

# **THE FOREVER CHILDREN.**

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FADE IN:

EXT. DIRT DRIVEWAY - NIGHT

Branches tangle overhead, their skeletal limbs clutching at the sky.

The woods breathe.

A girl stumbles forward -- DIANA (12). Her dress is torn, streaked with mud and something darker. Her bare feet leave wet prints on the dirt road.

She stares ahead, dazed.

Her breath comes out in clouds.

Raises a hand to her forehead.

Blood.

She stares at her fingers.

No reaction.

EXT. TALONFORD MANSION - NIGHT

A massive Victorian house looms ahead, hunched like an animal watching her approach.

The windows glow softly, but the bars cast shadows that look like claw marks.

Her wide, dazed eyes scan a weathered wooden sign, warped with age:

"THE TALONFORD HOME FOR GIFTED CHILDREN. OPERATED BY THE TALONFORD SOCIETY OF ST. ALOYSIUS ESTABLISHED 1860."

The letters seem to crawl across the wood.

With a shiver, she takes the steps one at a time. They creak under her weight, but it's not just wood -- something inside the house creaks back.

Before she can knock --

The front door swings open.

MR. BRADFORD SHONTS (70s) stands in the doorway.

Still. Watching.

(CONTINUED)

His face is too smooth -- like wax left too close to a flame. His glasses catch the moonlight, turning his eyes into two blank, gleaming holes.

DIANA sways, confused.

His voice is calm. Gentle.

MR. SHONTS  
Where have you been?

Diana's fingers twitch. Her lips tremble.

MR. SHONTS (CONT'D)  
You're late. Very late.

Diana shudders. She tries to speak. Nothing comes out.

She sags forward. Knees buckle.

She's falling--

Hands catch her.

Mr. Shonts lifts her with ease.

MRS. ADDA SHONTS (70s) appears -- a shape in the dark stepping onto the porch.

She smiles.

MRS. SHONTS  
Tsk, Tsk. Such a mess.

Diana's neck tilts against Mr. Shonts' shoulder.

As they step inside, the house breathes in as she is carried over the threshold.

INT. FOYER - MANSION - NIGHT

The door swings shut.

The house is silent. Too silent.

Diana's small gasps echo against the walls.

The hallway is too long -- the portraits along the walls seem to blur, stretch.

Diana blinks hard.

No mirrors. Not a single one.

(CONTINUED)

Her lips barely move.

DIANA  
(hoarse, weak)  
I was... lost.

MRS. SHONTS  
(gently)  
No.

Her nails press into Diana's shoulder. Not enough to hurt. Just enough to be felt.

MRS. SHONTS (CONT'D)  
You wandered. That's different.

Diana doesn't understand.

INT. THE ALCOVE - NIGHT

A narrow corridor. A locked door.

Diana's head jerks up.

MR. SHONTS  
We're certain this is seven?

Mrs. Shonts produces a key.

Her hand trembles.

MRS. SHONTS  
Yes.

The key slips into the lock.

The door creaks open.

Mrs. Shonts watches as they descend the stairs into darkness, Diana's small, limp body in his arms.

The house exhales.

DIANA (O.S.)  
(weak, but growing  
frantic)  
No...

Then stronger. Louder. Animalistic.

DIANA (O.S.) (CONT'D)  
(Screams)  
No! No! Please!

(CONTINUED)

Her voice distorts. It cracks, breaks, warps -- something inhuman crawling up from her lungs.

A wet, tearing sound.

A single thud.

Then silence.

Mrs. Shonts continues to stare into the dark below -- fists clenched, her face void of emotion.

A moment passes.

A new sound. Soft. Dry.

Like sand slipping through fingers.

A beat.

FOOTSTEPS rise from below.

Mr. Shonts steps into view. His suit shows splotches of dust. His expression is neutral.

He meets Mrs. Shonts' stiff, waiting gaze.

They say nothing.

The door shuts. The lock turns.

EXT. TALONFORD NURSING HOME - DAY

The Talonford Sunset Home doesn't look like a place where people go to live -- it looks like a place where people go to be forgotten.

A low industrial hum vibrates through the air. Thick storm clouds loom over the one-story brick building, smothering the sun.

A sign reads: TALONFORD SUNSET HOME.

INT. NURSING HOME CORRIDOR - DAY

Clean. Old. Several fluorescent lights burned out.

A gaunt ELDERLY WOMAN shuffles down the hall, her hand gripping a YOUNG BOY (10) in a sharp suit. He doesn't blink. Doesn't speak.

He walks her -- not the other way around.

(CONTINUED)

Two women drift through the hall, casual on the surface, but one of them -- MELONY "MEL" BARNES (29), a local reporter with big-league instincts, notices everything. Sharp, focused, and hungry for a bigger story.

The kind that could get her out of this town.

Beside her, HEAD NURSE NICHOLSON (50s), overworked, tired in a way that sleep won't fix.

MEL

You've always been private, right?

NURSE NICHOLSON

And one of the most successful in the state. Years ago, we had a waiting list a mile long.

They walk past open doors -- elders lie motionless in beds, staring at nothing, mouths slightly open, like they're listening.

MEL

What changed?

NURSE NICHOLSON

Less state funding. And... well, people want to die at home now.

MEL

So you need residents?

NURSE NICHOLSON

Funding and residents. Maybe you could write about how serene it is here?

A voice erupts from a distant room.

OLD MAN (O.S.)

(furious, desperate)

This isn't right. This isn't right! It's not supposed to be like this! You're a bastard, you hear me!? A son-of-a-bitchin' bastard!

Mel winces as the voice rattles the walls.

NURSE NICHOLSON

(forced smile)

That's... not normal.

A CRACKLE over the speaker:

(CONTINUED)

INTERCOM (V.O.)  
Nurse Nicholson to pharmacy,  
please.

NURSE NICHOLSON  
Would you excuse me?

MEL  
Of course.

Nurse Nicholson hurries off.

But Mel doesn't.

She follows the voice.

OLD MAN (O.S.)  
You're insufferable! You always  
were!

INT. OLD MAN'S ROOM - DAY

Mel arrives and lingers in the open doorway.

An OLD MAN (88), gaunt, stretched thin over his bones,  
like something siphoned him out over time.

His room is lifeless -- no pictures, no personal touches,  
and no mirrors.

He glares at the boy sitting at the foot of his bed --  
LUCIAN BOWAN (13), in a pinstripe suit. Impeccably  
polished. Hair slicked back, skin porcelain.

Lucian studies the Old Man like a scientist watching a  
rat that's run out of options.

LUCIAN  
Nothing is the way it's supposed  
to be. That's what makes life  
interesting.

OLD MAN  
Interesting for you. The hell with  
the rest of us.

LUCIAN  
Now, don't say that.

Mel leans in, listening.

Lucian's head snaps toward her.

(CONTINUED)

She freezes.

Lucian smiles.

Mel forces a smile back and steps away.

INT. NURSING HOME CORRIDOR - DAY

Mel flags down a passing NURSE (30s).

MEL  
Excuse me...

NURSE  
Yes?

MEL  
A lot of kids here today, huh?

NURSE  
They're from the Talonford Home  
For Gifted Children.

Mel stiffens at the name.

The nurse glances away. She doesn't buy it herself.

NURSE (CONT'D)  
They... cheer up the residents.

The nurse walks off.

Mel glances back toward the Old Man's room.

INT. OLD MAN'S ROOM - DAY

Lucian turns back toward the Old Man.

LUCIAN (O.S.)  
Quit bitchin' about it! Look,  
you're better off. Who knows  
better? You or me?

The Old Man trembles, whispers.

OLD MAN  
You.

Lucian leans in.

Smiles.

(CONTINUED)



LUCIAN

That's right.

EXT. TALONFORD MANSION - DAY

Even in the daylight, the house swallows the sun. A heavy presence lingers.

A compact car winds up the dirt driveway, passing the faded wooden GIFTED CHILDREN sign.

The lettering is almost gone, as if something scratched it away.

The driveway loops in front of the mansion's front doors.

The car stops.

DAVID COLLINS (12), exits.

Sharp. Observant. Too old for his age. His silence is not shyness -- it's patience.

His aunt, DEBORAH LEIGH (40s), hauls herself out from the driver's seat.

Once thin. Now, not so much -- but her clothes are still convinced otherwise.

She stares at the towering house, its barred windows catching the gray sky like a ribcage.

LEIGH

Is it a prison or a school?

She fishes breath mints from her purse, pops a few.

DAVID

The school uniform is probably an orange jumpsuit.

LEIGH

Doesn't even look open, does it?

David doesn't answer.

His eyes track movement.

Second floor window -- a child's silhouette.

Motionless. Watching.

Its head tilts slightly.

(CONTINUED)

The glass fogged where it breathes.

DAVID

It's open.

Leigh follows his gaze -- but the window is empty now.

She waves him forward.

LEIGH

Come on.

David hesitates.

DAVID

Can't I go somewhere closer to the city?

LEIGH

I busted my ass on Google just to find this joint. It's exclusively for gifted children.

DAVID

Does that matter?

LEIGH

Wouldn't you like to be with boys and girls like yourself?

DAVID

Not particularly.

LEIGH

Get your ass up there.

They move toward the porch, the wood creaking beneath their steps as the house looms over them.

David lags. The shutters rattle slightly, though there's no wind.

LEIGH (CONT'D)

Hurry up.

DAVID

I don't want to.

LEIGH

It's not always all about you.  
Come on.

They arrive on the porch.

(CONTINUED)

The front door opens.

Mrs. Shonts stands framed in the shadow.

Severe. Perfect posture. Eyes too still.

MRS. SHONTS  
Miss Leigh?

LEIGH  
Mrs. Shonts?

Mrs. Shonts steps aside, gestures inward.

Leigh starts forward -- then stops.

She eyes the iron bars on the windows.

LEIGH (CONT'D)  
Bars?

MRS. SHONTS  
Before this was our school, it was  
an orphanage. The orphans would  
try to escape.

LEIGH  
Huh!

Leigh brushes past her, disappearing inside.

David lingers.

Mrs. Shonts waits. Her arm still outstretched.

Her eyes locked onto him. Unblinking.

LEIGH (O.S.) (CONT'D)  
David!

He steps inside.

The door shuts behind him.

INT. FOYER - MANSION - DAY

The heavy door CLANKS shut behind David, sealing him  
inside. His aunt straightens her blouse, oblivious to the  
oppressive silence pressing in.

David notices a girl standing on the bottom step of the  
grand staircase -- ZELPHRA RAWLINGS (12).

(CONTINUED)

Stick-thin, drowning in an old-fashioned dress, her ghostly face as colorless as the peeling wallpaper.

She watches David. Unblinking.

MRS. SHONTS

This way.

INT. THE HALLWAY - DAY

They follow her down the dim hallway.

David glances into the LIVING ROOM as they pass.

A thick cigar smolders in an ashtray.

Next to it, lounging in a leather chair, Lucian meets David's gaze. His dark eyes flick over him, unreadable, like he's measuring something unseen.

David keeps walking.

INT. THE OFFICE - DAY

Dim light seeps through dust-covered windows. The walls swallow sound.

At the center of the room, behind a massive antique desk, sits Mr. Shonts.

A KNOCK.

MR. SHONTS

Yes?

Mrs. Shonts opens the door for Leigh.

LEIGH

(to David)

Wait here.

She steps inside, followed by Mrs. Shonts who closes the door on David.

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE OFFICE - DAY

David stares at the door, sighs, and turns to face the dark-paneled hallway.

INT. THE OFFICE - DAY

Mr. Shonts takes his seat behind his desk.

Behind him, Mrs. Shonts settles at a small wooden desk.  
An ancient switchboard box sits next to her rotary phone.

MR. SHONTS

You received my response to your  
letter?

LEIGH

I did.

MR. SHONTS

And yet... here you are.

She forces a smile.

LEIGH

Mister Shonts, David deserves to  
be here.

A long beat.

MR. SHONTS

Why?

Leigh hesitates. The silence expands.

LEIGH

Because... it's in the will.

Mr. Shonts doesn't react.

LEIGH (CONT'D)

And if I don't make it happen, I  
don't get my ten grand.

Mr. Shonts stares at her.

Leigh softens.

LEIGH (CONT'D)

It was left to me. By my dear,  
dead sister.

Mr. Shonts remains motionless.

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE OFFICE - DAY

David leans into the door, ear pressed against the grain.  
Muted voices.

(CONTINUED)

DAVID

Ten grand...

David frowns.

A whisper, right behind his ear.

ZELPHRA (O.S.)

Hello.

David JUMPS.

DAVID

AHHH!

Zelphra stands too close, her black eyes sharp against her pale skin.

DAVID (CONT'D)

Don't do that!

ZELPHRA

No worse than eavesdropping.

David glances at the door, then back to her.

DAVID

It's not eavesdropping if they're talking about me.

ZELPHRA

That's bullshit.

DAVID

Swearing shows a limited vocabulary.

She smiles.

ZELPHRA

Does like hell.

David puts his ear back to the door.

ZELPHRA (CONT'D)

Are you staying?

DAVID

I hope not.

ZELPHRA

I hope not, too.

He looks at her, confused.

(CONTINUED)

DAVID  
Why? What's wrong with me?

Zelphra's smile vanishes.

ZELPHRA  
Because I like you.

A beat. His ear goes back against the door.

ZELPHRA (CONT'D)  
And kids like you always die.

David freezes. Processes that.

He turns toward her.

DAVID  
What did you--?

She's gone.

The hall stretches empty. Silent.

David spins, scanning corners, doorways -- nothing.

A deep creak as the old wood settles.

David presses his back against the door and stares into the hall.

INT. THE OFFICE - DAY

Mr. Shonts takes the seat behind his desk.

MR. SHONTS  
This is a private home, Miss  
Leigh. We are at capacity.

Leigh leans forward, her voice lowered, measured.

LEIGH  
David has an IQ off the charts.  
Higher than most adults.

MR. SHONTS  
We do not dispute his  
intelligence.

Leigh exhales, gripping her purse strap like a lifeline.

(CONTINUED)

LEIGH  
I'm a poor substitute for a  
parent. I really am.

MR. SHONTS  
Indeed.

LEIGH  
I'm a terrible guardian. I know  
it.

MR. SHONTS  
Indeed.

LEIGH  
I'm not a mother, never wanted to  
be. David needs a real home, real  
structure.

MRS. SHONTS  
You're his family. That is  
structure.

A beat. Leigh's jaw tightens.

LEIGH  
My sister got married. She had a  
kid. She died. Now I have the kid.  
It's not the same thing.

Silence.

Shonts clasps his hands, considering.

MR. SHONTS  
There are other schools.

LEIGH  
Not for the gifted.

MR. SHONTS  
Oh, but there are.

Leigh hesitates. Sweat beads on her temple.

LEIGH  
Those are out of state. Another  
stipulation of the will -- I have  
to visit twice a month.

The Shontses exchange a wordless glance.

(CONTINUED)



LEIGH (CONT'D)  
I can't drive cross-state twice a month, so... here we are.

Mr. Shonts leans back, face stone-cold.

MR. SHONTS  
The Talonford Home is very exclusive. It is not free.

Leigh smirks, the edges of her lips curling just enough.

LEIGH  
Mister Shonts...

He waves her off, already shaking his head.

MR. SHONTS  
I'm sorry. The answer is no, Miss Leigh.

Leigh's smirk fades. Her shoulders square up. The temperature in the room drops.

LEIGH  
I would hate to have to go to the authorities.

A silence. Shonts blinks, genuine confusion.

MR. SHONTS  
For what, exactly?

She tilts her head, studying his reaction. Then, she drops the bomb.

LEIGH  
The reports of abuse.

He is puzzled.

LEIGH (CONT'D)  
Abuse.

Mr. Shonts' face hardens, the muscles in his jaw flex.

LEIGH (CONT'D)  
Sexual abuse.

The words hit like a gunshot. Mr. Shonts' chair SCREECHES as he stands.

(CONTINUED)

MR. SHONTS

What the hell are you talking  
about!?

Mrs. Shonts steps forward, her calm veneer slipping.

MRS. SHONTS

There is no abuse in this home.

LEIGH

Do you honestly think the press  
would care?

MR. SHONTS

The truth will exonerate us.

Leigh laughs, but there's no humor in it.

LEIGH

Eventually. But in the court of  
public opinion? Guilty for years.

A tense, unbearable pause.

Mr. Shonts' knuckles whiten as he grips the desk.

Leigh just sits back, eyes calm and certain. Checkmate.

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE OFFICE - DAY

A deep silence.

David, small but defiant, stands against the solid oak of  
the office door.

Facing him --

A line of children, arranged in a way that feels  
unnatural, like pieces on a board.

Their clothes are drained of color. Their faces hollow,  
their eyes too knowing.

At the center: Lucian and Zephra.

They say nothing.

They just stare.

David forces a smile, tries to break the ice.

DAVID

Hi.

(CONTINUED)

Nothing.

No reaction. No change. They don't even blink.

The office door creaks open behind him.

MR. SHONTS

This is David Collins. He will be  
joining us at Talonford.

The children do not nod, do not welcome him. Just watch.

INT. DAVID'S ROOM - DAY

Sparse and sterile -- more cell than room.

A thin cot, a dresser with a dusty old TV, a single  
chair. No mirror.

David stands at the barred window, watching his aunt's  
car shrink into the distance.

Behind him, Mrs. Shonts lingers at the doorway.

MRS. SHONTS

Dinner is promptly at six. You  
will be called for.

No warmth. No intonation. Just fact.

She steps back. Closes the door.

The click of the latch echoes.

David swallows. His reflection stares back at him in the  
glass of the windowpane.

Something moves in the yard below.

A shadow between the trees.

INT. THE HALLWAY - DAY

At the base of the staircase, Mr. Shonts waits.

Mrs. Shonts steps down, face tight with tension. Beside  
him stands WILLIAM PICKMAN (12), his features striking,  
his manner calm -- a predator with patience.

MRS. SHONTS

What are we going to do? That  
Collin's boy can't stay here.

(CONTINUED)

Mr. Shonts doesn't look at her. Just pulls out his pocket watch, checks the time.

A slow, quiet smile spreads across his face.

A beat.

MR. SHONTS

Right now it's time for William.

William smiles back.

INT. THE ALCOVE - DAY

The ancient key twists in the lock. CLICK.

The door creaks open with a low moan... just enough to reveal blackness beyond.

MR. SHONTS

After you.

William steps forward, unafraid.

A moment's pause -- then he disappears down the steep, creaky stairs.

INT. THE CELLAR - DAY

The air is thick, damp with age and decay.

William descends, his footsteps groan against the wood.

The room is empty -- no furniture, no storage.

Only the dripping stone wall that gleams with an unnatural wetness.

DRIP... DRIP... DRIP...

The sound stretches, bouncing off the cold.

The furnace rumbles, exhaling in low, heaving breaths.

At the center --

A statue of St. Aloysius, carved from blackened wood, long draped sleeves, arms beckoning.

The face -- stretched, hollow, sunken eyes that seem to stare too deeply into the room.

(CONTINUED)

Time has warped the wood, twisted the features into something else.

Not a saint. Not a savior -- something else.

William and Mr. Shonts bow their heads in prayer.

The dripping continues.

DRIP... DRIP... DRIP...

EXT. TRANSCRIPT NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

A town frozen in time -- storefronts unchanged for decades. Only the cars break the illusion.

The Transcript Newspaper Office sits among them -- a small, aging brick building. The sign above the door:

"TALONFORD TRANSCRIPT - JACKSON MORRIS, EDITOR."

INT. TRANSCRIPT PRESS ROOM - DAY

Three desks. Stacks of yellowed newspapers. The hum of old computers fills the room.

At one desk, Mel types, focused.

On her screen: a photo of Talonford Mansion -- grim, gothic, caged in by iron bars.

Underneath, the caption:

"TALONFORD HOME FOR GIFTED CHILDREN."

A second REPORTER types behind her, his keyboard CLACKING in mechanical rhythm.

JACKSON MORRIS (50s), rumpled editor-in-chief with thinning hair, emerges from his office. The door behind him reads: "JACKSON MORRIS - EDITOR."

He hooks his finger at Mel, summoning her.

INT. JACKSON'S OFFICE - DAY

A small, cluttered office -- desk overflowing with paper stacks marked with coffee stains.

Jackson's computer screen glows with Mel's latest article, its headline bold, accusatory: "SELECT PEOPLE?"

(CONTINUED)

He doesn't look happy.

JACKSON  
This article you turned in.

MEL  
What about it?

He waves a printed copy at her.

JACKSON  
"The Board of Selectmen is now the  
Board of Select People -- but the  
name change was not selected by  
the people."

MEL  
That's how the board vote went.  
Townspeople had no say.

JACKSON  
Mel--

MEL  
The "select people" were skipped  
in the process.

JACKSON  
Exactly!

He plops into his chair, pinches the bridge of his nose.

JACKSON (CONT'D)  
Which is why I'm moving you to  
page thirteen.

Mel leans forward, stunned.

MEL  
You promised me the front page,  
Jackson!

He waves the article again.

JACKSON  
Not for this! You're picking a  
fight.

MEL  
I didn't take a side.

He reads aloud from the article.

(CONTINUED)

JACKSON

"The 'men' lost, and 'people' won.  
But in reality, the people lost,  
as they were denied a vote that  
should have gone to Town Meeting."

MEL

Fact.

JACKSON

It's a fact that it's gonna start  
another war in this town.

He tosses the paper onto his desk.

JACKSON (CONT'D)

Page thirteen: next to the obits.

MEL

I can kiss my Pulitzer goodbye.

He grins, the kind of grin that comes with too many years  
in this business.

JACKSON

You'll live.

Beat.

JACKSON (CONT'D)

So what's next week's headache?

She sits, thinking.

MEL

The Home for Gifted Children.

Jackson leans back, amused.

JACKSON

There's nothing there.

MEL

How much do you know about it?

He shrugs.

JACKSON

Been around forever. Full of  
little geniuses who make a MENSA  
test look like remedial reading.

She watches him, measuring his reaction.

(CONTINUED)

MEL

I think it might make a good human  
interest story.

Jackson's eyes narrow.

JACKSON

Bullshit. You smell something  
else.

Mel smiles.

MEL

Do I?

A long pause.

JACKSON

Bring me back a story, not a libel  
suit.

EXT. ED'S SEDAN ON THE ROAD - DAY

The car hums along the empty, tree-lined road. The canopy  
dims the daylight, the road a tunnel of shadow and light.

Music BLASTS from the radio -- energetic, bleeding into  
the silence outside.

A PHONE RINGS, cutting through the noise.

INT. ED'S SEDAN - DAY

ED LYNCH (25), a good-looking, aggressive preppy geek  
with a Bluetooth earpiece, is behind the wheel.

Expensive cameras and lenses cover the passenger seat.

He turns the radio off.

ED

Ed Lynch.

MEL (V.O.)

Ed? Where are you?

ED

Clark Road about five miles out.  
Just shot the ribbon cutting at  
the new hardware store. What's up?

(CONTINUED)



MEL (V.O.)  
You know the Talonford Home for  
Gifted Children?

INT. TRANSCRIPT PRESS ROOM - MEL'S CUBICLE - DAY

Mel, phone to her ear, studies an old photograph of  
Talonford Mansion on her computer screen.

ED (V.O.)  
What about it?

MEL  
I'm doing a story on it. Jackson  
assigned you as my photographer.

INTERCUT - PHONE CONVERSATION

Ed grins.

ED  
Nice. I'll swing by now, grab some  
exteriors.

MEL  
Not yet. We don't have permission.  
They're my next call. See you  
soon.

CLICK. The call ends.

Ed sighs, leans back, and taps his GPS screen.

GPS VOICE (V.O.)  
Destination?

ED  
Talonford Home for Gifted  
Children, Talonford, New York.

GPS VOICE (V.O.)  
Calculating...

A beat.

The road ahead narrows, darkens.

INT. TRANSCRIPT PRESS ROOM - DAY

Mel sits at her desk, phone to her ear, fingers tapping  
anxiously on her notepad.

(CONTINUED)

A tense RING... then a CLICK.

MR. SHONTS (V.O.)  
Talonford Home. Mister Bradford  
Shonts, speaking.

MEL  
Mister Shonts? My name is Melony  
Barnes. I'm a reporter with the  
Talonford Transcript.

INT. THE OFFICE - DAY

Mr. Shonts, stiff-backed, phone to his ear.  
His fingers drum on the desk.

MR. SHONTS  
What can I do for you?

INTERCUT - PHONE CONVERSATION

MEL (V.O.)  
I was hoping to be able to come  
out and meet with you. I'd like to  
do a story on the school.

Mr. Shonts' jaw tightens.

MR. SHONTS  
I don't think so.

A small, knowing smile from Mel.

MEL  
Please, just let me explain what I  
had in mind. You might actually  
like the idea.

A long, heavy pause.

The faint TICK-TICK-TICK of a grandfather clock in Mr.  
Shonts' office fills the silence.

Finally...

MR. SHONTS  
Shall we say tomorrow at ten?

Mel sits up straighter, barely hiding her surprise.

(CONTINUED)

MEL

That would be wonderful. Thank  
you, Mr. Shonts, I'm sure you'll--

CLICK.

The call cuts dead. Dial tone HUMS in her ear.

Mel frowns, sets the receiver down.

INT. THE OFFICE - TALONFORD MANSION - DAY

Mr. Shonts places his receiver back into its cradle.

Across from him, Mrs. Shonts sits still, only her fingers  
tapping against the chair's worn upholstery.

MRS. SHONTS

How could you have said yes?

MR. SHONTS

If I said no, she'd come anyway.

Mrs. Shonts' tapping stops, her hand pressing flat  
against the fabric.

MRS. SHONTS

This is all because of Miss Leigh.  
We never should have let that boy  
in here.

Shonts stops pacing, turns to her.

MR. SHONTS

We took her nephew in. Why would  
she call the newspaper?

MRS. SHONTS

Who knows what's on her mind?

MR. SHONTS

We would have looked suspicious if  
I said no.

A beat.

Mrs. Shonts glances at the window, where the trees  
outside press against the glass, shifting in the wind.  
Listening.

EXT. TALONFORD SCHOOL DRIVEWAY - DAY

Ed's sedan glides onto the dirt road, tires crunching over loose gravel.

The trees here loom taller, thicker, their branches woven together overhead, casting the road into unnatural shadow despite the midday sun.

The faded sign creaks on its rusted hinges as the wind picks up.

GPS VOICE (V.O.)  
Continue for 0.5 miles.

Ed turns down the volume on the radio, suddenly aware of the silence pressing in around him.

The long driveway ahead is a tunnel of gnarled trees swallowing him whole.

INT. ED'S SEDAN ON THE ROAD - DAY

Music BLARES. Ed drums on the steering wheel, nodding along. Shadows slither across the cracked asphalt.

He checks the passenger seat, grabs a camera, rests it on his lap.

His eyes flick back to the road --

A BOY. Standing dead-center. Unmoving.

ED  
Oh, Shit!

He SLAMS the brakes -- TIRES SHRIEK! The car fishtails, gravel sprays.

The boy doesn't move. Not an inch.

Ed's car stops just short -- his front bumper nearly kissing the boy's knees.

A long, breathless silence.

The boy stares through the windshield, his expression hollow, blank.

Ed's grip tightens on the wheel, chest heaving.

ED (CONT'D)  
What the hell, kid? Are you okay?

(CONTINUED)

No response. The boy doesn't blink.

EXT. THE ROAD - DAY

Ed throws his door open and rushes out, heart hammering.

ED

You nearly got yourself killed!

The boy doesn't react.

This is AMBROSE SHELDON (10), emotionless, eyes void of light. His face is pale, waxy.

His drab, faded clothes hang loose.

Ed exhales, steadying himself. He steps closer.

ED (CONT'D)

Why the hell would you run out  
like that?

Ambrose tilts his head, slow. The way a dog might when it hears something just out of reach. His vacant stare locks onto Ed.

Ed's bravado falters. His voice wavers.

ED (CONT'D)

Hey... you from the school?

Nothing. Just that eerie, hollow gaze.

ED (CONT'D)

I'm heading up there now. Just  
taking a few pictures.

Ambrose's face twitches. His lips tremble. Something flickers in his expression.

ED (CONT'D)

It's okay, kid. Come on. I'll give  
you a lift.

Ed walks to the passenger side, opens the door --

A loud RUSTLE! Ed looks back.

Ambrose is gone -- glimpses of a figure dashes through the thick underbrush -- FOOTSTEPS -- quick, uneven.

A long, empty pause.

(CONTINUED)

Ed swallows hard, unsettled. He climbs back into his car, starts the engine. And drives.

INT. WINDOW IN FOYER - DAY

Zelphra peers through a sheer curtain, barely breathing.

Through the gauzy haze, she sees Ed's sedan roll onto the circular driveway.

David descends the creaky steps. He slows when he sees her frozen at the window.

No blinking. No movement. Just watching.

Unnerved, he hurries past her.

INT. THE ALCOVE - DAY

A narrow passage. A heavy wooden door, locked. Ancient.

CHARLOTTE COFFIN (11), stands before it. Tense. Waiting.

David stops at the alcove entrance.

DAVID

Hi.

No response.

DAVID (CONT'D)

Is the door going to do something?

No response. David steps into the Alcove and stands next to her.

DAVID (CONT'D)

I'm David. When does it open?

Charlotte doesn't blink.

CHARLOTTE

In a day or two.

DAVID

What's behind it?

She finally turns -- just enough for him to see the dark hollow of her eyes.

(CONTINUED)

CHARLOTTE

You don't want to know. You don't  
ever want to know.

She walks away.

David lingers, staring at the door.

INT. THE OFFICE - DAY

Mrs. Shonts peels back the curtain, her bony fingers  
clutching the fabric.

Outside, Ed snaps photos.

MRS. SHONTS

Look!

Mr. Shonts steps beside her.

MR. SHONTS

Who is that?

Ed lowers the camera -- heads back to his car.

MRS. SHONTS

(low, tight)

I bet your reporter friend is  
already at work.

Mrs. Shonts turns to her husband. If looks could kill, he  
would be dead.

EXT. TRANSCRIPT NEWSPAPER OFFICE - NIGHT

Only one light glows inside.

INT. TRANSCRIPT PRESS ROOM - NIGHT

Ed, alone at his desk.

The click-click of his mouse echoes in the silence.

A ribbon-cutting photo fills his screen -- some bloated  
politician beaming with scissors in hand.

CLICK

The next image:

The Talonford Home.

(CONTINUED)

His brow furrows. His eyes narrow for focus.

Several indiscernible figures in the upstairs windows stare back at him.

Puzzled, Ed leans back in his chair, eyes glued to the computer screen.

ED  
What the hell?

Ed leans closer... his eyes grill the screen.

Upstairs. In the windows.

Figures. Watching.

Their faces too blurred to make out.

Ed blinks. Was that-- ?

He zooms in. Hits "Enhance."

The shapes remain.

His brow furrows.

ED (CONT'D)  
(soft, to himself)  
What the hell...?

EXT. ED'S SEDAN ON THE ROAD - DAY

Morning light cuts through the trees.

INT. ED'S SEDAN - DAY

Ed drives.

Mel studies the printed photo in her hands.

MEL  
They're kids, right? Or just shadows?

ED  
Thing is, I didn't see them when I was taking the pictures.

MEL  
You were focused on the shot. It happens.

(CONTINUED)



ED

(flat)  
Not to me.

Mel turns to him.

MEL

Don't tell me you think they're  
ghosts.

Beat.

ED

No.

Mel studies him.

MEL

Then what?

He doesn't answer. Just grips the wheel tighter.

EXT. THE MAIN ROAD - DAY

The sedan turns onto the dirt side road.

They pass the school sign.

INT. ED'S SEDAN - DAY

The mansion emerges through the trees.

MEL

Could use some paint.

ED

And an exorcist.

MEL

Okay, listen to me -- no photos  
until I get permission.

ED

Just pour on that sexy charm --  
you'll get it.

INT. THE OFFICE - DAY

Mr. Shonts sits behind his imposing desk. Jaw tight. Eyes  
like knives on Mel.

(CONTINUED)

Mrs. Shonts stands beside him, rigid. Unblinking.

Mel and Ed sit across from them.

A slow-burn tension.

MR. SHONTS

A couple of days? You want to stay here that long?

MEL

That's right. Your school's been in Talonford for so long, and no one knows anything about it.

MRS. SHONTS

It's a private school.

MEL

Yes, but not a typical school. The students here -- people say they have incredible minds.

MRS. SHONTS

We are entrusted with their privacy.

MEL

I wouldn't print any names.

MR. SHONTS

We have had the press in here before.

MEL

You have?

MR. SHONTS

A long time ago.

MEL

When was the article published?

A long beat.

MR. SHONTS

Before Mrs. Shonts and I took over.

Mel catches on to the odd phrasing.

MR. SHONTS (CONT'D)

(shifts tone)

Why not just one day?

(CONTINUED)

MEL

Because I want to capture a routine -- dinners, lunches, class time, free time. How they interact. Are they just normal kids who play ball, or are they--

A visible reaction.

Mr. Shonts' posture stiffens.

MR. SHONTS

"Normal kids?"

Mel stumbles. A misstep.

MEL

I didn't mean--

MR. SHONTS

Our children are not abnormal, Miss Barnes.

Mrs. Shonts' expression hardens.

MRS. SHONTS

That's probably how she'll write her story.

MEL

No! No, not at all.

The tension thickens.

Mr. Shonts exhales.

MR. SHONTS

We will give you our answer in the morning.

A curt dismissal.

Mel swallows. Stands.

MEL

Thank you. I appreciate it.

She leaves her business card on the desk.

MEL (CONT'D)

(softly)

You can reach me at that number.

No response.

(CONTINUED)

She nods to Mrs. Shonts. No reaction.

Ed and Mel exit.

Behind them -- the Shontses remain motionless.

Their faces masking something.

Something dark.

INT. THE HALLWAY - DAY

Mel and Ed slowly walk the long, empty hallway toward the front door.

No children in sight.

Too quiet.

ED

Where are the kids?

They glance into the Living Room as they pass --

Lucian sits alone in a cracked leather chair, his face half-hidden behind the spread of a newspaper.

On the table beside him, a lit cigar smolders in an ashtray.

A child. With a cigar.

Ed slows his steps.

Lucian's fingers turn the page. His eyes don't follow.

He's reading them instead.

Ed leans toward Mel.

ED (CONT'D)

(low, urgent)

Was that kid smoking a cigar!?

Mel glances back -- but her eyes catch something else.

Mrs. Shonts.

She stands at the office doorway, watching them.

Expression unreadable. A statue with a pulse.

(CONTINUED)

MEL  
(soft, half-smiling)  
I think so.

She turns forward again, eyes locked ahead.

A moment later and they exit out the front door.

EXT. THE PORCH - DAY

Ed takes a last peek inside as he closes the front door.

MEL  
I think this story might get me  
out of here and into the big  
leagues.

ED  
A kid smoking a cigar?

MEL  
No. Whatever Mr. and Mrs. Shonts  
are hiding.

They head for the car.

INT. THE OFFICE - DAY

Mr. Shonts watches motionless from the window, hands  
behind his back as he sees Mel and Ed approach their car.

Mrs. Shonts steps in beside him.

MRS. SHONTS  
You're going to let her stay.

MR. SHONTS  
You saw for yourself. She'll never  
give up.

Outside, Mel and Ed climb into the car.

Mr. Shonts checks his watch.

MR. SHONTS (CONT'D)  
Call Miss Leigh and have her come  
in tomorrow.

MRS. SHONTS  
She'll ask why.

He watches as the car drives away.

(CONTINUED)

A beat.

MR. SHONTS  
Tell her there's been an accident.

EXT. BACKYARD - THE MANSION - DAY

The yard glows burnt orange under the setting sun.

David sits alone at a picnic bench, running his fingers along the wood -- tracing some invisible road.

A distant laugh.

Soft. Light. Drifting from the trees.

His head lifts.

More laughter, echoing from the woods.

Hesitation. Then

LUCIAN (O.S.)  
David! Hey, David!

DAVID  
Hello!?

LUCIAN (O.S.)  
We're in here!

More LAUGHTER.

Mercedes GIGGLING. William WHISPERING.

It pulls him in.

David stands. Takes a step toward the tree line.

MERCEDES (O.S.)  
Come find us!

WILLIAM (O.S.)  
We're waiting for you!

David steps into the woods.

EXT. THE WOODS - DAY

The woods close in around him.

David slows.

(CONTINUED)

Before him -- rotted wooden crosses. Rows of them.

The paint has long since peeled away, splintered wood barely holding shape.

A graveyard.

David kneels, brushing fragile dust from one marker.

He flinches.

The wood crumbles away under his fingers.

LAUGHTER erupts.

He spins in time to see Mercedes dart deeper into the trees... just a flash of her dress.

DAVID

Where are you!?

MERCEDES (O.S.)

Come and find us!

WILLIAM (O.S.)

We're waiting for you!

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

We're waiting for you!

David moves toward the voices.

His footsteps CRUNCH over dry leaves.

The LAUGHTER grows distant.

David speeds up.

CRUNCH. CRUNCH. CRUNCH.

The LAUGHTER stops.

David stops.

A dead silence.

DAVID

Hello!?

No response.

His eyes scan the trees.

Nothing.

Then -- a shape on the ground.

(CONTINUED)

A hole.

David steps forward, standing at its edge.

An open grave. Dark. Freshly dug.

He stares down into it.

A rush of FOOTSTEPS behind him.

David spins --

A steel shovel swings for his head.

THUMP.

The shovel connects -- hard. A sharp, wet CRACK.

David's body stiffens, then goes limp into the grave.

His fingers twitch once. Then nothing.

Without a word, Lucian hands the shovel to William.

A beat.

LUCIAN

Bury him.

EXT. TALONFORD MANSION - NIGHT

The house glows against the dark.

A night breeze shakes the leaves.

Inside, a piano plays Clair de Lune. Perfectly.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The piano sings with flawless, lilting precision.  
Delicate. Haunting.

HILDA MORGAN (10), plays, fingers gliding over the keys.  
Her hair is styled with unsettling maturity. Her posture,  
rigid. Unnatural.

The other children listen, lost in their own worlds.

Near the fireplace, Lucian reads the newspaper. The amber  
glow flickers over him.

(CONTINUED)



On the small table beside him, a cigar smolders in an ashtray, curling a thin line of smoke into the air.

At the poker table:

VERNER LLOYD (12), pale and sharp-featured, slides a crisp fifty-dollar bill across the felt.

BENSON WOLCOTT (12) watches with an amused smirk, his aristocratic face unreadable. His fingers tap against his stack of chips -- measured, rhythmic, like a clock ticking down.

By the window, Charlotte knits.

The needles click, click, click. A soft, ceaseless rhythm. Mechanical.

In the corner, PHINEAS BIRCH (13) sits with a book. His hollow eyes drift over the pages, but he doesn't turn them. The firelight glints off his gold tooth. The only thing that catches the light.

Across the room, William and Mercedes play chess. Their expressions remain neutral.

Every move feels like an execution.

The fireplace SPITS. HISSES. CRACKLES.

No one speaks.

No one smiles.

Just the piano.

Just Clair de Lune.

EXT. TALONFORD MANSION - DAY

A familiar car rolls up the gravel driveway, tires grinding into the silence. It slows. Stops.

The door creaks open, and Deborah Leigh steps out.

A child's voice calls out -- soft, sweet... unnatural.

MERCEDES (O.S.)

David! She's here!

Leigh pauses.

(CONTINUED)

From the corner of the mansion -- movement. A dress whirls behind the house -- too fast, too silent.

Leigh steps forward, peering around the side of the house. Nothing. No children. No footsteps. Just stillness.

LAUGHTER.

A GIGGLE curls out from behind the house. More join. Light. Playful. Wrong.

Leigh hesitates, then moves toward it.

The mansion looms behind her. The LAUGHTER doesn't fade.

It waits.

EXT. BACKYARD - THE MANSION - DAY

Leigh steps into the yard.

Empty. Too quiet.

A GIGGLE. She edges toward the trees.

A blur of a girl vanishes into the woods.

Silence.

The trees loom, unblinking.

LEIGH

David! Who's that you're with!?  
Don't run away! Come back!

Leigh stumbles through the trees, branches claw at her.

GIGGLES. Just ahead.

LEIGH (CONT'D)

David! Stop playing games! They  
said there was an accident!

WILLIAM (O.S.)

(sing-song)  
You're getting warmer.

LEIGH

David?

Silence.

(CONTINUED)

LEIGH (CONT'D)  
Come here at once!

No response.

LEIGH (CONT'D)  
David!

Ahead, a ditch. A shape inside.

She creeps forward. A grave.

And in it -- David. Dirt brushed from his face, his dead eyes glazed over.

THWACK!

The shovel strikes her skull.

She crumples.

William, Lucian, and Mercedes emerge from the trees.  
William Poses like an umpire.

WILLIAM  
Steeeerike one! She's out!

Lucian and Mercedes watch, silent, as William rolls  
Leigh's body into the grave.

THUMP.

Lucian drops the shovel at William's feet.

INT. THE OFFICE - DAY

Mr. Shonts dials the rotary phone, his fingers  
deliberate, slow.

Outside the window, Lucian approaches Leigh's car.

He climbs in. Drives away.

MEL (V.O.)  
Melony Barnes.

MR. SHONTS  
Mr. Shonts speaking.

MEL (V.O.)  
Hello!

(CONTINUED)

MR. SHONTS

We've discussed your request. Your stay here is acceptable. When might we expect you?

MEL (V.O.)

Oh! That's wonderful! Uh... tomorrow?

MR. SHONTS

We'll see you then.

CLICK. He hangs up.

INT. TRANSCRIPT PRESS ROOM - DAY

Mel holds the phone, still mid-sentence. Dial tone.

Jackson watches from the doorway.

JACKSON

You're in?

MEL

Tomorrow.

She grins.

EXT. TALONFORD HOME - NIGHT

Crickets. Tree frogs. The heavy quiet of country night.

A PIANO lilts through the night -- Debussy's "Serenade for the Doll."

On the porch, Mr. Shonts waits.

The moonlight drains color from his face. He looks almost... translucent.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Hilda plays, her fingers dancing over the keys. Mechanical. Perfect.

EXT. THE PORCH - NIGHT

Mr. Shonts stares down the long driveway. Waiting.

A rustle in the distance.

(CONTINUED)

Footsteps approach.

A figure slips out of the dark.

LUCIAN (O.S.)  
You know, I forgot how far that  
was.

Lucian steps into the moonlight.

LUCIAN (CONT'D)  
Worried about me, Pops?

MR. SHONTS  
Do not address me as "Pops," Mr.  
Bowen

Lucian drops onto the step, exhausted.

LUCIAN  
Whatever you say. Damn, that was a  
workout.

MR. SHONTS  
What took so long?

LUCIAN  
I parked a mile in, wiped it  
clean.

MR. SHONTS  
And that took four hours?

Lucian's eyes narrow.

LUCIAN  
I had to camouflage it, too!  
Christ. You see an "S" on my  
chest?

MR. SHONTS  
The car must be dumped in the  
lake.

LUCIAN  
Yeah, but I need help.

A pause.

LUCIAN (CONT'D)  
Any calls looking for her?

Mr. Shonts shakes his head.

(CONTINUED)

Lucian smirks.

LUCIAN (CONT'D)  
 She wasn't wearing a ring. Real  
 frump. No boyfriend. Maybe she  
 won't be missed.

MR. SHONTS  
 The logic of a thirteen-year-old  
 brain.

LUCIAN  
 Exactly. That's the beauty of it..

He rises.

LUCIAN (CONT'D)  
 Good night, Mr. Shonts. Don't  
 worry about a thing.

Lucien opens the door, steps inside, and vanishes into  
 the shadows.

Mr. Shonts stares at the empty road.

INT. THE ALCOVE - NIGHT

Mr. Shonts unlocks the door.

His wife and Hilda wait.

The door creaks open. A black hole leading down.

They descend.

INT. THE CELLAR - NIGHT

DRIP. DRIP. DRIP.

The hollow silence.

The spectral statue of St. Aloysius.

Water trickles from the wall -- agleam in the dim light.

Hilda turns to Mr. Shonts, uneasy.

HILDA  
 How many does this make?

MR. SHONTS  
 Five.

(CONTINUED)

HILDA  
You're sure? I've lost count.

MR. SHONTS  
I'm sure.

She stares at the damp wall.

EXT. ED'S SEDAN - DAY

The car hurtles down the road.

INT. ED'S SEDAN - DAY

The tires hum against the road as sunlight flickers through the trees.

ED  
We should get your car so you have it at the school.

Mel doesn't answer.

ED (CONT'D)  
It's not safe to be out here without a car.

MEL  
Funny.

ED  
What's funny about -- oh.  
Suspended license. Forgot. My bad.

Mel stares out the window.

ED (CONT'D)  
That's what happens when you drive into a police chase.

MEL  
It was my story to lose.

ED  
You should let me stay, too.

MEL  
We've gone through this. You'll come take pictures.

ED  
You need someone--

(CONTINUED)

MEL  
To protect me? Ed, if I were  
attacked, you'd take pictures.

ED  
I would n... well, only one--  
okay, two for insurance. Then I'd  
help!

She pats his cheek.

MEL  
You're sweet.

EXT. TALONFORD HOME - DAY

A PIANO plays. Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata."  
Ed's sedan pulls in.

EXT. ED'S SEDAN - DAY

Mel and Ed step out, greeted by the music.  
Ed listens.

ED  
Mozart.

MEL  
Beethoven.

He raises an eyebrow.

MEL (CONT'D)  
Piano Sonata #14 in C Sharp Minor.  
"Moonlight."

ED  
Good to know. No one plays Mozart  
anymore.

He grabs his camera bag from the back seat.

ED (CONT'D)  
Okay.

Mel catches movement.

A curtain flutters. An eye watches -- gone in a blink.



EXT. THE PORCH - DAY

They climb the steps.

Before Mel can knock --

The door opens.

Mrs. Shonts waits.

MRS. SHONTS  
Good morning, Miss Barnes.

MEL  
Mrs. Shonts. Good morning. You  
remember Ed Lynch?

Mrs. Shonts steps aside, her gaze unreadable.

Gestures them inside.

INT. THE HALLWAY - DAY

No children in sight.

A distant GIGGLE -- then, suddenly, a series of unseen  
doors SLAM! One after another.

The somber, yet hauntingly beautiful piano music swells  
through the house.

MRS. SHONTS  
We were not expecting the man with  
the camera.

MEL  
Ed's not staying overnight. He'll  
be here mostly days, to chronicle  
my stay.

MRS. SHONTS  
I'll show you to your room.

She ascends the stairs. Mel and Ed follow.

MRS. SHONTS (CONT'D)  
One of the attractions of this  
school is its privacy. You shall  
be supervised when you photograph  
the children. Is that clear?

(CONTINUED)

ED  
Candid shots work best, Mrs.  
Shonts.

MRS. SHONTS  
I'll speak with Mr. Shonts.

They reach the second-floor landing, turn a corner, and head up to the third floor.

MRS. SHONTS (CONT'D)  
You're on the third floor.

Mel forces a smile.

MEL  
Third is fine.

INT. THE LIVING ROOM - DAY

Hilda plays the piano, oblivious to the world.

Lucian lounges in his chair, the smoldering cigar beside him. His newspaper lowers, revealing narrowed eyes.

At the fireplace, William stares into the flames.

Charlotte knits in silence.

Hilda's final note lingers, a chilling echo through the house.

INT. THIRD FLOOR HALL - DAY

Two doors. Mrs. Shonts gestures to the first.

MRS. SHONTS  
That leads to the attic. Your room  
is this way.

She continues down the hall.

INT. MEL'S BEDROOM - DAY

David's former room -- small, spare, like a space left behind. The cot-sized bed. Dresser. A barred window.

A rotary phone.

Mrs. Shonts gestures inside.

(CONTINUED)

MRS. SHONTS

This was once the maid's quarters.

Ed notices the phone, runs a finger over the dial.

ED

Don't see many of these anymore.

MRS. SHONTS

You will need it. You will notice there is no mobile phone service here, nor internet.

MEL

What!? How do I call out?

MRS. SHONTS

Dial your number and I shall connect you from our switchboard.

Mel examines the door handle -- no keyhole.

MEL

Do I get a key?

MRS. SHONTS

There are no keys here. All doors are open.

Mrs. Shonts exits.

Mel and Ed exchange a wary look. They instinctively check their phones -- no signal.

They follow her.

INT. THE LIVING ROOM - DAY

The children barely acknowledge Mel and Ed as they enter.

MRS. SHONTS

This is our living room. A lot of free time is spent here. This is Hilda Morgan who was playing the piano.

MEL

You play beautifully, Hilda.

Hilda shows just the faintest smirk of self-satisfaction.

(CONTINUED)

MRS. SHONTS

There is Lucian Bowan. He loves to read the paper.

ED

You smoke cigars, Lucian?

Lucian peeks over the top of his newspaper.

ED (CONT'D)

Just remember, smoking kills.

LUCIAN

Is this a face that gives a shit?

Mrs. Shonts gestures to William, slouched near the fire, a book half-open on his lap.

MRS. SHONTS

That's William Pickman. It appears he's dozed off.

Mel forces a polite smile.

Ed lifts his camera, aims it at Lucian.

LUCIAN

Hey! Hey! I didn't say you could take my picture.

ED

Sorry. I didn't think you'd mind.

LUCIAN

Suppose I do?

ED

I thought you would like your photo in the newspaper.

LUCIAN

Local or national?

ED

Local.

LUCIAN

In that case, you can take it.

Ed snaps the photo -- quick, matter-of-fact. No artistry.

ED

Thanks.

(CONTINUED)

Lucian stares at Mel.

LUCIAN

I know you.

MEL

We've never met, but I've seen you  
at the nursing home.

Lucian grins. Picks up his cigar. Exits.

Mel turns to William -- awake now. His heavy-lidded eyes  
fixed on her.

From the next room -- CRACK! BILLIARD BALLS BREAKING.

Ed glances toward the sound. Steps away.

INT. BILLIARD ROOM - DAY

Lucian leans over the billiard table, cue in hand, lining  
up his shot. Phineas watches, the dim light casting  
shadows over his gaunt face.

Mel and Ed step in.

ED

Now, that's my game!

Lucian straightens, his eyes cool and amused.

LUCIAN

Want to play?

ED

Sure!

Lucian smirks.

LUCIAN

How much can you lay on the table?

ED

Play for money?

LUCIAN

What's the point, otherwise?

Ed fishes into his wallet, pulls out a five-dollar bill.

Lucian and Phineas stare at it. The moment lingers --  
silent, uncomfortable.

(CONTINUED)

LUCIAN (CONT'D)  
You shittin' me? Five?

ED  
It's all I got on me. Besides, I  
don't want to take advantage of  
you.

LUCIAN  
I've been playing my whole life.

ED  
I've got a number of years on you.

Lucian nods to Phineas.

LUCIAN  
Let me finish this game.

The game continues -- Lucian doesn't miss a single shot.  
He calls them, sinks them with robotic efficiency.

LUCIAN (CONT'D)  
Nine ball, corner pocket.

The CRACK of the cue ball. The thud of the nine sinking.

LUCIAN (CONT'D)  
Eleven ball, side pocket.

CRACK. THUD.

LUCIAN (CONT'D)  
Eight, side.

The cue banks off the side, taps the eight. It drops into  
the corner.

Lucian leans on his cue stick.

LUCIAN (CONT'D)  
Game.

Phineas silently racks the balls.

Ed stares. Mouth slightly open. He snatches his five-  
dollar bill off the table.

ED  
I ah... I think I need to brush up  
a bit before I take you on.

Lucian CHUCKLES.

(CONTINUED)

LUCIAN

And when you do, come back with  
some real dough.

Mel grabs Ed's arm and leads him out

INT. THE HALLWAY - DAY

Lucian and Phineas LAUGH behind them.

LUCIAN (O.S.)

Five bucks! What a bunch of hooey!

Mel and Ed move through the long, dim hallway, their  
footsteps swallowed by the thick silence beyond the boys'  
mocking laughter.

Mrs. Shonts waits for them, expression unreadable.

MEL

Mrs. Shonts, rude behavior appears  
to be tolerated?

MRS. SHONTS

It's how they vent their  
frustrations. Advanced minds in  
children can cause anger and  
impatience.

Her voice is clipped. Final.

Mrs. Shonts glides toward the office.

MRS. SHONTS (CONT'D)

If you require anything, I shall  
be in the office.

Mel watches her go, then turns to Ed. He shrugs.

They walk toward the front door, their conversation  
dropping into quiet thought.

Mel's gaze drifts over the house -- every wall, every  
doorway, every reflective surface...

MEL

Have you noticed anything odd  
about this house?

ED

Lots of things. Starting with the  
kids.

(CONTINUED)

MEL

No. The house.

Ed squints, glances around.

ED

I give up.

Mel stops at a dusty picture frame -- no glass. Just an empty frame, nailed to the wall.

A beat.

MEL

Not a single mirror in this entire house.

Ed follows her eyes. His face darkens.

EXT. ED'S SEDAN - DAY

Ed tosses his camera bag into the back seat.

MEL

So I'll see you tomorrow at ten.

ED

You're sure you'll be okay?

MEL

I'll be fine. Thanks, Ed.

Ed lifts his camera, frames the house.

THROUGH THE CAMERA VIEWFINDER

A small figure watches from a third-floor window.

SNAP!

BACK TO SCENE

MEL (CONT'D)

Another shot of the house?

ED

Yeah, but this one has a kid looking out what I thought is your bedroom window.

Mel spins. The window is empty.

Ed shows her the photo -- Verner, staring right at them.

(CONTINUED)



She rubs her arms, suddenly chilled.

A long beat.

Mel forces a smile.

MEL  
I'll see you tomorrow.

Ed hesitates but nods.

Mel watches as he drives away.

Behind her --

From the third-floor window, the curtain shifts slightly.

INT. MEL'S BEDROOM - DAY

Mel enters to find her suitcase ransacked, clothes tossed across the bed.

MEL  
That little bastard.

Mel sits on the bed, eyes lingering on her disheveled belongings, frustration simmering.

EXT. TALONFORD MANSION - NIGHT

A single third-floor window glows. Mel's room.

The light clicks off.

INT. THIRD-FLOOR HALLWAY - NIGHT

Mel steps out of her room, quietly shuts the door. The quiet is unnatural -- heavy, expectant.

THUMP.

She stops. The attic door.

MEL  
Hello?

Silence.

She hesitates, fingers hovering over the glass doorknob. Slowly, she taps three times.

(CONTINUED)

BAM! BAM! BAM! A violent pound from the other side!

Mel stumbles back, sucking in a gasp. She waits -- listens. Nothing.

She turns, hurries downstairs.

Behind her, the attic doorknob slowly twists.

The door creaks open.

A pair of hollow eyes -- Ambrose. He watches her vanish below, then silently pulls the door shut.

INT. THE DINING ROOM - NIGHT

The long table brims with food, the children seated in eerie stillness. At the head, Mr. and Mrs. Shonts. At the center, Lucian, cigar smoldering beside his plate.

One empty chair -- David's place.

Mel enters, masking her unease.

MR. SHONTS

I hope your room is satisfactory.

She slides into her seat, eyes flicking to Verner.

MEL

Yes. I wasn't aware my things would be unpacked. Feels like a cruise.

MR. SHONTS

Who unpacked your things?

Mel lets the question hang, then turns to Verner.

MEL

Someone looking for something.

MRS. SHONTS

No one is allowed in Miss Barnes' room. Is that understood?

The children pass plates, unbothered.

LUCIAN

When's your boyfriend coming back? Maybe we can play for some real money.

(CONTINUED)

MEL  
He's not my boyfriend.

LUCIAN  
Oh. Makes sense. He seemed like a  
cream puff.

MEL  
Cream puff?

LUCIAN  
You know. Light in the loafers?

Mel glares. A faint smirk from Lucian.

VERNER  
Are you married?

She turns her attention to Verner.

VERNER (CONT'D)  
Hm?

MEL  
No.

MR. SHONTS  
Now, now. Miss Barnes' personal  
life is just that -- personal.

HILDA  
Funny. She expects us to share  
ours.

MERCEDES  
Turnabout is fair play.

MEL  
Your lives are interesting.

HILDA  
Were interesting.

MEL  
Were? You're still children.

CHARLOTTE  
What's so interesting about us?

ZELPHRA  
Reporters are like cats. Curious.

(CONTINUED)

MERCEDES

And you know what curiosity did to the cat.

MEL

It's just a little story about a little school.

ZELPHRA

How long does it take to write?

MEL

I'm just getting a feel for the place.

MR. SHONTS

Miss Barnes will be with us for a couple of days.

CHARLOTTE

A couple of days!? But, what about--

She stops herself. Mel notices.

MEL

What about what, Charlotte?

Charlotte recovers, forced smile.

CHARLOTTE

What about your family? Won't they miss you?

MEL

I live alone. My family is on the west coast.

ZELPHRA

Two days to write a story about this place?

MEL

Almost sounds like you don't want me here.

MERCEDES

Now you're getting it.

Mel stiffens -- Mercedes stares.

Then, she smiles.

(CONTINUED)

MERCEDES (CONT'D)

Don't mind me. That's my sense of humor.

Mel isn't sure.

LUCIAN

Pass the gravy.

Mr. Shonts reaches for the gravy boat.

EXT. TALONFORD MANSION - NIGHT

Rain SLAMS against the earth, turning the driveway into a slick sheet of mud.

The Old Man stumbles back, drenched, his breath ragged. He wears an open overcoat over his pajamas, and tall mud boots. He looks up at Mel's window.

OLD MAN

Melony!

THIRD FLOOR WINDOW

Mel presses her palms to the glass, staring down at the Old Man in horror.

DRIVEWAY

Lucian, William, and Mercedes step into the downpour. Their figures seem to glide through the rain.

LUCIAN

What are you doing out here?

The Old Man takes another unsteady step back.

OLD MAN

I have to talk to Melony!

Lightning FLASHES. A soaked overcoat clings to his bony frame. His wild eyes are locked onto Mel's window.

OLD MAN (CONT'D)

Melony! Are you listening!?

Mel takes a step back. Then another.

Lucian, William, and Mercedes begin to circle the Old Man like wolves.

(CONTINUED)

LUCIAN

Go home!

OLD MAN

She needs to know the truth!

MERCEDES

She won't be here much longer.

WILLIAM

We're getting rid of her.

A flicker of realization crosses the Old Man's face. His breath quickens.

OLD MAN

No...

William and Mercedes GRAB his arms. He rips free and SHOVES them down into the mud.

Lucian pounces.

The two CRASH into the ground, fists flying, mud spraying. The Old Man fights like hell, but he's frail and weak.

INT. THE HALLWAY / STAIRS - NIGHT

BOOM! A THUNDERCLAP shakes the house as Mel races down the stairs.

INT. FOYER - NIGHT

She slams into the front door -- GRABS the knob, twists, pulls -- Locked.

MEL

No! No! No!

She yanks the window curtains aside -- bars.

MEL (CONT'D)

Damn it!

A LIGHTNING FLASH!

THUNDER CRASH!

INT. THE KITCHEN - NIGHT

Mel darts to the service door. TUGS the knob -- the door won't budge.

She snatches a butcher knife, swings -- THUD! CRACK -- hacking at the lock.

WOOD SPLINTERS.

With a final swing -- CRACK -- the door FLIES OPEN.

EXT. BACKYARD - MANSION - NIGHT

Mel stumbles into the storm.

Through the downpour -- Lucian, Mercedes, and William drag the Old Man toward the woods.

MEL

Lucian!?

They don't turn.

Mel sprints after them.

EXT. THE WOODS - NIGHT

CRACK! Branches whip against her face.

She stops -- spins, disoriented. Darkness all around.

A LIGHTNING FLASH -- Lucian, just ahead.

LUCIAN

(grinning)

Melony. Wanna "do it?"

BOOM! THUNDERCLAP!

He's gone.

Mel pushes forward.

Another FLASH -- Lucian, Mercedes, and William with the Old Man.

OLD MAN

(desperate,  
struggling)

I'll ring your neck!

(CONTINUED)

MEL  
Leave him alone!

Lucian licks rain off his lips.

LUCIAN  
Ooo! Threaten me, baby! You're  
sexy when you're pissed.

MEL  
(advancing)  
I haven't even started!

Hilda. Zelphra. Charlotte.

They circle Mel -- laughing, jeering.

Zelphra SHOVES HER -- HARD.

Mel SLAMS into a tree.

MEL (CONT'D)  
(gasping, dizzy)  
Damn it...

Blood trickles down her forehead.

Then -- a whispering SONG.

THE CHILDREN (O.S.)  
(soft, eerie)  
RAIN, RAIN, GO AWAY  
COME AGAIN ANOTHER DAY  
DADDY WANTS TO PLAY  
RAIN, RAIN, GO AWAY

Mel whirls, desperate.

MEL  
Where are you!?

The Old Man SCREAMS.

OLD MAN (O.S.)  
Help me! Help me, please!

BOOM! THUNDER!

The voices rise.

THE CHILDREN (O.S.)  
(giggling, taunting)  
RAIN, RAIN, GO AWAY  
COME AGAIN ANOTHER DAY  
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)



THE CHILDREN (O.S.) (CONT'D)  
MOMMY WANTS TO PLAY  
RAIN, RAIN, GO AWAY

Mel stumbles deeper into the blackness.

BOOM! THUNDER CLAP!

A LIGHTNING FLASH!

The children stand in a circle. Watching.

They SING.

THE CHILDREN (CONT'D)  
RAIN, RAIN, GO AWAY  
GIFTED CHILDREN WANT TO PLAY  
RAIN, RAIN, GO AWAY

Mel spins, panicked -- too many voices, too much sound.

She SCREAMS.

MEL  
Stop it! Shut Up!

INT. MEL'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Her chest heaves, sweat beads on her forehead. Her eyes wide, frantic.

A glance out the window.

Bone-dry.

No cut on her forehead.

The CHIRPING of crickets. No rain. No storm.

CLICK.

Her door handle turns.

She turns to see Verner, standing in the doorway.  
Pajamas, calm, watching her.

Mel yanks the bedsheet up to her neck.

MEL  
What the hell, Verner! You scared  
the shit out of me!

He steps inside. Closes the door behind him.

(CONTINUED)

VERNER

I heard you scream. I was worried.

MEL

Just a nightmare. I'm fine.

He sits on her bed. Too close.

MEL (CONT'D)

You can go now.

VERNER

About earlier... I did go through your suitcase.

MEL

(tightens grip on sheets)

Why?

VERNER

It was Lucian's idea.

MEL

You always do what Lucian says?

VERNER

It's safer that way.

MEL

What was he looking for?

VERNER

Bourbon.

MEL

What!?

VERNER

That's all.

His hand moves to hers. Gently, he pulls her hand down... dragging the bedsheet with it.

VERNER (CONT'D)

You're just my type. You remind me of a girl in Vienna. Before the war.

MEL

What war?

Verner leans in.

(CONTINUED)

VERNER  
Just one kiss.

MEL  
(uneasy)  
Verner...

VERNER  
Please...

MEL  
Verner! No!

He pulls back. Annoyed.

VERNER  
Shit. You're a lesbian.

MEL  
I am not. I am also not a  
pedophile.

VERNER  
What the fuck does that have to do  
with it? Age is in the mind.

MEL  
Age might be in your mind, but  
physically you're thirteen. Please  
leave.

Verner shrugs.

VERNER  
Your loss.

He exits.

Mel bolts out of bed, slams the door, wedges a chair  
under the knob.

She throws on a robe, flicks on the TV.

ON SCREEN:

A NEWS ANCHOR appears. Photo of Deborah Leigh and David  
Collins in the upper corner.

ANCHORMAN  
Deborah Leigh has not been seen  
since. Authorities confirm her  
nephew, David Collins, is also  
missing after enrolling at  
Talonford, a private facility.  
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

ANCHORMAN (CONT'D)  
Emerson County officials are not  
ruling out foul play.

CLICK.

Mel stares at the screen.

MEL  
Oh, my God.

EXT. TALONFORD NURSING HOME - DAY

Ed leans against his car, swapping out a camera lens.

INT. NURSES STATION - DAY

Head Nurse Nicholson fills out paperwork, barely glancing  
at Mel.

MEL  
How long?

NURSE NICHOLSON  
I told you -- I'm not sure.

MEL  
In all the time you've seen them  
here, have they ever had a fight  
like the other day?

NURSE NICHOLSON  
I thought this was a positive  
article to help us get funding.

MEL  
It is. But I need to cover all  
angles.

Mel glances down the corridor.

Lucian stands by the glass entrance doors -- watching.

Mel -- tense.

NURSE NICHOLSON  
Miss Barnes?

Mel snaps back to her.

MEL  
I-- I want to--

(CONTINUED)

A quick second glance at the entrance doors.

Lucian is gone.

She walks toward the Old Man's room.

Eyes locked on the door.

LUCIAN (O.S.)  
Now listen, I told you there's  
nothing I can do.

OLD MAN (O.S.)  
You did it! Why can't I?

LUCIAN (O.S.)  
Because it doesn't work that way!

INT. OLD MAN'S ROOM - DAY

Lucian is at the bedside of the Old Man.

LUCIAN  
Look, if I could fix it for you,  
you know I would, but that isn't  
how it works!

Mel reaches the door.

LUCIAN (CONT'D)  
The Society has rules. And I don't  
want you there.

Lucian turns to see Mel.

LUCIAN (CONT'D)  
Yeah?

MEL  
May I come in?

LUCIAN  
No. Personal.

MEL  
A relative?

The Old Man slowly turns his head.

OLD MAN  
Who are you?

(CONTINUED)

LUCIAN  
No one, never mind.

MEL  
Lucian--

LUCIAN  
What part of "it's personal" don't  
you get, lady?

Mel bites her tongue.

OLD MAN  
(to Lucian)  
You shouldn't come here anymore.

LUCIAN  
Why not!?

OLD MAN  
Because you don't give a damn.  
I'll be dead soon. And you'll go  
on!

Lucian lets out a quiet sigh. Pats the Old Man's arm.

LUCIAN  
I'll be back. Gotta go for now.

OLD MAN  
Don't bother.

Lucian walks past Mel into the corridor.

INT. NURSING HOME CORRIDOR - DAY

Lucian and Mel walk side by side. Low voices.

LUCIAN  
You just can't mind your own  
business, can you, sweetheart?

MEL  
I thought I could offer you a ride  
home.

He pulls a cigar from his breast pocket.

LUCIAN  
No thanks. I'll walk.

MEL  
Ten miles!?

(CONTINUED)

LUCIAN

Keeps me fit.

MEL

That's rich -- says the kid  
clutching a cigar.

LUCIAN

(smirks)

I'm just holding it.

MEL

You come here a lot. More than  
once a week.

LUCIAN

What's it to you?

MEL

Just getting my facts straight. He  
your grandfather?

LUCIAN

None of your goddamn business. And  
I swear to Holy Hell, if you put  
that in your story--

MEL

(mocking)

You'll sue my ass?

A beat.

Mel grins.

MEL (CONT'D)

You sure you don't want a ride?

LUCIAN

Scram.

He walks away.

EXT. TALONFORD MANSION - DAY

A state police cruiser idles in the driveway.

DETECTIVE CROWLEY (40s), tousled suit, dead eyes from  
long hours, rings the bell. A POLICE OFFICER stands  
behind him.

Mr. Shonts opens the door, face neutral. Mrs. Shonts  
joins him.

(CONTINUED)

MR. SHONTS

Yes?

Crowley flashes a badge.

CROWLEY

Detective Crowley. You Mr. Shonts?

MR. SHONTS

Yes.

MRS. SHONTS

Is something wrong, Detective?

MR. SHONTS

This is my wife, Adda. We run the school.

Crowley holds up a photo of Leigh and David.

CROWLEY

She was guardian to her nephew,  
David Collins. He's missing, too.  
Either of them been here?

MR. SHONTS

No.

MRS. SHONTS

Never seen them.

CROWLEY

Take a good look.

MR. SHONTS

We have never seen either of them.

CROWLEY

We found your number in her  
apartment.

MRS. SHONTS

David was gifted. They must've  
considered us, then changed their  
minds.

CROWLEY

How do you know he was gifted?

A tense beat.

MRS. SHONTS

It's all over the news.

(CONTINUED)



Crowley hands over a card. Mrs. Shonts takes it.

CROWLEY  
If you hear anything, let me know.

MR. SHONTS  
Of course.

CROWLEY  
Good day.

Crowley and the officer turn away.

Mrs. Shonts crushes the business card in her fist.

INT. ED'S SEDAN ON THE ROAD - DAY

Mel and Ed drive in silence.

ED  
The mouth on that kid! He really  
said that to you!?

MEL  
I hit a nerve, that's for sure.

Ed shakes his head.

EXT. ED'S SEDAN ON THE ROAD - DAY

A lonely stretch of asphalt.

In the distance -- another car behind them.

Closing in. Fast.

Leigh's car.

INT. LEIGH'S CAR - DAY

A foot SLAMS the gas pedal.

The speedometer CLIMBS --

55... 65... 75...

A black-gloved hand LAYS on the horn --

BEEEEEP! BEEEEEP!

INT. ED'S SEDAN - DAY

Ed's hands tighten on the wheel.

BEEEEEP! BEEEEEP!

ED  
What the hell! HEY!

Mel looks out the back window. She sees a shadowed figure driving the chase car... a fedora pulled low. Coat collar high. No facial features.

EXT. ED'S SEDAN - ROAD - DAY

Leigh's car now inches from their bumper.

INT. LEIGH'S CAR - DAY

The gloved hand YANKS the wheel.

The car JERKS left -- SWERVES -- NEARLY CLIPS them!

Speedometer rockets -- 80... 90... 95!

INT. ED'S SEDAN - DAY

Mel squints at the plate --

MEL  
Can't see the plate!

ED  
Hang on!

EXT. THE ROAD - DAY

Ed CRANKS the wheel --

The sedan SWERVES onto the SHOULDER --

TIRES SCREAM on loose dirt -- KICKING UP A DUST CLOUD!

INT. LEIGH'S CAR - DAY

The black-gloved hands SQUEEZE the wheel --

The driver SLAMS the gas pedal...

(CONTINUED)

ENGINE HOWLS -- TIRES SCREECH

Speedometer SPIKES -- 100 MPH.

EXT. THE ROAD - DAY

BAM!

Leigh's car RAMS the sedan --

Ed's car FISHTAILS -- SPINS OUT -- SCREECHES sideways  
across the road --

A final JOLT.

They stop.

Facing the wrong way.

INT. ED'S SEDAN - DAY

Silence.

Ed's hands are frozen on the wheel.

Mel watches the chase car vanish down the road.

She turns to Ed.

MEL

Are you all right?

Ed lets out a nervous laugh -- still shaken.

ED

I never knew my car could do  
ninety-five.

MEL

Who the hell was that?

EXT. TALONFORD MANSION - DAY

Ed's dust-covered, dented sedan sits in the driveway.

From inside, the murmur of children's voices drifts out.

MEL (V.O.)

Everyone in front of the mantle...  
squeeze in.

INT. THE LIVING ROOM - DAY

The children shuffle into place -- all except Lucian.

Ed climbs onto a worn leather chair, angling his camera.

ED

Closer.

They inch together. Unsmiling. Stiff.

ED (CONT'D)

Good... good... Perfect! Now gimme  
a sec...

CRACK!

A distant billiard cue strikes a fresh rack.

Mel's head snaps toward the sound.

She and Ed lock eyes.

Mel bolts from the room.

INT. BILLIARD ROOM - DAY

Mel bursts in.

Stops cold.

Lucian stands over the billiard table, cue in hand. His  
lit cigar smolders on the rail.

MEL

(quiet, unnerved)

How did you get back here so fast?

Lucian lines up his shot.

LUCIAN

I hitched a ride with a guy in a  
hurry, sweetheart.

Mel furrows her brow.

LUCIAN (CONT'D)

Would have been here sooner but a  
slowpoke was in the way.

He smirks. Sinks the shot.

(CONTINUED)

MRS. SHONTS (O.S.)

Lucian?

Behind Mel --

MRS. SHONTS (CONT'D)

Lucian?

Mel turns. Mrs. Shonts stands in the doorway, watchful.

MRS. SHONTS (CONT'D)

Miss Barnes has had a harrowing  
experience in a car.

Lucian finally looks up.

LUCIAN

No shit? Gee, that's too bad.

MRS. SHONTS

Please join us for a group  
photograph.

Lucian sighs, lays the cue stick down, and saunters past  
Mel without another word.

Mel doesn't move.

Her jaw tightens.

INT. THE LIVING ROOM - DAY

The children stand frozen in place as Mel enters.

Ed, camera in hand, clocks her expression.

ED

(whispers)

What?

Mel, tight smile, whispers back.

MEL

Lucian hitched a ride, so he says.

Lucian slides into the back row.

Mel's gaze drifts to the Hallway.

Ambrose lingers in the shadows, watching.

MEL (CONT'D)

Hey, there. Come join us.

(CONTINUED)

Ed, framing the shot, doesn't notice the boy.

MEL (CONT'D)  
Come on! It'll be fun.

ZELPHRA  
Ambrose doesn't like cameras. Do  
you, Ambrose?

Ambrose grows tense. Turns. Walks away.

The children settle.

ED  
Good... everyone steady....  
and.... smile!

No one smiles.

CLICK!

EXT. BACKWAYRD - THE MANSION - DAY

Benson stands at an easel, brush in hand, painting with  
quiet intensity.

Mel approaches, mesmerized.

MEL  
That's incredible.

BENSON  
Can't talk. Need to work while the  
light's right.

Mel stares at the canvas.

A perfect replica of the backyard.

The trees.

The shadows. She glances up.

His painting is as good as a photograph.

Mel steps toward the tree line.

The moment her foot touches the grass -- silence.

Not a single bird. No wind.

ZELPHRA (O.S.)  
See something?

(CONTINUED)

Mel spins.

Zelphra stands behind her, smiling.

MEL

Just looking. Zelphra, who's  
Ambrose?

ZELPHRA

Ambrose Sheldon. He can't talk.

MEL

Can't, or won't?

ZELPHRA

He's a mute. Keeps to himself,  
eats in his room. We hate him, so  
it's fine with us.

MEL

Why do you hate him?

ZELPHRA

Same reason we hate you. You don't  
belong here.

Mel absorbs that.

MEL

You know... just because you're  
all smarter than most adults  
doesn't mean you have to hate  
them.

Zelphra's smile widens.

ZELPHRA

I've been lectured by better than  
you.

She skips away, humming to herself.

Mel watches her vanish into the house.

From the trees --

Something watches.

INT. THE OFFICE - DAY

Phineas lingers in the open doorway.

(CONTINUED)

PHINEAS

Mr. Shonts?

MR. SHONTS

Phineas! Come in, please.

Mr. Shonts closes the door, and guides Phineas to the guest chair.

PHINEAS

This is the day.

He smiles, his gold tooth flashing.

MR. SHONTS

I've been dreading it.

PHINEAS

You shouldn't.

MR. SHONTS

Your first time was never recorded. We don't know if it's six or seven.

PHINEAS

It's six. My last one.

Mr. Shonts studies him. Worried.

MR. SHONTS

After the reporter is asleep.

EXT. A SIDE PATH - NIGHT

Lucian and William push through thick brush.

They reach Leigh's car, camouflaged under branches and leaves.

LUCIAN

There it is.

They yank away the branches.

LUCIAN (CONT'D)

Can't wait anymore. If they got the plate this afternoon, we're screwed. Gotta ditch it.

WILLIAM

Good.

(CONTINUED)



LUCIAN  
After we stop in town.

WILLIAM  
What do you mean?

LUCIAN  
I'm out of bourbon.

WILLIAM  
They won't sell you bourbon!  
Shonts has to get it for you.

Lucian slides into the driver's seat. William follows.

LUCIAN  
You're always so negative, son.

The engine rumbles to life.

Tires kick up dirt.

They disappear into the night.

EXT. TRANSCRIPT NEWSPAPER OFFICE - NIGHT

The building sits quiet, most lights off.

Only one faint glow from inside.

INT. TRANSCRIPT PRESS ROOM - NIGHT

Ed hunched at his desk, flipping through printed photos.

A fresh picture slides out of the printer.

He grabs it, adds it to a stack.

Jackson Morris leans over his shoulder.

JACKSON  
How's Mel doing?

Ed hands him the photos.

Children, lined up. Expressionless.

No smiles. No warmth.

Jackson studies them.

(CONTINUED)

JACKSON (CONT'D)  
They don't look very happy.

Jackson flips to another picture. Stares.

ED  
How long has the school been  
around?

JACKSON  
Not sure. Might be something in  
the archive books.

INT. LEIGH'S CAR - NIGHT

Lucian drives like a pro, one hand on the wheel, the other resting near the ashtray, where his ever-present cigar smolders.

William fidgets, eyes flicking to the speedometer.

WILLIAM  
We're driving a dead woman's car  
that the police are looking for.  
You need another reason to be  
nervous?

LUCIAN  
Pally, I drove this car to the  
nursing home and back. No one  
noticed.

FLASH. Police cruiser lights flood the rear window.

WILLIAM  
Shit! We're so fucked.

Lucian exhales smoke, calm.

LUCIAN  
Dry up and let me handle this.

EXT. LEIGH'S CAR - NIGHT

Lucian pulls over. The cruiser stops behind them.

INT. LEIGH'S CAR - NIGHT

Lucian stares at the rearview mirror.

(CONTINUED)

LUCIAN

The bastard's running the plates.

WILLIAM

We're kids. Tell him we found it.

CLOP... CLOP Measured footsteps approach on pavement.

TAP. The officer raps on Lucian's window.

Lucian rolls it down. A cloud of smoke curls into the night air.

The officer hesitates, surprised.

LUCIAN

Good evening, Officer.

POLICEMAN

A kid your age driving and smoking a cigar?

LUCIAN

It's better than cigarettes, or whacky tobacky. Right?

POLICEMAN

Step out of the car.

Lucian opens the door, steps out.

The officer barely registers what's happening as Lucian leans in close -- pressing against the man's chest, staring up at him like a smirking delinquent.

Lucian's arm drives forward.

The officer gasps, eyes bulging.

Blood trickles from his mouth.

Lucian yanks a hunting knife from the man's chest. The officer crumples. Blood pools on the pavement.

William stares in horror.

WILLIAM

Jesus...

Lucian steps over the body, kneels next to it, wipes the blade clean on the officer's sleeve.

He leans in the squad car, shuts off the flashing lights.

(CONTINUED)

LUCIAN

Now they'll be looking for him.  
Means we drown this shitbox right  
away.

Lucian slides back into the driver's seat.

LUCIAN (CONT'D)

And no bourbon tonight. God damn.

Tires SCREECH as they peel out, leaving the officer's  
body in the dark.

INT. TRANSCRIPT PRESS ROOM - NIGHT

Ed hunches over a large, yellowed ledger labeled:  
"Talonford Transcript Journal 1890-1920."

Stacks of other dusty volumes sit beside him.

He flips a page. Then another. Eyes glazed.

Another page --

Freeze.

His breath catches. He leans in.

INSERT - PHOTO

A black-and-white image: Children gathered before the  
fireplace at Talonford Mansion.

Expressionless. Hollow-eyed.

Lucian.

Phineas.

Benson.

Charlotte.

William.

Mercedes.

Verner.

The date: October 15, 1900.

BACK TO SCENE

(CONTINUED)

Ed's hand trembles as he snatches the recent group photo.  
Side by side.

Same faces. Same children. No mistake.

He stares at the picture in horror.

EXT. TALONFORD MANSION - NIGHT

A third-floor light glows. Below, a few dimly lit rooms.

INT. MEL'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Mel types on her laptop.

On screen:

"THE TALONFORD SCHOOL."

A scuffle. Muffled whispers outside her door.

SHHHH!

THUMP!

Mel freezes. Listens.

A voice -- low, agitated.

PHINEAS (O.S.)  
Damn it, I know I'm right!

Silence. Footsteps -- descending.

Mel edges to her door. Peeks out.

INT. SECOND-FLOOR LANDING - NIGHT

Below, Phineas -- now in a suit. Benson beside him.

They reach the last step.

FOOTSTEPS approach.

Mel ducks back.

MR. SHONTS  
Are you ready?

(CONTINUED)

PHINEAS

Yes.

INT. THE HALLWAY - NIGHT

They approach the grandfather clock as it TICKS -- hollow, relentless. A steady pulse in the dark.

Mr. Shonts walks by as normal... but when Phineas and Benson glide past, their reflections flash across the clock's glass door -- distorted, wrong, impossible.

Phineas: face blackened, mummified. Skin stretched tight as leather. A few brittle strands of hair.

Benson: A shrunken husk of a man. Ninety, maybe older. Ears too large. Eyes small, sunken voids.

A blink -- gone. The boys pass without noticing.

They follow Mr. Shonts into the Alcove.

THE ALCOVE

Mel peers around the corner.

Mr. Shonts unlocks the door. It CREAKS open.

Benson and Phineas descend into darkness.

The door closes.

Mel presses her ear to it. Listens.

INT. THE CELLAR - NIGHT

Drip. Drip. Water seeps from a crack in the stone wall.

Mr. Shonts catches it in a silver ladle.

Phineas settles into the chair. Calm. Ready.

Mr. Shonts holds the ladle to his lips.

MR. SHONTS

(a chant, ancient and  
absolute)

Thirty-Five and Six may drink from  
the well -- but Seven calls the  
reckoning. When the final drop is  
taken, the dust rises, the veil  
falls, and time reclaims its own.

(CONTINUED)

Phineas drinks. Swallows.

A pause.

His face is serene... almost relieved... until --

THUD!

He slams into the wall, convulsing. Violent. Unstoppable.

PHINEAS  
(choking, gasping)  
No! Oh, shit! No! No!

His neck withers, folding into deep wrinkles.

Hair loosens, falls in clumps.

Skin dries, tightens, splits.

His face caves inward -- steam hisses from his pores as his body contracts, shrivels.

His screams turn wet, gargled.

Then -- Silence.

His hollowed body collapses.

A pile of clothes. Ashes and ancient bone. Nothing more.

Benson stares. Eyes glassy. Jaw clenched.

MR. SHONTS  
He was wrong. It was seven times.  
Not six.

He gathers the empty clothes.

The furnace door creaks open.

The fabric disappears into the flames.

Benson wipes his eyes. A slow inhale.

BENSON  
(soft, shaken)  
And just like that -- it's over.  
Like you never existed.

MR. SHONTS  
Nonsense. He had over two  
centuries. That's a good run.

(CONTINUED)

Benson follows him to the stairs.

MR. SHONTS (CONT'D)  
I'll collect the ashes in the  
morning.

They ascend.

Behind them, Phineas' remains scatter with a whisper of  
unseen wind.

INT. THE ALCOVE - DAY

Mel presses her ear to the door.

Footsteps approach.

She steps back.

INT. THE HALLWAY - NIGHT

The door latch CLICKS.

Mel hurries to the stairs.

EXT. THE LAKE - NIGHT

Leigh's car bobs on the surface... dipping lower as water  
floods the interior.

Lucian and William stand on the shore, watching it sink  
with detached amusement.

LUCIAN  
Shit. Should've stuffed the cop in  
the trunk.

WILLIAM  
Mmm. You're getting old.

LUCIAN  
Fuck you.

The last bubbles pop. The ripples die. The car is gone as  
the surface closes like a wound.

INT. MEL'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Mel cradles the phone, voice hushed.

(CONTINUED)



MEL

I was told there were no locked doors in this house.

ED (V.O.)

Right.

MEL

They lied. There's a locked door just off the main Hallway.

ED (V.O.)

Yeah?

MEL

Three people went in... and only two came out.

ED (V.O.)

Damn.

(a beat)

Hey, I found something you gotta see.

MEL

What is it?

ED (V.O.)

If I told you, you would never believe me.

INT. THE OFFICE - NIGHT

Behind the desk, Mrs. Shonts has the receiver pressed to her ear.

MEL (V.O.)

Meet me tomorrow. Early.

ED (V.O.)

Right.

A soft CLICK.

The dial tone HUMS. Mrs. Shonts stares at the receiver, then gently returns it to the cradle.

EXT. TALONFORD MANSION - NIGHT

The house is in total darkness.

INT. MEL'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Mel opens her door.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

She creeps down the stairs, moving toward the office.

INT. THE OFFICE - NIGHT

Lit by moonlight, she goes to the desk and opens drawers with a quick rummage.

Keys. Got 'em.

INT. THE ALCOVE - NIGHT

A key slides in in lock.

CLICK.

Door CREAKS open. Wooden stairs spiral into dark.

She steps inside. Shuts the door. CREEEEAK.

INT. THE CELLAR - NIGHT

She yanks a frayed string. A dim bulb flickers on.

A chair. A wet wall. That hideous statue.

A dark mass on the floor.

She kneels. Brushes it.

Something shines.

She lifts it -- a gold tooth.

Ash coats her fingers.

She pockets it, bolts up the stairs.

THE ALCOVE

Door CREAKS open. She steps out, closes it. Locks it.

THE HALLWAY

She moves fast to the office.

(CONTINUED)

THE OFFICE

She enters without a sound and returns the keys.

THE HALLWAY

Mel exits the office and heads for the stairs. She stops short. On the first landing, Lucian and William stare down at her.

Lucian grins, cigar tucked between his fingers.

LUCIAN

You shouldn't wander around at night.

Mel doesn't stop.

MEL

Neither should you.

William smirks as she passes.

WILLIAM

Sweet dreams.

She keeps moving, never looking back.

INT. MEL'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

The door clicks shut behind her.

Her hand dips into her pocket. She pulls out the worn gold tooth.

She places it carefully inside her suitcase.

INT. THE DINING ROOM - DAY

Breakfast underway. Phineas' chair is gone.

Mel enters.

MEL

Good morning.

She takes her seat.

MR. SHONTS

How did you sleep?

(CONTINUED)

MEL

Like a rock.

MR. SHONTS

And your story?

MEL

Evolving.

MR. SHONTS

May I read it?

MEL

Sorry, I never share drafts.  
Where's Phineas?

MR. SHONTS

Transferred.

MEL

Overnight?

MR. SHONTS

That's correct.

MEL

Funny. I didn't hear a thing.

She turns to Lucian.

MEL (CONT'D)

Did you?

Lucian glares.

A beat.

MEL (CONT'D)

You're all gifted, but what  
exactly are your gifts? I know  
Benson paints, Hilda plays piano,  
but Phineas?

Silence. All eyes on her.

MEL (CONT'D)

And in all my time here... not one  
class.

Mr. Shonts meets her gaze. A slow nod.

EXT. THE DRIVEWAY - DAY

Mel strides toward Ed's car.

INT. THE OFFICE - DAY

Mr. Shonts watches from the window.

MR. SHONTS  
Bring Charlotte to the cellar.  
Now.

EXT. THE DRIVEWAY - DAY

Mel climbs into Ed's car.

INT. ED'S CAR - DAY

Ed hands her two photos -- one old, one new.

MEL  
What the...

ED  
Right? Straight from the archives.

MEL  
This is a hundred and twenty-five  
years old.

ED  
And so, apparently, are the kids.

She stares at him.

INT. THE CELLAR - DAY

Charlotte slouches, dark circles under her eyes. Mercedes  
leads her forward.

EXT. ED'S SEDAN ON THE ROAD - DAY

The car speeds toward town.

INT. ED'S SEDAN - DAY

Mel studies the old photograph.

(CONTINUED)

MEL  
I think they killed Phineas.

ED  
Shit! Mel!?

MEL  
I don't know for sure.

ED  
We should go to the police.

MEL  
There's no body. No proof.

ED  
Mel, if they killed a kid, they  
can kill you, too.

MEL  
I need to find out what happened.  
This could get me out of  
Talonford.

A beat.

ED  
You'd take me with you, right?

INT. THE CELLAR - DAY

Mr. Shonts holds the ladle to Charlotte's lips.

MR. SHONTS  
Thirty-Five and Six may drink from  
the well -- but Seven calls the  
reckoning. When the final drop is  
taken, the dust rises, the veil  
falls, and time reclaims its own.

Charlotte drinks.

EXT. TALONFORD NURSING HOME - DAY

Ed waits in his car near the front entrance.

INT. OLD MAN'S ROOM - DAY

The Old Man lies still, eyes closed.

Mel waits beside him.

(CONTINUED)

His eyes open, meeting her smile.

MEL

I'm a friend of your grandson.

A puzzled look.

OLD MAN

I don't have a grandson. My only son died when he was seven.

MEL

Oh. Oh, I'm so sorry. I meant Lucian. I thought--

OLD MAN

That's my father.

Mel freezes.

MEL

What?

OLD MAN

Lucian. My father.

She stares in disbelief.

MEL

Lucian is thirteen.

The Old Man's face darkens.

OLD MAN

Thirteen my ass! He just turned one hundred and thirty-three... and he won't help me. Can you help me? Can you!?

His voice rises.

OLD MAN (CONT'D)

I'm eighty-nine! It's going to be too late! Too late!

TWO NURSES rush in to calm him. He jerks violently in their grip, wild with desperation.

Mel backs toward the door -- stops.

OLD MAN (CONT'D)

Too late! Too late!

A clipboard on the wall.

(CONTINUED)

The name at the top: HENRY BOWMAN

She reels back.

EXT. TALONFORD MANSION - DAY

Ed's car idles at the front door. Mel reaches through the passenger window as Ed hands her the folder.

ED  
I don't like this. What if we--

MEL  
Ed! Good-bye!

A beat.

ED  
Yeah.

She makes her way to the front door as Ed drives off.

INT. FOYER - FRONT DOOR - DAY

Silence.

The latch CLICKS. The door CREAKS open.

Mel steps inside. The house is still, the only sound -- the TICK TOCK of the grandfather clock, echoing through the Hallway.

She moves forward, slow, deliberate.

A glance into the Living Room -- empty.

INT. THE KITCHEN - DAY

Mel walks to the service door, opens it, and steps into the backyard.

Nothing.

She turns to the woodline.

EXT. THE WOODS - DAY

Mel moves carefully through the dense brush.

Soft SOBS drift through the trees.

(CONTINUED)



She nears the rotted crosses.

A distant voice -- quiet, solemn.

MR. SHONTS (O.S.)  
 ...our comforter and friend, we  
 come before you today. May he find  
 perfect rest in you, Lord, though  
 we grieve.

Hunched low, Mel edges forward.

CHILDREN (V.O.)  
 (whispered, in  
 unison)  
 Our Father, which art in heaven,  
 Hallowed be thy Name...

Through the heavy brush, she sees them -- Mr. and Mrs.  
 Shonts, the children, all gathered.

A small box in Mr. Shonts' hands. He opens it.

MR. SHONTS  
 We now entrust Phineas Birch to  
 Almighty God... Earth to earth,  
 ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Mel sees him scatter the ashes.

Mrs. Shonts steps forward with another box.

MR. SHONTS (CONT'D)  
 We now entrust Charlotte Coffin to  
 Almighty God... Earth to earth,  
 ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

More ashes scatter.

Mel pulls back as Mr. Shonts' voice fades...

MR. SHONTS (V.O.)  
 And I heard a great voice out of  
 heaven saying, Behold, the  
 tabernacle of God is with men, and  
 He will dwell with them...

INT. MEL'S BEDROOM - DAY

Fingers fly over the keyboard.

Mel types furiously, her laptop glowing.

(CONTINUED)

Next to it -- both group photos.

Their faces stare back at her.

INT. THE OFFICE - DAY

The switchboard phone rings. Mrs. Shonts plugs in a wire.

MRS. SHONTS  
The Talonford Home for Gifted  
Children. This is Mrs. Shonts.

ED (V.O.)  
Can you connect me to Mel's room?  
It's Ed.

MRS. SHONTS  
One moment.

She plugs another connector in.

INT. MEL'S BEDROOM - DAY

Mel answers.

MEL  
Hello?

ED (V.O.)  
Mel!? Listen --

MEL  
I've got it! Thank you, Mrs.  
Shonts.

INT. THE OFFICE - DAY

Mrs. Shonts slips her headphone jack into a hidden port  
beside Mel's room line.

A faint click.

ED (V.O.)  
We clear now?

MEL (V.O.)  
I think so. Ed, listen -- they  
were cremated!

ED (V.O.)  
What!? Who!?

INT. MEL'S BEDROOM - DAY

She lowers her voice.

MEL

I saw ashes in the basement. I  
never thought they could be human!

ED (V.O.)

How the hell do they cremate  
someone in the basement!?

MEL

I need you to look up some names.

INT. TRANSCRIPT PRESS ROOM - DAY

Ed sits at his computer.

ED

Fire away.

MEL (V.O.)

Search "Lucian Bowman."

He types. A black-and-white photo appears -- a cigar-smoking thug from the 1920s.

ED

God damn...

INTERCUT - PHONE CONVERSATION

MEL

What!? Read it to me. Not too  
fast, I'm typing.

She types.

ED

"Lucian Bowman. Pool hustler,  
millionaire -- adjusted worth  
today: five billion. Accused of  
killing an opponent and his wife.  
Disappeared before his  
arrest in 1927... at age 40."

A beat.

ED (CONT'D)

Mel! What the actual fuck!?

(CONTINUED)

MEL  
Next name. Hilda Morgan.

Ed types.

An old portrait appears -- a Victorian woman with immaculate posture and a haughty expression.

ED  
"Hilda Morgan, famed concert pianist, vanished 1898."

Mel's fingers pause over the keyboard.

MEL  
Impossible. Benson Wolcott.

Ed types.

A photo appears -- a twenty-year-old man, dapper in an early 1900s suit.

ED  
Oh, my God.

MEL  
What!?

ED  
"Benson Wolcott. Millionaire playboy. Gifted artist. Declared lost at sea... 1901."

Ed stares at the screen, shaken.

Mel rereads what she just typed -- unable to believe it.

MEL  
They didn't disappear...

A breath.

MEL (CONT'D)  
They came here.

A chill lingers over the call.

ED  
Mel...

MEL  
Search Saint Aloysius!

Ed types.

(CONTINUED)

A painting appears -- an eerie, hollow-eyed figure with outstretched arms.

MEL (CONT'D)

Well?

ED

"The Patron Saint of Youth."

INT. THE OFFICE - DAY

Mrs. Shonts continues to listen.

MEL (V.O.)

Ed, hate to do this, but I need you here ASAP.

ED (V.O.)

On my way.

Mrs. Shonts sets the receiver down, turns to Mr. Shonts.

MRS. SHONTS

We have a problem.

INT. MEL'S BEDROOM - DAY

Mel yanks open her suitcase, pulls a USB flash drive, and jams it into her laptop.

A floorboard CREAKS.

She looks up -- Ambrose Sheldon stands in the doorway, eyes dark with urgency.

MEL

Ambrose... right?

He nods, steps in, and quietly shuts the door. Pulls a battered notebook from his pocket, scribbles: YOU MUST LEAVE NOW.

Mel sits beside him on the bed, concern growing.

MEL (CONT'D)

Are you in danger? Do they hurt you?

Ambrose writes, and holds the pad up. It says: I STAY IN THE ATTIC.

(CONTINUED)

MEL (CONT'D)

Why?

He writes: THEY WON'T FOLLOW ME IN THERE.

MEL (CONT'D)

Can't you speak at all? Is it  
you're just afraid?

A pause. Then, carefully, he writes again: THEY CUT MY  
TONGUE OUT.

Mel goes still. Ambrose opens his mouth. A stump remains.

Her stomach drops.

MEL (CONT'D)

My God, Ambrose! Why?

He writes: AS YOU ARE NOW, I ONCE WAS.

Mel frowns.

MEL (CONT'D)

I don't understand.

Ambrose walks to the desk, lifts the old group photo,  
scrawls beneath it: I TOOK THIS PICTURE... WHEN I WAS 27.

Mel staggers into the chair, trembling.

EXT. TALONFORD MANSION - NIGHT

The sun sinks low.

Ed's car arrives -- he parks a short distance from the  
front door.

INT. MEL'S ROOM / STAIRCASE/ HALLWAY - NIGHT

Mel slips from her room, moving fast but quiet.

Down the second-floor stairs.

Then the first.

She stops cold.

The children -- except Lucian -- wait at the bottom.  
Silent. Watching.

She swallows, forces a smile.

(CONTINUED)

MEL

Hey... where was everyone?

No answer.

MEL (CONT'D)

Well, Ed's waiting... I'll be right back.

She moves forward. They don't.

Hiding her nerves, she edges between William and Verner, then hurries for the door.

A glance back. Their eyes follow.

Mel opens the door and steps outside.

EXT. THE PORCH - NIGHT

Ed waits as Mel closes the door behind her. They move to the far end of the porch.

Inside, the piano begins to play "Clair de Lune."

Mel hands him a folded handkerchief.

ED

What's this?

She nods for him to open it. He unravels the cloth -- inside, the flash drive and the gold tooth.

ED (CONT'D)

What the hell--

MEL

The tooth belonged to Phineas. There might be dental records -- not sure. The flash drive is my story so far. Take it to Jackson.

ED

And you?

She gestures to the drive.

MEL

I need an ending to that story.

ED

Let the cops end it.

(CONTINUED)

MEL  
The cops won't break this story. I  
will.

Ed exhales, frustrated, then pockets the handkerchief.

ED  
Be careful.

They part. Ed heads for his car. Mel hurries back inside.

INT. FOYER - NIGHT

Mel enters. The house is eerily empty.

MERCEDES (O.S.)  
Hi.

Mel jumps, startled.

She turns to see Mercedes.

MEL  
Damn it, Mercedes! I didn't see  
you.

Mercedes only smiles, drifts to a window, and peeks  
through the thin curtain.

INT. ED'S SEDAN - NIGHT

Ed fumbles for his keys, still rattled.

Something's off. He sniffs the air.

In the rearview mirror -- a curl of smoke... then a flash  
of something awful.

A face.

Sunken. Rotting.

Rising up from the back seat.

Hollow eyes peering through Ed.

Ed turns around -- Lucian sits in the backseat, looking  
perfectly normal, smirking, cigar clamped between his  
teeth, piano wire in his hands.

Before Ed can react, the piano wire whips around his  
throat -- tight and merciless.

(CONTINUED)



Lucian, cigar clenched in his teeth, pulls hard. Ed claws at the wire, legs kicking, choking.

INT. FOYER WINDOWS - NIGHT

Mercedes watches through the window, her face unreadable.

In the driveway, the struggle in the car slows... stops.

Lucian steps out, looking just as he always does -- young, composed, untouched by time.

He adjusts his cuffs, takes one last drag of his cigar, and slides into the driver's seat.

EXT. THE DRIVEWAY - NIGHT

Ed's sedan rolls to a stop at a side path.

INT. ED'S SEDAN - NIGHT

Lucian glances at Ed's lifeless body, and quickly digs through his pockets.

He takes the flash drive, the gold tooth.

LUCIAN  
Five bucks, my ass.

INT. THE OFFICE - NIGHT

Mel steps inside. Mr. Shonts closes the door behind her.

MR. SHONTS  
I had high hopes for you, Miss Barnes.

He moves to his desk, calm and composed.

MR. SHONTS (CONT'D)  
You could have written something beautiful -- something that celebrated our school, our purpose.

MEL  
Your purpose? Killing children so a handful of you can live forever?

A thin smile creeps across his face.

(CONTINUED)

MR. SHONTS

You misunderstand. We give them a gift.

MEL

Phineas and Charlotte didn't seem too grateful.

His smile fades.

MR. SHONTS

The gift, sadly, does not last forever.

The door bursts open!

Lucian strides in, tossing the gold tooth and Mel's flash drive onto the desk.

Her eyes widen.

Lucian grins, teeth clenched around his cigar.

LUCIAN

How much does she know?

MEL

I know that you look pretty good for a man who's 133 years old. How's that for a start?

MR. SHONTS

The first house stood here in 1732, built by Josiah McKean. He tore it down in 1860 and built what we are in now.

MEL

What!?

MR. SHONTS

He lived here until 1863. It was Josiah who founded the St. Aloysius Society. Would've lasted longer, but he was killed at Gettysburg.

MEL

That's impossible.

MR. SHONTS

Not if you have the water.

(CONTINUED)

MEL

Water?

MR. SHONTS

Ponce de Leon searched in the wrong state. This house was built over a fresh spring. One sip every thirty-five years keeps you young. But you can only drink from it six times.

MEL

Why six?

MR. SHONTS

They thought it was forever... until they saw their reflections. The body stays young. The soul does not.

MEL

That's why there are no mirrors.

MR. SHONTS

Mirrors show truth. No one here wants to see the truth.

MEL

And these kids? How did they find this place?

MR. SHONTS

Through the Society. Discreet social circles. The tuition is... considerable.

MEL

That's why you killed that boy. He was real. A normal kid.

LUCIAN

He was a pain in the ass. Just like you.

MEL

You died at forty! How is it your thirteen?

LUCIAN

That first drink sets you back a ways. Gives you a nice running start.

(CONTINUED)

MR. SHONTS

You see, Miss Barnes, no one outside has ever learned our secret. And I intend to keep it that way.

MEL

You're too late. Even if you kill me.

Mel catches the wicked gleam in Lucian's smile -- it's pure malice.

She bolts from the office.

INT. THE FOYER - NIGHT

Mel runs to the front door.

It's locked.

She grabs the window bars, yanks hard -- no use.

MR. SHONTS (O.S.)

Children!? How about a nice game of hide-and-seek? The reporter will hide, and you shall seek!

Unseen children SHRIEK with joy -- high-pitched, delighted GIGGLES that seem to come from everywhere.

LUCIAN (O.S.)

Okay! I saw you, so you get a chance to hide! I'll give you till ten! One...

The other Children join him, their voices come from all over the house.

CHILDREN (O.S.)

two... three...

Mel's breath catches. Nowhere to run.

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

Four... five... six...

She bolts up the stairs.

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

Seven... eight... nine...

INT. THE SECOND FLOOR - NIGHT

Mel flies off the steps.

She crashes against the first door she sees -- a closet.

Turning on her heel, she makes for the third floor.

CHILDREN (O.S.)

Ten! Ready or not! Here we come!

BOOM -- low, distant THUNDER BOOMERS.

INT. THE THIRD FLOOR - NIGHT

Mel sprints past her bedroom to the attic door at the end of the hall.

She grips the handle -- twists --

It opens. She rushes in.

INT. ATTIC STAIRS - NIGHT

A long, narrow flight of wooden steps stretches into darkness.

Mel slams the door shut behind her -- bolts up.

Below, FOOTSTEPS. Tiny, creeping, playful.

She reaches the top, throws open the door.

INT. THE ATTIC - NIGHT

BOOM! THUNDER rattles the rafters.

Mel stumbles onto the top step -- freezes.

A labyrinth of mirrors.

A funhouse of reflections -- tall, thin, warped, cracked. Mirrors lean against rafters, stacked atop chests, propped on furniture draped in dusty sheets.

Glass everywhere.

Another FLASH of LIGHTNING --

Ambrose.

(CONTINUED)

Standing in the path.

MEL

Ambrose! They won't follow me up  
here, right?

He turns -- and in the mirror beside him...

a mummified corpse stares back.

Flesh like leather. Hollowed eyes in a sunken face.

Mel GASPS.

Ambrose disappears into the shadows.

She pushes forward -- steps too fast --

BAM!

Pain shoots through her knee as she slams into something  
solid and unseen.

She clamps a hand over her mouth -- stifles a cry.

Below -- CHILDREN GIGGLE.

Mel hurries deeper into the attic, weaving through the  
labyrinth of mirrors.

A dusty trunk, surrounded by chairs, looms beside a tall  
standing mirror.

She drops behind it, pulls her knees to her chest -- arms  
wrapped tight.

She waits.

The attic door CREAKS open.

MERCEDES (O.S.)

Up there maybe?

HILDA (O.S.)

Yes.

MERCEDES (O.S.)

I don't want to see.

WILLIAM (O.S.)

We have to. Come on.

Soft. Slow. Coming up the stairs.

(CONTINUED)

Mel quivers -- lip trembling.

She peeks over the trunk.

Six silhouettes emerge in the gloom.

MERCEDES AND HILDA  
Come out, come out, wherever you  
are!

FLASH!

Lightning ignites the attic.

FLASH! BOOM!

Their reflections --

A rotting nightmare.

Shriveled flesh, sunken skulls. Some have black sockets,  
oozing pus where eyes used to be.

Mel recoils -- claws a hand over her mouth.

A whisper -- close.

VERNER  
Where are you, Mel?

LUCIAN  
You know we'll find you.

BOOM! THUNDER!

FLASH! FLASH! FLASH!

Macabre faces explode across the mirrors.

Then -- a hand.

Cold fingers dig into Mel's shoulder.

She SCREAMS!

Lucian leans in.

LUCIAN (CONT'D)  
Hi sweetheart. Miss me?

He whispers in her ear.

LUCIAN (CONT'D)  
Hey... I've got a gift for you.

(CONTINUED)

FLASH! FLASH! FLASH!

In the mirror beside them --

Lucian's rotted head grins back.

Mel SCREAMS!

EXT. TALONFORD MANSION - DAY

Calm and quiet. Benson paints outside. Inside, a piano plays Clair de Lune.

A large car pulls up. Jackson Morris steps out, walks to the door, and rings the bell.

Mr. Shonts opens it.

JACKSON

Hello, sir. My name is Jackson Morris.

MR. SHONTS

I am Mr. Shonts. How can I help you?

Mrs. Shonts joins him.

JACKSON

I'm looking for Mel Barnes and Ed Lynch. They were last seen here.

MR. SHONTS

Oh? I thought you knew. They eloped.

JACKSON

Excuse me?

MR. SHONTS

Niagara Falls. Getting married.

JACKSON

Mel and Ed? That doesn't track.

Lucian, Hilda, Mercedes, and William run to Mr. Shonts, brimming with childlike energy.

LUCIAN

Who's here, Uncle Shonts?

MERCEDES

Is it a new student?

(CONTINUED)



HILDA  
Who's at the door?

MR. SHONTS  
Mr. Morris.

JACKSON  
I'm the editor of the Talonford  
Transcript.

LUCIAN  
The reporter lady? She was very  
nice.

MERCEDES  
Yeah. I miss her a lot.

A voice cries out -- frantic, desperate.

MEL - AGE 10 (O.S.)  
Wait! Don't go!

She bursts into the Hallway as she struggles against  
Ambrose's grip and breaks free.

A plain dress. Hair in a ponytail. But it's her.

MEL - AGE 10 (CONT'D)  
Jackson! It's me! Mel! Help me!  
Please!

Lucian and William restrain her.

MR. SHONTS  
Take her inside, Mercedes.

MEL - AGE 10  
He's lying!

Jackson hesitates.

JACKSON  
How did she know my name?

MR. SHONTS  
I mentioned it. She idolized Miss  
Barnes -- and she told the  
children all about her wonderful  
job--

LUCIAN  
And the people she worked with.

(CONTINUED)

MR. SHONTS

Now she's pretending to be her.

Mel's struggles grow weaker.

MEL - AGE 10

Find the flash drive! The gold tooth!

JACKSON

Tooth?

MEL - AGE 10

They killed Ed! The water! The cellar!

MR. SHONTS

She has quite the imagination.

MEL - AGE 10

I'm Mel! I'm Mel!

A long beat.

JACKSON

Thanks for your time.

He turns and walks away.

MEL - AGE 10

They killed Ed! I'm Mel! Jackson!  
Come back! Please!

He gets into his car. The engine starts.

MEL - AGE 10 (CONT'D)

Don't leave me here...

The car disappears down the road.

INT. JACKSON'S CAR - DAY

Jackson stops the car and looks into the rearview mirror.

IN THE MIRROR

Young Mel, on the porch, screaming, being held by Lucian and William.

His grip tightens on the wheel.

EXT. TALONFORD MANSION - DAY

Mr. and Mrs. Shonts watch the stopped car... and wait.

They breathe a sigh of relief as the car drives slowly away. They enter the house and close the door.

Young Mel -- silent now -- stares at the empty driveway, tears streaking her face.

LUCIAN

That's the thanks I get for giving  
you a second childhood? You were  
my favorite, Mel.

Young Mel shudders.

LUCIAN (CONT'D)

Hey... being a kid's not so bad.  
You get away with murder.

The piano plays.

LUCIAN (CONT'D)

I wish you hadn't screamed and  
made a scene. That tells me you  
can't be trusted.

William and Lucian seize her arms. Zephra approaches,  
garden shears in hand --

SNAP! SNAP! SNAP!

The blades bite the air.

Lucian is handed the shears.

He leans in.

Smirks.

LUCIAN (CONT'D)

Open wide.

Mel - Age 10 SCREAMS!

CUT TO BLACK.