

ORPHAN

Screenplay by
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Property of:

Dark Castle

Appian Way

Warner Bros.

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FADE IN:

CLOSE SHOT - KATE COLEMAN (MID 30'S)

She's a simple beauty and very pregnant, propped up in a bed, wearing a hospital gown. A heart rate monitor BEEPS. She touches her swollen belly, flush with excitement, her eyes full of wonder.

MAN'S VOICE (O.S.)

Okay, just relax now. This'll be over with before you know it.

Kate looks up. Her smile falters as we REVEAL:

INT. DELIVERY ROOM - NIGHT

Harsh lights overhead. THUNDER rumbles outside. Kate's on a delivery table, legs already in the stirrups. A sheet hangs across her belly so we can't see what's going on below her waist.

A DOCTOR and NURSE snap on gloves, prepare instruments: SHARP BLADES and CURETTES, NEEDLES and FORCEPS. Kate is stricken. She tries to sit up.

KATE

Wait, I've changed my mind. I don't want to do this anymore.

The Doctor gives the Nurse an exasperated look. The Nurse takes Kate's hand, eases her back onto the table.

NURSE

Your baby is dead. There's nothing else we can do.

Kate reels, her world turned upside-down. Emotional free-fall.

KATE

No, this isn't what's supposed to happen. My baby's alive!

NURSE

We're so sorry. A terrible loss, we're so sorry...

KATE

But it's still alive! It's moving! Feel it, you can feel it!

Kate tries to put the Nurse's hand on her belly, but the Nurse pulls away and hands the Doctor a pair of gleaming blunt-tipped SURGICAL SCISSORS. The Doctor leans between Kate's spread legs, disappearing behind the curtain. Kate gasps.

KATE

No, stop! I want to be asleep!

DOCTOR

Too late for anesthesia. The baby's coming. You're going to experience some pressure now...

Kate winces and bites her lip as the Doctor goes about his unseen work. A GOOD-LOOKING MAN in surgical scrubs stands behind him. Bizarrely, he's videotaping the whole thing. He's Kate's husband, JOHN (late 30's). He smiles at her from behind the camera.

JOHN

It's okay, honey! You're doing great!

The Doctor hands the scissors, now slick with gore, to the Nurse. He takes a SUCTION CATHETER and disappears behind the curtain again. The Nurse presses a button on a vacuum pump and the machine begins to HUM. Kate tightly closes her eyes.

KATE

This isn't happening. Wake up, wake up, wake up...

Suddenly -- the thin wail of a BABY CRYING. Kate's eyes go wide with horror as the smiling Nurse approaches with a wriggling bundle wrapped in a blanket. Blood seeps through the pink fabric. We can't see what's inside, but it's moving. And it's CRYING.

NURSE

Congratulations, Mrs. Coleman. It's a girl.

The Nurse offers her the bloody, blanketed bundle. Kate screams --

INT. KATE AND JOHN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

-- then snaps awake. She's been having a nightmare. John lies next to her in bed. He stirs, but doesn't wake. Kate slips out of bed and quickly pads to the bathroom.

INT. KATE AND JOHN'S BATHROOM - NIGHT

Kate closes the door. We now see that she's not pregnant in reality, only in her nightmare. She slides to the cold floor in the dark, a hand on her flat belly as she starts to cry...

INT. DOCTOR BROWNING'S OFFICE - DAY

Water TRICKLES in a little Zen fountain. Kate sits across from DR. BROWNING, a mousy-haired woman in her 50's.

DR. BROWNING

A lot of women experience difficulties around the anniversary of the miscarriage or the baby's expected due date. It's perfectly normal.

KATE

I was thinking of going back to work.
I really thought I was doing better.

DR. BROWNING

You are. Think about where you were
just four months ago.

(off Kate's look)

Are you still sober?

Kate hesitates. Dr. Browning gives her a penetrating look.

KATE

I drove by the wine shop on my way home
the other day.

DR. BROWNING

Did you stop?

KATE

I really wanted to. The thought went
through my head, you know. It wasn't
for me, it just might be nice to have a
bottle handy in case we had guests.

DR. BROWNING

But you didn't go in?

KATE

No.

DR. BROWNING

That's all that matters. Let's try to
stay focused on the positive. Grief is
different for everyone. You have to
take it at your own pace. Keep writing
in your journal. You're doing fine.

Kate smiles weakly. Unconvinced.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Kate hangs curtains over a beautiful picture window. She steps
back to admire her work, then sighs. Now what? Now that she's
done, the house suddenly seems quiet and lonely and too big.

INT. NURSERY - DAY

Kate sits in a rocking chair, gazing out a distinctive ARCHED
WINDOW. We realize that she's in a fully furnished and decorated
nursery. Crib, changing table, baby swing. No baby.

EXT. COLEMAN RESIDENCE - DAY

It's a big, dramatic home in an affluent neighborhood. Kate
crosses the backyard into the nearby woods.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

After a short walk, Kate sits by a PEACEFUL BROOK, lost in her thoughts. She pulls a JOURNAL filled with handwritten entries from her coat pocket. After a beat, she begins to write.

EXT. SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF - DAY

Class has just let out, PARENTS arriving to pick up their KIDS. But the playground is MOSTLY SILENT -- these children are deaf, communicating to one another and their teachers by sign language.

Kate pulls up in a luxury minivan. Her five-year-old daughter MAX runs over to greet her. She's almost ridiculously cute.

(NOTE: Max doesn't speak. Her "dialogue" is SIGNED and SUBTITLED. She wears a HEARING AID to help her read lips. When people speak to her, they must face her and/or sign.)

Kate kisses Max's head and helps her into the van, buckling her car seat. Max shows her an art project she's bringing home.

KATE

Wow, did you make this?

MAX

MY TEACHER HELPED.

INT./EXT. KATE'S MINIVAN - DAY

Kate's driving. She stops at an intersection. A PREGNANT WOMAN crosses the street in front of them and stops at the corner. Kate watches her for a long beat as if transfixed...

In the backseat, Max CLAPS her hands to get Kate's attention. Kate turns and sees Max pointing to the traffic light. It's green. A car horn HONKS. Kate snaps out of it and drives off.

INT. MUSIC ROOM - DAY

Kate sits at a baby grand piano, trying to compose a piece of music. She plays a few NOTES, frowns, tries again, takes a pencil and erases what she's written down.

She pauses to look over at a beautiful ORCHID in an ornate planter by the window. For a moment, she just stares at it. Then:

BANG! She's startled by something outside BOUNCING off the side of the house. She closes her eyes, frustrated. **BANG! BANG!** **BANG!** She tries to ignore it, but can't.

EXT. COLEMAN RESIDENCE - DAY

Max is playing basketball in the driveway, but the ball's too big for her and the hoop's too high. Every time she tries to shoot, the ball falls short and BANGS against the house.

Kate opens the door, angrily signing as she speaks:

KATE
Stop banging that against the house!
I'm trying to work!

MAX
SORRY.

Max gives an abashed look. Kate sighs. She knows she was too harsh with her.

KATE
No, I'm sorry. But just... take a
break for a little while, okay?

Max nods. Kate goes back inside.

A CAR pulls into the drive. It's John and eleven-year-old DANIEL, Kate and John's other child. Daniel's blonde, brash, and cocky, the all-American kid. He's wearing a Little League uniform.

Daniel runs toward Max. He steals her ball and dribbles it around her in circles. Max watches glumly. He offers her the ball, but when she reaches for it, he snatches it away and shoots a lay-up.

DANIEL
Boo-yah! He shoots! He scores!

JOHN
Nice one, champ!

Daniel pumps his arm and runs inside. John walks up the drive, carrying a bouquet of FLOWERS. He hands Max the ball and lifts her up to the basket. Max happily puts the ball through the hoop.

JOHN
All right! Gimme five!

She smiles and gives him a high-five as he carries her inside.

INT. MUSIC ROOM - DAY

Kate has just sat back down at the piano when she hears Daniel tear into the house and run upstairs. She slumps her shoulders and closes her notebook. No more work today. John enters.

JOHN
Drapes look nice.

KATE
Curtains.
(off his look)
They're curtains, not drapes. And how
exciting is my life that I now know the
difference.

He offers her the flowers.

KATE
What's this for?

JOHN
Just love you.

He kisses her as she takes them. Some of her gloomy mood melts.

INT. MAX'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Kate tucks Max into bed.

MAX
READ ME A STORY?

KATE
One story. Then bedtime. Okay?

Max nods happily and picks up a book from her nightstand. Kate groans inwardly when she sees what it is. It's called "We Were Going To Have A Baby, But We Had An Angel Instead."

KATE
You want to hear about the baby again?

Max nods. Kate hesitates, then gives Max a sad smile.

INT. MAX'S BEDROOM - NIGHT (TIMECUT)

Kate sits on Max's bed, reading and showing her the pictures:

KATE
"People send us flowers and cards, but we still miss our baby. If this just happened to you, I'm sorry you got an angel instead of a baby. I think a baby would have been more fun."

The last picture is a FAMILY WITH A BABY ANGEL watching over them.

MAX
IS BABY JESSIE AN ANGEL?

KATE
Yes, she is. She's with us every day.

Kate gives Max a gentle kiss on the forehead.

INT. KATE AND JOHN'S BATHROOM - NIGHT

Kate opens a medicine chest and shakes a PILL from a prescription bottle. She swallows the pill with a Dixie cup of water.

INT. KATE AND JOHN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

John watches TV in bed. Kate enters from the bathroom in a nightshirt and sits on the bed. She rubs lotion on her feet.

John watches her, then reaches out, runs his fingers up and down her back. Kate freezes. He can't see the nervous look that crosses her face. He moves closer, pushes her hair aside, kissing her neck. Kate responds stiffly, trying to get in the mood.

He slides a hand around her waist, moves it up to her breast...

KATE

I'm sorry. I can't. *Shit...*

She moves away, tears suddenly in her eyes. He gives a concerned look, lets her have her space. A beat.

KATE

I'm so sick of feeling like this.
Christ, the kids must think I'm crazy.

JOHN

Will you stop worrying about what
everybody else thinks?

KATE

How can I? I saw a pregnant woman
today on the way home and I almost lost
it. Just burst into tears with Max
sitting right there. Daniel barely
talks to me. You and I haven't had sex
in over a year now. What if I never
get better? I don't want to lose you.

JOHN

You're never going to lose us. I
promise you. I just wish...

(off her look)

Have you thought any more about
adopting?

KATE

I can't even be a mother to the
children we already have.

JOHN

That's not true. The kids understand.
They just know you're not happy.

KATE

But I should be.

JOHN

Do you want another child?

KATE
You know I do. More than anything.

JOHN
Even if it can't be biologically ours.

KATE
Yes.

JOHN
Then what are we talking about this for? Let's do it.

KATE
You don't just adopt a child because you're lonely and depressed.

JOHN
That's not why we'd be doing it. We wanted a child a year ago and we still want one now.

KATE
We can't replace our baby.

JOHN
No, we can't. But we can take the place we made for her in our hearts and our home and give it to a child who needs a family.
(beat)
Kate, we love being parents. We're good at it and it makes us happy. What better reason do you want?

Kate looks at him for a beat, then smiles and lets her tears fall.

INT. LAWYER'S OFFICE - DAY

Kate and John are being interviewed by a FEMALE LAWYER.

LAWYER
Are you both employed?

JOHN
I'm an architect at a firm in the city.

The Lawyer turns to Kate. Kate hesitates.

KATE
I used to teach music at Yale. I haven't worked for about a year.

LAWYER
(a beat, considering)
You're sure you want an older child?
(MORE)

LAWYER (CONT'D)

With your background, you could have a newborn in as little as a year.

JOHN

We've already waited a long time. We'd like a child as quickly as possible.

LAWYER

Well, getting an older child is definitely quicker, not to mention cheaper, but there's a reason for that. A lot of these kids have serious behavioral problems.

JOHN

We've already signed up for special-needs adoption classes. Trust me, we're ready for anything.

LAWYER

You must have a lot of love to give. Are you looking for a boy or a girl?

KATE

(smiles)

A girl. We'd like a little girl.

EXT. RURAL HIGHWAY - AERIAL SHOT - DAY

CAMERA FINDS John's car winding its way along a tree-lined road...

INT. JOHN'S CAR - DAY

John is driving. Kate is studying pages and pages of photocopied records in a manila folder. John gives her an amused look.

KATE

You're not worried about being prepared?

JOHN

There's not gonna be a pop quiz.

Kate smiles. She closes the folder and looks at a Polaroid of a happy, seven-year-old Puerto Rican girl stapled to the cover. The name next to the photo is YOLANDA.

EXT. HOME FOR GIRLS - ESTABLISHING - DAY

It's a pillared mansion with a large porch. TWO NUNS supervise a GROUP OF YOUNG GIRLS on a playground. A sign out front reads "ST. CABRINI'S HOME FOR GIRLS." John's car pulls into the parking lot.

From a SHAKY, HANDHELD POV looking out a second floor window, we see Kate and John get out of the car. Someone is watching them...

Kate senses movement and looks up... but there's no one there.

INT. HOME FOR GIRLS - PLAYROOM - DAY

Yolanda, the girl from the Polaroid, is playing with a dollhouse. The door opens. Kate and John are led inside by SISTER ABIGAIL, an African-American nun in her 50's.

SISTER ABIGAIL

Yolanda, look who's here to see you.

Yolanda smiles at Kate and John. She runs over to greet them, but stands just out of their reach. Kate kneels in front of her.

KATE

Don't you look pretty!

YOLANDA

Sister Abigail put ribbons in my hair.
See?

KATE

Wow, that was nice of her. Look, we brought you something for the trip tomorrow.

She hands her a bag of activity books and a "Travel Turtle," a kid-sized lap desk for coloring in the car. Yolanda's face lights up.

SISTER ABIGAIL

What do you say?

YOLANDA

Thank you.

Kate reaches out to her, but Yolanda pulls away, focusing all her attention on her presents. Kate gives her a sad smile.

INT. HOME FOR GIRLS - PLAYROOM - DAY (TIMECUT)

Yolanda is drawing a picture, "Travel Turtle" on her lap. Kate and Abigail sit nearby, watching. Kate seems worried. Abigail notices. She speaks in a low voice so Yolanda won't hear:

SISTER ABIGAIL

Nervous?

KATE

Yeah. And happy. And excited. And proud. And scared shitless. It's funny. All the same feelings I had when I was pregnant with our others.

SISTER ABIGAIL

That's what really worries you, isn't it? Something bad happened the last time you felt this way.

(off Kate's look)

Yolanda's doing something similar.

(MORE)

SISTER ABIGAIL (CONT'D)

She's afraid of getting hurt again,
too. But I have a good feeling about
you two. You can help each other heal.
And you're lucky. You have a wonderful
husband who can be there for you both.

A flicker crosses Kate's eyes at the mention of her "wonderful husband." Doubt? Uncertainty? Abigail doesn't see it.

INT. HOME FOR GIRLS - CORRIDOR - DAY

John emerges from the MEN'S ROOM. The walls of the hallway are lined with children's artwork. He glances at it as he walks by.

Suddenly, he stops short. Amidst the crude watercolors and macaroni mosaics are several beautiful paintings, surprisingly sophisticated, more like the works of Henri Rousseau than the crayon-and-stick-figure scribbles surrounding them.

Then he hears something: a LITTLE GIRL'S VOICE, softly HUMMING a tune. We know the words. *When I was juuust a liiiittle giirl, I asked my mother, What will I be?...*

INT. HOME FOR GIRLS - ART ROOM - DAY

John follows the HUMMING to a stark, white room. Light slants in from a big window, shining on A LITTLE GIRL in a lacy white dress. Her back is to us, so we can't see her face, just curls of platinum blonde hair spilling to her shoulders. She sits at an easel, all alone, painting another extraordinary picture.

John watches, curious. Suddenly, she senses his presence. She stops humming, the paintbrush freezes mid-stroke. She turns.

She looks about eight years old, with pale skin and bright, doe-like eyes, her delicate features framed by Shirley Temple curls. It's the face of a porcelain angel, a perfect little living doll, friendly and inviting. She wears a thick black velvet ribbon around her neck and one around each wrist. Her name is ESTHER.

JOHN

Hi there.

ESTHER

Hello.

She speaks with a strange accent. Sounds Eastern European.

JOHN

Are these paintings all yours?

ESTHER

Yes. Do you like them?

JOHN

Very much. They're remarkable.

ESTHER

Thank you. My name is Esther. What's yours?

JOHN

John. It's nice to meet you.

She smiles and demurely offers her hand, giggling as he takes it. She blushes, then turns back to her painting. It's a half-finished jungle scene with a SMILING LION crouched beneath a tree.

JOHN

So what's this one going to be?

ESTHER

My paintings are stories that come from my imagination. This one's about a sad mother lion who can't find her cubs.

JOHN

She's smiling.

ESTHER

She's dreaming about her babies. It's the only thing that makes her happy.

JOHN

Well, I hope she finds them.

ESTHER

She will. Look.

As she speaks, Esther dabs her brush and paints little lion cubs curled up in front of their sleeping mother:

ESTHER

They were lost in the jungle and they were so scared because they didn't have a mother or father. But just when they thought they'd be alone forever, they found their mother sleeping under this tree. And they felt so safe that they fell asleep too. Now when the mother lion wakes up, her dream will have come true. She has her family again.

JOHN

Where did you learn how to do this?

ESTHER

I've just had lots of time to practice, I guess. It's so boring here.

JOHN

You don't play outside with the other girls? Sounds like they're having fun.

ESTHER
I like staying inside. That way I
don't get my clothes dirty.

JOHN
(amused)
Well, that's very responsible of you,
but I'll bet the sisters could find
something else for you to wear.

ESTHER
You don't like my dress? Don't you
think it's pretty?

JOHN
Your dress is very pretty. I'm just
saying you could probably go outside if
you really wanted to.

ESTHER
(a beat, hesitant)
I don't like playing with the other
girls. I'm different from everyone.

JOHN
There's nothing wrong with different.

ESTHER
Yes, there is. Everybody says there's
not, but it isn't true. I don't care.
If I'm sad or lonely, I just come in
here and paint a story with a happy
ending. And when people say they like
my paintings, it makes me feel better.
(off his look)
I think people should always try to
take the bad things that happen to them
and turn them into something good.
Don't you?

John is taken aback. *Who is this kid?* Before he can respond:

KATE (O.S.)
There you are.

Kate and Sister Abigail stand in the doorway. John waves for Kate
to enter and Esther sits up eagerly when she does. Abigail's
expression darkens when she sees who John has been talking to.

JOHN
Hey, I'd like you to meet someone.
(to Esther)
Esther, this is my wife, Kate.

Kate smiles and offers her hand, but instead of shaking it, Esther
lovingly presses it to her cheek.

ESTHER

Motta...

Kate and John exchange a bemused look.

JOHN

She painted these all by herself.

KATE

Wow, you're quite the little artist.

ESTHER

Thank you. You smell nice.

Kate laughs. Sister Abigail shifts uncomfortably.

ESTHER

Would you like me to paint you a picture? You can watch me if you want. I'm normally a little shy, but --

SISTER ABIGAIL

Esther, I'm sorry, they don't have time for you to paint them a picture.

(off Esther's look)

They have to come with me now. Yolanda's going home with them tomorrow. Isn't that wonderful?

Esther wilts. She releases Kate's hand and musters a weak smile.

ESTHER

Yes. I'm sure she'll be very happy.

KATE

It was nice meeting you.

ESTHER

The pleasure was mine.

JOHN

(to Sister Abigail)

You've got a real talent on your hands here.

SISTER ABIGAIL

Yes, we're very lucky to have her.

But there's something strange in Abigail's voice -- she definitely doesn't sound lucky. Esther watches them go.

INT. HOME FOR GIRLS - ENTRY - DAY

Sister Abigail walks Kate and John to the front door.

SISTER ABIGAIL

The notary will be here at ten for you to sign the placement agreement.

KATE

Thank you so much for all your help.

Kate gives her a warm hug. But mid-embrace, she notices something: Esther is at the end of the hallway, peering at them from around a corner. Abigail and John see her, too.

KATE

What did she say to me back there? It sounded like... "motta?"

SISTER ABIGAIL

It's Russian. It means "mother."

INT. JOHN'S CAR - NIGHT

John whistles "Whatever Will Be, Will Be" to himself as he drives. Kate gives him an amused look, then jokingly sings along:

KATE

*When you were juuust a liiiittle
giiirl...*

JOHN

Sorry, I've got that stuck in my head now.

KATE

She made quite an impression on you.

JOHN

I wish you could've heard the things she was saying before you came in. I know adults who aren't that mature.

(beat)

I wonder why they didn't show us her case file.

KATE

She probably wasn't there when we were first looking.

JOHN

It just blows my mind, a kid could go through as much as she must have and still turn out like that.

KATE

You sound like you're sorry we're not adopting her instead of Yolanda.

JOHN

No, of course not. I just hope she gets the right break.

(off her look)

I wouldn't trade our little girl for the world. You know that.

Kate gives him an adoring look and squeezes his hand.

EXT. HOME FOR GIRLS - ESTABLISHING - MORNING

The sun is just rising, warming the sky with an idyllic light.

INT. HOME FOR GIRLS - DORMITORY - MORNING

The GIRLS (5-7) are busily getting dressed and making their beds. The HOUSEMOTHER inspects each of them in turn. One bed remains unmade, its occupant missing. The Housemother turns to the room, ready to give a scolding, but can't find who she's looking for:

HOUSEMOTHER

Where's Yolanda?

INT. HOME FOR GIRLS - WASHROOM - MORNING

The OLDER GIRLS (8-12) are brushing their teeth and washing up. The Housemother enters and looks around.

HOUSEMOTHER

Have any of you seen Yolanda?

Nobody has.

INT. HOME FOR GIRLS - VARIOUS - MORNING

Sister Abigail leads the NUNS and LAY ASSISTANTS in a search of the home, looking for Yolanda. The playroom, art room, chapel, classrooms, laundry room, rest rooms -- they're all empty.

INT. HOME FOR GIRLS - BASEMENT - MORNING

A young nun, SISTER JUDITH, walks downstairs into a dark storage area. Lots of hiding places.

SISTER JUDITH

Yolanda? Are you hiding down here?

Then she notices a closet behind her. The door is ajar. She reaches out, opens it... and nearly gags at what she sees inside.

LOW ANGLE - INSIDE THE CLOSET

A child's bare feet dangle in mid-air. The "Travel Turtle" is on the floor beneath them. A chair lies on its side nearby.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - MORNING

Kate dries her hair in the bathroom. The PHONE RINGS O.S. She pauses, suddenly concerned for some reason. She opens the door.

As John reaches for the phone, CAMERA MOVES IN on Kate. She watches from the doorway, her face already registering dread. She knows. Even before he answers the phone, somehow she knows.

JOHN (O.S.)

Hello?

EXT. HOTEL ROOM BALCONY - DAY

The sky has turned gray. Kate stares out at the hotel parking lot, smoking a cigarette. Her eyes are red, but she's long since cried herself out. John stands by the open sliding glass door.

JOHN

The birth family is claiming her body.
They're planning a private service.

He looks to Kate for a reaction, but she has none. He continues:

JOHN

Sister Abigail thinks she might have been playing something called "The Choking Game." It's a kind of schoolyard dare. You try to get a rush by having someone choke you until you almost pass out. There have been cases where kids have tried it alone and accidentally hanged themselves.

A beat. Kate's voice is distant, as:

KATE

So that's it? She just vanishes from our lives?

JOHN

We can have our own service. I think it's important that we --

KATE

I've been in grief counseling for almost a year-and-a-half. If you say the word "closure," I'm going to claw your eyes out.

She's not angry, just matter-of-fact. He wants to say something, but holds his tongue. Silence hangs heavy between them.

KATE

Maybe we're not supposed to do this.

JOHN

No. Don't say that.

KATE

We try to have a baby and I have a third trimester miscarriage that leaves me sterile. We try to adopt and she dies the night before we bring her home. That doesn't sound like somebody's trying to tell us something?

JOHN

Yolanda didn't die to teach us a lesson. We didn't make this happen.

KATE

It doesn't make any difference. I can't go through this again.

JOHN

So let's not. Let's adopt Esther.

This brings Kate back to reality. She eyes him coolly.

KATE

Her body's barely cold and you're already thinking about replacing her?

JOHN

We can't replace Yolanda any more than we can replace Jessie. But we can't help her anymore, either. Esther is alive and needs a family. Right now.

KATE

We have to at least wait until --

JOHN

Until what? I don't want to waste another year of our lives wishing for something that we can't have.

(beat)

I want us to feel like a family again.

Kate regards him for a beat, conflicted. Then:

KATE

Let's see what Sister Abigail thinks.

INT. HOME FOR GIRLS - SISTER ABIGAIL'S OFFICE - DAY

Sister Abigail hands Kate and John a folder with a Polaroid of Esther stapled to it. Her case file.

SISTER ABIGAIL

For the most part, she's an ideal child. She's originally from Russia,
(MORE)

SISTER ABIGAIL (CONT'D)
but her English is flawless. Smart as a whip and very mature for her age. I don't think I've ever had to tell her anything twice and I've never had to clean up after her. She's a bit of a neat-freak.

JOHN
I think we can handle that.

SISTER ABIGAIL
She's also fiercely independent. Whatever the other children want to do, she wants to do the opposite.

JOHN
She told me they make fun of her.

SISTER ABIGAIL
I'm sure they do, but she doesn't make things any easier on herself. She just doesn't seem interested in friends. She doesn't even play like a normal child. She just reads and paints. Most of the time she barely speaks.

KATE
Why do you think that is?

SISTER ABIGAIL
Well, like most of the girls here, there's been no shortage of hardship in her life. She's been orphaned twice -- her birthmother died of AIDS, then the American family who adopted her was killed in a house fire. And I strongly suspect that she's been sexually abused as well.

KATE
By who?

SISTER ABIGAIL
I don't know. There's nothing in her history, but that doesn't necessarily mean anything. Russian adoption records are notoriously unreliable.

JOHN
Then what are you basing this on?

Sister Abigail hesitates. Deciding how much to say.

SISTER ABIGAIL
I wish I knew. There's just something missing with her. A spark you see in a child's eyes that isn't there. I've
(MORE)

SISTER ABIGAIL (CONT'D)
only seen that before in cases where
the child had been severely
traumatized. It might also explain
some of her idiosyncratic behaviors.

JOHN
Like what?

SISTER ABIGAIL
She refuses to shower or change clothes
with the other girls. She won't even
allow the housemother in the bathroom
with her. She's also very concerned
with her physical appearance for her
age. She's like a teenager getting
ready for a date every morning. She
insists on wearing dresses every day.
The ribbons around her wrists and neck
stay on day and night. The only
trouble we ever had with her was when
we tried to take them off. She kicked
two of Sister Francis' teeth out.

Kate and John are taken aback. Abigail sighs.

SISTER ABIGAIL
I'm sorry. I'm not trying to
discourage you. If you're serious,
I'll do everything I can to expedite
the process, given the circumstances.
(beat)
My one reservation is this. When an
adoption fails, it's usually because
the parents didn't know what to expect.
And in this case, I can't tell you what
to expect because the plain fact of the
matter is that I don't know.

INT. HOME FOR GIRLS - CHAPEL - DAY

Esther is happily helping a NUN clean the sanctuary. Kate and
John sit in a pew near the back of the empty chapel.

KATE
She really did open up with us, didn't
she?

JOHN
She latched right onto you. We're
probably the best chance she has at a
normal life.

Esther looks up from her work and waves at them. They wave back.

KATE
A normal life. That sounds really
good, doesn't it?

She smiles and takes John's hand.

EXT. HOME FOR GIRLS - DAY

CAMERA FOLLOWS Esther's feet, saddle shoes CLICKING on the walk. Kate walks beside her, holding her hand. In Esther's free hand, she clutches a DOG-EARED BIBLE held together with a rubber band.

Activity on the playground stops as the girls watch Esther leave. None of them look sorry to see her go. She ignores them.

John puts Esther's things -- a small suitcase and her paintings -- in the trunk of the car. Sister Abigail sees them off.

SISTER ABIGAIL

If you ever need anything, please don't
hesitate to call.

Before Kate can respond, Esther tugs on her arm.

ESTHER

Come on! Let's go!

Kate laughingly lets Esther drag her away.

KATE

(to Abigail)

We will!

Sister Abigail happily watches them go. Kate and Esther smile and wave goodbye. She waves back... but once the car pulls out, her smile fades. She seems vaguely troubled as they drive away...

INT./EXT. JOHN'S CAR - DAY

Headed for home. Kate is showing Esther some SIGN LANGUAGE. Esther makes the sign for each letter as she says it aloud:

ESTHER

E-S-T-

KATE

Put your thumb here.

She makes the sign for "T." Esther sees her mistake, corrects it.

ESTHER

T-H-E-R. E-S-T-H-E-R. Esther.

KATE

Perfect!

Esther smiles and practices it a few times. Outside, the LEAVES have turned color. Esther gazes out in wonder.

ESTHER

It's so beautiful, motta.

KATE
Sweetie, here we say "mom" or "mommy."

ESTHER
Mommy...

Kate and John exchange a warm look.

EXT. PRIVATE ROAD - DAY

John's car turns at a GATE and drives down the road leading to their private community. The secluded road winds through the forest and crosses the little BROOK we saw earlier.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - DAY

The Coleman's neighborhood is surrounded by forest, an upscale community of big houses and manicured lawns. A POSTMAN delivers the mail. A HISPANIC NANNY pushes a BABY in a stroller. GARDENERS tend someone's flowers. Esther soaks it all in.

EXT. COLEMAN RESIDENCE - DAY

They pull into the driveway and get out. Esther's mouth practically hangs open at the sight of their beautiful house.

The front door opens and Max runs out to meet them. Daniel appears in the doorway with DORIS COLEMAN (mid-60's), their grandmother. Daniel stands aghast at the sight of the strange, pale girl with the Goldilocks curls and frilly white dress.

DANIEL
(softly)
Holy shit...

Max runs straight into Kate's arms and gets a big hug.

KATE
Oh, we missed you so much!!

Kate gives Max a kiss, then turns to Esther. Max hangs back, a little shy. Esther signs to Max without speaking:

ESTHER
HELLO, MAX. MY NAME IS ESTHER.

Max gives Kate an excited smile.

KATE
She's been practicing the whole way.

Kate takes the girls' hands and they all walk up to the house. Esther notices Max's hearing aid.

ESTHER
What's that?

KATE
That's a hearing aid. It helps her
hear a little so she can read lips.

John gives Doris a kiss on the cheek.

JOHN
Hi, Mom. Thanks for watching them.
(to Esther)
Esther, this is Grandma Doris.

ESTHER
A pleasure to meet you.

Esther surprises everyone by giving her a perfect little curtsey.
Daniel fails to suppress a laugh. Kate silences him with a look.

DORIS
How precious! It's a pleasure to meet
you, too.

JOHN
(to Esther)
And this is our son, Daniel.

Esther smiles and puts out her hand. Daniel grudgingly takes it.

ESTHER
Hello, Daniel.

DANIEL
Hey.

INT. COLEMAN RESIDENCE - VARIOUS - DAY

Esther walks from room to room, in awe of her luxurious new home.
Kate and the rest of the family follow her.

ESTHER
Everything's so big!

As Esther moves on to the next room, Daniel hangs back and
whispers to John, too loud:

DANIEL
Why is she dressed like that?

JOHN
Don't be rude.

Esther overhears them, but pretends she didn't. Kate sees this
and tries to distract her.

KATE
Would you like to see your room?

Esther smiles and nods eagerly. But on the way up the stairs, she eyes Daniel furtively, sizing him up...

INT. ESTHER'S BEDROOM - DAY

Kate pushes the door open and Esther enters. We recognize the room by the arched windows -- this used to be the nursery. It's been completely made over as a little girl's room, complete with a lacy white canopy bed covered with a mountain of STUFFED ANIMALS.

Esther turns to Kate and John with a toothpaste-commercial smile.

ESTHER
It's perfect.

INT. ESTHER'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Esther is in bed, wearing a nightgown. Kate and John tuck her in.

ESTHER
I love you, *motta* -- I mean, Mommy.

KATE
I love you, too, sweetie.

She kisses Esther on the forehead. John leans in for a kiss and Esther hugs him tight. Then he and Kate turn out the light and close the door. Esther watches them go...

INT. UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - NIGHT

Kate and John walk to their room, arms lovingly around each other. They close their door, leaving the hallway empty and dark. Then:

CAMERA SLOWLY MOVES back down the hall toward the closed door of Esther's room, PUSHING IN on the doorknob, lingering there for a long beat... Then we hear the lock CLICK shut.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - ESTABLISHING - MORNING

JOGGERS. PAPERBOY. Lawn sprinklers. KIDS running and riding bicycles. Saturday in the suburbs.

INT. KITCHEN - MORNING

Esther and Max eat breakfast at the table while Kate pours their juice. Daniel tears through wearing a soccer uniform.

KATE
Good luck!! I love you!!

DANIEL
Love you, too!!

John follows Daniel, kissing Kate on his way out.

KATE
Remember, it's only a game.

JOHN
I'm a fan. Fans yell. I'll call to
let you know who won.

INT. ESTHER'S BEDROOM - DAY

Kate and Esther are decorating. Esther pins up some of her paintings. Kate spreads out a selection of wallpaper borders.

KATE
Okay, which one do you like?

ESTHER
These are for a younger child. Did you
pick them out for Yolanda?

Kate is taken aback. She stammers for a beat.

KATE
I'm sorry. I'll take them back and
pick some just for you.

ESTHER
It's all right. I rather like this
one.

Esther points out her favorite and goes back to pinning up her paintings. Kate sighs. As she rolls up the samples, she notices the same Gothic mansion in several of Esther's older paintings.

KATE
Is that a real place?

ESTHER
No. I just made it up. It's a haunted
castle where a beautiful princess was
locked away. She waited so long and
was so sad that she filled the moat
with her tears, but then a handsome
prince swam across it and rescued her.
(smiles)
I like happy endings. Don't you?

INT. SHOPPING MALL - DAY

Sliding doors open. Kate and the girls enter. Esther looks around, dazzled by three stories of glass-ceilinged extravagance. It's totally alien to her.

INT. CLOTHING STORE - DAY

Kate and the girls look through racks of children's clothes. Kate pulls a pair of jeans with flowers embroidered on the pockets.

KATE
These are cute.

ESTHER
Jeans are ugly.

KATE
But sweetie, you have to have something
you can play outside in.

ESTHER
That doesn't mean I have to look like a
boy.

INT. SHOPPING MALL - DAY

Kate leads the girls through the mall, carrying BAGS of purchases.
Something catches Esther's eye. She hangs back, distracted.

It's a pet store. In the display is an aquarium filled with
TROPICAL FISH, their vibrant colors illuminated by a black light
in the tank. Esther gazes in, nose practically against the glass.

KATE
You like fish?

ESTHER
I like all beautiful things.

Kate taps Max's shoulder and signs to her.

KATE
You should show her Hodgepodge when we
get home.

Max nods eagerly. Esther gives them a curious look.

ESTHER
Hodgepodge? What's that?

INT. MAX'S BEDROOM - DAY

HODGEPODGE is a hamster. Esther kneels in front of his cage for a
closer look. Kate stands behind her. Max beams proudly.

KATE
Max takes care of him all by herself.
It's her big girl responsibility.

ESTHER
Aaaww, can I pet him?

KATE
Sure. But you have to promise not to
let him out of his cage unless Mommy or
Daddy is here to hold him.

ESTHER

Why?

KATE

Because he's very delicate and you
could hurt him. Okay?

Esther nods. Kate scoops Hodgepodge up and kneels between the girls. Esther and Max share a smile as they stroke his fur.

EXT. COLEMAN RESIDENCE - POOL - DUSK

A banner reading "WELCOME HOME, ESTHER!!" has been hung. John sprays LIGHTER FLUID on a charcoal grill and starts the fire. Daniel watches attentively at his father's side.

INT. KITCHEN - DUSK

Kate and Doris prepare hamburgers and hot dogs for the barbecue. They can see Esther and Max laughing and playing horseshoes in the backyard, wearing NEW MATCHING SUNDRESSES. Adorable.

DORIS

They grow up fast, don't they?

KATE

Too fast.

DORIS

So what are your plans now?

KATE

Well, we'll get Esther settled, then
I'll probably go back to work.

DORIS

Oh, so you think they'll take you back?

Kate's eyes flicker with irritation.

KATE

I'm not talking about Yale. I'm going
to teach piano lessons from home.

DORIS

I see. That was such a good position
you had at Yale. It's a shame.

KATE

I didn't quit because I wanted to. I
quit because I couldn't work anymore.

DORIS

I know. I'm so glad you're doing
better now.

(beat)

How's Maxine feeling?

KATE

She's fine.

Kate's pointedly not making eye contact with Doris now.

DORIS

Well, it's a shame that it took something like that for you to get help, but I'm glad you did.

Kate takes the plate of food and leaves without looking at her.

EXT. COLEMAN RESIDENCE - POOL - NIGHT

Dinner's over. Daniel has changed into swim trunks and SPLASHES around in the pool. Everyone else is gathered around Esther, who's opening a few small presents. She unwraps a BOOK OF SIGN LANGUAGE and gasps excitedly.

ESTHER

This is perfect! Thank you! How do I say "thank you?"

Kate shows her. Esther turns and makes the sign to Max.

MAX

YOU'RE WELCOME.

Behind them, Daniel climbs out of the pool and runs out to the end of the diving board, poised to jump back in.

DANIEL

Dad! Watch this!

But John is focused on Esther. She's opening a big present labeled "FROM: DADDY." Daniel can't get his attention.

DANIEL

Dad! Dad!! Dad, look!!

John distractedly glances over his shoulder at him and Daniel does a huge cannonball into the pool. SPLASH!

Suddenly, Esther squeals with glee. She's unwrapped an ART EASEL and NEW PAINTING SUPPLIES. By the time Daniel's smiling face pops out of the water, he's disappointed to find that Esther has drawn John's attention again, barraging him with hugs and kisses.

She looks at Daniel over John's shoulder and sticks her tongue out at him. Daniel fumes.

INT. ESTHER'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

John walks behind Esther, his hands over her eyes. Kate leads her into the darkened room by the hand.

KATE
Are you ready?

Esther nods excitedly. John uncovers her eyes. Esther stops short in awe. It's the FISH TANK from the shopping mall.

Esther kneels before it, entranced. She turns the black light on and off, marveling at how it makes her dress glow and the colors in her paintings light up. She gives Kate and John a big smile.

INT. KATE AND JOHN'S BEDROOM - DAY

Kate and John get dressed for church. John pulls on a tie. Kate searches through a jewelry box. She's missing something.

KATE
Have you seen my pearls?

INT. CHURCH - DAY

Sunday morning in America. Kate and John sit with Doris and the kids. A PRIEST reads from the scripture and a SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER translates.

Esther follows along in her own Bible and Kate notices a photo poking from between its pages. All she can see is the face of a RUGGED-LOOKING MAN in his 40's. She eyes it curiously...

INT. MAX'S BEDROOM - DAY

Kate is cleaning, picking Max's clothes up from off the floor. She sees something that gives her pause -- one of Max's STUFFED ANIMALS has a STRING OF PEARLS hung around its neck.

INT. FAMILY ROOM - DAY

Esther and Max are playing a board game. Kate enters with the pearls and shows them to Max.

KATE
Did you take this out of my jewelry box?

Max shakes her head, confused.

KATE
Then how did it get in your room?

MAX
I DON'T KNOW.

KATE
Somebody put this around T.J.'s neck.
Who was it if it wasn't you?

Max shrugs. She looks nervous. Kate sighs.

KATE

Go take a time-out and think about it.

ESTHER

But we're playing!

KATE

She can finish your game later.

(to Max)

Come on.

Max pouts and follows Kate upstairs. Esther watches them go.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Esther stands in front of a class full of KIDS. Their teacher, MRS. GROSSE, is introducing her. Esther's wearing a pretty little dress and Shirley Temple curls, but her usually unflappable smile seems wary, uncertain in the face of these staring third graders.

MRS. GROSSE

This is our new student. Her name is Esther Coleman and I want you all to make her feel very welcome today.

One of the kids, BRENDA, whispers a wisecrack to a FRIEND. Esther shifts uncomfortably.

INT. CAFETERIA - DAY

Esther sits at the end of the table where Brenda and her FRIENDS are eating. They eye her derisively. Esther ignores them and prays over her lunch. The other girls exchange amused looks. Brenda folds her hands and makes an earnest, mocking face.

BRENDA

Dear Jesus, please help me to not dress like such a freak tomorrow.

The girls laugh. Esther pays no attention.

INT./EXT. TREEHOUSE - DAY

Daniel and his friends AUSTIN and TREVOR run down a short path through the woods behind the Coleman's house to a tall tree. CAMERA REVEALS an enclosed treehouse about ten feet up. This is no "Little Rascals" job -- this thing was professionally built.

They climb up to it. Inside, Daniel throws back a rug and pries up a loose plank. Under it is a small STASH OF WEED. The other boys open their backpacks, pull out video game magazines, comic books, and an old "PLAYBOY" with Cindy Crawford on the cover.

TREVOR

Cindy Crawford? This magazine's older than we are! She's probably got like wrinkly old grandma boobs now!

They laugh. Daniel sparks up a joint. Suddenly:

ESTHER (O.S.)
Do you want to play?

The boys startle, quickly waving the smoke away. Esther and Max are looking up at them from the foot of the tree, holding hands.

DANIEL
Get out of here! This is my treehouse.
Dad built it for me.

Esther smiles, then leads Max away. The boys watch them go.

AUSTIN
Is your, like, whole family retarded or something?

Trevor and Austin laugh. Daniel flushes, angry and embarrassed.

INT. BATHROOM - NIGHT

Kate finishes drawing a bath for Esther.

KATE
I think we should try this with the door unlocked tonight. What do you say?

ESTHER
(panicked)
What if someone comes in and sees me?

KATE
Nobody's going to come in. I'll stand right outside the door.

ESTHER
I could sing for you. At the home, I used to sing so the sisters would know I was all right. Please?

Esther's eyes are desperate, pleading. Kate sighs.

INT. UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - NIGHT

Kate closes the door. The lock CLICKS shut. A moment later, Esther starts HUMMING. Kate listens for a beat, troubled.

INT. MAX'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Esther and Max are huddled in bed and Kate reads them a story. John watches from the doorway. Kate sees him and smiles.

INT. KATE AND JOHN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Kate's in bed, writing in her journal by the light of a bedside lamp. Outside, rain PATTERS on the window and lightning FLASHES.

John kisses her good night. She smiles and surprises him by pulling him close and kissing him more deeply. He responds. She places his hand on her breast and he starts to undress her. Then:

A KNOCK at the door. John and Kate cringe at the interruption.

KATE

Come in.

The door opens. It's Esther and Max.

ESTHER

We're scared of the lightning.

Max giggles. Kate and John exchange a resigned look.

JOHN

Okay, come on. But just for tonight.

Esther and Max excitedly clamber into the bed and snuggle between them. Kate and John share amused looks.

INT. KITCHEN - MORNING

The kids are eating breakfast. Esther reads her sign language book at the table. Max signs to Daniel. He turns to Kate with a frustrated sigh.

DANIEL

Mom, what's she saying?

ESTHER

She wants you to pass the milk.

Kate gives Daniel an admonishing look.

KATE

See? If you studied more, you wouldn't have to ask all the time.

Daniel glares at Esther, but she doesn't see it. John enters, ready for work. He grabs his travel mug, gives Kate a kiss.

JOHN

See you later.

Esther puts out her arms for a hug. He leans in to kiss her, but she clings to him and won't let go. She pouts.

ESTHER

I want you to take us to school.

She looks up at him with big sad eyes. He can't resist.

JOHN
I guess I can be late today.
(to Kate)
I can take them to school and you can
pick them up.

ESTHER
Yay! We're going with Daddy!

She jumps up from the breakfast table and runs off to get ready.

INT. FOYER - MORNING

The kids are leaving for school with John. Kate sees them off.

DANIEL
Bye, Mom.

Kate gives him and Max a kiss, but Esther runs right by without pausing, hurrying after John. Esther takes John's hand, holding it on the way to the car. Kate watches them, a little hurt...

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Kate sits with Esther, watching her open a gift-wrapped box. Inside is a JOURNAL like the one we've seen Kate writing in.

KATE
I have a journal just like this that I
write in every day.

ESTHER
What kinds of things do you write
about?

KATE
What I did that day, how I feel.
Anything I don't want to forget. I
thought you and I could spend some time
together today and start a life book.

ESTHER
What's that?

KATE
It's like an adoption storybook. And
it's all about you. I did a couple
pages to get you started. Look.

She opens the journal. Pasted to the first page is a photo from Kate and John's wedding. Little sticker letters spell out, "MOMMY & DADDY GET MARRIED." Esther marvels at Kate's wedding dress.

ESTHER
So beautiful...

Kate turns the page to a picture of Kate and John with Daniel as a BABY. Then Kate, John, and SIX-YEAR-OLD DANIEL with BABY MAX.

KATE

This is Daniel when he was born. And there's Max. And there's you.

She turns next to a photo of the whole family taken at Esther's welcome home party. The caption reads, "ESTHER JOINS THE FAMILY."

KATE

If you want, we can put your other pictures in here, too.

ESTHER

What other pictures?

KATE

The ones I saw in your Bible.

Esther gives her a dismayed look.

KATE

I'm sorry. They slipped out at church. If they're private, we don't have to --

ESTHER

It's okay. I want you to see them.

She smiles, but it looks forced.

INT. ESTHER'S BEDROOM - DAY

Kate and Esther sit on the floor. Esther removes the rubber band from around her Bible and takes out a few battered photographs.

They're all of Esther with a rural family -- the man Kate saw in the photo at church, his WIFE, and THREE BOYS, aged 6, 10, and 14. In one, they're all posed together in front of a farmhouse.

ESTHER

These are the Wallaces. That's James and Hannah. And that's Micah, Luke, and Isaiah.

KATE

This is the American family that adopted you from Russia?

Esther nods. They're candid family snapshots full of laughter and hugs. Esther's adopted father is in all of them. The last one is of him and Esther, the same photo Kate saw part of at church.

KATE

They look very nice. They must have loved you very much.

Esther nods, but Kate sees that she's holding back tears.

KATE
What's wrong?

ESTHER
I hid these because I didn't want you
to know how much I miss them. I was
afraid you'd think I didn't love you.

KATE
It's okay, sweetie... I understand.
(beat; considers)
You know, I lost someone who was very
special to me once, too.

Esther wipes her eyes and looks up, interest piqued.

ESTHER
Really?

INT. MUSIC ROOM - DAY

Kate shows Esther the orchid in its ornate planter.

KATE
We don't have any pictures of Jessica
because she died while she was still in
my tummy. But we spread her ashes in
here and as long as this flower grows,
part of her will be alive inside it.
(beat)
It's okay to be sad about the people
we've lost. And it's okay to miss
them, too.

Esther nods. They smile at one another through their tears.

INT. ELEMENTARY SCHOOL - HALLWAY - DAY

Between classes, crowded with KIDS. Esther clutches her books to her chest. Daniel and Trevor are walking the other way and as they pass, Daniel dumps Esther's books. Trevor laughs.

Esther glares at Daniel and kneels to pick up her books, but the kids walking by purposefully kick them, laughing faces leering down at her. She gathers her books, but one of them is missing. She looks around. Spots it.

Esther's Bible lies on the floor at someone's feet. A hand reaches down and picks it up. It's Brenda.

BRENDA
Is this a Bible?

ESTHER
Give it back to me.

She reaches for it, but Brenda laughs and raises it over her head.

BRENDA
Jesus-freak brought a Bible to school!

Esther angrily swipes at it again, but one of Brenda's friends grabs it first. Esther takes a deep breath, trying to calm down.

ESTHER
May I please have my Bible?

The girl hesitates, shrugs and offers Esther the Bible... but snatches it away again at the last second. Brenda laughs. Esther reaches for it, but the girls keep passing it between them.

Esther and Brenda grab it at the same time. There's a brief tug-of-war, then the rubber band SNAPS and the Bible flies apart, pages and photos scattering everywhere.

Esther gasps in horror and dives to the floor, desperately scooping up the loose pages. A crowd gathers, watching and snickering, Daniel and Trevor among them. Esther looks to Daniel for help, but he just stands there, watching uncomfortably.

Brenda laughs at Esther crawling around on all fours.

BRENDA
Look at the cute little doggie! Is this your collar, little doggie?

Brenda reaches out and grabs the ribbon around Esther's neck...

The second Brenda touches the ribbon, Esther flies into a panic. She screams and swats Brenda's hand away, thrashing her arms and kicking her feet, hysterically shrieking at the top of her lungs. Brenda leaps back, wide-eyed and freaked out.

The kids fall into stunned silence. Esther's screams echo in the hallway. A TEACHER comes running. Trevor puts a hand over his mouth so the teacher won't see him laughing.

TREVOR
Dude, your sister's a total spaz!

DANIEL
She's not my sister.

INT. KATE'S MINIVAN - DAY

The drive home from school is silent and tense. Esther stares out the window. Kate eyes her in the rearview mirror, concerned.

EXT. COLEMAN RESIDENCE - DAY

The minivan is parked in the drive and the kids are climbing out. As Daniel and Max head to the house, Kate takes Esther aside.

KATE

Mrs. Grosse told me what happened today. Do you want to talk about it?

Daniel hangs back to see if Esther is going to tell on him. She sees him standing there, then turns to Kate with a smile.

ESTHER

There's nothing to talk about. We were just playing a game, that's all.

She walks away, passing Daniel without a look. Kate is dubious.

INT. MAX'S BEDROOM - DAY

Max enters, throws down her "Hello Kitty" bookbag -- and stops short. Hodgepodge's cage is empty. Max stands frozen for a beat, then starts looking for him. Esther appears in the doorway.

ESTHER

What's the matter?

Max turns and tries to block the cage, but Esther sees that it's empty. Esther gasps.

ESTHER

Where is he? Were you playing with him?

Max frantically shakes her head. Esther quickly shuts the door.

ESTHER

You left his cage open! Look!

Sure enough, the door of the cage is wide open. Max shakes her head, frightened tears in her eyes.

MAX

I DIDN'T! I PROMISE!

ESTHER

Then how did he get out?

MAX

I DON'T KNOW! I DON'T KNOW!

ESTHER

You have to think! Mommy's not going to believe you! She didn't believe you about the necklace and she's not going to believe you about this!

Max is devastated. She's sobbing now. Esther tries to calm her.

ESTHER

It's okay. Don't cry. Look at me.

She takes Max by the shoulders. Max looks up, breath hitching.

ESTHER
I'll tell Mommy it was my fault. You
won't get in any trouble. I'll tell
her I took him out of the cage without
your permission and he ran away, okay?

Max gives a grateful nod. Esther smiles and strokes Max's hair.

ESTHER
Don't worry. It'll be our little
secret.

Max nods again and gives her a hug. She doesn't see the
calculating look in Esther's eyes...

INT. SUNROOM - NIGHT

A glassed-in terrace off of Kate and John's bedroom filled with
plants. Kate is wearing only a long T-shirt, watering the plants
before bed. John enters in his pajama bottoms, snuggles into her
from behind. Kate smiles and leans into him.

INT. KATE AND JOHN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

The lights are off. Kate and John are in bed, making love. Slow,
passionate, intense. When they're finished, breathless and
trembling, she cradles his face in her hands, gazing lovingly up
at him. Then something catches her eye in the moonlight:

Esther is watching them from the open bedroom door, her hand
frozen on the doorknob.

KATE
Oh, my God!

They hurriedly pull the sheets up and Kate turns on the bedside
lamp. Esther stares at them blankly.

KATE
Esther, honey? What is it? Are you
okay?

Esther just glowers at her, then turns and walks away.

INT. ESTHER'S BEDROOM - DAY

Esther sits at her easel, painting. Kate enters and sits down on
the bed. Esther doesn't look at her. She's painting a
sophisticated, stylized PORTRAIT OF KATE. Other PORTRAITS of the
family are already pinned to the wall. Kate shifts uncomfortably.

KATE
We need to talk about last night.

ESTHER

Do we?

KATE

Yes. There are certain things that grown-ups do that kids aren't supposed to see. And that was one of them.

Esther keeps painting. She still hasn't looked at her.

KATE

Esther, I need you to listen to me.

Esther pauses. She deliberately sets her paintbrush down and turns to Kate. An awkward beat.

KATE

See, when two grown-ups love each other very, very much, they like to show that love to each other --

ESTHER

I know. They fuck.

Kate is dumbfounded. Esther regards her with a bored, aloof look.

INT. JOHN'S DEN - DAY

John is troubled by what Kate has told him.

JOHN

She could have picked it up anywhere. Hell, she probably heard it at school.

KATE

This wasn't something she overheard. She knew what it meant. And the way she said it. I don't even think she expected to get in trouble over it.

JOHN

We'll talk to her about it tonight.

KATE

You think that's enough?

JOHN

What do you suggest?

KATE

I could take her to Doctor Browning.

JOHN

It was one dirty word. I don't think we need to call in the shrink just yet.

KATE

Maybe. It just reminded me of what Sister Abigail said. We really don't know that much about her. The last family she was with could have been like, "Pass the fucking potatoes" at the dinner table for all we know.

JOHN

I get it. I just don't want to make a bigger deal out of it than it is.

KATE

If she's saying "fuck" to my face, what's she doing when we're not around? We have to be thinking about what kind of influence she's having on Daniel and Max. Particularly Max.

JOHN

I wouldn't worry about it. You're right, we don't know how she was raised, but we do know she's a good kid. If Danny and Max want to start acting like her, that's fine with me.

EXT. COLEMAN RESIDENCE - DAY

Esther and Max pick wildflowers along the edge of the forest.

ESTHER

Let's pick flowers for Daddy.

Max nods happily. Then Esther notices something that makes her stop short. A girl approaching on a bicycle...

It's Brenda. She pretends to not see Esther, just rides right by. Esther watches, her face strangely slack... then starts to follow her. Max gives Esther a confused look, but tags along.

EXT. PARK - DAY

Esther finds Brenda's bike parked at a neighborhood playground -- swings, carousel, jungle gym, and a tall corkscrew slide made to look like a rocket ship. There are KIDS playing. MOMS watching. A HOMELESS GUY with a shopping cart full of stuffed garbage bags asleep by a tree. WOMEN doing pilates. Esther ignores them all.

Brenda is climbing on the jungle gym with some other kids. Esther walks over with Max in tow and just watches Brenda play. Brenda sees her and makes a face. Esther just stands there. Staring.

BRENDA

What are you looking at?

No response. Max tugs on Esther's arm, but she's rooted in place, staring blankly at Brenda. Finally, Brenda can't take it. She climbs off the jungle gym and walks away. Esther watches her go.

Brenda gets on a swing, but just as she starts to get some height, Esther's right there, staring up at her again. Max happily grabs a swing for herself, but Esther is fixated on Brenda.

BRENDA

Stop staring at me! Stop it!!

But Esther is unwavering. Can't take her eyes off of her. Brenda gets off the swing and runs away. Esther calmly walks after her.

BRENDA

Go away! Stop following me, freak!

Max sees Esther following Brenda and grudgingly gets off the swing, hurrying to catch up. Brenda gives them an angry look.

BRENDA

Why don't you two go home and change each other's diapers?

Esther and Max follow Brenda across the park, Max still uncertain about what's going on. Brenda heads for the tall corkscrew slide. Steep stairs lead to the enclosed top, the tip of the rocket ship.

Brenda starts up the stairs, then pauses. She turns to Esther.

BRENDA

You go first.

Esther doesn't move, but Max gladly takes her turn. After a beat, Esther follows Max up the stairs. Brenda stays behind, watching.

Max goes down the spiraling slide, but Esther just stands at the top, looking down at Brenda.

BRENDA

Go!!

Esther continues to stare down at her for a beat, then turns and disappears from sight. Only then does Brenda climb up.

Max runs to the stairs for another turn. Brenda reaches the top and looks around. She sees Max. But where's Esther? She turns.

Suddenly, Esther is right in front of her. She didn't go down the slide, she was just crouched out of sight. Brenda gasps --

-- then Esther spits in her face and pushes her down the stairs.

Brenda SCREAMS as she falls, limbs flailing, out-of-control. She lands hard in the dirt and just lies there crying, clutching her arm and bleeding from a gash in her forehead.

Brenda's scream draws alarmed looks. The Homeless Guy startles awake. One of the playground mothers comes running to help. But Max stands frozen, gaping at Esther in total shock. Esther stares blankly down at Brenda from atop the slide. Utterly emotionless.

EXT. PARK - DAY (TIMECUT)

BRENDA'S FATHER arrives on the scene. Brenda says something to him and points at Esther and Max, who watch from a distance.

ESTHER

Are you going to tell on me?

Max shrugs.

ESTHER

I didn't mean to hurt her. I just wanted her to stop picking on me.

(off Max's look)

Don't you hate it when someone is mean to you for no reason? Wouldn't you do almost anything to make them stop?

A beat. Max nods. Esther offers her hand and Max takes it.

INT. DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Esther and Max sit at the table. Kate and John eye them sternly.

JOHN

Brenda says you pushed her.

ESTHER

That's not true! We were just playing and she tripped! I swear!

KATE

(to Max)

Did you see what happened?

Esther eyes Max expectantly. Max hesitates. Then:

MAX

IT WAS AN ACCIDENT.

Kate sighs, not entirely convinced...

INT. MUSIC ROOM - DAY

Kate carefully tends the memorial orchid, spraying it with a fine mist of water.

INT. SUNROOM - DAY

Kate's watering the plants when she feels something on her hand. There's an ANT on it. She flicks it off. Then she sees ANOTHER, this one crawling up her arm. She makes a face and looks down.

There are ants crawling on the floor all around her feet. She quickly steps back, brushing at her arms and legs. She looks under one of the plant tables to see what's attracted them:

It's Hodgepodge. He's been dead for several days, his body swarming with ants and MAGGOTS.

EXT. COLEMAN RESIDENCE - GARDEN - NIGHT

A hole has been dug in the backyard flower garden. Kate, John, Esther, and Max stand around it. Max places a shoebox with "HODGEPODGE" written on it in the hole and lays a flower on top of it. John starts shoveling dirt into the hole.

Esther and Max exchange a knowing look...

INT. MAX'S BEDROOM - DAY

Esther and Max are giggling and playing dress-up. Clothes are strewn everywhere. They're both trying to look grown-up. They're even wearing makeup -- heavy mascara and pink, painted cheeks.

Daniel walks by and sees Max putting on lipstick. He takes it away from her.

DANIEL

Hey, you're not allowed to wear makeup.
Does Mom know you have this?

ESTHER

Give it back.

DANIEL

Make me.

ESTHER

Give it back or I'll tell Daddy that
you hit her and then you'll be in
trouble.

Max smiles. Daniel scowls at Esther, then gives Max the lipstick. He leaves. Max gives Esther a hug. Best friends forever.

INT. SUPERMARKET - DAY

Kate waits in line at the check-out. Esther and Max are with her. As Kate pushes her cart up to the counter, she looks over and sees the nearby "WINE & SPIRITS" aisle. No big deal, just a passing glance, a flash of idle distraction. Her eyes unreadable. Then:

ESTHER (O.S.)

What kind of sex do men crave most?

Kate looks back, shocked. Esther has picked up a "COSMOPOLITAN" from the newsstand and is reading the cover aloud to Max.

KATE

Put that away. Don't look at those.

Kate puts the magazine back. There are several others just like it at kids-eye level. "Orgasms UNLIMITED!" "Thrill EVERY INCH Of Him!" Kate sighs and starts putting groceries on the conveyer.

ESTHER

"How To Hit Your G-spot Every Time."

Kate whirls. Esther has picked up the same magazine. Kate angrily snatches it and pulls Esther toward her. Max startles.

KATE

Stand where I can see you!

The CASHIER and a couple CUSTOMERS turn to look at her. Kate ignores them. Esther can't suppress a little smile.

INT. DINING ROOM - NIGHT

The family is eating dinner. Esther makes a face and pushes her plate away half-finished.

ESTHER

May I be excused?

KATE

At least eat your chicken.

ESTHER

I'm not going to eat something that I don't like just to make you feel better. That's ridiculous.

JOHN

Esther, stop it. Eat the chicken and then you can be excused.

ESTHER

Yes, sir.

Esther starts eating. Kate gives John an exasperated look.

INT. FOYER - DAY

The doorbell RINGS. Esther hurries to answer it. It's Sister Abigail. She's carrying a clipboard. Esther smiles and curtsseys.

ESTHER

Hello, Sister Abigail.

SISTER ABIGAIL

Hello, Esther.

INT. STAIRWELL - DAY

Esther leads Sister Abigail upstairs. Kate and John follow.

SISTER ABIGAIL

I'm also going to need updated charts from her pediatrician and her dentist for my supervision report.

KATE

That's no problem. We've got a check-up with the dentist next week.

INT. ESTHER'S BEDROOM - DAY

Esther leads Kate, John, and Sister Abigail into her room.

ESTHER

Isn't it lovely? Look at my new paintings. I've done a portrait for everyone in the family.

She shows Sister Abigail the portraits pinned to her wall. There's also a painting of everyone together.

SISTER ABIGAIL

That's one good-looking family you've got.

ESTHER

I know. Aren't they perfect?

Sister Abigail gives Kate and John an amused look.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Kate, John, and Sister Abigail talk over coffee.

JOHN

I swear, we didn't bribe her to say that.

SISTER ABIGAIL

No explanation necessary. I don't think there's anything that girl could say that would surprise me.

KATE

She dropped the f-bomb on me a few weeks ago.

Sister Abigail raises her eyebrows in comic, exaggerated surprise.

SISTER ABIGAIL

Well. I'm glad to hear she's finally come out of her shell.

JOHN

She's just testing us. It's been
nowhere near as bad as we expected.

SISTER ABIGAIL

What kinds of things is she doing?

KATE

Talking back to me. Purposefully
disobeying. She took Max to the park
without permission the other day. That
was the biggie. A girl they were
playing with got hurt.

A beat. Sister Abigail is suddenly apprehensive, tries to cover.

SISTER ABIGAIL

Really? Is the girl all right?

KATE

She broke her arm and had to have
something like eleven stitches, I
think. She was lucky.

SISTER ABIGAIL

She doesn't sound very lucky.

JOHN

She's lucky she didn't break her neck.

Sister Abigail seems troubled by this.

EXT. COLEMAN RESIDENCE - DAY

Sister Abigail walks out to her car, concerned. She doesn't see
Esther spying down from her bedroom window, just staring at her
with that strange, blank look...

INT. MUSIC ROOM - DAY

Kate gives a piano lesson to a COLLEGE STUDENT, listening as he
runs through a finger exercise.

KATE

Relax, wrists following fingers...

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - DAY

John leads Esther and Max on a bike ride around the neighborhood.
Esther speeds up, leaving Max behind so she can ride next to John.

ESTHER

I'm Daddy's little girl, aren't I?

JOHN

That's right. You both are.

As they head home, they see JOYCE PATTERSON (late 30's) jogging toward them. A blonde with dark roots and an overdone boob job, wearing a skimpy sports bra and mini shorts. She waves to them.

JOYCE
Look at these three cuties!

JOHN
How're you doing?

JOYCE
Hanging in there. Hey, I've got a chair I want moved upstairs. You think you could come over and give me a hand?

John glances toward home. Kate's at the door, waving goodbye to the College Student. She sees John talking to Joyce and gives them an unreadable look before going back inside.

JOHN
Uh, yeah. Maybe Kate and I could help you out.

JOYCE
Okay, I'll call you.

John and Max start off again, but Esther doesn't move. She's openly looking Joyce over from head to toe.

ESTHER
You have a lovely body.

JOHN
Come on, Esther. Let's go.

Esther reluctantly follows. Joyce eyes her dubiously.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

John and the girls enter. Kate has juice boxes for the girls. A look passes between John and Kate. Esther notices.

KATE
How was the ride? Did you have fun?

Max nods and heads off, but Esther hangs back, eavesdropping:

KATE
Didn't waste any time turning that divorce settlement into a tit job, did she?

JOHN
I didn't notice.

KATE
Yeah, right.

She's teasing, but there's something biting underneath it. Esther walks away, sipping on her juice box.

INT. HOME FOR GIRLS - SISTER ABIGAIL'S OFFICE - NIGHT

After hours. Sister Abigail is at her desk. She opens a file and reads. We see a Polaroid of Esther stapled to the cover...

EXT. CARNIVAL - NIGHT

Midway rides and boardwalk games have been set up in the parking lot of Daniel and Esther's school. A banner reads "EDGAR ELEMENTARY ANNUAL HALLOWEEN HOOT." The place is packed with excited children in Halloween costumes.

The school is at the top of a steep hill. Kate and John walk up it with the kids. Daniel's dressed as a ninja, Max is a "FINDING NEMO" fish, and Esther's an angel, complete with a shiny halo.

SERIES OF SHOTS

John gives Daniel some money to hang out with Austin and Trevor...

On the BOARDWALK, playing games, winning prizes. Esther shoots BBs at balloons with a toy rifle. She's pretty good at it...

On the MIDWAY, Esther and Max are whirled around on the Scrambler, screaming and laughing. Kate and John watch and take pictures...

THE HAUNTED MAZE

A cheap fun house attraction. The girls run up to John and Kate.

ESTHER

We want to go in by ourselves!

JOHN

Okay, just make sure you hold her hand.

ESTHER

I will.

The girls run inside. John smiles, but Kate watches anxiously.

INT. HAUNTED MAZE - NIGHT

Esther leads Max through the dark, winding fun house corridors. Max starts to look scared. She nearly leaps out of her skin when a RUBBER-MASKED GHOUL jumps out at them. But Esther just laughs at it. Max sees that she's not afraid and soon they're both giggling at the CHEESY SPOOKS that try to scare them.

EXT. CARNIVAL - NIGHT

The girls emerge from the maze, clutching each other and laughing.

ESTHER
Let's play "hide and seek." You go first.

Max excitedly runs off. Esther watches her vanish into the CROWD. Moments later, Kate and John appear. Kate nervously looks around.

KATE
Where's Max?

ESTHER
I don't know. I was trying to hold her hand, but she pushed me and ran away.

KATE
Oh, my God...

JOHN
It's okay. Did you see where she went?

ESTHER
This way, I think.

She points the wrong way. Kate takes her hand and they quickly move through the crowd, looking for Max. John stands on a bench for a better vantage, Kate grabs passersby:

KATE
Have you seen a little girl in a fish costume? She has short brown hair?

Nobody's seen her. Kate grows frantic. Esther watches with a nonchalant smile, enjoying the drama. She tugs on Kate's arm.

ESTHER
Mommy, I want some cotton candy.

KATE
Not now, Esther!

JOHN
Kate, please. Take it easy. She's gotta be around here.

Then Kate spots Daniel approaching, holding Max's hand. Kate breathes a sigh of relief and rushes to give Max a fierce hug.

KATE
Are you all right? Don't you ever run off like that! What were you thinking?

DANIEL
They were playing "hide and seek." I saw Esther let her run off.

Esther gives him a sharp look. John turns on her, angry.

JOHN
Did you lie to us? What did I tell you
about holding her hand?

ESTHER
I'm sorry, sir.

She looks like she's going to cry. John sighs, then turns to Kate and Max. Esther gives Daniel a hateful look through her tears.

EXT. COLEMAN RESIDENCE - MORNING

The kids pile into the minivan for school. As Daniel climbs in, Esther drops something behind him and pretends to find it.

ESTHER
What's this?

She shows Kate a little PLASTIC BAGGIE OF WEED. Daniel blanches when he sees it. His treehouse stash.

INT. JOHN'S DEN - NIGHT

Kate and John confront Daniel.

DANIEL
I wasn't taking it to school!

KATE
Then what was it doing in your
backpack?

DANIEL
I don't know! She just put it there to
get me in trouble!

JOHN
Where would Esther have gotten pot?

DANIEL
(a beat, reluctant)
She saw me with it in the treehouse.

JOHN
Is that what you're doing out there
with Austin and Trevor? Smoking pot?!

Daniel stammers. John stews.

EXT. TREEHOUSE - DAY

John screws a hasp to the treehouse door with a POWER DRILL and slaps a PADLOCK on it. Daniel stands below, watching. John climbs down, shows Daniel the padlock key, and pockets it.

JOHN
Off limits until further notice.

He heads to the house. Esther is playing in the backyard. She takes John's hand and walks inside with him. Daniel watches them.

INT./EXT. KATE'S MINIVAN - DAY

Kate pulls out of the driveway with Esther in the back seat. As they leave the neighborhood, Joyce Patterson jogs by in her skimpy workout clothes. She waves. Kate gives a polite nod.

ESTHER

Why does she have to dress like that?

KATE

She just likes the attention.

ESTHER

Well, I think it's immodest. I don't know why Daddy likes her so much.

KATE

(a beat, apprehensive)

What do you mean?

ESTHER

He's always smiling at her and talking to her. She wants him to come over to her house. Did you know that?

(off Kate's look)

Please don't tell Daddy I told. I don't want him to be mad at me.

Kate doesn't respond, clearly disturbed.

EXT. DENTIST'S OFFICE - PARKING LOT - DAY

Kate gets out of the minivan, but Esther stays put in her seat. Kate sighs, frazzled and distracted.

KATE

Esther, come on.

ESTHER

I told you, I don't like the dentist.

KATE

There's nothing to be afraid of.

ESTHER

I know. Because I'm not going.

KATE

Esther, get out of the car! Right now!

For a moment, they just glare at each other. Mexican stand-off. Then Esther sticks her nose in the air and does as she's told.

INT. DENTIST'S OFFICE - EXAM ROOM - DAY

The DENTIST lowers Esther back in the chair, pulls on rubber gloves. The HYGIENIST clips a dental bib around Esther's neck.

HYGIENIST

She hasn't had a check-up in about two years, so she's a little nervous.

DENTIST

She doesn't look nervous to me. Now let's have a look at those choppers.

Esther just looks at the ceiling with her mouth tightly shut.

DENTIST

Come on, darling, open wide.

Esther eyes him anxiously, then reluctantly opens. Just a bit.

DENTIST

That a girl. Little wider...

She opens more. He leans in to take a look...

Suddenly, she CHOMPS down on his fingers hard enough to draw blood and locks on like a Rottweiler. The Hygienist is frozen in shock.

DENTIST

Aaagh! Goddammit!! Help me with her!

The Hygienist holds her down while the Dentist tries to pry her mouth open. Finally, he yanks his fingers free, cradling them painfully. Esther HISSES at him like a cat, lips flecked with blood. The Dentist and Hygienist exchange a startled look.

INT. DENTIST'S OFFICE - WAITING ROOM - DAY

Canned MUSAK. Kate sits waiting. The Hygienist enters.

HYGIENIST

Mrs. Coleman?

Kate gives her a confused look. Then she notices Esther standing behind the Hygienist with a smug grin on her face.

INT./EXT. KATE'S MINIVAN - DAY

Driving home. Kate stews, on her last frayed nerve. Esther gazes out the window, seemingly oblivious, singing a little nonsense song under her breath: "La-la-la, la-la-la-la... La-la-la..." Kate stops at a traffic light. Glances outside.

She's stopped next to a LIQUOR STORE. Kate quickly looks away, her temptation real enough to startle her. The light turns green and she drives off without looking back. Esther keeps SINGING.

A few blocks later, they pass a BAR. Then a bus shelter with a big ABSOLUTE VODKA AD. Kate probably drives by them every day, but now they're popping out at her, sly old enemies that never really left, re-emerging from the shadowy recesses of her mind.

She tries to focus on the road, Esther's VOICE grating in her head... "La-la-la, la-la-la-la... La-la-la, la-la-la-la..."

INT. FOYER - DAY

Kate and Esther enter. Esther skips upstairs. Kate sighs, angry and frustrated. She plays a message on the ANSWERING MACHINE.

SISTER ABIGAIL (V.O.)
Hello, this is Sister Abigail calling for John and Kate. Please call me as soon as you get this message. I have something that we need to discuss in person. It's regarding Esther.

UPSTAIRS

Esther stands at the top of the stairs, listening to the message. She's heard everything. And she's scared. Scared and pissed.

INT. KATE AND JOHN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Kate and John get ready for bed.

KATE
He's been our dentist for ten years.
Why would he lie to us?

JOHN
I didn't say he's lying. I just think he's blowing it out of proportion.

KATE
I saw the bite marks. We're lucky he's not suing us.

JOHN
Fine, but I don't believe for a second that she just did it for no reason.

KATE
That's because she's always on her best behavior with you.

JOHN
That's not true. I've had to deal with her at her worst.

KATE
What you think is her worst is what she's like with me all the time. She's
(MORE)

KATE (CONT'D)
completely different with me than she
is with you.

JOHN
So you've seen her haul off and bite
someone like an animal?

KATE
No, but she threw that fit at school --

JOHN
Yeah, because the other kids were
harassing her. It's the same thing
here.
(off her reaction)
She's from a completely different
culture, Kate. She has to be taught
that this behavior isn't appropriate,
but there's nothing malicious about it.
If she says she bit him because she was
scared and he was hurting her, I don't
see any reason not to believe her.

A beat. Kate looks at him. She's stewing about something.

KATE
So should I believe her when she says
you've been hitting on Joyce Patterson?

JOHN
(taken aback)
Did she say that?

KATE
Is it true?

JOHN
Of course not!

KATE
Did she invite you over?

JOHN
She wanted me to help her move a chair.

KATE
Oh, come on.

JOHN
All right, she was obviously coming on
to me. But I shut her down.

KATE
Then why didn't you tell me?

JOHN
Because I knew how you'd react!

KATE

Really? You sure it wasn't because you were coming on to her so obviously that an eight-year-old picked up on it?

A long beat. John sighs, resigned.

JOHN

How long are you going to keep this hanging over me? It was ten years ago.

KATE

You keep saying that. But it's only been about two years since you told me.

(a tense beat)

Having another child was supposed to bring us together.

JOHN

I'm sorry I didn't tell you about it. I just feel like I've earned a little trust here.

KATE

I don't know what you expect from me. I might never completely trust you again. Not like before.

JOHN

I gave you a second chance.

Kate stops short. His words are like a physical blow.

KATE

That's not fair.

JOHN

So you can keep bringing up my mistakes over and over, but we're not even allowed to discuss yours?

KATE

I was sick! You were just an asshole who wanted to fuck somebody else!

JOHN

You were a danger to our children. If I didn't want to make this work, I could have left months ago and nobody would have blamed me.

KATE

Nice. Is that what your mother told you?

Angry tears well in her eyes. He realizes he went too far. Kate goes into the bathroom and SLAMS the door.

INT. MAX'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

It's late. Esther and Max sit on the bed in their nightgowns. Only the bedside light is on. They're signing to one another.

ESTHER
THE MEAN LADY IS COMING TOMORROW.

MAX
I'M AFRAID. I DON'T WANT HER TO TAKE
YOU BACK TO THE HOME.

ESTHER
NEITHER DO I. WE HAVE TO SCARE HER
AWAY. WILL YOU HELP ME?

Max anxiously nods her head. Esther smiles.

INT. JOHN'S DEN - NIGHT

The room is dark. The girls sneak in, still in their nightgowns, and close the door. Esther turns on a reading lamp.

ESTHER
Look for the key to the treehouse.

Max nods and they start searching the room. Esther rifles through John's desk. Nothing. She looks in a closet. A DARK PLASTIC CASE with TWO PADLOCKS on it catches her eye...

Max opens a keepsake chest and finds SEVERAL KEYS on a ring. She excitedly shows them to Esther. Esther smiles and takes them. As they're about to leave, Esther pauses. She looks back at the closed closet. Then looks at the keys. Max eyes her curiously.

Esther slides a chair over to the closet and opens it. She stands on the chair, pulls down the case with the padlocks on it, and sets it on the floor. She tries a couple of keys. Then -- CLICK.

There's a GUN inside. A shiny revolver and a BOX OF AMMUNITION.

Esther's face lights up. She carefully picks up the gun, turns it over, looks at it. Max's eyes nearly pop out. Esther gives her a sly look, then loads a single bullet, SPINS the cylinder...

... and points the gun at Max. Right between the eyes.

ESTHER
Do you want to play?

A beat. Max shakes her head. Esther smiles, fingers the trigger. After a long, awful, pants-wetting eternity, she lowers the gun.

ESTHER
You're right. We'd better not.
(beat)
Not yet.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Sister Abigail sits across from Kate and John with a grave look.

SISTER ABIGAIL

When you first asked about adopting Esther, I expressed some misgivings. But I wasn't completely straightforward with you. You see, I love children. I've worked with them my entire life. And the thing about love is that it sometimes clouds your judgement.

(beat)

But the truth is that I knew there was something wrong with Esther from the moment I laid eyes on her.

Kate sits up, concerned. John bristles.

KATE

You said you suspected some kind of abuse.

SISTER ABIGAIL

Yes, but there was something else. It was hard to say what it was at first. Just a feeling that she was a profoundly damaged little girl.

(beat)

Then I noticed that she always seemed to be around whenever there was any kind of trouble. Two girls would get in a fight. And there she'd be. Someone would get caught stealing. And there she'd be again. I tried to tell myself it was a coincidence. But I never really believed it.

(beat)

After you told me about the girl who broke her arm, I started wondering again. I called the school Esther went to while she was with the Wallaces and asked if there'd been any serious accidents while she was there. One incident was still fresh in everyone's minds. A boy in one of her classes was stabbed in the throat with a pair of scissors. All the kids who saw it happen said it was an accident, that he was running with the scissors and fell. But once again, Esther was there.

ANGLE - ESTHER

is eavesdropping from around the corner. She slips away.

BACK TO SCENE

JOHN

But none of these things were her fault.

SISTER ABIGAIL

That's why I was reluctant to say anything before. Now I think that may have been a mistake.

(off their looks)

Children like Esther, who've spent their entire lives in institutions, have never had a chance to form normal, lasting bonds. The long-term effects of this can be devastating. In the very worst cases, children who fail to form early attachments are unable to learn the difference between right and wrong. They can lie, cheat, steal -- or worse -- and have no remorse whatsoever for their actions. They view other human beings as objects, pawns for their amusement. And they can be potentially very dangerous.

INT. ESTHER'S BEDROOM - DAY

Esther pulls on a pair of dainty white dress gloves, like she's dressing for Easter morning church service.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

JOHN

This doesn't sound like Esther at all.

SISTER ABIGAIL

A severely character-disturbed child can appear to be completely normal, even exceptional. It's like they have two faces -- one they show the outside world in order to get what they want, and the other, their true face, lying just beneath the surface.

INT. MAX'S BEDROOM - DAY

Max sits on her bed, wearing a jacket and clutching her "Hello Kitty" backpack. Anxious and waiting. Esther enters.

ESTHER

Let's go.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

KATE

What about the orphanage in Russia where she was raised? Wouldn't they have been able to tell?

SISTER ABIGAIL

I've put in a call to the director there, but she could have easily slipped through the cracks.

JOHN

So the bottom line here is that you don't have proof of any of this.

SISTER ABIGAIL

That's true, I don't. But I believe the circumstantial evidence is enough to warrant taking the next step.

KATE

Which is what?

SISTER ABIGAIL

Get Esther out of the house.

Kate and John are stunned.

JOHN

You want to disrupt the adoption over this?!

SISTER ABIGAIL

If I'm wrong, she can come back home. But you need to get her to a therapist who can tell you what you're dealing with.

JOHN

She's just a kid!

SISTER ABIGAIL

She's also the sole survivor of a house fire that killed her last family.

(off their looks)

It was arson. I did some checking. Someone deliberately set that fire. They never caught who did it.

JOHN

Wait a minute, you're not suggesting --

SISTER ABIGAIL

Pyromania is one of the warning signs of a character-disturbed child.

Kate blanches, realizing:

KATE
Do you think she had something to do
with what happened to Yolanda?

A long beat. Sister Abigail hesitates, reluctant to answer.

SISTER ABIGAIL
The thought that a child could commit
such a monstrous crime flies in the
face of everything I hold dear. But in
my opinion, it's a possibility that you
need to take very seriously.

INT. WORK SHED - DAY

Esther slides the door open on SCREECHING rails and steps inside.
Walks over to John's workbench. Looks at the TOOL RACK above it.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Kate and John are stunned by what Sister Abigail has told them.

JOHN
We can take her to Doctor Browning.
Kate suggested doing that weeks ago.
But I don't want to send her away. Not
without at least some kind of proof.

Sister Abigail sighs, frustrated. Kate turns to him:

KATE
But what if the doctor says she's
dangerous?

A beat. He considers, uncertain and emotional.

JOHN
Then I guess we won't have any choice.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Daniel sits near the brook, sullenly throwing rocks in the water.
He hears something behind him and turns. Esther and Max are
running off through the woods, leaves CRASHING under their feet.

Neither of them see him. He eyes them curiously.

EXT. COLEMAN RESIDENCE - DAY

Sister Abigail is leaving. Kate and John stand by the front door,
troubled, watching her go.

EXT. PRIVATE ROAD - DAY

Esther and Max run toward the bridge where the road into the neighborhood crosses the brook. They climb an embankment and crouch by the bridge abutment, out of breath. Esther looks both ways. There's no traffic. She and Max hide behind the abutment.

INT./EXT. SISTER ABIGAIL'S CAR - DAY

Sister Abigail drives away, troubled. She takes a pack of cigarettes from the glove compartment and lights one.

EXT. PRIVATE ROAD - DAY

The girls wait by the abutment. The only sound is the RIPPLING brook. Max looks nervous. Esther gives her a reassuring smile.

ESTHER

It's going to be fine. Just wave your arms and make sure she stops.

Max nods. Then Esther hears a CAR coming. She peers out from behind the abutment. It's Sister Abigail's car. Esther quickly ducks out of sight.

ESTHER

Here she comes. Wait until she gets close.

Max nervously peers out from behind the abutment. Esther stands behind her. The car starts across the bridge. Suddenly --

-- Esther pushes Max out into the road. Max stumbles and falls right in front of the speeding car.

Sister Abigail gasps and SLAMS on the brakes, TIRES SQUEALING, stopping the car mere feet from where Max lies in the road. She frantically jumps out of the car and kneels next to Max.

SISTER ABIGAIL

Dear Lord! Are you okay, honey?

Max looks up at her, stunned, but unhurt. Sister Abigail is taken aback. She recognizes her.

SISTER ABIGAIL

Max...?!

A SHADOW falls on Abigail from behind. She turns and looks up.

Esther looms over her, a CLAW HAMMER raised above her head.

Before Sister Abigail can react, Esther angrily hits her in the head as hard as she can with the hammer. CRUNCH.

Max startles, eyes wide with shock. Sister Abigail falls and lies twitching on the pavement. Eyes staring blankly, one pupil wide from the head trauma. Blood trickles from under her headdress.

As Max stares at the body, paralyzed with fear, Esther scurries into Sister Abigail's car and finds her purse. She flips through her wallet. Cash, credit cards. Takes it all. Finds her rosary beads. Grabs them, too. Then she hurries back to the body.

ESTHER

Help me get her off the road.

Max looks up blankly, then staggers to her feet. They each take a hand and start dragging Sister Abigail's body, but she's heavy and they're little. It's all they can do to slowly move her.

Then Esther hears something. There's ANOTHER CAR coming. It's still out of sight through the trees, but closing.

Esther and Max hurriedly drag the body, struggling it to the side of the road, just as the car rounds the bend. Esther gives the body a kick, sending it rolling down the embankment.

The car is almost on them. Esther and Max quickly hide under the bridge. Esther grabs Max's backpack and pulls out John's gun. The car reaches the bridge. Esther listens to it cross, tense, gun ready... but it passes Abigail's car and continues without stopping. Esther breathes a sigh of relief.

Suddenly, there's a CROAKING noise from behind them. Esther turns. It's Sister Abigail. She's still alive. She's trying to speak, but all that comes out is an awful MOAN.

Esther scowls and grabs the hammer. Sister Abigail looks up at her, moaning louder. Then Esther brings the hammer down. CRUNCH. The moans stop. Esther hits her AGAIN and AGAIN.

Max watches, almost catatonic with horror. Esther wipes her brow. Her pretty dress and white gloves are now splattered with blood.

ESTHER

Did you get any on you?

Max shakes her head, pale and shivering.

ESTHER

Good. Let's get her covered up.

Esther starts scooping leaves and debris onto Sister Abigail's corpse. Max just watches for a long beat... then shuffles over like a zombie and helps her. Esther smiles.

INT. TREEHOUSE - DAY

Esther is wearing a clean dress. She stuffs Max's "Hello Kitty" backpack under the loose floorboard where Daniel used to keep his weed. Max is huddled in a corner, still dazed. As they talk,

Esther places the bloody hammer and the things she took from Sister Abigail's car in a plastic grocery bag and ties it off.

ESTHER

If you tell on me, you'll get in trouble, too.

MAX

YOU TRICKED ME.

ESTHER

That doesn't matter. They'll send you to jail just for helping me bury her.

Max starts to cry. Esther moves closer, comforting.

ESTHER

She wanted to take me away from you.

(beat)

Now we can be together forever.

EXT. TREEHOUSE - DAY

Daniel heads home on the path through the forest. He hears a NOISE up ahead and sees Esther and Max emerge from the treehouse.

He quickly hides, watching. Esther locks the treehouse and looks around, but doesn't see him. She and Max climb down and walk home holding hands. Daniel peers out at them...

EXT. PARK - DAY

The usual suspects are here. Kids playing. Moms watching. The Homeless Guy with his shopping cart, rooting through a trash can. A VENDOR selling a SpongeBob popsicle from a cart. CAMERA FOLLOWS the SpongeBob pop as the Vendor hands it to a little girl...

It's Esther. She smiles at the Vendor and walks away. She spots the Homeless Guy across the park and casually heads toward him. As she approaches, we see that she's carrying the plastic grocery bag with the bloody hammer and Sister Abigail's things in it.

She carefully looks around to make sure nobody is watching, then nonchalantly tosses the incriminating bag into the Homeless Guy's shopping cart and keeps walking, sucking on her SpongeBob pop...

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Kate hangs up the phone and turns to John.

KATE

She's canceling some appointments so we can get her in tomorrow.

They hear Esther HUMMING upstairs and exchange a disquieted look.

INT. BATHROOM - DAY

Esther HUMS O.S. Her black velvet ribbons have been removed and laid out in a row on the counter. CAMERA MOVES to the bathtub, where Esther is taking a bath. The water is faintly red. She's scrubbing under her fingernails. Humming pleasantly to herself.

And now we see what the ribbons have been covering: she has thick, knotted scars all the way around her neck and wrists.

INT. JOHN'S DEN - NIGHT

John sits on his desk, eyeing Daniel wearily.

JOHN
Esther and Max? You saw them?

DANIEL
Uh-huh.

JOHN
The treehouse is still locked.

DANIEL
Esther had the keys.

JOHN
You mean these keys here?

He goes over to the keepsake chest and opens it. The KEY RING is there. He holds it up. Daniel flusters.

JOHN
You're not lying to get them in trouble, are you?

DANIEL
No, I swear!

JOHN
(sighs, exasperated)
I don't know what's got into you lately. Just go to your room.

Daniel leaves, dejected...

IN THE HALLWAY

... and trudges upstairs. He doesn't see Esther emerge from the shadows behind him. She glares angrily after him...

BACK IN THE DEN

Alone now, John looks at the key ring, considering. He goes to the closet, looks at the gun case. Takes it down. Unlocks it...

The gun is right where it belongs. He sighs and closes the case.

INT. DANIEL'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Daniel is in bed, sound asleep. The doorknob turns, the door CREAKS open. Someone sneaks into his room, approaching his bed. Turns on the bedside light. Daniel stirs, squinting, blinded.

It's Esther. Daniel looks up at her, confused. Suddenly, she grabs a fistful of his hair and SLAMS his head back against the pillow. Before he can call out, she whips out a PAIR OF SCISSORS and plunges them toward his face --

Daniel gasps, but the gleaming point of the scissors stops short, hovering less than an inch from his wide, staring eye.

ESTHER

Ssshhh.

Esther leans in, her face wild and terrifying. Daniel lies there breathless, paralyzed with fear. The scissors drift from his eye, down his body, between his legs. He whimpers and squirms, but she holds him fast by his hair. Her voice is an evil, sibilant hiss:

ESTHER

*You tell anybody what you saw and I
will cut your hairless little prick off
before you even figure out what it's
for. Do you understand me?*

She rapidly cuts the air with the scissors -- SNIP-SNIP! Daniel frantically nods his head. She twists his hair again.

ESTHER

Say it!

DANIEL

I won't tell! I won't tell, I promise!

She holds him for a beat, savoring his fear. A DARK STAIN seeps through the bedspread. Esther sees it and grins.

ESTHER

You pissed yourself.

Daniel is crying, humiliated, helpless, too terrified to dare make a sound. Finally, she releases him and turns off the light. As quickly as it began, it ends. When she's gone, Daniel curls up in a ball and buries his face in his pillow to stifle his sobs.

INT. DOCTOR BROWNING'S OFFICE - WAITING ROOM - DAY

A SECRETARY sits behind a desk. Kate flips through a magazine. John glances at his watch. Kate gives him a nervous look. A moment later, Dr. Browning emerges from her office with Esther.

ESTHER

It was nice talking to you, Alice. I hope we can be friends.

DR. BROWNING
I'd like that.
(to Kate and John)
You can come on in.

INT. DOCTOR BROWNING'S OFFICE - DAY

Dr. Browning's manner is serious. Kate and John sit, anxious.

DR. BROWNING
Well, let's start with what you came
here for. You don't have anything to
be worried about with Esther.

John breathes a sigh of relief. Kate gives a dubious smile.

KATE
She's not dangerous?

DR. BROWNING
No, of course not.

JOHN
Thank God.

DR. BROWNING
It's not all good news. You do have a
serious problem in your home.
(beat)
But the real issue is with you, Kate.

Kate reacts, stunned.

INT. DOCTOR BROWNING'S OFFICE - WAITING ROOM - DAY

Esther fidgets, impatient. She turns to the Secretary:

ESTHER
May I go to the restroom?

INT. DOCTOR BROWNING'S OFFICE - DAY

Dr. Browning continues. Kate can't believe what she's hearing:

DR. BROWNING
I was able to coax her into admitting
that there's been some tension between
the two of you. She's really trying
very hard to please you. The problem
is that you're blocking her attempts to
attach with you. That's why whenever
something bad happens, you blame her,
whether it's really her fault or not.

KATE
But that's not what's been happening --

DR. BROWNING

I doubt you're even aware that you're doing it. But subconsciously, you want her to be bad because demonizing her is your way of covering your own feelings of inadequacy as a mother.

KATE

I don't feel inadequate.

DR. BROWNING

But you do have doubts. You worry that you could relapse.

KATE

What does that have to do with Esther?

DR. BROWNING

Frankly, everything. Your guilt over what happened with Max is preventing you from bonding with Esther.

Kate turns to John, aghast, but he's taking this very seriously.

DR. BROWNING

It's made you doubt your fitness as a mother. And that terrifies you. So you're having trouble with Esther, along comes Sister Abigail with these stories about her being some kind of monster and you believe them because it's easier than dealing with your fear that there's something wrong with you.

KATE

What the hell did she tell you?

DR. BROWNING

Let's not make this about her. I made real progress with her today and I can tell you with complete certainty that Esther is not to blame here.

INTERCUT:

INT. RESTROOM - DAY

CAMERA MOVES IN on one of the stalls. Esther is inside, huddled in a ball, muttering to herself, her eyes glassy and staring...

ESTHER

She didn't see. She doesn't know.
Kuradi lits! She doesn't know!

She starts POUNDING the walls of the stall with her fists. We CUT between her and Dr. Browning talking to Kate:

DR. BROWNING
She's an extremely bright, thoughtful,
sensitive little girl going through a
very challenging time.

Esther clutches her head, rocking back and forth.

ESTHER
*Thinks she knows me!! Munni imeja!!
She didn't see, she doesn't know!!*

DR. BROWNING
You just have to learn to be more
patient. You're really very lucky to
have her.

END INTERCUT:

Esther's fit has passed. She neatly composes herself and emerges from the stall... and sees that there's a WOMAN at the sink. She eyes Esther warily. Probably heard everything. Esther hesitates, then walks right by with her nose in the air.

INT. GARAGE - DAY

John pulls the car in out of the RAIN. They get out and Esther goes inside. When Kate is sure she's out of earshot:

KATE
Thanks for the support back there.

JOHN
Hey, I'm not a psychiatrist. And a lot
of what she's saying makes sense.

Before she can respond, Kate's cell phone RINGS. She turns away from John and answers it. He sighs and goes inside.

KATE
Hello?

SISTER JUDITH (V.O.)
Is this Mrs. Coleman?

KATE
Yes. Who's calling?

SISTER JUDITH (V.O.)
This is Sister Judith from Saint
Cabrini's. I'm sorry to bother you.
Did Sister Abigail make it to her
appointment with you yesterday?

THUNDER rolls.

EXT. PRIVATE ROAD - NIGHT

CRIME SCENE TAPE flutters in the rain. POLICE CARS are parked on the roadside, lights FLASHING. DETECTIVES shine flashlights under the bridge. Sister Abigail's body has been discovered.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Kate and John sit across from a POLICE DETECTIVE and TWO UNIFORMED PATROL OFFICERS. Kate and John are still in shock.

JOHN

We'll help in any way we can. We at least owe her that much.

KATE

Do you have any idea who could have done this?

DETECTIVE

We have a suspect in custody based on an anonymous tip. We're just trying to place him at the time we think the murder took place.

JOHN

Who is it?

DETECTIVE

I can't tell you that right now. But he was found with the murder weapon, along with some cash and credit cards.

JOHN

Jesus... What kind of sick monster carjacks a nun?

Kate glances up, sees Esther crouched on the stairs, watching...

INT. FAMILY ROOM - DAY

Daniel sits in a big recliner, sullenly playing a VIDEO GAME SHOOT-EM-UP. Kate is researching on the internet. We get CLOSE SHOTS of some of her Google results, INTERCUT with Daniel BLASTING AWAY at alien baddies, his face angry and intense:

"Character-disturbed Children." BLAM!-BLAM!-BLAM! "Antisocial Personality Disorder." BLAM!-BLAM! "Children Who Kill."

Esther enters holding Max's hand, leading her around like a pet. Max numbly follows. They walk up to Daniel in the recliner.

ESTHER

We want to sit there.

KATE

Esther, Daniel was there first.

Daniel eyes Esther. Wary, but defiant. She sighs and makes a "cutting" motion with two fingers. Daniel brusquely turns off the game and gets out of the chair. As he leaves, Kate calls out:

KATE
Daniel? Daniel?

He ignores her and stomps upstairs. She watches him, concerned.

INT. JOHN'S DEN - NIGHT

Kate shows John some pages she's printed out from the internet.

KATE
This is what Sister Abigail was telling us about. Character-disturbed children. Look at the symptoms.
(reading)
"Superficially charming. Difficulty making and keeping friends. Cruelty to pets. Bossy and controlling. Overly affectionate with strangers."

JOHN
"Extended period of bedwetting. Speech pathology. Abnormal eye contact." She doesn't have half of these.

KATE
I still think Doctor Browning could have missed something. Esther could have just told her what she wanted to hear. Look.
(flips pages, reading)
"Character-disturbed children are adroit manipulators. They can be exceptionally charismatic, oftentimes playing people off one another to get what they want."

JOHN
Have you showed this to Doctor Browning?

KATE
(hesitates)
I'm not seeing her anymore.

JOHN
You're not going to therapy? When did you decide that?

KATE
When do you think?

John sighs. A tense beat.

JOHN

I know you were upset. But we have to at least consider the possibility that she's right about this.

KATE

No, we don't. Why does everybody around here get the benefit of the doubt from you except me?

JOHN

That's not true. I'm just worried about you, that's all. We can hire someone to help you with the kids if it's getting to be too much.

KATE

I don't need help. All I want is for a doctor who knows what they're doing to give us a second opinion.

INTERCUT:

INT. ESTHER'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

All the lights are out except for the BLACK LIGHT in the aquarium. Esther is touching up the PAINTING OF THE MOTHER LION we saw when we first met her, but we can't see what she's doing to it. The black light causes some of the paints on her palette to fluoresce.

John and Kate's VOICES carry up through the heating vent:

JOHN

We're not going to keep taking her to doctors until you hear what you want to hear.

KATE

That's not what I'm trying to do! I want this to work just as much as you do, but there are serious questions that we still don't have the answers to. If Sister Abigail was right about Esther, then people are dead because of her!

JOHN

She didn't really believe that.

KATE

She didn't want to believe it. But she was worried enough to think we should put her in foster care until we found out for sure.

JOHN

For all her good intentions, Sister Abigail was not a trained psychologist. She had certain suspicions about Esther and they turned out to be wrong. Why can't you accept that?

KATE

(a beat, thinks)

What if somebody else thought there was something wrong with her? Like the director of the orphanage in Russia?

Esther stops painting and listens, suddenly apprehensive.

KATE

If it's a dead end, I'll drop it. But if they say the same thing, then we'd have to get a second opinion.

John considers. He doesn't want to be unreasonable. He nods.

JOHN

All right. See what you can find out.

END INTERCUT:

Esther fumes. She angrily throws her painting across the room.

INT. KATE AND JOHN'S BATHROOM - MORNING

John is shaving with his shirt off. He sees Esther in the reflection, slyly watching him. She smiles at him.

ESTHER

Will you take me to school today?

JOHN

You'll have to get ready early.

ESTHER

I don't mind.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Kate is on the phone. She has pen and paper ready to take notes.

KATE

Sister Judith? Hi, this is Kate Coleman. I was wondering if you'd heard from anyone at the Sludianka Orphan's Shelter in Russia. Sister Abigail said that... Oh, you did?
(listens, troubled)
What do you mean?... Well, I don't understand. How could they not have any record of her being there?

(MORE)

KATE (CONT'D)
(listens)
Yes, please. Call me the moment you
hear anything. Thank you.

She hangs up, disturbed.

INT. JOHN'S CAR - MORNING

John drives. Esther rides next to him. She SNIFFLES and he realizes that she's holding back tears.

JOHN
What's the matter?

ESTHER
I don't want to go to school.

JOHN
Why not?

ESTHER
I hate it. Nobody likes me there.
Nobody ever likes me.

She stares forlornly out the window. Big sad eyes. John sighs.

JOHN
You want to play hooky?
(off her look)
I can call in sick and we'll go to the
zoo. What do you think?

Esther smiles through her tears.

ESTHER
I'd like that very much.

EXT. ELEMENTARY SCHOOL - MORNING

Kate drives up the steep hill in front of Daniel and Esther's school and stops at the end of a long line of parents dropping kids off. Daniel gets out without looking at Kate.

KATE
Daniel, wait a minute.

He hangs back. Kate gives him and Max a concerned look.

KATE
How are you guys getting along with
Esther?

Daniel freezes. An apprehensive look passes between him and Max.

DANIEL
Fine, I guess.

KATE

Does she ever make you guys feel uncomfortable or do things you know she's not supposed to? Has she ever hurt either of you?

Daniel wants to say something, but the frightened look on Max's face stops him. Kate realizes she's struck a nerve.

KATE

Please. You can tell me anything.

DANIEL

I gotta go.

Before Kate can stop him, he closes the car door and runs off.

EXT. ZOO - DAY

John and Esther walk by the LION exhibit. She takes John's hand and presses it to her cheek.

ESTHER

You don't know how long I've waited for a daddy just like you.

JOHN

And a mommy, too. Right?

Esther hesitates. John notices. She gives a sad shrug.

ESTHER

I don't think Mommy likes me very much.

John is taken aback. An awkward beat.

JOHN

That's not true. Mommy loves you.

ESTHER

It's all right. I understand if she doesn't. It must be difficult to love an adopted child as much as your own.

JOHN

Sweetheart, you are just as much a part of this family as Danny and Max are. Mommy doesn't love you any less because you're adopted. Do you understand?

She nods, but doesn't look convinced. John thinks.

JOHN

Why don't you do something special for her? So she can see what a good girl you are. I'll bet she'd like that.

Esther's face brightens.

ESTHER
That's a wonderful idea. I think I
know just what I'm going to do, too.

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

After dinner. Kate is loading the dishwasher. John is bringing in dirty dishes from the dining room. Esther enters, all smiles. Hands hidden behind her back. John gives Kate an expectant smile.

ESTHER
I have a special surprise for you,
Mommy.

Kate eyes her warily. No idea what to expect.

KATE
You do?

ESTHER
I picked this flower just for you!

It's Kate's memorial orchid. Kate gasps. John is horrified. Kate reaches for the flower.

KATE
Esther! Put that down --!

Esther laughs and playfully pulls it away. Kate grabs her by the wrist and Esther suddenly drops the flower, SHRIEKING in pain.

ESTHER
You're hurting me!

Kate releases her, startled by Esther's overreaction. Esther runs from the room, crying and clutching her wrist.

JOHN
What the hell did you do to her?

KATE
I just grabbed her arm!

John hurries after Esther. Kate hangs back, picks the orchid up from off the floor. It's ruined.

INT. FAMILY ROOM - NIGHT

Esther sits on the sofa, still crying. John comforts her. Kate looks in on them. John shoots her an angry look.

INT. WORK SHED - NIGHT

Darkness. Esther slips inside, closes the door, turns on a light.

Goes to the workbench. There's a VICE bolted to it. She finds some rags and wraps them around her wrist where Kate grabbed her. Then she places her wrist in the vice, puts the handle of a SCREWDRIVER between her teeth, and bites down on it.

She takes a couple of deep breaths and starts closing the vice on her arm. Grimacing in agony, screwdriver clenched between her teeth against the pain, she twists the vice tighter and tighter...

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

Kate sits at the table. John has calmed down, but is still angry.

KATE
She knew what it meant to me. She did it on purpose.

JOHN
It wasn't even her idea.
(off her look)
I'm the one who told her she should try to do something nice for you.

He leaves.

INT. ESTHER'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

It's late. The room is dark. Esther plaintively calls out:

ESTHER
Daddy! Daddy!

The door opens. John blearily enters in his pajamas.

JOHN
What is it, sweetheart?

ESTHER
My arm hurts.

JOHN
Okay. Let me see.

He turns on a bedside lamp and sits on the bed. She pulls up her sleeve, cringing. Her wrist is mottled with HORRIFIC BRUISES.

INT. EMERGENCY ROOM - CURTAIN AREA - NIGHT

A camera flash POPS. Esther is in a hospital gown (still wearing her black ribbons) while a SOCIAL WORKER photographs the bruises.

INT. EMERGENCY ROOM - EXAM ROOM - NIGHT

Kate and John sit across from a harried ER DOCTOR. An x-ray of Esther's arm is clipped to a light box.

ER DOCTOR
It's a hairline fracture in her radius.

KATE
I swear, I barely touched her.

ER DOCTOR
(skeptical)
You'll need to talk to the social worker about that. She's going to come in here and ask you some questions.

JOHN
But it was just an accident.

ER DOCTOR
It's routine. We're required by law to file a report. Child Protective Services will be in touch to schedule a follow-up visit at your home.

Kate is shocked. John shoots her a dirty look.

INT. FOYER - NIGHT

Home from the hospital. It's very late. The kids are wearing coats over their pajamas. Esther's arm is in a fiberglass cast. John is carrying Max, who has fallen asleep.

As they start upstairs, Kate reaches out to John. He hangs back. Daniel and Esther go to their rooms. When they're gone:

KATE
You know I would never hurt any of the kids on purpose.

JOHN
I know. It's not what you do on purpose that scares me.

He turns away and takes Max upstairs. Kate watches him go.

INT. MUSIC ROOM - NIGHT

Kate sits curled up on the window seat by the planter, holding the wilting orchid and sobbing inconsolably, old wounds re-opened...

INT. KATE AND JOHN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Dark. John is asleep, alone in the bed. The door is ajar. Esther appears in the doorway. She peers in, watching him sleep.

After a beat, she gathers her courage and quietly enters, tiptoeing toward the bed. She pulls back the covers and climbs in next to him. John doesn't stir. Esther curls up beside him.

INT. KATE'S MINIVAN - DAY

It's raining. Kate sits in the parked van. No sound except RAINDROPS TAPPING the roof. She's looking out at something.

It's the LIQUOR STORE she drove by earlier. She's parked in front of it, staring at it through the rain-streaked windshield...

INT. LIQUOR STORE - NIGHT

Kate puts TWO BOTTLES OF WINE on the counter. The CASHIER rings them up. She's anxious, guilty, already hating herself.

KATE

We're having guests over for dinner.

The Cashier nods. Like he gives a shit. Kate lowers her eyes.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

The two wine bottles sit on the kitchen counter. One bottle is open, a GLASS already poured. But Kate's not drinking it. She's just standing there, arms folded, looking at it. The house is quiet. She's alone here. Only her demons to keep her company.

A long moment of awful indecision passes, Kate paralyzed. Then she looks up, her gaze moving past the wine glass to the window.

Through it, she can see the backyard. It's the swimming pool that holds her eyes, its cold surface rippling in the rain. But she's seeing something else there, something awful. Impossible to know what she's thinking, but whatever it is, it moves her to action:

She abruptly grabs the glass and quickly empties it in the sink before she can change her mind. Then she grabs the open wine bottle and pours it all down the drain. She runs the water and scrubs the sink with her fingertips, removing every trace. Tosses the empty bottle in the trash and ties up the garbage bag.

EXT. COLEMAN RESIDENCE - DAY

Kate hurries out in the rain and stuffs the kitchen trash in the garbage can, burying it under another bag.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Kate re-enters, dripping wet. There's still the other wine bottle. The unopened one. She hesitates.

INT. KATE AND JOHN'S BEDROOM - DAY

Kate's in the walk-in closet. She hides the wine bottle in a cubby in her shoe rack and turns out the light.

INT. KATE'S MINIVAN - MORNING

Driving the kids to school. Kate looks drawn and weak. Daniel and Max stare off into space. Esther holds a stack of her paintings in her lap, obliviously prattling:

ESTHER

I can't wait for show-and-tell. I hope Mrs. Grosse likes my paintings. I did one especially for her.

Nobody responds. Kate's blocking her out. Esther doesn't mind.

EXT. ELEMENTARY SCHOOL/INT. KATE'S MINIVAN - MORNING

Kate drives up the hill and pulls to the curb. Daniel gets out, but Esther struggles, her wrist cast making her clumsy, and she awkwardly fumbles her paintings. They land in the gutter and start blowing away. She gives Kate a horrible, pleading look.

ESTHER

Mommy! My paintings!

Kate eyes her accusingly.

KATE

You dropped them on purpose.

ESTHER

No, I didn't! I swear!

Kate doesn't believe it for a second, but sees a CROSSING GUARD and a FEW KIDS hurrying to grab the paintings as they're carried off by the wind. Kate shoots Esther a dirty look, then sets the parking brake with an exasperated sigh and gets out to help...

But the second Kate is out of the van, *Esther springs into action like a snake that's been poised to strike*. She quickly puts the gear shift in neutral and grabs the parking brake. Max gives her an alarmed look. Esther smiles at her... and releases the brake.

Daniel sees Esther jump out of the van, just as it starts to roll back down the hill.

DANIEL

Mom!

Frazzled, Kate turns to Daniel. He points to the van.

KATE

Shit!

She hurries after it, but it's already moving too fast, picking up speed, rolling into oncoming traffic. Kate goes into a panic-fueled run, surprise erupting into horror.

KATE

MAX!

Drivers HONK and swerve as the van gains speed and scrapes along a row of parked cars, SHEERING OFF the open passenger side door.

Max is trapped in her car seat, helpless, eyes wide in mute terror, as the minivan clears the parked cars, headed for the intersection at the bottom of the hill. Kate chases it, powerless to do anything but watch.

KATE

MAAAAAX!!!

The minivan careens into the intersection. Tires SQUEAL, horns HONK, cars weave and skid to a halt. The van shoots through it all and CRASHES into a streetlight on the opposite corner.

Kate frantically dashes across the street, hysterical with fear, and throws open the back door. Max is crying and terrified, but safe. Kate scoops Max into her arms, clutching her to her chest.

KATE

It's okay, baby. It's okay, you're all right. Mommy's got you...

BACK AT THE SCHOOL

A crowd has gathered out front. Daniel is horrified, watching breathlessly until he sees Kate pull Max safely from the van.

A wave of relief washes over him. Then he whirls angrily, looking for Esther. He spots her through the crowd, blithely headed to class, paintings under her arm, as if nothing has happened.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Kate sits across from John and Dr. Browning. The mood is grim.

KATE

I set the brake. Even if I hadn't, the police said it wouldn't have rolled unless it was put in neutral.

DR. BROWNING

But Max says she didn't see Esther do anything wrong.

KATE

Max is covering for her. And I don't think it's the first time.

DR. BROWNING

It also wouldn't be the first time that you've tried to blame Esther for something that was really your fault.

KATE
This isn't all in my head. Sister Abigail was right. There is something wrong with Esther. And I don't care anymore if I can't prove it. I want her out of this house.

John and Dr. Browning exchange a dark look.

DR. BROWNING
So you're at a place where you would actually let somebody take her away?

KATE
I'll do whatever I have to do to protect my children.

JOHN
So will I.
(re: Dr. Browning)
That's why she's here.

Something in his voice makes Kate apprehensive. An uneasy beat.

DR. BROWNING
I have an opening held for you at a residential rehabilitation clinic about forty-five miles from here. They specialize in extended treatment for women who are relapsed alcoholics.

Kate is stunned silent. She gapes at them with a mix of anger and fear, unable to stop a flash of guilt. *How much do they know...?*

KATE
What are you talking about?

JOHN
I'll stand by you through this for as long as it takes. My mom's already agreed to help look after the kids.

KATE
Tell her not to bother.
(to Dr. Browning)
I'd like you to leave now.

JOHN
Kate, don't.

John stands and takes something from inside the sideboard. He sets it on the coffee table between them...

It's the wine bottle she hid in her closet. Kate is stricken. She looks at it like it was a poisonous spider.

JOHN
The girls found it while they were
playing in your closet.

KATE
"The girls?" You mean Esther found it.

JOHN
Yes, Esther found it. Does that make a
difference? Is she lying?

A beat. Kate's silence is answer enough.

KATE
I didn't... I bought two bottles. I
poured the other one down the sink.

JOHN
But not this one.

Again, no answer necessary. Kate looks defeated, tears welling.

KATE
I'm not going to rehab.

JOHN
I'm not going to leave you alone with
the kids again until you do.

KATE
I haven't had a drink in almost a year.

John sighs, frustrated. Dr. Browning intervenes, her voice
infuriatingly even and calm.

DR. BROWNING
Relapse is very common in early
sobriety. We can help you. But not
until you drop the charade.

KATE
It's not a charade. I wanted to drink
it. You have no fucking idea how badly
I wanted to drink it. But I didn't.
(off John's look)
I know I should have told you. I was
just afraid of what you'd do.

JOHN
I wanted you to come to me. That's why
I didn't confront you with it last
night. If Max had gotten hurt this
morning, it would've been because I
trusted you tell me if there was a
problem.

KATE

What happened this morning had nothing to do with this!

JOHN

How do you expect me to believe that?

KATE

Max and Daniel are the only reason I'm still sober. I would never do anything that would hurt them.

DR. BROWNING

You don't think this behavior effects them?

KATE

You know damn well what I'm talking about.

Her voice is brittle now, barely controlled. A beat. The tears start to spill.

KATE

When I look out at the pool and think...

(to John)

When I try to imagine what would have happened if you hadn't come home early that day... it makes me want to kill myself. I would die before I let something like that happen again.

JOHN

Then why not throw both bottles away?

KATE

Because I need help. I thought I could handle it myself, but I can't. I'll go back to therapy. I'll start going to A.A. meetings.

JOHN

That's not enough anymore. I told you last time what I'd do if this ever happened again. I'm trying to give you another chance.

KATE

You haven't heard a word I've said.

JOHN

I've heard enough. If it was just the two of us, that would be one thing. But I can't let you be in a position where you could hurt the kids.

KATE

I'm not the one you need to be worried about! Seven people close to Esther have died in the past year. Max was almost the eighth. How many more coincidences are you willing to ignore?

JOHN

Kate, stop it. You're talking about an eight-year-old girl. And right now she's making a lot more sense than you are.

KATE

I know I haven't given you any reason to believe me. But you have to. I'm begging you.

JOHN

I'm sorry. Maybe if you'd been honest with me from the start. But not now.

ANGLE - MAX AND ESTHER

peer around the corner, watching them argue. Max is crying.

JOHN

You either check into rehab this week or I leave and I take the kids with me.

Esther leans close and whispers into Max's hearing aid:

ESTHER

I'll kill her if you tell.

Max gives her a frightened look. Just then, Doris appears with a bowl of popcorn. She quickly shoos the girls away.

DORIS

Come on, you two. Let's go watch TV.

Max wipes her eyes. Esther takes her hand and leads her away.

EXT. COLEMAN RESIDENCE - NIGHT

John walks Doris out to her car. He gives her a hug.

JOHN

You sure you don't mind? She's not going to appreciate your being around.

DORIS

I don't care what she appreciates. You can't leave those kids alone with her while you're at work all day.

(off his look)

(MORE)

DORIS (CONT'D)
You're doing the right thing. Don't
let her change your mind.

JOHN
I'll see you tomorrow.

Doris gets in her car. John looks conflicted.

INT. UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - NIGHT

Bedtime. Esther can be heard HUMMING through the closed bathroom door. Daniel listens as he sneaks down the hall in his pajamas...

INT. MAX'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Max's eyes are red from crying. She's drawing a picture, but hides it under some other papers when Daniel enters. He closes the door. Esther's HUMMING can be heard O.S. A tense beat.

DANIEL
Are you okay?

Max nods. Daniel sits down next to her. He lowers his voice.

DANIEL
Did Esther do something to the van?

Max turns away and shakes her head.

DANIEL
It's okay. You can tell me. I saw her
jump out before it started to roll.

Max gives him a startled look, suddenly frightened.

MAX
DID YOU TELL ON HER?

DANIEL
No way. Dad won't believe me. You
have to do it with me.

Max shakes her head and starts signing, but Daniel can't keep up.

DANIEL
Slow down, I don't understand. Did she
make the van crash?

A long beat. Max reluctantly nods.

DANIEL
Then we have to tell Mom and Dad.

Max starts crying. She signs, but Daniel doesn't understand. Frustrated, Max starts hitting him. Daniel grabs her arms.

DANIEL
Stop it! She's going to kill us if we
don't tell! Mom and Dad can protect
us!

Max shakes her head. Daniel releases her.

DANIEL
Why not?

MAX
NOBODY CAN.

Daniel stops short. Max hesitates, then gets up and shows him the pictures that she hid from him when he first came in.

They're crude crayon drawings of Max and Esther. In the first, Esther stands atop the rocket ship slide and pushes Brenda down the stairs while Max watches.

The next one turns Daniel's blood cold. It's of Sister Abigail's murder. Esther stands over Sister Abigail with a bloody hammer while Max cowers under the bridge. The last one is of Esther and Max in the treehouse. Esther is covered in blood.

DANIEL
What did she do in the treehouse?

MAX
SHE PUT THE BAD THINGS THERE.

Suddenly, Esther's O.S. humming STOPS. Daniel looks up, alarmed.

DANIEL
She's coming.

Max quickly hides the pictures. Daniel scrambles to the door, but pauses and signs to Max as best he can.

DANIEL
Everything's going to be all right.

INT. UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - NIGHT

Daniel hurries back to his room and closes the door, just as Esther emerges from the bathroom. She pauses, suspicious.

INT. KATE AND JOHN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Kate and John are in bed. It's 3:23 a.m. They both appear to be sleeping. Then Kate moves. She's still wide awake.

She looks over at John, slowly pushes the covers back, and inches out of bed so that he doesn't wake up. She quietly dresses.

INT. UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - NIGHT

Kate emerges from their bedroom with a small OVERNIGHT BAG and creeps into the dark hallway, careful not to make any noise. She stops by the door of Max's bedroom and slowly opens it.

INT. MAX'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Kate slips inside, closes the door, and starts toward Max's bed...

Suddenly, a desk light comes on. It's Esther. She's been sitting there in the dark. The light casts strange shadows on her face.

ESTHER

Going somewhere, Kate?

Kate startles and whirls to check on Max. She's fast asleep.

ESTHER

She's fine. Let's not wake her.

KATE

What are you doing in here?

ESTHER

I couldn't sleep. I was afraid you might try to take Daniel and Max away.

Kate stands frozen, frustrated and angry.

KATE

Go to your room.

ESTHER

(laughs)

Honestly, we're past that now, aren't we?

KATE

I'm not going to let you hurt my children.

ESTHER

I'm not the one who passed out drunk and let Max almost drown in the pool.

(confidentially)

I hear the first step is admitting that you have a problem.

KATE

(a beat, stricken)

Who told you about that?

Esther holds up Kate's journal. Kate blanches.

ESTHER

It's in your journal. I found it a few weeks ago. It's very intimate. I learned so much about you. Your marital troubles, your drinking problem. Where you hide your wine bottles. You have lovely handwriting, by the way. Would you like to hear my favorite part?

Esther has a page marked. She reads:

ESTHER

"Eight weeks before my due date, Jessica died from several undiagnosed birth defects. I hadn't felt her move for days, but now that I knew she was dead, I started to feel her kick again. It's called phantom fetal movement, like the pain felt in a missing limb. I was an amputee and my baby was the lost part of me. Because of other complications, Doctor Kosgrove didn't want to induce. So I had to wait to go into labor. For sixteen days I carried Jessica's body and felt her ghost kicking in my belly. My womb was now a coffin and inside me slept a corpse."

(to Kate)

How perfectly hideous. No wonder you turned into a nasty, smelly drunk.

Kate is dumbfounded, trembling with impotent rage and raw emotion.

ESTHER

You don't know how lucky you are, Kate. I'll never have children of my own. My father saw to that while I was still in diapers. I actually don't remember a time when he wasn't hurting me.

(off Kate's look)

I don't want your pity. He did it to make me strong. So I wouldn't turn out weak and pathetic like you.

KATE

I'm not weak.

ESTHER

Please. You're soft. Like a worm. Losing your baby could have made you stronger. But for you it's always more therapy and more pills and more booze. Anything so that you don't have to actually face the sorry state of your miserable existence. And why should you? You've got John to carry your dead weight around. But you know

(MORE)

ESTHER (CONT'D)
something? You don't deserve him. And
sooner or later, he's going to figure
that out.

Esther stands up to leave. Kate blocks her path.

ESTHER
What are you going to do? Hit me?

Kate looks really tempted. A beat. She puts out her hand for the
journal. Esther gives it to her with a smile. Kate steps aside.

ESTHER
See you tomorrow.

She leaves. Kate glares after her.

INT. KATE AND JOHN'S BEDROOM - DAY

Kate is on the phone, angry, trying to keep her voice low:

KATE
I need to know where she came from and
I need to know now.

INTERCUT:

INT. HOME FOR GIRLS - OFFICE - DAY

Sister Judith talks to Kate on the phone, looking harried.

SISTER JUDITH
I'm sorry, we've called every orphanage
in Moscow trying to find out.

KATE
We adopted her from you! How can you
not know anything about her?!

SISTER JUDITH
The Wallaces could have adopted her
illegally. Are you sure she doesn't
remember anything that could help us?

END INTERCUT:

KATE
I'll call you back.

She curtly hangs up.

INT. FAMILY ROOM - DAY

Doris plays a game with the kids. Esther feigns nonchalance, but
the tension is thick between Daniel and Max. Doris is oblivious.

DORIS
I say Professor Plum did it in the
Conservatory with the candlestick...

INT. ESTHER'S BEDROOM - DAY

Kate rifles through Esther's things. She finds the life book that she gave Esther and flips through it. The pages are still blank except for the family photos that Kate put in for her.

Then she notices that the first page has been torn out. And on the page captioned "ESTHER JOINS THE FAMILY," Esther's face has been meticulously cut out of the family photograph. Creepy.

Kate ransacks the room, searching for something, anything. Then she notices a stuffed doll that she just knocked over. Its dress has been flipped up, revealing a slit cut in the doll's back. She grabs it. Something has been hidden in the stuffing...

It's Esther's Bible. Kate pulls it out and quickly looks through the pictures that Esther keeps inside. They're the same photos of the Wallaces that we saw earlier. With one new addition.

It's the missing page from Esther's life book, the picture of Kate and John at their wedding. But the face that Esther cut out from the other picture has been glued over Kate's face here, making it look like John and Esther are getting married.

The caption is still "MOMMY & DADDY GET MARRIED." Kate shudders.

KATE
Jesus Christ...

She flips through the Bible and shakes it, but there's nothing else. She notices that the Bible is in a foreign language. There's an ink stamp on the inside cover. It's in the same language as the Bible. "See on Saarne Instituut omand."

She focuses on two words: *Saarne Instituut.*

INT. FAMILY ROOM - DAY

Daniel gets up from the game.

DORIS
Where are you going?

DANIEL
Bathroom.

Esther eyes him as he leaves.

INT. DOWNSTAIRS HALLWAY - DAY

Daniel hurriedly sneaks toward John's den, but stops just outside. He hears a keyboard CLACKING and warily peers around the corner.

Kate is working on John's computer. Daniel eyes the KEEPSAKE BOX. No way to get to it unseen. He thinks a beat, then slips away...

INT. JOHN'S DEN - DAY

Kate googles "SAARNE INSTITUUT." All the sites that come up are in the same language as Esther's Bible. She sighs, frustrated.

Then she sees something -- a photo of a Gothic mansion. The sign out front reads: "Saarne Instituut." Kate recognizes it instantly. It's the same Gothic mansion from Esther's paintings.

She scours the web site for anything decipherable. There's a link: "KONTAKT JA INFO." She clicks it. There's a phone number.

INT. GARAGE - DAY

Daniel looks around, finds what he's looking for: a TIRE IRON.

INT. JOHN'S DEN - DAY

Kate is on the phone, anxiously listening to the TONE of a foreign telephone ringing. Then:

RECEPTIONIST #1 (V.O.)
*Saarne Instituut. Kas ma saan teid
aidata?*

KATE
Uh, hello. I'm sorry, do you speak
English?

RECEPTIONIST #1 (V.O.)
Kuidas, palun?

KATE
Do you speak English? Does anybody
there speak English? This is very
important.

RECEPTIONIST #1 (V.O.)
Ma ei saa aru. Oota üks silmapilk.

Kate starts to say something, but she's interrupted by HOLD MUSIC.

EXT. TREEHOUSE - DAY

Daniel runs to the treehouse with the tire iron. He stops and looks around. The coast is clear. He starts climbing...

INT. JOHN'S DEN - DAY

Kate is still on hold. Finally, a MAN picks up. He speaks English with the same ACCENT as Esther.

RECEPTIONIST #2 (V.O.)
Hello?

KATE
Is this the Saarne Institute?

RECEPTIONIST #2 (V.O.)
Yes.

KATE
I need to talk to someone about one of your children. She was adopted by an American family about a year ago.

RECEPTIONIST #2 (V.O.)
I beg your pardon?

KATE
A little girl, possibly adopted from your orphanage. I'm trying to find somebody who might remember her.

RECEPTIONIST #2 (V.O.)
This girl, she is not come from here.

KATE
Can't you at least check?

RECEPTIONIST #2 (V.O.)
No, I am sorry.

KATE
Please, I know she at least spent some time there.

RECEPTIONIST #2 (V.O.)
No, you not understand. Saarne Institute is not orphanage. It is mental hospital.

Off Kate's shocked reaction:

INT./EXT. TREEHOUSE - DAY

CRAAAACK! Daniel uses the tire iron to pry the hasp off the treehouse door. The wood SPLINTERS and the hasp comes free.

He enters and looks around. Nothing unusual. He throws back the rug and pulls up the loose plank. Max's "Hello Kitty" backpack is stuffed inside. He unzips it, his eyes going wide with horror...

... as he pulls Esther's blood-stained dress from the backpack.

ESTHER (O.S.)
I couldn't have done it by myself, you know.

Daniel whirls around. CAMERA REVEALS Esther standing in the doorway behind him. She's holding something behind her back.

ESTHER

Max is just as guilty as I am.

She steps toward him and he backs away, angered by her words, but wary of those hands behind her back. *What's she hiding...?*

DANIEL

You leave her alone.

ESTHER

Think about it. Somebody had to have helped me. If they find that dress, they won't just be coming for me. They'll be coming for Max, too. Is that really what you want?

She's maneuvering him away from the door. Daniel screws up his courage and stands his ground.

DANIEL

You're full of shit. I'm telling Mom what you did and you're gonna fry for it.

ESTHER

(sighs)

All right. I was just trying to be nice.

And with that: she takes a can of CHARCOAL LIGHTER FLUID from behind her back and starts spraying the floor at Daniel's feet with it. He gasps and jumps back as it SPLATTERS in front of him. She douses the floor from one side to the other.

Then she opens a BOOK OF MATCHES and lights one. Daniel blanches.

ESTHER

Goodbye, Daniel.

She drops the match. FWOOOF! The lighter fluid IGNITES and a wall of fire ERUPTS between Daniel and the door. Esther smiles at him through the FLAMES. He's trapped.

INT. JOHN'S DEN - DAY

Kate talks on the phone. She's e-mailing a picture of Esther.

KATE

It's called the Saarne Institute. S-A-A-R-N-E. It's in Estonia.

INT. HOME FOR GIRLS - OFFICE - DAY

Sister Judith jots down the info.

SISTER JUDITH
Estonia? This can't be right. All her
paperwork is from Russia.

INT. JOHN'S DEN - DAY

KATE
Please, just try to find out if she was
ever a patient there. I'm sending them
a picture of her right now.

INT./EXT. TREEHOUSE - DAY

SMOKE pours from the treehouse. Esther has climbed down and is
watching it burn. Inside, Daniel is surrounded by FLAMES, choking
on black smoke. He stumbles to a window and sticks his head out.

DANIEL
MOM! HELP! MOOOOM!

The fire closes in. The place is going up like a tinderbox. He
carefully climbs out the window and stands on the sill, fifteen
feet off the ground.

DANIEL
MOOOOOM!!

He hugs the side of the treehouse, panicked. The FLAMES grow
higher, licking at his feet. No place to go now but up.

He reaches for the edge of the roof and struggles to pull himself
onto it, his legs kicking out over empty space. He gets an elbow
on the sloped roof and starts wriggling up onto it...

Suddenly -- he slips. He slides down, barely grabbing the edge of
the roof with his fingertips at the last second. Esther gasps,
excited, like she's in the front row of a great sports event.

DANIEL
MOMMY! HELP MEEE!!

INT. JOHN'S DEN - DAY

Kate's still on the phone. She glances out the window at the
backyard and the woods beyond. Suddenly, her eyes go wide. A
COLUMN OF SMOKE rises above the treetops. Realization and horror
slam home at the same time. The treehouse.

EXT. TREEHOUSE - DAY

Daniel fights desperately to hang on. Esther watches, eyes wide
with exhilaration. For a long, breathless beat he just hangs
there, dangling helplessly, fingers slipping bit by bit...

... then he loses his grip and plummets to the ground.

He lands hard and doesn't move. Esther walks over and crouches next to him. She touches his neck for a pulse. He's still alive. Esther pouts, disappointed. She looks around, finds a HEAVY ROCK. She lifts it over her head, ready to cave in Daniel's skull...

Suddenly, Max rushes in and pushes her aside, knocking the rock from her hands. Esther whirls on Max, eyes flashing with rage.

But then Kate is there, running up the path with Doris not far behind. Kate sees Daniel's crumpled body and her world collapses, everything else falling away. She races to his side.

KATE

Oh, my God! Daniel! Baby, can you hear me? Please, baby! Wake up!

He doesn't move. Kate calls out to Doris:

KATE

Call nine-one-one!

Doris hurries back to the house. Kate catches Esther watching her warily. Kate glares at her with pure hate.

EXT. COLEMAN RESIDENCE - DAY

FIREFIGHTERS have arrived to put out the treehouse. NEIGHBORS gather to gawk. Max is in the house, watching from the window as EMTs load Daniel into an ambulance. He's still unconscious and in full cervical immobilization. Doris hovers nervously. Kate climbs in with Daniel, angrily dragging Esther along by the wrist.

KATE

Get in here.

DORIS

She can ride with us.

KATE

I'm not letting her out of my sight.

INT. HOSPITAL - WAITING ROOM - NIGHT

Hours later. The whole family waiting for news. Kate and John sit across from one another. The silence and tension heavy between them. Doris sits with the girls. A DOCTOR (DR. RAJAN) enters. Kate and the others are instantly on their feet.

DR. RAJAN

We stopped the abdominal bleeding. He's stabilized for now. You should consider yourselves very lucky.

Relief floods over Kate and John. Esther listens, intent...

JOHN

Can we see him?

DR. RAJAN

In a little while. He's resting in ICU.

KATE

Will he be able to tell us what happened?

A pointed glance between Kate and John. Dr. Rajan doesn't notice.

DR. RAJAN

It's possible. There's no way of knowing for sure what he'll remember until he wakes up.

Esther shifts nervously. Not the answer she was hoping for...

INT. HOSPITAL - WAITING ROOM - NIGHT (TIMECUT)

Kate has taken John aside, voices low, out of earshot of the others. She's shown him two pieces of paper: One is a painting Esther did of the old Gothic mansion. The other is a printout of the photo from the Saarne Institute's web site.

KATE

She told me she just made it up, but it's a real place.

JOHN

There has to be some other explanation. She didn't come from an insane asylum!

KATE

How do we know? The orphanage we thought she came from has never even heard of her! Everything about her could be a lie!

JOHN

We have her passport, her birth certificate, her school and medical records --

KATE

It's just paper, John! From halfway around the world! This isn't just me being paranoid. Call Saint Cabrini's yourself if you don't believe me.

A beat. John looks like he's wavering.

KATE

Your own mother was there this time. Only Esther or Daniel could have started that fire. I know who I think did it. Do you?

JOHN

I don't know what to think anymore.

KATE

Well, I'm done connecting the dots for you. You can believe what you want about me. Blame me for everything. I'll leave tonight if you want me to. On one condition.

(beat)

Esther goes, too.

ACROSS THE ROOM

Esther watches Kate and John. She can't hear what they're saying. She looks worried. She turns to Doris.

ESTHER

Can I have a dollar for the pop machine?

Doris gives her a dollar from her purse. Esther smiles and heads toward the vending machines. Max watches her go.

But as soon as Esther's out of sight, her cheery face turns to granite. She puts the dollar in her pocket and sneaks away...

INT. FOYER - NIGHT

Back at home, the phone RINGS. The answering machine picks up. A MAN with an Estonian accent (DR. VÄRAVA) leaves a message:

DR. VÄRAVA (V.O.)

I'm calling for Katherine Coleman. This is Doctor Värava from the Saarne Institute in Tallinn. Please call me immediately...

INT. HOSPITAL - ICU - NIGHT

Esther peers through a door and sees Daniel lying unconscious with a rigid cervical collar around his neck. He's in traction, both his arms elevated by wires. A heart rate monitor BEEPS.

Esther approaches his bed like the angel of death, slowly drawing the CURTAIN around them. The HEART RATE MONITOR is clipped to his finger. Esther slips it onto her own finger. The machine continues to BEEP, registering her heartbeat instead of his.

Slowly, she climbs up onto the bed, prowling like a cat. She carefully straddles him and takes a pillow from under his head. The movement causes him to stir. His eyelids flutter. At the last moment, he sees her looming over him...

Then she smashes the pillow down over his face.

Daniel struggles, but he can barely move, traction wires Jangling as he thrashes helplessly. His SCREAMS are muffled under the pillow. Esther viciously presses down with all her strength...

INT. HOSPITAL - WAITING ROOM - NIGHT

Max sits next to Doris, staring at the hallway that leads to the vending area, waiting for Esther to return. She looks worried. She gets up and walks toward it, dread mounting...

DORIS

Maxine, where are you going?

Max turns the corner. The vending area is empty. Esther isn't there. Max's eyes go wide with fear.

INT. HOSPITAL - ICU - NIGHT

Daniel has stopped struggling. When Esther finally lifts the pillow, his eyes are glassy, wide, and staring. She gently closes them and slides the pillow back underneath his head.

Then she climbs down from the bed and slips the heart rate monitor back on his finger. FLATLINE. An ALARM sounds.

INT. HOSPITAL - WAITING ROOM - NIGHT

Max runs up to Kate and John. She urgently yanks Kate's arm.

KATE

What is it, sweetie?

Suddenly, a CALL comes on the overhead speakers:

HOSPITAL OPERATOR (V.O.)

Code ninety-nine, ICU. Code ninety-nine, ICU.

Dr. Rajan runs by at top speed. Kate gasps, panicked.

KATE

Oh, my God... Daniel!

She and John run after Dr. Rajan. Doris quickly grabs Max to keep her from following.

INT. HOSPITAL - ICU - NIGHT

Kate and John follow Dr. Rajan to the room where a CODE TEAM races to resuscitate Daniel.

KATE

Daniel!

Kate and John try to enter the room, but the ICU NURSE stops them.

KATE
What's happening --?!

ICU NURSE
You have to stay out here.

They catch a glimpse of Dr. Rajan picking up defibrillator paddles before the door is SLAMMED in their terrified faces.

INT. HOSPITAL - ICU - NIGHT (TIMECUT)

Kate and John sit outside, waiting. Dr. Rajan emerges. His face tells them everything. Kate's crying before he even says a word.

DR. RAJAN
I'm sorry. His injuries were more severe than we first thought.

John chokes back tears. He holds Kate close as she sobs.

KATE
Oh, no... Oh, no... Oh, my baby...

DR. RAJAN
We're so sorry. A terrible loss, we're so sorry...

Kate gets up and rushes into Daniel's room in time to see the ICU Nurse cover his body with a sheet. Kate collapses to the floor, weak with horror and grief. John tries to comfort her.

Then slowly, Kate's eyes turn steely and her grief burns into rage. She pushes John away and stands up.

KATE
Where is she?

INT. HOSPITAL - WAITING ROOM - NIGHT

Kate storms in and looks around, her face a mask of fury. John hurries after her. She spots Esther returning from the vending machines, innocently sipping a soda. Kate practically growls:

KATE
What did you do?!

Heads turn. Doris and Max are taken aback. Kate looks insane. She strides toward Esther, gaining momentum with every step, but Esther just looks up at her with a half-hidden smile on her face.

KATE
What did you do to him, you bitch?!

Then she slaps Esther as hard as she can across the face, sending her reeling to the floor. Everyone is horrified.

JOHN
Kate! Stop it!

Kate looks ready to hit her again, but a NURSE holds her back.

WAITING ROOM NURSE
ORDERLY!

Esther touches her mouth. She's bleeding. For a beat, she just lies there, sprawled on the floor, giving Kate a look of genuine shock. Then she sees John and instantly bursts into tears.

ESTHER
Daddy! Daddy! Help me!

John scoops her into his arms. Kate is apoplectic. It takes TWO ORDERLIES to hold her. Max watches, crying.

KATE
She killed him! He was going to live
and she killed him!!

JOHN
She was out here the whole time!

Dr. Rajan rushes in, readying a syringe.

KATE
No! Get away from me!!

DR. RAJAN
Hold her still!

A small crowd has gathered, watching with horror and pity as the Orderlies overpower her. Dr. Rajan grabs Kate's arm, quickly hunts for a vein, then jabs the needle in. Kate screams.

KATE
Please! Somebody listen to me! She
killed my baby! She killed my baby...

But her eyelids are already drooping. John watches, nearly overwhelmed with emotion. Kate goes limp in the Orderlies' arms.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

Kate lies in a bed, barely conscious. A NURSE pushes a sedative into an IV tube taped to Kate's arm. Kate looks up groggily and sees John talking to Dr. Rajan.

DR. RAJAN
We can keep her sedated overnight.

John nods. He waits for Dr. Rajan and the Nurse to leave, then walks over and looks down at Kate. She's fighting to stay awake.

JOHN
Mom's driving us home. I think it's
better if you stay here tonight. I
don't want you around the kids like
this.

Kate weakly grasps his hand, her voice a thready whisper:

KATE
John... Please... Please don't let
her take my family...

A long, emotional beat. John hesitates, conflicted.

Then he places her hand back on the bed and turns away. She tries to call out, but doesn't have the strength. She sees the girls waiting in the hallway. Max has been crying. She looks scared.

John leads them all away. And the last thing Kate sees before blacking out again is Esther's devious smile...

EXT. COLEMAN RESIDENCE - ESTABLISHING - NIGHT

LIGHTNING flashes in the distance. There's a storm coming.

INT. MAX'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

John tucks Max into bed. When he leans down to kiss her, we see Esther watching from the doorway. Max eyes her warily.

JOHN
What's wrong, sweetheart?

ESTHER
She's thinking about Daniel.
(to Max)
Aren't you?

Max reluctantly nods. John gives her a sad look.

JOHN
Me, too.

Esther enters and stands next to John at Max's bedside.

ESTHER
Sweet dreams.

As she kisses Max good night, Esther furtively reaches out and grabs Max's HEARING AID from off her nightstand...

INT. ESTHER'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Esther stands at her closet, looking through her pretty dresses, pleasantly HUMMING to herself. She holds one up to her chin, looks at herself in the mirror. Then another. She chooses a

RUFFLY DRESS and lays it out on her bed. She stands over it with a pair of scissors in her hand, eyeing it appraisingly.

After a thoughtful beat, she starts cutting its ruffles off...

INT. FOYER - NIGHT

Esther's HUMMING can be heard O.S. John trudges downstairs, exhausted and emotionally devastated. He goes into the living room, slumps in a chair, buries his face in his hands, and cries.

CAMERA PULLS BACK, revealing the unnoticed answering machine in f.g. The light on it is BLINKING. One new message...

INT. UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - NIGHT

Esther walks down the hallway with her dress draped over her arm, still HUMMING. She goes into the bathroom and closes the door...

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

Esther's HUMMING continues, no other sound here at all...

Kate comes to, fighting her drug-induced stupor. She forces herself to sit up and gingerly pulls the IV needle out of her arm.

INT. HOSPITAL - ICU - NIGHT

Esther's HUMMING continues, still no sound. Kate stands in the doorway. The bed Daniel was lying in is already empty and remade. It's as if he was never here. RAIN streaks down the window.

Kate enters and sits down heavily next to the bed. She touches the place where her son lay dead only hours before. She breaks down and sobs inconsolably, but we can't hear it, only the HUMMING of Esther's lighthearted, melodic tune.

INT. FAMILY ROOM - NIGHT

Back to NORMAL SOUND. John sits on the sofa, eyes red and teary, watching a videotape of Daniel playing soccer. There's a NOISE from the kitchen. He pauses the video, listens.

A moment later, SOFT MUSIC starts playing O.S. An old, crackly recording from the forties of The Ink Spots singing "I'M MAKING BELIEVE." Sentimental, bittersweet, and a little creepy. Baffled, John goes to the kitchen...

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

... and stops short at what he sees.

Esther stands on a chair, cutting slices of cheese with a LARGE KNIFE. She's prepared a plate of fruit, cheese, and crackers.

She's wearing the dress we saw her choose, but with some alterations. The ruffles are gone, so are the sleeves. It's low

cut and too grown up. Her hair is perfectly curled and her face is caked with makeup -- powder, red lipstick, thick mascara, dark eyeliner -- giving her a grotesque, woman-child, eight-year-old-beauty-queen look. JonBenet Ramsey by way of Angelina Jolie.

John is stupefied. She smiles at him. Outside, THUNDER RUMBLES.

ESTHER
Hello, darling.

JOHN
What are you doing?

ESTHER
Making you a snack. You skipped your dinner.

JOHN
Get down from there. That knife's too sharp for you to be playing with.

Esther climbs down from the chair and nonchalantly carries the cheese and cracker plate to the dining room, as if he hadn't said anything. John follows her, dumbfounded...

INT. DINING ROOM - NIGHT

There are TWO GLASSES and a bottle of SPARKLING WATER on the dining room table. Dim lighting and romantic MUSIC. John is completely nonplussed. Esther sets the cheese plate on the table.

JOHN
What is this?

ESTHER
I wanted to do something special for you. I don't like my daddy to be unhappy.

JOHN
But why are you dressed like that?

ESTHER
Don't you like it?

JOHN
No, I don't. You're not supposed to play with Mommy's makeup.

ESTHER
I'm sorry, sir. I just want to be as pretty for you as she is.

JOHN
You don't need makeup to be pretty.

Esther is touched. She gazes up at him lovingly.

ESTHER
You really mean that, don't you?

JOHN
Of course. Why don't you go wash your face and we'll tuck you back into bed.

ESTHER
But I worked so hard. Can't we stay up just a little longer?

She gives him the big, sad eyes. They're a little disconcerting under all the makeup. John sighs.

JOHN
All right. We'll have a little snack and then off to bed.

Esther beams. John sits down, reluctantly humoring her. Esther starts pouring sparkling water into the glasses.

ESTHER
We really should be drinking that bottle of wine, but I couldn't find it.

JOHN
Little girls aren't allowed to drink wine.

ESTHER
I'm not so little. To family.

She raises a glass in toast. John gives her a sad look, but goes along with it. They CLINK their glasses together and drink.

But instead of sitting down, Esther continues to stand next to him. She picks up a piece of cheese and tries to feed it to him. John eyes her uneasily. He takes the cheese from her and eats it.

JOHN
Why don't you sit down?

ESTHER
I like being close to you.

She gazes into his eyes and touches his face. John moves her hand away, suddenly very uncomfortable. She hesitates, nervous...

... then leans in and kisses him on the mouth. John grabs her arms and abruptly pushes her away in shock and near-panic.

ESTHER
What's wrong?

JOHN
Don't ever do that again.

ESTHER

I thought you loved me. You said I was pretty.

JOHN

Of course, I love you. But not...
It's different than how I love Mommy.
You're my little girl.

ESTHER

Will you stop saying that? We can be together now, don't you see? She can't come between us anymore.

JOHN

Who can't? You mean Mommy?

ESTHER

She's not my mommy! Please, sir, I'll do anything for you...

She reaches out to touch his face again, but he grabs her hand.

JOHN

Esther, stop it! I mean it. This is wrong.

ESTHER

Am I being bad? You can spank me if you'd like. I'll let you. I won't even cry. Unless you want me to.

John gapes with disgust and horror. He looks like he might vomit.

JOHN

Go to your room.

A beat. Esther looks heartbroken. Suddenly, she tries to kiss him again, desperate this time, throwing herself at him, but John pushes her to the floor. She frantically crawls back to him. He hurries to the other side of the table.

ESTHER

Please! Please! You're ruining it!

JOHN

Jesus Christ, just stop talking! Go upstairs and wipe that shit off your face! Right now!

Esther runs upstairs, crying. John just gapes in utter dismay and revulsion. He runs into the kitchen and throws up in the sink.

INT. ESTHER'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Esther sits at her little vanity table, looking at her overly made-up face in the mirror, and sobs hysterically...

INT. HOSPITAL - ICU - NIGHT

Kate is still sitting at Daniel's empty bed, eyes red and puffy from crying. Outside, it's RAINING HARDER. Lightning FLASHES.

Her CELL PHONE CHIMES. She eyes it wearily, considers not answering. After a few RINGS, she picks up.

KATE

Hello?

DR. VÄRAVA (V.O.)

Is this Katherine Coleman?

KATE

Who's calling?

INTERCUT:

INT. SAARNE INSTITUTE - MORNING

Doctor Värava is a craggy-faced man in his 50's. His manner is urgent, almost desperate as he speaks on the phone.

DR. VÄRAVA

My name is Doctor Värava from the Saarne Institute. I got your mobile number from Sister Judith.

Kate sits up, suddenly roused.

KATE

Did you get the picture I sent? Did you recognize her?

DR. VÄRAVA

Yes, I did. Where is she now? Is she with you?

KATE

No, she's at home with my husband.

DR. VÄRAVA

Neetud! Call him now and tell him to get your family out of the house. Then call the police.

KATE

He won't do it. He's not going to do anything without some kind of proof.

DR. VÄRAVA

Then tell him that the little girl in that picture isn't a little girl.
She's a grown woman.

Kate stops short, confused and suddenly frightened.

KATE

What are you talking about? The picture I sent you was of our adopted daughter. She's only eight years old.

DR. VÄRAVA

No, she's not. She has a pituitary disorder that causes proportional dwarfism. She only looks like a child.

INT. ESTHER'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

We're intercutting now with Esther at her vanity, her crying building to a MANIACAL WAIL, her MAKEUP STREAKING from her tears.

DR. VÄRAVA

Her real name is Veera Klammer. She escaped from here eighteen months ago and she's thirty-two years old!

Esther SCREAMS, slowly scratching her face with her fingernails...

RESUME KATE AND VÄRAVA

Kate's mind is reeling.

KATE

This can't be. There has to be a mistake.

DR. VÄRAVA

Does she have the scars?

KATE

What scars?

ESTHER

has stopped crying, her sorrow burning into blind, monstrous rage. She glares at her reflection, her mascara smeared down her cheeks.

DR. VÄRAVA

We had to keep her in a restraint jacket when she was here to stop her from hurting our staff, but she was constantly fighting against it until the collar and cuffs began cutting into her skin. She wound up with deep scars from it. Around her wrists and neck.

Esther methodically removes the black ribbons from her wrists and neck, revealing the scars we saw earlier...

KATE AND VÄRAVA

KATE
(realizing)
Oh, my God... How could this have happened?

DR. VÄRAVA
She's been passing herself off as a child for most of her life. She worked as a prostitute for years, catering to wealthy pedophiles.

ESTHER

curls her upper lip, looking at her top teeth. She reaches up, pulls on her teeth and -- KA-CLICK. They come out.

DR. VÄRAVA
She even had a dental appliance made to complete the illusion by disguising her adult teeth.

Her perfect, pearly white baby teeth are fake. Underneath -- a full set of CROOKED, ROTTEN, YELLOW ADULT TEETH.

DR. VÄRAVA
When she was finally arrested, she continued the pretense to stay out of jail and was sent to an orphanage.

KATE AND VARAVA

DR. VÄRAVA
You're not the first to have been fooled. She's even been adopted before. A family here in Estonia took her in and lived with her for over six months. They never suspected.

Kate hesitates a beat, almost afraid to ask:

KATE
But why was she at your hospital?

DR. VÄRAVA
Veera is dangerously insane. She was molested by her father and sexualized at a very early age. When he took another lover, he told Veera it was because she could never be a real woman. Veera murdered them both.

ESTHER

just stares at herself in the mirror. With her scars revealed, her face scratched, her mascara streaked down to her chin, and her awful, yellow, snaggletoothed sneer, she looks like a monster.

DR. VÄRAVA

She now sees herself as trapped in the body of a child and it disgusts her. She wants to be what her father considered to be a "real woman." She wants to be a wife, a mother, a lover. She wants to grow up.

Suddenly, she grabs her chair and SMASHES the mirror with it. Then she whirls and swings the chair into her aquarium with a feral scream -- CRASH! Water and fish flood onto the floor.

DR. VÄRAVA

When she was adopted here in Estonia, she tried to find love where she had found as a child. With her new father. When he refused her, she murdered the entire family in their sleep.

END INTERCUT:

KATE

And then she burned the house down...

DR. VÄRAVA

Yes. How did you know?

Off Kate's horrified look --

INT. ESTHER'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

John pushes the door open and looks inside.

JOHN

Esther? Are you all right?

She's not here. The light is on, but the room is empty. Fish are still FLOPPING around on the floor, mouths gasping. John gives the broken aquarium an unnerved look.

JOHN

Esther, where are you?

No answer. He turns off the light, about to look elsewhere...

... then stops. With the overhead light off, the room is lit only by the black light in Esther's broken aquarium, REVEALING:

Esther's paintings have changed. She's painted them so that they look different under black light. John takes a closer look, turning the black light on and off.

Under normal light: the painting he saw when he first met Esther, a mother lion and her sleeping cubs. Under black light: the cubs are now dead and the mother's mouth is dripping with blood.

The paintings that looked like typical family portraits in normal light are now nightmarish visions of death and violence. In one, Kate's eyes have been gouged out. In another, Daniel's throat has been slashed. In the picture of the whole family, John and Esther look normal, but Kate, Daniel, and Max are all decomposed corpses.

John staggers back in shock. The telephone RINGS, startling him. The answering machine picks up. He hears KATE'S VOICE:

KATE (V.O.)
John? Are you there?

EXT. HOSPITAL PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Kate is on her cell, running to the car.

KATE
John! For God's sake, pick up the
fucking phone!

INT. ESTHER'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

John turns to leave -- suddenly, Esther bursts out from under her pile of stuffed animals with a WILD SCREAM. She launches herself at John from the bed and jabs her scissors into his eye.

John screams and throws her to the floor. He stumbles out of the room, blood streaming down his face.

UPSTAIRS HALLWAY

John staggers to the stairs, the handle of the scissors jutting from his eye socket. But just as he hits the first step, Esther rushes out and pushes him down the stairs.

FOYER

John goes flying, head over heels, crashing into the railing hard enough to SPLINTER it, and lands hard at the foot of the stairs.

He lies there in a heap, too stunned to move. Esther appears at the top of the stairs, looking down at him. She has a JUMP ROPE in her hands and starts slowly walking toward him, softly singing:

ESTHER
When I was juuust a liiittle giiirl
I asked my mother, what will I be...

John tries to stand, but cries out in agony. His leg is broken. He looks up, sees the table with the PHONE on it. As he painfully crawls toward it, Esther closes in on him, singing and winding the jump rope around her fists like a garotte.

ESTHER

*Que será, será, Whatever will be, will
be... The future's not ours to see...*

John reaches for the phone, actually touches it, when Esther straddles him from behind, wraps the jump rope around his neck, and starts strangling him with it. The phone falls out of reach. John is too dazed from the fall to fight.

ESTHER

*When I grew uuup and feeell in looove
I asked my sweetheart what lies ahead
Will we have rainbows, day after day
Here's what my sweetheart said...*

John chokes, clawing at the rope as she twists it tighter and tighter. Finally, his head droops, his remaining eye goes blank. He's dead. Esther gently lowers his body to the floor, a tear running down her cheek. She kisses him. Whispers in his ear:

ESTHER

Que será, será.

Suddenly -- a GASP from upstairs. Esther whirls.

It's Max. She stands atop the stairs, paralyzed with fear. She's seen everything. Esther looks up at her with a reassuring smile on her awful, mascara-streaked, blood-splattered monster face.

ESTHER

It's all right, baby. Come to Mommy.

Max runs away. Esther scowls.

ESTHER

Neetud!

She scrambles to her feet.

INT. JOHN'S DEN - NIGHT

Esther pulls John's gun case down from the closet shelf, frantically unlocks it, and grabs the gun.

INT./EXT. JOHN'S CAR - NIGHT

Kate is speeding home, talking on her cell phone.

911 OPERATOR (V.O.)

*Dracena nine-one-one. What is your
emergency?*

KATE

*I need the police. There's an intruder
in my home.*

INT. MAX'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Esther enters, gun in hand, turns on the light. Max isn't here. Esther looks under the bed, opens the closet. Nothing.

UPSTAIRS HALLWAY

Max carefully peers out from around a corner...

Suddenly -- no sound. This is how Max experiences the world. A silent vacuum. Her perspective is shot MOS.

The hallway is empty and Max cautiously makes her way toward the stairs. Suddenly, Esther emerges from Max's room. Max quickly ducks into Daniel's room. Esther doesn't see her.

DANIEL'S BEDROOM

Max looks around for a place to hide. She sees a TOY ROBOT lying on the floor amongst Daniel's things...

KATE AND JOHN'S BEDROOM

Esther is searching the walk-in closet when she hears a LOUD NOISE from Daniel's room -- something heavy falling over. She smiles.

UPSTAIRS HALLWAY

Esther edges toward Daniel's room, gun raised. There's a STRANGE GRINDING SOUND coming from inside...

DANIEL'S BEDROOM

Esther enters and looks around, confused. There's a PILE OF BOOKS that have been knocked to the floor, but Max isn't here.

Then she sees what's making the GRINDING noise. It's the TOY ROBOT. It's been placed atop a bookshelf, motor grinding, walking on wobbly legs. As it walks, it pushes books off the edge of the bookshelf onto the floor. That's what made the noise that lured her here. Esther scowls furiously at the robot and SHOTS it.

Her back is to the doorway, so she doesn't see Max emerge from her hiding place in the bathroom and slip past.

INT./EXT. JOHN'S CAR - NIGHT

Racing through the streets, running stop lights. Kate is still on her cell.

POLICE OPERATOR (V.O.)
We have officers on the way, ma'am.

KATE
Well, where the hell are they? Jesus
Christ, I'll be there before they will!

POLICE OPERATOR (V.O.)
Ma'am, I need you to stay calm. Do not
approach the house. Let the officers --

Kate hangs up.

INT. BATHROOM - NIGHT

Esther enters, looks in the linen closet, pulls back the shower curtain. Nothing. She's getting frustrated.

SUNROOM

Streaking rain casts frightening shadows in the glassed-in terrace. Max quickly sneaks in and crawls under one of the numerous plant tables. Hanging leaves droop almost to the floor, hiding her. But as she curls up in the shadows, she bumps into a table leg and unknowingly knocks over a FLOWER POT.

MOS: The flower pot SMASHES TO PIECES on the floor directly behind Max. Naturally, she doesn't hear it.

BATHROOM

But Esther does. She turns. Eyes narrowing, suspicious.

SUNROOM

Max cowers underneath the table with her back to the door. She doesn't see Esther enter.

Esther looks around. The room is dark and still. She starts looking under the plant tables, one by one, HUMMING to herself. Max is facing away from Esther and doesn't see her approaching. Can't hear her HUMMING. Esther is closing in...

Suddenly, TIRES can be heard SQUEALING out on the street. Esther stops and hurries to look outside. She stands right across from where Max is hiding and now Max sees her. Max presses her knees to her chest, trying to disappear under the table.

Esther doesn't notice. Max is right behind her, there are pieces of BROKEN POTTERY right by Esther's feet, but she has her face pressed to the rain-streaked glass, trying to see outside...

EXT. COLEMAN RESIDENCE - NIGHT

Kate's car races toward the house. She drives right over the curb and SKIDS to a stop on the wet lawn. She jumps out of the car and sprints to the house.

INT. SUNROOM - NIGHT

Esther sees Kate and leaves. Max breathes a sigh of relief.

INT. FOYER - NIGHT

Kate bursts through the front door and runs inside, drenched from the rain -- and sees John's body crumpled on the floor.

KATE

John! Oh, my God! John!!

She rushes to him, but it's obvious that he's dead. She leans over his body and bursts into tears, aching at what has been done to him... then stops and steels herself for what she needs to do.

JOHN'S DEN

Kate hurries to the keepsake box and rummages for the keys. Can't find them. She quickly looks around. Her breath catches. The GUN CASE lies empty on the floor, bullets scattered around it.

KITCHEN

Kate runs in, sobbing. She sees the big knife that Esther was using earlier, grabs it. Reconsiders. She throws it aside and instead draws a huge goddamn BUTCHER'S KNIFE from the knife block.

MAX'S BEDROOM

Kate throws the door open. Max's bed is empty.

KATE

No!!

UPSTAIRS HALLWAY

Kate runs back out, crying, frustrated, knife trembling in her hand. She calls Esther out, voice thundering with rage:

KATE

VEERA! VEERA KLAMMER!

DOWNSTAIRS

Esther hears her real name and freezes. Realization hits. Gig's up. It's over. Her eyes flit, panicky. She quietly darts away.

BASEMENT STAIRWAY

Esther opens the door to the basement. She pulls open the breaker box and starts flipping SWITCHES.

UPSTAIRS HALLWAY

Kate cautiously moves down the hall -- suddenly, the lights go out, plunging the house into darkness.

KATE AND JOHN'S BEDROOM

Max freezes. Now she's blind as well as deaf. The only light comes from the FLASHES OF LIGHTNING through rain-streaked windows.

KATE AND JOHN'S BATHROOM

Max hurries inside and hides in the linen closet.

UPSTAIRS HALLWAY

Esther sneaks upstairs, hugging the wall, gun held ready. She pauses at the top of the stairs, waiting. Lightning FLASHES. The hallway is empty. She sidles along the wall...

LINEN CLOSET

MOS: Max is huddled on the floor, terrified. Suddenly, there's a FLASH of lightning -- and she sees shadowy movement through the louvered slats in the closet door.

KATE AND JOHN'S BATHROOM

The shadowy figure is Kate. She's within feet of Max's hiding place and doesn't know it.

LINEN CLOSET

MOS: Max watches the shadowy figure, nearly hyperventilating, not realizing that it's Kate. It's coming closer, closer... then moves away. Max catches her breath.

UPSTAIRS HALLWAY

Kate heads back toward the stairs. She doesn't see Esther slowly emerge from one of the rooms behind her, silhouetted by LIGHTNING. Esther raises the gun and --

BLAM! The knob on top of the bannister EXPLODES. Kate startles and whirls to see Esther, just as she pulls the trigger again.

BLAM! Kate is shot in the shoulder, the blow knocking her to the floor. The knife flies from her hand. No time to grab it. She frantically crawls/crabwalks into Esther's room, just as another SHOT blows a chunk out of the moulding right by her head.

ESTHER'S ROOM

Kate stands by the door with her back to the wall, holding her bloody shoulder. Her eyes flit, searching for a weapon. Nothing.

A FLASH of lightning casts Esther's long shadow on the floor. She's standing right outside the door. Kate holds her breath. Esther takes a wary step into the room, gun raised...

Suddenly, Kate lunges, body checking Esther against the door. They struggle for the gun. It GOES OFF. Kate knocks it out of

Esther's hand and slams her to the floor, but Esther is like a wild animal, kicking and shrieking and clawing at Kate's face.

Kate gets her hands around Esther's throat and starts viciously choking the life out of her. She looks possessed.

But Esther reaches up and pushes her thumb into the bullet hole in Kate's shoulder. For a moment, they're locked like that, Kate's hands wringing Esther's neck, Esther's thumb twisting into Kate's wound. Kate screams in agony, forced to release her.

Esther wriggles out from under her and scrabbles/slides into the hallway, quickly scoops up the gun --

FOYER

-- but Kate flat-out TACKLES her and the two of them go tumbling down the stairs. They hit the already splintered section of the railing and it gives way -- CRASH! Kate and Esther fly through the smashed railing and fall to the floor in a tangled heap. Kate cracks her head. The gun goes SKITTERING.

They're both stunned by the fall, breath knocked out. Kate is dazed, unable to move. Esther recovers first, looks around for the gun, can't find it. Kate stirs, fighting to stay conscious.

Esther squirms away from her, crawls over to John's body, and wrenches the scissors from his eye socket. Kate sees her coming, but can only watch helplessly as Esther staggers painfully toward her, bloody scissors clutched in her little fist like a dagger...

Then -- THUNK! Something hits Esther in the back of the head. Max has snuck up from behind and clocked her with a heavy piece of the broken railing swung like a baseball bat. Way to go, slugger!

Esther stumbles to her knees, but manages to shake it off. She slowly rises and turns on Max with a feral snarl.

Max tries to hit her again, but Esther is ready this time and swats the blow aside. She rips the piece of railing from Max's hands and tosses it across the room. Then she knocks Max to the floor with a fierce backhand from her fiberglass cast.

Kate sees this and desperately searches for the gun. She spots it under a nearby table and starts dragging herself toward it...

... but Esther hears her and wheels around. She sees Kate going for the gun and runs at her, scissors raised above her head, screaming with hate. Kate reaches out for the gun. Esther's almost on her. Kate grabs the gun, whirls and --

BLAM! Esther staggers back with a bloody hole in her chest.

Max watches, wide-eyed, as Esther limply drops the scissors and gives the smoldering bullet hole in her chest a surprised look. Blood trickles from her mouth. She looks up at Kate, frightened tears welling in her big, sad eyes.

ESTHER
Please don't hurt me, Mommy.

Fat fucking chance, bitch. Kate SHOTS her again. This one goes right between those pretty eyes.

Esther falls to the floor, dead gaze staring at the ceiling, a pool of blood expanding around her pretty Shirley Temple curls.

Kate drops the gun and crawls over to Max, scooping her into her arms and hiding her face from the horrible sights all around them.

For a long moment, mother and daughter just hold each other close. Kate strokes Max's hair, crying tears of sorrow and relief.

What Kate can't see is the slack, traumatized expression on Max's bloodied face. Vacant and emotionless. That spark you should see in the eyes of a child, gone forever.

CAMERA PULLS BACK and we

FADE OUT.

THE END

