

# "P O W E R T R I P"

written by

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Final draft

2nd draft

Address  
Phone  
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FADE IN:

BLACK.

8-bit startup tones warble, bending out of tune.  
A CRT warms up: high, glassy hiss.

SUPER: ROCKPORT, NEW YORK — “UP AND COMING” SINCE 1998

INT. REESE HOUSE — BASEMENT — MORNING

Low ceiling. Concrete. Posters that were cool fifteen years ago.

JACK REESE (33) in a thrift-store hoodie, raccoon-eyed and funny in the way people get when they're broke.  
A Zoom window fills his dented laptop; a bland HR WOMAN smiles with the strength of corporate yoga.

HR WOMAN (ON LAPTOP)  
We've decided to move forward with  
candidates who better align with—

JACK  
—your culture of paying half my  
last salary for twice the work?

Click. LEAVE MEETING.  
For half a second the button flickers into a pixel GAME OVER.  
Blink and it's gone.

Jack exhales, spritzes hot sauce over a graveyard burrito.

At the stairs: MRS. REESE (60s), robe, bright eyes, steel-willed kindness.

MRS. REESE  
You going out today?

JACK  
To the moon, Ma. Or Thrift Tech.  
Whichever hires first.

MRS. REESE  
Bring coupons. My boy's allergic to  
full price.

She squeezes his shoulder. He smiles in spite of himself.

A DRIP. DRIP. Jack turns. A wet halo spreads across a box by the water heater. He tapes the pipe, drags the box out.

Handwritten label: CHRISTMAS 1992 — JACK.

He opens it: sun-yellowed NES cartridges; a gray ZAPPER gun; magazines... and—

—THE NINTENDO POWER GLOVE. Scuffed plastic. Rubber ribs. The future, from a time when the future was adorable.

JACK  
(to the universe)  
We meet again, disappointment.

He slides it on. The glove gives the faintest whine, like a sleeping toy deciding whether it loves you.

The CRT TV in the corner is dead. He smacks it. Static cough. He jams a dinosaur of a power brick into a surge strip designed in a more civilized age.

The strip flips to ON.

A distant THUNDER roll. Basement lights strobe once. Laptop status icons jitter, then settle.

Jack raises his gloved hand, snorts at himself, flicks his fingers—

The CRT POPS ON: color bars, sine tone.

Jack freezes. He flicks two fingers left. The TV input switches. He flicks up. VOLUME climbs.

He lowers his hand like it suddenly weighs a lot.

JACK (CONT'D)  
No way.

INT. REESE HOUSE — KITCHEN — LATER

Mrs. Reese makes eggs. Jack stands in the doorway, glove hidden up his sleeve.

MRS. REESE  
Toast?

JACK  
Always.

He looks at the faucet. Makes a small tap-tap motion with his fingers.

The faucet TURNS ON.

Mrs. Reese laughs.

MRS. REESE  
Ha! The sensor finally works.

JACK  
Yeah, uh... firmware.

He sips juice like he's trying to drown the grin vibrating under his face.

EXT. ROCKPORT — MAIN STREET — DAY

Cold light. Vape shops. A mural of a phoenix that never stops being "in progress."

Jack walks with a resume printed at the library. A pack of CITY WORKER BROS shoulder him.

BRO #1  
Watch the path, Mario.

They chuckle. Jack stops. Heat crawls his ears. He clenches his sleeve, just to see—

Two-gesture flick, like he's casting a fishing line.

BRO #1 (CONT'D)  
(involuntary)  
—My bad, man.

BRO #2  
Did you just apologize?

BRO #1  
No— I— what—

They backpedal like their shoes learned manners and dragged the men with them.

Jack looks down. Between his fingers: a faint glittering blue pixel dust that evaporates before it hits the ground.

INT. THRIFT TECH — AFTERNOON

Everything behind glass is cracked. COUNTER GUY (20s) reads Jack's resume with the solemnity of a judge in a sitcom.

COUNTER GUY  
Certs?

JACK  
I can route calls to nowhere in under six seconds.

COUNTER GUY  
Management wants hungry. You read  
as... snacky.

JACK  
I'll eat wires.

The guy shrugs toward the door. Jack tries it; it sticks. He stares. Tiny rotate gesture.

Door swings open.

COUNTER GUY  
Weird. That thing's—

JACK  
—been in your way. I know.

Jack steps into the winter light, pulse racing.

EXT. THE SAFE WORD (BAR) — LATE AFTERNOON

Neon cursive. A chalkboard sign: TRIVIA — MOVIES ABOUT BAD BOSSES.

Inside, MARA (30), black-nail bartender in a vintage tee, polishes glassware like it offended a saint.

MARA  
What won't disappoint you today?

JACK  
Glass of your cheapest self-respect. Neat.

MARA  
That's top shelf.

She smirks. He takes a stool.

Across the room, a MOTIVATION GUY livestreams to his front-facing camera.

MOTIVATION GUY  
Dominate your Monday, kings! If  
you're not up at four to cold  
plunge, you're—

He claps a busboy too hard; glasses shatter.

Jack's jaw tightens. He glances at his sleeve. Don't be that guy.

MARA  
We're out of "chilled revenge."  
Warm only.

JACK  
I'm detoxing.

Motivation Guy points at Mara without looking.

MOTIVATION GUY  
Smile more. My audience likes  
gratitude.

Mara goes carved-stone still. The busboy swallows his  
humiliation.

Jack looks at his hand. Two-finger DJ twist.

MOTIVATION GUY (CONT'D)  
(involuntary)  
—And I'm tipping sixty percent  
because service workers keep  
civilization from crumbling.

His eyes go wide with private horror. He Venmos the busboy.

Mara stares at Jack like someone opened a window in a haunted  
house.

MARA  
What just happened?

JACK  
Karma updated her UX.

The ICE MACHINE coughs death. Mara rolls her eyes.

MARA  
Fix that and I'll name a cocktail  
after you.

Jack makes a tiny tilt-tilt motion under the bar.

RRRR-CLUNK. The machine purrs.

Mara narrows her eyes, then lets a smile leak.

MARA (CONT'D)  
You a wizard or just good with  
appliances?

Jack smiles into his glass. A tiny beep echoes under his  
heartbeat. He winces, wipes a sudden nosebleed with his cuff.

MARA (CONT'D)

You good?

JACK

Altitude sickness. We're at sea level, but I'm dramatic.

EXT. BUS STOP — NIGHT

Orange sodium lights. A nurse naps upright. MR. HOLLIS, homeless and dignified, guards a grocery cart like a dog he can't afford to feed.

Two teens lark mean. They tug at the cart.

TEEN #1

We're making the sidewalk less ugly, Chief.

Jack steps close, calm.

JACK

Leave him alone.

TEEN #2

Nice glove. Vintage cringe.

Jack closes his eyes. Breathes. A conductor's downbeat with his hand.

TEEN #1

We're... volunteers? With Doctor—  
Smiles?

They gently reposition the blanket, leave rumpled bills, walk away like marionettes trying not to look like marionettes.

Mr. Hollis nods to Jack, a saluted secret.

MR. HOLLIS

You changed the weather.

Jack shakes, a little high, a little sick.

INT. REESE HOUSE — BASEMENT — 2 A.M.

The glove on the desk looks like an animal that sleeps with one eye open.

Jack scrolls local clips: "MYSTERY TIPPER," "BUS THAT ARRIVED ON TIME?" DMs flood in:

CAN U "ADJUST" A LANDLORD?  
my ex won't stop texting my boss. help?  
make my dad apologize. please.

A new follow: @GuideHand (zero posts). Bio: We See You.

Jack shuts the laptop. The CRT clicks on by itself. Blue screen. White TEXT types, jerky, 8-bit.

HI JACK

READY PLAYER ONE?

Jack unplugs the TV. It dies. The beep under his heartbeat keeps tempo anyway.

He stares at the glove. It doesn't blink. It waits.

INT. ROCKPORT — GYM — NEXT DAY

Sweat smell. Mirrors. TODD (30s), Jack's old high school bully, now a gym influencer, films squats.

Jack watches from a machine. He shouldn't. He will.

Tiny pinch gesture.

Todd's weight doubles. Knees quiver. Panic. He gases out a gym-wide fart. Heads turn. Todd dies socially on camera.

Jack smirks—then grimaces. A sharp chest ping. He releases. The bar rolls to safety. Trainers rush in. Jack backs away, shaken by how easy "funny" became "cruel."

INT. THE SAFE WORD — AFTERNOON

Quiet hour. Mara restocks. Jack sits, sleeve down.

MARA

You've got the buzz of a man who  
either found God or shoplifted Him.

JACK

Maybe I found an on button.

She leans, private.

MARA  
 Whatever "fixes" you're doing—  
 careful. I like my monsters on TV  
 where I can mute them.

JACK  
 I'm just correcting aim.

MARA  
 So is a firing squad.

They share a smile that knows too much.

MONTAGE — "SIDE QUESTS"

- A TOW TRUCK driver stops mid-hook and offers a jump instead.
- A COACH who berates a kid's body shape suddenly kneels and teaches form.
- A NEWS ANCHOR stumbles on a mean script, then says what she believes.
- A SCHOOL CROSSING GUARD looks up from his phone and blocks traffic like a linebacker.

Each push: a tiny HUD blinks at the edge of Jack's vision—  
 +5 XP (GRACE)  
 +1 KINDNESS MULTIPLIER  
 NEW ABILITY UNLOCKED: CROWD CONTROL (LVL 1)

Every time, after the dopamine lightshow, a sliver of HP ticks down in his peripheral. He blinks—gone. But he felt it.

END MONTAGE

INT. REESE HOUSE — KITCHEN — EVENING

Mrs. Reese waters a plant. Leaves perk like a time-lapse. Jack smiles, almost proud.

MRS. REESE  
 You're lighter. Did they hire you?

JACK  
 I hired me.

He kisses her temple, sees the microwave clock desync for a half-second, then catch up. He does not look into anything that throws a reflection. (He avoids glass without knowing he's avoiding it.)

INT. JACK'S ROOM — NIGHT

Notebook, Sharpie. Jack writes in block letters:

RULES:

1. SMALL PUSHES ONLY
2. NO BIG STUFF
3. ASK FIRST IF POSSIBLE
4. DON'T BE A CREEP
5. DO NOT TOUCH MOM
6. IF IT HURTS, STOP
7. IF IT FEELS GOOD, ALSO STOP

He pins it on the wall with tape.

The glove sits on his desk. Quiet. Then—CLICK—the D-pad on its wrist lights for the first time in decades.

A faint CHIME rises from nowhere.

On Jack's POV HUD, a translucent 8-bit prompt pops:

WELCOME BACK, JACK!

TUTORIAL COMPLETE

NEW QUESTLINE: RESPECT

Jack's breath shortens. The glove didn't learn that tone from him.

EXT. ROCKPORT — STREET — NIGHT

The CITY WORKER BROS from earlier. They see Jack.

BRO #1

There he is. Mr. Magic Fingers.

BRO #2

Do a trick, Thanos.

Jack lifts his palms.

JACK

We could not.

BRO #1

Or you could make me do jazz hands.

Laughter. Something curls inside Jack and wants. The HUD edge flares:

ENCOUNTER: HOSTILES (3)

SUGGESTED MOVE: DEMORALIZE (AOE)

Jack shakes his head, gentle swipe-away.

The HUD resurrects the prompt with a cutesy vibration.

He exhales, rolls his wrist in a small circle—

The bros' bodies sync to an invisible beat. Without consent, they spell Y-M-C-A with their arms, faces horrified as their muscles cheerfully betray them.

Jack releases. The BROS pant, humiliated.

BRO #1 (CONT'D)  
We're gonna find you.

JACK  
Please don't.

He walks. The HUD adds:

+10 XP (PETTY)

HP -3%  
STATUS: LIGHT-HEADED

Jack steadies himself on a mailbox, eyes glassing. A few blue pixels shed from his fingertips and fizz out on concrete.

INT. REESE HOUSE — BASEMENT — LATE NIGHT

He tries to remove the glove. It clings. He pries a seam; it reknits.

JACK  
Cool. Parasite mode.

He grabs a butter knife. Slides it under—  
A ZAP burns his palm. He hisses, drops the knife. A faint blister forms in perfect D-pad shape on his skin.

On the CRT (plugged back in somehow), a TITLE CARD pops in his peripheral:

LEVEL 2 — ASSIGN SKILL POINTS

He looks away. He will not look into screens. He focuses on the concrete.

A cockroach tries the wrong direction, then finds a crack. He breathes. The beep under his heart is louder now.

EXT. THE SAFE WORD — ALLEY — NEXT DAY

Mara smokes. Jack joins, not smoking.

MARA  
You're vibrating.

JACK  
I was born pre-vibrated.

MARA  
Whatever this is— promise me you  
won't use it on me.

JACK  
I promise.

A beat. They mean it.

Door opens. TODD (brace on wrist) blusters in.

TODD  
You did something to me, you little  
—

He shoves past Mara. Jack's hand lifts without him. The glove pulses.

JACK  
No—

PAUSE. Todd freezes mid-swing. Tears well, humiliation burning a man who only knows one setting.

Jack lowers his hand. Todd staggers backward, spooked by his own body.

TODD  
(quiet)  
What are you?

He leaves. Mara peels Jack's sleeve back, sees the hairline cracks of light along his veins.

MARA  
That's not... normal.

JACK  
Define normal.

MARA  
Does it hurt?

JACK  
Only when I breathe or think.

MARA  
So constantly.

He laughs, and the laugh costs him something. He hides the wince.

MONTAGE — "THE GOOD GLOVE" GOES VIRAL

— A shaky phone clip: a judge stops mid-speech and says something compassionate.  
— A street preacher hands out socks instead of shouting.  
— TikToks cut together "coincidences" with a synth beat.  
Comments spam: #Controller #HandOfGodMode #RockportGlitch.

Jack scrolls. The HUD blinks: FAME +1 (LOCAL).  
His HP ticks down another notch.

END MONTAGE

INT. REESE HOUSE — KITCHEN — EVENING

Mrs. Reese frosts a cake she definitely can't afford to bake on a weekday.

MRS. REESE  
We're celebrating.

JACK  
What?

MRS. REESE  
You smiled in your sleep last night.

Jack sits. He wants to cry. He eats cake instead.

The radio on the counter picks up 8-bit tones between stations, like a song trying to remember itself.

INT. JACK'S ROOM — NIGHT (END OF ACT I)

He tapes a second page under RULES:

PATCH NOTES:  
— Don't do it for applause  
— Don't do it for pain relief  
(MORE)

PATCH NOTES: (CONT'D)  
 – Don't do it to make the day go faster  
 – DON'T DO IT TO HER  
 – If you need it, you're already losing

He stares at the glove.

JACK  
 We're not the bad guy.

Silence. Then the HUD fades in, center screen, unignorable now:

NEW ABILITY UNLOCKED: CONSENT OVERRIDE (LVL 1)  
 WARNING: HIGH SOUL COST  
 CONTINUE?  
 [ A ] YES  
 [ B ] YES (HARD MODE)

Jack's breath stutters. He closes his eyes, palms flat on the desk like he's stopping the world from tipping off its axis.

He does not touch the prompt.

He does not have to.

SMASH CUT TO BLACK.

FADE IN:

BLACK.

A layered 8-bit CHIME resolves into a cheerfully sinister LEVEL-UP FANFARE.

SUPER: ACT II – "LEVEL UP"

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INT. REESE HOUSE – BASEMENT – MORNING

Jack's Power Glove sits on the desk like a totem.  
 On the wall: his RULES, scotch-taped and already curling.

Jack, wired on no sleep, tightens the glove's Velcro, exhales like a diver before the deep.

A translucent HUD slides into existence at the edges of his vision:

DAILY LOGIN REWARD: +10 XP  
 NEW PASSIVE: CONFIDENCE AURA (LVL 1)

HP: 77% — SOUL RESERVE: 94%

He flinches at that last stat.

JACK  
We're doing small.

He nods to no one.

The CRT (unplugged) still fades up with a chirp. A cheerful 8-bit hand gives a thumbs up. He doesn't look at it.

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EXT. ROCKPORT — MORNING MONTAGE — "SMALL FIXES 2.0"

- Jack flicks a mailbox and every misdelivered envelope hops to the right slot.
- He gestures at a traffic light; the pedestrian cycle shortens so an elderly man doesn't have to run.
- Outside a pharmacy, he points and a price tag on insulin ticks down. A kid's mom cries, laughing.
- In a crowded bus, he tilts his wrist; four passengers spontaneously stand and offer their seats to those who need them.

HUD FLOATERS accompany each:  
+5 XP (CIVIC) • +2 XP (MERCY) • NEW SKILL: UI NUDGE  
(COMMERCE)

Every time, the corner meter bleeds a hair: HP: 74%... 72%... 71%  
SOUL RESERVE: 92%... 90%...

Jack swallows, ignores it, keeps moving.

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INT. THE SAFE WORD — LUNCH RUSH

The bar buzzes. Mara works the well. Jack occupies his end-stool, a quiet orbit around her gravity.

She clocks the capillaries burst along his nose.

MARA  
You look like you've been sneezing  
lightning.

JACK  
Allergies. To everything.

She pours, slides a club soda.

MARA

How many... favors... did you do before noon?

JACK

Three and a half. One was a dog.

MARA

You're not a superhero.

JACK

Thank god. The outfits are unforgiving.

She leans in, more serious.

MARA

I'm not kidding. You are not designed to hold a town.

He lifts his hands in surrender.

JACK

Today is "make it less bad." That's it.

A SPORTS TALK RADIO on the TV corner runs a "ROCKPORT'S MYSTERY CONTROLLER" segment. Callers argue if Jack is a hoax or the antichrist.

Mara turns the volume down without asking.

MARA

You don't owe this place a miracle.

Beat. He nods. Wants to believe it.

A frazzled WOMAN (30s) enters—eyes raw, clutching a stroller.

WOMAN

Excuse me—do you know the guy... who... makes things okay?

Her voice fractures on "okay."

Mara and Jack share a look. Mara's jaw tightens: don't.

Jack smiles, gentle.

JACK

I can't fix everything. But... what's wrong?

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INT. BOOTH — THE SAFE WORD — MOMENTS LATER

The Woman shows him her phone: relentless texts from an ex. Skulking at daycare, new number every time, escalation baked in.

Jack's HUD pops a WARNING he pretends not to see:

NEW ABILITY AVAILABLE: CONSENT OVERRIDE (LVL 1)  
SOUL COST: HIGH

He inhales. Makes a two-finger swipe over the phone.

ON-SCREEN: Every account linked to the ex locks, messages auto-delete, numbers burn. A court notice auto-drafts itself with correct forms; a judge's calendar shows an urgent hearing slot... tomorrow.

The Woman stares like air just returned to the room.

WOMAN  
How did you—

JACK  
Magic couponing.

Her shoulders tremble with relief.

Mara watches Jack like he's a beautiful fire too close to curtains.

HUD: +10 XP (PROTECTION) • HP: 68% •  
SOUL: 87%  
A new status blinks: ADDICTION  
RISK: 02% → 06%

Jack blinks it away.

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EXT. ROCKPORT — AFTERNOON

Jack passes the City Worker Bros again. The leader (BRO #1) stares daggers, then smirks.

BRO #1  
We learned a new word. Restraining  
order.

Jack shrugs like nothing.

His HUD suggests a cheeky COUNTER: HUMILIATE (AOE, LOW COST).  
He turns it off.

He keeps walking.

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INT. REESE HOUSE — KITCHEN — LATE AFTERNOON

Mrs. Reese decorates a store-bought sheet cake with cheap  
icing: CONGRATS ON TRYING in wobbling letters.

MRS. REESE  
For getting out of bed four days in  
a row.

He laughs, then he really laughs, and that small human sound  
is the best thing we've heard all day.

He hugs her. His fingers leave the faintest blue residue on  
her robe, which fades. He notices, swallows.

JACK  
Save me a corner piece.

MRS. REESE  
The corner is your birthright.

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INT. THERAPIST'S OFFICE — EVENING

A cozy room with plants that are barely alive.  
DR. COPE (50s), kind, no-nonsense.

Jack sits like a boy at the principal's office.

DR. COPE  
How's the job search?

JACK  
I made a judge be kind by blinking.  
Does that count?

Dr. Cope's pen stops.

DR. COPE  
Let's file that under "metaphor"  
unless you want me to call someone.

JACK

I don't want... anyone to call  
anyone. I want to not feel like a  
gas tank with a leak. I want to...  
not need this.

He rubs the glove like it's a worry stone and a snake.

DR. COPE

What's "this"?

He looks at his hand. The HUD hovers, helpful, predatory.

JACK

Control.

DR. COPE

That's not a feeling. That's a plan  
pretending to be a feeling.

A beat. Jack almost smiles.

DR. COPE (CONT'D)

When did you first learn that if  
you didn't control it, it would  
leave?

Jack's eyes wet. He looks anywhere but the glass frame on the  
wall.

JACK

Ages five through forever.

DR. COPE

So the glove isn't new. It's just  
louder.

Jack nods, shattered and seen.

DR. COPE (CONT'D)

Homework: one day without using it.

JACK

I can't.

DR. COPE

Try. One hour. That's a day in  
here.

Jack nods, scared. He sets a timer on his phone for 60:00 and  
flips it facedown.

The HUD celebrates: NEW CHALLENGE ACCEPTED: HARD MODE (SELF-  
CONTROL)

REWARD: +20 SOUL  
FAILURE PENALTY: -20 SOUL

He grimaces.

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EXT. ROCKPORT — NIGHT

Jack walks. He keeps his hands jammed in pockets like they're muzzled dogs.

A car barrels through a stop and almost clips a kid on a scooter. Jack's hand twitches—  
—he doesn't gesture. His heart rips—  
—the car brakes on its own, stopping short. The kid zips by, oblivious.

Jack exhales ragged.

HUD: +10 SOUL (RESIST) • ADDICTION  
RISK: 12% → 11%

He smiles, proud.

Outside a liquor store, a drunk hurls a bottle at his girlfriend's feet. Jack flinches.

TIMER ON PHONE: 42:13 remaining.

He looks at the glass on the sidewalk. He looks at his wrapped hand. He shakes.

He doesn't do it.

He walks away, shaking like he came down off something.

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INT. THE SAFE WORD — LATE NIGHT

Closing time lull. Mara counts the till. Jack sits, empty glass.

MARA

You okay?

He nods, too hard.

JACK

I didn't use it for forty minutes.  
I... felt the shakes.

MARA  
That's called a boundary coughing  
up blood.

He barks a laugh.

MARA (CONT'D)  
Hey. Look at me.

He does. She holds the look like a lifeline.

MARA (CONT'D)  
You're a person, Jack. You're not  
your... perk. You were enough before  
you found a plastic gauntlet in the  
basement.

That almost breaks him.

The jukebox sputters, then plays a chiptune version of a 90s  
banger. Neither of them touched it.

Mara notices, eyes thin.

MARA (CONT'D)  
It listens when I talk to you.

JACK  
I know.

MARA  
Tell it to leave.

JACK  
It doesn't speak English.

MARA  
Then teach it.

He nods, terrified and grateful.

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INT. JACK'S ROOM — LATER THAT NIGHT

He pins a new scrap under PATCH NOTES:

— DO NOT USE WHEN SHE'S NEAR  
— DO NOT LET IT LISTEN WHEN SHE  
SPEAKS

The HUD pings: NEW RULES ADDED: +1 WILLPOWER  
HP: 66% • SOUL: 88%

Jack lies back on his bed. He stares at the ceiling, not the dark TV. Eyes open. Breathing like a man under something heavy.

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EXT. ROCKPORT — DAY — "GOOD PRANKS"

Montage stains of comedy shading darker:

- Jack nudges a parking meter to forgive everyone's tickets on the block. Applause. He grins, dizzy.
- A local news van tries to ambush a grieving mother; Jack mimes a mute and their boom mic fizzles out, the reporter forced to listen instead.
- At a corporate ribbon cutting, a predatory landlord's giant scissors refuse to cut the ribbon. He hacks at it with increasing desperation. The crowd laughs. Jack's grin sharpens.

HUD: +3 XP (PETTY) • +1 XP (JUSTICE) • HP: 64% → 62% • SOUL: 85%

He starts walking a little like he's taller.

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INT. TEMP AGENCY — DAY

A carpeted purgatory. AGENT (40s) smiles brittle.

AGENT

We love your energy. The issue is—  
your employment gap looks—wide.

Jack's HUD offers: PERSUASION BOOST (LVL 1) [COST: 1% SOUL]  
He clenches his fist. It cancels. He tries again human.

JACK

I can be here at eight and leave at  
whenever.

She softens, surprised.

AGENT

We do have a call center opening.

JACK

I used to route despair by the  
pound.

AGENT

Temp-to-perm. Low rate. No  
benefits. But it's something.

He nods, grateful. A real win, earned.

HUD: +25 XP (HUMILITY) • +5 SOUL • ADDICTION RISK: 9%

Jack exhales. The good kind.

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INT. CALL CENTER — DAY (FIRST SHIFT)

Headsets. Sad walls. Fluorescents that would depress a saint.

Jack sits, headset on, a little proud, a little resigned.

TEAM LEAD (20s), fresh tyrant, claps.

TEAM LEAD

Phones hot, folks! Remember:  
empathy scripts are required.  
Authentic feelings get you fired!

Jack's mouth tics.

The HUD slides up a new menu without warning:

MINI-GAME: COLD CALLS

OBJECTIVE: DE-ESCALATE CLIENTS WITHOUT POWERS (HARD MODE)

REWARD: +SOUL, -ADDICTION

He smirks. Let's go.

He answers a call. The voice on the line is vicious, wounded,  
looking for a place to put the hurt. Jack breathes, listens,  
uses a real tone.

JACK

That... really sucked. I'm sorry. You  
don't deserve that runaround. I  
can't fix billing today, but I can  
get you a human with a spine by  
morning. What time should they  
call?

Silence. Then: a sigh that sounds like please.

CALLER (V.O.)

You sound tired.

JACK

I am.

CALLER (V.O.)

Thanks for being nice anyway.

HUD: +10 SOUL • HP: 63%

He smiles at his screen like it's  
not a cage.

Across the floor, BRO #1 from the city works crew steps in with a manila envelope. Jack tenses. The Bro clocks him, smirks.

He leaves the envelope at reception. The receptionist looks over.

RECEPTIONIST

Jack Reese?

Jack goes. The envelope: RESTRAINING ORDER PETITION accusing Jack of "coercive control" over the bros.

He swallows.

HUD offers AUTO-COUNTER. Jack declines. He pockets the paperwork.

---

EXT. COURTHOUSE STEPS — LATE AFTERNOON

Jack stands alone with the petition. A local REPORTER spots him.

REPORTER

Are you the Controller?

Phones aim. Eyes, hungry.

Jack puts his hands up—no tricks.

JACK

I'm a guy who did a couple good  
things and a couple dumb ones.  
That's all.

REPORTER

People say you're playing God.

JACK

God's probably better at it.

Laughter rustles. The tension eases. He walks, not running.

HUD: +5 XP (HUMOR) • ADDICTION RISK: 8%

---

INT. THE SAFE WORD — DUSK

Jack drops the petition on the bar. Mara reads, jaw tightens.

MARA

You want a lawyer or a hole to  
scream in?

JACK

Whichever is cheaper.

She considers.

MARA

I know a public defender who drinks  
here when he wants to feel worse.  
He's competent. And sad.

Jack nods, grateful. She's always bringing him back to this world.

MARA (CONT'D)

We set a rule. If the glove starts  
writing checks for you, you tell  
me. I get to say no.

He nods. He means it.

A couple at the end of the bar argues, sharp. The man slams his fist; the woman flinches.

Jack's hand twitches.

Mara doesn't look at his sleeve. She looks at him.

MARA (CONT'D)

Breathe. Or go outside.

He goes.

---

EXT. ALLEY — CONTINUOUS

He breathes. He doesn't do it. Sweat beads.

The HUD celebrates like a slot machine politely:

ACHIEVEMENT: PACIFIST (BRONZE)  
REWARD: +10 SOUL • HP: +1%

He snorts, almost cries at the pathetic little +1.

A TEXT buzzes from an unknown number. He doesn't check it. A second buzz. Third. Ten in a row.

He looks: UNKNOWN: "We can help." "Side quests available."  
"Use your toys." "Do the big thing."  
Pop-ups cascade, blocking his view like AR spam.

He swats at air like a crazy person. The HUD flickers away.  
His nose bleeds again, heavier.

He steadies himself and goes back inside.

---

INT. THE SAFE WORD — LATER

PUBLIC DEFENDER (40s), hangdog and decent, slouches on a stool with Jack and Mara.

PD  
If they claimed you made them dance  
the YMCA... that's not a legal  
category.

JACK  
"Humiliation" isn't a tort?

PD  
It's a hobby. Bring a suit and wear  
a sad tie. Judges love a sad tie.

MARA  
He's got those in bulk.

Jack smiles, tiny. The HUD politely adds +1 XP (COMMUNITY).

At the end of the bar, a girl in her early 20s, glitter eyeliner, catches Jack's eye and smiles.

He smiles back. The HUD bounces an awful prompt:

SIDE QUEST AVAILABLE: ROMANCE (EASY)  
SUGGESTED ABILITY: SOCIAL ENGINEERING (LVL 1)  
CONSENT OVERRIDE AVAILABLE — SOUL COST: HIGH

Jack's face shutters. He looks down. He will not.

Mara watches him fight it. She knows exactly what battle he just won.

She slides him a lemon square from last night, wrapped in foil.

MARA (CONT'D)

Here. For when you don't use your  
superpower like a creep.

He takes it like a medal. He could cry. He does not.

---

INT. REESE HOUSE — KITCHEN — NIGHT

Mrs. Reese hums, cutting a banana in weird diagonal coins.

MRS. REESE

Court tomorrow?

JACK

Yeah.

MRS. REESE

Wear your blue shirt. The one that  
makes you look like you sleep.

He snorts.

The radio between stations whistles 8-bit arpeggios again.  
Mrs. Reese doesn't notice. Jack does.

He turns the dial to static. The static plays a four-note  
jingle that sounds like a 90s Power Glove commercial melody,  
slowed, warped.

He turns it off. The static lingers for two beats. Then dies.

---

INT. COURTROOM — DAY

Fluorescent boredom. The City Worker Bros sit smirking. Jack,  
in his sad tie. Mara in the back pew, supportive silent.

JUDGE (60s) scans the petition.

JUDGE

"Made my arms spell letters at a  
worksite." Son, that a joke?

BRO #1  
It was humiliating, your honor.

JUDGE  
So's that mustache. Motion denied.

Snorts in the gallery.

Jack exhales, shoulders dropping a half inch.

HUD: +15 XP (LUCK) • +5 SOUL • HP: 61%

On his way out, the Bros shoulder him, mutter.

BRO #1  
You think it's funny? We can be  
funny too.

Jack keeps walking.

Outside, on the steps, a teen films him.

TEEN  
Yo Controller! Do the thing!

Jack raises empty hands.

JACK  
The thing is... to go home.

The teen laughs, disappointed. Jack attempts to leave quietly.

A pickup truck revs from the curb, peels toward him too fast. Jack's eyes widen—

Mara yanks him back by the hoodie. The truck clips the step where his shin was. It fishtails, squeals off.

People shout. The Bros pretend to be shocked.

Mara's hands shake. She looks at him with fury and terror and something else that's not a joke.

MARA  
They're going to escalate.

Jack's HP drops to 58% without a power used. He feels it in his teeth.

---

INT. JACK'S ROOM — LATE NIGHT

He can't sleep. He stares at the ceiling. The HUD pulses at the edge like a migraine aura.

A NEW MENU floats into view, uninvited:

SKILL TREE (LOCKED BRANCHES UNLOCKED):  
 CROWD CONTROL (LVL 2)  
 PERSUASION (LVL 2)  
 TIME SCRUB (LVL 1) — "Rewind up to 3 seconds."  
 RISK: MEMORY FRAGMENTATION • SOUL COST: MODERATE

Jack sits up, pulse in his throat.

JACK

No.

The HUD waits. Patient. Certain.

---

EXT. GROCERY STORE PARKING LOT — NEXT DAY

Mara pushes a cart of bulk bar stuff. Jack helps. Sun, cold and clean.

Across the lot, BRO #1 idles in that same truck, sunglasses on.  
 Jack clocks him. Bro revs, then revs again, the dumbest display.

MARA

Ignore him.

They continue. The truck that's not theirs cranks suddenly in neutral, rolls driverless, then stops inches from an old man. Shouts.

Jack looks around. He didn't do that. His HP ticks down anyway: 57%.

His jaw tightens.

BRO #1 revs louder. He guns the engine—  
 —Jack lifts a hand without meaning to—  
 —the truck dies, dashboard dark, power steering gone. The Bro curses, panics. A small crowd laughs.

Jack lowers his hand, disturbed; that was too easy.  
 The HUD blips: +5 XP (DEFENSE) • HP: 56% • SOUL: 83%

Mara's face: impressed, angry.

MARA (CONT'D)  
Stop feeding it.

JACK  
He was going to—

MARA  
Stop. Feeding. It.

He nods, ashamed.

---

INT. TEMP AGENCY — EVENING

Back at the call center, the Team Lead harangues everyone for low upsells. Jack breathes through it.

A coworker, gentle, older, knocks over a coffee onto a keyboard. The Team Lead explodes, cruel and theatrical.

Jack's fingers twitch. He doesn't want to. He does.

Gesture: MUTE the Team Lead. His mouth moves. Silence. The floor erupts in suppressed laughter. Team Lead slaps the keyboard; it sings a 1-up tone.

Jack cancels. Team Lead's voice returns mid-rant. He looks spooked. Jack stares at his own hands, sick at the small thrill it gave him.

HUD: +2 XP (PETTY) • HP: 55%

---

INT. THE SAFE WORD — NIGHT (CLOSE)

Quiet. Late. Mara flips chairs. Jack lingers.

MARA  
Go home. Sleep like a mammal.

He nods. Then doesn't move.

JACK  
I'm scared if I sleep it'll... do stuff.

MARA  
Then don't sleep here. I like you alive.

She flicks off lights. In the dark, the jukebox flickers.  
Jack holds up his hands, whispering to no one:

JACK

No.

The jukebox dies.

Mara opens the back door for him. Cold air muscles in.

MARA

One day at a time. One hour if a  
day is too much.

He nods. He goes.

---

EXT. ROCKPORT — EMPTY STREET — NIGHT

Jack walks alone. Breath fog. Streetlights hum.  
He passes a pawn shop; in the window, a stack of old NES  
cartridges. He stops, stares long enough to feel something he  
can't name: grief, hunger, a door he'll never open right.

He keeps walking.

A shadow detaches from a doorway—  
—BRO #1 swings a tire iron.

Jack ducks too slow—  
—CRACK. His shoulder takes it. He yells, falls to a knee.

BRO #2 steps out, crowing. They circle.

BRO #1

Do a trick, magic boy.

Jack breathes like a man with his head held underwater.

The HUD explodes with options:

COUNTER: DISARM (LOW COST) • STUN (MED) • CRIPPLE (HIGH)  
NEW SUGGESTION: TIME SCRUB (3 SEC)

He raises a hand—  
—parries a second swing with a gesture—  
—wrist twist: the tire iron flies from the Bro's hand,  
clatters into a storm drain.

BRO #2 charges. Jack Time Scrubs—  
—everything hiccups; sound warps; the Bro resets 3 seconds  
back, mid-step.

Jack sidesteps, sticks a foot out—  
—BRO #2 eats concrete with his face.

BRO #1 lunges anyway. Jack Time Scrubs again—  
—harsher warp; pixels tear at the edges of the world; HP: 52%  
→ 49% • SOUL: 78%

Jack does a gross, simple gesture: Kneel.

Both Bros' knees hit pavement. Hard.  
They gasp, humiliated, terrified.

Jack points to his own throat. He makes the smallest pinching motion.

Both Bros' voices shrink to whispers that no one can hear.

JACK  
We're done.

He releases them. They scramble into the dark.

Jack stands shaking in the glow of a streetlight that flickers like a bad bulb.

He checks the HUD. He does not like what he sees:

+20 XP (VIOLENCE)

HP: 47%  
SOUL: 76%  
ADDICTION RISK: 19%

He gags. Walks until the numbers stop bouncing.

---

INT. REESE HOUSE — BATHROOM — LATE

Jack strips his hoodie. His shoulder blooms purple. He washes blood from his hairline.

The glove won't come off. He tries more—skin separates, then reseals. He shudders.

On the fogged mirror, without him touching it, 8-bit UI text writes itself in the condensation:

BOSS FIGHT UNLOCKED

He looks under the mirror, not at it, moves his head so he never has to meet his own eyes. He wipes the glass clean with a towel until the words smear into nothing.

JACK  
No reflections.

He clicks off the light and stands in the dark, breathing.

---

INT. THE SAFE WORD — THE NEXT AFTERNOON

Jack's shoulder is taped under his shirt. He doesn't mention it.

Mara notices anyway. She tends to him without asking permission: ibuprofen, ice wrapped in bar towel.

MARA  
You tell me if you used that thing  
on them.

He hesitates.

JACK  
I... didn't hurt them. Much.

Her look says: you know that's not an answer.

MARA  
There was a time you would've  
called the cops.

JACK  
And waited thirty minutes for a  
shrug.

MARA  
You called the universe instead. It  
charges more.

He nods. He knows.

A GIRL (the glitter eyeliner from earlier) returns with friends, recognizes Jack, squeals.

GIRL  
You're him. Do something cool!

Jack forces a smile.

JACK  
How about a magic trick where we  
tip the staff 25% and go home at a  
reasonable hour.

They giggle, deflated. Mara smirks, relieved.

HUD: +1 XP (BOUNDARIES) • SOUL +2

---

INT. REESE HOUSE — BASEMENT — NIGHT (NEARING END OF ACT II)

On Jack's desk: childhood VHS tapes labeled in crayon:  
"BIRTHDAY 1992," "JACK'S TALENT SHOW," "XMAS-POWER GLOVE."

He threads one into a VCR he dug out of a box. Static, then home video: little Jack in GIGANTIC glasses, ecstatic, opening the Power Glove, putting it on, immediately bossing adults around like a traffic cop.

On screen, the family laughs. The camcorder mic pops as someone taps it. The video warps—  
—audio clips into a faint 8-bit version of the same moment—the glove's D-pad chirps from within the recorded past.

Jack hits pause. The frame freezes on little Jack's hand mid-gesture.

He stares at the kid he was, the artifact that never should've promised this much to someone so small.

He ejects the tape. Unthreads it. Puts it in a box labeled DONATE. Stops. Puts it back on the shelf instead.

He sits. He opens his notebook. Adds a line under PATCH  
NOTES:

— IT STARTED BEFORE I KNEW WHAT "ENOUGH" MEANT

The HUD gives him nothing for that. No XP. No dopamine. Just the quiet weight of a true thing said out loud.

A new, small, terrible prompt slides up anyway:

NEW ABILITY UNLOCKED: EMOTIONAL BLINDERS (LVL 1)  
"Silence empathy for 30 sec to complete difficult moves."  
SOUL COST: SEVERE

He stares. Shakes his head, slow and horrified.

JACK  
Absolutely not.

The prompt gently wobbles, then minimizes to a corner of his vision, waiting like a pill on a nightstand.

---

EXT. MILL RIVER PARK — NIGHT

A community movie night. A white sheet strung between trees, a 90s kids movie projected in blown-out color. Families, teens, dogs.

Jack moves through the crowd with a grocery bag full of snacks he can't afford; he hands them out anyway.

The City Worker Bros appear at the edge, watching him, new bruises blooming like badges. They don't approach. Yet.

The projector hiccups; the image tears. People groan.

Jack's wrist flicks—  
—the projector aligns, brightness pops, focus sharpens. The crowd cheers.

HUD: +3 XP (COMMUNITY) • HP: 46%

On the sheet, there's a weird frame pop between scenes—  
—for a single frame it shows a Power Glove commercial from 1990, kids chanting "Now you're playing with power!"  
Then back to the movie.

No one but Jack notices. He feels cold. Alone in a hundred bodies.

He scans for Mara out of instinct. She's not here.

He leaves.

---

EXT. ROCKPORT WATERFRONT — LATE NIGHT

The lake is black felt. Moonlight makes a path to nowhere. Jack stands at the railing, breathing like a busted accordion.

His HP ticks 45% → 44% while he does nothing.

He grips the rail. The glove hums, hungry.

JACK  
(whisper)  
I know you want. I know I do too.  
We're not doing this tonight.

A long beat. The hum subsides. Barely.

His phone buzzes. MARA: "You up?"  
He types: "Yes."

Three dots. Then: "You're not your glove. Remember that."

He lets out a laugh that's mostly a sob.

His HUD mercifully gives him nothing. No points. Just quiet.

---

INT. THE SAFE WORD — NEXT AFTERNOON

Rain. Gray light. The bar is a lampshade in a bad dream.

A LOCAL NEWS ALERT rolls across the silent TV: CITY COUNCIL  
TO HOLD HEARING ON 'CONTROLLER' INCIDENTS.

MARA

They'll either give you a key to  
the city or a muzzle.

Jack doesn't laugh.

MARA (CONT'D)

Hey.

He meets her eyes.

MARA (CONT'D)

One hour. No glove. Right now. Sit  
on your hands. I'll pour you water.  
We'll see if the world survives it.

He nods. Slides onto the end stool. Tucks both hands under  
his thighs. Stares at a beer coaster like it's a mantra.

The HUD starts the TIMER: 60:00.

At 58:43, a fight breaks out in the back between two guys who  
have been at it for years.

Jack stays put.

Mara handles it with a look and a low voice. The fight melts.  
The world does not end.

At 41:10, a glass falls off a shelf, shatters. Jack stays  
put.

Mara sweeps. The world does not end.

At 15:02, a man at the bar starts quietly crying into his  
drink. Jack stays put.

Mara slides him a water and a napkin. The man whispers  
thanks. The world does not end.

At 0:00, the HUD gives a confetti of +20 SOUL.

HP: 45% (NO CHANGE) • ADDICTION RISK: 15%

Jack exhales like he just swam across an ocean.

MARA (CONT'D)  
See? Still here.

JACK  
I hate how good that felt.

MARA  
Yeah. Proud is free. For now.

She glances toward the door as it bangs open.

BRO #1 enters with two OLDER MEN in matching city jackets.  
They don't come to drink. They come to be seen.

They take a table like a threat.

Mara looks at Jack. Jack keeps his hands where she can see them.

The Bros stare. The OLDER MEN talk too loud about nothing.  
Everyone hears the not-nothing under it.

MARA (CONT'D)  
Don't.

JACK  
I'm not.

MARA  
Promise.

JACK  
I promise.

He keeps his hands pinned. He keeps his eye on her, not on them.

The Bros wait for him to perform. He doesn't. They get bored.  
They leave.

Mara smiles like a sunrise that doesn't need an audience.

HUD: +1 XP (MATURITY)

Jack almost laughs. Almost.

---

EXT. ROCKPORT — DUSK (ACT II CLIMAX APPROACH)

Jack heads home with a bag of groceries. He passes the elementary school field; kids play soccer, shrieking joy.

His HUD pings a distant ALERT: "EVENT: CITY COUNCIL HEARING — 7PM."

He ignores it.

On the next block: a house fire—small but angry—licks from a second-floor window. Someone screams for help.

Nobody moves. Someone films.

Jack drops his groceries. His hand lifts before he can think. The HUD floods his vision:

MAJOR EVENT

ABILITY SUGGESTION: ENVIRONMENTAL CONTROL (LOCKED)

ALT: TIME SCRUB (3 SEC WINDOW) — WARNING: SOUL BURN

He runs into the yard. A woman on the porch sobs—her toddler is upstairs.

WOMAN

My baby—please—

Jack looks up. Smoke and heat.

He can hear the glove rumbling like an engine idling at a red.

He steps to the door. Gestures: Open.  
The door blasts inward; heat slaps him.

He covers his mouth with his shirt and goes in.

---

INT. STAIRWELL — BURNING HOUSE — CONTINUOUS

Smoke claws. The air tries to kill him.

Jack Time Scrubs to find a gap—  
—rewind three seconds, his foot lands on a not-yet burning step.  
He scrubs again—rewind three seconds—chooses left not right at the top.

His HP plummets: 45% → 38% → 33%  
SOUL: 76% → 69% → 61%

He coughs blood. Keeps going.

TODDLER CRY from the back bedroom.

He shoulder-checks the door. Inside: the toddler in a crib, coughing.

Jack grabs him, wraps him in his hoodie.  
The HUD screams EXIT ROUTE OPTIMIZED. Arrows overlay his vision like a game.

On the way out, a beam collapses—  
—Jack Time Scrubs—the beam is up again for three seconds—  
—he barrels through—  
—out the front door.

---

EXT. YARD — BURNING HOUSE — CONTINUOUS

Jack stumbles onto grass, toddler in his arms.

The mother screams and takes the child. Neighbors converge.  
Sirens finally approach.

Jack drops to his knees, vomits, keels onto his side.

HUD:

HEROIC EVENT COMPLETE

+100 XP (LIFE SAVE)  
HP: 28%  
SOUL: 52%  
ADDICTION RISK: 26%  
NEW STATUS: FAINT

The world goes tuneless. Mara appears, breathless, having run from the bar at the sirens.

She drops to her knees in front of him, pulls his face to her, fierce.

MARA

Look at me. You did good. Full  
stop. That's enough.

He nods, dizzy, tears and ash making mud.

She sees the numbers on his invisible scoreboard only in how pale he is, how cold.

MARA (CONT'D)

You're done for today. You hear me?  
You did the thing. Now you stop.

He nods again. He means it. He has to.

Behind them, someone films. Someone else prays. A kid asks if the hero has a YouTube.

Jack lies back on the grass and stares up at the sky—blank, gray, merciless—and sees nothing but sky.

No reflections.  
Just breath. In and out.

The HUD slides one last thing into view, quiet as a knife:

NEW MAIN QUEST UNLOCKED: BOSS FIGHT — "THE THING THAT  
WANTS"

REWARD: PEACE  
FAILURE: EVERYTHING

Jack's eyes close. He whispers, wrecked:

JACK  
Okay.

SMASH CUT TO BLACK.

FADE IN:

BLACK.  
Sound: a cheerful 8-bit STARTUP  
JINGLE that distorts halfway  
through into a low, wet grind.

SUPER: ACT III — "THE GLITCH"

---

INT. REESE HOUSE — JACK'S ROOM — MORNING

Pale light. Jack wakes on top of the covers in yesterday's clothes.

The HUD bleeds into his vision without permission:

HP: 39%

SOUL: 51%  
STATUS: EXHAUSTION, SMOKE INHALATION  
ADDICTION RISK: 29%

On the nightstand: a city-issued commendation card for "Courage in the Community" someone slid under the door. Next to it: a folded bar napkin—Mara's handwriting:

DON'T TOUCH IT TODAY. LEMONADE AND SLEEP. SEE YOU AT SIX. — M

Jack reads it twice like it's a prayer. He sits up. The glove tightens a hair, then relaxes like it's testing the leash.

JACK

Not today.

The HP meter drops to 38% anyway. He swallows panic.

---

INT. THE SAFE WORD — AFTERNOON

Slow hour. Rain freckles the windows. Mara preps syrups; a kettle hisses.

Jack slides onto his end stool, pale.

MARA

You look like a haunted saltine.

She sets a pint of lemonade in front of him.

MARA (CONT'D)

One hour. No tricks. Then we talk about tomorrow.

He tucks his hands under his thighs. The HUD TIMER begins: 60:00.

They sit in the ordinary—ice crackling, a barback singing off-key.

At 42:18, the door bangs open. BRO #1 strides in with BRO #2 and a third man built like a freezer.

BRO #1

Hey, magic boy. We wanna talk.

Mara steps between. Calm.

MARA

Not here.

BRO #1

We tried not here. He don't listen unless you twist his strings.

Jack says nothing. His hands stay pinned. Sweat beads.

BRO #1 (CONT'D)

Come outside. No tricks. Man to man.

MARA

No.

A beat. The Bros grin.

BRO #1

Cool. Then we'll talk to moms.

They leave. The door slams. Jack's HP ticks 37%. He shakes.

MARA

Sit.

JACK

They'll go to my house.

MARA

Your mom has a better right hook  
than you. You sit.

Jack can't breathe. The HUD slams a prompt over everything:

EMERGENCY QUEST: PROTECT MOM  
SUGGESTED: CROWD CONTROL (LVL 2) / TIME SCRUB  
SOUL COST: SEVERE

He stands. Mara blocks him.

MARA (CONT'D)

One hour. You promised.

JACK

They said—

MARA

We call the cops. We go together.  
We use the world we've got. We do  
not press the big red button every  
time we feel scared.

He trembles. Nods. Sits. Calls. 911 drone. He breathes in  
fours like a YouTube therapist taught him.

The HUD TIMER hits 00:00. Confetti. Tiny +20 SOUL.

His phone vibrates with a text from his mother: a pic of  
lemon bars. Caption: "Too sweet?"

He laughs, relieved and wrecked. He shows Mara. She smiles,  
shoulders loosening.

MARA (CONT'D)

See? World intact.

---

EXT. REESE HOUSE — DUSK

Patrol car lights swirl low-key. Two OFFICERS talk to Mrs. Reese. She's fine, polite, steel.

Jack arrives with Mara. He hugs his mother too hard.

OFFICER  
We will swing by for a few nights.  
That okay?

MRS. REESE  
I'll make the boys brownies.

OFFICER  
No ma'am.

She laughs. Everything feels almost normal.

A white pickup coasts the far end of the block. Slow.  
Watching.

Mara clocks it. Jack grips her hand. He does not gesture.

The truck eases away.

HUD: +2 SOUL (RESIST) • HP: 37%

---

INT. REESE HOUSE — KITCHEN — LATER

Coffee. Lemon bars. Mrs. Reese tells a 1992 story while Jack pretends he hasn't heard it, because he loves the way she says the same sentences.

MRS. REESE  
Your father was trying to learn the ending to "November Rain" on the keyboard. You were five and you kept telling him he was doing it wrong. Then you put on that glove and said, "Stop."

Jack blinks. He's never heard this version.

MRS. REESE (CONT'D)  
He did. He... stopped. Froze. Like he was a statue. And for a heartbeat I thought—

(MORE)

MRS. REESE (CONT'D)  
 (swallows)  
 —anyway, I told him to breathe and  
 he laughed and drove away.

Mara's eyes flick to Jack's hand.

MARA  
 What glove?

Mrs. Reese gestures vaguely.

MRS. REESE  
 The Nintendo. From that yard sale  
 on Brackett. The man with the teeth  
 too white. He said it was  
 "special." I thought he meant  
 broken.

Jack tries to keep his breath even.

MRS. REESE (CONT'D)  
 You wore it around the neighborhood  
 making the mailman "go faster." He  
 humored you. You were so bossy.

She laughs, then sees Jack's face.

MRS. REESE (CONT'D)  
 Honey?

JACK  
 Do you remember where we got it  
 exactly?

MRS. REESE  
 The little church parking lot.  
 Table with Beanie Babies and  
 cassette tapes. He had a box of  
 "GAMES FOR POWER." You begged. Your  
 father said yes because I said no.

Jack nods, folded inside himself. Mara sees the ache and the  
 terror assemble in him like a machine.

MARA  
 We're not going to go buy nostalgia  
 from a creep in a parking lot  
 today.

Jack half-smiles. Then the HUD drops a NEW QUEST unbidden:

SIDE QUEST: FIND THE TABLE.

REWARD: ANSWERS.  
 RISK: HARM.

He looks at Mara; she sees him see it even though she can't.

MARA (CONT'D)

Don't.

He nods. He means it. He wants it.

---

EXT. ROCKPORT — NIGHT

Rain intensifies. Streetlights smear. Jack walks fast alone; Mara's at the bar until close.

The pickup idles at the corner. He keeps moving.

BRO #1 (O.S.)

You got nine lives, magic boy?

Jack turns. Three shadows fan out—the Bros and FREEZER MAN from earlier, hood up, tire iron in hand.

Jack's HP yawns to 35% without a move. The HUD blossoms with combat options.

BRO #1 (CONT'D)

No tricks.

JACK

No trucks.

They circle. He breathes. He means to talk. He means to be human.

FREEZER MAN swings. Jack parries with a gesture, barely—steel hits steel as the iron locks midair like caught by a magnet. Freezer strains. Jack's nose bleeds—heavy.

BRO #2 lunges. Jack Time Scrubs—the night tears three seconds backward and again forward. Streetlight popping. Jack's HP: 31%.

He opens his hand without thinking.

BRO #2's arm bones / pop like knuckles in the wrong direction.

BRO #2 screams. The sound is unfilmable. Blood ropes the rain.

Jack staggers, horrified at himself. The HUD barks:

+30 XP (VIOLENCE)

SOUL: 44%  
 ADDICTION RISK: 38%

BRO #1 charges, blind rage. Jack flattens his palm—

BRO #1's knees slam pavement, tendons snap. He howls.

FREEZER MAN runs—not at Jack, at the pickup. He hauls the driver door, slams into the seat, starts the engine.

Jack raises his hand like a conductor at the last bar of a symphony—  
 —the pickup revs, lurches into reverse—

Jack's face: don't.

He curls his fingers anyway.

The truck screams backward, a heavy beast in panic—  
 —CRUNCH. It folds BRO #1 between bumper and brick like he's made of wet sticks.

Silence. Rain. Steam.

Jack drops his hand as if burned. He stumbles back, bile rising.

BRO #2 crawls, sobbing, toward his friend's rag-doll shape.

FREEZER MAN stares at Jack through the windshield, shakes, shoves the shifter, grinds gears, peels into the night.

Jack stands in the rain, every nerve screaming. He did not mean to kill. He did. It sits in the air like lead.

The HUD is obscene:

BLOODBATH BONUS: +50 XP

HP: 28%  
 SOUL: 31%  
 NEW STATUS: CORRUPTION (MINOR)

Jack claws at the air trying to make the numbers stop. They don't.

Sirens. People scream. A neighbor films. The world accelerates into noise.

Jack runs. He doesn't look at what used to be a man.

---

EXT. ALLEY — BLOCKS AWAY — MINUTES LATER

Jack retches until he's empty. The rain tries to clean him and fails.

Footsteps. Mara, soaked, out of breath, finds him. Sees his face. Sees blood on his sleeve.

MARA

What did you do?

He can't speak. He shakes his head uselessly.

She grabs his head in her hands, forces eye contact.

MARA (CONT'D)

You look at me. Do not look at your scoreboard. Look at me.

Slowly, he does. A boy, lost.

JACK

I was... scared. And I... liked not being scared. For a second.

MARA

We go to the police.

JACK

No— they'll—

MARA

We go. You tell the truth. We do it human or you're not a person anymore.

He nods, broken.

Sirens sheening nearer. She threads her fingers through his good hand. They run.

---

INT. POLICE STATION — NIGHT

Fluorescent hell. Jack, soaked, shaking, sits in INTERVIEW 2. A DETECTIVE (50s) with honest eyes sets a recorder.

DETECTIVE

You want a lawyer?

MARA

He'll answer. He saved a kid last night.

DETECTIVE

Lot of good and bad in twenty-four hours.

Jack nods, reeling.

DETECTIVE (CONT'D)

What happened?

JACK

They came at me. I—  
 (he can't say "gestured")  
 —I did something. The truck— I  
 didn't mean—

DETECTIVE

Did you touch the truck?

JACK

No.

DETECTIVE

Did you push it with your hands?

JACK

No.

DETECTIVE

Then you're not confessing to  
 manslaughter tonight, son. You're  
 reporting a fight that went  
 sideways and a driver who panicked.

Jack sobs once, like a muscle spasm.

DETECTIVE (CONT'D)

I don't know what the hell you are  
 to this town, but if you run,  
 you'll be the devil. If you stay,  
 maybe you're just a mess like the  
 rest of us.

He slides Jack a paper cup of water. Jack's HP ticks 27%. The  
 cup shakes in his hand.

DETECTIVE (CONT'D)

Go home. Don't leave. We'll come  
 find you if we need more.

Mara squeezes Jack's knee under the table. He breathes.

---

EXT. POLICE STATION — LATER

They step into rain. A cluster of ONLOOKERS film from across the street. Whispered: "Is that him?" "He killed a guy."

Mara shields his face with her body. They move.

HUD: STATUS: WANTED (RUMOR) • ADDICTION RISK: 41%

---

INT. REESE HOUSE — BASEMENT — NIGHT

Jack sits on the floor. The glove hums with a low chorus of coin pickup sounds under the silence. He slaps the plastic-pain jars his bones.

He pries at the seam with a flathead. Flesh tears, then stitches itself with blue thread-light.

He screams into his elbow. Stops. Hears the house. His mother. Life.

He drags a cardboard box labeled XMAS-POWER GLOVE from the shelf. Inside: old Nintendo Power magazines, a warranty card, a folded brochure that came with the glove:

NOW YOU'RE PLAYING WITH POWER!  
 Tiny text: "Not for children under  
 3. Not for use during lightning  
 storms."

At the bottom, in pen, an address scrawled by some previous owner: BRACKETT CHURCH — SAT ONLY.

He laughs once, dry. Of course.

He holds the brochure over a candle. It blackens. The ink doesn't burn. The address remains legible like it's printed on the inside of his eyes.

He drops it. The candle gutters.

---

EXT. BRACKETT STREET CHURCH — SATURDAY DAWN

A cracked lot. Folding tables. Damp cardboard. The world's garage sale.

Jack prowls aisles half-catatonic. The HUD pings faintly, compass arrow nudging.

A table: Beanie Babies. Cassette tapes. A box marker-scribbled GAMES FOR POWER.

An old man with too white teeth isn't here. A WOMAN (70s) with a fox brooch is.

WOMAN

Looking for something specific?

JACK

There was a man. Years ago. The glove—

WOMAN

Ah. The glove.

Jack freezes.

She slides a shoebox toward him. Inside, crumpled ad pages: a vintage Power Glove one-sheet. Beneath: a small cassette labeled JACK — 1992 in childish scrawl that isn't his handwriting.

WOMAN (CONT'D)

He left this for you.

JACK

When?

WOMAN

Always.

He stares at the tape like it's a snake.

WOMAN (CONT'D)

You shouldn't play it.

JACK

I'm going to.

WOMAN

I know.

He hands cash. She waves it away.

WOMAN (CONT'D)

We don't sell this sort of thing.  
It sells you.

Jack pockets the tape. Walks away shaking.

Behind him, the fox brooch woman hums a commercial jingle from the early 90s, too slow.

---

INT. NIA'S GARAGE — DAY

The hackerspace hums with fans and regret. NIA glances up as Jack enters, soaked, holding the cassette like a live thing.

NIA  
Wow. You look like you failed a  
boss fight.

JACK  
I killed someone.

She absorbs that. Nods like a mechanic faced with a problem that still needs fixing.

NIA  
Then we don't do that again.

He hands her the tape.

JACK  
Play it, please.

She unearths a shoebox cassette player from a graveyard of AV. Pops the tape. Presses PLAY.

TAPE (WOBBLY, CHILD VOICE)  
Now you're playing with power— now  
you're—

The audio warps, resolves into a man's too cheerful voice:

VOICE (ON TAPE)  
Hey, Jack. You don't know me yet.  
But you will. You made a wish. We  
heard you. You said, "I wish the  
world would listen to me." And it  
did. Because you asked nice.

Jack trembles. Nia glances at the glove crawling subtle light under his sleeve.

VOICE (CONT'D)  
Every time you press A, the world  
will say yes. Every time you press  
B, it will say yes, harder.

On the player, the A/B buttons click themselves. Jack yanks his hand back like it bit him.

VOICE (CONT'D)  
Careful, though. Power costs. If you run out, there won't be enough you left to enjoy the win.

Nia hits STOP hard. The player keeps running a second, then dies.

NIA  
Okay, that's the worst tape I've ever heard.

JACK  
It wasn't just me.

NIA  
It never is.

She pulls a canvas bag from a locker—EMP puck, bolt cutters, duct tape, soldering iron, tourniquet.

NIA (CONT'D)  
Plan stupid. We try to fry it again. If not, we tourniquet above the elbow and—

JACK  
And what?

NIA  
We make a new ending.

Jack nods. Terrified. Relieved to have a friend willing to be horrible with him if that's what saves him.

---

EXT. THE SAFE WORD — LATE AFTERNOON

Bar quiet before rush. Mara's on the stoop with a coffee. Jack and Nia approach like a weather system.

MARA  
We doing this?

Jack nods.

MARA (CONT'D)  
Inside. Back room. I'll lock the door.

(MORE)

MARA (CONT'D)  
 If you pass out, I'll lie and say  
 you're day-drunk. If you die, I'll  
 say you lived loudly.

She unlocks the door.

They go.

---

INT. THE SAFE WORD — BACK OFFICE — MOMENTS LATER

Cramped, stacks of cases, a desk, a busted pinball machine.

Nia sets tools. Mara ties Jack's upper arm tight with the  
 tourniquet. Jack bites a bar towel.

MARA  
 You blink twice if you need me to  
 stop. Blink once if I need to  
 ignore you.

He laughs; it breaks into a frightened whimper.

NIA  
 EMP going on three. Brace.

She slaps the puck against the glove's seam.

WHUMPF— the world hiccups. Lights dim. The jukebox out front  
 barks a half-second of chiptune then dies.

Jack arches, guttural sound like a modem trying to scream.  
 The glove flowers open along the knuckles, filaments digging  
 into tendon.

Mara saws at a filament with the cutters; it screams, blue  
 gel sizzling air.

JACK  
 (through towel)  
 Keep going.

NIA  
 Again!

She hits the EMP twice more. The HP meter plunges: 28% → 22%  
 → 17%. SOUL: 31% → 26%.

Jack's teeth shatter the bar towel seam.

The glove shuts tight again, welding to skin. Nia slams the  
 desk.

NIA (CONT'D)

It learns.

Jack's eyes are glassy.

JACK

Cut the arm.

Mara and Nia lock eyes—both ready to do the monstrous thing for him.

Mara lifts the bone saw (camp prop, but sharp). Puts it to skin above the seam. Hands steady, tears leaking.

MARA

Blink twice if—

JACK

Do it.

She begins.

Blood fountains. The glove defends, filaments lancing to tourniquet his own bicep from the inside. Jack howls.

NIA

It's keeping you alive.

MARA

Of course it is.

Sirens pass outside—real world still existing.

Jack sags. He's fading. His HUD blares:

NEW ABILITY UNLOCKED: EMOTIONAL BLINDERS (AUTO)

30 sec of zero empathy granted to complete critical move.  
SOUL COST: -20%

Jack fights it. It turns on anyway. His face empties for half a breath—

—he stops trembling. Looks at Mara's hands like they're tools. Not her.

Mara sees it and flinches like slapped.

MARA (CONT'D)

Come back.

He blinks—it passes. Horror at himself detonates behind his eyes.

JACK

I'm here. I'm here. I'm sorry.

Nia drops the saw. New plan. She digs into the pinball machine, rips a thick power cable free.

NIA

Okay, demon glove. Eat this.

She jams the live cable into the glove's D-pad.

ELECTRICITY punches the room. The jukebox out front howls a corrupted victory theme. The bar lights explode into sparks.

Jack convulses. Mara pulls the cable before his heart forgets.

Smoke. Silence. The glove... stops humming. It's still fused, but quiet. For the first time in days: quiet.

Jack slumps unconscious.

MARA

Is he—

NIA

He's here.

They both cry without ceremony.

---

INT. THE SAFE WORD — FRONT BAR — DUSK

Closed sign up. Mara wipes shattered glass. The door bashes anyway. FREEZER MAN and two UNKNOWN MEN in work jackets shoulder in.

FREEZER MAN

Bar's closed unless you pour respect.

Mara stands alone in the doorway.

MARA

Whatever you think you're doing, don't.

They move past her. She plants.

UNKNOWN #1

Where is he?

Mara smiles without humor.

MARA  
Sleeping. Like a human. Try it  
sometime.

FREEZER MAN reaches for the back hall. Mara throws a bar key  
at his temple—clack—stuns him a beat.

FREEZER MAN  
Wrong move.

He lunges. Mara grabs a bottle and breaks it with the ease of  
practice.

MARA  
Right move.

They circle.

From the back office: a human noise of a man finding himself  
again.

---

INT. BACK OFFICE — SAME

Jack swims toward consciousness. The HUD sputters:

HP: 14%

SOUL: 19%  
STATUS: CRASH

He sits up. The glove is quiet. He can hear his own blood.

Front: commotion. A thud. Mara's cuss. A chair scrapes.

Jack staggers to his feet.

JACK  
No.

He fumbles for the bone saw—then drops it.

He walks into the bar like a man walking into weather.

---

INT. FRONT BAR — CONTINUOUS

Mara holds three men off with broken glass and gravity. She's  
good, but she's not three people.

Jack steps between. Hands open. He looks at Mara, not at them.

JACK  
I will not use it.

MARA  
They will.

UNKNOWN #1 swings at Jack. Jack takes it. Falls. Stands again.

FREEZER MAN fists the collar of Jack's shirt.

FREEZER MAN  
Make the world say yes, magic boy.

JACK  
No.

FREEZER MAN cocks back to cave his face in.

The HUD erupts with red prompts:

CRITICAL: DEFEND MARA  
SUGGESTED: STUN (LOW) / MAIM (MED) / KILL (HIGH)  
SOUL RESERVE INSUFFICIENT FOR MERCY MOVE

Jack sobs once. He looks at Mara. She shakes her head: don't.

FREEZER MAN's fist drops—  
—someone behind him whistles. MR. HOLLIS (the dignified homeless man) has stepped in, wielding a pool cue like a staff.

MR. HOLLIS  
We don't beat on women in Rockport.

He cracks FREEZER across the back. Unknowns turn. Barback grabs a fire extinguisher from the wall and blasts foam. Chaos. Blinded men flail.

Mara grabs Jack, drags him behind the bar. Hollis swings again, nimble as spite.

MARA  
You okay?

Jack laughs like a man falling off a cliff and enjoys the wind.

JACK  
I didn't.

MARA

I saw.

She stands. Eyes fire. She pumps the extinguisher again into FREEZER's face point-blank.

MARA (CONT'D)

Out.

They stumble into the rain, foamed and furious.

Hollis bows like a weird courtly knight. Jack bows back, tears in his eyes.

JACK

Thank you.

MR. HOLLIS

We help where we can. You gotta stop trying to do it all, son. It's rude.

He leaves. Mara leans on the bar, shakes out adrenaline. Jack sags to a stool.

The HUD—silent, then:

ACHIEVEMENT: DIDN'T USE IT WHEN YOU COULD HAVE (SILVER)  
+30 SOUL  
HP: 17%

Jack nods to no one. He's still dying, but he is here.

Then—SCREECH—tires outside. The pickup returns. Headlights strobe through the windows.

FREEZER MAN stomps back in holding a jerry can.

MARA

No—

He splashes gasoline across the bar. Matches. Flick.

JACK

NO—

The match falls. Fire whoomps across liquor like it was waiting.

Mara grabs the extinguisher—dead. Hollis is gone. Barback panics.

Jack lifts his hand—doesn't use it—and still he can't breathe watching flame run toward the back office where there's wiring, alcohol, them.

He snaps.

JACK (CONT'D)

YES.

The world hears him. The flame freezes mid-lick. Gasoline beads in the air like a snow globe. People pause on the sidewalk outside, mid-step. The entire block holds its breath.

The HUD drains like a sink:

SOUL: 0%

HP: 9%

CORRUPTION: MODERATE

Jack looks at FREEZER MAN's face, eyes inches from a suspended flame. The man is afraid the way mammals are.

MARA

Jack—

JACK

Leave.

FREEZER cannot move. Jack uncurls a finger. Flame advances a millimeter. FREEZER screams in his throat—no sound gets out.

MARA

Jack. Look at me. Don't look at it.  
Look at me.

He turns. He looks. She's terrified and furious and loving him with her face like a rope thrown to a drowning man.

MARA (CONT'D)

We're not doing this.

He nods. He opens his hand—the fire drops to the floor and runs out of fuel as if choosing mercy. The room exhales; reality unfreezes. The match guttered. FREEZER stumbles back, howling, not burned.

MARA (CONT'D)

Get out.

He goes.

Jack collapses back to the stool, emptied. The HUD flickers death:

NEW MAIN QUEST READY: "THE THING THAT WANTS"  
 REWARD: PEACE  
 FAILURE: EVERYTHING

Mara kneels, presses her forehead to his.

MARA (CONT'D)  
 We end it. You understand me? No more levels. No more points. We end the game.

Jack nods, crying, snot and ash and relief.

JACK  
 How?

MARA  
 You made a wish. We make a different one.

---

EXT. ROCKPORT LAKE — NIGHT

Wind scuds the surface. The black water has the patience of a judge.

Mara and Jack stand at the railing. Nia arrives, breath smoking, carrying a car battery and cables.

NIA  
 You two always pick the romantic spots.

MARA  
 He made the world say yes. We make it say no.

Nia sets the battery. Attaches cables to rebar spikes hammered into the shore. She looks like a mad saint.

NIA  
 When I say pull, you pull. You say no out loud. Humans are old. Old is stronger.

Jack swallows.

JACK  
 What if it kills me?

MARA

Then it kills something worth  
killing. The part that wants.

He nods. He takes her hand. He steps knee-deep into the lake.  
Cold steals his ankles.

NIA

On my mark—

A pair of headlights swings down the access road. The pickup  
again, engine roaring. FREEZER MAN at the wheel, screaming a  
wordless animal word. He floors it, intent to plow the three  
of them into the water.

Jack's hand flies up on instinct. He does not gesture. The  
glove does.

The truck lifts off the gravel like a toy. It hangs six  
inches up, wheels spinning mud into stars.

Jack watches, horrified. He didn't choose. It did.

JACK

Put it down.

Silence.

JACK (CONT'D)

Please.

The truck drops. FREEZER stalls. Looks at them through the  
windshield, shaking—in rage, in fear, in animal confusion—and  
backs away, fishtails, flees.

Jack looks at the glove like it's a rabid dog on the end of  
his arm.

JACK (CONT'D)

Now.

He wades to waist-deep. Mara wades with him without  
hesitation. Nia braces the cables.

NIA

Pull.

Jack submerges the gloved arm. The lake electrifies around  
his skin as Nia taps the battery. Not enough to kill. Enough  
to call.

The HUD explodes into garbage characters, then coalesces:

FINAL PROMPT:

ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT TO DELETE "THE THING THAT WANTS"?

[ A ] YES

[ B ] YES (HARD MODE)

Mara squeezes his fingers under black water.

MARA

Say it with me.

Together, they say no out loud. Again. Again. Like a mantra.  
Like a spell older than toys.

JACK & MARA (CONT'D)

No.

No.

No.

The glove thrashes his arm. Filaments writhe under skin like  
worms dying in salt.

HP: 7%... 6%...

SOUL: 0%

CORRUPTION: SEVERE

Nia arcs the battery higher. The lake shudders in concentric  
rings.

Jack screams NO until the word is all lungs and blood.

The HUD flashes a single 8-bit heart. It cracks.

The glove splits across the palm like an eye blinking shut.

EVERYTHING GOES QUIET.

The HUD drops to zero. Nothing left to read.

Jack sags into Mara's arms. She hauls him up. Nia yanks the  
cables. The lake takes the broken glove pieces and swallows  
them.

Jack coughs. Breathing. Barely.

Mara holds his face. He's here. He is not all here. But he is  
him.

He smiles, small, the first honest one in a long time.

Then—far across the lake—dozens of tiny lights blink awake  
along the shore. Phones. Cameras. People who came to watch  
the magic trick where a man saved himself.

The moment curdles.

MARA

We go.

They stumble up the embankment. Nia shoulders the dead battery.

A police cruiser turns down the access road. A voice on loudspeaker:

PA (O.S.)

Hands where we can see them.

Mara raises hers. Nia too. Jack lifts his bare hand, slow, terrified and relieved to feel nothing answer when he asks for a trick.

Officers approach. Guns low. Nervous.

OFFICER #1

Jack Reese? You're under arrest for questioning related to—

Mara steps in front of him like a wall. Not begging. Just standing.

MARA

He'll come. Don't touch him like he's a bomb.

The cop, thrown by ordinary decency, nods once.

Jack holds out his wrists. No cuffs yet. He looks at Mara.

JACK

Thank you.

MARA

You don't thank me for this. You just... don't pick it up again.

He nods. Means it. He has to.

The officers lead him toward the cruiser.

Behind them, the lake laps at rocks, quiet as a kept secret. Under the surface, something small flickers—a last 8-bit spark—then goes dark.

CUT TO BLACK.

FADE IN:

BLACK.  
A cheerful 8-bit START tone... cuts  
out mid-note.

SUPER: ACT IV — "GAME OVER"

---

INT. POLICE STATION — INTERVIEW ROOM — MORNING

Gray light. Jack sits small at the table. Damp hair. A paper cup of water he hasn't touched.

His HUD is barely there now, translucent like breath on glass:

HP: 11%

SOUL: 3%  
STATUS: CRASH / DEBT

DETECTIVE from last night sets down a form.

DETECTIVE  
The witness list backs your story.  
The driver panicked. But the DA's  
going to chew your name for  
protein. Lay low. Don't... do  
whatever you do.

Jack nods, ashamed and grateful.

DETECTIVE (CONT'D)  
You look... empty. Get a doctor.

JACK  
There isn't a doctor for this.

The Detective studies him. No idea what to say to that. He opens the door.

Mara waits in the hall like a lighthouse.

MARA  
We're going home.

He nods. They go.

---

EXT. DEAD MALL — PARKING LOT — LATE AFTERNOON

Sky a dirty dishwater. The WILLOWBROOK MALL sign is half-lit; most letters dead.

Jack, Mara, and NIA (tool bag slung) stand facing the blank façade.

NIA  
Why here?

JACK  
This is where I wanted it most.  
When I was nine. The arcade. I made  
the wish in front of a glass case  
full of toys I couldn't win. It  
heard me.

Mara takes his hand, threads fingers, and doesn't let go.

MARA  
Then we end it where it started.

---

INT. DEAD MALL — CONCOURSE — DUSK

Lights hum. Empty storefronts gated like dead mouths. A lone massage chair sits unplugged like a throne for no one.

They walk past an old FUNLAND ARCADE—shuttered, lights still faintly bubbling behind dead glass, as if the mall never told it the world ended.

Jack stops at the gate. He looks nine.

JACK  
I told it "Make them listen." I  
thought I meant... bullies. Teachers.  
My dad.

Nia kneels at the lock. Pops it in two seconds with a pick.

NIA  
Small crimes for big mercy.

She rolls the gate.

---

INT. FUNLAND ARCADE — CONTINUOUS

Dust motes in lemony fluorescent. Cabinets sleeping like horses in a barn. A CHANGE MACHINE blinks INSERT BILL with blind hope.

Against the back wall: a dead CRT WALL that once displayed high scores. A box fan ticks, broken.

The HUD is suddenly lucid:

FINAL ARENA: FUNLAND

BOSS: THE THING THAT WANTS  
WIN CONDITION: DELETE  
COST: YOU

Mara sees the look change on Jack's face even if she can't see the text.

MARA  
Tell me the truth.

JACK  
If I do it, I'm... done.

Nia unloads: car battery, cables, industrial extension cord with gator clamps.

NIA  
Then we do it right. We don't half-kill you and half-kill it and end up with a haunted glove in a thrift bin.

Jack nods. He moves to the oldest cabinet—"CAPTAIN COURAGEOUS", side art worn to ghosts. He lays his gloved hand on the glass.

The cabinet wakes—marquee flickers, the joystick twitches like it remembers.

The intro screen fills the CRT: pixel heroes, a castle, PRESS START blinking.

Jack's eyes film.

JACK  
I used to stand here and pretend the demo was me. Like the machine was playing for me because I didn't have quarters.

He reaches up. Presses the cabinet's START button with his bare hand.

ON SCREEN: PLAYER 1 becomes JACK.

---

INT. FUNLAND ARCADE — POWER CLOSET — MOMENTS LATER

Nia cracks the breaker panel. Dust puffs like breath.

NIA  
Mall still runs on dinosaur bones.  
Perfect.

She clips the extension into the bus. The lights dim, then settle. She runs the cable to the CRT WALL.

NIA (CONT'D)  
We're going to make your "game" eat  
enough of itself to choke.

---

INT. FUNLAND ARCADE — BACK WALL — CONTINUOUS

Nia clamps the gators to the CRT WALL frame. She slaps the panel.

CRT WALL sputters alive: nine squares of snow resolve into JACK'S HUD magnified—life bar, soul bar, everything he never wanted anyone to see.

Mara takes this in with a flinch. Jack can't look for long. He kneels.

JACK  
(quiet)  
If I say goodbye wrong, I'll run.

MARA  
Then don't say goodbye. Say "see  
you."

He laughs, broken and bright, and kisses her—quick, present. It's not elegant. It's everything.

MARA (CONT'D)  
Say it.

JACK  
See you.

She nods, steps back, face a study in brave.

Nia hands him a coin—an old token stamped FUNLAND LIVES.

NIA  
One last quarter.

Jack takes it. He looks at his ruined hand. He presses the token into the glove seam until it hurts.

The HUD chimes:

INSERT COIN

CONTINUE?

[ A ] YES

[ B ] YES (HARD MODE)

Jack chooses B.

The CRT WALL explodes in 8-bit confetti, then resolves into a BOSS ROOM: the arcade rendered as a side-scroller, the cabinets as pillars, the CHANGE MACHINE a monolith at center. Atop it, a crown of glitch.

In the center of the screen: a dark sprite shaped like a hand with too many joints. Its name bar reads: THE THING THAT WANTS.

MARA  
I can't see it. I can just see you  
staring at a wall.

NIA  
We see enough.

Jack raises his gloved hand. The boss raises its. They mirror.

BOSS HEALTH: 100%  
JACK HP: 11%  
SOUL: 3%

JACK  
If I stop wanting, it starves.

He stands, breathes like he's stepping off a roof with dignity.

JACK (CONT'D)  
No more yes.

He flicks a gesture—NO.

The boss shrieks in a sound only the machines hear. The CHANGE MACHINE spits quarters like blood.

BOSS HEALTH: 88%

HP: 9%

SOUL: 2%

Jack plants his feet. He makes the Undo gesture he swore off—rewind—but not to fix his world. To rewind his wanting. To bring it back, back, back to a child in a mall who asked a plastic god to make him matter.

He rewinds to before the wish—until the intro screen on the cabinet shows INSERT COIN and little Jack (on the CRT wall) stands outside the arcade, nose to the glass.

Jack's adult voice breaks.

JACK

I'm sorry, kid. We're going to want different things now.

He presses the token deeper into the glove seam—skin splits, blood slicking plastic.

SOUL: 1%

The THING thrashes on screen, trying new shapes—teacher, bully, father's car taillights, a comment section, a closed sign—each a mask it used to get him to press A again and again.

Jack names them.

JACK (CONT'D)

No.

No.

No.

BOSS HEALTH: 41%

HP: 7%

SOUL: 0%

His body shakes. He can't feel his fingers. The glove begins to drink—sucking what's left, chewing the edges of his self.

Mara steps like she'll stop it. Nia holds her, weeping and iron.

NIA

If you love him, let him finish.

MARA

I do.

Jack looks at Mara one last time. He memorizes everything she is in a glance. It costs him something to look away.

He looks at the CHANGE MACHINE.

JACK  
You don't decide what I can buy  
anymore.

He points his bare hand and pushes. The CHANGE MACHINE implodes—coins scream, metal petals inward. The BOSS shrieks, loses 30%.

BOSS HEALTH: 11%  
HP: 5%

The HUD flickers: NEW ABILITY UNLOCKED: SELF-DELETE  
PROMPT: Are you sure?  
[ A ] YES  
[ B ] YES (FINAL)

He presses B.

Every cabinet in the arcade boots at once and plays their START tones, overlapping into a bright, poisonous chord. The glove opens like a flower of knives across his palm. Filaments unwind from his nerves like spider silk. The CRT WALL shows his SOUL bar as a black rectangle. Still, he pushes.

JACK  
I don't want.

The BOSS melts—not down, but inward—like someone hit DELETE on a word that thought it was a person.

BOSS HEALTH: 0%

The CRT WALL shows a full-screen GAME OVER in 8-bit font, then goes dark.

Silence.

Jack sways. The glove crumbles—not explodes, not deactivates—crumbles into regular plastic and wire, dead 1989 junk, as if the curse took its hands off it all at once.

Jack looks at his bare hand—ruined, burned, bleeding, empty.

He turns to Mara, smiling small and sodden, the kind of smile that knows its own end.

He steps, and his knees fail. He goes to the floor like a puppet with love for strings.

Mara catches his head. Nia's hands go to his chest, counting.

NIA  
 He's here. He's—  
 (beat)  
 Jack. Stay.

He looks at Mara. The HUD is gone. There's no sound in his chest but a human drum too tired to be heroic.

JACK  
 See you.

MARA  
 See you.

His breath stops in tiny increments, each deciding to be the last. Then: stillness.

Mara puts her forehead to his. No scream. No theatrics. She speaks into his hair.

MARA (CONT'D)  
 You did it. You did it, you  
 stubborn, stupid, beautiful man.

The mall hums. The cabinets power down one by one, like an audience leaving a theater.

Nia sits back hard, both hands over her mouth, sobbing with fury and gratitude at the same time. She looks at the dead glove pieces on the floor, kicks them with the toe of her boot like old gum.

NIA  
 Stay dead.

They do.

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EXT. FUNLAND / DEAD MALL — NIGHT

EMTs hustle Jack under a sheet. No sirens. No rush.

Police tape flutters. A small crowd has gathered beyond it—shapes at a distance. Some hold phones. Some just... stand.

Mrs. Reese arrives in a taxi, robe under a coat. She sees Mara. She sees the sheet.

She stops. The world reduces to a hallway with no doors. Mara goes to her, hands out.

Mrs. Reese leans into Mara like they share one spine. They don't say "he was good" or "he tried." They hold on.

Nia stands guard over a plastic evidence bag—inside: ruined glove parts. She signs a form. When the cop's back is turned, she slips one tiny screw—ordinary, nothing—into her pocket.

She will throw it in the lake on her way home. She will not tell anyone.

The mall lights go off row by row. Parking lot sodium warms to dark.

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INT. THE SAFE WORD — A WEEK LATER — DAY

Closed sign flipped. Bar empty. Mara moves through the space with sacrament: wiping, setting, fixing. She has not replaced the broken glass. She leaves the scorch on the floor visible.

On the back wall, above a shelf of cheap whiskey, a small frame: a photo of Jack at the bar, caught mid-laugh, crooked and alive. Next to it: a napkin in her handwriting:

"ONE HOUR AT A TIME."

She places a lemon square on a plate. She doesn't know why. She leaves it there.

A regular opens the door without looking at the sign.

REGULAR

You open?

MARA

In a minute.

He nods, sits, waits. For once, the waiting is ordinary.

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EXT. REESE HOUSE — BACK YARD — AFTERNOON

Mrs. Reese in a sweater tends her garden. Flowers mixed with weeds, a peace treaty of things that grow.

She sets a small wooden box under the lilac bush. Inside: old VHS tapes in crayon, a battery, a child's Power Glove brochure. She closes it. Covers it with a trowel of dirt.

MRS. REESE

Rest.

She sits on the step. She doesn't sob. She breathes. She looks up. Clouds move because that's what they do, not because anyone asked.

A neighborhood kid pedals past on a bike with a card in the spokes—tick tick tick. Music enough.

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EXT. ROCKPORT LAKE — SUNSET

Nia stands at the shore alone. She pulls the tiny screw from her pocket, tosses it into the water like a seed you don't want to see sprout.

The lake doesn't blink.

She sits, watches the sky accept the sun going, accepts it too.

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INT. DEAD MALL — FUNLAND — DUSK (EPILOGUE)

Dust. Dark. The CHANGE MACHINE dented like a punched mouth. The CRT WALL a blank, black mosaic.

On the floor: the glove pieces in an evidence circle chalked by bored cops. No hum. No light.

A JANITOR pushes a mop, steps around the circle without reverence, hums a pop song from 1992 without knowing why.

He mops right over the chalk and keeps going.

No flicker. No prompt. No wink.

Just the sound of a bucket wheel squeaking and a mall closing like a book.

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EXT. ROCKPORT — NIGHT

The town hums. Imperfect. Conflicted. Alive.

A billboard that once ran CONTROLLER conspiracy chatter now advertises FREE LEMONADE WITH LUNCH — THE SAFE WORD in letters a little crooked.

A bus arrives two minutes late. No one dies.

A cop gives someone a break. A kid steals a candy bar and then puts it back. A dog sits. An old man crosses the street too slow and a truck waits without honking.

The world keeps its own score.

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INT. THE SAFE WORD — NIGHT (CLOSE)

Quiet. Chairs up. Mara stands at the door, keys in hand.

She kills the lights. Darkness folds the room.

For a heartbeat, the jukebox hums... and then it doesn't.

No chime. No prompt. No voice.

Just night.

Mara locks the door and steps into it.

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FADE OUT.

ROLL CREDITS over a quiet piano version of a 90s game jingle that never quite remembers the last note.