

DUTCH TREAT

By

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OVER BLACK:

Heavy breathing...

The scrape of shovels hitting dirt...

FADE IN:

EXT. CATSKILL WOODS - DAY (1935)

Sun filters through the pines. Wind moves the needles. A cave at the base of a mountain, half-hidden behind rock and snow.

INT. CAVE - CONTINUOUS

Three men in tailored suits dig into frozen ground. Breath clouds the air. Their polished shoes now smeared with mud.

DUTCH SCHULTZ (30s) stands with his fedora low, a cigarette hanging from his lips. Calm. Like he's done this a hundred times.

LULU (30s) built like a doorframe, a pistol under his coat.

OTTO (20s) wire-nerved, his eyes drifting to the cave mouth.

DUTCH
Expecting company?

OTTO
Heard there's bears out here.

LULU
We're in the woods, kid. Where else
they gonna be?

Otto pauses, looking out into the trees. Uneasy.

DUTCH
Relax. If something's watching, it
ain't got fur.

LULU
Yeah. The only animals you gotta
worry about wear suits.

DUTCH
Or badges.

Dutch and Lulu share a look.

They keep digging – shovels breaking through layers of dirt and stone. A heavy metal trunk beside them.

EXT. CAVE – LATER

The men walk out of the cave. Lulu uncaps a small flask, takes a pull – passes it around.

Then they seal the cave with stones and branches.

OTTO
You'll be able to find this again?

DUTCH
Why wouldn't I?

LULU
Woods got a way of swallowing things.

DUTCH
Only if you let 'em.

He slips Otto's tie off and knots it to a low pine branch.

OTTO
Still feels off. Everything looks the same out here.

DUTCH
That's the point.

Dutch lights a cigarette and starts down the trail.

As they get to the road next to their car, Dutch motions for Lulu's tie. Lulu loosens it, hands it over.

Dutch ties it to a circa 1935 "Warning, Sharp Curves" sign.

LULU
Okay, well, I'm starving, think Lucky'll mind if we take a detour?

DUTCH
Fuck him. I call the shots now...

Dutch moves to the passenger side of the car. Lulu follows to the driver's side –

Otto lingers... staring up at the mountain.

PRE-LAP: Laughter over jazz. A bottle pops.

INT. ROADSIDE BAR - NIGHT

Smoke thick in the air, yellowed by low light. A phonograph wheezes out tired jazz.

Dutch and his boys crowd a back table. Lulu sits half-turned to the door, drinking while his eyes work the room.

Otto finishes what's left in his glass, then drains the bottle to top it off. He digs for his cigarettes.

Behind the bar, RAY (20s) wipes down glasses. In the mirror, the whole joint is reflected back - patrons blurred in smoke.

Dutch raises his glass.

DUTCH

To the fools who said we wouldn't
make it this far.

LULU

Hell, some didn't think we'd make
it outta the Bronx.

They clink glasses.

At the end of the bar, a man in a low hat watches them. He finishes his drink, drops a tip, and slips out the back.

Ray's the only one who sees him go.

Dutch leans back, studying Otto - long enough to shake him.

OTTO

All good, boss?

DUTCH

That look you gave at the cave.
Don't let it turn into anything. If
that schmuck Luciano even smells
the dirt on your shoes, you'll be
wishin' a bear got to you first.

Otto forces a thin smile.

OTTO

Wouldn't dream of it, boss.

LULU

You dream plenty. That's the issue.

Otto stiffens – part pride, part booze. Dutch takes a drag, smoke curling off his grin.

DUTCH
Relax. The stash is safe and sound.
(to the bar)
Another bottle, kid. Make it fast.

The door creaks open. Wind pushes in – the music hiccups. Ray looks up as two men step inside, dark coats, city faces.

Lulu stiffens, clocking their details – gloves on, hats low.

Ray reaches for a bottle, then freezes – both men digging into their coats. Lulu catches it too, but a beat late.

Before anyone moves, the two hitmen draw and open fire. Lulu fires back. Glass shatters. The music cuts mid-note.

A round tears into Lulu's neck. He stumbles into the table, hands clamped over the wound.

Otto reaches for his gun, clearing the holster when –

A flash. A hard grunt. A shot to the chest.

He drops fast, crumpling to the floor.

Ray dives to the mats behind the bar. Glass showers down. Spent brass rings out. Bullets cut the air above him.

One hitman grabs Dutch and slams his face into the table.

Dutch snatches a fork and drives it into the man's throat. A spray of blood hits his face.

The second hitman fires once – a shot to the gut.

Dutch drops.

DUTCH (CONT'D)
(gritting)
Son of a bitch.

The room goes still – only the hiss of the phonograph needle.

Dutch pushes up, his shirt pooling red.

One hitman left – limping toward him, gun raised.

HITMAN
Where is it?

DUTCH
(shouting through pain)
Go fuck yourself. And Lucky too,
while you're at it.

A shot. Dutch's ankle blows out.

HITMAN
Try again.

Dutch winces, then lets out a thin, bloody laugh.

Another shot.

Dutch's knee shatters. He screams through his teeth.

The hitman raises the barrel, lining up Dutch's groin—

HITMAN (CONT'D)
Last chance.

Dutch shakes his head — done, spent. He digs out a folded slip of paper, blood slicking the edges.

The hitman reaches for it...

A glass shatters behind the bar.

The hitman turns, catching Ray in the mirror — pale, frozen.

He moves in, gun angling toward him.

Dutch spots Otto's pistol on the floor. Reaches for it.

The hitman nears the bar, the gun fixed on Ray's face, his finger tightening on the trigger.

Ray braces...

A GUNSHOT.

The hitman's head snaps forward — a clean exit out the front of his skull.

His body slams into the bar.

Silence. Smoke. Blood.

The record spins with no song.

Ray rises, trembling — the only one left breathing.

INT. RAY'S CABIN - MORNING (LATE 1990S)

Light seeps through thin curtains. A wall-clock ticks. Ray (80s) sits on a worn couch, a cigarette between his fingers.

A scrapbook rests open on his lap - old newspaper clippings gone brown, headline: DUTCH SCHULTZ FALLS IN GANGLAND AMBUSH.

A half-burned photo of Dutch pinned to the page.

Ray studies the article in silence.

Then reaches for his phone, dialing slow and steady.

INTERCUT WITH:

EXT. FARM - DAY

A crooked gate opens down the drive. A barn to the right, an old Airstream up front, silver peeled, set on blocks.

The dirt road ends at the farmhouse - broken shutters, patches missing off the roof, a flooded field beside it.

Beyond that, a line of trees stand dark against the sky.

CHARLIE (30s) works in the field, mud up to his knees. He wrestles a leaking pipe that hisses and spits.

His farmhand, MARCO (30s), fights beside him, soaked.

CHARLIE

Cut the line.

(beat)

No - the main.

MARCO

They're both shot, boss.

Charlie wipes mud from his face, checks his buzzing 'Motorola' cell phone.

CHARLIE

Gramps, bad time - can I call you back?

RAY

Ain't it always a bad time?

CHARLIE

Yeah, welcome to my world. This place's got it out for me.

RAY

Your pops used to say the world's
got her own way of remindin' us
who's boss.

CHARLIE

Yeah? Well, she's been loud lately.

Ray's eyes move to a photo on the wall – young Charlie (9)
swallowed by big boots, a rifle in his hands, a huge grin.

RAY

You haven't been up in a while.
Maybe this weekend. Bring Tara.
Bring Judy, if she'll come.

Charlie watches Marco cut the line – the water dies.

CHARLIE

Judy? Yeah... that'd be somethin'.

RAY

She's keepin' busy?

CHARLIE

Your guess is as good as mine.

RAY

You make time for her. If the
family ain't right, nothin' is.

CHARLIE

Says the eternal bachelor. Time's
not the issue.

Another pipe groans, pressure builds.

MARCO

Charlie...

A spray bursts. Drenching both of them.

CHARLIE

Shit. Ray, I gotta go.

He ends the call, stuffs the phone away, and works the wrench
as water comes spraying up.

BACK TO:

INT. RAY'S CABIN - CONTINUOUS

Ray lowers the receiver. Stares at the scrapbook - another headline: LOCAL MAN DIES CHASING FABLED MOB CASH.

His eyes shift to a small metal box on the shelf - dusty, locked. He takes a drag. Smoke curls up around his face.

EXT. FARM - LATER

The sun beats down. Mud cakes the equipment. Water pools in the field where crops should be.

Charlie loads tools into his truck bed. A stack of unopened mail sits on the tailgate - FINAL NOTICE stamped in red.

JUDY (30s) steps off the porch, tank top streaked, hair pulled back, skin flushed from the heat.

Her voice stays calm, but there's a bite under it.

JUDY
Said that pump'd be fixed last
month.

CHARLIE
Parts came late.

JUDY
Parts always come late.

On the porch, TARA (11) pretends to read, watching.

Judy steps to the tailgate, eyes the mail.

JUDY (CONT'D)
You gonna open those, or wait till
they turn pink?

CHARLIE
Soon as I catch a break.

JUDY
You've been catchin' breaks for
years. Still broke.

She looks out at the flooded field.

JUDY (CONT'D)
Maybe the land's tryin' to tell you
somethin'.

CHARLIE
We'll dry it out. Be fine.

JUDY
That what you told the bank?

CHARLIE
Don't start.

JUDY
Just askin' how long you plan on
keepin' up the act.

She picks up a bill, holds it out.

JUDY (CONT'D)
They stopped askin' nice, Charlie.
He takes it, sets it back down without lookin'.

CHARLIE
I'll handle it.

JUDY
You been sayin' that for months.
What part of this are you not
gettin'? Any idiot could—

TARA
Mom.

Judy looks over, lowering her tone...

JUDY
Your daddy's just tired. Tired men
make bad math.

Charlie's jaw tightens.

CHARLIE
Enough, Jude.

JUDY
You think I like this? Cold
showers, busted trucks, prayin' for
rain one week, damn-in' it the
next?

She nods toward the flooded field.

JUDY (CONT'D)
Sell it. Before it drags the rest
of us down with you.

He opens his mouth to reply... then shuts it.

She waits, eyes locked on his.

JUDY (CONT'D)
Keep chasin' ghosts. See how far
that takes you.

She brushes mud off her sleeve and walks into the house. The screen door slaps behind her.

Tara closes her book, steps down, hands him a wrench — a small smile between them. They load the tools in silence.

INT. STICKEL'S OFFICE — DAY

Fluorescent lights hum over ceiling stains. A fan turns slow, moving more dust than air.

Paper stacks lean like tired buildings. A crooked certificate reads: OUTSTANDING SERVICE. A fly circles the room, lazy.

STICKEL (50s) — county lawyer, suit two sizes too small — eats half a sandwich over zoning papers.

Across from him —

SHERIFF CAMERON (40s) — uniform worn thin, boots up on the desk, toothpick rolling in his teeth. Sweat on his collar. Badge buffed to a mirror.

CAMERON
Ever gonna fix that fan?

STICKEL
Cheaper to sweat.

CAMERON
You say that about everything.

STICKEL
Keeps me consistent.

Cameron hunches over the county map — shaded parcels, scar-thin lines cut through it. He taps one with his toothpick.

CAMERON
That the last piece?

STICKEL
You said you had it handled.

CAMERON
It's in the works.

The fly lands on the map. Stickel slaps at it — misses.

STICKEL
Bank's gettin' itchy.

CAMERON
Want me to nudge him some more?

STICKEL
What the hell you been doin'?

CAMERON
I can nudge harder.

STICKEL
Just keep it subtle.

CAMERON
And if subtle don't work?

STICKEL
Make it work. You want your cut,
sheriff? Earn it.

CAMERON
What d'you think I've been doin'?

STICKEL
Hell if I know. 'Til that deed's in
my hands, my best guess is nothing.

Cameron's jaw tightens. The toothpick snaps.

CAMERON
You ever think maybe we're bein'
too soft on him?

Stickel looks up, brows raised.

STICKEL
We?

CAMERON
You're the one askin' for subtle.

STICKEL
You're the one said he was easy.
Desperate. Broke.

CAMERON
Yeah... but he's proud.

STICKEL

Pride's a luxury. Shame to waste it
on a man who can't pay his bills.
'Specially when the land's worth
more than he is.

Cameron rises, adjusts his hat.

CAMERON

I'll check in on him.

Cameron exits. The door creaks shut. Stickel stares at the
map. Draws a clean line through a parcel.

The fly lands on the wet ink.

He swats at it - leaves a black smear.

EXT. FARM - DAY

The sun presses down on the drowned field. A luxury sedan
idles at the gate - city plates blurred with dust.

JIMMY (40s) - suit jacket off, sleeves rolled, tie loose -
leans on the hood with two coffees.

Charlie wipes his hands on a rag and walks over.

CHARLIE

Didn't think you knew how to find
this place.

JIMMY

Car's got GPS, baby.
(beat)
Though she gave up a mile back.

They share a half grin. Jimmy hands him a coffee.

JIMMY (CONT'D)

You look... tan.

CHARLIE

That's rot. Soil's gone sour.

Jimmy eyes the flooded field.

JIMMY

You really still fightin' this?

CHARLIE

Someone's got to.

JIMMY
Not necessarily you.

He passes over an envelope, a business card tucked inside.

JIMMY (CONT'D)
Got a guy in the city with a job.
Nothin' glamorous, but it's a
start.

CHARLIE
I'm too old to start from the
bottom.

JIMMY
You're too old to be sinkin' in
mud.

Silence. Distant crows.

CHARLIE
Ain't about pride. It's about what
my old man built.

JIMMY
And what it's cost you.

Charlie looks away - eyes landing on Jimmy's car.

CHARLIE
Still drivin' that same whip?

JIMMY
Company lease. Nothin's mine, not
really.
(beat)
You think I'm happy? I'm just not
losin'.

That lands.

CHARLIE
Appreciate the offer. But I'm fine
right here.

JIMMY
That's what you said last year.

He finishes his coffee, flicks the cup into a bin.

JIMMY (CONT'D)
I'd loan you the cash if I could.
But my lawyer's got it all tied up
right now.

(MORE)

JIMMY (CONT'D)
You know, creative accounting with
the divorce and all.

CHARLIE
Ain't about the money.

JIMMY
Sure it is. Everything's about
that.

A long beat.

JIMMY (CONT'D)
You and Judy talkin'?

CHARLIE
We talk plenty. Just nothing nice.

JIMMY
She always had her reasons.

CHARLIE
Maybe. But when two people pull the
same way it lightens the load.

JIMMY
You think she doesn't feel the
same?
(beat)
She's a city girl, Charlie. She
didn't sign up for this.

CHARLIE
None of us did.

Jimmy studies him —

JIMMY
I hate seeing you like this.

CHARLIE
Makes two of us.

Jimmy climbs in, starts the car.

JIMMY
You ever ask yourself why you're
still doin' this?

CHARLIE
Every day.

Jimmy nods, drives off. Dust swirls behind him.

Charlie stands holding the envelope, the flooded field reflecting sky.

EXT. FARM - LATER

Cameron's cruiser rolls through Charlie's open gate, easing down the dirt road until it stops beside Marco's trailer.

Cameron steps out, sets his hat on. His mirrored glasses catch the sun. He eyes the trailer, then turns to the barn.

INT. BARN - CONTINUOUS

Half-light, half-shadow. Tools hang in rows. Marco grinds a metal part - sparks spit.

The door creaks open. Cameron slips in without a sound, watching Marco work.

Marco kills the grinder - looks back.

MARCO

Sheriff.

CAMERON

Hope I ain't interruptin'.

MARCO

Nah. Just keepin' this tiller from coughin' itself dead.

Cameron nods, eyes moving over the shop - a beat too long, a shade too curious.

CAMERON

Heard about the flooding.

MARCO

We'll manage.

CAMERON

Tough run lately. Charlie hangin' in?

MARCO

Best he can.

CAMERON

He's a stubborn man.

MARCO

That's one way to put it.

Cameron drifts closer, studying the tools like weapons. He picks up a saw blade, turning it in his hand.

MARCO (CONT'D)
Careful with that. Cuts deep.

Cameron smirks.

CAMERON
Million ways to get hurt in a room
like this.

MARCO
Not if you're careful.

CAMERON
Lotta folks say that.
(beat)
What's he got you workin' on next?

MARCO
Same as always. Keepin' things from
dying.

CAMERON
Hm.
(beat)
Judy around?

MARCO
Should be.

CAMERON
I'll stop in. Check on her.

He pulls a brass lighter from his pocket. Flicks it – the flame flares, then dies.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
Found this after the fair. Thought
it might be yours.

MARCO
Don't smoke anymore.

CAMERON
Take it anyway. Never know when you
might start again.

He sets it on the table, heads for the door.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
If the water acts up again, don't
bother with the office. Call me
direct.

Cameron steps out.

Marco flips the lighter open. Click. Nothing.

Again — a dry grind. Nothing.

He sets it down slow, still staring at it.

EXT. FARM — CONTINUOUS

Cameron's cruiser crawls up the dirt drive, dust curling as
he eyes the flooded field. He steps out, folder under his
arm, and walks toward the porch.

Judy meets him at the door, drying her hands on a dish towel.

JUDY
Sheriff.

CAMERON
Ma'am.

He taps the folder.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
Friendly reminder from the bank.

JUDY
Didn't know they sent friendly
ones.

CAMERON
Depends who's readin'.

He hands it over — his fingers lingering on hers a moment too
long before he lets go.

JUDY
Charlie's out back.

CAMERON
Course he is. Man loves a lost
cause.

JUDY
You said it, not me.

He studies her — hair pulled back, tired eyes, wedding ring.

CAMERON
You miss the city?

JUDY
Every damn day.

CAMERON
Crazy givin' all that up for this.
Woman like you deserved better.

She almost smiles – almost. The screen door creaks. Tara (11) walks out, barefoot, clutching a notebook.

TARA
Mom? You said you'd look at my
essay.

JUDY
In a sec, hun.

Cameron crouches, his grin too wide.

CAMERON
Essay, huh? Maybe about your
daddy's farm?

TARA
It's about whales.

CAMERON
Whales, huh? Lot smarter than
farmers.

TARA
My dad's smart.

CAMERON
...Sure he is, kid.

Charlie rounds the house, mud to his knees, wiping his hands on his jeans. He reads the scene before speaking.

CHARLIE
Sheriff.

Cameron straightens – waves the folder.

CAMERON
Stopped by with somethin' from the
bank. Routine stuff.

Charlie opens it. His face falls.

CHARLIE
Auction notice.

CAMERON
They call it that now, yeah.

A quiet beat.

CHARLIE
Didn't know you worked for the
bank.

CAMERON
County likes things tidy. Saves
everyone a trip.

He motions toward the flooded field.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
Heard about that busted pump. Hell
of a run of luck.

CHARLIE
We'll handle it.

CAMERON
Sure you will.

He steps closer, voice dropping.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
Be a damn miracle, pullin' cash
from mud.

CHARLIE
Even miracles are expensive.

CAMERON
So's bad luck.

He glances around the yard — leaning fence, busted pickup.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
These little accidents don't fix
themselves. Gotta sting the wallet.

Silence. Wind through grass. Cameron tips his hat.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
Y'all take care now.

He steps down, boots kicking dust. Charlie stands with the
notice. Judy gives it a hard glare.

JUDY
How long we got?

CHARLIE
I told you, I'll handle it.

JUDY
Like you always do, huh?

She watches the cruiser roll away, then heads inside.

TARA
Bad news?

CHARLIE
Could be better.

He folds the notice, tucks it into his mud-stained pocket.

INT. RAY'S CABIN - DAY

TV murmurs under the rattle of kitchen drawers.

Ray builds a sandwich - salami, cheese, peppers. Knife scraping the board.

ANCHOR (V.O.)
-Federal prosecutors confirming the
final charges-

He plates the sandwich.

Then heads into the living room.

On the TV - headline: LUCIANO CRIME FAMILY DISMANTLED.
Mugshots roll, one after another.

Ray stops mid-step. The plate slips and shatters. He grips the wall, staring at the screen like he's seen a ghost.

ANCHOR (V.O.)
-three generations of organized
crime now brought to justice-

He steps closer, squinting. One of the mugshots on the screen is Dutch. He nearly loses balance. Grabs the phone, dials -

RAY
Come on, kid... pick up.

EXT. FARM - DAY

Rain clouds rolling in. Charlie and Tara walk the fence line, boots sinking in mud.

TARA
Why's stuff always falling apart
around here?

CHARLIE
I don't know. Seems I breaks things
faster than I can fix 'em.

TARA
That's not true.

CHARLIE
Feels true.

She looks up at him.

TARA
That why the sheriff came?

CHARLIE
He had papers from the bank.

She kicks a rock ahead of her.

TARA
Why does the bank want our farm?

CHARLIE
No one said that.

TARA
I'm not an idiot, Dad.

He exhales, long and slow.

CHARLIE
Bank don't want it, sweetheart.
They just want what's owed.

TARA
So... they do want it.

Charlie gives a thin, tired smile.

CHARLIE
Guess they do.

They pass a beat-up tractor, half caked in mud.

TARA

Is that why Mom gets mad at you?

He tenses, jaw tight.

CHARLIE

Adults get scared different than kids. We shout instead of cry.

TARA

So you're both scared.

CHARLIE

Yeah. Sounds about right.

She kicks another rock.

TARA

You gonna fix it?

He stops. Silence sits between them.

CHARLIE

I'm tryin'. Just feels like I'm one step away from losing everything.

TARA

Not everything.

Tara looks up, searching his face.

TARA (CONT'D)

Not me.

He smiles. They keep walking — hand in hand toward the house. Judy stands on the porch, phone held out.

JUDY

Charlie. It's Ray. He's going on about something.

Tara tugs on his arm.

TARA

Great-gramps?

CHARLIE

You know he hates that.

TARA

Nah. He only pretends he does.

They step onto the porch. He wipes his hands on his jeans and takes the phone.

Judy crouches, wiping mud from Tara's leg.

JUDY
Go upstairs, wash up.

CHARLIE
Ray, what is it? Slow down.
(beat)
Who?

INT. RAY'S CABIN - LATER

Light rain sprinkles the windows.

Charlie, damp from the rain, walks in. Ray sits at the table sipping a shot - scrapbook open, bottle of rye beside it.

CHARLIE
You drinking?

RAY
Sit down.

Charlie hangs his jacket on the back of a chair and sits.

CHARLIE
You all right?

RAY
That's a stretch.

He slides the scrapbook toward him - mugshots, yellowed headlines: BLOODY SHOOTOUT AT ROADSIDE BAR.

Charlie glances at the article.

CHARLIE
This what's got you worked up? Some mafia hit from forever ago?

RAY
You've never heard the real story.
(beat)
I was there.

Charlie half-smiles, unsure if he's joking.

CHARLIE
C'mon?

RAY
Hiding behind the bar while
everyone else was catchin' rounds.

FLASH TO:

INT. ROADSIDE BAR - NIGHT

Ray (20s) dives to the mats behind the bar. Glass showers down. Spent brass rings out. Bullets cut the air above him.

BACK TO:

INT. RAY'S CABIN - AFTERNOON

Ray pours himself another shot and offers one to Charlie.

Charlie shakes his head, so Ray pours himself a double.

CHARLIE
What happened?

RAY
Felt death breathing down my neck.

FLASH TO:

INT. ROADSIDE BAR - NIGHT

The hitman nears the bar, the gun fixed on Ray's face, his finger tightening on the trigger.

Ray braces...

A GUNSHOT.

The hitman's head snaps forward - a clean exit out the front.

His body slams into the bar.

Silence. Smoke. Blood.

The record spins with no song.

Ray rises, trembling - the only one left breathing.

He steps out from behind the bar...

The place is wrecked - bodies sprawled, tables on their sides. Dutch lies in a pool of blood, gun in hand.

Only his eyes move... holding on Ray as he walks over.

Ray stands over him, watching as the life drains out. Then he spots a small piece of paper clenched in Dutch's fist.

Sirens rise in the distance.

BACK TO:

INT. RAY'S CABIN - AFTERNOON

Ray takes another swig, empties the glass.

RAY
Dutch Schultz. Did the dirty work
for Lucky Luciano's family.
Somehow... I was the last face he
saw.

Charlie looks down at the photo of Dutch in the scrapbook.

CHARLIE
That's heavy.

Ray gets up, comes back with the small tin box, unlocks it, opens it. Inside is a folded, brittle note.

RAY
He was holding this.

Charlie opens the note: a faint sketch of a hiking trail, a couple numbers, two marks by North Ridge.

CHARLIE
What am I lookin' at here,
directions?

RAY
A map.

CHARLIE
To what?

RAY
Money. What'd you think? That's
what this whole thing's about. The
Luciano's missing stash.

CHARLIE
How would I know? This is dinosaur-
era stuff to me.

RAY

It was a big deal then. People got killed just lookin' for it. Some even called it cursed.

CHARLIE

Like haunted?

RAY

Like if anyone in the family heard someone was searching for it...

(beat)

Let's just say people went missing.

CHARLIE

You took this off a dead mobster?

RAY

Wasn't my smartest moment.

CHARLIE

You think?

Charlie sets the note aside. Rises.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

Good story, Gramps, but I didn't have to drive all this way for it.
(puts on his jacket)
I've got plenty on my plate as is.

RAY

You got only one problem. That's all. And this fixes it.

Charlie motions to the scrap book.

CHARLIE

This? You think some old mob money's gonna fix my life?

RAY

Don't see why not.

CHARLIE

C'mon. What makes you think it's even out there? People already went looking. Think about it.

RAY

They didn't know where to look.

CHARLIE

And you do?

RAY

Week after the massacre, I spot a tie hanging off a sign on North Ridge. Real nice one, clear as day.

CHARLIE

That's supposed to mean something?

RAY

I think I know where it is.

CHARLIE

Ray, that was sixty years ago.

RAY

Then it's waited long enough. Come on, walk it with me.

CHARLIE

I can't go trompin' through the woods with you. Not now.

Rain builds outside – steady, relentless.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

Sorry, Ray. I'm stretched thin as it is. I'll catch you later.

Charlie walks out.

Ray stares at the box, lost in memories sixty years deep.

INT. TRUCK – LATER

Window cracked, rain spitting in. Wipers drag slow, labored – a faint squeak each pass.

Charlie drives down a country road – engine tired, gas needle flirting with empty. Gray and brown fields roll past.

On the passenger seat: a small collage of his failures – red-stamped mail, the auction notice, and Jimmy's envelope.

He glances between them, jaw tight. The radio hisses static. He kills it. The quiet makes the rain rattle louder.

The fuel light blinks on. He rubs a hand down his face, presses the pedal – the engine coughs, shudders.

He turns down the side-road leading to his farm –

Up ahead... a county cruiser, half-hidden behind trees.

Through the windshield he sees Cameron inside, hat low, sunglasses on, facing the front of his farm.

Charlie slows...

For a moment, neither moves.

Then Cameron tilts his head – a small, knowing smile as Charlie drives past –

Charlie stares, pulse rising.

He eases his truck forward... as he passes through his gate the gas light flickers again.

EXT. FARM – CONTINUOUS

Charlie's truck pulls into the drive. The engine coughs once, then dies. Silence.

The yard is empty – no voices, no movement.

He sits a moment, then climbs out into the rain. Boots sink into mud. The farm looks all beat up – fence leaning, barn door hanging by one hinge, tools left out to rust.

He glances toward the field – a spread of water and mud.

Then he notices something on his porch...

A single sheet of paper flutters against his doorframe – another auction notice.

Charlie steps onto the porch. Soaked. Defeated. He stares at the notice, the corners tugging loose in the wind.

He pulls it down, holds it. Stares at it a long beat. His gaze drifts out across the flooded land.

The paper crackles as his fist closes around it.

EXT. FARM – LATER

A break in the rain. A pump shudders, struggling to pull the field dry. Half of it's already emptied – nothing but mud.

A tractor crawls through the drier patches – coughing and stalling before the engine gives a final rattle and dies.

Charlie turns the key again. Dead. Steam rises off the hood.

He climbs down. Boots sinking into the mud.

He pops the hood open – smoke, heat, defeat.

He kicks the tire. Nothing. He grabs a wrench, slams it against the frame – the clang echoing across the empty field.

He throws the wrench into the dirt.

CHARLIE

(to himself)

You win. I got nothin' left.

He hits the hood once, then leans on it, head hanging.

He looks out at his field – half mud, half brown water, dead stalks. Then his eyes drift past it... to the tree line.

The pines stand dark and still. He stares at them a long beat. A distant engine hums – tires on gravel.

He turns. Judy's sedan comes up the drive, bags in the backseat, Tara beside her with a backpack in her lap.

Judy steps out – sunglasses on, grocery bags cutting into her arms. She lowers her shades, sees smoke rolling off the tractor.

JUDY

(calling out)

Really? You kill another one?

He doesn't answer.

Just stares at her – beaten, defenseless, knee-deep in mud.

Tara gets out, backpack hanging off one shoulder, taking in the tension. Judy storms inside with the groceries.

Tara lingers... eyes fixed on her dad.

EXT. ROAD – AFTERNOON

Charlie's truck rattles down a dirt road. Mud hits the windshield – brown streaks and pine needles across the glass.

INT. TRUCK – CONTINUOUS

Charlie drives, steady and silent. Ray rides shotgun, metal box in his lap.

RAY

Was a real road back then. Now,
just a scar through the trees.

Ray opens the box, unfolds the note -

RAY (CONT'D)

Two marks. North ridge.

CHARLIE

That ridge runs forty miles.

RAY

Wasn't the ridge I remembered. It
was the smell... sap, pines, wet
dirt.

He leans out the window, breathes deep - a cough breaks
loose, raw and wet. Charlie glances over.

CHARLIE

You good?

RAY

Fine. Air's thinner up here.

Charlie doesn't buy it but keeps driving.

RAY (CONT'D)

Slow it down. Think this used to be
the turnoff.

They roll past thick brush, half-buried fence posts.

CHARLIE

These woods all look the same.

RAY

Not to me.

Ray stiffens.

RAY (CONT'D)

Stop.

Charlie brakes.

The now rusted "Warning - Sharp Curves" sign, half-swallowed
by weeds.

RAY (CONT'D)

That's it.

CHARLIE
That's just a sign. A real old
sign.

Ray reaches once again into the box and pulls out Lulu's tie.

RAY
A tie. Silk, Italian.

CHARLIE
Yes, a tie. I can see that.

RAY
I came out here right after. This
here tie was hanging on that sign.
It's been tellin' me to come back.

Charlie kills the engine.

The world goes still – only the tick of cooling block metal.

Charlie looks over at Ray – frail, sunken in, fragile. Then
he looks at the forest – dense, wild, wet from the rain.

CHARLIE
I don't know about this, gramps.

Ray opens his door and nearly falls out – manages to stay on
his feet. Charlie races out to check on him.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)
You're gonna gimme a heart attack.

Ray stares up at the sign, starts coughing again – harder
now. Charlie tries to help him back into the truck.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)
That's enough. We're headin' back.
Someone needs to check on that
cough.

Ray waves him off, breath ragged.

RAY
Not yet.

He walks to the truck bed and pulls out a shovel.

RAY (CONT'D)
It's out there.

He nods toward the pines – dark, wet, silent. Charlie looks
from the trees to Ray – sees his eyes lit with old fire.

CHARLIE
You're a piece of work, old man.

Charlie takes Ray's arm – they step off the road together.

EXT. WOODS – LATER

Light filters thin through the trees – pale, cold.

Charlie leads, eyes scanning the ridge ahead. Ray trails behind, hand to his chest, coughing into his sleeve.

RAY
Keep an eye out for a break in the ridge.

CHARLIE
We've seen three.

RAY
Not the right one.

Charlie stops, looks back –

Ray's doubled over – breath shallow, face pale.

CHARLIE
You need a minute.

RAY
I'm fine.

He pushes forward, dragging his feet, using the shovel as a cane. The trail is choked with weeds, the ground wet, uneven.

Charlie grabs Ray's arm as he slips on a slick fallen trunk.

CHARLIE
Careful.

RAY
Log came outta nowhere.

They reach a small clearing – stumps, rocks, gray light pooling between the roots. Ray turns slow, scanning the tree-line. Confusion spreads across his face.

RAY (CONT'D)
This isn't right. These trees weren't so close.

CHARLIE
Trees grow. Time changes things.

Ray coughs – a deep, tearing sound. He bends over, can't catch his breath. Charlie grips his shoulder.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)
That's it. We're done.

RAY
No. We're close. I can feel it.

CHARLIE
You can't feel nothin' but your lungs givin' out.

Ray tries to push past him – his knees buckle.

Charlie catches him.

RAY
Just one more ridge.

CHARLIE
No. We're done.

Ray grabs his sleeve – desperate.

RAY
You don't get it... I been thinkin' on this longer than you been alive.

CHARLIE
Then it can wait another day.

Ray tries to answer but coughs again – weaker now. Charlie gets under his arm, starts leading him back toward the road.

RAY
(hoarse)
But, it's gotta be close.

They work their way back through the brush, slow and heavy. Ray can't stop staring at the trail behind them.

INT. RAY'S CABIN – LATER

The only sound is the wall clock ticking. Ray's propped up in bed, blanket to his chest. The scrapbook open across his lap.

Charlie sets a tray down – soup, pills, water.

CHARLIE
Eat a little.

RAY
Don't want to.

CHARLIE
You need to.

RAY
For what?

Charlie sits on the edge of the bed.

CHARLIE
Look, I'm sorry about earlier, but
maybe you've been chasing that
dream a little too long.

RAY
Dreams don't leave bodies behind.

He flips a page in the scrapbook. Points to the headline:
THREE DEAD IN A DITCH. SEARCH CONTINUES FOR MISSING CASH.

RAY (CONT'D)
Once word spread people went
lookin'... until the killings
started. Nobody found a dime.

CHARLIE
Maybe cause there was nothing there
to begin with.

RAY
-There was.
(beat)
There has to be.

A cough shakes him.

CHARLIE
You need to see a doctor.

RAY
What I need is for you to listen.

He grips Charlie's wrist - frail hand, fierce eyes.

RAY (CONT'D)
It's out there. Always has been.
Now it's safe to go lookin'.
(beat)
I just don't got the breath left in
me. But you do.
(beat)
(MORE)

RAY (CONT'D)
I always wanted to leave you
something... this is all I got.

CHARLIE
You don't need to leave me nothing,
I'm fine.

RAY
You're not fine. You're drownin'.
Farm, family, you, all of it.
Life's draggin' you down fast, and
if you don't push back, they'll be
nothing left but regrets.

Charlie looks at him – tired, worn down.

CHARLIE
Ray... I don't have time for this.

RAY
Like hell you don't.
(beat)
Promise me you'll look again.

CHARLIE
Get some sleep.

RAY
Promise me.

Charlie pulls the blanket up, closes the scrapbook.

At the door –

CHARLIE
We'll talk tomorrow.

He flips the lamp off and leaves.

Ray stares at the ceiling. The clock ticking louder now.

INT. COUNTY PLANNING OFFICE – MORNING

A coffeemaker gurgles like it's dying. A stack of zoning
files leans precariously beside it.

Stickel sits at his desk – sleeves up, tie crooked – spooning
tuna from a can while sketching dollar signs on a parcel map.

The front door creaks open.

MR. HALPER (50s) steps in – neat as graph paper. Pressed
suit. Wire-frame glasses. Briefcase clasped like a shield.

HALPER
Mr. Stickel. County Deputy Clerk,
correct?

Stickel swallows wrong, coughs into his hand.

STICKEL
That's— that's right. You, uh...
you from Albany?

Halper opens his briefcase without sitting. Folders perfectly organized, tabbed and color-coded.

HALPER
Office of State Audit and Finance.
We're reviewing rural rezoning
appropriations. Random selection.
Purely procedural.

Stickel forces a smile.

STICKEL
Procedural's my favorite kind.

Halper removes a thin folder, lays it flat.

Inside: photocopies, forms, numbers circled in red.

HALPER
You filed parcel 14-B as flood-
damaged.
(beat)
However, satellite imagery doesn't
seem to agree.

STICKEL
Could be old imagery. Satellites,
they slow down sometimes, right?

Halper looks up.

HALPER
They're in orbit, Mr. Stickel.
They don't nap.

Stickel laughs once — too loud.

STICKEL
Right, yeah. Course.

Halper flips a page with surgical precision.

HALPER

And parcel 9-C was reassigned under
a... C. Tucker. You wouldn't happen
to know a Charles Tucker?

Stickel freezes.

STICKEL

Can't say I do. Ticker, Tucker -
lots of T's 'round here.

Halper notes something in his file.

HALPER

We'll need originals for every
transfer in the last six months.
Receipts. Appraisals. All of it.

STICKEL

All of it?
(beat)
That's, uh... a lotta paper.

HALPER

Paper's the easy part.

Halper snaps the folder shut, slips it back into his
briefcase.

HALPER (CONT'D)

See you first thing Monday.

He leaves. Stickel sits frozen, tuna spoon in hand, staring
at the door - color draining from his face.

The coffeemaker groans... then dies.

INT. SHERIFF'S OFFICE - LATER

A ceiling fan turns lazy circles. Papers crowd the desk - a
parcel map with red-pencil scribbles spread out across it.

Cameron leans back in his chair, boots on his desk.
Sharpening a pencil to an absurdly fine point.

Stickel paces - tie loosened, hair a mess.

STICKEL

Showed up acting like it's routine.
Asking for transfer records. Files.
Everything from the last six.

CAMERON

Them bureaucrats always want
somethin'. Let 'em want.

STICKEL

You don't seem to grasp the
situation. They're sniffin' at
rezoning. Downstate's got eyes now.

CAMERON

Eyes'll see what you let 'em see.

He admires the tip of his pencil - then sharpens it more.

STICKEL

We fudged numbers on three parcels.
Not small ones.

CAMERON

Paper's a funny thing. You color it
right, looks like money.

STICKEL

We can't have a fire drill while
auditors are pokin' around. One
setback like a farm goin' up and
Tucker's the name they remember.

(beat)

Besides, if someone gets hurt...
there's no coming back from that.

CAMERON

That's the point.

STICKEL

You're saying what exactly?

CAMERON

I'm sayin' the timeline moves
faster if certain obstacles get
rearranged. Preferably to ash.

STICKEL

(whispers)

The word for that is arson.
Dangerous talk.

CAMERON

Danger's an expensive word. I
prefer... profitable.

Stickel wipes sweat from his face with a handkerchief.

STICKEL

Auditors sniffin', banks watchin'.
If smoke shows, they'll come down
on us, ask'n questions and all. Is
that what you want?

CAMERON

I want what's owed to me.

Cameron sharpens the pencil until the tip breaks.

CAMERON (CONT'D)

One proper setback and he's
finished. No insurance, no
bailouts. Paperwork moves fast,
developers line up. Everybody eats.
(beat)
But you gotta let me do it my way.

Stickel glances at Cameron's wall calendar – bikini models on
ATVs, caked in mud.

STICKEL

You got someone for... logistics?

Cameron taps the map with his broken pencil.

CAMERON

Same guy. Handles the messy bits.
Knows how to make a solution look
like an accident.

STICKEL

If auditors trace any of this back
to us—

CAMERON

They won't.

Cameron sharpens the pencil again. Stickel watches – pale,
nervous.

INT. MARCO'S TRUCK - DAY

Marco's battered pickup crawls slow, dust trailing.

A cruiser pulls up behind it – lights flash blue and red.
Cameron sits behind the wheel, mirrored glasses, hat low.

Marco pulls over. Cameron steps out.

CAMERON

License and registration.

MARCO
You gotta be kidding me.

Cameron remains expressionless.

Marco digs for his wallet -

MARCO (CONT'D)
What's this about?

Cameron prowls the truck, taps the tailgate, spots a dent.

CAMERON
Ever been told you drive reckless?

MARCO
Not until now.

Cameron leans in - softens his voice.

CAMERON
Still got that lighter?

MARCO
Didn't trash it if that's what
you're asking?

Cameron shakes his head.

CAMERON
Marco. You're sharp enough to know
I'm not here to write a ticket. I'm
here as a reminder. Like Smokey the
Bear talkin' about fires... and how
fast they ruin a place.

Marco shakes his head - small, nervous.

MARCO
They'll all be home tonight.

CAMERON
So?

MARCO
You want bodies on your conscience?

CAMERON
Be precise.

Marco's jaw tightens.

MARCO

I ain't doin' that. You wanna come
at me, fine.

CAMERON

You sure about that?
(beat)
One call and immigration comes
knockin'.

MARCO

Let 'em knock.

CAMERON

I'm thinkin' your mama's house
first. Carmen, isn't it?

Marco tenses -

CAMERON (CONT'D)

She's missin' papers, ain't that
right? They take her in, they hold
her. Those clocks tick slow.
Months... years. Hard on an old
woman with her condition.
'Specially with how slow the legal
wheels turn.

Cameron sticks a toothpick between his teeth.

CAMERON (CONT'D)

Know a guy that can make it slow as
molasses.

Marco goes still.

MARCO

She's been here her whole life.

CAMERON

Be a shame to see that change.
Lucky for her she's got you, right?

Marco meets his eyes.

MARCO

That's a low bar, Sheriff, even for
you.

Cameron shrugs - polite as a knife.

CAMERON

I like to see results. Tonight or
the call goes out in the morning.

Marco's fist tightens, then eases. Cameron studies him, watching the defiance drain out of him.

This make him smile - small, smug.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
For what it's worth... I'm sure
you're a good son.

He turns, gets back in the cruiser. The red-blue lights strobe across Marco's face as he pulls away.

INT. FARMHOUSE - NIGHT

The farmhouse interior is cramped, scuffed from years of use. A rifle hangs on a wooden rack - C.T. engraved on the stock.

A single bulb hums over the table. Three plates. Reheated stew steaming. Charlie eats slow, eyes on the food.

Judy cuts her meat - sharp, neat, surgical. Tara sits between them, swinging her legs. A thick, stale quiet between them.

Tara puts her utensils down and looks at her parents.

TARA
So... nobody's gonna talk?

Charlie looks up, a faint smile.

CHARLIE
Talkin'. Chewin'. Same thing.

TARA
That's your go to when you got
nothin' to say. It's lame.

Judy hides a smile behind a sip of water.

CHARLIE
Guess I'm predictable.

TARA
Mom says you used to be funny.

JUDY
I said sometimes.

CHARLIE
That's generous.

Tara locks eyes with her dad.

TARA
Tell the chicken story again. When
you met her parents.

CHARLIE
Not now.

TARA
Come on.

Charlie glances at Judy.

CHARLIE
You tell it better.

JUDY
No, you do.

CHARLIE
That's a first.

TARA
Fine, I'll tell it.
(beat)
Mom bought a whole roast chicken—

JUDY
Don't you dare—

TARA
—and Dad said he could carve it—

Judy and Cameron share a look — the old look.

Tara senses it, grins.

JUDY
—you were tryin' so hard to impress
them—

CHARLIE
—I wasn't tryin'—

JUDY
—You were absolutely tryin'.

TARA
—But when he pulled the legs off—

CHARLIE
—It slipped—

TARA
—Flew across the kitchen—

JUDY

—Hit the window—

CHARLIE

—Smashed right through it to be exact—

JUDY

—And to make it worse...
(suppressing laughter)
when he ran outside to get it—

TARA

—The neighbor's dog had it in its mouth.

Tara bursts out laughing.

Charlie joins — his first real laugh in a long while.

CHARLIE

Chased him three fences down.

Judy can't fight it anymore. She cracks up laughing.

JUDY

Poor guy came back empty-handed.

CHARLIE

That chicken never saw it comin'.

JUDY

Neither did the window.

Their laughter fades into a softer quiet.

They share a look — warm, unguarded. A shadow of who they were. Charlie leans back, wipes his eyes.

Silence settles — lighter this time.

JUDY (CONT'D)

You should laugh more. You look younger when you do.

Charlie meets her eyes.

CHARLIE

Still got that smile.

It hangs between them — not a truce, not a surrender. Something in-between. A spark of what they once had.

Tara watches, hopeful.

EXT. FARM - LATER

Stillness. Crickets. Wind through dead stalks.

A faint click - a lighter sparks.

Marco crouches behind the house, gas can in hand. The flame flickers at his thumb - small, shaking.

He exhales, kills it. Wipes sweat.

Then flicks it again.

He looks up - a warm square of light in the kitchen window. Laughter. Tara's voice.

Marco lowers the lighter. His jaw tightens.

He backs up - slow, careful. Takes a cleaner look.

Through the window he sees Charlie, Judy, and Tara clearing dishes off the table - laughing, teasing.

Marco crouches out of sight. The lighter trembling in his hand. He backs away - turns toward the barn.

INT. BARN - CONTINUOUS

Moonlight cuts through warped boards. Dust hangs in the air. Marco unscrews the gas can - pours a thin trail.

Flicks the lighter.

Click. Nothing.

Another flick - this time a flame.

He holds it over the gas. Then glances back at the house - sees Charlie and his family in the window.

MARCO
(under his breath)
Sorry.

He drops it.

A small pool of gas ignites - hesitant at first, then hungry. The flames crawl up the wall. Leaping to the rafters.

Marco backs away...

Wind shifts - a burst of fire races back toward him. He stumbles - the gas can slips from his hand.

MARCO (CONT'D)

Shit—

The can IGNITES —

An orange bloom erupts — violent, instant — swallowing the corner of the barn.

Marco scrambles out — the blaze swelling behind him.

INT. FARMHOUSE — CONTINUOUS

Charlie notices orange light across the wall. He turns to see the fire outside — the barn burning.

CHARLIE

No.

Judy sees the flames next — eyes wide.

JUDY

Charlie—

He's already pulling on his boots.

TARA

What is it?

CHARLIE

Call the fire department.

Judy runs for the phone as Charlie bolts outside.

EXT. FARMHOUSE — CONTINUOUS

The barn burns — sparks drifting like fireflies. Charlie sprints through mud. Tara runs out onto the porch after him.

TARA

Dad!

JUDY

(from inside)

Tara, stay here.

EXT. BARN — CONTINUOUS

Charlie grabs the hose — tries to turn it on... but it runs dry. He traces the line back — it's been cut clean.

He curses under his breath, grabs a shovel, beats at the flames, but it's useless. The fire roars, forcing him back.

Across the field – Marco watches, frozen, smoke haloing him.

A burning plank drops from the rafters and hits Charlie. He's knocked down, wincing as he crawls away from the flames.

TARA (O.S.)

Dad!

Charlie turns to see Tara's running toward him.

CHARLIE

Tara, no!

MARCO

(shouting)

Tara, stay back!

Tara gets too close to the barn.

The wind shifts – fire snakes along the ground, cutting her off, surrounding her. She coughs, lost in the smoke.

Judy steps out onto the porch and SCREAMS –

JUDY

Tara!

Tara is consumed in a cloud of smoke – flames drawing closer.

TARA

(crying out)

Dad!

Charlie tries to get to her, he's blocked by a wall of fire. He tries to run through, is forced back – coughing.

Marco's frozen – stuck between what he's done and what he should do... fear and guilt consuming him.

He yanks his shirt over his face and charges after Tara.

Into the smoke. He sees her, small, terrified, crouched down, coughing. He wraps her in his shirt.

MARCO

I got you.

He lifts her up, shielding her as he runs out of the smoke.

EXT. FIELD - CONTINUOUS

They burst out of the smoke and collapse into the dirt.
Behind them – the barn collapses in a thunder of flames.

Charlie rushes over and embraces them.

He looks at Marco –

CHARLIE
You saved her.

Marco coughs – eyes locked on the burning barn.

Judy reaches them, pulls Tara into her arms.

JUDY
Oh God... baby... Tell me you're
alright.

Charlie grips Marco's shoulder – gratitude and disbelief.

CHARLIE
Thank you.

Marco avoids Charlie's eyes, staring into the fire.

Sirens build in the distance.

EXT. FARM - DAWN

Fire trucks idle beside the charred barn. Steam lifts off the
burned beams. Cameron and the FIRE CHIEF (50s) sip coffee,
nodding like two guys catching up after a game.

Marco sits by his trailer. Unshaven, unwashed. A cigarette
burns between his fingers, forgotten.

INT. FARMHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Gray light through smoke-streaked glass. Fridge hums. A fly
works lazy circles over the sink.

Charlie, Judy, and Tara sit at the kitchen table – slumped,
silent, smoke from last night's fire still on them.

The tension in the room is thick, heavy.

JUDY
You happy now?

Charlie rubs his forehead. Doesn't look up.

CHARLIE
Not now, Jude.

JUDY
Like there's ever a good time to
watch everything fall apart.

She taps the table – once. A dull, angry metronome.

JUDY (CONT'D)
Every time you say you'll take care
of something, it breaks... or
burns... or dies.
(beat)
And that barn? You knew. You knew
it wasn't wired right.

Charlie meets her eyes.

CHARLIE
I didn't have the money to fix it.
(beat)
And we don't know if that's what
caused this.

She gives a small, sharp smile – no warmth.

JUDY
No? So what was it? Lightning? The
wrath of God? Or just your luck
rubbing off on us again?

Charlie looks away – raw, tired, ashamed.

Tara notices. She shrinks into her chair.

CHARLIE
You don't believe in me anymore.

Judy stands – slow. Chair legs scrape the tile.

JUDY
You think this helped?

She motions to Tara.

JUDY (CONT'D)
Upstairs. Go wash up.

TARA
Mom, I—

JUDY
Now.

Tara hesitates, then slips down the hall, stopping where the floorboards don't creak. She listens.

Judy stays standing, arms crossed tight, like she's holding herself together.

CHARLIE
Just say it. Whatever you've been
holding. Just—

JUDY
I can't keep doing this.

He flinches — barely visible, but it lands.

CHARLIE
Doing what?

JUDY
Watching you lose everything. And
dragging us down with you.
(softer, sadder)
I'm tired of being scared all the
time.

Charlie sits back — stunned, cornered, trying not to show it.

JUDY (CONT'D)
You keep saying tomorrow'll be
different. But tomorrow never shows
up, Charlie.

CHARLIE
So what do you want?

JUDY
I want... space. A place to breathe
for a while without all this.

Charlie shifts — like the room just tilted under him.

CHARLIE
Jude—

JUDY
My sister's got room in the city.
(beat)
For me and Tara.

Charlie's jaw locks.

CHARLIE
Don't take her away.

JUDY

It's not a punishment, Charlie.
It's a pause. While you figure out
what you're doing with this mess.
And why. At least, we'll be out of
the way.

CHARLIE

Jude, no.

JUDY

Charlie... look at yourself. Look
at last night. Tara could've died.

That hits him.

CHARLIE

I'm afraid if you take her... you
won't come back.

JUDY

Then give me a reason to.

She walks out the back door. The screen creaks. Slams shut.

In the hallway, Tara presses her head to the wall... shaking.

EXT. FARM - MORNING

The barn is a carcass - black ribs of timber steaming in the
morning light. Fire trucks idle near the ruins.

Firemen coil hoses, load gear.

Charlie drags charred planks out of the field, tossing them
into a pile by the house. Soot on his arms.

Judy sweeps ash off the porch - slow, mechanical, like she's
lost in her own thoughts.

Across the yard, Cameron strolls over. Hands in his pockets.
Smiling like he's just here to chat about weather.

CAMERON

Hell of a night.

Charlie keeps dragging wood. Doesn't look at him.

CAMERON (CONT'D)

Chief says faulty wiring. Old barn
like that... one spark and poof.

CHARLIE
Wiring wouldn't've done it like
that.

Cameron shrugs. Smiles.

CAMERON
Then must've been cursed wire.

Judy lets out a dry breath – half a laugh, half something broken. Cameron clocks it. Notices the distance between Charlie and Judy, the tension. Smiles a little wider.

He kneels, picks up a charred board, turns it like a prop.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
These old farms sure can break a
man. County's seen a dozen burn in
the last decade.
(looks at Charlie)
Dry wood. Bad wires. Bad luck.

Charlie stops working.

CHARLIE
Bad luck?

CAMERON
What else you call it?

CHARLIE
Suspicious.

Cameron sets the board down. Dusts his hands.

CAMERON
Fancy word for bad luck.

Judy steps forward, broom still in hand.

JUDY
Not the time, Sheriff.

Cameron nods – but keeps pushing.

CAMERON
No superstition here. Just saying
some men know when they're beat.

Charlie finally faces him.

CHARLIE
You here just to tell me that?

Cameron takes a long breath through his nose – like he's smelling the smoke.

CAMERON
I'm here to tell you no one would
blame you for lettin' go.
(beat)
Let the bank take it. Move on.

He starts walking in a slow circle around him...

CAMERON (CONT'D)
Start fresh, somewhere dry maybe.

Charlie steps in his path, blocking him.

CHARLIE
This is our home.

Judy shoots Charlie a look – sharp, loaded. Cameron notices. Enjoys it.

CAMERON
Home's where you're safe, son.
(beat)
You keep pushing your luck out
here... odds are it happens again.

He taps one of the charred beams with his boot.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
Troubled land.

CHARLIE
Nothin's wrong with the land.

Cameron tilts his head – patronizing, deliberate.

CAMERON
Beg to differ.
(beat)
But suit yourself.

He adjusts his hat, takes a step toward Judy.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
I've seen what happens when a man
throws his life away chasin' a
dream.
(eyes Charlie)
And what it does to the people
standin' beside him.

He tips his hat to Judy –

CAMERON (CONT'D)

Ma'am.

He turns and heads toward the trucks, boots crunching over ash. Charlie watches him go. Jaw clenched.

EXT. STICKEL'S OFFICE - MORNING

Halper arrives - crisp, exact, walking with purpose.

He passes Stickel's version of a luxury car: a dented sedan with gleaming rims and a custom plate that reads: STICK-IT.

The inside of the car is a crime scene of negligence - wrappers, blueprints, a fossilized half-hoagie.

Halper stops - stares through the window with disgust.

Then... he hears a SNAP. Turns in time to see the blinds slam shut inside Stickel's office. A shadow jerks out of sight.

INT. STICKEL'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Stickel freezes mid-crouch, one hand still on the blinds. He kills the lights. Sprints to the door. Checks the lock.

Checks it again.

One more time for luck.

The office is absolute chaos - drawers half-open, shredded documents jammed inside, sticky notes stuck to the floor.

Stickel grabs armfuls of documents and shoves them into a trash bag - the bag tearing a little more each time he yanks.

A knock.

HALPER (O.S.)

Mr. Stickel?

Stickel goes dead still - like a raccoon mid-garbage raid.

Another knock.

HALPER (O.S.) (CONT'D)

We have an appointment.

Stickel tiptoes across the office - surprisingly nimble - trying not to make a sound.

He bumps a metal shelf. A mug falls.

Halper tries the knob. Locked.

 HALPER (CONT'D)
Mr. Stickel, I can see your vehicle
in the lot.
 (beat)
And your shadow.
 (another beat)
And your hand on the blinds.

Stickel yanks his hand back like it's on fire.

Panic rising, he scrambles to the side window. It's stuck.

He shoves harder — knocks over a tower of files. They collapse like a slow-motion avalanche.

He curses, shoves again.

POP. The window finally gives.

Stickel climbs through — belly scraping, belt hooked on the frame. Legs kicking like a man trying to swim through air.

He drops into a bush with a thud and a small whimper.

EXT. PARKING LOT — CONTINUOUS

Halper rounds the corner just in time to see Stickel sprint across the lot — arms full of mismatched files, papers dropping behind him like a trail of breadcrumbs.

Stickel reaches his car, fumbles the keys — tries one, two, three before hitting the right one.

Half the files hit the pavement. He doesn't even glance back.

He dives into the driver's seat and peels out, rims gleaming.

Halper watches the car skid down the road.

INT. COUNTY SHERIFF'S STATION — DAY

Fluorescent hum. A handful of cops huddle around a vending machine. A sad bowl of stale candy sits on the front desk.

Cameron walks in — pops a sucker in his mouth. Then he pauses at his office door — a shape moves behind the frosted glass.

He opens it.

INT. CAMERON'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Marco stands at the window, back to the glass, hands buried in his pockets. He looks up - no surprise, no fear.

CAMERON
What are you doing here?

MARCO
We need to talk.

CAMERON
Not here.

MARCO
Why?
(low)
Worried your deputies might connect
some dots?

A long beat.

Cameron shuts the door. Locks it. Kills the light. Drops the shades until the room folds into shadow.

He moves closer...

CAMERON
Barns don't mean shit. They burn
down all the time.
(beat)
Except it wasn't supposed to be the
barn, was it?

Marco doesn't move.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
You were sloppy. Stupid. Could've
been seen.
(beat)
What? Nothing to say for yourself?

MARCO
I'm done.

CAMERON
Done how? Like as if you finished
something? Or you just pretending
you get to walk away, clean and
quiet-like?

MARCO
You told me to break equipment.
Flood a field.
(MORE)

MARCO (CONT'D)
That's what you said. That's what I did. Now you're talking arson. I'm not doing that.

Cameron exhales – almost a laugh.

CAMERON
You already did. If you'd followed instructions, it'd be wrapped. But no...
(beat)
You had to freestyle the finale.

Marco shakes his head – tiny, stubborn.

MARCO
They're good people. They don't deserve this.

CAMERON
I never asked you to kill anyone. Burn the house, not the barn. The barn was your own little accident.

MARCO
I won't hurt them.

Cameron tilts his head, amused.

CAMERON
Look at you. Saint Marco. You could've said no a while back.

MARCO
I did. You threatened my mother.

Cameron's face empties – completely blank.

CAMERON
Not my fault she's undocumented. Paperwork moves fast when it needs to. Time doesn't. You made choices.

Marco steps forward – for the first time, he's the one closing distance.

MARCO
I did what you asked. Now leave us alone.

CAMERON
Finish what you started.

MARCO

No.

Cameron studies him.

CAMERON

All right. Then walk. Walk home.
Kiss your mother. Tell her what a
good son you are. Probably be the
last time you get the chance.

INT. RAY'S BEDROOM - DAY

The oxygen machine hums beside the bed.

Ray lies propped up, gray but awake. The scrapbook rests on
his lap - faces and headlines fading.

A knock. Charlie steps in with a bowl.

CHARLIE

Brought you soup.

RAY

You still think food fixes
everything.

Charlie sets it down, sits.

CHARLIE

You look better.

RAY

You're a lousy liar.

A faint smile between them.

RAY (CONT'D)

Bank give you an extension?

CHARLIE

Not unless I got something to
trade.

RAY

You do.

He taps the scrapbook.

CHARLIE

A tired, old dream?

RAY
A second chance.

CHARLIE
C'mon, Ray. It might not even be there. Besides auction's tomorrow. Ain't nothing gonna change that.

RAY
Since when do you talk like that? You used to have a spark. Passion.

CHARLIE
Hope's the first thing that burns out.

RAY
Still got mine.

He coughs – waves off Charlie's help.

RAY (CONT'D)
Don't look at me like I'm gone.

CHARLIE
You to need rest.

RAY
You need a win.

CHARLIE
Don't see that happening.

RAY
Make it happen.

Let it go, Ray, it's just dirt.

RAY (CONT'D)
Just dirt don't ruin a man's life.

Charlie says nothing.

RAY (CONT'D)
Promise me you'll go back to the trail, just look for me.

CHARLIE
Ray–

RAY
Say it.

A long beat.

RAY (CONT'D)
Say you'll look one more time.

Charlie finally meets his eyes.

CHARLIE
...Alright. I promise, I'll look.

Ray exhales, slow, satisfied.

RAY
Good. 'Cause I ain't dyin' without-

CHARLIE
Without what?

RAY
I just gotta know.

Ray grips his hand, squeezes.

CHARLIE
I'll be back tomorrow.

Charlie leaves.

Ray looks at the scrapbook - Dutch's crew, young and wild. He turns a page: MASSACRE AT ROADSIDE BAR.

EXT. ROAD - LATER

Charlie's truck rumbles down a narrow road.

He reaches a crossroads - one lane leading back toward the farm. The other disappearing into thick woods.

INT. TRUCK - CONTINUOUS

Charlie slows... stops. Engine ticks. Wind hisses through dry pines. He stares down the road home - jaw tight.

Then he looks the other way - woods swallowing the narrow road. His hand drifts off the wheel. Taps the blinker.

It clicks left. He doesn't move.

A crow lands on the signpost - caws once, loud in the quiet.

Charlie flicks the blinker off.

A beat.

Then he throws the truck into reverse. Angles toward the woods road. No hesitation now. Gravel spits under the tires as he turns in. Branches scrape the sides of the truck.

He drives down the road... deeper into the woods.

INT. TRUCK - LATER

He turns up a winding dirt road - spots the rusted deer crossing sign, sees the threads of the old tie tied to it.

He slows... looks toward the ridge - black trees, slope swallowed in shadow. He kills the engine, leans forward, staring through the windshield, studying the tree-line.

CHARLIE (QUIET)
Ray, what've you got me doin'?

He steps out - grabs a shovel and walks into the woods.

INT. RAY'S CABIN - SAME TIME

Ray flips through the scrapbook.

Old photos of Dutch's crew, young and wild, grinning with the stupid confidence of brash men. He turns the page. A clipped newspaper headline stares back: MASSACRE IN THE CATSKILLS

A grainy crime scene photo - bodies under sheets, cops hauling men in cuffs, the images blurred by age and ink.

Something tightens in him - guilt, memory, fear.

The oxygen machine beside him hums, steady... then dips to a soft stutter, almost a sigh.

Ray's breath catches. He leans forward, fingertips brushing the photograph. The hum of the machine thins again, softer this time - a long exhale. Ray closes his eyes.

His body tenses, a tremor up the spine.

The scrapbook falls from his lap - hits the floor.

Pages fan open across the boards as the oxygen machine gives one last, uneven wheeze. Ray reaches for the scrapbook, hand hangs in the air a moment... then goes still.

EXT. WOODS - SAME TIME

Gray light through the pines. Wind moves the tops but nothing below. No birds. No bugs. Just trees.

Charlie climbs the ridge, boots slipping on the needles. He stops, one hand on a trunk, catching his breath.

He looks around.

The woods are the same in every direction.

CHARLIE
(under his breath)
Screw this.

He turns back down the slope - freezes. A scrap of cloth hangs off a low branch. Faded. Torn. Out of place.

Charlie steps closer. The threads of an old, weathered tie.

He looks around again - slow, careful...

A steep ridge. Rocks piled tight against it. Packed hard with roots. Not the way nature does, man-made.

Charlie stands there a beat.

Then he moves in, pulls a stone away. Then another.

The stack shifts, dirt spilling out. A narrow hole appears - behind it... a cave mouth, almost completely hidden.

INT. CAVE - CONTINUOUS

He squeezes through. The space is small and dark, a circle of packed dirt. Too round. Too perfect.

Charlie kneels. Tests the ground with his hand. Solid. He starts digging - small bites at first. Then harder. Faster.

The scrape of metal hits the shovel.

He stops.

Hits the same spot again. Definitely metal.

Charlie drops to his knees and digs with his hands now, pulling dirt out in tight, fast scoops.

A rusted corner shows.

Then the shape of an old trunk.

He digs it free, shoulders straining, and drags the trunk toward the light at the opening.

Gets his shovel under the latch...

CRACK — the lid snaps open. Inside, he finds wet bills fused together. Mold. Sludge. But still money. A lot of it.

Charlie reaches in, pulls a stack — it breaks apart in his hand, smearing into pulp. He flinches — then grabs another.

This one holds. Damp but real.

A breath escapes him — sharp, almost a laugh. He stuffs the bills into his pockets. Quick, rough movements. He keeps grabbing. Checks over his shoulder once — no one outside.

He reaches again. Stuffs cash in his pockets, jacket, shirt.

A draft rolls through the cave. Charlie freezes, listening. He goes back in, both hands now, shoving bills wherever they'll fit.

EXT. STREET — AFTERNOON

Halper walks the sidewalk with a folder under his arm. He spots Stickel's car half-parked in front of a hydrant.

His eyes narrow as he scans the street...

Far up the block — Stickel, clutching a stack of papers.

 HALPER
 (shouting)
 Mr. Stickel.

Stickel freezes...

Then pretends he didn't hear anything and keeps walking.

 HALPER (CONT'D)
 Mr. Stickel!

Stickel casually speeds up.

Halper follows — calm, irritated.

Stickel jog-walks, pretending to wave at people, acting like he's in a hurry, like he's unaware Halper is even behind him.

HALPER (CONT'D)
 (shouting)
 We have outstanding state
 documents. Mr. Stickel.
 (walking faster)
 Mr. Stickel.

Halper sighs – then power-walks like an angry accountant.

Stickel breaks into a full sprint.

People watch the chase, like it's the day's entertainment.

Stickel turns into an alley – tries to shove the papers into an air vent. A gust blows them back into his face.

Halper rounds the corner and finds Stickel batting the papers like he's fighting off attacking birds.

HALPER (CONT'D)
 Mr. Stickel.

Stickel bolts again – puffing, sweating, clutching a handful of papers as he disappears around a corner.

Halper stops – out of breath, furious – surrounded by scattered paperwork. A single sheet sticks to his pant leg.

He kicks it off.

HALPER (CONT'D)
 (under his breath)
 Prick.

EXT. RAY'S CABIN – LATER

Charlie's truck barrels in – skids to a stop.

He steps out – pockets heavy with damp bills, clothes streaked in mud. He looks at the cabin. Small. Dark. Quiet.

CHARLIE
 Ray... you won't believe this.

No answer.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)
 Ray?

INT. RAY'S CABIN – CONTINUOUS

Dim room. Oxygen machine silent. Clock ticking in the corner.

Charlie steps in – eyes adjusting. Ray sits propped in bed. Still. Head turned slightly toward the floor.

CHARLIE

Ray?

Charlie stops mid-step – staring at Ray's lifeless body.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

Oh, Ray...

He lets out a deep breath, sits on the edge of the bed.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

C'mon, old man, today of all days?

He reaches out – touches Ray's cold, stiff arm.

Charlie's breath slips. Not a gasp – just that tiny exhale people make when something breaks inside.

He pulls a damp bill from his pocket. Holds it up, trying to keep his voice steady.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

Look at this.

(beat)

You were right.

He places the bill into Ray's hand.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

It was out there.

He exhales – rough, uneven.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

Just like you said.

He pulls the blanket up to Ray's shoulder. Smooths it once.

Then he just sits there, on the edge of the bed, pockets overflowing with bills. The wall clock ticking away.

EXT. FARM – LATER

Charlie's truck stops short of the gate.

He looks out at what's left of his farm – flooded rows, his barn charred and skeletal, the tractor half-buried in mud.

Charlie takes a breath. Long. Slow.

His eyes drift toward auction notice on the seat beside him.
Then he pulls out his big cell phone. Dials.

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. JIMMY'S LIVING ROOM - SAME TIME

Jimmy sits in a recliner. His cell phone ringing. TV muted with one thumb. He leans forward and answers.

JIMMY
What's goin' on?

CHARLIE
You still got that lawyer friend
you work with, the numbers guy?

JIMMY
Thought you were done with that.

CHARLIE
Thing's have changed.

JIMMY
What do you need him to do?

CHARLIE
Talk to the bank. Slow things down.

JIMMY
They'll want proof of funds.

CHARLIE
I know.

JIMMY
And?

A small pause - Charlie measuring how much to say.

CHARLIE
I got somethin'.

JIMMY
What kind of somethin'?

CHARLIE
Not over the phone.

Jimmy sits upright.

JIMMY

Charlie...

(beat)

This doesn't sound so good.

CHARLIE

Let's just say I need him open-minded about where it came from.

JIMMY

Christ.

(beat)

You do something crazy?

Charlie doesn't answer.

JIMMY (CONT'D)

You're not tellin' me, are ya?

CHARLIE

Not tonight.

JIMMY

Shit. Okay.

(beat)

How fast can you get it here?

CHARLIE

Couple hours.

JIMMY

You're drivin' to the city now?

CHARLIE

Auction's at nine tomorrow.

Jimmy rubs his face.

JIMMY

Alright. I'll call him.

(beat)

Charlie... is this gonna come back on me?

CHARLIE

I don't know, but I'll do everything I can not to let it.

Jimmy nods - uneasy.

JIMMY

Get movin' then.

Charlie ends the call. Sits there a moment with the phone in his hand. Then backs the truck away and drives off.

INT. MARCO'S TRAILER - NIGHT

Rain ticks against the tin roof - steady, mechanical.

A weak lamp pools over a cluttered table: empty beer cans, tools, a half-eaten sandwich.

Marco sits hunched, a voice recorder in hand. He hits play.

CAMERON (V.O.)
I never asked you to kill anyone.
Burn the house, not the barn. The
barn was your own little accident.

Marco stares at the recorder - jaw tight, breath slow.

He opens a drawer. Pulls out a crumpled envelope. Smooths it flat. Finds a pen. Starts writing.

MARCO (V.O.)
Charlie, I did wrong by you and
your family. Sheriff said it was
small things. Flood the field,
break the equipment. He swore no
one would get hurt. I believed him.

He hesitates... pen hovering.

MARCO (V.O.)
I swear I never meant for it to go
this far.

He folds the letter. Slides it into the envelope. Presses the flap closed with his thumb - slow, deliberate.

His phone buzzes with a new message: Cameron.

He ignores the message and turns his phone off.

INT. FARMHOUSE - SAME TIME

Rain taps the windows. Judy throws clothes into a suitcase, moving fast, not looking at anything too long.

Tara stands in the doorway, backpack clutched tight.

TARA
Does Dad know?

JUDY
We'll call him when we get to my
sister's.

TARA
Call him now.

JUDY
When we get to the city.

TARA
But you told him, right?

Judy doesn't answer – just keeps packing. Tara watches, eyes
wet but stubborn.

JUDY
We're not waiting, Tara.
(beat)
I'm not spending another night
here.

TARA
It's our home.

JUDY
Tomorrow it'll belong to the bank.
No reason to wait around for that.

She zips the suitcase. Grabs her coat.

A beat – her hand trembles once on the zipper.

Then she hardens, shoulders set.

Tara doesn't move. The house creaks in the rain.

EXT. FARM – CONTINUOUS

Thin rain falls. The barn's skeleton looms in the distance.
Judy hauls the suitcase to the car, slings it into the back.

JUDY
In.

Tara hesitates... looks at back at the farmhouse, the drowned
field, the half-buried tractor.

JUDY (CONT'D)
Now.

Tara climbs in slow. Reluctant.

Across the yard, Marco stands by his trailer window – cigarette ember pulsing. Watching them, face unreadable.

INT. CAR – CONTINUOUS

The wipers squeak. Tires churn through mud. Tara stares out – the farm shrinking in the mirror.

TARA
We can't leave him.

JUDY
He'll be fine.

TARA
No he won't. Not without us.

JUDY
He brought this on himself.

TARA
He's still fighting.

JUDY
For what? A graveyard with a mortgage?

Tara turns, eyes wet.

TARA
Dad said the land's part of us.

JUDY
Then it's the cursed part.

A beat. Rain starts coming down harder. They roll up to a lonely crossroads. The car idles.

TARA
This isn't fair, Mom.

JUDY
Fair? He's too stubborn to let go.
Always has been.

TARA
Like you?

Judy stiffens. No comeback.

JUDY
You don't understand. This place'll eat him alive.

Tara glares at her.

TARA
Then let it eat me, too.

She yanks the door open – bolts into the rain.

JUDY
Tara! Get back here!

Judy slams the car in park, scrambles out after her.

EXT. ROAD – CONTINUOUS

Rain thrashes. Pavement glistens like oil.

JUDY
Tara, come back!

Tara darts into the tree line – swallowed by the dark.

Judy stands soaked, shaking – breath showing in the cold. The car idles, headlights cutting through sheets of rain.

She listens... wind... rain... the long groan of the trees.

A beat.

Then – a faint crack of a branch deeper in the woods.

JUDY (CONT'D)
(shouting)
Tara!

EXT. FARM – NIGHT

Rain coming down hard. The farmhouse sits dark except for a weak, flickering porch light. Marco approaches through the downpour – soaked, clutching an envelope tight to his chest.

He stops at the door.... checks the windows.

Then slips inside.

INT. FARMHOUSE – CONTINUOUS

Dark kitchen. Rain hitting the glass. Marco sets the envelope and recorder on the table – covers it with a dishrag.

A low rumble outside. Tires on wet gravel. Headlights sweep across the window – bright enough to bleach the room white.

Marco freezes. Turns. Through the glass... The sheriff's cruiser rolls into view, crawling up the drive.

Cameron steps out, hat low, rain bouncing off his coat.

Marco's breath tightens. He backs away from the table – grabs Charlie's rifle from the rack and walks out the back door.

EXT. WOODS – SAME TIME

Rain hammers the trees, a steady roar in the dark. Wind shoves the branches sideways, making the woods sway.

Tara bursts through the brush – soaked, hair plastered to her face. She keeps running, feet slipping in the mud.

A distant rumble of thunder.

Another follows – closer, louder – enough to rattle the sky. She hits the old service road, nearly falls, catches herself.

Headlights sweep the road behind her, quick flashes cutting through the trees and rain.

She ducks away from the shoulder, crouches low, watching as a car barrels past – tires hissing over the flooded asphalt.

She waits until it's gone, then crosses the road and pushes forward.

The farmhouse reveals itself in pieces – a flicker of porch light through the branches, the roofline lost in the storm.

She runs toward the house.

EXT. ROAD – SAME TIME

Rain slams the windshield. Wipers drag, struggling to keep up. Judy grips the wheel, knuckles white. The road ahead barely exists – just a thin ribbon of headlights and water.

JUDY

(shouting out the window)

Tara!

Wind swallows her voice. She checks the phone on the passenger seat – screen wet, no signal bars, no messages.

A gust pushes the car sideways.

She steadies it, breath sharp.

JUDY (CONT'D)
Come on, baby... where are you?

She picks up the phone, thumb hovering over CHARLIE in her contacts. She trembles... then drops the phone on the seat.

JUDY (CONT'D)
No. Not yet.

Thunder cracks nearby – close, violent. Trees lash the roadside. Branches scatter across the asphalt.

Judy leans over the wheel, scanning the darkness, eyes wide, soaked hair clinging to her face.

JUDY (CONT'D)
Tara!
(voice breaking)
Where are you?

The storm grows – harder rain, louder wind, the road fading into a blur. She slows, searching the ditches, the tree line.

Lightning flashes – a strobe of empty road.

Judy presses her foot down again, engine groaning as she pushes deeper into the storm.

EXT. FARM – SAME TIME

Rain hits hard. Cameron steps out of the cruiser, flashlight cutting through the storm. He scans the yard.

CAMERON
Marco?

No answer. Just rain on metal. Thunder.

Cameron moves toward the house – his flashlight sliding across the porch, the open door, the dark kitchen inside.

No cars out front. No voices. No movement.

The farmhouse looks empty. Completely empty.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
Figures.

A faint sound behind him – boots crunching on wet gravel.

Cameron turns.

Lightning flashes – revealing one clean silhouette. Marco at the edge of the shadows, rifle raised, hands shaking.

MARCO
Go home, Sheriff.

Cameron's flashlight dips a touch.

CAMERON
Marco?
(beat)
What d'you think you're doing?

MARCO
I knew you wouldn't let it go.

CAMERON
House oughta be up in flames by now.

MARCO
Not happening.

Marco steadies the rifle at Cameron's chest – still shaking.

CAMERON
That's how you wanna play this?

MARCO
I'm coming clean.
(beat)
Troopers will hear everything.

Cameron's smile fades – slow, measured. Lightning flashes.

CAMERON
Okay. Sure. If that's what you want. But... is it?

Marco doesn't answer. The rifle wobbles in his grip. Cameron flicks a glance toward the road – quick, probing.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
Is that Charlie with you?

Marco's eyes dart behind him – instinct, nothing there.

Cameron moves on that beat – fast, gun coming up.

The shot cracks – swallowed by thunder.

Marco staggers back, hand to his side, blood pushing through his shirt. He drops to a knee, tries to steady the rifle.

He fires – wide.

The round smashes the cruiser's tire, rubber exploding.

Cameron flinches – looks at his shredded wheel.

CAMERON (CONT'D)

Asshole.

Marco crawls for cover – the rain barrel, the porch beam, anything. Cameron ducks behind the cruiser's hood and fires again – sparks off metal, mud kicking up near Marco's boots.

Marco grips the rifle with both hands, shaking, breath short.

Another round punches the dirt inches from him.

He fires back – blind, desperate.

Lightning flares – both men caught in the white for a split second, guns drawn, rain pouring between them.

Dark again. The fight continues in flashes.

Marco drags himself behind the rain barrel, slipping in the mud. He tries to chamber another round – the bolt sticks.

He slams it with his palm, breathing hard.

Cameron moves along the cruiser's side, gun tight to his chest. Rain runs off the brim of his hat in a steady pour.

Marco fires –

The shot snaps wide, ricochets off the tractor frame.

Cameron fires twice – one round punches through the porch post inches from Marco's head, splinters spraying.

Marco rolls in the mud, rifle nearly slipping from his hands. He gets behind a stack of firewood – barely cover.

A misfire clicks in his rifle. He curses under his breath, ejects the round with shaking fingers.

Cameron advances – boots sinking in the mud.

Marco fires again –

The barrel jumps, recoil throwing him off-balance.

The bullet rips through the cruiser's door, glass shattering.

Cameron ducks, reloads with quick, practiced movements.

Marco crawls for better footing – mud up to his elbows. He fires – muzzle flash white, round burying into the mud.

Another flash of lightning – both men exposed, drenched, panting, guns raised.

Then darkness again – just rain and gunfire.

EXT. WOODS – CONTINUOUS

Rain pours through the canopy. Tara pushes through branches, soaked, slipping on roots. The farm house getting closer.

A gunshot cracks in the distance – then another.

She stops – breath ragged, listening.

TARA

Dad?

More gunshots. Muffled by the storm.

Tara runs – faster now – branches whipping her arms. She breaks out of the trees onto the edge of the flooded field. Mud sucks at her shoes, she nearly loses one, keeps moving.

Lightning flashes – the whole farm lit for a split second.

Tara sees shapes in the storm. The barn ribs. The house. Marco's trailer. Another flash – brighter.

Behind the trailer – a burst of muzzle fire.

Just a flicker, then dark again.

Tara bolts toward it, rain hammering down, feet sloshing through waterlogged furrows.

EXT. TRAILER – CONTINUOUS

Rain slams the siding. Marco crawls behind the trailer, soaked, blood pouring through his shirt. He digs the rifle stock into the mud, trying to steady himself.

A flashlight beam cuts across the field.

CAMERON (O.S.)

Your bleeding, son.

Marco clutches the wound, tries to put pressure on it.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
Gonna need medical attention.
(beat)
I can help with that.

Marco limps through the darkness.

CAMERON (O.S.) (CONT'D)
No one's gonna take your word over
mine.

His beam sweeps the darkness – catches a smear of blood on
the trailer's siding.

He moves toward it, slow and steady.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
This ain't worth dyin' over.

Marco hides behind the trailer, rifle held close.

Cameron rounds the corner. Lightning flashes – both men
visible for a split second.

Marco tries to lift the rifle fully – the barrel trembles. He
gets it half up. A beat. Both soaked. Both shaking.

MARCO
Stay back.

CAMERON
Put it down.

Marco sways – vision narrowing. He props himself against the
trailer wall, trying to stay upright.

Cameron lowers his gun – slow.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
You're gonna pass out in a minute.
Let me get you help.

Marco hesitates – his body folding under him. Another flash
of lightning. Cameron steps closer – too close.

Marco blinks rain from his eyes.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
C'mon.

Marco lowers the rifle an inch – not trust, just exhaustion.

Cameron's hand snaps up – flashlight blasting white into
Marco's face. Marco flinches – blind.

The gunshot hits instantly. Marco collapses into the mud, legs giving out. The rifle falls from his hands.

Cameron stands over him, breathing hard.

He checks Marco's pulse — nothing.

He picks up Marco's rifle, sees Charlie's initials — "C.T." scratched into the stock.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
Well, look at that.

He lines the rifle up with Marco's wounds, matching the angle.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
Looks like you and Charlie had
yourselves a disagreement.

A shape bursts from the tree line —

Tara — in the field, sliding in mud, eyes locked on Cameron as he fires a shot into Marco's body with Charlie's rifle.

Tara SCREAMS.

Cameron's flashlight snaps toward the sound.

He sees her silhouette.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
Who's there?

His beam lands on her — soaked, frozen, eyes wide.

He swings the rifle toward her.

Tara bolts back into the trees — splashing, slipping, gone in a flash of darkness.

EXT. WOODS — CONTINUOUS

Rain pours through the canopy, trees shaking in the wind.

Tara sprints through the dark — branches clawing at her jacket, whipping her face. She trips, catches herself, keeps going. Behind her — heavy boots crashing through brush.

CAMERON (O.S.)
Stop!

She pushes harder — breath ragged, slipping in the mud.

A flashlight beam cuts between the trees – hunting her.

Tara dives behind a fallen log, splashing into cold mud. She presses herself low, hand clamped over her mouth.

Cameron's beam sweeps past – close enough to light the bark inches from her face. He slows. Breathing heavy. Gun out.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
Come on... I'm not gonna hurt you.

He steps over branches, scanning the trunks one by one.

The beam drags across the undergrowth – back and forth – jittery from his hand shaking in the rain.

Tara keeps still. Body trembling.

Cameron stops. Listens. Wind. Rain. Nothing else.

He takes a step toward her log – then another. His boot lands inches from her outstretched fingers.

He freezes – lifts the flashlight – sweeps the beam across a different section of trees. A gust of wind pushes the branches sideways.

He hesitates – senses nothing – then turns toward the road.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
(to himself)
Damn kid.

He moves off, pushing back through the brush, light fading between the trees. Tara stays down, barely breathing, mud up to her elbows. She waits – a long, painful beat – until the last sliver of his flashlight disappears.

Only then does she let herself inhale – quick, shaky – eyes wide in the dark.

EXT. COUNTY ROAD – NIGHT

Rain comes down steady, bouncing off the asphalt. Judy's car crawls along the shoulder, high beams on.

The window's cracked an inch – wind forcing rain inside.

She grabs her phone – one bar of service.

She dials with a shaking hand.

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. CHARLIE'S TRUCK - NIGHT

Charlie drives through heavy rain, wipers barely keeping up. His phone buzzes - Judy. He reaches for it.

It slips from his fingers, drops between the seats.

CHARLIE

Shit-

He digs for it, steering one-handed, eyes flicking between the road and the floorboard. The phone keeps ringing.

He digs his fingers between the seat... can't reach it.

BACK TO:

EXT. ROAD - SAME TIME

Judy holds the phone to her ear - listening to the endless ringing. Rain thrashers her window.

JUDY

Come on...

She lowers the phone - eyes scanning the dark ahead.

Something moves... a small figure bursts out of the tree line, straight into her headlights.

Judy gasps - slams the brakes. The car fishtails, slides sideways, stops crooked across the road.

She's out immediately -

JUDY (CONT'D)

Tara!

Tara stumbles toward her - soaked, shaking, barely upright.

Judy catches her, pulls her close.

JUDY (CONT'D)

Oh my God, baby, where were you?

Tara clings to her, breath stuttering.

TARA

He shot him.

Judy's body goes still.

JUDY

...What?

Tara looks up – terrified.

TARA

The sheriff.

(beat)

He shot Marco.

The storm fills the silence.

Judy turns toward the direction of the farm – nothing but darkness and rain.

Judy's voice drops – steady, firm.

JUDY

Get in the car.

Tara doesn't move – eyes fixed on the trees behind her.

TARA

He saw me.

That hits Judy – hard.

Her breath breaks once, quick.

Then she grabs Tara's wrist – tight.

JUDY

Inside. Now.

They scramble into the car – doors slamming.

Headlights flare across the road as Judy twists the key, engine coughing to life.

She snatches her phone and dials...

EXT. CHARLIE'S FARM - LATER

Rain falls. Charlie's truck crawls up the drive, headlights washing across the field. He kills the engine. Steps out. Cameron's busted up cruiser sits in front of the house.

CHARLIE

Hello?

He moves closer – mud sucking at his boots. Near the trailer – a shape in the dirt. Marco. Face down. Soaked. Still.

He turns him over. Eyes glassy. Soaked in blood.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)
Jesus...

Then he sees his rifle a few feet away.

He reaches for it – the second his fingers touch the gun –
A flashlight blasts him in the face.

CAMERON (O.S.)
I wouldn't pick that up.

Charlie squints into the beam.

Cameron steps out of the rain – calm, soaked, hat dripping.

Charlie moves away from the rifle.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
Sad, isn't it? All that fight gone
to mud.

CHARLIE
What the hell happened?

Cameron picks up the rifle.

CAMERON
You tell me. A boss and his
employee get into it, things go
sideways... pressure at home...
bank breathing down your neck.
(small shrug)
A man snaps.

He tilts the rifle like it's nothing.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
Must've lost your temper and shot
him. Then turned it on yourself.

CHARLIE
The hell I did.

CAMERON
Suicide's a neat bow, Charlie.
People eat it up. Depression. Money
trouble. It's clean. Makes sense.

CHARLIE
You think anyone's buying that?

CAMERON
People buy whatever keeps their
world tidy.
(beat)
And you—

Glancing at the farm, the field, the wreckage —

CAMERON (CONT'D)
You never belonged here.

CHARLIE
No way you're getting away with
this.

CAMERON
This town's mine. Courthouse, bank,
every badge on that wall. You?
You're nothing but noise out here.

CHARLIE
And you're just a small town bully
with a stupid hat. Desperate.
Greedy for what other men have.

Something flickers behind Cameron's eyes.

CAMERON
You think this is just about your
land?

A beat. His voice drops.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
It's about watching a smug little
bastard like you bleed in the very
dirt he thought he owned.

He raises the rifle. Sights locked on Charlie.

He starts to squeeze —

A burst of light hits them. Headlights. Then... sirens. Red-
blue strobes cut through the rain.

Cameron turns — stunned.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
What the...?

CHARLIE
Ain't that a bitch.

Cameron's jaw locks. He wipes his prints off the rifle. Drops it in the mud as the STATE TROOPERS pull in.

Another set of headlights behind them – Judy's car.

The STATE TROOPERS' cruiser skids to a stop – doors slam, boots splash. Charlie half-raises his hands.

Two TROOPERS (30s) exit the cruiser guns raised.

TROOPER #1

Hands where we can see 'em!

Charlie blinks into the floodlights.

CHARLIE

Sheriff Cameron shot him.

Cameron steps forward – calm, badge catching the strobe.

CAMERON

Easy, fellas. It's handled. Scene's secure.

TROOPER #2

Sheriff? We got a call of shots fired.

CAMERON

That's right. Found Charlie here in the act. Poor bastard snapped.

CHARLIE

He's lying–

CAMERON

(soft, measured)

I wish I was. Marco came by the station yesterday. Said Charlie'd been makin' threats, carryin' that rifle around, drinkin'. Said he was scared for his life. My deputies can vouch for the visit.

The troopers trade uneasy looks.

CAMERON (CONT'D)

When I got here, Marco was down. Charlie still had the rifle. Fired at my cruiser, just look at it.

They glance at Cameron's cruiser – shredded rubber, shattered glass, riddled with bullets.

Charlie takes a step forward.

CHARLIE
You lying piece of—

The trooper snaps his gun toward Charlie —

TROOPER #1
Sir, step back.

CHARLIE
Listen to me, he's setting me up.

CAMERON
Don't make this worse, son.

Charlie lunges again — the other trooper catches his arm,
SLAMS him face first into the mud.

A voice cuts through the storm —

TARA (O.S.)
He didn't do it. The sheriff shot
Marco. I saw it.

Everyone turns.

Tara runs from Judy's car, soaked, shaking. Judy runs after
her, breathless. A trooper intercepts, grabbing Tara before
she reaches Charlie.

JUDY
Leave her.

Judy pulls Tara away from the trooper.

TARA
He shot him, then he saw me and—

Cameron's face stays composed as he cuts her off.

CAMERON
—Honey, I know this is hard. You've
been through allot tonight.
(turning to troopers)
She's been scared of him for weeks.
Whole family's been. Domestic
calls, my deputies can confirm.

JUDY
That's not true.

Cameron casually motions to the rifle's engraving.

CAMERON
His gun. He used it on Marco, then
tried to turn it on himself,
luckily I got here first.

The troopers hesitate...

TROOPER #1
(to Charlie)
Sir, you need to come with us.

CHARLIE
Didn't you hear what my daughter
said? She saw him do it.

CAMERON
Let's not traumatize the girl more
than she already is.

He gives Charlie a quick, private smirk as the trooper cuffs him. Only Charlie sees it.

Tara thrashes in Judy's arms, screaming.

TARA
Let him go—

The troopers pull Charlie toward the cruiser.

CAMERON
I'll file the report.

Judy looks down at Marco's body, then up at the house, the fields, the burnt barn... finally at Cameron.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
Don't you worry, ma'am. I'll be
here for you.

A menacing smirk, subtle, but enough to hint at a threat.
Judy tightens her hold on Tara, backing away.

Charlie meets her eyes through the cruiser window — rain
streaking the glass like bars.

INT. COUNTY JAIL - LATER

Fluorescent lights hum. Cold concrete walls. Charlie sits in
a windowless cell — muddy, exhausted, eyes raw.

A DEPUTY (20s) sits behind a desk reading a local newspaper.

Cameron enters, hat in hand. Calm. Confident.

He nods to the deputy -

CAMERON
I'll take it from here.

The deputy hesitates, then leaves. Door shuts. Silence thickens. Cameron sits, sets his hat down.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
Should've let it go. Sell the land,
pay your bills, walk away.

CHARLIE
You killed a man.
(beat)
And framed me. When this gets out-

Cameron laughs - soft, dismissive.

CAMERON
"When this gets out."
(beat)
That's cute.

CHARLIE
People aren't blind. There's
evidence.

CAMERON
You think anyone's looking for
evidence?

Charlie leans in, anger rising.

CHARLIE
I testify, you're done. You fooled
'em tonight, but the truth-

CAMERON
Truth.
(shakes his head)
You're a romantic, Charlie. That's
why this place ate you alive.

CHARLIE
There'll be a trial. And when that
day comes-

CAMERON
(chuckling)
There won't be a trial.

Charlie tenses...

CHARLIE
...What's that mean?

Cameron approaches the bars, his voice goes low, flat.

CAMERON
Means accidents happen. Cells are
lonely. Slippery floors, guilty
consciences... there some bad men
in here. Anything could happen.

Cameron leans, whispers....

CAMERON (CONT'D)
Maybe they'll say you couldn't live
with what you did. Your wife'll
cry. Your little girl too. But
they'll heal. Move on. I can always
stop by and check on them.

Charlie charges, bangs against the bars.

CHARLIE
You touch them-

Cameron doesn't flinch.

CAMERON
Won't have to. They'll come to me.
Paperwork. Auction. Someone's gotta
help 'em through it.

Charlie falters - one word lands hard...

CHARLIE
...Auction.

Cameron checks his watch.

CAMERON
Bank opens at nine.

He backs up, takes his hat.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
Get some rest. I'll stop by after.

He smiles, turns. Charlie pounds the bars.

CHARLIE
You think you scare me?

Cameron pauses in the doorway. Doesn't turn.

CAMERON

When I want you scared you'll know.

He leaves.

Charlie sinks onto the bench – breath tight, hands trembling.

INT. FARMHOUSE – NIGHT

Rain still falls – soft, tired now. The front door creaks open. Judy and Tara step inside – soaked, hollow-eyed.

Tara lingers in the doorway, arms crossed tight. Judy moves like she's sleepwalking, taking in the empty room.

TARA

Mom... what do we do?

Judy doesn't answer. She drops her coat on a chair – it slips off, lands in a wet heap. Judy sinks to her knees beside it.

She breaks. Quiet, raw sobs into her hands.

Tara kneels beside her, trembling.

TARA (CONT'D)

They'll let him go.

(beat)

They have to.

Judy lifts her head – eyes red, unfocused – she looks toward the kitchen. A faint red light blinking.

Something sits half-covered by a dish towel. She rises, moves toward it. Lifts the towel. A recorder. Light flashing.

Beside it – a folded envelope, edges damp.

She presses play.

MARCO (V.O.)

Charlie... I did wrong by you and your family. Sheriff said it was small things. I believed him. I never meant for it to go this far.

Judy's hand covers her mouth. Tara inches closer, listening.

MARCO (V.O.)

If you're hearing this... it means I finally tried to fix what I broke. Probably failed. I'm sorry.

Static.

Then a clip from Marco's convo with Cameron plays -

MARCO (V.O.)

You told me to break equipment.
Flood a field. That's what you
said. That's what I did. Now you're
talking arson. I'm not doing that.

CAMERON (V.O.)

You already did. If you'd followed
instructions, it'd be wrapped. But
no...

(beat)

You had to freestyle the finale.

She pauses the recorder. Silence. Tara looks at her.

TARA

Mom... what is it?

Judy unfolds the letter - hands shaking as she reads.

JUDY

It's Marco's confession.

Barely a whisper - part disbelief, part prayer.

JUDY (CONT'D)

Proof your dad didn't do it.

(beat)

He didn't do any of it.

INT. COUNTY COURTHOUSE - MORNING

Bland room. Plastic chairs. Fluorescents buzz like hornets. A
taped banner reads: COUNTY LAND AUCTION.

Clerks shuffle folders. LOCAL REPORTERS lean on the walls.

Cameron and Stickel sit near the front - calm smiles.

The AUCTION CHAIRMAN (50s) taps the mic.

CHAIRMAN

Next order of business...
foreclosure and auction of Parcel
117-B - Tucker Farm.

(beat)

Mr. Charlie Tucker has been
notified and given final
opportunity to settle-

He glances at the empty chair where Charlie should be.

CHAIRMAN (CONT'D)
Is Mr. Tucker present?

Cameron rises, smooth.

CAMERON
He won't be attending. He's
currently in custody on homicide
charges.

Whispers ripple. Stickel stands, business-like.

STICKEL
No reason to delay, then. The
bank's claim is valid.

CHAIRMAN
Noted.

He flips the page.

CHAIRMAN (CONT'D)
For the record, this parcel's
transfer will fall under the juris-

STICKEL
-Stickel Development Group.
(beat)
We've already begun the planning
phase.

Cameron checks his watch, smirking.

CHAIRMAN
If everyone agrees-

The doors swing open. The room falls silent.

In walks Halper - rumpled suit, immaculate posture. Two
assistants wheel in massive cartons of files behind him.

He adjusts his glasses.

HALPER
Apologies for the interruption.
Office of State Audit & Finance.
Here on the Tucker matter.

Stickel's smile falters.

STICKEL
What matter?

HALPER
Recent discrepancies in county
disbursements. Until verified, all
asset transfers tied to that
property must be paused.

He pats the nearest box - shoots Stickel a look.

HALPER (CONT'D)
Lots of numbers to run through. Big
ones.

STICKEL
We're talking delinquent loans, not
creative bookkeeping.

A small chuckle from the back.

CHAIRMAN
Mr. Halper, unless you have an
injunction-

HALPER
Not yet. But I have something with
a bit more weight... suspicion of
fraud.

Stickel goes pale.

STICKEL
This is a waste of time.

HALPER
Fraud usually is... for the idiots
committing it.

Chuckles from the crowd.

Stickel locks eyes with the Chairman. The Chairman shuffles
nervously, then faces Halper...

CHAIRMAN
Perhaps that matter is best left
for another-

The double doors SLAM open again.

Jimmy bursts in - soaked, panting - trailed by a LAWYER (50s)
clutching a heavy canvas satchel.

JIMMY
Hold up. Hold the auction.

Everyone turns.

CAMERON

What now?

JIMMY

Funds for settlement of the Tucker farm. Full amount. Verified by counsel.

CAMERON

Bullshit.

Jimmy drops the satchel on the table. The lawyer opens it – stacks of old, weathered bills.

STICKEL

What is this, a ransom?

LAWYER

Legal tender. Every bill accounted for.

CHAIRMAN

This money's... vintage.

LAWYER

Still green. Still valid.

CHAIRMAN

And... who are you?

JIMMY

Charlie's associate.

Stickel's eye twitches.

CAMERON

Chairman, no way this is legal.

The Chairman rubs his hand down his face, looks bewildered.

CHAIRMAN

It's definitely not protocol.

(to Jimmy)

I'm sorry, but-

Another SLAM of doors.

Judy and Tara rush in – soaked, clutching a folder and a recorder. Cameron stiffens.

JUDY

We have proof.

STICKEL
What the hell is going on?

TARA
(point to Cameron)
He killed Marco. Framed my dad.

Dead silence. All eyes on Cameron. Before he can respond Judy sets the recorder on the table, presses PLAY.

MARCO (V.O.)
Sheriff said it was small things.
Break a line, burn a field. Didn't
know he'd go this far. If I die,
it's him. Sheriff Cameron.

The room freezes. Halper turns slowly to Cameron.

HALPER
Well... that changes the math.

CAMERON
This is fabricated. A doctored
tape—

JUDY
It's backed by a signed confession.

She slides the letter to the Chairman.

Halper intercepts it and reads.

HALPER
Nice penmanship. Should be easy to
verify.

Stickel panics.

STICKEL
This is hearsay, it proves nothing.
(beat)
Whatever trouble the Sheriff's got
himself in's got nothin' to do with
me... or this auction. I didn't—

CAMERON
(over him, exploding)
Oh shut up. You funded it, the
rezoning, the payoffs—

STICKEL
You son of a—

He freezes — all eyes on him.

A group of COURT OFFICERS (30s) slowly approach...

Stickel panics – runs for the exit.

Halper sticks his foot out – Stickel hits the floor.

The crowd bursts into gasps and laughter.

Two court officers move in.

Cameron tries to bolt – they pin him down and cuff him.

CAMERON

You think this ends with me? It was
all Stickel's plan. He's the one
you're after. Not me.

They drag him off.

Stickel gets hauled up next – still shouting legal jargon.

STICKEL

You can't do this. I have my
rights. This is not legal.

Halper straightens his tie. Glances at Judy, Tara, Jimmy.

HALPER

Well. Looks like this auction's
canceled. Is that right, Chairman?

He locks eyes with the frozen Chairman.

CHAIRMAN

Uh... yes, auction is canceled
pending fraud review and proof of
funds.

Judy exhales. Tara squeezes her hand. Jimmy leans against the
wall, catching his breath.

EXT. FARM – DAY

Mist lifts off the fields. The soil still dark with water,
but the sky is clear for the first time in days.

Charlie steps out of a county cruiser –

From the porch, Judy and Tara watch, wrapped in blankets.

He walks toward her – slow, careful. She runs out to meet him
in the yard, throws her arms around him.

JUDY
You look terrible.

She smiles through tears.

CHARLIE
You still got that smile.

She laughs – quiet, shaky. They hold each other. Tara wedges herself between them. For a moment, their world stops.

Jimmy's car pulls up the drive.

He hops out with a grin and three coffees.

JIMMY
Well, hell. Thought I'd find you
halfway to Mexico.

CHARLIE
Ran outta gas.

Jimmy hands Charlie and Judy a cup of coffee –

JIMMY
Bank signed off.

He pulls a folded document from his jacket, hands it over.

JIMMY (CONT'D)
Farm's safe. You're officially too
stubborn to foreclose on.

CHARLIE
That so?

JIMMY
For now. But try not to burn
anything for at least a week.

Charlie glances toward the charred barn – smiles thinly.

CHARLIE
Got a feeling all that's behind us.

Jimmy surveys the property – the wreckage.

JIMMY
She needs work. But I got a few
guys that owe me favors. We'll get
this place up and running.

CHARLIE
We?

Jimmy grins.

JIMMY

Thought maybe you could use some friendly faces around here.

JUDY

That'd mean a lot, Jimmy.

JIMMY

Least I can do. Besides, I like seeing the little guy win one.

CHARLIE

Little guy?

JIMMY

You ever gonna tell me where that money came from?

CHARLIE

Long story.

JIMMY

Try me.

CHARLIE

Let's just say it started round sixty years ago, with some mafioso's and a bartender who saw something he shouldn't've.

Jimmy squints.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

Ever hear of a man called Dutch?

JIMMY

You serious?

CHARLIE

Deadly.

They laugh. Tara runs circles around them through the wet grass, giant smile on her face.

Judy leans against Charlie.

Jimmy looks at them, grins, raises his coffee.

JIMMY

To new seasons.

Charlie looks out at the land – battered, stubborn, but his.

CHARLIE
To second chances.

JUDY
Second? Gotta be at least our
fourth.

They share a look, a smile, warmth between them.

FADE TO BLACK.

THE END