

Walter Makes a Movie

Written by

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INT. HOME OFFICE - DAY

WALTER BECKTON sits in a plush recliner, dressed shabbily in robe and loafers. He dons a full scraggly beard and a balding head. His hair curls indiscriminately out the sides.

Beckton glances up from "The Idiot" by Dostoyevsky to check his watch. He closes the book and brings it with him as he leaves the room.

INT. BATHROOM - DAY

Beckton studies his unkempt appearance in the mirror. Doesn't change a thing. He kneels down to open a drawer under the sink and rummages through a stack of bathroom products.

Jackpot - a crude hole in the wall. He takes out a pillbox. He swallows a pill with water and kneels back down to return the pharma box to its hole. He resurfaces in the mirror.

EXT. BALCONY - DAY

A humongous balcony overlooking Beckton's impressive estate. Old money look, nothing tacky, beautiful open grounds.

Beckton's agent, ADRIAN GROSSMAN, is seated at a long table. The table is strewn with papers, pens, plans.

Beckton exits onto the balcony. Adrian scribbles.

BECKTON

Am I late?

ADRIAN

(not looking up)

You know you're not.

BECKTON

Can't volley today. He must have a massive fucking ego.

ADRIAN

So many do, in this business.

BECKTON

Not me.

ADRIAN

(smiling)

No. Not you. Listen, he'll be here in ten. We should prepare.

BECKTON

So he's late. We can leverage that.

ADRIAN

If he was, you couldn't. And again, he isn't. You can slip off your Svengali suit. I'm not playing Pervert #3.

BECKTON

(sighing)

Just read the script. None of them are "perverts", in the sense you mean.

ADRIAN

Gonna beep Steph.

BECKTON

I have a perfect shot in store for Pervert #3. The first soiree. And don't spurn a role so quickly. You're still young.

ADRIAN

Old enough to know not to subject myself to your direction.

BECKTON

(affectionately)

You know I'd never cast you. So. What do we know about the inimitable Nick Bates. Industry chatter. Might be gay, no?

Adrian stops writing. He puts down his pen and his pager.

ADRIAN

Listen. I think you should consider the full picture of what it is you're trying to do here.

BECKTON

I have considered it. I'm considerate.

ADRIAN

That's fine. Maybe just try being... a person, this time. Not every actor you work with needs to be tricked.

BECKTON

(fondly)

Jack didn't. We could have finished that shoot in 18 weeks. But Rita needed a nudge. That took time.

ADRIAN

Yeah. You nudged her into the nuthouse. Carew went full fucking looney toons.

BECKTON

Okay, okay.

ADRIAN

That way won't work this way. Nick Bates. Big, disco-ball spotlight on this one. And it's my job-

Beckton holds his hand up. An edict - QUIET.

BECKTON

- to make sure I'm not late for meetings like this. Disco balls aren't that bright, either. They just twirl.

ADRIAN

You haven't directed a movie in 10 years. You want to get this made?

BECKTON

Of course.

ADRIAN

I don't mean "made". Collecting dust on twelve reels in three continents. Living on a soundstage for two years. Worrying about the things only you worry about. I can't, I, I can't do it, Walt.

Beckton eyes Adrian. He puts his hands up in defeat.

BECKTON

Simmer down. I know, yes. And I need this movie made.

ADRIAN

What do you mean, need-

Adrian's pager beeps. His eyebrows shoot up. He scrambles to collect and stack his notes.

ADRIAN (CONT'D)
He's here. You good?

BECKTON
(fake smiling)
Good. Good, good, good.

Adrian fixes his tie and slicks his hair back. Showtime.

ADRIAN
Just wildly unconvincing. Fine.
Brooding genius tries his best.
That'll play.

BECKTON
(playful indignation)
That'll play? That's what it is. I
am a brooding geni-

NICK BATES steps onto the balcony with entourage in tow. He is gorgeous, stylishly comfortable, complete with black wavy hair and kind eyes.

Nick's agent STEPH SAMSON walks by his side. The entourage is comprised of publicists, managers, all dressed expensively in shades of blue and gray. All but one.

GENE, a middle-aged man, observes the cohort exchange hellos. He is clean shaven with a pinkish face and crew cut white-blond hair. He wears a buttoned black peacoat and a starched white shirt, buttoned to the top.

Gene stands apart, shifting his gaze lazily from Beckton to Nick to Beckton's estate.

ADRIAN
Hey, Steph. Nick! Great to see you!

NICK
Adrian. Shit, buddy!

Gene speaks to no one and continues to focus on Nick. He takes his time in joining the group, maintaining a dully pleasant expression as he pulls up a chair next to Steph.

NICK (CONT'D)
I'm serious. You slimmed down.
Walter making you run laps? I
thought your PA days were over.

Everyone at the table laughs long and loud at Nick's bad joke. Everyone but Beckton, who only grins and nods.

ADRIAN

I love your work, Nick, but I don't
do my own stunts!

Dead silence. Nick starts to laugh, warmly and sincerely, patting Adrian appreciatively on the back. Nick's laughter ripples through and around the table, his reps following his cue, until they're all howling with laughter.

Beckton clears his throat, smiling, waiting for the sycophantic choir to die down. It does.

BECKTON

Adrian is an enormously competent agent. He has considerably less talent as a comedian. So I've taken care to employ another one.

Adrian fails to suppress a grin. Nick's cohort is confused but attentive. Nick's appealing smile never wavers. He looks thoughtfully at Beckton and speaks with great conviction.

NICK

Well. Mr. Beckton. First, let me just say it plainly, you're a visionary. I saw Genesis at 14. I'd just gotten back from JV softball. That film is what started this, this whole thing. My "Big Bang."

More laughter from Nick's cohort. Beckton cocks his eye and pauses before responding.

BECKTON

It's very nice to finally meet you, Nick. I am a huge fan of your work.

Beckton leans forward without rising and limply extends his robed hand to Nick. Nick rises and shakes it firmly.

NICK

Thank you.

BECKTON

So. Genesis made you want to act. I don't really remember asking the cast to do a whole lot of acting in that picture.

Silence. The cohort sit uneasily. Nick plows on.

NICK

YES. Subtlety. Underacting, the purposeful monotony of it. That's exactly what struck me.

BECKTON

You weren't struck by the special effects? The themes?

NICK

Are you kidding? I couldn't leave my house for days. It was all I could talk about. Think about.

BECKTON

What about the softball game?

The cohort laughs politely. Gene smirks faintly at Beckton.

NICK

(confidently)

We lost. But I didn't care.

BECKTON

But you do remember what happened.

Nick stares at Beckton with a fixed smile. Nick's eyes flit towards Gene. Then back to Beckton. Nick laughs freely.

NICK

So. Let's talk Too Rich for Blood. Do you plan on changing the title?

Beckton nods at Adrian. Adrian notices, then leans over to whisper in Steph's ear. Gene stares straight ahead.

BECKTON

Yes. No, we keep the title. Yes, we can talk. Would it be terribly rude of me to insist to the, uh, gaggle, that I speak to Nick alone?

Adrian and Steph stand. Everyone else follows their lead.

ADRIAN

We have a room inside. There are drinks. And if anyone wants, uh, fresh trout-

Nick's cohort follows Adrian inside the house. Gene remains standing for a moment longer. He looks once at Nick, then amiably shambles into the house.

NICK

Alright! I want you to know. I read the novella. I know this story. The sex, the intrigue of it. My Italian, full disclosure, it's not where it needs to be. My dialect guy is the best. The best there is.

Beckton waves his hand abruptly.

BECKTON

(kindly)

It will all be set in New York, present day. No need for all that. Tell me a little more about you.

Nick clears his throat and leans forward with purpose.

NICK

Mr. Beckton, I've loved movies ever since I was nine years old. The first time I ever acted, it wasn't a movie. Obviously. Just this play my middle school put on. Couple of folding chairs, meant to be a cathedral. But it was there, on that stage, that I knew. This feeling I was having. It was the crowd, and the attention, sure. But even then. I felt like I was making something. Creating. I feel that a character must be understood through the lens of one's own perception before you can really identify. To subdue your own impulses and magnify another's. It's a terrific, magical business. I feel blessed to be a part of it.

Nick leans back comfortably, content with himself and his occupation. He may have practiced that answer once or twice.

BECKTON

I thought it was seeing Genesis that made you want to be an actor.

NICK

Absolutely.

BECKTON

Was it Genesis, or that cathedral chair production?

Nick chuckles good-naturedly. He gestures towards his army of representatives inside the house.

NICK

They warned me. You got me, Mr. Beckton, I've wanted to be an actor for a long time. I've always had a passion for it. And I have a passion for this project. The empty longing of the upper-middle class. And present-day New York! It's just, it's terrific. And the SEX!

BECKTON

(picking his ear)
What about the whole height thing?

NICK

I'm sorry?

BECKTON

The height problem. Your height.

Nick is stunned. A valiant smile hangs limply on his face.

BECKTON (CONT'D)

The tabloids say 5'6. Sometimes 5'7. The PR ghouls haunting my mansion are capable. But you look-

Beckton examines Nick for an uncomfortably long time.

BECKTON (CONT'D)

- Closer to 5'4. Maaaybe 5'5. We'd have to measure the body.

Nick is still smiling, but his face clouds briefly at Beckton's use of "the body" to describe Nick's person.

NICK

Mr. Beckton. You've been at the forefront of some of the greatest technological innovations in film over the last... Over the history of film. I use shoe lifts, mostly.

BECKTON

(sternly)
Yes, but the female lead can't be a midget, too. We have a whole herd of midgets at the first soiree. Having two more as leads... It would baffle the audience.

Nick pauses. He bursts out laughing. It sounds like music.

NICK

It is true. All that shit they say about you. I should be nervous, right? I'm not. I think that sort of forthrightness is *exactly* what makes great art.

BECKTON

Good. Because I'd really like for you to play my lead in Too Rich for Blood. And that's what it'll be. Great art.

NICK

That's it? No audition?

Beckton and Nick laugh.

BECKTON

Steph wouldn't let me. So. Alert your team. Send word to the studio.

NICK

Mr. Beckton. I've never said this to anyone before. But let's have some trout!

Beckton laughs heartily, pats Nick on the back, and starts to steer him inside the house.

BECKTON

All right, Nick. And call me Walter. We'll be working together.

INT. DINING ROOM - DAY

Beckton and Nick head into the house to find Adrian and the cohort seated at a stacked table. Calls are ended and chatter dies down as the two men enter. Nick is smiling. The cohort begins to smile too. Nick surveys the room.

NICK

Great art. Has a way of cutting through the complication. We just gotta iron out the details, we're good to go!

STEPH

Nick. Need to talk to the studio. You remember studios, Walter?

Beckton grins widely at Steph. Steph smiles at Adrian. Adrian exhales at nobody.

NICK

Steph, speed-run it. To work with Walter Beckton? I'd take scale.

STEPH

No, we wouldn't. Ade, we have to get back stateside. Another shoot.

BECKTON

Pleasure, Steph.

STEPH

Walter.

EXT. ESTATE DRIVEWAY - DAY

The cohort exchange mutually warm goodbyes with Beckton and Adrian. They each file into a waiting car.

Gene waits with his arms laid evenly at his sides, taking a self-guided tour of Beckton's estate. His expression is one of dim alertness and it never, ever changes.

The cohort sits with Nick in the car as Gene walks up to Beckton. He extends a pale, fat-fingered hand.

GENE

Hello, Walter Beckton! I'm Gene.

BECKTON

Hey, Gene. What do you do for Nick?

GENE

That is an excellent question, Walt. I advise Nick on a moderately wide range of matters ranging from matter to matter. He's special, I'm sure you'd agree, and he needs all the help he can get in the jungle. Hollywood. Myself, the people I work with. We try to help him out with all that.

BECKTON

Uh-huh.

GENE

I KNOW how much YOU know how much Hollywood can suck the marrow out of someone.

(MORE)

GENE (CONT'D)

All those greedy people around.
Fingers in the pie, points off the
top. Moving to England was a swell
idea, though. Nobody puts their
finger in a mincemeat pie,
amiright? And you still get to make
your movies!

Beckton looks at the luxurious SUV idling. No rush.

BECKTON

(confounded)

I suppose that's true.

GENE

Well, Walt. I'll get out of your
beard hair. Just kidding! I'm
looking forward to seeing you on
set, though. Haven't gotten around
to seeing your old ones. I'm not
really a movie guy. But I hear
you're a real perfectionist while
you're making them. And we greatly
appreciate perfectionism. Myself.
The people I work with.

Gene stares with curiously glassy eyes right at Beckton. A
pause. Beckton finally breaks and looks down at the ground.

GENE (CONT'D)

(mock British accent)

Thank you kindly for a lovely
afternoon, guvnah! See you soon!

Gene smiles dully and saunters down the lawn into the waiting
car. Beckton looks on speechless and, for the first time in a
long time, unnerved.

BECKTON

(muttering to himself)

A moderately wide range of matters,
ranging from matter to matter? What
the fuck does that even mean?

Adrian approaches Beckton. They walk on the estate grounds.

ADRIAN

The trout play has been dumb for
years, it doesn't work. I'm
starving. Do they even have bagels
in England, or is it just blackened
bread and kidney pudding and
whatever these people eat.

BECKTON

Who the fuck was that guy in the peacoat? He thinks he'll be allowed on my set.

ADRIAN

John? He's an Institute guy. Nick likes them. Why, what?

BECKTON

Gene, not John. Kept calling me Walt. Weird little fucker.

ADRIAN

Listen. With Nick, did it go well?

BECKTON

It did go well.

ADRIAN

Well, what's well? What did you think of him?

BECKTON

Do you consider me to be an apt judge of people, Adrian? Of character? Be frank.

ADRIAN

Walt, you aren't my only client, and the rest of them don't live in fucking Bedfordshire. I gotta get back to civilization.

BECKTON

Hollywood, California isn't any sort of civilization.

ADRIAN

Please, huh.

BECKTON

Well, he's a void, Adrian. There's nothing there.

Adrian stops walking.

ADRIAN

This is Nick Bates you're talking about. He had charisma leaking out of the bottom of his jeans. I almost slipped in it.

BECKTON

That stunt joke was shit.

ADRIAN

And look how he handled it.
Convinced me I was funny for a
moment. Fleeting, but-

BECKTON

Stop. Forget charisma.

Beckton swivels to face Adrian. He gets up close. He slings his arm around Adrian's neck and smiles, with a gleam in his eye that Adrian had concerned himself with many times before.

BECKTON (CONT'D)

This guy. Bates. He is a 24/7 news
ticker with nothing to report.
Tabula Rasa. He's perfect.

INT. SUV - DAY

Nick, Steph, her assistant RACHEL, and various reps are chauffeured down the Hollywood Freeway. Gene sits in the back row, gazing dreamily out the window. The Hollywood scenery illuminates his window like a movie screen.

Steph and the PR team chat excitedly as Nick nods, until -

STEPH

...perfectly. He was always going
to be cagey. He was never going to
fawn, he's an asshole. Everyone
knows he's an asshole, and
"everyone" includes Beckton. Vanity
Fair, last month.

RACHEL

"Bates has an ineffable charm."

STEPH

Mhmm. Beckton, he's *effable*.

NICK

Thanks. I don't know. He didn't
seem to like me very much.

Gene turns icily from the window. He looks at Steph and awaits her response.

STEPH

He didn't like you. He loved you. He played mind games, what else is he going to do? Genius. Okay. Or, an asshole from Brooklyn playing the posh elder statesman of film. You are Nick Fucking Bates. You are New Hollywood. He loved you.

GENE

(pleasantly)

He *is* a genius, though. Right?

Everyone but Nick becomes visibly annoyed and a little trepidatious. A short lull. Steph responds confidently.

STEPH

He's a legend. But the name of the game is money, and Nick's the most bankable male lead on-

GENE

(utterly confident)

I think he *is* a genius. I've seen all of Beckton's movies. You all know I'm an insatiable movie buff. Beckton has done things nobody else has dreamed of doing. Probably a lot of back and forth with studios.

STEPH

Yep. But-

GENE

Conflict, y'know! He seems a man who can handle conflict. I don't think he is playing at anything. I can see why he left Hollywood.

Gene smiles, shrugs, and resumes staring out the window. Steph and the PR team sit sullenly.

STEPH

Yep. Terrific filmmaker. Lots of trouble with studio types over the years. It's documented.

NICK

Gene makes a good point, though.

The cohort again falls into a lull.

NICK (CONT'D)

We talked about this. "Ricardo Takes DC", Jim Roach, using those rehearsal takes. And everybody knows what he did to Rita Carew. I mean, that was fucked up.

STEPH

It was certainly a certain way of doing things. She had... issues-

NICK

Come on. I'm not stupid. It was fucked up.

STEPH

(mortified)

Stupid?! You're brilliant, you're Nick FUCKING BATES-

NICK

(firmly)

Alright, enough. Gene's right. I don't need reassurances. I need research. He'll be something new.

GENE

He will be that.

Nick turns to look back at Gene, then directs the DRIVER.

NICK

Please drop Gene and I at the center. Thanks, pal.

FRANK

Yes, Mr. Bates. Should be just under an hour.

NICK

Alright. Steph, do some research. Learn more about Beckton on set. Not the rumor mill stuff.

STEPH

Absolutely. That's prudent.

NICK

Maybe you get Jack on the phone, too. Soon.

STEPH

I will. You two will talk. He loves you. It's just hard to get Jack on the phone sometimes. You know Jack-

NICK

(angrily)

Can you get him on the phone?

STEPH

I can get anybody on the phone. Jack's guy is Eckstein, I talk to Eckstein twice a week. You and Jack will talk. But Nick?

NICK

Yeah.

STEPH

Jack is Jack. He'll say everything will be fine, because for him, it's never not been. He lives in a fairy tale and he talks in riddles.

NICK

Jack just talks the way he thinks.

STEPH

Okay. But he's as weird as Beckton. And you're *not* weird, Nick-

Raucous laughter explodes from the backseat. The cohort crane their necks to observe.

Gene is doubled over laughing, his face red, his necktie tightening around his fleshy neck. His eyes fill with water. He laughs long and hard until he can't breathe.

Gene coughs. He catches his breath, dabs his eyes, and breathes deep. He exhales slowly and resumes his dully pleasant expression.

Like a hivemind, the cohort glance hopefully at Nick. Nick only chuckles and brushes a hand through his lush black hair.

GENE

Sorry, guys. I just thought of something Walter said earlier. What a *card* that man is.

STEPH

(sharply)

You spoke to Beckton? When?

GENE

I'll tell you all about it during
our session, Nick.

Steph fidgets with her phone. The ride continues in silence.

EXT. GARISH MCMANSION - NIGHT

Quiet. Stilllllness. Suddenly, a WOMAN whimpers in terror.

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

JACOB PAULSON and his wife, AMY, talk over produce in a
massive, gleaming kitchen.

AMY

(meekly)

They don't always have it day-of
fresh, love. I'll go now.

PAULSON

Is the market open at 4:00am? Do I
have time to wait for you to go,
come back with more shit kale?
Those antidepressants are clouding
your brain. You sound like an
idiot, really.

AMY

I just thought... I guess I thought
it looked fresh. It all get blended
anyway. But, I know that's not-

PAULSON

Pick up some carrots at the market.
That shit is clouding your eyes,
too. This looks fresh? You look
like a moron. My eyes work great.

AMY

Sorry, love. I'm sorry.

PAULSON

Just be a little smarter, maybe. A
little smarter, yeah?

AMY

The meeting will go great, honey.

PAULSON

Thanks, dummy. The hard part is
over. He's in.

AMY

In the movie?

PAULSON

In the *Institute*. I'll be home late. Call Ed, you need anything.

AMY

Okay, love.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - NIGHT

Paulson slams the door and walks huffily to a black Audi waiting outside. He wordlessly gestures. The driver peels out dangerously fast. The car's headlights shimmer and illuminate the road beyond.

EXT. ROADSIDE SPEED TRAP - NIGHT

Down the road, two Andover City cops sit in a police car, shrouded in darkness. Officer ABE REMUS is older, heavysset, and clean shaven. Officer TERRY FANTANA is young, slim, lightly bearded, with a heavy southern affectation.

FANTANA

Yeah, we're gonna do it on the deck we got now. No deck in Lubbock. Darlene has this dip she's always wantin' to make. It's good.

REMUS

I'll tell Gail. What's the dip?

FANTANA

It's good, man. She just makes gallons of the stuff. Only the two of us livin' there til a baby comes. Always throwin' it away all the damn time.

REMUS

Yeah, I mean. I'll try it. But what's in it?

FANTANA

You know... Sauces. It's good, it's just we got so much of it.

REMUS

You don't know what's in the dip.

FANTANA

Not exactly what's in it, no. You don't wanna try the dang dip, you don't have to.

Pause. Silence.

FANTANA (CONT'D)

IT'S GOOD, THOUGH-

REMUS

(shaking his head)

Mystery dips. This is textbook. This is how cops gets killed. How marriages jump off the rails. I know every last seed and stem Gail puts in my food. That's a 23 year marriage.

FANTANA

Mystery dips? The fuck are you talkin' about, man, it's GOOD. I don't need to know what's in 'em to know it's good.

Pause.

FANTANA (CONT'D)

How marriages end? What?!

REMUS

"Dang dip" is catchy. If she wants to bottle it. Is it any good?

FANTANA

Man, I TOLD you it was good. She might uninvite you herself, she hears about this shift. What in the Sam Hill-

Paulson's Audi whizzes past. The radar gun beeps. The cops turn on their siren and start following, signaling for Paulson's Audi to pull over.

Paulson's Audi drives at the same heightened speed, unbothered, for a few more seconds. The cops exchange a look. The Audi screeches to a stop in the middle of the street.

FANTANA (CONT'D)

This fuckin' asshole.

REMUS

Asshole drives an 8-series.

FANTANA

Real estate or coke?

REMUS

Up at 4, breaking ground himself?
My pension's on coke. Go, you gotta
get used to this stuff.

FANTANA

I'm plenty used to a drug stop. I'm
goin'. Get the plate number up.

Fantana unbuckles and starts to exit the car.

REMUS

Yep, it's loading...wait. Hold up!-

Fantana has already exited the car and walked up to the Audi's window. Remus slowly puts his hand over his mouth and watches with morbid interest as Fantana taps the Audi window.

FANTANA

Roll it down please, sir. License
and registration. What's your name?

Paulson's DRIVER rolls down the window. He stares vacantly at Fantana. Fantana stares back, unsure. A few tense moments.

Paulson's face comes into view as he leans forward and pokes his head toward the driver's window. He eyes Fantana.

PAULSON

What's your name?

FANTANA

I'm happy to tell you, sir. What's
important is I find out the name of
the man speedin', and see some
identification besides.

Fantana peels his eyes off Paulson and addresses the driver.

FANTANA (CONT'D)

You know how fast you were goin'?

Paulson lightly touches the Driver's arm. Driver immediately ceases reaching for his ID. Paulson reaches into the front lapel of his suit.

Fantana puts his hand on his holster. Paulson chuckles meanly and smoothly produces an ID card. He hands it to Fantana.

PAULSON
Neither of those things are
important. At all.

Fantana keeps one hand on his holster. He curiously takes the ID with his other. He scans it. His eyes go wide. He takes his hand off his holster like it's been zapped.

He shakily hands the ID back to Paulson.

FANTANA
I'm Officer Terry Fantana, Mr.
Paulson. I'm very sorry about the
delay. We just want to be sure
everyone is safe in Andover.

PAULSON
That's fine. I want to keep
everyone here safe, too.

FANTANA
(stammering)
Yes. Well, yeah, of course. Have a
good nigh- uh, mornin'. Have a good
day, sir.

Paulson slowly starts to roll up his window. He doesn't look at Fantana as he talks.

PAULSON
I will, Terry. I'll let Sergeant
Anderson know that you introduced
yourself. You have a "good nigh-uh-
mornin'day", too.

Fantana walks back to the police car as Paulson's Audi speeds off, faster than ever. He enters the car to find Remus laughing and waiting with a look of nervous excitement.

FANTANA
You ran the plate.

REMUS
(laughing)
Tell Darlene to cancel the party.
Best fuckin' welcome to Andover you
could get. How was that?

FANTANA
Jesus. He really is scary. Way he
talks. He said he was gonna let
Anderson know.

REMUS

He will. He likes to fuck around.
It'll be a talking-to, tops.

FANTANA

Shit.

REMUS

Well. You were right about it being
a real estate developer.

Silence. They look at each other. The cops burst into
laughter. Remus turns on the car.

FANTANA

(shaking his head)
This place is PLUMB fucked, man.

EXT. MANSION POOLSIDE - DAY

JACK THE MACK and CALISTA FLOCKHART lounge by a beautiful
swimming pool, nestled in a sprawling Beverly Hills backyard.

Jack is 60 and shirtless. Fat and happy, a wise jester. He is
not as shockingly beautiful as he once was, and he knows it,
but he is beautiful still. He finishes a drink.

Calista dances playfully in a bikini. She holds a bottle of
whisky. She brings the bottle to Jack and starts pouring.

The phone rings. Jack lazily answers.

JACK

It's Jack, you're welcome... OHHH,
NICKY BOY! How the hell are ya!

Jack turns somberly to Calista as she pours. He arches an
eyebrow.

JACK (CONT'D)

Sweetheart, you're drowning it.
Thank you goorgeous. Nicky, sorry-

Calista gestures at Jack - BE DISCREET. Jack looks right into
Calista's soul. Jack smiles, toothy-big. JACK the MACK.

JACK (CONT'D)

I'm just here with my attorney.

Calista mouths "WHAT THE FUCK" and throws her hands UP-

JACK (CONT'D)

Name's Ally McBeal. Firm's based in Boston, but she flew all the way out to Mulholland Drive to offer her legal services personally. She is VERY competent.

Calista picks up a newspaper and smacks Jack on the head. Jack offers no resistance. He grins wide like a Cheshire cat.

Nick, waiting on the other end, laughs and shakes his head.

JACK (CONT'D)

What? What we did was legal. In most states.

CALISTA

Won't watch the show, but he jokes about the show.

JACK

Baby, I *feel* like I watched it.

Nick waits patiently on the other end. He's heard this sort of thing before. Interject? He knows better.

JACK (CONT'D)

You paint this richly detailed portrait. When you talk about it, and talk about it, and talk about-

Calista yanks the phone from Jack.

CALISTA

Is whichever "Nicky" this might be a discreet person?

NICK

Hi, Miss Flockhart. It's "Nicky" Bates.

CALISTA

Ooo, Jack, *somebody* took time out of their schedule to hear you ramble. Hi, Nick. Huge fan, etcetera. Not a word of this, please?

NICK

(laughing)
Won't tell a soul.

CALISTA

A gentleman. Unlike-

Calista smacks Jack. Jack's eyes plead and kid. Forgive me?

CALISTA (CONT'D)
- Who is a dog. Byeee, Nick.

Calista tosses the phone back at Jack.

JACK
I'm an old lump and you're pouring
drinks. By a pool! It's worked out.

Nick is pacing on the other end. Jack addresses him.

JACK (CONT'D)
She even brought the bottle.

NICK
She seems nice.

JACK
She's NOT. I think I might luuurve
her.

Calista rolls her eyes. A smile tugs the corners of her lips.
JACK the MACK.

NICK
If you're busy, I'll call back.

JACK
NAH. No. Let's seize, with white
knuckles, Nicky. I'm having a
regular kinda day.

A look at Jack's opulent compound. Priceless furniture
everywhere. Three errant marijuana bricks lined up against an
antique Roman bust head. Top shelf and mixer-grade bottles
scattered indiscriminately on a cherrywood oak bar.

And a fucking leopard strolls the grounds for good measure.

NICK
It's 11am. You're a drink in.

JACK
Like I said, regular. BONSHI!

Upon hearing BONSHI, the fucking leopard stops nibbling on a
plastic-wrapped marijuana brick. He licks the Roman bust's
nose and reluctantly strolls back out onto the grounds.

NICK
 (nonplussed)
 Okay. Eckstein told you about this new role? Variety doesn't know.

JACK
 He did tell me that. Question you have is, are you casted. Trades are quiet. This being Walter and all.

NICK
 Yes.

Jack leans forward, suddenly engaged. He speaks deliberately.

JACK
 But of course you *are*. Casted. He must have done a number on you.

NICK
 That's what I wanted to talk about.

JACK
 Come on. Remember our shoot? I started off jealous.

NICK
 You couldn't have been nicer.

JACK
 Yeah, well, I deserved my nomination. Acting before action.

Jack looks sagely at Calista and gestures for her to take notes. Calista lowers her sunglasses, flips him off, and returns to tanning. Jack smirks and sighs theatrically.

JACK (CONT'D)
 Once we started shooting, I understood. I was a star eclipsed. By some newly discovered planet.

NICK
 You're the only thing anyone remembers about that movie.

JACK
 (slurring)
 I don't remember it. You'll hear this later when you talk to Steph, but,
 (imitates Steph)
 You're NICK FUCKING BATES, you are the BEST.

(MORE)

JACK (CONT'D)
 (slurring in his voice)
 Seriously, be merry. You've scaled
 mountains. We're both playing with
 house money, now.

Jack starts to sing off-tune. It's not half bad.

JACK (CONT'D)
 (singing)
 "In your boones, you know it true.
 Beckton toooo. Laaa daaa dooooo..."

NICK
 Never change, Jack. How do I know
 you're not acting now?

JACK
 You don't! I'm still second best. I
 gotta go, Nicky, I'm bound by
 arrangements. You promise to come
 and see me soon.

NICK
 I will. I just wanted to ask if you
 had a rapport with Walter.
 Something that made things easier
 to shoot-

JACK
 BUT! Let's not let the tyranny of
 time dictate our right to dissect
 and disassemble this cesspool of a
 town. We'll strategize, Nicky.
 Prepare fastidiously for the war
 ahead. And make no mistake, war it
 will be. But you will emerge,
 blood-stained, victorious.

Calista looks at Jack with a a mix of amusement and awe. He
 is certifiably ridiculous and quite drunk, but he sells it.

NICK
 I'd like that. Until then, less
 drinking.

JACK
 Relative to when?

NICK
 Love you, big guy.

JACK
 Bye-bye, Nicky.

Nick hangs up, frustrated but amused.

Jack places the phone down. Calista removes her sunglasses and sits down next to him.

CALISTA

Would you get all red and jealous the way you do? If I said... I got starstruck, hearing him on the phone.

Jack is no longer slurring or employing flowery language. Suddenly, he seems curiously sober.

JACK

What did you think of him?

CALISTA

From the ten seconds? That time I told Nick Bates not to tell anyone I was fucking "Jack the Mack"?

JACK

Yeah. That time.

CALISTA

Over the sounds of you being a 12 year old boy. I thought he sounded sweet. Confident.

JACK

Hm.

CALISTA

What do you think of him?

Jack doesn't answer. He stares sullenly at the view.

CALISTA (CONT'D)

Awww, he is jealous. Don't worry. You are so much more my type.

JACK

I heard you had a thing for 12 year old boys. I made my move.

CALISTA

(giggling)

You are so GROSS sometimes. You barely even mentioned Beckton, by the way. I was eavesdropping.

JACK

This is privileged, Ally. But Walter is. Well, he's diabolical. Why spook Nick. He's a good boy.

CALISTA

He's your friend. You should tell him. You're diabolical.

JACK

I would never mess with Walter's process. Whatever the hell it is.

Calista pours Jack more whisky. Jack takes it.

JACK (CONT'D)

(softly)

Best goddam bartender from Boston to Beverly Hills.

CALISTA

What?

Jack gazes into his pool, deep in thought. He doesn't reply.

INT. OFFICE LOBBY - DAY

A gorgeous, gleaming front lobby filled with bustle. Businesspeople in bespoke suits file in and out.

Beckton, shabbily dressed, steps into the lobby. His beard has grown wilder. He holds his book - "The Idiot". He stands in messy contrast against a sea of coiffed Brits.

Beckton listens, eavesdrops, stares unabashedly. Absorbs information. He overhears passerby on their phones.

PASSERBY #1

-can't sustain this drubbing. Thai markets will bounce back by October or August. No, not September-

PASSERBY #2

Amelia could never have bread, could she, she hasn't suddenly learned to eat BREAD-

PASSERBY #3

I simply cannot do 4:00-

PASSERBY #1

Fine, September then. In any case-

Beckton turns towards an elevator servicing floors 10-20. He enters a crowded one, mechanically slotting himself between two Brits. Every button is lit, except for the 17th floor.

Beckton hits the 17th floor button. The Brit to his left looks at him with mild interest as the elevator doors close.

Doors open. Beckton exits and checks his watch. 9:34.

He walks down a long hallway, finding a single unmarked office with a plain wooden door at the end. He buzzes a lonely white button on the wall and looks up into a tiny mounted camera. Beckton waves.

A MAN in a bulletproof VEST sits munching a breakfast burrito and watching a gigantic monitor with many screens. He hears a beep and glances at Screen #2.

He sees Beckton waving and chuckles. Grabs his walkie-talkie.

VEST
(mouth full of burrito)
6-3 has arrived. Admit?

POSH BRIT (V.O.)
(dryly)
Hurrah. Admit.

Vest presses a button. Bzzzz. Beckton steps inside. The cheap wooden door closes on the unremarkable hallway to reveal a beautiful modern lobby. The other side of the door is not cheap wood, but heavily reinforced bulletproof steel.

Beckton nods at a receptionist, sits, and opens his book. A few seconds pass. Click-clack. Well-heeled footsteps.

JAMES DARBY, the posh Brit at the other end of the walkie-talkie, emerges from his corner office into the lobby.

Darby is tall, thin, with an angular face. He wears a pleasant expression. He is dressed impeccably. He looks amusedly at Beckton.

DARBY
You are ludicrously early.

BECKTON
It's 9:37.

DARBY
Our meeting is at 12:00.

BECKTON
I brought a book.

DARBY
Please. Come inside.

BECKTON
All right.

They enter Darby's magnificent office. Beckton settles into a chair. Darby sits behind a big oak desk with files stacked tall and neat. He adjusts his glasses and peers at Beckton.

DARBY
Well. You've given me possibly my single most difficult assignm-

BECKTON
Don't brass tacks me. When you were hourly you didn't brass tacks me. "How's the wife, Walter?" "She's well, Jim."

DARBY
(sighing)
How is your wife, Walter?

BECKTON
I dunno. I can't read her. How's yours?

DARBY
Never had one. Bully for salutations. You've given me possibly my single most difficult assignment since entering the private sector.

BECKTON
Does it bring you back? MI6. Afghanistan. But then, the Reds... it must have been a tricky pickle.

Darby's pleasant face slackens. His eyes go cold.

DARBY
I have no knowledge of any SIS involvement in Afghanistan. If I did, I would posit that this is more difficult. If we move forward, I must quadruple my weekly rate.

Beckton slaps Darby's oak table like a dealer at an auction.

BECKTON

Sold. To an utter snake and a world class spook. The usual information, and I want private security.

Darby's pleasant expression returns. He pulls out a file.

DARBY

Before I milk you dry, can I give you a bit of free advice?

BECKTON

Sure.

DARBY

The people who sit in the chair you're sitting in aren't usually you.

BECKTON

I appreciate that fact.

DARBY

They tend more towards businessmen with sensitive international interests. High ranking government officials. Sometimes, one and the same.

Beckton snorts.

DARBY (CONT'D)

You are the only director to have ever sought my services. The only artist. You give me the easiest work and pay me the most money. I know you consider it well spent.

BECKTON

It pays for itself.

DARBY

This won't. You will wire me an offensively large sum as retainer this afternoon. Plus weeklies, which will be quadruple, as discussed. Expenses, obviously.

BECKTON

Obviously.

DARBY

And the retainer and weeklies' prices are subject to change.

BECKTON
To change upwards.

DARBY
Yes.

BECKTON
Which part of that was advice?

DARBY
My advice is, drop the entire thing. I'll cut your old rate in half for the work I've done already and shred the file. That's that.

BECKTON
You wouldn't shred the file. You might need it later.

Darby looks down at his notes. Back at Beckton.

BECKTON (CONT'D)
Now tell me what you've learned.

DARBY
(reviewing his file)
Plainly put? They are gangsters. The Institute uses enforcers of all stripes. Hitmen, shakedown artists, spies, bagmen, plants. They employ threats, bribery, financial extortion, wiretaps, sabotage, espionage, covert-false flag operations. They are enormously wealthy, with billions of dollars in real estate holdings, diversified investments, and liquid assets. They are highly organized and have installed affiliates in most every sphere of cultural influence. A city in Florida called Andover is their base and they have effectively infiltrated the law enforcement there. And the worst bit. They are, bar none, the most litigious organization active today. In the world. They sue at the slightest provocation, and they fund the case indefinitely until you settle. In one way or another.

Beckton scratches his beard, absorbing the totality of the group he is up against. He drums his fingers on his knees.

BECKTON
(brightly)
Okay! Not too bad, then.

DARBY
(dryly)
It is bad, Walter. It's very bad.

BECKTON
The head honcho. This Paulson.

DARBY
Groomed for leadership. By Alex
Smith himself. Before he passed.

BECKTON
Him, I know.

DARBY
Read his file anyway. Colorful.
Paulson is reportedly abrasive and
unforgiving. His deputy eludes
description. A truly nasty piece of
work named Ed Calhoun.

BECKTON
Yeah, well. I lunch with Don
Simpson. See who eats who.

DARBY
Very good.

BECKTON
What's their deal with Nick, Jim.
What are they up to?

DARBY
Nick Bates is the proverbial
feather in their culture-war cap.
Rank-and-files regard him as a
demigod of sorts. He and Paulson
are close.

BECKTON
Go on.

DARBY
The Institute recognizes his
utility as a superstar-actor and
treats him with accordant
adulation. It assigned him a
handler named Gene Kirby in 1994.

(MORE)

DARBY (CONT'D)

It seems Kirby was chosen because he holds a PhD in Cinema and Media studies from USC and gets along smashingly with Bates.

Beckton exhibits true shock at the mention of Gene.

DARBY (CONT'D)

Kirby transferred from Compliance, the most unsavory of the Institute's departments. He is no stranger to violence. But it seems he's cleaned up his act.

BECKTON

(puzzled)

I met Gene Kirby. He told me he wasn't a movie fan...

DARBY

Moving on. Policy is to have Bates refrain from commenting extensively on his association with the Institute in public. They are well aware of their unsavory reputation and do not wish for it to impact his film career. They employ a subtler strategy.

BECKTON

What is their strategy?

DARBY

Twofold. First, to have Bates preach the gospel of the Institute in private among the upper crust of the entertainment industry. He has made considerable headway in this arena. Names are in the file. Second, utilize his position to collect damaging information on Hollywood players. I suspect they go directly to Calhoun or Paulson.

It dawns on Beckton. He slouches and sighs.

BECKTON

And why should my set be any different. A blackmail factory. Tell me more about Smith.

Darby stands and buttons his suit - time to go. He slides a stack of files over the table to Beckton.

DARBY

I have a scheduled 10:00am, and you cannot know who it is with. Everything is in there. When you call me, use the burner I gave you. And it is quadruple.

Beckton stands. He coughs, hard. Darby stays impassive.

BECKTON

Thanks, Jim. Let me ask you. Would you ever let me take a little peek at *my* file?

The two men, both standing, stare comfortably at the other. Darby towers over Beckton. Beckton is unbothered.

After a beat, Darby sits back down. Beckton stays standing.

DARBY

Why?

BECKTON

I'm curious. I respect good research. I've wondered how good an intelligence man I would be.

DARBY

Clients often regret reading their files.

BECKTON

I am notoriously thick-skinned.

Darby regards Beckton dispassionately.

DARBY

You are driven. Perceptive. Quite obviously intelligent. You have obsessive tendencies and a gargantuan ego. But then, many highly touted agents do. Most importantly, you play to your audience. Here, you refrain from the kabuki.

BECKTON

That'd be a waste of time.

DARBY

But. You have an inescapable need to prove... all that. What do Americans say? The big swinging veiny cock in the room?

Beckton laughs.

DARBY (CONT'D)

I imagine that urge is useful in your capacity as a filmmaker. It would greatly hamper any potential as an intelligence agent.

Darby studies a file. Beckton ponders a moment. He smiles at Darby and nods in agreement.

DARBY

Use the back exit, please. My next client arrives shortly.

Beckton, still smiling, heads to the back of Darby's office. He moves a bookshelf to reveal a hidden door. He opens the door. As he steps out-

DARBY

Walter?

BECKTON

Yeah, Jim.

DARBY

I don't have a file on you. Take care.

Beckton's face darkens. He exits to a hallway in the back of the office, walks to an elevator and presses the button.

He pulls out his phone. Waits. Beckton leaves a voicemail.

BECKTON

It's Walter. Let me know when you can next get to England, good?

Beckton moves to hang up, but decides to add one more thing.

BECKTON (CONT'D)

Ah. Gene Kirby. Nick's friend. Call the studio and get him a pass to get allowed on set. All access.

Beckton hangs up. The elevator arrives. He steps inside, opens a file labelled "ALEX SMITH", and begins to read.

His brow furrows. His eyes scour. The doors ding and close.

INT. TEMPEST COCKTAIL LOUNGE - NIGHT

Agents, producers, and attractive up-and-comers mingle and dance. Steph Samson sits at the bar. She finishes a scotch and motions to a handsome BARTENDER to pour another.

Bartender winks at Steph as he refills. She smiles back.

Adrian enters the bar and heads towards the bar. He seems to know just where Steph will be sitting. And there she is.

He sits next to her. Bartender shrugs and smiles at Steph.

STEPH

Oh, don't do that. You were right there. And do NOT let up on the winking.

Bartender smiles and nods his head. He looks slyly at Adrian.

ADRIAN

Don't look at me, pal. I've gotta work with her. Heineken.

STEPH

No! Sorry, but no. He'll have a dirty martini.

ADRIAN

Okay, then.

STEPH

(sliding a piece of paper)
And this. Is my phone number. I'm 44, no kids, I fuck like I'm on fire and I'm usually busy.

BARTENDER

Uhh...

STEPH

(smiling sweetly)
I think the olives are over there.

Bartender laughs, pockets the number, and walks off to make Adrian's drink. Adrian side-eyes Steph.

ADRIAN

You just had that ready?

STEPH

I pre-write them. Five slips, in my purse when I leave the office.

(MORE)

STEPH (CONT'D)

Some nights I still need to get a pen out.

ADRIAN

Divorce looks good on you, Steph.
"I fuck like I'm on fire." Does that actually work?

STEPH

Directness. I realized. The best way to talk to men about sex-

Bartender hastily returns with Adrian's martini. He shakily sets it down and exhales nervously. He looks at Steph.

BARTENDER

I just have to say. You have beautiful eyes-

STEPH

(waving her hand)
No. You have my number, don't blow it.

BAR PATRON

Can I get a Manhattan?

Bartender dejectedly walks away to make the Manhattan. Steph smiles.

STEPH

The best way to talk to men about sex is by being *direct*. He'll call.

ADRIAN

He will. I use a different tactic with women. I call it "Being Rich and Sitting Still."

STEPH

(laughing)
You don't use any tactic. Sheila's a bigger shark than anyone in here.

ADRIAN

You're in a zone. Why can't I have a Heineken?

STEPH

Uhh. I can't even look at beer. Ed is doing-

ADRIAN

Which Ed.

STEPH

Norton. The FIGHT CLUB adaptation. His character likes beer. Now he likes beer. He shows up sloshed at noon. Sud stains on all his shirts.

ADRIAN

A client, zonked-out and harassing his client on a workday. I can't imagine.

STEPH

(playfully)

Oh, shut up. I know it's part of the job. But the rest of them don't think its sacred artistry.

ADRIAN

Acting?

STEPH

No, yelling "COORS LIGHT IS THE GATEWAY TO THE MIIIIND" in my office lobby. Like a maniac.

ADRIAN

Rich Littell said Brad is getting his teeth filed and everything.

STEPH

Bullshit. He's too pretty. This town is filled with fucking nutsos.

ADRIAN

Yeah but you're Mrs. - Ms. - Direct now. You talk to Ed like you talked to barkeep. Right?

STEPH

You know they're basically children.

ADRIAN

You told barkeep you had no kids.

Steph sips on her drink and smiles.

STEPH

My "kids" pay me big fat commissions.

ADRIAN

On that note. I wanted to talk to you about your most lucrative child. And his babysitter. Gene.

Steph's face falls. A sullen sip.

STEPH

What about him?

ADRIAN

Walter called. He wants Nick and the studio to know that Gene is welcome on set.

STEPH

That's all he said?

ADRIAN

That's all he said. I'm sure it's not all he meant.

Steph sighs and reapplies some lipstick.

STEPH

Well, Nick will be happy. He was going to be on set either way.

ADRIAN

I'm getting a sense you dislike Gene.

STEPH

Please. Ten years, he does "Compliance" for the Institute. Then, gets assigned to Nick. Now, comes in my agency to share his wisdom. Like I give a fuck about a PhD in movies.

ADRIAN

He's got a PhD in film?

STEPH

He's hacky. It's all recycled mob tropes. He wears those Scorsese glasses when he pitches me.

ADRIAN

The black ones? He really does that?

STEPH
Wouldn't put up with this bullshit
if Nick wasn't Nick.

Steph finishes her scotch and reaches for Adrian's untouched martini. He gestures - all yours. She sips.

STEPH (CONT'D)
Why is Walter Beckton calling you
about Gene Kirby, anyway? What does
he care?

ADRIAN
I don't know. I never do, with him.

STEPH
Please tell him that whatever
Machiavellian scheme he's cooked up
is DOA. Just make the movie.

ADRIAN
I'll tell. He won't listen. Same as
it ever was.

STEPH
Is Beckton sick?

ADRIAN
(startled)
How do you mean?

STEPH
ACA mailroom. You made me a-

ADRIAN
-a promise, yeah. To share the
information we have.

STEPH
I thought I was lying, back then.
It turns out I wasn't. And now
we're both rich, so, spill.

ADRIAN
Alright. Walter's not well. I don't
know exactly. Doctor's
appointments, he sleeps later. He's
still sharp. Still Walter. I don't
know.

STEPH
We shoot next month.

ADRIAN
(rubbing his temples)
That I do know.

Steph downs the martini and stands. She surveys the crowd on the dance floor. She clasps Adrian on the shoulder.

STEPH
We're just dealing with these
assholes. We don't have to live
inside their heads. Like they do.

ADRIAN
Yeah.

STEPH
Was there anything else?

ADRIAN
Nothing important. I'll call you.

STEPH
Later, traitor.

Adrian raises his eyebrows. Steph rolls her eyes.

STEPH (CONT'D)
You know I won't tell anyone. And
hey. Hey. I know you two are close.
I'm sorry I called him an asshole.
I hope he gets better.

ADRIAN
Thanks, Steph. But he is an
asshole.

Steph smiles tenderly at Adrian. She places two crisp \$100 bills on the bar, wriggly-waves goodbye to the bartender, and saunters out the door.

Adrian loosens his tie. Bartender watches Steph admiringly as she exits.

ADRIAN (CONT'D)
I know, right?

BARTENDER
Damn, doggy.

ADRIAN
Gonna call her?

BARTENDER

Fuckin' right I'm gonna call her.
Another martini?

ADRIAN

Heineken.

Adrian sits alone at the bar. Hollywood hotshots dance and laugh and dream and scheme over music in a lava-lamp haze.

INT. PAULSON'S OFFICE - DAY

A humongous portrait of ALEX SMITH hangs. Paulson stands and stares at Smith's face. Paulson's eye twitches.

Smith's voice emanates from the still portrait, responding to a silent question. Paulson has entered a hallucinatory state.

SMITH (V.O.)

What you tell the fresh meat. What
I always told you.

PAULSON

Attack. Don't defend.

SMITH (V.O.)

This requires an attack of
magnitude, my son.

PAULSON

But, why? Why would this guy pick a
fight with us?

Smith's portrait only stares back. Paulson slams his desk.

Office line beeps. It is LINDA, his secretary.

LINDA (V.O.)

JP? Mr. Calhoun and Chief Druthers
are here. Whenever you're ready.

PAULSON

Give me a fucking minute.

Linda sits at her desk with a resigned look. She forces a rictus grin. Exhausted, trying in vain to appear perky.

LINDA

You got it, JP!

Linda turns to CHIEF DRUTHERS and ED CALHOUN. Druthers is dressed in uniform.

Calhoun wears a fitted white button down tucked into jeans. He is well-built, tall, handsome, with dead shark eyes.

LINDA (CONT'D)

He'll be ready in just a minute.
Chief Druthers, Mr. Calhoun. Can I
get you some coffee?

DRUTHERS

That's fine, dear. You all right?

LINDA

Yes. Yes! A little tired, but
great-

CALHOUN

I'll have coffee.

Linda, flustered, practically jumps out of her chair.

LINDA

Okay! Black, with the packets on
the side.

CALHOUN

You got it.

Linda leaps to fetch Calhoun his coffee. She returns quickly holding a mug and eight sugar packets. She shakily places it down in front of Calhoun.

CALHOUN (CONT'D)

Thanks.

Paulson exits his office. He beckons the two men - enter.

Linda returns to her desk. The door closes. She sniffles and trembles. She slowly fixes a smile back on.

Druthers takes a seat in Paulson's office. Calhoun stands by the window. He puts two sugars in his coffee. Drinks.

PAULSON

What do you need, Chief.

DRUTHERS

Nothing big, Jacob.

PAULSON

That's good.

DRUTHERS

Things have been quiet. All is
good.

PAULSON
Good. Good, good, good.

An awkward pause. Paulson speaks as one would to a child.

PAULSON (CONT'D)
So, whaaat. Doooo. Youuu. Neeeed.

DRUTHERS
Like I said, nothing big. The money's been a little tight lately.

PAULSON
The money. Ed, I thought you two had this discussion.

CALHOUN
Last month. 12% bump.

PAULSON
That's a fat envelope.

DRUTHERS
Jacob, no. I don't- I'm fine. It's the department. Morale is low. I wanna do something nice for the boys. Guns, vests. Show them the C-suite cares about them.

Calhoun pours another sugar into his coffee.

PAULSON
Okay. How much do you need?

DRUTHERS
I don't know. 100 grand, maybe.

Calhoun pours two more sugars into his coffee. Drinks.

PAULSON
\$100,000.

Druthers looks apprehensively at Paulson. Paulson looks at Calhoun and smirks.

PAULSON (CONT'D)
Ed, have Gloria put through a \$250,000 donation from the Institute to the PD. Use AMY F LLC.

Calhoun nods.

DRUTHERS
Jacob, thank you. You have no idea.

PAULSON

I do have an idea. You will keep a pandemic-level fucking chokehold on this place for the next two weeks. Zero tolerance policy. I'm taking a trip.

DRUTHERS

(excitedly)

Could use a trip myself. Where you headed?

Calhoun smiles. Paulson stares. Druthers regroup.

DRUTHERS (CONT'D)

Absolute fuckin, uh, epidemic chokedown on this place. No trouble on the Southern front.

PAULSON

Thanks for coming in.

Chief Druthers stands to leave.

PAULSON (CONT'D)

How's the pool, Chief? Ed tells me you just put one in-ground.

CALHOUN

Concrete.

PAULSON

Nice.

DRUTHERS

The kids love it. You come by anytime you want to. Ed, you too, y'know, just lemme know.

Druthers exits the office. Calhoun puts another sugar in.

PAULSON

How about it, Ed. You want to take a dip in the Chief's pool sometime?

CALHOUN

Maybe, JP.

PAULSON

A quarter-million for these gator-fucker BB guns. We could piss in his pool if we wanted to.

CALHOUN
I don't want to.

PAULSON
I leave for England tomorrow.

CALHOUN
Nick?

PAULSON
Yeah. Well, no, Nick's solid. It's
this dickhead director.

CALHOUN
He's making problems?

PAULSON
None. But I'm told he does. So why
the fuck isn't he?

CALHOUN
He's supposed to be smart, right?
He's probably looked into us. He'll
behave.

The PORTRAIT. Smith's eyes pierce. Smith's smile mocks.
Paulson's hand balls into a fist. He looks at Calhoun.

PAULSON
Attack. Don't defend.

Calhoun pours the last sugar in his coffee and downs it.

CALHOUN
Gene's out there with Nick. Reports
from set have been standard. Why
are you going?

PAULSON
Gene's been a fuckin' miracle
worker with Nick. He'll be
rewarded. But he's not a tactician.

CALHOUN
You don't want me with you?

PAULSON
I need you here. Can't bring a
Rottweiler to a garden party.

CALHOUN
(sighing)
Talking like that. It hurts my
feelings.

PAULSON

I forgot you had any. To be on your bad side, Ed.

CALHOUN

You never could be, JP.

Smith's portrait looms. Paulson rises from his desk.

PAULSON

It'll be a vacation. Maybe we make a new friend in Mr. Beckton.

Calhoun tips his coffee cup in affirmation.

CALHOUN

I'll hold down the fort.

INT. FILM SET - DAY

A buzzing beehive of activity. PA's shout directions. Extras wander around in animal masks. A dwarf smokes a cigarette.

Gene sits quietly in a corner, surveying the controlled chaos with great interest. He wears his customary black peacoat.

Beckton and a cinematographer, BARRY TURK, review a shot. Barry sits. Beckton hovers over his shoulder, stern as God.

BECKTON

Just barely. But her eyes. Here.

BARRY

Yep. Otherwise, perfect. Fuck me.

BECKTON

It is perfect.

BARRY

Walter, she's looking right at the camera.

BECKTON

What is my favorite Picasso quote?

BARRY

Uhhh. "Learn the rules so you can break them"?

Gene looks up. A smile starts to creep up his face.

BECKTON

"If I don't have red, I use blue."
We've got blue.

BARRY

But you can have red! I'll give you
red!

Gene sits, engrossed, watching the debate. He stifles a
giggle. His feet leave the floor.

Gene cautiously approaches. He stands unnoticed, listening
reverently to the filmmakers' exchange.

BECKTON

- it baits the audience, and it
plays. Use it.

BARRY

Like I have a choice. I'm hostage
to a madman.

Gene clears his throat and crash-lands headfirst through the
conversation.

GENE

Rules?! We didn't see any rules
around here, did we, Charlie?

Barry stares, dumbfounded. A terrible joke, mistimed by many
sentences, yelled by a nobody. What the fuck?

Barry's head jerks towards Beckton like a marionette. He
tries to gauge his reaction. There is none.

Then, Beckton laughs.

BECKTON

Gene! Quite right. Willy Wonka,
Barry.

BARRY

(eyeballing Gene)
Thanks, Walter. I'll add it to my
watch list.

BECKTON

Simmer down. Gene here has a PhD in
film studies from USC.

BARRY

Let him shoot the cum-stained
birdpeople, then.

BECKTON

(sternly)

No cum. Better not be anything that looks like cum in the shot. This is not that kind of scene.

BARRY

(exasperated)

There's no cum.

BECKTON

Good. Gene is here with Nick. And the Institute.

Barry stillllllls. Realizes. New disposition, pronto. He forces a smile.

BARRY

Hey, Gene. Barry Turk. I help Moloch here with cinematography.

GENE

Mr. Turk. The lighting, in Crayon Canyon? Dazzling!

BECKTON

He likes your work, Turk.

BARRY

A suit with a soul! See, Gene, we did it all by candlelight.

BECKTON

I bet he knew that already. Gene, walk with me. Barry - no cum.

BARRY

Alright. Nice meeting you.

GENE

And you.

Beckton steers Gene through the chaotic set. Gene looks like a kid in a candy store. He gleefully watches a dwarf walk by.

BECKTON

Being on set. A little intense, eh?

GENE

In school, there was so much theory. This is the gristle. And thank you for clearing me with the studio. I so wanted to observe.

BECKTON

Sure, sure. I wanted you to see the back of the kitchen. Before the studio cases the sausage.

GENE

Nick told me you called personally. I didn't even think you knew who I was.

BECKTON

I'll confide. You were at my house. One year, two months, five days ago. You said you'd never seen any of my movies. Now. I am notoriously thin-skinned. So I think to myself, I'll make sure he sees one of them.

GENE

(laughing appreciatively)
That seems on brand.

BECKTON

I suppose. I'm a hardhead, Gene. No two ways about it.

GENE

I think- uh, I suppose- one must be. To execute a vision.

BECKTON

Right, but I gotta ask. At the house. Never seen any of my movies, but you've got a film degree. And knowing who did the lighting on Crayon Canyon. I mean...

Both start to laugh.

GENE

Oh! I lied.

Beckton stops laughing, but keeps smiling. He looks amazed.

BECKTON

Okay. Why'd you do that?

GENE

It feels stupid saying it now. Nick loves you. All this gruff about the infamously stone-cold Walter Beckton. Mind games. And we show up to a perfectly pleasant set.

BECKTON

Glad you feel that way.

GENE

(in a hushed tone)

He called Jack the Mack for advice.
A man as accomplished as Nick.

BECKTON

Was Jack at home? For the call.

GENE

I think so.

BECKTON

Did you hear a woman in the
background?

GENE

(hushed but excited)

Ally McBeal! He was with Calista
Flockhart, if you can believe it.

BECKTON

There isn't a woman walking for
whom I wouldn't believe it.

GENE

Anyways. It was a misguided attempt
at intimidation. And it was the
stupidest thing I've ever done.
Like I haven't committed your
movies to memory! It's
embarrassing.

BECKTON

No, I know the rumors. When I was
younger, some of them- spot on. But
I've mellowed with age. Experience.
It's about the craft for me now.

GENE

I can see it. As a once-aspiring
filmmaker myself. Just a dream.

BECKTON

We artists never sleep. We only
dream, huh? You have lived a life.
I can tell. You must have ideas.
Movies, TV?

GENE

Not really. Just some ideas, but
no. Not really.

BECKTON

Maybe you talk to Steph. She knows the right phone numbers.

GENE

Never, no. Steph is wonderful. She's asked me to pitch a few times. We're very close. But I couldn't do both, that and the Institute.

BECKTON

Company man! Admirable. This day and age, it feels like people switch jobs every year. Chase some passion. More people should stay the course they've chosen, whatever it is. However they might feel about it. Resilience, y'know?

GENE

(twitching)
Exactly.

BECKTON

Ah well. If you ever want to bounce something off me for fun. We'd have to set aside a time. I can't just have you coming up to me mid-shoot, you understand.

GENE

Of course! My goodness, yes! I'll put some ideas together.

BECKTON

How about just come over for dinner. Tonight, 8pm. You can meet Diane, we'll schmooze, you'll pitch.

GENE

8pm!

BECKTON

I do need you out of here. Barry has worked up some courage in the time we've been gone. I need to beat it out of him.

Gene laughs and walks off. Beckton watches him go.

BECKTON (CONT'D)
(under his breath)
Wow. Wow, wow.

Adrian appears. He talks on his cell. He sees Beckton, waves, and begins to wrap up the call.

ADRIAN
- sober for the commercial. No,
what? Beer is fine. He's not a
Mormon. Yeah. Bye. Walt.

BECKTON
Adrian. I just had the most
interesting conversation.

ADRIAN
Wait until we have this one.
Someone is visiting us.

BECKTON
Everyone I like is already here.

ADRIAN
Learn to like Jacob Paulson by
tomorrow. He gets in tonight.

BECKTON
I didn't authorize that.

ADRIAN
The studio did.

BECKTON
They can't.

ADRIAN
They did. They are.

BECKTON
Barbarians at the gates? We lock
the doors.

ADRIAN
Walt. It's from Daley and Semel.
I've never seen both their
signatures on anything before.

BECKTON
Fucking tentacles everywhere, these
people.

ADRIAN

You know you've gotta let him in.
And he'll probably want a meeting.

BECKTON

You know what? Good. Give him one.
Tomorrow night, 11pm. At the
estate. It's my shoot. He'll have
to work on my schedule.

ADRIAN

Tomorrow's good. He'll like that.

BECKTON

Let me ask you something.

ADRIAN

Yeah.

BECKTON

How's Steph doing? She okay, all
this pressure on Nick?

ADRIAN

She's fine. She's used to it. Why?

BECKTON

I dunno. Gene Kirby, Nick's friend.
He knows his stuff. He hasn't
pitched her yet, but, could be
good. They're creative types.
Aliens and all that.

ADRIAN

Uh-huh.

Beckton winks at Adrian and strides off to direct his film.

ADRIAN (CONT'D)

Can't be something good.

INT. PRIVATE JET - NIGHT

Paulson stares and scowls at a row of aides. They stare
blankly back.

The plane lands. Paulson and his aides step out and walk
towards a waiting SUV.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Gene eyes three shirts he's laid out on his bed.

INT. CHAUFFEURED SUV - NIGHT

Paulson stares and scowls. He taps his leg. An aide hands him a folder filled with articles, files, info. He takes it.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Gene wears a suit and a shirt that wasn't on the bed. No black peacoat tonight. He grabs a bottle of wine off the countertop, looks in the mirror, and walks out the door.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

Paulson reads a newspaper clipping. The headline - "TINSELTOWN TYRANT RETURNS TO SET!". A photo of Beckton.

EXT. BECKTON'S ESTATE - NIGHT

Gene rings the bell. A moment. Beckton opens the door.

BECKTON

Gene! You're early.

GENE

I brought wine.

BECKTON

Come in. I'm always early, too. Best to get up on people before they get up on you, hm?

GENE

(quite seriously)

Yes.

BECKTON

I'm kidding. Diane had to run out. Bridge game. The book club crones are relentless.

GENE

Oh. Well, it's a shame I couldn't meet her.

BECKTON

I'm a lousy cook. Got us a curry-spot up the road. How about it? Four naan, two movie buffs, one bottle of gin?

GENE

Fine by me!

BECKTON

Bravo. Come, sit. Eat something.

Beckton starts to load his plate. Gene does the same. Beckton rises and goes to the kitchen to fill their glasses with gin.

Beckton takes the bottle and fills Gene's glass. Unseen by Gene, he puts a dash into his own glass, and waters the rest.

Beckton returns and places the glass down.

BECKTON (CONT'D)

Cheers.

GENE

Cheers!

They clink glasses and take sips. Beckton rips a piece of naan. He chews thoughtfully.

BECKTON

So. Favorite thing about being on a Walter Beckton production. Don't think, just go.

GENE

Oh, well. I have seen some great directors at work in my capacity with Nick. You just have such a handle on everything. Lighting, sound. It's all so administrative.

BECKTON

I supervise craft services, too.

GENE

(laughing)
I bet.

BECKTON

Administrative, now, that's the word. Critics call me a control-freak. A tyrant. Maybe they're right. A lot of good directors, directors with visions, delegate too much. Compromises everything.

Gene nods. Beckton leans forward as if to confide a secret.

BECKTON (CONT'D)

Then, there's Spielberg. He could stand to rule with a looser grip.

GENE

Spielberg? Really?

BECKTON

Don't mistake me, he's a first-rate filmmaker. Second-best out. But as a director? I'm back and forth.

GENE

Really? With *Spielberg*?

BECKTON

His later stuff. He hits you over the head with emotion. Until your ears ring. Boo-hoo.

Beckton takes a swig. Gene follows his lead. Beckton rises to refill the glasses.

Again, Beckton fills Gene's glass with gin and his own with water. He returns with the glasses and sets them down.

BECKTON (CONT'D)

That's just my opinion, of course.

GENE

Your opinion holds a lot of weight.

BECKTON

Take Marty. He directs from the heart, too. But he worked out a neat formula. He makes his characters cretins. And Marty loves his cretins.

Gene seems to realize something. His eyes widen.

BECKTON (CONT'D)

You can't harbor contempt for the people you write, right? Else it's a diatribe. A toddler's scream.

GENE

Yes.

BECKTON

See, you get it. So many don't. With his camera, Marty forgives. As God does. Do you know why?

GENE

What's your take on it?

BECKTON

It's because he's still a good Catholic boy. He doesn't think God'll see fit to forgive him. Pearly Gates. He can't forgive himself. And film is his penance.

Gene is awed and curious. He struggles to respond.

GENE

You know. I actually wrote my dissertation on Scorsese.

BECKTON

"Paranoia and Delusion in Cinema: A Reflection on the Antiheroes of Martin Scorsese." I plagiarized you just now.

GENE

I thought... you read my paper?

BECKTON

I have buddies at USC.

GENE

Walter Beckton. You really are always researching.

Pause.

GENE (CONT'D)

For your movies. Should I be concerned?

Beckton sips his ginwater. He stares stark straight at Gene.

BECKTON

You should be. Frankly, I didn't like you, last time you were here. You struck me as strange. But I couldn't get you out of my head. Here is a man with ambition, of some sort. What does he want?

GENE

Okay.

BECKTON

So, I ask about the guy in the peacoat. Is he PR? A dietician?

(MORE)

BECKTON (CONT'D)

Nope. A million times worse. An Institute man. Now, I'm spooked. Now I'm thinking I have a problem. Ambitious Institute Man, wants on my set...

GENE

A problem? Mr. Beckton. I'm just an advisor. I represent the Institute but I, we, never had any intention to cause problems.

BECKTON

I know it now. But you know what they say about paranoia and delusion. Hell, you're "they". You wrote it. I do some digging, you went to film school. And wrote a paper. And I will be honest. That's all I know how to be.

GENE

Please. Please, do be.

BECKTON

Well, I thought it was fucking brilliant, Gene. You put into words, on paper, what I've been trying to say about Marty's work for 25 years. I'm not a bad writer, myself. I couldn't do that.

GENE

(excitedly)

It took years. If you tried, you-

BECKTON

Maybe I ought to read more dissertations. I dunno. But I read yours. That's why I wanted you on set. That's why I invited you over.

Gene looks thrilled. He hastily takes a gulp.

GENE

Mr. Beckton. Thank you.

BECKTON

Come on, already. Call me Walt.

GENE

(growing more emotional)

Walt. Thank you, from the bottom of my soul. Being here, with you- I-

BECKTON

We're running dangerously low.
Refills, refills.

Beckton does the ginwater routine in the kitchen while Gene sits, glowing, in the living room. He returns with glasses.

Beckton raises his glass. A toast.

BECKTON (CONT'D)

Enough about the old guard. To an
exciting up-and-comer and his
exciting ideas. Gene Kirby, eh?

Gene is beside himself. He laughs, clinks, drinks, slugs it back. Beckton sips and smiles.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

Paulson paces in his five-star room. Notes and articles from the aide's file are scattered about the room. He takes off his shirt and furiously starts doing push-ups.

Paulson steps into the bathroom and takes a shower. He shaves methodically. He slaps himself in the face and exhales, hard.

INT. BECKTON'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The food is gone and the gin near-empty. Gene's wine bottle sits unopened on the kitchen counter. Only Gene is drunk.

Gene sits on the master recliner, upright but swaying slightly. Beckton lays on the floor.

BECKTON

Time travel, but no time machine.

GENE

You take a pill. This company,
"Technicorp", makes it. But only
for the elites. Someone else steals
one, they can time travel, too.

BECKTON

Right, right.

GENE

An homage to big budget shoot-em-
ups with brains, like in the 80's.
Like Terminator.

BECKTON

And this Council. They set up...
the lottery... to catch middle-
class time travelers?

GENE

First thing anybody says they'd do,
if they could time travel. Win the
lottery.

Beckton gets off the floor and starts to pace.

BECKTON

Killing Hitler polls well, too.

GENE

I didn't even consider Hitler.
Maybe I'll write him in. He could
be on the Council.

BECKTON

No. Hitler's tough to write. Him
running the world with five other
people, that's a mess.

GENE

Okay. We'll sidebar Hitler.

BECKTON

But what if someone actually does
win the lottery? Gets the right
numbers?

GENE

(takes a swig)

That's the story! The odds are even
more astronomical than they say. So
no one who couldn't time travel
ever won for real. Until, one day.

Gene pauses dramatically. Beckton looks amused, expecting.

BECKTON

... someone does?

GENE

That's right!

BECKTON

It's something, Gene. Could be a
hit. But I'm confused.

GENE

Me too. Time travel is really hard to write.

BECKTON

I'm confused as to why your ideas aren't more suited to your credentials. Why not a mob story?

GENE

Well. Walt. I gotta come clean.

Beckton leans forward, brow furrowed, eyes accepting.

GENE (CONT'D)

On set, I told you I never pitched anything to Steph.

BECKTON

(raising his glass)
Separation of Church and State.
Commendable.

GENE

It wasn't true. I pitched Steph a few times. Mob stuff, meticulously researched. It writes itself!

BECKTON

What happened?

GENE

She didn't like it.

BECKTON

Which?

GENE

Any of them.

BECKTON

Example.

GENE

The last one I did. Mob enforcer, with a signature move. He shoots his victims in the foot, right away. Subverts the whole trope! Villain talking his way into danger. No. Just... bang. Done.

BECKTON

That is original. That's good. In fact, that's sort of perfect for Nick. She didn't like that?

GENE

She was polite in the way that she is. Frigid fucking cunt. Oh!..

Beckton raises his eyebrows. Gene expresses alarm.

GENE (CONT'D)

Oh, God. When I drink. I'm sorry, Walter. What a crass thing to say.

BECKTON

Ah, stop it. You've taken to the parlance around here. And besides..

Beckton lowers his voice dramatically and leans forward.

BECKTON (CONT'D)

She really can be an ice-cold fucking cunt.

Beckton starts to laugh. Gene, relieved, follows his lead.

BECKTON (CONT'D)

I mean, why do you think they call Steph Samson "Ze SS" on the lot?

GENE

They DO? Goodness, isn't she Jewish? Aren't you?

BECKTON

My parents were. My father would say I was too arrogant to settle up with God. You understand?

GENE

Oh, I've never been Jewish.

BECKTON

What I mean is. You don't stay where you are. You go around Steph, pitch straight to Nick. Mob stuff.

GENE

Nick gets a lot of scripts.

BECKTON

But you have his ear. Don't you.

GENE

We are close. He's a Great Man.

BECKTON

He is. What did you do before working with Nick? At the Institute.

Gene straightens. He pauses, seems to revert to a semi-programmed state. He answers reflexively.

GENE

Compliance. I oversaw the Institute satellite base in Los Angeles.

BECKTON

Compliance. What is that, exactly? Institute... human resources?

GENE

Essentially, yes.

BECKTON

Well. The important thing is, you're here now. With Nick.

GENE

With the Institute.

BECKTON

Of course. I pry when I drink.

GENE

I think I'm a little drunk too. Your wife must be getting home soon. It's 10:15.

BECKTON

Yes. You can't drive. A cab. And some water.

GENE

No, no. I'm good.

BECKTON

Gene. I like and see promise in you. But if you crash on the way home, I'm going to have to talk to an army of insurance people. People I don't like talking to. You're registered on set.

GENE

Ah. I hadn't thought of that.

BECKTON

My driver will bring your car back over tomorrow. But the gin can't drive.

GENE

(mumbling)

Ah, it's a rental. The gin can't drive. The Gene's got a ticket to dri-iive.

Beckton watches from his window as Gene gets into a cab. He dials the phone.

BECKTON

Hi, Birdy. Can you be home in ten?

FEMALE VOICE

What am I leaving? Poker?

BECKTON

Bridge. With your friends from the book club.

FEMALE VOICE

Yes. That book club I'm always going to. On Nonsense Road.

BECKTON

(grinning)

Ten minutes?

FEMALE VOICE

I'll be home in seven, dear.

BECKTON

Thank you.

Beckton hangs up and smiles with great warmth at the phone.

INT. CHAUFFEURED SUV - NIGHT

Paulson checks his watch - 10:57pm. His car pulls into Beckton's driveway. He checks himself in the mirror.

Gene's rental appears in the mirror.

PAULSON

Wait here. I hear he's a talker.

Paulson exits the SUV and strolls importantly up to Beckton's front door. He rings the bell. Waits. Rings it again. Waits.

Finally, DIANE BECKTON, wearing a nightgown, opens the door.

DIANE

Yes?

PAULSON

Good evening. Mrs. Beckton?

DIANE

Yes?

PAULSON

Pleasure to meet you. I'm Jacob Paulson.

DIANE

You fans are obsessive! My husband is an older man, for god's sake.

PAULSON

(a little too firmly)

No. No. I have a meeting with your husband for 11pm. Studio set it up.

DIANE

A meeting. At 11 at night?

PAULSON

Your husband chose the time and place.

DIANE

That does make sense. Well, come in, then.

Paulson, annoyed but controlled, steps inside. He surveys the home. He notes the unopened wine on the counter, near-empty gin bottle and take-out bags.

He begins to ask a question. He stops himself.

DIANE (CONT'D)

Can I get you something? Water?

PAULSON

No. Thank you. I'll just speak to Mr. Beckton and be on my way. I'm sorry he didn't tell you.

DIANE

Don't be sorry. I'm sorry. Walter's asleep.

PAULSON

Asleep.

DIANE

I didn't know about any meeting. He had a friend over. He went to bed.

PAULSON

Do you think you can wake him? I'll be very quick.

DIANE

What do you do, again? For the movie?

PAULSON

I'm the leader of the Institute of Self. Nick Bates is a dear friend.

DIANE

Oh, we love Nick! He is such a sweet man.

PAULSON

Yes. Yes, he is.

Diane stares politely at Paulson. He stares right back. Her expression goes DEFIANT. She takes a step towards the door.

DIANE

Well. It was nice to meet you, Jacob. I'm Diane. Walter can be rude. I'll give him a smack in the morning and tell him to call you. Jacob, from the Institute of Self.

Paulson seethes. There is no one to rage at but a woman in her own home. He arranges a smile at great expense.

PAULSON

Okay. We'll get another one on the books.

DIANE

Okay. Goodnight. Drive safe.

PAULSON

Please do tell him. Goodnig-

Diane shuts the door in Paulson's face.

INT. BECKTON'S ATTIC - NIGHT

Beckton watches Paulson leave with a pair of binoculars. Engrossed, he takes a pill with water.

Through the binoculars. Paulson slowly turns and walks back to his car. He screams "FUCK!" and knocks over a trash can.

BECKTON

Oh-hoh, boy.

Paulson slams the door. The car speeds off.

Diane enters the attic. Beckton hastily hides the pillbox.

DIANE

That was our garbage can.

BECKTON

I can't believe this.

DIANE

He just screamed and chucked our garbage can. Is he crazy?

BECKTON

I'd hoped for mildly irritated. This is wonderful.

DIANE

Should I be worried this time? He seemed "off" downstairs. Not actor "off".

BECKTON

Worried? This is perfect. Phase two is complete.

DIANE

Phases, he says.

BECKTON

I need to call Jim. Spectacular.

DIANE

You're welcome. Just remember, Benny is coming by tomorrow.

BECKTON

Yes, yes.

Diane sighs and leaves the attic. Beckton dials the phone.

Darby sits in a loud BDSM club, talking to two handsome young lads. They all wear leather, complete with assorted rings, chains, metals. The lads drink beers. Darby watches the lads.

His phone rings. He shushes one of his dates. He sees Beckton's code - 6-3 - and smiles. He picks up.

DARBY

Yes.

BECKTON

Jim, I just- where are you?

Darby steps over the two young men. They protest playfully. He wags a finger in their faces and walks outside.

DARBY

I can hear you now. I won't charge for the noise or the time spent discussing it. Clock is... running.

BECKTON

I need you to put electronic surveillance on someone. I need audio, video, vehicle. Phone.

DARBY

Who?

Beckton eyes the toppled trash can outside. He grins.

BECKTON

A big fish. Might not be easy. But he is a powder keg, Jim. I just need the boom on tape.

Darby listens. Beckton's voice is now inaudible. Darby shakes his head.

DARBY

Too high up. The risk outweighs whatever it is you're trying to do.

BECKTON

Tell me what it'll cost. All in.

Beckton listens. He smiles.

BECKTON (CONT'D)

Octupling the already-quadrupled rate, you mean?

DARBY

Around \$2 million worth of work.
Maybe more.

BECKTON

That's *ridiculous*.

DARBY

I agree.

BECKTON

Do it, then. Call me tomorrow.

DARBY

Very good.

Darby hangs up, chuckles, and strolls back into his life.

Beckton stays in the attic. He finds and fidgets the pillbox.

INT. FILM SET - DAY

Steph and her assistant Rachel walk through an eerily quiet set. Steph talks on her flip phone.

STEPH

We can ask for more. But it's a lot
for voiceover work.

Gene materializes down the hall. He spots Steph and walks towards her, his feet practically bouncing off the floor.

Steph sees him approach and eyes him warily. He walks right up to the two of them and silently waits, hands at his sides.

STEPH (CONT'D)

You wear whatever you want. No, you
don't have to wear the Iron Giant
suit. You just record the lines.

Gene waits. He leers at Rachel. She looks at her shoes.

STEPH (CONT'D)

Oh, you WANT to wear it? I don't
see why you couldn't. Vin, can I
call you back? Okay. Hi, Gene.

GENE

Steph. Rachel. Where is everyone?

STEPH

Beckton called a noon shoot.

GENE

I am not surprised. We really tied one on last night.

STEPH

Oh?

GENE

At his Manor. Glug glug.

STEPH

Sounds fun.

GENE

It was! Here's what I think you should do. When Nick gets in, you tell him I have a new pitch for a movie. Something perfect for him.

STEPH

Okay, well, do you want to tell it to me first?

GENE

No. But! I do want you in the room. There could be legal, businessy stuff we could use you for.

STEPH

Um, okay. I read all of Nick's scripts. I know what he likes.

GENE

Yeah. Last night, Walt told me that it was a great idea. That it was perfect for Nick. At his Manor.

STEPH

Did he.

GENE

He did!

Gene looks serenely at Steph. He smiles brazenly, beastlike.

STEPH

Look, Gene. I'm happy to hear a pitch. But I don't work for you.

GENE

But we both work for Nick.

STEPH

Yeah. And I'll keep handling the legal, businessy stuff.

Steph starts to walk away. Rachel follows. Gene calls out:

GENE

It's just, when Walt asks Nick why he never mentioned that movie Gene pitched. Nick says, "What movie?". And then Walt says, "Steph didn't tell you?" That's baaad business.

Steph stops walking. Rachel stops in lockstep. Steph turns.

STEPH

Okay. Relax.

GENE

I know you're a bigwig and I'm an aw-shucks Institute man. But bad business is bad business.

STEPH

Fine. Prepare it, and we'll set a date for next month. Okay?

GENE

Nah. We've got an empty set! No better time.

STEPH

Do you have a pitch ready?

GENE

Of course. When will Nick be here?

RACHEL

Eight minutes.

GENE

Great! Steph, see you and Nick in 15? His trailer? Ok. Bye, Rachel!

Gene, radiant, saunters off. Steph glares at Rachel.

RACHEL

Sorry. He freaks me out.

STEPH

If I have to deal with Gene the Producer, I'm done. Seychelles. I don't know what the fuck you'll do.

RACHEL
You can say something came up?

STEPH
Not if Beckton cosigned it. My
hands are tied. And not in that way
you like.

RACHEL
Okay.

STEPH
I'm talking about getting fucked,
Rachel.

RACHEL
I know.

STEPH
Which I'm about to be, raw, until
my knees-

Steph notices SOMEONE appear. Her eyes widen.

STEPH (CONT'D)
Nick! Good morning. Quick thing.

INT. BECKTON'S KITCHEN - DAY

Beckton reads "The Idiot". Diane paints. The door rings, and
Diane jumps up to answer it.

DIANE
Ahh! Come in, come in here!

BENNY FUCHS, a casually dressed man in his early 20's, beams.

BENNY
Hey, Diane!

They embrace. Diane squееееees. Benny laughs and hugs back.
She finally releases him.

DIANE
I made strudel. The kind you like.
Come.

BENNY
I can't. Trying to cut back.

DIANE
Nonsense. It's the kind you like.

BECKTON

No, he's right. He put on weight.

Benny looks over Diane's shoulder. His eyes fall on Beckton, seated. He walks over. Beckton rises, and they embrace.

BECKTON (CONT'D)

(warmly)

I pushed back the shoot for this.

BENNY

Well, I'm worth it.

BECKTON

Cheeky. He used to be cute.

DIANE

He is still very cute. And he did not put on weight.

BECKTON

At least he's not an actor.

(beat)

Have I ever told you how happy that makes me?

BENNY

Every time you've seen me. For the last 15 years.

BECKTON

Biology, still?

BENNY

Yeah. I don't know about field work anymore, though. I think I want to be a professor.

DIANE

Here we go.

BECKTON

Birdy knows I would have liked to teach. If I wasn't doing all this.

BENNY

Really?

BECKTON

Sure. Photography, maybe. Academia is its own viper's nest. But it's not Hollywood. No kid should be dropped into that.

BENNY

Every time you fly me out, you say that. I never know why. It was fun.

BECKTON

You were six. I don't remember anything from six.

Diane sets down some strudel. Benny smiles and takes a big bite. Diane looks at Walter - see?

BENNY

(mouth full of strudel)
How's the new one going?

BECKTON

It's going great.

BENNY

Papers say you're being devious.

BECKTON

I'm not.

BENNY

No?

BECKTON

No. There's no need to mess with the actors on this.

Diane gives Beckton a knowing look at the word "actors".

BENNY

Okay. Well, what's Nick Bates like?

BECKTON

Very nice man. Total professional. Strange group of friends.

BENNY

You can handle that.

BECKTON

We'll see. He can act, though. He understands what I need from him.

BENNY

So, it's going smoothly?

BECKTON

So far, anyway.

Diane kisses Beckton on the forehead, gives Benny a big hug from behind, and walks up the stairs.

BECKTON

(abruptly)

I shouldn't have treated Rita Carew like that. In front of you.

BENNY

It's okay. I don't really remember her.

BECKTON

Right. Six. I made her do 117 takes. The golf club scene. On the 116th, I told her she was a one-hit wonder with no hits.

BENNY

I read that.

BECKTON

Do you think I should apologize?

BENNY

If you feel like you went overboard. Yeah.

BECKTON

I didn't go overboard. I got what I needed out of her. But I never told her that it *worked*. She was great.

BENNY

Well. That's a start.

BECKTON

I shouldn't have you over mid-shoot. You'll make me go soft.

BENNY

Wouldn't be so bad. You can be a good person and a good director.

BECKTON

Maybe. Just don't call me a "good" director ever again.

BENNY

Walter. Why do you tell... *me* all this stuff?

BECKTON

You know you auditioned against 110 kids for that role. You went fifth, and I knew. Not only was it your part. I had to protect you.

BENNY

I didn't even know it was a horror movie. We played catch. There's nothing to feel guilty about.

BECKTON

Protecting you from the movie was easy. But those people. Hollywood.

BENNY

I never know what to say when you get like this.

BECKTON

I don't feel guilty anymore. You are a tonic, Benny. I confide because in the dozen times I've had you over. All the lurid tales you've heard told. Never a peep in the tabloids. People don't even know we've kept in touch.

BENNY

I know you value privacy.

BECKTON

Thank you. You'll stay the night.

BENNY

I can't. I've been seeing someone. Well, I saw her once, so far.

BECKTON

Good. Go. Enjoy it. But come back before you leave England.

BENNY

I will. Thanks, Walter.

BECKTON

Do you need money?

BENNY

I have money. Some. And parents.

BECKTON

They had you film with me. When you were six. Your parents are lacking.

BENNY

That's not as good a rebuttal as
you think.

Beckton throws his head back and laughs freely.

EXT. BECKTON'S ESTATE - DAY

Beckton and Diane hug Benny. Wave goodbye as he drives off.

INT. BECKTON'S BEDROOM - DAY

Beckton gets dressed. Phone rings. He answers.

ADRIAN

Just got here. Still good for noon?

BECKTON

Yes. Had some personal business.

ADRIAN

Alright. Uh, did you have Gene
Kirby over for drinks last night?

BECKTON

And dinner. Yeah.

ADRIAN

Well, he just cornered Steph into a
pitch. For Nick.

BECKTON

Already? Today?

ADRIAN

Right now. Wait. You knew he was
going to do this?

BECKTON

No, no. He mentioned some ideas.
That he wanted to go right to Nick.
It's probably safer to pitch to
Steph first, no?

ADRIAN

Yeah. It is. But the one you loved,
he's going for it.

BECKTON

The one I *what*?

ADRIAN

The one you told him would be
"perfect for Nick".

BECKTON

Adrian. He mentioned a few ideas.
No treatment. I'm gonna tell him to
go straight to Nick Bates?

ADRIAN

Just so I'm clear. You did not love
the idea.

BECKTON

I barely remember it. Something
about a hitman who shoots people in
the foot.

ADRIAN

Well. He thinks you love it, and
Steph does too.

BECKTON

I don't know. Maybe Nick will love
it. He and Gene are close.

ADRIAN

Maybe. Hey, how did it go with
Paulson?

BECKTON

Was asleep when he got here. See
you at noon.

Beckton hangs up and resumes getting dressed.

INT. FILM SET - DAY

Gene and Steph exit Nick's trailer. Steph looks defeated.
Gene, now donning his thick black glasses, looks elated.

GENE

Hey. Thanks for your help in there.
Intellectual property concerns. I
never would have thought to bring
that up.

STEPH

Yeah. I think he liked it.

GENE

I need to start writing. And we
need to talk representation.

STEPH

Hm?

GENE

I think it makes the most sense for you to represent the producer and the actor. Corporate synergy.

Steph's phone rings - sweet relief. Adrian calling.

STEPH

I have to take this.

GENE

Yup. See you later, partner!

Gene saunters off. Steph answers.

STEPH

Don't speak. I know Beckton is crazy, but this is inhumane. Do you have any idea of how much harder my life is about to get?

ADRIAN

The Lord Taketh. The Lord Giveth.

STEPH

What?

ADRIAN

Walter didn't love Gene's idea. In fact, he barely remembers it. Gene is a born promoter.

Steph, stunned, considers. Ding. Her eyes go bright.

STEPH

But... no. Wait. He *lied*? Beckton gets here in an hour! That's crazy.

ADRIAN

Which makes less sense? That Walter Beckton pretends to love a shit pitch for no reason? Or maybe a crazy person is doing crazy things.

STEPH

But if he lied... Oh, my god.

ADRIAN

I don't think Nick would appreciate it very much at all. He likes Walter. Walter likes him.

STEPH

I take back everything I've ever said about Beckton. And I think I've fallen back in love with you.

ADRIAN

Appreciate that, Steph, but Sheila won't.

STEPH

I gotta talk to Nick. Adrian. THANK YOU.

Steph hangs up and bounces up to Nick's trailer. She knocks.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - DAY

The phone rings. Paulson sets down a file and answers.

PAULSON

Nick! How we doing?

NICK

Terrific, JP. Can't wait for you to see all this.

PAULSON

You just tell me when I can drop by set. Whenever works best for you.

NICK

Come tomorrow, if you can. I'm shooting with a live parrot.

PAULSON

I'll be there. What time?

NICK

No rush. We had a late start today. Walter called it for noon.

PAULSON

How are things with him?

NICK

He's been great. We got worked up for nothing. I think I got him to like me.

PAULSON

(mechanically)
Of course he likes you.
(after a pause)
(MORE)

PAULSON (CONT'D)

I was supposed to meet with him last night. He fell asleep.

NICK

Really? After Gene left?

PAULSON

What?

NICK

I gotta tell you, I'm a little concerned. It's why I'm calling.

Paulson looks smacked at the revelation that Beckton blew him off for his employee. He returns to reality.

PAULSON

Uh- why? What's wrong?

NICK

You know I love Gene. But he's been different. Less focused, lately.

PAULSON

He didn't tell me he was meeting with Beckton...

NICK

And, JP, he just pitched me a movie idea? Said he'd been wanting to for awhile. And that Walter said it'd be perfect for me.

Paulson grows more confused. Paulson hates being confused.

PAULSON

He did what?

NICK

To be fair. Walter Beckton endorses a project, you hear it out.

PAULSON

And what did you think of Gene's project?

NICK

Half-baked. I don't want to do a mob role. But the thing is. Beckton didn't love the idea. My agent talked to his.

Paulson snaps at an aide. He mouths "CALL GLORIA."

NICK (CONT'D)

I don't know. Maybe Gene is working a little too hard.

PAULSON

Don't say another word. This is handled. You can't worry about Gene harassing Beckton or the shoot. You need to focus on your work.

NICK

Thanks, JP. Just be nice about it, okay? He's a good guy.

PAULSON

No one is looking to punish anyone. I'll make sure he's taken care of.

NICK

Great. Sorry to bother you with it. See you tomorrow?

PAULSON

It's why I'm here. Talk soon, pal.

Paulson hangs up.

INT. FILM SET - DAY

Gene writes a script. The heading - "FOOTSHOT (WORKING TITLE)". The rest is blank. His phone rings. He answers.

GENE

Gene Kirby!

GLORIA (V.O.)

Mr. Kirby. This is Gloria Burr. I'm calling to inform you that-

GENE

Gloria! How's John? Did you-

GLORIA (V.O.)

I'm calling to inform you that your position as handler to Mr. Bates has been reassigned. You will report to headquarters in Andover tonight. You will be given a new-

Gene's face starts to crumple. He loses his breath.

GENE

What? Gloria. What are you talking about? Why are you talking like you don't know me?

GLORIA (V.O.)

You'll board the 2:06pm leaving Heathrow today. Your ticket has been purchased. Be at headquarters at 11:00pm tonight.

GENE

STOP. Gloria. What the fuck is going on?

GLORIA (V.O.)

Please try and contain your hysteria.

GENE

Yes. I'm sorry. I'm calm. Just let me talk to Nick about this. Please.

GLORIA (V.O.)

Mr. Bates is not immediately available to you.

Gloria hangs up. Gene, crestfallen and in shock, gathers his things in a daze.

As Gene walks off set, he glances at Nick's trailer. He starts walking towards it. He stops. He turns and leaves.

INT. FILM SET - DAY

Beckton confers with his film crew. Adrian approaches him.

ADRIAN

Hey. I know you're in director mode. But Gene Kirby just got fired. Or reassigned. I don't know.

BECKTON

(addressing the crew)
Turn it way down. One sec.
(addressing Adrian)
For coming over to my house?
Paulson is a prickly pear.

ADRIAN

I don't know. I think it was the pitch. He kept telling everyone you loved it.

BECKTON

Huh. Back to Florida for Gene. Nick all right?

ADRIAN

I think so. Steph is over the moon. She fuckin' hated that guy.

BECKTON

I didn't. But if Nick's good, we're good. Got a masterpiece to make.

Beckton starts shouting directions. The crew assembles.

EXT. AIRPORT - NIGHT

Gene hails a cab. It drops him at a house with a car parked in the driveway. He enters the home, which looks like it has been unoccupied for awhile. The clock - 10:31.

He changes into a black peacoat, grabs car keys, and starts to head out the door. He stops. He walks to a bedroom, opens a drawer, and stares down. He takes something out.

EXT. ROADSIDE SPEED TRAP - NIGHT

Remus and Fantana talk dozily in an Andover patrol car.

FANTANA

I'm tellin' you. Beatles used payola. Skynyrd was bigger. Organically.

REMUS

You're fuckin' insane. I gotta tell Face about this. He loves Paul.

FANTANA

Face? Whose face?

REMUS

Face. From the Department.

FANTANA

(in disbelief)
Officer Face of the APD?

REMUS

Name's really Michael Stallone.

FANTANA

Why's he Face, then?

REMUS

He had a kind of a beard when he started. Nobody else had a beard. We all called him Beard.

FANTANA

Right.

REMUS

One day, he shaved. Guess he got tired of it. Now it's just Face.

Fantana laughs.

EXT. ROAD - NIGHT

Gene guns it down a quiet side street. He drives zig-zag crazy. He mutters, giggles, rambles, raves.

GENE

Just get in a room, Calhoun, Calhoun. Opportunity. Walter, our asset, OURS. He's - got - VISION -

EXT. ROADSIDE SPEED TRAP - NIGHT

Remus and Fantana engage in spirited, stupid debate.

FANTANA

I'd get confused all the fuckin' time! Someone just says face, like the word, "face".

REMUS

Man, it's rough and tumble. Look at Bill from the Department. You think he gets his head in a knot every time he pays for cable? Insurance?

A soft roar grows louder. Car going TURBO, getting closer.

FANTANA

I guess. Gettin' named Bill Billington was still a shit draw.

REMUS

Yeah. Mr. and Mrs. Billington were wrong for that.

The car approaches. Gene grips the wheel, possessed.

GENE

Nick's not THERE, he's fuckin' slow. Not like Calhoun. Not like Walter. Nobody is like Walter, HA, just gotta talk to CALHOUN -

Gene's car whizzes past Remus and Fantana. They follow.

FANTANA

Oh, looky. Wayyyy over.

REMUS

Run that bad boy.

Fantana punches in the plate number. No hit. They throw the sirens on and rev it.

FANTANA

Yippeee! Where you goin'!

Gene groans loud and slams the steering wheel. He pulls over.

REMUS

I got it.

FANTANA

Alright.

Remus exits and walks up to Gene's car. He taps the window. Gene rolls it down.

REMUS

Evening. License and registration.

GENE

(exasperated)

Do you know who I am? I really think you should run my plate.

REMUS

(amused)

Easy, son. We ran it. Still gonna need your papers there.

GENE

It's the car. New plate. I'm Gene Kirby. From the Institute.

Remus tenses a bit. He thinks it over. The plate didn't hit.

REMUS

We can sort it later. For now-

GENE

(hands tighten the wheel)
I do NOT have time for this! I do
not have the fucking time so, do
you enjoy having a job?

REMUS

Step out of the car, sir.

GENE

Just run my name. Once more.

REMUS

Get out. Now.

Both stare. Gene's face goes bland all over. He sighs deep.

GENE

Okay.

Fantana looks on from the car as Gene steps out. Focus on
Fantana's face.

He hears a gunshot. A yelp of pain. Another gunshot. Silence.

Fantana jerks. Fantana SCREAMS. He hastily draws his gun and
scrambles out of the car.

Fantana runs up to Gene holding a gun. Remus lies dead in a
pool of blood. His foot, shot. His head, shot.

Gene and Fantana point their guns at each other.

FANTANA

You crazy fuckin' sonofabitch, you
just killed a cop! PUT IT DOWN!

GENE

(speaking quickly)
Listen to me. Listen. Listen. You
run my name. Not my plate. My name.

Gene tosses his wallet over to Fantana. It thuds on the
ground. Fantana looks at Gene in wild-eyed confusion.

FANTANA

I don't care who you are, put your
FUCKING GUN DOWN, NOW!

Gene immediately drops his gun and raises his hands.

GENE

(breathing heavy)
Run the name. Run it. Trust me.

Fantana holds his gun steady at Gene as he picks up the wallet. He finds the ID. He motions for Gene to come with.

They walk to the cruiser, Gene by gunpoint. Fantana, still in shock, numbly enters Gene Kirby. MATCH. T2 - DO NOT DISTURB.

FANTANA

Oh, fuck. Ah, god, you psycho FUCK.

GENE

(still breathing heavy)
Now you know I'm who I am. Right?
Right. You know this has to be
cleaned. Because I'm me. And you
also know the Institute will take
care of you. One of two ways.

Gene cranes his neck towards Fantana's badge.

GENE (CONT'D)

Officer Fantana.

Fantana sweats heavy.

FANTANA

Maybe I'll just bring you in
federal. Put all of you in prison,
finally. Huh? Huh??

GENE

Nah. Don't do that. They'll torture
you. I've seen it happen. I've *made*
it happen. They'll pay some people,
and some other story will come out.
A plaque at the police station. Or.
That other way.

FANTANA

You're fuckin' evil. You even LOOK
evil.

Gene stares quizzically at Fantana. Suddenly, he erupts into laughter. He laughs until his face matches his blood-streaked coat. He sighs theatrically as Fantana looks on, disgusted.

GENE

I'm just an academic, really.

Fantana keeps his gun steady-pointed. Gene seems refreshed.

GENE (CONT'D)

Here's what happens next. I'm going
to make a phone call. A crew will
be here to clean this up.

Fantana looks at Remus' body. The pool of blood expands. Hot tears form, coat, and sting his eyelids. He blinks hard.

FANTANA

There is somethin' fuckin' wrong with you.

GENE

They'll be here in 20 minutes, max. Someone comes along before then. You stay. Say it just happened. That's why you didn't phone it yet. Say it was homeless, a mental man-

FANTANA

(enraged)
It fuckin' was!

GENE

Say he was black, if it helps. Florida, right? But that's just in case. Plan A, they come first, they clean, leave. Give you further instructions. Gonna take this back-

Gene, holding eye contact with Fantana, slowly reaches for the gun on the floor. Fantana holds his gun steady.

GENE (CONT'D)

- with me. Remember, now, torture, that's the operative word. They'll torture you. Or whoever. Tor-ture. You a family man?

Fantana looks almost rabid. He breathes deep. He slowly lowers his gun. Gene takes his own gun and pockets it.

GENE (CONT'D)

I'm going back in my car. I'm going to drive away and make that phone call. And you're going to stay.

FANTANA

You're sick. You ain't... there.

Gene wipes his hands clean of blood with a handkerchief.

GENE

I think you do have a family. Every night, from now on. *Every* night. Stare at them. Don't look, stare. Think about me. And
(gestures to Remus corpse)
Your colleague.

(MORE)

GENE (CONT'D)

Well, you know his name. And you'll know you made the right call.

Gene steps into his car and drives off.

Fantana stares ahead blankly, fuzzed the fuck out. Shock.

He looks at Remus' body and turns away in shame. He enters his car and nervously scans the road. Silent. Just the body.

A beat. His cell rings. "Darlin' Darlene". He hits end.

His cell rings again. BLOCKED NUMBER. He hits end.

FANTANA

Fuckin' hell.

He sits stoic. His work pager buzzes. BLOCKED NUMBER.

Message - "I KNOW WHAT HAPPENED. ANSWER NEXT CALL."

Fantana in disbelief. His cell rings. He lets it ring awhile, staring in wonder. He answers numbly.

FANTANA

Hello.

CALHOUN (V.O.)

Officer Fantana. This is Ed Calhoun.

FANTANA

Okay.

CALHOUN (V.O.)

He called me. Gave me your name. Told me you let him go.

FANTANA

Yes. I did.

CALHOUN (V.O.)

Good. Now go pick him up. Give him a police escort to HQ. He wants to talk to me.

FANTANA

He just left. I don't understand.

CALHOUN (V.O.)

That's fine. Laurel Street and JFK. Told him to wait for you. He was headed towards HQ.

FANTANA

Why not just let him head there,
then?

Fantana listens to Calhoun. He listens with interest and horror. He looks at Remus' body on the pavement.

His face contorts. Dull anger conquers interest and horror. He responds calmly.

FANTANA (CONT'D)

Okay. Yeah. I can do that for you.

EXT. LAUREL ST AND JFK AVE - NIGHT

Gene waits patiently in his car, his coat stained with blood. Red and blue police lights flash behind him. Gene yells -

GENE

Officer Fantana! It's been forever!

Gene steps out of his car and into Fantana's car's backseat.

Fantana drives off. Silence.

GENE (CONT'D)

This is what I was talking about.

FANTANA

What.

GENE

The way they do things. Ed. Why would he send you to pick *me* up? After the disagreement we just had.

FANTANA

Disagreement meanin', you murdered my partner. For no reason.

GENE

Right. Any cop here could have escorted me. Looking like this. But he called you.

FANTANA

You're a strange bunch.

GENE

It's not strange. It's standard. I learned a lot from Ed.

Gene looks out the window, stray droplets of blood dotting his pale face.

They pass a luminescent Blockbuster sign. The store is packed. Blue and yellow lights dance off the window. Gene stares and smiles hopefully.

GENE (CONT'D)

I hate coming back to Andover. HQ.
I live in Hollywood. Have you ever
been there?

FANTANA

No.

GENE

You should save up for a ticket!
Everyone is interesting. Here, it's
small, smallyyy. Small people.

FANTANA

You're out of your fuckin' gourd.

GENE

A small life. Is still a life. Hm?

FANTANA

We're here.

GENE

Well done. If this cop stuff ever
gets too scuzzy for you. Chauffeur!

Gene exits the car and starts walking towards HQ. BANG.

Gene gets domed in the head with a metal pipe by a man in a black PEACOCK. Several more men in peacoats hoist him up. They take his gun.

PEACOCK #1

Hey, Gene.

PEACOCK #2

A gun, Gene? You went full Johnny
Hollywood. You were a knife man.

GENE

No! Nono, okay. Okay. Let me talk
to Ed-

PEACOCK #1

Ed's not available to you. C'mon.

GENE

No! HEY! Officer, you're seeing this, they'll KILL me, you know they will-

Fantana slugs Gene in the jaw. His head goes hangy-limp.

The Peacoats look at Fantana, eyebrows raised.

PEACOAT #3

He alive?

PEACOAT #1

I think. Syringe is in the van.

PEACOAT #3

Night, Officer.

The Peacoats haul Gene's unconscious body into a black van. It drives off. Fantana returns to his car and waits.

His cell rings. BLOCKED NUMBER. He answers immediately.

FANTANA

Yeah.

CALHOUN (V.O.)

You almost took his jaw off. I said make sure he left in the van.

FANTANA

You're just gonna have to believe me when I say I couldn't help it.

CALHOUN (V.O.)

We like to drop new liabilities at the site as healthy as possible. To chart the progress.

Fantana doesn't reply. He considers the totality of his deed.

CALHOUN (V.O.) (CONT'D)

It's all right. He deserved it. I'm just glad we could help you.

FANTANA

Wait. Remus. There's shift records-

CALHOUN (V.O.)

We've staged the scene. The records will show that you switched shifts with Ramirez tonight. Go home. We'll call. And well done.

Fantana hangs up. He stares at the road. He starts driving.

INT. FILM SET - DAY

Beckton directs a scene with JUDAH HIRSCH, focusing intently with a crew behind him. Paulson sits to the side, observing.

BECKTON

CUT. Judah. There. *That's* flat.
That's the intonation.

HIRSCH

(dryly)
I knew you'd get it eventually.

BECKTON

Let's wrap. Bright and early
tomorrow.

Paulson stands and walks towards Beckton. Beckton notices.

PAULSON

Mr. Beckton. Am I interrupting?

BECKTON

No, no. We're all done today. And I
owe you an apology.

PAULSON

That's all right.

BECKTON

No. It isn't. You fly to England, I
set the time and place, and I fall
asleep after some drinks? It was
disrespectful. I pray not
inexcusable. I apologize.

PAULSON

It's fine. Your wife was very nice.

BECKTON

Not to me. I got an earful in the
morning. Deservedly.

PAULSON

Mhm. I'd really like to talk soon.
Something came up. I need to be
back in Florida by the weekend.

BECKTON

I hope everything is okay.

PAULSON
Business. No breaks.

BECKTON
I know it. Come by tonight, then.
Or wherever works for you.

PAULSON
Yours works fine. I can do 9pm.

BECKTON
9pm, then.

PAULSON
Listen. Don't be nervous. I know
you're a researcher. I just want to
talk about Nick. If there's any way
we can help you. With anything.

BECKTON
(smiling)
I look forward to it.

PAULSON
(briskly)
See you then.

Paulson walks away. Beckton exhales. He calls Darby.

DARBY (V.O.)
Yes?

BECKTON
Paulson is coming over at 9.

DARBY
I'll send someone over at 8.

Beckton hangs up.

EXT. BECKTON'S ESTATE - NIGHT

Paulson steps out of an SUV and walks up to Beckton's front
door. He rings the bell. Beckton answers immediately.

BECKTON
Mr. Paulson! Come in.

PAULSON
Thank you. I won't be long.

Paulson enters and scans the now-tidy living room.

BECKTON

Stay as long as you like. Diane is out with friends. Poker game.

PAULSON

Got it. Listen, we've heard nothing but good things from Nick.

BECKTON

Come to the study. Relax. Take your shoes off.

PAULSON

Sure. Thanks.

They enter Beckton's home office. The room is an elegant mess. Books, papers, vinyls, and VHS copies neatly arranged. A TV on wheels sits in the corner.

Beckton sits at his desk. Paulson takes a seat facing him.

BECKTON

So. Nothing but good things.

PAULSON

Nick's at peace. He likes you a lot. So we're happy. And honestly, we were nervous. The stories they tell about you, man.

BECKTON

Ah, well.

PAULSON

Nick insisted everything would be fine. When he was cast. And he was right.

BECKTON

Good. Good. Nick is the heart of this film.

PAULSON

We're happy you see it that way. But I think you are just as important. So. If you need anything. Just call me. My cell.

BECKTON

Thank you. That's kind. But I'm not sure I know what you mean. What would I need your help with?

PAULSON

I'll be direct. You must have looked into us. Read some articles. Maybe even talked to a private eye. I know. That sounds NUTS.

BECKTON

(expressionless)

I always look into my partners. Especially the silent ones.

PAULSON

I'd be offended if you hadn't. So. You already know. Simple. We have resources. We can help you.

Beckton stares through Paulson. Paulson squints.

PAULSON (CONT'D)

... for example. Funding dries up on a future project. Producer won't fall in line. We make a call. He stops being such a hardhead.

BECKTON

Sounds shady, Jacob. I play clean.

PAULSON

(eyeing Beckton cockily)

Okay. The offer is there.

BECKTON

I do appreciate it.

PAULSON

Look at us. Getting along. I thought meeting you would be some sort of showdown. Actually. I was intimidated.

BECKTON

Laughable.

PAULSON

No. It isn't. I looked into you, too. You don't play clean.

Beckton drums his hands on the desk. Paulson waits.

BECKTON

No, I guess not. Jacob, what would you say if I said I was recording our conversation? This one.

Paulson's eyebrows shoot into his hairline. He stares at Beckton. His expression goes from surprised to appreciative.

Paulson takes a black rectangular gizmo out of his lapel and places it on Beckton's desk.

PAULSON

I'd say I hope you didn't spend much on a fancy model.

BECKTON

What is that?

PAULSON

This is an audio jammer. Same kind the CIA uses. I'd be fucked if that producer intimidation stuff came out. But this. White noise.

BECKTON

I am bewildered and impressed. You saw that coming?

PAULSON

Director tries blackmailing me with a tape recorder? No. I didn't. Never leave home without it.

BECKTON

Smart. *Proactive*. When I looked into the lot of you. My favorite file, by a mile. Was Smith's.

PAULSON

He was a Great Man. I'm sorry, did you just actually try to fucking record me?! Wow. You are as-

BECKTON

A quote of his resonated with me deeply. I'm sure you're familiar. "Attack. Don't defend."

Paulson smugly holds up the audio jammer.

PAULSON

Defense has its place.

BECKTON

I think I'd have enjoyed sparring with Alex Smith. From what I read- not the Institute's cowshit, I read what happened- he was a Great Man. Lived many lives.

(MORE)

BECKTON (CONT'D)

A thieving, cuckolding, quack-turned-prophet-turned-billionaire. A first-round draft pick for every circle of Dante's Hell.

Paulson rolls his eyes. Here's that talker he was told about.

BECKTON (CONT'D)

Do you know what the 2nd circle is?

PAULSON

Is it boredom?

BECKTON

Lust. Bubba Smith was a man who got his rocks off. On land, at sea, friend's wives, wives' friends. A true pussy hound. I read that you don't have that problem.

The muscles in Paulson's face tighten.

BECKTON (CONT'D)

(brightly)

One wife. No cracks in that marriage. Impulse control! Smith, the reckless visionary. You.. more of a bureaucrat. And a worthy successor to the big man.

PAULSON

I know you're having fun. But shut your hairy fucking hole and listen.

BECKTON

I'm listening.

PAULSON

First, that stunt was embarrassing. If you'dve recorded me, I've got worse quotes in the papers. Second, you've got negative fuckin' leverage, and I don't know why you ever thought you needed any. We *do not care about you*. We never have.

BECKTON

Mhm. That's why you flew to England. To speak to me.

PAULSON

Just so I get it. You hired a PI. Got your files and your tape recorder.

(MORE)

PAULSON (CONT'D)
 Because the Institute MUST have set
 its sight on the legendary Walter
 Beckton. Yeah?

BECKTON
 Yeah.

PAULSON
 Yeah. You get any threatening
 letters? People in the rosebushes?

BECKTON
 No.

PAULSON
 No. Because nobody, and I include
 myself here, gives a fuck about
 Walter Beckton anymore. I flew here
 because you are a nut in a machine
 that makes me money. So. Make the
 fucking movie, and make it right.

Paulson stands to leave. Beckton picks up a TV remote.

PAULSON (CONT'D)
 (turns back)
 Fucking disappointment! I was
 expecting something THEATRICAL.
 Keep at your files. You could learn
 something from us.

BECKTON
 I did. "Attack. Don't defend."

Beckton pushes a button. The TV lights up. Paulson looks.

A closeup of Remus' face appears onscreen. Beckton hits PLAY.

Screen shows Remus leaning into Gene's car and asking for ID.
 The recording is coming from inside Gene's car.

Gene exits the car and shoots Remus in the foot. He lords
 over Remus, crawling. Shoots him execution-style in the head.

Paulson's face goes gobsmacked. Fantana appears onscreen.
 Beckton hits PAUSE.

PAULSON
 I don't know what that is.

BECKTON
 It's the best shot of my career.
 There's the Andover PD logo. And
 the timestamp. Just last night.

Paulson is finally speechless. Beckton stands and sighs.

PAULSON

Look, I don't know what you think you have. I haven't spoken to Gene.

BECKTON

I know. Calhoun uses the same jammer you do. Calls were pffft.

PAULSON

You tapped Gene? That's illegal.

BECKTON

Yeah. This is the second act, here.

Beckton hits play. Fast-forward. Screen shows Gene waiting, blood-soaked, in his car. He yells "Officer Fantana!, it's been forever!", and exits the car.

The feed goes still. Beckton switches it off.

BECKTON (CONT'D)

What happens in the third act is up to you. My guy called Andover PD. You people sucked the marrow out of that department, boy. \$500 for details on an ongoing murder investigation. Of a COP! You get the Department you pay for, hm?

Paulson's shock festers into rage. His eyes SHINE BAD.

BECKTON (CONT'D)

The story now is that the body was found an hour later. An Officer Ramirez switched shifts. Fantana was "out with friends."

PAULSON

You feel free to sue the PD if you have a problem with them. But if you think you can blackmail me, believe me, I'll fucking relish destroying you, your-

Beckton groans, disappointed, cutting Paulson off.

BECKTON

You'll destroy my career, the movie! Kill me, maybe. I get it. Now I'll be direct. Jacob, I am blackmailing you.

(MORE)

BECKTON (CONT'D)

I will send this video of Gene Kirby, high-ranking Institute member and recent personal handler to Nick Bates, murdering a policeman and colluding with another to cover it up. Fantana, Ramirez, probably the whole PD, exposed. Chief Druthers. You think he'll share a cell with the people he put away? I think he'll talk. I know what he'll say.

PAULSON

You'd lose Nick. I guarantee you.

BECKTON

No. Movie's in the news, Nick's in the news. This tape goes out. Now, you're all in the news. What does Nick do? Disavow the cop-killer and the freaks that covered for him? Honest mistake. Clean break. Or, he sticks with the alien mafia. Takes all that bad press.

Paulson is furious and decidedly beaten. He sits down.

PAULSON

Is there something you want?

Beckton takes out a pen and paper. He starts scribbling.

BECKTON

Let me just say. That you are a titan in the field of extortion. I recognize your talent and appreciate that it must be strange for you to be on the other side of the table for this one. I am a neophyte, and I am open to notes.

Beckton keeps scribbling.

BECKTON (CONT'D)

This is my second favorite Smith quote. Official Institute Governing Policy. It pops off the page.

Beckton slides the paper over. Paulson picks it up. It reads:

"MAKE MONEY. MAKE MORE MONEY. MAKE OTHERS PRODUCE SO AS TO MAKE MONEY." Bottom text - "\$20 MILLION POUNDS".

PAULSON
(scoffing)
Fuck you.

BECKTON
You built an incredibly impressive
blackmail factory. Offshore
accounts, shell companies, whatever
you people do. I don't need to know
how. Just do it in the opposite
direction. \$20 million pounds. You
leave England until production
wraps. And that's it. We both stay
out of jail.

PAULSON
You're out of your shiny fuckin'
mind if you think I'm giving you
\$20 million dollars.

BECKTON
Pounds. \$33,800,000 with the
exchange rate today. I've seen your
"donation" numbers. You'll find the
money.

PAULSON
You, your guy. Saw a man get
killed. You saw Gene. You didn't do
anything. Call anyone.

BECKTON
You look mad, Jacob. You look like
you could jump across this table
and beat me to death. Barehanded.

Paulson seethes and sweats. He sits, coiled, leaning forward.

BECKTON (CONT'D)
That sort of thing would elevate
you to Smith-status. But that's why
he's the god on the pamphlets. And
you're the man on the ground.

PAULSON
You let a guy get killed. For some
money. For *no reason*.

Paulson stands up and shakes his head.

PAULSON (CONT'D)
You're the most morally bankrupt
person I've ever met. We could have
done something, you and me.

BECKTON

You know, you might want to keep your co-conspirator close. That cop who gave you a hand. Fantana.

Paulson stares at Beckton with a mixture of disgust and admiration. He turns and walks out. Beckton hits REWIND.

INT. DARBY'S OFFICE - DAY

Darby sits behind his desk. Beckton slouches in a chair.

DARBY

The rumors are true. It appears you are a genius.

BECKTON

Sticking cameras on a few cars?

DARBY

Having me bug Kirby. In three states and two countries. I haven't the slightest idea of how you thought to do that.

BECKTON

I told you. Gene was a powder keg. Big spook, first time I meet him. Starts falling over himself to impress me after 5 minutes on set. I know that type.

DARBY

But how did you know he'd do *that*?

BECKTON

(coughing)

Kill a cop over a speeding ticket? I didn't. I thought some friction between Paulson and Nick. Maybe Paulson gets jealous. 6-week model. Things escalated. I seized the gap.

DARBY

A lucky hunch, then.

BECKTON

Believe me. I did not fully appreciate the lunacy of these people.

DARBY

I do. You would not relinquish an opportunity to gloat.

BECKTON

I'll gloat. I just made \$20 million pounds.

DARBY

\$15 million pounds.

BECKTON

Oh?

Darby reaches for a bottle of champagne. He removes the foil.

DARBY

At your behest, I am newly liable for a litany of crimes here and in the United States. The revised cost reflects that risk and the work required to launder our newfound Martian blood money.

BECKTON

You'd never see a jury. Guy with your past.

DARBY

Probably not. I add that I have copies of the tape and ledgers detailing our conferrals.

Darby pours Beckton a big glass of bubbly and hands it over.

BECKTON

Oxbridge values. You're a bastard.

DARBY

And you are audacious. I am unspeakably impressed.

They clink and drink.

BECKTON

You were right about the jammer.

(beat)

He called me the most morally bankrupt person he'd ever met.

DARBY

Tensions do rise when you point a gun in someone's face.

BECKTON

Wasn't just the blackmail thing. I think he meant it.

Darby seems to realize something. He studies Beckton.

DARBY

You're making a film. You had no reason to suspect the Institute of interfering with that goal. You're already a wealthy man. I typically don't ask questions, as I am content to collect money from those giving it away. But why come to me at all? Why do any of this?

BECKTON

Almost two years ago, Gene Kirby came to the Manor. He called me "Walt". He told me he'd be on my set. Didn't ask. He told me. That's not how I do things.

Darby waits. That's all there is. Darby breaks into a smile.

DARBY

I thought it might be something like that.

Beckton shrugs and sips his champagne.

INT. PAULSON'S OFFICE - DAY

Paulson sits behind his desk. Calhoun and BRAD PACKER, an Institute attorney, sit in chairs opposite his. The portrait of Alex Smith looms over them all.

PACKER

I don't want you to worry about this anymore.

PAULSON

I'm not worried. I'm fucking angry. He bugged a car. Who does that?!

CALHOUN

We do.

PACKER

I understand the anger. But there's nothing left to do. The money's been wired, and the tape destroyed. Although he probably kept a copy.

CALHOUN
It's what we would do.

PACKER
M.A.D. He can't put it out without going to prison. We had the money. You gotta give it to the guy.

CALHOUN
(nodding)
And Nick likes Beckton. Nick can't know what happened to Gene.

PAULSON
And how is Gene?

CALHOUN
Earmuffs, Packer. You're an officer of the court.

They all laugh.

CALHOUN (CONT'D)
Johnny's seeing to Gene's reeducation personally. This rate, he'll get another degree.

They all laugh. Linda's voice comes through the intercom.

LINDA (V.O.)
JP? Officer Fantana is here.

PAULSON
Send him in.

Fantana enters. He nods at Calhoun. Calhoun nods back.

PAULSON
Officer Fantana. Take a seat.

Fantana sits between Calhoun and Packer.

PAULSON (CONT'D)
I'm Jacob Paulson. It's nice to meet you.

FANTANA
We've met before, Mr. Paulson.

PAULSON
Oh. I don't remember.

FANTANA

I pulled you over around two years back. Speedin'.

PAULSON

How did that go?

FANTANA

Not too well for me.

Paulson and Packer chuckle. Calhoun only smiles.

PAULSON

I hope I wasn't too rough. I have this dark sense of humor. It can come out mean, sometimes.

FANTANA

No, not at all.

PAULSON

This is our attorney, Brad Packer. And this is Ed.

FANTANA

I expect you want to discuss what happened last week.

PACKER

First of all, Officer, I want to assure you that there will be no legal repercussions for your actions on the night in question.

CALHOUN

No repercussions of any kind.

PAULSON

Quite the opposite. Ed told me how you handled yourself. I wanted to meet you. And I like what I see.

FANTANA

Well, that's good.

CALHOUN

We're gonna houseclean the Department. Dead cop. No suspect.

PAULSON

Druthers will finish his term end of the year. Clear the top brass.

FANTANA

Makes sense.

PAULSON

And you're a good fit for mid-brass. Sergeant Anderson'll have to go, too. You'll take the exam. You can study, if you want, but you'll pass. And you'll take Anderson's spot in a couple of months.

FANTANA

Okay.

PAULSON

You'll be the youngest sergeant in Andover history.

FANTANA

Uh, thank you. I appreciate it.

Calhoun and Paulson share a look.

PAULSON

I know you must feel raw about what happened. But you did good. You were right to let him go, and you were right to pick him back up when Ed called. We reward loyalty and competence. So cheer up. We're a good group of friends to have.

FANTANA

Thank you, Mr. Paulson. I do understand that. I'm a team player.

PAULSON

Quick learner, too. Excellent.

PACKER

There is one more thing.

FANTANA

Alright.

PACKER

Let me reiterate that you have nothing to worry about from a legal standpoint.

PAULSON

There's a video. It shows Kirby killing your partner.

(MORE)

PAULSON (CONT'D)

Your Mexican standoff. You picking him back up. His car was bugged.

FANTANA

His car was *bugged*? By who?

PAULSON

Walter Beckton. We paid him to destroy the tape. But he has a copy.

PACKER

Probably.

PAULSON

We are sure the tape will never see light. But we paid the \$34 million anyway. An investment in your future. Like a college fund. I just thought you should know that.

FANTANA

Who the hell is Walter Beckton?

PAULSON

(laughing)

I like him. I like you. Alright. Ed'll be in touch. Go celebrate your pre-promotion.

Fantana exits and walks through the hallway, past a chirpy Linda, out the door and into his car.

Near-narcotized, Fantana blankly watches the parking lot, numb to the world he has entered and tethered himself to.

He turns the ignition, restarting the car and his life.

INT. HOME OFFICE - DAY

Beckton takes a pill - the last in the box. He throws the pillbox in the trash.

He opens a blank file and takes out a handwritten letter. He studies it hard.

INSERT some quotes from the letter.

"Dear Rita," - "and my actions, inexcusable." - "cruel" - "unappreciative, as your part was the best piece of the" -

"I only hope you can forgive me. Sincerely, Walter Beckton."

Beckton studies it some more. He crumples it up and throws it in the trash, right next to the pillbox. He walks downstairs.

INT. BECKTON'S KITCHEN - DAY

Diane paints, and Beckton reads. The door opens. Adrian has let himself in.

ADRIAN
Hey, Diane.

DIANE
Hi, Adrian. You look tired.

ADRIAN
You have coffee?

DIANE
I'll make tea. Sit.

BECKTON
Only give him 10% of what you brew.
It's in his contract.

Adrian sits.

ADRIAN
Thanks. How goes editing?

BECKTON
Don't dance. Tell Daley and Semel
it'll be ready when it's ready.

ADRIAN
Had to try. It's in my contract.

BECKTON
This is going to be a great fucking
movie, Adrian. My best ever.

ADRIAN
You always say that.

BECKTON
I've always been right.

ADRIAN
Different this time. The set, calm.
The actors content. The crew only
mildly traumatized.

BECKTON
You're suggesting we reshoot.

ADRIAN
 Maybe you're just now hitting your
 stride. A golden era.

BECKTON
 I hope not. Birdy. Would you mind
 giving us a moment?

Diane sets down the tea.

DIANE
 Don't stress him out too much.

ADRIAN
 I won't.

DIANE
 I wasn't talking to you.

Adrian and Beckton smile. Diane goes upstairs. Adrian waits.

BECKTON
 This'll be the last one. Probably
 why it's taking some time to edit.

ADRIAN
 Are you retiring?

BECKTON
 Come on, Adrian. You know I'm not
 well.

ADRIAN
 What is it?

BECKTON
 Does it matter? It's curtains.

ADRIAN
 Does Diane know?

BECKTON
 She's my wife. Of course she knows.
 (after a beat)
 I haven't *told* her, but she knows.

ADRIAN
 You have to tell her, Walter.

BECKTON
 I will. But isn't it interesting
 how she hasn't yet brought it up?

ADRIAN

I guess.

BECKTON

The games we play. That's how I know she's the one.

ADRIAN

You are such a weird fucking client to have, you know that?

BECKTON

I was wrong about Nick. But those friends of his. I don't know.

ADRIAN

You were wrong about that, too. Institute didn't cause trouble.

BECKTON

A lot happened that I can't tell you about. Can't tell anyone about. Things you wouldn't believe.

ADRIAN

Come on. It's me.

BECKTON

You know the scorpion and the frog?

ADRIAN

Scorpion stings the frog and they both drown. In its nature. Yeah.

BECKTON

That's what it was, but there was no frog. Only scorpions. Racing in the river.

ADRIAN

I dunno, Walt. I'm not an artist. You do whatever you do. Write it down. You die, you have someone else direct.

Beckton laughs. His joy rings out. Adrian has to smile.

BECKTON

No. You'd have to be out of your fucking mind to make that movie.

CUT TO BLACK.

THE END