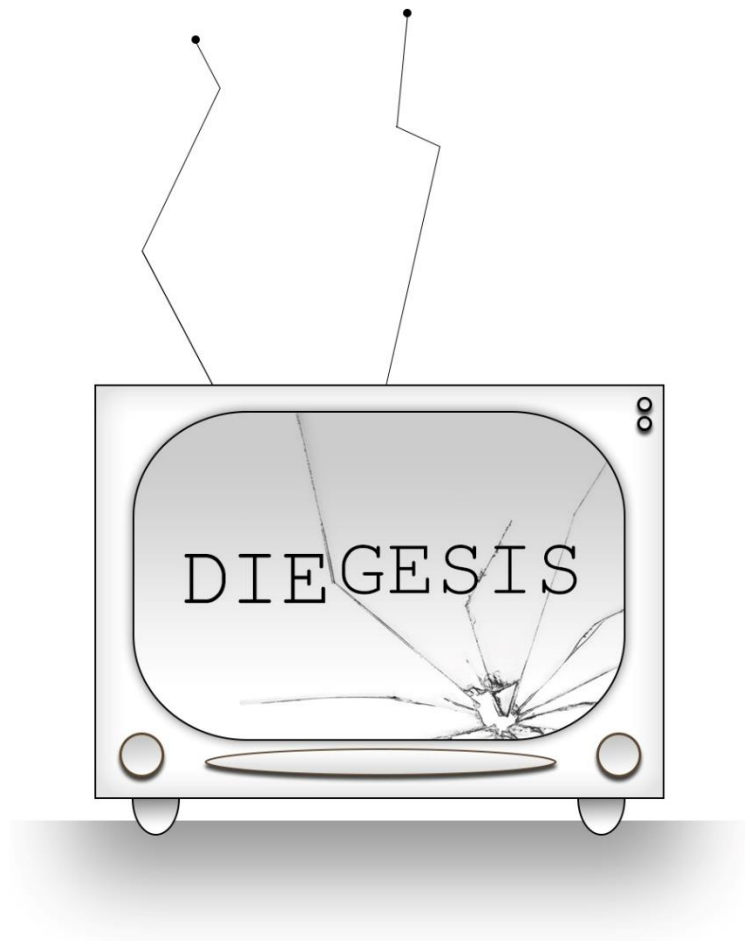


BLACK MIRROR



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ACT ONE

1 INT. TELEVISION STUDIO - DAY

1

The camera PANS past a LIVE STUDIO AUDIENCE as their excited chattering turns to hushed whispers. The camera continues to pan until it reaches a display monitor showing what the final output will look like when the footage airs; it CREEPS inward until the blank monitor takes up the camera's entire FOV.

ANNOUNCER(V.O.)

Best Buds is filmed in front of a live studio audience, AND streams online simultaneously for your viewing pleasure! Tune in tomorrow for the second part of today's two-part season finale!!

The blank monitor flickers to life as the theme song to "*Best Buds*," begins to play. The live audience cheers as they're treated to a cliché title sequence featuring all of their favorite characters smiling, hugging, and dancing in a public fountain.

NOTE: This scene will be shot EXACTLY as if it were an actual multi-cam sitcom.

Taking up the entire stage is a set made to look like a classic 20-somethings' apartment from the mid-2010's. Beyond the apartment's "front door" is a few couches/chairs around a coffee table, a nearby kitchen, a few more "doors" to various bedrooms, and a stunning "view" of the surrounding New York City, covered in snow, through the window at the back.

RUSS (27, intelligent but somewhat overbearing) sits on the couch swiping left and right on his phone.

RUSS

Still no matches? I can't really be that ugly, can I!?

The obnoxious laughter of the live audience echoes throughout the studio; Russ pauses to allow it to die down, but doesn't seem to address it otherwise. He stands and looks at himself in a nearby mirror.

RUSS

(into mirror)

No, it has to be something else.

He shoots finger guns at his reflection.

(CONTINUED)

RUSS(CONT.)

'Cus you're one handsome son of a bitch!

The audience erupts into laughter once again, as the front "door" swings open and JOHNNY (26, fit but a bit of a stoner), Russ' friend and neighbor across the hall, struts in carrying a bong. The audience cheers and applauds his entrance.

JOHNNY

Oh god. You aren't doing finger guns again are you?

More laughter from the audience as Johnny rolls his eyes and plops down on one of the couches. He begins to pack weed into the bong's bowl.

RUSS

No, well... Maybe. I'm just worried that something might be wrong with me. I haven't gotten any matches on The System in three weeks!

JOHNNY

Gee, I wonder why that could be.

Laughter. Russ reclaims his spot on the couch next to Johnny.

RUSS

Be quiet. Can't you do that across the hall? You're gonna make it reek in here.

JOHNNY

No, Chester's having dinner with his little sister in there right now, and he doesn't want it to smell while she's visiting. Besides, don't you wanna know who I ran into at the coffee shop earlier?

RUSS

Who? Raegan? No...

Johnny lights the bowl and takes a big rip of the bong as he nods his head, smirking mischievously. He exhales directly into Russ' face, causing him to frantically wave his hands to get rid of the smoke as the audience laughs.

(CONTINUED)

RUSS(CONT.)

Be careful! You're gonna set off
the smoke alarm!!

JOHNNY

Relax.

RUSS

Well, at least tell me what you
saw. What was Raegan doing? Was she
with someone?

JOHNNY

Indeed she was, my
romantically-challenge hombre.

RUSS

Well who was it-- a guy? I'll kill
him!

The audience laughs hysterically as Johnny proceeds to take
another large rip from the bong. He coughs a few times.

JOHNNY

No clue. He left right as I walked
in 'cus Raegan was about to start
her shift. I asked her about him
though.

RUSS

And?!

JOHNNY

Calm down, broski. She said it
wasn't anything serious. Just
another match she got on The
System.

RUSS

Another!?

JOHNNY

Yeah... apparently she's been
getting A LOT of them since, well--
you know... you cheated on he--

RUSS

It was mutual! WE WERE ON A BREAK!!
How many times do I have to tell
you guys that? It wasn't cheating!!

(CONTINUED)

JOHNNY
Tomato. PotAto.

Russ shakes his head as the audience chuckles.

JOHNNY(CONT.)
You just gotta get over her
already, man. It's been, what? Like
three months? Just get yourself a
rebound already, sheesh.

Russ stands again to look at himself in the mirror.

RUSS
Easy for you to say! According to
The System, I must be repulsive.

He whips out his finger guns again, this time much more
half-heartedly, trying to fake a smile. But he holsters his
fingers as it turns into a frown. Laughter from the
audience.

JOHNNY
Well the finger guns definitely
aren't helping... And that's not
true, even I have some dry spells
occasionally. Last year, I went a
whole month without!

RUSS
(sarcastic)
Oh, a *whole* month. How did you ever
survive?

JOHNNY
Being an asshole probably doesn't
help your case either, ya know.
Just watch some porn, that's what I
did. A LOT of porn.

More laughter and a "WOO!" from the audience.

RUSS
Way past ya there already, pal.

JOHNNY
See, you'll be fine then. Nothing
like a little spanking the monkey
to mend a broken heart.

RUSS
Not quite the same in my book...
Speaking of monkeys, where's
Mortimer?

(CONTINUED)

JOHNNY

My primate partner in crime is currently with Chester. Wanted to show the *Capuchin Casanova* off to his sister or something, I guess. You know how he is.

RUSS

Damn, that furry lil' guy always cheers me up...

2

INT. STUDIO CONTROL ROOM - SIMULTANEOUS

2

NOTE: This scene will be shot like a normal *Black Mirror* episode.

The muffled sound of the show's performers and the audience's laughter can still be heard as the camera moves behind the scenes.

Employees scurry left and right frantically, carrying wires, costumes, and MANY cups of coffee, performing various production duties. They dodge and juke their way around the many desks and screens in the center of the room where the camera technicians maneuver the cameras and control which angle is being shown.

At the head of the room, surveying his well-oiled creative machine from an elevated podium, sits *Best Bud's* creator and showrunner, the *mastermind* behind all of its success, VINCE LAZARUS (48, stern, uncompromising, and kind of an egomaniacal dickhead). His eyes dart from screen to screen, analyzing each individual camera angle.

LAZARUS

DUMBASS, why haven't you cut to the two shot!? DO IT NOW!

One of the head camera techs, DUMBASS (28, not his real name), lets out a frightened squeak.

DUMBASS

Yessir! My apologies!

LAZARUS

Don't let it happen again, or I'll put you in the corner with Dumbfuck.

Dumbass shoots a worried look toward his fellow head camera tech, DUMBFUCK (31, also not his real name), who sits on a stool in the corner wearing a dunce cap.

(CONTINUED)

DUMBASS

Yessir!

LAZARUS

Somebody make sure Chester and
Johnny's apartment is ready to go!
And if someone forgot to void
Mortimer's stomach chamber again,
you're all fired!

A nearby employee wearing a "Best Buds CREW" HOODIE, ALYSSA (28, squirly) drops the coffees she was holding after hearing this, and darts off with a nervous look on her face. The cardboard cups splatter on the floor. Lazarus shakes his head in disappointment.

LAZARUS

Guess I gotta do all this shit
myself-- WE NEED MORE LAUGHTER!

The camera technicians all nod. A Production Assistant, BETHANY (26, clever and intelligent) rushes over and begins cleaning up the coffee spill. Lazarus glances at her.

LAZARUS

You!

Bethany's eyes shoot upward toward her boss; she pauses her cleaning.

BETHANY

Me, sir?

LAZARUS

Yes, you. Get over here, let
Dumbfuck handle that.

Lazarus snaps his fingers at Dumbfuck, who shuffles off his stool to continue cleaning up the spill.

LAZARUS

You're new here right?-- DUMBASS,
WHAT'D I SAY? CUT BACK TO THE
WIDE!!-- The new PA, correct?

Dumbass frantically switches the camera angle.

BETHANY

Um, yes. Bethany Du--, I mean,
Bethany Hendricks, sir. I started a
few months ago. It's an honor to
work with you.

(CONTINUED)

LAZARUS

FOR me. And yes, I'm aware. I remember your resume. Pretty solid narrative coding background if I remember correctly.

BETHANY

Yessir, I did my senior thesis on your invention of the ThespAIns and the effect it's had on the industry. But when I was hired, they told me everyone has to start as a PA, so--

LAZARUS

Yes, that's how things typically go. But lucky for you, one of those was my caramel frappuccino.

He nods at the spill Dumbfuck continues to clean. A confused expression grows on Bethany's face.

LAZARUS(CONT.)

Which means you've just been promoted-- Congratulations. Now go down and make sure Russ and Johnny's ThespAIns make it back into their pods once this scene is over. And check that Chester's updated dialogue for the dinner scene was loaded into his speech box too while you're at it. He's on stage in 5.

Bethany stares back at him in shock.

LAZARUS(CONT.)

Stay down there once you're done too and make sure that Russ and Johnny don't shut down completely like last time; they'll be back on soon too.

Bethany still remains silent, staring back at him with wide eyes.

LAZARUS

You just gonna stand there? TV this good doesn't just make itself...

BETHANY

Uh, yes! Sorry, I'll get right on that sir. Thank you so much for the opportunity.

(CONTINUED)

Bethany rushes off toward the control room's exit, a sly grin growing on her face.

LAZARUS

Tell that bitch who spilled my
frappuccino she's fired too, will
ya? But wait till she empties
Mortimer's stomach first, he's
gonna need room for the next scene.
Gonna be a real crowd-pleaser,
haha!

Bethany reluctantly nods and exits.

3

INT. BACKSTAGE - CONTINUED

3

Bethany stands in front of a set of futuristic lockers, each with a retracting glass cover and an individual wire hanging down from each of their ceilings. CHESTER (27, Johnny's super sarcastic roommate) stands lifeless with his back facing Bethany.

The camera PANS to reveal that she is actually using a small TABLET DEVICE to fiddle with Chester's speech box through an open panel on his back. She closes the panel, looking satisfied, then presses a switch on the locker's exterior which rotates Chester's lifeless body around inside the pod until he faces Bethany.

BETHANY

Okay. Updated dialogue loaded and
ready to go. Break a leg, Chester.

She pats him on his shoulder as he detaches the ceiling wire from his ear, and begins to robotically walk toward the sound stage along with a few other ThespAIins.

Suddenly, Alyssa rushes by behind her, carrying what appears to be a petrified Capuchin Monkey in her arms, MORTIMER. She hurries to the edge of the sound stage and puts Mortimer into Chester's lifeless arms, sighing in relief.

ALYSSA

He's here! Mortimer's ready!
Stomach chamber has been freshly
voided! I made it!!

She looks for someone to congratulate her, but everyone besides Bethany is too busy rushing around to notice. Bethany stares at her, remembering what Lazarus told her to do.

(CONTINUED)

BETHANY
(under breath)
Shit...

She walks over to Alyssa.

BETHANY
Hey, um-- it's Alyssa, right?

ALYSSA
Hi, yes! And you're Bethany!

BETHANY
(awkward)
Uh, yeah... Listen, Lazarus told me
to tell you that uh--

Alyssa looks at her longingly.

BETHANY
--I'm really sorry... But he said
to tell you that you're fired.
Apparently, you dro--

ALYSSA
I'm-- what? No... I voided the
chamber in time! Nothing went
wrong! Please!

BETHANY
I know... but I didn't make the
call. I-- I'm so sorry.

Alyssa bursts into tears, crying uncontrollably. But then she stops, anger growing on her face.

ALYSSA
(through tears)
FINE THEN! THREE WHOLE YEARS FOR
NOTHING!! Y'KNOW WHAT? FUCK THIS
PLACE, FUCK THIS SHOW, AND FUCK
LAZARUS!! I'M DONE WITH THIS SHIT!

Bethany steps back and stares, startled by this sudden outburst, as Alyssa rips off her "*Best Buds* CREW" hoodie and throws it on the ground. She storms out of the studio immediately.

BETHANY
Wow.

But then she looks down at the hoodie, the same sly grin reappearing on her face. She grabs the hoodie and puts it on

(CONTINUED)

just as a red light above the stage entrance blinks on, a sign reading "LIVE ON AIR" below it. Chester and the other ThespAIns begin to walk out on stage, becoming much more lively as they go.

Seconds later, Johnny and Russ walk off stage, now just as lifeless as Chester was, and enter their pods, plugging their respective wires into their ears. Bethany watches this process happen eagerly. Once they've gone into sleep mode, she approaches Russ' pod and opens it while whipping out her tablet.

BETHANY
 (to sleeping Russ)
 Good to see you again in person...
 Time to get to work.

4 INT. TELEVISION STUDIO - LATER

4

NOTE: We transition back to the cliché multi-cam sitcom shooting style.

Filming of the scene in Russ' apartment continues once again, but the two friends are now joined by Chester, Mortimer, and PENELOPE (26, the eccentric hipster of the group).

Johnny takes another rip of the bong and passes it to Chester as Russ continues to sulk. Penelope sits in the chair next to them.

PENELOPE
 Wait... Mortimer did what to your sister?

CHESTER
 He swallowed her engagement ring like it was a freakin' gumdrop! She's gonna hate me now! Could I *BE* a worse brother!?

The audience laughs. Chester is a fan favorite.

PENELOPE
 Oh no! Mortimer, you didn't do that, did you? How could something so cute do such a bad thing?

Penelope tickles Mortimer on his chin as he climbs over her onto Johnny.

(CONTINUED)

CHESTER

He may be cute but he's really just a demon in a monkey suit-- Johnny, I swear to god you better be sifting through that that thing's shit for the next week until you find it, or else I'm gonna make sure George ain't so curious anymore.

The audience cackles hysterically.

JOHNNY

Yeah, yeah. He'll pass it just like everything else he swallows. Besides, you're the one who wanted to show him off-- Same shit, different day.

CHESTER

Literally...

Chuckles from the audience.

PENELOPE

Why'd you get a monkey anyway, Johnny? You should've just gotten a cute little kitty like mine!

JOHNNY

'Cus your cat stinks like shit, Penelope. That's why.

PENELOPE

Hey, that's not nice! She was a rescue!

RUSS

He's not wrong though.

Johnny puts Mortimer down on the coffee table next to his weed as Chester passes him the bong again to take another rip. He coughs some more.

JOHNNY

You ever notice, *bong rip*, how in porn--

RUSS

Oh, we're still on this, huh?

(CONTINUED)

PENELOPE

Still?

JOHNNY

Yes, shut up. And you're the one who won't stop talking about Raegan--

PENELOPE

(pitying Russ)

Oh, Russ. You're still not over it, huh?

CHESTER

I mean he did sleep with another girl, so--

RUSS

WE WERE ON A BREAK!

The audience laughs at Russ' catchphrase as the other characters roll their eyes.

JOHNNY

Anyway... You ever notice how a video with a certain pornstar will be like "teen amateur does blah blah blah," but then in another video with the SAME pornstar that's released like a week later, it'll say like "Mature MILF blah blah blah"?

CHESTER

Jeez, how much have you smoked, Johnny? What's your point?

JOHNNY

More of an observation than a point. But like, how can they go from "teen" to "MILF" in that short of time, ya know? I'm just wondering, like, what's their average career length, and like, how old are they when they gotta make that transition?

CHESTER

Huh. You might actually be onto something. I saw one of those "MILF" videos one time and there's NO WAY that girl had ever pushed a baby out of her--

(CONTINUED)

PENELOPE

Ugh! Men are disgusting...

The audience laughs uncontrollably.

RUSS

Does it really even matter?

JOHNNY

No, I guess not. Just find it a little creepy that I could unknowingly be doing the five finger shuffle to, like, a dead chick or something, y'know?

RUSS

No, I most definitely do not. And I'm officially done with this conversation. I'm going down to the coffee shop to confront Raegan about all these "matches" she's been getting.

CHESTER

Here we go again...

PENELOPE

Russ, you really shouldn't--

RUSS

I don't care! I'm going down to talk to her and there's nothing you can do to stop me! I LOVE HER!!

More eye rolls from Russ' costars.

PENELOPE

Fine, but I'm going with you. At least I can mediate then--

JOHNNY

DAMNIT MORTIMER! Not again...

Johnny slams a fist on the coffee table as the last of his weed disappears down Mortimer's esophagus. The audience absolutely loses it.

CHESTER

See! Not so funny when it happens to you, huh?

Penelope giggles while she grabs her coat and walks out the front door, followed closely by Russ. The door slams shut as the scene ends.

The lights dim as Johnny, Chester, and Mortimer all freeze in place for a few seconds before they all stand and also exit out the front door, but in a single-file line. Almost robotically...

5 INT. BACKSTAGE - CONTINUED

5

NOTE: We now switch back to the typical *Black Mirror* shooting style until further notice.

Russ follows Penelope out the door, but gets a confused look on his face. What he sees isn't the hallway of his apartment building that he was expecting, but rather a dim, futuristic backstage production environment. PA's scurry all over the place; random equipment, lights, and promotional material for *Best Buds* are strewn about everywhere.

RUSS

What the--? Penelope, you're seeing this, right?

He turns to look at Penelope, but receives no response. Instead, just an uncharacteristically blank expression covers her face. She doesn't even look at him, or even seem to register that she was asked a question.

RUSS

Penelope? Are you okay? What's going on?

Still no response. Instead, Penelope begins to walk forward in a very robotic way until she reaches her storage pod. She steps inside of the pod and plugs the dangling wire into one of her ears; she closes the glass cover of her pod as her eyes slowly close and her head lowers as if she fell asleep.

RUSS

(starting to freak out)
Penelope?

Suddenly, Russ is knocked out of the way by Johnny exiting the door he just came out of. He falls onto the ground.

RUSS

Hey! What the hell, Johnny?

But Johnny doesn't respond either, his face showing the same blank expression as Penelope's. Johnny continues forward, followed closely in line by Chester and Mortimer, both with the same expression as well. All three of them do exactly as Penelope did: enter their pods, plug in their wires, and shut down as they close the covers of their respective pods.

(CONTINUED)

RUSS
(officially freaking out)
What--?

All of the employees around Russ are too busy running coffees to notice that he hasn't entered his own storage pod yet.

He gingerly rises to his feet and walks toward the pods to get a closer look. He stares through the glass covers at his "best buds" as he moves down the line. Penelope, Johnny, Chester, Mortimer... MARISSA (26, Russ' obsessive-compulsive little sister).

RUSS
Marissa!? What'd they do to you?

He flings open her pod's cover and begins to violently shake his little sister.

RUSS
Wake up, sis! Wake up!

No response. Russ begins to hyperventilate as he gently rests Marissa's limp body back into her pod. But then he catches a glimpse of the face in the next pod down the line... it's RAEGAN (26, Russ' stunningly beautiful ex-girlfriend).

RUSS
Oh god, Raegan... No! Wha-- What is this place!? Oh god, oh god, oh god... I-- I need to call the cops!

Russ pulls out his phone to dial 911, but is surprised to find that it doesn't work whatsoever, just a black screen. It's a prop.

RUSS
What the hell is happening?? HELP!
Please someone HEL--!!

BETHANY(O.S.)
HEY!

Russ quickly turns to see Bethany sprinting towards him, still wearing her new "Best Buds CREW" hoodie, now with its hood up.

RUSS
Who are you!? Stay back!

Bethany stops a few feet in front of him.

BETHANY

Shhhh! Just calm down, you have to be quiet, okay? Deep breaths. I'm here to help.

Russ nods as he successfully manages to slow his breathing.

BETHANY(CONT.)

See, you're alright. I can explain everything, okay?

RUSS

Wh-- where am I? What happened to my friends? What *is* this place?

BETHANY

I can't explain now, this area of the studio is covered in security cams. I need to get you out of here first. Then I can answer all your questions, okay?

RUSS

Uhh--

BETHANY

We have to hurry, you're back on stage in 10.

RUSS

Stage--?

BETHANY

Someone's gonna notice you're missing real soon. So we gotta go now, okay? Just follow me.

Bethany takes Russ' hand and begins to lead him away from his friends; he's too startled and confused to even try to put up a fight. Bethany stops by a bin of discarded *Best Buds* merchandise. She grabs a hoodie and a pair of cheap sunglasses, both sporting the show's logo.

BETHANY

Put these on. Hurry, we have don't have much time.

Russ quickly pulls the hoodie over his head and puts on the glasses, still unsure of what's happening. But before he can question it, Bethany drags him out of a side exit door.

They emerge into an alleyway as Bethany continues to sprint away, dragging Russ closely behind her.

RUSS

My apartment... where is--?

BETHANY

It doesn't exist.

RUSS

What? How can-- wait why is it so warm out now? It's January... in New York...

BETHANY

No, it's July-- and we're in Los Angeles.

They round the corner of the studio and are met by a stunning view of a futuristic Los Angeles skyline; Russ stares at it in amazement and confusion.

RUSS

How is that-- What the--?

PROTESTERS(O.S.)

FUCK LAZARUS! FUCK THE THESPAINS!

Russ turns toward the nearby entrance of the studio as a glass bottle shatters against its front door. A mob of protesters stand out front blocking the entrance, chanting and shouting. Many of them hold picket signs, saying things like, "Actors have a right to work too!", "You can't program a true performance!", "Cancel Lazarus!", "Support the Stunt Performers Union!", or "Thespians > ThespAIns"

RUSS

Whoa-- What is this?

BETHANY

Protests against you and your creator. Now stop asking questions or someone is gonna recognize your voice. I told you I'd explain once we're safe, so just pipe down and follow me. Stay close.

Russ reluctantly nods as they reach the protest. Bethany fights through the crowd while dragging Russ close behind her. There are hundreds of protesters; the noise from their shouting is unreal.

(CONTINUED)

After a lot of shoving, he finally see's where they're headed: a large parking structure ahead of them, with a MASSIVE BILLBOARD on its front. Russ stares at the billboard in shock; it shows a similarly-massive image of himself, doing his classic finger guns, with the words "Don't be like Russ! Find your perfect match right now on *The System*."

RUSS
(very confused)
What--?

Bethany hears this and glances at the billboard too, shaking her head.

BETHANY
(to herself)
Like he needs anymore money.

7 INT. PARKING STRUCTURE - CONTINUED

7

Bethany approaches a futuristic looking electric car and opens the door for Russ.

RUSS
(very confused)
I've never seen a car like this
be--

BETHANY
Be quiet and get in. I need to make
sure we aren't being followed--
I'll explain everything once we're
there.

Bethany pulls the car out of the parking structure with Russ in the passengers seat. They quickly drive off as Russ continues to marvel at the surrounding futuristic environment.

ACT TWO

8 INT. STUDIO CONTROL ROOM - DAY

8

A steaming Lazarus stands atop his podium, staring down at his many employees, all with frightened expressions on their faces.

LAZARUS
HOW COULD THIS HAVE HAPPENED?! I
WILL TAKE GREAT JOY IN ENDING THE
CAREER OF WHOEVER IS RESPONSIBLE
FOR THIS!!

(CONTINUED)

Scared murmurs spread across the crowd of employees. No one comes forward; Lazarus sighs.

LAZARUS

I created *Best Buds* seven years ago, and it's been the highest rated TV sitcom ever since! And do you know how many times one of my star ThespAIns has gone missing in that time?!

The crowd grows quiet. No one wants to be singled out by this maniac.

LAZARUS(CONT.)

ZERO! ZERO FUCKING TIMES!! AND DURING THE FINALE TAPING TOO!? Thank god we had the Understudy ready and Russ basically only said his catchphrase in that final scene, or else we would've been FUCKED! Wouldn't have even been able to finish filming today's fucking episode!

He nods to the man standing lifeless next to him, THE UNDERSTUDY, an identical, albeit less sophisticated, copy of Russ that the show typically only uses for stand-in shots when the actual ThespAIns need maintenance or updating.

LAZARUS(CONT.)

All because one of YOU decided to betray me! How long until today's audience members start talking to the press, huh?! How long until everyone's calling me a "washed up hack" and that those stupid fucking protesters outside are right!? That my ThespAIns-- *my greatest achievement*-- are done for!? HUH!?!?

The crowd remains silent as Lazarus exhales heavily.

LAZARUS

Typical, just fucking typical... Well, I hope none of you had any plans tonight. 'Cus no one's going home until we've reviewed all the security footage and everyone's been searched and questioned! We're gonna find out who's responsible for this atrocity RIGHT NOW!!

9 EXT. BETHANY'S HOUSE - EVENING

9

Bethany pulls into the driveway of a large manor house in Beverly Hills-- way too nice of a house to afford on a PA's salary. She gets out of the car, crosses to the passengers side, and opens Russ' door.

BETHANY

Come with me.

RUSS

I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what the hell is going on here. What happened to all of my friends back there? And where are we?

BETHANY

My house. Once we're inside, we'll be safe and I can explain everything-- I promise.

Russ thinks to himself for a moment then reluctantly exits the car.

RUSS

Fine.

10 INT. BETHANY'S HOUSE - EVENING

10

The interior of the manor is just as lavish as its exterior. Marble floors and columns. A wide open atrium filled with expensive paintings, plants, statues, and even a few fancy, antique sports cars.

Old MOVIE POSTERS line the walls in frames, each one featuring a leading man who bears a STRIKING resemblance to Russ, identical even; all of them also have some text on them reading something along the lines of "Starring the brilliant JACOB DUNN".

RUSS

(impressed)

You live here?

BETHANY

For the past year or so, yeah.

Russ continues to survey the house as he walks by each of the posters hanging on the wall next to him: *South of Eden*, *Huge*, *Rebel Without a Meaning*, etc. He finally notices how similar he looks to the man on all of these posters and pauses in front of one of them.

(CONTINUED)

RUSS

Is thi-- Is this me? Who is "Jacob
Dunn"?

But before Bethany can answer, a woman dressed in scrubs enters the atrium from another room, SOFIA (56, with tired but kind eyes). Bethany walks over to hug her.

SOFIA

Welcome home, Ms. Dunn.

BETHANY

Thank you Sofia, and please, I told you you don't have to call me that. Bethany is fine.

SOFIA

Yes, of course, Ms. Bethany. My apologies. Another good day at work?

BETHANY

Fantastic actually. I got a lucky break, and now I can start my plan much earlier than I thought I'd ever be able to.

SOFIA

Really? What do you me--

Sofia finally notices Russ' presence as he walks over to them from the posters. She gasps.

BETHANY

Yeah, I know right. Kinda creepy-- I'm still not quite used to it either.

Sofia nods in agreement, still speechless as she stares at Russ.

BETHANY(CONT.)

How's she doing today?

Sofia finally snaps out of her paralysis and looks back to Bethany.

SOFIA

Uh-- She seemed good this morning when I got her out of bed, but things started to get worse after lunch or so. She was coming in and out of it, so I put on one of his

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

SOFIA (cont'd)
old films for her. She's still in there now.

BETHANY
Good idea, that always seems to cheer her up at least. Thank you for looking after her.

SOFIA
Of course. I'll leave you to it now. I'm sure you have many things to discuss with--

She begins to stare at Russ again, eyes wide, but then quickly exits.

RUSS
What was that about?

BETHANY
You'll see. Follow me.

11 INT. OFFICE - EVENING

11

Bethany walks into a dark room and flicks on the light as Russ enters behind her. A large, expensive-looking desk sits in the middle, taking up the majority of the room, as well as a few chairs. Behind it is a massive book shelf, littered with awards and framed photographs of the same man from the posters with various celebrities or fancy race cars.

One picture catches Russ' eye, a framed PHOTOGRAPH of the man on the posters hugging a beautiful, young woman, both of them smiling brightly; the woman bares a very slight resemblance to Raegan. Russ stares at it for a moment.

A futuristic looking monitor and keyboard sit on the desk, as well as many books and stacks of papers. In front of the desk is a BULLETIN BOARD, covered with little notes and photographs of various people, including Russ, his co-stars, and even Lazarus himself; threads of yarn spread across the board in every direction connecting all of it together.

Bethany takes a seat in the large chair behind the desk and motions for Russ to sit down in one of the others. He sits as she begins to type on the keyboard.

BETHANY
Before I get started, a lot of this is gonna sound crazy to you. Okay?

(CONTINUED)

RUSS

Um, what do you mean by crazy exactly? 'Cus this whole day has been pretty crazy already.

BETHANY

You'll see. Watch this.

Bethany stops typing and swivels the monitor around so that Russ can see the screen. She hits play on the keyboard and a video interview from the "Best Buds" studio starts playing.

INTERVIEWER

(on screen)

So, Mr. Lazarus, how did you first come up with the idea for your invention?

LAZARUS

(on screen)

Well, I guess you could say I've always been a bit of a control freak, haha. Going back to the beginning, I originally got my degree in Computer Science, and even went on to get my masters studying Artificial Intelligence.

INTERVIEWER

Impressive.

LAZARUS

Yes, yes. But once I got out into the real world, I discovered that I had another passion I wanted to explore and master: entertainment.

INTERVIEWER

Interesting. And that's where the ThespAIns came in, yes?

LAZARUS

Indeed. Once I was in the industry, I was lucky enough to be able to work as a writer/director fairly early on in my career. But I quickly became dissatisfied with having to wrangle all these overly-expensive and pompous actors on set-- always showing up late, acting like divas, wanting to change their lines, asking for more money-- whatever it may be. I just

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

LAZARUS (cont'd)
wanted to tell the stories I wanted
to tell, and was used to the level
of control I had when writing my
own programs.

INTERVIEWER
I'm sure that must've been
frustrating for you.

LAZARUS
Very. But everyone I asked for
advice at the time would just say,
"It's just a part of the job,
Vince," or "You'll get used to it
one day," and other bullsh-- Can I
curse on here?

The interviewer subtly shakes her head no.

LAZARUS
Right, cable. Sorry. Anyway, all
this advice didn't sit right with
me. I thought that there must be
another way-- a way in which I
wouldn't have to constantly deal
with these assho-- Shit-- I mean...
sorry.

INTERVIEWER
It's fine. Please continue.

LAZARUS
Yes, and well, that's when it hit
me I guess. I thought if I could
somehow combine my expertise in
computer programing and the
development of artificial
intelligence, with my knowledge of
the entertainment industry and how
it works behind-the-scenes, I'd
never have to work with these
arrogant actor-types ever again.

INTERVIEWER
I see. Your ThespAIns are now being
used in over 77% of the film and
television productions currently in
development. Did you have any
indication of how much this
invention of yours would change the
industry at that time?

(CONTINUED)

LAZARUS

Maybe a little, but I knew I had to get it right for that to happen. That's why I decided to develop *Best Buds*-- the show to first make use of my ThespAIns-- to be as approachable and relatable as possible. A proof of concept, if you will. Even if the ThespAIns aren't real people with lives of their own--

Russ shifts uncomfortably in his chair.

LAZARUS(CONT.)

--the audience should still feel as if they are. Every viewer should be able to say, "Oh I like Raegan, 'cus she's just like me." Or, "I like Chester because I'm funny like him." The actors themselves don't really matter-- they're just a distraction. What matters is the characters and the performances. And in that sense, you can't really beat the ThespAIns because, well, they quite literally ARE their characters.

Russ looks nervously to Bethany, confused. She nods back toward the monitor for him to keep watching.

INTERVIEWER

All of the characters on *Best Buds* are based on the likenesses of past, deceased actors, including many very famous ones from the "*Golden Age of Entertainment*." What made you decide to go this route instead of just giving the ThespAIns identities of their own? It's proven to be a controversial choice, as I'm sure you're aware.

LAZARUS

Yes, yes-- I'm always going to have my critics, I suppose. But once I had the base tech finished and working, I realized that there was something these actors had that my inventions could never hope to achieve by themselves: their own personality-- something you

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

LAZARUS (cont'd)

associate with them as soon as you see them walk on screen. There's a certain joy in seeing a recognizable face, so I went back to the start-- the "Golden Age" as you called it-- because that's when actors were *real*, not these idiotic douche bags who think they're irreplaceable-- Sorry.

The interviewer waves it off again, looking slightly more annoyed than before. The confusion on Russ' face continues to grow.

INTERVIEWER

And what do you say to the many people who claim using these actors' likenesses post mortem is immoral-- or just flat out wrong? That you're purposefully automating away an art form, as well as the jobs of thousands of people around the world?

Lazarus shifts his position in his seat as a frown grows on his face.

LAZARUS

I would say that they need to wake the hell up. It's not the early 2000's anymore, technology and its advancement is an unstoppable force. Automation revolutionized many industries before entertainment, and I'm sure it'll do the same for many after. The fact that these actors think they're above that just goes to show you how arrogant and full of themselves they really are.

Bethany rolls her eyes.

LAZARUS (CONT.)

I don't seem to see any of them ever mentioning how the use of my ThespAIins has sped up production times and decreased costs ten fold-- or how injuries while filming stunts and other dangerous sequences have been reduced to basically zero thanks to me. Do you?

(CONTINUED)

INTERVIEWER

I suppose not... Moving on, how did you go about choosing the actors and actresses you would recreate the likenesses of when first developing the *Best Buds* characters?

A screen shot of Raegan on *Best Buds* pops up on screen, next to an older-looking, black-and-white image of an actress who could be her identical twin.

LAZARUS

It was a difficult process, for sure. Starting with Raegan, I really wanted someone who--

The video jump cuts suddenly to a different part of the interview.

LAZARUS

--and that's why I chose him for Chester... As for Russ-- Well, he really is the heart of the group, y'know? He's Marissa's brother, Raegan's lover, and so on. So he was actually the first one I really finalized--

B-roll footage of Russ' various appearances on *Best Buds* starts to play over the interview.

RUSS

(starting to freak out)
Wait, wh--?

BETHANY

Just keep watching. Almost done.

Russ brings his hand up to his face and inspects it suspiciously for a moment, before turning his eyes back to the monitor.

LAZARUS(CONT.)

--so I knew he had to be based on an actor that everyone could easily recognize, as well as an someone who served as an example for how actors *should* perform and behave. And I really couldn't think of a better person than the *prodigal son of entertainment* himself, Jacob Dunn. Especially given how

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

LAZARUS(CONT.) (cont'd)
 unceremoniously he was taken from
 our world-- before he could even
 reach his true potential as a
 performer.

Russ' jaw DROPS as more footage of himself in *Best Buds*
 plays side by side next to footage of the real Jacob Dunn,
 acting in *South of Eden*. Not only do they look the same, but
 also talk the same, walk the same, and have the same
 mannerisms and quirks.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have any response to those
 who say that this use of deceased
 actors' likenesses, like Jacob Dunn
 here, is disgraceful to their
 memory?

LAZARUS

Horse shit-- Sorry, last one I
 swear. But really, I just don't get
 it. How is it any different than
 just watching one of their films
 from when they were alive? We've
 made sure to clear their usage with
 their remaining next-of-kin, so I
 don't really see what the issue is.
 My ThesPAIns allow for these
 legendary actors' legacies to
 continue on beyond their own death.
 If anything I'm doing them a favor.
 I'm allowing them the chance to be
 immortal, to surpass the binds of
 our frail human bodies, and
 continue to live on within our
 screens forever.

INTERVIEWER

Very interesting, Mr. Lazarus.
 Thank you for taking the time to
 speak with us today.

The interviewer turns toward the camera and speaks directly
 to it. An image of a ROBOTIC BEE appears beside the
 interviewer's head on screen.

INTERVIEWER(CONT.)

Up next: Bee populations have
 reached a record low this year, but
 could this new tech be our saving
 grace? Stay tun--

The video cuts out and Bethany turns to Russ.

(CONTINUED)

BETHANY

So... still got questions?

Russ continues to stare at the blank screen, mouth still agape. He attempts to form a response, but nothing but incomprehensible blabber comes out.

BETHANY(CONT.)

Yeah. It's a lot to take in, I know. Take your time.

Russ is finally able to close his mouth and regain control of his lips and tongue.

RUSS

What the... FUUCCCKKK!!?

BETHANY

What the fuck, indeed.

RUSS

You're trying to tell me I'm some kind of *robo-actor*!?

BETHANY

Well, technically a ThespAIn-- *douchey name, I know*-- And I'm not trying to tell you that. I AM telling you that.

RUSS

Bu-- But... I'm a fucking PALEONTOLOGIST!!

BETHANY

I know you think that-- But everything you know, everything you *think* you know, about who you are... is fake-- Your past, your memories, your family, your friends-- all of it. *Fake*. It was all written for you, created to be as massively appealing and entertaining as possible.

RUSS

(getting angry now)

You're lying!! This can't be real! This is just one of Johnny's sick jokes or something. It has to be!

Bethany places her hand on Russ' to try to calm him down. He stares at one of the photographs of Jacob Dunn behind her.

(CONTINUED)

BETHANY

I wish I could tell you that were the case-- but it's not. I'm sorry. But that's exactly why I need your help for my plan to--

RUSS

Help you?! Why the hell would I help you?! You kidnap me from my home, take me away from my friends, drive me off to god knows where? FUCK THAT. Whatever this plan of yours is, it's not my--

BETHANY

Please! Without you--

RUSS

I SAID NO! Now I'm going home, going to bed, and when I wake up everything is gonna be normal again! And there's nothing you can do to stop me. Have a nice fucking life!

Russ shoots up out of his chair and storms out of the office. A few of the items pinned to the bulletin board to fall to the ground as the door slams. Bethany lets out a deep sigh, puts her head down on the desk in defeat, and begins to sob softly into her arms.

12

INT. BETHANY'S HOUSE - CONTINUED

12

Russ continues to fume as he attempts to navigate through the house to find an exit.

RUSS

(to himself)

Fucking robo-actor my ass!

He rounds another corner but is just met by another unfamiliar hallway.

RUSS

Christ! This place is like a goddamn maze! How the hell do I get out of here?

He turns 360 degrees, surveying his surroundings for a way out. Nothing too promising, but he does see a door. He walks toward it and enters.

13 INT. HOME THEATER - CONTINUED

13

Light pours into the dimly lit room from the doorway as Russ enters, he gently closes the door behind him. He is now in an absolutely massive private home theater. An old movie is being projected onto the large screen at its center. He ignores it and begins to make his exit.

RUSS
Wrong way again--

But just as he's about to leave, something starts to happen on screen; it's playing one of Jacob Dunn's old films, *South of Eden*. A grizzled old farmer is currently on screen.

FARMER
(in movie)
You think you can just walk outta here!?

Russ thinks it's someone talking to him, so he turns around. But just as he does JACOB DUNN appears in the next shot.

JACOB DUNN
(in movie as character)
Man has a choice, and it's that choice that makes him a man.

Russ is mesmerized by the appearance of his doppelganger on the screen. He pauses his exit to watch. The scene continues to play out as he stares in disbelief.

After a few moments, he walks forward to the middle of the room and takes a seat in one of the many red-cushioned chairs that line the theater. He continues to watch the film for a few minutes until it ends, absolutely entranced.

BARBARA(O.S.)
Just brilliant, isn't he?

Startled, Russ jumps and quickly turns around to find a small old woman sitting in the row behind him that he hadn't noticed, BARBARA DUNN (87, Bethany's sick grandmother and Jacob's widow).

BARBARA(CONT.)
OH, I'm sorry! Didn't mean to startle you there-- I should've introduced myself! My name is Barbara-- he's my husband, you know... I'm so proud of him, *such a talent*. We just had a our first child together too, a *beautiful* baby girl.

(CONTINUED)

Russ stares back at her, confused. She adjusts the glasses sitting on the end of her nose to get a better look at her new visitor.

RUSS

Uh, yeah. He's very goo--

BARBARA

Oh my! Jacob! Why didn't you tell me you'd be home this early! I would've waited to start the film if you'd have told me. I just know you aren't too fond of watching yourself on screen is all.

Russ begins to piece things together in his mind.

RUSS

Um... well, actually I'm not--

BARBARA

I can have Sofia put on *Rebel Without a Meaning* again, if you have the time. It was always my favorite! Would you mind?

RUSS

Well, actually I was just about to lea--

BARBARA

(a bit sad)

Oh please, Jacob?! I do miss watching your movies with you-- you've been so busy these days... with all the jobs... all the appearances... all the races...

Russ thinks to himself for a moment, unsure of what to say or do in this situation.

RUSS

Uhh... Sure, why not? Just the one though, okay? Then-- then I have to go.

BARBARA

Of course, my love!

Barbara raises her wrist to her mouth and begins to speak into her watch.

(CONTINUED)

BARBARA

Sofia, my dear, could you put my favorite on again for us, please?

Within seconds, a light from someone entering the projector room behind them appears. The blank projector screen flickers to life once again, this time playing *Rebel Without a Meaning*.

Barbara signals for Russ to come sit next to her and he complies. He sits down in the seat next to her as Jacob Dunn, now portraying a different character, appears on screen once again. Barbara wraps her hand around his tightly and squeezes. Russ initially tries to pull away but allows it to happen anyway. The film continues to play.

BARBARA

So handsome! I must be the luckiest lady on Earth.

She smiles warmly and squeezes his hand once more, but this time he doesn't pull away. Instead, a gentle grin grows on his face as he looks at Barbara, the projector's light making her look almost angelic. He looks back to the screen again and settles into his seat to get comfortable.

FADE TO:

ACT THREE

14 INT. OFFICE - NIGHT (HOURS LATER)

14

Bethany sits on the edge of the large desk, next to the monitor, various files in hand. She scans through the papers she holds while occasionally glancing up at the bulletin board and all of its contents. Dried tears and what little makeup she was wearing are now smeared down her cheeks from her crying.

BETHANY

(frustrated, thinking to herself)

Maybe... if I somehow got access to my own version of the base code, I could update their firmware remotely... but that's given I don't get fired and arrested as soon as I walk into the studio tomorrow... Fuck. FUCK!!!
Goddammit!

(CONTINUED)

She tosses the papers in her hands up in the air and they scatter across the floor. She buries her face in her hands and lies back across the desk, groaning in frustration. But then there's a knock at the door. Bethany shoots up onto her feet and quickly wipes her cheeks, unsuccessfully trying to hide the smudges.

BETHANY
(frazzled)
Uh-- Come in!

The door cracks open and Sofia peaks in; Bethany waves her in. She shuffles inside hesitantly.

SOFIA
Sorry to interrupt, Ms. Bethany. Is everything... okay?

She stares worriedly at Bethany and the state the office is in.

BETHANY
Um, yes. Everything's fine Sofia, I just had a-- a bit of a set back, I guess. Just not sure what I'm gonna do about it quite yet...

SOFIA
Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that, dear. I'm sure you'll figure something out though. You always do.

BETHANY
Thank you, Sofia. But I've never--
I just-- *I was so close...*

Bethany stares longingly at her bulletin board, following the many threads of yarn that dart across it. Sofia waits awkwardly by the door.

SOFIA
Um, anyway, I thought I should let you know that he's been in the theater with your Grandmother for a few hours now. Just wanted to check with you that it's still okay--

BETHANY
(snapping back to reality)
What? Who?

SOFIA

I assumed you sent him in there to maybe-- help her?

BETHANY

Who, Sofia!?

SOFIA

(uncertain)

The *man*, the one you brought back earlier... your-- your *Grandfather*--

BETHANY

(more frustrated)

He's not my-- he's been in there with her this whole time!? I thought he left! Why didn't you tell me sooner?

SOFIA

(feeling guilty)

Well, when she first said "us" I just assumed it was her memory acting up again, but then I saw him in there when I went to change the film and-- I'm so sorry, Ms. Bethany! I should've told you--

BETHANY

(angry, but not at Sofia)

It's fine, Sofia-- It's not your fault. I just can't believe he'd-- the theater, you said?

SOFIA

Yes, Ms. Bet--

Bethany rushes off, slamming the door to the office behind her before Sofia can even finish her words.

15

INT. BETHANY'S HOUSE - CONTINUED

15

Bethany sprints through the labyrinth of hallways, fancy dining rooms, and atriums, and past all the fancy race cars and movie memorabilia as she makes her way to the theater.

BETHANY

(under breath)

Swear to god...

She flings open its door aggressively and enters.

16

INT. HOME THEATER - CONTINUED

16

Barbara and Russ remain seated together in the center of the theater. She continues to tell anecdotes and memories about her late husband as if Russ were really him, sitting right there next to her. She still holds his hand tightly, enough to cut off his circulation by now (if he had any blood...)

Despite that, he seems to be genuinely enjoying listening to her stories. A fight scene between Jacob Dunn's character and another character dominates the screen. They're now nearing the end of their third Jacob Dunn film, *Huge*, when Bethany bursts through the doors and spots the two of them.

BARBARA

--look at those arms on you, Love!
Stunning! You should try to--

BETHANY

(livid)

HEY!!

A startled Russ jumps in his seat and quickly retracts his hand as Barbara slowly turns to see who is interrupting her quality time with her husband. Bethany stomps down the aisle until she reaches their row. She stares directly at Russ, fire raging in her eyes.

BETHANY

What the hell do you think you're doing?

Barbara finally seems to recognize who is causing the interruption.

BARBARA

Language, Bethany! Don't talk to your Grandfather that way!

Bethany turns to face her grandmother, her tone and demeanor changing completely in the process.

BETHANY

Yes, I know-- I'm sorry, Grandma.

BARBARA

Oh it's fine, sweetie. Sit down with us! We're just about to reach the climax! So exciting!

Bethany ignores her grandma's request and crouches down next to her, inspecting her body all over.

(CONTINUED)

BETHANY

Are you okay? Did he do anything to you? Did he hurt you?

Russ takes offense from this and finally decides to speak up.

RUSS

Hey! I may not be--!

BARBARA

(chuckling)

Hurt me!? He's my husband, Bethany! Why would he ever hurt me?

RUSS

I never hurt anyon--!

Bethany's head snaps back to Russ.

BETHANY

(with attitude)

Shut up, you don't get to talk.

She looks back to Barbara, her tone becoming much gentler again.

BETHANY

Because, Grandma... because this isn't really Grandpa. This isn't the man you married bac--

BARBARA

What are you talking about, young lady? Not another one of your *tall tales* I hope-- Of course he is, look at him!

Barbara turns to Russ in the seat next to her and cups his face in her wrinkled hand, squeezing his cheeks slightly.

BARBARA(CONT.)

(smitten)

Just as handsome and talented as the day we first met at the race track!

She lets go of his cheeks and turns back to Bethany with an endearing smile on her face. Bethany stares at her, nothing but pity and sorrow in her eyes, and sighs again as she rubs her temples. But then Bethany's gaze snaps back to Russ, filled with just as much anger and vitriol as before.

(CONTINUED)

BETHANY

(calm but still livid)

You see what you've done now? See what you made me have to do? Third time this week--

RUSS

I didn't mean to do anything! I was just--

BETHANY

Shut up right now! I'll deal with you later, just go wait up there till I'm done here.

Bethany points to the enclosed projector room at the back of the theater. A confused Russ tries to object some more but decides against it for good reason; he rises to his feet and begins to walk out of their row. Barbara sees this and gets a disappointed look on her face.

BARBARA

Jacob? Where are you going, my love? We haven't finished the movie yet, you'll miss your big finale!

Russ' expression fills with guilt and pain as he looks back at Barbara, staring at him longingly. But then he catches Bethany's cold stare.

RUSS

(sad)

I'm sorry, Barb--

BETHANY

(at Russ)

GO!!

Russ nods his head and raises his hands to show he concedes. He begins to walk back toward the projector room. Barbara keeps her eyes locked on him as he goes.

BARBARA

(voice cracking from sadness)

Jacob...? Please don't go--

Bethany wraps her hands around Barbara's face and turns her head toward her.

BETHANY

Grandma, I need you to listen to me. Okay?

(CONTINUED)

BARBARA

What is it, sweetie? Is it about where your grandpa went?

BETHANY

No, well, kinda-- that wasn't Grandpa, okay? I need you to understand that. That man wasn't your husband.

BARBARA

I already told you, Bethany! Of course that's him, I think I'd know the love my life, don't you?

Bethany lets out a deep sigh again.

BETHANY

No, Grandma. That wasn't Grandpa. I know you're having trouble remembering things-- But... Grandpa is dead.

BARBARA

Bethany! Why would you ever say something so terrible and untrue! You just saw him as well as I did-- just now! How could someone so lively and handsome be dead?

BETHANY

Because that wasn't the *real* Grandpa, okay?

A confused and concerned look grows on Barbara's face; she doesn't understand. Bethany's voice starts to crack.

BETHANY(CONT.)

I know this doesn't make any sense to you, but you have to believe me, okay Grandma?

Bethany's voice begins to break up even more, as a tear after a tear begins to roll down her cheeks.

BETHANY(CONT.)

Grandpa died in a car accident almost 60 years ago, remember? At the race track? That man... that wasn't him, okay? Do you-- Do you remember that, Grandma? I need you to remember... Grandpa isn't coming back, okay? Remember for me-- please just remember...

(CONTINUED)

Barbara shifts her gaze from her granddaughter back to the screen, as her confused expression turns into a blank one. She smiles as Jacob Dunn comes on screen once again.

BETHANY
(still sniffling)
Grandma?

Barbara quickly turns back toward Bethany

BARBARA
Oh, Bethany! When did you get here?
You made it just in time for the
best part!

Tears begin to flood out of Bethany's eyes as her watery eyes evolve into full on sobbing.

BARBARA
(concerned grandma mode)
Oh, sweetheart! What're you crying
for? What's wrong!?

Bethany lets out a few more sobs then takes a deep breath and pulls it together. She wipes the tears off her face, worsening the makeup smudges.

BETHANY
(sniffling)
It's nothing Grandma, I'm fine--
Don't worry. I-- I just miss
Grandpa is all.

BARBARA
(reassuring)
So do I, sweetheart. But we'll see
him again real soon!

Bethany leans in to hug Barbara; she squeezes her frail, old body tightly.

BETHANY
Thanks Grandma-- but that's what
I'm worried about...

Bethany stands as Barbara goes back to intently watching her late husband perform on screen.

BETHANY(CONT.)
I'll be back in a bit to check on
you, okay? Enjoy your movie.

Bethany heads back toward the projector room where Russ remains waiting.

JACOB DUNN
 (on screen)
 --You sure do look pretty, Miss
 Layla. Pert nigh good enough to
 eat!

BARBARA
 (to herself)
So talented!

17 INT. PROJECTOR ROOM - CONTINUED

17

Russ continues to watch Jacob Dunn perform on screen from behind the glass window in the projector room; the sound is muffled but he's still mesmerized. He snaps to as the door quickly opens and slams shut; Bethany enters.

BETHANY
 (fuming and still kind of
 sobbing)
 What the fuck is wrong with you?!

RUSS
 I didn't do anything to her! She
 thought I was--

He looks through the window again as Jacob Dunn strikes a pose on screen.

BETHANY
 Do you not see that that's the
 issue!

RUSS
 I didn't want to leave her! She
 seemed so... happy-- Just from me
 being there... beside her. I--

BETHANY
 She has Alzheimer's, you asshole!
 She thinks you're him 'cus she
 doesn't remember the truth! Doesn't
 remember--

Her voice cracks as her eyes begin to water once again.

BETHANY(CONT.)
 --doesn't remember that he's GONE!
 That he crashed in a race 58 years
 ago! That his body was destroyed!
 That it was unrecognizable! That
 he's FUCKING DEAD!

(CONTINUED)

Russ starts to say something, but can't find the words and remains silent. Instead, he just stares at the girl sobbing in front of him.

RUSS

I'm sorry. I-- I didn't know.
Pleas--

BETHANY

(crying and livid)
SHUT UP! Please just shut up.

She takes a few deep breaths.

BETHANY(CONT.)

I don't remember him much-- my Grandfather. He got into amateur racing after he got his big break and died in a collision when I was six... The world mourned *the brilliant Jacob Dunn*, but none more than my Grandma. She-- She always told me that burying him was the hardest thing she's ever had to do...

More tears start to form in her eyes. Russ remains silent, listening.

BETHANY(CONT.)

...until five years later, when she had to tell me my parents had been killed. Some asshole took them away from me over the *whole 23 dollars* they had in their pockets.

She lets out a few quiet sobs.

RUSS

Bethany, I'm so sorry--

BETHANY

I never really understood what she meant by that. At least not until she started to get sick... started to forget-- forget that he was gone. Forget that he was never coming back...

She looks at Jacob Dunn on the projector screen for a moment, then snaps back to face Russ.

(CONTINUED)

BETHANY

That's when Lazarus showed up, right when she started to get real bad-- I was at school across the country at the time. He took advantage of the situation like the fucking prick he is-- tricked a confused old lady into signing over the rights to her husband's face for next to nothing... *fucking asshole*. I-- I should've been here to stop it, to sto--

Bethany pauses to let out some more sobs.

RUSS

Bethany, you cou--

BETHANY

Do you know how hard it is? I mean-- his old movies are one thing, at least that's really him-- but that STUPID, IDIOTIC SHOW OF YOURS?! *Really!?* Do you know how hard it is?! *Every time* she happens to somehow catch a glimpse of YOUR fucking face on that show-- They air reruns of it constantly, y'know?! And every time--

Bethany BURSTS into tears, but a fire still rages underneath all the waterworks.

BETHANY(CONT.)

(sobbing uncontrollably)

EVERY SINGLE FUCKING TIME! I have to be the one to tell her! That it's not really him, that none of it is real--! THAT YOU'RE NOT REAL! THAT HE'S GONE! *GONE FOREVER!*

Russ shifts his stance, feeling guilty.

RUSS

I'm sorry, I--

BETHANY

(still crying)

NO, TELL ME! DO YOU KNOW? DO YOU *REALLY* KNOW HOW HARD IT IS FOR ME TO-- TO HAVE TO TELL HER *EVERY TIME!?* TO BREAK HER GODDAMN HEART WHENEVER SHE TURNS ON THE FUCKING

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

BETHANY (cont'd)
TV!? TO WATCH ALL THE JOY SHE HAS
LEFT DRAIN FROM HER EYES? *EVERY.*
SINGLE. FUCKING. TIME.

Ross remains silent, staring at her as tears continue to stream from her eyes.

BETHANY
That's why I did all this, you know-- Studied programming and AI for years, took this crappy job that I'm way too overqualified for, worked for the fucking sociopath that started all this for the past three months without a single complaint, risked my ass just to change your diegetic detection algorithm!! All 'cus I had a *fucking plan*-- a plan to end all this! To make it so I wouldn't have to force the woman who raised me-- the woman who told me things were gonna be okay when really they couldn't have been worse-- to relive the worst day of her life *OVER and OVER* again, anymore?! So don't act all confused and innocent, alright!? 'Cus I couldn't fucking care less.

Russ takes all of this in for a moment as she sniffles a few times.

RUSS
So you're the reason why I didn't just walk back into one of those pods like the others, huh?

Bethany continues to cry into her hands as she slowly nods her head. Russ looks at Jacob Dunn on the screen one more time; he's passionately kissing the beautiful starlet of the film. Russ thinks to himself, then purses his lips.

RUSS
What's this plan of yours anyway?

BETHANY
(defeated)
It doesn't matter anymore-- Who cares.

A long, silent pause. Russ continues to stare at the screen, still mesmerized.

(CONTINUED)

RUSS

I do.

Bethany looks up at Russ, confused. For a moment, he glances at Barbara's silhouette sitting many rows away from them in the theater, still intently watching her late husband's performance. Then he looks back to Bethany.

RUSS(CONT.)

Whatever it is, count me in.

BETHANY

(taken aback)

What? Why? I thought you didn't believe me?

Russ takes a deep breath.

RUSS

You ever watched the "show" that I'm apparently on before? *Best Buds*, right?

Bethany nods, regaining her composure a bit-- her face still showing a mixture of anger, sadness, and confusion.

BETHANY

Yeah, I mean I worked on it too so--

She wipes the tears from her face again.

BETHANY(CONT.)

But not before that, no-- I refused. At least not outside of when she'd accidentally flip to an episode and see a scene or two-- wasn't a huge fan of seeing my dead grandpa make fucking porn jokes, or spout out product placement for some stupid dating app-- I'd always turn it off right away.

RUSS

Can't say I blame you there.

BETHANY

Why do you even care?

RUSS

The girl I'm with-- on the show I mean, Raegan-- or whoever her body actually belongs to-- she's all I

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

RUSS (cont'd)
can ever think about. I'm *madly* in
love with her--

BETHANY
Yeah, well-- your character's
entire base personality code is
based around you doing whatever it
takes to be with her-- so that
checks out.

RUSS
Uh, okay... Whatever that means.
Anyway, when I was in there-- with
her--

Russ nods out the window toward Barbara.

RUSS(CONT.)
--she kept telling me all these
stories about all the wonderful
times we-- I mean, your Grandfather
and her-- had together. The way she
talked about him-- it reminded me
of the way I feel about Raegan...
That I'd do anything to be by her
side again.

Bethany stares at Russ, still confused.

RUSS(CONT.)
She kept telling me story after
story-- when they first met, when
they had their first kiss, when she
gave birth to your mother-- one
after the other, *endlessly*.

BETHANY
(chuckling)
Yeah, she's a talker alright...

Russ looks through the window again at Barbara watching the
screen, as Jacob Dunn continues to lovingly embrace the
starlet on screen.

RUSS
It made me realize that-- even
though I feel this overwhelming
love for Raegan-- even though I'd
do *literally anything* to be with
her, I-- I don't have any of those
stories... I couldn't remember how
we first met, or how we had our
first kiss--

(CONTINUED)

Now Russ is the one who starts to choke up a bit. His eyes start to water.

RUSS(CONT.)

--all I could remember was *Johnny* talking about *fucking PORN*, and that *STUPID monkey* eating *everything* that gets put in front of him.

He wipes his eyes. And for the first time since she helped him escape the studio, Bethany's face shows some empathy for the robot standing across from her.

RUSS(CONT.)

It made me-- It made me realize that... *you were right*. Everything that I know-- who I am, where I'm from, what I want, my family, my friends... Raegan-- *All of it*. It's all just fake, written and implanted in my head by someone else. I can't feel the things that she feels-- my feelings are just fake, like everything else about me. And if not being able to be with Raegan makes *ME* feel this bad, then I can't even *begin* to imagine what she feels every time she has to learn that Jacob isn't here to watch movies with her anymore.

A single tear runs down his cheek as he looks at Barbara's tiny silhouette once more. Bethany looks out at her too and smiles softly.

RUSS

(regaining composure)

So if there's anything I can do to help her never have to feel that way again-- no matter what it may be, or what it may cost-- *I'm in*.

They look back toward each other and share a smile.

RUSS

So what's the plan, boss?

Bethany whips out her tablet device and grins.

ACT FOUR

18

INT. STUDIO CONTROL ROOM - DAY

18

ALYSSA
 (terrified and crying)
 I SWEAR I DIDN'T TAKE HIM!! You
 have to believe me!

A battered and bloody Alyssa sits in the chair atop Lazarus' podium, her wrists bound to its armrests. The room is basically empty besides Russ' Understudy who stands lifeless next to Alyssa as Lazarus and a frightened Dumbass stare at her.

LAZARUS
 Understudy-- hit her again.

The Understudy winds his forearm back, and swings it across her face, connecting with her cheek and nose HARD. She lets out a whimper.

LAZARUS
 You could stop all of this, if
 you'd just stop *lying*.

ALYSSA
 (sobbing harder)
 I'm not lying! I promise!

LAZARUS
 Just like you promised you'd get me
 that Caramel Frappuccino earlier,
 huh?

Confusion grows on Alyssa's battered face.

ALYSSA
 What?

Lazarus ignores her response.

LAZARUS
 Let's review the evidence, shall
 we? You, Alyssa Robinson, were
 regrettably let go earlier today,
 were you not?

ALYSSA
 (sniffling)
 Yes.

LAZARUS
 And we've gotten some accounts from
 other employees, that-- after you
 (MORE)

(CONTINUED)

LAZARUS (cont'd)

were informed of this news-- you were heard yelling *profanities* by the storage pods backstage. I believe the quote was, "Fuck this place, fuck this show, and--", *my personal favorite*, "Fuck Lazarus." Does that all sound correct to you, Ms. Robinson?

ALYSSA

Yes-- I'm sorry! But I would never take one of the Thes--!

LAZARUS

Then please do tell me why we have security footage of you leaving with Russ' ThespAIn? Didn't think I'd remember what a lowly employee like yourself was wearing, did you?... Dumbass-- play the tape.

Dumbass frantically fiddles with the tablet device he holds, causing the security footage to play on the big output monitor at the center of the control room. It shows a woman wearing a "Best Buds CREW" hoodie, her face hidden by its hood. The woman hands another hoodie and a pair of sunglasses to Russ. He puts them on as the woman drags him out of the building.

LAZARUS

I don't care much for dishonesty, Ms. Robinson. So just tell the truth so we can all be done with this, and then the finale taping can go on tomorrow as planned-- I'd really hate to leave the fans disappointed, wouldn't you?

Alyssa sniffles some more. Confused by what she's being shown on screen.

LAZARUS(CONT.)

And before you get any ideas about suing me and my show for this-- *think again*. Because if you talk about this to *anyone*, your career isn't going to be the only thing that *ends*.

Alyssa starts sobbing uncontrollably again.

(CONTINUED)

ALYSSA

A bunch of people have those hoodies! It wasn't me!!

LAZARUS

I'm sorry, Ms. Robinson, but I simply just don't believe you. You're the only one who was working at that time that both had access to the storage pods, AND had a clear motive-- Understudy.

The Understudy wails on her again as she screams in between her sobs.

LAZARUS

This could all be over, y'know. Just tell us where you're hiding the ThespAIN, and maybe I'll tell the Understudy here to not break your femur-- For a piece of silicon with no brain, he sure packs quite the punch, doesn't he!?

Lazarus pats the Understudy on his back.

ALYSSA

I swear it wasn't me-- PLEASE! Just let me go home!

Lazarus exhales deeply from his nose, disappointed. He nods to the Understudy as it begins to grab one of her legs.

ALYSSA

WAIT, WAIT, WAIT! Before I left-- I took off the hoodie! I left it behind--!!

Lazarus holds up a palm; the Understudy freezes in place, still gripping Alyssa's leg tightly.

ALYSSA

There was a girl there-- she saw me do it! Maybe she took it! PLEASE, you have to believe me!! Her name was, uh-- it was the one you told to--!

Alyssa's confession is interrupted by the control room door opening. Dumbfuck enters, still wearing his dunce cap. Lazarus lets out a a loud, agonizing groan.

(CONTINUED)

LAZARUS

(frustrated)

DUMBFUCK!! *How many times* do I have to tell you to not disturb us! We were finally about to get someth--

DUMBFUCK

Very sorry sir. But I thought you should know-- The ThespAIN has been found.

Lazarus' ears perk up at the sound of this. He turns to face Dumbfuck.

LAZARUS

Finally! Thank god-- What happened to it?

DUMBFUCK

Unsure at the moment, but it was found in alleyway about 7 blocks from here-- Security thinks one of the protesters broke into the studio and stole it somehow.

LAZARUS

Animals. Is it still in working condition? We only have a few hours til we need to start prepping them for the finale shoot.

DUMBFUCK

Besides some *unkind* words spray painted onto its body--

Dumbfuck approaches Lazarus, showing him his tablet's screen as he swipes through a few photos: an "unconscious" and nearly-naked Russ, laid out on the ground against a brick wall in a grimy alley. RED SPRAY PAINT, reading "Fuck Lazarus," covers his entire torso.

DUMBFUCK (CONT.)

--it seems to be perfectly fine. But the maintenance guys said it'd take about a day to run a full diagnostic on all of its systems--

LAZARUS

Bullshit! We don't have time for that-- as they say in this business, *the show must go on!* So as long as it can still move and say its lines, I couldn't care

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

LAZARUS (cont'd)
less. Get it cleaned up and back
into its pod ASAP.

Dumbfuck nods and quickly exits. Alyssa remains trembling,
still bound to the chair with the Understudy clutching her
femur, as Lazarus begins to make his exit.

DUMBASS
Uh, sir? What would you like us to
do with her?

He nods toward Alyssa as Lazarus turns around.

LAZARUS
Ah yes, Ms. Robinson-- I do hope
you'll accept my sincerest
apologies for this *little incident*.

He waves his hand again and the Understudy lets go of her
leg, returning to its normal lifeless state. Alyssa lets out
a sigh of relief.

LAZARUS(CONT.)
Just a simple misunderstanding as
they say-- Dumbass, would you
please ensure that Ms. Robinson
here makes it home safely? And go
ahead and set her up with a nice
severance package to help keep that
mouth of hers shut, will you?... I
have television history to make--
Understudy! With me!

Dumbass nods and begins to untie Alyssa as the Understudy
quickly rejoins Lazarus at his side while he makes his exit.

19 INT. TELEVISION STUDIO - DAY

19

The next day, the studio audience is packed; the excitement
to watch the conclusion of *Best Buds'* latest season is
tangible. Electric almost.

ANNOUNCER(V.O.)
Best Buds is filmed in front of a
live studio audience, AND streams
online simultaneously for your
viewing pleasure! Will Russ and
Raegan finally get back together?
Stay tuned for the second part of
yesterday's season finale to find
out!!

The show's theme song begins to play again, just as cliché and obnoxious as the first time. The audience cheers eagerly.

20 EXT. TELEVISION STUDIO - DAY 20

Bethany rushes out of the parking structure and sprints toward the studio's entrance. Billboard Russ stares down at her, giving her his classic finger guns. As she nears the studio, she's met by more protesters than she's ever seen out front before, still chanting and carrying their signs.

She grins slightly and begins to fight her way through them once again. After great effort, she finally pushes her way through to the front doors, flashes her badge to the security guards outside, and enters the studio.

21 INT. STUDIO CONTROL ROOM - DAY 21

Employees scurry around the various desks and screens in the control room even faster than they usually do; everyone is stressed the fuck out for the finale taping.

LAZARUS

ALRIGHT PEOPLE!! THREE MINUTES TIL
WE'RE LIVE! This is the *Television
Event of the year*, so everything
HAS to be perfect! GOT IT!?

The crew all look to Lazarus as he speaks and all nod fearfully, then return to their scurrying. Lazarus sips his frappuccino as he spots Bethany enter the studio out of the corner of his eye.

LAZARUS

Ah! So nice of you to join us, Ms.
Hendricks! *You're late...*

BETHANY

Yes, I'm really sorry sir. Late
night last night-- had to drop
something off--

LAZARUS

I really don't care. Just make sure
it doesn't happen again-- Yes?

BETHANY

(overly nice)
Yessir. I can *GUARANTEE* it will not
happen again.

(CONTINUED)

LAZARUS

Good. Are the ThespAIns ready to go with their new dialogue?

BETHANY

Uhh--

LAZARUS(CONT.)

Because I'd hate to have to let go of such a *talented employee* so soon after she was promoted... Wouldn't you?

BETHANY

Yessir. I'll get right on it. Very sorry, again.

Lazarus purses his lips then nods. Bethany waits for him to say something but he just takes another sip of his frappuccino. He notices she's still standing there and snaps at her.

LAZARUS

(annoyed)

Go on then.

BETHANY

Right! Sorry.

Bethany rushes backstage as Lazarus goes back to intently studying the many monitors in front of him. He smiles.

22

INT. BACKSTAGE - CONTINUED

22

Bethany dodges the many PAs running all over the place as she makes her way to the ThespAIns' storage pods. She whips out her tablet device and begins to type on it furiously as she moves down the line of ThespAIns.

One by one, she rotates them around, opens the panels on their backs, and makes a small change to each of their base codes until she reaches Russ' pod. She pauses to stare at him for a moment-- her grandfather-- UNTIL his eyes SHOOT open suddenly. Bethany jumps.

BETHANY

JESUS! You scared me.

Russ chuckles a bit inside of his pod as he opens its glass cover.

(CONTINUED)

RUSS

Sorry-- had to do it. Everything good to go?

BETHANY

Besides not being able to find any fucking parking earlier, yeah.

RUSS

Still haven't fixed that in the future, huh? Figures-- Might wanna scrub your hands a bit more by the way.

He looks down at her fingers typing away on the tablet. RED SPRAY PAINT stains their tips; she acknowledges this.

BETHANY

Yeah, I know-- shit just wouldn't come off. I will when once I get access to the camera controls. Just gotta make sure he can't pull any of his normal tricks on you guys first... DONE.

RUSS

Don't forget my lunch either.

BETHANY

Right-- I'm gonna need to open your stomach chamber then.

RUSS

Do what you gotta do. How'd you even know how to make this thing anyway?

BETHANY

Oh y'know-- I guess I just have a few hidden talents-- considering I was *just a production assistant*, and all.

Russ smiles but then winces as Bethany lifts his shirt to reveal his stomach, opening the panel on it. The panel's cover blocks our view, but we're able to see Bethany grab *something* from her bag and put it into the chamber. She closes the panel.

BETHANY

Quick and easy, see-- and here's this too.

(CONTINUED)

She tucks a folded SLIP OF PAPER into his pocket and he nods. They look at each other longingly for a moment before Bethany suddenly rushes forward and hugs Russ tightly. He's confused at first, but then hugs her back.

BETHANY

(voice slightly cracking)
Thank you-- *for everything*. I couldn't have done any of this without you. And-- I know it's weird, but... I'm gonna miss you.

RUSS

I'll miss you too, Bethany. But this is worth it, you know that. Everything's gonna work.

Bethany lets go of him as he gives her a reassuring smile and nod. The red "LIVE ON AIR" light above the stage entrance blinks on. As if by command, all of the ThespAIIns besides Russ "wake up" and exit their pods, walking toward the stage in a perfect single-file line.

RUSS

Guess that's my cue. Good luck with-- *everything*... And watch a few movies with Barbara for me, will you?

Bethany smiles and nods as Russ takes his place in line with his costars.

BETHANY

Of course. Break a leg out there, alright?

RUSS

Hopefully more than that, right?

Bethany continues to smile as Russ gives her a wink and walks on stage behind the others.

FADE TO:

23

INT. STUDIO CONTROL ROOM - LATER

23

Employees continue to rush around everywhere. Dumbass and Dumbfuck sit in their positions, sweating bullets as Lazarus finishes his fourth frappuccino.

(CONTINUED)

LAZARUS

Okay, no ones managed to fuck anything up yet! But don't pat yourselves on the back just yet-- we still have to nail the final scene first! AND EVERYTHING ABOUT IT HAS TO BE PERFECT!!

All of his lackeys nod while they continue to scurry. Lazarus cracks his knuckles.

LAZARUS

And... Here. We. GO...

24

INT. TELEVISION STUDIO - DAY

24

NOTE: In this sequence, we'll be cutting back and forth between the *Best Buds* episode and what is happening simultaneously backstage and in the studio control room. Any scenes featuring the ThespAIns in character will still be shot as if they were from an actual multi-cam sitcom.

The stage is made up to look like Russ' apartment again. Chester and Johnny sit on the couch, still taking bong rips and passing it to one another periodically. Penelope sits in the chair next to them, feeding Mortimer pieces of fruit and giggling. Russ' sister, Marissa, rushes around the small kitchen at the back, furiously cooking and baking multiple things at once.

They all remain quiet for the most part until all of their ears perk up simultaneously at the sound of a muffled, "WE WERE ON A BREAK!!" coming from the "hallway". The audience laughs softly.

MARISSA

Oh no. That doesn't sound good...

CHESTER

When has *that* EVER sounded good?

The audience laughs harder.

PENELOPE

I thought they were getting back together! What do you think happened?

MARISSA

I don't know...

Marissa pulls a beautiful cake out of the oven.

(CONTINUED)

MARISSA(CONT.)

But I made this whole cake to
celebrate them getting back
together-- and if it doesn't get
eaten, I'm gonna lose my--

Johnny shoots his hand up into the air.

JOHNNY

(red-eyed)

I can handle that! Give it here,
Marissa!

The audience laughs uncontrollably as Marissa rolls her eyes
and Chester chuckles.

MARISSA

I want someone to eat it, Johnny.
Not inhale it--

Suddenly the front door opens as Russ and Raegan enter,
still bickering incessantly, not noticing everyone staring
at them.

RAEGAN

--I don't care what you think,
Russ! This is why I didn't think
this was a good idea to begin wi--

They finally notice everyone else in the room looking at
them and freeze silently. Giggles from the audience.

RUSS

Why are you people ALWAYS here!?
How did you even get in?

Marissa awkwardly rushes toward them, carrying her cake in
her arms.

MARISSA

SURPRISE!!

Russ and Raegan stare at the cake, confused.

MARISSA

We wanted to celebrate you guys
getting back together, but--

She turns around and sadly places the cake on the coffee
table in front of Johnny. He begins to dig in as Mortimer
slaps the fruit out Penelope's hand and jumps over to join
his owner in the feast. More audience giggles.

(CONTINUED)

MARISSA(CONT.)

--I guess that may not be the case anymore...

Everyone looks to Russ and Raegan, who stare back at them and then at each other.

25 INT. STUDIO CONTROL ROOM - SIMULTANEOUS

25

LAZARUS

Here we go, the big emotional moment to end the season! DUMBASS I swear to god if you fuck up any of the angles on this--

DUMBASS

YESSIR! I'm on it!

Lazarus rolls his eyes as he goes back to watching his monitors.

26 INT. TELEVISION STUDIO - SIMULTANEOUS

26

Everyone now sits on the couches and chairs, while Russ and Raegan talk in the kitchen. Johnny and Mortimer have finished the cake; Marissa stares in shock at the empty plate.

MARISSA

How is that even possible?

The audience laughs but then quickly grows quiet as Russ and Raegan's conversation grows more heated in the background.

RUSS

RAEGAN PLEASE! I'm telling you! I just screwed up a tiny bit! It didn't mean anything! I SWEAR!! I--
I love you.

"AWWWWS" from the audience.

RAEGAN

Will you stop saying that already!? You clearly don't-- or else you wouldn't have done what you did!!

A "MMHMM! You go girl!" from the audience. But all of the characters are silent. Awkward...

(CONTINUED)

RUSS
Raegan, you have to listen to me--
please!

27 INT. STUDIO CONTROL ROOM - SIMULTANEOUS 27

LAZARUS
Alright. Here comes Russ' big
speech to win back Raegan and end
the season with a bang! We're gonna
absolutely KILL the ratings charts
this week!!

A PA brings him another frappuccino and he waves her off to
go get another.

28 INT. BACKSTAGE - SIMULTANEOUS 28

Bethany remains in her position by the storage pods,
watching Russ and the other characters from backstage,
tablet device in hand. She listens closely to the dialogue
being said until she hears...

RUSS(O.S.)
Raegan, you have to listen to me--
please!

BETHANY
(to herself)
That was it!

She raises her arm to give Russ a thumbs up. She sees him
scratch his ear in acknowledgment as they planned. Bethany
begins to furiously type away on her tablet device.

BETHANY
Okay, here it goes. *Please work...*

29 INT. TELEVISION STUDIO - SIMULTANEOUS 29

The audience eagerly awaits to hear what Russ will say to
win back Raegan's heart. Russ sees Bethany's thumbs up and
scratches his ear for a moment as Raegan stares at him,
pissed-- waiting to hear his next excuse. Everyone else
remains quiet amongst the tension.

RUSS
The truth is Raegan... *You're
right-- I don't love you.*

GASPS from the audience.

LAZARUS

(livid)

WHAT THE FUCK!! THAT'S NOT THE
LINE! WHO THE HELL CHANGED MY
DIALOGUE WITHOUT TELLING ME!!

DUMBASS

Uhh-- Everything looked fine when
we checked his speech box earlier.
We weren't notified of any changes
to the script, sir. I'm not sure--

LAZARUS

Well figure it the fuck out!
DUMBFUCK, shut him down! We'll cut
and reset, get the Understudy out
there while we figure out the
problem-- have the studio put out a
press release-- the critics are
gonna have a fucking field day with
this, but I-- I CAN STILL DO THIS!

Dumbass quickly runs off, out of the room.

DUMBFUCK

I'm trying, sir! It's not letting
me access his systems!

LAZARUS

WHAT DO YOU MEAN?!

DUMBFUCK

I don't know sir! It's not letting
me access any of them. It's telling
me all the ThespAIns are offline.

LAZARUS

CLEARLY THEY AREN'T-- FUCK!! CUT
THE CAMERAS THEN!

DUMBFUCK

I'M TRYING! It's saying we don't
have access to them either!!

Lazarus groans and thinks to himself, frustrated.

31 INT. TELEVISION STUDIO - SIMULTANEOUS

31

The audience remains completely silent, still in shock from what Russ just said, when suddenly all the human characters besides Russ freeze in place. Mortimer looks at the frozen Johnny, confused.

RUSS(CONT.)

--but that's not because I don't want to love you-- *I do*. I'm just not capable of loving you... not really anyway-- *none of us are*.

Confused whispers spread throughout the audience. They only grow louder as the viewers begin to notice Russ' frozen costars. But then Russ turns away from Raegan and faces the camera and the audience directly.

RUSS(CONT.)

Because none of us are real. None of this is. *All just fake*... just like the love I feel for you, Raegan. No matter how real it may seem.

The audience grows quiet again, but still very confused.

32 INT. STUDIO CONTROL ROOM - SIMULTANEOUS

32

LAZARUS

Oh god... DUMBFUCK! You need to stop him RIGHT NOW! Get him off that stage!!

DUMBFUCK

How!!? None of the ThespAIns are responding to my commands, sir!

LAZARUS

I don't care! JUST DO IT! Send the Understudy out there to pull him off!

DUMBFUCK

But sir-- we can't stop the cameras from rolling... How are we going to explain there being two Ru--

LAZARUS

WE'LL SAY IT'S HIS LONG LOST TWIN OR SOME SHIT! I DON'T GIVE A FUCK!! WE CAN FIGURE IT OUT LATER, JUST GET HIM OFF THAT STAGE NOW!!

(CONTINUED)

DUMBFUCK

YESSIR!

Dumbfuck types a command into his keyboard.

33

INT. TELEVISION STUDIO - SIMULTANEOUS

33

RUSS

I met a woman recently-- her name is Barbara. And she showed me how true love *should* be... not any of this bullshit. She-- she knew what real love felt like... knew what it felt like to lose it too. She's gone through more pain than you can imagine...

Russ pulls out the SLIP OF PAPER that Bethany gave him at the storage pods. He unfolds it and holds it up to the camera, revealing that it's actually the photograph from the office at Bethany's house; the one showing a young Jacob and Barbara Dunn, hugging each other and smiling.

RUSS

This is her, but that's not me-- despite what it looks like. That's her husband, the *great Jacob Dunn*-- the man I'm told I was "based on"-- the man she truly loved, who was taken away from her too soon... A few years ago, Barbara developed Alzheimer's Disease-- her memory started to go quick. But her memories of Jacob remained-- the only thing she had left to hold onto. That is... until my *creator*, VINCE LAZARUS, decided to take advantage of this poor old woman-- *tricking her* into signing over her husband's image for next to nothing.

34

INT. BACKSTAGE - SIMULTANEOUS

34

Bethany watches all of this happen from backstage, tablet still in hand, as a single tear rolls down her cheek. When suddenly she's knocked to the side by the Understudy, slowly and menacingly lumbering toward the stage.

(CONTINUED)

BETHANY

Oh shit.

She quickly starts typing into her tablet again.

35 INT. TELEVISION STUDIO - SIMULTANEOUS

35

The audience's frantic whispers turn into confused gasps as the Understudy walks on stage. Russ quickly puts the photograph back into his pocket.

RUSS

(startled)

What the--?

The Understudy reaches out its powerful arms toward Russ, as it continues to slowly move closer to him.

UNDERSTUDY

(very robotic)

WE WERE ON A BREAK! HA. HA. HA. HA.

The audience's chatter grows louder as the gap between Russ and his evil twin gets smaller and smaller. Russ shoots Bethany a scared glance as she continues to type away backstage. The Understudy lumbers closer and closer.

RUSS

(nervous)

Just take it easy, bud.

The audience gasps as the Understudy takes a mad swing right at Russ' jaw, attempting to shut him up. He raises his arms in defense, but is surprised when he doesn't get hit by anything.

He looks up to see the emotionless bodies of Chester and Raegan holding the Understudy's arms back, while Johnny wraps himself around it's legs, keeping him in place. Russ takes a few steps back and sighs in relief, as he sees Bethany throw another thumbs up to him from backstage.

36 INT. STUDIO CONTROL ROOM - SIMULTANEOUS

36

Lazarus fumes as he watches his plan to silence Russ fall a part. He screams as he walks up to Dumbfuck's station and stands over him.

LAZARUS

DUMBFUCK DO SOMETHING!!

(CONTINUED)

DUMBFUCK
I can't, sir! I've lost all
control! Nothing is responding!!

LAZARUS
FUUUUCCCKKK!!!

Lazarus kicks the chair out from underneath Dumbfuck,
causing him to fall to the floor.

LAZARUS
WHY DO I HAVE TO DO EVERYTHING
MYSELF!?!?

Lazarus storms off toward the stage.

37

INT. TELEVISION STUDIO - SIMULTANEOUS

37

Russ, now safe from harm, turns back to the audience and
cameras again.

RUSS
You see?! See what he'll do to
maintain his status? His fortune?
HIS EGO? To stop all this from
getting out to all of you! Lazarus
is a *MENACE* and he needs to be
stopped!

As if on cue, Lazarus enters from the doors behind the
audience and stomps down the aisle in between the many
spectators.

LAZARUS
CUT!! STOP TALKING!

He leaps onto the sounds stage and is met by a cacophony of
"BOOS" from the audience.

LAZARUS
(annoyed)
Oh, shut up! You don't even know
why you're booing.

He approaches the ThespAIns still holding the Understudy in
place.

LAZARUS
(smirking)
My creations-- please let go of my
friend here and bring that thing to
the control room, IMMEDIATELY!

(CONTINUED)

Lazarus points toward Russ, but none of the ThespAIns respond to his voice commands like they're supposed to. His expression grows concerned.

LAZARUS
HELLO!? Do as your told! NOW!

But all the ThespAIns remain frozen, holding the Understudy still as a rock; it groans in agony.

UNDERSTUDY
(struggling)
WE WERE-- ON -- A BREAK! HA. HA.
HA--

Lazarus screams and punches the Understudy in the face, shutting it up. Then he snaps toward Russ and begins to walk over to him.

LAZARUS
FINE! You're coming with me then,
you goddamn idiot. I'm gonna scrap
you for FUCKING PARTS!

Lazarus tries to grab Russ as more "BOOS" come from the audience. Lazarus ignores them but Russ won't budge, so Lazarus takes a swing at him. Russ dodges it just in time. He counters and grabs Lazarus' wrist tightly; the sound of it breaking in his robotic grip can be heard as Lazarus lets out a whimper.

RUSS
No-- I think the audience has a
different end in mind for you,
Lazarus.

Russ gives Bethany a quick nod, and she does the same. He then grabs Lazarus by his neck, still gripping his broken wrist in his other hand, and forces him to look directly into the cameras.

LAZARUS
(terrified)
Wha- What are you doing?!

RUSS
Don't worry, it'll all be over
soo--

LAZARUS
YOU CAN'T HURT ME!! I-- I MADE YOU!
I AM YOUR GOD!!

Russ chuckles at the sound of this, still easily restraining Lazarus as he struggles. The audience stares at them, speechless.

RUSS

Cmon, Lazarus-- If anything I'm doing you a favor. I'm allowing you the chance to be immortal, to surpass the binds of your frail human body, and continue to live on within all of our screens *forever*. Don't tell me you've changed your mind on all that now-- *after all this...*

Russ lifts up the bottom of his shirt and opens his stomach chamber slowly. He winces.

LAZARUS

(still struggling)

What-- What are you doing!? WHAT IS--?

He stops talking as soon as he sees what it was that Bethany stored inside of Russ back at the storage pods: a homemade PIPE BOMB. Russ looks at Bethany one last time and smiles. Bethany smiles back and activates one more command on her tablet.

LAZARUS(CONT.)

(desperate)

You can't!! PLEASE!

Russ ignores Lazarus' pleas and holds him steady, right next to the bomb. He looks directly into the camera.

RUSS

This is for you, Barbara...

Lazarus struggles until the pipe bomb begins to beep rapidly...

LAZARUS

NOOOOO--!!!

Suddenly the pipe bomb explodes and completely obliterates all the ThesPAIns on stage, as well as Russ' apartment, the stage, the Understudy, AND LAZARUS. The audience starts screaming and running for their lives. Panic everywhere.

Penelope and Marissa's ThesPAIns, who Bethany had commanded to slip off stage minutes earlier amidst the commotion, reappear at the doors at the back. They open the doors as

(CONTINUED)

far as possible as a stream of angry protesters flood through, yelling and chanting. They begin to tear apart set fire to the studio and all of its contents, including Penelope and Marissa.

The cameras somehow remain rolling, aimed at center stage, streaming all of the havoc live to the whole world. Mortimer, seemingly unphased by all the destruction around him, walks up to where Russ and Lazarus had previously been standing before the explosion.

He finds one of LAZARUS' EYEBALLS rolling on the ground amongst the mush and gore that used to be his creator's body. He picks it up and inspects it for a second... before he EATS IT WHOLE, as the entire world watches live-- the last image to be broadcast before the cameras finally shut off and the screens go black.

38

EXT. TELEVISION STUDIO - LATER

38

Bethany walks out of the studio through the rioting protesters still swarming the building. She turns to look at the studio one last time; chunks of it are blown apart or just plain gone, smoke and fire are everywhere, the muffled shouting and chanting of the protesters still inside can be heard all the way down the street. Bethany looks content.

She turns around and begins to walk back toward the parking structure to finally go home. She looks up at Billboard Russ giving her his finger guns as she continues to walk. She smiles.

CUT TO BLACK.

ROLL CREDITS.