

MERRY CHRISTMAS FROM MUD MOUNTAIN

Written by

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EXT. CHRISTMAS COTTAGE - DAY - ANIMATION

Jingly holiday music plays.

Snow swirls around a quaintly decorated cottage. Lights twinkle. Smoke puffs from the chimney. Snowman in the yard.

It's an animated Christmas card.

The movie title scrolls out in festive handwriting: "Merry Christmas from Mud Mounta-"

Record scratch.

A gleaming tower building drops from the sky, SLAMS down on the house. Obliterated. The giant sun BLAZES to life; the snowman melts with a high-pitched cry.

Heavy font, all-caps STAMP OUT the words "Mud Mountain" with:
"LOS ANGELES"

INT. WEST HOLLYWOOD APARTMENT - DAY

No jingly music. Dead silence.

A stark black and white painting fills the background behind LOUIS BRAXTON (37, emotional walls higher than he is right now). His eyes reflect a huge ring light on his computer.

Button-down shirt, silk tie. Dark-framed glasses. Coiffed, perfectly in frame, he looks fantastic.

On his laptop, DIEGO RAMOS (beleaguered boss), screen name "Diego Ramos District 2". Diego clearly just got bad news, his dour expression at odds with the Zoom wallpaper that flashes the word "JOLLY" as his background.

LOUIS

Look, I know it's sudden, but I'll get all the budget reports in front of council before I go. Things will quiet down for the holidays after that. Promote Whitney to take over for me; it'll be seamless.

DIEGO

The idea was to promote you to take over for me, Louis. That's what you said you wanted...

Louis ticks his gaze up from the computer screen and looks directly into the camera, breaks the fourth wall.

LOUIS
 ...*"for the past five years."* Here
 we go. Throw facts in my face.

DIEGO
 ...for the past five years. I
 thought I could retire--

LOUIS
 --You still can, Diego. Whitney
 might need an extra six months to
 get her feet under her, but--

DIEGO
 It was supposed to be you.

Again, Louis shifts his gaze to the camera, sighs.

LOUIS
 I know how he feels.

He looks down at his desk at a framed photo of himself in
 front of a Christmas tree, wrapped in the arms of a CUTE GUY.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
 It was supposed to be *him*.

Louis gently turns the photo face-down on the desk, then
 clicks "Leave Meeting." Diego disappears.

At his bare feet beneath the desk, a bottle of Macallan
 whisky. He takes a long swig, then returns it to the floor.

Loosens his tie. Rolls up his sleeves. Runs his fingers
 through his hair to fluff it just a bit. Takes off his
 glasses. Still fashionable, but more approachable.

Clicks on a new link. Waits, straight-faced.

MAYOR CLAIRE SWIFTWATER (60s, denim, radiates earthy warmth),
 appears on the screen. Her smile is a comfort.

Louis beams at her like a ray of sunshine.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
 Mayor Swiftwater.

CLAIRE
 Call me Claire. As long as you're
 calling with good news.

LOUIS
 I'd love to accept the job. And I
 can start by Christmas.

CLAIRE

Excellent. The council agreed that I could negotiate terms with you after you've reassured me one last time you're certain you want to make this move.

LOUIS

I'm certain I want to make this move. I get why you're asking the question. Many, many times. I don't have a creative new way to say it, Claire, so I'll just repeat myself. I've got the chops to do the job, but it's more than that.

Louis drops his head, as if in contemplation. When he looks back up, he wrings out every drop of earnest charm he's got.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

I want to come home to Mud Mountain. I want to use my skills and experience to serve the community that raised me.

He shifts his gaze to the camera, cocks an eyebrow. There might be more to the story.

CLAIRE

Big pay cut. Small town life.

LOUIS

(playful)

Am I supposed to repeat that back to you, too? I get it.

CLAIRE

All right, all right. I'm convinced. I'll email you the offer this afternoon.

LOUIS

Relocation assistance, yes?

CLAIRE

Not generous, but it'll get you here and settled.

LOUIS

Giving me a shot is generous.

CLAIRE
That, and the top of the salary
scale, according to your
recruitment packet.

LOUIS
Promise I'm worth it.

Claire's willing to be charmed. To a point.

CLAIRE
I promise I'll make you earn it.

LOUIS
Deal.

CLAIRE
Good. We'll talk soon. In the
meantime, Louis...

His hand pauses on the trackpad, the arrow on the screen
hovers over the "Leave Meeting" button.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)
...ditch the tie. You won't be
needing it.

Louis gently snaps the laptop closed and flicks a cynical
gaze at the camera while he yanks off his tie. Grabs the
bottle of Macallan.

When he walks to the bathroom, the tail of his dress shirt
just covers his bare ass. Everything visible in the apartment
from his waist up is neat and stylish... and cold.

Everything in the apartment from the waist down shows his
ass: laundry on the floor, to-go containers littered on
surfaces, grocery sacks strewn about.

BATHROOM

Modern fixtures, stone, tile and glass. High-end grooming
products and a second bottle of Macallan line the counter.

Propped on the sink, he studies himself in the harsh bathroom
light. Dark circles. He shifts his gaze in the mirror so he's
looking over his shoulder into the camera.

LOUIS
This is a fantastically bad idea.

Another thirsty chug of whisky. Casts his gaze to the floor.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

I blame you.

REPUTATION (overweight French Bulldog) slumbers in her red velvet bed, name bejeweled on it. Roused, she grins at him.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

You want to be a country puppy?

She snorts her agreement. He squats to rub her tummy and lifts his gaze back to the camera, shakes his head.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

Have you ever met a more demanding bitch in your life?

As Louis turns to leave the bathroom, a photo on the wall of him kissing Cute Guy catches his eye. He rips it down with a jerk that leaves a hole in the plaster.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

Second-most demanding bitch.

He passes back through the sun-soaked living room and home office he just left into the darkened-

BEDROOM

-an even bigger pigsty. With a dramatic groan, he throws himself face first onto the rumpled sheets.

CLOSE ON HIS FACE, it rolls halfway over from being mashed in the mattress to look into the camera.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

After Garrett broke up with me for being "too emotionally distant", I decided it would be bitterly ironic to apply for the city manager job back in Mud Mountain, Washington, the podunk town I grew up in. When they kept calling me back, I decided it would be *cinematically* ironic to blow up my life in Los Angeles and actually take it.

A sloppy sideways drink off the bottle; his voice slurs.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

So, I'm only doing this ironically, although, to be honest, I've never had the best grasp on the concept of irony. It's probably just a sad, stupid thing I'm doing.

Clutching the whiskey, he rolls onto his back, still gazing bleary-eyed into the camera. As he starts to pass out, inspiration strikes.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

Ohhh, my god. You should come with me! Will you? You're coming.

The idea soothes him; he settles back onto his pillow. The room goes quiet. His breathing deepens. He's aslee-

LOUIS (CONT'D)

Stop staring at my wiener.

The camera JOSTLES, cuts off.

INT. MAYOR CLAIRE'S OFFICE - CITY HALL - DAY

A tiny office without a square inch of surface to spare: desk and shelves cascade with books, binders, reams of files.

Her personality peeks through: Native American art, family photos, memorabilia from community celebrations.

A mini chainsaw mounted as a plaque on the wall: "MUD MOUNTAIN LOGGER'S RODEO 75TH ANNIVERSARY".

Lost in thought amidst it all, Claire watches snow begin to fall out her window framed with Christmas lights. She turns at a rap on her doorframe.

EMILY CHAMBERS (32, enterprising, Down Syndrome) pokes her head in, the rest of her body angled to leave.

EMILY

Should I go tell Sheriff Tate he took the job?

CLAIRE

(gently amused)
You could just call over.

Emily shrugs, already decided.

EMILY

I have to drop off the mail at the post office anyway.

CLAIRE

And Garreth will be there.

Emily shakes her head at such a ridiculous idea, then disappears from the doorway to complete her mission.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

Emily!

Empty-handed, Emily returns. Claire holds out the stack of forgotten mail; they share a chuckle.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

Tell Doug - tell *Chief Tate* - I said to start getting that office cleared out. I need Louis to hit the ground running.

With a purposeful nod, Emily heads out.

Alone again, Claire picks up Louis' CV from her desk, his winning smile beaming out from his profile photo.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

You'd *better* be worth it, Mr. Braxton. Main Street isn't going to revitalize itself.

Outside the window, Emily tugs a red knit cap around her ears against the blustery snow on her walk to the police station.

INT. LOUIS' BEDROOM - DAY

Splayed out with the bottle tucked to his side, Louis hasn't moved from the position he passed out in.

Reputation hops onto the bed and makes a beeline to his open mouth, licks it vigorously. He turns away in disgust.

LOUIS

I'm going to have you made into a placemat, I swear to gay Jesus.

She hops over his torso and licks him from the other side.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

GAH! All right. Go get your leash.

Hop! The TIC-TAC clatter of nails on a wood floor.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

And my pants!

EXT. MAIN STREET, MUD MOUNTAIN - DAY

As Emily strides down the sidewalk, she approaches STUMPY STACKHOUSE (70s, tall, grizzled).

Perched on a ladder, he wraps old holiday lights and banners between poles across Main Street.

A lone pickup sprays powder down the sleepy thoroughfare.

STUMPY

Walkin' with a purpose this morning, Emily. What's up?

She stops, inspects his work.

EMILY

Going to tell Chief Tate to clear out the extra office. We have a new city manager coming. No room for him at city hall.

STUMPY

Heard talk it might be that Louis Braxton kid that ran off to L.A. all those years ago.

EMILY

Claire says once you're Mud Mountain family, you always are.

STUMPY

Hmph. Guess we'll see.

Emily tugs her jacket tighter and sets off again.

EMILY

The lights are looking good, Stumpy. Be careful in this snow.

Hustled away by the wind, Emily passes storefronts, some vacant. At the coffee shop, she waves through the window at-

CHRISTINA "TANK" FONTAINE (18, petite, vibrates with energy), who cheerfully TAPES UP DECORATIONS and waves back.

EXT. SANTA MONICA BOULEVARD - DAY

The sunbaked afternoon sidewalk overflows with cleverly dressed gay men of all ages and sizes. Most walk in pairs, arms around each other or holding hands.

Louis shuffles, pathetic in his pit-stained dress shirt, gym shorts, and flip flops with Reputation in the lead, the *real* queen of the boulevard.

They pass thriving bars and boutique storefronts, everything the opposite of Main Street on Mud Mountain, including-

A SHOPKEEPER (50s leather daddy) who, like "Tank," strings decorations in the window: red and green PENIS LIGHTS.

Reputation stops, drops, pees in front of the place. Shopkeeper and Louis trade looks, but not waves.

INT. POLICE STATION LOBBY - DAY

Behind a glass partition, OFFICER GARRETH KENNEDY (30s, guileless) grins, smitten, at Emily's blustery arrival.

Snow-covered, she marches to the door to the precinct offices and waits for him to buzz her in, all business.

EMILY
Morning, Garreth.

GARRETH
I know that face.

EMILY
Of course you do. It's my face.

GARRETH
I mean, it's the face you have when you have news.

EMILY
Okay, but it's also my face when I don't have news.

GARRETH
You're so funny, Emily.

She wasn't joking. Now she's waiting. *Shit.*

BUZZZZZZ.

The door opens and closes behind her. Garreth shakes his head at himself; he never seems to get it right.

INT. STATION OFFICE AREA - DAY

Emily enters to greetings from LIEUTENANT PENNY SANCHEZ (30s, tough mom), who fills out paperwork at her desk.

In the corner, ROSEMARY BENDER (60s, disheveled, caustic charm) slowly sobers up in a wooden-barred holding cell.

EMILY
Gonna have to start charging you rent, Rosemary.

ROSEMARY

Ah!! I'm gonna have to start comin'
to your house and pooping on your
rose bushes, Emily!

LT. PENNY WESTBROOK

(doesn't look up)
Guess I'll just skip lunch then.

ROSEMARY

Good! I'll take it!

No time for this silliness, Emily proceeds back to-

THE CHIEF'S OFFICE

-where CHIEF DOUG TATE (38, boyishly handsome) watches the
door in anticipation of her arrival.

DOUG

He accepted the job, didn't he?

Deflated that he guessed, Emily's shoulders slump.

EMILY

How'd you know already?

Doug turns back to replace a folder in a file cabinet, locks
it, and shoots her a smirk as he returns to his desk.

DOUG

Because you're here to tell me in
person, my friend. I know you well.

EMILY

Is it true you were best friends in
high school?

With a wistful sigh, his grin evaporates.

DOUG

Something like that. Tell Claire...

He swivels to his computer, done with the conversation.

DOUG (CONT'D)

...I'll make sure the office is
ready for him. Fresh coat of paint
and everything.

Though she wants to ask more, Emily simply nods and slips
away from the door.

EXT. SANTA MONICA BOULEVARD - DAY

As Reputation leads the way back to their apartment, Louis fumbles with his key fob for the lobby door and-

WHAM!

- runs into Cute Guy from the photos: GARRETT CLEFT (30s, dreamy, and yup, similar name to "Garreth") Startled, Louis drops his keys and stoops to pick them up.

From the squat, he looks up. Garrett looks down, the afternoon sun a halo behind his dreamy head.

Louis scowls between Garrett's dreamy legs, into the camera.

LOUIS

Fuck me.

Back on his feet, Louis tries to recover.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

Garrett! Hhheyy! Hhhhii!

Garrett tries not to react to his breath, but can't help it.

GARRETT

Louis! You look...

Dread washes over Louis' face.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

...like you smell, honestly.

Louis turns to the camera, mortified.

LOUIS

I'm begging you to murder me where I stand. MUR. DER. ME.

Reputation attempts to climb Garrett's dreamy legs and finds herself scooped up in his dreamy arms.

GARRETT

I missed you, pretty lady! I missed you so much! You're the baby!

As Reputation bathes Garrett in kisses, Louis pries her away.

LOUIS

She was just eating poop, so-

Garrett recoils, wipes at his dreamy face.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

-yeah, you don't want that. What are you doing here, Garrett?

Still skeeved out, Garrett exfoliates with his sleeve.

GARRETT

Bleagh! I, uhh... I think I left my blue cardigan at your place. Thought I'd see if you have it.

LOUIS

Umm, yeah. Yeah, I think so. Let me run up and grab it for you.

GARRETT

I can come up with you real quick--

LOUIS

--NO.

(embarrassed)

Sorry... No. I think I need to just... I'll grab it for you.

Garrett nods sadly and steps aside. Louis fumbles his keys and tangles himself in the leash, desperate to get upstairs.

INT. LOUIS' BEDROOM - DAY

Louis rifles through piles of clothes and pulls out the sweater, then slumps down onto the bed.

Holds the sweater to his face and takes a deep breath. It smells so good. Like happiness.

His phone buzzes. On the screen: "Did you find it?"

And then, he just can't hold it in. He buries his face in the sweater and cries.

INT. LOUIS' ROSE GOLD FIAT - MOVING - DAY

Front paws rested on her luxe dog seat / harness, Reputation co-pilots. Behind her, a back seat crammed with moving boxes.

SUPER: TWO WEEKS LATER

OFF REPUTATION, Louis drives, eyes on the road, and talks for the benefit of the camera.

LOUIS

How cute is she? I named her Reputation after Taylor Swift's best album ever. At least, it was at the time. The first week, I tried calling her "Look What You Made Me Do," which was pretty spot-on, but obviously not sustainable.

He chuckles nervously, then looks into the camera, chastened.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

Okay, you're right. We need to talk about what happened.

Reputation WOOFs gently, encouraging Louis to open up. He nods in agreement.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

I had some... *sad feelings* recently, but they all went away and I'm fine now. I just need a fresh start in Mud Mountain. From here on out, it's smooth sailing to a new life!

The wind in their hair, nothing can stop our dynamic duo now!

EXT. HIGHWAY 101 - SAME

Louis' car ZIPS onto an onramp for Highway 101-

-and then STOPS ABRUPTLY, not even fully on the highway yet.

Traffic is ground to a halt. A tumbleweed crosses the highway to the MOURNFUL WHISTLE from a western movie soundtrack. A graveyard of vehicles splays out before them.

EXT. MUD MOUNTAIN GRAVEYARD - DAY

An actual graveyard splays out before us. Gentle snow falls.

All the characters we've met in Mud Mountain so far, along with dozens of other MOURNERS, are gathered at an open grave, where a casket lowers into the earth.

Nearby, a black and white photo portrait of an ELDERLY MAN (80s) propped on a tripod. Printed beneath it: "JOE WYTKO, Beloved Friend of Mud Mountain."

Claire wraps an arm around Emily, who cries softly as they walk from the gravesite. Chief Doug Tate and Lt. Penny Sanchez nod sympathetically as the women pass by.

EXT. CITY HALL - DAY

A historic home converted to a city hall looms over a large, snowy lot at the end of the business district on Main Street.

Claire and Emily climb the steps to the front door.

INT. CITY HALL - DAY

A vestibule with mahogany crown moulding, doorway, floors. Charming. Old. The women stomp off their boots, shuck their jackets and hats in solemn silence.

CLAIRE'S OFFICE

Five cardboard boxes labeled "Joe's files", stacked on her desk. She takes the lid off one, lifts out an unruly stack of papers, then flops them back in, with sadness and dismay.

INT. LOUIS' ROSE GOLD FIAT - DAY

Louis' head tips back on the seat rest.

Outside the windows, pure traffic jam.

SUPER: TWO HOURS, TWO MILES LATER

He rolls his head towards the passenger seat, looks down at Reputation. As usual, she snores, but wakes when-

-the dashboard console lights up with a call from "MAYOR CLAIRE SWIFTWATER". Louis answers, road weary.

LOUIS

If you're calling to see if I can start any sooner than Thursday-

CLAIRE (O.S.)

-Can you start any sooner than Thursday?

LOUIS

Let's establish up front that it's only funny when I make jokes.

CLAIRE (O.S.)

I'm going to scan some files and email them for you to review. We have to submit a compliance report to the state by the 23rd, or we'll lose our tax credits for the revitalization project.

LOUIS

I know, I'm scheduled to sit down with Joe on Friday and go through the files with him. We have plenty of time to get it done.

CLAIRE (O.S.)

Joe's dead.

LOUIS

I thought he retired.

CLAIRE

And then he died.

LOUIS

That's stupid.

CLAIRE

He was deeply loved, Louis.

LOUIS

Well, so was I, but antibiotics cleared it right up. Listen, I'll try to take a look at the files when I get to my hotel tonight.

Brake lights in front of him ease off; he inches forward.

CLAIRE

Appreciate it. Do your best to get here as soon as you can.

The brake lights FLARE red again.

EXT. MOTEL IN THE REDWOODS - NIGHT

The Fiat slow rolls into the parking lot of a motel as if it's exhausted from the journey. Louis exits, also tired, then Reputation hops out, perky as fuck.

A jolly dive bar adjacent to the motel office beckons.

INT. MOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

In boxers, a t-shirt, and reading glasses, Louis sits up in bed studying his laptop screen, looks confused. Reputation lounges at the foot of the bed.

LOUIS
(to self)
You've got to be kidding me with
this. They're already on their
third extension? I can't even...

He slaps the laptop shut. Reputation whips her head back at the noise. Honky-tonk music vibrates through the walls from the bar next door.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
I need a drink.

Judgment stares back. She low-key growls at him.

Exasperated, he looks into the camera, as if he'll find sympathy. His expression turns indignant.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
Unbelievable.

Reputation snuffs and waves a paw at the nightstand lamp.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
Fuck a fresh start.

The music swells louder. With a melodramatic groan, Louis clicks off the light and flops back onto his pillow.

INT. POLICE STATION - NIGHT

In an empty, closet-sized office near Penny's desk, Doug - out of uniform in splattered jeans and t-shirt - pulls the last strip of painter's tape off a floorboard.

PENNY (O.S.)
Every wall in this building is
white. The new guy gets color?

Doug ducks his head in a sheepish grin.

DOUG
It's called "Cry Baby Blue." What
do you think?

Penny steps inside the doorway, inspects.

PENNY

Very soothing. If there's enough left over, you should do Rosemary's sobering cell.

They share a gentle laugh.

PENNY (CONT'D)

You need a hand with anything? I mean, I gotta go put the kids to bed. And also, I don't really want--

DOUG

(laughs again)
--you don't really want to help. I know. Say 'hey' to the kids for me.

She moves to leave. then lingers in the door. Looks around one more time at the paint job.

PENNY

It's really nice, Doug. I'm sure he'll love it.

He smiles after his friend as she leaves, then looks back around the tiny office with a heavy exhale.

INT. MOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

MATCHING DOUG'S EXHALE, Louis and Reputation SNORE LOUDLY with mouths open, dead to the world.

INT. POLICE STATION - NIGHT

A desk now consumes the office. Barely room to squeeze past it from the doorway. Dim lights cast a soft glow in the station; a small lamp illuminates the new office.

Doug sits at the desk with an old yearbook open to a photo of Louis and him, arms draped over each other, laughing.

He smiles at the caption: "Best friends Louis and Doug, obviously up to no good."

DOUG

Guess you were right, Emily... best friends. Everyone said so.

He runs his fingers over the photo, clicks out the light. The room plunges into GENTLE DARKNESS.

INT. MOTEL ROOM - DAY

GENTLE DAYLIGHT peeks in.

Louis blinks awake, sits up in bed. The nightstand clock reads 6:12 a.m.

With Reputation still snoring, Louis pads to the window. Majestic redwoods filter morning sunbeams on the ground.

He fills his lungs, runs his hands through his hair.

Squints. Crashes the curtains together, turns away.

LOUIS

Disgusting. Let's get outta here.

Reputation springs to life.

EXT. SANTA CLARITA MOTEL PARKING LOT - DAY

The Fiat PEELS OUT of the parking lot onto the highway.

SERIES OF SHOTS - ON THE ROAD AGAIN

--HOLIDAY MUSIC PLAYS as the Fiat zips along the highway.

--Reputation in a grassy field, WHIZZING.

--HOLIDAY MUSIC PLAYS as the Fiat speeds up a mountainous highway road with patches of snow on tree tops and ground.

--The sun sets on a snowbank. Reputation WHIZZING.

--HOLIDAY MUSIC PLAYS as the Fiat pulls into a roadside motel parking lot.

--Louis in boxers, tank top, reading glasses, laptop in bed. Shakes his head in frustration, SLAPS the screen closed. Trades looks with Reputation. Chastened, turns out the light.

--The Fiat PEELS OUT of the parking lot in the morning sun.

--HOLIDAY MUSIC. Driving up Interstate 5.

--The beauty of nature. WHIZZING.

--HOLIDAY MUSIC. Driving up Interstate 5.

END SERIES OF SHOTS

INT. LOUIS' ROSE GOLD FIAT - MOVING - DAY

HOLIDAY MUSIC cuts off when Louis takes a call from Claire.

LOUIS
What's up, boss?

CLAIRE
Gathering starts in twenty. You
gonna make it?

Reputation perks up, concerned. Louis pats her reassuringly.

EXT. SNOWY COUNTRY HIGHWAY - SAME

The Fiat flies past a road sign: "Welcome to Mud Mountain!"

LOUIS (V.O.)
Of course, we're going to make it.

EXT. MAIN STREET, MUD MOUNTAIN - DAY

The sun dips low on the snow-blanketed town.

The Fiat turns off the highway and rolls down Main Street as the tired Christmas lights on lamp posts blink to life.

A block away from city hall, the Fiat parks on the street in front of one of a vacant store with boarded windows.

I/E. LOUIS' ROSE GOLD FIAT - SAME

Louis regards the boarded up storefront. Next to it, a barbershop, then a vacuum repair shop that's clearly been there forever. Past that, another vacancy.

The string of lights on a lamp post across the street flickers, then goes out. Louis takes it all in, then looks into the camera, dubious.

LOUIS
We're hoooOOOOoome!

Clears his throat, forces a grin, tries again.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
We're home!!

Looks down at Reputation, who wiggles with excitement to get out and check things out. Louis checks himself, softens.

...Stumpy Stackhouse emerges, towering over Louis in grubby overalls. Looks curmudgeonly. Maybe menacing.

STUMPY

Fruitcake.

Eyes narrowed, Louis turns to Emily, incensed.

LOUIS

GIRL. What'd that girl just say, girl?

EMILY

Fruitcake's his specialty. Sells them on line for 35 bucks. You should be honored.

Embarrassed, Louis looks down to see that Stumpy holds an actual fruitcake out to him.

EMILY (CONT'D)

And never call me "girl" again, unless you want to excavate that fruitcake from your--

LOUIS

--it's actually a line from a song. You- okay, still a 'no'. Got it.
(turns to Stumpy)
Thank you, Stumpy. This is really thoughtful. You still driving plow?

STUMPY

Yuh. Heard you drive plow now, too.

LOUIS

Not a metaphor for butt sex, if that's what you were thinking.

Stumpy thrusts a Saran Wrapped fruitcake at Louis' chest, then turns back into the crowd.

STUMPY

Well, I tried. Welcome home, kid.
Good to see you.

Claire smiles again at Louis: *relax*.

He barely takes a calming breath before COUNCILOR JOSEPH (60, Lindsey Graham vibes) and COUNCILOR MARY (60s, Sarah Palin vibes, giant poinsettia brooch) push forward to greet him.

COUNCILOR JOSEPH
 Look at those fancy snow boots!
 This your first time wearing them?

LOUIS
 Councilor Joseph! Counselor Mary!
 So good to see you again.

COUNCILOR JOSEPH
 Doesn't snow much in L.A., I guess.

LOUIS
 Well, I grew up in it here, so-

COUNCILOR MARY
 Fancy pants!

LOUIS
 Sorry?

COUNCILOR MARY
 Your pants are fancy, too. Are they
 Brooks Brothers?

Louis' expression nearly curdles at the thought.

NEAR THE ENTRANCE

Penny and Doug stand off to the side and observe Louis' interactions like it's a sport.

PENNY
 They've locked in on him. Why don't
 you give him a save and go say hi?

DOUG
 He's a big boy. I'll wait until
 things quiet down.

Penny knows her friend. She pivots and hits him with an incredulous look.

PENNY
 Mud Mountain Chief of Police
 Douglas Tate! Are you *nervous*?

OFF DOUG'S AFFECTIONATE GAZE, we see Louis clearly turn the conversational tide and charm Councilors Joseph and Mary.

DOUG
 (chuckles)
 Of course not.

But he is nervous, all right.

LATER

As the crowd thins out, Claire and Emily arrive at Louis' side to rescue him from a HIPPIE COUPLE (70s) who deliver a dissertation on environmental land use policy.

HIPPY WIFE

...furious that the urban growth boundary debate has not included focus groups with the actual trees that will be impacted--

CLAIRE

'Scuze me, folks. I want to let Stumpy clean up and get home while the roads are still--

LOUIS

--Good! Because safety. So lovely to meet you both.

Emily thrusts a pair of disposable white cups at the couple.

EMILY

Want some snacks for the road?
We've got a bunch left over.

Hippy Couple subdue their desire to recoil at the offer.

HIPPY HUSBAND

Is that styrofoam?

EMILY

It's Chex mix.

Claire and Louis step away from the conversation as Emily guides the couple to the door.

CLAIRE

This has been--

LOUIS

--exhausting--

CLAIRE

--a good start. You'll need to invest face time with the community to be credible with council.

LOUIS

Well, lucky for us, I'm endlessly charming, and...

He nods over at Reputation, who holds court with some KIDS.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

...I even brought back up charm.
Hey, could I poke my head in my
office, just to get a feel for it
before I show up in the morning?

Claire looks over Louis' shoulder, gets a twinkle in her eye.

CLAIRE

Of course. Doug can show you.

LOUIS

Doug..?

Louis turns. Sees Doug standing near the entrance in full uniform, a sweet smile on his face.

Across a room of scattered chairs and dissipating conversations, Louis and Doug take each other in, transported back in time. The magic of the moment sparkles, until-

Nope.

Full power to forward deflector shields: Louis isn't trying to catch feelings right now. He spins back to Claire, cocks his head in the direction of the offices in back.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

I need a police escort to my
office?

CLAIRE

He can walk you to the station. No
room for you here.

LOUIS

My office is in the *police station*?

From behind, Doug closes the gap between them.

DOUG

More of a repurposed broom closet,
to be honest.

Louis returns his attention to Doug, tries not to swoon. They're now close enough to touch.

LOUIS

Sounds cozy.

Doug blushes like a schoolboy, leads the way out.

DOUG

Let me show you.

As they exit, Louis tries to play it cool. It mostly works.

EXT. MAIN STREET - NIGHT

The men stroll down Main Street as a gentle snow swirls. Reputation trots ahead like she knows where she's going.

DOUG

...so I spent a couple years as a beat cop in Seattle, pretended I was going to make my way up to be a big shot detective in the city, but the truth is, I was always--

LOUIS

--You were always going to come home to Mud Mountain.

Doug chuckles, nods.

DOUG

Yeah. No one was surprised. Not like when you--

Louis stops in his tracks, looks around as if he's taking in the town for the first time. Walks into the street.

LOUIS

Has it always been cute like this?

DOUG

What? ...Town?

Lighted lamp posts, snowy street, quaint shops - straight off a Christmas card. Louis snaps some pictures on his phone.

LOUIS

Yeah. Come here!

Doug shakes his head as he walks to Louis, amused, but also a little offended.

DOUG

I know how cute it is, Louis.

He playfully pushes Louis' knit cap down over his eyes. When Louis pulls it back up, Doug locks his gaze.

DOUG (CONT'D)

You're the one who always had his head in the clouds, missing the good things staring you right in the face.

Too caught up in his own brilliance, Louis doesn't get the message. He shakes his head at Doug.

LOUIS

I don't mean it's like, cute-cute,
I mean cute like the girl in every
romcom who doesn't *know* she's cute.
Do you know what we could--

On a roll, Louis makes a call on speaker phone, resumes walking to the police station. Doug follows, mystified.

After three rings, a MAN'S VOICE answers Louis' call.

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.)

Louis?

LOUIS

Hey, Garrett! Listen, I'm gonna
text you a few pictures--

GARRETT (V.O.)

It's a little early to be drunk
sexting me, even for you, Louis.

Louis looks at Doug, aghast, shakes his head in denial. Tries to get the phone off speaker, fumbles.

GARRETT (V.O.)

It kind of doesn't matter how you
light it at this point. I know what
your hole looks like.

LOUIS

(smacks at phone screen)
FUCK!

Finally, it switches off speaker and Louis puts the phone to his ear, blushing. Doug shoots a playful "you're nasty" look and marches ahead.

DOUG

Reputation and I'll just meet you--

Louis tries to play cool, waves them away.

LOUIS

(to Garrett)
Haha! Silly! No... hole for you. I
have something else to show you.

In the distance, Reputation trots around the corner with Doug, both of them eager to ditch that scene.

I/E. POLICE STATION - NIGHT

Behind the glass doors to the station lobby, Officer Garreth Kennedy locks up. When he spots Louis approaching, he unlocks and swings one open.

GARRETH

Hey, you must be Louis! Doug said you'd be coming. We lock the front doors at seven, but you'll be getting your own keys so you can come and go whenever.

Garreth offers a handshake as they step into the lobby; Louis reaches for it.

GARRETH (CONT'D)

Officer Garreth Kennedy. You can just call me Garreth.

Louis snatches his hand back as if he got burned.

LOUIS

Sorry. Garrett is a very triggering name for me.

GARRETH

It's Garreth.

LOUIS

I heard you, Garrett. It's just, I used to date--

GARRETH

GarreTTTHHHHHHHH.

LOUIS

Don't you hiss at me, Garrett! I will not be toyed with!

Mildly terrified, Garreth rushes to fob them into the-

STATION OFFICE AREA

-where Lieutenant Penny Sanchez taps away at her computer. Beyond Penny's desk, Rosemary lounges in the holding cell.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

Oh, my goodness. Is that Penny Fairbanks, all grown up?

Beaming, Penny rises to deliver a warm hug.

PENNY

Penny Sanchez now. Got kids old enough to play "ding dong ditch" like we used to.

A weighted beat hangs in the air between them.

LOUIS

Sorry, I thought you were going to follow that up with a "ding dong dick" joke.

PENNY

I knew this would be a hard transition for you.

In the holding cell, Rosemary runs a tin cup along the bars.

ROSEMARY

C'mere, new guy. I wanna get a look at ya.

PENNY

Where'd you get that tin cup, Rosemary?

ROSEMARY

Brought it in with me. Decided I wanted to try PROP HUMOR!

She chucks the cup over her shoulder; it CLANKS off the wall and RATTLES to the floor.

Louis wanders over to the cell and offers a handshake.

LOUIS

Louis Braxton. I'm the new city manager.

When Rosemary reaches through the bars of the door to take his hand, she brushes against them and the door creaks open. Louis jumps back, startled.

ROSEMARY

AH! Sorry.

She closes the door again. Louis looks to Penny for answers. Penny shrugs it off.

PENNY

Rosemary hangs out when she needs to sober up. She can leave whenever she feels like it. Usually.

ROSEMARY

Unless I'm acting like a real cock
knocker. Then they lock the door.

LOUIS

I think you and I will get along
just great, Rosemary.

ROSEMARY

I should hope so. I'm your
executive assistant.

Reputation YAPS with dismay.

LOUIS

I'm sorry, what, now?

PENNY

When the city budget got cut a
couple years ago, Joe eliminated a
paid position. Rosemary stepped in
as a volunteer. Don't know what
we'd do without her, honestly.

Louis sizes her up anew.

LOUIS

We've got a shitload of work to
start tackling tomorrow. You gonna
be ready to help?

ROSEMARY

Never miss a day.

LOUIS

Good. See you here at seven.

DOUG (O.S.)

Ready for that office tour, then?

Louis turns around to find Doug has emerged from his office
with a mischievous grin.

LOUIS

I remember that look. I'm gonna
hate it, aren't I?

The mischievous grin turns sheepish. Doug points across the
room at Louis' space.

As Louis treads towards it, his lip curls.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

Where's the door!?

DOUG

Had to take it off. Wouldn't close
once I put your desk in there.

Penny and Garreth trade "uh oh" looks as they pull on their jackets and make for the door to the lobby.

PENNY AND GARRETH

Night!

Doug holds his arms out to them in a silent plea for help, but he's on his own.

The office is as we last saw it, except Joe's cardboard file boxes that were in the Mayor's office - and more - are now piled onto Louis' desk. It looks impenetrable.

LOUIS

Do I have a computer, or am I just going to scrawl memos with a quill pen and mimeograph them?

DOUG

Settle down. There's a laptop under one of those boxes.

LOUIS

If there's a poster in there of a kitten hanging off a tree branch, I'm going to kill myself.

DOUG

Let me know when you're finished.

LOUIS

What is that color on the walls?

DOUG

It's called "Cry Baby Blue."

Louis looks at Doug with admiration, mildly stunned.

LOUIS

Did I just get dunked?

DOUG

Walked right into it.

LOUIS

Something I clearly won't be doing with my office.

With a gentle chuckle, Doug retreats to his own office.

DOUG
See you in the morning, Louis.

LOUIS
Good night, Doug.

As Louis watches the office door shut, he can't fight the smile that blooms across his face.

EXT. TRAILER IN A FIELD - DAY

A clear dawn breaks over a field where grassy patches poke through the snow. Louis' Fiat sits parked a few feet from a single-wide trailer with a holiday wreath on the door.

BECCA MILNER (41, ginger fireplug) trudges to the trailer with a steaming Santa mug in her mittened hands, kicks hard at the door with her snow boot.

Wrapped in a towel, hair wet from the shower, Louis answers with a toothbrush jammed in his mouth.

BECCA
Jesus, porno.

LOUIS
If you're gonna kick my door down at six in the morning, you get what you get.

BECCA
Thought you might not've dug out your coffee pot yet. Just brewed a fresh one.

LOUIS
You're a godsend. Want to come in?

BECCA
I don't think Kevin would love me hanging with my naked ex-boyfriend.

LOUIS
I was a closeted high school sophomore. Does that even count?

BECCA
I seem to recall it counted a few times, buddy. Enjoy your coffee.

LOUIS
 (calls after her)
 Next time, send Kevin to bring it
 to me. I'll supply the heavy cream.

She flips him off as she trudges away.

BECCA
 You're disgusting.

LOUIS
 Okay, but really!

He takes in the pastoral beauty - a little more open to it,
 now? maybe? - before he shivers and retreats inside.

INT. MAIN STREET COFFEE SHOP - DAY

Cafe tables, metal stools. Linoleum floors. Homemade cutout
 snowflakes and Christmas coloring competition entries paper
 the walls. Strings of lights. Tiny counter.

A cold gust of wind blows Louis and Reputation through the
 front door. The dog shakes snow off her red plaid jacket.

Behind the counter, Christina "Tank" Fontaine SHRIEKS with
 delight at their entrance.

Louis and Reputation flinch.

Tank scurries around the counter to pet the dog.

TANK
 OHHHHH! NOOOO!!!! It's too much!
 Look at this precious cargo! Who
 are youuuuu??

Louis can't help but be charmed and Reputation is a glutton
 for attention, so it's all good.

LOUIS
 Her name is Reputation.

TANK
 NOOOOOOOO! I CAN'T!!!! Like the
 Taylor album?

He giggles and nods his head. Tank screams.

TANK (CONT'D)
 MMOOOMMMMMMMMMM!!
 (to Louis)
 (MORE)

TANK (CONT'D)

I played that record NONSTOP when I was like ten years old.

(screams louder)

MMMMOOOMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM!!

From the kitchen in back, XANADU FONTAINE (40, sweet, weary) emerges, wiping her hands on a bar towel.

XANADU

Jesus, Tank, what's the--

A moment of recognition between Louis and Xanadu.

LOUIS

Holy shit. Xanadu?

XANADU

Lou-Lou?!?

Reputation shoots him a judgmental look for the nickname.

Joyful hugs are exchanged; they linger in each other's arms.

TANK

What the heck! How do you guys know each other?

LOUIS

We grew up together. All through school. We even went to--

XANADU

--senior prom together.

TANK

(to Louis)

Oh my god, I've seen the pictures. You were so skinny like me, and you had long hair!

LOUIS

I was having a Trent Reznor moment. For three years. What's your story?

TANK

I'm Tank.

Louis takes in her tiny form, skeptical.

TANK (CONT'D)

You know, short for "Christina."

LOUIS

I don't know that at all.

TANK
Yeah, because, like--

LOUIS
No. Can I have an oat milk latte?

TANK
(To Reputation)
Can Reputation help me make it?

This is a very exciting invitation to the dog.

TANK (CONT'D)
CAN REPUTATION HELP ME MAKE IT???

In a pure frenzy, Reputation follows Tank to the kitchen.

LOUIS
(to Xanadu)
Cute kid.

XANADU
Hard to believe she's almost 19.

LOUIS
Oh, wow. Were you--

XANADU
--pregnant when we graduated? Yeah.
Didn't even know it yet. By the
time I found out, Dwayne and I had
already broken up. Again.

They gaze into each other's eyes for a moment before new BFFs Tank and Reputation reappear beside them. Tank holds out a paper bag and a cup to Louis.

LOUIS
What's this?

TANK
It's your oatmeal and your latte.

LOUIS
Oh. That's... lovely. Here--

XANADU
Nah, your money's no good here.

Louis looks around at the small, empty space.

LOUIS
Hon, someone's money has to be good here. How long have you been open?

XANADU

A year. City gives us cheap rent.
We're making it.

Louis taps on the wall that separates the coffee shop from the empty retail space next door.

LOUIS

Hm. Just drywall... Well, we gotta go, but we'll be back, right, Reputation?

The dog shuffles closer to Tank's feet.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

What? You want to stay?

TANK

Oh, my god, can she please?

Reputation waves her paw for Louis to leave. Xanadu offers a shrug: cool with her.

With a cock of his eyebrow at Reputation's betrayal - she looks away from it - Louis heads to work.

EXT. MAIN STREET - SAME

Full morning sun refracts off last night's snow. Doug strolls up the street in a peacoat and knit scarf over jeans and hiking boots. He looks sexy af.

LOUIS

Where's the uniform?

They fall into stride together towards city hall.

DOUG

Today and Friday are my days off.

LOUIS

But you said you'd see me in the morning.

Louis peeks over; Doug wears a grin.

DOUG

I don't know if you've noticed, but it's a small town, Louis.

LOUIS

The subtle clues are starting to pile up.

They arrive at city hall; Louis looks surprised when Doug doesn't follow him to the front door.

DOUG

I'm walking up to school. Breakfast with the freshman I mentor. It's a little easier coming out when your best friend is chief of police.

Charmed, Louis looks at Doug with fresh eyes. Yet again.

LOUIS

I'd love to hear more about that.

DOUG

Maybe I'll tell you about it over dinner sometime.

LOUIS

When?

Doug shrugs and ambles towards the high school.

DOUG

You're home, now, Louis. We've got all the time in the world.

With a contented smile, Doug treks on.

OVER DOUG'S SHOULDER, Louis tugs his jacket tight against the cold, takes a long look around. *All the time in the world?*

INT. CITY HALL - DAY

Council chambers are dark. A few desk lamps illuminate the offices in back. Quiet and empty, except for-

-Claire, coffee mug in hand, cardigan sweater for the chill. Clearly a morning person.

LOUIS

Thought you might be here.

She checks her watch.

CLAIRE

I thought you might be here, too.

LOUIS

We agreed that I would be the funny one. It's only 7:15.

She shrugs and hands him a manila folder full of papers.

CLAIRE

However you want to manage your time, as long as you're ready to present your budget recommendations for the new fiscal year to council next week. Rosemary just got the last batch of business tax receipts and revenue's down eight percent.

He opens the folder and flips through, scans quickly.

LOUIS

...From the six percent drop the year before. Rosemary's here?

Before Claire retreats into her office, she hits him with a smirk and nods towards the back corner.

CLAIRE

She's in her office.

Her what? He doesn't return the smirk as he heads back to...

ROSEMARY'S OFFICE

Scrawling away at a stack of forms, she's more put together today, though her hair looks like she's already on a bender.

The office is big. You could fit two desks. Windows are huge. There's a gorgeous view of the snowy foothills.

LOUIS

Why do you get this--

ROSEMARY

--Because I was here first. Joe gave it up when he got too fragile and had to start working from home.

LOUIS

When was that?

ROSEMARY

About four years ago.

LOUIS

Four--! How old was he?

ROSEMARY

Eighty-nine.

Aghast, Louis drops his voice to a stage whisper.

LOUIS
Eighty-nine?! What the fuck,
Rosemary?

ROSEMARY
He was very good at his job. At
least, for the first five decades.

Louis massages his temples.

LOUIS
Do you know where all the bodies
are buried, so to speak?

He waits. She smiles.

ROSEMARY
They're in the boxes on your desk.

Well, fuck.

INT. LOUIS' OFFICE - DAY

SALIVA POOLS at Louis' open mouth while he sleeps, face
smashed on the lid of a cardboard file box. It's saturated.

Slumped at his desk, it's unclear how he made it past all
the shit piled up in there.

EMILY (O.S.)
Are you okay?

Louis startles, wipes at his mouth. Embarrassed, he whips the
lid off the box and tosses it. The office is so small, it
ricochets off the wall and lands back on his desk.

Emily stands in his doorway, mildly concerned.

EMILY (CONT'D)
It seems like you should be
dehydrated after that.

He nudges the lid so it slides off the end of his desk.

LOUIS
Sorry. I paid a tantric shaman to
teach me how to keep my salivary
glands activated at all times. It
turned out to be kind of a curse,
but it does come in handy.

Garreth sidles up next to Emily; they exchange a sweet smile.

GARRETH
 (to Louis)
 Couldn't sleep last night?

LOUIS
 Better than I have in months,
 actually. I think my body's trying
 to make up for everything I put it
 through since, I don't know. 2011.

GARRETH
 It's the mountain air. Want some
 fresh coffee?

LOUIS
 Ooh, that sounds really-- Wait.
 From a communal pot?

Garreth nods, confused.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
 Hard pass. What's up?

EMILY
 Storm moved back in. Mayor thought
 it'd be a good idea for you to do a
 ride-along with Stumpy.

LOUIS
 I can't believe he's still doing
 it. He's been on that thing since I
 was a little kid.

Emily shrugs. Welcome to Mud Mountain.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
 And it's snowing again?

EMILY
 (as if it's obvious)
 Yeah, there's already four inches
 out there.

LOUIS
 How would I know?? I LIVE IN A
 CLOSET. Which I'm reasonably
 confident is ironic, by the way.

GARRETH
 You're the boss of, like, half the
 town. You could make someone give
 you their office.

Louis stands, pulls on his jacket from the back of his chair.

LOUIS

I'm bitter and caustic, but I'm not
cruel, Garreth. Now, help me.

HAND OUTSTRETCHED to Garreth, Louis prepares to climb his way out of the office.

EXT. VEHICLE YARD - DAY

HAND OUTSTRETCHED to Stumpy, Louis prepares to climb into the cab of a rusty-ass industrial snowplow. It chugs fitfully.

Around them, an old chipper truck, back hoe, bulldozer, several pickups, and a horse trailer on a large gravel lot.

With a groan and a yank from Stumpy, Louis settles into his seat and searches for the seatbelt. There isn't one.

STUMPY

Ready?

Before Louis can answer, the snowplow backfires like a cannon exploding, and Stumpy pulls out.

EXT. COUNTRY HIGHWAY - DAY

The snowplow RUMBLES down the highway. Daylight dims as the snowstorm whirls around them.

EXT. COUNTRY HIGHWAY - NIGHT

The snowplow RUMBLES through the dark in the other direction.

I/E. SNOWPLOW CAB - MOVING - NIGHT

Stumpy turns onto a residential street, waves at NEIGHBORS.

STUMPY

We'll clear some of these main roads, then call it a night. That'll get most folks home from work and the grocery store. Lots of 'em on smaller roads have plows that attach to their truck; they help each other out. I'll get back out here again around three in the morning, do it all over.

He turns onto another street. All around them, Christmas lights twinkle through the snowfall.

LOUIS
So, you run all those vehicles in
the yard?

 STUMPY
Run 'em, maintain 'em. Yup.

Louis waves to a couple of kids making a snowman in the yard.

 LOUIS
Must be a lot of work. They all
look pretty old.

 STUMPY
Got 'em all through disposition
sales from the State. Old, sure,
but sturdy. The prices were right.

Up ahead, a familiar house to Louis. He pulls out his phone,
taps out a text.

 LOUIS
Hey, Stumpy, could we stop up here?

Stumpy weaves over to the right and puts it in park.

EXT. XANADU AND TANK'S HOUSE - SAME

As Louis tromps to their house, Tank runs out the front door
with Reputation under her arm, passes the dog to Louis.

 TANK
Can she hang out again tomorrow?

 LOUIS
(to Reputation)
Whattya think? You want to hang out
with Tank and Xanadu tomorrow?

Reputation YAPS her assent. Louis grins at Tank.

 LOUIS (CONT'D)
Reputation's a friendly girl, but
you're something special. She
really likes you, kid.

Before Louis knows what happened, Tank hits him with a hug
and a kiss on the cheek, then trots back to the house.

 LOUIS (CONT'D)
Say hi to your mom for me!

At the doorstep, Tank turns and points above her. In the upstairs bedroom window, Xanadu waves to Louis.

Reputation under his arm, he grins his way back to the plow.

Is it already starting to feel like home here?

INT. LOUIS' OFFICE - DAY

A stack of empty file boxes on the floor opposite the desk where Louis sits. Much neater in here. Louis types intently.

SUPER: SIX DAYS LATER

Claire appears in his doorway, starts to ask a question. He answers without looking up.

LOUIS

I filed the tax credit paperwork with the state this morning. Should bring us back into compliance.

CLAIRE

Excellent. You ready for tonight?

He takes off his glasses, rubs his eyes, weary but content.

LOUIS

I'll have to walk all the materials on - there won't be time to circulate them before the meeting. But yeah, I'll be ready. Full report with a budget analysis and narrative, a clear set of recommendations, and a PowerPoint presentation to walk you all through it.

Rosemary materializes at Claire's side, arms crossed.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

...None of which would have been possible without the diligent and expert help of Rosemary.

CLAIRE

All right, then. Try to catch a breath before the meeting, Louis. You did good work.

He smiles as she turns to leave. Rosemary steps further into his office, holds up a bound report.

ROSEMARY
It *is* good work.

LOUIS
Thanks, Rosemary.

ROSEMARY
And they're gonna eat you alive,
kid. It's been an honor.

Sigh. He puts his glasses back on, resolute.

LOUIS
I'm not wrong.

ROSEMARY
Being right's not the same as
winning. Good luck.

As Rosemary departs, Louis turns his gaze to the wall in front of him. For the first time, we see a poster of a kitten clinging to a tree branch with the message, "Hang in there!"

INT. CITY HALL COUNCIL CHAMBERS - NIGHT

Council chambers abuzz; seats are full, standing room only. Claire and four CITY COUNCILORS settle in, poised to start.

Stylish and confident, Louis sits in the center of the room, a stack of reports and his laptop ready to begin the PowerPoint. He turns back to face the CROWD.

Xanadu and Tank sit with Reputation in Tank's lap; they wave. Rosemary winks. Hippy Couple, Stumpy, and others fill seats.

Penny, Garreth, and Emily stand in back with Doug, who flicks a cute thumbs-up.

Louis blushes, faces front. He catches Claire's eye, nods. She gavels the meeting to order.

CLAIRE
Evening, everyone. Council meeting for December 23rd, 2023 is now called to order. Thank you all for coming out so close to the holidays. As you know, we have a significant budget presentation from our new City Manager, Louis Braxton, the lone item on our agenda tonight after we adopt the minutes from our last meeting--

Councilor Joseph is ready to get on with it.

COUNCILOR JOSEPH

--So moved.

COUNCILOR MARY

Seconded.

As Claire takes the unanimous vote to adopt the minutes, Louis rises to pass out reports to council.

CLAIRE

Looks like we're all eager to hear from you, Louis. Ready for me to hand it over?

He sits, straightens his jacket, smiles.

LOUIS

Absolutely. Mayor Swiftwater, Councilors, it's wonderful to be speaking to you in a forum that's not a job interview.

(collegial chuckling)

As you're aware, you've asked me to make some recommendations that reflect a less-than-ideal budget forecast, not just for next year, but for the foreseeable future.

Poised and attentive, Claire watches Louis address the council, but the rest of the group is already reading ahead in their reports, and they're bristling.

Louis clicks to the first slide of the PowerPoint.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

What I'd like to do is walk you through a look at some year-over-year financial trends, then some projections for how we can anticipate--

COUNCILOR JOSEPH

--I'm sorry, what is this?

Councilor Joseph wags the report in the air; Councilor Mary scowls and reads intently.

LOUIS

I'm guessing you're looking ahead at the menu of options I've put together for your consid-

COUNCILOR JOSEPH

You want us to eliminate the police department?

Claire shits herself. The audience GASPS.

COUNCILOR MARY

And sell our equipment fleet? Our snowplow, for god's sake??

Stumpy SMACKS his knee. More GASPS.

LOUIS

Jesus--

CLAIRE

--Mary and Joseph, please. Let's let Louis walk us--

COUNCILOR PETE (30s, soccer dad) looks concerned, but impatient with the theatrics. He's about to speak up to support Claire when COUNCILOR BEV (50s, community theater star) recoils at the report in disgust.

COUNCILOR BEV

You want to move the Logger's Rodeo from August to DECEMBER?

A HORRIFIED SCREAM from the crowd. Louis is suddenly the weariest gay on the planet.

GARRETH

(near tears)

Why would you fire your friends??

Rosemary rolls her eyes. Emily puts a reassuring hand on Garreth's arm. Doug looks pissed.

Claire POUNDS the gavel. The audience settles, but they're agitated. The councilors are all loaded for bear.

CLAIRE

(to crowd)

I'm going to ask you all,

(to councilors)

ALL of you to take a breath. Louis is going to--

COUNCILOR JOSEPH

--Look at this! He wants to renovate City Hall into a library!!

Joseph just lost the crowd. *That might be cool.* But Joseph's not going down like that. He slaps the report down and goes back to the greatest hit.

COUNCILOR JOSEPH (CONT'D)

He wants to move the Logger's Rodeo
from the summer to winter!!

AN EVEN LOUDER, BLOODCURDLING SCREAM. Someone passes out and THUMPS to the floor in the audience.

Reputation hides her face against Tank, who looks dismayed.

Claire glares at Louis and POUNDS THE GAVEL.

He slumps.

WHAM! WHAM! WHAM! WHAM! WHAM! WHAM!

SMASH CUT TO:

EXT. MAIN STREET - NIGHT

PEACEFUL SILENCE. Snowfall.

Louis and Reputation trudge down Main Street, past the darkened lights of Xanadu's coffee shop. Downtrodden.

DOUG (O.S.)

Hey! Wait up!

From half a block away, Doug trots towards them. Reputation runs to greet him. Louis groans.

LOUIS

I don't want to fight right now,
Doug. I just want to go home and
get drunk and scroll Grindr and cry
over the fact that the closest cute
guy to my single-wide trailer in a
cow field is forty-two miles away.

Doug scoops up Reputation, gets covered in kisses.

DOUG

I come in peace. You'll be drunk
and naked in no time. I just don't
get why you didn't give me a heads
up about your recommendation.

LOUIS

The county sheriff's department has the capacity to absorb the majority of your functions. Contracting with them would save eighteen percent of the budget dedicated to your operations. That's a significant number. I'm not asking anyone to cut our police force, I'm asking them to consider a menu of potential structural changes that will be more fiscally sustainable over time. It's up to them to pick and choose what they want to do. But they need to have the discussion. And stop coddling the dog. She's on my side.

Doug sets her down and the threesome resume their walk.

DOUG

You're really smart, Louis.

This catches Louis by surprise. He stops, looks into Doug's eyes. They share a moment, could almost kiss...

DOUG (CONT'D)

You're also pretty dumb.

This also catches Louis by surprise. Bad surprise.

DOUG (CONT'D)

Mud Mountain isn't a math problem for you to solve, Louis. It's our home. You have to talk to us and you have to actually listen before you flop a report down and ask us to sit quietly while you explain everything that's wrong here.

LOUIS

But that's not--

DOUG

--How differently do you think that would have gone if Stumpy and I were sitting at that table with you to discuss those recommendations?

Louis can't even fully process that question.

LOUIS

You would..?

DOUG
I don't know. Maybe not. But maybe.

Doug turns away, resumes his walk to the station.

DOUG (CONT'D)
You should have asked.

LOUIS
(grimaces)
I have to walk in the same
direction as you--

DOUG
(calls back)
--Just wait thirty seconds and let
me have the moment, please.

Reputation sits. Doug gets his moment and strides away.

Although still not entirely sure why, Louis feels bad.

EXT. XANADU'S HOUSE - DAY

A humble ranch house strung with lights, blanketed in snow.

Louis rings the bell, a huge present at his feet. His arms
overflow with more. Reputation's dolled up for Christmas Eve.

Tank opens the door, drops her jaw.

TANK
Whoa. You didn't have to--

LOUIS
--Don't get excited. I didn't have
time to go Christmas shopping and
the only thing open this morning
was the farm supply store.

Louis foists the gifts onto Tank and turns back for the
largest present. Reputation trots inside.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

A fire crackles in the fireplace. Christmas lights twinkle on
the tree. "It's A Wonderful Life" murmurs from the t.v.

At the end of the couch near the tree, Xanadu sits with a
pillow and Louis' head in her lap. He's stretched out,
buzzed, with a highball of whisky on his abs.

On the floor next to them amidst the pile of presents, Tank looks like she got a family Christmas she's long dreamed of.

The magic hasn't quite captivated Louis yet.

LOUIS

What am I doing here, Xanadu? I thought I could do some good.

XANADU

Well, your first problem is you're too full of yourself. Just do your job. No one needs you to save the town. And maybe, instead of trying to do some good, you should let some good get done to you.

He looks up at her, smiles tenderly, then takes a drink.

LOUIS

I'd love to get some good done to me. It's been three weeks.

XANADU

Yeah? Try three years.

TANK

MOM!! GOD!!

ROSEMARY (O.S.)

Ha! I got railed like a barnyard hooker about six hours ago.

Necks nearly snap as Louis, Tank, and Xanadu turn their attention to-

-Rosemary, who plays on her iPad at the dining room table, whisky in hand, Reputation in her lap.

ROSEMARY (CONT'D)

Let's just say they don't call him "Stumpy" for nothin'. Ooh, I got a three on Wordle!

Reputation jumps down, heads to Tank's lap instead.

XANADU

Maybe we should open presents!

Louis brightens at this, rolls onto his side to watch.

LOUIS

Let's do it. Kids first.

Tank and Reputation trade indignant looks.

TANK
We're not kids!

YAP!

LOUIS
Fine, I'll go first.

TANK
No! That's okay!

YAP!

Tank shimmies the biggest present in front of her. Gift wrap flying in shreds, she reveals a tall wooden box with drawers.

TANK (CONT'D)
What is this?

LOUIS
It's a honey bee starter kit, so you can make a bee hive and the bees can make honey and you can sell artisan honey lattes at the cafe. There's a whole marketing plan I wrote for you at the bottom of the box and everything.

Concerned looks pass between Xanadu and Rosemary. *What a weird present. She's going to hate it.*

TANK
(touched)
I love it.

LOUIS
You do?

It's obvious our cynical hero was hoping she'd love it. His heart grows ten sizes when she swipes at a happy tear.

A blustery snowfall at the window can't chill the warmth of the fire and the lights that glow on our li'l misfit family.

LATER

Splayed back in a recliner, Rosemary snores.

On the couch, a sleeping Louis. Tank lifts a blanket to his shoulders and kisses his cheek. He smiles, eyes closed.

MORNING

Rosemary wakes up in the harsh light of day, sneers at Louis.
He wakes up the same way, returns the look.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
Christmas.

ROSEMARY
Fuck that business. I'm going home
to- AAAAHHHHHHH!!

Tank emerges from the kitchen, proudly wearing her new
beekeeper outfit.

ROSEMARY (CONT'D)
Is it Russia? Did the nukes go off?

LOUIS
(to Rosemary)
Are you still drunk? That's a NET
on her face.

TANK
I wanted to show you guys my new
beekeeper outfit! And watch this!
BUZZ BUZZ BUZZ!

Reputation rockets from the kitchen in a bumblebee costume,
runs circles around Tank's feet. It's mayhem.

ROSEMARY
I'm outta here.

TANK
I made bacon!

ROSEMARY
Stick it in a pint glass with some
tomato juice and vodka, we'll talk.

Already on his feet, Louis pats Tank on her hat and heads to
the kitchen.

LOUIS
Merry Christmas, kid. Where do you
keep the vodka?

EXT. SINGLE-WIDE TRAILER - DAY

The sun sets on Christmas. Louis, bundled on the steps of the
trailer, tosses a tennis ball for Reputation. She retrieves
it; Louis chucks it again, too far. Lands in a bank of snow.

Undaunted, she goes for it, leaps in. Gets stuck.

LOUIS
Shit. Sorry. I'm coming.

She snaps at him; he's an idiot.

BECCA (O.S.)
Hey! Pity Party!

Arms full of snowy mutt, he turns to see Becca trudging over with a pile of holiday ham and dressings on a dinner plate.

BECCA (CONT'D)
Since you won't join us for dinner,
I figured I'd make you a plate
while you wait for the ghost of
Christmas ASS to come torment you.

Judgmental and guarded, he stares at her. She turns away.

BECCA (CONT'D)
If you don't want it--

LOUIS
--Give. Thank you.

He takes the plate.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
Be gone.

As she treks away through the snow, she calls back to him.

BECCA
Merry Christmas, Louis.

LOUIS
Go fingerbang your husband under
the mistletoe for me, you wretched
heterosexual.

OFF BECCA'S CHUCKLE, the trailer door SLAMS shut.

INT. SINGLE-WIDE TRAILER - NIGHT

Kitschy country decor. Tiny dining table. Open bottle of Macallan. Half-eaten plate of food. Sad gay.

Garrett's contact info displays on Louis' phone. His thumb hovers over the "call" button...

No. He drops it heavily on the table, hoists his drink.

RINGGG!

Louis jumps, almost spits whisky.

It's Garrett! He swallows wrong; it burns.

LOUIS
Garrett! Merry Christmas.

GARRETT (V.O.)
You too, Louis. I've been looking
at those pics you sent me, and--

LOUIS
--I like to call that series "hole
in the snow".

GARRETT (V.O.)
Not those. Well, those too, but I
meant the shots of Main Street.

Interesting. But then... did Louis hear a noise outside?

GARRETT (V.O.)
It's got potential, so I thought
maybe I'd come up and check it out
while it's still the season.

There are definitely voices outside. Louis pads to the door
and puts a hand on the knob--

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK!

Once again, he jumps, SQUAWKS, almost drops the phone.

GARRETT (V.O.)
--afterwards, I could crash at your
place and maybe we could talk--

Louis swings the door open as Claire backs up to rejoin the
Crowd in front of his trailer.

I/E. SINGLE-WIDE TRAILER - NIGHT

Claire. All four City Councilors. The Police Officers.
Stumpy. Emily. Becca and her husband KEVIN (40s, smokin'
hot), with a pitchfork in his hand.

LOUIS
(into the phone)
That's great, Garrett. I gotta go.

GARRETT (V.O.)
 Okay, so I'll see you--

CLICK. The call ends. Louis stuffs the phone in his pocket, eyes the crowd with suspicion. Especially that pitchfork.

CLAIRE
 (sings)
 Should old acquaintance be forgot/

The rest of the group joins in.

EVERYONE
 And never brought to mind?/ Should
 old acquaintance be forgot and auld
 lang syne? /

Though he doesn't fully understand, Louis is touched. Tries to hide it.

LOUIS
 That's a New Year's Eve song,
 weirdos.

Undaunted, they sing louder. Sweeter. Reputation appears at the door. Sings along.

EVERYONE
 For auld lang syne, my dear,/ for
 auld lang syne/ we'll take a cup of
 kindness yet/ for auld lang syne.

Claire takes a step forward, holds out Louis' report.

CLAIRE
 We've all taken the time to read
 this report, Louis. It's a very
 good piece of work.

LOUIS
 Thank you.

CLAIRE
 Poorly delivered.

LOUIS
 (humbled)
 Yeah.

CLAIRE
 For which I am at least partly
 responsible.
 (MORE)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

It's Christmas and this is not a public meeting, so we're not going to get into it now, but first thing Monday morning, we're going to map out a process to work through your recommendations.

COUNCILOR JOSEPH

Except for cutting the police force. Nonstarter!

COUNCILOR MARY

Anarchy will not rule the streets of Mud Mountain!

Louis pinches the bridge of his nose, sighs.

LOUIS

Jesus...

CLAIRE

Mary and Joseph! Not now.

(to Louis)

You've been gone a long time, Louis. But you're still Mud Mountain family. We'll figure all of this out together. For auld lang syne, and all.

LOUIS

Then, what's with the pitchfork?

BECCA

(shrugs)

We didn't know why everyone was out here and we just figured it was gonna go a different way.

LOUIS

Lovely.

The group begins to disperse.

CLAIRE

Merry Christmas, Louis.

EVERYONE

Merry Christmas!

As the crowd parts...

There's Doug. Wrapped in a red scarf, dusted with snow, looking adorable.

And then, it's just Louis and Doug, dreamy-eyed.

LOUIS
Are you Team Pitchfork or Team
Wrong Holiday Song?

DOUG
Uhh... I guess I'm something else.

Doug digs in his pocket, pulls something out. Holds it up.
Scrunches his face, nervous.

DOUG (CONT'D)
Team Mistletoe?

LOUIS
You want me to fingerbang you?

Doug drops his arm and laughs, but he's embarrassed.

DOUG
Sorry. Stupid of me.

Louis shakes his head, approaches Doug.

LOUIS
Nah, it's me. I can't handle too
much sweetness.

Face to face, Doug smiles softly.

DOUG
Can you try?

LOUIS
I *am* trying. Do you think you can
be patient a little longer?

Doug tucks the mistletoe back in his pocket. Eyes locked
together, the air between them is electric.

With a gentle smile, Doug chooses patience.

DOUG
Merry Christmas, Louis.

LOUIS
Merry Christmas, Doug.

They smile in the quiet, gentle snowfall.

INT. CITY HALL - DAY

High-energy WEST WING walk-and-talk style, Louis and Claire strut down the corridor. She passes him a manila folder.

CLAIRE

I don't think there's anything in the historic preservation language that's prohibitive, but I'd want to have legal double-check.

LOUIS

Does anyone ever just email a link?

Apparently not. Rosemary approaches from the side, joins the walk and hands him another folder.

ROSEMARY

I ran the comps you asked for. Had to widen the search a little, but I think we've got a decent picture.

He grudgingly slaps the folder on top of the one from Claire.

CLAIRE

Soil testing quotes?

ROSEMARY

Holidays, so it'll take about a month, but the orders are in.

With an approving nod, Claire peels off as they arrive at-

COUNCIL CHAMBERS

LOUIS

Have Stumpy push the council tables back and make a big circle with the chairs. You've got the listening session invites up on social media?

Rosemary nods patiently.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

And you'll call--

ROSEMARY

--I'll get the word out. Why don't you skooch that tight little heiney over to the cafe? Stumpy's waiting.

He smirks, shakes his head at her. Inappropriate, but his heiney *is* tight.

INT. MAIN STREET OUTSIDE COFFEE SHOP - DAY

Street view into the cafe on one side, empty retail space on the other. Commotion as Reputation and Tank greet Louis' arrival with a latte and oatmeal. Stumpy taps on the walls.

TIME LAPSE

-- Louis and Stumpy conflag at the wall that separates the cafe from the vacant business on the other side, sheets of building plans in Stumpy's hands.

-- On the other side of the wall, they gesture and walk around the space. Ideas spark.

-- On the sidewalk in front of the storefronts, they look and point at various retail spaces up and down the street. They wave at a truck that honks when it slowly passes by.

END OF TIME LAPSE

INT. VACUUM REPAIR AND SALES SHOP - DAY

A bell DINGS to announce Louis' arrival in a shop packed to the gills with mostly used vacuums and accessories. Dusty. Dim. No one at the counter.

Louis spins around and takes it in, exactly as he remembers it as a kid.

IAN (O.S.)

Your mama still got that old Kirby
Classic Omega?

A smile blooms on Louis' face, but he doesn't turn around, continues to scan the merchandise.

LOUIS

God, I hated that thing. She'd make
me haul it out of the closet twice
a year for "deep cleaning weekend."
Weighed about a thousand pounds.

Louis turns, shares the grin on his face with IAN GALLOWES (40s, burly, boyish), who just came in from the back.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

Thing could nearly suck the carpet
off the floorboards. She sold it
when she and dad moved to Arizona.

IAN

Cool. How're they doing?

Louis shrugs; the smile fades.

IAN (CONT'D)
 Sorry, man. Lost mine, one after
 the other a couple years ago. Sucks
 like a Kirby Classic Omega.

LOUIS
 (rueful)
 More than one way to lose people.

IAN
 I've got the ex-wives to prove it.
 What can I do for you, old friend?
 Got some hose attachments that'll
 make you forget your ex-wives...

They share a laugh; Louis gets a glimmer in his eye.

LOUIS
 Close. I was hoping you'd take me
 in the back room and show me what
 you've got.

Intrigued, Ian cocks his head back towards the door.

INT. VACUUM SHOP BACK ROOM - SAME

A huge open shop - as wide as Ian's place and the two vacant
 stores on either side, fifty feet deep. His work table, tool
 bench, and shelves of inventory take up less than half of it.

As Louis surveys the shop, the gears turn in his brain.

LOUIS
 Lotta space.

IAN
 (shrugs)
 Comes with the rent. I share it for
 storage when someone on either side
 decides they want to try to keep a
 business open in Mud Mountain,
 so... mostly just me.

LOUIS
 How are you staying afloat?

IAN
 Only repair shop left in the
 county. City keeps the rent low.

One more 360 degree view of the shop, stars in his eyes:

LOUIS
 The goal's not to keep the rent
 low, buddy...

Louis hits him with an conspiratorial grin and walks him to the back door.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
 ...the goal's for you to make so
 much money, you can afford to pay
 higher rent. Do I remember that out
 back here is a very--

EXT. PARKING LOT BEHIND SHOP - CONTINUOUS

The back door swings open. Louis and Ian step out.

LOUIS
 --big, undeveloped lot?

Two cars sit in an otherwise vacant gravel lot - half a town block. Inspiration blooms. As the men brainstorm...

...we zoom above them and look down on Main Street and the surrounding commercial and residential blocks.

So much potential.

INT. CITY HALL COUNCIL CHAMBERS - DAY

Louis - different outfit from the day before - stands before a group of Townsfolk in a circle of chairs, coffee steaming from paper cups.

Behind him, Rosemary stands ready to take notes on big pages of a chart pad pasted to the wall.

A PowerPoint screen blinks to life: "Welcome!"

LOUIS
 Should we get started?

Townsfolk look eager, restless.

SERIES OF SHOTS - LET'S WORKSHOP SOME SHIT

-- Louis points at an OLDER WOMAN with her hand up. On a chart pad labeled "REVENUE GENERATION", Rosemary writes the feedback: "Bake sale". Louis forces a nod, gestures to the group to think big.

-- Same setup, now with Police Officers, some FIREFIGHTERS, and Stumpy. All sit, arms crossed, and stare at a PowerPoint slide with a declining bar graph. Rosemary stands at a chart pad titled "Potential Economies". It's blank.

--Same setup, different day / outfits. Standing room only; seems like the whole town is here. On the PowerPoint slide: "LOGGER'S RODEO". On one of Rosemary's chart pads: "GROUND RULES: 1) No Screaming." End of list. Louis reluctantly points to a WOMAN who looks very much ready to scream.

END SERIES OF SHOTS

Seconds later, the room is in an UPROAR. Neighbors yell at each other and at Louis. Louis rubs the bridge of his nose, defeated. A paper cup full of Chex Mix bounces off his head.

Her chart pads blank, Rosemary takes a swig from a hip flask.

Three SHRILL BLASTS from a coach's whistle around Emily's neck cause the Townsfolk to freeze and fall silent, except for Officer Garreth, who's nearly in tears.

GARRETH

You can't even have a bouncy house
in the snow!! It's not safe!!

One more SHRILL BLAST from Emily's whistle AT Garreth. He sits. Claire and Emily stride up front, next to Louis.

CLAIRE

(to Louis)

You have many skills. It's okay
that group facilitation isn't one
of them.

LOUIS

Depends on the context. You should
see me in a bathhouse.

CLAIRE

(to Townsfolk)

All right, everyone. Let's try this
again, shall we?

(to Louis)

Nutshell this for everyone, Louis.
No charts or graphs, just paint a
picture for these folks.

The Townsfolk don't look particularly interested in what he has to say, but Louis clears his throat and steps forward.

LOUIS

The Logger's Rodeo is a signature Mud Mountain event that draws people to town for one weekend every summer. And then they're gone. And we spend more money on the event than we make.

Restless murmurs in the crowd.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

Meanwhile, at *this* time of year, traffic on the highway through town is at least double what it usually is. Why?

A few people murmur "skiing" or "Timber Lake."

LOUIS (CONT'D)

Yup, people are driving through to go skiing at Timber Lake Lodge. And why do they stop here?

Same as before, a smattering of replies like, "they don't," or "gas, maybe?"

LOUIS (CONT'D)

That's right, they don't. Or they stop for gas and go on their way. But what if our signature event happened over the course of a week during the holiday season when we had the most traffic in the area to pull from? And what if people were so charmed by our little Christmas village that they did some holiday shopping here? And ate dinner here? And stayed overnight?

Lightbulbs start to go on for Townsfolk. Positive energy buzzes in the room.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

What. If. Mud Mountain was so famous for Christmas, it became a destination year 'round? What if we became a hub of economic activity because we have the resources and the talent and we are *so fucking charming*--

Small gasp at the f-bomb. Claire puts a hand on his arm to interrupt. Rosemary rolls her eyes.

CLAIRE

Easy. I think you got them.

They look back over the crowd, where several hands are raised and excited murmurs fills the room.

GARRETH

(tearful)

I can't eat snow cones *in the snow!*

Emily shoots daggers, but poor Garreth is otherwise ignored. Louis watches everyone else chatter enthusiastically.

LOUIS

Yeah.

(turns to Claire)

I think we got them.

EXT. MAIN STREET - NIGHT

Just like after the last city council meeting, Louis and Reputation stroll down Main Street in drifting snow, this time with a bounce in their step. And just like before-

DOUG (O.S.)

Louis! Wait up!

-they turn to see Doug trot up the sidewalk towards them. The threesome continue the trek when he catches up.

DOUG (CONT'D)

Logger's Rodeo in December, huh?

LOUIS

(mischievous)

One of many tricks up my sleeve.

VOICE ACROSS STREET (O.S.)

Louis! Is that you?

Holy shit, The Voice belongs to Garrett who walks out into the middle of Main Street. Louis lights up.

LOUIS

(to Doug)

Here's another one.

(turns)

Garrett!

Doug watches Louis and Reputation run into the street, where Garrett sweeps Louis up in his arms for a long embrace.

GARRETT

You were right, the place is really cute. Glad I could squeeze in a visit while it's still decked out.

LOUIS

Me too.

As they bask in their reunion, Doug makes his way over. He's met halfway by Reputation, who scrambles to be picked up.

GARRETT

(to the dog)

Oh hey, girl! I didn't even see you down there!

Reputation SNUFFS. Is he kidding?!

LOUIS

Doug! This is Garrett. He's a location scout for a production company that does holiday movies and they're looking for places--

DOUG

(to Garrett)

--Welcome to Mud Mountain.

(to Louis, wry)

So many tricks up your sleeve. I'll leave you to it.

After a peck on Reputation's head, Doug passes her to Louis and offers Garrett a handshake before departing.

The threesome watches Doug leave until he turns the corner towards the station.

GARRETT

He's hot. Maybe we should all get a drink together.

Maybe. Or maybe Louis' run of good luck just ended.

EXT. STREET TO POLICE STATION - NIGHT

Now, it's Louis' turn to trot after Doug, who strides to the police station.

LOUIS

Doug! Wait up!

Doug, slows, but keeps walking. Louis jogs past him and turns around, blocking Doug's path.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

Wait! I want to talk... *wheezes*
 God, I haven't done cardio since I
 moved back here... Elevation. Just.
 Hold on.

Reputation joins them at a leisurely pace, takes up a spot
 next to Doug's legs, her Potential Boyfriend of Choice.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

...Did I do something? Did that get
 weird somehow?

Despite feeling stung, Doug finds Louis adorable; he wrestles
 with his conflicted feelings.

DOUG

Nah. Nope, all good. I'm just gonna
 go wrap up at the station.

LOUIS

Okay. Should we catch up later?

Doug smiles, but it's a sad one.

DOUG

Garrett staying at the motel?

LOUIS

No, he's crashing with--

It dawns on Louis that Doug is jealous.

DOUG

--I figured. Go spend time with
 your guest, Louis. Show him around.
 I'll see you tomorrow.

Louis steps aside, lets Doug pass. Reputation stays put and
 watches him go, then snaps her attention to Louis.

He's fucking it up! As usual!

With a melancholy exhale, Louis turns around and heads back
 towards Main Street, where Garrett frames imaginary film
 shots with his fingers, a big grin on his face.

EXT. MAIN STREET - DAY

Bright sunshine.

Perfect, white powder blankets the street. Beautiful, new Christmas decorations adorn freshly painted lamp posts. Pretty as a postcard.

The festive scene bustles with ATTRACTIVE SHOPPERS coming in and out of every revived storefront. No vacant spaces.

An ADORABLE COUPLE (20s), bundled in knit caps and scarves, strolls down Main Street arm-in-arm, each carrying a shopping bag full of Christmas gifts.

ADORABLE GAL

I can't wait to see my mom's face on Christmas Eve when I give her these handblown ornaments!

Adorable Guy stops in his tracks, surprised.

ADORABLE GUY

Your mom? I thought we were spending Christmas Eve at *my* parents' house!

Uh oh. Trouble's a-brewin'!

DIRECTOR (O.S.)

Cut!

Attractive Shoppers relax; the chemistry between Adorable Couple drops immediately. Adorable Gal rips off her cap.

ON THE CORNER

In shorts and tee-shirts, Louis and Claire stand next to DIRECTOR (50s) and watch the scene through a monitor.

A carpet of fake snow stops a few feet in front of them. Detour signs block the street. Other Townsfolk gather at a distance to watch the action. SET CREW bustles.

SUPER: SIX MONTHS LATER

Director pulls her headphones down to her neck; Claire and Louis step back.

CLAIRE

Oh, my goodness, that was fun. Thanks for letting us peek.

DIRECTOR

Hopefully, it'll feel fun when we're still in your hair five weeks from now. Come watch anytime.

Smiles all around as Claire and Louis turn to walk to the police station; Director returns focus to the set.

As they stroll, Louis and Claire lift their faces up to warm in the early summer sun. Contented.

CLAIRE

Think you can handle a little more good news?

LOUIS

My li'l gay heart might just explode, but let's give it a shot.

CLAIRE

Our economic development grant from the state was approved. Four million dollars. Second largest allocation in the state.

She stops to enjoy the moment, waits for his excitement.

LOUIS

Second largest?! Whose is bigger?

CLAIRE

Oh my lord, Louis. Take the win. Between our revamped tax credit application, this grant, and the attention from the movie, our whole strategy is locked down. We did it!

Louis nods as the news sinks in; he cracks a smile as they start to walk again. Up ahead, Doug and the Cops wash police cars in civvies and play-fight with the water.

Everything is perfect.

LOUIS

Okay, but--

CLAIRE

--Seattle got the biggest grant, Louis. Okay? *Seattle*, then tiny little Mud Mountain.

A begrudging grunt from Louis as they approach the station, but he melts when Doug catches his eye. He starts to wave, but is interrupted by a-

JOLTING HUG from behind and Reputation YIPPING at his feet.

It's a sneak attack by Tank! Louis wriggles free.

LOUIS
Whoa! What's going on?

TANK
Just happy to see you! And this
movie stuff is so cool! Plus, I'm
just happy to see you.

LOUIS
Mm. Very on brand.

Wet t-shirt alert: Doug strides over to them. Louis anticipates his sexy arrival, surrounded by love and success in his new home. Nothing could ruin this!

BUZZ!

A phone call! But probably nothing that could ruin this!

TANK
Hey, could I talk to you for a sec?

Louis pulls his phone from his pocket and is immediately distracted by the caller i.d.

LOUIS
Sure. Yeah. Just gimme a--

DOUG
--Who's this cutie? You want to
come help us wash the cars?

Reputation scrambles around, full of helpful zeal, smacks Louis in the calf for permission to go.

CLAIRE
We should probably go over the
grant agreement before we send it
to the full council for review, but
I want to--

LOUIS
(abrupt, to all)
Okay, I can't right now.

He trots away from the chaos, answers the call.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
This is Louis... Yeah... No shit?

As the gang talks and laughs together in the distance, Louis looks back to take in the scene. Feels like home.

He furrows his brow and turns away.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

Of course, I'm interested. Can I call you back tonight?

With a smack of his thumb, the call ends and Louis returns to the group. Keeps his smile casual.

EXT. LOUIS' TRAILER - DAY

Parked in lawn chairs facing the sunset, away from the gravel drive that leads to the trailer, Louis and Rosemary nurse beers, deep in conversation.

LOUIS

...so I said I'd come down and meet with her. I mean, I have to at least do that.

ROSEMARY

Sure, kid.

They both take a swig of beer, enjoy the scenery for a beat. Rosemary's stoic, but Louis knows she's pissed.

LOUIS

The Mayor-Elect of the City of Los Angeles wants me on her transition team, Rosemary. It's a big deal.

ROSEMARY

Mm hmm.

TANK (O.S.)

You're leaving?

Startled, Louis nearly leaps out of his lawn chair. Behind him, Tank has arrived to drop off Reputation. They both stare at Louis, horrified.

LOUIS

Goddammit, why are country people so fucking stealthy?

Overcome, Tank fights back tears. Louis doesn't know what to do with the suddenly emotional situation.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

I mean, you basically had to walk across a football field to get here, you couldn't give me a little
(like a bird cry)
Lou-Lou! Lou-Lou! Lou-Lou!

Not funny. Tank's tears spill over. Rosemary grabs Louis' hand, gives it a gentle squeeze.

He doesn't say anything. She squeezes so hard it hurts.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

(to Tank)

AHHHHH'm sorry! I'm sorry I yelled. You scared me. Listen, I don't know what's going to happen; nothing is for sure. But Tank, you can't tell anyone about this. People will flip out on me.

Tank smears the tears off her face and stiffens her spine. Nods her head.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

You said you wanted to talk to me earlier. What's up?

With a sad smile, Tank walks backwards, the way she came.

TANK

Don't worry about it.

The red sunset frames the saddened Louis, Rosemary, and Reputation as they watch Tank leave.

As she tromps off, Tank pulls something from her pocket.

ROSEMARY

(to Louis)

You're an asshole.

LOUIS

I've done a lot for this town in just a few months, Rosemary. It's part of the reason they want me on their team in L.A.

PING!

Louis pulls his phone from his pocket; horror washes over his face as he watches messages blow up on the screen.

PING! PING! PING!

He looks into the distance as Tank raises her phone in the air, then disappears beyond Becca's house.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

Okay, she can NOT keep a secret!

Rosemary makes no attempt to hide her amusement.

PING! PING! PING! PING! PING! PING!

INT. POLICE STATION - DAY

Penny. Garreth. Claire. Emily. All stand with arms crossed as they watch Louis enter the office in the morning. Frosty.

In the holding cell, door open, Rosemary sleeps heavily.

Louis, taken aback, throws his arms up.

LOUIS

I'm just going to L.A. for a couple
of days to have a conversation.
It's no big deal!

GARRETH

(emotional)
It's a big deal to me!

LOUIS

Okay.

GARRETH

Why would you even fly down there
if it's not a big deal?

Indignant, Louis stomps towards his office.

LOUIS

I don't need your passive
aggressive interrogation, GarreTHH.
Or your irony, for that matter. If
that's what that was.

Claire stands between Louis and his office, blocks him.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

I'm telling you, *it's no big deal*.

CLAIRE

And I'm telling you...

She rolls her eyes over her shoulder, where Doug stands in his doorway. When Louis shifts his attention there, Doug drops his gaze and goes into his office.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

...you are the smartest, dumbest
person I know. It's infuriating.

Without waiting for a response, Claire heads out.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)
Good luck in L.A.

LOUIS
See, that's also passive-aggressive. You all have a lot of issues to work on!

The gang all passive-aggressively returns to work as Louis walks to Doug's office, knocks gently.

A tin cup whizzes from the holding cell, BONKS off Louis' head just as Doug opens the door. He winces at the impact.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
I'm ignoring that!
(to Doug)
Look, the Mayor-Elect's office reached out to me about joining the transition team and then becoming her chief of staff when she's inaugurated. I need to at least hear them out. It would be bad form to just decline.

DOUG
You wouldn't be worried about your form if you planned to stay here. You want the job and you're too chicken shit to say it.

With flair, Louis turns to the office.

LOUIS
See, *that* is proper aggression. Take a note.

Nope. They still ignore him. Louis turns back to Doug.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
I'll be honest, I think I prefer passive aggression.

DOUG
No problem. Here you go.
(sad smile)
I wish you the best in Los Angeles, Louis. I'm sure they'll be as impressed as we were.

A step back, a firm close of the door, and Doug is gone.

EXT. LOS ANGELES TOWER BUILDING - DAY

The GLARE of bright sunlight reflects off the windows of an elegant office tower. The long concrete steps that lead to its front door bustle with PEOPLE IN BUSINESS SUITS.

Sharp-dressed in a suit and tie, Louis climbs these steps like he's on top of the world.

After a few steps, he loses his composure, pulls at his collar. Tries to smack the heat waves out of his path.

LOUIS

My god, why is it like this?!

As beads of sweat gather on his brow, he sweeps his gaze up the side of the gleaming tower, all the way to the top floor.

INT. TOP FLOOR MODERN OFFICE - DAY

A well-appointed corporate office, where leftover campaign lawn signs and posters intrude on the classy interior design.

SERENA LOPEZ (late 40s, everything on point) takes in a stunning view of L.A. as she wraps up her pitch.

SERENA

...you know the city's full of climbers who see this as a launchpad for their own political careers, and, great, do that, no one can say I'm not ambitious, but I love that you're so *retrograde* about it. In the best way possible.

Standing at her side, a bit starry-eyed at the view, Louis comes back to earth at the odd compliment.

SERENA (CONT'D)

You know this town and how city hall works, but you also know people and I don't just mean
(gestures at window)
L.A. people, but PEOPLE. All kinds of everyday, dirt-in-their-fingernails people. Mud in their fingernails! Ha!

LOUIS

Oh, because Mud Mountain.

A playful scrunch of her nose.

SERENA

So look, come back to L.A. Help me assemble the team, liaise with the outgoing mayor's office, work your magic. Come January, we start a whole new chapter together and, then, a long career of getting shit done in politics. Big shit. Yes?

She reaches out for a shake to seal the deal.

Louis considers her hand, then turns to the side, looks near the camera, then right into it. His eyes flare.

LOUIS

(stage whisper)

Oh, my god, you're here! I forgot all about you. I mean, I could never. But I did! I haven't seen you since...

When the answer dawns on him, he shakes his head and turns back to Serena, reluctant to shake. He *boops* his pointer finger on hers instead.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

Whoop! Almost yes! For sure, I'm interested, it's just a big commitment. Can I sleep on it?

Serena withdraws her hand with reptilian cool and hits him with a campaign-trail smile.

SERENA

Take all the time you need. Take TWO days, even!

Unnecessarily robust laughter ensues.

SERENA (CONT'D)

...ahh! We're going to have a lot of fun working together, Louis. Call me when you're ready.

One last look out at that view of the city that could be his.

His gaze tics into the camera. How could he say no?

I/E. ELEVATOR - DAY

OFF SERENA'S SMALL WAVE, Louis raises his hand in a 'see you later' before the elevator doors close on his departure.

The button for the 33rd floor goes dark; the descent begins.

Louis locks eyes with the camera. Drops his cool facade.

LOUIS

Don't look at me like that! I've
been striving for this for years.
And where have you been anyway?

The elevator DING at the 25th floor goes unnoticed in the middle of his tirade.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

I haven't even seen you--

The doors slide open as Louis JABS his pointer finger directly at a RANDOM LAWYER (60s) who waits to get on. They're both startled.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

(to Random Lawyer)
--since you... get in here, you!

With some hesitation, Random Lawyer boards and steps to the back of the elevator, behind Louis.

Playing it cool, Louis faces forward and rides in silence, but side-eyes the camera and curls his lip at it.

On the 17th floor, they glide to a stop and Random Lawyer exits briskly. The doors slide shut.

Alone again, Louis launches right back in at the camera.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

I haven't seen you since I got to
Mud Mountain. You didn't show up
there once!

He stops, struck by this realization, looks away.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

Not once.

His brow furrows. Another realization. Looks back at camera.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

You only show up when I'm--

DING! First floor. Doors slide open.

Garrett stands right there, waiting to get in.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

--lonely.

The two men stare at each other, captivated.

GARRETT

Louis!

LOUIS

(wistful)

Garreth.

(horrified)

GarreTT-TUH!

The spell broken, Garrett steps in and holds the door for Louis to exit.

GARRETT

I'm late for a meeting on twenty-five, so I can't stay and talk, but you look great! What a surprise!

Louis punches the button for the 25th floor, stays put.

LOUIS

I'll ride up with you! You look great, too!

As the two of them stand grinning at each other, the elevator doors slide shut.

MOMENTS LATER

The doors slide open on their animated conversation.

GARRETT

...amazing! Congratulations!

LOUIS

Thanks! I mean, I'm not sure I'm gonna take it yet, but--

GARRETT

--C'mon, this is what you've always wanted. And even sooner than you expected! You've gotta take it.

Garrett steps out, turns back to Louis.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

It'd be nice to have you back.

Louis nearly swoons. Once more, the doors slide to close. Before they do--

LOUIS
Have dinner with me tonight?

At the last second before they shut-

GARRETT
Yes!

Garrett yells into the seam where the doors meet.

GARRETT (CONT'D)
Text me!

MOMENTS LATER

A million miles away, Louis rides down with a blissed out grin, but then trouble clouds his expression.

LOUIS
(to camera)
Wait a minute...

The first floor button lights up; the elevator stops.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
...why are you still here?

The doors slide open. Louis steps out into the harshly bright lobby, perplexed at the camera's presence. He looks away and strides confidently out the front doors, leaving us behind.

INT. TRENDY RESTAURANT - NIGHT

Long tables of reclaimed wood for communal seating. Dim lighting. Craft cocktails. Beautiful people talk loudly.

Still in their suits, Louis and Garrett lean into the table as they catch up, nearly empty high balls in front of them. Their ankles touch under the table.

GARRETT
...so ever since I made it onto the production side, it's been nonstop. I don't feel like I have time for anything these days.

LOUIS
Well, you're here now.

GARRETT
Lucky you.

LOUIS

Lucky me.

Louis looks past Garrett's shoulder into the camera.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

Please fuck off!

He lifts his glass in a toast; Garrett mirrors it.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

Here's to making time for what's most important.

A gentle CLINK.

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

A loud CRASH when the hotel door hits the wall as Louis and Garrett burst in, ripping each other's suit jackets off.

Breathless, Garrett takes Louis' face in his hand, pulls him in for a kiss. With a conflicted look, Louis resists.

GARRETT

What is it?

LOUIS

I don't know, I just...

Garrett's hand drops; he steps back.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

I keep hearing your voice in my head telling me it's over, telling me I'm emotionally distant, and I don't know if I'm ready to--

GARRETT

(surprised)

--I'm just trying to fuck a friend for old time's sake, Louis. What did you think was happening?

LOUIS

--to get hurt like that again. What?

Oh, boy. It got awkward fast. And kinda sad.

GARRETT

I never wanted to hurt you. I didn't actually think it was possible, to be honest.

With a pained chuckle, Louis hands Garrett's jacket back to him, nods his head.

LOUIS

You didn't interpret my cutting sarcasm and sporadic availability as love? What's wrong with you?

They share a gentle laugh, then look into each other's eyes.

GARRETT

Is anything different now?

LOUIS

Am *I* any different now? I'm not sure. But for the first time in a long time, I want to be.

GARRETT

I'd like to see you try. Take the job and come back.

Small, sweet nod from Louis. Garrett eases out the door.

LOUIS

Good night, Garrett.

Louis softly closes the door, walks to the bed. FLOPS backwards onto the pillows, lost in thought.

INT. DOUG'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

In shorts and a t-shirt, Doug FLOPS on top of his bed, book in hand. He looks to the open window, where curtains sway in the summer breeze. Starry night sky.

He turns his attention to the empty space next to him, sighs. Opens his book and starts reading "How to Not Die Alone" by Logan Ury.

INT. TANK'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

A young woman's bedroom with leftover flourishes from childhood: a few teddy bears, posters of cute country singers like Jake Owen.

Tank FLOPS onto a pile of pillows with Reputation on the bed next to her. The dog looks at Tank expectantly.

TANK
(disconsolate)
Don't worry, your dad will be back
tomorrow night.

Reputation nudges Tank's arm and whimpers.

TANK (CONT'D)
Sorry. *Our* dad. I guess.

Off Tank's sad expression, she turns a wallet-sized snapshot over in her fingers. It's Louis and her mom at their prom.

With his long hair and thin face, he *does* resemble Tank.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

Louis sits bolt upright. Resolute.

Stands up, straightens his tie. Smooths his hair, puts his glasses on. Looks into the camera.

LOUIS
You think I don't know what I want?
Watch this.

He pulls on his jacket, sits at the table where his laptop rests. Makes a Zoom call.

It rings for a bit, then Claire appears on screen, roused.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
Hey! I'm sorry if I woke you.

CLAIRE
I can't imagine you're calling with good news at this hour, especially looking like that.

LOUIS
No, I think I am! What if I took a leave of absence for a few months, just to work on the transition here, and then when--

CLAIRE
No.

LOUIS

--the time comes to... wait. What?

CLAIRE

It takes months to recruit for your position, Louis. I'm not going to have it sit vacant and lose all that time to find a replacement just for you to decide you're staying in L.A. permanently.

LOUIS

I get that, but I can keep things moving remotely for you while I'm down here. You and I already leveraged both of our political capital to get that state grant. Imagine what we could do--

CLAIRE

I said no. If you leave and you want your job back, you can reapply for it if it's still available.

Stunned that his infallible charm isn't working, Louis slumps back in his chair.

LOUIS

Damn, Claire.

CLAIRE

Damn *you*, Louis. You told me you knew what you wanted.

LOUIS

I know, but this is Chief of Staff for the Mayor of Los Angeles! Do you understand what that could mean for my career?

Claire's eyes manage to burn through the screen as if they were sitting face to face.

CLAIRE

Apparently, it means more to you than we do. And that's a real shame, my friend.

Before Louis can react, Claire leaves the meeting. He looks past the laptop screen into the camera.

LOUIS

Can you believe that shit?

He rises, as in the first scene, and makes his way to the mini-bar. Ass is covered, but still looks great.

Yanks the door open, scoops every bottle into his shirt tails, waddles to the bed, falls backwards onto it. Little booze bottles scatter everywhere.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

What is wrong with everybody?

He cracks a tiny bottle open, let's it drain into the corner of his mouth while he opens three more. Spits out the empty, scoots back onto the pillows, puts the next three in his mouth at the same time.

The camera hovers over his face as the liquid bubbles into his throat. He opens more bottles as he tongues the last three to the sides of his mouth.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

Get outta here!

He THRASHES again at the camera, too mad and crazed to sleep-

NEXT MORNING

-He SNORES while sunlight streams through a break in the curtains. His phone alarm BLARES Taylor Swift: "It's me, hi! I'm the problem, it's me" on a loop.

Bleary eyes blink open.

Fuck.

EXT. SKY - DAY

A jet barrels through the bright blue sky.

EXT. AIRPORT PARKING LOT - DAY

Louis throws his carry-on into the trunk of his Fiat.

INT. LOUIS' ROSE GOLD FIAT - MOVING - DAY

Disheveled and hung over, Louis skims down the highway towards Mud Mountain. Eyes on the road.

It's awkward somehow. He knows we're there.

Finally, he breaks, turns to the camera.

LOUIS
 Look, I'm doing this. I'm asking
 you very politely to fuck off.

He turns away and doesn't look back.

EXT. TRAILER IN A FIELD - NIGHT

Starry sky. Crickets CHIRP.

The carry-on suitcase scrapes as Louis drags it out of the trunk and lets it crash to the ground. He tugs at it with weary disdain and ambles to the trailer.

YIP!

Reputation barrels towards his feet from behind as Xanadu makes her way through the field.

LOUIS
 Princess!

Scooped into a loving embrace, the two enjoy a kissy reunion until Louis clocks Xanadu. Happy to see her.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
 Hey! Where's Tank?

XANADU
 She, uhh...

Xanadu closes the gap between them, seems troubled. Studies Louis' face.

XANADU (CONT'D)
 ...she heard you're leaving. She's
 pretty heartbroken.

LOUIS
 Does everybody know everything
 instantly around here?!

She cracks a rueful smile, slowly backs up to leave.

XANADU
 I'd give you a primer on how things
 work in a small town, but...

LOUIS
 Yeah. No need, I guess.

XANADU

Do me a favor, Louis? Talk to your-
 (catches herself)
 -talk to Tank before you go.

Brow furrowed, he watches Xanadu turn to walk away.

XANADU (CONT'D)

And good luck in L.A.

LOUIS

(calls after her)
 Can everyone please stop wishing me
 good luck in L.A.?

The gentle thrum of crickets, the whisper of a summer breeze
 escort Xanadu through the field.

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. POLICE STATION - DAY

CRICKETS.

Not the chirpy kind. The awkward silence kind.

A banner strung up on the wall reads "GOOD LUCK IN L.A."

All the Police Staff - except for Doug - plus Claire,
 Rosemary, and Emily stand around and sit at desks.

In a pointy party hat, Louis stands under the banner, near
 Doug's office. A sheet cake on the table in front of him,
 piped icing with name misspelled: "GOOD LUCK IN L.A. LOIS"

CLAIRE

Everyone. We are here to mark a day
 we thought would never come. Or at
 least, we thought it would take
 slightly longer than ten months.

Disgruntled murmurs of agreement.

LOUIS

I deserve that, sure.

CLAIRE

But really, we do owe Louis a
 heartfelt thank you. What we've
 accomplished together in a short
 amount of time is truly impressive.

The group offers a grudging, but sincere clap. Claire turns to him, a little misty eyed, perhaps?

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

Thank you, Louis.

Touched, Louis addresses the group.

LOUIS

Thanks, you guys. I just want you all to know--

Nope. The cops go back to work. Claire, Rosemary, and Emily head for the door.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

Okay.

He looks at his cake, still covered with its plastic dome.

EXT. TRAILER IN A FIELD - DAY

The Fiat pulls up to the trailer. Cheerful sun and vibrant dandelions frame the image of Doug sitting on Louis' front steps, yearbook open in his lap.

The passenger door opens from inside the car. Reputation rockets out to launch herself at Doug. He casually welcomes her into his lap as if that's where she lives.

LOUIS

Come to wish me luck?

The driver door slams shut as Louis approaches Doug.

DOUG

Nah. You've got plenty. You seem to manufacture it.

LOUIS

Just takes a little blind ambition and an ass that won't quit. Whatcha got there?

Doug spins the yearbook around so Louis can see the pages. It's open to the picture of them with arms around each other.

DOUG

You left this on the shelf after you packed up your office. It's okay, I know you don't want it. But I was flipping through and I looked at this picture of us...

(MORE)

DOUG (CONT'D)

(hands book to Louis)
 ...which I've seen a million times.
 The two of us, arms around each
 other. "Best friends." I've always
 felt nostalgic when I look at it;
 missing a time when we were so
 close and I loved... that. But
 today, I finally saw it.

CLOSE ON PHOTO IN BOOK.

DOUG (V.O.)

I'm looking at you, and you're
 looking over my head, somewhere in
 the distance. It's like you're not
 smiling at me, you're smiling at a
 future beyond this town, something
 better that's waiting for you.

The book closes. Doug looks sad, and goddammit, he's cute
 when he's sad.

DOUG

Someone better that's waiting for
 you. Not me.

As Louis takes in the sight of Doug on the steps holding
 Reputation, the perfect scene to come home to, tears fill his
 eyes. He shakes his head.

LOUIS

There's no one better than you,
 Doug. I'm the problem. I'm good at
 what I do, but that doesn't make me
 a good person. You're the one who
 deserves better.

With a gentle scoop to set Reputation aside, Doug stands and
 dusts off his uniform, then walks past Louis to the sheriff's
 car parked in the yard.

DOUG

You are a good person, Louis.
 That's not your problem. Your
 problem is that you're dumb.

Doug opens the driver's door and kicks a foot inside, ready
 to leave. He smiles gently to soften the blow.

DOUG (CONT'D)

You're truly one of the dumbest
 people I've ever met in my life.

He gets in the car, shuts the door, starts it up.

And then he's gone.

LATER

Night has fallen. One last concert of cricket music accompanies Louis' exit from the trailer to his car, small moving box in his arms. He stuffs it in back, shuts the door, and joins Reputation in front.

LOUIS
Ready to go?

She curls into a ball in her carseat, faced away from him.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
Great. You, too.

The car starts, headlights flare to life. They illuminate the trailer, where there's a small envelope taped to the door.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
How did that get there? Sneaky--

Louis flings the car door open, complains as he goes.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
--small town fuckers always
sneaking around in all this goddamn
nature.

As he snatches the envelope off the door, he swings it wildly at the chorus of cricket music that fills the air.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
Shut up with your stupid cute
chirping, you little fucks!

The world goes SILENT.

Back in the car, he SLAMS the door, reads the envelope: "To Louis From Tank".

LOUIS (CONT'D)
Fuck.
(to Reputation)
Did you know about this?

She snuffs a "fuck you" at him, goes back to sleep.

He flicks his gaze over the steering wheel into the camera.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
Oh, good. You're back.

Stuffs the envelope into the inside pocket of his summer jacket and shakes his head.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

Forget it. I'm not giving you the satisfaction. I'll read it later.

Throws the car in reverse, peels out backwards.

Hits the road.

INT. SERENA'S OFFICE IN L.A. - DAY

Louis stands at the big office window where he first met with Serena. He looks out at the city, not so starry-eyed.

In a tower building across the way, a lone window lined with Christmas lights is the only sign of the season. PEDESTRIANS walk the streets in summer clothes.

SUPER: FOUR MONTHS LATER

Behind LOUIS, a small team of STAFFERS argues over media strategy, first 100-day goals, their policy turf.

On the wall-mounted t.v., Serena sits for an interview with a local station. All smiles; it's going well.

INTERN (early 20s, backpack) shuffles in with sacks of takeout and a carrier of coffee drinks. They drop everything on the table and trot over to Louis.

INTERN

Here's your oatmilk latte.

Unimpressed, Louis doesn't reach for it.

LOUIS

I said "oatmeal and a latte."

Confusion and horror wash over Intern's face.

INTERN

I'm so sorry. I'll go get you-

Louis snatches the latte.

LOUIS

Please stop acting like I'm a monster. It's no big deal. I see and appreciate everything you do. Now, go to lunch. Be gone.

LOUIS

Xanadu.

A weighted beat. Louis stops walking.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

Xanadu, am I..?

XANADU

Look, Louis, whatever Tank is doing, she's doing on her own. She made me promise I'd stay out of it. She's an adult now and this is between the two of you.

LOUIS

Just tell me--

XANADU

--I have to go. I'm sorry.

CLICK.

A seething volcano of gay angst erupts on the streets of L.A.

It turns its ire on the camera.

LOUIS

Did you know about this?!

Oh, shit. The camera's out of there. We run down the sidewalk with a RAGING Louis in hot pursuit.

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. APARTMENT - DAY

Dead quiet.

Furnished studio apartment with an unmade bed. Open bottle of Macallans on the messy desk. Clothes strewn about.

Reputation dozes in her velvet bed. The door SLAMS; her head shoots up to see what's what.

Louis stands at the door, still frenzied. He holds up the prom photo to Reputation.

LOUIS

Did you know about this?!

YIP! She sure did.

He storms in, gathering clothes and throwing them on the bed.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
Well, that's just great.

He drags a duffel bag off the top shelf of a small closet, stuffs shit in there.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
Pack your things!

She leaps to her feet, runs across the room and grabs her bumble bee costume. Jumps on the bed, drops it in the duffel. Looks expectantly at Louis.

He finally slows down, returns her gaze. Can't help but crack a smile.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
Yeah. We're going home.

Reputation whips in circles; excitement crackles in the air.

But, wait! Louis looks into the camera.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
Sorry. Not you.

Reputation joins Louis, looks into the camera. They're both really, really happy.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
It's time for us to say goodbye.

EXT. COUNTRY HIGHWAY - DAY

As the sun sets, the Fiat zips down the road to Mud Mountain.

SUPER: THREE DAYS LATER

In the distance, festival lights on children's rides and craft booths glow merrily.

INT. LOUIS' ROSE GOLD FIAT - MOVING - SAME

Paws up on her car seat, Reputation excitedly watches the lights of town grow brighter.

Hands perched on the steering wheel, Louis mirrors the dog in his unguarded eagerness.

LOUIS
We're almost there! Who are we
gonna see?

REPUTATION
Yap!

LOUIS
Tank, that's right! Who else?

REPUTATION
Woof!

LOUIS
(smitten)
Yeah, Doug. Who else?

REPUTATION
Yap! Yap! Yip!

LOUIS
You even miss Rosemary?! Me too!

They pull into a grassy lot, dwarfed by pickups, on the
periphery of the Loggers Rodeo.

EXT. MUD MOUNTAIN LOGGERS RODEO - DAY

A bustling field full of REVELERS. Booths selling baked
goods, crafts, and artisan Mud Mountain merchandise.
Children's rides. Dizzying, joyful.

Chainsaws ROAR to life as two COMPETITORS race to cut through
huge logs.

Louis and Reputation scamper under a gateway adorned with
lights and a sign: "LOGGERS RODEO". They quickly spot Claire
and Emily in a cluster of Revelers off to the side.

The women huddle together over cups of cocoa while they chat.

LOUIS (O.S.)
Hey, boss.

Claire and Emily register joyful surprise at the sight of
Louis, who circles around them into view.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
I'm so happy to see you.

With a warm smile, Claire signals Louis to come to her. He
moves in for a hug; she side steps it and makes room for him.

A huge log SLAMS into the ground where he just stood.

Louis SCREAMS and recoils. Reputation hops backwards. The crowd claps and hoots.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
(terrified)
What just happened?

With a jab of her thumb downfield, Claire points out COMPETITOR 3 at a chalked-off starting line.

CLAIRE
She threw a log.

LOUIS
Why would she do that?!

CLAIRE
To see who can throw the farthest.

LOUIS
This town is chaotic and deadly!
Regardless, I've decided I'm
willing to accept my job back.

Emily cackles. Louis squints at her, offended.

LOUIS (CONT'D)
Did you just cackle at me, queen?

EMILY
We're interviewing the finalist to
replace you in...
(checks watch)
...half an hour.

CLAIRE
We actually need to wander back to
city hall and get ready.

Seeing his heartbreak, Claire softens, gestures at the crowd.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)
You should feel really proud,
Louis. We've never had attendance
like this before. The motel is
booked. We're getting tons of
tourist traffic on Main Street.

She chucks him on his sad li'l chin as she and Emily move to make their way into the crowd.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

Try to enjoy the rodeo. We'll catch up later.

With a wink, she's gone. Louis and Reputation swim in a sea of out-of-town Revelers. The sounds of rides, music, chainsaws, and applause flood their senses.

But then, through the crowd-

There's Tank! She and Xanadu sell cocoa, coffee, and cute "Xanadu's Coffee Shop" merch. Tank's happy smile dissolves when she shifts her gaze into the crowd and sees...

...the REVELERS part to reveal Louis and Reputation.

Time slows down. The world gets quiet.

A gentle smile resurfaces on Tank's face.

Reputation can't take it anymore and peels the fuck out, launches herself at Tank. A joyful, kissy reunion.

Xanadu realizes what's happening, gives Louis a warm nod, then nudges Tank to go talk to him.

With Reputation under her arm, Tank makes her way to Louis.

TANK

I think you lost something.

LOUIS

Nah. I just brought her home.

As the dog slathers Tank in kisses, Louis studies her face.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

Tank, are you my kid?

TANK

Shouldn't have taken that 23 and Me D.N.A. test if you didn't want me to find out.

LOUIS

That was a few years ago. I was just trying to find out if I'm genetically predisposed to ulcerative colitis. I had no idea about you.

She nods, disappointed he's not more excited.

TANK

It's okay. Mom didn't, either. It's just... Dwayne never felt like my dad and then, when I met you, some part of me knew right away.

Reputation raises her hand. She knew, too.

TANK (CONT'D)

Not you, though, huh?

LOUIS

Sweetie, your father has intimacy issues and as soon as I sense an emotional door opening, I kick it shut. Real hard.

TANK

Oh.

LOUIS

And then I drink.

REPUTATION

Yip!

Louis steps closer, puts a hand on her shoulder.

LOUIS

But not this time. This time, I'm gonna stick around and leave the door open. If you want that.

TANK

(cautious excitement)
You're staying?

LOUIS

If your mom will hire me in the cafe. They're replacing me at the city as we speak.

Tank turns to Reputation, affects a baby talk voice.

TANK

Oh, did you hear that? They're wepwacing him WIGHT. NOW. AWW!!

The two of them whip their attention to Louis. Harsh.

TANK (CONT'D)

Go fight for your job, stupid!

REPUTATION

BARK! Grrrrr!

LOUIS

Jesus. Okay, already.

There's joy in Tank's eyes as Louis backs up into the crowd.

Then he hesitates, uncertain.

Strides back to Tank, takes her head in his hands, kisses her forehead. Looks in her eyes.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

I never would have left if I had known. I'll find you later, okay?

Tears welling, she nods.

He turns, jogs into the crowd.

Breaks into a run. *He's gonna go get that j-*

WHAM!

He runs smack into Doug's formidable, sexy body. They collect themselves in a moment of surprise at their reunion. Doug seems pretty stoic about it.

DOUG

Wow. Louis. I wasn't expecting--

No time for small talk. Louis has a job to save. He grabs Doug and plants a sexy kiss on him.

LOUIS

I am the worst. I don't deserve you. But I love you and I'm sorry I've been--

TANK (O.S.)

Run, stupid!

LOUIS

(renewed urgency)

--so stupid. I gotta go get my job back so I can spend the rest of my life trying to make it up to you.

DOUG

That's what you're doing here?

Louis nods, feeling vulnerable.

DOUG (CONT'D)
 (romantic)
 Then run, stupid.

Eyes lock. It's love.

Louis runs.

EXT. MAIN STREET - NIGHT

Gorgeous decorations gifted from the movie shoot adorn Main Street. Lights twinkle in shops. Street lamps glow.

Louis leaves footprints in the snow as he RACES down the middle of Main Street to city hall.

INT. CITY HALL COUNCIL CHAMBERS - SAME TIME

The mayor and councilors perch with interest in their seats. A handful of Townsfolk populate the audience, including Becca and her husband Kevin, the Hippy Couple, and Stumpy.

Garreth and Emily stand in back with Rosemary, who drinks from a water bottle and pulls it away like it burns. *Vodka*.

At the presenter's table, FINAL CANDIDATE (late 50s, rumped suit, probably smart) smiles and nods at a question.

FINAL CANDIDATE
 I'm glad you asked. The increased revenue from business tax receipts, combined with a slight reduction in expenses is a good start, but you've bumped up your risk profile at the same time by taking on--

CRASH! Off screen, the vestibule door slams open. Final Candidate startles, turns towards the noise.

Louis skids into view, sliding over linoleum in snowy boots.

The Councilors share a light gasp.

LOUIS
 I'm glad you raised the issue of risk profile, Bob--

FINAL CANDIDATE
 --I'm Thatcher.

Louis strides confidently forward, snatches a chair from the audience, plants it at the table next to Thatcher.

LOUIS

You look like a Bob. But cute, I like Thatcher for you.

(to council)

A background in risk management and compliance is a great, safe bet if you all want to solicit a Starbucks and turn this town into the next Bonney Lake--

Mary and Joseph recoil. Thatcher takes offense.

THATCHER

--How do you know my backgr--

LOUIS

--I told you, you have a look. Councilors, I know this is highly--

CLAIRE

--theatrical.

LOUIS

Thanks!

CLAIRE

Not a compliment. It's also probably illegal. Louis, I'm going to have to ask you to--

LOUIS

--Just hear me out and then I'll go. I know I screwed up. But I also did a really good job here, and technically, the job is still open. This time, I promise I'll stay.

CLAIRE

How could we possibly trust that?

Louis digs out a set of keys, dangles it.

LOUIS

I never stopped renting the trailer out at Milner's place.

In the audience, Becca cracks half a smile.

Council is clearly not that impressed. Louis has to come up with something else! He vamps.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

And I bought it from them. I'm a permanent resident of Mud Mountain.

Claire scowls out at Becca, who's caught by surprise.

Louis turns back to the audience.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

Oh, hey Becca. Can I buy the trailer? Maybe carve out a little flag lot on the property?

BECCA

Hundred and sixty K, and you promise to stop offering to milk my husband like a dairy cow in the back forty.

LOUIS

Done.

Happy murmurs swell in the audience. Louis has fans.

Claire arcs an eyebrow at him.

He arcs his eyebrow back. *He knows what he wants, now.*

INT. XANADU'S CAFE AND BAKERY - DAY

The wall that separated the coffee shop from the space next door is gone; the shop has been remodeled to twice the size, with a giant pastry case at the coffee counter.

Updated decor, but coloring contest entries still paper the walls. Twinkling lights, lots of holiday goodies in the case.

Xanadu rings up the last MORNING CUSTOMER while Tank serves their coffee and Louis passes them a pastry sack.

As Louis unties his apron, the bell on the front door DINGS.

Briefcase in hand, Thatcher steps up to the counter. A weighted beat as everyone looks at him.

LOUIS

Your usual? Maple scone?

With a familiar smile and nod from Thatcher, the ice breaks. They're all pals.

THATCHER

At least until my new year's resolution starts next week.

SUPER: ONE YEAR LATER

LOUIS

I got you. I'm gonna start making some killer bran muffins after the holidays. Clean you right out.

TANK

Dad, ew.

LOUIS

It's the only way he can squeeze into that ridiculous office.

THATCHER

Rosemary still won't share hers with me.

LOUIS

Yeah, good luck with that. Hey, do me a favor and flip the sign on the door to 'closed'?

Thatcher heads to the door and flips it.

THATCHER

You nervous?

Tank puts the scone in a sack, then onto a serving tray affixed to Reputation's harness. She scampers the pastry over to Thatcher.

Louis whips the apron off and pulls on a suit jacket.

LOUIS

How could I be nervous?

As Tank smooths his lapels, he beams down at her with pride.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

My daughter promised to hold my hand the whole time.

Touched, Thatcher opens the door to head out.

THATCHER

See y'all out there.

Xanadu, Tank, and Louis all wave. The bell DINGS.

Through the holiday lights in the window, they watch Thatcher amble out onto the snowy sidewalk.

EXT. MAIN STREET - DAY

Keys JINGLE as Xanadu locks the door to the cafe.

Across the way, Ian closes up the vacuum shop. It looks brand new. He joins dressed-up Townsfolk who flood the scene to find seats in chairs lined up on Main Street.

Outside city hall, a makeshift stage festooned with holiday decorations awaits the ceremony.

Near the stage, TAYLOR SWIFT* sings an acoustic version of "I Knew You Were Trouble" with Reputation draped atop the piano.

**Look, I know. Just let me have this.*

MINUTES LATER

Around the corner from the event, Louis and Tank wait to start their walk down the aisle.

TANK

I can't believe I just found you
and now I have to give you away.

LOUIS

Don't worry, kid.

They side-eye each other and squeeze hands.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

I'll be back to work on Tuesday.

In the distance, Taylor starts playing a tinkly, Christmas-y rendition of "Here Comes the Bride" on the piano.

Tank juts her elbow out; Louis takes it. They walk around the corner into view.

Everyone turns to watch.

ON THE STAGE

A huge smile blooms on Garrett's face when he sees Louis.

Wait, what??

Haha, it's okay! He's there to perform the ceremony!

Doug, meanwhile, devastatingly handsome in his tuxedo, waits for Louis to join him. Eager, madly in love.

On Doug's side, Penny is the maid of honor; Garreth and Stumpy are groomsfolk.

On Louis' side, Rosemary's the maid of honor; Claire, Becca, and Xanadu are groomsfolk.

ON THE STREET

Louis and Tank, dressed to the nines, strut down Main Street in clunky snow boots like it's a catwalk. They exchange smiles with familiar faces in the crowd as they pass.

Among the guests, Emily and Garreth sit side-by-side. Swept up in the moment, Garreth touches his pinky to Emily's. She hooks hers to his; they smile romantically at each other.

Across the aisle, Rosemary wags her eyebrows at Stumpy.

Delivered to the stage with a kiss from Tank, Louis takes his place next to Doug.

TAYLOR

(sings)

And I promise that nobody's gonna
love you like ME-HEE-HEE!

Louis and Doug smile over at her.

TAYLOR (CONT'D)

HOO-HOO-HOO!

LOUIS

Okay, that's not...

TAYLOR

Yeah.

A cacophonous PLUNK of the piano keys.

GARRETT

Friends, we are gathered today to
witness the joining together of
Louis and Doug in matrimony. If
anyone here objects to this union,
let them speak now--

In the back row, Mary stands up.

COUNCILOR MARY

I have to admit, I'm just--

COUNCILOR JOSEPH

--we're a little squeamish about
the whole thing--

LOUIS
 (to self)
 Jesus.

CLAIRE
 Mary and Joseph!

Reputation low-key growls from the piano.

Mary sits, chastened. Joseph adjusts his tie.

Garrett cranes his neck to watch the mini-drama, then whispers to Louis and Doug.

GARRETT
 This place is the cutest. Do you
 want to do vows now?

Garrett doesn't know what he's doing. Louis and Doug shrug and nod at him.

GARRETT (CONT'D)
 (to crowd)
 Time for vows!

This pleases the Crowd. It's fucking cold out there. Garrett nods at Doug to start.

DOUG
 Louis Braxton, you're truly one of
 the dumbest people I've ever met in
 my life.

SHARP INHALE from the Crowd.

LOUIS
 (to Crowd)
 It's okay, it's this whole thing
 between us.

DOUG
 You've run away from every good
 thing in your life that was staring
 you in the face. Until now. For the
 first time, I really see you here.
 I really see you looking at me. I
 really feel you love me. You're
 home now, and I promise to never
 let you go again. Dummy.

Taylor dabs her eye. Mascara remains flawless.

LOUIS

Doug Tate, I truly am the dumbest person you have ever met. How it could take me so long to realize that I've been in love with you since high school is beyond me. But I like to think that my stupidity at least dragged things out long enough for us to arrive at this perfect moment with our family and friends. You're right. I'm home now. Home is Mud Mountain, and home is in your arms. I love you.

In her seat, Tank HONKS AND SNORTS with emotion. Everyone turns their gazes to her.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

It's okay, honey.

GARRETT

(quiet voice)

You guys wanna make out now, or..?

DOUG

I think we have to do rings first.

GARRETT

Okay, well, hurry up.

As they shove rings on each other's fingers, a gorgeous snow begins to fall.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

I now pronounce you husbands! You may each kiss the groom!

Louis and Doug step into each other's arms and share a tender, but sexy kiss.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

Oof. Yum.

Doug turns to Garrett with a devilish grin.

DOUG

You want some of this?

Garrett nods and steps in for it.

DOUG (CONT'D)

Not here!

GARRETT

Fuck, dude! Come on.

They share a laugh. Garrett raises his voice for the crowd.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

Please join me in clapping for Mr.
Braxton and Mr. Tate! They don't
have the patience for hyphenated
names! It's a lot of paperwork!

The crowd is on its feet as the couple starts down Main
Street, accompanied by Taylor's singing.

TAYLOR

Oooh, look what you made me do /
Look what you made me do / Look
what you just made me do / Look
what you just made me... OOH!!

ROSEMARY

Read the room, lady!

Another cacophonous PLUNK of piano keys.

The soundtrack picks up with "All I Want for Christmas".

In SLOW MOTION, Louis and Doug walk down the aisle, smiling
and waving to a town full of loving friends and family.

As Louis turns his head to wave at more well-wishers,
something catches his eye.

It's us. He talks into the camera.

LOUIS

You came! I'm so glad you're here.

Doug slings an arm around Louis' neck, like their yearbook
photo, pulls him into a kiss. Behind them, the perfect view
of Christmas on Main Street.

When they break their kiss, Louis flicks his gaze over Doug's
shoulder, back into the camera.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

Merry Christmas from Mud Mountain.
You're welcome to visit anytime.

And then, full of love, his eyes return to Doug.

FADE OUT.