

REINDEER GAMES

by Ehren Kruger

FADE IN:

A FIGURE IN A SANTA CLAUS SUIT

lies face-down in a nighttime expanse of snow. One of the body's red-sleeved arms is twisted at a sickening angle. The white snow beneath the figure is spreading with red.

REVEAL EXT. SNOWY ROAD - NIGHT

The figure in the suit lies motionless. Snowflakes drift.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Dark, rustic wood, an office with broken windows and whistling winter beyond. A second BODY in a Santa Claus suit lies dead in the doorway.

It's a man with a large build. The suit is riddled with holes. His face is missing.

EXT. PARKING LOT - NIGHT

More snow falling. A handful of cars in the lot. A third BODY in the same red-and-white outfit lies atop the hood of an old Pontiac. His head is not visible, having smashed through the windshield. His suit is charred and blackened.

A halo of broken glass outlines him. His black boots hang off the front bumper. The parking lot is silent.

INT. ROOM - NIGHT

A floor scattered with shiny silver quarters. Reflections of neon. There's a fourth SANTA here, face-down in a red pool. The suit is far too big for him. Not that it matters now.

EXT. SNOW-FILLED RAVINE - NIGHT

Where the fifth and final Santa lies at the edge of a ravine, which plummets a hundred feet down. The man rests precariously atop the slope, upside-down, eyes closed.

His burned suit is smoldering. He has a sly but tired face, late-20's, sandy hair, cold and scarred. This is RUDY DUNCAN.

He opens his eyes.

RUDY (v.o.)

I never was much for the holidays.

CUT TO BLACK.

THE SOUND OF A WINTER WIND

2.

rises, as a TITLE appears: "SEVEN DAYS BEFORE..."

And then, to complete the sentence: "...XMAS."

FADE IN:

EXT. IRON MOUNTAIN STATE PRISON - DAY

Snow drifts down onto the stone walls and wire fences of the Iron Mountain, Michigan S.I.C. Winter's been here awhile.

INT. PRISON CELL - DAY

Rudy Duncan lies in his top bunk, staring at his ceiling -- where a handful of paper-cut snowflakes have been pasted.

The sounds of YELLING INMATES and GATES slamming shut echo through the fortress. Rudy watches a spider scurry across the paper snow. It's his excitement for the day.

He turns to the wall, where there's a photo of his teenage self with some co-workers at an auto body shop. And a family photo, cheery Midwesterners, with Rudy a scowling Artful Dodger.

A WALL CALENDAR

Shows the dates have been crossed off up to December 18th. December 22nd is circled again and again.

Rudy muses at the calendar, then hops out of his bunk. Drops to the floor, crosses to a desk, finds a chewed-on pen. Turning back to the beds we reveal--

THE LOWER BUNK

where Rudy's cellmate, NICK MASON (32), rugged, mustached and well-built, sleeps soundly. In contrast, his bed-wall is a COLLAGE OF PHOTOGRAPHS, twenty, maybe thirty of them. Almost a mural.

All of them photos of A BEAUTIFUL YOUNG GIRL, mid-twenties, smiling out from beaches, parties and snowy scenes. Gorgeous brown hair, heartbreaking smile. Effortlessly sexy.

RUDY

stares at the pictures for a moment, wistful. Nick snores, turns over. Rudy climbs atop his bunk again, with the pen this time. And crosses December 18th off the calendar.

CUT TO:

The two of them, Nick and Rudy, shivering by the fence. Nick absently whistles some "Silver Bells," then digs for a smoke.

NICK

What's the first thing, man? What's the first thing you're gonna do?

RUDY

Haven't thought about it.

NICK

Hell you haven't.

RUDY

Get to thinking about it, it won't happen.

NICK

We walk outta here, we hit that road, what's the first thing you're gonna do.

RUDY

Ain't there yet.

NICK

Three days, man.

RUDY

Not yet.

NICK

Fuckin' Christmas, man. Fuckin' Christmas on the outs.

Dozens of uniformed INMATES wander the yard, stamping feet, hands tucked away, breath frosting. Nick tries to light his cig, but the wind plays havoc. Nick curses, tosses it.

RUDY

Hot chocolate.

NICK

What?

RUDY

Get a hot mug of chocolate.

(nods)

First thing I'm gonna do.

NICK

(smiles)

And a slice of pecan pie, right?

RUDY

And some pecan pie.

Nick laughs, stares through the fence at the gates of the prison's entrance road. Longingly.

4.

NICK

She's gonna be out there, man.
Right there. Right there waiting.

RUDY

Yeah.

NICK

Gonna walk out of this shitstorm
and right into her arms.

RUDY

Yeah.

NICK

Got us a motel out Highway 5,
bringing her own damn sheets, you
read that part? Silk damn sheets.
Lock ourselves in the whole week,
drinking wine, taking baths, man,
see if they got those room service
steaks...anything I want to do.
Remember when she wrote that?
Anything I want...

RUDY

Yeah. Fuckin' Christmas.

Nick grins. They stand there, shivering. It's freezing, but
the time they get outside is too precious to give up.

RUDY

All those pictures she's sent...
y'know...you sure they're all of
her, Nick? You hear sometimes they
don't send their real pictures.
Could be her cousin or something.

Nick studies him.

NICK

Why you gotta say a thing like that.

RUDY

I'm just saying.

NICK

Why you gotta. We were gonna give
you a ride someplace, man. Now I
just don't know.

RUDY

I'm just talking.

NICK
Fuck your hot chocolate, Rudy.

5.

They trail off in silence. Nick looks out at the prison road again. A snowy wasteland.

NICK
I'm gonna marry this girl.

INT. PRISON CELL - DAY

Rudy lies in his bunk, staring at the same paper snowflakes.

NICK (o.s.)
Hey, hey, listen here. "I've made my list and I've checked it twice, and as long as you're naughty, it's gonna be nice. These cold winter weeks have been killing me, Nick, as I lie here alone. It's not enough to have your warmth in my heart anymore; I need your warmth next to me. Work at Penney's has been busy because it's Christmas and that's when we do almost half of our business for the whole year--", okay, whatever, whatever--

(skipping on)

"--my manager's still mad at me for asking for the whole week off," whatever, whatever--

(smiles)

Here we go. "And all that gets me through the day is to close my eyes and imagine holding you, and kissing you, and touching you, and tasting you everywhere because I know at that moment, I'll feel I've found the reason for my whole entire life."

Rudy still stares at the stone ceiling.

RUDY
For twenty-five, she sounds pretty mature.

NICK
Yeah. You grow up in Detroit, you get matured real quick.

Nick's doing pushups on the floor below, smoking a cig, reading sheets of pink stationery. With a new photo: of the same GIRL, in a bikini by a lake. Vamping a childish pose.

6,

NICK

Sure as hell don't make me miss
Millie Bobek. Guess I owe Millie,
though. If I hadn't been rollin' her,
I woulda never ended up here. And
I woulda never met Ashley.

(studies photo)

That's the world for ya.

Nick climbs off the floor, paces back to the bunks, marvelling
at the latest letter.

RUDY

What if she sees you, man, sees what
you look like...and it's not there.
You just don't do it for her.

NICK

Me and her got a connection.

(hands page to him)

Read this part. Read the part
about stuffing her stocking.

Nick drops the page on his stomach. Rudy sighs, picks it up,
brings it to his nose.

RUDY

She's using a new perfume.

NICK

No, I think that's just oranges.
She writes here she's eating
oranges.

RUDY

Oh.

NICK

Shoulda written to that magazine,
Rudy. I'm gonna walk outta here,
walk right into a relationship.
Not some one-nighter, man...a
relationship. You? You're gonna
walk outta here with bus fare.
Searching for the drunkest skirt
in the room.

RUDY

Mornin', gorgeous. More egg nog?

NICK

Shoulda written, Rudy...

Nick drops back to his bunk, pasting the new lakeside photo
among his collage of pictures. Admiring his pen pal:

NICK

Shoulda got yourself a girl.

Above, Rudy peruses the page Nick gave him. Some lipstick marks pressed to the paper. He passes it back, closes his eyes.

7.

RUDY

All I want...is to make it to Sidnaw,
and sit down for Christmas dinner.
Watch some ball with my old man,
sleep in my old bed, and have
leftovers for 'bout six months.

NICK

Thought you hated Sidnaw.

RUDY

Just taste that Christmas turkey.

NICK

Thought you hate your old man.

RUDY

Five years, Nicky. Five years.
(shrugs)
I just want to go home.

There's the echo of CRASHING metal gates. Prisoners YELLING.
Nick smiles, still staring at his girl.

NICK

Well, man. Me and Ashley. We'll
be thinking about you.

INT. MAIN PRISON FLOOR - DAY

GUARDS monitor PRISONERS as they file out of their cells for the
afternoon meal. Rudy and Nick are motioned out by a MEAN GUARD,
his bitter world etched in his face. They join the line.

RUDY

Shit. Alamo's back.

Across Broadway, a parallel line is forming. A tall, tattooed
Native American, THE ALAMO, steps out of his cell. His hands
are the size of a man's skull.

NICK

Don't look like he missed the
sunlight.

RUDY

Pinscher told me Alamo thinks I'm
the one ratted on him beating up
Cree. Since I was there, I saw it,
he thinks I got him sent to solitary.

NICK

Aw, fuck, Rudy.

At that moment, Alamo glances over. Finds Rudy's eyes. Rudy swiftly looks away--

8.

RUDY

Count me outta mealtime--

He slaps Nick on the back, heads back for their cell--

MEAN GUARD

GET BACK IN LINE!

RUDY

I'm not hungry, I'm gonna--

MEAN GUARD

SHOULDA STAYED IN YOUR HOLE! GET
BACK IN FUCKING LINE!

The mean guard pulls his blackjack. Another guard's ready behind him. They want Rudy to give them trouble.

Rudy stops. Slides back into the line of prisoners. Looks across Broadway. The Alamo's walked on up ahead. Rudy swallows, heads toward the mess hall.

INT. MESS HALL - DAY

A GLOOPY SPOON of CHUNKY RED AND GREEN JELLO gets splooshed on Rudy's plate. Same with Nick. It's the cafeteria line.

NICK

What the fuck is this?

UGLY STAFFER

Holiday jello.

NICK

What's this shit in it?

UGLY STAFFER

Swallow and see.

The ugly staffer grins from under his plastic hairnet. Nick looks to Rudy, then turns back to the help:

NICK

Just so you know, this man and I are outta here in two days. So while we're inhaling London broil and lobster bisque, you're gonna still be standing here smelling up the mystery creamfuck.

(nods)

Who's in prison now?

The ugly staffer curls his lip. Nick smiles. Rudy moves on, taking his tray off the rail and turning--

--right into the chest of The Alamo. He looks up--

--into the most scarred and vengeful face a man could ever dread to see. The Alamo's a lifer. Many times over.

THE ALAMO

When you don't expect it.

RUDY

It wasn't me, Alamo--

THE ALAMO

That's when.

The Alamo strides into the cafeteria line. Rudy finally takes a breath, as if he's dodged death. Nick's at his shoulder. They share a grave and worried look. Trying to help:

NICK

Two days.

INT. MESS HALL - TABLES - DAY

Rudy and Nick sit at a cafeteria table. Beside Rudy is a frail, nervous, fiftyish inmate, ZOOK. Zook sits alone, talks to no one, always has the shakes.

NICK

So maybe after our week beneath the sheets, we'll head down to Motor City for New Year's. She says her roommate's skipping town for a few days, have the place to ourselves. Remember how her brother's a truck driver down there? I'm thinking he might be able to help get me some work.

RUDY

What, working security?

NICK

No, I'm through with that shit. Ashley's right. Gotta start doing something I got a stake in. Get a business going.

RUDY

I don't know, I've seen the business world.

NICK

Hotwiring cars, Rudy, does not qualify as a small business. Chop shop consultant; doesn't work on a resume.

Rudy shrugs. He checks across the room, on the whereabouts of The Alamo. The big Indian has his back turned.

10.

NICK
Ashley's talking about maybe we
can start something up together...

Next to Rudy, Zook has stopped eating. He is still as stone, staring at his tray.

NICK
Whatsa matter, Zook?

They both watch Zook put down his utensils and reach into his red-and-green jello with his bare hand.

RUDY
The hell you doing, Zookerman?

Gloppy gelatin drips from his hand, as the frail man lifts a large black cockroach out. Zook's shaking.

NICK
Just a roach, Zook.

RUDY
Good for you. Protein.

ZOOK
Monsters...in the gelatin...

NICK
It's a roach, guy--

ZOOK
There are monsters...
(voice rising)
...in the gelatin...

NICK
Oh, man--

Zook stands up, holding jello aloft:

ZOOK
THERE ARE MONSTERS IN THE GELATIN!

NICK
(shakes his head)
Fuckin' Zookerman--

ZOOK
THERE ARE MONSTERS! IN THE GELATIN!
THERE ARE MONSTERS! IN THE GELATIN!

A GRUMBLING MURMUR sweeps through the cafeteria, as inmates sift through their jello, searching for--

DISTANT INMATE
Sonofabitch!

11.

He pulls something bug-like out of his dessert, holds it aloft, and then HURLS it at the cafeteria line. A STAFFER ducks away. The inmates LAUGH and suddenly they're all on their feet--

ZOOK
THERE ARE MONSTERS! IN THE GELATIN!

--grabbing handfuls of jello and throwing it at the cafeteria line. Inmates get errantly SPLASHED, and respond by wheeling on their fellow inmates -- red and green globs flying to and fro!

GUARDS
SIT DOWN! SIT THE FUCK BACK DOWN!

As GUARDS immediately rush in to restore order--

NICK
Rudy, don't move--

RUDY
Two days, we got two days! Don't do nothing. Don't touch nothing--

An INMATE at the end of their table picks up their table and overturns it, sending food flying. Rudy and Nick stand back, hands raised in surrender. Jello HITS Rudy in the face.

NICK
Don't move, Rudy!

RUDY
Standing right here, man!

Zook is still SHOUTING until a GUARD clubs him senseless with a blackjack. WHISTLES are blowing. Guards SCREAM for order.

NICK
(as a GUARD eyes them)
Ate the jello, jello was fine!

The guard leaves them alone, runs on. The melee's still out of control. As Rudy turns--

--and suddenly sees The Alamo charging across the room, with murderous eyes, a metal shank in his hand! Five feet away!

NICK
RUDY, LOOK OUT!

Nick grabs him, trying to push him out of the way--

--and The Alamo's shank plunges deep into Nick's stomach, burying between his ribs. Blood splashes. Nick slumps.

RUDY

NICK!!!

12.

The Alamo pulls the blade out with a ferocious YELL, pushes Nick to the floor and spins on Rudy! Rudy blocks with a chair, stumbling back, cartwheeling over a table as The Alamo roars over him for the kill--

--and two GUARDS tackle the big Indian out of nowhere! Knocking the knife away, hammering him with blackjacks. It takes another three guards to keep The Alamo down.

Rudy scrambles across the floor. Nick's on his back, blood pumping freely from his gut--

RUDY

GUARD! GUARD!

NICK

(in shock)

Alamo...

RUDY

GUARD!!!

No one's helping, the guards nearby all subduing The Alamo. Nick grabs Rudy's shirt, gasping to speak--

NICK

Jesus, Rudy--

RUDY

Take it, man! You're all right!
Hold it in! GUARD!

NICK

Oh, fuck, Rudy...oh Jesus...

RUDY

GUARD!!!

NICK

Ash...Ashley...

RUDY

No, man! No, no, no!

NICK

(choking)

Tell her...I'll be there...

RUDY

You're GONNA be there! We're
getting outta here! TAKE IT!

NICK

Tell Ashley...I...

RUDY
YOU TELL HER!

NICK
...be with her...

Blood spills out Nick's mouth. His eyes go vacant.

RUDY
NO!!!

NICK
...for Christmas...

RUDY
NICK!!!

And Rudy's suddenly hauled backwards. A trio of GUARDS descend, grabbing Nick's body as his life fades away. Dragging his figure out of the melee. WHISTLES are blowing.

GUARDS
GET HIM OUT OF HERE! LOCK DOWN!

RUDY
NICK!!!

Rudy struggles, enraged, and gets blackjacked across the skull for his trouble. He hits the jello-covered floor.

And the world goes dark.

INT. PRISON CELL - NIGHT

Darkness and shadows. Rudy sits in a corner, holding his head. The cell block silent for the first time.

Bootsteps from down the row. A SHADOW falls across Rudy's somber figure. It's the Mean Guard. He stares at Rudy with distinct pleasure.

RUDY
The man had two days...

MEAN GUARD
Well. Least he won't be coming back.

The guard grins a gold tooth. Rudy looks at him--

--and then springs to his feet, charges the room, grabbing through the bars. The guard takes a calm step back. Keeps the cruel smile.

MEAN GUARD
You need company tonight, Rudy...
you just give a holler.

He puckers a kiss and walks on. Starts whistling "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" Several shadowed VOICES request that he shut the fuck up. The bootsteps and melody drift down the row.

14.

RUDY

turns back, starts toward his bunk. And stops. His eyes on Nick's empty bed. And the wall behind.

THE PICTURES OF ASHLEY

Smiling, laughing, playing kissy-face. Hearts drawn on the photos. All colors of stationery taped to the wall.

RUDY

takes a seat on Nick's bed. There's a shoebox at the foot of it. Rudy opens it. It's filled with Ashley's letters.

He trails a finger along them, must be over a hundred pages. He selects the one nearest the front. Surveys it.

NICK (v.o.)

Rudy, man, here we go, here,
what she wrote here: "The car's
waiting. The motel's waiting.
And I'm waiting. I've waited for
so long. I'm burning for you, Nick.
My whole body. My whole heart.
I'm burning for you..."

Rudy turns to the wall. To the lakeside picture of Ashley, a swimsuit siren. Rudy stares sadly.

RUDY

He was burning for you too...

And puts the letter away.

CLOSE ON RUDY'S CALENDAR - NIGHT

As his hand slashes through December 21st. Prison's over.

CUT TO:

EXT. IRON MOUNTAIN PRISON - DAY

Snow swirls. Near blizzard conditions. A heavy steel door BANGS open, held by an EXIT GUARD. And FIFTEEN CONVICTS, make that EX-CONVICTS, trudge onto a fenced drive, covered in snow.

EXIT GUARD

Your world and welcome to it,
dumbfucks! Don't be a stranger
now! We'll keep the lights on
for ya!

Rudy stumbles out with the group, shivering in a Goodwill hand-me-down coat. Thin canvas, wouldn't keep him warm in summer. Secondhand shoes. No possessions.

He clutches his sides with his hands, hunched over. All fifteen huddle and herd toward the gate at the end of the fenceway.

BEYOND THE GATE

There are a dozen FRIENDS and RELATIVES waiting. A few MEN, several WOMEN, a couple KIDS. Bundled in winter coats, hats and hoods. A prison shuttle bus is parked behind them.

The released cons reach the gate, where a GATE GUARD unlocks the fence to the outside world. Fifteen men are free.

The ex-cons and relatives scan each other's faces. Wives rush over to embrace their men. Pals nod to ex-cons and trade slaps on backs. Reunion time.

The snow batters them, wind whipping. Rudy keeps his head down, leaning forward, keeps walking. Toward the bus. But he can't help himself -- he glances up--

TO SEE A YOUNG WOMAN

bundled in a silver ski jacket, pink wool hat with a poof-ball on top, scarf and mittens. Scanning the released prisoners.

RUDY

drops his head, looks away. Climbs onto the shuttle bus.

INT. BUS - CONTINUOUS

Rudy shakes his arms, basking in the vehicle's warmth. Takes a seat at the back. A couple other lone ex-cons climb aboard. Then the cons with relatives start to pile in.

Rudy's window is steamed against the cold. He stares into his lap, then reaches for his coat pocket. Takes out the picture of Ashley, in her bikini by the lake. Stares at it.

He rubs his window with his sleeve.

Outside, the woman in the silver coat turns this way and that, troubled. She's watching the other ex-cons climbing onto the bus with their loved ones.

The woman looks back to the prison. The guard closing the gate. The steel door has been shut. No one else is coming.

Rudy watches her sadly.

Aboard the bus, the seats fill up. Ex-cons are feeling up their wives, kids are climbing on their absent daddies, buddies are jawing loudly 'bout how the neighborhood's changed.

The woman outside is now alone. Silver coat, pink poofball. 10.

Rudy looks at the bikini picture again.

Then at the shivering bundle.

RUDY

Don't do it, Rudy...

The bus ENGINE starts up. In the seat beside Rudy, an EX-CON makes out with his WIFE while his bratty KID punches his leg.

Out the window, the young woman is scanning the bus windows. Then the prison again. She turns in a worried circle. Rudy looks swiftly away. Closes his eyes.

RUDY

Don't do it...

The bus door closes. It REVS and starts forward. Rudy sighs with relief. The photo of Ashley falls to the floor.

EXT. PRISON RELEASE GATE - CONTINUOUS

The young woman watches the bus pull away, down the snowy road. But it doesn't get fifty feet before it suddenly stops.

The door opens. And Rudy steps out.

The bus REVS up again and GROANS OFF into the winter.

The young woman pushes her poofball hat out of her eyes. We get a look at her face for the first time. Skin pale, lips turning blue, but it's the girl from the pictures. It's Ashley.

She watches Rudy's figure trudge back toward her. Snow obscuring him until he's right in front of her. Both of them shivering. Both of them standing there.

And finally:

RUDY

You Ashley?

Ashley nods. And Rudy sadly smiles.

RUDY

I'm Nick.

CUT TO:

INT. TRUCK STOP - DAY

Rudy and Ashley sit at a coffee shop booth. Coats still on. Big rigs bluster by on the highway outside.

Two untouched cups of coffee sit before them.

She's watching him in silence.

17.

RUDY
I like your coat.

Ashley says nothing. Rudy looks at his own:

RUDY
This...this is just something they
gave me at the door. Wasn't snowing
when we signed up, y'know?

Ashley nods.

RUDY
How's your coffee?

Ashley looks at it, like she's just realizing it's there. She
lifts the cup, takes a sip. Puts it down.

ASHLEY
Good.

Rudy nods. Silence again.

RUDY
Gotta be ten degrees out there.

ASHLEY
Radio said negative five.

RUDY
Negative five?

ASHLEY
Yeah.

RUDY
I don't think it's negative five.

ASHLEY
Radio said.

Beat.

RUDY
Wind chill. That's probably
what they meant.

Ashley nods. Rudy bites his lip.

RUDY
I was scared. Scared you were
gonna take one look at me and
change your mind. Scared I was
walking into heartache. All those
words...

(MORE)

RUDY (cont'd)

18.

...you put a picture in your mind of where they come from and when you see where...maybe it's not the same as your picture.

He trails off.

ASHLEY

I figured you walked outta there and saw me and walked right the other way--

RUDY

No, no--

ASHLEY

Saw my outfit or something, my coat--

RUDY

No, hey, I like your coat--

ASHLEY

Saw me--

RUDY

Ashley, no. That was me, that's what I was scared of. I mean, be serious...I ain't exactly looking like Mr. Universe here.

ASHLEY

You are to me.

Rudy goes silent. Whoa. Ashley considers.

ASHLEY

Thought you wrote you had a mustache.

RUDY

I can get another one going. Y'know, hey, whatever you want me to--

ASHLEY

No, no, no. Be like you want to be.

Another awkward pause. Rudy picks up a milk dispenser beside the coffee, puts it to his lips. It gives him a wide white mustache. He stares straight-faced.

Ashley gives a bashful smile, covers it.

RUDY

Do that again.

ASHLEY

What.

RUDY

Smile.

19.

Ashley smiles again, blushing now.

ASHLEY

No--

RUDY

One more. Smile. One more.

ASHLEY.

(trying not to)

No, c'mon--

RUDY

I've been dreaming about that smile,
Ashley Mercer. For a long time.

They stare across the table, drifting into one another's eyes.

ASHLEY

You're better than the picture
in my mind, Nick...

(softly)

You're real.

Outside, another truck rumbles by, whipping up snow.

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. INTERSTATE MOTEL ROOM - DAY

And Rudy and Ashley SLAM inside, kissing passionately, limbs intertwined, pawing at each other's coats. Rudy kicks the door closed. Mouths devouring, hands lost in snowy hair.

They collide with a side table, knocking over a lamp, tumbling onto the lumpy bed. Rudy tears at her silver coat and sweater and turtleneck and capilene and whatever else's she got on, as Ashley's lips explore his neck and body. Writhing and wrestling and rolling off the bed. Bang.

INT. MOTEL ROOM - LATER

Rudy and Ashley fuck like lovers in R-rated movies.

INT. MOTEL ROOM - DAY - LATER

The bed sheets lie tangled on the floor. Rudy and Ashley rest naked amidst them. Her pretty young head on his chest, all their inhibitions gone. Rudy strokes her arms.

RUDY

Tell me something. This the first
time you've ever done this?

ASHLEY

Go to hell, Nick Mason, what's that supposed to mean--

RUDY

No, not that, no...

(laughs, kisses her)

...I mean this, the whole thing. Start writing to a guy, guy in the bricks. Get a boyfriend like this. Tell me the truth.

ASHLEY

Well. You're not the first guy I wrote to. But you're the only one I kept writing to.

RUDY

Yeah. Me too.

(considers)

Why? I mean I know why for me, why I paid for the ad. But you...why start writing to some guy -- some con -- you don't even know?

Ashley studies his face, smiles in reflection.

ASHLEY

I told you, Nick. Remember?

RUDY

Tell me again.

ASHLEY

All the guys I've ever been with... they never want to know me. Who I am on the inside. They just want to get inside. When they do, they think that means they know who I am. That I trust them. That they know me. That there's nothing left to learn.

(beat)

A guy like you, Nick -- six months before you can even touch my face. I figure a guy in that kind of bind, he's gonna hafta work to get to know me some other way.

RUDY

Had some bad relationships, didn't you.

ASHLEY

Not bad. Just regular.

(smiles)

You wrote me wonderful things, Nick. Personal things.

She turns to him, kisses his chest--

21.

RUDY

Well, wasn't all me, y'know.

ASHLEY

Yes it was all you--

RUDY

Guy I was in with...he helped sometimes...some of the romantic stuff, actually...you'd like him--

ASHLEY

I'm talking about the heart, Nick. I'm not talking about the words.

RUDY

Y'know, some of the heart mighta been his too...

ASHLEY

Then he shoulda signed his name.

She turns over playfully, eases herself back atop him. Ready to make up for lost time. With a kiss:

ASHLEY

And he'd be here right now.

INT. SHOPPING MALL - DAY

Ashley runs through an Xmas-decorated megamall, dragging Rudy behind her. Both of them laughing, as she hauls him over to some cookie bakery company:

RUDY

Where the hell are you going?

ASHLEY

Provisions! We are not leaving that motel room again till after New Year's: we need ten days worth of provisions!

(to cookie matron)

What's good?!

COOKIE MATRON

Oh my, we've got a special on our chocolate crunchie elves, they're shaped like little helpers--

ASHLEY

THIS MAN...has not had a cookie in two goddamn years! Get him two of everything!

RUDY
Ashley, Jesus--

22.

ASHLEY
Can't survive on our bodies alone,
Nick.
(to cookie matron)
Hurry up!

RUDY
Ash...didn't you write me that you
don't eat chocolate?

ASHLEY
Yeah, well you wrote me you were
six-foot-four, baby.
(teasing smile)
So don't talk to me about little
white lies.

INT. J.C. PENNEY'S DEPARTMENT STORE - DAY

Teddy bears with nightcaps, green bows, red ribbons. Ashley's
tearing through men's clothing racks, all love and confidence.
Rudy's got a bunch of purchase bags weighing him down:

ASHLEY
You need a COAT!

RUDY
Ash, you've gotten me enough--

ASHLEY
No boyfriend of mine is going to
walk around in negative-five degree
wind chill without a goddamn
good-looking coat!

She pulls out a hellacious black leather fringe number.

RUDY
Baby, c'mon, all this stuff...
I haven't gotten you anything--

ASHLEY
You got out, Nick. You're here.
You're my Christmas.

She puts the jacket against his chest, smiling. Rudy sighs.

RUDY
It's two hundred dollars, Ash--

She whips a Penney's card from her purse, grins wickedly:

ASHLEY

You forget where I work?

RUDY

(beat)

Beauty and fragrances.

ASHLEY

Fifty percent off, motherfucker.
Ho ho ho.

She runs off with the jacket. Rudy turns to a dressing mirror, left to stare at his reflection. An ex-con in rags, with a half-dozen holiday shopping bags. To himself:

RUDY

Just for the holidays, Nick. Then
we'll tell her. We'll let her...
have her holidays...

Rudy nods till he convinces himself. Can't help but smile.

INT. TOY STORE - DAY

Puzzles, Barbies and dinosaurs. KIDS scurrying, PARENTS chasing. Rudy and Ashley with a scared TEEN CLERK:

TEEN CLERK

You can't find...what?

ASHLEY

Toys for adults. Where are your
toys for adults?

TEEN CLERK

Toys for...adults?

ASHLEY

C'mon. How old are you, sixteen?
C'mon.

TEEN CLERK

We sell children's toys--

ASHLEY

(slams money down)

I got fifty dollars to spend in
your store, Jesus of Nazareth.
Can you help me or not?

The clerk glances around, then, low:

TEEN CLERK

Slinky's in aisle five, Twister's
in aisle one, Moon Mud's in aisle four.

Thank you.

INT. SUPERMARKET - DAY
CLOSE ON CONVEYOR

As bottles of wine, vodka and rum, cartons of egg nog and orange juice, and countless prepackaged sandwiches come scrolling past.

ASHLEY (o.s.)

You know what I was thinking, after our holiday hideaway? Instead of going back to Detroit, maybe we could go gambling. Y'know? Drive up to that Indian place you worked at. Wouldn't that be fun? I haven't gone gambling in forever!

EXT. SUPERMARKET PARKING LOT - DUSK

Light snow falls. Rudy, in his new black fringe eyesore, and Ashley carry grocery bags across the icy asphalt:

RUDY

Well, I don't know about that--

ASHLEY

Blackjack, Nick, blackjack I am good at. I mean, they'd give us some free games or something, wouldn't they? Since you worked there?

RUDY

Security, Ash, I just worked security. They wouldn't be rolling out the red carpet--

ASHLEY

And the slots, slots I'm good at too. Wouldn't that be fun?

RUDY

We'll have more fun in Detroit.

ASHLEY

We could live it up and--

RUDY

Ashley. We're not going anywhere I used to work.

It comes out too harsh. Ashley stops, a little hurt.

ASHLEY

I just...I thought you'd have friends there...

Rudy softens, touches her arms:

25.

RUDY

Hey. I been in prison for two years,
Ash. Believe me. Those guys
wouldn't want to see me.

He kisses her. She nods, dismisses it, kisses back.

ASHLEY

Well, they don't know what the
hell they're missing.

EXT. MOTEL - NIGHT

Ashley's Chevy Nova pulls back into the lot of the roadside
joint. There's an artificial (silver) Christmas tree tied to
the roof. She and Rudy climb out; she heads for the office:

ASHLEY

Baby, I'm gonna go tell 'em not to
disturb us for the rest of the year.
I get back in that room, you better
be wearing nothing but a candy cane.

RUDY

I'll see what I can do.

ASHLEY

No, lover. I'll see what you can do.

She smiles, sashays sexily away. Rudy watches her go, admiring
his good fortune. Then pops the trunk, collects some of their
shopping score. Gifts and goodies.

RUDY

(sings, sotto)

...I have no gifts to bring, pa-
rum-pum-pum-pum. No treasures for
the king, pa-rum-pum-pum-pum...

Loaded down, he struggles to the motel room, balances bags on
his knee, gets the key in the door, and heads inside.

INT. MOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

Pitch dark. Rudy fumbles his way in:

RUDY

...but I got a girl to be with,
rum-pum-pum-pum...

MERLIN (o.s.)

Hi, Nick.

Rudy drops the shopping bags, whirls around, as a stocky black shadow, MERLIN, all 280 pounds of him, KICKS the door shut--

26.

RUDY

What the fuck--

--and SWINGS a baseball bat toward Rudy's chest. Rudy gets an arm down to deflect the blow, but it still stings like a mother. Rudy HOWLS. Merlin comes at him again--

--and this time Rudy slips by. Merlin's bat SHATTERS a dresser. Rudy grabs him by the neck, kicks out his knees and wrests him to the ground. Grabs the bat--

--and gets DECKED from behind by another shadow, PUG, a little white guy with a snarl. They go CRASHING onto the bed, grappling for leverage, and then to the floor--

--where Rudy grabs a champagne bottle from the groceries and BASHES it backwards, shattering it over Pug's head!

Pug lets go, as Rudy scrambles up, and Merlin's got him again in a bear hug. Rudy's struggling, whirling with him, crashing into one wall, then another, YELLING for help--

RUDY

HEYYYY!!! IN HERE!!! HEYYYY!!!

--until he hears the PUMP-LOAD SNAP of a shotgun.

Rudy stops still. A lamp clicks on.

Standing in silhouette, a figure in a leather duster holds a sawed-off on him.

GABRIEL

Welcome home, Nick.

Another lamp comes on. Rudy, still in Merlin's choke-hold, gets a look at the gunman, GABRIEL. Weathered face, stringy hair, early 30's. Handsome in a scuzzy way. He's seen a lot of road.

Rudy stares, totally thrown. Pug, the little guy, bad teeth, bad hair, bad skin, gets up spitting blood and champagne.

PUG

I owe ya a drink, ya fuck--

--and slugs Rudy in the gut. Merlin yanks him back up. Merlin's a black widebody, wears a goatee and brass knuckles. Behind Merlin stands a fourth intruder, a stone-faced Indian in a Grateful Dead longsleeve. JUMPY. Guarding the door.

Gabriel's studying Rudy, up and down. Nods. Merlin relaxes his choke-hold so Rudy can breathe.

RUDY

You...you don't know me--

GABRIEL

Oh, I know you, Nick. I know
you real well.

RUDY

No, you can't--

GABRIEL

The hell I can't.

As the room's door gets kicked open--

ASHLEY

Watch out, baby! I'm bringing in
the fucking tree!

--and the silver fake evergreen fills the doorway, getting
forced through with Ashley's grunts and groans--

RUDY

ASHLEY!

Merlin traps his jaw shut. The tree comes squeezing through,
followed by Ashley, face in branches--

ASHLEY

I'm telling you, we got the best
one in the store...I don't know why
people want their houses smelling
like the stupid woods...

She's GRABBED from behind by Jumpy. Ashley screams, but he
slams her against the wall. The tree hits the ground.

RUDY

NO!

ASHLEY

NICK!

Rudy fights to help her, but Merlin's got him. Pug locks
Ashley's arms. She fights, muffled cries, but Jumpy and Pug
have her held firmly. Her face to the wall--

GABRIEL

(re: the silver tree)

Hope her taste in men's better
than her taste in Christmas.

Ashley's turned to face him. Her eyes widen. Gabriel nods.

GABRIEL

Hey, sis. Happy holidays.

Rudy's jaw drops. He looks to Ashley. Then to Gabriel.

Ashley YELLS, enraged, kicking and clawing. Jumpy slams her back against the wall for her trouble--

28.

GABRIEL

Jumpy, don't hurt her, now.

Gabriel steps to Rudy. Studies him.

GABRIEL

So. This is the guy you been waiting for. Man of your dreams.

ASHLEY

Gabriel--!

GABRIEL

(unimpressed)

Must have a way with stationery.

ASHLEY

Gabriel, what are you doing!

Gabriel raises the sawed-off to Rudy's chest. Rudy flinches, but Merlin's got him.

ASHLEY

GABRIEL!!!

Gabriel fixes her with a stare. She shuts up. To Rudy:

GABRIEL

You better be here to be good to her, loverboy. 'Cause she's been good to you.

ASHLEY

Gabriel, let him go--

GABRIEL

Read a lot about you, Nick.

ASHLEY

What are you doing here?!

GABRIEL

Read you're a man of some knowledge.

ASHLEY

Gabriel!

GABRIEL

A man of some travels.

ASHLEY

GABRIEL, I LOVE HIM!

Rudy's trying to speak, voice CHOKED. Gabriel nods to Merlin, who again eases his hold. Rudy coughs.

RUDY
I'm...not...Nick...

Gabriel frowns. Rudy turns to Ashley.

RUDY
I'm not him. I...
(then to Gabriel)
You want something from Nick,
you got the wrong guy.

ASHLEY
(hurt)
Nick...

Gabriel looks from her to him, then lowers his sawed-off, and SWINGS it into Rudy's stomach. Rudy buckles. Panicked.

GABRIEL
Who are you now.

RUDY
You got the wrong guy! She thinks
I'm Nick, I'm not!

GABRIEL
(to Merlin)
Put him in the truck.

RUDY
I was in the joint with him! I
knew about him and her, okay!? I
took his place!

GABRIEL
You what...

RUDY
I got out, Nick didn't! I pretended
I was him! I knew about her letters!
Jesus Christ, whatever you want from
him -- I'm not Nick!
(to Ashley)
I -- I just wanted to be--

A glance of regret amidst his desperation. Ashley stares back, confused, searching his eyes.

GABRIEL
You're not Nick Mason...

RUDY
I shared his cell!

GABRIEL
But you were saying you were...

RUDY

Yes!

GABRIEL

So you could get with my sister.

RUDY

Yes!

GABRIEL

So you could get down her chimney.

RUDY

Yes!

GABRIEL

And you think telling me that's gonna help your cause.

Gabriel RATCHETS him across the chin with the gun butt. Rudy hits the floor. Gabriel spins on Ashley, enraged:

GABRIEL

Is this him!?

ASHLEY

(reaches for Rudy)

Don't hurt him...

GABRIEL

Is this the fucker you been writing all year!?

ASHLEY

(reaches for Rudy)

Please, Gabriel, don't...

Gabriel puts the gun to Rudy's head.

GABRIEL

IS THIS NICK MASON!???

ASHLEY

YES!!!

Gabriel doesn't shoot. Studies Rudy.

GABRIEL

Well, he's gonna have to learn to give you some respect.

Gabriel KICKS Rudy in the jaw. Ashley screams. Gabriel motions to his boys: Jumpy and Pug drag her outside. Gabriel KICKS Rudy again. Rudy lies there and takes it.

Merlin lights a cig, examines Rudy and Ashley's grocery bags:

MERLIN

Hey. They got a shitload of cookies.

GABRIEL

Take 'em.

MERLIN

How 'bout the tree? You want the tree?

GABRIEL

Leave the tree.

Merlin nods, tucks the bags under his arms, leaves the room. Gabriel drops beside Rudy, with a sick smile:

GABRIEL

I've read your letters, motherfucker.
Don't play no reindeer games with me.

EXT. INTERSTATE - NIGHT

As we SWOOP DOWN onto a four-lane stretch of winter highway, arcing into the blackness.

CLOSING ON an 18-wheel tractor trailer, RUMBLING onward, emblazoned with "Great Lakes Trucking." There's an airbrush painting on the door to the cab, of a skeleton looking thru a flaming radial tire, and the legend "Motor City Monster."

INT. GABRIEL'S RIG - CAB - NIGHT

Gabriel at the wheel, Merlin smoking, Jumpy eating cookies. A TRUCK passes; Gabriel waves. A moment later, the CB crackles:

PASSING DRIVER (over CB)

Hey there, Monster! What're you hauling this far north?

GABRIEL

Hell, Bugeye. How you doin'?
Ain't hauling, man, I'm up for the holidays. Gonna have myself a holidays...for a goddamn change...

INT. GABRIEL'S RIG - TRAILER - NIGHT
CLOSE ON RUDY

eyes closed, dried blood, head rocking side to side. He winces, waking, with the headache to end all headaches.

ASHLEY (o.s.)

Shh, Nick, shh. They won't hurt you now. You're okay...

Her hand strokes his face. Rudy's eyes struggle open.

They're in the back of the truck. There's some packing mats, rope, two tall storage lockers, and Ashley's Chevy Nova.

Rudy's head is in her lap. He struggles to sit up, finds his wrists tied with cord. He looks at Ashley, follows her gaze.

In a corner, Pug sits guard in a beanbag chair. He's dipping chewing tobacco, reading Road & Track, headphones on. Gives Rudy a bored glance, then back to his magazine.

ASHLEY

I won't let 'em, Nick. They won't hurt you anymore.

RUDY

Your brother...

Ashley nods. Rudy looks around, remembering.

RUDY

...the truck driver...

ASHLEY

He's not a bad person, Nick...
he's not...

From the corner, Pug spits some chaw. Ashley wheels.

ASHLEY

You're not gonna hurt him anymore!

Pug doesn't even look up. Still stroking Rudy's face:

ASHLEY

Since Janey moved in...Gabriel...
he's come over more and more. To the
apartment. Janey's the divorced one,
'member, with the tit job--

RUDY

What the fuck is going on.

ASHLEY

He read the letters, Nick. Some
day I wasn't there. He went through
my room. He found your letters.

RUDY

What's going ON!!!

The truck shakes.

ASHLEY

He knows you worked at that casino.

Rudy stares at her. She's scared.

RUDY
You motherfucker.

ASHLEY
Nick, no--

RUDY
You sold him out.

ASHLEY
Nick--

RUDY
When'd you decide to do it, Ash?
After which of his letters, huh?
The fortieth? The fiftieth? The
first?!

ASHLEY
Nick, what are you--

She reaches out for him; Rudy scrambles to his knees, tumbles against the opposite wall of the trailer.

RUDY
I'M NOT NICK!
(raging)
You thought you'd fuck him over?!
Well he's fucked you! I've never
worked at some casino! I can't
help you! Because he's not me!

ASHLEY
Nick, I love you--

RUDY
JESUS CHRIST!

PUG
Watch your mouth, man. It's Christmas.

RUDY
I'M NOT NICK!

Ashley runs at him, wraps her arms around him tightly. He tries to fight her off. She won't let go.

RUDY
Get the hell off of me!

ASHLEY
(hard whisper)
Nick, it won't work. It won't work!

Rudy stops fighting. She has a terrified look in her eye. Checks to Pug: he's watching them now, chewing slower. Ashley turns them away from the little guy's view.

ASHLEY

He'll kill you.

RUDY

You're not hearing me here--

ASHLEY

My brother's killed people, I know he has. Truckers. If you talk him into thinking you're not you, you'll only get yourself dead.

RUDY

He didn't "find" Nick's letters, did he.

ASHLEY

Nick, please, it's me--

RUDY

You told him about Nick's letters.

ASHLEY

No, Nick, no--

RUDY

You're in on this.

ASHLEY

I love you!

Rudy stares at her coldly.

RUDY

Y'know, in a way, I'm glad it's me.
'Cause you woulda broken his heart.

Ashley stares, panicked. Pug's still watching them.

RUDY

Your pen pal's dead, lady.

ASHLEY

If you say that, if you keep saying that, they will kill you. If they think you're not you, they will kill you. Don't you see? I know what you're doing, but it won't work!

RUDY

Nick died for me....

ASHLEY

I won't let him hurt you! He just wants what you know!

RUDY

(ruefully)
...maybe I die for Nick...

ASHLEY

Just tell him what you know, Nick!
That's all they want! And we'll
get out of this!

Rudy gives her a stone cold stare. Ashley crumbles, touching his face, shaking her head, tears. Devastated.

ASHLEY

He found them...I swear, Nick...
(helpless)
...he found them...

The truck shudders through downshifts, to a groaning stop. Ashley embraces Rudy fiercely, holding on for the last.

The trailer gate RATTLES open into the truck's roof.

Ashley shuts her eyes.

EXT. REST STOP/INT. GABRIEL'S RIG - CONTINUOUS

The rig all alone at a snowy rest area. Gabriel, Merlin and Jumpy climb inside as silhouette sentries. Gabriel surveys, then lifts a piece of paper:

GABRIEL

"My sweet, sexy Ashy-lashy, I have been dreaming of you constantly, and knowing you are out there makes these walls not seem so close or so strong or so cold..."

(to Merlin/Jumpy)

Women live for this stuff.

(reads on)

Dreaming 'bout your this, dreaming 'bout your those, gettin' X-rated on me here, Nicky...where are we... oh, right, other side...

(turns paper over)

"Someday I'm gonna take you up by Lake S. Before I went in, before goddamn Millie, 'fore I had my situation, I used to work up at this casino, working security. Used to watch for people stealing chips, counting cards, getting piss-drunk, that kinda shit. Indian place, they hired this reject outta Vegas to run it, got about as much business sense as a buffalo patty. Anyways, it's a fun place to run some numbers and play."

Gabriel puts the letter down.

GABRIEL

You're a good writer, Nick. I give this writing an A-plus.

RUDY
I never worked at no casino.

ASHLEY
(hopeless)
Nick...

Rudy steps out of her hold and stalks forward:

RUDY
That's the guy I was in with, I did my last ten months with him. He rode a two-year bit for manslaughter -- split a guy's skull open at a bar for harassing his girl. That's Nick Mason. He worked at that casino. He's the one who wrote her letters. Me, I'm a damn mechanic, my last job was a Quickie Lube, I did five for lifting cars. I don't know shit about blackjack, I don't know shit about Indians. I'm not him.

Gabriel stares at him. Then crumples the letter.

GABRIEL
Bury this guy.

Merlin and Jumpy grab Rudy and THROW him from the truck. He HITS the snowy parking lot on his side, hands bound.

ASHLEY
Gabriel, you promised!

GABRIEL
I promised that when he helped us, we'd be gone! When he helped us! Loverboy don't want to play!

Merlin and Jumpy drop to the snow, picking Rudy up.

ASHLEY
You promised me!

GABRIEL
And you promised me you'd get your sweetheart to help!

Rudy meets eyes with Ashley. She's caught.

GABRIEL
He'd rather die than be with you, he'd make a fucked-up boyfriend anyway.
(to Merlin/Jumpy)
Bury him all over the place.

NO!!!

She charges at her brother. Gabriel grabs her, spins her into control and PUNCHES her in the jaw. She goes flying out of the truck. HITS the ground hard. In shock.

Merlin and Jumpy march Rudy across the lot. A stand of dark and snowy woods ahead...

MERLIN

Beats prison, I guess.

ASHLEY (o.s.)

NICK!!! NICK!!! NOOOOO!!!

Rudy struggles, desperate but held firm. Jumpy loads a handgun, as he muses for the very first time:

JUMPY

The problem with prison...is that it is founded on the fundamentally flawed perception of rehabilitation through punishment. A society can't hope to create a "changed man" by surrounding him with the worst in his fellow man; what it "rehabilitates" is solely a conviction that if he can survive the inhumanity of prison, what then, can he not withstand? He has seen man's darkest soul and kept his sight: what is left for such a man? What faith? What fear?

At the woods' edge, Jumpy gives the gun to Merlin--

JUMPY

Don't get no blood on my boots--

The gun goes to Rudy's head. A bullet fills the chamber. Ashley SCREAMS. Rudy shuts his eyes tight and--

RUDY

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO KNOW!

Merlin and Jumpy stop. Ashley stops screaming. Gabriel turns.

RUDY

About the Tomahawk! What the hell do you want to know!

His guards look to Gabriel. Rudy nods, sweating.

RUDY

I spend six months writing poetry and my goddamn pen pal fucks me over. Thanks for the stamps, Ash. You want me, you got me. Whaddya want to know.

Ashley gasps relief. Gabriel smiles.

38.

GABRIEL

Every-thing.

Merlin and Jumpy march Rudy back. Still on the ground:

ASHLEY

I love you...Nick, I love you...

Rudy won't meet her eyes.

GABRIEL

Hey. She says she loves you, Nick.

RUDY

She says a lot of things.

GABRIEL

She's getting you to help us... 'cause she knows if you don't, you're dead. You just tell us what we need to know, you two live happily ever after. My sister loves you, mother-fucker, and I ain't gonna have you break her heart.

RUDY

Wish I had a brother like you.

GABRIEL

A girl says she loves you, you say something.

Rudy looks at Ashley. Her eyes plead forgiveness.

RUDY

I had better sex in prison.

GABRIEL

Heyyy. Be nice, convict. We're gonna be working together here.

(to his boys)

Get him back in the rig.

Merlin and Jumpy wrench Rudy backward. Ashley reaches out to him, starts to speak. He looks right through her. She goes silent, casts her eyes to the snow.

PUG (o.s.)

He's not the guy, Monster.

Everyone looks to the truck. Weasel-faced Pug has sidled next to Gabriel. Spits some chaw.

It hits Merlin's boots. Merlin growls.

PUG

Whole time you were driving, he was telling her he's not the guy, he's not the guy. I know why he'd tell us he's not the guy. Why's he telling her he's not the guy? What if he's not the guy?

Gabriel considers, jumps off the truck. Walks to Rudy:

GABRIEL

The man who wrote those letters loved Ashley, boys. He lived for her love.

(nods)

Let's see him live for love.

Gabriel puts a gun under Rudy's chin. Rudy flinches.

GABRIEL

Where's she work?

RUDY

What?

GABRIEL

(forces gun harder)

Wrote you a hundred letters, didn't she? Where's she work?

RUDY

J.C. Penney. Beauty and fragrances.

GABRIEL

What's her middle name?

RUDY

(thinking hard)

Samantha.

GABRIEL

What'd they call her in high school?

RUDY

Bam Bam.

GABRIEL

What'd they call her in college?

RUDY

What college.

GABRIEL

Where'd she drop her cherry?

ASHLEY

Gabriel!

RUDY

Canada.

GABRIEL

Be more specific.

RUDY

A station wagon in Canada.

GABRIEL

What's her greatest fear?

RUDY

Her brother.

GABRIEL

Wrong, Nick. It's drowning.

RUDY

No. It's her brother.

Rudy stares him down. Gabriel shrugs.

GABRIEL

That's love.

He puts the gun away. Ashley regains her breath.

GABRIEL

Let's get back on the road. It's time to start talking, Nick. Time to start telling tales--

RUDY

Nick don't talk till Nick gets something.

Gabriel gives a challenging stare. Rudy stares right back.

It's a showdown.

RUDY

Hot. Chocolate.

The trucker slowly smiles. His crew chuckles.

MERLIN

You want that for here or to go?

RUDY

I been in Iron Mountain for two years, truckdriver. I do one more crime, I'm back there for good, so fuck you and fuck your sister and fuck your trucker friends. You want to hear about some goddamn job of mine? I want some hot-goddamn-chocolate.

They've stopped laughing.

41.

RUDY
And some pecan-fucking-pie.

INT. TRUCK STOP - NIGHT
CLOSE ON HOT CHOCOLATE AND PECAN PIE

The six of them sit in a booth, Ashley leaning on Rudy's shoulder apologetically. The four truckers watch him scarf his pie. "White Christmas" plays over the speakers.

GABRIEL
So when you worked there--

Rudy raises a finger sharply. Silence. He continues eating. Scrapes the last of his pie crumbs.

GABRIEL
You knew the place--

RUDY
Hey.

Rudy stares hard. Gobbles the crumbs, washes it down with his hot chocolate. Savors it. Sets the mug down.

RUDY
Y'know, I could really go for
some onion rings.

Gabriel nods to Jumpy, who snaps his arm up, SMASHING his knuckles into Rudy's face.

ASHLEY
Gabriel! You said talk to him.
That's all you ever said...

GABRIEL
We're talking, aren't we?

Rudy holds his nose. Blood trickles.

GABRIEL
How much money's in that casino?
Day-to-day.

RUDY
I don't know.

GABRIEL
The hell you don't.

RUDY
(sighs, a guess)
Five million?

GABRIEL

You wrote Ash that letter, you told her that story 'bout working Christmas Eve, 'bout how they'd send half the security guys home, nobody comin' in that night. And the rest of you got shit-faced drinking hot buttered rum. That a true story now?

RUDY

Christmas...Eve...

GABRIEL

You know where the guards are.
You know how to get in and out.
You know where the money is.
(nods)
We're taking down that casino, convict.
You're the guy gonna tell us how.

Rudy turns slightly pale.

RUDY

Hey, it's...been two years--

GABRIEL

We got faith in you, Nick Mason.
(smiles)
You're our inside man.

INT. TRUCK STOP BATHROOM - NIGHT

Rudy slams in, letting the door smack shut behind him. It's a tiny windowless closet. Rudy kicks a stall door, pacing.

RUDY

...goddamn it, Rudy...goddamn it...
goddamn girl, goddamn Nick...you're
so smart, so fucking smart...

He stalks a circle, grabs a sink, and stares at his reflection in the mirror. He looks a wreck. He settles down.

RUDY

Where's your Christmas dinner now...

INT. TRUCK STOP - MOMENTS LATER

A COUPLE leaves the booth behind Gabriel's crew. Pug and Merlin reach over, steal their leftovers and dig in. Ashley fidgets.

Jumpy regards the garlands painted on the windows beside:

JUMPY

43.

I've read where the retail industry does fifty percent of its business between December 1st and December 25th. Half the year's business, in one month's time. It seems to me an intelligent society would legislate a second such gift-giving holiday, create, say, a Christmas Two -- late May, early June -- to further stimulate growth and prosperity. For who would protest such a holiday? Taking the fifty percent model, a Christmas Two would grow this country's annual per capita income by close to one-third.

Everyone stares at Jumpy.

GABRIEL

Christmas Two.

The Indian nods. Gabriel shakes his head.

GABRIEL

Ever since you started night school, you been givin' me headaches, Jumpy. Headaches.

(to Merlin/Pug)

Go see what's taking him.

INT. BATHROOM - SAME

Rudy crouches behind the door, a piece of iron pipe in his grip, ready to strike. Listening...listening...

As the door SLAMS open, swinging fast and BASHING him in the head. Rudy tags the floor, drops the pipe, knocked out.

Merlin and Pug gaze down on him, shaking their heads. Pug spits tobacco. Hits Merlin's boots again.

INT. TRUCK STOP - MOMENTS LATER

Rudy's back, with a new facial bruise. Ashley reaches for his hand; he pulls it away. Gabriel unfolds a piece of paper -- it's a crude map.

GABRIEL

Here ya go, convict. We cased the place in the fall, got the layout down. What you're gonna do is show us where each of these doors go, what the upstairs level looks like, where they got the alarms, all of it.

MERLIN

And where they hide the real money.

Merlin exhales some smoke in Pug's face. Pug hacks, shoves him. 44.

GABRIEL

And Nick? If you even think about setting us up, giving us some bad information? We go down...you go down...

(lets it settle)

Now. Christmas Eve. How many guards are there gonna be?

Rudy surveys the table. All five waiting for him. Sighs.

RUDY

Hell. Ten?

GABRIEL

And which of these doors here lead/ up to the security level?

Gabriel passes the map across the table. Rudy stares at it.

MERLIN

Start talking, Nick.

Rudy's still staring.

PUG

Start talking.

RUDY

Who the hell made this map.

GABRIEL

What?

RUDY

I said, who the hell made the map?

GABRIEL

I did.

RUDY

This isn't the Tomahawk.

GABRIEL

What the fuck are you talking about.

RUDY

This is the front entrance, right? You get through the slots, you hit craps here, not blackjack. Blackjack's here to here, lined up. What's this, the cage? Cage is over there, hard to get to, you got it all mixed around--

PUG

That's what it looks like!

RUDY

Since when? What the hell is this room?

MERLIN

Buffet. Whaddya think it is?

RUDY

Buffet is by the goddamn bar! What the hell kind of map is this?!

Gabriel reaches across the booth, grabs Rudy's shirt, pulls his face to table level:

GABRIEL

We walked the place...for a week.

RUDY

And I worked there. For a year.

Neither man blinks.

PUG

Map is kinda dirty, Monster...

RUDY

They changed the layout.

GABRIEL

What?

Rudy nods, pretending to be dawning upon.

RUDY

They changed the layout -- whadda they call you? Mr. Monster? They remodeled the place. When I worked there -- listen to me -- guy that managed the joint, guy who ran it--

ASHLEY

Jack. Jack Bangs.

RUDY

Right, Jack Bangs. Uh...guy was always talking 'bout fixing the place up. Maybe get a better crowd. Musta gone and done it while I was in the Mountain.

(pushes map away)

I don't know this map, man. How the hell am I supposed to tell you what door goes where?

GABRIEL

They wouldn't have changed the security setup.

RUDY

When I worked there, this was Bangs' office. Back here. He kept a little safe in the...uh, the wall, money he'd take for himself, skim from the Indians. Called it the...uh...
(stumbling)
...the Powwow Safe.

JUMPY

The Powwow Safe?

RUDY

His personal safe, he gave it a name. Now you're telling me they've taken his office, put the buffet there? Then who knows what else they changed.

Gabriel stares at him, suspicious.

GABRIEL

So what the hell good are you...

RUDY

You'd have to get me inside.
(carefully)
Get inside, watch where the money's moving, see where the guards are going. Then I could work with your map.

GABRIEL

Wrong, convict. You walk in there, they recognize you.

PUG

So what?

GABRIEL

They recognize him, they'll remember him after the job goes down.

RUDY

They won't recognize me.

GABRIEL

Why not.

RUDY

Trust me. They won't recognize me.

GABRIEL

We'll trust you when we're rich. Why not.

RUDY

'Cause you're gonna get me a disguise.

Rudy locks eyes with Gabriel.

47.

RUDY

I give you the wrong information,
you're gonna shoot me. Well, I
don't know your damn map. So you
can either find a way to get me in
there...or you can shoot me right now.

A WAITRESS comes over, drops their check on the table. It rests
near Rudy. Rudy locks eyes with Gabriel.

And pushes the check his way.

EXT. SNOWY HIGHWAY - NIGHT

The "Motor City Monster" RUMBLES along a two-lane blacktop.
Across barren Michigan tundra. A sign reads "You Are Now
Entering Powahachee Indian Lands. No Littering."

INT. GABRIEL'S RIG - CAB - NIGHT

Gabriel drives, with Ashley beside him. Rudy sits in the
sleeper, Jumpy sitting guard.

OUT THE WINDOW

they pass a brightly neon-lit building, with a parking lot full
of cars. The Tomahawk Casino, with a red neon axe pointing the
way. And a marquee which reads: "10X ODDS ON CRAPS. \$5.95
PRIME RIB. PERFORMING TONIGHT: DAKOTA!"

The truck motors on by. Gabriel nods to Rudy:

GABRIEL

Bring back some memories, Nick?

RUDY

More than you know.

EXT. KNIGHTS INN - NIGHT

A Midwestern castles-and-Camelot-themed chain hotel, amidst an
outcrop of roadside exit civilization: fast food and gas. The
Great Lakes Trucking rig parked in the hotel's lot.

INT. KNIGHTS INN - HALLWAY - NIGHT

Faux stonemasonry and torches. "Regal" purple carpets. Gabriel
and his crew escort Rudy into--

INT. HOTEL ROOM

--his quarters. Jumpy marches Rudy to the bed, snaps a handcuff
around his ankle--

RUDY

What the hell is this? What happened to working together?

--and snaps the other cuff to the bedframe.

GABRIEL

Rather be back in the Mountain?

RUDY

Might as well be.

GABRIEL

Don't have Weather Channel in the Mountain, Nick.

Gabriel tosses him a TV remote. Merlin rips the room's phone out of the wall, takes it. They return to the hallway.

GABRIEL

Sleep good, loverboy. Tomorrow you got singing for your supper to do.

The truckers leave. Rudy tugs at his ankle cuff, sighs, collapses back on the bed. Ashley has remained.

Rudy sits up, sees her.

RUDY

Get your own room.

She approaches instead. Sits beside. Gently:

ASHLEY

He said he wanted to talk to you. When he found the letters...he said "when your boyfriend gets out, I wanna talk to him." I thought he meant back in Detroit. I thought he meant--

RUDY

But you knew why. Knew why, didn't ya.

Ashley stands her ground, guilty.

ASHLEY

I thought we'd have a few more days.

RUDY

For what? You to talk me into "helping"? What, he promise you a share of the winnings?

ASHLEY

No!

Rudy looks at her with new interest.

49.

RUDY

They've never done a robbery?

ASHLEY

(shrugs)

They're truck drivers.

For the first time in a long time...Rudy smiles.

RUDY .

Then they do need me, don't they.
They really need me...

ASHLEY

We're gonna get out of here, Nick!
We're gonna get out of this...

RUDY

We? What "we"...

Rudy stares at her. The smile gone.

RUDY

Get your own room, Ashley.

ASHLEY

Nick...

RUDY

Get your own room.

Ashley pulls away, walks to the door. Turns back, wanting to say something, but Rudy's not even looking her way.

ASHLEY

If I'd told you what he wanted,
you'd have been gone. You'd have
gotten on that bus and stayed on it.
And if that's selfish, I am. If
that's lying, I'm a liar. But I
been dealing with my fucked-up
brother and his fucked-up friends
for a long time, and I was stronger
than him then and I'm stronger than
him now. 'Cause he showed up for
money. I showed up for love.

(hard)

And if you're so ready to make me
your enemy...then what did you
show up for, Nick. What did
you really want...with me...

With a fiery look, she strides from the room.

Rudy stands, can't get far cuffed to the bed. Checks the end table, finds a Bible and a deck of cards.

Out his second-floor window is a view of the rear parking lot. Rudy watches as a Chevy Blazer parks and two drunk FISHERMEN get out. The truck's bumper sticker reads "Ice Fishermen Do It All Year Long."

Rudy watches the good ol' boys stumble toward the hotel. He turns back, surveys his new prison cell:

RUDY

They've never done a robbery...

(nods)

Christmas is looking up.

INT. RUDY'S ROOM - MORNING

The bed has been dragged to the door to the bathroom, the comforter and pillow are on the floor, "Miracle on 34th St." is on the TV, and Rudy lies asleep on the ground, ankle still cuffed. Two SHADOWS fall across him.

INT. HALLWAY - MORNING

Rudy is brusquely dragged out by Jumpy and Merlin, passing Ashley, who lies asleep in the hall, head on a pillow.

MERLIN

Having romance problems, Romeo?

RUDY

Not with you.

They march him onward. Rudy glances over his shoulder at Ashley. Who spent the night at his door.

INT. GAME ROOM - MORNING

A wood-panelled room adjacent to a small indoor pool, with arcade games and a dart board. Gabriel's with Pug, tossing darts, as Jumpy and a chain-smoking Merlin haul Rudy in.

PUG

Goddamn, Merlin. There any part of the day you don't smoke?

MERLIN

There anytime you don't got a mouthful of shit?

PUG

Cancer-sucker.

MERLIN

Acid-chewer.

Gabriel THWAPS a dart into the board, to shut them up.

GABRIEL

Take a look what Pug's bought for ya.

Pug empties a shopping bag on a pinball machine. Cowboy boots, spurs, a black cowboy hat, a black rhinestone jacket and a long-haired wig tumbles out.

RUDY

A cowboy. You're going to send me into an Indian casino disguised as a cowboy. Have you thought this entirely through?

GABRIEL

Put it on.

Merlin and Jumpy shove Rudy toward the merchandise. Gabriel slams another dart into the board, then turns:

GABRIEL

You're a country-western singer up from Nashville for the the holidays. Visiting your Grandma on the lake, driving into the Tomahawk for some scotch and slots. You only play the slots, you got that? Don't want no dealer friend of yours recognizing you, you sidle up to shoot some craps.

RUDY

What kind of half-ass cowboy plays the slots?

GABRIEL

You do.

RUDY

At least gimme video poker.

GABRIEL

Shut the fuck up. You play what your girlfriend plays. Ashley's going in with you. You talk to her, otherwise you don't talk to nobody. You walk the room as many times as you want, but the second you come out, I want to know the run of the place.

Rudy examines his new hair and cowboy gear.

RUDY

Do I get a country-western name?

GABRIEL

You get recognized, convict, you
get a country-western funeral.

52.

EXT. TOMAHAWK CASINO - DAY

The Chevy Nova crunches into the parking lot in the shadow of
the gaudy neon axe.

INT. NOVA - DAY

Rudy's in "disguise": paste-on goatee, tinted shades and black
cowboy gear. Very Nashville Network.

He's wedged between Jumpy and Merlin, wearing handcuffs.
Gabriel, Ashley and Pug in the back.

RUDY

Y'know what, guys? I woke up
this morning, I got a really lucky
feeling going on. I mean it, I'm
feeling that good. I wouldn't be
surprised if I walk in there, pull
a handle and hit jackpot. Hell,
we wouldn't even have to--

GABRIEL

Get out.

EXT. PARKING LOT - CONTINUOUS

Rudy stamps feet, shivering in the cold, as Merlin unlocks his
cuffs. Gabriel reaches to help Ashley out--

ASHLEY

Get your goddamn hands off me--

She edges toward Rudy, then stops. A chill still there.

GABRIEL

You got one hour.

RUDY

I'm gonna need some money.

Gabriel hands a bill.

RUDY

Ten dollars? What do I do
with ten dollars?

GABRIEL

Don't tip.

RUDY

Monster. If we're working together here, we gotta be working together. I can't walk in there looking like the Lone Fucking Ranger with ten bucks to throw down. You don't want me getting noticed, right? Not getting noticed costs a guy at least a couple hundred.

Gabriel glares, turns to his crew. Mutter, rubs his fingers together. Merlin, Pug and Jumpy reach for their wallets, grumbling. Gabriel takes a few twenties from each.

Rudy nods thanks as Gabriel hands him the cash--

GABRIEL

(threateningly)

Don't. Lose.

Rudy pockets the wad, hooks his elbow for Ashley to slip her arm through. Grins with a drawl:

RUDY

You ready to gamble, darlin'?

She regards him warily, but puts her arm in his.

RUDY

(to the boys)

Y'all take care of my guitar.

He tips his hat, and strides for the casino entrance. Gabriel and his truckers watch them go.

MERLIN

(grumbles)

Who's robbin' who here, Gabriel...

GABRIEL

Get in there and watch 'em.

Watch their every fuckin' move.

INT. TOMAHAWK CASINO - DAY

The cascade of JINGLING and JANGLING COINS fills the brightly-lit, horrendously-carpeted space. Wooden-beamed ceilings suggest a rustic theme, but the neon slots, lush green tables and red wheels of fortune are pure Midwest Vegas.

The Tomahawk is tiny by Nevada standards, about the size of a large bingo hall. This morning, about FIFTY GAMBLERS mill about. Skimpily-dressed COCKTAIL WAITRESSES, most of them Powahachee Indians, pimp drinks. Bored DEALERS deal.

As the sound of slot machine payoffs suddenly go silent--

And some scattered cassettes, labeled "Big Winners," "Little Winners," and "Medium Cash." A HAND pops the tape currently in the system -- "Big, BIG Winners" and flips it over. Presses play. The sounds of JINGLING and JANGLING return.

ON FULL SCENE

An office overlooking the casino floor through smoked glass. JACK BANGS, late 50's, silver-hair, capped teeth, shark suit and high blood pressure, paces his office. He's got the air of a washed-up gameshow host, Wink Martindale, Peter Tommarkin, one of those hacks. Right now he's all caffeine.

JACK BANGS

There's an S-word I'd really like to throw in the discussion here, guys, 'cause it's a big part of what's going on. Big element, 'kay? S-word. It's a serious issue, serious factor, so I'm just gonna get it out there, throw it on out there, so we can know it, we can talk about it, we can get things done...

(big pause)

Snow. Are you with me, guys? Snow. Big time, fucking, grade-A, God-quality, S-N-O-W-snow.

Two INDIAN GOVERNORS sit before him. Business-dressed, with overcoats, ponytails. One gray-haired, one jet-black.

JACK BANGS

There's no snow in Vegas, 'kay? They don't know it, they don't want it, they got laws against the stuff. They got Egypt down there, right, they got Monte Carlo, Hawaii, they got ancient Rome, but where's the Winter Castle, right? Where's the Swiss Miss Chalet? Where's the Big Fucking Igloo?

YOUNG GOVERNOR

We understand you, Mr. Bangs.

JACK BANGS

Ice Capades? They don't do it. Mittens? Outlawed. Why?

YOUNG GOVERNOR

We're aware of your position.

JACK BANGS

(picks up a chip)

Because down there this is money.

Up here this is heat.

(pleads)

You wanted Vegas quality, I brought it to you. You wanted Vegas press, I gave it to you. But guys, please, guys...I can't get you Vegas profits... till one of ya does some spirit dance and does something about this snow.

The tribal governors stare him down.

OLD GOVERNOR

We understand the Paiutes' casino saw a net profit of twelve million dollars last year.

JACK BANGS

The Paiutes, they cook their books.

OLD GOVERNOR

The Waitela reservation made seventeen million.

JACK BANGS

(sobers)

Seventeen?

OLD GOVERNOR

Perhaps you have researched this, Mr. Bangs. Is the snowfall on our side of the lake that much greater than the snowfall on theirs?

Jack Bangs stares at them both. Considers his next move.

JACK BANGS

I'm bringing in this great showroom act next week; these three Russian girls, they look like Meryl Streep, they can juggle anything--

YOUNG GOVERNOR

Mr. Bangs.

JACK BANGS

Guys. We're doing it right, here. \$5.99 prime rib? Nobody does that in Michigan. Nobody.

YOUNG GOVERNOR

The tribe is concerned that many of your...new ideas...are not resulting in any new revenues.

JACK BANGS

I'm putting liquor in the drinks, I'm giving 10-times odds on craps, I got the girls showing sixteen-percent more skin! Show me another buffet's gonna offer you Coke and Pepsi! Whaddya want me to do?!

YOUNG GOVERNOR

We want to see our casino making money again, Mr. Bangs. Making money for our community.

OLD GOVERNOR

Like the Paiutes and the Waitela.

The young man stands, stares Jack Bangs in the eye.

YOUNG GOVERNOR

We want you doing the job...that we brought you here to do.

INT. TOMAHAWK - DAY

Rudy and Ashley move away from a change booth, with a bucket of quarters. Rudy messes with his cowboy getup, noting two SECURITY GUARDS punch a code in a private door, step inside:

ASHLEY

So does it look a lot different?

RUDY

Here and there. Restaurant, uh, that's the main expansion. Tables've been moved around; the big man's office, I dunno, might be upstairs now.

They settle at a slot machine. Another SECURITY GUARD walks past them. Rudy turns his back. Ashley notices.

ASHLEY

That guy knows you?

RUDY

Yeah, uh. Mike. That's Mike.

At the door, Merlin and Jumpy enter, wandering through the slots. Rudy sees them.

RUDY

You start spending your brother's money. I'm gonna take a circuit around the joint, check for any new ins and outs. I'll get us some drinks.

As he strides away--

ASHLEY
(sotto)
Be careful, Nick...

51.

MOVING THROUGH THE CASINO

with Rudy, ambling among the tables, making a show of checking out the layout. In reality, he's surveying the GAMBLERS.

Passing the cage, he walks right by Jack Bangs and the Indian governors. Jack Bangs is all smiles, while the governors turn their backs on him and storm out.

ARRIVING AT THE BAR

RUDY
Couple rum and Cokes, please.

INDIAN BARTENDER
You want that rum and Coke or
rum and Pepsi?

Rudy gives him a strange look. The bartender shrugs. Rudy still scans the tables, settling on--

A BLACKJACK TABLE

where a trio of COLLEGE KIDS are forking over chips. One of them's dark-haired with a goatee, a sweatshirt and jeans. Rudy studies this kid for moment.

JACK BANGS (o.s.)
Gimme a goddamn bottle of anything.

BACK AT THE BAR

Jack Bangs sidles up, distraught. The barkeep hands him a bottle. Bangs takes a swig.

JACK BANGS
I can't go back to Vegas, Bear.
They'll fuckin' kill me, 'kay?
I can't go back...

BARTENDER
What does the tribe want?

JACK BANGS
They want gold-paved roads is what they want. Talking 'bout the fuckin' Paiutes. Fuckin' Paiutes are on the interstate. Nothing I can do about that, man, I didn't pick the spot for your reservation.

BARTENDER
Neither did we.

JACK BANGS
Yeah, yeah, whatever.

58.

Rudy gets his drinks, as Jack Bangs turns his way:

JACK BANGS
Hey. Hey, cowboy. Jack Bangs, I
run the place. Nice to have you in
the Tomahawk. Tell me something...

Rudy winces, glancing to see Merlin and Jumpy watching him.
Frowns on their faces.

JACK BANGS
...does upstate Michigan need another
roadside casino or does upstate
Michigan need an international
gaming destination?

RUDY
(wants outta here)
Roadside casino?

Jack Bangs' smile falls flat.

JACK BANGS
Well, so how'd you hear about this
place, then. Word-of-mouth? Mass
mailings? Cable TV?

RUDY
Prison.

JACK BANGS
Prison?!

Rudy shrugs, smiles, takes off with his drinks. Bangs looks
sick, turns to a FAT GUY on the next stool over. But before he
can ask, the guy shakes his head--

FAT GUY
I just stopped in to use the can.

Bangs turns to the bartender, puts his head in his hands:

JACK BANGS
I can't go back to Vegas, Bear...
I can't...

From the slots, we hear a JACKPOT PAYOFF.

JACK BANGS
Aw fuck.

THROUGH THE TABLES

walks Rudy, as Merlin sidles up next to him:

MERLIN

What the hell was that about--

RUDY

He didn't recognize me. Back off,
willya? He didn't recognize me.

Merlin eyes him darkly, but lets him walk on into the slots. As he nears Ashley, he glances to the blackjack table, where the College Kid has left...heading for the bathroom--

ASHLEY

Hey Nick! We're up fifty cents!

--and as a barely-dressed COCKTAIL WAITRESS crosses between Rudy and Ashley, blocking her view of him--

--Rudy pretends to crash into her, splashing the rum and Coke into his own face--

RUDY

Heyyyy!

Reaching Ashley, his goatee is dripping--

ASHLEY

Nick, what happened--

RUDY

There went my...damn...well, doesn't seem like security's all that switched...Ash, shit, this mustache is starting to fall off. I gotta fix this thing--

(hands her his glass)

--drink this for me.

He hustles for the bathroom. A moment later, Jumpy storms by. Stops at Ashley.

JUMPY

What happened?

ASHLEY

He started losing his hair.

INT. CASINO BATHROOM - DAY

The College Kid is zipping up when Rudy SLAMS into his back, money in hand, crashing him against the wall:

RUDY

Hundred bucks to wear this jacket--

COLLEGE KID

Jesus, man, don't kill me!

RUDY

Nobody's killing you, kid. Santa's giving you a rhinestone jacket and a hundred bucks.

INT. TOMAHAWK - SAME

Merlin's at a slot machine, watching the hall to the bathrooms. A WAITRESS arrives, hands him a beer:

MERLIN.

Thanks, sister. How are ya.

WAITRESS

Fuckin' freezing.

MERLIN

Hell yeah. You work here long?

WAITRESS

Five years. Since it opened.

MERLIN

How long ago was your makeover?

WAITRESS

My what?!

MERLIN

No, the place. The remodeling. Moving everything around..

The waitress frowns.

WAITRESS

The Tomahawk's looked the same since I started, mister.

(shrugs)

Only the losers change.

Merlin stares at her. Then drops his drink to the floor, charging for the bathroom.

INT. BATHROOM

As Merlin crashes in, seeing the cowboy hat and jacket, back turned, adjusting a belt. As the figure turns around.

It's the College Kid. Merlin stops in his tracks--

--as Rudy CRASHES into him from a stall, kicking his legs out, driving his throat into a countertop. Merlin hits the ground, gagging. Rudy wears the kid's sweatshirt:

RUDY

Go! Go!

The College Kid, shaking, hustles out the door.

61.

INT. TOMAHAWK - CONTINUOUS

As the College Kid, in Rudy's black getup, strides out of the bathroom hall, walking for the casino exit.

From the slots, Ashley and Jumpy glance up, seeing him go. From their vantage, it looks like Rudy. They frown.

As they're watching the Kid hit the door, Rudy darts out of the hall, heads the other way.

EXT. PARKING LOT/INT. NOVA

Gabriel and Pug sit sentry, seeing the cowboy figure leave the casino. Wandering into the parking lot... away from them.

GABRIEL

Where the hell's he going?

PUG

Where the hell's your sister?

As the figure unlocks the driver's door of a Trans Am--

GABRIEL

Get him!

Pug REVS the engine, speeds through the lot, cutting off the Trans Am from backing away.

Gabriel jumps out, HAULS the cowboy from his car...and sees it's the College Kid. Rudy's gone.

COLLEGE KID

(scared shitless)

Oh man. It's your jacket, isn't it...

INT. TOMAHAWK

Merlin stumbles out of the bathroom, holding his throat. Catches Jumpy and Ashley's eyes from the slots:

JUMPY

Trouble.

INT. CASINO KITCHEN

As Rudy charges toward COOKS, holding a buffet plate aloft--

RUDY

MEDIUM RARE?! You call this MEDIUM RARE??!!

--hands them the plate, hurries past them, and out the--

62.

EXT. REAR OF CASINO - DAY

--to the back of the building. In his stolen clothes, he charges across the staff parking area and into the snowy expanse of meadow beyond.

Running for a thicket of winter woods.

EXT. PARKING LOT

Merlin and Jumpy stride out to join Gabriel and Pug. Ashley follows, stumbling to keep up.

GABRIEL

Where the HELL did he go?

MERLIN

Monster. There never was a structure change. This place was built the same from day one.

PUG

That motherfucker--

MERLIN

And Monster...he was talking with the casino manager. Nick was talking to him.

Gabriel darkens.

GABRIEL

Get. Him. Back.

EXT. SNOWY MEADOW - DAY

Rudy races as best he can through the waves of snow. He keeps struggling, losing his footing, fighting his way toward the cover of trees. From far away...

ASHLEY (o.s.)

Nick! Run! RUN!!!

Rudy turns back to see Merlin, Jumpy and Pug round into view back at the parking lot. They see him.

And charge into the snowfield.

Rudy breaks into the trees.

EXT. PARKING LOT

63.

Gabriel pushes Ashley into the Nova and peals out of the parking lot. Onto reservation roads.

EXT. WOODS - ON CHASE - DAY

Rudy darts among barren oaks and brush pines, crunching deeper into snowdrifts, slowing him down. Stumbling forward, shivering, breath frosting--

--as Merlin, Jumpy and Pug reach the treeline. Gaining but struggling too. With guns held.

Rudy keeps battling through the drifts--

--as GUNSHOTS start to ring out. Rudy glances back to rest; the truckers are a hundred yards distant. But as he turns to struggle on, treebark SPLITS apart beside him.

Rudy keeps running.

INT. NOVA

Bouncing over a snowy dirt road, having found a shortcut into the woods. Gabriel searches the trees, Ashley too.

EXT. WOODS

Merlin, Jumpy and Pug keep up their steady march. Rudy's running figure now only fifty yards distant.

MERLIN

You keep running, Nick! Keep running now! Can't keep warm if you don't keep running! We'll just be right back here... keeping track of your trail.

ANGLE to show Merlin's striding right in Rudy's bootprints. Pug FIRES off two shots.

They KICK UP snow just behind Rudy, struggling, panting...

MERLIN (o.s.)

Wherever you run...we'll get there.
Fast as you want...we'll be there.
We drive for a living, Nick.
Twelve, fifteen, twenty-hour days.

Rudy's anguished, ducking behind some pines, trying to brush away his footprints. Realizes it's useless.

A BULLET whistles through the pine branches.

MERLIN (o.s.)
We got nothing but time.

64.

Rudy takes a breath, crashes onward--

--then stops at the sound of a RUMBLING. Getting louder.
Closer. It's a car's engine.

Rudy spins for the source, focuses, and manages to make out a
snow-covered dirt road fifty yards away, down a swale. Another
BULLET smashes treebark. Rudy runs for it.

EXT. WOODED ROAD - DAY

As Rudy leaps out to wave down the car, as around the corner
comes a Chevy Nova--

--with Gabriel and Ashley inside. Gabriel's eyes widen, he
floors the gas, RACING right for Rudy.

Rudy scampers toward the opposite roadside, a steep wooded slope
cradling a meadow and frozen river--

ASHLEY

No!!!

--as Ashley grabs Gabriel's steering wheel, swerving the other
way. Gabriel fights her for control--

--as the Nova just misses Rudy, who dives off the road, hits the
slope and tumbles head-over-heels toward its bottom, a hundred
feet down, kicking up geysers of snow!

On the road, the Nova skids to a stop. Ashley and Gabriel leap
out, as Merlin, Jumpy and Pug reach the road.

AT THE SLOPE'S BOTTOM

Rudy pops to his feet, a dazed snowball.

BACK UP AT THE ROAD

Gabriel grabs a rifle from the Nova, steps to the slope-top edge
and takes aim--

ASHLEY

RUN!!!

--as Ashley suddenly slams into him from behind--

--sending the both of them tumbling down the slope! Sliding and
tangled, the rifle flying from Gabriel's grasp--

TO THE BOTTOM

--where they come to a tangled, snowy halt. Gabriel struggles
to clear the ice from his face--

--as the butt of his rifle cracks him in the jaw.

65.

RUDY

That's for reading her mail.

He extends a hand to Ashley--

RUDY

Come on.

--and hauls her to her feet. Ashley beams. As Gabriel howls, the two of them scramble away from the woods, Rudy with the rifle, toward the meadow and its frozen pond.

More GUNSHOTS ring as Merlin, Jumpy and Pug slide their way down the ravine.

EXT. FROZEN RIVER - CONTINUOUS

Rudy and Ashley race out across the ice. The traction's slippery, but there's no way around. There's a highway bridge two hundred yards away, with sparse truck traffic.

RUDY

We get to the bridge, we're all right!

ASHLEY

Nick, the ice is--

RUDY

Get to the bridge!
(waving at traffic)
HEY! HEY! DOWN HERE!

He grips her hand tighter, as SHOTS crash into the ice at their feet. Suddenly, the ground splinters and gives way--

--and Ashley goes plummeting through to the river! She vanishes from sight in an instant!

Rudy scrambles back, onto sturdy ice. He stares, stunned, at the ripples in the freezing water.

Ashley's not coming up.

RUDY

looks to the truckers in pursuit. Coming down the ridge.

Then looks to the highway. Safety within sight.

But he can't run. Cursing himself, he grips the rifle tightly and LEAPS into the ice-hole--

EXT. RIVER BENEATH THE ICE

66.

--plummeting underwater, the temperature hitting his body like needles. He writhes, spinning around--

--and sees Ashley ten yards away, desperately pounding at the ice above her. Strength giving out.

Rudy struggles to her, wrapping an arm around her. She fights, panicked, clawing at the ice, both of them pulled further away from the opening.

With Ashley safely in hand, Rudy raises his rifle-arm, pressing the barrel against the ice above them--

--and FIRES. A HOLE blasts a shaft of light into the gray-blue. Rudy FIRES again. Another HOLE caves in. Ashley reaches for a sheath of ice, splashing--

TO THE SURFACE

--clutching frozen ground, treading water. Rudy surfaces beside her, the both of them gasping, facing the bridge.

Instinctively, they spin around--

TO FIND GABRIEL, MERLIN, JUMPY AND PUG

--standing right behind them. Guns trained.

GABRIEL

(rubs his jaw)

At the rate you're going, Nick...
I'm gonna have a hard time ever
considering you family.

He extends his hand, a gesture of help. But menacing.

GABRIEL

How lucky ya feeling now.

CUT TO:

INT. GABRIEL'S RIG - DAY

Pitch black. We can barely make out a huddled, fetal form, quaking and trembling. It's Rudy. Dripping wet, on the verge of hypothermia. Trying to stay conscious:

RUDY

I-I-I-I...have n-n-no g-g-gifts
to br-br-bring, pa rum-p-p-p-p-p...
(struggling)
...pum-pum-pum. N-n-no treasures
for the k-k-k-k-k....
(waits)
...king.

The trailer doors swing open, crashing harsh light upon him. He squints into the light, shivering madly.

67.

RUDY
Pa-rum-pum-pum-pum.

INT. KNIGHTS INN GAME ROOM - DAY

Gabriel is hurling darts again, focused, expressionless. Bullseye.

Merlin and Jumpy haul Rudy in. He collapses at Gabriel's feet, unable to stand. Still trembling.

A couple KIDS scamper into the doorway--

MERLIN
Game room's closed.

--and Merlin slams the door in their face. Gabriel hurls another bullseye, then retrieves his darts from the board.

GABRIEL
A for effort, Nick, honestly,
A for effort and an honorary degree.
I'm surprised you never escaped
from the Mountain.

RUDY
(teeth chattering)
...never...tried...

GABRIEL
Nick, here's what we're gonna do.
In the spirit of the season,
I'm going to give you a chance.
I understand you're unhappy. Right
outta the lockup, here against
your will, it's the holidays and
there's reruns on TV.
(beat)
So we're gonna have a contest.

Gabriel strides back to him, with two darts.

GABRIEL
We're each going to get one of
these. Whichever one of us hits
closer to the bullseye...gets
what he wants.
(beat)
You land closer, you get Ashley.
And you guys get to go free. I
land closer...and we start getting
your help.

He lifts Rudy's shaking hand, puts a dart in it. Rudy's fingers are half-frozen, they don't bend. Gabriel has to wedge it in. 68.

GABRIEL

May the best sportsman win.

Gabriel turns to the board, ten feet away, and tosses his dart. It thunks in the "13" wedge of the outermost ring.

GABRIEL

Damn.

He steps aside for Rudy. Rudy struggles to raise his hand, trembling badly. He focuses on the board, teeth chattering, tries to reposition his fingers, rears back and throws--

--except the dart remains in his frozen grip. He brings his icy hand back, tries to move his fingers. And the dart finally tumbles out and hits the floor at his feet.

Gabriel smiles, steps close.

GABRIEL

Got something to say to me, Nick?

RUDY

...ttt..tt...two out of three?

Gabriel grabs his jacket and hurls him backward. Rudy CRASHES into a chair, flanked by video games.

GABRIEL

What'd you tell that casino manager?

RUDY

Nnn...nothing...

GABRIEL

You were talking to him! What'd you tell him!?

RUDY

Nothing...I promise...nothing...

GABRIEL

MAYBE SOMETHING ABOUT A ROBBERY?

RUDY

NO!

Gabriel spins to the dartboard, pulls out a fistful and wheels. He whistles a dart at Rudy's head. It SMACKS the wall beside his ear. He whistles another. It THUNKS right above his head. A third HITS the wall by his chin.

RUDY

He thought I was some gambler...
he didn't know me...he didn't
recognize me!

GABRIEL

I been driving rigs a long time,
Nick. Four, five million miles of
road. Worked for people who wouldn't
keep me on less I was driving
fifteen hours a day. Tell 'em I
needed sleep, I needed rest, shit,
they'll hire someone else...

Gabriel flings another dart. Just misses Rudy's other ear.

GABRIEL

...Dispatcher's screaming for me
to haul ass, he's got a load on the
runback for me. Shipper's making me
wait for the pickup, receiver's
bitching 'bout the count...

Another dart NAILS the wall, right through Rudy's hair.

GABRIEL

...Got the cops at the bottom of
every mountain, got the DOT at the
top. And every day, every day, I see
all those faces in their little
airbag Hot Wheels, moms and pops and
jam-faced kiddies, giving me that
look to go to hell and get off their
happy goddamn highway. Hey. They
don't gotta get two thousand miles
by sundown, or the gang don't eat
come sunrise.

Gabriel strides to Rudy, sitting stock-still, his head ringed by
darts. Stares him down.

GABRIEL

It's time for me...to be working
for me. I want mine, Nick.
And I need you.

(frightening calm)

Did you tell your manager there's
gonna be a robbery?

RUDY

No, Gabriel...no...

Gabriel pulls the darts free. Backs away again.

RUDY

...he...he asked me...how I'd
heard about his place...he didn't
know it was me...

Gabriel raises a dart to throw--

70.

RUDY
I PROMISE YOU HE DIDN'T KNOW IT
WAS ME!

--and then lowers it. Believing he's gotten a reprieve, Rudy relaxes, his shivering coming under control.

RUDY
Man, Monster...just...just don't
start trying to hit me...

GABRIEL
Nick. I been trying to hit you.

Gabriel rears back and WHISTLES another dart. It plugs into Rudy's chest. Rudy screams. Gabriel FIRES another, skewering him in the ribs. Then a third, fourth and fifth.

Rudy howls in pain, his body too numb to defend itself. Five darts protrude from his chest, colorful plastic feathering and spreading rivulets of blood.

GABRIEL
Maybe that'll help sharpen your
memory.

Gabriel stalks close.

GABRIEL
Tonight we're gonna take another
look at that map. And this time
you're gonna tell me what I need
to know.

INT. RUDY'S ROOM - DAY

Rudy gets hurled inside by Merlin and Jumpy. He hits the floor beside the bed, where Ashley sits prisoner. Pug sits guard, watching "How The Grinch Stole Christmas" on TV.

ASHLEY
Nick! Jesus, Nick--

She falls to his side. Merlin cuffs Rudy's ankle again to the bedframe. He and Jumpy head out--

MERLIN
Pug.

Pug's engrossed in the cartoon. They're singing in Whoville.

MERLIN
PUG!

Pug snaps to. Shuts off the TV, spits some chaw on the floor and gone. Rudy and Ashley are left alone.

ASHLEY

Nick, oh my God, what'd he do to you? What'd he do?

She touches his bloodied chest. Rudy winces badly.

RUDY

He had some points to make...

Ashley helps pull his shirt off, sees the wounds:

ASHLEY

Jesus Christ, stay here, don't move, stay right here--

RUDY

(near-delirium)

All I wanted...was to make it home... for a little of Dad's turkey, and Mom's stuffing...Aunt Lisbeth's acorn gravy... Aunt Mary's cranberry buns...

Ashley has leapt to the bathroom. She brings wet washcloths back to clean and dress--

ASHLEY

We'll get there, baby...we'll get there...

RUDY

...haven't had cranberry buns... in five whole years...

ASHLEY

Shh, now. Rest now. Two years, Nick. You haven't had cranberry buns in two years.

She kisses him softly. Rudy meets her eyes. Staring to get his bearings back...

ASHLEY

You saved my life.

(beat)

You could have run, but you didn't. You saved me.

RUDY

You saved me...

ASHLEY

I saved you because I love you, Nick.

(smiles)

Why'd you save me?

Rudy studies her hopeful face, attending to his wounds. Still weak and distant: 72.

RUDY

Guy I was in with...car thief...I used to read your letters to him. I know they were private...I know, but... you spend twenty-four hours a day with somebody, you gotta talk, y'know? You gotta share. Or the room gets even smaller.

(beat)

And sometimes, I'd be reading them, and he'd close his eyes, get a smile on his face...and I'd know somewhere inside he was pretending, you were writing to him. He'd see your face, your pictures on the wall...

(beat)

Some nights I think he fell in love with you, too.

Rudy touches a hand to her hair.

RUDY

You gave a couple guys hope, Ashley. And with hope, there ain't nothing you can't survive.

Ashley stares, touched, still kneading the cloth into his chest. Rudy struggles up, his face level with hers. She kisses him tenderly. Lingerin'.

And this time Rudy responds, mouth seeking, working down her neck. Her eyes flutter closed.

ASHLEY

I'm sorry, Nick...I'm so sorry...

RUDY

Don't say my name...

ASHLEY

I love you, Nick...

RUDY

Ash. Don't say it. Don't say my name.

Ashley hesitates. Carefully strokes his chest. He's still kissing her, softly, still somewhat delirious.

ASHLEY

(a small frown)

I love you...

As he returns to her lips, mouths joining. Ashley's eyes close again, as they fold into each other...

...and move slowly, tenderly, back to the floor.

73.

EXT. KNIGHTS INN HOTEL - DUSK

A bitter cold sunset. Through a room's window, Rudy and Ashley lie tangled in sheets on the carpet.

INT. RUDY'S ROOM

Ashley nestles against him. Rudy stares skyward. Hard.

RUDY
They'll have guns.

ASHLEY
What?

RUDY
You said they've run guns, in their trucks. So they'll have guns. To do this robbery. They'll have serious guns.

ASHLEY
I...I don't know...

RUDY
We'll need one.

Ashley frowns. There's a new look in Rudy's eyes.

RUDY
I'm going to have to be inside that casino. When it happens. I'll need to be part of it. I can't just be drawing some map.

ASHLEY
Nick, what are you talking about?

RUDY
We need to find a way to make me part of it.

ASHLEY
Part of...with them?

Rudy meets her eyes.

RUDY
If we're helping them with their robbery, Ash, we're gonna be doing more than just walking away. Like that's some Christmas bonus.

He nods, scheming the way he's always known.

RUDY

You want him outta your life?
You want a real New Year to look
forward to?

(bravely)

If we're gonna do this...we're
gonna do it to get it all.

74

INT. KNIGHTS INN RESTAURANT - NIGHT

A medieval-themed biergarten. A happy FAMILY of five sits at a booth, singing along to "Good King Wencelas."

In the booth beside, Merlin and Pug are holding court. Merlin's puffing smoke rings. Pug watches dully, chewing:

PUG

Knew a guy in Joliet, smoked ten packs a day like you. His lungs got so black they couldn't find 'em with an x-ray.

MERLIN

That right? Shit. I used to run rigs for a guy loved your chaw there. Shit rotted out his tongue, had to build him one outta silicon so the poor boy could talk. You ever see a motherfucker with a silicon-fucking tongue?

The Happy Family stops singing. Pug considers, spits a wad.

PUG

Hell. The guy from Joliet, those black-ass lungs were the least of his problems. Got so much smoke in him his lungs couldn't even hold it. Got into his system, man. Into his blood. Coming out his ears, man, coming out his eyes. Guy'd be walking the row, smoke'd be puffing out his skin.

The Happy Family trade discomfited looks. Merlin shrugs, takes another drag.

MERLIN

This trucker? Met a girl in a bar one night, she didn't know his situation. He's drunk, she's drunk, they get to mackin' hot and heavy and the woman swallows it. His tongue. Sucks it right down.

PUG

My guy would walk into a room, set off the goddamn sprinklers.

MERLIN

His lips went next. You ever see some silicon-fucking-lips?

The Happy Family flees their booth. Pug and Merlin glance over. And grab their leftovers. Rifling the grub:

MERLIN .

(with disgust)

Vegetarians...

Behind them, Gabriel and Jumpy file into the biergarten, leading Rudy and Ashley to the booth. Meeting commenced.

Rudy, battered and freezer-burnt, gets shoved in first. Gabriel throws down the casino map:

GABRIEL

Start singing.

RUDY

I have no gifts to bring, pa-rum-pum-pum-pum--

GABRIEL

Sing it in pictures, Nick.

Rudy takes the map, glances at Ashley, and then takes charge. For the first time, he's giving the orders:

RUDY

What you gotta worry about first is the guards. Place doesn't look much richer than when I worked there, so let's figure you're gonna have to deal with ten of 'em. There'll be two on the floor, walking the room, that leaves eight up above. Eyes in the sky. They see something up, they're the ones who'll hit the silent alarm and you're fucked.

MERLIN

How do we take them out?

RUDY

You gotta get someone upstairs.

MERLIN

How do we do that?

Rudy takes the map, points to the gaming tables area:

RUDY

Across from blackjack, there's a security doorway. Keypad access.

GABRIEL

What's the code?

RUDY

Uh...they change it every month. I wouldn't know.

(beat)

If there's trouble on the floor, you'll get security coming through. What you gotta do, is get inside that doorway once they do. You gotta draw 'em out.

PUG

Without having them hit the alarms.

RUDY

I got an idea on that one. Once you're up there, you gotta hold those guards down till some backup can get there. There's a security camera room that videotapes everything. You've gotta destroy every last one of those tapes.

MERLIN

What about the money?

RUDY

You lock down security, you move behind the cage. You hit the Count Room. There'll be a guy in there but he's got no guns; room's accessed by another code. Cashiers'll know it. They'll have alarms.

JUMPY

What about the Powwow Safe?

RUDY

What?

JUMPY

The Powwow Safe. The secret safe. You said the manager's got a safe in his office where he hides skim money.

RUDY

Oh. Right. Yeah. That's, uh... upstairs. Uh. Here. Powwow Safe.

His confident manner wavers. Gabriel notices, narrows his eyes. Rudy quickly grabs the map again:

RUDY

So. You're gonna need a man through here, two men at the cage, one to cover the count. You're gonna need a lookout outside, a sweeper through the back, and a gun guarding the front.

(beat)

You need six.

GABRIEL

We got five. Putting Ashley outside.

RUDY

You need six.

Gabriel eyes him darkly.

GABRIEL

No.

RUDY

You go in with five, you're either leaving an alarm free or an exit free. Someone hits an alarm, you're fucked. Someone gets to a phone, gets outside, 'cross the street, whatever, you're fucked. You need six.

(nods)

Six is me.

GABRIEL

No!

RUDY

You guys get caught, I go away for good. I got an interest in making sure you don't. You need a sixth man covering an exit. What're you gonna do about it.

ASHLEY

Yeah. What're you gonna do about it.

She puts an arm around Rudy, smiles. That's her man.

GABRIEL

I want a map of that security level. Every room, every guard, every thing.

RUDY

Six men means six guns.

GABRIEL

No way.

RUDY

I'm no threat without a gun.

GABRIEL
No, you're not.

78.

RUDY
There'll be people in that casino.
I can't keep them from leaving
if I don't get a gun. I don't
need bullets, Monster...but I
gotta be a threat.

ASHLEY
What's the matter, Gabriel? This
is what you wanted him for, isn't it?

Gabriel's eyes don't leave Rudy's.

GABRIEL
No gun.

RUDY
Well. What you guys have to plan
out, then...is how you're going to
get to that cage and that security
level before anybody realizes
anything's wrong. Running in with
ski masks and bullets flying ain't
gonna do it.

GABRIEL
That part, Nick...was planned out
the day I read your letters.

RUDY
What. We all gonna dress up like
cowboys?

GABRIEL
Not cowboys, Nick. Not cowboys.

Gabriel smiles.

GABRIEL
Not on Christmas Eve.

INT. GABRIEL'S RIG - TRAILER - NIGHT
CLOSE ON STORAGE LOCKER

Pulled open to reveal FIVE SANTA CLAUS SUITS, hanging side-by-
side. Red polyester coats and pants, white felt trim and black
buckles, black boots and red caps.

WIDEN TO REVEAL TRAILER

As Gabriel lifts a Santa Claus suit and presses it against Rudy.
Ashley, Merlin, Jumpy and Pug look on.

RUDY
You gotta be kidding me.

79.

GABRIEL
'Tis the season, convict.

He puts the suit back in the locker, pulls another. Finding Rudy's size.

GABRIEL
Can't be attracting attention, right?

RUDY
What, we walking in there and delivering toys?

He turns to see Merlin open another locker. This one stacked with rifles, carbines and handguns.

MERLIN
Hell yeah.

INT. RUDY'S ROOM - NIGHT
CLOSE ON SKETCH

of a floor plan, a sheet of paper overlaid on Gabriel's map of the casino. A pencil draws a boxy room and labels it "Security Video Room." Then an eraser wipes it out.

WIDEN TO REVEAL RUDY

still cuffed to the bedframe, pulled close to a desk. He's sitting, working on the security level map.

The door opens; Ashley enters, looking worried:

ASHLEY
He wants to see your map.

RUDY
I'm almost done.

ASHLEY
He says he wants it now.

RUDY
If he wanted a photographic memory, he shoulda kidnapped one. I'm working on it here.

Ashley walks over, puts her arms around his neck. Whispers:

ASHLEY
How are we gonna do this, Nick?

RUDY

You're the getaway girl. The money's gonna get to you eventually. Gonna be my job to be the guy who walks outta there with it. But I can't do that without a gun. Any luck talking to him?

ASHLEY

Bullets or no bullets, he won't do it.

RUDY

Is there any way you could get into his truck?

ASHLEY

No.

RUDY

We need a gun, Ash. We need a gun...

Rudy studies his map, then quickly pencils in the "Security Video Room," in a totally different place than he drew it before. Hands the paper to her.

RUDY

Here's the Picasso. Is he in his room?

ASHLEY

They all are. Football's on.

RUDY

(nods, thinks)

Keep 'em there for a little while.

Ashley takes the map, frowns. Rudy kisses her gently.

RUDY

We're gonna get you out of Detroit, Ash. Get you out of beauty and fragrances.

(smiles, then)

Remember that. After all this is over, when you know me, when you really know me...remember it was me.

She searches his eyes, not quite understanding. But smiles. Rudy smiles back, nods toward the door. Ashley slips out.

When she's gone, Rudy stands and turns to the window. Outside, the Blazer with the "Ice Fishermen Do It All Year Long" bumper sticker still sits parked.

Rudy reaches for his jeans pocket, and pulls out...one of the game room darts, flecked with blood.

He gives it a solemn stare.

INT. RUDY'S ROOM - MOMENTS LATER - NIGHT

81.

Rudy lies on his back, under the bedframe, dart in hand. He tears off the plastic feathering, to get at the cross-shaped end, furthest from the tip. Four protruding metal edges.

He finds the Phillips screws on the bedframe, and tries to work the dart-end into the grooves. It scrapes and jags, but with pressure he's able to do a quarter-turn at a time.

The screw starts spiralling out.

ANGLE ON BEDFRAME

As two metal pieces split apart, and Rudy wriggles his ankle handcuff off the frame.

ANGLE ON CLOSET

As Rudy's hand grabs a paper-covered wire hanger and rips the paper off, untwisting the wire.

ANGLE ON ROOM'S WINDOW

As Rudy slides it open, and climbs outside.

EXT. KNIGHTS INN PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Light snow falling. Rudy drops from the second floor window into some snowy shrubs and an empty parking space. He stealthily darts ahead to the ice fishermen's Blazer.

AT THE FISHERMEN'S BLAZER

Rudy peers in the windows, spotting fishing rods, tackle and gear boxes in the back seat.

He takes his wire coat hanger, now stretched straight, and slips it between the driver's window and moulding, jamming it around until it trips the door lock.

The lock pops up; Rudy pops in--

INT. BLAZER

--and raids the gear box. Bait, reels, fishing wire. Boning knives. A compass. A first aid kit. A switchblade.

RUDY

Gun, gun, c'mon, boys like you
gotta be keeping a gun...

He rustles around in the backseat. Ice cooler, open bag of pork rinds, another gear box. Nothing.

Some HEADLIGHTS sweep past the Blazer. Rudy ducks down, pockets the switchblade. Munches some pork rinds.

ASHLEY

...he wants to help now, he wants
to rob it now...we could probably
stay right here, he'd go on
and rob it by himself...

--as Gabriel steps into view, also undressed, moving toward her
in the pool.

GABRIEL

He wants the money.

ASHLEY

No, baby. He wants me.

Gabriel reaches her, puts his arms around her. She smiles.

ASHLEY

He wants...your "sister"...

GABRIEL

...whoever she is.

And they kiss, entwining together, reflections and ripples. A
steamy embrace.

ASHLEY

Nick Mason's gonna help us more
than we ever dreamed.

ANGLE ON RUDY

in the shadows, hearing them. Staring into darkness.

IN THE POOL

Gabriel turns with Ashley, wrapped together. Moving slow.

GABRIEL

All those letters are about to
pay off, baby...all those letters...

ASHLEY

To all those cons...

GABRIEL

Searching for a money man...

ASHLEY

We musta written what, twenty of
'em? And they were before this guy.
One, two letters apiece, ten to
the racetrack guy in Leavenworth--

GABRIEL

--till he fucked his parole--

ASHLEY

--plus the forty to Mason...how many letters is that?

GABRIEL

That's a book, baby.
(presses closer)
That's a book of love.

They kiss again. Gabriel strokes her wet hair:

GABRIEL

I can't take watching you touch him.
I can't take his hands on you.

ASHLEY

One more day, baby. One more day
to Christmas.

GABRIEL

I've been doing good, though.

ASHLEY

Didn't have to hit me so fucking hard. Didn't have to throw me outta the goddamn truck.

GABRIEL

Didn't have to send me down a fucking mountain.

ASHLEY

What, he should see me help you catch him?

ON RUDY

still in the shadows, welling with betrayal.

ASHLEY (o.s.)

He's shown us the setup, he's drawn us the map, he's helped us do the plan. He wants a gun, give him a gun. Take the bullets out, whatever, but give him the gun. The more manpower we've got in there, the better. He won't try and make his move till the money's in hand.

GABRIEL (o.s.)

He'll be dead when he does.

BACK IN THE POOL

Gabriel and Ashley rock slowly, coupled, in the water.

GABRIEL

Y'know something, baby? If you were
my sister? I'd still want to
wake up Christmas morning with you...

ASHLEY

Mmm, baby. And I'd still want to
be the tinsel 'round your tree...

And as their words turn to moans and murmurs...

IN THE SHADOWS

Rudy is gone.

INT. FIRST FLOOR HALLWAY - NIGHT

Rudy strides a corridor, eyes dead ahead, passing a stairwell on his way toward the "Exit" sign posted above a door. He's almost there, marching fast--

RUDY

Here's my present to you, truck
drivers--

AS THE EXIT DOOR OPENS

MERLIN (o.s.)

Where the hell's Gabriel?

--and Rudy dives to the stairwell, out of sight just as Merlin and Jumpy stride back inside.

JUMPY

With his girlfriend. Making up
for "Nick" time. I'm going down
to the bar, you want something?

MERLIN

Get me a brew. I'm gonna check
on our convict.

They separate, Jumpy down the hall, Merlin to the stairs--

INT. STAIRWELL

Merlin trudges upward, while Rudy steps from hiding one flight down. Checks the hall for Jumpy, then races out--

EXT. PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Rudy slams out the side door, scrambling straight for the same Blazer. He jimmys the lock again, leaps in, tears free the engine panel and searches for ignition wires like a pro. Stripping the plastic, trying to spark contact--

RUDY

85.

Catch, dammit, catch! Like riding
a bike, it's like riding a bike!

But there's nothing. The engine won't start.

INT. STAIRWELL

Merlin reaches the second floor, steps into the hall.

EXT. PARKING LOT

Rudy jumps from the Blazer, looks at the lot, the highway, the woods. His own footprints in the dusting snow.

RUDY

How far you gonna get, Rudy...

Realizing the answer, Rudy looks to his room's window. Forced to race back. He tries clambering the wall, standing on shrubbery, but he can't reach. He whirls, desperate.

And his eyes find the Blazer.

INT. SECOND FLOOR HALL

Merlin ambles the corridor. Approaching Rudy's room.

EXT. PARKING LOT

Rudy flings open the Blazer door, slams the emergency brake down. Forces the gearshift into "Reverse."

INT. SECOND FLOOR HALL

Merlin reaches Rudy's door. Searches his pockets for the key.

EXT. PARKING LOT

Rudy darts to the front of the Blazer, slipping and sliding on asphalt ice. He drops to his knees, pushing on the front bumper. The wheels start to move.

INT. SECOND FLOOR HALL

Merlin finds a room key. Puts it in the lock. Turns the handle but the door won't open. Merlin checks the key.

MERLIN

My room.

EXT. PARKING LOT

The Blazer starts to roll backwards, toward the snowy shrubs ringing the building. Headed straight for the empty parking space below Rudy's window. Rudy keeps pushing. The Blazer picks up speed, rolling on its own.

INT. SECOND FLOOR HALL

86.

Merlin searches his pockets again, finds the right key.

EXT. PARKING LOT

The Blazer rolls toward the building. Rudy scrambles to his feet, runs after it, leaps his left foot onto the bumper, the right foot onto the hood, then onto the roof--

--getting two roof-steps worth of running start--

--as the Blazer slows to a rest against the snowy shrubs--

--and Rudy dives into the air, torpedoing himself right through the window to his room--

INT. RUDY'S ROOM

--where he crashes headlong to the floor, turning a somersault and landing sprawled across the carpet.

INT. SECOND FLOOR HALL

The key in the lock, Merlin hears the crash--

INT. RUDY'S ROOM

--and as Merlin opens the door, he finds Rudy sitting calmly on the floor, ankle-cuff locked once again to the bedframe. Spreading a deck of cards out before him.

Starting a game of solitaire. He looks up.

RUDY

Hey.

Merlin frowns, takes a suspicious look around the room. The window's open. Rudy continues his card game.

Merlin watches him for a long time. Then pulls the door shut.

Once he's gone, Rudy collapses to the floor. Breathing hard, heart pounding. The cards go flying.

INT. RUDY'S ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

The LIGHTS go out. Rudy creeps back to the window, checks outside...and stops still. In the parking lot...

...a cigarette glow burns inside the Nova. From the driver's seat. It's Merlin. Now watching.

Rudy steps back into the shadows. Closes the window and watches the falling snow. Caged again, after all.

DISSOLVE TO:

Pitch dark. Rudy asleep on the floor, as Ashley creeps back in. Seeing he's asleep, she lies beside him, pulls a blanket over them both, nestles into his body and kisses him.

ASHLEY

Merry Christmas-Eve, my love. My
love, my love. Merry Christmas-Eve...

Ashley closes her eyes. With a smile.

A moment later, Rudy's eyes open. Turning to look at her smiling, sleeping face...with a convict's vengeful stare...

INT. KNIGHTS INN LOBBY - DAY
CLOSE ON DESK CLERK

In a elfin cap, smiling cheerfully:

SMILING DESK CLERK

Hello, gentlemen. And how can we
help you on this holiday morning?

CLOSE ON GABRIEL, MERLIN AND PUG

Three grim faces.

GABRIEL

Checking out.

EXT. KNIGHTS INN PARKING LOT - DAY

The three truckers stride to the Nova, where Jumpy guards Rudy and Ashley. In the b.g., the Ice Fishermen are by their car, wondering how the hell it switched parking spaces overnight.

Gabriel marches straight to Rudy and SLUGS him in the gut. Rudy hits the snow--

ASHLEY

Gabriel!

GABRIEL

That's for the hundred bucks
worth of pay-per-view.

(then KICKS him)

And that's for the two hundred
you took outta your minibar.

RUDY

(chokes, pained)

You guys were paying for the room,
I just figured--

Gabriel KICKS him again, then pulls a handgun, points it at Rudy's head. Ashley screams, rushes him--

88.

--as Gabriel's gun SHOOTS a thin stream of water into Rudy's face. It's a forty-five caliber squirt gun.

GABRIEL
(cruel smile)
You wanted a weapon, convict?
You got one.

Gabriel tosses the water pistol onto Rudy's chest. Jumpy and Pug haul him up. With venom:

GABRIEL
Merry Christmas-Eve.

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

The Motor City Monster cruises the snowy landscape, with Lake Superior beyond. Pug drives the Nova in convoy.

INT. GABRIEL'S RIG

Gabriel hands copies of Rudy's sketched map to Merlin and Jumpy. Rudy and Ashley are in the sleeper.

GABRIEL
Commit this thing to memory.
Every guard, every exit...don't
tape it to your fuckin' wrist:
remember it. That's the Gospel right
there. The Gospel. Matthew, Mark,
Luke and John...

Rudy watches them studying his made-up map. Ashley strokes his arm, gives a loving smile. Rudy stares at her.

He smiles right back.

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

The rig and the Nova blow by a road sign: "Now Entering Powahachee Indian Reservation Lands."

INT./EXT. TRAILER - DAY - PREPARATION MONTAGE

The storage locker with the Santa suits SLAMS open.

Merlin's hands PULL automatics and shotguns from the weapons chest. Pug's hands UNLOAD ammo.

A red-and-white Santa coat gets PULLED ON and BUTTONED UP.

Jumpy's hands apportion GUNS and AMMO on a picnic table.

Black Santa boots STAMP TIGHT in the snow.

89.

A shoulder-strap ASSAULT RIFLE gets hidden under a Santa coat.

AMMO CLIPS are taped inside a fat black buckle-belt.

A HANDGUN gets tucked under a Santa hat.

And the rig's trailer doors come CRASHING SHUT.

EXT. LAKESIDE REST AREA - DUSK

Lake Superior shimmers in the dying light. The rig's in the empty rest area lot. On a nearby bank, four men in Santa Claus suits and one woman without sit scattered at picnic tables, guns at their sides. Staring out at the lake.

RUDY AND ASHLEY

sit apart from the rest. Rudy in a red suit, black boots, cap in hand. Ashley's head is in his lap, watching the sky.

ASHLEY

Where should we go, Nick? When we're gone from here...where should we go...

The Nova drives into the lot. Pug gets out, carrying several fast-food bags. Hurrying to stay warm:

PUG (o.s.)

Okay, who had the cheeseburger with bacon; what about a roast beef, I've got two roast beefs here--

JUMPY (o.s.)

Cheeseburger 'n bacon's mine--

MERLIN (o.s.)

I got a bacon too; there another bacon in there?

PUG (o.s.)

I got a bacon for him and a bacon for me; there's four cheeseburgers and two roast beefs--

MERLIN (o.s.)

Somebody better give me something with some goddamn bacon--

As they continue chow dispersal, Rudy stares over the lake.

Distant. Not even aware Ashley's there.

RUDY

90.

This time right now...Dad's stacking wood out back, getting ready for tomorrow. Little blaze in the fireplace. Mom's setting out the good silver, hanging her cinammon sticks, up in the doorways. Getting out her scratchy old records...singing along...

Rudy smiles to himself. He's got a faraway look.

RUDY

I don't know where you're going.
But I'm going home.

ASHLEY

We go together, Nick. Wherever...
we go together. Remember?

RUDY

Well. I'm going home.

GABRIEL

sits by the water, staring over the lake too. With a white cotton Santa beard resting on his chin. He unwraps his roast beef sandwich, pulls his beard down to his neck, and takes a savage bite.

Munches away, stares to Rudy and Ashley. She meets his eyes. Gabriel smiles. And looks again to the water.

ON FULL SCENE

The snowy rest stop, the glistening lake. And the six figures scattered, watching day turn to night...

CUT TO:

EXT. TOMAHAWK CASINO - NIGHT

The neon axe lit up in full regalia, with Christmas lights now strung along the building's roof. There are fewer than a dozen cars in the parking lot.

INT. TOMAHAWK - NIGHT

Filled with the JINGLING, JANGLING slots, but there's only two FAT WOMEN sitting at them. Three INDIANS at a poker table. An OLD TIMER in his 90's playing blackjack.

INT. SECURITY LEVEL

A ragged headquarters, looking down to the casino level through smoked glass. Desks, file cabinets, pin-up centerfolds. A room with video monitors to one side. Stairs to a camera catwalk that rings the casino.

Jack Bangs is at a table of wassail and cookies. He opens a bottle of brandy, pours a bit into the punch, and takes the bottle for himself. Walks over to his HEAD OF SECURITY, watching the lack of activity below:

91.

JACK BANGS

And all through the house...not a creature was stirring...

(sighs)

Why don't you go ahead and send most of your guys home, Ed.

SECURITY BOSS

Thanks, Jack. Merry X-mas.

The boss smiles, heads off. Jack Bangs swigs his brandy, eyes his high-tech security gear glumly:

JACK BANGS

Hell. Nobody even comes here to cheat...

EXT. TOMAHAWK - NIGHT

The Nova pulls into the lot and parks. Merlin, Pug and Ashley inside. On the road, the Motor City Monster slows to an idling stop. In the cab, Gabriel turns to Rudy and Jumpy:

GABRIEL

Go.

Rudy gives Gabriel a withering look. He and Jumpy climb out. Gabriel's rig rumbles up the road.

[NOTE: All five men, save Ashley, from now till story's end, are in their Santa Claus suits.]

RUDY AND JUMPY

make their way across the lot, heading for the entrance.

RUDY

Hey Jumpy, I want to ask you something. You have any problem with the fact that we're on our way to take millions of dollars from an Indian casino?

The Native American considers. As they walk:

JUMPY

Nick. It's true that Indian gaming's gone a long way toward restoring wealth and pride to communities who've been economically isolated and enslaved for centuries. Stronger infrastructure, better schools, higher employment...

(MORE)

JUMPY (cont'd)

...they're all the results of reservation casino success stories. Still, many natives believe that these are temples to a godless materialism and greed that will only infect the souls of indigenous peoples until their love of money has destroyed the spiritual values their ancestors died to protect and their homelands have become no different from any United States suburb, satellite city or industrial park. Destroying the Indian legacy once and for all and leaving behind a nation of selfish, angry natives, of which I, it's true, am one--

--as they hit the Tomahawk's doors--

INT. TOMAHAWK - NIGHT

--and SLAM inside, stumbling into each other, suddenly LAUGHING and slapping backs. Surveying the casino:

RUDY

Hey-hey, egg nog for everybody!

Rudy spreads his Santa arms wide and whoops. Jumpy laughs with him, steadying his balance. Drunken and slurred:

RUDY

Let's win some MONEY! MONEY-MONEY-MONEY!

The few gamblers inside look up at the commotion. Bear the Bartender. Two CASHIERS and one WAITRESS. Ed the Security Boss strides over, smiling tightly:

SECURITY BOSS

How you gentlemen doing tonight?

RUDY

We're out of work tonight, that's how! Christmas Eve! We're out of work!

JUMPY

(shakes his hand)

Hi, Santa Claus, how are you. He's with Sears, I'm with Wal-Mart, twas the season...

RUDY

We're all outta gifts, boys and girls, but we got charitable donations!

Rudy grabs a wad of bills from his pocket, drops some to the floor. Jumpy retrieves them--

JUMPY

...bunch of us got together for
the union party. Hey, how late
are you open?

SECURITY BOSS

(eyes on the money)

All night and all day.

RUDY

I got wampum for the Cocktail
Waitress Civil Defense Fund! Are
there any representatives here present?

A Waitress sidles close; checks with the Boss. He nods okay.

WAITRESS

What can I get ya, Santa?

RUDY

Santa drinks American beer.

SECURITY BOSS

(to Jumpy)

What's your game, guys?

JUMPY

Blackjack. Got a buddy from
Woolworth's out parking the sleigh.

The Security Boss stares him down. Then:

SECURITY BOSS

Good luck, gentlemen.

He steps aside and indicates the tables. Jumpy claps him on the
back, pushes Rudy on through the slots.

EXT. RESERVATION ROAD - NIGHT

Gabriel's truck at the roadside, hazards on, with signal
triangles as if broken down. Gabriel places the last one,
hurries back down the casino road.

EXT. PARKING LOT/INT. NOVA - NIGHT

Ashley sits between Merlin and Pug. Gabriel jogs by the car.
Ashley checks her watch:

ASHLEY

Three minutes.

Rudy and Jumpy sit at a blackjack table, beside the Old Timer. Jovial ad libs as the Waitress brings Rudy's beer. Rudy doubles down, busts, and gets belligerent:

RUDY
(to the Old Timer)
That was my card, pop! My
card! You hit for my card!

JUMPY
(to the Waitress)
How are you tonight?

OLD TIMER
I...sorry, mister...

WAITRESS
Fuckin' freezing. What
can I get ya, Santa?

RUDY
That was my king!

JUMPY
Jack and Coke.

OLD TIMER
Well...sorry...

WAITRESS
Want that Jack and Coke
or Jack and Pepsi?

Behind them, Gabriel SLAMS through the casino doors.

JUMPY
Woolworth's!

GABRIEL
Hey, Sears! Hey, Wal-Mart!

JUMPY
Saved you a seat, man. Get in
on a hand here!

Gabriel sidles to the table, claps Rudy on the back.

RUDY
(re: Old Timer)
Careful. Watch out for this guy.

They throw chips in. The Waitress circles around:

WAITRESS
What can I get ya, Santa?

GABRIEL
American beer.

The Old Timer hits and stays. Rudy hits and busts:

RUDY
POP! That was my card!

OLD TIMER
But...I had a five...

RUDY
You're hitting for MY cards!

EXT. PARKING LOT

72.

Ashley's eyes on her watch. Nods to Merlin and Pug:

ASHLEY

Go.

INT. TOMAHAWK

Jumpy has left the table, sidling to a change booth, glancing at his watch. Passes a \$100 bill:

JUMPY

Could Fat-Man-With-Flying-Horse get
some quarters, please?

AT THE BLACKJACK

Gabriel slides off his stool, punches Rudy in the shoulder:

GABRIEL

Be back, Wal-Mart. Watch my bank.

Rudy nods, slugging beer. He's becoming an unruly drinker. The Old Timer motions to hit; but before the Dealer can pull the card, Rudy slams the table, points to it:

RUDY

That is my card, guy. My card.

DEALER

He hit, mister.

RUDY

He didn't hit.

(to Old Timer)

You didn't hit. You're not hitting.

OLD TIMER

But you don't even know what it is!

The dealer hits grandpa to twenty-one. Then hits Rudy and busts him. Rudy stares darkly.

IN THE HALL TO THE BATHROOMS

Gabriel walks to the men's room door. Then stops. Adjusts the rifle under his red coat. And turns back.

AT THE CHANGE BOOTH

Jumpy is handed a bucket of quarters.

EXT. PARKING LOT - SAME

Merlin and Pug march toward the entrance, hands in pockets.

INT. SECURITY LEVEL

96.

The Security Boss returns upstairs, beside Jack Bangs, who's watching the video monitors. On one screen, a parking lot cam shows Merlin and Pug approaching:

VIDEO GUARD

There's two more coming.

JACK BANGS

Hell, there we go. That's the spirit.

He drunkenly clinks his bottle to the Security Boss' wassail. The Boss frowns.

SECURITY BOSS

Jack? Is there a union for department store Santas?

INT. TOMAHAWK - ON BLACKJACK

Rudy bolts up suddenly, sends chips and his chair to the carpet. Points sternly at the Old Timer, slurring:

RUDY

Switch seats with me.

OLD TIMER

What? No...

RUDY

You're taking my money. Switch seats with me. Switch seats with me if you're not taking my money--

OLD TIMER

I'm ninety-two years old--

RUDY

Then get yourself another table! You're hitting Santa's cards and you're taking Santa's money!

OLD TIMER

There is no other table--

RUDY

THEY'LL OPEN ONE!

Rudy grabs the blackjack table and wrenches with all his might, OVERTURNING IT, cards, chips, cash scattering--

AND EVERYTHING HAPPENS AT ONCE

Two SECURITY GUARDS at the bar rush for Rudy--

Gabriel steps from the restroom hall, moves toward the keypad door to the security level--

97.

Jumpy carries his bucket of quarters past the cage--

Rudy tackles the Old Timer, fists and false teeth flying, as the Guards arrive, trying to wrench him off the poor guy--

RUDY

(hard whisper)

Stay down, pop! Trust me, stay down!

As Gabriel stops just beyond the keypad door--

IN THE SECURITY LEVEL

The Security Boss grabs more men, while Jack Bangs merely smiles at the sight. Guards wrestling a drunken Santa:

SECURITY BOSS

Help them down there! HELP them!

IN THE CASINO

Three guards CHARGE out of the keypad door--

--right past Gabriel, who slips deftly inside--

AND UP THE PRIVATE STAIRCASE

--opening his coat, pulling his assault rifle--

GABRIEL

Right at the top of the stairs,
right at the top of the stairs...

--charging to the top, starting right and running SMACK into a wall. He spins, sees the doorway's on his left--

TO A PRIVATE HALLWAY

with three doors. Gabriel stops at the first, grips his gun--

GABRIEL

Video room, video room--

--and swings open a closet bathroom. He frowns, confused. Jumps to the second door--

GABRIEL

Map said video room--

--and swings open a storage closet. Gabriel grumbles, leaps to the third door and flings it open--

GABRIEL

Map said goddamn video room!

TO REVEAL THE MAIN SECURITY AREA

98.

--with two Guards sitting at their posts, and Jack Bangs, the Security Boss and the Video Guard in the doorway to the video room. Which is on the far opposite side of the space.

As they turn to see the furious Santa Claus with the AK-47--

GABRIEL

WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON????!!!

--as he SPRAYS the ceiling with GUNFIRE.

INT. CASINO FLOOR

Where the RIFLE sounds, just as Jumpy grips his bucket of quarters at the cashier's cage and wheels--

--throwing a fragmentation grenade's worth of quarters at the two Cashiers! Bits of metal flying between the bars. They SCREAM, stepping backwards in defense--

--and Jumpy whips a sawed-off shotgun from his coat--

JUMPY

Step BACK from the desks!

AT THE BLACKJACK

The five guards wrestling Rudy spin and scramble, pulling pistols from shoulder holsters as--

MERLIN

CHARGES through the casino entrance, shotgun held--

MERLIN

DROP 'EM! DROP, DROP, DROP!!!

RUDY

(from the floor)

DROP THE GUNS! NOW!

But the guards don't. Whirling on Merlin--

--who OPENS FIRE, BLASTING two of the guards off their feet. Rudy stays on the ground, covering his head, holding the petrified Old Timer down--

--as the other three guards FIRE back, forcing Merlin to race behind the slots. BULLETS rip into slot machines--

--as GUNSHOTS ring out from the casino restaurant. Two of the Guards spin to look behind them as--

--Pug storms in, contorted glee, twin pistols BLAZING, popping a steel flurry into an outgunned Guard.

Merlin spins from hiding behind the slots. He and Pug both OPEN FIRE, blowing away the two remaining men from both sides. 99.

One of the guards falls in front of Rudy, gun in hand--

--but as Rudy reaches for the guy's pistol--

MERLIN

Hold it right there, Nick.
Your squirt gun's all you need.

Merlin steps to him, gun aimed. He and Pug collect the Guards' weapons.

MERLIN

Cover 'em.

Rudy gets to his feet, pulls the water pistol from his pocket. Moves to round up the Old Timer, the Waitress, the Poker Players and the Fat Slots Women.

RUDY

Sorry, guys. But what the hell were you doing here on Christmas Eve anyway.

INT. SECURITY LEVEL

The two Guards lie on the floor, with Security Boss and Video Guard. And the ruined Jack Bangs.

JACK BANGS

No...not here...please...mister...

Gabriel storms to the video room's doorway. Slams a new clip.

JACK BANGS

Mister. I'm begging, 'kay? I'm begging. This is not some card club, 'kay? This is the Tomahawk. We're an international gaming destination. We're in guidebooks. You can't do this...you can't do this to me...

GABRIEL

Show's over.

He OPENS FIRE, BLOWING AWAY the wall of monitors and VCR's recording the robbery. SPARKS and METAL fly.

EXT. PARKING LOT

Ashley waits in the Nova, checking her watch. Behind her, a RED WRANGLER rolls in and parks. A FIRE CHIEF and his DEPUTY, just off-duty, stroll toward the casino, laughing.

Ashley sinks low, panicked. Presses her HORN. The firemen spin around but don't see her. They shrug. Keep walking. (00.

INT. TOMAHAWK

Rudy forces the gamblers and employees behind the bar. Onto the floor with Bear the Bartender, whispering hard:

RUDY

Get down and stay down, and you're gonna be fine. Just don't do anything. My friends are disturbed--

The hostages do as told. Rudy breathes relief, squirt gun in hand. And then stares at the array of bottles around him.

IN THE CASHIER'S CAGE

Merlin and Pug force the cashiers to the floor:

PUG

What's the security code to the Count Room?

CASHIER #1

Security code? What security code? You just use a key!

PUG

NICK SAID SECURITY CODE!

CASHIER #1

Who's Nick?!

Pug bangs the guy's head off the floor, stalks to the Count Room door. Just a key lock. Pug BLOWS it away with his guns, kicks the door open--

--and gets SHOT TO HELL by three COUNT MEN inside, pistols blazing! Pug puppets, dead. A wad of chaw hits the ceiling. Stunned Merlin FIRES BACK.

EXT. PARKING LOT

--as the Firemen hear the GUNFIRE, pulling holstered pistols--

INT. TOMAHAWK

--while Merlin dives out of the cage, joining Jumpy, taking cover as the Count Men FIRE AWAY--

--as Rudy scrambles back from the bar--

MERLIN

You said no GUNS in there! NO GUNS!

Merlin and Jumpy leap up, GUNS BLAZING, firing through the cage bars at the Count Men. Killing all three just as--

THE OFF-DUTY FIREMEN

storm through the doors, pistols ready--

FIREMEN
DROP IT! DROP THE GUNS!

Merlin and Jumpy are caught. Trade a look. And let their weapons fall, turning just as--

THE CHEVY NOVA

CRASHES through the casino doors, MOWING DOWN the firemen!

The car SLAMS inside, crashing into slot machines. The slots send SPARKS showering into the air. Which set off the casino floor's SPRINKLERS. The room fills with watery spray.

Ashley swiftly climbs out of the mangled vehicle. Rudy stares darkly at her. She knows he knows. And she doesn't care.

ASHLEY
(wild-eyed)
WHERE'S THE FUCKING CASH, NICK?!

RUDY
Yeah. That's love.

She storms on by. The slots pay off behind her.

INT. COUNT ROOM; - MOMENTS LATER

Jumpy, Merlin, Ashley and Rudy step inside the Count Room. There are stacks and stacks of bills.

Ashley smiles wide, throws Jumpy three laundry sacks.

ASHLEY
MOVE, MOVE, MOVE!

Merlin, meanwhile, slams Rudy against the wall:

MERLIN
You knew there were guns in here!

RUDY
Merlin, I didn't know--

MERLIN
You got Pug killed! You tried to get ME killed! You just lost your Get-Outta-Jail-Free--

RUDY
I promise you, I didn't know!

As Merlin puts a gun to Rudy's head--

102.

GABRIEL (o.s.)
(over casino speakers)
Santa Claus, Santa Claus, and Santa
Claus...would you please bring our...
mapmaker...to the security level?

Merlin stares daggers at Rudy. Shoves the gun away.

INT. JACK BANGS' OFFICE - NIGHT

Gabriel stands at the windows overlooking the watery carnage.
The taped jingle of slots still plays.

Poor Jack Bangs lies on his desk, beaten to a pulp. Blood runs
down his face and shark suit. Tears and shock:

JACK BANGS
...I can't go back to Vegas...I
can't...go back...

JUMPY (o.s.)
What the hell is with this place?
Thought the video room was back there--

Merlin and Jumpy lead Rudy in. Ashley follows. They carry
bulging money sacks. Gabriel stares Rudy down.

GABRIEL
I told you not to fuck us with
that map, Nick. I told you not
to, and you did. How am I s'posed
to keep my promises now?
(Ashley joins him)
How's she s'posed to keep hers?

He kisses her hard. Sloppy. Grins.

Then points to Jack Bangs:

GABRIEL
He won't tell us where it is.
The Powwow Safe.

JACK BANGS
...I don't know...what you're...

Gabriel hammers him with the butt of his rifle. CRACK.

GABRIEL
THE POWWOW SAFE! WHERE IS THE
POWWOW SAFE!

JACK BANGS
What...Powwow...

GABRIEL

The Powwow Safe where you steal
your money! Where you cheat your
Indians!

JACK BANGS

I don't steal any--

Gabriel CRACKS him again. And again. Rudy winces. Gabriel
grabs Rudy, pulls him over.

GABRIEL

We KNOW about the Powwow Safe!
We KNOW it's in here! We KNOW
how you work! Because WE know
who's worked for you!

(smiles)

Remember a guy named Nick Mason!?
A security guard named Nick Mason!?

Gabriel pushes Rudy's head toward the desk. Jack Bangs,
drooling blood, eyes swollen, turns his face to see.

JACK BANGS

Nick...Mason...?

Jack Bangs stares at Rudy. Rudy stares back.

JACK BANGS

...so where is he?

GABRIEL

(laughs, mocking)
Where is he?! Where is he?!

JACK BANGS

He's not Nick Mason...

The smile fades from Gabriel's face.

JACK BANGS

Nick Mason...worked for me two
years ago. This man...
(a spark of recognition)
...he's some cowboy...

Gabriel grabs Rudy, slams him against a wall. He glares at
Ashley for answers. She stares in disbelief.

Rudy meets her eyes.

RUDY

Fucked the wrong guy, Ashley.
(shrugs)
Story of your life.

Back to Gabriel:

RUDY

I did time with Nick Mason, Monster.
Told you that from the start.

Ashley's putting it all together...

ASHLEY

You...you...YOU--

RUDY

We still gonna spend Christmas
together?

Ashley CHARGES him. Gabriel stops her; Merlin and Jumpy help
hold her back. Gabriel spins on Rudy with his rifle:

GABRIEL

You are lucky, convict. You're
spending Christmas with the
birthday boy himself--

RUDY

Hey! HEY! THERE IS A POWWOW SAFE!

Gabriel hesitates. Doesn't fire.

RUDY

I did time with Nick Mason, remember?
I knew he worked here, didn't I!?
Well, some shit he told me!

Rudy steels himself for the shot. It still doesn't come.

RUDY

Nick told me his manager kept a safe
in his office, his stealing safe.
His Powwow Safe. I swear, please...
Nick told me.

(looks to Jack Bangs)

Behind the liquor cabinet.

Jack Bangs dully meets Rudy's eyes.

Gabriel steps to the liquor cabinet, feels at the shelves. They
split in the middle. And there is a combination safe mounted in
the back. Gabriel turns to Jack Bangs:

GABRIEL

Open it.

He pulls him off the desk. Jack Bangs wavers, struggling. He
looks at Gabriel. Then at Rudy.

JACK BANGS

I can't go back to Vegas...

GABRIEL

OPEN IT!!!

Jack Bangs steps to the safe. Spins the lock. Spins back.
Spins forward. Click. Jack Bangs looks at Rudy.

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RUDY

(nods)

Pow. Wow.

And Jack Bangs opens it--

--reaching inside in the same swift motion, so that as the safe swings open to reveal it's a rack of WEAPONS that lies inside, Jack Bangs already has an Uzi in hand--

JACK BANGS

VEEEEEGGGGAAAASSSS!!!

--SPITTING BULLETS as he turns back to the room--

--sending Gabriel, Ashley, and Merlin diving for the floor! Jumpy can't get down, as BULLETS riddle him dead--

--and BLOW OUT the smoked windows overlooking the casino--

Jack Bangs keeps turning in a madman's circle--

--BLOWING OUT the windows to the parking lot, shattering the liquor, sending Rudy scrambling under his desk--

JACK BANGS

I CAN'T! GO BACK! I CAN'T!
GO BACK! I CAN'T! GO BACK!

GABRIEL

GO!!!

He and Ashley both scramble for the windows, jumping out with two of the money sacks--

TO THE CASINO FLOOR

--and landing on poker tables below, overturning them--

Jack Bangs keeps FIRING, into the casino, SHREDDING the tables but missing Gabriel and Ashley--

--as he JUMPS right after them.

BACK IN BANGS' OFFICE

Merlin scrambles to his feet, whirling with his gun, looking for Rudy--

--just as Rudy slams into him. Merlin's SHOT hits the ceiling. The two of them CRASH down, wrestling and rolling toward the parking lot window. Two guns spill to the floor. Rudy grabs one, just as Merlin kicks out, leaping up--

--and freezes, seeing Rudy's got a pistol on him.

Before Merlin can make a move, Rudy fires--

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--and a thin stream of water shoots out. Leaving a stain on his shirt. It's the water pistol. Rudy stares blankly.

As Merlin swiftly snatches the second gun, a real gun, off the floor. Rudy's dead to rights.

MERLIN

Hell. I'm gonna take pleasure in this...

With the gun on Rudy, Merlin finds a cigarette in his pockets. Pops it between his lips, raises a lighter's flame--

--and hesitates. Sniffing the air. Looking down.

At the stain on his shirt. His lighter still lit--

RUDY

Me too.

--and Rudy fires the water pistol again, this time catching Merlin's lighter, which turns the stream into a ARC OF FIRE! He's filled alcohol in the gun!

FLAMING LIQUOR shoots into Merlin's face and eyes. He drops the handgun. Rudy keeps squeezing the squirt gun, spreading the fire down his neck and chest. Merlin howls wildly--

--and staggers back, blind and helpless, pinwheeling himself--

OUT THE PARKING LOT WINDOW

--and CRASHING down on the hood of a Pontiac, head through the windshield, boots on the bumper, dead. Flames flickering.

RUDY

Smoke 'em if you got 'em.

IN THE CASINO

Gabriel and Ashley have scrambled to the Nova, tumbling in with the money sacks. Jack Bangs gets up, stalking toward them, still FIRING and babbling.

Gabriel FIRES back, hitting Bangs in the chest. He staggers, but stays upright. His bullets RIDDLE the car, shattering the windshield, but Gabriel and Ashley keep their heads down, slamming it into reverse--

--and burning rubber backwards out the casino entrance, into the parking lot, and speeding out of sight.

Jack Bangs stops shooting.

He staggers back toward the bar, totters there, and turns, gun still raised.

Rudy stands at the base of the stairs to the security level. He puts his hands up, until he sees the dying look in Bangs' face. The Uzi drops to the ground. 107.

A silence. Even the slots have stopped.

RUDY

I'm sorry.

Jack Bangs stares blankly. Surveys the wreckage of his poor man's empire. And gives a small shrug.

JACK BANGS

That's why they call it gambling.

He slumps against the bar and hits the floor. Dead.

EXT. PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Rudy ambles out into the snowy night. The lot is quiet. He takes a few wary steps toward the road--

--and hears a CLICK. He turns to see Ashley standing behind him, with a gun. Shaking her pretty head.

ASHLEY

Your turn.

Rudy shuts his eyes for the end.

EXT. RESERVATION ROAD - NIGHT

The Nova drives up a ramp into the back of the truck, in reverse. Gabriel gets out, pulls shut the trailer. Ashley collects the hazard triangles. They hurry to the cab.

EXT. MICHIGAN HIGHWAY - NIGHT

The Motor City Monster storms through the night, passing a couple POLICE CARS, sirens wailing, speeding the other way.

INT. GABRIEL'S RIG

Gabriel and Ashley inside, with the money sacks:

GABRIEL

With the wrong fucking guy! We took the place down with the wrong fucking guy! Is that Christmas?! Huh?! Is that Christmas?!

He grabs Ashley, kisses her wildly. Then turns back--

Where Rudy lies sideways, hands bound with his Santa belt.

GABRIEL

God bless us every one...

EXT. RIDGESIDE ROAD - NIGHT

A winding two-lane road, overlooking a small ravine at a grassy overlook. The road is dusted with snow; there's been no traffic here for awhile.

The Motor City Monster steams to a stop beyond the overlook. Then starts backing up, such that the gate of the trailer is fifteen feet from the edge of the ridge.

A hundred-foot drop into the ravine below.

Gabriel and Ashley pile out of the cab. They lift the trailer gate, extend the tire ramps. The ramps run from the trailer to five feet away from the ravine drop.

IN THE CAB

Gabriel pulls Rudy out of the sleeper. Marches him back--

TO THE RAVINE'S EDGE

--and gives him a look. Forces him to his knees. Ashley is in the truck trailer, splashing the inside of the Nova with a can of gasoline.

GABRIEL

You almost got away with it, Santa.
Got outta the Tomahawk, got to
your car, got halfway to Canada
till you caught some ice in the road.
By the time you hit bottom down
there, whole car was burning like
a comet. Musta burned up all that
money too.

Rudy glances to the trailer. Ashley tosses a couple handfuls of bills into the car.

GABRIEL

Buncha guys in red suits busted in,
they'll say. Started shooting.
They won't be able to remember...
if it was three, or four...or five.
Four dead Santas and some burned-up
cash. Merry Christmas, The End.

RUDY

Was it your plan, Monster? Or was
it hers.

Gabriel smiles at him.

109.

GABRIEL

She told me 'bout the convict
magazines. Had to figure there'd
be some boys in the pen with some
useful knowledge. With nobody
to talk to. Nobody to listen.
So we stocked up on stationery.

Ashley hops down. Gabriel puts an arm around her.

GABRIEL

Hard life being a trucker's girl.

Rudy eyes Ashley. She stares darkly back.

RUDY

I saved your life.

ASHLEY

You shouldn't have.

RUDY

He did love you, you know. Nick.
He did love you.

ASHLEY

Who wouldn't.

So cold. But Rudy doesn't pause.

RUDY

Maybe this is where you wanted him,
Ashley. At the bottom of a ravine,
dead as ice with a burnt-up heart.
Maybe. But it didn't happen.
'Cause what you did for him was
make him the happiest he'd ever been.
You showed him hope and taught
him mercy. And he died a peaceful
man. You wanted to destroy some
convict...and all you did was
save his soul. Remember that.
Love your money and remember that.

Ashley shivers, a touch shaken. But steels herself:

ASHLEY

Merry Christmas, Rudy.

RUDY

I'm glad it was me.

ASHLEY

Merry Christmas.

GABRIEL

Get in the car.

Gabriel hauls him up. Marches him to the trailer. Rudy stops at the ramp. Gabriel pushes. Rudy doesn't move.

GABRIEL

Get in the CAR!

RUDY

How'd you know my name...

He turns back to Ashley.

ASHLEY

What?

RUDY

Rudy. How'd you know my name?

ASHLEY

What are you talking about?

Rudy looks at Gabriel. He's frowning. To Ashley:

RUDY

You said Merry Christmas, Rudy.

ASHLEY

I...you told me your name was Rudy. You told me a million times, back in the truck, telling me you weren't Nick--

RUDY

No--

ASHLEY

You were screaming you weren't Nick! And we just didn't fucking believe you!

RUDY

But I never said Rudy.

ASHLEY

You said it a million times!

RUDY

I never told you my name.

He stares her down. Then stares at Gabriel.

GABRIEL

Ash?

RUDY

How'd you know my name was Rudy.

GABRIEL

Ash?

RUDY

How'd you know my name.

Ashley stares daggers. Shakes her head ruefully--

ASHLEY

Men.

--and pulls a handgun, SHOOTING Gabriel in the heart.

Gabriel falls to his knees in the snow, his mouth a ring of shock. Blood spurts through his red coat. He stares at Ashley, incredulous.

She steps forward and PUTS another bullet in his neck. Gabriel falls still.

Ashley's breath frosts in the cold.

Rudy watches her. Finally, she meets Rudy's eyes. They stare each other down for a long moment, before:

RUDY

Where is he.

A silence.

No one moves.

And finally, the CRUNCH of footsteps from around the side of the trailer. And WHISTLING. "Silver Bells."

A shadow moves across the snow behind the trailer, and soon steps into Rudy and Ashley's view.

It's Nick Mason.

Alive and well.

NICK

Merry Christmas, Rudy.

Ashley smiles. Her muscles-and-mustache man pen pal is here.

NICK

I missed you, beautiful.

ASHLEY

I missed you too, Nicky baby.

They share a passionate kiss. Ashley melts at the sight of him, embracing happily. Then turns to Rudy:

ASHLEY

For your information. I never
fuck the wrong guy.

Rudy just stands there, his mind playing catch-up.

NICK

Oh, hey. Have you two been properly introduced? Sweetness, this is Rudy Duncan, I did almost a year with him in the Mountain. Read him all your letters, talked about you all the time, made him feel like he really knew you.

(turns to Rudy)

My friend...wantcha to meet Millie Bobek. 'Member Millie Bobek, dontcha? My girlfriend 'fore I went in? Worked at that bar in Motor City, where I manslaughtered that guy? Hell. Didn't talk about her much once the Ashley letters started coming, I guess.

Rudy doesn't notice it's started to snow.

NICK

Millie here used to serve drinks to these gunrunning truckers, real big talkers, talking 'bout a real score one day. I was in the Mountain, man, what the hell, why not let her get friendly with 'em? Let her tell 'em an idea she had, 'bout writing guys in prison. Getting one who could show 'em a sure thing.

RUDY

She set them up. All of them.

NICK

Why not have her pretend to find me? Pretend to write me and reel me in? Tell her new trucker-man she'd pose as some sister of his named Ashley?

RUDY

And you set me up.

NICK

Always wanted to rob that casino, Rudy. Way back when I worked there. What better way than to get some guys to rob it for me.

Nick shrugs. Prods Rudy up the ramp. Into the trailer:

NICK

Paid the Alamo ten bucks to put the shiv in me. He's a lifer, what does he care. Paid a hospital guard fifty to put out the story I was dead. Once the wound healed up...
(notes cash-sacks)
Got out of the Mountain this morning. And tonight I'm a rich man.

RUDY

How'd you know I'd do it.

NICK

Do what?

RUDY

Walk outta there and tell her I was you.

Nick looks back at Ashley.

NICK

Because every time I read her letters, Rudy...you listened.
(to Ashley)
Keep your gun on him.

Nick forces Rudy inside, unties the belt from his wrists and lashes them to the bottom of the steering wheel.

NICK

Five Santas walked into that Tomahawk, Rudy. That's what the witnesses'll say. So we gotta have five Santas not walk out. Gotta have five...
(working)
This'll burn right away...in the fire...

Nick gets Rudy's wrists locked to the wheel. He laughs.

NICK

Hell, you never needed to convince Ashley you were me. Just the dumb fucking truckers. I figured I'd talked enough about the Tomahawk in the pen for you to get by--

RUDY

Talked about the old man's weapons stash, probably forgot I'd remember that.

NICK

Hmm. Well. They'd have killed you if you weren't me, Rudy. We knew you'd start convincing 'em soon enough.

Nick slams the car door, locking Rudy in.

NICK

They had the weapons and the willpower. We just gave them their inside man.

RUDY

You gave them me.

NICK

I gave them me.
(shrugs, smiles)
Said some nice things about me, Rudy. I appreciate it. But don't worry. I do love her. And she loves me. You had that right all along.

Nick reaches across him, releases the brake. Puts the car into "Drive." Turns to Ashley:

NICK

Sweetness! Let's light up the tree!

Ashley steps toward the ramp, taking out a matchbook. Nick steps further into the trailer, to the back of the Nova.

IN THE CAR

Rudy immediately wriggles his hands, trying to touch his wrists together. Trying to press together the white cuffs of his Santa suit. Trying to get the right pressure point--

--as a BLADE suddenly springs out of the cuff! The switchblade he'd stolen from the Blazer -- it's lashed to his right wrist! Rudy starts sawing his wrist back and forth, cutting through the Santa belt--

--his hands at the bottom of the wheel, too low for either Ashley or Nick to see--

IN THE TRAILER

Ashley is at the hood of the car, LIGHTING her match. Nick is at the back bumper, ready to push it down the ramp--

NICK

Goodbye, Rudy! Nice spending time with you!

IN THE CAR

The belt breaks! Rudy snaps his hands free! But instead of trying to escape, he reaches under the steering column, RIPPING its panel away and pulling wires free!

As Ashley tosses her match onto the hood, and FIRE races over the body of the car, TONGUES racing inside, over the dash, over the seats, lapping at Rudy--

--who ducks his head beneath the wheel, frantic to locate the right leads--

IN THE TRAILER

Ashley jumps out of the way, to the snow. Nick pushes the flaming car to the trailer's edge--

--starting on down the ramp, the ravine ahead--

--and as gravity starts to take the metal bonfire--

IN THE CAR

Rudy sparks two wires together, FLAMES eating at him--

RUDY
LIKE RIDING A BIKE, LIKE RIDING
A BIKE, LIKE RIDING A BIIIIIKE!

--and the ENGINE IGNITES!

Rudy slams the gearshift into "Reverse", grabs the wheel and looks over his shoulder at shocked Nick behind him--

RUDY
RULE ONE! NEVER PUT A CAR THIEF
BEHIND THE WHEEL!

--and SLAMS the accelerator.

ON FULL SCENE

As the burning Nova races backwards up the ramp, and back into the trailer--

Terrified Nick turns to run but there's nowhere to go--

--and the car SLAMS into the trailer's back, CRUSHING Nick's legs between metal and metal!

ASHLEY
NOOOOOOO!!!

Then Rudy faces front, pounds the shift into "Drive."

RUDY
RULE TWO!

Ashley stands at the bottom of the ramp, vengeance and rage. She grabs her handgun, OPENS FIRE--

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--and Rudy SLAMS the gas again, shooting down the ramp--

--as he flings open the car door, dives and rolls--

--while the burning Nova COLLIDES with Ashley, throwing her onto the hood, and sending the tandem inferno speeding off the ridgetop--

--arcing slowly as it PLUMMETS into the ravine, a smoking, blazing shooting star with a woman's figure hanging on.

The shooting star hits Earth and explodes.

SLOW DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CASINO/EXT. SNOWY ROAD - MONTAGE

The same four shots that opened the film. The Santa on the floor of the cage (Pug), the Santa on the hood of the car (Merlin), the Santa in the hallway (Jumpy).

And the Santa lying face-down on the snowy road. Gabriel.

EXT. RAVINE'S EDGE - SAME

The last of the opening images. Rudy's motionless Santa figure, upside-down on the snowy incline, bits of his suit still aflame. He opens his eyes.

ANGLE ON SNOWY ROAD

Rudy staggers to his feet. Battered and dazed. Looks at Gabriel's body. Then looks to the trailer.

Inside, Nick is still alive, bones broken from the waist down. He's mumbling madly, staring at the ceiling:

NICK

...Rudy...help me...Rudy...

Rudy climbs the tire ramp. And pulls the trailer gate shut.

He climbs into the rig's cab. Starts the engine. Puts the truck in reverse, taps the accelerator and hops out.

NICK (o.s.)

...Rudy! Rudy! HELP ME!!!

The truck rolls backwards. And into the ravine.

Rudy listens to its TUMBLING SOUNDS all the way to the bottom. He then looks up the road one way. Then the other.

And notices the two money sacks sitting in the snow.

He stares at them.

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A long time.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. RUDY'S JOURNEY - MONTAGE - NIGHT/DAY

In his burnt and battered Santa suit, Rudy's figure trudges the snowy night. Two sacks over his shoulder.

Walking empty roads and highways. And passing a road sign that reads "Sidnaw -- 35 Miles."

He passes rural roads and driveways, and every time he comes across a mailbox...he puts a stack of cash inside.

On the soundtrack, the STRINGS and RUM-PUM-PUM-PUMS of "The Little Drummer Boy" start to rise--

With snow falling, he passes a new sign: "Sidnaw -- 27 Miles."

With the sun rising, a PAIR OF CHILDREN huddle at a window, seeing the man in the Santa suit at the end of their driveway. Giving them something from his sack and ambling on.

--and we follow Rudy's march, stuffing presents into mailboxes. At every stop on the way.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. A SUBURBAN NEIGHBORHOOD - DAY

A cul-de-sac of Norman Rockwell Michigan homes. Graced with pines and a pristine snowfall. Christmas trees in windows, lights on inside, figures of FAMILIES in holiday gear.

No one noticing the man in the Santa suit, his sacks long gone, walking up the road.

EXT./INT. FIFTIES-ERA HOME - DAY

At cul-de-sac's end. Where a blackened red cuff KNOCKS.

After a moment, the door opens to reveal a smiling MOTHER and FATHER in their sixties. There's a party going on inside; a dining table visible beyond them.

The Mother and Father's smiles disappear. Shock. Concern.

MOTHER

Rudy...? Rudy?

FATHER

Son? Is...is that you...?

The Santa Claus shuffles inside, right past them.

The Santa Claus sleepwalks straight for the dining room, finding a dozen RELATIVES, laughing and eating. A table laden with turkey and stuffing, gravy and cranberry, wassail and wine.

The relatives stop still. The room goes silent.

The Santa Claus sits down at the head of the table.

Yes, it's Rudy.

Without a word, he stares at the food before him. And takes a plate. He stacks it with meat and dressing and trimmings, and sets it in front of him.

And digs in. Stuffing his face in silence.

His Mother and Father return to the dining room, gaping. The other relatives look likewise.

All staring at Rudy.

Then, while he eats, without another sound...

...the Mother takes her seat at the table...

...and the Father pulls up another chair.

They touch hands privately, and turn back to their plates.

There's a CLANK of silverware, a SCRAPE of china, a CLINK of glass, and one-by-one, the relatives resume their meals. CONVERSATION picks up where it left off, SMILES return to the table, LAUGHTER slowly rises in the room.

There's Mr. Duncan and Mrs. Duncan, Aunt Lisbeth and Uncle Ray, Aunt Mary and Uncle Pete, toddler Sasha and teenage Sam, brother Mike and his girlfriend Jill, sister Stacy and her husband Bill, Grandpa Walter, little Wendy Sue...

...and at the head of the table...

Rudy Duncan.

Home for Christmas.

CUT TO BLACK.