

REVISED WITHOUT ROOTS
Alt. Title: ABSENT

Written by

Melanie Hope Lang

Based on, Seven Parents, Daughter to None

Library of Congress ©2023

Melanie.lang@mccracken.kyschools.us
(270)994-3101

ACT 1

EXT. LARGE CITY SHADY STREET - 1981 - EVENING

The dimly lit street, nestled on the wrong side of a large city, carries the weight of its history. Faint echoes of the occasional city life in the distance add to the scene.

DAVID, in his mid-30s, bears rough, hard features. His hair is shoulder length, wavy, and loose. His chops and partial goatee is thick but reveals a bare chin. He leans casually against a weathered brick building, engaged in conversation with another MALE FIGURE who sports a leather jacket adorned with hard rock patches and a disheveled hairstyle.

An oversized late 1970s sedan, showing signs of age, pulls up to the curb with a distinct roar. Inside, a dark figure of a man occupies the driver's seat.

The passenger seat of the sedan holds AMY, barely 30, radiating the beauty of the early '80s big dark hair, bright makeup, and the embodiment of a new wave fashion icon in her polyester skirt and tall boots. The back seat reveals a glimpse of family life in 1981, with a toddler boy sitting next to an infant strapped in a car seat.

AMY steps out of the car, looking around in all directions, her eyes darting to the graffiti-covered walls.

David looks Amy over. A wry smile emerges on his face, watching the attractive woman.

AMY

I'm lookin' for a little pick me up.

DAVID

I gotcha.

AMY

How much?

David looks Amy over again.

DAVID

7-50. Hey, you lookin' for a place to party tonight?

Amy looks over her shoulder towards the children and male figure waiting inside the car.

AMY

My husband and kids are waiting.

DAVID

I hear ya.

He reaches out his hand to make the transaction, brandishing a crude scar on his forearm revealed by his rolled-up sleeves. Amy reaches out in response. David holds her hand a moment longer in the exchange.

DAVID (CONT'D)

I'm Dave. Well, maybe next time.
Oh, and there's plenty more where
this came from.

Amy looks into David's eyes and smiles.

INT. SUBURBAN HOME/LIVING ROOM - 2023 - DAY

The scene has shifted dramatically from the gritty streets of the past to a bright, comfortable, and clean home in a lush suburban neighborhood. The contrast is stark, symbolizing the passage of time.

MELANIE, now 42 years old and no longer the infant in the car seat, exudes confidence and stands in sharp contrast to the turbulent scenes of the past. Petite and graceful, she is seated in her well-lit living room, her surroundings reflecting the serene suburban lifestyle of 2023. Melanie is engrossed in grading papers, her laptop open on the coffee table, indicating a professional career and a life focused on education.

As she meticulously reviews her students' work, Melanie's cell phone suddenly rings, breaking the peaceful atmosphere. She looks towards the phone, its sleek and modern design, resting on the table. The caller ID displays "Los Angeles Police Department."

With a deep breath, Melanie answers the call, her face a mixture of concern and curiosity.

MELANIE

Hello?

DETECTIVE MARSHALL (O.S.)

Hello. Is this Melanie Lang?

A female detective speaks on the opposite line.

MELANIE

Yes.

DETECTIVE MARSHALL (O.S.)
Melanie, this is Detective Sandra
Marshall from the LAPD robbery-
homicide cold case department. Is
this still a good time?

Melanie takes a deep breath and settles back into a plush
armchair in their modern living room.

Her husband, DANIEL, 47 and handsome, enters and,
understanding the importance of the call, sits beside her,
offering his silent support. Their shared connection and
reassurance in the face of the call's news showcase the
strength of their bond as he listens in next to Melanie.

MELANIE
Sure. I was just grading some
papers while waiting for your call.

DETECTIVE MARSHALL (O.S.)
Oh, what do you teach?

MELANIE
High school English.

DETECTIVE MARSHALL (O.S.)
Oh, that's a tough age, huh?

MELANIE
You'd be surprised at what some of
these kids face at home. They can't
help but bring all of their
troubles with them to school.

Melanie glances at a student's paper with a troubled
expression, hinting at her deeper concerns. Her focus is then
brought back to the purpose of the call.

MELANIE (CONT'D)
I'm sorry. Your letter said...
something about needing my help.
What's this about?

DETECTIVE MARSHALL (O.S.)
Melanie, I'll be direct. Your
father was involved in the brutal
murder of a man in West Hollywood
in 1974.

Melanie looks at Daniel, both narrowing eyes in confusion.
Pause. She takes a deep breath before speaking.

MELANIE
Which father are we talking about?

DETECTIVE MARSHALL (O.S.)
Just David.

Melanie begins to understand and gives a nod. Her body begins to tense as she sits up straight. Daniel's hand slides gently across her back to remind her she is not alone.

MELANIE
Well, he was a dangerous man. But
he passed away years ago.

DETECTIVE MARSHALL (O.S.)
I understand that now. After
reading your book, we were finally
able to investigate the cold case
once more. We weren't even aware
that he had died.

Daniel furrows his brow as he glances at Melanie.

DETECTIVE MARSHALL (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Reading your book... it's clear
you've faced more than most. And
yet, here you are.

MELANIE
Thank you. I'm surprised you found
the book and read it. It was just
my way of trying to find healing
and forgiveness.

Det. Marshall seems sympathetic and understanding.

DETECTIVE MARSHALL (O.S.)
And did you?

MELANIE
Um...I think I'm starting to.

Det. Marshall shifts the focus.

DETECTIVE MARSHALL (O.S.)
Right now, I'm trying to build a
picture of your father's past. Can
you tell me when you first remember
David coming into your life?

MELANIE
As I'm sure you're aware, I didn't
know he adopted my brother Luke and
me until I was older. But what I
remember is David, my mom, and the
drugs.

INT. IRVING RENTAL/DINING ROOM - 1985 - EVENING

The room is a time capsule of the '80s, scattered with cheap, worn-down furniture in earthy tones of oranges, brown, and yellow. The walls, once a light yellow, are now dinged and stained from years of cigarette smoke. The atmosphere is heavy with the smell of tobacco.

A large CRT television sits against one wall, an iconic relic of the time, flickering with the grainy images of a He-Man cartoon. A few large, flat floor pillows, covered in faded polyester, are placed in front of it.

MELANIE, a 5-year-old with pigtails, is seated on the floor, coloring on colossal graph paper. The paper bears the bold letters "Associated Air Center" at the top, a detail reflecting the interests and surroundings of the parents. Her child-like artistry depicts stick figures, including one placed far away from the rest, revealing a young mind trying to make sense of her world.

LUKE, her 7-year-old brother, sits beside her, engrossed in the television, his attention captured by the cartoon.

Amy, whose beauty is beginning to fade as her facial features sink in, sits at the dining room table. Her head is in her hands, symbolizing the pressures and struggles she is battling both inside and out. The room's smoky haze adds to the sense of decay and desperation.

Melanie, with her innocent curiosity, picks up the graph paper and carries it over to Amy, wanting to share her creation. However, she halts in her tracks, her young eyes widening as she watches Amy cutting up lines of white powder on the table. Amy proceeds to snort the lines of cocaine, her actions starkly contrasting the innocence of Melanie's drawing.

Amy suddenly realizes that Melanie is watching, and Melanie's curiosity has now shifted to uneasiness.

AMY

Oh, baby. Don't...um...sneak up on me like that. What is it, Mel?

MELANIE

I drew you an airplane like the ones you and Daddy work on. And here is Luke and you and me holding hands and...daddy is over there.

Melanie holds the picture up high for Amy to see. She waits for Amy's approval. Without really looking, Amy stands up, wobbly on her feet, and sloppily tries to clean up the mess on the table.

MELANIE (CONT'D)

Momma, what are you doing?

AMY

Nothin'. Momma just needed a little... medicine is all. Um...Honey, don't talk to anyone about my medicines. Someone might worry, think I'm sick. And you don't want the police to come and take y'all away, right?

Melanie's frightened expression in her eyes leads her to shake her head no.

MELANIE

(quietly)

I won't, Momma. I promise. Do you like my picture?

AMY

Sure, baby. It's real nice.

Amy doesn't acknowledge the picture in Melanie's hand, her focus consumed by her own demons.

David, with a fully grown beard, slowly enters and comes to a halt at the frame surrounding the dining room archway. He leans back against the grain of the wood, his arms crossed. The crude scar peering below his pulled-up sleeves is a reminder of his past, one of the few remnants of his true identity. He watches Amy for a moment with dark-wired eyeglasses covering his beady eyes, his expression inscrutable, and pays no attention to Melanie.

Amy, aware of David's presence, steadies herself, her hands a mess from hastily trying to clear the table. She walks away from the room, retreating towards the kitchen, leaving Melanie frowning and clutching the paper. Melanie's youthful innocence is juxtaposed against the troubled dynamics of her family, and her paper sags towards the floor, mirroring the weight of the moment.

INT. IRVING SCHOOL - DAY

Melanie, in a rainbow-striped tee shirt and tan corduroy pants, sits at her desk. An empty chair is beside her, symbolizing the **absence of stability** in her life.

As she concentrates on her work, a skinny BOY, also about 6 years old, walks past her. He tauntingly pinches his nose in response to the lingering scent of cigarette smoke clinging to Melanie's clothes, an interaction that captures the harshness of unguided childhood.

BOY

You smell like yucky cigarettes!

The other children laugh and hold their noses in mock disgust. Melanie looks down in shame.

INT. IRVING LIVING ROOM - DAY

The room is shrouded in a thick haze of cigarette smoke. An overflowing ashtray on the record player table adds to the cloud of smoke, which drifts lazily through the dimly lit room.

David and Amy, both lost in the music of the era, sit amidst the haze, surrounded by vinyl records. The room is decorated with '80s decor from the shag carpet to the collection of sea shells and coral among the records on the shelf.

Creedence Clearwater Revival plays on the record player, filling the room with the iconic sound of the '60s and '70s, which had a lasting impact in the '80s and Amy's youth. David, with a cigarette in one hand, pulls Amy up to dance, their connection reflecting a moment of happiness.

Melanie and Luke, their innocent eyes absorbing the atmosphere, enter the room. They sit on the shag carpet near their parents, curious about the joy they share. Melanie smiles at her mother, her admiration evident, until her gaze falls on David. Her young eyes lock with his, her smile fades, and he glares back.

EXT. BACKYARD - DAY

Under the warm, summer sun, David sits on the steps that lead to the backyard, his face buried in his hands. The weight of the day's events bears down on him, and he struggles to hold back tears.

O.S. THE FRONT DOOR SLAMS.

INT. HALLWAY/LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

In the distance, Amy enters the house through the back door. Her footsteps echo in the hall as she storms past Melanie, her face flushed with anger and frustration.

The front door slams shut, reverberating through the house and signaling Amy's departure. Melanie left bewildered by the sudden commotion, stands alone in the hallway, her small frame overshadowed by the uncertainty around her.

Driven by curiosity and concern, Melanie walks to the back door, her little hand barely reaching the handle. With determined effort, she pushes open the glass screen door. The creaking sound grabs David's attention, and he lifts his chin, his face glistening with tears.

EXT. BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS

As Melanie steps onto the backyard steps, her innocent eyes meet her father's troubled gaze. David, in that moment, straightens up, acknowledging her presence, and nearly knocks over a half full bottle of vodka.

DAVID
(with a snuffle and a slur)
Yur as pretty as a picture. You
look like your momma, you know?

His brown eyes survey her from behind his huge wire glasses.

DAVID (CONT'D)
I'm gonna take yur picture. Wait
here.

Melanie nods reluctantly, frozen in place while David disappears into the house.

EXT. IRVING BACKYARD - MOMENTS LATER

Melanie's restlessness is evident as she sits on a stool in the backyard, the weight of boredom hanging heavy in the air. Nearby, David unclasps his oversized Nikon camera from its sturdy leather case. His experienced hands make precise adjustments to the focus until he's content with the settings. With each click, he expertly turns the knobs, peering intently through the oversized lens, capturing moments with a resounding SNAP-SNAP.

As David adjusts the camera's settings, he takes a step closer to Melanie.

Gently, he brushes her overgrown bangs away from her forehead, tucking them behind her ears with care. But Melanie's smile remains forced, her teeth clenched together in discomfort.

Stepping back to frame the shot, David continues his photographic journey with another SNAP-SNAP! Zooming in for a closer look, he meticulously adjusts the focus around the lens.

David briefly pauses, shifting his attention from the camera to Melanie. A warm smile graces his face, and he takes a step toward her. His hand caresses her face, strokes her neck, and keeps sliding down. Melanie freezes. Horrified. David smiles at her and moves back. SNAP-SNAP!

DAVID

Atta girl. Smile. Smile for me!

Melanie's gritted smile becomes a hard frown while her lips are pressed firmly shut, disobeying the light commands from David to smile for him. She sits uncomfortably on the stool in the sweltering Texan sun against the dried-out wooden fence in her navy shorts and now tainted top. Once again, he steps close to her, reaching, touching. With each picture, Melanie begins to pull herself inward, elbows drawn into her sides and ankles crossing with knees clenched together.

INT. IRVING HALLWAY - DAY

David stumbles in a drunken stupor from his bedroom to the bathroom. In fear, Melanie slips away into her bedroom to hide from him.

INT. IRVING MELANIE'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Melanie runs into her closet and pulls the door closed. She moves toys over and begins to bury herself underneath. Melanie pulls a teddy bear to her face and peers through it trying to stay concealed.

INT. IRVING MELANIE'S BEDROOM CLOSET - HOURS LATER

Melanie kneels on the matted-down carpet playing with her Barbies and matted stuffed animals, WHISPERING to herself. The toys remain closely piled around her providing comfort and security. The door opens. Melanie GASPS.

AMY

What're you doing in here, Mel?

MELANIE
(half-lies)
Just...playing.

Amy extends her hand down to Melanie, though suspicious of Melanie's excuse.

AMY
Come and help me make dinner.

Melanie's caution melts as she takes her hand and smiles.
Melanie emerges from the closet holding her mother's hand.

INT. IRVING KITCHEN - EVENING CONTINUOUS

The kitchen is a testament to the colors of the '80s, with a dated palette of yellows, browns, and tan. The ambiance reflects the era's aesthetic, where earthy tones were the norm.

A small radio sits on the kitchen counter, its telescopic antenna stretching towards the window. Timeless country music softly fills the kitchen, setting the mood of the time and the Texas environment. Amy, fully immersed in her cooking, hums along to the tunes.

Melanie eagerly helps her mother by fetching ingredients and dishes, climbing up and down the counters with the enthusiasm of youth. Her presence adds a touch of liveliness to the otherwise mundane kitchen scene.

David makes his entrance. He promptly pours two drinks and hands one to Amy. She hesitates, her reluctance evident in her expression. In a bold move, David reaches across Melanie to change the radio station, replacing the country music with classic rock. He turns up the volume to a level that ensures it can be heard in the next room, marking a shift from the old to the new.

With a vodka bottle in hand, David leaves the room, leaving the kitchen filled with the sounds and colors of the old 70s he clings to.

INT. IRVING DINING ROOM - LATER

Amy is serving up plates of food at the dining table.

AMY
Melanie, run and get yur daddy.

INT. IRVING LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Melanie enters the living room to find David fully clothed and passed out on the floor. He lays on the carpet in his sweatpants. A dark, wet stain spread across the front of his crotch and legs. Melanie stands observing David not daring to go any nearer to him. She returns to the dining table.

MELANIE

Daddy's asleep.

AMY

Why is he asl...? Oh, he's asleep.

Amy understands what Melanie means. She lets out a sigh in frustration.

AMY (CONT'D)

Y'all go ahead and eat. I'm suddenly not feelin' very good.

Amy begins to get up from the table, disappointed.

MELANIE

Do you need your medicine, Momma?

Amy pauses, realizing just how aware Melanie is of what she and David have been doing around them.

AMY

I'll be fine, honey. Don't you worry about me. Eat your dinner.

Melanie watches Amy slip away and down the hall toward their bedroom. She pauses and looks out toward the living room where David is passed out. Amy steps into the bedroom and closes the door behind her. The lock clicks. Luke continues to eat his dinner as Melanie sits there watching him.

INT. IRVING DINING ROOM - EVENING

David sits drinking at the dining table. Luke carrying a worn, sun-bleached basketball and Melanie with her blue and red jump rope draped around her deck walk in from playing outside. They are sweaty and dirty from exhilarating play outside. Just beyond them, lights from the outside street lamps begin to flicker on with a hum, dim but growing in light in the dusk.

LUKE

Where's Momma? I'm hungry?

DAVID
She's workin'.

Pauses, looking the children over. David fidgets with a cigarette in his left hand and touches the glass with his right.

DAVID (CONT'D)
Come here. Don't y'all wanna sit
with yur daddy?

Melanie and Luke do as they're told, sitting at the table next to their father.

DAVID (CONT'D)
(under his breath and to
himself, irritated)
Y'all look just like her and
that...

LUKE
What's that, Daddy?

David swipes the air in dismissal not letting go of the cigarette.

DAVID
Nothin'.
(pauses)

David takes a sip from his glass. The kids watch. He looks at them through the glass as he drinks. Lowering the glass, he continues to eye them.

DAVID (CONT'D)
You know, I went all over the place
after the war, til... til I met yur
momma. You see, I love yur momma so
much...
(his voice cracks)
...I took all y'all in.

David spills part of his drink on the table.

MELANIE
(worried)
When's Momma coming home?

David glares at Melanie for a moment. He shakes his head a little and looks away before taking a sip, ignoring her question. David begins to mumble to himself in slight irritation.

LUKE
What was it like? Did you
make any friends?

David shoots him a stern look accusingly.

DAVID
(slurs)
What was "what" like?

LUKE
(innocently)
The war.

Tension can be seen in David's face. A nerve in his jaw
begins to twitch. He takes a breath.

DAVID
(continues to slur)
You don't get to pick who you trust
out there... but you have to. He
was my brother...
(pause, lost in thought)
But then... he was gone. Just like
everyone else

David is lost in thought. His eyes fill with tears but he
doesn't cry. He almost forgets the children are even there.

MELANIE
Daddy, do you miss your friend?

David is taken by surprise by Melanie's question.

DAVID
What? Um, yeah. I mean, no. But
that's just part of life. People
don't stay around long enough to
miss 'em.

David sniffs to pull back his emotions.

LUKE
I wanna know about the fighting.

David looks off and waves his hand to dismiss Luke's comment.
Luke continues to pester David for details.

LUKE (CONT'D)
I bet you had one of those big
machine guns.

Luke pulls his arms up to imitate holding a large imaginary
gun, spying through the scope.

David starts to grip the glass in his right hand, his face tense. The cigarette falls out of his left hand on the floor. Melanie watches it fall and then up to David's face as his irritation grows.

LUKE (CONT'D)

(excitedly)

Did you ever kill anyone?

Tense silence for a long moment. David's eyes fall accusingly on Luke as David's jaw is gripped tight. David's nostrils flair a little as his breathing becomes harder, fueling his anger. Suddenly, David reaches across the table, grabs Luke by his shirt, and holds him in the air with his feet dangling. David's scar bulges on his arm. Melanie leaps from her chair.

MELANIE

(yells)

Let go of him! Daddy, stop!

David glares at Melanie and then at Luke. He throws her into the table with one quick swipe of his free left hand. She falls to the floor, wailing helplessly. David lowers Luke with a quick release. As the camera remains on Melanie's face watching in horror, the sound of punches are heard. Then, Luke feebly peers at David as he lays on the floor, bloody nose, red face, swollen. Luke cries in big deep sobs. David stands over him, swaying, studying his work as he looks from Luke to Melanie. David's face drops as guilt flushes over. His hand starts to reach forward, but Melanie scoots in front of Luke. David stops and looks at Melanie. He begins to open his mouth to say something, but instead turns away, swaying as he walks.

INT. MELANIE'S BEDROOM CLOSET - LATER

Amy opens the familiar closet door with fear in her eyes. Melanie is startled by the opening of the door and clings to cover her brother with her arms as she crouches on the carpet next to him. Luke lies on his side in the fetal position in front of Melanie.

Amy's eyes change from fear to sadness as she studies Luke's puffy face and blood-stained shirt. The children's tears begin to well once more at the sight of her. Amy kneels and lifts the back of Luke's shirt, revealing the bruises and swelling covering the majority of his skin. She wipes their tears and kisses their foreheads.

INT. IRVING KITCHEN - EVENING

Melanie is helping her mother prepare dinner. David pours himself a screwdriver. He sways, surveying Melanie as she passes.

DAVID
(slurs)
Yur so purty.

Amy eyes him in silence. Melanie looks to the ground, not wanting to make eye contact.

INT. BARBERSHOP - DAY

Luke and Melanie sit in barber's chairs. Amy stands over them.

BARBER
So, what kind of cuts are we doing today?

AMY
(to the barber)
Short. Give her the same cut as her brother.

Melanie looks over at Amy in disbelief, wondering what she did wrong to be punished like this. Amy is unable to look at Melanie, her face full of shame. Melanie sulks, trying not to cry as her long brown hair is cut short just like a boy.

INT. IRVING KITCHEN - LATER

Melanie enters the kitchen with her 80s bob. David double-takes when he sees her. His face filled with disappointment as he shakes his head.

INT. IRVING GARDEN - 1986 - DAY

Melanie is in the garden, hopscotching up the path. She runs up the steps into the house. From the hallway, she hears David and Amy in conversation.

AMY (O.S.)
I can't do this anymore. I can't leave the kids at home with you and trust you not to drink or...
(she pauses a moment)
...or trust they'll be safe with you.

(MORE)

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

(pause)

I'm moving back to San Angelo with
the kids.

Melanie moves towards their bedroom door and peers through
the crack.

MELANIE POV:-

David furiously throws a bottle of vodka. It smashes against
the wall.

DAVID

(raised voice)

You won't last a day without me!
Where do you think yur drugs are
gonna come from? So what, yur just
gonna go back to where I found ya,
with that...

David flings his hand in the air as he turns toward the
cracked door. Melanie jumps, terrified of being seen.

AMY

(stern)

I want a divorce. I mean it. I
don't need you, and I don't need
that stuff anymore. I can quit, you
just watch.

EXT. SAN ANGELO HOUSE - DAY

Melanie and Luke watch from the garden, as a MOVING MAN
(30s), carries boxes into their new house. Amy steps out of
the house. The man passes her, carrying a large box.

MOVING MAN

Where would you like this one Ma'm?

AMY

(to the mover)

Put that one in the kitchen.

Amy glances at Melanie. Melanie smiles. When Amy looks back
toward the mover, her smile disappears. Melanie walks toward
Amy. Melanie looks up to catch a tear rolling down Amy's
cheek. Melanie reaches up and takes her mother's hand. Amy
doesn't look down but squeezes her hand in recognition.

AMY (CONT'D)

(to Melanie and herself)

You can't depend on anyone but
yurself to do what's right.
Understand me?

Amy looks down at Melanie. Melanie nods her head in understanding. Amy looks away. Watching her mother's face causes Melanie to shed a tear as well. A sense of loss is felt between them.

INT. MELANIE'S LIVING ROOM - 2023 - DAY

Daniel is still sitting on the arm of Melanie's plush chair in their clean suburban home. His hand on her shoulder provides soft, loving rubs of comfort. Melanie's voice continues to hold steady despite the harsh contrasts of her former childhood and current life. She in no way resembles the child she was in the 80s.

MELANIE

My mom knew what kind of man David was. As far as a murder from 74, I don't know. There was just so much that happened. Honestly, I don't really want to go back there again. I thought I was finished with him, with all of it, when I wrote the book.

DETECTIVE MARSHALL (O.S.)

It's a real possibility she knew, but I can't really discuss that just yet. I have so many questions about him, some things he took from the scene and may have held onto. I could really use your help.

MELANIE

(hesitant)

Um, I don't know if I want to get involved. It was so long ago anyway. If you know he did it, then what does it matter now?

DETECTIVE MARSHALL

(disappointed)

I understand that you might be afraid, but because no one stopped him in 74, he was able to keep on hurting people...like you and your brother.

(a pause)

(MORE)

DETECTIVE MARSHALL (CONT'D)

Listen, I have a few leads I want to follow up on from your book. Would it be okay to reach out to you again if I have any more questions?

The detective is hopeful.

MELANIE

You can call, but like I said, I don't know how helpful I can be. However, I would like to know what you find and when this case is closed. I still have questions myself.

DETECTIVE MARSHALL (O.S.)

It is an active case, so I can't discuss many of the details until it's closed. But if you change your mind and want to talk, we might be able to get some answers together. You can call me anytime. Thank you, Melanie, for all your help. I know it's not easy forgiving and forgetting the past. Good-bye.

MELANIE

Thank you. Bye.

Daniel reaches his arm around Melanie from behind and hugs her. Melanie embraces his arm and leans her cheek against it.

DANIEL

That was weird. You ok?

MELANIE

I'll be fine. I just thought it was over, you know?

DANIEL

I know. You don't have to talk to her again if you don't want to. I don't buy that they didn't know where he was all this time. It's not like she's going to tell you anything anyway.

MELANIE

Maybe. It's crazy. He's been hurting people long before he married my mom. Not just us kids.

(MORE)

MELANIE (CONT'D)

The man he murdered probably had a family, maybe kids that are my age now. I understand that they deserve to know who killed him. To know David was a monster. But I'm not sure how I can help anyone though. I barely escaped him when I was a kid. I just don't want to let him keep reappearing in my life.

DANIEL

I get it. I know your mom tried to get you and your brother away from him, too. And when she couldn't, you didn't have anyone to speak up for you.

INT. SAN ANGELO HALLWAY - 1988 - EVENING

Melanie and Luke rummage through empty cupboards. The linoleum floors reflect the fluorescent lights. A radio softly plays country music. As they search desperately, Clayton enters with a greasy paper bag.

Melanie and Luke kind and caring older brother CLAYTON (17), tall, and lanky, walks in carrying a greasy paper bag from a fast food chain.

MELANIE

(excitedly)

Clayton!

They rush to him, hugging tightly. Clayton smiles but looks over his shoulder at the bedroom door, concern replacing his grin. Amy's absence from caring for the needs of the children are obviously recognized.

INT. SAN ANGELO AMY'S BEDROOM - MORNING

Amy is passed out on the floor with a bottle of pills next to her hand.

EXT. SAN ANGELO SCHOOL - LATER

Melanie, wearing rolled-up acid-washed jeans, and Luke, wearing dark jeans that are too short for him, are unlocking their bike chains. The bikes are classic for the time. Melanie's a light blue Huffy with a large white banana seat and Luke's a red 10-speed Schwinn. Clayton pulls up to the school in his bulky brown Westfalia VW van with a pale topper.

Clayton's driver window is rolled down as his arm rests on the edge of the window frame rocking out to Whitesnake's "Here I Go Again." Melanie and Luke raise an eyebrow, confused as to why their big brother was at their school.

CLAYTON

Well, do y'all want a ride or not?

Melanie and Luke smile in excitement. Luke jumps in the front passenger seat as Clayton opens the back doors of his van. The van is surprisingly gutted behind the front seats and lacks back seats or seat belts. Melanie sits on the floor behind Clayton's seat. He loads their bikes inside through the sliding door on the passenger side with a roaring bang. Seatless, Melanie becomes a human roly-polly trying not to crash into the bikes and various debris as Clayton takes sharp turns.

LUKE

Where are we going?

CLAYTON

To my apartment.

MELANIE

Where's momma?

Clayton looks in the rearview mirror at Melanie but glances away quickly when their eyes meet. His response is hesitant at first, but shows no sign of deception.

CLAYTON

Momma's sick. She's gonna be in the hospital for a little while. So, I'm gonna look after y'all til she's better. I'll take you to see her when she's ready.

Melanie and Luke look at one another, worried.

INT. SAN ANGELO KITCHEN - DAYS LATER - EVENING

Amy sits at the table with a vacant expression. Her desire and purpose are absent. She is pale and thin, with dark circles around her eyes. Melanie's grandparents, NANA, strict but kindly, 60, and warm-hearted PAPA JUNE 62, walk into the kitchen with Melanie and Luke. The children, excitedly run to hug their mother.

LUKE

Momma!

MELANIE

Momma, I missed you.

Amy slowly begins to hug them back with a blank expression. Her eyes fall to Clayton. She mouths the words "I'm sorry" to Clayton. He nods his head toward Melanie and Luke indicating she should turn her attention to them. Amy leans her head in against the children in their embrace, guilt filling her eyes.

INT. SAN ANGELO NANA AND PAPA JUNE'S LIVING ROOM - EVENING

The living room is as old-fashioned as the grandparents. The decor in frills, dollies, and ceramic statues of ducks and cats. An oak coffee table in the center of the table is an oversized Bible belonging to the family, worn from generations of use and handling.

Melanie sits on the hardwood floor in her pink two-piece polyester pajama set. Nana, settled in a cozy chair, gently combs through Melanie's shoulder-length hair, placing neon pink foam curlers in Melanie's hair. The decor includes a brass floor lamp with a fringed shade, casting a warm glow across the space.

MELANIE

(in childish, choppy
pronunciation)

What's A-pos-toe-lick Pent-a-cost-
al?

Melanie's face is quizzical. Nana chuckles at the mispronunciation.

NANA

(correcting kindly)

Apostolic Pentecostal. It means you believe in the Father, the Son, and the holy ghost. You don't wear pants unless your a boy. You don't smoke or drink. And you grow your hair out reeeeeal long like me.

MELANIE

(confused)

But you don't have long hair. You keep your hair in a ball on top of your head.

NANA

I do have long hair. Longer than yours. I just don't show anyone 'cept your Papa.

MELANIE

Oh, then why do you grow it out if you don't show anyone else?

NANA

It's just the way we do things.

MELANIE

(a pause, then a somber tone)

Why, then, did Momma cut my hair off?

Nana glances to catch Papa June's eyes as he sits in his recliner. A pause.

NANA

(deceitful tone)

I don't know, honey. I'm sure your Momma had her reasons.

MELANIE

(curious again)

What will the church be like tomorrow?

NANA

Tomorrow you'll wear that frilly lil' dress I found fur you at a yard sale. When you get to church, you'll smile and shake hands with everyone who comes up to you.

Melanie smiles and pretends to wave at imaginary church members.

NANA (CONT'D)

When your teacher arrives, you'll go to Sunday school to learn the scriptures. And after that, you'll come sit by your Momma and me in the big church. We listen to lots of music and speak to God. Pastor Stone will talk fur a bit until he's outta breath. Then, when we're done, we'll go home to pray and fast.

MELANIE

What's fast?

NANA

It's when you don't eat for day, a sacrifice to God. Like a gift to him.

MELANIE

Oh. We do that all the time at our house. Momma must want to give lots of gifts to God.

Nana pauses from working with Melanie's hair. Distress is on her face as she realizes the depth of absence of God in the children's and Amy's life. She looks as though she wants to speak but can't find the words. Melanie interrupts her thought.

MELANIE (CONT'D)

Can I use your tambourine during big church?

Nana smiles and continues curling Melanie's hair.

NANA

Only if God speaks to you and tells you to play. Now, let me finish your hair; then, we'll get a snack.

Nana begins to sing a hymn.

NANA (CONT'D)

Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee. How great Thou art, How great Thou art.

Melanie is enchanted by Nana's soprano voice. Papa smiles and leans his head back in the recliner.

INT. SAN ANGELO NANA AND PAPA JUNE'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Melanie has just finished talking to Nana about God, faith, and the rules of the her church. Nana tucks Melanie into bed on make-shift mattress on the floor of a spare room. Nana walks out of the room, humming a hymn softly to herself.

Melanie lays in silence for a moment, staring down at her hands, which are folded neatly on her stomach. Her brow furrows as if trying to make sense of everything she just heard. Her eyes drift toward the closet door in the room.

Melanie, dressed in her pajamas, sneaks away into the closet, pulling the door closed behind her, creating a small, quiet space of her own.

She sits down on the floor, surrounded by old shoes and coats. Her face is tight with worry, her young mind trying to grasp what she had learned about God.

MELANIE
(whispers, unsure)
God? It's Melanie...

Her voice falters, unsure of how to begin. She fidgets, pulling her knees close to her chest.

MELANIE (CONT'D)
I know I'm supposed to be good and
do what's right... but...

She hesitates, glancing toward the door of the closet, as though afraid someone might hear her.

MELANIE (CONT'D)
But why don't you help us? Why
don't you make things better? Why
don't you help Momma stay away from
Daddy?

Tears start to fill her eyes as she remembers David's harsh treatment, Amy's neglect, and her fear of what's waiting outside this small space. Her hands tighten around her knees.

MELANIE (CONT'D)
(voice cracking)
If you're really there, could you
make him stop hurting us? Could you
help my momma? She's sad all the
time.

A tear rolls down her cheek as she squeezes her eyes shut, her body curling into itself for comfort.

MELANIE (CONT'D)
I want to believe... but...

A long pause. She lets out a shaky breath, feeling the weight of her helplessness.

MELANIE (CONT'D)
If you're there... please keep us
safe.

She leans her head back against the closet wall, her eyes closing as if trying to feel some sense of comfort, a sign, but none comes.

EXT/INT. SAN ANGELO LIVING ROOM - AFTERNOON

Melanie and Luke run into the house with school bags to find their mother on her knees packing boxes. The house is in disarray. Amy looks up at them only momentarily and continues to pack.

AMY

(manic)

We need a change of scenery. We're going on... uh...an adventure. So... we're moving to Ruidoso... New Mexico.

Melanie and Luke stand watching in disbelief. Amy looks away, unable to look at the children as she speaks.

AMY (CONT'D)

You can't depend on anyone but yourself to do what's right.
(hesitant and unsure)
So, this is what's right... at least for right now.

Amy pauses in her packing. She glances around the room at the boxes piled around the room.

INT. YOUNG MELANIE'S CLASSROOM - DAY

Melanie is sitting, staring at a blank paper on her desk. A young teacher approaches her and glances at Melanie's incomplete work. As she approaches her, she pulls her sleeve to her nose and takes a step back away from the smell of the child.

TEACHER

(quizzically without concern)

Melanie, why haven't you been working? I

Melanie is nervously playing with her hands and looks down at them, afraid of looking at the teacher.

MELANIE

(soft and solemn)

Cuz Momma says were moving tomorrow.

The teacher furrows her brow but doesn't pry.

TEACHER

Well, you still have to do the work.

The teacher starts to walk away from Melanie with her nose covered, glances back, and then continues to walk away. The bell rings and startles Melanie.

INT. MELANIE'S CLASSROOM - 2023 - DAY

The high school classroom is decorated in bright welcoming colors. Upon the walls are samples of student work. A large dry-erase whiteboard at the front is covered in notes and instructions from the day's lesson. A projector hangs from the ceiling, displaying an image on a dry erase board of an author of a story studied in class.

Melanie is deep in thought when the bell rings, signaling class to start. She looks around to see that students have come in and taken their seats.

MELANIE

(addressing the whole class)

Good morning! Let's get started by reviewing our objective today and prepping our space.

Students of high school age are opening laptops and taking out notebooks. Melanie allows students some time to prepare when her attention is caught by two GIRLS whispering. She eyes them while slowly moving toward them.

GIRL 1

(whispering to GIRL 2)

She might as well not even bother to change after gym.

GIRL 2

(whispering to GIRL 1)

I can always smell her. Someone should teach her about deodorant.

ABBY, 14, thin, and worn, sits in front of Girl 2. She wears an oversized hoodie with long sleeves. She has her head hanging low. Melanie walks over to the two whispering students who quickly straighten up.

MELANIE

Is there something I can help you with?

GIRL 2
(nervously lies)
No, Mrs. Lang. I was
just...uh...asking Kenzie for help
because I-I need a charger for my
ChromeBook.

The girls don't make eye contact with Melanie.

MELANIE
I see. You know, we could all use a
little help every now and then. You
know, be a friend.

Girl 2 shakes her head yes with a slight nod, understanding
Melanie's real meaning. Abby lifts her chin slightly back to
the computer on her desk. Melanie walks forward next to Abby,
looking down at her.

MELANIE (CONT'D)
Hi, Abby. I noticed that you were
absent again yesterday. Were you
sick?

ABBY
(barely audible)
Yes, mam.

Abby doesn't look up at the teacher. She is nervous.

MELANIE
You've been out sick quite a bit in
the short time you transferred here
2 months ago.

There is no response from Abby. Abby pushes at sleeves of her
oversized hoodie, revealing some bruising on her wrist.
Melanie's expression turns to concern as she purses her lips
together. Melanie is hesitant before speaking.

MELANIE (CONT'D)
Well, I wanted to tell you that you
did a nice job on the last
assignment you turned in. I really
liked your response to #6. How did
you know how the main character
felt when they were isolated from
the other characters?

Abby lifts her chin up as if to look at Melanie but doesn't
quite meet her eye to eye. She is still holding back.

ABBY
(softly but with a little
confidence)
To know someone, you have to put
yourself in someone else's shoes.

MELANIE
And does he want to be alone?

There is a long pause. Abby is fidgeting, contemplating
whether or not to answer.

ABBY
No one wants to be alone. Not
really. I think he's hiding.
There's something...something he
doesn't want anyone else to see.

Melanie takes a slight step closer to Abby's desk. She
responds softly.

MELANIE
What doesn't he want the other
characters to see, Abby?

Abby suddenly looks up, realizing Melanie is looking right at
her. Melanie's face reveals her concern for Abby.

ABBY
Where he comes from? What he's
hiding from.

Abby turns her head suddenly. Melanie is frozen. A tear
starts to roll down, but Melanie quickly snaps back and wipes
it away as she walks up to the front of the classroom.
Melanie starts to turn back to Abby to reproach her when
another student raises their hand. Melanie looks over to the
student, back at Abby, and then decides to walk over to the
student who raised their hand.

ACT II

INT. MELANIE'S LIVING ROOM - 2023 - EVENING

Melanie is folding a basket of laundry but looks bothered. Her husband Daniel walks in and notices she is not her usual self.

DANIEL

You ok? Bad day?

MELANIE

What? Oh, um, I'm fine.

DANIEL

You don't look fine. What's on your mind? Are you thinking about whether or not you want to help that detective with your dad's case?

Daniel walks around from the backside of the couch and kisses the side of Melanie's head as she folds clothes. Melanie is starts to show frustration.

MELANIE

That?! No, I'm not getting involved in David's stuff.

Melanie looks up at Daniel out of the side of her face and he is staring at her. She quickly looks away. A long silence as Daniel waits. Melanie is reluctant to say anything.

DANIEL

Mel?

MELANIE

Yeah?

Daniel says nothing. She can hear him through the silence. Melanie slows down in the folding and takes a deep loud breath.

MELANIE (CONT'D)

It's a student. She's been missing a lot of school lately.

Daniel sits on the arm of the couch to listen, but Melanie doesn't speak. She picks up a long sleeve shirt and starts to fidget with the sleeves. Daniel looks at the shirt in her hands and then back at Melanie.

MELANIE (CONT'D)

Abby, when she's there, pulls at her sleeves a lot, trying to keep them down. Like she's...

Melanie doesn't finish her sentence but Daniel understands her. Daniel places his hand on Melanie's back and gives her a sympathetic rub. Melanie pulls the shirt to her face, takes a deep breath to smell the clean shirt, and then closes her eyes.

INT. SAN ANGELO SCHOOL - 1988 - MORNING

Young Melanie, now 8, looks depressed packing up her locker. Her hair looks oily and needs to be brushed. Her pants are short, showing her ankles. Her shirt is too big for her, a hand-me-down from her brother's closet. Two children walk past her.

CHILD 1

Weirdo. She wore that shirt yesterday.

CHILD 2

Yeah, her pants look like they would fit a kindergartener.
(to Melanie)
Hey, we won't miss you when you move, Smellany!

Melanie looks down in shame at her clothes. She sniffs at her shirt and becomes aware that the clothes need to be washed.

EXT. RUSTIC CABIN - RUIDOSO, NEW MEXICO - 1989 - DAY

A rustic cabin in Ruidoso, New Mexico, stands as a humble refuge for the family. The exterior, weathered by time, blends with the picturesque surroundings of the Southwest. The vast landscape of rocky mountains and majestic pines provides a serene backdrop to their new life.

INT. RUIDOSO KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

The unpacked treasures reveal a collection of old milk glasses, teapots, and ruby dishes. Amy's face lights up with nostalgia as she carefully places each piece on the table, embracing the memories associated with these simple yet cherished items.

Melanie, almost 9, enthusiastically joins in, taking one of the ruby dishes and polishing it with a dust cloth.

The sun filters through the cabin's small windows, casting a warm glow on the rustic kitchen scene. The family's humble possessions, with their Southwest charm, blend seamlessly into the simple beauty of their new home.

While unpacking and settling into their rustic home, the family finds solace and warmth, turning a modest cabin into a place filled with love, despite the challenges that come with their circumstances.

AMY

You know, I'm going to pass those ruby dishes on to you when you're older, Mel.

Melanie looks wide-eyed at the bright red dish.

AMY (CONT'D)

Ruby is your birthstone. No matter what happens, I'm never gonna sell these.

Melanie smiles.

MELANIE

Thanks, momma.

One of the porcelain teapots is shaped like Aladdin's genie lamp. Melanie lifts it carefully and studies it in wonder. She takes extra care polishing this one. She lifts the lid and peeks inside for a genie.

INT. CONSIGNMENT STORE - DAY

A cluttered consignment store is run over with an assortment of items from lamps and household goods to racks of clothes in round dress racks. The walls are crudely painted a bright mauve hardly visible behind shelves packed with forgotten goods.

Amy and Melanie are standing at the counter. A petite, abrupt, HISPANIC WOMAN, 50s, is rifling through the large box of old milk glasses, teapots, and dishes that Amy has brought in. She inspects them with a sharp eye, noticing a few chips and cracks among some of the pieces.

AMY

(pleading)

But you know they're worth much more than that. Can you at least pay a little bit more?

The Hispanic woman eyes her coldly.

HISPANIC WOMAN

(stern)

\$50, no more!

Amy looks at Melanie and then sighs.

AMY

Ok. Fine.

Melanie watches the woman hand over the money to her mother. Both mother and daughter look disappointed. As they turn to go out the door, Amy places her hand around Melanie's shoulder and pulls her in closer. Amy leans down and kisses Melanie on top of her head.

INT. RUIDOSO KITCHEN - LATER

Amy and Melanie walk into the kitchen. Amy notices Melanie is sulking. Amy opens a cupboard door and reaches inside.

AMY

I kept this one for you. I know
it's yur favorite.

Amy hands Melanie the porcelain teapot shaped like Aladdin's genie lamp. Melanie stares at the teapot. Her smile beaming.

MELANIE

Momma! Thank you.

She sets the teapot down gently on the kitchen table and hugs her mother tight.

INT. RUIDOSO MELANIE'S BEDROOM - LATER

Melanie sits on her bed rubbing the teapot shaped just like Aladdin's genie lamp.

MELANIE

(to the teapot)

Please, genie. I wish we weren't so
poor so we don't have to sell our
stuff anymore. And to have clothes
that don't smell and fit when I go
to school.

Amy is just beyond the cracked door and hears Melanie. She thinks for a moment, then turns away.

INT. RUIDOSO LIVING ROOM - DAY

Amy hums as she sits at her sewing machine. She has a brightly colored western blouse across her lap as she pulls out the stitching of some shoulder pads.

MELANIE

Whatcha you doing, Momma?

AMY

I'm takin' out these shoulder pads and puttin' in a new hem on this shirt.

MELANIE

What for? Don't it fit you?

AMY

This isn't for me; it's fur you. I'm fixin' it fur you and yur birthday coming up. It's a real cowgirl shirt like I wore when I rodeoed as a girl.

Melanie's eyes become like saucers as she smiles.

AMY (CONT'D)

You know, when I was 9 like you'll be, I was already going to show my horses. Before you go back to school, I'm takin' you to the rodeo in Mescalero at the Apache reservation. When you get older, wishing for somethin' to happen won't make it happen. Remember, you can't depend on anyone else but yurself to do what's right.

The sewing machine whizzes as Amy steps on the pedal. Amy looks content, beautiful even. Melanie rests her chin on the chair back, watching her mother work.

INT. MELANIE'S CLASSROOM - 2023 - MORNING

The high school hallway is filled with students in heavy coats who just walked in from outside at the beginning of the morning. Teachers stand in about not paying close attention to the students but talk to other teachers nearby. Melanie notices Abby walk past her down the hall with her head down, not wearing a coat, holding her books close to her chest as she shivers. Melanie walks over to a nearby teacher.

MELANIE

Hey, you have Abby Anderson for algebra. You ever see her wear a coat since the weather turned cold?

The other teacher shrugs to gesture they don't know and then walks away. Melanie continues to watch Abby walk further away alone down the hall.

INT. RUIDOSO LIVING ROOM - WINTER- EVENING

Melanie and Luke sit at the table wearing layers of winter clothes doing their homework. Melanie is struggling with her work, irritated as she impatiently erases writing on the paper. The **absence of consistent education** beginning to show. The winter wind blows hard enough to rattle the windows. The sound whistles through every small crack of the old cabin. Snow is blowing outside in gusts outside the window of the living room's only window. Amy steps into the room holding sheets and blankets. She starts making up a bed on the sofa.

AMY

Luke, you'll sleep in here from now on; it's too cold in yur room. Lord knows I can't keep up with the electric bill this winter, so we're going to have to shut up part of the house.

LUKE

OK, Momma.

MELANIE

Can I sleep with you tonight, Momma? I get cold, too.

Amy half smiles. The wind outside is strong and shakes the house a bit.

AMY

Alright, Mel. I may have to call yur daddy to see if he can help just til I can get another job in the spring when businesses pick up.

Melanie and Luke up at Amy with worry.

MELANIE

(nervous)

But Momma, I thought you said you can't depend on anyone but yourself.

Amy looks down and begins to brush away invisible dust on her clothes, ashamed at her own words being used against her.

AMY

That's not exactly what I said. But
I have to do whatever I have to do.

MELANIE

(pleading, arguing)
But Momma, Nana says that you can
ask God for anything. And I don't
think he should...

Amy snaps at Melanie before she can finish, giving her a look of warning.

AMY

(stern)
I don't wanna hear it. Not about
God or what you or anybody else
wants, for that matter. You're not an
adult. You can't possibly
understand.

Amy huffs and walks out of the room. Luke stares at Melanie in concern. Melanie avoids his eyes and just stares at her paper in anger. She gives a little toss to her pencil on the table and watches it roll away.

EXT. RUIDOSO LIVING ROOM - SPRING - DAY

The living room is full of packed boxes. Melanie watches through the living room window as a large van pulling a small boxed trailer pulls up outside the cabin.

MELANIE POV:-

David steps out of the truck and strolls up the path toward their front door.

O.S. KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK ON THE FRONT DOOR.

Amy walks past Melanie and signals for her to go to the other room. Melanie stands up from her seat but does not go. She stands firm, holding her ground for whatever may come next. Amy walks out the door to greet David. He scoops her up as they hug.

MELANIE
(quietly mumbles to
herself in a sarcastic
tone)
I guess you can't depend on anyone
but yourself to do what's right.

INT. IRVING MELANIE'S BEDROOM - 1990 - DAY

Melanie is unpacking her clothes and hanging them in another new bedroom closet. The sound of a busy street can be heard outside, a stark contrast to her last home. She steps inside. Closes the door behind her and quietly sobs. Melanie folds her hands.

MELANIE
(whispers)
Please, God, don't let Momma forget
about us. Don't let Daddy hurt us.
Give me the courage to stand up to
him. Amen.

EXT. A RESTAURANT - 1991 - EVENING

David is passed out on the carpet. A substantial urine stain on the crotch of his jeans. Melanie steps over him, disgusted. She weaves her way down the hall, the matted brown carpet muffling the sound of her footsteps.

INT. IRVING MELANIE'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Melanie retrieves a homemade birthday card from her night stand.

INT. IRVING HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Melanie stands outside her mother's bedroom door, a hesitant witness to the muffled sounds of prayer and tears seeping through the closed space. She knocks gently.

The door creaks open, revealing Amy, perched on the edge of the bed, her body curled forward, head cradled in her hands. Melanie, holding a card in her hand, approaches with a soft step and places it gently on the bed beside her.

MELANIE
Happy birthday, Momma.

She slips out of the room. Amy doesn't look up at Melanie but over at the innocent yet sincere gift. Her sobs fade as she begins to straighten up.

INT. IRVING KITCHEN - EVENING

Melanie is helping her mother prepare dinner. The phone rings. Amy picks it up.

CLAYTON (O.S.)

Hi, Momma.

AMY

(with surprise)

Clayton! How are you?

CLAYTON (O.S.)

I'm fine, Momma. I'm fine.

AMY

How's life in the Marines?

CLAYTON (O.S.)

(with excitement)

It's OK. I just finished my basic training. Listen, Momma, Tonya and I are getting married. Would I be able to have that ring? The one you promised me? For when I get married?

AMY

(hesitant)

Um...Sure, you can have it, I'll send it to you. But Clayton...I'm very happy for you both... I am... but you're so young. Are you sure you're ready to get married?

Melanie jumps up when she realizes what they are talking about and runs over to her mother on the phone.

CLAYTON (O.S.)

Yes, Momma, I'm sure. We love each other. We're happy and we want to get married.

Amy hands the phone to an impatient Melanie. She squeals.

MELANIE

(impatiently)

Clayton, can I be a flower girl?

(MORE)

MELANIE (CONT'D)

I've always wanted to be a flower girl. I could wear a white dress with lace and carry a basket full of pink rose petals, like the girls in the movies.

CLAYTON (O.S.)

Hey, Mel! Of course, I would love that.

MELANIE

Thanks, Bubba!

Melanie smiles and hands the phone back to her mother. Melanie starts twirling and dancing about the room.

CLAYTON (O.S.)

It'd be really great if y'all could come.

Amy's eyes well up with tears.

AMY

Of course, we'll do our very best to be there. You know how tight things are. And there's David. But if God wants us to be there, he'll make it happen.

Melanie's excitement fades. Reality sets in as she realizes she isn't going to be a flower girl or see her brother get married.

INT. IRVING LIVING ROOM - DAY

Melanie arrives home from school to find her mother sitting slumped over her lap, crying on the sofa.

MELANIE

What's the matter, Momma?

Amy murmurs between sobs.

AMY

Yur daddy isn't going to be livin' with us anymore. He's gone, and he's not coming back this time.

Amy tries to calm herself with Melanie present. She sniffles as she continues.

AMY (CONT'D)

Melanie, you can't trust men when they say they'll change. You hear me? You can't depend on anyone but yourself to do what's right.

INT. IRVING BEDROOM/LIVING ROOM - 1992 - AFTERNOON

A plastic Christmas tree covered in silver tinsel strands stands in the corner of the living room, the only decor for the holiday season. The furniture is a different yet worn suit from last seen at the last few homes. Melanie, 12, hears a knock at the front door. Melanie opens her bedroom door and stands in the doorway watching as Amy opens the front door to reveal 2 UNIFORMED MARINE OFFICERS, delivering the fateful news. Amy's legs give way under her as one of the officers steps forward to catch her. She wails in agony, amidst floods of tears. Melanie watches in shock and horror.

INT. IRVING BEDROOM - DAY

Amy is packing a small suitcase. Melanie stands watching her pack.

AMY

I'll be back in a couple of days.

Melanie looks disturbed.

MELANIE

But why can't Luke and I come with you?

AMY

Melanie, I can't afford it. I had to borrow money from yur dad as it is.

MELANIE

(angry)

I haven't seen Clayton since we left San Angelo. You wouldn't even take us to see him get married.

Amy continues to pack not making eye contact with Melanie.

AMY

You won't get to see him. No one will. It's a closed casket.

MELANIE

Then tell me what happened to him.

Amy freezes. She finally looks at Melanie.

AMY

He...he had an accident. He just...he got really sad and couldn't keep...I can't talk about this now, Melanie. I have to get ready to go.

Amy turns away from her toward the closet, looking for things to pack.

MELANIE

(anger growing)

But Clayton was MY brother. He was there for me when you weren't.

Amy stops again and looks at Melanie. She is tired and emotional.

AMY

I'm sorry, Mel. I'm doing the best I can. I'll try to do better from here on. I'll try.

EXT. PARK - LATER

Rain sprinkling.

Melanie sits by herself on the wooden stage of an amphitheater by a duck pond. Just beyond the park, Christmas lights twinkle on houses in a small neighborhood. She is wearing headphones, and listening to her Walkman. Tears streaming down her face. Her voice cracks as she mouths the words to Bette Midler's "Wind Beneath My Wings" towards the sky. The rain mixes with her tears as her voice cracks.

INT. IRVING KITCHEN - 1993 - MORNING

Melanie, 12, body beginning to blossom, and Luke, 15, a teenage maturing build, sit at the kitchen table eating bowls of cereal. Melanie's hairstyle with raised bangs and teased hair add to her growth and independence. Luke's hair is shaggy, overgrown, and unkempt. Amy enters in her dressing gown, followed by JOEL, 40s, sleazy, bald with a comb-over what hair remains, with bits of thin brown hair circling his head like a false halo. Amy's hair is dyed a deep dark brown as an effort to regain her youth, but her deep-set wrinkles around her eyes and mouth are evidence of years dependent on drugs and worn by stress.

Melanie and Luke glance at one another, confused at the stranger in their home.

AMY

Melanie, Luke... this is my friend.

Joel throws them a smarmy smile. Then leans on the kitchen counter eyeing Amy as reaches for the coffee maker. He reaches over and pulls her towards him. Kisses her neck. Squeezes her backside. Melanie and Luke look away, uncomfortable. Joel blurts out.

JOEL

Your mother and I are gonna get married.

Amy smiles. He gives her a sleazy kiss on the lips as Melanie and Luke sit in shock.

INT. IRVING LIVING ROOM - EVENING

Melanie and Luke are on the couch watching a family show on the TV. They hear the hooting of horns and rush to the window. They watch Amy pull up in her brand-new teal Camaro. She is beaming with joy. They rush down the stairs to open the front door for Amy.

AMY

How do you like my new car?

LUKE

It's great.

MELANIE

Wow, momma! I love the color. But can you afford...

AMY

(irritated)

Shhh! You don't need to worry about what I can afford. Besides, yur daddy is helping me out for a little while, and...

Amy pauses a moment trying to figure out the words.

AMY (CONT'D)

I'm helping him out here while he's out workin'.

Just then, an oversized matching teal pickup truck pulls into the driveway and parks.

Joel climbs out of the vehicle with a wry grin and struts across the driveway and into the front door. He passes Melanie and Luke in the hallway.

JOEL

What d'ya think?

Melanie and Luke stand there speechless, looking at the truck and then at each other. Joel slaps Amy on the butt. Amy smiles proudly.

MELANIE

(boldly)

Better, huh?

Melanie looks at Amy with intent. Amy's smile fades. She turns and walks through the door, ignoring Melanie. Joel walks behind her.

MELANIE (CONT'D)

(whispers to Luke)

He doesn't have a job. Is Momma really making enough from Dad to pay for all this?

Luke gives her a knowing look as he closes the front door.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

It's late in the evening. Streetlights illuminate quiet, deserted streets. The Camaro zips along; its rumbling exhaust note piercing through the peace of the night.

INT. CAR INTERIOR - CONTINUOUS

Amy is driving, lost in her thoughts. Melanie sits in the passenger seat. The car radio blares with Dwight Yoakum singing, "Maybe I'll be as fast as you." Amy seems happy as she sings along and taps the steering wheel. Melanie joins in. Amy glances over at Melanie and nods in approval. With the windows rolled down, Melanie allows her hand to soar up and down, feeling the air rush through her fingers.

Amy's smile fades, and she takes another sip from the bottle resting in the cupholder. She switches the radio to the tape deck. Elton John's "The One" blasts through the speakers. Amy bursts into tears for a moment as the lyrics flow. Then she grabs the bottle once more, drowning her grief. The car speeds through a red light and carries on along the street. Melanie looks anxiously at her mother and grips the seatbelt tight.

INT. IRVING MELANIE'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Melanie is asleep in her daybed, but a brush on her skin causes her to open her eyes.

MELANIE POV:-

A dark invading figure is lurking over her. Melanie freezes in fear. The figure moves swiftly, backing away.

She screams. The figure opens the bedroom door, flips on the light switch, and asks in a panic.

JOEL

Wake up. You're having a dream.

Luke comes running in.

LUKE

What's wrong? Mel, you ok?

Melanie looks at Luke, disturbed. Joel interjects.

JOEL

She just had a nightmare. Come on.
Leave her alone, now.

Joel closes the door signaling Luke to go. They both turn to leave, turning off the light and closing the door behind them. Melanie pulls the covers back and creeps to the door, locking it. She pulls a blanket and pillow from the bed. Melanie enters her closet and closes the door behind her.

INT. IRVING LIVING ROOM - 1994 - EVENING

Melanie sits at the table doing her homework, listening to 90s pop music on her Walkman. Amy and Joel are fighting downstairs, their voices carry through the house. Melanie pulls the headphones off and listens.

AMY (O.S.)

So why are you goin' out again
tonight?

JOEL (O.S.)

I don't have to explain myself to
you.

INT. AMY'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

AMY

You've been out every night this week!

JOEL

No one's stopping you from going out. Why don't you call your ex-husband?

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Melanie is stiff listening intently. The sound of a door slamming.

AMY (O.S.)

I'm tired of payin' for everything. You need to bring in money, Joel.

JOEL (O.S.)

Like you? Running for him for dope.

AMY (O.S.)

Yur the reason I have to work fur David.

The argument stops, and everything is silent. A pause. Joel stomps up the stairs from their bedroom.

JOEL

(yelling down the stairway)

Like I'm going to help you. Maybe you should just die!

He storms into the living room and grabs his keys off the end table next to his chair. He doesn't notice Melanie.

MELANIE

Is Momma ok?

Shoots an evil look at Melanie.

JOEL

What do I care about your Momma? I've gotten exactly what I wanted out of her, and I'm done.

Joel huffs in disgust. He begins to take a few more steps toward the front door and stops.

JOEL (CONT'D)
You're gonna be just like her, you know.

Joel struts out the door. Melanie spies through the window watching his truck back out of the driveway with a squeal and then runs to the front door and locks it. She descends the stairs hesitantly. Fearful. Then stops at the bottom, afraid to turn the corner. She listens intently. Nothing. Still hesitant, she slowly rounds the corner and enters the open bedroom doorway.

INT. IRVING MASTER BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

There, on the bedroom floor, in a fetal position, is Amy clenching her chest.

MELANIE
Momma, what's wrong? Did he...

Amy gasps for air as Melanie rushes to her side.

AMY
(whispers)
My purse...get my purse.

Melanie finds her mother's purse on the floor, next to the open closet door. She runs back to her mother.

AMY (CONT'D)
Open it.

Melanie unzips the large, floppy purse, fumbles around blindly, and pulls out a bottle of pills. She unscrews the small cap and gives one of the pills to her mother. Amy takes it in her hand and puts it under her tongue. She starts to breathe more deeply. She's coming to. Amy reaches out her arm.

AMY (CONT'D)
Help me up.

Melanie helps her mother up onto the bed. Amy's breathing is stabilizing now.

MELANIE
I've got you, Momma. You don't need them. You've got me. I'll take care of you.

Amy looks away in shame.

AMY
(still slightly out of
breath between words)
I need David. Call yur dad. I
shouldn't have trusted him. You
can't depend on anyone but yurself
to do what's right.

Melanie hesitates, looking at Amy with disappointment. Amy covers her face with her hands unable to look at Melanie. Melanie walks over to the phone on the nightstand.

INT. IRVING HALLWAY - DAY

Melanie arrives home from school. She walks through the front door, along the hallway, and down the stairs of the split-level. She wanders past the living room and notices Joel's recliner is gone. The room is quiet.

INT. IRVING LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Relieved, she steps inside and puts down her school bag. She looks at the empty space where Joel's recliner used to be. The cardboard box with all his losing lottery tickets is gone. Amy steps into the room.

AMY
Yeah, he's gone. Yur dad took care
of it.

MELANIE
What did he do?

AMY
What he always does. He cleans up
my mess.

MELANIE
He makes his own messes too, you
know.

Melanie freezes. She couldn't believe she had said the words out loud. She eyes Amy for her response, half waiting to be scolded.

AMY
(snaps)
You should be more forgiving when
he sends money all the time to take
care of you.

MELANIE
(only slightly sincere)
Sorry.

Melanie watches Amy turn away ashamed of her.

MELANIE (CONT'D)
Are you feeling better today,
Momma? I can make dinner for you
after I start laundry.

Melanie walks over to her and hugs her around the waist. Amy looks depressed and feigns a smile but doesn't hug her back.

AMY
I'll be fine. You take care of you
and yur brother. I'm not in the
mood for anything.

Amy pulls away, walking toward her bedroom. She stops a moment and turns slightly toward Melanie.

AMY (CONT'D)
Oh, there's no washin' detergent.
You'll have to wait a few weeks til
I get another paycheck.

Amy turns once more and continues to her room, closing the door behind her. Melanie continues to stand in the living room alone.

INT. MELANIE'S CLASSROOM - DAY

Students walk into a classroom with friends carrying backpacks and notebooks. Two GIRLS are sitting at desks next to each other at the front of the room talking and laughing together. Young Melanie walks by in wrinkled clothes a little worn for wear.

GIRL 1
(dramatically)
Oh, gross! What is that smell?

She pulls her finger to her nose and looks at girl 2 to chime in.

GIRL 2
P.E. must have been running outside
today.

The girls' faces follow Melanie as she walks toward the back of the classroom and takes a seat.

A teacher at a desk looks up for a moment and quickly looks down, ignoring the girls and not paying attention to Melanie.

GIRL 1

(callously)

No, that's not it. Didn't you wear that a few days ago? You forgot to wash it.

Melanie doesn't respond. She takes her notebook out of her backpack and keeps her head down so as not to make eye contact. The girls turn back towards each other and begin to laugh.

EXT. IRVING FRONT ENTRANCE - AFTERNOON - 1994

Melanie is putting on her coat as she opens the front door. She bends her elbows trying to stretch the fabric since it, like most of her clothes, is too small as she continues to grow. She walks out the front door and down the street.

We see Melanie walk towards a church and enter. Then, we see Melanie standing at a pew alone in the back of a church. She is holding a hymn book and singing along with the congregation.

MELANIE

(singing)

It is well... with my soul. It is well. It is well with my soul.

Melanie smiles. She's touched. A warm glow of light surrounds her.

INT. IRVING LIVING ROOM - EVENING

Melanie is sitting at the table doing her homework. Amy is lying on the couch, detached and out of it.

O.S. THE DOORBELL RINGS.

Amy doesn't move. Melanie reluctantly gets up to go to the door.

INT. IRVING LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Melanie walks back into the room followed by HEATHER, 36, loud, abrasive, and full-figured with bright red hair.

Melanie sits back down to her homework. Heather stands over Amy who is almost passed out on the couch.

HEATHER

Looks like you need a 'pick me up'.

INT. IRVING KITCHEN - LATER

Melanie is standing at the counter spreading peanut butter on a slice of bread. Amy and Heather come bounding into the kitchen, upbeat and almost manic. Their eyes are wired. Amy wears a black short skirt, red heels, and a low-cut top. Melanie looks at her mother's outfit disapprovingly.

AMY

(to Melanie)

Look at you all grown up!

She leans forward and kisses Melanie's forehead. Melanie pulls away slightly, annoyed at Amy.

AMY (CONT'D)

I taught her how to take care of herself.

Melanie rolls her eyes.

MELANIE

You need to eat something. You don't wanna get sick if you're going to be drinking again.

Amy blows Melanie off.

AMY

Always worried about yur Momma. Heather said we're gonna eat out tonight. Besides, I can take care of myself.

Melanie gets a sarcastic look on her face and shakes her head no in a slight shake, continuing to make a sandwich.

MELANIE

(irritated)

This is the last of the bread. And we need more milk. You think you can go to the store before you come home?

Amy ignores the question. Heather eyes Melanie as she pulls out two glasses and pours shots of whisky. She hands one to Amy. They clink the glasses together, knocking them back.

HEATHER
(grimacing)
Come on, let's get going.

AMY
See ya later, Mel. Don't wait up.

MELANIE
(under her breath)
It's cold out.

No response.

MELANIE (CONT'D)
Bye, Momma. Love you, too. I'll
just be here taking care of the
house...like always.

Melanie looks annoyed as Amy and Heather shut the front door with a bit of a thud, not paying any attention to Melanie.

EXT. TRACK MEET - DAY

The GIRLS from Melanie's junior high team sit together in the stands waiting for their races and watching each other compete. Each wears a track uniform in red and blue or a blue baggy sweatsuit covering their uniform. Melanie sits in anticipation of her race to be called when she notices her mother waving her hand around in the air from the bottom of the bleachers. Amy's hair is teased high, and she wears a pair of flare-legged jeans, a sign she is clinging to the style of her younger years. She is smiling and holding a white plastic bag with her other arm. Melanie beams with joy. Amy's steps clang against the metal bleachers as she hollers.

AMY
Melll...

Amy is utterly thrilled to find Melanie. Pulling the bag out from under her arm, she makes a grand gesture for everyone to note. Lifting a plastic bag high in the air. Melanie smiles as she takes the surprise gift from her mother.

MELANIE
Thanks momma!

She pulls a shoebox out and opens the cardboard top to discover a pair of white, navy, and teal Nike running shoes. The other girls gawk.

GIRL 1
Wow!

GIRL 2
Those are cool.

AMY
(excitedly)
Try 'em on Mel.

Melanie hesitates, then changes from her old canvas tennis shoes to the stiff new gear. The other girls glance at one another knowingly as she laces the stiff, new shoes.

GIRL 1
(whispers to Girl 2)
She can't run in those. They need
to be worn in.

GIRL 2
I know. Shh.

Melanie's race is announced as the wonky BLARE from the announcer squeals through a worn intercom.

MELANIE
It's time, Momma. Come down and
watch me race.

AMY
(smiles)
Go on. I'll be here.

Amy claps her hands as Melanie turns to walk down the steps, making her way to the entrance of the track. She takes her place, wiggling her body all over, loosening up.

Each competitor lines up, squats, and assumes the starting position. Finally, the gun POPS, and they're off. Melanie glances up towards the bleachers, then sprints like she's on fire. She runs lap after lap with her team cheering for her on the other side of the fence. Then, suddenly, Melanie notices the girl in front of her slow down, flailing her arms as she crosses the finish line. Crossing the line with heels close behind her, Melanie places third. Her team yells for her, supportive and thrilled at her victory.

Melanie's heart races, still trotting with adrenaline as she scans around the arena, panting and holding her hands to her sides, trying to catch her breath. Slowly and still breathing heavily, she makes her way to the gate and passes through to the spectator side walking over to her group where she had left them. Clueless, she continues to look around the stands for her mother.

GIRL 2
(knowingly)
She left.

Although not surprised, Melanie looks heartbroken.

MELANIE
Oh. Figures.

INT. IRVING KITCHEN - 1994 - DAWN

Melanie opens a cupboard. She surveys and pulls out an almost empty bread packet. She removes the two remaining slices, places them on the counter, and then notices they are moldy. She opens the fridge door and looks inside. A packet of cheese, a couple of cans of soda, and some old vegetables on the bottom shelf. Melanie looks tense as she sighs.

INT. IRVING HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Melanie hesitates as she stands in front of her mother's bedroom door. Then finally KNOCKS lightly.

MELANIE
Momma?

Eerie silence and no answer. She KNOCKS a little louder.

MELANIE (CONT'D)
Momma, I need lunch money.

Still, nothing. She tries to turn the brass handle, but the door is locked. Again, she KNOCKS but a little louder. Melanie becomes worried and her KNOCKS become louder and grow into BANGS as she yells out to her mother.

AMY
Momma? Momma? Are you awake? Momma
open the door!

Melanie begins to panic. In desperation, she runs upstairs, grabs the cordless phone, and carries the phone back downstairs. She dials 911. BANG, BANG on the door.

MELANIE
Momma! Momma! Open the door!

DISPATCHER (O.S.)
911, what's your emergency?

MELANIE

My momma won't wake up. She won't come to the door.

DISPATCHER (O.S.)

Can you try to open the door?

MELANIE

I tried. It's locked.

DISPATCHER (O.S.)

Do you know how long she's been in there?

MELANIE

(frantic)

I don't know. Something is wrong. I know it.

INT. IRVING FRONT ENTRANCE - LATER

A shrill SIREN approaching, Melanie unlocks the deadbolt. Swinging the front door open. The 2 level-headed PARAMEDICS, 30s, are getting out of the vehicle.

MELANIE

(yells)

She's downstairs.

The men rush up the sidewalk path to the front door. Melanie guides them through the house and to the steps leading to Amy's bedroom.

PARAMEDIC 1

(to Melanie)

Stay up here.

They march down the stairs. One of the men looks back over his shoulder at Melanie.

PARAMEDIC 2

What's her name?

MELANIE

Amy.

The paramedics KNOCK loudly on the door.

PARAMEDIC 2

Amy, the paramedics are here to assist you. Can you come to the door?

No answer.

PARAMEDIC 1

Amy. If you're unable to open the door we will need to force entry.

Melanie looks terrified. Still no answer. The paramedic gives the door a kick with the sole of his foot. The door easily gives way.

INT. IRVING AMY'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

As they enter, the room is pitch-black with curtains drawn. The paramedics turn on the light.

Amy is lying unconscious on the bed. An empty bottle of pills next to her, with half a dozen pills scattered nearby.

PARAMEDIC 1

(loudly)

Amy, we're here to help you.

Paramedic 1 picks the bottle up, reads the label, then looks knowingly at his colleague. Two more PARAMEDICS, 30s, abruptly enter the room carrying a stretcher.

INT. IRVING STAIRS - MOMENTS LATER

With Amy strapped down, all four men surround the stretcher, carefully raise her, and carry her up the stairs. Unresponsive, but not asleep. Her lifeless body jiggles about with every jolt from the stretcher. She is unaware of what is happening to her, who is trying to save her, or Melanie watching in apprehension. Melanie jolts back down the steps to her mother's room, locating Amy's purse on the floor in front of the bathroom sink.

INT. IRVING BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

On the counter, a mirror covered with white dust. Instinctively she grabs the mirror covered in white powdery residue and throws it in the toilet, shattering the glass into pieces as she flushes. A small red straw is on the floor. She snatches the device and hurls the straw into the trash can.

INT. IRVING DRIVEWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Frantically, Melanie rushes outside as they close the doors to the ambulance.

PARAMEDIC 1
(to Melanie)
Get in the front seat next to the
driver.

She does as she's told. Paramedic 1 and Paramedic 2 are in the back with Amy. The other two walk back to their truck.

The lights flick on and the siren WAILS. They speed down the street, heading for the hospital. The neighbors stand out front with curiosity and concern as the morning sun peaks over the horizon.

MELANIE
(to the driver)
Can you call my school and tell
them I'm going to be absent today?

The world-weary DRIVER, 32, gazes at her strangely.

DRIVER
No, hun, I can't.

MELANIE
Is she going to be okay?

He hesitates, then answers honestly.

DRIVER
I don't know.

EXT. HOSPITAL EMERGENCY ROOM- LATER

The vehicle pulls up under a covered awning with massive, bold red letters reading Emergency Vehicles Only. The driver jumps out. Melanie unbuckles and climbs down too. The men pull out the stretcher and roll Amy inside, as NURSES rush to their sides. They all walk fast. Melanie keeps up behind, clutching her mother's oversized purse.

PARAMEDIC 2
(to the female nurse)
The daughter found her.

The compassionate FEMALE NURSE glances back at Melanie with pity. Amy is wheeled into a hospital room. Melanie stares from across the hall and through the open door. In the chaos and uncertainty of the situation, she is left unattended.

MELANIE POV:-

Doctors and nurses begin to cut Amy's clothing away. They check her vitals. Everyone is rushing and talking fast.

An efficient MALE NURSE, 33, wheels in stomach pumping equipment and holds a large clear tube. The staff huddle around Amy. Her mouth is opened. A nurse holds the tube, ready to insert it into Amy's mouth. Just then, a concerned-looking FEMALE NURSE, 29, catches Melanie's eye through the door. She rushes over, obscuring Melanie's view, and closes the door. Melanie slides down the wall to the floor crouching, the purse at her feet. She closes her eyes and begins to pray.

MELANIE

God, please help her. Please don't take her away from me. I don't want to be alone. I promise I'll take better care of her.

INT. IRVING LIVING ROOM - DAY

Amy sits on the couch next to Heather. She appears worn and aged. Her eyes are vacant, with dark circles underneath. Melanie rushes into the living room holding her school bag.

MELANIE

Momma, you're home!

She rushes over to hug her mother. Amy hardly notices her.

HEATHER

Give her some space. Don't smother her.

Melanie steps back.

HEATHER (CONT'D)

I was just telling her what a handful you kids have been while she was away. Things are gonna change around here. I'll take care of yur momma.

EXT. 2 BEDROOM HOUSE/RENTAL - 1994 - DAY

A small white brick house, on a corner. Amy and her new husband, MIKE, 48, a muscular prison bird, covered in tattoos, carry boxes into the house. Melanie and Luke lift trash bags filled with their belongings.

MELANIE

What does bankruptcy mean?

LUKE

I don't know, but this is all Momma can afford now.

MELANIE

Where did she and Mike meet? She only just got back a few weeks ago.

LUKE

Not sure. Maybe at rehab.

MELANIE

Really?!

Luke carries his bags towards the entrance. Melanie follows behind with hers.

INT. 2 BEDROOM HOUSE/DINING ROOM - EVENING

A cot and dresser are squeezed in next to a large old dining table. Luke is putting his clothes away inside the dresser. He sits on the cot and looks around the room, perfectly happy with his new sleeping area.

INT. 2 BEDROOM HOUSE/MELANIE'S BEDROOM - SAME TIME

Melanie sits on the bed brushing her hair in her new little bedroom. A KNOCK on her bedroom door. The door opens before she can respond. Amy pops her head around the door.

AMY

Mel, Heather and her friend are gonna sleep in here tonight. I've made you a bed on the couch.

Melanie looks disappointed as she slowly stands up.

INT. 2 BEDROOM HOUSE/LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Melanie drags her feet into the living room carrying a small pile of clothes. Heather pushes past her towards Melanie's bedroom, with a SLEAZY MAN, 45, heavy set and balding, in tow. Melanie slumps down on the couch and lets out a big sigh.

INT. MELANIE'S CLASSROOM - 2023 - NEW DAY

Adult Melanie is walking around passing graded papers out to students in her class. Some students express joy at their graded work, and a few are disappointed. Most students are wearing short sleeves, shorts, and skirts for the warm weather. Melanie approaches student Abby. Abby is wearing long sleeves but with the sleeves pushed up to the elbow.

MELANIE

(quietly to Abby)

If you want to make corrections to this and schedule a retake, let me know.

Abby is emotionless and reaches for the paper Melanie is handing to her. Melanie notices bruising around her wrist. Abby catches Melanie's stare at her arms and instinctively pulls down her sleeves. Melanie continues passing out papers, although, a little slower now as she is deep in thought. Occasionally, she glances back at Abby, watching her behavior as she squirms uncomfortably in her chair.

The dismissal bell rings, and students busily gather their notebooks and backpacks. As students pass Melanie out the door, Melanie catches Abby's eyes.

MELANIE (CONT'D)

Abby, just a second.

Abby takes a step back away from the students trying to get through. Melanie waits until the last student has walked out and takes a few steps toward Abby. Abby is clinging her notebook to her chest, resting her chin on the top. She is nervous.

MELANIE (CONT'D)

I just wanted to check in with you. You were doing so well in class and then you were absent a few days in a row again. Is that why you failed the test? Is everything alright?

Melanie waits for Abby to respond , but she doesn't move or speak.

MELANIE (CONT'D)

Is there anything you want to talk about? Should I call someone at home?

Abby looks up at her teacher and makes eye contact for just a moment. Abby considers a moment longer before responding.

ABBY

I'm fine. I just didn't get much sleep before the test.

Abby looks back down. Melanie shakes her head in acknowledgment, but continues to eye Abby knowing more is going on.

ABBY (CONT'D)

Mrs. Lang, I don't want to be late for my next class. I'm sorry. There's no need to call home.

Abby looks worried and glances at the clock on the wall.

MELANIE

Alright. I'm here, Abby, if you want to talk about anything.

Abby quickly walks by Melanie and down the hall. Coming up the hallway from the opposite direction is the PRINCIPAL, a white-haired man 50s, wearing a suit, focused and in a hurry.

MELANIE (CONT'D)

Oh, Mr. Williams. I was wondering if I could talk to you for a moment about a student.

The principal continues forward, not stopping. He speaks over his shoulder as he passes.

PRINCIPAL

Did you call the parent yet?

MELANIE

Not yet, but I wanted to ask you...

PRINCIPAL

(interrupts)

Not now, Mrs. Lang. Call the parent first. Then, send me an email.

Melanie shakes her head in irritation and puts her hands on her hips, watching the principal continue down the hall never slowing down or looking at the students going into classrooms. The tardy bell rings.

Melanie walks back into her empty classroom and closes the door. She looks up Abby's file on her computer and finds a telephone number. Melanie picks up the phone receiver on the wall and begins to dial the number. After many rings, Abby's mother, MRS. ANDERSON, picks up, groggy.

MRS. ANDERSON (O.S.)

What?

MELANIE

Hello. I'm looking for Mrs.
Anderson. Abby's mother.

MRS. ANDERSON (O.S.)

(sleepily)

Yeah. What she do?

MELANIE

Oh, no. Abby didn't do anything.
Actually, I was just checking in.
She's been absent from school quite
a bit lately.

MRS. ANDERSON (O.S.)

Oh. She's uh...um...she had hurt
herself cleanin' up round here
while I was workin'. Her dad kept
her home. Is that all?

MELANIE

I see. Well, I wondered if you
wouldn't mind meeting with me about
Abby and her adjusting to the new
school.

MRS. ANDERSON (O.S.)

Look, I'm real busy. I gotta get up
for my night shift soon. But you
can be sure I'll have a talk with
her. You don't need to worry bout
nothin'.

The line clicks. The woman hangs up on her end leaving
Melanie on the line alone.

MELANIE

Hello? Hello?

Melanie lets out a sigh and hangs up the phone.

INT. TEXAS LIVING ROOM - 1994 - DAY

Amy is lying on the couch. Her eyes are open, but looks
dazed. Melanie walks into the room with an overnight bag. She
puts the bag down on the floor.

MELANIE

Momma, Mrs. Morris just called and asked if I can babysit for a few days. She and her husband will be working late, so she needs me to stay at their house. Is that OK?

Amy stares vacantly at Melanie.

AMY

(groggy)

When will you be back?

MELANIE

On Friday.

Amy drifts off into space again.

AMY

Uh-huh.

Melanie picks up her bag and turns to leave.

MELANIE

Ok, see you later momma.

INT. VAN - DAY

MRS. MORRIS, 37, kind, and nurturing, is driving her minivan with Melanie in the passenger seat. Her TWO CHILDREN, aged 6 and 7, sit quietly in the back seats. She pulls up in front of the small dingy white house where Melanie lives.

MRS. MORRIS

Melanie, I'd like to come in and meet your mother. I want to thank her for letting you babysit over the last few days and let her know what a great job you did.

Melanie is apprehensive.

MELANIE

Um...I guess that would be ok.

Mrs. Morris reaches into her bag and pulls out her purse. She pays Melanie in cash for the babysitting work. They get out of the van and Mrs. Morris helps Melanie with her bags as they walk up to the porch, leaving the kids in the running van. The front door is open. Melanie pushes open the screen door and the metal hinges SQUEAK. They step through the door into the living room. Heather stands, hands on hips, waiting for Melanie's return.

Amy sits on the edge of the couch, seemingly lost in space. Right away, Heather shouts, as the screen door smacks shut behind them.

HEATHER
(raised voice in anger)
Where in the world have you been?

Mrs. Morris is completely taken aback.

MRS. MORRIS
Melanie has been babysitting my...

Heather interrupts her.

HEATHER
Yeah right! She's just been slavin'
for some stuck-up snob who is not
her mother and has no right to be
around her without her mother's say-
so!

Melanie is mortified. She stares at Mrs. Morris in horror.

MRS. MORRIS
Are you Melanie's mother?

HEATHER
(huffs)
Course not.

MRS. MORRIS
I can assure you Melanie asked for
permission.

HEATHER
Who do you think you are
comin' in here like you own the
place? If I say she didn't have
permission, then she didn't.

Amy doesn't move or speak. She seems completely detached. Heather approaches Mrs. Morris like a predator, forcing her backward towards the door. Heather gives her a shove. In desperation, Mrs. Morris looks to Melanie for support. Melanie yells.

MELANIE
Stop it, Heather! Leave her alone!

Heather is not backing down. Mrs. Morris turns and jets out the door to the safety of her vehicle and drives away. Amy sits in a daze, taking no part in the attack nor giving any support in Melanie's defense.

Heather fumes, grabbing Melanie's bag. She pulls items out, tossing them to the floor. The babysitting money flies in the air.

HEATHER

Is this the money you made?
Is this what yur worth?

Numb to her environment, Amy stands up and drifts to her bedroom, sitting down on the edge of the bed. Heather grabs Melanie's arm and twists her wrist to propel her forward as she follows Amy to her room.

INT. 2 BEDROOM HOUSE/AMY'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Heather throws Melanie down on the chair in the corner of her mother's room. The yelling continues.

HEATHER

You're worthless. You're a disgrace
to your poor momma who doesn't have
the energy to deal with you!

Blankly staring into nothing, Amy gazes on. Melanie cowers into a ball, drawing her knees up and bending her arms.

HEATHER (CONT'D)

You don't appreciate what you have.
You think you can just do anything
you want, don't you? You think
you're too good for us, that you're
better than us. Well, you're not!

Melanie is in tears. Heather slaps her hard across the face. Melanie pleads.

MELANIE

Momma! Momma! Help me! Stop her!

She reaches out to her. Nothing. Amy doesn't flinch. Heather yanks her by the wrist off the chair, and they circle trading places as she sits on the chair. She jerks Melanie back down over her knees. Heather leans over her, crushing her, and picks up a shoe from the floor. She beats her butt, thighs, and lower back with the heel as she swings blow after blow. Melanie screams and tries to find her feet. Heather bites her arm, hard. Melanie collapses to the ground. Heather falls on top of her, stopping her from crawling away. She punches her back and sides with her fists until she runs out of steam.

Melanie lies on the ground crumpled and wounded.

HEATHER

Now get to your room!

Melanie crawls a few feet towards the bedroom door frame and pulls herself to her feet. Her face is red and swollen.

INT. 2 BEDROOM HOUSE/MELANIE'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Melanie falls on top of the mattress, lying on the floor next to the broken metal frame, and cries. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees blood trickle down her arm from one of Heather's bite marks. She reaches for the phone, above her head on the TV tray, and dials 911. The dispatcher answers.

DISPATCHER

911, what's your emergency?

Melanie whispers.

MELANIE

I need help. My momma's friend beat me up.

Melanie's nose is dripping blood onto her shirt, as the tears flow.

INT. 2 BEDROOM HOUSE/PORCH - LATER

A KNOCK on the front door. Heather comes to open the door.

HEATHER

(shouts sarcastically)

Oh great, she called the police!

Two POLICE OFFICERS, in their 30s, step inside. Melanie tiptoes out of her room and peers around the corner, looking into the living room.

POLICE OFFICER 1

We received a call from a child in danger.

HEATHER

She's not in danger. She's in trouble for not coming home and being gone for days without permission.

POLICE OFFICER 1

Still, ma'm, we need to see the child.

The officers and Heather turn to see Melanie, spying on them. She steps around the corner looking terrified. Her face red and swollen.

INT. POLICE STATION - LATER

Melanie stands uncomfortably as a kind and compassionate FEMALE OFFICER, 30s, photographs her injuries. A MALE OFFICER, 33, fills in some forms on a table on one side of the room. SNAP, SNAP.. She photographs her face forward and then the sides. SNAP, SNAP..

FLASHBACK--

David snaps Melanie's picture with the same SNAP, SNAP. Melanie looks down in shame.

BACK TO SCENE--

SNAP, SNAP of Melanie's arm and the bite marks with dried blood. Scratches are swollen and red. Finally, the male officer leaves the room, leaving her alone with the female officer.

FEMALE OFFICER

(gently)

Can you lift up the back of your shirt so we can document some pictures of any injuries underneath?

Melanie nervously turns her back to the officer and lifts her blood-stained t-shirt exposing her back, revealing her old 6th-grade training bra, unraveling at the seams. Bruises are already formed, the outline of the heel of a shoe imprinted in several areas. Scratches on her side with puffy redness surround them, and the thin frame of her body arches forward from years of neglect.

SNAP, SNAP.

FEMALE OFFICER

(delicately)

You can pull the shirt back down now. Would you like a soda, dear?

Melanie nods and pulls her t-shirt back down, concealing her body. Her movements are slow.

INT. CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES/LOBBY - LATER

A SOCIAL WORKER, 40s directs Melanie to a seat in the front lobby, while she speaks quietly with the POLICE OFFICERS, 30s, who brought her in. The office is small and cold. No toys or bright colors. Melanie sits frozen. Her face turns red as the adults glance at her through the office's open door during their conversation. Whispering about her. The three finish their discussion.

SOCIAL WORKER

Melanie, you can come in now.

INT. SOCIAL WORKER'S OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Melanie sits quietly in front of the social worker.

SOCIAL WORKER

I'm very sorry, Melanie. There are no available placements for you right now. Since you're a minor, you could either go to a shelter where someone will watch over you while you sleep tonight, or you could choose to go home if you think you'll be safe. Possibly, a placement may open for you tomorrow.

MELANIE

(distrustful)

There's no one, nowhere?!

(pauses)

I guess I'll just go home.

INT. MELANIE'S CLASSROOM - 2023 - DAY

Melanie is alone in her classroom. She walks to her desk and sits down. She looks at a phone number on a piece of paper and inhales nervously. She picks up her cell phone and dials the number on the paper. A recording answers the line with an automated message from Western Kentucky Child Protective Services to please leave a detailed message as all agents are currently busy and the call will be returned. Melanie huffs in frustration.

INT. MELANIE'S CLASSROOM - 2023 - NEXT DAY

Students enter Melanie's classroom as Melanie stands just outside her door greeting each of them by name. The murmur of salutations and pleasantries exchange between them.

As the last student enters the bell rings. Melanie raises her chin, looking around the hallway for a missing student. She turns and closes the classroom door behind her. Melanie speaks to a student, DARIUS.

MELANIE

Darius, you have 5th period with Abby, right?

DARIUS

Yes, ma'm.

MELANIE

Was she in class today?

DARIUS

Uh, I didn't notice her. I guess not.

Melanie clues in on Darius's words. She nods to Darius.

MELANIE

(disappointed and a bit worried)

I see. Thank you.

INT. MELANIE'S CLASSROOM - LATER

Melanie is in the doorway of her empty classroom and waves goodbye to a student. As the halls clear of students leaving the school for the day, she closes the door as she steps inside. She takes out her cell phone and calls the child protective services again. The automated message begins but is interrupted by a WOMAN answering the line.

WOMAN (O.S.)

West KY CPS. Can I have your name and reason for your call?

MELANIE

Yes, my name is Melanie Lang. I'm a teacher. I called a week ago and requested that someone do a home visit of a student of mine. I wanted to follow up.

WOMAN (O.S.)

Just a moment. Let me see if I can find it. Lang? L-A-N-G?

MELANIE

Yes. It was 1 week ago.

WOMAN (O.S.)

Here it is. Yes, an agent visited the home a few days later. The note on file says they spoke to both parents and the daughter, Abby Anderson, together. Mom explained Abby was shy and didn't like to talk to strangers. Agent asked Abby some questions but the child wouldn't speak to her. The condition of the home was acceptable. The parents were cooperative, and the child did not seem in any immediate danger.

MELANIE

So, what? Did they just leave? Did they try to talk to Abby alone without her parents?

WOMAN (O.S.)

The call was for a wellness check without any evidence of abuse or danger.

MELANIE

Well, she's not going to talk around them if they are abusing her. She hasn't been to school since I called your office. Can you go back and check on her?

WOMAN (O.S.)

Mam, I understand your concern. But our agents are very good at recognizing whether or not a child is in danger.

MELANIE

(impatient)

Really?! And what if you're wrong. What if something has happened to her? Who wants to be responsible for her if something happens but it's too late? Huh?!

WOMAN (O.S.)

I'm sorry. But unless she speaks to us or we have proof of endangerment or abuse, there is nothing we can do. Please call us if something changes.

MELANIE
(giving up)
Of course. Good-bye.

Melanie hangs up the phone not waiting for the woman to respond further. She is clearly upset. She folds her hands and closes her eyes. Bowing her head, she begins to pray.

MELANIE (CONT'D)
(whispers)
Please, God. Where are you?

ACT III

INT. 1 BEDROOM APARTMENT/AMY'S BEDROOM - 1995 - DAY

Melanie opens the top drawer of her mother's dresser. She digs under the clothes and pulls out various pill bottles.

INT. 1 BEDROOM APARTMENT/LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Melanie lines up the bottles of pills next to a can of soda on her bedroom side of the living room and sits looking at them. Hearing the lock at the front door jiggle, she snatches the bottles. Then, wiping her wet cheeks with her fingertips, she pokes her head up to meet eyes with Amy peering around the bookcase at her. Amy's eyes narrow as she scans Melanie's living space.

AMY
(suspicious)
What are you up to?

MELANIE
(sniffling)
Nothing.

AMY
What's wrong with you? Did you get into some kinda trouble?

MELANIE
(offended)
Since when do I ever get in trouble? I just have a lot on my mind. Okay?

AMY
(picking a fight)
Is that right? Well, you've been runnin' around too much lately.

MELANIE
(suddenly furious)
What?! I have?!

AMY
You heard me, Missy. Yur gonna have to pull your weight around here. Yur always gone and not takin' care of the apartment.

MELANIE

Oh, you mean I don't clean up after you enough when you get back in the middle of the night with God knows who. I mean, we all know who the parent REALLY is around here, don't we?!

Amy wings her hand landing a SLAP across Melanie's face. She is shocked Melanie is talking back to her. Melanie slowly brings her face slowly up with anger in her eyes. Amy yells.

AMY

That's it! You need to get a job like yur brother. Start takin' care of yurself if you wanna keep living under my roof.

MELANIE

(in retaliation)

I need to take care of myself?!
Your the one who taught me you can't depend on anyone but yourself to do what's right. So, I've been taking care of myself since I was 7. Ever since...

Melanie stops abruptly.

AMY

Ever since what? Huh? You have no idea what I've been through with yur father to make sure you have a roof over yur head. I've done the best I can takin' care of you and yur brother. What more do you want from me?

MELANIE

What do I want?! I want you to want me. I want you to see me.

Amy shakes her head in disbelief, stomps into her bedroom, and slams the door behind her. Melanie begins to sob for a few moments. She looks down at the hidden pill bottles, opens one, and takes a handful of pills. Melanie opens the soda and swallows the pills. She gathers the other pill bottles hidden under her covers and drops them into her backpack.

EXT. STREET/CHURCH - MOMENTS LATER

Melanie walks slowly on the street. The sidewalk and road signs begin to distort. She sees the church ahead and pulls herself together until she is in front of the church doors.

INT. CHURCH - MOMENTS LATER

Melanie walks in to find her youth group in a dress rehearsal for a play. A boy she recognizes dressed in period clothing from the Bible speaks into a microphone.

BOY

Do not fear, for I am with you; do
not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous
right hand.

Melanie turns stumbling out of the church.

INT. SCHOOL - NEXT MORNING

Melanie drowsy and weak enters school. She walks as casually as possible and sits cross-legged in the hallway between the band and choir room. She pulls out a water bottle and, using the guise of her backpack, swallows more pills after pills from the first bottle she already delved into. Students stroll in and sit along the corridor walls. Melanie manages through the majority of the bottle when some students sit within feet away. Melanie puts the almost empty pill bottle back in her backpack. Sweat is dripping from her forehead. She finishes the soda, her eyes vacant. The bell for the first hour SHRILLS overhead as teenagers collect their backpacks, books, and instruments to head to class. Melanie stumbles to her feet with her backpack. Her hands shake as she makes her way down the hallway in a daze.

INT. ALGEBRA CLASS - MOMENTS LATER

Melanie is sitting at her desk sweating profusely. The room is spinning as she tries to make out her surroundings. MRS. WILSON, 40s, is writing on the board. Melanie tries to make out the figures as they dance on the board. Her heartbeat pumps hard and loud. She looks around her, paranoid. Suddenly, her brain loses communication with her body and she goes into a panic. Unable to control herself, she jolts out of her desk with her backpack and stumbles for the classroom door. She fidgets with the knob while all eyes stare at her in amazement.

MRS. WILSON
Melanie, are you Ok?

Melanie bursts out of the room. Two steps to the left, and collapses on the cold linoleum floor. Mrs. Wilson rushes out in shock to discover Melanie clawing at the brick wall behind her.

MRS. WILSON (CONT'D)
Melanie, what's wrong? What's happening to you?

MELANIE
(mumbles)
Bag...my bag...

Mrs. Wilson rustles through Melanie's backpack. She finds the pill bottles, one of them is almost empty.

MRS. WILSON
Oh, Melanie. Did you take all these? (cries out) Call the nurse! Quickly. Help! I need help!

Students pop their heads out the doors lining the hallway.

INT. EMERGENCY ROOM - LATER

MELANIE POV:-

Everything is blurry.

Entering the emergency room on a stretcher, the nurses and doctors scurry around her. Moments later, a nurse approaches her, holding a long clear tube.

MELANIE
(Whispers)
God, where are you?

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

MELANIE POV:-

Amy leans over Melanie's hospital bed with a cold expression.

AMY
What's wrong with you? You know I had to take offa work? What the bills are gonna be like?

Melanie rolls over away from Amy.

INT. 1 BEDROOM APARTMENT - 1996 - EVENING

The front door opens. Amy saunters in with JIMMY, 50s, stern, overbearing, with shaggy brown hair and a matching mustache. They approach Melanie, 16, as she sits reading a textbook with a backpack and notebooks lying all around her on her bed.

AMY

Melanie, this is Jimmy. Jimmy and I've been seein' each other a few weeks now and we're gonna be movin' in together. Well, 'cept yur brother... he's old enough to get his own place now.

MELANIE

Luke's gotta go to school, Momma.

AMY

He's gonna have to be an adult now and work like the rest of us.

Melanie stares at them, speechless.

EXT. TRAILER PARK - 1997 - DAY

A trailer park in a run-down corner on the south side of town. An 80s red Firebird is parked outside.

INT. TRAILER - CONTINUOUS

The 70s model trailer has two bedrooms completely lined in brown wood paneling.

Melanie is on her hands and knees scrubbing the stained kitchen floor from years of use. BANGING on the metal door of the trailer. Jimmy opens the front door to find a frantic WOMAN, 27, with track marks down her arms holding a 3-year-old toddler.

WOMAN

(desperate)

I gotta get outa town right before I get picked up. I can't go back to prison, Jimmy. She's your kid; you gotta take her!

She hands the baby over to Jimmy, as he stands there in shock.

JIMMY

What? Take her with you. You can't just leave her here.

AMY (O.S.)

Who's at the door?

WOMAN

I told you, I can't Jimmy. I don't even know where I'm gonna go.

The woman kicks at a filthy child car seat, and a black trash bag on the front steps. Before Jimmy can argue, the woman gets in a beat up car and drive off into the night. Amy steps out of her bedroom door to find Jimmy holding the baby. She glares at him, incredulous. The filthy little girl with bright blonde hair starts to scream.

INT. TRAILER - MORNING

Melanie is searching the kitchen for something to eat for breakfast. All she can find is baby food. Jimmy is in the living room, off the kitchen watching TV. Melanie pours a glass of milk. As she drinks it, she catches Jimmy's eye. He glares at her coldly.

INT. TRAILER - MOMENTS LATER

Amy enters the living room and sits down with the toddler in front of her.

AMY

Mel, we need to talk. Jimmy and I have been talkin' and its gettin' kinda crowded around here. Yur gonna have to move out.

Melanie stops dead.

MELANIE

What? What did I do?

Melanie is panicked.

AMY

Yur old enough to take care of yurself now. Jimmy said the baby can't keep sharin' our room.

MELANIE

Then tell him I'm not old enough to leave. I don't even know how to drive yet. Where would I go?

Melanie moves her arms about during her plea, but Amy refuses to make eye contact.

MELANIE (CONT'D)

(irritated)

I mean if he can suddenly reveal a kid he's been hiding from you, you can keep the one you haven't been hiding.

AMY

(at a loss for words)

Melanie, I... it's not up to me.

MELANIE

(serious tone)

Momma, if I don't live with you, I can't go to school. They'll kick me out if I don't live with a parent just like they did Luke. This is important to me.

A long pause. Amy looks away ashamed. Melanie is disgusted and shakes her head in disbelief. She gives up in defeat.

MELANIE CONT'D

(exasperated)

Whatever. I don't know why I even...Fine. I'll go but you're gonna have to get some things for me. I'll need all the paperwork to enroll somewhere if I can't stay here. Like my shot records and birth certificate?

Amy looks at Melanie with serious eyes and tension in her face at the words birth certificate.

INT. NEW HIGH SCHOOL - 1997 - DAY

A hard-looking FEMALE PRINCIPAL, 50s, with wiry grey hair eyes Melanie through her steamed glasses, she holds Melanie's birth certificate and enrollment papers. Melanie sits nervous about being in a new school. The Principal continues to look up at Melanie, back to the birth certificate, and back up at Melanie. Melanie holds her breath, rubbing her clammy hands together under the table, nervously looking side to side.

The principal waves the birth certificate in the air as if checking for weight or something strange. Her beady eyes fixate on the date of Melanie's birth.

THE PRINCIPAL

(stern)

Your paperwork is incomplete. The issue date of this birth certificate doesn't match your transfer records from your last 7 schools. Who's responsible for you?

Melanie winces and stutters over her words. The principal just stares at Melanie.

THE PRINCIPAL (CONT'D)

I'm going to need to have a word with your parents. Why aren't they here?

MELANIE

I-I'm not at home anymore. They...

The principal gathers the papers together.

MELANIE (CONT'D)

I-I-plea-please let me--

THE PRINCIPAL

If you want to attend school, be responsible and return home instead of running away. You can come back when you bring a guardian with you.

The principal hands Melanie the papers. Melanie turns away examining the birth certificate. Just beyond the office, Melanie stops dead in her tracks.

MELANIE POV:--

The birth certificate's issue date has been changed and the name of the father has been corrected with David's name in its place. She scratches at the corrected name revealing a faint name underneath. Darren Hope Hall.

EXT. TRAILER PARK - LATER

Melanie is beaten down and wide-eyed as she walks out of the trailer park carrying two large duffel bags. The fake birth certificate and papers are left behind on the screen door. Amy stands at a window with the baby on her hip, watching Melanie walk away.

INT. DALLAS BUS STATION - 1997 - DAY

The bus station is dirty and full of anxious-looking people. Melanie, barely 17, looking out of place, scans the station. The phone booths are occupied by the homeless, sitting on top of garbage bags full of their belongings. She sees the ticket counter and wanders over. A world-weary ticket agent eyes her as she approaches.

Melanie pulls out a little purse from her pocket. She counts out her crumpled dollars, takes a chunk of what little money she has and hands it to through the hole to an unseen attendant on the other side. A ticket is slide through the hole toward her.

Melanie gathers her bags and scans the room again looking for a place to wait out the day. She spots an empty place on a dirty tiled wall. Melanie leans her back against it, holding the bags under her arms, and pulling them close. No one notices her as they walk by about their business.

INT. DALLAS BUS STATION - EVENING

All the seats are full of a menagerie of people crowding the terminal. Melanie leans against a wall, clutching her two bags. She slides down to the floor and stares at the ground as she waits overnight for her bus.

INT. BUS - MORNING

Melanie sits on the bus too anxious to sleep. She watches through the window. Cities become towns as they fade into parched mesquite-filled plains. A uniformed sailor, SAM, 23, tall with an easy smile, is sitting next to Melanie. He looks at her with concern.

SAM

Where ya headed?

Melanie looks up nervously.

MELANIE

Ruidoso. You?

SAM

San Diego.

He puts his hand out.

SAM (CONT'D)

I'm Sam.

They shake hands.

MELANIE

Melanie.

SAM

What you gonna be doing in Ruidoso?

MELANIE

I'm visiting a friend. I'm hoping to stay with her till I finish my last year of high school.

SAM

Hoping?

MELANIE

Well, I haven't seen her in a long time. But we were best friends when I used to live there.

Sam shakes his head as a sign of understanding. Sam writes down his phone number on a small piece of paper and hands it to Melanie.

SAM

Well look, I hope it goes well for you. But if you're ever in trouble, give me a call, you hear?

Melanie takes the number and smiles warmly. She looks out the window at the mountains.

EXT. RUIDOSO BUS STOP - EVENING

The bus pulls into a tiny brown bus stop. A small, simple building, void of people. Melanie gets off the bus alone. It's pitch black outside.

Melanie steps out to the deserted little brown building used as a bus stop, next door to the junior high school. She sits on a cold bench and places her bags next to her. Exhausted, she lays down on the bench using her bags to rest her head. She shivers as the wind swoops through the maze of buildings around her. She stares ahead at the junior high school she used to attend.

INT. RUIDOSO BUS STOP - DAWN

Melanie wakes up on the bench. She sits up and wipes her eyes, then looks around at the deserted bus stop.

She digs her hand into her pocket and pulls out the small piece of paper with Sam's phone number.

INT. SAN DIEGO COURTHOUSE - 1998 - DAY

Melanie is five months pregnant, standing before a Justice of the Peace with Sam.

JUSTICE OF THE PEACE
I now pronounce you husband and wife.

Melanie and Sam share an awkward glance.

INT. HOSPITAL - 1999 - DAY

Melanie, still young in facial features, sits in a hospital bed with her newborn baby girl, KAYLEE, in her arms. Sam leans over and kisses the baby on the forehead.

SAM
I gotta take care of something.
I'll be right back.

MELANIE
Oh, um...OK.

She stares down at the little miracle in her arms.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - LATER

Melanie is sitting anxiously on the phone as she cradles the baby in her arms. The phone rings for a long time. Finally Sam answers, half asleep.

SAM (O.S.)
Hello?

MELANIE
(annoyed)
Are you coming back? They're discharging the baby and me.

SAM (O.S.)
Oh, um...

MELANIE
What are you doing? Where did you go?

SAM (O.S.)
I, uh, I had some stuff
to take care of.

MELANIE
(snaps)
I need you to bring a car seat.

The line clicks.

MELANIE (CONT'D)
(whispering to the baby)
I guess we should call your
grandma, huh? How could she turn
her back on you?

INT. SAN ANGELO AMY'S LIVING ROOM - SAME TIME

The front room is decorated in the same worn decor. Amy and her new boyfriend RICHARD, 50s, authentic, dependable - a short, skinny cowboy with a thick southern accent, step into their living room with Melanie and her baby Kaylee. Richard puts down Melanie's bags and dashes over to put his arm around Amy as they dote over Kaylee. Melanie watches as Amy takes Kaylee out of her car seat and holds her in her arms.

AMY
Come here to yur granny, baby
girl. Oh, aren't you a sweet one?!

RICHARD
She's so purtty. Oh, wait a
minute. I've got something special
for you.

Richard unwraps a little rattle and shakes it in front of Kaylee. Kaylee smiles and tries to hold onto it.

AMY
Mel, she's adorable. She reminds me
of you when you were a baby.

Melanie beams proudly.

RICHARD
(In babyish voice)
Awe, look at that, lil' bean. She
got her Papa wrapped around her
lil' finger already. Yes, she does.

Kaylee grabs onto his finger.

AMY

Oh, look at that! She knows her
Papa, don't she?

RICHARD

You don't mind she calls me Papa do
ya, Mel?

MELANIE

No, why not?

Melanie watches curiously as her mother and Richard dote over
her newborn.

INT. SAN DIEGO/LIVING ROOM - EVENING

Kaylee is crying hysterically. Melanie is holding Kaylee as
she paces the room. Trying to soothe her. Melanie glances at
a pile of bills on the table. Melanie is getting more and
more worked up.

The phone RINGS. Melanie answers the phone.

MELANIE

(exasperated)

Hello?

DAVID (O.S.)

Hi, Bug.

MELANIE

Oh, David.

She sounds surprised.

DAVID

Everything Ok?

MELANIE

Not really, but it's my problem. I
think Sam's gambling.

DAVID

It's ok Mel, I'll help you like I
helped your momma. How much do you
need?

Melanie hesitates, totally frustrated with her situation.

MELANIE

No, really, I'll figure something
out. I have to do this on my own.

DAVID

You don't want to put that baby
through more than you have to. Just
let me help clean up y'all's mess.

Melanie straightens up.

MELANIE

(firmly)

You're right. I don't want to put
her through anything I went
through. And I can clean up my own
mess. I have to go, David. The baby
needs me.

Melanie hangs up the line.

EXT. SAN DIEGO/MILITARY HOUSING APARTMENTS - 2000 - DAY

Melanie pushes her daughter in her stroller out on their daily walk. They pass by a playground and wave at the other moms and dads, spending some playtime with their children. They roll by the mailboxes. Melanie opens their mailbox and pulls out a stack of random junk mail and bills. As she rifles through, she finds an envelope sent from David's grandparents. She puts the mail in the back of the stroller and continues her walk.

INT. SOUTHERN ILLINOIS/LIVING ROOM - 2003 - DAY

Melanie, 22, is unpacking boxes in her new apartment. (4 year old) Kaylee approaches one of the boxes and sees the old teapot shaped like Aladdin's genie lamp that Melanie's mother gave to her all those years ago. Kaylee touches it carefully and studies it in wonder.

KAYLEE

I'm gonna show Daddy when he picks
me up!

Kaylee hears a car outside.

KAYLEE (CONT'D)

He's here, he's here, he's here,
he's here!

Kaylee bolts to the window with her little suitcase standing there. A car passes by but does not stop. Time has passed - Kaylee is now sitting on the front doorstep, hands on her chin, looking glum. Melanie shakes her head without Kaylee seeing, puts on a cheerful face for her disappointed daughter.

MELANIE

Guess what! I have some exciting news.

KAYLEE

What?

MELANIE

(smiling)

I'm gonna go back to school.

KAYLEE

Yur gonna start school like me? We can go together!

Kaylee gives her mother a big hug. Melanie looks out to Kaylee's non-existent father, she smiles at her future together with Kaylee.

MONTAGE SEQUENCE -

INT. RESTAURANT - DAY

A small town restaurant with a handful of customers. Melanie wears an apron with smears of food and her hair tied back. She loads a tray with dishes as she clears a table. Exhausted, she smiles at customers leaving.

INT. SOUTHERN ILLINOIS/LIVING ROOM - EVENING

Melanie sits couch surrounded by books. She is very focused on reading and taking notes.

EXT. SOUTHERN ILLINOIS KAYLEE'S SCHOOL - MORNING

Melanie waves to Kaylee as she gets out of the parent drop off line at the modern elementary school.

INT. SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY - DAY

Mother and daughter, both with backpacks in tow, walk into Melanie's college class and sit down next to each other. College-age students turn to watch them, lifting their eyebrows and whispering.

INT. RESTAURANT - AFTERNOON

Melanie looks tired as she rings up an order at a register. She glances up to see an attractive man, DANIEL, looking at her with a smile. She perks up and smiles back.

She gets up with and walks over to Daniel at a table to take his order. Melanie is a shy and tries not to show her smile.

MELANIE

Hi there. Do you need a few more minutes or do you know what you would like?

DANIEL

I would like to get your name and get to know you.

Melanie bashfully smiles and gives a little chuckle.

INT. SOUTHERN ILLINOIS/MELANIE'S APARTMENT KITCHEN - 2005 - MORNING

Kaylee sits eating a bowl of cereal at the kitchen table. Melanie stands at the counter making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. She places it in Kaylee's lunch box.

KAYLEE

Momma, why are you going to school?

MELANIE

Hopefully, one day, I'm going to be a teacher. I want to help kids who are growing up like I did.

Kaylee giggles.

KAYLEE

A teacher?! Me, too.

Though exhausted, Melanie looks at Kaylee with pride.

INT. CHURCH - DAY

Melanie and Kaylee sit next to one another in the congregation. They listen intently to the PASTOR, 40s, as he delivers his sermon.

PASTOR

You are not a product of your environment.

(MORE)

PASTOR (CONT'D)

You have a choice from the moment you are introduced to God. From here, you can either become the shepherd leading his sheep to meet him, to salvation. Or, you can be the sheep, forever searching for someone else to show you what you already know is standing before you. Who is God telling you to be?

EXT. UNIVERSITY - 2007 - DAY

Kaylee, 8, older now, stands happily in the audience, as she watches her mother on stage next to the group of graduates.

SPEAKER

(calls out)

Melanie Hope Wallace.

Melanie, 26 beautiful, confident, walks across the stage in her graduation gown. She shakes hands with the guest Speaker, 50s. He hands her a folded framed certificate, and she walks off the stage towards Kaylee, beaming with pride.

INT. MELANIE'S CLASSROOM - MORNING

Melanie stands writing her name on the whiteboard. She turns around bearing a huge smile, as she faces a class full of teenagers.

INT. SUBURBAN HOME/ LIVING ROOM - 2016 - CHRISTMAS EVENING

A beautifully decorated living room features a large Christmas tree. The twinkling colored lights are the only lights in the room. Light holiday music plays from a stereo nearby.

Melanie, 36, with mature facial features, and Daniel, 41, sit together wrapped in each other's arms on the couch, staring at the majesty of the tree in a peaceful moment. Kaylee and Daniel's 3 other children of similar ages are asleep on the carpet surrounded by bright-colored paper shreds and various gifts still opened. Daniel looks into her eyes.

DANIEL

Mel, I think we've waited long enough. You and Kaylee are part of our family. Will you marry me?

Melanie becomes overwhelmed. She struggles for words. Daniel reaches into his pocket and pulls out a diamond engagement ring.

MELANIE
(emotionally)
Of course, I will.

Daniel slips the ring on Melanie's finger. They kiss. Melanie looks at the ring on her finger.

DANIEL
(grinning)
I've been holding that inside all
day.

He begins to laugh out loud. Melanie catches him, signaling to not wake the children. They both laugh together in hushed voices.

MELANIE
You had to know I would say yes.
Here with you, this is home.

EXT. SAN ANGELO AMY'S HOUSE - 2018 - DAY

Amy's house appears tired and worn down. Amy's carefully kept home from ten years ago is covered in weeds and broken plastic yard ornaments littering the path. The porch crawls with stray cats and kittens, littered with cat food bits and forgotten fake plants in baskets. Daniel and Melanie step inside Amy's home.

INT. SAN ANGELO AMY'S LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

The front room is decorated in the same worn decor, but the furniture and home are caked in dust and grime from neglect. Melanie walks through the house.

INT. SAN ANGELO MASTER BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

On the buckled mattress, Amy lays curled up on her side with a light blanket covering her. She is 65 but could pass for 85. Her bleached hair is now white from age, brittle from hair dye. Yet, sleeping and unaware, she seems peaceful. The bedroom furniture remained rooted in place for the last 20 years since they first moved in when they married. Before sitting down on the bed, Melanie scans the room at the filth-preserving time in a cocoon.

MELANIE
(calling gently)
Momma, I'm here.

Amy's eyes open, groggy with sleep.

AMY
Mel-nie?!

MELANIE
Yes, Momma. It's me. Surprise.

Amy is shocked. She slowly sits up.

MELANIE (CONT'D)
Daniel and I wanted to surprise
you.

Amy smiles broadly. Her eyes are filled with tears.

INT. SAN ANGELO AMY'S KITCHEN - LATER

Melanie is peeling potatoes, helping her mother prepare the dinner.

AMY
You seem happy, Melanie. Daniel
seems to have had a good effect on
you.

Melanie smiles.

MELANIE
How are you coping, Momma? I've
been worried about you since
Richard died.

Amy stops and places her hands to her face and she begins to cry.

AMY
(her voice breaking)
I dunno what I'll do without him?
Who's gonna take care of me?

Melanie reaches over and rests her hand on her mother's back.

MELANIE
I'm always going to be here when
you need me.

AMY

You live so far away. God knows I can't stay here all alone.

MELANIE

Well, maybe you can live in Kentucky close to me and Daniel and the kids.

AMY

I knew I could count on you to do what's right. I knew you would take care of me.

INT. KENTUCKY AMY'S NEW HOUSE - 2019 - DAY

The house is gutted and being remodeled. Electrical wires hanging out, walls are stripped, and busted pipes poking out. Floors missing and covered in plastic for drywall and painting. Daniel and Melanie are on their hands and knees pulling out the old carpet. Melanie's mobile phone RINGS.

MELANIE

Hi, Momma.

AMY

(O.S.)

Hi Mel, I just sold my house in San Angelo.

MELANIE

What? You sold it already?

AMY

(O.S.)

Yep. I need to move out by the end of April. So will you guys be able to finish remodelin' my new house by then?

Melanie looks around in a panic at the mess.

MELANIE

April? That's impossible. There's no water until the plumbing's been completed. Most of the rooms don't have electricity yet. We had agreed to get it done for you by the summer.

AMY

Can't you just speed it up a bit?

MELANIE

Momma, there's just far too much work to do. Don't forget we both have full-time jobs.

Melanie glances at Daniel.

MELANIE (CONT'D)

You'll have to stay with us until we can get it finished for you.

EXT. SAN ANGELO AMY'S HOUSE - EVENING

Melanie pulls up in her car, followed by a large moving truck. Melanie gets out of her car. Daniel gets out of the truck. They both stretch out their arms and legs, looking tired from the long journey.

INT. KENTUCKY AMY'S NEW HOUSE/BATHROOM - DAY

Melanie is painting the new drywall in the bathroom. Amy stands at the door.

AMY

What are you doing?

MELANIE

I'm painting the new drywall with the color you picked out.

AMY

Mel, why is everything takin' so long? I want to move into my house.

MELANIE

We can only be here so much, Momma. We both have jobs and have to take care of our house, too.

Amy rolls her eyes. Melanie starts to raise her voice.

MELANIE (CONT'D)

We're doing the best we can. You could be helping out, you know. You're not doing anything all day while we're at work. Even now you're just watching us work over our shoulders. Pick up a brush and help me.

AMY

(snaps)

You just wanna control me. You just wanna fix this house up for yurself so you can take it from me.

Amy storms off. Melanie follows her through to the living room.

INT. KENTUCKY AMY'S NEW HOUSE/LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

They are surrounded by furniture piled high.

MELANIE

Momma, that's ridiculous. I have a house. You're the one staying with me, remember? Everything we're doing is to help you.

AMY

Well, it sure don't feel like it.

Melanie lashes out and kicks Amy's cheap grandfather clock. It crashes to the floor, the glass smashing around her tennis shoes.

MELANIE

You know what, I've had enough of you using me and then turning your back on me. You've never been there for me. I've had a lifetime of it. You've always chosen men over your own children. Men who touched me and did things to me. You chose drugs and alcohol over groceries and attending my track meets. I was never your first choice. Like David, you won't change. Like Joel, you're only nice to me when you want something. Like Mike, you don't practice what you preach. And Jimmy, always thinking about yourself. You hid secrets from me because you knew you were wrong. No matter what I do for you, you just don't see me!

Amy stands there in shock watching Melanie vent out years of frustration.

MELANIE (CONT'D)

(confidently)

I'm not you.

(MORE)

MELANIE (CONT'D)

And I'm never going to be anything like you because you can't depend on anyone but yourself to do what's right.

EXT. KENTUCKY AMY'S NEW HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Amy sits on a plastic yard chair in the yard. Her hands shake as she smokes her cigarette. Melanie approaches looking guilty.

MELANIE

Momma, if I wasn't doing this all for you, why would I invite you to live with us?

Amy glares at her.

AMY

Each man I brought home paid the bills. To put a roof over yur head, Missy. You were never grateful! I don't need you. I'm moving out of yur house and in here, in MY house.

Melanie becomes furious again, staring Amy down.

MELANIE

(Fuming)

Grateful? Fine! You can go grab your stuff from my house and move into your house that isn't finished if that's what you want. You can fix your house yourself and move all your furniture on your own. I'm done helping if you're going to use me and my family this way. I put them first. Do you hear me? I put MY family first.

Amy is frozen in shock, a cigarette hanging out of the corner of her mouth.

EXT. KENTUCKY AMY'S NEW HOUSE - DAY

Melanie pulls up outside the house. She notices Amy's car is not there.

INT. KENTUCKY AMY'S NEW HOUSE/FRONT ENTRANCE - DAY

She opens the front door, glances around, and calls out.

MELANIE
Momma..? Momma?

She picks up her cell phone and dials.

AMY (O.S.)
Hello?

MELANIE
Momma? Where are you?

AMY
I'm back in San Angelo at my friend
Jessie's apartment.

MELANIE
What? How did you..? When are you
coming home?

Melanie waits, but Amy doesn't answer.

MELANIE (CONT'D)

Look, Momma. I don't like leaving
things like this between us. I was
hoping maybe we could talk. Maybe
we could find a way to forgive each
other.

Again, Melanie waits, but Amy doesn't respond.

MELANIE (CONT'D)
Well, we're gonna finish the work
we started because I made a
commitment to you. I made a promise
and told you that you could depend
on me. When we finish, do you think
you could come back and talk about
forgiveness?

AMY
Let me know when it's done.

The line clicks as Amy hangs up on Melanie. Melanie is
disappointed and puts down the cell phone.

INT. KENTUCKY AMY'S NEW HOUSE/LIVING ROOM - DAY

The living room has freshly painted walls and all the
fixtures are finally in place. Melanie and Daniel are placing
Amy's pieces of furniture around the room. Melanie's phone
RINGS.

MELANIE

Hello?

WOMAN (O.S.)

Melanie? This is Abilene Medical Center. I'm so sorry, but something's happened to yur Momma.

MELANIE

(alarmed)

Is she alright?

WOMAN

She's unconscious and can't wake up. They think it's a stroke. She listed you as her emergency contact. You need to come right away.

Melanie stares at Daniel, distraught.

INT. ABILENE HOSPITAL ICU - DAY

Melanie and Daniel rush into the hospital room to find Amy lying unconscious in bed. Eyes closed, oxygen flowing to her lungs, with machines beeping away. Melanie glances at Jessie sitting quietly in the room. She walks over to her mother and whispers.

MELANIE

Momma, I'm here. It's Melanie. I'm going to make sure they take care of you.

Amy does not respond and lays completely still. Melanie touches her hand. Cold. Still no reaction. The WOMAN who called earlier, 30s, caring, and compassionate, enters the doorway.

INT. HOSPITAL MEETING ROOM - LATER

A small room with a round table, a box of Kleenex, four chairs, and a few table lamps. The Woman sits with Melanie.

WOMAN

(Gently)

There's no easy way to say this. The doctors want to discuss end-of-life care. There's no chance your mother will regain consciousness. She won't ever be able to breathe on her own.

Melanie holds back her tears.

MELANIE

Can we do another brain scan to be sure there's no sign of healing or activity?

WOMAN

Of course. Yes, we can do that. But once it shows no activity, you will have to make a decision.

MELANIE

Can we not do this today? Today is my birthday. I don't want to lose my momma on my birthday.

The woman bows her head in compassion.

WOMAN

I'm so sorry. Of course.

Melanie takes a deep breath as she struggles to contain her emotions.

INT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY - LATER

Melanie sits on the phone with her brother, Luke.

LUKE (O.S.)

Ok, I understand.

MELANIE

There's really nothing else they can do.

LUKE (O.S.)

Mel?

MELANIE

Yeah?

LUKE (O.S.)

I'm sorry you have to be there alone.

Melanie looks surprised.

MELANIE

That's ok Luke. I'm never really alone.

As she ends the call, she takes a breath.

MELANIE (CONT'D)

(whispering to herself)

God, I don't know your will. And I know I don't have any right to ask, but if there is any hope for her to heal, please help her now. The way we left things... But...but if you need her more than I do, help me to understand. Help me to forgive.

EXT. TEXAS CEMETERY - AFTERNOON

Under a little tree in a cemetery with the dry dirt of West Texas, Melanie and Daniel stand together facing Amy and Richard's graves. Melanie bends down to place a beautiful bunch flowers on her mother's grave. Daniel puts his arm around her and they walk away slowly.

INT. MELANIE'S LIVING ROOM - 2023 - PRESENT DAY

Melanie stands wearing her Sunday best in front of a tall glass side unit. Inside it on display are the bright red Ruby dishes her mother had promised to keep for her, all those years ago. She smiles warmly as she looks closely at the ruby dishes.

DANIEL (O.S.)

Are you ready, Mel?

MELANIE

I'm coming.

She grabs her purse and follows him out the front door.

EXT. KENTUCKY CHURCH - LATER

A bright autumn day. The golden autumn leaves are contrasting with the blue sky. The congregation CHITTER CHATTER as they come out of the small church.

CHURCH MEMBER

That was a wonderful sermon about forgiveness.

MELANIE

Yes, it was.

Everyone is happy and uplifted. Melanie and Daniel follow the crowd out of the church arm in arm along the path.

INT. MELANIE'S CLASSROOM - 2023

The bell rings signaling the end of class. Melanie is clearing her desk, as her students walk out into the hall. Melanie looks up at Abby who is moving slowly.

MELANIE

Hey, Abby?

Abby looks up without much emotion.

MELANIE CONT'D

May I speak to you for a moment
before you head home?

A pause.

ABBY

Am I in trouble?

MELANIE

No, of course not.

Abby looks relieved.

MELANIE (CONT'D)

Do you mind if I talk to you about
something really important?

Abby sits on the chair that Melanie holds out for her.
Melanie sits opposite Abby in one of the student chairs.

MELANIE (CONT'D)

I noticed you've been wearing the
same clothes again as you did when
you were here last time. Is
everything ok at home? You've been
absent again for awhile.

Abby looks down in shame.

ABBY

Um...

Abby stops herself from speaking.

MELANIE

Abby, when I was younger, well your
age, I moved around a bunch and was
made fun of by all the kids at each
school for not having clean
clothes. And my bruises...well...

Abby looks down and rubs her bruised wrist solemnly with her other hand.

MELANIE (CONT'D)

I also used to try and tell my momma what was happening, but she wasn't really there for me. So, I felt like I had no one. Abby, I became a teacher because I never wanted anyone else to feel that way. I want to make sure that whoever goes through what I did, knows that they're not alone.

Abby looks up at Melanie. Melanie tries her hardest to say this softly.

MELANIE (CONT'D)

I've never met your parents, Abby.
But I think you need help.

A pause.

MELANIE (CONT'D)

Did somebody hurt you?

A few silent moments pass as Melanie waits patiently for Abby to find her voice. Abby suddenly nods apprehensively. Melanie catches Abby's eyes as they recognize each other. Abby's eyes begin to well up. Melanie hugs Abby, her head resting on Melanie's shoulder as she cries.

MELANIE (CONT'D)

(slips out)

It's not your fault, honey.

Abby looks up worried.

ABBY

What will happen to my mom?

MELANIE

(knowingly)

We'll make sure she gets the help she needs, too. If I call someone to meet with us, would you be willing to open up? I'll stay right here with you the whole time.

Tears stream down Abby's face. She looks Melanie directly in the eyes.

ABBY
(through tears)
You promise not to leave?

Melanie reaches out to Abby to hug her. Abby steps forward and hugs Melanie as she breaks down. Melanie looks out the window as she comforts Abby.

MELANIE
I won't leave you. I promise you
can count on me to do what's right.

Melanie sits down with Abby at two desks next to each other. Melanie takes out her cell phone from her back pocket and dials the number to CPS. The line rings.

MELANIE (CONT'D)
(to the agent who picks up
on the line)
Hi, my name is Melanie Lang. I have
a student with me who needs to file
a report of abuse. Can you please
send someone to the high school?

Melanie waits a moment as she listens to the other person on the call.

MELANIE (CONT'D)
Thank you. I'll be staying right
here with her. Her name is Abby.
Abby Anderson.

INT. MELANIE'S LIVING ROOM - 2023 - EVENING

Melanie and Daniel sit across from each other. They have just finished a long, emotional conversation.

MELANIE
There's just one more call I need
to make.

Daniel nods his head in agreement. Melanie picks up her phone and dials a number. She takes a deep breath and begins to exhale slowly when the other line picks up.

DETECTIVE MARSHALL (O.S.)
Hello?

MELANIE
Detective. Hi, this is Melanie
Lang.

DETECTIVE MARSHALL (O.S.)
(surprised)
Melanie. Yes. Is everything
alright? I didn't expect to hear
from you any time soon.

MELANIE
I know, but you said to call if I
remembered anything that might be
helpful. Is this a good time?

DETECTIVE MARSHALL (O.S.)
Sure. But what made you change your
mind?

Melanie takes another deep breath for courage.

MELANIE
Well, I just want to start by
saying since we first spoke, I have
been revisiting the past, memories
I tried to block out because I
didn't want to remember. My mom
taught me one thing growing up. You
can't depend on anyone but yourself
to do what's right. So...if I'm
going to forgive him...I'm going to
have to reveal years of secrets.

DETECTIVE MARSHALL (O.S.)
I understand. Melanie, I can't tell
you how much I appreciate all the
help you can give us. Maybe this
can give you closure.

MELANIE
Thanks. I believe God is helping me
with that.

INT. MELANIE'S KITCHEN - 2023 - MORNING

Melanie sips her coffee at the kitchen counter. Daniel
approaches.

MELANIE
Are you leaving for work?

DANIEL
In just a moment. Are you ready for
today?

Melanie looks at Daniel in the eye with confidence.

MELANIE

I am now. Helping Abby has forced me to deal with the memories I wanted to block out. To block out the men coming in and out of my life who hurt me. To forget about the adults who were supposed to protect me and could have saved me from men like David. I can't stand in the background and ignore what's happening to her. If I'm ever going to truly forgive, I can't be one of those people I tried to forget. The people who turned away when I needed someone to see that I needed help when I couldn't help myself.

DANIEL

You're doing the right thing. No matter what happens from here, at least you know you broke the cycle.

Melanie smiles at Daniel lovingly. He smiles back.

MELANIE

I love you! Have a good day!

They squeeze each other's hands with deep love in their eyes.

DANIEL

I love you, too. Let me know how it goes, okay?

MELANIE

Alright. Thank you!

Melanie exits her home.

INT. MELANIE'S CLASSROOM - 2 MONTHS LATER

Melanie welcomes students into the classroom as they take their seats. Abby enters laughing, dressed in nice clean clothes suitable for her age. She is talking to new friends as they enter the classroom. Abby and Melanie's eyes meet as they exchange a warm smile. The bell rings for the class to start.

MELANIE

Let's get started, shall we? Who can tell me the theme of the story we have been reading this week?

Several students raise their hands including Abby. Melanie nods to Abby to answer.

ABBY
(with confidence)
Redemption and finding your roots.

Melanie smiles.

CREDITS ROLL.