

SHUTOUT

written by
Alejandro Adams

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INT. BAR - BRONX

MONTAGE over credits, accompanied by a raucous LATIN BEAT:

DOMINGA ZAMBRANO (20) works in a bar with pool tables in back. A waitress, she's groped by the MALE REGULARS. She puts up with it until finally she's swollen with pregnancy. Then--

A Latina TODDLER waddles around the bar. At THREE, she sits in the middle of a pool table arranging balls. At FIVE, men teach her to shoot. At SEVEN, she makes a trick shot as men look on in awe. At TEN, the guys urge her on, point to balls and pockets, like she's an attack dog. She runs the table and they laugh. They pay each other, not her.

At FOURTEEN the girl delivers nachos, *asopao*, fried plantains. A pair of earbuds are part of her wardrobe now. Trick shots. Homework. Food service. Men throw cash around. A few shove bills in her back pocket--not sexual but still. They're men she grew up with. Honorary uncles.

At SIXTEEN, still no makeup, but when she bends over the table, the men leer. She makes a masse shot and the cue ball sinks the object ball as it leaps from her table to the next table. She moves to that table, makes the same shot, popping the cue ball to the next table. Annie Oakley. Cash flies.

Out of high school. A FRAMED PHOTO of our baby girl in cap and gown goes on the wall. Her mother Dominga pushing 40 now.

Image quality drops: SHAKY PHONE VIDEO. The girl cracks a cue over the head of a MALE PLAYER, 20s. The stick snaps in half, the guy falls to his knees. She yanks his pants down and shoves the thick end of the cue in his rectum as he SHRIEKS.

She marches toward the phone camera, cutting a furious look at us as she passes. PULL BACK to reveal we're looking at an online video: "SMOKESHOW RAMMING POOL STICK UP DUDES ASS." Comments range from "Go girrrrrrl" to "THAT is sexual assault" to "I would pay her to do that to me!"

The "smokeshow" is MIA ZAMBRANO, now 19.

EXT. HIGHWAY - NIGHT

A car RIPS down the highway--a convertible with its top down. It's a Spyker C8, burnt almond orange. Price tag over \$250K.

ANGLE ON a distinctive watch on the DRIVER's wrist: a Richard Mille 27-01, worth well over \$1M. TILT UP to reveal JAKE LEJEUNE, 60s. A napping WOMAN is curled tight in the passenger seat, hair up in an elegant do, cocktail dress visible under her coat.

EXT. CORPORATE GAS STATION - NIGHT

A few big rigs idling in shadows. VZZZZT, the Spyker snaps to a stop at a gas pump.

IN THE STORE, the college-aged ATTENDANT ogles the Spyker's gullwing doors as he eats from a noodle cup.

AT THE PUMP, Jake starts pumping, notices his companion writhing under her coat. He looks over at the shop, sees scarves and knit caps hanging for sale.

JAKE
(leaning into the car)
I need the top down, the wind keeps
me awake. But I can get you a hat
and scarf...?

He nods to the options. She stirs, looks, then scoffs.

WOMAN
I'm fine.

JAKE
It's another two hours.

WOMAN
Just get me whatever.

Jake saunters over to the Attendant. He clocks the security monitors, then looks back at the pumps, evaluating something.

JAKE
Pretty boring in there, huh.
(off his silence)
Tell you what. I'm gonna land my
car with the front wheel on your
top monitor and the back wheel on
your bottom monitor. I make it, you
give me a hat and scarf. If I
don't, I give you a hundred bucks.
What do you say?

The Attendant raises a vague eyebrow, then shrugs assent.
Jake grins, then walks back to the car, checks on the Woman:

JAKE (CONT'D)
Bathroom?

WOMAN
Not here.

Jake gets in the car, starts it. He whips the car around and lands in the spot he identified.

He dances back to the Attendant, looks at the monitors and smirks as he confirms that he nailed it.

JAKE

I mean...

("GLADIATOR" voice)

...are you not entertained?

Attendant yanks down a scarf and a cap, crams them into the drawer. Jake takes them, then shoves two bills back through.

JAKE (CONT'D)

And a bag of Corn Nuts.

The still-stunned Attendant takes the money, slides a bag of Corn Nuts through. Jake tears it open, emptying them into his mouth as he walks off.

ATTENDANT

What kind of--

(louder)

What kind of car is that?

Jake turns, waves a finger and makes a show of clearing a handful of nuts from his mouth. Then he grins massively.

JAKE

The best kind.

INT. CAR - HIGHWAY - NIGHT

Manhattan skyline. Queens.

EXT. CITY STREET - QUEENS - NIGHT

The Spyker noses into a parking garage. Jake grabs an overnight bag, his groggy companion carries her clutch purse.

JAKE

Motel's the next block over.

WOMAN

(stops dead in her tracks)

This is a joke, right?

(off Jake's confusion)

For fuck's sake, aren't you loaded?

What's the slumming about?

Jake looks oddly nonplussed. The woman seethes, peers up and down the desolate street--then spins back to the Attendants.

WOMAN (CONT'D)
 I need somebody to call me a cab.
 Right fucking now.

An Attendant nods. Jake salutes the guy, starts walking away as the Woman shouts after him:

WOMAN (CONT'D)
 That was my fiance, by the way!
 (off Jake's look)
 The guy I was with at the casino?!

JAKE
 Then I guess we did him a favor!

INT. MOTEL ROOM - QUEENS - MOMENTS LATER

Jake flips on the light. Familiar but it's been a while.
 ANGLE ON his million dollar watch: 3:04 A.M. He crashes.

INT. STEINWAY BILLIARDS - QUEENS - DAY

A Straight Pool tournament is underway. The place is busy with Players, Spectators, Groupies. Younger, friskier players wear sponsor gear. No smoke. The CLACKING of balls is all-permeating. An ANNOUNCER at the scorer's table blends into the noise of Railbirds hastily making bets.

Jake strides in, exchanging nods of recognition with a few Railbirds. He finds a place at the bar to evaluate the current matches, then smiles to himself when he spies--

BARRY LISKA (56, cardigan) finishing a match. Barry shakes hands with his Opponent, disassembles his cue, heads to the bar...and slows when he sees Jake waiting to intercept him. Barry looks exhausted by the sight of him.

BARRY
 Jake...I'm gonna start this conversation by saying no. And I'm gonna end it by saying no. So you just have to decide if you want to do the middle part.

JAKE
 Two weeks, hard stop.

BARRY
 No.

JAKE

Was that the starting "no" or the ending "no?"

BARRY

I'm done winging it on the road.

JAKE

I'll rent a normal car.

BARRY

It's not about you or the fucking car. The road. Is over. Dried up.

JAKE

Barry, God gave me an infinite supply of pixie dust, you know that. I can still attract the best action you've ever seen.

Barry pats Jake's face, takes his drink and walks away.

LATER

Jake, downbeat, immersed in the railbird fog. A match finishes. Jake takes a hefty wad of cheddar off of one Railbird, pays another. Net gain. Glancing up, he notices--

MEGHRAJ "RAJ" BHATI (40s, gabardine suit) perched on a stool nearby, thumbing his phone and nipping a Diet Coke. Exuding an air of authority, Raj barely looks up as some cheddar walks to him.

Jake approaches, stands near him a beat before speaking.

JAKE

How'd you do on that match?

RAJ

I can buy a newspaper as long as it's not the Sunday edition.

Jake chuckles at this, impressed by Raj's cool demeanor.

JAKE

How much are you in for?
(off Raj's aloofness)
I'm in for 15.

RAJ

I'm in for a bit more than that.

JAKE
You ever go on the road?

RAJ
I live on the road.

JAKE
Really? Like east coast, or...?

RAJ
Well, no, more like the Silk Road.
Shanghai, Manila, Dubai...

JAKE
Damn. What's the gig?

RAJ
Saving cue sports in the part of
the world where they can still be
saved.

He hands Jake a business card: "Meghraj Bhati, WPA / WPBSA"
Additional Mandarin text underneath.

JAKE
Meghraj Bhati...

RAJ
Just "Raj." And you are?

JAKE
Jake Lejeune.

IVAN SHARPE (50) pops into view, all toxic alpha energy.

IVAN
Jake, this is Raj Bhati, the duke
of cue across the pond.

JAKE
We met.

RAJ
(to Ivan)
I can do five on Briggs.

IVAN
Fuck no.
(affected Cockney accent)
Real American cheddar, bruv.
Ten gets you the base model.

Sensing a longer negotiation, Jake returns to the Railbirds.

INT. STEINWAY BILLIARDS - QUEENS - LATE AFTERNOON

The crowd has thinned, a few matches drag on. Ivan is talking to Barry at the bar. Jake stands off to the side, glumly sipping his drink, half-listening.

IVAN

...but Dobie always wants to hit these Cuban joints. So we're up in the Bronx last night, not even packing stick because we're not there to play, not expecting anything to come up, right? And we check out this bar, they got this Latin beat thump-thump-thumping, but even over that we hear slamming billiard balls from the back, like powerhouse stuff. So we go back there and here's this kid--she's maybe 18--doing some of the best raw-talent-pure-shooter-dead-stroke shit you'll ever see in your life.

ON JAKE, growing more and more intrigued by this...

IVAN (CONT'D)

And of course people are betting like crazy, cheddar's flying everywhere, just nickel and dime stuff, but apparently she's like a circus attraction over there. Tell you what, thank Christ she doesn't come around here, because fuck, she'd mop the goddamn floor.

JAKE

Where'd you say this was?

IVAN

Kingsbridge. Why?
(guessing, sneers)
Jake, you play that kid, she'll destroy you. I'll put money on it.

INT. MOTEL ROOM - QUEENS - NIGHT

Jake is lying fully dressed on top of the dingy bedspread, thumbing on his phone, looking up bars in the Bronx, reading reviews. Looking for a mention of pool tables, anything about this violent prodigy. He finds the right one, just enough of a hint.

INT. BAR - BRONX - NIGHT

Jake enters. *JIBARO* MUSIC, couples dancing. A wall of people toward the back, WHOOPING and craning their necks. Jake walks straight to the bar, eyes locked on... Dominga (40), tending.

JAKE
Mojito, por favor.

Dominga gives a quick nod and turns to make the drink. Jake suddenly hears it between beats in the music: the CLACK of lacquered balls colliding. Dominga coasters the highball.

JAKE (CONT'D)
(smooth, low-wattage smile)
What's your name? *Como se llama?*

DOMINGA
Dominga. But everybody calls me *Mamacita*.

JAKE
Oh, you're the boss, huh? This is your bar?

DOMINGA
Not really my bar. My daughter is always here. For 19 years. So everybody calls me *Mamacita*.

JAKE
(raises his glass)
To you and your daughter.

DOMINGA
And your name is...?

JAKE
Jake.

Dominga smiles. Her availability seems negotiable. Jake takes a drink and nods towards the wall of spectators. O.S. a surge of CHEERING. Jake exaggerates his reaction.

JAKE (CONT'D)
What's going on back there?

DOMINGA
That's my daughter. She's always playing back there.

JAKE
What's her name?

DOMINGA
(resistant)
Emigdia.

JAKE
Emig--?

DOMINGA
EH-MIG-DEE-UH. Everybody calls her
Mia.

JAKE
Mia.

As if under a spell, Jake abruptly steps away without a word. He pushes through the spectators, finally laying eyes on--

Mia as she bends over to line up a shot. He's almost derailed by her casual radiance, her untapped stage presence. He watches her annihilate a complicated trick shot. More CHEERS.

Jake's eyes dart around, land on what he's looking for: he grabs an old wooden broom with a lot of miles on it.

JAKE (CONT'D)
Mia!

She looks up just as Jake tosses the broom. She catches it:

JAKE (CONT'D)
Two hundred if she makes it with
the broom.

Mia shifts from dumbfounded to intrigued. She lines up her shot with the broom. The crowd leaps into action, mirroring Jake's wager with each other, but for lower stakes.

A HAND tugs Jake's arm to accept his bet. He acknowledges with eyes on Mia. She makes it. He collects \$200, waves \$400.

JAKE (CONT'D)
I see five more balls there. Four
hundred if she makes the next four
shots and misses the fifth.

Mia looks wary. Spectators wager in Spanish and pool funds. Mia comes around the table, leans over to line up the first shot. Dominga arrives at the periphery, observing uneasily.

LIGHT DRAMA as Mia makes the first four shots. She looks at Jake during one stroke instead of watching the balls. We hear it FALL as their eyes lock. Here comes the fifth ball. She doesn't look at him. She sinks the ball.

Jake waves four bills without looking at the Bettor who takes them. When Mia looks at Jake, his grin expands. A Barfly takes the broom from Mia and tries the stroke for himself. He YELPS and his pals laugh.

Mia looks down at her finger: TIGHT ON a spot of blood from a splinter as she tugs it out. When she looks back up--

Jake is gone. She scans the noisy crowd. Nada.

INT. STEINWAY BILLIARDS - QUEENS - DAY

The place is empty save one LONER practicing on a table in the back and Jake, who's rolling a ball back and forth on a pool table in the center of everything. Excess energy.

Mia and Dominga enter and loom by the entrance. Jake closes the distance, motions to them, then drags two chairs to the table where he's been standing. He gestures and they sit.

Jake stands facing Mia and Dominga like it's a presentation. Mia crinkles a bottle of water and Dominga clutches her purse, anxious.

JAKE

Thanks for coming all the way down here.

DOMINGA

You said "business proposition."
(eyeing the pool table)
What's going on...?

Jake turns and sets up two object balls in random spots on the baize. He places the cue ball between them and picks up the house cue lying on the table.

Jake holds the cue towards Mia. She removes her earbuds.

JAKE

Sink both of those in one shot
without using a rail.

Jake smiles. Mia wavers...then takes the cue, lines up her shot. An obscene amount of backspin. She trashes both balls.

Jake's eyes pop dramatically. He looks at Dominga and grabs the edge of the table, making his knees tremble.

JAKE (CONT'D)

Did you feel that? Either we just
had an earthquake or God himself
made that shot.

Dominga doesn't seem to know what's singular about her daughter's skill. Jake takes out the object balls and cue ball, rolling them into position, identical to round one.

JAKE (CONT'D)

Now sink them both in one shot
using two rails.

Mia walks halfway around the table. Seemingly without calculation she rips the cue into the white ball, banking and slicing the two object balls into their respective pockets.

Jake spins around once, then locks eyes with Mia.

JAKE (CONT'D)

Jesus Christ. You gotta tell me how this happened. You grew up playing in the bar, that much I gathered. What's your game? Three rail? Full rack banks? Russian pyramid?

MIA

I don't...know...any of those...

JAKE

So just 8-ball, 9-ball...?

MIA

No, I've never played...any game. I just...hit the balls.

JAKE

Do you know how many people can do what you did with the broomstick?! Or what you did here just now?! All that talent and nowhere to put it.

(off their indifference)

Well I guess you put it up that poor guy's ass.

DOMINGA

He was harassing her. She was protecting herself. His family tried to sue us--

MIA

Everybody saw it, he was touching me all over--

JAKE

Okay, okay. Whew. Okay. So you can take care of yourself. Excellent.

"Boy Named Sue," huh?

(to Dominga, dry, fast)

(MORE)

JAKE (CONT'D)

I want to take her on the road for a month.

DOMINGA

What??

JAKE

Hear me out. We'll split all the winnings fifty-fifty and send you two thousand a week on top of that. She'll do trick shots. I'll run the stake. I'll pay for everything. No risk to you or Mia. We'll stay in separate rooms, in places I trust.

DOMINGA

Mia's never been out of New York...

JAKE

You want a list of all the towns, every highway? No problem. Ah-ah-ah, even better!

(pulling out his phone)

I've got a phone tracking app. We'll put this app on both of your phones--all three of us can keep track of each other. Nobody can wander off and get in trouble.

Mia and Dominga look at each other warily. Jake digs in his pocket and hands a clump of bills to Dominga.

JAKE (CONT'D)

Okay, you've got, what, two thousand dollars there.

(another clump, fans it)

I've got five thousand. You're betting a thousand that she can make a shot using two rails. She makes it. I give you a thousand.

(giving her more bills)

But I don't believe she can do it again, I think it was luck, so I bet again, and she makes it again, and I lose again. Now I'm down to three thousand and you're up to four thousand. I want to get my money back and I'm certain there's no way she can make the shot a third time. I'm so convinced her luck will run out I bet the rest of what I have, all three thousand on one shot. And she makes it again.

(MORE)

JAKE (CONT'D)

Now you have seven thousand and I have nothing. So that's what I'm doing. But I'm you in that example. I mean, in the example you're me.

(beat)

We should've done it the other way.

DOMINGA

I don't want her gambling.

JAKE

No, no, no. She's not gambling. I'm gambling. No risk to her. And we're not hustling anyone, nothing shady or deceitful. All clean bets.

DOMINGA

Even if she's not betting herself, it sounds dangerous.

JAKE

I've been doing this for decades. It's perfectly safe.

(off their skepticism)

It's entertainment. That's all it is. People admire skill. They pay to see it. Think of it like the circus. Acrobats, right? Sea lions farting a Beethoven melody.

Dominga holds the \$7000 like it's a dead rodent.

JAKE (CONT'D)

Look, just keep that--keep the seven G's. I get it--strange world out there, where's all this money coming from --but it's a world I know, and anybody can make a good living if they know what they're doing.

The women aren't buying. They look at each other, then stand. Jake straightens up and gestures to the far table.

JAKE (CONT'D)

Do you know who that is? That's Will Greeley. Does that name mean anything to you?

(off their blank stares)

He won 40 thousand dollars here, in this room, two days ago. First place in the tournament. Sent a lot of guys home empty-handed.

Women vaguely impressed. Jake gets emphatic with his hands, as if he wants to take Mia by the lapels but knows better.

JAKE (CONT'D)

And you could've beaten him. You could beat him right now, just walk over there and ask him for a game and that's all she wrote.

Mia looks at the player in the back, studies him. Then she looks at Jake. He's getting through. So he relents.

JAKE (CONT'D)

Anyway, go home and think it over. I'll come by your place tomorrow.

Mia puts in earbuds.

DOMINGA

(awkward with cash)

But I...

JAKE

Yep. Exactly. Keep that seven grand, put it to good use. I'll come by and see you tomorrow on my way out of town.

The ladies leave the bar. Jake walks to the bartender.

JAKE (CONT'D)

Who's the guy playing in the back?

BARTENDER

No idea. Rented the table for the day, said he's looking for action.

Jake drifts toward the table in the back, grabs a house cue off the wall and calls out to the Lone Player as he walks.

JAKE

You play for money?

The Player finishes his shot without looking up. No sweat.

PLAYER

They said I'd get all kinds of action if I came to town after the tournament was over.

JAKE

Looks like you'll have to settle for me.

INT. MOVIE THEATER - BROOKLYN - DAY

Jake CACKLES as he watches an action-comedy by himself. The Quips & Guns of Dwayne Johnson. He sits too close to the screen and pops jelly beans into his mouth.

INT. BAR - BRONX - MORNING

Mia and Dominga are getting things ready for the day, helping two LINE COOKS start a pot of *asopao*. Jake stands at the margins, trying not to soil his sweater. He's been patient.

JAKE
Mamacita...?

The cooks' heads whip around protectively.

DOMINGA
(to cooks)
Tranquilicense
(to Jake)
Momento.

Dominga finishes making *sofrito*. As she wipes her hands on her apron, she sighs, readies herself and goes to him. Mia comes along, which seems to irritate her mother.

JAKE
Before you say anything...

Jake leans toward Dominga as if he's going to hug her.

JAKE (CONT'D)
Your hands are--you've got a lot of funky spices going on there, so let me just...

He reaches his sweater sleeve up to her face and rubs the material on her cheek in a polishing motion.

JAKE (CONT'D)
Okay? Right? You feel that?

He turns and reaches up to Mia's face. She bats him away.

JAKE (CONT'D)
(back to Dominga)
You're thinking, okay, cashmere, but then why does it feel so much better than cashmere? Because it's baby cashmere.

Mia reluctantly pinches the material on his forearm. Her expression indicates she's fertile for conversion to the good life, even if her mother isn't. Jake smiles at Dominga.

JAKE (CONT'D)
 (mouthing/silent)
 Three thousand daw-lers.
 (normal voice)
 You want to know what it feels like
 to wear this. You deserve this.

Finally Mia cracks a smile. Dominga notices.

JAKE (CONT'D)
 Give me one month and you'll both
 be wearing something like this.
 Some world class garment. Shoes
 you've never seen in a magazine
 because there's no magazine good
 enough to advertise them.
 (beat)
 The finer things...
 (opening his arms)
 ...are waiting for you.

Dominga is more weirded out than moved.

JAKE (CONT'D)
 All right, give me that seven
 grand, I need to get on the road.

He shoves his open palm toward Dominga. She studies him coldly for a beat.

DOMINGA
 (turning away, to herself)
 Ay, *cabrón*.

Mia grabs Dominga's apron string so that it comes undone as she steps away. Mia clutches the string firmly so that Dominga is restrained by the apron. She turns to Mia--a look that only the two of them understand.

Mia lets go and charges to the pool tables in back. Dominga follows, equally urgent. Jake stays put.

IN THE BACK

Mia grabs a bright red 3-ball lingering on a pool table and rolls it up her bare arm, catches it in the crook of her elbow, then lets it roll back to her palm--clearly a habit, like a stress ball that can't be squeezed. Dominga watches her, warily, a few feet away.

MIA
It's just, like--I mean, what do
you expect.

DOMINGA
Expect?

MIA
From me. Like--
(gesturing around her)
--here. What do you expect me to do
here. Is this a...forever thing?
Because I'm--you do know I'm
nineteen, right?

Dominga fumes.

DOMINGA
(how fucking dare you)
Chica--

Mia SLAMS the billiard ball onto the baize.

MIA
No me diga "chica."

DOMINGA
(baffled)
You--you want to go with
that...man?

Mia inches closer to her mother. The vibe is menacing.

MIA
Do you know what you smell like?
(off Dominga dodging eye
contact)
Do you think I want to smell like
fried plantains when I'm 40?

Dominga SLAPS her.

ON JAKE wincing. This is not a triumph, not what he wanted.

MIA (CONT'D)
Yo. Soy. Una. Adulta.
Independiente.

Mia pushes past Dominga and heads for Jake. He tries not to
seem like he's recoiling inside.

MIA (CONT'D)
(to Jake)
It'll take me 10 minutes to pack.
(MORE)

MIA (CONT'D)

Have a seat. They'll give you something to eat.

Mia BARKS at the line cooks in back. They CALL back affirmatively. Mia flees the bar.

Dominga is immobilized but makes direct eye contact with Jake across the space. Jake heads to the back, not exactly toward Dominga--his pace is aloof. He circles the pool table beside her, landing on the opposite side.

Jake gently, thoughtfully picks up the 3-ball that Mia slammed down. He looks at the ball, not at Dominga. He holds it up between his fingers like he's looking for flaws in a diamond.

JAKE

Originally these were made of stone. Then wood, then clay. Then ivory--until the '20s, when they finally realized it wasn't sustainable to wipe out elephants for this.

Dominga straightens her hair, re-ties her apron, but stays put. Jake is not attentive to her.

JAKE (CONT'D)

Now it's all resin and plastic but they mimic that ivory feel--and that strength. With a couple of these, a good MLB pitcher could total a car in ten minutes.

Jake smiles faintly at Dominga and lays the ball on the table.

JAKE (CONT'D)

I'll make sure she calls you tonight.

He walks toward the front. Dominga moves without much conviction through a small doorway labeled "Baños."

INT. CAR - HIGHWAY - DAY

Top down, Mia's hair banded into fists. Jake yells over the wind, briefing her on the ground rules for their adventure.

JAKE

Always downtowns and suburbs. Never a roadhouse. Never a remote place off the highway.

(MORE)

JAKE (CONT'D)

That's where you get tweakers and angels and people passing through. But in downtowns, or strip malls, people live there, they're regulars, they see each other every day, they don't fuck with you unless you fuck with them. And never, ever go to a private residence or believe anyone who says they can take you to a high roller. No middle man, that's all bullshit. Any questions so far?

MIA

What kind of car is this?

JAKE

Try to stay on topic.
(suddenly vain)
It's a Spyker. Hand built in the Netherlands since 1898.

MIA

What am I supposed to call you?

JAKE

(cold stare)
...Sensei...

INT. DINER - PENNSYLVANIA - DAY

Diner booth. Jake is murdering a sandwich with one hand while using the other to cram potato chips into his mouth.

JAKE

Maybe you bet rack-to-rack, you get fifteen hundred in the hole, then lay heavy cheddar on one shot at the end of the night when everybody's drunk and feeling invincible. Maybe you do three of those and all the railbirds get in on it and you're up five G's when you walk out. You're looking for that side action on if-bets, prop bets, jaibi, exotic--that's when you say, "I can clean up a rack in 90 seconds with diapers taped around my hands." See, you gotta realize, these guys are used to meat and potatoes. But you walk in and offer them a dessert menu.

Mia rubs a hunk of garlic bread in the sauce on her untouched spaghetti. She takes a bite, drinks some water, seems done with it.

JAKE (CONT'D)

You gotta eat.

MIA

I don't really have an appetite.

(whispering)

I'm confused as fuck. I have no clue what you're talking about.

JAKE

You'll be fine. It'll take a couple days to see what's what.

MIA

Where are we right now?

JAKE

Pennsylvania. I'm thinking someplace like Doylestown first.

MIA

So is this--are we going west or south or...?

JAKE

South.

(big bite, mumbling)

Jethuth Chrithe.

(swallows)

Right--do you know what a bed and breakfast is?

(off her reaction)

It's usually a creepy old house, some gay dudes buy it and jazz it up with antiques, but it's safe for the car and safe for everything in the car. We do not stay in motels. Half the time I'll just drive all night till we get to the next place.

MIA

And you said none of this is illegal, right? Because I was hoping to--I mean, I've considered going into law enforcement.

Jake's sandwich is parked at his gaping maw. Wags it at her.

JAKE

Hey, this shit will make you a better cop.

(beat, off her gravitas)

You're looking at me like I know a guy on the force and you want me to pull some strings.

MIA

No, no, I just--I guess I was wondering what you think of-- something like that--

JAKE

Hey, I can tell you exactly what the future holds. If you really want to hear it...

(leaning forward)

In a few minutes, I'm gonna ask Susie for the check, then you and I are gonna go get in the car and I'm gonna hit the accelerator.

(leaning back)

I'm not trying to be an asshole, that's just how the future looks to me.

Mia sucks air, looks around like she needs the closest exit.

JAKE (CONT'D)

I get what you're saying. You're looking for a spark. Totally normal at your age. But flashing a badge? That's not your spark.

MIA

You don't know me. You have no idea what--

JAKE

Okay, look at it this way. You asked me what I thought about law enforcement. You said you've "considered the option." So what do I think? It's not your spark.

Mia is dazed--looking through Jake rather than at him.

JAKE (CONT'D)

(energized, manic)

Spark overwhelms you. You don't "consider" it. You can't do anything else.

(MORE)

JAKE (CONT'D)

You can't even think about anything else. There's no alternative.

She nods quickly to calm him, then stares at the table. It's evident he's pummeling her defenses. She picks up the bread.

MIA

My cousin opened a salon last year. That's all she ever wanted to do. Acrylic nails and shit--she'd never shut up about it and I was always her guinea pig. But I mean, I never had that kind of feeling about anything and I wondered what gave her that--that--

JAKE

(whispering)

"Spark."

MIA

Like, did someone walk up to her on the street and say, "You'd be great at running a salon."

(checking his receptivity)

And she's--she's only 22 and I guess she's already successful--I mean she always has customers in there--"clients"--and she seems really happy with all of it...

Jake smiles, gives her an extra beat in case there's more.

JAKE

That salon is her spark. She had to do nails. And look at my life. Whatever you wanna call this, I've got infinite spark to do it. Trust me, it'll show up. You don't have to worry. It cuts in without asking. You think you're dancing with law enforcement but nope, this other thing barges in and takes over. And you won't be able to push it aside.

(off her uneasiness with the metaphor)

Anyway, look--this isn't my jam. Heavy talks.

(forms a hand-wall in front of him on the table)

I can see this far in front of me.

(draws his hands back a bit)

Okay, this far.

(MORE)

JAKE (CONT'D)
 (off her slight smile)
 So, you know, next time we stop to
 get a bite, don't ask me about the
 afterlife. Okay?

EXT. BAR - PENNSYLVANIA - EARLY AFTERNOON

A small, rundown bar. The Spyker is parked out front,
 standing out almost comically. Jake and Mia head inside:

JAKE
 Remember, we're not hustling here.
 Always play your real speed.

MIA
 Speed?

JAKE
 Your actual ability. Never dump a
 match. Never dog a shot on purpose.
 And never make it personal. Betting
 isn't personal. If it starts to
 feel personal, that's when you know
 you're about to lose everything.

INT. BAR - PENNSYLVANIA - LATE AFTERNOON

Practically empty. Mia is holding a cue as Jake comes
 alongside the pool table and reaches up to tug the light
 cord. He directs the fixture to inspect the table.

JAKE
 That's a loose rail, you can see
 the shadow is different there. The
 baize is eighty-twenty. 80% percent
 wool, 20% nylon. If we ever go
 somewhere serious, you're looking
 at about 95% wool on the slate.

A huge, lumbering REGULAR has wandered over to the table.

REGULAR
 Is that your only setting? Or if I
 put enough quarters in you, can you
 actually play?

JAKE
 What's your game? 9-Ball?

REGULAR
 Texas Express.

JAKE
I'm Jake, this is Mia.

REGULAR
They call me Das Beast.

Jake racks for 9-Ball, diamond formation. He wanders over to Mia and begins gesturing, explaining the game.

DAS BEAST
Hold up. Am I playing you or her?

JAKE
Her.

DAS BEAST
Uh, okay. For money?

JAKE
Yes. For money. For your entire wallet and your car and your house.

DAS BEAST
All right, brother, it's just kinda funny you're teaching her the game while I'm standing here.

JAKE
Don't worry about her, she'll be fine. But do me a favor, go put something on the jukebox and give us a minute.

DAS BEAST
So is this like a summer day camp and she's the only camper?

Jake ignores him. Das Beast meanders to the jukebox and programs a song: Don Williams covering "Jamaica Farewell." Das Beast is instantly wistful, singing along as he walks back.

DAS BEAST (CONT'D)
Not to impose on you again, but are we thinking a hundred a rack?

JAKE
Sure. You break.

Das Beast grins, CROONING through the break. He quickly runs the table and bags the 9. Jake talks Mia through racking. She clumsily rotates the balls to see their numbers--it never mattered before.

Das Beast finally misses and steps back, still singing. Jake mumbles to Mia, telling her what to shoot. Balls CLACK and DROP. Pocket. Pocket. Das Beast's face changes, his voice growing more subdued until his lips are barely moving.

JAKE (CONT'D)

You've got to bank the 3...Okay, but if you jump the 8...Go off that rail, not the loose rail, and slice the 5 in the corner...You have to hit them in order, numerical order...that's blue for fuck's sake, does that look purple? Okay, maybe it looks a little purple in this light...

A series of QUICK SHOTS as Das Beast racks multiple times, his fate sealed.

JAKE (CONT'D)

Nine...Nine...Nine...Combo on the nine...Two hits the nine...Okay, now try it on the snap.

Das Beast's eyes are lifeless as we hear a THUNDERCLAP BREAK.

INT. CAR / EXT. BED AND BREAKFAST - PENNSYLVANIA - DUSK

The Spyker pulls into a gravel driveway leading up to an old cozy-looking three-story country house.

JAKE

So now you can play the game and you're eight hundred heavier. It won't always be that easy, but hey, you got off on the right foot.

MIA

You said this whole thing was about doing trick shots.

JAKE

Only if there's a crowd.

INT. BED AND BREAKFAST - PENNSYLVANIA - MOMENTS LATER

The OWNER is CLACKING away on a desktop computer. Mia looks around the place. Very quaint. She cautiously sits on an antique settee.

OWNER

It's four-sixty. You can have any of the rooms, go take a look and pick the two you want.

JAKE

(paying)

A little extra in there for helping us out at the last minute. Very gracious of you.

Jake looks at Mia. She grins "this is the life" as she leans back into the settee. Jake smiles.

OWNER

Breakfast is between seven and ten.

JAKE

We can do ten.

OWNER

(glances up, frowns)

You plan to be out late?

INT. BAR - PENNSYLVANIA - NIGHT

Mia leans over a pool table, lining up a shot.

JAKE (O.S.)

Stop!

Mia pulls away, stands up and rests her cue on the floor. A demoralized MALE OPPONENT is standing off to the side.

JAKE (CONT'D)

You guys see what I see?

RAILBIRD 1

She's trying to jump the 6 and combo the 4 - 9?

JAKE

Two hundred says she can make that.

RAILBIRD 2

She might've made it if you hadn't broken her concentration.

JAKE

Are we doing business?

RAILBIRD 2

Fuck, man, I'll take that bet for a grover. She can't make that shot.

JAKE

Okay, so you're in for a stack, for her to blow the 4 - 9. Plus what you have on this rack. Bacon up.

The railbird stashes 10 bills on top of the light fixture, trying to unsettle Mia with a lingering leer. Jake comes between them as he puts more bills on top of the first pile.

Jake looks at Mia and nods. She murders the shot: the cue ball jumps over the 6 and nudges the 4, which drops the 9. Jake takes all the cash from the top of the light, nodding to the opponent Mia just finished--*prop bets across game bets*.

RAILBIRD 2

Set 'em up the same way. Double or nothin' she can't do it again.

JAKE

Sure, chief, however deep you wanna go, just front that cheddar.

RAILBIRD 2

I can cover my bets.

JAKE

(gauging the crowd)
Two G's if she makes the same shot?
Let it collect some dust.
(to a Woman, phone out)
No videos.

RAILBIRD 2

You're gonna make me wave all my money around?
(out comes his cash roll)
Fuck two. Let's go three.

Back to the OVERHEAD shot of the light as HANDS apply more money. We HOLD the shot for a TIME LAPSE SLOW PUSH on the dust, wires and cash f.g., with Mia and the baize b.g., balls configured for the same 4 - 9 combo jump shot.

Tap-tap-tap-pocket. More HANDS, more MONEY on top of the light, not just the original Railbird but plenty more. Tap-tap-tap-pocket. More HANDS, more CHEDDAR. Tap-tap-tap pocket.

INT. BED AND BREAKFAST - PENNSYLVANIA - MORNING

A Bed & Breakfast Employee carries the breakfast tray across the vacant dining area to the window where Jake and Mia are seated. She dispenses omelets, muffins, coffee.

MIA

So do you actually live anywhere?

JAKE

Nah, I've been mobile for years.

The Employee retreats with her empty tray.

MIA

(low to Jake)

I can't believe everybody acts like this is normal, you and me traveling together.

JAKE

What are they gonna do? You're a legal adult.

Mia avoids eye contact and fusses over creaming her coffee.

MIA

We were in three bars yesterday. Or did I imagine that? I don't even know what state we're in now.

JAKE

Pennsylvania. It's big.

MIA

But, like, I'm underage...?

JAKE

You're not drinking. Nobody's gonna come crashing in and arrest everybody. Besides, look at you. They want you in there. Anyway, how did you feel last night? Safe?

MIA

Yeah. The smoke though...

JAKE

You'll get used to it. What did we end up with?

MIA

You mean cash? Was I supposed to keep track?

Jake throws cash on the table, unconcerned about it touching their food.

JAKE
Nine and change.

Mia looks around as if someone might appear and grab it.

JAKE (CONT'D)
But see, think about it. We overpaid to stay here, then we've got food and gas. And we're sending money to your mom. So nine grand is peanuts, might level out to a per diem. Fifteen years ago we could've scored twice that much with half the effort, but that's all right. We find a couple rainmakers, the whole thing makes sense.

MIA
What's a rainmaker?

JAKE
Like fifty G's on one shot. And they're willing to keep losing.
(off her reaction)
That might only happen once while we're out and about, but action like that will definitely materialize. Trust me, I know how to attract it.
(scarfs a last scone)
You done? I wanna get you some threads.

INT. BAR - PENNSYLVANIA - NIGHT

Mia stands idle with a cue. Sensible ponytail, red scoop-neck top, a very different look--not too elegant, not too revealing. Jake is egging on railbirds, Mia suppressing a smile at his antics.

JAKE
I need a volunteer. Someone willing to be a human prop for a trick shot you won't believe.

Finally a youthful RAILBIRD comes forward, silent.

JAKE (CONT'D)
Great, what's your name?

RAILBIRD

Cory.

JAKE

Cory is going to touch his toes
over here--standing three feet from
the table--and my traveling
companion will shoot the cue ball
off his back and onto the table and
sink the seven ball in the corner.

VOICE (O.S.)

Why the seven?

JAKE

Because it's...
(cueing Mia)

MIA

Lucky...?

JAKE

I didn't even teach you that!

Everyone scrambles for a piece of the action. Jake waves his hands to contort Cory into a 90-degree angle without touching him. Mia puts the cue ball on the dip in Cory's back. She takes the shot. The 7 ball drops.

Jake brushes past her to collect money.

INT. VARIOUS NONDESCRIPT BARS

A brisk MONTAGE of memorable BANGERS, all races and sexes. They introduce themselves with a fist-bump, dropping names like Guillotine, Chump Change, Starbuck ("no relation").

Mia and Jake try on some of their own. He introduces her as "La Niña." She bristles. She introduces herself as "The Brown Widow," then "The Nuyorican Knife."

INTERCUT: A FLURRY OF HIGHWAY SIGNS. Entering West Virginia, Leaving West Virginia, Entering Virginia, Entering Kentucky.

IN THE BARS

Dizzying jargon: "Your girl's got too much stick, but I'll play for some weight." "I'm thinkin' you can spot me three games in five ahead, and the eight and nine."

More names: Old Faithful. Gizmo.

PLAYER

Catfish.

MIA

Like "catfish" on the internet?

PLAYER

What's an internet catfish?

DIFFERENT BAR

An OLD TIMER, 80+, reaches out to shake Mia's hand.

OLD TIMER

Sweetheart, you're a bucket of gold
with a barbed wire handle.

(to Jake)

You ever heard that one?

JAKE

I've heard it the other way. Bucket
of shit with a barbed wire handle.

OLD TIMER

Well, she's that too.

DIFFERENT BAR

PLAYER 6

(handing over cash)

You guys rolled in here like Booty
and Clyde and robbed us blind.

Jake evaluates Mia's backside as they walk toward the door.

JAKE

We need to get you some loose-
fitting pants.

EXT. BED AND BREAKFAST - KENTUCKY - DAWN

An elegant antebellum mansion with pillars and a balcony.
Spyker out front. Jake and Mia sit in a porch swing, luggage
at their feet, as they watch ducks waddle by.

MIA

So what's the deal with the car?
I'm guessing you won it off some
douchebag because I know you can't
hold onto money long enough to
afford something like that.

Jake snort-laughes and pops his eyebrows: *thanks*.

MIA (CONT'D)

How does that even work? Guy loses the car to you and then walks home?

JAKE

Why not?

MIA

And do you bet the car?

(off his head shake "no")

Would you?

JAKE

Under the right conditions, absolutely. That's what it's all about. The only thing I will never bet with is this...

Jake pulls up his sleeve and shows off the watch.

MIA

Really?

JAKE

First of all, this little baby could buy six of those cars.

MIA

That watch? Could buy six...of those cars?

JAKE

Ree-sharr Mille. Appraised at a million-five. The components are graphene. Lightest timepiece ever made.

MIA

A mill--

(can't even form the word)

What does it do?

JAKE

It tells time. With hands. Something you wouldn't understand.

MIA

You're fucking with me. Doesn't it have a velcro strap?

Jake proudly makes the velcro strap CROAK a few times.

JAKE

Its history obviously matters--you gotta have the documentation. Who owned it.

MIA

Who owned it?

JAKE

Stefan Brunestud.

(off her reaction)

Tennis pro? Well, whatever, he's been on the cover of Rolling Stone.

(off her reaction)

Rolling Stone is a magazine that--

MIA

I know what Rolling Stone is. I don't know who Stefan...

JAKE

Brunestud. Won the French Open.

(beat, contemplative)

All that legitimacy. You can't take it away from them. But you can take everything else. And that cover of Rolling Stone--guess what? He's not wearing this watch anymore.

MIA

And you've never bet the watch?

JAKE

Doesn't matter how friendly the odds are, it's a no fly zone.

Jake sighs and looks at her as if trying to determine how vulnerable he should be.

JAKE (CONT'D)

You know, if you took away these two trophies...

MIA

The car and the watch?

JAKE

(nodding)

They're my net worth. Plus whatever cash I have on me. Zero in the bank, zero in the stock market--you name it, I don't have it.

Before Mia can formulate a reaction, the Proprietors open the door. Jake and Mia stand and go in with their bags.

EXT. BAR - PARKING LOT - TENNESSEE - MAGIC HOUR

The Spyker pulls into a gravel parking lot with two other cars parked cockeyed. Something catches Jake's eye. He gestures and Mia looks: a 2007 Shelby GT Mustang. So what? Then TIGHT ON its Tennessee vanity plate: "POOLGOD."

JAKE

This is it. What'd I tell you?

MIA

The "rainmaker"?

JAKE

Any jackass who puts that target on his back knows how to lose. You ready for the main event?

MIA

Bitch, I am the main event.

INT. BAR - TENNESSEE - MOMENTS LATER

Jake throws the door open waving the vanity plate like a fan.

JAKE

Whew, it is haaaaawwt out there!

The BARTENDER, a spunky Holly Hunter type, and a REGULAR seated in front of her, turn to look at Jake and Mia.

JAKE (CONT'D)

So one of you must be the Pool God?

BARTENDER

Not quite, sweetie. The Pool God is my ex-husband and he's in prison...

(points to the license plate
"fan")

...making more of those.

INT. DINER - TENNESSEE - NIGHT

Jake is in a booth. Mia comes from the restroom to join him.

MIA

What if there is no rainmaker?

JAKE

There's always a rainmaker. Let's
split some chili fries.

(off her look)

What? It'll happen. Trust me, okay?

EXT. HIGHWAY - TENNESSEE - DAWN TO DUSK

Jake drives and Mia naps with earbuds in. Highway signs,
livestock, a descent from picturesque little towns that have
seen better days, to total economic collapse.

INT. BAR - TENNESSEE - DAY

A weathered, emaciated PLAYER playing at a table. No bettors,
no lurkers--just Jake, Mia and a chubby STAKE HORSE riding a
stool. The weary Player finishes a rack, looks exhausted.

PLAYER

I think we're done...?

STAKE

You're done when I say you're done.
And you ain't done.

Jake walks a handful of bills to the stake.

JAKE

You the only stake horse in town?

STAKE

Buddy, I'm the stake stallion.

JAKE

Let's max out the next rack. No
need to let it simmer all night.

STAKE

I like to watch people bleed out
real slow. But hey, there's the
door if you've got better things to
do. You're only down, what, eleven?

Mia waits for a signal from Jake. He considers his options,
then nods at her. She starts to rack again. Jake walks away,
passing the weary Player, who's headed to the Stake. Jake POV
as the Player mumbles to the Stake. Then:

STAKE (CONT'D)

I told you it was gonna be a long
night. Get better fuckin' shoes.

The Player hangs there, his back to Jake and Mia. The Stake gestures fiercely to the table. The Player turns and offers a faint smile. He unscrews the shaft off his cue and attaches a breaking shaft. He maneuvers around the table and breaks.

STAKE (CONT'D)

(staring at Jake)

See, I know what you're thinking.
You're waiting for him to give out.
Maybe even dump, just to make a
point. Thing is, he can't lose. I
staked him too deep in too many big
matches. So you know what he's
playin' for tonight?

The balls keep falling. The Player is a vacant-eyed automaton. The Stake forms a zero with his fingers.

STAKE (CONT'D)

Zero percent.

INT. CAR - HIGHWAY - NIGHT

Jake drives with less conviction than ever. Mia: earbuds.
ANGLE ON Mia's phone as she looks through selfies with high school friends. Graduation, not much else.

EXT. REST AREA - TENNESSEE - DAY

Jake and Mia stretch their legs beside a picnic table, far from the restrooms. Mia takes a seat, deflated. She's remote, picking at the label on her bottled soft drink, as Jake walks in tight circles, emphasizing calf stretches.

JAKE

Listen, those guys last night--
trust me, that's not where this is
headed. I mean it, I would never
put you in that situation. You and
I are just...having fun. Making
some money.

MIA

Are we?

JAKE

Having fun?

MIA

Making money. I know you said there's always a rainmaker but it's been...how many weeks? This life is a fucking time warp.

JAKE

You're feeling the calendar, I get it. I said a month, but it's like, law of averages. It's gonna come at us like a freight train.

Mia nods slowly, more skeptical than ever.

JAKE (CONT'D)

Hey, I can send you home. Right now, today, stick you on a plane, give you your split. It's not enough to retire to the Hamptons, but it's something.

Mia sighs and fingers the etchings in the tabletop. Jake stops walking, starts to reach for her, decides against it.

JAKE (CONT'D)

So whaddaya say...Give it one more night?

She's unresponsive. He segues into a Phil Collins cover.

JAKE (CONT'D)

(singing)

Ooone moooore niiight...give me
ooone moooore niiight...

(off her silence)

You don't know that song?

Mia touches her phone expertly and yanks out an earbud as the phone BLARES tinny but aggressive female-driven hip-hop.

MIA

(yelling)

What? You don't know this song?

Jake understands a stray word or two in Yung Baby Tate's "Rainbow Cadillac." After a moment, he twitches as if possessed. He "fights" each limb as if they are dancing against his will. Mia blinks at his clowning, then smirks.

MIA (CONT'D)

(yelling)

One more night?

JAKE
 (yell-singing but calmly)
 OOONE MOOOORE NIIIGHT...

MOMENTS LATER, the Spyker rips out of the rest area as Yung Baby Tate's anthem RISES...

Take that wack bitch off the map...Blow a stack and get it back...Times ten, that's simple math...

EXT. RIVERBOAT CASINO - BILOXI - NIGHT

The SONG continues over an AERIAL of riverboat casinos along the gulf coast, emblazoned with carnival lights.

INT. RIVERBOAT CASINO - BILOXI - LATER

Jake has pulled some Gamblers into a billiards room. Mia is at the table, finally using a real cue.

Among the bettors is FWAM, a slovenly HMONG MAN with a ponytail. He's oddly inert, not gambling or engaging with the others. Just staring at Mia. Jake keeps an eye on him.

Mia's male Opponent is patient as Mia owns the table with batshit circus stuff. The Opponent taps his cue: respect.

As the gamblers settle bets, Jake glimpses Fwam behind them, still isolated. Voyeuristic. He bro-nods to Jake. Jake answers the nod, staring after Fwam curiously as he leaves.

EXT. RIVERBOAT CASINO - BILOXI - LATER

Aft deck. Fwam drags from his cigarette and smoke flows from his nose. Jake, sans Mia, waits for a proposal.

FWAM
 How big you wanna go tonight?

JAKE
 Why limit ourselves to a number?

FWAM
 You ever heard of Buck Ellis?

JAKE
 Of course. Can you get him here?

FWAM
 (scoffs)
 Please.

JAKE

Did you tell him how good she is?

FWAM

Doesn't matter. He won't come here.

JAKE

Then what are we doing.

FWAM

I can take you to him. You and the girl.

JAKE

Tonight?

FWAM

Right now.

JAKE

Do I look like an idiot?

FWAM

You could just say "no thank you."

Fwam walks away. Jake sighs, irked by uncertainty.

INT. RIVERBOAT CASINO - BILOXI - MOMENTS LATER

Mia is at the Cajun buffet, nudging hush puppies with tongs to determine what they are. Jake breezes up to her, yanks the tongs from her and drops one into his hand.

JAKE

Hush puppeee. It's fried corn bread. Did you play some roulette?

MIA

No, just looked around.

JAKE

So, uh, the clientele in here isn't what I was expecting. These things are a moving target--the economy--you just never know until you're here. Everybody looks like they're in town for a fucking convention.

MIA

Yeah, the action seems light.

JAKE

Anyway, I found us a better opportunity, but you have to trust me. This one is--I mean it's big, but it's also gonna be outside our comfort zone. So we gotta be on the same page. You trust me, right?

He reaches out for a fist bump. She hesitates, then bumps.

EXT. HIGHWAY / INT. SPYKER - MISSISSIPPI - NIGHT

Jake and Mia follow Fwam's truck along a back road, past boarded-up churches, capsized tractors, defunct bait shops.

MIA

You said it was a two-hour drive. It's been almost three. Feeling pretty sketchy.

JAKE

It'll be worth it, trust me. He's taking us to King Moonracer.

MIA

King who?

JAKE

Moonracer. Island of Misfit Toys.

(off her reaction)

Really? Rudolph. The claymation...?

(off her reaction)

Sometimes you come across these high rollers who've created a little kingdom for themselves and they end up controlling all the action. Gamblers are misfits, right? But you can't rule over them without being one. So guys at the top are just the ultimate misfits.

(obvious)

King. Moonracer.

MIA

You said to never trust anyone who claimed they could take you to a high roller.

Jake grimaces as the Spyker takes a pothole too hard.

JAKE

He didn't say "high roller." He said the guy's name. When they drop a name--

MIA

(snort laugh)

A name you've never heard.

JAKE

But the way he said it--sometimes that's all it takes. You don't need his resume to know this guy has the world by the balls. You'll see.

EXT. BUCK ELLIS HOUSE - VICKSBURG - NIGHT

Cars and trucks, some dilapidated, some newer, line a gravel driveway to a palatial estate on the Mississippi River. Ten more vehicles are arranged like circled wagons around some kind of EVENT. Topiaries obscure the view.

IN THE SPYKER, Jake whistles at the majesty.

JAKE

What'd I tell you?

MIA

"Never go to a private residence."

Jake waves it off.

ON THE GROUNDS

Fwam parks, gets out of his truck, and motions Jake and Mia to follow. VOICES are WHOOPING and CHEERING. A BLUR of agitated MEN--young, old, black, white, military, blue collar, upper crust, toothless vagrants, and more Hmong.

MIA (CONT'D)

(as they walk, low to Jake)

I'm getting a rapey vibe.

JAKE

I would not let anything happen to you, are you kidding? Come on. This is straight up.

Nearing the circle of cars, we now see that the men are waving money as they watch a COCKFIGHT.

Fwam guides them to a WHITE SOUTHERN ARISTOCRAT, 60s, smoking a good cigar. This is BUCK ELLIS.

FWAM

This is Jake.

BUCK

Thanks for coming, Jake. Who's your friend?

JAKE

This is Mia.

BUCK

Young lady, I've heard a lot about you. Name's Buck Ellis.

The crowd is increasingly amped. Mia is bumped from behind and falls to her knees. Jake forms a quick shield. Buck gestures for them to follow him as he yells back at an austere Lieutenant in this enterprise.

BUCK (CONT'D)

Wrap it up by three!

(leaning toward Mia)

All these guys travel for this, so I hate to chase them away.

INT. BUCK ELLIS HOUSE - VICKSBURG - CONTINUOUS

As Buck opens the door, a flood of WHOOPING greets them, along with Cajun MUSICIANS chanting in PATOIS as they ferociously perform MINIMAL CHORDS: "Tighten Up" by Clifton Chenier & The Louisiana Ramblers, recorded live in 1971.

Jake and Mia exchange a look: *can this get any crazier?* Buck moves briskly and motions them likewise--

IN THE PARLOR

A topless STRIPPER (woman, 20s) dances on a covered pool table surrounded by a cadre of Twentysomething Bros, more frat than cornpone, more uniformly white than the group outside.

BUCK

Rip! Rip! We have guests!

RIP ELLIS (20s, polo, jeans) and six friends, mirror images of each other, stare at Mia as the singer CROONS. The stripper gyrates with her hands on her hips, then sees Mia.

STRIPPER

You brought another girl? Get up here, sweetie!

The stripper kneels and crawls to the edge of the table near Mia, licking her lips and come-hithering with her finger.

BUCK
Rip, turn down the music!

The assault of MANIC ACCORDION, WASHBOARD and STOMPING FEET is diminished but still setting the tone.

BUCK (CONT'D)
I know you're having a good time...

Buck offers a hand to the Stripper on these words, as if "good time" is her job description. She looks at Rip for guidance before climbing down awkwardly in heels. Mia registers all this with notable discomfort.

BUCK (CONT'D)
...but we need the table, boys. Who wants to play for some Yankee cheddar?

Jake sees the Stripper's shiny robe on a nearby chair and tosses it to her. She puts it on and disappears behind a few Bros who start folding the table cover. Rip brings the crate of balls from a shelf.

BUCK (CONT'D)
Who's your best stick-man, Rip?

The Bros mumble consensus, then shout: "Lucas!" LUCAS cocks an eyebrow, nods and points to his own chest.

One of the Bros hands a cue to Jake. Jake hands it to Mia. She's stiff, almost disappearing into herself.

BUCK (CONT'D)
You boys empty your wallets, play for whatever you've got on you, whatever's left after...
(nods at the stripper)
...you've paid this angel.

Jake pulls Buck aside as the Bros rack for 9-ball, clearing drinks and store-bought snack platters from the area.

JAKE
(low)
I was told you'd go big, that's why we came. These guys maybe have a few hundred?

BUCK

Relax, I want to get a look at your friend. Just roll with it and the Lord will smile kindly on you.

Buck and Jake turn to see the Bros being gracious and "gentlemanly" with Mia, motioning for her to break.

BUCK (CONT'D)

Whatever you do, boys, do not let her break.

Lucas suddenly seems diminished, but shrugs and gets into position to break. Jake and Rip sidebar as Rip flashes some bills. Jake nods. Buck nods. Mia nods. Lucas breaks.

WIPE TO:

The music is no more. Mia sinks the 8, then the 9. The crowd is mute, the whole affair like an exercise. Rip pays Jake.

RIP

That's everything.

Jake looks impatiently at Buck.

BUCK

Just an appetizer, Jake.

(to Mia)

My goodness, I don't believe that Lucas--I mean, none of these boys--hell, nobody in this town would pose a threat to you on the baize.

(beat, searching)

Would they?

Mia remains aloof. She glances at the Stripper, who smiles sincerely at her.

JAKE

And your point is...

BUCK

(still on Mia)

Maybe you don't like to be challenged. And I'm guessing you've never challenged yourself. But I think you should. You've hardly even seen the possibilities for a talent like yours. You think Jake is showing you the possibilities?

We roll call the faces in the room. There's a new tension.

BUCK (CONT'D)

I'd like to challenge you, Mia. I'd like to show you the possibilities.

(quickly to Jake)

And to answer your question, Jake, I can go up to a hundred in currency and then I'll have to get some stones involved.

Dazed from Buck's cult-like needling, Jake nods slowly then pops back with an expulsion of air.

JAKE

Now you're speaking my language.

EXT. BUCK ELLIS HOUSE - VICKSBURG - MOMENTS LATER

Buck leads Jake and Mia past a fountain to a small but elaborate building behind the house. As Buck deals with the electronic padlock, Mia looks back toward the house. Through the enormous rear windows she can see the Stripper flirtatiously lowering her robe to re-engage her clients' attention.

INT. BUCK ELLIS GAME ROOM - VICKSBURG - CONTINUOUS

As they walk in, BEEPING indicates that a security system has been triggered. Buck keys in the code to disarm it as Jake and Mia take in the large room: a full bar, cocktail tables, stools, sofas and armchairs all arranged around--

A Facquet Majeste pool table. Etched platinum base, electric drawers to dispense balls, diamonds inlaid on the rails. A \$200,000 statement.

The Majeste is positioned like a stage with perfect lighting all around. There are cameras mounted discreetly above it. The baize is bright, glowing.

MIA

(low to Jake)

So...better wool on the slate? Like you said?

JAKE

(hardly the point)

Yeah, good wool. Plus, you know, the platinum and diamonds.

BUCK

I won't let my son near this.

JAKE

Okay, so what's your game? What do you want to play? I'm guessing straight?

BUCK

(sing-song, mysterious)
I don't want to play anything.

Buck mimes cocktail shaking as he heads to the bar. Jake nods, then points to Mia and shakes his head.

Buck uses his phone to cast a video to a 70-inch TV on the far wall. It's a recent WPA 9-ball tournament with Chinese COMMENTATORS. The CHINESE GIRL lining up her shot is LANFANG XU, 16. Her petite nonchalance is intimidating.

The commentators marvel as Lanfang pots a ball. Jake scoffs.

JAKE

All right, you weave a nice little web, what's the bet.

BUCK

Just watch. We'll have plenty of time to talk about the other stuff.

Jake is uneasy, Mia transfixed. Buck walks a drink to Jake.

BUCK (CONT'D)

(to Mia)
Seltzer water okay?

JAKE

From an unopened bottle.

Mia moves closer to the screen. Lanfang shoots textbook positional play, defense, less flashy than Mia. Lanfang's youth, sangfroid and skill provide a twisted mirror for Mia, who studies the classy uniform, the alert referees, the reverent spectators. *Her obsession is instant.*

Buck pauses the video on Lanfang mid-stroke.

BUCK

So here's what we're going to do. We'll set up the balls just like they are at the 27-minute mark. Then you're going to clean them off exactly as she does, same order, same English, same positional play. If you miss one, we start over.

Buck takes a pre-assembled cue from the wall and hands it to Mia. She likes the heft.

BUCK (CONT'D)

Shoot around. Get a feel for the table--it intimidates some people. When the time comes, we'll set the balls up like they are in the video, and you repeat everything on screen.

JAKE

What are the figures here.

BUCK

Let's start at 25.

JAKE

Twenty-five thousand dollars. To shadowbox with that toddler.

BUCK

As long as we wrap up by dawn, I don't care how many times she takes a crack at it.

JAKE

At 25 per?

Mia is vacant-eyed. Jake walks to her and grabs the cue. Mia jerks the cue away from Jake.

MIA

I'll do it. I can do it.

Jake and Mia stare each other down. Buck saunters to Jake, snifter in one hand, his other extended to seal the deal.

JAKE

I'm not carrying that much bacon.

BUCK

We'll figure it out.

Jake hesitates, then their hands meet.

BUCK (CONT'D)

By the way, I record everything that happens in here--just for my own enjoyment, not for the internet.

Mia shrugs and starts shooting. Buck's amusement is palpable.

A FLURRY OF SHOTS as Mia sinks various balls mercilessly. Lanfang remains locked on the 70-inch screen like an effigy held aloft for a religious ritual.

MIA
Let's start.

BUCK
That was about 40 minutes. Your confidence is either your greatest strength or your greatest weakness.

Buck spins the video to the 27-minute mark. He wanders over to the table and starts setting up the balls.

BUCK (CONT'D)
I'll set these up for you once, just to establish the layout. After this, you set them up. It'll be burned into your brain before long.

Buck plays the video, Lanfang makes a shot, Buck pauses the video, Mia mimics the shot. And so on. When Mia misses, they start over at the beginning.

First attempt: no dice. Second attempt: nope. She can't get there, but she's performing at a level that thrills Buck, who exchanges loaded glances with Jake--it could go either way.

The sixth time Mia blows it, she collapses onto the table and lets out a PRIMAL SCREAM into the baize.

BUCK (CONT'D)
Ready to throw in the towel?

Mia looks at Jake, his "up to you" shrug not what she wants.

BUCK (CONT'D)
We're at one-fifty. So far.

Mia looks at Lanfang paused on the TV, then grabs one of the balls off the table. Jake reacts, sensing potential for an outburst, but instead Mia looks at her reflection in the surface of the ball. She looks at Lanfang, and then at Buck.

MIA
Double...?

BUCK
"Double or nothing?"
(off Mia's nod)
You respond well to pressure--I was wondering about that.
(MORE)

BUCK (CONT'D)
Some play their best when
everything's on the line. Others,
well, they collapse when you turn
up the heat.

JAKE
That's not an answer. She said
three hundred or bust.

BUCK
That's fine, Jake.

Mia starts setting up the balls. Buck re-starts the video and Mia settles in. She works in nearly perfect sync with the video. We CROSS-CUT Mia and Lanfang, emphasizing the harmonious CLACKING of their shots.

Mia gets ahead of the video, shooting faster than Lanfang, her execution growing more instinctive. Buck is elated by the amateur theater production he's orchestrated.

Mia pauses before the final shot. The video catches up with her. Lanfang finishes. Mia still doesn't. She looks at Jake.

BUCK (CONT'D)
It doesn't matter how deep he
stakes you, sweetheart, this is not
a team sport. You're feeling that
pretty profoundly right now.
(chuckle)
And so is he.

We jump to a VERTICAL ANGLE above the table that isolates Mia as if to emphasize Buck's point. Image quality drops, denoting this is Buck's recording. Mia settles in, takes the shot...and misses.

BUCK (CONT'D)
I'm willing to keep going...? We
can go back to 25 each or double it
again. Either way.

JAKE
We need to call it a night.

BUCK
Fair enough. You can sleep in the
back room, and we can settle up in
the a.m. Unless we need to put our
heads together and explore options
that don't involve legal tender?

JAKE
You'll get your money.

INT. BUCK ELLIS GAME ROOM BUNKS - VICKSBURG - MOMENTS LATER

Buck turns on a light in an adjoining room and gestures to a few bunks with bare mattresses.

BUCK
Bedding's in the linen closet. Make yourselves at home. Shower's well stocked.

LATER

CRICKETS are the only sound as Mia and Jake lie in their beds, silently staring up. Mia is in the top bunk.

MIA
We can't cover what we owe this guy.

JAKE
I told you, logistics are my problem. And paying a debt without money is logistical.

MIA
I don't know what to say...

JAKE
That's wheelin'.

MIA
...What?

JAKE
Off-road, 4-wheeler types. They crack an axle on a boulder, they say "that's wheelin'." The risks are just part of it.

MIA
But I--

JAKE
I'm staking you. Tonight was my call and I pushed too hard for it. That's how we got here--not because you missed a shot. So start counting sheep and let it go.

MIA
I don't know what--what came over me. It was like I blacked out and became some other person.

JAKE

It's called competitive spirit. New sensation, huh.

(off her silence)

When you close your eyes, that girl's face is all you can see. Right?

MIA

...Yes.

JAKE

Good luck with that.

MIA

Where was that match? What country?

JAKE

China. I mean, I saw the flag by her name, so I'm assuming.

MIA

"Shoe" Lanfang? "Zhu" Lanfang?

JAKE

I know where your head's going. "What does she have that I don't?" Le-gi-ti-ma-cy.

MIA

What does that mean exactly?

JAKE

Okay, you've got a girl that age performing at that level? Her family situation is--let's just say they're supportive. To the tune of: "Hey, mom, I gotta fly to Rome next week and Stockholm the week after that." And the cultural opportunity to develop this skill in the first place. That kid didn't get her talent the way you did, surrounded by child molesters.

Mia's expression is a new one. She's crossed into the Land of the Extremely Provoked. But Jake continues, glib as can be.

JAKE (CONT'D)

Somebody like you? You don't have a chance against any of that. It was over the minute her face popped on the screen.

MIA

(beat, tone changing)

Why did you bring me on the road?
What the fuck is this? I mean,
you're sitting there talking about
family and opportunity? Who the
fuck are you? You think there's
somebody I can't beat because of
my--because--

JAKE

Hey. Stop. I'm telling you about
circumstances that you and I don't
align with. Neither of us, right?
That's all I'm saying. At the end
of the day that's another universe.
Apples and oranges. So let it go.

MIA

So what you mean is--I can do this,
what you want me to do. But I can't
do that.

JAKE

Only she can do that.

MIA

SHE'S NEVER HAD A FUCKING OPPONENT?

(beat)

You're a loser. But you--you do not
get to decide that I'm a loser.

The upper bunk shakes. Jake stares at the underside. Gutted.

INT. RANGE ROVER - PAWN SHOP PARKING LOT - VICKSBURG - DAY

Mia looks through the window of a pawn shop from the back of
a Range Rover, as Jake and Buck wait for a preoccupied PAWN
BROKER to notarize the Spyker swap. She watches with morbid
curiosity.

INT. PAWN SHOP - VICKSBURG - CONTINUOUS

Jake and Buck watch the Pawn Broker pass a guitar over the
counter to a FATHER and pre-teen SON who look like they've
skimped to make an important purchase. The Pawn Broker chats
with them as he re-hangs other guitars on their wall hooks.

PAWN BROKER

That one'll last you till your
dad's age. By then you'll be a
household name.

(MORE)

PAWN BROKER (CONT'D)
(off the father's chuckle)
But it's a big price difference, so
you might want to stick with
something that's easier to play in
the short term...

He turns to Jake and Buck, and surprises Jake by extending a
hand to Buck. They shake.

PAWN BROKER (CONT'D)
Buck Ellis strikes again. Title
transfer?

Buck, supercilious, nods to Jake to hand over the document.

BUCK
(to Pawn Broker)
When are you coming out to see my
chickens?

PAWN BROKER
Oh, I'm still hurtin' from the last
time I saw your chickens.

The Pawn Broker examines Jake's title and I.D. as Jake and
Buck watch the Father and Son noodle on the guitar. The
Father sees that his Son's fingers barely reach the frets.

FATHER
You want to try the Gibson again?
The red one?

The boy is focused, already attached to the instrument.

SON
I think I just need some practice.
I'd rather have this one.

The Father sighs, knowing it's a bigger expense, and looks at
the wall of options again. Buck detects an opening and drifts
a few steps toward them. TIGHT ON his hand as he fingers some
bills, laying them on the counter where the Father can see.

BUCK
Lovely thing. Your dad's giving you
something you can't run out of. It
never made sense to me that the
world runs on money instead of love
or talent.
(hand on the Father)
(MORE)

BUCK (CONT'D)
Money only matters if you have
somebody to leave it to when you're
gone...and it helps immensely if
you like the person you're leaving
it to.

The Father offers a smile of recognition, father to father.
Buck wanders back to Jake, who seems alienated.

BUCK (CONT'D)
That boy will never forget this
day.
(off Jake's distance)
It's all part of something bigger,
Jake. Money. Cars. Guitars. You
gotta consider your legacy, my
friend.

Jake signs the documents as Buck pays the Pawn Broker.

Jake hands Buck the keys to the Spyker. Unceremoniously.

INT. RANGE ROVER - PAWN SHOP PARKING LOT - MOMENTS LATER

The front doors of the Range Rover open. Jake and Buck climb
in.

BUCK
Now I'll drop y'all where you can
get a rental car so you can--

MIA
Just take me to a bus station.

EXT. BUS STATION - VICKSBURG - MOMENTS LATER

The Range Rover pulls into the bus station. Mia climbs out.
The passenger window goes down, but Jake isn't the one doing
it. Buck leans over and calls to Mia.

BUCK
Hey!

Mia turns to him as she slings her bag over her shoulder.

BUCK (CONT'D)
I know it's easier said than done,
but be sure that bus takes you to
the future, not the past.

Jake watches Mia process the remark. Finally she turns and
walks away, more dispirited than before.

MOMENTS LATER

The BLINKER in the Range Rover is oppressively loud as Jake looks straight ahead out the windshield. Buck is waiting to make a turn at a busy intersection.

Jake opens the passenger door and slides out of the Rover into traffic. As the door closes, we faintly hear:

BUCK (CONT'D)

Jake! What are you--?

Jake pulls out his phone, dodging a few cars as he heads for the sidewalk. He power-walks down the street, eyes darting to his phone as he fingers the screen.

ANGLE ON his phone: Jake's throbbing avatar on the phone tracking app indicates that he's five blocks from Mia's avatar.

EXT. BUS STATION / INT. BUS - VICKSBURG - DAY

Mia is seated in a bus, leaning against the window with earbuds in. Deep fatigue. She looks down at her phone, culling photos of her adventure with Jake. Swipe, delete, swipe, consider. Not wistful--just closing a chapter.

The bus GRINDS and HISSES, then jolts backward. Stops. GRUNTS forward, slowly making its elaborate turn out of the bus station--

BAM BAM BAM. The lumbering DRIVER slams on the brakes and leaps from his seat. He opens the doors and positions himself on the bottom step to intercept someone who's trying to board. The Driver steps fully out of the bus to deal with it.

Other passengers note the commotion as Mia remains zoned out.

MOMENTS LATER

The Driver heads down the aisle to Mia, stops, nudges her. She looks up and removes one earbud.

DRIVER

That guy down there--

(gesturing out Mia's window)

--he's asking if you want to beat that girl. That's what he said. Do you want to beat that girl.

Mia looks down to see Jake, eight feet below her elevated window, looking up hopefully while trying to catch his breath with dignity. He seems unaware that cars and buses are inconvenienced by his stunt.

Mia's eyes narrow, her jaw throbs. The Driver and nearby passengers are hanging on her answer.

INT. BUS STATION - MEMPHIS - MOMENTS LATER

Jake and Mia march through the bus station toward the taxi stand. He's slamming a twinkie as she trails him.

MIA

What's the plan exactly?

Jake braces the twinkie in his mouth and fishes in his pockets. He pulls out a business card and hands it to her as if it will explain everything. She takes it as he resumes gnoshing the twinkie. ANGLE ON the card, which we recognize from the top of our story (Steinway scene): "Meghraj Bhati."

INT. YMCA - MEMPHIS - NIGHT

Mia is seated in a hard plastic lobby chair, head back. Jake is at the counter signing in. Behind the counter, a bedraggled, no-bullshit female Attendant (30s) stares at Jake as he fills out the form.

ATTENDANT

No address? Are you de-homed? Put that.

JAKE

Not de-homed. Just living on the road.

She looks at Jake coldly, then at Mia.

ATTENDANT

You can write "unhoused" or "de-homed." What's the story with you two. I need to see that girl's I.D.

Jake calls to Mia. She wanders over.

ATTENDANT (CONT'D)

I need to see your I.D., baby.

Mia pulls out her phone, pries off the case, slips out her I.D. The Attendant looks it over, looks up at Mia.

ATTENDANT (CONT'D)
Are you with this man of your own
free will or under duress?

Mia laughs exhaustedly.

INT. YMCA GUEST ROOM - MEMPHIS - NIGHT

The door opens. Jake and Mia step into a stark white room hardly larger than a closet. A bunk bed with a steel tube frame prevents the door from opening all the way.

JAKE
Living the dream.

MIA
I guess it's bunk beds from now on.

JAKE
It's definitely a circle of hell
I've been in before. Which, you may
deduce, means it's a cycle I know
how to break.

INT. BAR - MEMPHIS - NIGHT

Jake is in a bar with a half-dozen ratty pool tables and four weathered patrons drooping off their stools.

Jake stands beside one of the tables, cue at rest. His OPPONENT (male, 60s, shirt missing most of its buttons) slowly lines up a shot. He sinks it. Jake smiles tenderly.

When it's Jake's turn, he finishes the rack and takes a five-dollar bill from his Opponent.

OPPONENT
One more? You ain't gonna quit
winner on me, that don't fly around
here.

Jake pulls cash out of his pocket and looks at it meaningfully: four five-dollar bills.

JAKE
I just needed enough to eat.

OPPONENT
There are worse ways to get it.

INT. DINER - MEMPHIS - DAY

Jake and Mia sit in a window booth with remnants of breakfast on the table. Mia jumps up from the table and runs out through the glass doors. She jogs to a 2002 Ford Taurus wagon, throws open the driver door and embraces Dominga.

MOMENTS LATER

Dominga, seated in the booth beside Mia, works on a plate of breakfast. Jake exudes pride as Mia prattles on.

MIA

She's this Chinese prodigy--perfect complexion, as if I needed more reasons to hate her--and Jake is convinced I can beat her, we just have to get to wherever she is, and that's the next step, teaming up with this guy who--

JAKE

Yeah, Raj Bhati.

Jake pulls out the business card Raj gave him in New York and slaps it on the table like a mic drop. Dominga glances at it.

JAKE (CONT'D)

I've known him a long time--solid individual.

MIA

(to Dominga)

So you could, you know, give us a boost and we'll do the rest.

Dominga takes Mia's hand, rubs her fingers--a private code.

DOMINGA

When you called, I expected you to say you were coming home. I drove out here to tell you I think this experiment is over. So you should take a minute, say your goodbyes.

MIA

Mamiii--come on. I was, like--I was clear on the phone. This is the best thing I could--this is a real opportunity.

Jake looks on with a mix of pride and trepidation but his body language is resigned to non-intervention.

DOMINGA

You had the opportunity. You earned money, you lost money. Now you're asking for my money, which--

(to Mia, gesturing to Jake)

It's very clever that he's not wearing that cashmere sweater, *verdad*?

Jake internalizes the hit and shrugs sheepishly.

MIA

But no, like, this is the opportunity. That was, I mean, we were warming up. This is my chance to, like, turn pro or whatever. It's a real sport.

DOMINGA

Mia. You're being taken advantage of. This business card is probably fake.

JAKE

(pushing the business card)

Call the guy. Everything Mia's saying is true. She got her bearings, that took time, now she's ready to turn pro. I'll stay by her side all the way, protect her--

DOMINGA

Protect her? Is that what you've been doing? Then how did she lose everything?

MIA

Mami, mami, tranquilicense. He's done a lot for me and I...Some things happened that--

(ashamed)

I mean, I owe him. At this point.

Jake is a bit too smug at the trump card Mia played on his behalf. Dominga rolls it around in her head.

DOMINGA

The only way I will do this is drive you there myself...to--

MIA

Montreal.

DOMINGA

--Montreal and see this coach guy
with my own eyes.

JAKE

No, he's not a coach, he's a
promoter or administrator--he's,
you know, the--
(trying)
--pope...of pool...over
there...overseas.

DOMINGA

The pope...of pool...

MIA

Yeah, he's the pope of pool. And we
need his *bendición*--

Jake and Mia both giggle. Dominga looks at Jake, then Mia,
then back at Jake, confounded by their chemistry.

EXT. HIGHWAY GAS STATION - OHIO - MAGIC HOUR

A ramshackle gas station perched along a two-lane highway.

The Taurus wagon zips up to a pump, Dominga driving, Jake
snoozing in the passenger seat. The back door opens and Mia
shoots out, heading around the small building to a restroom.

Jake gets out calmly, walks around the car to the pump,
unbuckles the nozzle, plugs it into the car, then reaches
toward the open driver window to take Dominga's debit card.

He starts the pump and looks over at distant horses behind a
patchy barbed wire fence. Then he leans nonchalantly toward
the open driver window.

JAKE

Travel has been really good for
her. All this fresh air. She's
blossoming. I know it feels like
she's getting away from you, but
you would've had to face that
sooner or later--

DOMINGA

Basta, cabrón.

JAKE

I know, I know, basta cabron, but just picture her thriving out there, doing this globetrotting double-oh-seven thing. She's built for it. And you did that. You made her tough and fearless. That is one brave kid. I mean brave woman. That must be hard--seeing her become a woman.

Dominga rolls up her window. The pump stops, Jake re-hooks the nozzle. Then he opens the driver door, returns Dominga's debit card and squats beside her.

JAKE (CONT'D)

Do you know anything about snow leopards?

(off her straight-ahead stare)

These huge graceful cats--gorgeous animals.

(checks his phone)

No signal--fuck it--"A picture's worth a thousand words, he said with zero bars." But trust me, these white leopards waaay up in the Himalayas are really something to see.

Dominga is restless, works her jaw. Jake is unperturbed.

JAKE (CONT'D)

But they're solitary. I mean solitary. A baby snow leopard--a cub--it travels with its mother for a while, learns to hunt, then goes off on its own, totally alone. Once in a while the cub passes a rock high in the mountains--some specific boulder--ice-cold, snow piled all around it--the cub stops to piss on it. Then six months go by. The mama leopard crosses that peak and smells that same rock--six months later--it's summer now--she smells that rock. Can you imagine, the simple beauty of that biological process--that's all the mama cat needs to know her baby's okay. Just smelling that rock.

DOMINGA

...They never--see each other again?

JAKE

They never see each other again.

Dominga appears moved, maybe choking back tears. Mia jogs back. Jake stands, slowly closing Dominga's door as--

JAKE (CONT'D)

(low)

The thing is, only a snow leopard can give birth to a snow leopard. She got that independent streak from somewhere...

Jake and Mia pile into the car. Dominga jumps out.

DOMINGA

¡Baño!

EXT. CONVENTION CENTER - MONTREAL - DAY

We TILT DOWN from the illuminated convention center sign, scrolling "BIENVENU WPA TOURNAMENT," as--

Jake and Mia jump out of the Taurus wagon. Jake hustles to the convention center entrance, throwing his duffel over his shoulder. Mia and Dominga emerge slowly from the car, b.g.

Raj darts out of the building, dressed as he was at Steinway, far better than the environs demand.

JAKE

Hey, Raj, good to see you. We got here as soon as we could--minor transportation snafu.

Raj gives Jake a perfunctory handshake, then pushes past him to Mia and Dominga.

RAJ

You must be Mia?

He extends a hand. She shakes. Dominga inserts herself, hand extended. Raj is too scattered to seem warm or hospitable.

RAJ (CONT'D)

(shaking Dominga's hand)

Raj Bhati.

DOMINGA
The pope of pool.

RAJ
The pope of pool?

He quickly scans all their faces, lost, then steps back toward the convention center.

RAJ (CONT'D)
I've been called a lot of things--
(gesturing)
Shall we?

Jake follows without missing a beat as Dominga hugs Mia goodbye. Dominga heads back to her car, b.g., as Mia hustles to catch Jake and Raj. Raj spins to check on her while still hop-walking toward the building's entrance.

RAJ (CONT'D)
I've got about 10 minutes to see
what's under the hood, okay?

He breezes back through the doors. Jake and Mia follow.

IN THE LOBBY, Jake catches up to Raj.

JAKE
I know it was short notice--I
really appreciate it. She's gonna
blow your mind. I've never seen
anything like it and I've been
around the game for a lot of
years...

Raj, marching, cuts Jake a look.

RAJ
Cut the huckster routine, Jake.
What I prefer to hear is--

Raj pushes open a door along the hallway.

INT. CONVENTION CENTER - GREEN ROOM - MONTREAL - CONTINUOUS

The three of them enter a small, drab room with two pool tables. Balls are already racked in a diamond configuration for 9 ball.

RAJ
--an elastic collision between
lacquered balls, as Pythagoras
intended.

Jake scoffs--but he has no rebuttal. Raj grabs a house cue and hands it to Mia butt-first as if cautiously presenting a large knife by the handle.

RAJ (CONT'D)
A cold splash of physics always
shuts 'em up.

Mia breaks, runs the table. No nonsense.

MOMENTS LATER

RAJ (CONT'D)
Okay, I've seen enough.

JAKE
She's just getting warmed up--you
said you'd give her 10 minutes--

RAJ
Jake. I'm putting her in. She's in
the tournament.
(to Mia)
You don't know if it's hot or cold
in this room, do you?
(off her confusion)
Dead stroke maybe top five I've
ever seen--
(soothsayer)
--but you're used to playing alone
and that'll be a problem.

JAKE
How do you know she's used to
playing alone?

RAJ
(gesturing like a coroner)
Stance, how close she is to the
table when she repositions, where
her toes are pointing, angle of cue
in repose. But there are some other
reflexes in there I don't see every
day.
(to Mia)
When you're lining up--you're
worried about being looked at...or
touched?

Mia withdraws. Raj stares, a little too fascinated.

JAKE
(playful, defusing)
Wow, can you do my chart next?

Raj snaps out of it and hands his phone to Mia.

RAJ

Put your name in here, I'll have them add you.

(to Jake, as Mia types)

You bought the pants I texted you about?

(off his nod)

After she changes, go straight down this hall--you'll see the A frame sign for the tournament--and listen for the announcer to call your name.

Raj disappears. Mia opens her bag, removes the pants in question. Jake turns away as Mia changes b.g.

MIA

I don't like this guy.

JAKE

We need his administrative juice to get to the next level.

MIA

Everything in my body clenches when he opens his mouth.

JAKE

He talks like a filing cabinet. That can pile up in the wrong way and kill the magic. No matter what he says, stay loose.

She's not hearing him. She shoves her jeans into her carry-on and hands it to Jake. He doesn't take it--he uses the lingering beat:

JAKE (CONT'D)

Mia. You're an unranked player. Without Raj pulling strings, you couldn't get into this cage match. This is your only path to Lanfang Xu.

He takes the bag. Mia nods more earnestly than usual, glad for his guidance.

INT. CONVENTION CENTER - WPA POOL TOURNAMENT - MONTREAL - DAY

We PUSH past 10 tables to the ANNOUNCER, who's going at it in French. A banner behind him identifies our location as Montreal. It's a modest regional affair with three bleachers.

ANNOUNCER

*A table deux, s'il vous plait. Mia
Zambrano, Etats-Unis. Jessica
Dougherty, Canada.*

Mia and JESSICA, 17, approach their table and greet each other. Jessica wears a vest, button-up shirt and slacks. Mia wears black slacks in place of her standard jeans--halfway to a uniform.

JESSICA

They call me Chunky Panda.

MIA

They shouldn't.

JESSICA

You have a name?

MIA

Emigdia Clementina Zambrano.

The match begins. At the margins, Jake stands beside Raj. Both watch intently.

LATER

Mia finishes off Chunky Panda. Jake is more relieved than impressed--but snaps out of it to punch Raj in the shoulder. Mia meanders to Jake and Raj.

RAJ

That kid's a prodigy and you just
sent her home in soiled skivvies.

Raj directs their attention to the large monitor displaying the matchups. ANGLE ON the monitor: "SONIA POLLARD / MIA ZAMBRANO." Raj laughs, stifles it.

RAJ (CONT'D)

(to Mia)

You know what sharking is?

(off her head-shake "no")

Well, I won't spoil the surprise.

INT. CONVENTION CENTER - WPA TOURNAMENT - MONTREAL - DAY

We SAIL over the carpet behind an electric wheelchair.

ANNOUNCER (O.S.)

A table quatorze, s'il vous plait.

Sonia Pollard, Les Isles Bermude.

Mia Zambrano, Etats-Unis.

We zip past the scorekeeper's table and continue to table 14, where the wheelchair stops. We finally get a REVERSE ON the chair's occupant: SONIA, 18, biracial. Mia greets her. Sonia uncases her cue and assembles it. Mia does the same.

MIA

Where are you from? I didn't understand the--

SONIA

What, you don't speak French? You must be the only American who doesn't! I'm from Bermuda.

(beat, aggressive glance)

You don't know where it is, do you?

MIA

It's an island, in the...?

SONIA

Nobody calls me Sonia. The name is Side Saddle.

Side Saddle pushes a button that elevates her chair, her arms now at table level. She shoots by twisting her shoulders perpendicular to her legs. She positions her chair meticulously. BZZT forward. BZZT two inches backward. She breaks, then nails every shot.

SIDE SADDLE

(zipping by Mia)

Check your pulse. It's saying "fuck this" in Morse Code.

Mia is rattled. When it's finally her turn, she can't see a way to pocket anything. She pokes the cue ball into a safety.

Side Saddle nods at the Referees and they bring her a mechanical bridge. She makes her shot.

SIDE SADDLE (CONT'D)

(zipping by Mia)

You suck. But that's okay. Because you smell good. And that's what matters.

Mia fumes. She looks at Jake, who's barely obscuring his panic, and Raj, beside him, apparently delighted at Mia buckling.

INT. CONVENTION CENTER - GREEN ROOM - MONTREAL - MOMENTS LATER

Raj is leaned over a pool table as Jake and Mia plead their case.

JAKE

This was one little speedbump.
She's not used to all the formality
and rules and--those pants--

MIA

Jesus--whatever--that Robocop twat
wouldn't shut up! You need to do
something about people mouthing off
during matches. I mean, it's a
tournament. Isn't that the point?
Rules? A standard for behavior?

RAJ

She sharked you. Sharking is the
art of distraction. Not just trash
talking. Psy-ops. Get in your
opponent's head and live there rent
free. I wanted to see if you could
handle it instinctively because it
can't be taught.

Jake and Mia stare at each other as if to assign blame.

RAJ (CONT'D)

You've got a lot of talent, but a
tournament's not a circus--you
can't impress them to death with
God-level stick. You need to play
defense, think strategically, show
some killer instinct. Work on it
and call me next year.

Raj leaves. Jake and Mia avoid looking at each other.

INT. CONVENTION CENTER - WPA POOL TOURNAMENT - MONTREAL - NIGHT

Jake watches HUGO BYNUM, 23, finish a match against a Male Opponent. Raj is at the scorer's table dealing with an administrative kerfuffle. Mia is nowhere to be seen.

LATER

ANGLE ON the monitor, now displaying the final results of the tournament: Sonia Pollard (Side Saddle) placed second in the women's bracket, Mia fifth. Hugo Bynum won the men's bracket.

Jake casually wanders to the scorer's table and waits until Raj notices him.

RAJ

You're still here. Did Mia go back to New York?

JAKE

We found a hotel. She's...better off alone at the moment.

RAJ

I have a feeling you want to talk shop so I'll go ahead and offer to buy you a drink and be pleasantly surprised if you decline.

Jake blinks. No rejoinder.

INT. BAR - MONTREAL - NIGHT

Jake and Raj are in a booth with bottled beers. First round.

JAKE

How many opportunities do you think she's had in her life? To really make something of herself?

RAJ

No handouts, Jake. I have a reputation and I can't withstand any embarrassment. In a place like Qatar? It matters what people think of me when I'm trying to sell them a thousand tables.

JAKE

How did she embarrass you?

RAJ

If she gets in a high profile match, clearly doesn't belong there--people start asking how she got in. It all comes back on me.

JAKE

Okay, I hear you. So let's attack this from another angle.

(off Raj's impatient sigh)

She's obsessed with this Chinese kid, Lanfang Xu.

RAJ

Wait--what? How does she know Lanfang Xu? I thought Mia had never competed in a tournament.

JAKE

Let's preserve that sense of mystery for a minute. If I told you I'd do whatever it takes to get Mia into a showdown with Lanfang Xu...I mean, help me reverse engineer this.

Raj whirls his bottle in circles on the table, lost in thought. He nods vigorously. Laughs.

RAJ

Mia's from the Bronx? American kid from the Bronx wants to take down Lanfang Xu, who's never skipped a day brushing her teeth?

Raj would be stroking his beard if he had one. Jake leans forward eagerly.

JAKE

Give me some hope here, man, I can work the angles, just point me in the right direction.

RAJ

You know Hugo Bynum? He won tonight, he finished on top in the men's bracket. He, uh, never turns down an interesting wager. He'll still be around tomorrow morning. You talk to Hugo--I'll give you his number--don't mention my name. Get him to agree to a match in the green room, off the books.

Jake brightens, biting his lip in anticipation.

RAJ (CONT'D)

He'll turn you down if it's not some funky parlay.

(MORE)

RAJ (CONT'D)

Like Mia has to win 7 out of 9 racks and the last rack she has to sink the 9 on the break with her eyes closed. Really funky.

Jake grins. In his element.

RAJ (CONT'D)

If Mia can beat Hugo in whatever cockamamie arrangement you agree to, I'll get her into this tourney in England where I'm headed next.

Jake angles his beer bottle to clink with Raj on the deal. Raj complies.

RAJ (CONT'D)

But seriously--that's the last leg up I can give you guys.

INT. TROU DE BEIGNE PÂTISSERIE - MONTREAL - DAY

A giant owl effigy against the wall is inlaid with benches in its eye sockets. On one of the benches sit Jake and Hugo, who makes his way through a plate of donuts coated with powdered sugar. Jake nurses his coffee, plucks a donut from the pile.

JAKE

(chewing)

How about this. I rack both tables for 9-ball. You make a shot on one table, then make a shot on the second table, then move back. The catch is that on the first table, you shoot forward, right-handed, in numerical order. The other table you shoot in reverse order, starting with the 9, using your left hand. So table two flushes backwards, like an Australian toilet. That's what we'll call it--Australian toilet. And whoever misses a shot--you continue where they left off on the last table, so if she misses the 6 going backwards, 5 is next up for you, but on table one, 7 would be next.

Hugo's chewing is bovine. He wipes powdered sugar from the corners of his mouth with a napkin.

HUGO

Australian toilet...

JAKE
(indicating the amusement
park vibe of their seat)
Hey, I can tell you're a sucker for
a gimmick. You like to have fun?
You met the right guy.

HUGO
Strict numerical order? No combos?

JAKE
(nodding)
First one who fucks up, pays up.

HUGO
You said five K. Let's make it 10.

JAKE
At 10 K...full disclosure...we can
only go once. I don't have full
bars at the moment.

HUGO
You want to do this in the green
room? No railbirds?

JAKE
The game is you and her. The action
is you and me. Nobody else.

HUGO
Who is she? Did she play in the
tourney?

JAKE
Yeah, she finished fifth place.

Hugo shakes his head, then snorts. Looks at Jake.

HUGO
I think I can bump my flight for a
a few racks of Australian toilet.

Jake beams and munches another donut.

INT. CONVENTION CENTER - GREEN ROOM - MONTREAL - DAY

Jake, arms crossed, leans smugly against a wall. We STAY ON
him as the CLACK CLACK CLACK intensifies. It's...emotional.
Then it ends.

Hugo enters the frame, stops. He hands Jake something--it
SMACKS into Jake's palm. Hugo storms out.

Jake lifts a wad of Canadian dollars into the frame, waves it. Mia enters the frame and takes it.

Jake's phone VIBRATES. He pulls it out. ANGLE ON the phone:

RAJ (VIA TEXT)
I just saw Hugo's face as he left.
(beat, incoming text ripple)
We're good to go.

INT. PLANE - NIGHT

Raj and Mia sit together. Jake is several rows behind them, across the aisle, watching them at an oblique angle. Raj glances back at Jake, then leans toward Mia conspiratorially:

RAJ
Jake's a dinosaur, huh. Do you have a contract with him?
(off her confusion)
Anything on paper? Did you sign anything?
(off her headshake "no")
Good. He's had you stuck in that road loop where everybody's got a face tattoo and looks like an ex-con. They think the "big game" happens in Reno. You're done with that world, okay? Now you're going up against players from Europe, Africa, Asia, islands that don't even show up on a map.

A Flight Attendant hands them two cups filled with a sparkling beverage.

RAJ (CONT'D)
I thought you deserved some champagne. I know, this doesn't feel like much of a celebration but it's catch as catch can with my schedule. To your first--ahem--tournament victory.

They "clink" and drink.

MIA
(stiff)
Thank you.

ON JAKE, glancing at their champagne moment. He aggressively flips the pages of an in-flight magazine.

WITH MIA AND RAJ

RAJ

You're gunning for Lanfang Xu?
She's 16--she could play as a
juvenile but she plays in the adult
women's bracket--she's been playing
as an adult since she was 13--but
to get to her you have to beat the
Welsh warriors.

Raj pulls a tablet out of his carry-on. ANGLE ON the screen:
he swipes through official photos of WPA events. Raj shakes
hands with tournament champions, all men. He hands them
trophies, awards prize money in the form of oversized checks.

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

It's unconventional for you to
crossover against male players,
maybe unprecedented, but
technically permissible at the
discretion of the event organizers.
I'll sort it out.

ON THE TABLET, Raj poses with three sheiks as they break
ground on a billiards facility in the Middle East. Finally
photos of crisply uniformed male players in action on tables.

Mia stares for a beat. Raj puts the tablet away.

RAJ (CONT'D)

But these guys will never let you
forget it's a man's world. So
remember your secret weapon.

Raj pulls away from her, looks her over. He runs a hand
through a lock of her hair. With her own hand she reclaims
it. Her expression is more dour than usual.

RAJ (CONT'D)

You look like a chimney sweep but
more so. You don't have to smile,
but there's a dress code for
players. Denim is forbidden--a lot
of ladies do a vest and button-up.
You can wear a dress if you want,
but it has to cover the knees--

Raj looks back at Jake and nods, winks, throws a thumbs-up.
Very canned.

EXT. MILTON KEYNES, ENGLAND - DAY

AERIAL on Woburn Abbey and its expansive verdant grounds--the countryside of Buckinghamshire, England.

INT. PUB - MILTON KEYNES, ENGLAND - NIGHT

Pub ambience at a minimum--almost a library vibe. Raj and Jake are at opposite ends of the place, both dimly lit and predatory. They're watching a 9-ball match. Railbirds wander at the margins, whispering to establish side bets.

The two casually dressed white male PLAYERS at the isolated pool table don't speak to each other. GRAHAM DEEVER (mid-30s, emaciated) and ELIOT OATFIELD (mid-20s, rotund).

LATE REVEAL on Mia even deeper in the shadows, earbuds equipped, positioned almost perfectly between Jake and Raj. She watches the game and drinks in the mounting tension. After a beat, she pulls out her phone.

ANGLE ON the phone and aural POV: Mia has been listening to a Lanfang Xu match, the CLACK CLACK CLACK alongside Chinese commentators ENTHUSIASING in Mandarin (no subs). Lanfang looks even younger than before as she pockets the game-winning shot.

Mia swipes to the next video: a Lanfang interview in Mandarin (no subs). Her Parents stand beside her like bodyguards. Mia is thrown by the presence of family members.

BACK TO SCENE

Deever and Oatfield finish a game, to much murmuring. Jake takes handfuls of pound notes off some neighboring Railbirds. He garbles the localese--still learning the ropes.

Mia watches Jake charm everyone around him as he takes their money. Vague resentment--*this isn't about her*.

Raj is firm-footed as the billiards stars begin their next rack. Mia wanders over to him and removes one earbud.

MIA
Shouldn't I be practicing?

Raj looks her in the eye, impassively.

RAJ
You can't get better on the baize.
You need to get better at the
people part. You're looking at
Graham Deever and Eliot Oatfield.
(MORE)

RAJ (CONT'D)

You'll play one of them next week.
Don't worry about which one, we're
still pushing the brackets around.

MIA

They're not as hungry as I am.

Raj eyes Jake before twisting and obscuring his mouth to dig into Mia.

RAJ

Save it for the cameras. I told you
to stay out of the way and observe.
I have a lot of money riding on
this match, so if you don't mind...

Mia recoils at the condescension and walks back to her unassuming corner to "observe." She re-equips her earbuds for MANDARIN V.O. and CLACK CLACK CLACK while she keeps her eyes on the Brits.

The Mandarin morphs into English as we PUSH IN slowly on Mia's expressionless face:

COMMENTATOR 1 (V.O.) (PRE-LAP)

It's been a pleasure watching
Zambrano today, but it looks like
this may be it for her. Dalton is
walking all over her at this point.

INT. MARSHALL ARENA - MILTON KEYNES, ENGLAND - DAY

Mia is at a pool table playing CASEY DALTON, 25.

COMMENTATOR 2 (V.O.)

This game was do or die for her.

Jake is in the stands with a mass of reverent spectators. This is the first time we're seeing a proper fandom for this sport, and it's significant. We get a BLUR of the crowd--hundreds, if not a thousand. Jake winces, grinds his teeth.

COMMENTATOR 1 (V.O.)

Once Dalton finishes this match,
he'll need one more win in the
qualifiers to get his pro card for
this year. He would have to beat
Deaver or Beatty.

Mia tries not to look at the crowd. She tugs her stiff vest into place--it's at once restrictive and abundant.

COMMENTATOR 2 (V.O.)

Who made these brackets? Zambrano walks in off the street and they throw her into the seventh circle of hell. No wonder she looks out of it.

Dalton ignores Mia as he pockets a dicey bank shot, then glances at her. She notices the slight twitch of a smirk, as if he just sealed her fate.

All distractions disappear as Mia comes forcefully back to the baize and takes over the match. The commentators react RAUCOUSLY, then dead stop into the pin-drop atmosphere of:

INT. TV STUDIO - MILTON KEYNES, ENGLAND - DAY

Raj, Mia and Jake stand slightly staggered at the edge of the set, watching a peppy female SPORTS JOURNALIST interview Eliot Oatfield. Jake is charged with delight at Mia's win.

JOURNALIST

So if you get through the qualifiers, you'll be headed to China in the spring. We've seen a remarkable spike in interest there. It seems that cue sports like 9-ball and snooker are almost a national obsession.

OATFIELD

Yeah, China is definitely the future of cue sports. All the players know it, you can just feel the--

JOURNALIST

Well, money, I assume.
(chuckling)

I mean, the top three prizes amount to half a million pounds...?

OATFIELD

It's now reached a scale that we would never have dreamed of even five years ago, and we're all really fortunate to be living through these developments. But it really did come out of nowhere.

JOURNALIST

(to camera)

Speaking of coming out of nowhere,
we'll be talking to a brand new
face on the billiards circuit--a
lovely face...

The Camera Crew and Floor Director cut glances at Mia. Raj notices. He looks over Mia's outfit.

RAJ

Unbutton the top one.
(turning away, then back)
The top two.

MIA

Fuck no.

Jake looks around at the camera crew to see who noticed the tension. He steps toward Raj, ready to say something. Raj puts up a hand to stop him.

RAJ

(stage whisper)

We don't need you standing around
everywhere we go. Why don't you
take a tour of Woburn Abbey.
It's...
(smiles "patiently")
...astounding.

Jake looks at Mia, who looks back at him. She couldn't hear the exchange but contorts her face into sheer disgust behind Raj's head. Jake winks at her and locks his feet.

JAKE

(to Raj)

Not a bad idea. I'll take Mia to
see it tomorrow. Stick our heads in
church, do a hard reset with Jesus,
get some perspective.

Raj is irritated by Jake's liquid form, the easy spontaneity.

RAJ

Yeah, well, she plays tomorrow, but
don't let that jam up your plans.

INT. TV STUDIO - MILTON KEYNES, ENGLAND - MOMENTS LATER

Mia is in the hot seat with the Journalist.

JOURNALIST

So you're from the Bronx, which is a--forgive me--a rougher section of New York City...?

MIA

Right. I guess.

JOURNALIST

You guess?

MIA

I mean, you just have to--it's only rough if you don't know how to take care of yourself.

We bounce from the set to disembodied broadcast to the control room monitors, seeing lower thirds intermittently.

JOURNALIST

And somehow...you've ended up here. In England. Without any record of you coming up on the circuit.

MIA

It's hard to explain.

JOURNALIST

I imagine so. But the one question everyone seems to have is why you didn't register to play in the women's bracket.

MIA

I thought anybody could play in any bracket. That's what I was told.

JOURNALIST

Well yes, technically, but it's simply not done. Moreover, it will drastically lower your odds of winning. Some might say you're a bit of a masochist for putting yourself in this situation.

MIA

I was told to play here. In this tournament. With the men. Otherwise I couldn't qualify for China this year.

JOURNALIST

...China...? You still have to beat one of the best players in the British Isles to qualify. Aren't you getting ahead of yourself?

MIA

I'm sorry, this is new to me. I know I have to beat someone--

JOURNALIST

"Someone." Blake Beatty or Graham Deaver, just household names to anyone who knows the sport from here to...China.

MIA

I'm sure they're good. Good players.

IN THE GREEN ROOM

Deaver and BLAKE BEATTY (30s) are watching the interview in broadcast. The lower third says: "Zambrano: I know I have to beat someone." Beatty is irate, Deaver amused.

BACK TO SCENE

JOURNALIST

So you're in a hurry to rise to the top of a sport you're trying out for the first time.

Mia doesn't bother to reply, feeling condescended to. The floor camera PUSHES IN on her no-bullshit expression. We roll call Jake and Raj having similar cringey reactions.

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

Mia Zambrano, from America. A new billiards star who knows she has to beat someone--which is how many sports are designed, as it turns out. Thank you for being with us today, Mia.

Mia yanks off her lapel mic and storms out. Raj starts to go after her, but Jake grabs his arm and means it. They lock eyes. Raj pulls away, Jake shoots in front of him.

JAKE

She needs some space.

RAJ
Coming from you, that's--

Raj turns his head to see the PRODUCER rushing toward them.

PRODUCER
So, yeah, your girl there.
(peeps of laughter)
Instant television. Nobody saw that
coming. It's like King Midas
shagged Rumpelstiltskin and she
popped out. Solid. Bloody. Gold.
I'm going to run her first tonight.

Jake and Raj aren't really hearing it--lost in their
standoff. The producer catches their distracted vibe.

PRODUCER (CONT'D)
Which one of you is her manager?

Jake steps forward, thrusting out his hand to shake. The
Producer looks down at it, ignores it, slides his arm around
Jake and pulls him away from Raj, who laughs in disbelief.

PRODUCER (CONT'D)
(to Jake)
This level of publicity--you can't
buy this. What I want to do,
whether she wins or loses, there's
enormous potential for a piece--

Jake nods vehemently, crossing his arms.

PRODUCER (CONT'D)
--but we need to do something
exclusive, so we need you to sign,
you know, the standard bollocks--

Jake breathes deeply, his chest heaving.

PRODUCER (CONT'D)
You do know how to sign--you're not
illiterate?

JAKE
How long can you give me to ping
her and--and present this offer?
She's gonna need a minute to cool
off.

PRODUCER
You're her manager, right? It's
your decision to make!

AN ARM comes around Jake's shoulder: Raj, smoother than ever:

RAJ

(to the producer)

We've agreed to share handling duties on Mia Zambrano while she's playing internationally. Let us take a look at what you need us to sign, and we'll go from there.

PRODUCER

Back in a flash.

The Producer scurries away. Raj squeezes Jake's shoulder.

RAJ

It's okay, mate. Let's remember we're on the same team. We can spackle each other's holes.

(off Jake's "WTF" look)

Isn't that a phrase in the states? "Spackle each other's holes," meaning fill in for each other when it counts?

JAKE

I haven't heard that one--but I can certainly imagine a bunch of hard-hat guys saying it to each other.

Jake pulls away from Raj, putting up a hand to indicate *never touch me again*.

EXT. TV STUDIO - MILTON KEYNES, ENGLAND - DAY

Beatty catches up to moody Mia, who's donning her earbuds.

BEATTY

Great job, love. That gormless bit --bloody brilliant, that. Will you be at the pubs tonight?

MIA

(dazed)

Dude...I can barely understand you.

BEATTY

The pubs. We're all going knees up tonight. It'd be great to chat, the guys want to get to know you.

Mia offers a scoffing GRUNT and marches on. Beatty stops.

BEATTY (CONT'D)
Great! See you then!
(to himself)
Ya jammy cunt.

A devious twinkle in his eye as he heads back to the studio.

INT. PUB - MILTON KEYNES, ENGLAND - NIGHT

Beatty and Deaver are teaching Mia darts. Mia and Beatty are sloppy drunk. Pub Crawlers nudge in and ask for photos with the billiards stars. Some ask for selfies with Mia.

DEAVER
You're bladdered, love. And you've gotta play this tosser tomorrow.

MIA
(slurring, to Beatty)
We should play now. Let's go.

BEATTY
It wouldn't be officially recognized. Back to square one.

DEAVER
You know how to get to your hotel?
I think it's time. I can walk you.

MIA
I can get there. I know my way around. I grew up in a real city.

Beatty doubles down with a territorial glare at Deaver.

BEATTY
I can take her. It's on my way.

Beatty puts his hands on Mia's hips and steers her like they're an item. She seems too blasted to protest.

INT. HOTEL HALLWAY - MILTON KEYNES, ENGLAND - NIGHT

At the door to her hotel room, Mia and Beatty are reeling, struggling to get in. Finally the key card works.

INSIDE MIA'S HOTEL ROOM, Beatty locks the door. Mia turns and jumps on him, wrapping her legs around him. He puts his hands under her to support her as they SLAM against the door.

INTERCUT: Dozens of phones pop across the screen featuring a screengrab of Mia's aggressive interview glare, with meme text burned in: "I know I have / to beat someone."

BACK TO SCENE: Oblique ANGLES ON sweaty GROANING coitus. Suggestive without revealing who's doing what to whom.

INTERCUT: The "I know I have / to beat someone" meme floods social media, used as a gag reply to threads about political candidates in various countries.

INT. PUB - MILTON KEYNES, ENGLAND - DAY

A pint glass SLAMS onto the bar beside Mia, who is dressed to play in the tournament. She's hunched, in a deep funk. Jake sits beside her, disappointed but still compassionate. He sighs heavily and shoves the pint glass in front of her.

JAKE

Hold your nose and guzzle this. You play in a half-hour.

Mia lifts the glass. Her eyes are heavy, skin blotchy. She quaffs the dense liquid, trying not to gag.

JAKE (CONT'D)

If Raj knew...

MIA

(gravelly)

Why are you talking like his bitch all of a sudden. "If Raj knew?"

It's like saying--

(nasal '50s housewife)

"When your fah-ther gets home."

Jake looks at her like he wants to kill her, then he bursts from the stool toward the door. He doubles back immediately.

JAKE

You're throwing everything away. You know that, right? I mean goddamn, Mia, I color outside the lines, but I'm good at it. I do it because it works. I'm not reckless. If I had all this going for me...

(gestures around, scoffing)

I wouldn't throw it away.

MIA

(faint)

I don't belong here.

JAKE

What, so you're gonna run back to mama because the redcoats made fun of you on TV? Laughing is all they had to do to scare you away? The whole culture of this sport is sharking you. And you can't fight back by shoving a cue stick up their ass. I'm the first to admit I don't know anything about this crowd, which is why I wanted to hang around and make sure you were okay. But I can see now, nobody's a danger to you except you. And I can't save you from that.

(beat, door ajar)

As we say in my country, "hasta la fuck off!"

He SLAMS the door as he leaves. Mia cringes through the headache and haze, then rests her head on the bar.

INT. MARSHALL ARENA - MILTON KEYNES, ENGLAND - DAY

The crowd is massive.

DOWN THE BACK HALLWAY

Mia and Beatty see each other as they exit their dressing rooms. Beatty looks fresh as a daisy, and it's instantly clear to Mia: he sharked her last night. He turns away, trying to stay ten steps ahead of her.

Mia, earbuds applied, watches Beatty's swagger from the back. Then she stops and blinks away the lingering fog. DO OR DIE.

Mia rips out her earbuds and shoves them into a trash bin as she catches up to Beatty. She shoves him against the wall like the night before, nibbling his neck as she brings one leg up against his thigh. TIGHT ON her mouth near his ear.

MIA

I want you again after the match, come straight to my room. But this time, try to keep the little guy awake longer than 20 seconds.

Mia bites his lip while reaching down to flick his junk.

INT. MARSHALL ARENA - MILTON KEYNES, ENGLAND - LATER

Mia wins rack after rack against Beatty, with textbook execution, doubling down on her psychological gamesmanship:

While considering a shot, she holds the phallic cue at her side, letting it droop, then lifting it with certainty, eyes brightening. Then she reconsiders the shot and lets the cue droop again, adding a disappointed expression.

Beatty reddens and swallows hard, trying to ignore her.

INT. DOWNMARKET PUB - MILTON KEYNES, ENGLAND - DAY

Jake is watching the match among local FANS in disbelief. They BARK English idioms and Jake apes them. They GUFFAW and drink and gamble. Most of them make crude gestures at Mia's 90-degree stance but one GENT sidebars with Jake respectfully.

During a break between games, Jake takes light cheddar off his new pal, then pulls out his phone. Video clips of Mia are already queued up--Montreal, Phoenix. Close angles that reveal Jake has been alongside her throughout her rise.

GENT

So what is it, mate, you're a groupie or stalker or something?

Jake is lost in the video clips--Mia seems more childlike there. He looks up to the TV to see her severe expression in the heavily recycled studio interview. The crowd JEERS.

JAKE

Nah, I'm just a guy who helped her find her spark.

INT. MARSHALL ARENA - MILTON KEYNES, ENGLAND - LATER

We SWERVE by Raj and a Publicist, the Producer and Journalist from the TV studio, and a Camera Crew, all obscuring the object of their fascination: Mia Zambrano. She's autographing cheap cues and billiard balls for dozens of fans.

The Camera Crew maneuver around her to get close-ups of her hands, then B-roll of every nuance as she engages with her public. She's not smooth yet. The Journalist is trying to interview every breathless fan. Mia looks around for relief.

Raj approaches. He's absent-mindedly handsy, guiding her away from the fans. The Producer touches her too.

Mia's face twitches as she registers these violations, but she's trapped in a flow of bodies, with all eyes on her.

Finally she discreetly elbows both men and ducks away, finding a corner as she pulls out her phone. We hear Raj and the others MUMBLING additional publicity schemes in the b.g.

ANGLE ON Mia's phone as she texts Jake without hesitation.

MIA (VIA TEXT)

u prolly didn't watch the match but
i won
 (send)
i go to macow next
 (send)
macaw
 (send)
i want you there if you can come
 (send)
i understand if ur mad but i
 (beat)
think we r a good team
 (send)

Mia turns to face the crowd. Raj, producer, journalist, cameras, fans, all giving her space, as Raj's body language suggests this new star is about as manageable as a ravenous crocodile.

INT. RESTAURANT - MILTON KEYNES, ENGLAND - DAY

Jake's phone DINGS as he eats Yorkshire pudding, blowing on a bite of stewed carrot and beef. We HOLD ON his face as he checks his phone. He smiles with a misty twinge of pride--quickly turning smug--as his fork PLOPS back into the dish.

FADE OUT.

EXT. MACAU - DAY

AERIAL of the Grand Lisboa casino, a shimmering sword thrust into the earth by angry gods--the tallest building in a city that makes the Las Vegas strip look like blighted Detroit.

A LOWER ANGLE ON the Louis XIII hotel ("The 13"), a red monstrosity that resembles a lobster claw pinching a giant diamond at the top. Both buildings are distinct to the point of perversity, but the XIII is more menacing.

EXT. INTERNATIONAL ARRIVALS - MACAU AIRPORT - DAY

Mia, Jake and Raj saunter out of the airport, bedraggled from the long flight, minimal luggage in hand. Raj veers toward a properly outfitted CHAUFFEUR, who takes Raj's garment bag.

Jake and Mia stop short, exchanging looks as they notice the car: a red, gold-infused, extended wheelbase Rolls-Royce Phantom, part of the fleet built for the XIII.

Raj motions Mia and Jake to the car, slipping an arm around Mia to separate her from Jake, then climbing into the car after she does. Raj looks up from the backseat at Jake, popping his eyebrows to indicate the seats are taken.

Jake slides into the front seat, managing his duffel himself.

EXT. MACAU TOWER - MACAU - DAY

The RR Phantom drops Mia, Jake and Raj at the Macau Tower. Climbing out of the car, Jake sidles up to Mia protectively.

Mia re-ties her ponytail as they enter--

INT. MACAU TOWER - GRAND HALL - MACAU - DAY

International press event. Mia sits at a long table on an elevated dais between other players in her bracket. A name placard identifies CHRISTINA MUKHERJEE, 20, more conventionally "pretty" and better styled than Mia, and under the circumstances more energized than Mia.

PHOEBE OWENS, 19, a white Brit, more severe than the other potters, almost an MMA vibe. She leans back and half-smiles at Mia, more social invitation than threat. Finally Lanfang Xu, all the more intimidating for seeming softer, more at ease than the rest.

JAKE AND RAJ stand at the back of the event space. Jake eyes Raj as Raj manages a heated text exchange on his phone. Finally Jake leans over as Raj is still typing.

JAKE

What's with the custom Rolls Phantom? Who's paying for us to ride around in that?

RAJ

The further we go up the ladder, the more throw-weight I have. Don't worry about the particulars.

JAKE

I'm not worried. I have a hard time
getting worried--I should probably
take lessons.

The press event is underway, b.g. Mia and her competitors
answer questions, but our aural POV is Jake and Raj.

RAJ

(gesturing around them)
Don't ask me about any of this.
You're in over your head. If--as a
courtesy--I clarified the
operational details, you'd know
just enough to fuck things up for
us. I can't let that happen.

JAKE

Who's "us"?

RAJ

Me.
(louder, snapping)
Mia.

Jake smiles.

JAKE

(pointing to himself)
Me-uh?
(pointing to Raj)
You mean "you-uh."

Laughter o.s. due to--

In the b.g., Mia answers questions in her brusque, meme-
friendly style. The press gobble it up. The rhyme between
Jake's "routine" and Mia's is firmly established for the
first time. *They know how to work a crowd--two of a kind.*

RAJ

(to Jake)
Why did you feel the need to come
all the way to Macau? What do you
have to offer at this point?

JAKE

I promised Mia's mother I'd keep an
eye on her.

RAJ

So now you're just a babysitter.
Not even a glorified babysitter.
Just--literally--a babysitter.

JAKE
I'm a...family friend.

RAJ
(boiling)
That label doesn't really work for where we are in this process. Think of it this way--Mia's being admitted to a hospital where only relatives are allowed in to see the patient.

Jake is briefly thrown--then, as if rehearsed:

JAKE
Okay, let's take this thing apart. You snapped your fingers and Dorothy poofed into your technicolor world. You didn't scout her or develop her talent. You act like a sponsor or a manager but you're an administrator with an international organization--who's also selling tables on the side.

Raj's eyes dart around the room anxiously.

JAKE (CONT'D)
And then that TV producer asks you to sign something, but you don't have anything on paper with Mia...I gotta tell you, I see a lot of cracks in the brickwork.

RAJ
(fast, firm)
The arrangement is informal. It happens all the time. I'm a stepping stone for Mia. If I started busting out contracts? That's when you know somebody's trying to take advantage.

JAKE
Oh, that's when you know.

RAJ
Frankly, Mia's not as important to me as she is to everyone else in the billiards expanded universe. She's a symbol. Woman of color--dime a dozen around here--she's not special that way.

(MORE)

RAJ (CONT'D)
 But look at those faces--silver
 spoon, silver spoon, plastic spoon.

Jake looks over at Mia: sleepy, edgy, rumpled, sans makeup,
 boldly contrasted with Christina Mukherjee, a clothes horse
 with immaculate posture.

RAJ (CONT'D)
 Mia carved a path so all the other
 street urchins of America can join
 her on the world stage. She's
 Spartacus--they'll line right up
 behind her. And for me, it's all in
 the name of enriching cue sports
 however I can. And I'm not making a
dime off of it. Okay? Are we good?

JAKE
 So it's just winks and handshakes.

RAJ
 Which is exactly what you had with
 Mia. And hey, I sympathize with
 your position here. I know you
 burned a lot of cash dragging her
 around--

JAKE
 It's not about that.

RAJ
 Whatever you say. But when we
 formalize it, we're looking at
 "Jake" as an expense category that
 gets reimbursed right off the top.
 It'll take me 10 minutes to draw up
 the paperwork.

Jake shakes his head "no." He won't entertain the idea. Raj
 deepens his stare, trying to slice Jake open.

RAJ (CONT'D)
 Don't bullshit me, Jake. I know you
 bottomed-out before you came to
 Montreal. When you called me, the
 flop sweat was dripping through the
 phone. That girl owes you.

Jake looks off in the distance at Mia, who's now watching
 Lanfang Xu talk.

JAKE
 (slow nod, wistful)
 I lost a few bets along the way.
 (MORE)

JAKE (CONT'D)

(beat)

But that's wheelin'.

Raj pulls back and sighs at Jake's inscrutability.

In the b.g., the press conference ends and players disperse, except--

MIA and Lanfang hover at the table, both noodling on their phones. Finally they stand, awkwardly, at the same time.

Mia forces a tight-lipped smile. Lanfang throws her head back, chin up.

LANFANG

(stilted but adequate
English)

I like your phone case.

Mia is so taken off-guard that she fumbles her phone and it bounces off Lanfang's shoe, a clog with a leather upper. Lanfang reaches down for Mia's phone.

MIA

I--oh--thanks--I--

(taking the phone from her)

It was really cheap, it's been
cracked forever, I need a new one.

Lanfang nods, shrugs, moves past Mia. Beat. Mia turns.

MIA (CONT'D)

Hey, your shoes--

(as Lanfang turns to her)

I noticed you wear those every time
you play. Aren't they
uncomfortable?

LANFANG

They are nurse shoes. Dansko. You
can stand a long time without...

(searching for the word)

MIA

Soreness? Fatigue?

(off Lanfang's shrug)

Wow, that's great, I'll look into
that. Dansko.

Lanfang nods, smiles with one side of her mouth, looks Mia up and down, then turns to go. Mia glances over at Jake and Raj. As soon as Jake has her attention, he juggles his phone around and pretends to drop it. Mia fumes and gives him the finger.

INT. BILLIARDS PRACTICE FACILITY - MACAU - NIGHT

Mia is the only player from her bracket taking the opportunity to practice during dinner time. A Bodyguard/Translator stands near her table. Mia's earbuds shield her from social obligation.

A few Players from the main bracket are practicing on other tables, all Chinese and Indian men. They've chosen tables close to each other but far from Mia. Nonetheless, one of them nods at her and smiles.

INT. GRAND LISBOA - LOBBY - MACAU - NIGHT

Raj waits in the lobby, seated. He watches the entrance intently. Mia comes through with her cue case, not attentive to her surroundings. Raj moves discreetly to the front desk, gets quick attention from the Concierge in Mandarin. Then:

RAJ

Mia!

Mia stops, looks around, sees Raj at the front desk. She meanders toward him. As she closes the distance, Raj asks the Concierge for something in Mandarin (no subs). The Concierge disappears behind a door. Mia arrives.

RAJ (CONT'D)

Hey, I just talked to your mom.
She's not as fiery as you!

(off Mia's confusion)

I called to explain how things are
looking for you over here. I
offered to fly her out--

MIA

I should've thought of that. Of
bringing her here.

RAJ

No, Jake should've. He's the
brains, you're the brawn. Logistics
should not land on your shoulders.

(laughs off her meek shrug)

She told me she had to rescue you
and Jake after you guys lost the
car--which, well, we can get into
that in a minute.

Mia winces, studies him for a beat. The Concierge returns holding a manila envelope. He hands it to Raj. Raj thanks him in Mandarin, looks in the envelope.

RAJ (CONT'D)
 (to Mia)
 Can we sit? You probably want to
 get off your feet?

Raj gestures to the lobby chairs where he was sitting before.
 Mia walks toward them, plops down. Raj takes a chair beside
 her. He hands her the envelope.

RAJ (CONT'D)
 Just look through this real quick,
 I want to be sure I understood
 everything correctly.

Mia opens the envelope, pulls out five pages of a densely
 worded business document. As we PAN ACROSS the first page, we
 can make out certain telltale words and phrases: "LIEN,"
 "WAGES or CASH PRIZES," "USD 220,000" "EMIGDIA C. ZAMBRANO,"
 "JACOB R. LEJEUNE."

MIA
 I have no idea what this is.

RAJ
 Oh, Jake wanted to be sure--before
 you get all your ducks in a row on
 paper--you know, contracts? He
 wanted to be sure there was a lien
 in place.

MIA
 A lien?

RAJ
 Yeah, he didn't want to make things
 awkward by asking you to pay him
 back for the car. So we papered it
 up to make it less personal.

MIA
 So he wants--what does he want
 exactly.

RAJ
 He just wants to recoup the value
 of the car over time--you know,
 garnish your wages and--

MIA
 Garnish my wages? Like, I split my
 earnings with him until...I've paid
 for his car...?
 (off his cool nod)
 That's interesting.
 (MORE)

MIA (CONT'D)
 That's really interesting.
 (laughing)
 He came to you to ask for--
 (aggressively waving pages)
 --this?

RAJ
 No matter who you sign with--if you
 end up with a sponsorship or have
 an arrangement with the WPA--all
 those scenarios are going to be
 extremely lucrative for you--this
 is something that's just between
 you and Jake. He wanted to be first
 in line for his slice of the pie.
 Which is understandable, right?
 (off her stunned silence)
 Mia, not to be glib here--why did
 you think Jake was still hanging
 around? Let's take care of this so
 he can move on--before he gets
 unpleasant.

MIA
 Unpleasant...
 (gnawing her lip)
 Am I, like...supposed to just sign
 this? Right here? Like a fucking
 divorce settlement?
 (looking at pages)
 "Jacob Lejeune" couldn't tell me to
 my face that he--that he--had this
 pressing need for--
 (checking)
 --two hundred and twenty thousand
 dollars?

Raj looks around--a few people are staring. Mia rifles
 through the pages. Dumbfounded.

RAJ
 All right, you're jet lagged,
 you've been on your feet all night,
 why don't you let me--
 (reaching for documents)
 --hang onto that for now.

Mia yanks them away.

MIA
 We're good here, Raj. No beef.

Mia shoves the documents back in the envelope with the precision of soiled toilet paper. She leaps to her feet and heads for the elevator. Raj watches, pleased.

INT. GRAND LISBOA - CASINO FLOOR - MACAU - NIGHT

Jake stands in the sportsbook area, staring up at a TV. He's watching performance stats cascade down the screen--all the players in the Macau World Open, their rankings through various seasons. Mia's entry shows no previous record.

Jake takes two steps toward a Chinese Guy who's studying the stats. Jake gestures to the TV, mimes a bit, the Chinese Guy nods. Jake nabs another Casino Loner and gestures to the initial Bettor with "hey meet my cousin" energy.

Mia walks up, fresh from her chat with Raj, swinging the manila envelope. She slices through the cult of Jake, pulling the documents out of the envelope. She shoves the loose pages into Jake's chest. The pages scatter on the bright carpet.

JAKE

Mia--what--what's going on--

He glances down at the papers. The Bettors surround Mia, trying to high-five her, then taking rushed selfies.

MIA

You've been hustling me since the day we met, haven't you? Haven't you?!

Jake stares at her, lost. She elbows the Bettors away, raising her voice over their commotion:

JAKE

What are you talking about?

Jake drops to his knees and arranges the loose pages on the carpet, trying to make sense of them.

MIA

You're still trying to squeeze every last drop out of me, just like you did on the road.

JAKE

(comprehending the lien)
Mia, this is--holy shit--no, Mia--this isn't me, I didn't ask for any of this--it was--

TIGHT ON his face, aghast, as he realizes Raj played him. Mia kicks the pages away from Jake as he remains kneeling, distraught.

MIA

You couldn't just say it. You couldn't tell me this was the thing keeping you around. I'm asking myself every day, why is this guy sticking around? What's he getting out of this? Now I know. I've got a fucking dollar sign on my forehead.

Jake and Mia are poised like performers in theater-in-the-round. A few Bettors are trying to calm Mia in Cantonese while keeping their distance.

Jake stands and faces her, hands open, shaking his head "no."

JAKE

Mia, I know how this looks--but I swear to you--

Image quality drops: "EYE IN THE SKY" SECURITY CAM shows the swarm of people dissipating, forming an outer ring as the altercation becomes obvious to dozens of bystanders.

BACK TO SCENE: Jake reaches for Mia with both hands. She lunges toward him and head butts him as she yells:

MIA

STAY OUT OF MY LIFE, YOU FUCKING CREEP!

Jake collapses on the carpet. Mia disappears into the throng of people as--

Security Guards arrive and help Jake to his feet. His eyebrow is gushing blood. Mia is a ghost.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. GRAND LISBOA - CASINO FLOOR - MACAU - LATER

Jake sits in the sportsbook area, alone now, staring up at a TV as he holds a plastic baggie of ice against his bandaged eyebrow. A Server takes his ice baggie and gives him a fresh one, along with more coffee. He slips her some HKD.

He's watching clips of Mia and Christina Mukherjee-- interviews and previous matches against other opponents. His expression is sour, almost vindictive, as he zeroes in on the betting odds, which establish Mia as a pitiful underdog.

We PUSH IN on the odds, then we PUSH IN on Jake's face, the ice baggie held just above his bloodshot eye.

He glances down at his watch, almost an afterthought.

INT. MACAU TOWER - GRAND HALL - MACAU - DAY

The Macau World Open is held at the Macau Tower, a prosaic sprawling convention center with large windows looking onto the waterway toward Hong Kong. Roughly 2,000 in attendance, on temporary bleachers encircling four pool tables.

The first round. Matches in separate brackets: older men, teen girls. Some faces we remember from England. Players are Indian, Filipino, English, African, Brazilian, Chinese. The crowd of spectators vastly outnumbers those in Milton Keynes.

TIGHTER ON THE POOL TABLE. As we catch up with Mia mid-match, we immediately realize she's now blind to anything ancillary to the game: photographers, crowd size, what country she's in--maybe even her opponent.

Mia is blowing through her match with Mukherjee. Her play is matter-of-fact. We hear Chinese commentators in b.g.

INTERCUT: Jake watches the match on a TV in the casino, surrounded by a clump of eager Railbirds he's attracted.

INTERCUT: Livestream on the internet. U.S. viewer metrics are climbing. Newborn fans posting comments on forums--Mia has their attention. Browsers look up the history of the sport.

How many Americans have won international 9-ball titles?
NONE.

INTERCUT: Raj sits with HAO PAN, a statuesque woman in her 40s with an expensive tight hairstyle and pair of glasses that want to be remembered. They watch the match on a private monitor in a colorful suite we don't see fully.

BACK TO SCENE: Mia has finished off Mukherjee. She signs autographs for fans and poses for selfies with them.

INT. ROLLS-ROYCE / EXT. CITY STREETS - MACAU - MOMENTS LATER

Mia rides, uniformed, in the back of a Phantom by herself. She's slouched but not complacent--still feeling the spark. She catches sight of landmarks and leans up to the Driver.

MIA

Uh, hey, excuse me, where are we going? My hotel is the other way.

(MORE)

MIA (CONT'D)

I'm at the, uh, Grand Lee--Leesh-boo-ah.

The driver nods, smiles and says something in Cantonese.

The Phantom pulls in front of an enormous red building, oddly shaped: the XIII. Mia notices that the shade of red perfectly matches the car's paint. She climbs out, wary but ready.

INT. LOUIS XIII (THE 13) - LOBBY - MACAU - DAY

Mia is escorted through the entrance and taken to a fairy-tale door. The door opens onto La Villa du Prince, a 20,000 square-foot suite with marble floors, spiral staircase and gaudy sofas the length of a yacht.

On the other side of the door is Hao Pan's Male Assistant. Mia stands in the doorway, still dressed to play, holding her cue case. Hao Pan motions her in.

IN THE SUITE

RAJ

(to Mia)

Now you know who's been sending the Rolls-Royce for you.

(bridging the distance, then
a stage whisper)

Don't get used to it.

(normal volume)

Mia, this is Hao Pan, she's Lanfang's handler. She deals with contracts, goes after sponsorship opportunities, finances the season.

Hao reaches out for a handshake. Mia complies.

MIA

(to Hao Pan)

So you're her manager?

RAJ

Yes and no. It's more immersive. Usually the term "handler" means you've got one client. You're more of a family member, like an aunt or uncle. So I'd be "Uncle Raj" if--

(off Mia's glare)

Well. In other circumstances I might not condone this practice, but Hao and the rest of Lanfang's team wanted me to pitch you an idea they had.

(MORE)

RAJ (CONT'D)

And, you know, nothing we say here today leaves this room, right?

Hao gestures to the extravagant furniture. They all sit.

RAJ (CONT'D)

The thinking here is that your rise--your velocity and bouncing to different brackets--it's a little too much for the sport to handle. Topsy-turvy. What's good for the sport means, of course, what's good for the players, but it also has to take into account the business interests, all the scaffolding that holds up the sport itself.

(beat)

So what they're thinking is, why not an exhibition match? Just you and Lanfang? They've already chosen an ideal location that accommodates an international audience, and you won't have this home turf thing where Lanfang gets to play in her own backyard, putting you at an extreme disadvantage.

Hao's assistant waves a remote and a projection screen drops against the far wall. Mia turns. The projector kicks on and we see an AERIAL shot of a palatial building in Europe.

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

This is Villa Erba. It's in north Italy, on Lake Como, one of the most prestigious event venues in the world. Anything you do there is instantly glamorous and exclusive.

IN THE VIDEO, we see the building's interior.

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

So we would put one table right there. A two hundred-thousand-dollar flagship model.

The camera PASSES THROUGH the glass ceiling as we riff on the scrumptious hypotheticals via SLO-MO INTERCUT: Lanfang and Mia, hair coiffed into ceramic columns, circle a pool table surrounded by the oligarchs of Europe and Asia.

ANGLES ON uniform, custom cue, referees as Raj mentions them:

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

The top referees in the game. A uniform custom tailored for you by the best outfitter in England. Whatever cue you want, we'll do an autographed line, a branded cue that we can sell to your fans. The idea is that you'd play this exhibition match against Lanfang and the table would stay there in Villa Erba and it would become a tradition, a neutral-ground venue for this kind of showdown between high-profile players.

Raj takes a drink. Mia is lost in the screen. The video freezes on an exterior shot of the staggeringly posh villa.

RAJ (CONT'D)

Your fee would be a hundred thousand U.S. Both of you, same appearance fee, no prize money. Just a friendly exhibition match to promote the sport.

Mia whips her head toward him. Then at Hao. Hao says something in Mandarin (no subs).

RAJ (CONT'D)

And they're looking to do it in three months. Which gives you time to sort out some sponsor contracts while we stoke the fire in terms of publicity and fans.

Mia stares at the video, which re-starts at the beginning.

MIA

(muttering)

A hundred thousand...

RAJ

And that's a fee you can count on, unlike a tournament, where you're competing for it. What's the pot for your bracket this year--three? Wait, no, it's two hundred thousand, right? But that's pounds, not dollars, so--

Hao barks something in Mandarin (no subs). Raj nods with a mild grimace and takes a drink.

RAJ (CONT'D)
The thing is...

HAO
(in stilted English)
You lose the next match.

MIA
...Lose...against Lanfang...

HAO
No. Not Lanfang. The next match.
Phoebe Owens.

RAJ
You probably won't get past Phoebe
even if you play your heart out
tomorrow. And if you do get to
Lanfang, the outcome will be
humiliating. Most likely a shutout.
(beat)
What they want instead of putting
you through that--what they're
suggesting is: you don't play
Lanfang until it's designed that
way. It's something we build
carefully, a hand-crafted rivalry.
If we can tease that iso match in
Italy, a real showdown, and build
anticipation...
(off Mia's reaction)
I get it, you're on a collision
course with Lanfang. We're just
saying, hey, let's control the
collision so nobody gets hurt.

Mia leans forward and reaches for Raj's lowball. She winks at him. He gives her the glass. She slams the drink, eyeing Hao. Mia stifles a COUGH--not accustomed to straight booze. Hao says something sharp and scolding in Mandarin (no subs).

Mia stands and hurls the empty glass at "Villa Erba" on the projector screen, where it SHATTERS. Glass shards rain on the carpet. The assistant reacts, but Hao motions for him to stay put. Mia picks up her cue case and leaves the room.

OUTSIDE THE HOTEL, Mia marches to the street, hails a taxi.

INT. GRAND LISBOA - LOBBY - MACAU - MOMENTS LATER

Mia charges through the lobby of her hotel and shakes off the lingering press corps as she darts into an elevator.

IN THE ELEVATOR, Mia mashes the button to close the doors. Mia POV on Mukherjee answering reporters' questions as the elevator doors merge to seal out the hullabaloo. The elevator HUMS up and we get a renewed sense of Mia's isolation.

FADE OUT.

EXT. ROUGH NEIGHBORHOOD - MACAU - NIGHT

Jake walks aimlessly through the less glamorous section of town. He pokes around food vendors, sees "wild boar jerky" jotted in English on a sign. He nods, the Vendor cuts a plank of meat with scissors and hands it to him.

Jake nibbles the meat as he meanders, politely indulging the aggressive tactics of male and female Prostitutes.

He stops at a newspaper vendor and strikes up a conversation with the Old Guy managing the stall. They gesture to magazine covers to "discuss" current events. Jake holds his phone up to the man's face, lets him talk into it, then looks at the screen and reacts--clearly a translation app.

INT. GRAND LISBOA - MIA'S ROOM - MACAU - NIGHT

Mia is freshly showered, wet hair up, wearing a hotel bathrobe. She's curled up in a plush chair, stewing, lost inside herself.

A plate of room service (onion rings, wings) sits untouched in front of her as she half-watches a British sitcom with Cantonese subtitles.

She suddenly grabs her phone. ANGLE ON the screen as she opens the phone tracking app and zooms in on Jake's avatar. Even on the map, the place looks like a hellhole, surrounded by a fish market and strip clubs.

INT. DIVE BAR - MACAU - NIGHT

TIGHT ON Jake's hands as he lines up a shot on faded green baize. He shoots, steps back. Balls CLACK into each other, then one DROPS as an Opponent hands Jake a shot of local booze. Jake slams it and hands the glass back.

WIDER ON a few American pool tables surrounded by Unsavory Types--facial scars, shaved heads, gold teeth. Lewd, shrill Women mingle. Cheddar travels to Jake as he SHOUTS in Macanese Portuguese.

A late REVEAL on Mia standing among the riffraff--clearly no fans here, as no one recognizes her. She's dowdy, but two Sleazoid Gamblers are chatting her up as she hands them some HKD. She nods at Jake and gestures to herself.

The Sleazoids laugh and pass word through the crowd to Jake: *he has another taker*. He scans the group with "who wants a piece of this" body language. Mia steps forward.

Jake is dazed, already plastered. He leans on the table to stabilize his vision. He smirks and rubs his swollen eyebrow.

JAKE
(slurring)
They warned me about this
neighborhood but I didn't think it
would get this bad.

Mia throws up some fingers to the Sleazoids, securing a bet.

MIA
(to Jake)
Nothing personal. I need to win
back what I lost betting against
you just now. Who knew you could
actually play.

Jake looks wounded, then defiant.

Mia destroys him in rack after rack of 9-ball, every trick shot in the book, just like the early days. The crowd WHOOPS as cheddar flies. After the game, she takes all comers on a series of trick shots. They pump her full of booze. She can't miss.

Jake seems like a shell of himself, no longer the ringmaster, but he plays along and gets in deep bets with his slimy pals, continuing to marinate in the local hard stuff, until--

He starts to collapse. Mia reaches out to stabilize him but he falls. Gamblers descend, their hands going toward Jake's pockets. Mia CRACKS her cue in half on the table and YELLS as she pulls the massive wad of winnings from her own pocket.

MIA (ENGLISH) (CONT'D)
Take it! Take all of it!

She tosses the wad of bills on the table and helps Jake to his feet as the Gamblers tackle "their" money.

EXT. DIVE BAR - MACAU - CONTINUOUS

Mia holds Jake around the ribs to steady him as they come through the door. Some of the Streetwalkers from earlier disperse at the sight of Jake reeling as if he'll vomit. Mia pulls him into an alley.

IN THE ALLEY, Mia braces Jake as he assumes a 90-degree angle to expunge the unfamiliar booze. But--

He stands upright and blinks it off. He looks up at the night sky, visible between the walls of the narrow alley.

JAKE

Can't see the moon...

MIA

No, we can't see the moon from here.

JAKE

I don't want money from you--I
don't want my car back--that
bullshit contract--wasn't my idea--
Mia--that was not my idea--

Mia walks him to a stack of crates. She arranges a pair for him to sit. She winces at the stench.

MIA

Barf here, no one will even know.

JAKE

(sitting)
Emigdia Zambrano!
(marveling at the echo)
Stay loose and you will winnnnn!
(comically leveling eyes)
How about a friendly wager--are you
a gambling man--

MIA

Enough, Jake. No more bets.

JAKE

I want to be in your life--I want
you to be in my life--I want our
lives to be in each other's lives.
Look up--we can't see the moon--so
here's what I say--if the moon is
full--if it's a full moon--you have
to let me back in--be part of your
life--friendly wager...

MIA
 Okay, Jake, if it's a full moon,
 you can be a part of my life.

Jake stands and wobbles back toward the street. Mia follows him, shaking her head.

Jake reaches the street, spins, looks up at the sky. ANGLE ON the moon: crescent. Barely a sliver.

JAKE
 Wow. You changed the moon? You
 would change the moon to keep me
 out of your life?

Mia smiles, then chuckles.

MIA
 (playful)
 Looks like a full moon to me.

Jake breathes deeply, seems more stable on the strength of her affection. She hails a cab.

JAKE
 I never thought I would--I never
 thought I would do something like
 this--
 (gesturing wildly to Macau)
 --be part of something. I drove in
 circles for 40 years. Like a
 gigantic race track--a very slow
 race--a slow race to nothing--
nothing--that's what I had--before
 you...

She shovels him into the cab.

INT. GRAND LISBOA - JAKE'S ROOM - MACAU - MORNING

Jake and Mia are passed out fully dressed on separate beds. Mia stirs, winces, checks her phone: pushy texts from Raj.

LATER

Mia holds a paper coffee cup as she nudges Jake. She shakes him harder. Finally he GROANS and pulls himself up against the headboard. He takes the coffee, blinks off his haze.

JAKE
 (gravelly)
 One more match and then Lahn-fahng
 Shoo. Can you believe it?

Mia's mood drops.

MIA
FUUUUUHHHHHH. What am I doing on
this crazy island?

JAKE
It's everything you wanted. You
earned it.

MIA
They told me to dump tomorrow.

Jake is thrown. His mood instantly reverses.

JAKE
What? Who told you to dump?

MIA
Lanfang's..."people."

JAKE
Through who? How did they get to
you?

MIA
Well, Lanfang's handler was there,
but she barely said anything.

JAKE
(metabolizing the angles)
How do you know she was Lanfang's
handler? Was Lanfang there?

Mia brings herself up to a half-sit. She shakes her head.

MIA
Raj was there.

JAKE
Raj? He was in the room? With
"Lanfang's handler"?

MIA
Yeah, he was translating. I guess
they'd had a meeting and--

JAKE
And Raj said this was their idea?
Lanfang's team?

MIA
Right. Yeah. And they were saying
what's best for the sport is if--

JAKE

Nope. This is a Raj move. It was his idea. After what he pulled with me--

MIA

That occurred to me. That it was Raj's idea. I guess I needed to hear it from somebody else. So I didn't think I was going crazy.

(beat)

I'm just done trusting people.

Jake looks wounded, then he gently nods.

MIA (CONT'D)

You told me to always play my real ability.

JAKE

Always. Never less than full speed.

(beat)

Wait, you're not actually considering this...?

MIA

Of course I'm considering it.

JAKE

How much did they offer you?

MIA

A hundred.

Jake sighs deeply, leans back, nods slowly.

JAKE

Wow. That's tempting. But if you do this, you'll regret it forever. There is no amount of money...

(off her lost gaze)

Look, if you dog a shot, that's one thing--too much pressure, you're overconfident, or you were never really good enough to begin with. But you never dump. To anyone. For any reason. Especially not for money.

Mia's eyes are averted. Jake fears he's not getting through.

JAKE (CONT'D)
And he told you it would be better
for "the sport" if you dump? He's
hustling you.

Mia looks up. They lock eyes. She nods almost imperceptibly.

Jake touches the lump over his eye. Then, as if he dialed an
epiphany:

JAKE (CONT'D)
Wait--uh--wait. He's got a fat
playbook, that one. If he thinks
you're not dumping, he might
sabotage you.

MIA
You mean disqualify me.

JAKE
Yeah, he'll use whatever tools he
has at his disposal. So you have
to--

MIA
Tell him I'll dump against Phoebe.

She pulls out her phone and starts to text.

JAKE
And he thinks it's over between you
and me--we're kaput as far as he
knows--so it's better if--

MIA
You stay here.

ANGLE ON Mia's phone:

MIA (VIA TEXT) (CONT'D)
i'll do it

RAJ (VIA TEXT)
[Thumbs up emoji]
(beat)
Champagne after the match.

She shows Jake the message. He nods.

JAKE
Perfect.

MIA

But if I beat Phoebe, won't he
disqualify me for Lanfang somehow?

JAKE

Not at that point. You'll be the
last two standing. He's not stupid
enough to nuke the entire event.

INT. MACAU TOWER - GRAND HALL - MACAU - DAY

Amateur Chinese players of all ages and genders flock to Mia and ask her to sign the butt of their cues as they rest in cue cases. Like Zorro, Mia has established a flourish with "Zambrano." Fans flock to Lanfang for the same treatment.

Mia plays against Phoebe Owens and Lanfang faces another young Chinese Woman. We CROSS CUT their respective matches.

INTERCUT: Jake is in his hotel room, gyrating around, throwing room service morsels and catching them in his mouth. He's not looking at the TV but we hear Mia's match EMANATING from it. Jake comments on the match in an affected English accent, then affects another voice for rebuttal.

JAKE

It now looks as if Zambrano is not
dumping the match, contrary to the
predictions of our high cockalorum
Meghraj Bhati.

(now a pre-pubescent chimney
sweep)

She wunt nevah goinna dump this
match, guvna, I coulda toldja thah.

BACK TO SCENE: After Mia demolishes Owens, she shrugs at Raj, who slow-claps, his eyelids murderously half-mast.

Hao, elsewhere among the well-heeled denizens of the front row, peers at Raj as if his likeness appears in the dictionary entry for "fuck up."

LATER

The PRESS are interviewing Mia and Lanfang, both of whom chomped through their second-round opponents with little fanfare. We get English-language COMMENTATORS over the live interviews.

COMMENTATOR 1 (V.O.)

Lanfang Xu is the youngest female to turn pro in the history of the sport. So let's not forget her achievements, which are definitive.

COMMENTATOR 2 (V.O.)

And Zambrano could be a flash in the pan. Xu has the network of support that successful players usually have, as well as sponsorships. And there's nothing under Zambrano...

COMMENTATOR 2 (V.O.) (CONT'D)

...she's just there, free-floating, and that's a lot to ask of a player. Like, a Formula One racer-- that seems like a lonely gig, right? But those drivers have a pit crew and sponsors! If Zambrano has a support system within the WPA world, we haven't seen it.

Lanfang is cool-headed as ever, innocent-looking as her parents flank her in support. Mia is out of her element, alone at the long skirted table, terse, dealing with it.

INT. GRAND LISBOA - MIA'S ROOM - MACAU - DAY

Mia and Jake are sitting at the table with untouched room service dishes, cuisine that's friendly to American palates. Mia has her knees up, childlike, as she eyes the food.

JAKE

You won't be able to eat during the match.

MIA

I know.

Guilted, Mia picks up a French fry. Looks at it. Takes a bite. Chews and swallows. She picks up a glass of water, then drops it and runs to the bathroom.

We hear her VOMITING as we remain at the table with Jake.

INT. GRAND LISBOA - HALLWAY - MACAU - DAY

Jake walks beside Mia, cutting glances at her. She's hobbled, wan, like a prisoner of war. It feels like he's walking her down the aisle...to a guillotine.

INT. GRAND LISBOA - LOBBY - MACAU - MOMENTS LATER

Fans recognize Mia and arrange themselves to snap photos as she strides through the lobby with Jake. Jake offers a restrained smile at the phone cameras.

JAKE

(soft)

I'm smiling because you can't.

(softer)

I'm the royal smiler.

Mia grunts a sickly laugh. She looks up. We BUMP IN on a fan's phone: a photo of Jake and Mia, both smiling, *looking like a proper team.*

INT. MACAU TOWER - GRAND HALL - MACAU - DAY

We CROSS-CUT Mia and Lanfang getting ready--mentally and sartorially--in their private dressing rooms far down the stark hallways of the vast facility. Eerily tranquil.

INTERCUT: Raj greets Dominga coolly at the airport, following through on his offer, despite losing his grip on Mia. Raj and Dominga climb into the waiting RR Phantom.

OUTSIDE THE DRESSING ROOMS, Jake waits across the hall from Lanfang's parents, who whisper to each other in Mandarin--animated but not combative. Jake does his best not to stare.

INTERCUT: The Referees hover near the isolated pool table and prepare for the match. Fans pour in. Raj walks Dominga into the event space and shows her to their seats in the front row.

IN THE HALLWAY, Lanfang emerges from her dressing room. Jake smiles at her and mangles "good luck" in Macanese Portuguese. Lanfang looks placidly at Jake.

LANFANG (ENGLISH)

Thank you.

Lanfang's Father nods at Jake with finality as the family of three walk toward the tournament space.

Mia steps out of her dressing room, her condition not remotely improved. Jake reaches into his suitcoat pocket and brings out a closed fist, nudging her with it.

JAKE

Here, I got you some performance enhancers--

(MORE)

JAKE (CONT'D)
(looking around furtively)
--the good stuff.

Mia jolts, nearly leaps away from him.

MIA
(energized)
What the fuck--?

Jake opens his hand, palm up. Empty.

JAKE
Woke you up a little, right?

MIA
I can't do this.

JAKE
Are you kidding? You were born for this.

MIA
No, she was born for it. Remember?

JAKE
Her life is designed around it. But that doesn't matter when you're out there. Her home life, her support network, sponsorships, good grades --none of that matters when it's just you and her poking balls with a stick.

Mia looks down the hallway in the opposite direction, as if considering a hasty exit. Jake takes her by the shoulders.

JAKE (CONT'D)
Hey, I'm willing to admit I was wrong that night--when I said she had you beat from birth. That's my own baggage. You didn't deserve that. And I'm glad you fought so hard to prove me wrong. You're a fighter.

Mia's head sinks. Jake reaches for her chin, props it up. She looks at him vacantly.

JAKE (CONT'D)
What's it gonna take to get you to fight one more time? Some coachy word salad? I googled a speech about stamina and another one about composure. Which one do you want?

Mia's eyes stray down to Jake's hand on her chin. ANGLE ON his hand and wrist. Then we BUMP IN on his wrist:

THE WATCH IS MISSING.

MIA
(alert, vivid)
Where's your watch?

Jake pulls back, cagey.

JAKE
Eh, give me a month, I'll win
another one off of some dumbass
tennis pro.

MIA
What do you mean?

JAKE
I lost it.

MIA
Lost-it-lost-it? Like it flew off
on the highway?

Jake shakes his head meekly.

MIA (CONT'D)
You bet the watch?

MIA (CONT'D)
Was it here? It happened in Macau?
(off his shrug)
When? Who--who'd you lose it to?

JAKE
Some muckety-muck. I heard he was a
rainmaker, so I went out of my way
to make it happen.
(sigh)
That's wheelin'.

MIA
What'd he put up against the watch?

JAKE
What the dealer told him it was
worth. A million five. They made me
send over a copy of the
certificate, the whole bit.
(chuckling)
I even told him the whole story
about--

MIA
(breathless)
So he--he--that was--

JAKE
It happens.

Mia can't see straight.

MIA
It wasn't on my match though.
(forceful)
You didn't lose the watch on my
match. Because that would mean
you...

Her trailing words linger between them.

JAKE
Betting isn't personal, kiddo. You
said so yourself last night.

Mia lets out a PEEP of horror but can't look away from him.

JAKE (CONT'D)
There are bets under bets, bets
within bets, always, all around
you, on a molecular level. None of
it is personal. Right now somebody
in Vegas is betting that a star
quarterback will get hit by a truck
and never play again. And here in
Mah-cow? Everyone's betting against
you. And online--Jesus, you don't
want to look, trust me. Betting is
not personal, it's just an
expression of the odds. It's an
algorithm.
(beat for emphasis)
And the algorithm says you're
nobody.

Tears well up in Mia's eyes but it quickly turns to anger.
Before she can muster an outburst, Jake shoves her cue case
toward her and her hands come up instinctively to grab it.

JAKE (CONT'D)
You once told me that I don't get
to decide you're a loser. Maybe the
algorithm doesn't get to decide
you're nobody.

Mia spins around like an automaton and charges for the
tournament space.

AT THE TOURNAMENT TABLE, MOMENTS LATER

A Referee places two cue balls for Mia and Lanfang to lag for the break. Mia wins the lag.

Raj and Dominga are seated in the front row (floor level) together. Jake is elsewhere in the front row, alone, his manner oddly calm.

A Referee racks the balls. Mia breaks.

Mia and Lanfang get into a flow of games. Both ladies are in top form--neither seems to be dogging shots or finessing her way to a dumped match. There's no reason to believe either of them is sharking or that shenanigans are afoot.

The match lasts a few hours under subdued COMMENTATOR PUNDITRY.

INTERCUT to streaming devices. Fans are patient, glued.

Mia and Lanfang each win racks decisively, trading the lead, neck and neck, until the final match is won by Lanfang on a relatively quick 3-9 combo.

The match is tied at 8-8. The crowd GROANS. The Referees confer.

COMMENTATOR 1 (V.O.)
Technically that's the whole match.
Sixteen games ending in a tie--

COMMENTATOR 2 (V.O.)
Pretty uncommon but they'll play a
tie breaker. One extra rack.

COMMENTATOR 1 (V.O.)
Yeah, there will be a winner here,
folks.

Mia and Lanfang shift their weight from leg to leg, blinking away fatigue. The exhaustion is incomparable.

Jake catches Mia's eye and his face suggests: *you blew it*. She looks down and boils, strangling her cue.

The Referee places two cue balls for the players to lag. Lanfang wins the lag.

COMMENTATOR 1 (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Lanfang won the lag, she'll break.

Strong dorsal energy from the back of Lanfang's head and shoulders--as if she's praying, blocking everything out.

COMMENTATOR 2 (V.O.)
Well, maybe she's considering her options.

COMMENTATOR 1 (V.O.)
Yeah, actually, she doesn't have to break--the winner can force her opponent to break. And that's sometimes advantageous.

COMMENTATOR 2 (V.O.)
Yeah, if Xu gives the break to Zambrano and Zambrano flubs it--they're both pretty tired here--

COMMENTATOR 1 (V.O.)
Stress, fatigue--Xu might be thinking she'll scratch on the break and then she's imploded herself out of a championship.

COMMENTATOR 2 (V.O.)
We've seen that happen.

INTERCUT: Fans glued to streaming devices in the Philippines, England, India, Brazil, Canada, China and...the U.S.

Mia waits for Lanfang's decision as Lanfang remains turned away from the table, shrouding her features from scrutiny.

We roll call Jake, Dominga, Raj, Hao, Lanfang's parents.

COMMENTATOR 2 (V.O.) (CONT'D)
There's also a head game here--she's taking her time. That builds dread in your opponent.

COMMENTATOR 1 (V.O.)
Oh, absolutely. Zambrano hates this question mark--this huge black hole--more anything that could be happening on the table.

Lanfang turns toward the table. She studies Mia's bottled up intensity for a beat. Then she walks over to the Referee.

COMMENTATOR 2 (V.O.)
It looks like Xu made her decision.

The Referee motions for Mia to break. The crowd MURMURS extensively. Jake is gleeful. Raj and Hao are blindsided.

COMMENTATOR 1 (V.O.)

Wow. She just gave Zambrano enough rope to hang herself.

INTERCUT: Fans texting each other. "MZ to break," "Xu giving it away," "Zam can't run the table, no way." "SHUT HER OUT, ZAM-BAM!" And messages written in languages we can't read--but nervous emojis are universal.

BACK TO SCENE: Mia leans over the table and begins to line up for the break. Slower than usual--we've seen her reach peak performance without this kind of calculation. Mia POV as the cue rehearses its strike zone on the glistening white ball.

We RACK FOCUS and see Jake directly beyond the rack of object balls. He's steady and expressionless. Nonetheless Mia stands upright, looks out at the waterway and expels air to restore focus. Then--

She quickly leans over the table and shoots instinctively--*six frame INSERT of a Bronx toddler waving a house cue around.*

The cue ball goes toward the racked diamond of object balls--*six frame INSERT of a circus shot on the road with Jake.*

The cue ball intersects with the rack--*six frame INSERT of Mia struggling on the Buck Ellis table.*

The 9 ball breaks out from the pack and drifts toward a pocket.....hangs between the jaws.....crowd REACTION.....

THEN IT DROPS IN.

The commentators EXPLODE in an undifferentiated mass of superlatives. Mia has no response--inert, disbelieving, worn out from the exertion. Lanfang shakes Mia's hand, neutrally.

Finally Mia looks for her mother, who leaps to her feet, beaming as a standing ovation forms around her. Mia nods faintly to her, then smiles tenderly.

Then she finds Jake, seated and slow-clapping, and narrows her eyes at him. She holds her scowl a beat too long, as if the whole match was just "FUCK YOU" in skywriting.

Jake stands and continues to applaud with everyone else, his meager grin suddenly growing to maximum wattage. We PUSH IN TIGHT on his hand as it slides into the pocket of his slacks. His face morphs: *Wait, what's this I feel in my pocket?*

He pulls out his watch, the same RM 27-01 that he "lost." He tosses it to Mia, twenty feet away--*six frame INSERT of Jake tossing the broom to Mia the night they met.*

Mia catches the watch and looks uncertainly at Jake, who gestures benevolently as if he's one of the Magi giving frankincense to baby Jesus.

Mia examines the bizarre prize, then breaks into laughter at the absurdity of it. She shrugs and lashes the watch to her wrist, making the velcro strap CROAK a few times.

Jake's grin gives way to a full-bodied laugh as he begins to collect wads of HKD from well-heeled Chinese guys. He squeezes through the crowd toward Raj.

Raj pays off various Bettors as Jake approaches from behind. Jake cups Raj's shoulder and leans in. Raj scowls at Jake as he hands money to another Bettor.

JAKE

Next time...
 (loaded glance at the HKD
 flying off Raj)
 ...don't shoot the horse you're
 riding.

ON MIA

Fans have flooded the tournament area, CALLING to Mia from behind the stanchions as Security Personnel hover.

A Young Fan presents a mini-poster sized caricature drawing for Mia to sign. ANGLE ON the drawing: Mia in uniform, holding a cue, standing erect with pride, emitting a glow against a colorful background.

Mia studies this representation: *it's the work of someone who idolizes her*. She looks at the Chinese Girl in question, who's trembling as she holds a pen toward Mia.

Mia looks back at the drawing, takes the pen and signs the fuck out of it.

SMASH BLACK.

THE END