

THE AUDITORS

"PILOT"

by

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TEASER

EXT. IRS HQ - DAY

A big, bold

CAPTION: **WASHINGTON D.C., FEBRUARY 2025**

As dejected employees carry their belongings in boxes out of the building, a man in a business suit and a MAGA hat swims against the tide, approaching security.

He lifts an ID badge we can't see, revealing a distinctive SCAR on the back of his right hand. The guard nods.

INT. IRS HQ - CONTINUOUS

SCAR HAND, face never visible, strides through a maze of cubicles, black briefcase in hand. As he crosses out of frame, we reveal

NEIL CHASE, 27, Black, a sweet-faced auditor, hard at work at his cubicle.

Neil's desk has an old framed photo of his parents -- his dad, U.S. Army Special Forces, his mom, a Doctor Without Borders -- on deployment together in Afghanistan. Behind that, a picture of Neil as a kid with his grandparents.

Neil's fingers fly over the keyboard, examining files, flicking them away. He gets to one and STOPS.

Neil flinches as he reads, taken aback. Double-checks. By reflex, he calls:

NEIL

Hey, guys, can I get a second set
of eyes on--?

REVEAL that Neil is alone. Everyone else: quit or fired. Oh. Right.

Neil snatches papers as they hum out of a printer and, urgency on his face, RUNS.

As we follow him and the papers through the cubicles we

INTERCUT WITH:

EXT. WASHINGTON D.C. - EARLY MORNING

Neil out for a run, outpacing the other joggers.

INT. IRS HQ

Boxes in his path. As Neil LEAPS OVER THEM --

EXT. NATIONAL MALL - DAY

Neil, dressed in elaborate foam armor, hurdles a fallen foe, foam sword and shield in hand, to do surprisingly capable battle with another such combatant in a huge, cheerful melee. A banner in BG reads DC CHERRY BLOSSOM LARPFEST.

INT. IRS HQ

Neil lands and keeps running. Ahead of him, nervous survivors of the recent purges gather, coffee mugs in hand. As he weaves through them, apologizing --

INT. BAR IN ADAMS MORGAN

Neil and several friends -- including ANNIKA, his girlfriend -- cheering at a table as they win at pub trivia.

INT. IRS HQ

Neil turns a corner. We drift from him over to Scar Hand.

Scar Hand waves his ID badge at the access point for a door marked SERVER ROOM, and enters.

Inside, Scar Hand opens his briefcase. Lifts a false bottom to reveal a hidden laptop. Snakes a cord out and plugs it into a server. The screen lights up. SEARCHING ... FILES LOCATED ... TRANSFER INITIATED ...

INT. IRS OFFICE

Neil knocks quickly, and then open the door.

NEIL

Hey, Belinda, can you take a --

Two twentysomething young men occupy this freshly vacated window office. MAGA hats, baggy suits, Shiba Inu lapel pins. EDGELORD69 has his feet up on what was once Belinda's desk. OWMYBALLZ420 hunches in a corner, installing a black blinking box connected to a laptop.

NEIL

... Sorry, do I have the wrong office? I was looking for Belinda.

EDGELORD69

Belinda's fired.

OWMYBALLZ420

Efficiency, bitch!

Neil looks a little seasick, but presses on.

NEIL

... It's just, I got an assignment from her email, and I wondered if you could...?

EdgeLord69 holds out a hand for the papers.

Neil looks over at OwMyBallz420 and his device.

NEIL

Wait, is that a satellite uplink? Did you get IT's OK to set that up?

OwMyBallz420 looks at him contemptuously, then back to whatever he's doing.

OWMYBALLZ420

(Under his breath)

DEI hire.

Neil notes this, takes offense, but says nothing as EdgeLord69 shoves the papers back at him.

EDGELORD69

Yeah, these are in order.

NEIL

But ... these are all left-leaning groups. Only left-leaning groups. And you want me to audit all of them. (Reads:) "Find a reason to revoke their tax-exempt status?"

EDGELORD69

By order of the President.

NEIL

But -- look, that's illegal. 26
U.S. Code section 7217. We can't
do an audit at the request of the
White House. It's a felony, five
years in jail --

EdgeLord69 and OwMyBallz420 chortle.

EDGELORD69

New era. New rules.

NEIL

By law, I've got to report this to
the Treasury IG for Tax
Administration --

EdgeLord69 points to OwMyBallz420.

OWMYBALLZ420

(Realizing)

Oh, shit, that's right, that IS
me.

After a moment's shock, Neil's face hardens.

NEIL

I won't do this.

EDGELORD69

Fine. You're fired. Clean out your
shit. Libtard pussy.

Neil takes this like a punch to the stomach. Opens his
mouth to say something in his defense ... and then
deflates. Shoulders slump. Still holding the papers, he
turns to leave, when

OWMYBALLZ420

Wait. Hold up, dude. I just
thought of the funniest thing.

Neil stops. Turns. Sees OwMyBallz420's evil smirk.

OWMYBALLZ420

We can't just *fire* such an
upstanding employee...

SMASH CUT TO:

EXT. STRIP MALL OFFICE - DAY

CAPTION: **MINOT, NORTH DAKOTA**

CAPTION: **(NOT THE FUN PART)**

CAPTION: **TWO WEEKS LATER**

The ass-end of a brutal North Dakota winter. Bleak. Gray. Depressing. Salt-scoured trucks and cars line a parking lot. Between a laundromat and a Chinese restaurant, we see a bland little office labeled U.S. INTERNAL REVENUE SERVICE.

We hear a little automated DOOR CHIME as we cut to

INT. OFFICE - DAY

Neil, in a puffy coat and hat, box full of personal effects, wilts under fluorescents. Front door closes behind him.

NEIL

Uh ... hi. I'm Neil Chase. From DC. I went to the field office downtown, and they sent me out here? Is there a place where I can ... put ... my ... stuff ...?

The rest of the office stares at him from their cubicles:

ELMER: two eyes and a reddish thatch of hair above a divider. Glances at Neil, eyes seemingly dead and menacing, then looks back down.

ROGER -- late 50s, weathered, wiry, gives Neil a what-fresh-hell-is-this kind of stare behind his horn-rimmed glasses.

PERRY -- mid-'20s, bright streak of purple in her hair, shirtsleeves rolled up to reveal elaborate tattoos, looks right through Neil with perfect disinterest.

MADGE, in her 60s, matronly, leans back in her desk chair, regarding Neil with dry curiosity.

LEROY, late 50s, weedy, sweater-vested, frosted sunglasses indoors, slicked-back hair, lounges by the sad little coffeemaker, and takes a long, loud slurp of coffee from a mug emblazoned MONTANA'S SEXIEST GRANDMA.

Neil sighs heavily.

CUT TO:

EXT. STRIP MALL OFFICE

We see the office through the windshield of an old truck, parked across the street. A cup of fast-food coffee sits on the dashboard, next to a camera with a long lens. A vaguely menacing country song plays over the car radio.

A familiar scarred hand comes up and rests on the steering wheel. Scar Hand is watching...

END OF TEASER

ACT ONE

EXT. STRIP MALL BACK ALLEY - DAY

Behind a chain-link fence, under a gray sky, a dry dead field patched in snow seems to extend on forever.

Neil sits on the steps near the back door of the IRS office, shivering in his jacket and hat, eating a sandwich in one hand, holding his phone with the other.

ANNIKA (V.O.)
So how's it going, champ?

NEIL
It ... could be better.

ANNIKA -- 28, vibrant, in a coffeeshop -- smiles warmly.

ANNIKA
OK, spill the tea.

NEIL
Well ... my boss is nice enough...

CUT TO:

EARLIER THAT MORNING

Neil still clutches his box of personal items, shaking Madge's hand around them.

MADGE
You must be Neil, right? I'm Madge. Pleasure to meet you, young man. We got a notice you'd be joining us.

Madge leans in and winks.

MADGE
Not through the usual channels.

NEIL
Lotta that going around.

Madge lowers her voice, conspiratory.

MADGE
So what'd you do?

NEIL

Huh?

MADGE

To join our little unit here.

NEIL

(Sheepish)

Disobeyed an illegal order.

MADGE

(Intrigued)

Oh?

NEIL

They wanted -- get this -- they wanted me to audit all these nonprofits. At the order of the President.

Madge's face goes flat, polite. Neil doesn't notice.

MADGE

(No longer intrigued)

Oh.

NEIL

(Oblivious)

I know! 26 U.S. Code section 7217, right?

MADGE

Hm? Oh, yes. Absolutely. Anyway...

CUT TO:

EXT. LOADING DOCK - DAY

ANNIKA

(Over phone)

Well, that's good, right? Warm welcome?

NEIL

I dunno. A lot of the others are kind of ... intense.

INT. IRS OFFICE - MORNING

Neil and Madge stand by Roger's desk. Prominent Audobon calendar of Birds of North America.

MADGE

Neil, this is Roger, my right hand man. Roger, sweetie, you mind giving Neil the tour?

Roger holds Neil in a piercing stare for several seconds, then stands. Icicles hang from each word as he gestures.

ROGER

Bathroom. Break room. Big conference room. Little conference room. Storage room. IT room. Back door. Front door. [beat] Your desk.

Neil's desk is right next to Roger's.

Roger pushes his glasses up his nose in a somehow menacing fashion and sits, resuming his work.

MADGE

... Thank you, Roger.

ROGER

(Seriously, *don't*)
Don't mention it.

Madge lets out a little God-give-me-strength exhale and dons her smile again for Neil's benefit.

MADGE

Now, over here's Elmer. Say hi, Elmer.

Elmer gets up from his desk. Towers over Neil like a shaved, muscular Bigfoot. Stares from above his COVID facemask.

NEIL

... hi?

Elmer says nothing for several long seconds, just staring at Neil. Then he shuffles slowly out of his desk, away through the cubicles, into the IT closet, and closes the door.

MADGE

He's a little shy.

NEIL

What does he do here?

MADGE

Oh ... computer stuff.

Neil looks at Elmer's computer. It's ancient even by IRS standards. Ohhhhhkay.

MADGE

Perry, hon, how's it going today?
This is Neil.

Perry plays a first-person shooter on a tricked-out gaming rig. With each crack of her's character's sniper rifle, the in-game announcer booms, "HEADSHOT."

Perry flicks her gaze at Neil just long enough to indicate absolute disinterest. "HEADSHOT. HEADSHOT. HEADSHOT."

Neil looks at Madge, eyes asking: *Can she do that at work?*

MADGE

She's a real fast worker. And
we're not sticklers about what you
do in your free time. Work-life
balance, you know. Very important.

Madge leads Neil to a cubicle at the farthest possible end of the office from everyone else.

MADGE

(cont'd)
And this is Leroy.

Leroy has a ball python -- fished from the large tank in his cubicle -- draped on his shoulders. Kisses it on the mouth.

LEROY

Yes, Farrah Fawcett, you're such a
lovely lady. Ooh, tickles!

He looks over at Neil, big smile, genuine warmth in his voice. Somehow, that just makes it worse.

LEROY

(Cont'd)
Hi, Neil! So nice to meet you.
Glad you're here. I'm looking
forward to working with you.

He holds out the snake, who seems friendly enough.

LEROY

(Cont'd)
You want to get in on this? She's
had all her shots.

NEIL

Uh, no. No thank you.

Neil sees faded, older elementary-school pictures of different children posted all over the walls of Leroy's cubicle.

NEIL

Are those your kids? Grandkids?

LEROY

Nope!

Leroy just keeps smiling for several long seconds.

MADGE

... so that's Leroy.

Neil's eyes widen, deeply disturbed.

CUT TO:

EXT. STRIP MALL BACK ALLEY - DAY

Annika, on the phone, is making the exact same face.

ANNIKA

... oh my God. Neil, say the word,
I will book you a flight home.

NEIL

No, no, it's okay.

ANNIKA

You don't have to take this! You
know you can quit, right?

NEIL

And do what? I'm good at this. I
like this. Dad fought. Mom healed.
I ... calculate. It's how I can
serve. Besides -- all the layoffs,
the job market's flooded. I've got
a salary, I've got health care ...

Neil trails off, tries to put on a happy face for Annika.

NEIL

(Cont'd)

So, got any fun plans for tonight?

Annika looks away, brushes hair from her face nervously.

ANNIKA

Yeah, I'm ... I'm going out.

Neil's not stupid. He knows what she means. His smile falters a little, but he tries to hide it.

NEIL

That's -- I mean, that's great.
I'm happy for you. Have a good
time!

Annika sighs, frustrated, with real affection for Neil.

ANNIKA

See, this is what I mean! I've
seen you go to the mat for other
people a million times, but for
yourself ... Those asswipes sent
you to Butthole, North Dakota --

NEIL

It's not that bad --

ANNIKA

-- and you didn't say boo! I said
long distance never works, and you
didn't even put up a fight!

NEIL

You were right! It sucks, but you
were right! What was I supposed to
do, pretend you weren't?

They stare at each other, both sad.

ANNIKA

I just want you to be happy.

NEIL

Same for you.

ANNIKA

I'll call you this weekend, okay?
See how you're doing? Just ...
take care of yourself, Neil.

NEIL

You, too, Nik. Have fun, okay?

Annika hangs up. Neil sits alone in the frigid air.

CUT TO:

INT. BREAK ROOM

A drab kitchenette. From inside the freezer, we see Neil open the door and start back in shock.

NEIL
(To himself)
Are those ... bags of dead mice?

LEROY
(o.s.)
Farrah gets snacky sometimes.

Neil jumps, revealing Leroy standing behind him.

LEROY
(Seems genuine)
Have a good lunch break?

Neil shuts the freezer door slowly. Leroy takes another long, slow slurp from his coffee mug, never breaking eye contact (we assume, hard to tell from those sunglasses).

NEIL
Uh ... yeah ... I guess.

Roger barrels into the break room, face livid, shoves Leroy aside, and SLAMS Neil into the fridge.

NEIL
What the hell?

ROGER
What the fuck is this?

He holds up the photo of Neil's parents, inches from Neil's face. Neil is terrified and confused.

NEIL
Did you take that off my desk?

Roger SLAMS him against the fridge again.

ROGER
Answer me! How did you get this?

NEIL
That's my mom and dad!

Roger's eyes widen -- realizing he might have screwed up.

ROGER
Bullshit!

MADGE

Roger!

Madge stands in the doorway to the office, horrified. Roger turns, desperate. He shoves the picture at Madge.

ROGER

Look at this!

NEIL

I told you! That's my folks!
Darren and Sandra Chase! They died
when I was three, all right?

MADGE

Roger, let him go.

Roger, shaking, remorseful, releases Neil, who sags against the fridge. Roger can't look him in the eye.

ROGER

Sorry, kid. I -- I made a mistake.

LEROY

(To Roger)

C'mon, buddy. Deep breaths. You
want to feed Farrah?

ROGER

Fuck no.

Leroy walks Roger out to cool him off. Neil slides down to the floor, his legs shaking. Perry, passing the doorway, sees him, makes a disgusted little *tch* sound, and moves on.

Madge, sympathetic, eases herself down to sit with Neil.

NEIL

That was -- that was --

MADGE

PTSD. Roger's a veteran. He's ...
he's seen some bad shit. But that
was unacceptable, and I'm sorry.
He's working on it. And I give you
my word of honor that won't happen
again. You're safe here.

NEIL

Just in the break room, or...?

Madge chuckles warmly at this.

MADGE

We've kind of been our own little family out here. We weren't expecting you. Not your fault. Look. Let me make it up to you. Come out with us tonight. Little welcome party. Might help to break the ice a little.

She smiles at Neil, putting him a little more at ease.

MADGE

(Cont'd)

Whaddya say?

Off Neil's face, won over, about to say yes, we

CUT TO:

EXT. STRIP MALL OFFICE - NIGHT

From the IRS frontage, we whip pan over literally two stores -- past the Chinese restaurant -- to a raucous-looking, neon-fronted dive bar --

INT. THE BURIED HATCHET

THUNK! A throwing hatchet embeds itself in a target, to rowdy cheers. Chickenwire dividers between axe- and hatchet-throwing targets, bar, booths and tables in the back.

We see Madge line up her second hatchet, throw it, and -- THUNK! She whoops with delight.

At a table in the back, the whole office sits. Roger, Leroy, and Perry cheer for Madge. Elmer just sits quietly, taking down his mask for occasional sips of a beer that looks tiny by comparison.

Madge comes back, hatchets in hand, and offers them to Neil.

MADGE

Lane two. You're up, new guy.

Neil hesitates, then grabs them both and stands up. Madge and Leroy clap enthusiastically, Roger less so, Perry and Elmer not at all.

Neil's first throw bounces off the target, lamely. No one's impressed.

Neil plucks up his courage and tries again. Womp womp.

He slinks back to the table.

NEIL

Coulda done better if they were
foam, maybe.

Madge smiles. Leroy laughs uproariously, slapping his knee. Again, it seems sincere, but just so unsettling.

MADGE

You'll learn. Leroy, you're up.

Neil hands him the hatchets, but Leroy politely declines. He thumps a canvas bundle on the table and unrolls it.

LEROY

No thanks. I brought my own.

These are ACTUAL HATCHETS, and they all seem covered in varying degrees with odd, rusty stains. Leroy selects two and walks toward the targets, whistling.

Neil stares for a moment, then sits down quickly and drains half of his beer. He's sitting next to Roger. He leans over and talks as discreetly as possible over the noise of the bar.

NEIL

Madge told me you were a vet.
Uh ... thank you for your service.

ROGER

Kid, you don't know shit about my
service. [beat] I'm just gonna
leave you alone. For your own
good.

Roger picks up his glass and heads to the bar for a refill. Leroy returns, bearing his hatchets and an enormous neon-colored tropical drink with a twisty straw, and sits down.

LEROY

Elmer, your turn. [takes a long
sip] Ahhh. *Sabor de las islas.*

Elmer stands and shuffles over to the bar, past Roger. Mumbles to the bartender, who hands him a FULL-SIZED AXE.

Elmer walks over to a target lane. Stands very still. In one smooth motion he raises the axe and HURLS IT.

It nearly splits the target in two.

NEIL

Holy shit. He's your computer guy?

Madge just nods, innocently, and sips whiskey.

Elmer tries to yank the axe out of the target, and after several tries, wrenches the entire target off the wall.

Neil, seeing this, downs the rest of his beer. He turns to Perry. Not flirting, just trying to be friendly:

NEIL

So, Perry -- is that your first name? Last name?

Perry just stares at him. Says nothing.

She stands up, picking up the two throwing hatchets Neil brought back. Walks to the targets, turns until she's staring straight at Neil. She throws one hatchet.

BULLSEYE.

Throws the second.

It hits RIGHT NEXT TO THE FIRST ONE.

Still looking at Neil, her eyes narrow.

Neil gulps.

Perry returns to the table, drops the hatchets with a CLUNK, and sits down to resume nursing her drink.

NEIL

I ... this has been really nice,
but I think I gotta go.

MADGE

What? No, no, stick around, let me
get you another round.

NEIL

I appreciate it. Really. But... I
need to get home. Apparently if I
wait too long to take out the
trash, I have to fight the
dumpster raccoons or something.

LEROY

Drive safe! Turn into the skid!
And if you hit a deer, save it for
me. Good eating on those things.

Neil stands, wrestles himself into his coat, giving Madge an apologetic smile. He slouches out, past Roger at the bar, his face falling.

Madge looks at Perry, exasperated.

MADGE

Really?

Perry gives Madge a sarcastic, *what?* sort of look.

CUT TO:

INT. MOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

Shabby and dimly lit. A TV mutters low in the background, blue light flickering.

Pan across an open steel briefcase filled with ODD CURIOS packed in custom-shaped foam -- a ceramic monkey statue, a combat knife with a shattered blade, a cracked snow globe from Zurich, a set of dog tags.

Continue over one ugly-papered wall of the room, where surveillance photos of all the office workers -- Roger, Perry, Elmer, Leroy, and Madge -- have been taped up.

Scar Hand reaches into frame, sticks Neil's photo along with them -- then taps it meaningfully.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

INT. IRS OFFICE - MORNING

Close on a PHONE in Madge's hand, playing a recording of birdsong.

MADGE

That's not a white-breasted
nuthatch?

Roger listens thoughtfully, eyes closed.

ROGER

No, that's a common redpoll.
White-breasted nuthatch sings like
this:

He lets out a series of goonish little honks.

MADGE

One of these days I'll stump you.

Roger grins. These two like and trust each other.

ROGER

It's not gonna happen.

The front door chimes and Neil trundles in. Roger clams up.

NEIL

Uh ... morning.

Madge greets him. Leroy waves enthusiastically from the back corner of the office, dangling a frozen mouse above Farrah Fawcett's tank. Perry, Roger, and Elmer remain silent.

Neil's shoulders slump, and he shrugs out of his coat.

MADGE

Neil, we've got our weekly staff
meeting this morning --

NEIL

Oh, shoot! Did I need to prepare
anything or-- I mean, I started on
some return reviews yesterday that
headquarters had flagged --

MADGE

No, no! You just got here. You're still settling in. How about you cover the office while we do the meeting? It's all old business.

She sees the hurt on his face, and speaks more quietly.

MADGE

(Cont'd)

I've got a son about your age. Roland. He's a research chemist down in Fayetteville. Sweet kid. Real polite. Always thinking of others first.

Her face glows with motherly pride. She rests a hand gently on Neil's shoulder. She means it:

MADGE

(Cont'd)

I think he'd like you. I'm glad you're here, Neil. Truly. [beat] I lined up some audit reviews for you starting at nine. I bet you're good at that. You can use the small conference room.

Neil is, in fact, good at that. He composes himself, determined to make a positive impression.

NEIL

I won't let you down.

But as Neil drops his bag and coat off at his desk, he sees everyone else filing into the large conference room, closing the door behind them. Roger glares at him through the glass wall before closing the blinds.

Neil stands alone in the empty office.

CUT TO:

INT. SMALL CONFERENCE ROOM

Four walls, one glass facing the office, two bare, one with a framed picture of a bald eagle. Small table. Three chairs, two at one end, one at the other.

Neil's hand lays out pens in a neat row.

Opens a laptop.

Lays out a yellow legal pad.

Neil sits down. Composes himself. Deep breath. Looks up, determined. He's gonna help the hell out of some people.

NEIL

Good morning. Welcome to the
Internal Revenue Service. How can
I help you today?

A desperate-eyed woman -- DOLORES -- and her nervous, slightly embarrassed older teen daughter, ESPERANZA, push a cardboard box across the table.

DOLORES

Necesito ayuda, señor, dicen que
voy a perder mi tienda.

A flirtatious divorcee, HELENA, dressed to the nines and at least one and a half sheets to the wind, flicks a notice of audit across the table with manicured nails.

HELENA

David said, I swear, he put it in
writing at the divorce, that he
would, and I quote, handle this
sort of thing, unquote. You can
imagine my shock when this turned
up.

A careworn-looking man in his sixties, CLARENCE, sits shyly with his hands folded in his lap, neatly labeled folders spread out in front of him.

CLARENCE

He died last fall, and it's been
me running the business ever
since. I thought they were just,
you know, little hiccups in the
accounting -- I've never been too
good with math, I was always down
on the shop floor -- but now I
think ... I think he might have
been hiding something.

Dolores is sobbing now, shaking, as Esperanza tries to comfort her.

DOLORES

No entiendo, siempre pago mis
impuestos!

ESPERANZA

She says she doesn't understand--

Neil produces a small tissue box from under the table and hands one to Dolores. He smiles warmly.

NEIL

(fluent)

Esta bien. Usted le voy a ayudar,
señora. No perderá su tienda.

Helena bats her eyes at Neil, not nearly as charming as she thinks.

HELENA

Can't say I'm surprised. That's
not the only way he's failed to
get the job done. If you know what
I mean.

Neil clears his throat nervously.

NEIL

So, uh, yeah, looks like he's
covering income taxes. But you're
still responsible for the property
tax. Luckily, you've got plenty of
assets to cover it.

Clarence leans across the table, one hand still in his lap, the other tapping something on one of the papers from an open manila folder.

CLARENCE

See, right there. I can't find any
purchase records for them. And
they're not in our inventory.

Neil frowns, consulting the document, intrigued.

NEIL

I see what you mean. Hey, do you
still have those payroll forms?
Just want to play a hunch.

Dolores beams, her eyes shining with tears, Esperanza clutching her hand in happy relief.

DOLORES

Tienes que venir a mi tienda,
Neil. Te daré los mejores tamales
en todo de Minot! Eres demasiado
flaco.

Neil blushes and ducks his head.

NEIL

Lo haré, señora. Gracias.

Helena stands in the doorway, ready to leave, draping herself in what she imagines is her best come-hither posture. She holds up a card.

HELENA

And this is your ... personal number? Just in case I need any other columns to add up.

Neil's face is the most *welp* any face has ever been.

NEIL

That is the number of this office. Where I work. As an official of the United States Government. Ma'am.

Clarence sits stunned, looking small.

CLARENCE

I mean, we worked together for twenty years. He never even so much as bought a scratch-off ticket.

Neil grimaces in sympathy.

NEIL

I'm sorry. I wish you didn't have to find out this way.

Clarence rubs his other hand, the one that's been in his lap, over his cheek thoughtfully.

HIS HAND HAS A FAMILIAR SCAR ON IT.

CLARENCE

Gosh. You think you know a guy.

Neil clocks the scar on Clarence's hand.

NEIL

Bet there's a story behind that one, huh?

Clarence looks at it, chuckles.

CLARENCE

Occupational hazard. So you were saying?

NEIL

Right! So, in an authentic document, these last numbers here, they're going to be randomly distributed, right? But when people try to fake numbers, they're not good at mimicking those natural distributions. So some numbers show up too often, especially in the last digit. Here, Here. Here. See?

With every "here," we cut to close-ups of different numbers on the form, each ending in a 5.

CLARENCE

(Chuckling)

You know, when I came in here, I wasn't sure you could run this whole place by yourself. But now...

NEIL

Oh, no, I -- I'm the new guy, everyone else is in a meeting.

Clarence looks over his shoulder through the glass wall, across the office at the large conference room. Shades still drawn, door closed.

CLARENCE

Quite a responsibility for the new guy. They must really trust you.

NEIL

Uh ... yeah, yeah, absolutely.

Neil looks down at the papers in front of him, stops.

NEIL

Your partner died last year?

CLARENCE

Last October. Missed the election, lucky bastard. Sorry. Gallows humor.

As Neil picks up a document, we see

NEIL'S POV

These documents are from November, December, January. But when we look at the final digits of the numbers on them, we see, again and again, a pattern of 0s, 5s, and 7s.

BACK TO NEIL

Neil grows still. The vibe in the room shifts.

CLARENCE

Something wrong? Don't tell me I forgot to carry the two.

Neil puts on a professional smile.

NEIL

Huh? Oh, no, no. Everything looks in order. Let me run this by my supervisor, okay?

He stands up, taking the papers with him.

NEIL

(Cont'd)

You mind? I just need to make some copies for our records.

CLARENCE

Go right ahead.

Neil circles the table, heading for the door, playing cool.

NEIL

Thanks. Can I get you anything? Coffee? Maybe a granola bar?

Neil FREEZES as he hears a metallic CLICK. He looks down to see Clarence, his face still mild and pleasant, holding a large-caliber pistol to Neil's thigh.

CLARENCE

Your cooperation.

Confusion and panic mingle on Neil's face. He tries to stay calm, speak slowly.

NEIL

Mr. Fullam. Clarence. I don't know what kind of hole you're in, but I promise, it's not this bad.

CLARENCE
What do you do, son? Actually.

NEIL
(Confused)
I'm ... a forensic accountant?
[beat] Sometimes I LARP. Live
action role-playing, it's where--

CLARENCE
(Amused)
Son of a bitch. I was thinking you
were a chip off the old block. But
no. An honest-to-God taxman. How
the hell did you end up here?

NEIL
Just lucky, I guess.

CLARENCE
Here's what we're going to do,
son. We're going to stand up,
walk out of here, and meet the
rest of your coworkers. And you,
being sensible, being the kind of
person who prefers not to suddenly
acquire large convex absences in
your vitals, are going to behave
yourself immaculately. Aren't you?

Off Neil's taut face, we

CUT TO:

INT. IRS OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Neil walks into the office, sweating, still holding the
paperwork. Clarence's pistol at the base of his skull.

NEIL
(Shouting)
Madge? Hey, Madge?

Clarence clocks the name, looks bemused. Really?

CLARENCE
(Quietly)
Tell her you have a question about
an audit. Exact words, please.

NEIL
I have a question about an audit!

From across a row of cubicles, the conference room door opens, and Madge emerges. Sees Clarence. Stops, startled.

CLARENCE

Hello, Rosie.

The blinds in the glass wall next to the doorway open, revealing Roger, Leroy, Elmer, and Perry. Roger looks particularly alarmed; Madge's hand flutters at her side, keeping him back.

MADGE

Clarence. I went to your funeral.

CLARENCE

Really? How was it?

MADGE

Well-attended.

CLARENCE

That many mourners?

MADGE

Ehh. Twenty percent of them.

CLARENCE

And the rest?

MADGE

Let's just say they didn't need Port-a-Potties at the gravesite.

Clarence breaks into a sincerely fond grin.

CLARENCE

I missed you, Rosie.

MADGE

(Means it)

I missed you too. How 'bout I make us some coffee, and we catch up, and you don't shoot the new kid?

CLARENCE

Sounds nice. Wish I could.

Madge glances over at her colleagues in the break room.

MADGE

You pull that trigger in any context, Clarence, and there's no way you leave this room alive. I truly don't want that.

Neil, if anything, looks even more confused and freaked out.

CLARENCE

Happy to avoid it if you are. A trade. You for Mr. IRS here.

Madge's eyes narrow. This is new information. She's intrigued -- wheels turning.

MADGE

Works for me.

CLARENCE

Take three giant steps away from that door.

Madge does.

CLARENCE

(Cont'd)

Good. [louder] Now, everyone else out, slowly, hands visible.

Roger first, seething. Perry, ice cold. Elmer, ducking slightly through the doorframe, clenching and unclenching fists. Leroy, hands raised directly above his head as if stretching, fingers splayed as wide as they'll go.

CLARENCE

(Cont'd)

You come. They stay.

MADGE

Neil, you're doing great. Just keep calm and you'll be safe.

Neil's eyes ask a million questions. He doesn't dare speak.

Clarence beckons to Madge with the gun. As she crosses the office, he reaches into a jacket pocket and pulls out chain-tethered manacles, which he tosses to Madge.

Madge holds up the manacles, glowering at Clarence.

MADGE

Really? Christ, Clarence, I'm sixty-four.

CLARENCE

I considered zipties. But I know you.

Madge puts them on, showing each wrist to Clarence, proving they're fully tightened, and then rattling the chain dolefully at him: *this is ridiculous and you know it.*

Clarence, his free hand back in his pocket, jerks his head toward the door. Madge heads there slowly. Clarence follows, keeping Neil between himself and everyone else in the office.

Clarence, Neil, and Madge pause by the front door. Clarence peers over Neil's shoulder at the office, at the other, gauging distance.

Then in one smooth motion he CLIPS Neil at the back of the skull with the pistol butt, and produces a GAS GRENADE from his jacket pocket with his other hand, hurling it into the office.

WITH NEIL

dropping to his knees, his ears ringing, world blurring from the blow. Loud BANG of the gas grenade. Huge white cloud billows. We hear the front door chime. Neil begins to cough as the gas envelops him.

Roger collapses behind him, in mid-charge for the door, tries to get up, drops. Perry tumbles into frame, too, out cold. Somewhere we hear Elmer crash colossally against a desk. Leroy's legs totter into frame, his voice distorting as Neil succumbs to the gas.

 LEROY
 (distorted)
 Ohhh yeah. That's the good stuff.

Leroy's legs poleaxe backward, board-stiff, and Neil slumps forward to the carpet, papers in his hand scattering, as we

SMASH TO BLACK

END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREE

INT. IRS OFFICE - DAY

Close on Neil's face. Someone has rolled him on his back. Ears ringing, sound muffled. Two voices shouting, arguing.

Fingers creep into frame, massaging Neil's scalp. Neil's eyes SNAP OPEN.

From Neil's POV we see Leroy staring down at him, blurry, words distorted but audible.

LEROY

Shhhh. Shhhh. Easy. Gotta get that blood flowing back to the brain.

Neil SITS UP, winces both at his headache and the bruise on the back of his skull where the gun hit him. Neil's in focus, the background blurred, ringing continuing, making voices sound underwater. Leroy vague behind him.

LEROY

Whoa, whoa, slow down, chief! That MX-15 is a *ride*.

Neil grabs a cubicle divider and stands, dizzy. Behind him we can see the blurry forms of Roger and Perry in the middle of a SCREAMING MATCH -- the first time we've heard Perry speak!

PERRY

-- if *someone* let me carry a sidearm in staff meetings!

ROGER

That was Madge's fucking rule!

PERRY

You should have let me break it!

Their argument continues in the background.

WITH NEIL as he staggers forward, getting his bearings. Past Elmer's cubicle, the big man out of focus with his head down on his desk and his hands clasped over his head.

Neil reaches Madge's cubicle. Pictures of a much younger Madge with little Roland, going fishing, at the beach. Roland growing up, graduating high school, college, med school. Roland and a family of his own.

Neil takes all this in, looks back. The papers he dropped on the floor snap into focus, and so does the sound.

PERRY

And I'm saying try it again!

ROGER

Her tracker's dead, it's been dead, it's gonna be dead no matter -- look, you're gonna make Elmer cry!

PERRY

So she's in the wind? All this expensive shit for zero clue?

NEIL

(murmurs)

I know how to find her.

Perry and Roger keep arguing, and Neil keeps timidly trying to interrupt.

NEIL

You guys -- you guys -- look, if you'll just listen for a second, I know how to find her -- would you just -- just listen for a second --

The office BOOMS as a massive hand THWACKS onto a desk. Perry and Roger stop.

Elmer sits in his cubicle, his hand splayed on the desk where he struck it. He then slowly, shyly raises his hand like a schoolkid. His eyes are red, his face flushed. With a hacksaw-thick Appalachian accent, but surprisingly gentle:

ELMER

I think new guy said he knows how to find her?

He speaks! Neil goggles, speechless, as we

CUT TO:

EXT. DESERTED ROAD

A black PICKUP TRUCK hurtles down a state road, bleak snow-patched fields under gray skies.

INT. PICKUP TRUCK

Madge's manacled hands sit in her lap. She slips a paper clip down from her sleeve. Starts trying to pick the lock.

Madge sits in the passenger's seat, the safety belt fastened over her hands and locked taut. Clarence in the driver's seat, drumming fingers on the steering wheel to the radio.

CLARENCE
(Without looking)
You're trying to pick the lock.

MADGE
You don't know that for sure.

CLARENCE
Let me know how it goes.

MADGE
Well, thank you, I will.

Clarence holds up a little blinking box from his side of the dashboard.

CLARENCE
I'm jamming your tracker.

MADGE
I'd be disappointed if you didn't.

CLARENCE
It was that or find whatever tooth it's in and pull it out, and that seemed a little much.

MADGE
I appreciate it.

CLARENCE
You doing okay? Want me to roll down the window, give you some air? I got some water if you want it.

He holds up a travel cup with a straw. Madge smiles, touched by his thoughtfulness.

MADGE
I'm good for now, thanks.

She fumbles the paper clip and curses.

CLARENCE

See? Told you. [beat] "Madge?"
Really? That's your name now?

MADGE

Always was, actually.

CLARENCE

Huh. All these years. [beat] You
didn't seem surprised to see me.

MADGE

Please. You didn't even fake the
dental records. I'm not stupid.

Clarence winces.

CLARENCE

I meant to get to that, but there
were so many steps on the
checklist. Perfect's the enemy of
the good, you know?

MADGE

I didn't begrudge you. Figured
you'd earned it, after Chennai.
And Marrakech. And especially
Prague.

CLARENCE

Prague! That was what did it.
There I am, bleeding out, you're
trying to get me to the safe house
--

MADGE

And that street vendor wouldn't
stop trying to sell us a trdelnik!

They both laugh.

CLARENCE

... Damn tasty, though. Almost
worth the blood loss.

MADGE

So what's this about, Clarence?

CLARENCE

(Sighs)
You know damn well.

Madge looks at him, blankly innocent.

CLARENCE
Where's the Codex?

MADGE
The Codex is a myth.

CLARENCE
See, you didn't answer my
question.

MADGE
Even if it existed, it'd be years
out of date by now. Decades.

CLARENCE
Still not an answer. I know you.

MADGE
I don't know what else to tell
you.

CLARENCE
You never could lie to me.

Clarence sighs.

CLARENCE
(Cont'd)
Hell. Not my problem. I'm just
here to deliver you. I'm not the
one who'll get you to talk.

He looks sadly at Madge. Whatever's coming, it's bad.

CLARENCE
(Cont'd)
You'll wish I were.

Madge shifts uncomfortably, looking out the window.

CUT TO:

INT. IRS OFFICE - DAY

Neil holds up the printed papers Clarence gave him.

NEIL
Invisible yellow dots.

Everyone else, gathered round, looks at him blankly.

NEIL

(Cont'd)

Uh ... so ... every printer adds tiny yellow dots to every page. Scan the paper, adjust the colors, and you can match the pattern to the device that printed it. They use it to catch counterfeiters.

Neil taps the papers.

NEIL

(Cont'd)

If we can find the printer that ran this off, maybe we get his address. Or a clue, a, a license plate, something?

ROGER

It's thin...

PERRY

It's more than jack shit.

Elmer's huge hand closes over the paper.

ELMER

New guy, with me.

They awkwardly shuffle around each other, each trying to politely let the other one go first.

ROGER

Oh, for Christ's sake.

ELMER

(Sheepish)

Sorry.

Elmer leads Neil to the IT closet. Unlocks it with a key on a retractable cord at his belt. Neil follows him into

INT. IT CLOSET

Wow. Massive, nearly wall-sized screen. Racks of glowing towers, liquid cooling surging through and around them. Elmer sits down at an Elmer-sized chair in front of a desk and cracks his knuckles.

ELMER

Scanner's over there.

Neil stops gawking, finds the scanner.

ELMER

(Cont'd)

... Sorry about earlier. [beat] I
got the social anxiety real bad.
Gets me all tongue-tied and such.

He gestures to his facemask.

ELMER

(Cont'd)

And my sister back home, she's got
some health troubles, plus I don't
want me any of that long COVID, no
sir, so even though I got all the
vaxxes, I just figure I'll be
extra double safe, you know, and
-- hell, there I go running my
mouth.

Elmer seems to shrink into himself and focuses on the
screen. Neil relaxes, smiles.

NEIL

Nice to meet you, Elmer. Thanks
for sticking up for me.

Behind his mask, Elmer gives a shy little grin.

ELMER

Shoot, man. I know what it's like,
havin' no one listen.

He taps Neil in what's meant as an affectionate way; it
doesn't quite knock the breath out of Neil.

ELMER

(Cont'd)

You gotta advocate for yourself,
man.

NEIL

You're not the first person to say
that. I just ... my mom, my dad,
they did amazing things, always
for other people. My grandparents
told me all these stories about
them. How they put everyone else
first. I've always wanted to be
like them. What I want -- I guess
it's like it doesn't really
matter, if I can do something to
help someone else.

ELMER

Well, your momma and daddy -- don't you think they'd have wanted to be there with you? I bet they'd have traded at least some of them heroics and such to see you grow up. Just sayin'. Sometimes you gotta stick up for yourself so's you can take care of others. Least that's what my therapist says, anyway. [beat] And he's got this big bowl of Jolly Ranchers in his office, so you know he's worth listenin' to.

The scanner hums, and onscreen, the document appears in tranches. Elmer makes some color adjustments.

ELMER

(Cont'd)

Well, son of a gun.

He zooms in to a portion of the image, where a dot pattern has become visible.

ELMER

(Cont'd)

You said counterfeiting, so they probably got a database at Treasury.

He makes a few clicks, backdoors into the U.S. Treasury department's secure system.

ELMER

(Cont'd)

Aw, see, look, that didn't used to be near so easy. Them damn DOGE boys, I reckon. I ever saw 'em on the street, I would write 'em a strongly worded letter, let me tell you.

NEIL

Oh yeah. *Real* dicks.

Elmer shakes his head in sympathy. He drops the scanned dots into the Treasury interface, gets a match, pulls up sales information, and pauses.

ELMER

Good news is, it's local. Bad news...

NEIL

What?

Elmer turns, his face nervous and worried.

ELMER

I'd stay here, I was you.

EXT. STRIP MALL OFFICE - MINUTES LATER

Roger, Perry, and Leroy, coats on, head out the door into the parking lot. Perry has a large, long black duffel bag slung over one shoulder.

ROGER

Perry, you're overwatch. Cover our backs in case they invite any friends. Leroy and I--

NEIL

Um.

Neil runs out, struggling into his coat.

NEIL

I ... I want to come with you.

ROGER

Kid, you do *not* want any piece of this. Just do yourself a favor, stay here with Elmer, and --

NEIL

Madge was nice to me. She was the only one who was nice to me without asking me to feed a snake, which, no offense, Leroy.

Leroy shrugs, unbothered.

NEIL

(Cont'd)

So I ... I'd like to come help. If that's okay?

Roger clearly feels guilty about the Break Room Incident.

ROGER

(No time for this)

Ahhh, hell. [beat] You get shot, it is *not* my fault. OK, who's the kid riding with?

Perry, climbing into a badasstical muscle car, shoots Neil and Roger a death glare. Neil looks over at Leroy.

Leroy stands proudly next to an honest-to-God hearse. He slaps the roof, big friendly smile.

LEROY

Plenty of room. You can fit so
many bodies in this bad boy.

Neil looks pleadingly at Roger, who sighs.

CUT TO:

EXT. MINOT ROAD - DAY

Under a storm-darkening sky, Roger's beat-up old green truck, Perry's muscle car, and, yes, Leroy's hearse convoy.

INT. ROGER'S TRUCK

Neil looks around nervously. Roger keeps his eyes on the road.

NEIL

So ... I'm guessing you guys
aren't revenue officers.

Roger releases a short, jaded little laugh.

ROGER

Madge knows too much. I've seen
too much. Leroy's ... Leroy. Elmer
had a panic attack on an op, put
his piece-of-shit CO through a
wall.

NEIL

And Perry?

ROGER

Sniper. The best. Was, anyway.
Till she stopped killing. Which
is, you know, career-limiting.

NEIL

Why?

ROGER

Not my story to tell. [beat] Uncle Sam stashes us here, off the books but still on a leash. Tosses us a nice little deniable mission now and then. As a treat.

NEIL

Sounds like being buried alive.

ROGER

You've never been buried alive. [beat] So you show up and we're losing our shit. How'd he get here? How much does he know? What do we do all day with a civilian who expects us to, y'know, tax? [beat] Guess it sucked for everyone.

NEIL

Did ... did you know my mom and dad?

ROGER

... Long time ago, yeah. Good people. I'm real sorry.

NEIL

Were they --?

ROGER

No. No, far as I ever knew, they were clean.

NEIL

Were you there when they--?

ROGER

No. [beat] Wish I had been.

NEIL

How did you know them?

ROGER

We're here.

Roger rolls the wheel, and the truck turns into

EXT. MOTEL 88

A shabby old motor court at the weedy edges of Minot. The letters on the sign read CLEAN WHITE LINENS.

Roger leaves his coat in the car, despite the cold. Climbs out with Neil in tow. Leroy bwip-bwips the hearse and joins them, carrying the rattiest of old gym bags. Perry stays in her car.

ROGER

Trust me, kid. The assholes who run this dump are predisposed to hate your guts. You're safer out here.

Neil looks over at Perry, who glares back at him.

NEIL

I'll take my chances.

Roger throws an exasperated, cut-me-some-slack look Perry's way. She flares her eyes sarcastically at him.

ROGER

[mumbles, off Perry] Pain in my ass... [to Neil] Stay close, keep quiet.

INT. MOTEL 88 LOBBY

Roger, Leroy, and a trailing Neil pass through the automatic doors. Neil's eyes widen.

The lobby could be any cheap old motel's, save for the decor: Paintings of George Lincoln Rockwell, Nathan Bedford Forrest, Adolf Hitler, Andrew Jackson, and yep, Donald Trump. Framed Nazi and Klan memorabilia. Obligatory Confederate battle flag.

Behind the desk, KARL. At the coffee maker: DARRYL. Playing Galaga from a tabletop machine in the corner: EARL. Just generally loitering: WAYNE. Muscular. Tattooed. Unfriendly. Intensely aware of who just walked in. Zeroed in on Neil, who is definitely wishing he stayed outside.

ROGER

Afternoon, gentlemen.

KARL arcs a brown glob of tobacco over the front desk, to the floor just in front of Roger's sensible shoes. Roger looks down.

ROGER

Good aim. Now, to save us all some time, we know you provide a hidey-hole for every sufficiently pale piece of shit that drifts through town.

KARL

Get the *fuck* out.

Roger holds out a printout from some in-office security camera, showing Clarence holding Neil at gunpoint.

ROGER

Gladly. Soon as you tell us all about this man. Bout yea high, scar on the back of his right hand.

That last bit gets their attention. Roger notices, nods.

WAYNE peels off from the wall. Gets right up in Roger's face.

WAYNE

He said get the fuck out. And take your *boy* with you.

ROGER

Huh. Really thought you were gonna go hard "r" there --

Wayne takes a swing. Roger CATCHES IT WITH ONE HAND. TWISTS. Wayne's eyes bulge as he struggles. Earl and Darryl stand up, start closing in.

Roger takes off his glasses with his free hand, gives them to Neil.

ROGER

Hold these for me, would you?

Leroy leans way too close to Neil's ear, whispers loudly:

LEROY

You're gonna want to step back now.

Roger proceeds to ABSOLUTELY WRECK THESE GUYS' SHIT.

He's laughing off punches. Snapping limbs at the elbow and knee. Driving guys face-first into the glass-framed portraits of their sordid heroes. Beating Karl with the butt of the shotgun he's hiding under the front desk.

By the time it's over -- astonishingly fast -- four ruined men lie bleeding around the room. Neil has climbed up onto one of the lobby chairs, pressed against the wall. Leroy, having helped himself to coffee, checks his watch.

LEROY
You're slowing down.

Roger, leaning on the counter to catch his breath, looks over at him.

ROGER
Screw you.

Roger peers over the front desk. Karl lies bleeding on the floor, next to the open door to the small MANAGER'S OFFICE.

ROGER
(Cont'd)
So. About that fella.

KARL
Fuck you. Beat on me all you like.
I had worse.

Roger shakes his head sadly.

ROGER
You say that now. Leroy! You're up.

Leroy, whistling, carrying his bag, calmly circles the counter, grabs Karl by the collar, and drags him into the manager's office. Shuts the door behind him.

Roger crosses the lobby and collapses into the chair next to Neil. Looks sourly at a bloodstain on his shirt.

ROGER
Ahhh, shit.

Neil, still on the chair, hands him back his glasses.

CUT TO:

INT. MOTEL 88 MANAGER'S OFFICE

Karl struggles, ziptied to his office chair. Leroy THUNKS his gym bag down on the desk between them.

Leroy takes off his sunglasses. Striking eyes. From this moment on, he will never break eye contact with Karl. The expression on his face -- placid, bland -- will not change.

Leroy reaches into the bag. Takes out BOLT CUTTERS. NEEDLENOSE PLIERS. RUBBER TUBING. A LARGE PLASTIC BAG. AN ELECTRIC KNIFE. Sets them down on the desk.

Then Leroy draws out something long and rubbery and bright red. Karl watches, confused. It's ... a long tubular balloon?

Leroy inflates the balloon. Slowly. Inflates another, a different color. A third. NEVER. BREAKS. EYE CONTACT.

Karl grows pale. His eyes dart. What the hell is going on?

Leroy begins to twist the balloons together. Horrible high rubbery squeaking sound. Karl grimaces.

Leroy keeps twisting. Karl's eyes and nostrils flare. He begins to rattle against the zipties. Squeak squeak squeak.

Leroy's face, calm, unblinking, as the squeaking rubber grows louder and louder AND LOUDER AND

INT. MOTEL 88 LOBBY

Neil has climbed down to sit next to Roger. Roger, still catching his breath, nudges a groaning Earl with the tip of his shoe.

NEIL

What's he doing in there?

ROGER

Leroy?

NEIL

He's not ... like ... torturing the guy, is he?

Roger snorts, contemptuous.

ROGER

Leroy's never laid a finger on anyone. [beat] You see those pictures at his desk? The kids?

NEIL

Yeah.

ROGER

You ever hear of the Robert V.
Denney Federal Building bombing,
about twenty years back?

NEIL

No.

ROGER

Exactly. Leroy got two of the
militia assholes planning it to
sing. Not a mark on them. All
those kids were in the building
that day. Field trip. FBI stopped
the truck a half-block away.

NEIL

But ... how?

Roger laughs.

ROGER

That there is just the most
disquieting damn man on the
planet.

On cue, the Manager's Office door bangs open. Leroy wears
an elaborate balloon party hat. Sunglasses on again. Gym
bag in hand. We hear UNCONTROLLABLE SOBBING.

He steps aside, revealing Karl behind him, also wearing an
even more elaborate balloon hat, tears streaming down his
reddened face.

LEROY

We had a good talk.

He holds up a balloon dog, offering it to Neil and Roger.

LEROY

(Cont'd)

Weiner dog? Anyone?

END OF ACT THREE

ACT FOUR

EXT. FRACKING SITE - AFTERNOON

Under a sky that threatens snow, three signs, each slapped atop the one before:

DAKOTA ENERGY SITE #234 >> WARNING - CONTAMINATION - CLOSED
BY ORDER OF U.S. EPA >> REOPENING SOON BY ORDER OF DOGE

Beyond them, storage tanks, skeletal oil derricks idle, and an INDUSTRIAL TRAILER.

INT. INDUSTRIAL TRAILER

Clarence, gun in hand, peers out the windows. Waiting.

Madge sits shackled in a wheeled office chair. Her legs have been chained to its base. On the nearby desk, Clarence has stashed a go-bag and the STEEL BRIEFCASE we saw earlier.

MADGE

So who is it? The Russians?
Chinese? You never struck me as
the ideological type.

Clarence checks his watch.

CLARENCE

Please. Why go abroad? We've got
homegrown rich guys high on their
own farts, swimming in cash, giddy
to hollow out the country and
dance around in its skin.

MADGE

Oligarchs? And here I was thinking
you had a modicum of class.

CLARENCE

I have plenty of class. "Upper,"
preferably.

EXT. FRACKING SITE

On a bluff overlooking the site, Roger, Neil, and Perry low-crawl into view. Perry unslings her black bag. Roger peers through small binoculars.

ROGER
Yep, there's his truck.

Perry uses a monocular, then checks the readout on it.

PERRY
Range 350 meters. Wind from the
southwest, 10 knots.

She starts to assemble a sniper rifle.

ROGER
(To Neil)
You can stay in the truck.

NEIL
(Shivering)
And miss all the fun?

Roger raises himself on an elbow. Under his coat, he's wearing a bulletproof vest with extra clips for the pistol he produces, checks, and nods at, satisfied.

ROGER
Well, you're damn sure staying
put. [beat] You're not going to
argue?

Neil points at the pistol.

NEIL
I'm good with my current number of
holes, thanks.

ROGER
Huh. First smart thing you said.

Perry has the rifle assembled. Looks downscope.

PERRY
Got 'em. Thermals show two in the
trailer. Madge-shaped blob on the
north end, seated. Asshole-shaped
blob pacing on the south end.

ROGER
Any chance you can take him out?

PERRY
I wound him, maybe he kills Madge.

ROGER
And if you don't just wound him?

Perry glares at him. Not a chance. Roger shrugs.

ROGER
(Cont'd)
Had to ask. All right. Radio
silent in case he's monitoring
comms.

He starts to crawl down the hill. Stops, turns to Neil.

ROGER
(Ahhhh *hell with it*)
Second. That was the *second* smart
thing you said. The yellow dots --
that was pretty good.

Neil beams. Roger just sort of grimaces and resumes crawling.

Roger reaches the oil derricks, rises to a crouch. Moves from cover to cover, gun low. Wind's whipping up.

On the hill, Neil looks through Roger's binoculars, Perry through the rifle. Neil lowers his to glance at Perry.

NEIL
Roger said you stopped killing.

Seemingly endless silence. Then:

PERRY
Got bored. No challenge.

Neil slowly raises his binoculars again. Without ever looking away from the scope, Perry smirks.

Roger reaches the trailer. Old pipes and sheet metal piled around the exterior. Hears voices inside. Creeps around to the south end. A few light flakes start falling.

Neil, teeth chattering, spots something off to the north. Squints. Raises the binoculars. Lowers them, alarmed.

NEIL
Hey. Hey, do you see that?

Perry looks up, annoyed. Squints. Snatches the binoculars.

Across the plains, racing a snowstorm, hurtle THREE BLACK SUVs. Madge's ride is here.

Perry looks to the trailer, calculating distance, speed.

PERRY

Shit.

At the trailer, Roger imitates the call of a white-breasted nuthatch, same as he did for Madge in the office.

INT. INDUSTRIAL TRAILER

Madge notices. Clarence doesn't.

MADGE

You know the Codex is a legend, right? A lie.

CLARENCE

Lies pay pretty good these days.

MADGE

And even if it were real, what makes you think I could find it?

CLARENCE

Because you heard everything. Always. And you didn't forget. Why else would they exile you here? Lay out every dirty secret of the last forty years -- and at the center of the Venn diagram, there's you.

Madge murmurs something under her breath. Clarence frowns, moves closer, bends down to Madge.

CLARENCE

(Cont'd)

Come on, speak up. You know this ear's been shot since Taipei.

MADGE

I said you always were easy to distract.

Madge HEAD-BUTTS Clarence in the nose. He reels, bleeding.

Roger SLAMS THROUGH THE DOOR, pistol drawn. Clarence whirls, standoff, half-second from someone pulling a trigger --

MADGE

Hey, hey, whoa, stop!

Both men stop, glance at her, chagrined.

MADGE

(Cont'd)

In case you haven't noticed,
there's not a lot of room in here.
Anyone starts shooting, we all end
up springing leaks.

Clarence and Roger look at each other, silently agree.

MADGE

(Cont'd)

How about everyone puts it back in
the holster, and we talk this out?

By inches, Clarence and Roger holster their guns.

AND THEN SIMULTANEOUSLY DRAW KNIVES.

MADGE

Oh, for *CHRIST'S SAKE, BOYS--*

Roger and Clarence ATTACK EACH OTHER and we

CUT TO:

EXT. FRACKING SITE

Perry has angled her rifle toward the oncoming SUVs.

PERRY

Four to a car -- what're you
doing?

Neil, behind her, swings his arms. Doffs his coat.

NEIL

If you don't limber up, you get
cramps.

PERRY

This is not the 5K Fun Run,
dipshit.

NEIL

I gotta warn him. Clarence has his
truck right there. We get the
keys, maybe we can get out before
those guys show up. You go, I'm
useless up here. I go, you're here
to watch our backs.

PERRY

Sit down before you get yourself killed. I do *not* need Roger up my ass about that.

Neil's eyes narrow.

NEIL

No. I'm going.

PERRY

The fuck did you say?

As he speaks, Neil's courage gathers like a downhill snowball -- including the part where it grows increasingly perilous and out of control.

NEIL

You wouldn't even know where she is without me. I have done *nothing* but try to be nice and helpful since I got here, and you, you in particular, have been just the biggest asshole. Ooh, you can kill people, big whoop. I can do things with the right paperwork that would make people *beg* for death. You think you're scary? I'm the goddamned Internal Revenue Service! And there's a lady in that trailer who was kind to me for nothing while you were giving me endless reams of shit, and she needs help. So I'm going, and if you want to stop me, you're going to have to shoot me.

Perry looks like she's seriously considering it. Neil's resolve wavers.

NEIL

(Cont'd)

I'm mean, like I'm assuming it would be somewhere nonlethal, because I figure you know how to do that, and --

PERRY

All right! Shut up.

She grimaces and flutters one hand at him. Go on. Get out of here. He sags with relief. But as he turns to go:

PERRY

(Cont'd)

You do NOT want to meet the people
in those cars.

NEIL

Then make sure I don't. Please.

He tightens his shoelaces, flashing her a nervous grin.

Perry grunts. Sure. Fine. Puts her eye back to the scope.

Neil takes a deep breath, windmills his arms. Here goes.

Wind whips. Snow falls. Neil RUNS.

IN ONE CONTINUOUS SHOT:

- Down the hill, convoy small but approaching in BG.
- Across open field, onto dirt road, through the open gate.
- Behind him, the convoy draws alarmingly close. One tire on the lead SUV BURSTS, throwing rubber. The SUV veers, tips.
- Neil runs into the derricks. Men with guns climb from the upturned SUV. The second pulls in, finding cover behind the first vehicle. More armed men pile out.
- Distant shouts. Muzzle flashes, rifles bark. Bullets spark against the derricks. Neil stumbles, flails, keeps moving.
- Behind him, we see one gunman after another knocked off their feet by high-velocity rounds, clutching arms, calves, knees. Faint rifle cracks after each. Perry's work.
- The fire toward Neil intensifies. He skids to a stop behind a derrick, crouching, freaking out. Bullets ping the steel and rake the dirt.
- One by one the gunmen fall. Bullets punching THROUGH the flipped SUV. Groans and screams. The gunfire eases off.
- Neil keeps running. Out of the derricks, open ground, trailer in sight. Behind him, a large gunman sprints out of cover, on an intercept course. Huge. Fast. Motivated. Beelining for Neil closer and closer in the background. The gunman raises his pistol as he runs, drawing a clear bead on Neil.
- Neil pumps his arms, shuts his eyes. No way he'll make it.

- The gunman's KNEE EXPLODES, and he tumbles to the ground. He screams, prone, taking aim at Neil again, and ANOTHER ROUND PIERCES his arm. He screams again, drops the gun, lifts his hands as best as he's able. He's done.

- Neil passes him, skids to a stop at the edge of the trailer, winded. Behind him, the last few gunmen are disabled. The one who tried to shoot Neil starts slowly crawling backward toward the SUVs.

THROUGH A SNIPER SCOPE

First a thermal image, then a click over to optical: Neil grins at Perry. Gives a big doofy wave. *I made it!*

BACK TO

Perry, stonefaced, at the rifle. Then: The faintest flicker of a smile, a little head-shake. An exhale. That *nerd*.

Behind Neil, the trailer rocks and rattles.

INT. INDUSTRIAL TRAILER

Roger and Clarence fight, two vicious old pros. Both bleeding, grappling, slamming each other into the walls. Madge, knocked sideways, huddles on the floor.

Clarence punches Roger in the throat. While Roger gags, Clarence PLUNGES HIS KNIFE into Roger's shoulder.

EXT. FRACKING SITE

Neil hears Roger SCREAM. Eyes widen. Looks around. Sees pipes. Sheet metal. Idea. *Terrible idea, but, idea.*

INT. INDUSTRIAL TRAILER

Roger sinks to the floor, wheezing, clutching his bleeding shoulder. Clarence, panting, draws his gun.

MADGE

Clarence, don't, wait--

The trailer door BANGS OPEN again.

Neil CHARGES IN SCREAMING, sheet-metal shield and metal-pipe sword, and RAMS Clarence into the wall. Clarence grins at Neil from over the edge of the metal.

CLARENCE
Oho. Kid's got balls.

He gets his gun hand free, swings the pistol toward Neil. Neil clobbers his wrist with the pipe, breaking it. Clarence screams as the gun goes off. He drops the gun, and both he and Neil reel, Neil grimacing from the sudden noise.

NEIL
(Yelling)
Ahh! Shit! Why is that so loud?

Clarence SMASHES HIM ACROSS THE FACE with the steel briefcase, which flies open, scattering its contents. Neil tumbles to the floor.

EXT. FRACKING SITE

Through Perry's sniper scope, we see the limping, injured gunmen helping one another into the non-flipped SUV.

The scope moves to the third SUV, idling at a greater distance. View flips to thermal. One driver, one passenger in the back seat.

Perry murmurs into the scope:

PERRY
C'mon, asshole, get in range.

But the car back up, turns around, leaves. Car 2 follows.

Perry lifts her head from the rifle, watching them go.

INT. INDUSTRIAL TRAILER

Neil lies dazed. The dog tags from Clarence's briefcase swim into view, and he reaches for them.

Clarence, clutching his disabled arm, kneels before a pale, bleeding, semiconscious Roger. Fishes Roger's pistol from the holster. When Roger protests, Clarence JAMS THE KNIFE deeper into Roger's shoulder.

Clarence stands, levels Roger's gun at a woozy Neil. Shakes his head in disbelief.

CLARENCE
A goddamn civilian.

GUNSHOT. Clarence looks down, sees a hole through his torso. Nowhere fatal. Yet. He turns.

Madge, on the carpet, has Clarence's pistol. Dead aim.

MADGE
Clarence, don't. Please.

Clarence sighs. Smiles, real affection. Raises his gun --

Madge puts a bullet through his head.

Then she winces. Madge, Roger, and a recovering Neil, all on the floor with dead Clarence.

MADGE
Damn. That IS loud.

END OF ACT FOUR

CODA

INT. THE BURIED HATCHET - NIGHT

A hatchet in hand. Raised, thrown --

CLINK! Beer steins toast. The IRS gang sits at their table in the back, Neil now a more comfortable part of the group.

Neil drinks beer, winces, probes at his swollen black eye. Roger, next to him, leans over, favoring his injured shoulder.

ROGER
First shiner?

NEIL
Foam was a lot softer.

ROGER
Eh. You'll grow into it.

Roger actually SMILES. For, like, two seconds.

Madge leans over to Neil.

MADGE
I made some calls. Got contacts in DC working to get you back where you belong. But things are ... a little up in the air right now. Could be a while. [beat] We'll try to keep you out of trouble.

NEIL
It's OK. I've had worse coworkers.

Madge smiles, touched. Words heavy with regret:

MADGE
I don't ... see my son a lot. I wasn't there when he needed me. Out and about. [beat] You ever need to talk about anything, I'm here.

NEIL
... I *just* watched you kill a man.

MADGE
(Philosophical)
We contain multitudes.

Leroy -- massive, entirely different tropical drink -- and Elmer return to the table. Elmer claps Neil on the back, friendly, almost knocking him out of his chair.

ELMER

Neil, you're up, bud!

LEROY

You got this, muchacho! Slap its tushy and make it call you papa!

As he walks to the range, Neil fishes something from his pocket. Looks at it:

Dog tags. LT. COL. DARREN CHASE.

Flash of Neil back in the trailer, grabbing the dog tags. Clarence in V.O.:

CLARENCE

(V.O.)

I thought you were a chip off the old block.

Neil's brow furrows. Questions. He puts them away for now.

Before the target, Neil readies a throw.

PERRY

Stop.

Perry leans, arms folded, on the lane divider.

PERRY

(Cont'd)

Put the leg that matches your throwing arm forward. Let the axe do the work. Keep your shoulder still -- only motion should be the elbow. Let go when your arm's straight.

Neil follows her advice. Throws.

The hatchet STICKS IN THE TARGET, if far from bullseye.

Neil grins, delighted. Looks to Perry, who nods.

PERRY

Sucks less. Room for improvement.
[beat] Perry's my last name. Since you asked.

She doesn't wait for a response. Just walks off.

NEIL
 (Calls after her)
 What's your *first* name?

No answer, of course. (It's "Magnolia.")

Neil shakes his head, smiles. Turns back to the target for his second throw.

NEIL
 (Cont'd, to himself)
 Sucks less. Room for improvement.

Using what he's learned, he throws again, and we

CUT TO BLACK

END OF PILOT