

## No Other Choice [15]

2025 South Korea 139 mins

UK released **23 January 2026**

Director **Park Chan-wook**

Screenplay **Park Chan-wook; Lee Kyoung-mi; Don McKellar; Lee Ja-hye.** (Based on *The Ax* by **Donald Westlake**)

Cinematography **Kim Woo-hyung**

Music **Jo Yeong-wook**

Cast **Lee Byung-hun** (Yoo Man-su); **Son Ye-jin** (Lee Mi-ri); **Park Hee-soon** (Choi Seon-chul); **Lee Sung-min** (Goo Beom-mo); **Yeom Hye-ran** (Lee A-ra); **Cha Seung-won** (Ko Si-jo); **Yoo Yeon-seok** (Oh Jin-ho)

Criminals in the films of Park Chan-wook tend to be brilliant, devious, Machiavellian creatures, adept at the long game and staying several moves ahead of those who would bring them to justice. Not so Man-su (Squid Game's Lee Byung-hun), the endearingly klutzy protagonist of *No Other Choice*. A former paper mill middle manager whose job is abruptly terminated, Man-su turns to desperate and increasingly deadly measures to secure reemployment in a shrinking job market. He is, it becomes clear, supremely ill-suited to a rampage of violence.

But while the crime spree may be inept, Park's filmmaking is as elegant as ever, in a wildly enjoyable picture that balances psychological tension against giddily hilarious comic set pieces. Donald Westlake's satirical novel was written in 1997, but the story, about a family man's desperation in the face of swathing job cuts across his industry could hardly be more relevant in a time of AI (something that Park nods to in a darkly sardonic closing coda). The kitsch vision we see of a picture-perfect life turns out to be precarious and fleeting. In the lush, colour-saturated Eden that is the garden of his mid-century modern house, Man-su barbecues eel, generously gifted by his company. His gorgeous, doting wife Miri (Son Ye-jin) and their two kids gather for a group hug. A delicate confetti of blossom petals falls. They even have a pair of Golden Retrievers, for goodness sake. Life is charmed.

Until it isn't. Man-su's job is unceremoniously terminated (the company had "no other choice", he's told). As the months without work stretch past the year mark, Man-su hauls boxes in a warehouse and the mortgage company starts to make ominous noises about foreclosure. Miri takes a part time job, as a dental hygienist to an impossibly handsome dentist (as if Man-su's male pride wasn't dented enough). And she enforces belt-tightening all round: they even cancel Netflix (the latter prompts a sharp, horrified intake of breath from everyone who hears the news).

Realising that he's on the brink of losing everything, Man-su takes action. Equipped with his father's North Korean-made service revolver, Man-su sets about eliminating the competition. Totally unsuited to a life of crime and despite his petty jealousy of his wife and the whole murdering innocent rivals business, Lee still manages to make Man-su a somewhat sympathetic character. This is partly thanks to the way Park smartly defangs Man-su's crimes by ramping up the absurdity and physical comedy (at times, it's like watching Mr Bean blundering through an assassination). Man-su's first attempt, targeting an executive-turned-sloppy drunk, is a gloriously funny set piece.

Beneath the broad comedy and satire, however, is a minor key refrain. The film is extremely amusing, certainly, but it's simultaneously a poignant study of the desperation of the long-term jobless and the needless cruelty of the corporate world. It's also a warning. As AI chews increasingly large chunks out of the job market, we could all be Man-su. The question is, who will be the one holding the North Korean service revolver when the time comes?

**Wendy Ide**, *Screen Daily*, 29 August 2025 (abridged)

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