music.

EXT. MR. ERASMUS'S MANSION - NIGHT

The gate opens automatically as the two black sedans approach. They drive up to the large, old-fashioned brick mansion. The white lights glitter merrily.

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE GARAGE - NIGHT

Jimmy and Marcus drag Jake down the hallway, one of his arms over each of their shoulders.

Behind them, Mickey drags Natalie by her collar. Natalie stumbles, barely keeping on her feet.

The thugs turn and drag Jake through an open doorway.

INT. GARAGE - NIGHT

The black luxury car still sits in its parking place.

The thugs drag Jake to the same chair that once held Hiram and drop him into it.

Jimmy and Marcus take off their coats and hang them on hooks next to several other sweaters and jackets, including a red sweatshirt with a hood.

Marcus tears Jake's shirt off his body.

Jimmy straps Jake to the chair with duct tape.

The Torturer stands by in his blood-spattered butcher's apron. He grins as he watches Jake through fogged glasses.

Marcus glances at Mickey, who drags Natalie over, still in her coat.

MARCUS

She don't need to see this, Miz
Erasmus.

MICKEY

Okay. Take her to the library.
You got any extra tape?

MARCUS

You want me to tape her? She's
just a little girl.

MICKEY

She's with Jake. Tape her up.

Jimmy tosses the roll of duct tape to Marcus.

Mickey pushes Natalie over to Marcus and goes to the door.

MICKEY

I'll let Daddy know we're ready.

She leaves.

Marcus tosses the tape back to Jimmy.

MARCUS

You do it.

JIMMY

But she said...

MARCUS

And I'm saying you do it.

Jimmy glares at Natalie. Marcus shoves her over and Jimmy yanks her out of the room.

She cries out in pain.

INT. LIBRARY - NIGHT

Jimmy drags Natalie into the room and shoves her into a chair.

He draws his revolver from under his jacket.

JIMMY

Sit there and don't move, or I'll
put a bullet through your head.
Got that?

Jimmy places his revolver on a nearby side table and pulls a length of duct tape from the roll.

He tapes Natalie's arms together at her wrists and her legs at her ankles.

JIMMY

Keep your mouth shut and get some
sleep. It's going to be a while.

Jimmy pulls up a chair and sits across from her, placing the revolver in his lap. He takes the MP3 player from his

pocket, plugs in his earbuds, and turns up the volume. He slouches down and crosses his arms.

His head nods to the beat.

Natalie looks at the oak shelves that line the room, the rows and rows of books, and the heavy tables with comfortable chairs for reading.

Jimmy yawns.

INT. MR. ERASMUS'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Mr. Erasmus sits at his desk.

Bald Thug stands before the door. A knock sounds and he turns and opens the door.

Mickey comes in.

MR. ERASMUS

Baby.

MICKEY

Daddy.

Mr. Erasmus stands and comes around his desk. He and Mickey clasp each other in an affectionate embrace.

He releases her and turns her around to remove her coat, which he hands off to Bald Thug.

Mr. Erasmus runs his eyes appreciatively up and down his daughter's body.

MR. ERASMUS

You look good.

MICKEY

Thanks, Daddy.

Mr. Erasmus waves at Bald Thug, who leaves with the coat. He puts his arm around Mickey's shoulders.

MR. ERASMUS

Shall we?

MICKEY

Absolutely.

She follows her father behind his desk, to the portrait of Lucrece Borgia.

Mr. Erasmus touches the nipple and the portrait swings aside to reveal a large wall safe.

Mickey licks her lips as he dials in the combination.

MICKEY

You're going to make him hurt like
Kyle did?

Mr. Erasmus smiles grimly as he opens the door.

The safe contains an assault rifle, several pistols, an assortment of knives, bundles of money and expensive jewelry.

MR. ERASMUS

No.

He pushes aside a stack of cash to reach into the back.

MR. ERASMUS

I'm going to make him hurt like I
did.

He brings out a rolled leather bundle and unrolls it on the desk, revealing an assortment of metal objects.

Between a speculum and a hand-drill is a potato peeler. He slides it out and holds it up.

Mickey smiles and her eyes light up.

MICKEY

Oh, she's not going to enjoy that.

INT. LIBRARY - NIGHT

Jimmy yawns.

Natalie closes her eyes as if to block out the world.

Jimmy's eyelids droop. He blinks a couple times to keep them open, but they win the battle and slide shut. His breathing slows and deepens.

Natalie's eyes snap open, fixed on Jimmy's face. Her gaze drops to the revolver lying in his lap.

Slowly, quietly, she unzips her coat and draws Jake's belt knife out of her pocket. She maneuvers it to her wrists and saws at the duct tape.

Her hands free, she lifts her feet and cuts away the duct tape around her ankles.

Natalie slides out of her chair. The chair creaks softly and she pauses, but Jimmy's eyes remain closed. The muffled music plays through his earbuds.

Natalie steps away from the chair, toward the doorway.

She glances again at the gun.

INT. GARAGE - NIGHT

A glass of water splashes into Jake's bloodied face. He blinks awake, coughing.

The Torturer leans close with a beatific smile.

Jake is stripped to the waist. He looks around. He sees Marcus leaning against a wall.

Marcus gives Jake a cold smile.

MARCUS

Morning, Sunshine.

The Torturer straightens and crosses his arms. He continues to smile.

JAKE

Where's Nat?

MARCUS

Safe. For now.

Jake twists his head to take in as much of the room as he can. He glances at the Torturer and then returns his gaze to Marcus.

JAKE

Hiram?

Marcus chuckles.

The Torturer giggles like a school-girl.

MARCUS

Hiram had his fun. This is about you.

He gazes at Jake and slowly shakes his head.

MARCUS

What the fuck were you thinking, killing Mister Erasmus's son? You got a death wish, Jake?

JAKE

Kyle degraded and cut up homeless people.

MARCUS

What the hell do you care?

Jake grits his teeth.

JAKE

I couldn't protect Penny from people like him, but at least I got one of them off the streets.

MARCUS

Who the fuck is Penny?

Natalie steps into the room. She holds Jimmy's large revolver in both hands and points it at the Torturer.

Marcus stares at her.

The big gun shakes in her hand as she steps further into the garage.

JAKE

Nat! Are you okay?

Natalie steadies her aim.

NATALIE
Stay away from Jake!

The Torturer backs up near Marcus. He bumps into his equipment cart covered with sharp and spiky implements.

Marcus stands fully upright.

MARCUS
Take it easy, kid.

Natalie shifts her aim to Marcus.

Marcus holds up his hands in a placating gesture. He frowns uncertainly at Natalie.

Natalie keeps the revolver pointed at Marcus as she sidesteps over to Jake.

She awkwardly holds the revolver with one hand as she fishes Jake's belt knife out of her pocket. She carefully cuts at the tape holding Jake's forearm to the chair's armrest.

NATALIE
(whispers)
I'm sorry, Jake.

JAKE
You're doing fine, honey.

The knife slips and cuts Natalie's hand. She cries out and reflexively pulls the trigger. The revolver fires.

The bullet barely nicks the Torturer's arm. He stares at the tiny injury and screams like a little girl.

Startled from the blast, Natalie drops the pistol and the knife.

The knife falls to the ground near Jake.

Marcus lunges at Natalie.

Jake heaves upward with his arm and rips through the rest of the tape. He reaches down and scoops up the knife.

As Marcus reaches past Jake to grab Natalie, Jake plunges the knife into his stomach and tears upward. Marcus doubles over and collapses on the floor.

Jake uses the bloody knife to slash free his legs.

The Torturer grabs an ugly-looking blade from the cart and comes up behind Jake.

Natalie screams.

Jake lunges forward out of the chair just as the Torturer slashes at his neck. The blade misses.

With his other arm still taped to the armrest, Jake whirls around and smashes the chair across the Torturer's head.

The chair breaks apart and the Torturer sprawls across his equipment cart.

The Torturer rolls off the cart and falls to the floor. Sharp and spiky implements protrude from his chest. Red stains spread across his apron.

The Torturer gasps his last breath.

Jake cuts himself free from the remains of the chair taped to his arm.

Bald Thug, pistol in hand, walks in through the doorway ahead of Hairy thug, Mickey and Mr. Erasmus.

Bald Thug stares at Jake. He raises his pistol.

Jake hurls his knife.

The blade embeds in Bald Thug's neck. He clutches at his spurting artery and topples backward against Hairy Thug.

MR. ERASMUS

Mickey, run!

Mr. Erasmus turns and dashes down the hallway toward the library.

Hairy Thug shoves Bald Thug's body out of his way.

Jake dives for the revolver Natalie dropped.

Hairy Thug reaches into his jacket for his own handgun as he steps into the room.

Jake snatches up the handgun, rolls up to a kneeling position, and fires a shot into Hairy Thug's face before the man can draw a bead on him.

Hairy Thug collapses forward.

Jake shifts his aim to Mickey as he struggles to his feet.

She stares at the Torturer's body as she shakes her head.

MICKEY

Oh Auntie Bruce....

Jake glances at Natalie.

JAKE

Are you okay, Nat?

Natalie clutches her cut hand and stares at Jake in shock.

JAKE

Natalie!

Natalie manages to nod.

Mickey snaps out of her stare and looks at Jake. She sees Jake's gun and slowly raises her hands.

MICKEY

I know you don't shoot women,
Jake.

Jake manages a strangled laugh.

JAKE

I already killed a woman today...

He hesitates and lowers the revolver.

JAKE

...but that's enough.

He steps up to Mickey and grabs her wrist. He shoves her to the ground and picks up the roll of duct tape.

INT. LIBRARY - NIGHT

Mr. Erasmus bursts in through the door and slams it shut behind him.

Jimmy awakens with a start. He blinks at the empty chair where he'd taped up Nat, then over at Mr. Erasmus.

Mr. Erasmus glares at Jimmy.

MR. ERASMUS

You lazy-ass fuck! Are you deaf?

Jimmy scrambles to his feet and yanks the earbuds from his ears.

JIMMY

What?

He automatically paws for the gun under his jacket. It's not there.

MR. ERASMUS

Jake's coming, you idiot. My office. Now.

INT. GARAGE - NIGHT

Mickey lies on the floor, her arms taped behind her back and her ankles taped together.

Jake covers her mouth with a strip of duct tape.

He turns to Natalie and gestures at the parked luxury car.

JAKE

Hide under that car and don't come out until I say so.

NATALIE

But...

JAKE

I mean it, Nat.

Natalie nods soberly. She turns and runs toward the car.

Jake shudders and hugs his arms against his bare torso. He spots the red sweatshirt hanging among the coats and parkas.

He grabs the sweatshirt and pulls it on. The hood covers his head.

Tucking the revolver into the back of his pants, he picks up Bald Thug's pistol and checks the chamber and magazine.

INT. MR. ERASMUS'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Mr. Erasmus and Jimmy burst into the room. Jimmy locks the door. Mr. Erasmus hurries behind his desk and swings aside the portrait of Lucrece Borgia. He dials the combination into the safe.

He yanks the door open and grabs the assault rifle from inside. He pulls out a pistol and tosses it to Jimmy.

Mr. Erasmus moves behind his desk to the right of the door. He chambers a round into the assault rifle.

Jimmy looks at the rifle and grins. He grabs a heavy table and topples it over to form a barrier between him and the door.

They wait.

The muffled sound of a lightbulb breaking comes through the door. The light showing through from under the door goes out.

Jimmy licks his lips and aims his pistol at the door.

The door crashes open, splinters flying from the door frame.

Jimmy fires two shots toward the door and ducks behind the overturned table.

Mr. Erasmus crouches behind the desk and raises the assault rifle, but the angle is too great to shoot through the doorway.

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE MR. ERASMUS'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Jake stands in the shadows, back from the doorway to the office.

He fires three shots from the revolver at the overturned table. He keeps pulling the trigger but the hammer falls on already-fired chambers.

INT. MR. ERASMUS'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Jimmy hears the empty clicks from Jake's revolver, and he grins. He stands up and charges the doorway.

MR. ERASMUS
Jimmy, no!

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE MR. ERASMUS'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Jake draws Bald Thug's pistol from where it was tucked in the front of his pants.

INT. MR. ERASMUS'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Two shots fire from the hallway and strike Jimmy in the stomach. He stumbles and crashes to the ground.

Jake pokes his head in through the doorway and glances at Mr. Erasmus before ducking back into the hallway.

Mr. Erasmus fires a brief burst of rounds a moment too late.

JAKE
It didn't have to go like this,
Mister Erasmus.

MR. ERASMUS
You killed my kids, Jake. First
my son and now my daughter.

JAKE
Mickey's still alive. I don't
shoot women.

MR. ERASMUS
Right. You killed that kid's mom.

JAKE

Yeah, well. Your family got you into this mess, not me.

MR. ERASMUS

Bullshit, Jake. I paid off your debts and gave you a job. Why the fuck did you do something so stupid?

He waits, his rifle trained on the doorway.

MR. ERASMUS

Jake?

He frowns.

MR. ERASMUS

Jake!

A shadowed form staggers through the open doorway.

Mr. Erasmus fires on full automatic.

Mickey stares at Mr. Erasmus, her arms still taped behind her back and her mouth still taped shut. Blood seeps from half a dozen holes in her torso.

Mr. Erasmus stares in horror as Mickey collapses to the floor.

Jake leans in through the doorway and fires two rounds at Mr. Erasmus.

Two holes appear in Mr. Erasmus's forehead. He topples back, the look of horror frozen on his face.

Jake cautiously steps into the room and inspects his handiwork. Mr. Erasmus lies still in death. Jimmy moans.

Jake rolls Jimmy over. Jimmy's eyes flutter open.

JAKE

Who else knows I'm here?

Jimmy stares at Jake.

Jake plants the muzzle of the pistol on Jimmy's forehead. Jimmy manages a bloody smile as he croaks out a reply.

JIMMY

I'm already dead.

JAKE

I know. The question is whether you go quickly, or slowly and in a lot of pain. Who else knows?

Jimmy gives him a hateful glare. The glare turns to a grimace of agony. He groans.

JIMMY

Just us. And the two guards outside.

JAKE

That's it?

JIMMY

Mister Erasmus didn't want word getting out you killed Kyle. Bad for business.

Jake nods.

JAKE

Thanks, Jimmy. I'll see you in hell.

He fires a single round through Jimmy's forehead.

Jake takes a last look around and sees the open safe.

He reaches inside and withdraws a handful of bundled hundred dollar bills.

The safe contains piles of cash, jewelry, documents and other valuables.

Jake grabs an empty canvas sack from inside the safe. He shoves handfuls of money into the sack.

INT. GARAGE - NIGHT

Jake hurries in through the doorway, wearing the red sweatshirt and with the sack of money over his shoulder.

JAKE

Nat!

Natalie crawls out from under the car.

NATALIE
You're not dead.

JAKE
No.

She notices the sack over Jake's shoulder.

NATALIE
What's that?

JAKE
It's our Christmas present.

With big eyes Natalie takes in the hooded red sweatshirt and the sack over Jake's shoulder.

She throws herself into his arms.

NATALIE
You really are Santa.

Jake drops the sack as he hugs her back.

He glances around and spots a large gasoline can on a shelf.

Jake fetches the gas can, unscrews the lid and splashes gasoline around the room.

He uses a lighter to ignite a rag. He tosses it onto one of the gas-soaked bodies. The body goes up in flames.

EXT. MR. ERASMUS'S MANSION - NIGHT

The three black sedans sit parked in front of the mansion.

Beefy Thug and Twitchy Thug stand together near the mansion's front door, talking quietly. They wear heavy coats and smoke cigarettes.

The front door swings open. The two thugs turn and see Jake. He holds a raised pistol.

They reach for weapons in their coats.

Jake fires two shots at each thug, and they both drop without a sound.

Jake looks back into the mansion and beckons.

Natalie runs out to Jake and clings to him.

They hurry down the steps to the nearest car. Jake opens the passenger side door and glances inside.

INT. BLACK SEDAN - NIGHT

Keys dangle from the ignition.

EXT. MR. ERASMUS'S MANSION - NIGHT

Natalie takes a seat inside the black sedan and Jake closes her door. He heads around to the driver's side and gets in.

The black sedan's engine rumbles to life. It pulls away from the other cars and drives toward the front gates.

Smoke streams from the mansion through a gap in a window. The orange glow of fire flickers behind several windows.

INT. BLACK SEDAN - NIGHT

Jake drives down empty streets, snow blowing outside.

Natalie sobs in the passenger seat. Jake rubs her back.

JAKE

What's wrong, Nat?

NATALIE

I'm sorry. It's all my fault.

He rubs harder.

JAKE

No it's not.

NATALIE

I coulda got you killed.

JAKE

But you didn't. I'm fine. We're fine.

He draws her closer.

JAKE

Come here.

She scoots under his arm and he hugs her.

JAKE

We got the bad guys and we're both in one piece. We even got a great car and a bunch of money.

Natalie sniffs and wipes her face.

NATALIE

But my daddy's dead.

She bursts into fresh tears.

JAKE

Yeah. I'm sorry about that. That was my fault.

NATALIE

No it wasn't.

She snuggles against him and watches the odometer click over.

NATALIE

Where are we going now?

JAKE

I'm not sure. You don't have any other family?

NATALIE

No.

She starts to cry again.

NATALIE

I'll probably have to go back into foster care.

JAKE
Over my dead body. Foster care
sucks.

NATALIE
Yeah it does.

She furrows her brow in thought.

NATALIE
How do you know?

JAKE
Been there.

NATALIE
When you were a kid?

JAKE
Yeah.

NATALIE
With your sister?

Jake's expression turns dark.

JAKE
No. They split us up.

Natalie gasps.

NATALIE
Is that when she died?

Jake briefly closes his eyes in pain.

JAKE
It's not a story I want to tell
you on Christmas.

NATALIE
Christmas?

JAKE
Yes. It's way after midnight.
That makes it Christmas.

NATALIE
Oh.

JAKE

Merry Christmas, Nat.

NATALIE

Merry Christmas, Jake.

She leans against him as they both look forward at the headlight beams that illuminate their path through the darkness.

FADE OUT.