PAY OR PLAY

Written by

Christia Crocker and Juliet Burton

Idea Unit, Inc.

14347 Albers Street #307
Sherman Oaks, CA 91401
WGA Registration: 2172296
US Copyright Registration: PAu 4-141-659

COLD OPEN

EXT. LOS ANGELES CITY HALL - DAY

A large group of PROTESTORS hold signs and circle.

CUT TO:

EXT. LOS FELIZ - VERMONT AVE. - DAY

HIPSTERS feed their dogs from outdoor café tables.

CUT TO:

EXT. DTLA - SAN PEDRO STREET - DAY

Tents, debris, and UNHOUSED MEN, WOMEN and CHILDREN span block after block.

CUT TO:

EXT. CENTURY CITY - DAY

Tall office buildings glint in the sunlight.

CUT TO:

INT. CENTURY CITY - DAY

Long escalators carry patrons in business attire.

CUT TO:

EXT. LOS FELIZ - NEAR 101 - DAY

Tech school students and workers get on and off the bus in work and casual school attire.

CUT TO:

EXT. DTLA RIOT - DAY

ICE OFFICIALS run after FLEEING MEN and WOMEN as A CROWD fights back and begins to riot.

MATCH CUT:

Idea Unit, Inc.

INT. HENRY & LISA'S BUNGALOW - LIVING/DINING ROOM - DAY

ON TELEVISION

ICE OFFICIALS run after FLEEING MEN and WOMEN as A CROWD fights back and begins to riot.

TELEVISION COMMENTATOR 1
Riots have broken out near San Pedro and 6th Streets in Downtown LA, provoked by another forced roundup of undocumented workers.

ANI (early to mid-30s, affable disruptor and lawyer) sits at a small table with chairs, a booster seat, and a highchair, clad in an MIT sweatshirt. Ani looks up at the TV and shakes her head, sadly.

HENRY (mid-30s, Ani's legal partner) attempts to wrangle his son despite being dressed to the nines for a business pitch

ETHAN (2 years old), imitating the news, running in circles, yelling, and crashing into pillows, then into Henry, who scoops him up, tosses him in the air, and turns off the television.

HENRY
Easy buddy. Let's turn this off. Life these days is not G-rated.

Ani stares intently at a…

COMPUTER SCREEN

in one window, code appears as Ani types. In another window, global data on actor union rates, tax credits, and stage availability formats itself into a chart.

BABY STELLA (Henry and Lisa's daughter) cries from the other room. Ani snaps out of her trance, getting up out of her chair.

ANI
I can help.

HENRY
She loves her Auntie Ani, but please keep working. This thing—

ANI
ProdCo Scaler.

Idea Unit, Inc.

HENRY
We'll work on that branding— but it has the power to change the game! If we can give our clients instantaneous data on union rate changes, tax incentive details, immediate schedule updates, we can lock in retainers, license the system, and be set for life!

ANI
How about just getting it to demo without glitching?

INT. HENRY & LISA'S BUNGALOW - BEDROOM - DAY

Henry picks up Baby Stella from her crib, bounces and "shhhushes" her as his phone dings with a…

TEXT from Lisa:

"Hi babe. I'm running late from my doctor's appointment, but Aunt Joan should be there soon. Good luck today!"

Stella's cries and Henry's quieting techniques continue, as he pockets his phone, catching his appearance in the mirror as he exits the room.

INT. HENRY & LISA'S BUNGALOW - LIVING/DINING ROOM - DAY

Henry continues to bounce Stella as Ethan grabs a toy with a keyboard and imitates Ani, who is running a report through her Prodco Scaler program.

Henry looks over Ani's shoulder as she types.

HENRY
They're going to ask me to compare across territories depending on different shoot dates. Can I do that?

ANI
Yes. I'll guide you through it. I've got Stella.
(taking Stella)
Don't I, sweet girl?

Henry sits down and looks at the…

Idea Unit, Inc.

COMPUTER SCREEN

displaying the show title, a calendar, and boxes listing “local laws”, “stages”, “costs”, “crew”, and “blackout dates”.

ANI
Click on the calendar.

HENRY
stares intently at the screen and clicks the keyboard. His face breaks into a smile.

ANI
You got it, that’s it. Once all the parameters are entered, you can play around with them.

HENRY
Could it forecast the budget if the production moved to Hungary?

COMPUTER SCREEN

displaying a global map and pull-down menu of countries. The cursor moves down to Hungary and clicks. The data for the “local laws”, “costs”, “crew”, begin to glitch.

ANI
It’s just an expanded data model with plenty of glitches, so stick to the functions we just discussed, ok?

HENRY
Are you sure you can’t come? I’m not the one with an engineering background, and these people are your contacts.

Stella begins to fuss, and Henry takes her from Ani.

ANI
You’ll be great. I have to manage the legal clinic until they hire a full-time director, and there’s an important grant filing today.

Henry’s face loses its enthusiasm.

Ethan has found the remote again and tries to change the channel.

Idea Unit, Inc.

ETHAN
I want The Buggles!

Henry takes the remote from Ethan, but it lands on entertainment news reels.

TELEVISION COMMENTATOR 2 (O.C.)
In other news, SlixTIX, founded by Kendall Eaton, has tapped Elise Hendricks to helm its streaming services.

Ani and Henry's eyes widen in recognition of Elise's name.

ON TELEVISION

TELEVISION COMMENTATOR 2
While at Thompson, Hewitt, Cox and Payne, Hendricks negotiated deals that changed the landscape of streaming entertainment.

TELEVISION COMMENTATOR 3

Until she led the industry- shattering testimony against former boss, Joel Cox, now serving a 10-year sentence for multiple accounts of DOMESTIC VIOLENCE and sexual abuse.

ETHAN

reaches for Ani, who climbs onto her lap. Ani is fixed…

ON THE TELEVISION

INT. COURTROOM - DAY

JOEL (50s, handsome silver fox, composed) is led away in handcuffs by POLICE OFFICERS.

CHYRON: Joel Cox convicted of nine counts of sexual assault.

CUT TO:

Idea Unit, Inc.

EXT. LOS ANGELES SUPERIOR COURT - CONTINUOUS

Shouts of support from the crowd as Elise, PROSECUTOR TRENTO (early 60's, old-school DA's Office veteran) Ani, Henry, LES (50s, law firm partner) and ALX (20s non-binary, type-A and driven), all walk down the courthouse steps. Elise is being escorted by Alx as she fixes a concerned gaze on Ani who appears zombie-like.

ON ANI

ETHAN
Ani! This is boring.

Ethan pulls on Ani's blouse, revealing a spray of ghastly scars across Ani's body.

Ani watches the screen, frozen.

ON TELEVISION

Elise gives her interview with a polished smile.

ELISE
I am grateful to SlixTix for this opportunity, especially in an era that has replaced misogynist culture with a collaborative culture.

TELEVISION COMMENTATOR 2
Many thought she would retire, but we're glad to see her back and wish her the best in her new role. And now onto the numbers--

Henry looks at Ani's rigid posture, grabs the remote, and changes the channel.

HENRY
You okay?

ANI
I'm fine. Good for Elise.

The doorbell RINGS. Ethan runs to the door. Henry, still holding Stella, opens it to reveal JOAN (early 70s, Lisa's Aunt, recently widowed).

ETHAN
Jo Jo!

Idea Unit, Inc.

Joan hugs Ethan and then takes Stella from Henry.

JOAN
Ethan!

HENRY
(primping and prepping)
You are a lifesaver. I should be back in a few hours. Wish me luck. If we land this client, we can finally go to work in a real office!
(under his breath)
Again.

Henry and Ani depart.

END OF COLD OPEN

Idea Unit, Inc.

ACT ONE

EXT. MALIBU HOME - DAY

Sunlight glints off a beautiful beachside mansion as the ocean sparkles.

EXT. MALIBU HOME - INTERIOR GARAGE - DAY

ROBERT (50s, distinguished-with-an-edge) looks at 5 empty parking spaces with sadness. He walks towards the one single car in the garage, a 1961 Ferrari 250 Spider. He steps in and inhales, as if savoring a meal.

INT. FERRARI 250 SPIDER - PACIFIC COAST HIGHWAY - DAY

Robert accepts an incoming phone call from Alx.

ROBERT
Yes, Alx.

ALX (V.O.)
Elise is in and word is, it's a beauty contest. She is looking for a partner firm to handle the network's contract load. We need to present first and fast.

ROBERT
(Irritated)
Did you a run conflicts report? What are the projected billables? Other firms in the lineup?

ALX (V.O.)
Done and done and done. Check your inbox. To get our presentation ready fast, I need to pull Les' team off the Hong Kong Merger. But it needs to come from you . . .

Robert ponders. He accelerates and zips up the opposing lane to pass three cars in three seconds flat.

He gets flipped off by one of the cars and grins.

ALX
Dad? . . . Robert, you there?

Idea Unit, Inc.

ROBERT
Don't worry about Elise. I'll get the meeting. Make the presentation tight and flawless. This is our comeback.

INT. THOMPSON, HEWITT & PAYNE HALLWAYS - DAY

KURT (30s, stylish paralegal) sashays into SUSAN'S (50s, more traditional) cubicle.

KURT
(under his breath)
Check your texts. They're paying top dollar.

Susan takes out her personal phone and sees a...

TEXT from Kurt: "McGibbon & Sacs - Join Our Team!"

Robert's voice pierces the moment.

ROBERT (O.C.)
Susan!

SUSAN

throws her phone into her bag like a hot potato

SUSAN
Kurt!

Kurt covers Susan nonchalantly as Robert marches down the hallway with a stack of Redweld files.

ROBERT
Schedule a call with Elise and send flowers.

Robert hands Susan his files, empty coffee cup, and jacket. Susan struggles to hold them and Kurt takes a few items off Susan's hands.

SUSAN
Elise? Same number?

Kurt raises his eyebrows.

ROBERT
New number. SlixTIX. It's time sensitive.

Idea Unit, Inc.

SUSAN
Understood. I would go with peonies--

ROBERT
Whatever, fine. The bigger the better.

Robert departs. Susan rushes to her chair and computer, rubbing her temples.

SUSAN
Another day in paradise.

KURT
You've put up with Robert for 25 years. But Susan, look around. It's time for a change.

Susan watches Kurt walk back through the lavish, but half-empty office.

INT. SOUP KITCHEN GARAGE - CONTINUOUS

Ani collects her multiple legal files as she exits a scuffed Prius.

JON (mid-40s famous musician, owner/operator of the soup kitchen) pulls up on his motorcycle. He parks and dismounts.

JON
Good morning!

Ani collects herself, putting on a focused and unflappable front as she waits for Jon.

ANI
Today's the big day!

INT. SOUP KITCHEN - STAIRWELL - CONTINUOUS

Jon and Ani climb the stairs together, brightly feeding off each other's energy. Jon offers to hold some of the files.

ANI
After we get through these grant documents, we can file the application.

Idea Unit, Inc.

JON
No wonder you're my favorite lawyer, not yet in the office and you're already fired up.

They arrive at doors with two signs reading: "Feeding Hearts Kitchen - Founder Jon Van Sant, and Shield & Shelter Legal Services - Founder Ani Medina".

INT. SOUP KITCHEN - BACK OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

STAFF MEMBERS, INTERNS and VOLUNTEERS buzz around wrangling food supplies and organizing lines for the legal clinic and the soup kitchen.

JON
This is going to help a lot of people.

ANI
I hope so, and that's why it would be incredible to have some full-time support!

Jon walks with Ani to the legal clinic side of the space, which utilizes old desks and folding chairs but is painted in warm, cheerful colors with empowering phrases.

INT. SOUP KITCHEN - LEGAL CLINIC - CONTINUOUS

Jon gently places the files down on Ani's desk, as Ani's phone DINGS.

ON PHONE

"Notice! Your balance is below the minimum required. Please take action to prevent additional penalties."

ON ANI

Who plunks down her files, silences her phone, and turns it face down, irritated.

JON
(reading her)
Is everything okay otherwise?

ANI
Just the age-old balance of healing the soul versus fueling the wallet.
(MORE)

Idea Unit, Inc.

ANI (CONT'D)
I can always figure it out, but my legal partner could use more of my time and billable hours. He's got two young kids…

JON
It's a valid concern.

ANI
Also… the woman that convinced me to testify against Joel was on the news this morning.

Jon holds the moment with Ani meaningfully.

ANI (CONT'D)
And this work is the best therapy.

Let's meet after the lunch shift. I should have everything ready for you to sign.

TESSA (early 20s, law clerk) comfortable in the environment, appears at the doorway with a pile of intake clipboards. Jon nods, grabs an apron, and departs.

TESSA
We've got 2 landlord-tenant issues, 3 domestic violence cases, and 1 bankruptcy.

ANI
I'll take the DVs.

TESSSA
All of them?

ANI
Yes! And you and Casey can split the rest.

TESSSA
You got it, boss.

Tessa exits.

INT. ELISE'S OFFICE - SLIXTIX INTERVIEW - DAY

ELISE (50s) on an early morning status call with her team of 6 network lawyers (MASHA, TODD, SANJAY, CARO, JASON and LIZ).

LIZ (V.O.)
So that is 50 - five zero - shows on service at launch.
(MORE)

Idea Unit, Inc.

LIZ (V.O.) (CONT'D)
A variety of content. Inclusive, diverse and evocative and still plenty of family-friendly programming.

TODD (V.O.)
We're tracking data points on -

ELISE
(unmuting to interrupt)
I know we haven't had much time to get to know each other, but that is about to change. We are about to embark on a path that is a part of entertainment history. There used to be 3 main networks and 5 main movie studios. Sure, there was cable, but nothing like the impact of what we hope to do as a streaming company. Imagine every person on this planet with a computer, tablet, or phone. Subscribing monthly. That is our audience. Buckle up.

The team exchanges glances.

SANJAY
I heard the outside counsel budget came through. That's a plus.

ELISE
It wasn't much, but better than nothing. I have a few firms in mind. Send me any you know - experienced, hungry and open to contract assignments.

MASHA
I'm guessing big firms are out?

A SHIPPING TRAINEE enters with an enormous flower arrangement. Elise checks the card, shakes her head, chuckles.

ELISE
(distracted)
Big budgets are out. But I'll consider firms that see the potential and want in. I'm pressed for time - send me the final budget by noon. Thanks, team.

Her phone buzzes. It's Robert. Elise answers.

Idea Unit, Inc.

ELISE (CONT'D)
Nice touch, Robert. Two dozen, classic ivory French-bred peonies. But don't waste your time. SLIXtix will never retain Thompson, Hewitt & Payne.

INTERCUT WITH INT. ROBERT'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

ROBERT
You know we can easily handle the work.

ELISE
Robert, be real. I used to lead the team that could handle the work and taking "Cox" from the nameplate isn't a magic trick. Giving work to a tainted firm isn't bold - it's bad business. But I do love the flowers.

ROBERT
The firm's cut ties with Joel. What do you think I have been doing for 2 years? Harassment training, DEI work, overhauling hiring, keeping long-term clients from walking.

ELISE
And after all that, you're still giving off douchebag energy.

ROBERT
C'mon, Elise. Give us a meeting. Alx has been working his ass off. Don't you want to see how your mentorship paid off?

ELISE
Alx, now they, I will meet.

ROBERT
(uncomfortable with pronoun)
Great, and we've got the bandwidth. I'll knock billables down 10%.

ELISE
Robert, stop talking. You sound desperate. Not a good look. Have Alx reach out to my team. You can sit this one out.

Idea Unit, Inc.

ROBERT
(humbled)
Well, sincere congratulations on the new role. The sabbatical's clearly sharpened your fire.

ELISE
You mean turned me into a bitch. I learned from the best.

INT. SOUP KITCHEN - LEGAL CLINIC - DAY

Ani nibbles on a packed lunch at her desk. Across from her, Jon reviews a packet of bound pages with "Sign Here" stickers. Ani glances at her…

LAPTOP

The ProdCo Scaler flashes new charts and graphs.

JON
flips to the "Sign Here" stickers and begins signing the grant paperwork.

Ani's phone BUZZES. She sees it's Henry and momentarily considers sending it to voicemail. She picks up her phone and heads to the stairwell.

ANI
Pardon me. I'll be right back. I've got to take this.

INT. SOUP KITCHEN - STAIRWELL - DAY

HENRY (V.O.)
Thanks for picking up. Did you see my texts?

ANI
No, I haven't seen your texts. I'm doing double duty, tweaking the tech while I'm on lunch.

INTERCUT WITH INT. HENRY'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

HENRY
Well, I couldn't close the deal. You should have been there. This prospect was your connection.
(MORE)

Idea Unit, Inc.

HENRY (CONT'D)
It's not a good look for our law practice.

ANI
Don't put this on me. You pitched your best. There are more opportunities out there.

HENRY
Well, I'm glad you feel that way because I just left a message with Elise. She's going to need outside counsel and we can do this with the ProdCo Scaler.

ANI
Absolutely not! It's not ready and we know nothing about this streaming company. And Elise? Are we that desperate?

HENRY
Yes, we are. We are drowning and about to go into the red.

ANI
Let's talk later. I got to get back to work.

HENRY
(sarcastic)
Yeah, making big bucks.

Ani hangs up, returns to legal clinic office but thrown off by Henry's call. Jon is talking with young woman, TIA (16), who Ani, at first glance, suspects is a minor.

JON
Ani, I'd like you to meet TIA. She's been staying in the women's shelter and helping with the lunch service.

ANI
Nice to meet you. And thanks for your help. We certainly need it.

Tia smiles shyly and shakes Ani's hand.

JON
Tia expressed interest in helping at the legal clinic, maybe filing?

Idea Unit, Inc.

ANI
Great! Do you have any office experience?

TIA
Yes, but I don't have a resume.

Ani looks at her watch, then grabs an application from a drawer and hands it to Tia, who holds it like she just received a bomb.

ANI
Would you be able to stop by in a few days with a completed application and your ID. This way we can get you started ASAP.

Something about Tia's demeanor changes, which Ani clocks.

INT. THOMPSON, HEWITT & PAYNE - HALLWAY

Alx strides through the hallways tapping on office doors and cubicles of Kurt, NINA (50s paralegal), BRAYDON (30s paralegal), LASHELLE (30s, Alx's assistant) and KENNY (20s, legal assistant). Les, concerned, tracks the parade.

ALX
We've got a big one today. Follow me!

Alx swoops coffee out of Kenny's hand as Kenny turns and reluctantly follows.

ALX (CONT'D)
Just in time! Kenny needs a new coffee. Come.

Alx leads the group to a conference room. They all look at their phones, chuckling.

ON PHONES

Group text: a set of emojis- a baby, money, and briefcase - indicating Nepo Baby.

LASHELLE

rolls her eyes and texts back to the group.

Idea Unit, Inc.

ON PHONE

Lashelle: “Be Nice”.

INT. THOMPSON, HEWITT & PAYNE - CONFERENCE ROOM

ALX
Team, I need all hands-on deck. Tomorrow, we pitch SlixTIX to retain THP. I know many of you have been in deep with the Hong Kong merger, and I appreciate your efforts - but I’ll need you to pivot your focus - at least for today. Check your inboxes for the reports I need. Your responsiveness and teamwork mean a lot, and I truly appreciate everyone jumping in on short notice. Let’s make this happen. Chop! Chop!

The team departs the conference room. Alx feels pride in their show of leadership. They glance at their phone.

ON ALX’S PHONE

“Then and Now Photo Memories”

2016 THPC Summer Associates Lunch. Alx presents as polished Cis Male. Henry the golden boy. Ani, the beauty with ambition and fire. Behind them, Elise - smiling wide with pride.

2023 THP LGBTQ+ Pride Event. Alx wears a similar Armani suit but with a different skin - their long hair pulled back, kohl-rimmed eyes, and a beard that dares you to question how you read them.

ON ALX

acknowledging the dissonance of their growth.

INT. HENRY’S CAR - CONTINUOUS

Henry is driving. He presses PLAY on his voicemail.

LISA (V.O.)
Hey Babe. Thanks for handling the morning chaos - you’re the best.
(MORE)

Idea Unit, Inc.

LISA (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Doctor Riley asked me to stay for a few extra tests, but I'm sure it's nothing. And hey, sounds like congratulations are in order? I figured you must've landed the client. Either way, I'm so proud of you. This new firm you and Ani are building - I know it's just the beginning, but it already feels like something real. You two are going to make it work. Love you. See you soon.

He pulls into the driveway - jaw tightening. He sits for a moment, then walks inside.

INT. HENRY AND LISA'S BUNGALOW - LIVING / DINING AREA - DAY

HENRY'S POV - THROUGH THE BACK WINDOW

Lisa wears baby Stella in a carrier as Ethan leads her around the grass, his hand in hers. Lisa laughs.

ON HENRY

Watching his small family with pride. Snapping back to reality, Henry grabs his phone and dials Elise. Voicemail. He hangs up. Redials.

ELISE (V.O.)
Henry, I'd say it's been a minute, but you've been blowing up my phone all morning.

HENRY
Good to hear your voice, Elise. And congrats. I knew it was only a matter of time before you took a captain's seat.

ELISE (V.O.)
Thanks. Now tell me what's going on.

HENRY
Ani and I want a meeting. We started our own firm. SlixTIX is going to need outside counsel soon - - and you know we can handle it.

Idea Unit, Inc.

ELISE (V.O.)
Hold on, you and Ani? Do you have any clients?

HENRY
We're small but mighty and we learned from the best. You and …

An awkward silence.

ELISE (V.O.)
Joel. Yes… we're getting a lot of reminders of him today. How's Ani? I'm guessing she hasn't thought much about that production company tech we were working on before the shitshow went down.

HENRY
Actually, she's turned it into something incredible. It's almost ready for launch. Just give us thirty minutes of your time.

A beat.

ELISE (V.O.)
My assistant will coordinate a meeting.

INT. SOUP KITCHEN - HALLWAY - EVENING

Ani and Jon walk into the hallway from their respective sides. Ani pauses, but Jon indicates that she should take the lead.

JON
Thank you for all your work on the grant proposal.

ANI
Of course. We've got to keep the lights on!

JON
About that…

Idea Unit, Inc.

INT. SOUP KITCHEN - STAIRWELL - CONTINUOUS

JON
I didn't want to alarm you because it seems you've got a lot on your plate with Henry, but—

ANI
I know we need this grant.

JON
Like yesterday. I can probably get a donation from St. Augustine to cover the kitchen for a few more months, but the Legal Clinic is a different beast.

INT. SOUP KITCHEN - GARAGE - CONTINUOUS

ANI
I know - all the non-profits have their hands out and donating to provide legal services for low-income citizens is a tough sell

JON
It will work out. It always does. At any rate, special favor?

ANI
Of course.

JON
Will you check in with Tia? Something is going on, and she seems open to connecting with you.

ANI
You got it.

Ani's phone DINGS three times in rapid succession.

ANI (CONT'D)
Sorry. It's Henry. I'll see you Thursday! And you're right, it will all work out.

EXT. ANI'S CAR - NIGHT

Ani's Prius is in a long line of cars on the I-10 freeway where vehicles merge and maneuver around her.

Idea Unit, Inc.

INT. ANI'S CAR - NIGHT

Ani's frustration increases as she navigates her car.

ANI
Geez. I'm just trying to freaking drive, here!

The car speaker RINGS. Henry's contact image comes through, and Ani presses a button to accept his call.

HENRY
Ani! We got the meeting with Elise.

ANI
(wincing through traffic)
What the hell, Henry? We agreed we would talk about this later.

HENRY
Later is too late. If we don't get a big client, we don't have a firm.

ANI
Elise is not our only option. You've been talking to lots of people.

HENRY
And none of them have signed. Which means we have no incoming money. Which means we try this, or I move on and find a job to feed my family!

Ani holds Henry's gaze, torn… then CRASH!

END ACT ONE

Idea Unit, Inc.