

NO CLEAR SKY

A Play in Three Acts

by

Joseph Farr

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Main Characters

- **Erin Caldwell:** A mid-30s paramedic haunted by her failures and struggling with alcoholism, Erin embodies the town's harsh realities and relentless fight for survival.
- **Maddie Taylor:** A single mother in her early 30s, Maddie fights to provide a better life for her daughter Lily, despite overwhelming odds and her estranged relationship with her family.
- **Liam Brody:** A late-30s police officer determined to bring justice to a town riddled with crime, even as he struggles with the guilt of his brother's downfall and his own personal failures.
- **Ethan McAllister:** A weary 20-something caught in the web of Parkersburg's drug trade, Ethan seeks redemption for his mistakes and a way to escape the cycle of destruction.
- **Ryan Brody:** Liam's younger brother, early 30s, a once-promising welder who fell into addiction and petty crime, representing the lost potential of many in the community.

Supporting Characters

- **Natalie Sanders:** A defiant yet vulnerable 17-year-old navigating a strained relationship with her father, Judge Sanders, while yearning for understanding and connection.
- **Judge Robert Sanders:** A stern, early 50s judge juggling his responsibilities as a single father and his demanding career, struggling to repair his relationship with Natalie.
- **Lily Taylor:** Maddie's bright and hopeful 7-year-old daughter, who represents the possibility of a better future amidst bleak circumstances.
- **Frank:** A sleazy, 50-something strip club manager who embodies exploitation and the dark underbelly of Parkersburg's economy.
- **The Supplier:** A menacing, mid-40s figure in the local drug trade, whose manipulative power influences Ethan's fate.

Minor Characters

- **Alex:** Erin's older, gruff paramedic partner who offers quiet support amidst the chaos of their job.
- **Lacey:** Maddie's friend and coworker, a bubbly yet empathetic young woman who provides moments of kindness and solidarity.
- **Jason:** A 16-year-old overdose victim who serves as a turning point in Erin's storyline, reflecting the stakes of Parkersburg's drug epidemic.

- **Enforcers (Two):** The Supplier's loyal muscle, mid-20s to 30s, whose actions heighten the tension and danger of Ethan's arc.
- **Delivery Driver:** A minor role representing the mechanical routines of Maddie's life and her connection to Lacey's quilt gift.
- **Neighbor (Offstage Voice):** An offstage voice that adds tension to Ryan's theft scene.
- **Dr. Klein (Voice Over):** Erin's therapist, whose voicemail underscores her struggle with mental health.

SETTING AND TIME

The play unfolds in Parkersburg, West Virginia, and its surrounding areas, including industrial zones, residential neighborhoods, and rural outskirts. The town's harsh industrial backdrop looms over the characters, shaping their struggles and choices.

The events take place in the present day, spanning several weeks during a cold and rain-soaked autumn.

The atmosphere is gritty and oppressive, reflecting the challenges faced by the town's inhabitants, but small threads of hope persist amidst the darkness.

Production Notes

Tone and Style:

No Clear Sky is a modern drama that explores the interplay between despair and hope within the lives of characters bound by their struggles in a decaying industrial town. The tone is unapologetically raw and grounded, embracing the stark realities of addiction, loss, and redemption. While the play maintains a bleak undercurrent, moments of light and resilience punctuate the narrative, reflecting the complexity of human survival. Performances should prioritize authenticity, avoiding melodrama while embracing the emotional weight of each scene.

Set and Staging:

The play employs a realistic yet minimalist approach to staging, with key locations—including Maddie's apartment, Erin's cluttered space, Ryan's trailer, and the industrial skyline—suggested through symbolic set pieces. Transitions between scenes should feel seamless, facilitated by lighting and sound to maintain narrative flow.

The design should reflect the following:

- **Decay and Entrapment:** The settings evoke a sense of physical and emotional confinement, emphasizing the characters' struggles against their circumstances.
- **Vibrancy in Contrast:** Items like Lily's drawings and the warm light of a streetlamp symbolize fleeting hope amidst the surrounding bleakness.

Lighting:

Lighting plays a pivotal role in establishing the play's emotional atmosphere and guiding transitions between scenes. Key considerations:

1. **Contrast:** Use stark, cold lighting for moments of despair and softer, warm hues for moments of connection or hope.
2. **Isolation:** Spotlights frequently isolate characters to emphasize their loneliness and introspection.
3. **Transitions:** Lighting shifts between scenes should be smooth yet deliberate, enhancing the fluidity of the play's structure.

Sound:

The sound design should subtly underscore the oppressive environment of the town and the characters' lives:

1. **Ambient Noise:** The persistent hum of the refinery, distant sirens, and dripping water create an immersive backdrop that reflects the setting's decay.

2. **Emotional Underscore:** A haunting piano melody recurs throughout the play, shifting in tone to align with the emotional arcs of the characters.
3. **Scene Transitions:** Sound bridges transitions, blending ambient effects with musical cues to maintain momentum.

Character Interpretation:

Each character in *No Clear Sky* embodies a distinct emotional journey. Performances should highlight these complexities:

- **Maddie Taylor:** A mother driven by fierce love for her daughter, Maddie's resilience masks her vulnerability. Her moments of strength should feel quietly powerful.
- **Erin Caldwell:** Erin's fragility is central to her arc, with moments of despair portrayed with raw honesty. Her collapse is a culmination of internal and external pressures that should feel both inevitable and heartbreaking.
- **Ryan Brody:** Ryan's desperation is palpable, his guilt and addiction driving him toward self-destruction. The portrayal should balance anger, shame, and fleeting moments of hope.
- **Liam Brody:** As a man caught between duty and personal loss, Liam's determination should anchor his scenes, while his moments of reflection reveal his internal conflict.
- **Natalie Sanders:** Natalie's guarded demeanor contrasts with her vulnerability, her moments of defiance underscoring her longing for understanding.
- **Judge Sanders:** Judge Sanders should evolve visibly from detached and stern to introspective and compassionate, his arc reflecting a gradual reconnection with his daughter.

Technical Considerations:

1. **Split Staging:** Some scenes require the stage to depict multiple locations simultaneously. Lighting and blocking should clearly define each space while maintaining thematic connections.
2. **Projected Texts:** Key text messages and phone calls should be projected above the stage to enhance the audience's understanding of characters' silent struggles.
3. **Scene Transitions:** The fluidity of transitions is essential. Lighting, sound, and minimal movement of set pieces should ensure the audience remains engaged without distraction.

Final Note: *No Clear Sky* relies on the unflinching portrayal of its themes and characters to resonate with audiences. Every technical and creative decision should prioritize authenticity, grounding the story in realism while leaving room for the fleeting moments of hope that make the journey worthwhile.

ACT I

SCENE 1

SETTING:

An alley in Parkersburg, West Virginia. Rain falls steadily, pooling in dark puddles. The ambient hum of the nearby refinery lingers faintly in the background. The setting is oppressive, reflecting the weight of Ethan's choices.

AT RISE:

ETHAN MCALLISTER sits in the driver's seat of a car, suggested by two chairs positioned slightly angled toward the audience. A small hanging photo dangles from an imagined rearview mirror. The sound of rain is steady, with occasional thunder rumbling in the distance. SARAH, late 20s, frail and shivering, steps into the light cast by the car's "headlights."

SARAH

(pulling her hood tighter, stepping closer)

Ethan... Ethan, please. It's me. I—I just need a little help this time.

ETHAN

(flat, his gaze still on the "windshield")

You said that last time.

(SARAH steps fully into the light, her movements jittery, her voice trembling with desperation.)

SARAH

(panicking, almost tripping over her words)

I mean it this time! I get paid Friday—I swear, Ethan. I just need to get through the week.

(ETHAN exhales sharply, gripping an imaginary gearshift. His jaw tightens as he finally turns to her, his expression hard but cracking slightly. His free hand moves toward an unseen glove compartment.)

ETHAN

(voice low, measured)

This is the last time.

(ETHAN pulls out a small bag and thrusts it out the "window." SARAH grabs it with trembling hands, clutching it like a lifeline.)

SARAH

(voice breaking)

Thank you. Thank you so much.

ETHAN

(snarling, cutting her off)

Don't make this a habit.

(SARAH retreats quickly, clutching the bag to her chest. The sound of her footsteps splashing through puddles fades as she exits into the shadows.)

SOUND:

The rain intensifies briefly. A faint police siren grows louder in the distance.

(ETHAN leans forward, gripping the "steering wheel" tightly, his knuckles white. His breath fogs the "windshield" as he stares blankly ahead. His gaze shifts to the photo dangling from the "rearview mirror.")

ETHAN

(softly, almost inaudible)

Sorry, Mom.

(He reaches for the photo, his thumb brushing over its surface. A projection of the photo appears above the stage for the audience to see: a smiling woman holding a baby—his mother, full of hope. The projection fades as ETHAN lowers the photo, his expression hardening.)

SOUND:

A loud siren snaps ETHAN back to the present. He starts the car (mimed with precise hand gestures).

LIGHTING:

The "headlights" brighten slightly as the car lurches forward. Rain streaks past the light.

SOUND:

The rumble of an engine builds, blending with the hum of refinery machinery.

(ETHAN grips the steering wheel, his jaw tight, as he mutters to himself.)

ETHAN

(quiet, bitter)

How the hell did it come to this?

(The lights fade to black as the sounds of the car and rain dissolve into silence. A new spotlight emerges upstage, revealing Maddie's apartment for Scene 2.)

BLACKOUT

ACT I

SCENE 2

SETTING:

Maddie's small apartment, early morning. The living space is cramped, with peeling wallpaper and water stains visible on the ceiling. A bucket sits beneath a slow drip. Stacks of unpaid bills clutter a small, secondhand table. The futon serves as both bed and couch, draped with a thin, worn blanket. The atmosphere is stark and cold, emphasizing Maddie's struggle to provide stability for her daughter, Lily.

AT RISE:

MADDIE TAYLOR (early 30s, weary but determined) sits hunched on the edge of the futon, her head resting in her hands. Across the room, her daughter LILY (7, bright-eyed and brimming with curiosity) kneels on the floor beside a secondhand table. She clutches a bright crayon, her small hands carefully sketching on a piece of paper.

LILY

(cheerfully, looking up)

Mommy, can we have pancakes today?

(MADDIE sits up slowly, forcing a warm smile despite her exhaustion.)

MADDIE

(teasing)

Pancakes? Hmm... *(pauses, as if considering it)* How about cereal today? Pancakes are for special mornings.

(LILY frowns slightly, looking thoughtful. She nods reluctantly, turning back to her drawing.)

LILY

(quietly, as she draws)

Special mornings don't happen very often.

(An emotional beat. MADDIE's forced smile falters for a moment. She glances at the stack of bills on the table, her eyes lingering on the red "FINAL NOTICE" stamped across one envelope.)

(MADDIE rises, moves to the sink, and fills a chipped mug with water. She stares at the slow drip from the ceiling, then grabs a towel hanging from the stove handle and wrings it out into the bucket.)

MADDIE

(glancing back at LILY, playfully)

Hey, what are you drawing over there?

LILY

(beaming, holding up her picture)

A big house! With a yard... and flowers. And a swing!

(MADDIE freezes for a moment, her forced smile fading as she takes in the vibrant picture. She kneels beside LILY, pulling her into a soft hug.)

MADDIE

(quietly, almost to herself)

That sounds beautiful, Lily.

LILY

(cheerfully, holding the picture closer to her mother)

Do you think we'll have a house like that someday?

(MADDIE exhales softly, brushing LILY's hair back with one hand. Her voice is steady, but her eyes betray her uncertainty.)

MADDIE

(after a pause, gently)

Maybe someday.

LILY

(innocent, persistent)

Do you think it'll have a swing?

MADDIE

(smiling faintly, kissing LILY's forehead)

Definitely a swing.

(The warmth of the moment is interrupted by a sharp knock at the door.)

SOUND:

The knock echoes loudly, cutting through the soft drip of water and faint street noise.

LILY

(jumping up, excited)

Is it pancakes?!

MADDIE

(smirking slightly)

Not quite, sweetie. Stay here, okay?

(LILY nods and sits back down with her crayons, resuming her drawing. MADDIE crosses to the door, hesitating for a moment before opening it a crack.)

GRAYSON

(60s, impatient, gruff, standing just outside the door)

Maddie, we need to talk.

(MADDIE steps into the doorway, shielding the room from GRAYSON's view. She leans casually against the frame, though her crossed arms signal tension.)

MADDIE

(tightly)

I know what you're going to say, Mr. Grayson.

GRAYSON

(flatly, holding up a clipboard)

Good. Then you know you're two months behind. I've been more than patient.

(LILY peeks around the edge of the door, clutching her drawing.)

LILY

(showing her picture, innocently)

Look, Mister! I drew our new house!

(GRAYSON hesitates, caught off guard. He looks at the drawing, his stern expression softening briefly.)

GRAYSON

(awkwardly)

That's... nice.

(MADDIE steps forward slightly, blocking GRAYSON's view of LILY. Her voice sharpens.)

MADDIE

(firmly)

You'll have it. Friday.

GRAYSON

(recovering, his tone hardening again)

Friday. Noon. Not a minute later.

(He hands her a final notice and turns to leave. MADDIE closes the door and leans against it, exhaling sharply.)

LILY

(innocently)

Do you think we'll have a big house soon, Mommy?

(MADDIE crouches to LILY's level, pulling her into a hug.)

MADDIE

(quietly, with quiet determination)

I don't know, baby. But I promise you, we'll be okay.

LIGHTING:

The flickering overhead bulb dims, leaving MADDIE and LILY in a small, intimate pool of light.

SOUND:

The rhythmic drip of water grows softer as a faint piano melody underscores MADDIE's quiet resolve.

(The lights fade to black, and the sound of the rain blends into the faint hum of fluorescent lights, signaling the transition to Ethan's classroom.)

BLACKOUT

ACT I**SCENE 3****SETTING:**

A small, cluttered college lecture hall. The room feels outdated and uninspiring, with wooden desks arranged in uneven rows. A faded whiteboard dominates the front wall, with crooked motivational posters clinging stubbornly to the peeling paint.

AT RISE:

The PROFESSOR (40s, wiry, energetic) stands at the front of the room, gesturing emphatically as he lectures. Students are scattered across the rows, some scribbling notes, others distracted. ETHAN MCALLISTER (early 20s, tense) sits slouched in the back row, his head down, covertly scrolling through his phone beneath the desk.

PROFESSOR

(pacing, animated)

Ethics isn't about knowing right from wrong.

(He pauses for emphasis, scanning the room.)

It's about navigating the gray. Real dilemmas force you to confront your values—make uncomfortable decisions that stick with you.

(ETHAN glances up briefly, his face impassive. His attention quickly returns to his phone as it buzzes faintly in his lap.)

PROJECTION:

The text message appears above ETHAN, visible to the audience:

"Need ASAP. Usual spot?"

(ETHAN tenses, his jaw tightening. He types a quick response.)

PROJECTION:

"Later. Busy."

(ETHAN hesitates, then deletes the message. He types again.)

PROJECTION:

"Be there in 20."

(ETHAN sighs heavily, shoving his phone into his pocket. A CLASSMATE (19, cheerful, oblivious) sitting beside him leans over with a grin.)

CLASSMATE

(grinning, whispering)

Late night? Work-study shifts suck, huh?

ETHAN*(flat, deflecting)*

Yeah. Something like that.

PROFESSOR*(voice sharpening, cutting through)*

McAllister. Care to share with the group?

*(ETHAN stiffens, quickly pocketing his phone.)***PROFESSOR***(continuing)*

Or is something under your desk more important than today's topic?

ETHAN*(sitting up straighter, feigning confidence)*

No, sir. Just... a reminder for work.

*(The PROFESSOR narrows his eyes but doesn't press further. He resumes pacing.)***PROFESSOR***(sarcastically)*

Glad to hear your priorities are in order.

*(The PROFESSOR returns to the whiteboard, his voice fading into the background. ETHAN's shoulders slump as he exhales quietly.)***CLASSMATE***(whispering)*

You're lucky he didn't make you explain ethical gray areas.

ETHAN*(deadpan)*

Yeah. Lucky.

*(The spotlight tightens on ETHAN, isolating him further. The surrounding students fade slightly into shadow, amplifying his sense of detachment.)***SOUND:**

The faint buzz of his phone disrupts the moment. ETHAN glances at it, his face tightening.

PROJECTION:*"Don't make me wait. You know what happens."*

(ETHAN's breathing quickens as he shoves the phone back into his pocket. His leg bounces nervously under the desk.)

PROFESSOR

(continuing, unaware)

When faced with a moral dilemma, ask yourself: are you comfortable with the consequences of your choice? Can you live with it?

(An emotional beat. ETHAN freezes, his gaze locked on the PROFESSOR. The words hang heavy in the air, reverberating in ETHAN's mind. His lips press into a thin line as his expression hardens.)

PROJECTION:

ETHAN's imagined reply flashes momentarily above the stage:

"No. I can't."

(ETHAN abruptly gathers his notebook and stands, drawing a few curious glances from nearby students. The PROFESSOR pauses mid-sentence, raising an eyebrow.)

PROFESSOR

(eying ETHAN)

Leaving us, McAllister?

ETHAN

(forcing a smile, feigning casualness)

Work. You know how it is.

PROFESSOR

(dryly)

Yes. So I've heard.

(ETHAN nods and slips out of the lecture hall. The door creaks as it closes behind him, leaving a faint echo.)

LIGHTING TRANSITION:

The dim spotlight on ETHAN fades as the lecture hall returns to its monotonous hum.

SOUND TRANSITION:

The faint creak of the door dissolves into the rhythmic drip of water, signaling the shift to ETHAN's apartment.

BLACKOUT

ACT I

SCENE 4

SETTING:

A small, run-down apartment in Parkersburg. The space feels claustrophobic, with peeling wallpaper, stained furniture, and dim lighting. A sagging couch sits center stage, littered with discarded fast-food wrappers and empty soda cans. A cluttered coffee table holds a stack of unopened bills and a worn photo frame.

AT RISE:

ETHAN MCALLISTER sits hunched on the couch, staring blankly at a photo frame on the coffee table. His hoodie is wrinkled, his hair unkempt, and his shoulders slump as if carrying an unbearable weight.

(ETHAN picks up the photo frame, holding it in both hands. His thumb traces the edges of the worn frame, his face softening as he gazes at the image.)

ETHAN

(softly, almost to himself)

Hey, Mom.

(He pauses, his voice tightening with emotion.)

Guess this isn't the life you pictured for me, huh?

(An emotional beat. ETHAN exhales shakily, setting the photo back on the table. He leans forward, elbows on his knees, staring at the mess surrounding him.)

SOUND:

The faint buzz of his phone breaks the silence.

PROJECTION:

A message appears above him, visible to the audience:

"Where are you? People are waiting."

(ETHAN pulls the phone from his pocket, his expression hardening as he reads the message. His fingers hover over the screen.)

ETHAN

(quietly, biting)

Yeah, people are always waiting.

(ETHAN types: "Can't tonight." He hesitates, thumb hovering over the send button. His jaw tightens, and he deletes the message.)

PROJECTION:

"Be there in 20."

(ETHAN tosses the phone onto the couch, rubbing his face with both hands. His breathing grows shallow, tension radiating from his rigid posture. He abruptly stands, pacing the small room.)

ETHAN

(under his breath, building frustration)

What the hell am I doing?

(He freezes, his eyes locked on the faucet in the kitchenette. The steady drip-drip-drip grows louder, filling the room like a ticking clock. ETHAN moves to the sink, gripping the edge of the counter. He twists the faucet handle roughly, but the dripping continues. His grip tightens, knuckles whitening, as the sound gnaws at him.)

ETHAN

(louder, almost shouting)

I said stop!

(He slams the handle down, the sound reverberating through the space. The dripping stops, leaving an oppressive silence. ETHAN stares at the faucet, his chest heaving.)

LIGHTING NOTE:

The flickering overhead bulb dims slightly, heightening the isolation.

SOUND:

A faint siren wails in the distance, growing louder.

(ETHAN grabs a glass from the counter, filling it with water. He drinks slowly, his hands trembling. He glances at the photo frame on the coffee table, his expression softening briefly before the hardness returns.)

ETHAN

(quietly, to the photo)

I'll fix this.

(ETHAN sets the glass down, grabs a hoodie from the back of a chair, and heads for the door. He pauses briefly, his hand on the doorknob, as if considering turning back.)

SOUND:

The faint buzz of his phone pierces the silence once more. ETHAN exhales sharply, pulling the door open.

ETHAN

(to himself)

Just one more deal.

(He slams the door behind him. The sound echoes, leaving the apartment empty and still.)

LIGHTING TRANSITION:

The dim light on the stage fades, leaving the neon glow from the window as the only source of illumination.

SOUND TRANSITION:

The dripping faucet resumes faintly, blending into the hum of the refinery and the distant patter of rain.

BLACKOUT

ACT I

SCENE 5

SETTING:

Inside LIAM BRODY's patrol car, parked on a rain-soaked street near a run-down neighborhood in Parkersburg. The windshield is streaked with rain, and the faint glow of nearby streetlights flickers intermittently. The cramped interior of the car reflects Liam's emotional entrapment.

AT RISE:

LIAM BRODY sits motionless in the driver's seat, his hands gripping the wheel. His jaw is tight, and his tired eyes stare straight ahead, unfocused.

(LIAM glances at his phone, which sits in the cup holder. After a moment of hesitation, he picks it up. The screen's glow illuminates his face.)

PROJECTION:

The following text conversation appears above him:

BECCA:

"You need to pick up the rest of my things."

"We can't keep pretending, Liam. It's over."

(LIAM exhales sharply, tossing the phone onto the passenger seat. He flips down the visor, revealing a worn photo of himself and his younger brother, RYAN. LIAM removes the photo and studies it, his thumb tracing the creased edges.)

PROJECTION:

A clearer version of the photo is projected above: two young boys, one missing a front tooth, standing shoulder-to-shoulder on a summer day.

LIAM

(softly, his voice trembling)

Look at us. Just a couple of dumb kids...

(a beat, his tone hardens)

You were supposed to get out, Ryan. You had plans. Real plans.

(An emotional beat. LIAM's grip on the photo tightens as his breathing grows heavier. His voice drops to a whisper, carrying a mix of anger and sadness.)

LIAM

(CONT'D)

You were the one who always knew what you wanted. Building engines, opening that shop... all of it gone.

SOUND:

The police radio crackles to life, breaking the moment.

DISPATCH (V.O.):

"All units, 10-45. Robbery reported at Bowman's Hardware, 220 West Main. Suspect possibly armed."

(LIAM's focus sharpens instantly. He sets the photo down on the dashboard and picks up the radio microphone.)

LIAM

(into the radio, clipped)

10-4. Brody responding.

(He reaches for the switch to turn on the siren but pauses, his hand hovering over it. His gaze shifts back to the photo.)

LIAM

(quietly, to the photo)

If this is you, Ryan... don't make me do this.

(An emotional beat. The weight of his words hangs heavy in the air as thunder rolls faintly in the distance. LIAM places the photo carefully back on the visor, his jaw tightening with resolve.)

(He flips the siren on. The red and blue lights cast sharp, erratic shadows across the stage. The engine roars to life as LIAM pulls away.)

LIGHTING TRANSITION:

The dashboard light fades, and the rain projection intensifies, blending with the neon glow from the next scene's setting.

SOUND TRANSITION:

The wail of the siren crescendos before blending into the hum of the refinery and the faint clatter of rain, signaling the transition to Scene 6.

BLACKOUT

ACT I

SCENE 6

SETTING:

A secluded, rain-drenched alleyway near Parkersburg's industrial zone. Wet brick walls glisten faintly under the flicker of a dim streetlight. Stacks of crates, rusted barrels, and scattered debris create a maze of shadows. The distant hum of the refinery and the hiss of escaping steam loom ominously in the background.

AT RISE:

ETHAN enters cautiously from stage left, his hoodie pulled up against the rain. He pauses near a stack of crates, glancing over his shoulder. His breath is visible in the cold air as he surveys the space.

(ETHAN adjusts his hood and checks his phone. Its faint glow lights his face as he reads a message.)

PROJECTION:

The following text appears above him:
"You're late. Don't screw this up."

(ETHAN pockets the phone and exhales sharply, muttering under his breath.)

ETHAN

One more deal. Just one more, and I'm out.

SOUND:

The faint echo of approaching footsteps makes him freeze. He turns quickly, peering into the shadows.

(A splash as someone steps through a puddle. The hiss of escaping steam crescendos briefly, then fades. A silhouette appears at the far end of the alley, emerging slowly into the flickering light. It is the SUPPLIER, flanked by two ENFORCERS. The SUPPLIER moves with calculated confidence, while the ENFORCERS flank him, their posture predatory.)

SUPPLIER

(casual, almost amused)

You're late, Ethan. Time's money, white boy, and you're wasting both.

(ETHAN straightens, attempting to appear calm, though his hands twitch at his sides.)

ETHAN*(flat, defensive)*

The roads are slick. It's fucking pouring out here.

(One ENFORCER smirks and flips open a butterfly knife with practiced ease. The blade glints briefly in the flickering light.)

SUPPLIER*(smirking)*

The roads. That's your excuse? You're funny. I like funny.

(The SUPPLIER's tone shifts, his amusement dropping away as he steps closer.)

SUPPLIER (CONT'D)

But I don't like unreliable. Makes me... nervous. And when I'm nervous, motherfuckers start to have bad nights. You get me, white boy?

(ETHAN takes an involuntary step back, his foot splashing in a puddle. He quickly pulls a small wad of cash from his pocket, holding it out with trembling hands.)

ETHAN*(urgent)*

It's all here. Everything you asked for.

(The SUPPLIER doesn't take the money immediately. He studies ETHAN, his eyes narrowing.)

SUPPLIER*(flat, cold)*

You're looking... twitchy. Got something on your mind?

ETHAN*(quickly, shaking his head)*

No. Just tired. College, work... this. It's a lot, but I'm handling it.

(The SUPPLIER steps closer, his voice dropping to a menacing whisper.)

SUPPLIER

Tired's a problem. Makes people sloppy. Makes people... talk. And talking? Well, that's something I don't forgive.

(One ENFORCER steps forward, flicking his knife open and closed in a slow, deliberate rhythm. ETHAN flinches but holds his ground.)

ETHAN*(pleading, voice cracking)*

I'm loyal. You know that. I haven't said a word to anyone.

SUPPLIER*(staring him down)*

Loyalty's a funny thing. Easy to claim when no one's pressing you.

(A tense silence follows as the SUPPLIER finally snatches the money from ETHAN's hand. He weighs it in his palm before handing it off to one of the ENFORCERS.)

SUPPLIER (CONT'D)

Good. Because if I even think you're slipping... I won't be this polite next time.

(The SUPPLIER leans in close, his voice barely above a whisper.)

SUPPLIER (CONT'D)

And if I ever hear you've been talking... let's just say you won't be havin' an open casket.

(ETHAN recoils slightly, his breathing shallow. The SUPPLIER steps back, gesturing to his ENFORCERS to follow.)

SUPPLIER (CONT'D)*(smirking)*

See you next time, white boy. Try not to keep me waiting.

(The SUPPLIER and his men retreat into the shadows, their footsteps fading. ETHAN slumps against a crate, gripping the edge for support.)

ETHAN*(to himself, trembling)*

What the hell am I doing?

(His phone buzzes again. He pulls it out hesitantly, staring at the screen.)

PROJECTION:

"Where are you? I need some."

(ETHAN exhales sharply, shoves the phone into his pocket, and pulls up his hood. He exits stage right, his figure disappearing into the rain.)

LIGHTING TRANSITION:

The flickering lightbulb dims completely, leaving the stage in darkness.

SOUND TRANSITION:

The rain and refinery hum fade, replaced by the faint tapping of water in Maddie's apartment, signaling the next scene.

BLACKOUT

ACT I

SCENE 7

SETTING:

Maddie's small, run-down apartment late at night. The cramped living space is dimly lit by a single lamp on the cluttered table. The room feels heavy, reflecting Maddie's growing desperation, but hints of warmth linger in Lily's scattered drawings and toys.

AT RISE:

Maddie sits cross-legged on the futon, folding Lily's small clothes into neat piles. Across the room, Lily kneels on the floor, coloring with crayons. Her latest drawing—a bright house surrounded by flowers and a swing set—lies half-finished.

(The futon is unfolded as a makeshift bed, draped with a thin blanket. A small table cluttered with unopened bills sits nearby, with a chipped teacup precariously balanced on the edge. Lily's drawings are taped to the walls, their bright colors providing a stark contrast to the dim surroundings.)

LIGHTING:

A soft, warm light focuses on Maddie and Lily, while the edges of the stage remain in shadow. Faint moonlight filters through cracked blinds, casting a cool blue tint.

SOUND:

The rhythmic drip of a leaky pipe echoes faintly in the background. Occasional distant noises—muffled footsteps, a car passing—underscore the isolation.

LILY

(cheerfully, holding up her picture)

Mommy, do you think Sunny will like our house?

MADDIE

(smiling faintly, glancing at the drawing)

Sunny?

LILY

(nodding eagerly)

The dog! Remember? He's gonna have a yard and a big bowl of food!

(MADDIE chuckles softly, setting down the pile of clothes. She moves to sit beside LILY, studying the drawing.)

MADDIE

(gently)

I think Sunny's gonna love it.

LILY

(thoughtfully)

Do you think we'll get a house like this soon?

(MADDIE hesitates, her smile faltering as her gaze drifts to the dingy walls of the apartment. She wraps an arm around LILY, pulling her close.)

MADDIE

(softly, with quiet resolve)

Maybe not soon, baby. But someday.

(LILY leans into her mother, looking up with wide, trusting eyes.)

LILY

(innocently)

What if it's really far away?

MADDIE

(kissing her forehead)

Then we'll keep going. Step by step.

LILY

(nodding, her voice serious)

Like an adventure?

MADDIE

(smiling faintly)

Yeah, like an adventure.

(An emotional beat. LILY reaches for her crayons, adding a bright yellow sun to her drawing. MADDIE watches her, her expression softening.)

SOUND:

A faint knock at the door interrupts the quiet moment.

LILY

(excitedly)

Is it pancakes?

MADDIE

(laughing softly)

No, you goof. It's not the pancake fairy.

(MADDIE stands, her smile fading as she crosses to the door. She peeks through the crack, her shoulders tensing. A shadowy figure is visible through the peephole.)

MADDIE

(firmly)
Who is it?

VOICE (O.S.)

Maddie, it's just me—Lacey.

(MADDIE relaxes slightly and opens the door to reveal LACEY, holding a grocery bag.)

LACEY

(stepping inside, glancing around)
Thought you might need some essentials.

(She sets the bag on the table, pulling out a loaf of bread, a carton of milk, and a small box of cookies. MADDIE's eyes fill with gratitude, but she quickly hides it.)

MADDIE

(quietly)
You didn't have to do that.

LACEY

(shrugging)
You'd do the same for me.

(LILY runs up, grabbing the box of cookies.)

LILY

(beaming)
Thank you, Miss Lacey!

LACEY

(grinning)
You're welcome, kiddo. Just don't eat them all at once, okay?

LILY

(giggling)
Okay!

(LILY runs back to her drawing, happily munching on a cookie. LACEY turns to MADDIE, lowering her voice.)

LACEY

(concerned)
You okay?

MADDIE

(nodding, though her voice wavers)

Yeah. We're fine.

LACEY

(gently)

Maddie... if you need anything, you know you can call me, right?

(MADDIE looks away, her jaw tightening.)

MADDIE

(quietly)

I know.

(LACEY watches her for a moment, then nods.)

LACEY

(softly)

I'll let you get some rest. See you at work.

(She squeezes MADDIE's arm briefly before exiting. MADDIE closes the door and leans against it for a moment. She exhales sharply, then turns back to LILY.)

MADDIE

(softly)

Time for bed, sunshine.

(LILY yawns and climbs onto the futon. MADDIE pulls the thin blanket over her, tucking her in.)

LILY

(sleepily)

Do you think Sunny will be there in the morning?

MADDIE

(whispering)

Maybe.

(She kisses LILY's forehead as her daughter drifts off to sleep. MADDIE sits beside her, watching her breathe peacefully.)

LIGHTING:

The warm light around MADDIE and LILY softens, focusing entirely on them as the rest of the stage fades into shadow.

SOUND:

The rhythmic drip from the leaky pipe slows, blending into a soft piano melody that underscores MADDIE's quiet determination.

BLACKOUT

ACT I**SCENE 8****SETTING:**

An alley behind Bowman's Hardware, late at night. The alley is cluttered with trash bags, rusted barrels, and broken pallets. Rain streams from a loose gutter, forming shallow puddles that reflect the faint, flickering neon glow of the store's sign. The atmosphere is tense and gritty.

AT RISE:

Liam Brody, in his police uniform, steps cautiously into the alley. His flashlight beam cuts through the darkness, sweeping across the cluttered space. The faint red and blue glow of his patrol car's lights spills faintly into the scene, signaling his recent arrival.

(The stage is set with a few upright barrels and stacked crates to represent the clutter of the alley. A flickering neon "Bowman's Hardware" sign hangs on the back wall, providing intermittent light. Projections of rain and occasional lightning flashes create depth and movement in the scene.)

LIGHTING:

A dim, flickering streetlamp casts uneven shadows. Occasional bursts of lightning momentarily illuminate the alley. A focused spotlight follows Liam's movements, narrowing the space and heightening the tension.

SOUND:

The steady patter of rain dominates, punctuated by distant thunder and the metallic clang of a dumpster lid closing. Muffled street noise, such as a passing car, fades into the background.

LIAM

(into his radio, clipped)

Dispatch, I'm 10-23. Brody on scene. No sign of movement yet.

(He steps further into the alley, his boots splashing in shallow puddles. The beam of his flashlight lands on a broken lock hanging loosely from the back door of the hardware store. Liam kneels, examining the lock closely.)

SOUND:

The faint sound of the door opening causes Liam to glance up.

(Jack Bowman, wiry and irritable, emerges cautiously, holding a bat.)

JACK

(grumbling)

About damn time. Thought you were gonna let them clean me out before you showed.

LIAM

(calm, standing)

What did they get, Mr. Bowman?

JACK

(gesturing toward the door, his voice sharp with frustration)

Tools. Big ones. Damn near cleaned me out this time.

LIAM

(sincerely)

We'll get them back—

JACK

(cutting him off)

Heard that before. What am I even paying taxes for? You remember that you work for me, right?

(Jack mutters under his breath and retreats into the store, slamming the door behind him. Liam exhales sharply, his flashlight returning to the alley. His focus sharpens as he steps deeper into the shadows.)

SOUND:

The faint clatter of something metallic draws Liam's attention toward a dumpster. He moves cautiously, the beam of his flashlight narrowing.

LIAM

(suddenly, voice sharp)

Ryan!

(Ryan Brody, early 30s, gaunt and jittery, steps into the light, clutching a small bag of stolen tools. His hoodie is soaked, and his posture is tense, defensive.)

RYAN

(mocking)

Long time no see, Officer Brody.

LIAM

(keeping his tone steady)

What are you doing here?

RYAN

(flatly)

Just passing through.

LIAM

(nodding at the bag)

With half the hardware store? Real subtle.

(Ryan adjusts his grip on the bag, his jaw tightening. He lets out a bitter laugh, shaking his head.)

RYAN

(sarcastic)

Here we go. Let me guess—you're gonna fix me, right? Save the day?

LIAM

(stepping closer, his voice lowering)

I'm not here to argue. Give me the bag, and we'll talk this out.

RYAN

(snapping)

Talk? Like you ever fucking listen.

(An emotional beat. Liam hesitates, the tension in his body visible. His anger gives way to frustration and guilt.)

LIAM

(softly)

Ryan, you're better than this.

RYAN

(bitterly)

Fuck off. Don't act like you know me.

LIAM

(pleading)

I do know you. I know this isn't you.

RYAN

(laughing bitterly)

Know me? Look around, Liam. This is it. This is me.

(Ryan tosses the bag of tools to the ground, the metal clanging loudly. He steps closer to Liam, his eyes full of anger and pain.)

RYAN (CONT'D)

Where were you when I needed you, huh? Too busy being a hero to notice I was drowning?

(Liam's flashlight lowers slightly as he takes a step back, absorbing the weight of Ryan's words.)

LIAM

(softly)

You're my brother. That doesn't stop, no matter how much you want it to.

RYAN

(breaking slightly)

Maybe it should.

(Ryan starts to walk away, his shoulders slumped, but Liam grabs his arm, stopping him.)

LIAM

(firmly)

You're not walking out of here with that bag.

(Ryan looks at him, his expression conflicted. Finally, he lets the tension go, releasing the bag completely. Liam takes it and sets it aside.)

LIAM (CONT'D)

(quietly, gently)

Let me take you in. Get you somewhere safe.

RYAN

(sighing, resigned)

What's the point?

LIAM

(earnestly)

The point is, it's not too late.

(Ryan nods faintly, his resistance fading. Liam guides him out of the alley, his hand on his brother's shoulder.)

LIGHTING AND SOUND TRANSITION:

The dim overhead light fades as the two figures exit the stage, leaving the alley empty. The sound of the rain grows softer, blending into the faint hum of the refinery and the occasional crackle of Liam's police radio.

BLACKOUT

END ACT I

ACT II

SCENE 1

SETTING:

The cramped, chaotic interior of an ambulance speeding through the dark streets of Parkersburg. The narrow space is filled with medical equipment, flashing monitors, and the overpowering red glow from emergency lights filtering through the windows. The atmosphere is tense and suffocating.

STAGE:

The back of the ambulance is suggested by a stretcher, medical bags, and a few panels with faux buttons and lights mounted on the walls. A small screen projects flashing red lights onto the stage, creating the sense of movement as the ambulance hurtles through the night.

LIGHTING:

Red emergency lights strobe intermittently, creating a sense of urgency and chaos. A stark, focused spotlight illuminates **ERIN CALDWELL** (mid-30s, lean, haunted) as she works over **JASON** (16, pale, unresponsive), who lies on the stretcher. A dim backlight silhouettes **ALEX** (50s, gruff but steady), who sits at the far end of the ambulance, monitoring equipment.

SOUND:

The shrill wail of the ambulance siren plays faintly in the background, muffled by the pounding rain. Jason's labored, shallow breathing alternates with the mechanical beeping of a heart monitor. Occasional bursts of radio chatter crackle faintly.

CURTAIN UP

(Erin crouches over Jason, her gloved hands moving quickly but deliberately as she administers a dose of Narcan. Her face is taut with concentration, but her eyes betray exhaustion. Alex observes from the corner, ready to assist but giving Erin space to lead.)

ALEX

Breathing's shallow. Pulse is weak.

ERIN

(under her breath)

Not today.

(Erin leans in, checking Jason's airway. She adjusts the oxygen mask over his face, her fingers trembling slightly as she works.)

ERIN

(to Jason, urgent)

Come on, kid. You're not giving up on me.

(Jason remains unresponsive. Erin pulls back, grabbing a syringe of epinephrine from the supply bag. Her movements are sharp and precise, but there's a barely contained edge of panic.)

ALEX

(watching her carefully)

Erin...

ERIN

(snapping, without looking up)

Don't.

(She injects the epinephrine into Jason's IV, glancing at the monitor for signs of improvement. The flatline wavers, then stabilizes into a faint rhythm. Jason's body jolts slightly, and he coughs weakly.)

SOUND:

The heart monitor beeps steadily, though still faint.

ALEX

(sighing with relief)

There we go.

(Erin exhales sharply, sitting back on her heels. Her gloved hands rest limply in her lap for a moment as she watches Jason take shallow breaths.)

ALEX

(quietly)

You did good.

ERIN

(flat, almost dismissive)

He's not out of the woods yet.

(She removes her gloves, tossing them into a disposal bag with more force than necessary. Her eyes flick briefly to Jason's face, then away, as if looking at him too long is unbearable.)

SOUND:

The radio crackles faintly with updates from the hospital.

RADIO (V.O.)

ETA two minutes. Patient stabilized. Prepare for transfer.

ALEX

(softly, leaning in)

You okay?

ERIN

(cutting him off)

Focus on the kid.

(Alex nods, backing off. Erin leans forward, adjusting Jason's oxygen mask with a gentleness that contrasts with her earlier sharpness.)

ERIN

(to Jason, quietly)

You're lucky. Someone out there still cares enough to call for help. Don't waste it.

SOUND AND LIGHTING TRANSITION:

The siren grows louder as the ambulance pulls to a stop, and the red emergency lights intensify briefly before dimming.

The spotlight fades as Erin and Alex prepare to transfer Jason out of the ambulance.

SETTING TRANSITION:

The stage shifts to the hospital exterior, where **JASON'S MOTHER** (40s, disheveled) waits anxiously under the harsh fluorescent lights.

The stretcher is wheeled out, Jason still unconscious but breathing. His mother rushes forward, grabbing Erin's hand with desperation.

MOTHER

(teary, clutching Erin's hand)

You saved him. God bless you.

ERIN

(pulling her hand back gently, avoiding eye contact)

Just get him the help he needs.

(Erin steps away, her face hardening. She lights a cigarette just outside the hospital doors, the flame briefly illuminating her weary features. She stares through the glass, watching Jason disappear down the hallway.)

SOUND:

The faint sound of monitors beeping and muffled hospital chatter filters through the scene.

ERIN

(to herself, bitterly)

One more. Just one more.

(She exhales a cloud of smoke, turns, and walks into the rain, disappearing into the shadows.)

BLACKOUT

ACT II**SCENE 2****SETTING:**

A dimly lit trailer park on the outskirts of Parkersburg. Ryan's trailer sits slightly askew, surrounded by overgrown weeds and a cluttered yard filled with old tools and discarded beer cans. The interior of the trailer is cramped and messy, with peeling wallpaper and a flickering overhead light.

STAGE:

The stage is split: one side depicts the exterior of Ryan's trailer with a screen door and a few steps leading up to it. The other side represents the cluttered interior, featuring a battered couch, a small table covered in pawn slips, and a broken TV.

LIGHTING:

The exterior is bathed in a cold, bluish hue to suggest moonlight and the harsh glow of a distant streetlamp. Inside, the lighting is dim and uneven, with a single flickering bulb casting jagged shadows.

SOUND:

Crickets chirp faintly outside, mingling with the occasional bark of a distant dog. Inside, the faint buzz of the flickering bulb and the clink of a bottle being set down punctuate the stillness.

AT RISE:

Ryan Brody (early 30s, gaunt and jittery) sits slouched on the couch, nursing a half-empty bottle of cheap whiskey. His hands shake slightly as he scrolls through his phone, the screen illuminating his hollowed-out face. A soft knock at the trailer door startles him.

RYAN

(calling out, tense)

Who the fuck is it?

LIAM (O.S.)

It's me. Open the door.

(Ryan hesitates, his eyes narrowing as he sets the bottle on the table. He stands unsteadily, crossing to the door and cracking it open.)

RYAN

(suspicious)

What do you want, Liam?

LIAM

(stepping into the light)

Can we talk?

(Ryan opens the door reluctantly, stepping back to let Liam inside. Liam (late 30s, rugged but weary) enters, his posture tense but deliberate. He glances around the trailer, taking in the mess with a tight-lipped expression.)

LIAM (CONT'D)

This place... it's worse than I remember.

RYAN

(flatly, shutting the door)

You didn't come here to fuckin' redecorate. Say what you gotta say.

(Liam moves toward the table, picking up one of the pawn slips. He studies it briefly before setting it back down, his jaw tightening.)

LIAM

Pawn shops, Ryan? Again?

RYAN

(snatching the slip from the table)

None of your damn business.

LIAM

(stepping closer)

It is when you're stealing to survive. This... (gestures around the trailer) This isn't living.

RYAN

(snarling, defensive)

Oh, and you're the expert? You don't know what it's like—scraping by, doing whatever it takes just to get through the day.

LIAM

(pained, his voice lowering)

I know more than you think.

(An emotional beat. A tense silence stretches between them. Liam sits down heavily on the couch, his shoulders slumping. Ryan stays standing, arms crossed, as if bracing for a fight.)

LIAM (CONT'D)

(quietly)

You weren't always like this, Ryan. I wasn't always like this.

RYAN

(scoffing)

Spare me the lecture, Officer Perfect. Go save someone who actually wants your help.

LIAM

I'm not here as a cop. I'm here as your brother.

(Ryan flinches slightly at the word "brother," his defenses cracking for a split second. He turns away, grabbing the bottle of whiskey from the table and taking a swig.)

LIAM (CONT'D)

You don't have to keep doing this. Let me help you.

RYAN

(bitter, shaking his head)

Help me? Like you helped Mom? Like you helped Dad? Shit, man, you couldn't even keep your wife from fucking half of Parkersburg while you were out playing hero cop.

(Liam stands abruptly, his fists clenching at his sides. His voice rises, but his tone remains controlled.)

LIAM

Don't you dare bring them into this. This is about you and me.

RYAN

(whirling around, shouting)

And what about what I wanted? Huh? I had dreams, Liam. Plans! And now... now all I've got is this.

(Ryan's voice breaks, and he gestures wildly at the trailer around him. His anger dissipates into something closer to despair. He sinks back onto the couch, cradling the whiskey bottle.)

LIAM

(softly, sitting beside him)

It doesn't have to end like this.

RYAN

(whispering, defeated)

After I got laid off from the pipeline and... hooked on the pills, I lost everything, Liam.

(Liam reaches out, placing a firm hand on Ryan's shoulder. Ryan doesn't pull away, but he doesn't look at Liam either.)

LIAM

You're my brother. I'm not giving up on you. Not now, not ever.

RYAN

(quiet, almost to himself)

You can't save me, Liam.

LIAM

Maybe not. But I can damn well try.

SOUND AND LIGHTING TRANSITION:

The rain intensifies outside, the sound filling the silence between the brothers. The dim interior light flickers, casting their shadows across the cluttered walls.

(Ryan leans forward, his head in his hands. Liam sits beside him, his hand still resting on Ryan's shoulder. The tension between them lingers, unresolved but charged with quiet determination.)

LIGHTING FADE:

The focus narrows on the two brothers, their faces illuminated as the rest of the stage fades into shadow.

BLACKOUT

ACT II

SCENE 3

SETTING:

A dimly lit strip club on the outskirts of Parkersburg. The stage is divided into two areas: the main floor with its garish neon lights and pulsating music, and a cramped backstage dressing room cluttered with mismatched furniture, makeup kits, and faded costumes.

STAGE:

The main floor is suggested with bright, shifting neon lighting and a small pole center stage.

The backstage area is darker and more subdued, with a single dressing table and mirror surrounded by dim, flickering bulbs.

LIGHTING:

The main floor is bathed in red and purple hues, with sharp spotlights that sweep across the stage in erratic patterns. Backstage is illuminated by a single warm light bulb above the dressing mirror, casting uneven shadows.

SOUND:

Thumping bass-heavy music dominates the scene, muffled slightly when the action moves backstage.

The low hum of patrons' voices and occasional bursts of laughter blend into the background.

AT RISE:

Maddie Taylor (early 30s, weary but defiant) stands under the garish neon lights of the main floor, dancing mechanically. Her movements are precise but devoid of enthusiasm, her face a blank mask. The spotlight follows her as a handful of patrons cheer halfheartedly, tossing crumpled bills onto the stage.

PATRON (O.S.)

Come on, sweetheart! Spread 'em and show us what you got!

(Maddie's jaw tightens, but she forces a faint smile as she spins around the pole. The stage lights flicker as the music crescendos.)

ANNOUNCER (O.S.)

(club mic, enthusiastic)

Let's hear it for the lovely Maddie!

(Maddie exits the main floor, slipping backstage as the spotlight fades. The loud music continues faintly in the background.)

BACKSTAGE SCENE:

The dressing room is cramped and chaotic. Maddie enters, draping a sweater over her shoulders. She crosses to the mirror, staring at her reflection for a beat before wiping off her makeup with a rag.

FRANK (O.S.)

Maddie!

(Frank (50s, overweight, sleazy) steps into the backstage area, leaning casually against the doorframe. His gaze lingers on Maddie as he crosses his arms.)

FRANK (CONT'D)

You're short this week. Again.

MADDIE

(coldly, without turning)

I know.

FRANK

(smiling, stepping closer)

I mean, you got options, you know. Real money's in the back rooms. With that body, you can prob'ly make 2, maybe 300 bucks a go. Just one night—

MADDIE

(snapping, spinning around)

I said no, Frank. I'm not doing that.

(Frank raises his hands in mock surrender, his smirk never fading.)

FRANK

Suit yourself. But rent doesn't pay itself, sweetheart. You gotta shake that ass and show that gash if you wanna earn.

MADDIE

(flatly)

I'll figure it out. Without your help.

(Frank lingers for a moment, then shrugs and heads back toward the main floor.)

FRANK (CONT'D)

(throwing over his shoulder)

Whatever, Maddie. Think you're too good... that's your problem.

(Maddie exhales sharply, sinking onto a nearby stool. She pulls out her phone, scrolling through her messages. A text from her landlord, Grayson, appears projected above her:)

TEXT PROJECTION:

Friday. Noon. Or you're out.

(Maddie stares at the message, her grip tightening on the phone. She types a response, then deletes it. Her reflection in the mirror stares back at her, hollow and exhausted.)

LACEY (O.S.)

(softly)

You okay?

(Lacey (20s, bubbly but sympathetic) peeks around the corner, holding a makeup brush.)

MADDIE

(sighing)

Fine.

LACEY

(stepping in, sitting beside her)

He's a creep, you know. Don't let him get to you.

MADDIE

(bitterly)

Easier said than done.

LACEY

(earnest)

You don't have to do this forever, Maddie. You're strong. Smarter than all of us put together.

MADDIE

(smiling faintly)

Strong doesn't pay the rent, either.

(Lacey reaches out, squeezing Maddie's hand briefly before standing.)

LACEY

Just... don't let him win, okay?

MADDIE

(softly)
I won't.

(Lacey exits, leaving Maddie alone. She stares at her phone again, her fingers hovering over the screen. The noise from the main floor grows louder, snapping her out of her thoughts. She tosses the phone onto the table and pulls her sweater tighter around her shoulders.)

MADDIE (CONT'D)

(whispering to herself)
One more day.

LIGHTING AND SOUND TRANSITION:

The warm backstage light dims as the flickering neon glow from the main floor seeps into the scene. The thumping music fades, blending into the distant hum of the refinery as the stage transitions to Ethan's storyline.

BLACKOUT

ACT II

SCENE 4

SETTING:

A crowded college library at West Virginia University Parkersburg. Rows of mismatched desks and bookshelves stretch into the background. The lighting is dim except for desk lamps, which cast small, focused pools of light on scattered tables.

STAGE:

Center stage features a long communal study table with scattered books, notebooks, and coffee cups.

Stage left has a counter suggesting the librarian's desk with a softly glowing computer.

Stage right features a tall shelf of books with an empty space behind it, where characters can slip in and out unseen.

LIGHTING:

Warm, soft light on the communal study area.

Dim, shadowy lighting over the shelves to suggest secrecy.

SOUND:

The soft hum of fluorescent lights.

Occasional rustling of paper and muffled whispers from other students.

A distant printer whirs intermittently.

AT RISE:

Ethan McAllister (early 20s, strained and restless) sits hunched over a pile of textbooks at the communal table, scribbling notes in a notebook. His phone lies beside him, the screen dark but ominous. His foot taps anxiously under the table.

CLASSMATE

(leaning over, cheerful)

Hey, Ethan. You gonna make it to the review session later?

(Ethan looks up sharply, forcing a smile. The classmate (19, enthusiastic but oblivious) gestures at his open textbook.)

ETHAN

(halfhearted)

Uh... yeah. Maybe.

CLASSMATE

(grinning)

You better, dude. Professor Warner's tests are brutal.

(The classmate exits stage left. Ethan's smile fades immediately. He flips a page in his notebook, scrawling notes faster.)

SOUND:

A faint buzz sounds from Ethan's phone. He freezes, staring at the dark screen before picking it up.

TEXT PROJECTION:

"SUPPLIER: You're late. You have an hour."

(Ethan exhales sharply, his hand trembling slightly as he types a reply.)

TEXT PROJECTION:

"Can't now. Later."

(He hesitates, deletes the message, and types again.)

TEXT PROJECTION:

"On my way."

(Ethan tosses the phone back onto the table, burying his face in his hands. His breathing grows heavier as the weight of his choices bears down on him.)

(Professor Warner crosses unseen toward Ethan.)

PROFESSOR WARNER

(calm, firm)

Mr. McAllister.

(Ethan looks up, startled. Professor Warner (50s, composed, watchful) stands near the bookshelf stage right, holding a stack of papers.)

PROFESSOR WARNER (CONT'D)

(gesturing at the books)

You seem... distracted.

ETHAN

(defensive)

Just... balancing work and school. You know how it is.

PROFESSOR WARNER

(raising an eyebrow)

Do I?

(Professor Warner sets the papers down and sits across from Ethan, his tone softening.)

PROFESSOR WARNER (CONT'D)

Ethan, you're smart. You're capable. But this? (gestures vaguely at Ethan's jittery demeanor) This doesn't look like someone who's in control.

ETHAN

(quickly)

I'm fine. Just tired.

PROFESSOR WARNER

(nods slowly)

Tired makes mistakes. You don't want mistakes catching up to you.

(The words land heavily on Ethan. He nods faintly, unable to meet Warner's gaze.)

PROFESSOR WARNER (CONT'D)

(standing)

The review session starts in twenty minutes. I hope I'll see you there.

(Professor Warner exits, leaving Ethan alone. Ethan stares at his notebook, but his focus is broken. His phone buzzes again, louder this time.)

TEXT PROJECTION:

"SUPPLIER: 30 minutes. Don't fuck this up."

(Ethan stands abruptly, gathering his things and shoving them into his bag. He moves toward the shadowy corner near the bookshelves, glancing over his shoulder to make sure no one is watching.)

SOUND:

The soft rustle of footsteps follows Ethan as he exits stage right. The hum of fluorescent lights fades into a low, ominous melody, signaling his transition into danger.

LIGHTING TRANSITION:

The warm study light dims, leaving the stage bathed in cold, shadowy hues. A single spotlight lingers on the abandoned table, the books and coffee cup standing as silent witnesses to Ethan's departure.

BLACKOUT

ACT II

SCENE 5

SETTING:

The living room of Judge Sanders' home. The space is neat and formal but cold, lacking any personal warmth. The furniture is traditional—stiff couches, an ornate coffee table, and shelves lined with law books. A family photo sits on the mantle, slightly askew.

STAGE:

Center stage features a couch and coffee table.

Stage right has a large window with sheer curtains, allowing faint light from the outside streetlamp to filter in.

A small desk with a laptop and legal files sits stage left.

LIGHTING:

Dim, warm lighting suggests evening. A faint amber glow spills through the window, casting long shadows.

A spotlight highlights the couch area where the scene's primary tension unfolds.

SOUND:

The faint tick-tock of a clock. The muffled hum of distant traffic.

AT RISE:

Natalie Sanders (17, guarded and defiant) sits cross-legged on the couch, scrolling through her phone. The faint glow of the screen illuminates her face. Judge Sanders (early 50s, stern but visibly weary) enters stage left, holding a cup of coffee. He pauses, observing Natalie for a moment.

SANDERS

(pointedly)

I see we're having another productive evening.

(Natalie doesn't look up, her thumbs tapping rapidly on her phone.)

NATALIE

(flatly)

Yup. Super productive.

SANDERS

(sighing, setting his cup on the table)

Natalie, we need to talk.

(Natalie finally looks up, her expression defensive.)

NATALIE

(sarcastic)

Oh, here we go. Another lecture about responsibility? Or is it my grades this time? 'Slutty' clothes, as you call them, or my-

SANDERS

(ignoring the sarcasm)

This isn't about any of that. Well, perhaps all of it.

(He picks up her phone from the couch, holding it up.)

SANDERS (CONT'D)

Do you really think this—(gestures to the phone)—is going to help you figure out who you are? Or where you're going?

NATALIE

(snapping, standing up)

And you think all your rules and lectures are helping me? Newsflash, Dad: all you care about is how I make you look.

SANDERS

(quiet but firm)

That's not true.

NATALIE

(mocking)

Oh, really? So why are you always too busy with your "important cases" to notice when I'm falling apart?

(Sanders flinches, the words hitting harder than he expected.)

SANDERS

(taking a measured breath)

I know I haven't been there as much as I should've. But that doesn't mean I don't care.

NATALIE

(bitterly)

You only care when it's too late.

(She storms toward stage right, but Sanders steps in her path, his voice breaking slightly.)

SANDERS

(pleading)

Natalie... stop.

(Natalie hesitates, her back to him.)

SANDERS (CONT'D)

(softer)

I'm trying. I really am. I just don't want you to make the same mistakes I've seen ruin so many lives.

NATALIE

(turning, her voice trembling)

Maybe if you'd listen for once instead of judging me, you'd know what I'm really going through.

(The tension in the room thickens as they stare at each other. Sanders exhales sharply, running a hand through his hair.)

SANDERS

(after a long pause)

You're right. I haven't listened enough. But I want to. I need you to trust me, Natalie.

NATALIE

(softly)

How can I trust you when you don't even see me?

(She retreats to the couch, curling into herself. Sanders watches her, his guilt palpable. He sits down beside her, leaving a respectful distance.)

SANDERS

(earnest, struggling)

I see you, Natalie. Maybe not the way you want me to, but I do. And I want to understand.

(Natalie picks at a loose thread on the couch, avoiding his gaze.)

NATALIE

(softly)

I don't know if I believe that.

SOUND:

The ticking clock grows louder in the silence that follows.

SANDERS

(after a long pause)

Then let me prove it.

(He stands, picking up his coffee cup.)

SANDERS (CONT'D)

You don't have to say anything tonight. But when you're ready, I'll be here.

(He sets the phone down and exits stage left, leaving Natalie alone. She stares at her phone, her thumb hovering over the screen.)

SOUND:

The faint tick-tock of the clock continues as the lights fade to black.

BLACKOUT

ACT II

SCENE 6

SETTING:

A dimly lit backyard in a residential neighborhood. The area is surrounded by overgrown shrubs and a leaning wooden fence. A small toolshed with a padlocked door stands upstage, its exterior weathered and covered in graffiti. A porch light from the adjacent house casts faint illumination, while the glow of distant streetlights spills through the trees.

STAGE:

Upstage: The toolshed, represented by a simple structure with a hinged door and a dangling lock.

Downstage: A cluttered space with a wheelbarrow, gardening tools, and scattered debris.

LIGHTING:

A faint spotlight follows Ryan as he moves stealthily through the yard.

Occasional flashes of light from passing cars outside the fence heighten the tension.

SOUND:

Crickets chirping, the distant hum of traffic, and the occasional bark of a dog.

The metallic creak of the padlock and the clinking of tools create sharp, jarring contrasts to the ambient sounds.

AT RISE:

Ryan Brody (early 30s, gaunt and desperate) creeps onstage from the left, his movements cautious and deliberate. He wears a dark hoodie and gloves, his face partially obscured by the shadows. He freezes as a car's headlights sweep briefly across the fence.

RYAN

(to himself, muttering)

Come on, Ryan. Just grab it and go.

(He darts to the toolshed, crouching low to avoid the porch light. He fumbles with the lock, pulling a small screwdriver from his pocket.)

SOUND:

The faint scrape of metal against metal fills the silence.

RYAN (CONT'D)

(whispering)

Damn thing's rusted shut.

He jimmies the lock harder. The padlock creaks loudly, making him pause and glance over his shoulder.

SOUND:

A dog barks from a nearby yard.

RYAN (CONT'D)

(through gritted teeth)

Shut up, shut up, shut up...

(The lock finally pops open with a metallic click. Ryan exhales sharply, quickly opening the shed door.)

(He steps inside, his flashlight illuminating a collection of power tools.)

LIGHTING:

The interior of the shed glows faintly as his flashlight beam sweeps across the space.

RYAN (CONT'D)

(low, triumphant)

Jackpot.

(He grabs a cordless drill, a circular saw, and a wrench set, shoving them into his backpack. His hands tremble as he zips it up.)

SOUND:

A loud clunk as the wrench slips from his grasp and hits the floor.

RYAN (CONT'D)

(hissing under his breath)

Damn it!

SOUND:

A porch light snaps on, casting bright illumination over the yard.

NEIGHBOR (O.S.)

(shouting from offstage)

Who's out there?!

(Ryan panics, slinging the backpack over his shoulder and sprinting toward the fence.)

LIGHTING:

The porch light follows Ryan's frantic movements as he stumbles over debris.

SOUND:

The muffled thud of his boots splashing through puddles and the clatter of tools inside the bag.

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

I'm calling the cops!

(Ryan reaches the fence, grabbing the top edge and hauling himself over. He lands with a crunch on the other side, crouching low as he catches his breath.)

LIGHTING:

The porch light dims as the focus shifts to Ryan crouched downstage, silhouetted against the faint streetlight glow.

RYAN

(whispering, breathless)

Just one more. One more job.

(He pulls the bag in front of him, inspecting the tools with a mix of guilt and desperation. His hands shake as he zips it back up.)

RYAN (CONT'D)

(bitterly)

Survival, baby. That's all this is.

SOUND:

The distant wail of a police siren makes Ryan flinch. He glances over his shoulder before darting offstage, disappearing into the shadows.

LIGHTING AND SOUND TRANSITION:

The stage fades to black as the sound of the siren grows louder, transitioning seamlessly into the next scene.

BLACKOUT

ACT II

SCENE 7

SETTING:

Maddie's small apartment. The living space is dimly lit, the peeling wallpaper and exposed pipes giving the room a worn, claustrophobic feel. A futon serves as both couch and bed, cluttered with Lily's toys and drawings. A small table upstage is covered in bills, and a half-full mug of tea sits precariously near the edge.

STAGE:

Furniture: The futon is downstage, with Lily's scattered crayons and a half-colored drawing spread across it.

Lighting Prop: A small, flickering table lamp provides the primary source of light.

Decorations: Lily's cheerful drawings are taped to the walls, a stark contrast to the dingy setting.

LIGHTING:

A soft, warm light focuses on Maddie and Lily, creating an intimate atmosphere that contrasts with the harshness of the apartment.

Dim lighting around the edges of the stage enhances the feeling of isolation.

SOUND:

The rhythmic drip of a leaky faucet echoes faintly in the background.

Muffled voices from neighbors and the occasional sound of passing cars outside.

AT RISE:

Maddie Taylor (early 30s, weary but resilient) kneels beside Lily (7, bright and hopeful), who is sprawled on the futon. Lily is coloring a vibrant picture of a sunny day, complete with a house surrounded by flowers and a swing set.

LILY

(cheerfully)

Look, Mommy! I added a dog this time. See? He's got a big tail!

(Maddie leans closer, studying the drawing with a soft smile. She tucks a stray strand of hair behind Lily's ear.)

MADDIE

(softly)

That's the happiest dog I've ever seen. What's his name?

LILY

(grinning)

Sunny! Because he likes to run in the sun.

(Maddie's smile falters for a moment as her eyes drift to the stack of bills on the table. She exhales quietly, brushing her hand over Lily's hair.)

MADDIE

(faintly)

Sunny's perfect.

LILY

(excitedly, sitting up)

When we get a big house, can we get a real Sunny? With a yard and a swing and everything? My friend at school has a dog.

(Maddie freezes briefly, her gaze flicking toward the dingy walls of the apartment. She forces a smile, sitting back on her heels.)

MADDIE

(after a beat, gently)

Maybe someday, baby. But for now...

(Maddie picks up a crayon and adds a bright sun to the corner of Lily's drawing.)

MADDIE (CONT'D)

(smiling)

...we can make our own sunshine.

LILY

(beaming)

It's gonna be the best house ever!

(Lily holds up the picture triumphantly. The stage light catches it, briefly emphasizing its vibrant colors. Maddie studies it, her smile soft but wistful.)

SOUND:

A knock at the door breaks the moment.

LILY (CONT'D)

(jumping up)

Is it pancakes?

MADDIE

(laughing softly)

I highly doubt it, kiddo. But you never know.

(Maddie stands, her smile fading as she approaches the door. She opens it cautiously to reveal a delivery driver (20s, wearing a rumpled uniform) holding a worn box.)

DELIVERY DRIVER

(flatly)
Taylor?

MADDIE

(nods)
Yeah, that's me.

(The delivery driver hands her the box, already turning to leave. Maddie closes the door, staring at the box for a moment before setting it on the table.)

LILY

(from the futon, curious)
What is it?

MADDIE

(softly, more to herself)
Something from 'Aunt Lacey.'

(She opens the box to reveal a small, handmade quilt with bright patches of fabric stitched together. A note sits on top, written in careful cursive. Maddie reads it aloud.)

MADDIE (CONT'D)

(reading)
"For Maddie and Lily—your own patch of home until you find the rest.
Your bestie, Lacey."

(Maddie's voice catches slightly, and she quickly clears her throat. Lily rushes over, pulling the quilt from the box and draping it around herself.)

LILY

(giggling)
It's so warm! Look, Mommy—it's like a big hug!

(Maddie kneels beside Lily, wrapping the quilt around both of them. She pulls her daughter close, kissing the top of her head.)

MADDIE

(whispering)
You're my sunshine, Lily. Always.

LIGHTING:

The warm light around Maddie and Lily brightens slightly, focusing entirely on them as the rest of the stage fades into shadow.

SOUND:

The rhythmic drip from the faucet fades into a soft piano melody, underscoring the tenderness of the moment.

BLACKOUT

ACT II**SCENE 8***SETTING:*

Erin's small, cluttered apartment. The space is dim and chaotic, with piles of laundry, unopened mail, and empty takeout containers scattered around. A photo of Erin's late parents sits crookedly on a shelf near the liquor bottles. A dimly lit bathroom door stands ajar, the harsh fluorescent light from inside spilling onto the floor.

STAGE:

Furniture: A worn couch upstage, a cluttered coffee table, and a shelf filled with mismatched items.

Bathroom: Represented by a small cubicle area stage left, lit with a cold, sterile light.

Props: Half-empty whiskey bottles, a disheveled uniform jacket draped over a chair, and a blinking answering machine on the table.

LIGHTING:

The main room is dimly lit by a flickering overhead bulb.

The bathroom has a stark, clinical light spilling onto the stage.

Shadows play across the walls, adding a sense of unease.

SOUND:

The faint hum of a neighbor's TV muffled through the walls. Occasional dripping from a leaky faucet.

A faint voicemail tone intermittently beeps from the answering machine.

AT RISE:

Erin Caldwell (mid-30s, exhausted and haunted) sits slumped on the couch, a whiskey bottle in hand. She wears her paramedic uniform pants, but her shirt is unbuttoned, revealing a tank top underneath. Her hair is disheveled, and her eyes are bloodshot.

(The room is silent except for the faint hum of the TV next door. Erin takes a swig from the bottle, wincing as it burns her throat.)

ERIN

(to herself, quietly)

Another day, another disaster.

(She leans forward, grabbing an unopened envelope from the table. She stares at it for a moment before tearing it open. Her face hardens as she reads.)

ERIN (CONT'D)

(mocking, bitter)

"Final notice." Yeah, no kidding.

(She tosses the letter onto the table, knocking over an empty coffee mug. The mug rolls off the edge and shatters on the floor. Erin doesn't react.)

SOUND:

The answering machine beeps. A voice begins to play, cutting through the silence.

VOICEMAIL (V.O.)

Erin, it's Dr. Klein. We've been trying to reach you. You've missed your last two therapy sessions. (pause) We have to put you on suspension until you meet the required sessions. Call us back—we're here to help.

(Erin stares at the machine, her face unreadable. The message ends, and silence fills the room again. After a beat, she chuckles darkly.)

ERIN

(raising her bottle)

Fuck it. Here's to help.

(She takes another long drink before setting the bottle down heavily. Her gaze shifts to the photo of her parents on the shelf. She stands unsteadily, crossing to the shelf.)

ERIN (CONT'D)

(softly, almost reverently)

You'd hate me if you saw me now.

(She picks up the photo, her thumb brushing over the glass. Her expression shifts, anger flashing briefly across her face.)

ERIN (CONT'D)

(louder, bitter)

You left me to clean up this mess! All of it!

(Her voice cracks as she hurls the photo onto the couch, the frame landing face down. She staggers toward the bathroom, leaving the bottle behind.)

SOUND:

The faint drip of the bathroom faucet grows louder as Erin enters the space.

BATHROOM ACTION:

(Erin leans over the sink, gripping the edges tightly. She stares at herself in the mirror, her reflection harshly lit by the fluorescent bulb.)

ERIN (CONT'D)

(to her reflection, quietly)

What the hell are you doing?

(She splashes cold water on her face, gasping slightly at the chill. Her gaze drifts to a small bottle of pills on the edge of the sink.)

ERIN (CONT'D)

(to the pills)

You're the only thing that shuts them up, aren't you?

(She picks up the bottle, turning it over in her hand. The sound of the pills rattling inside fills the silence. Her grip tightens, and for a moment, it seems she might throw it away.)

SOUND:

A sudden knock at the door startles her.

ERIN (CONT'D)

(calling out, hoarse)

Who is it?

VOICE (O.S.)

It's Liam. Open up.

(Erin hesitates, glancing back at the pills. She exhales sharply and moves toward the door, her steps unsteady. She opens it a crack, revealing Liam Brody, drenched from the rain and holding his hat in his hands.)

LIAM

(quietly, sincerely)

Hey, Erin.

ERIN

(flat)

Liam. What do you want? This better not be a booty call.

LIAM

(struggling)

I... I heard about the kid this morning. Thought you might need someone to talk to.

(Erin lets out a sharp laugh, shaking her head.)

ERIN

(sarcastic)

What, now you're my fuckin' therapist too? You got enough problems of your own, Liam.

LIAM

(firm but gentle)

Maybe I do. But that doesn't mean I can't try to help.

(Erin leans against the doorframe, her defenses faltering.)

ERIN

(softly)

You can't fix this.

LIAM

(earnestly)

I'm not trying to fix you, Erin. I just don't want you to go through it alone.

(A long beat passes. Erin's hand tightens on the doorframe as she looks away, the weight of his words sinking in. Finally, she steps back, opening the door wider.)

ERIN

(low)

Come on in.

(Liam steps inside cautiously, glancing around the apartment. Erin grabs the whiskey bottle from the table, hesitating for a moment before setting it down out of reach.)

LIGHTING:

The bathroom light dims, leaving the two of them in the soft, flickering glow of the living room lamp.

SOUND:

The faint hum of the neighbor's TV fades, leaving only the sound of the dripping faucet as the scene ends.

BLACKOUT

ACT II**SCENE 9***SETTING:*

Natalie's bedroom in Judge Sanders' home. The room is tidy but lacks warmth, with minimalist decor and impersonal furnishings. A desk cluttered with schoolbooks and a laptop sits by a window. A small corkboard on the wall holds photos of her with friends, notes, and a few inspirational quotes. The light from her laptop screen bathes the room in a cold glow.

STAGE:

Furniture: A bed with a plain, unadorned comforter, a desk with a chair, and a small nightstand.

Props: Laptop, phone, a small journal, and a corkboard with pinned items.

Projection Option: Text messages or social media content may be projected above the stage to give insight into Natalie's inner world.

LIGHTING:

A cool blue spotlight simulates the laptop screen illuminating Natalie's face. A warm bedside lamp glows faintly, contrasting the cold light of the screen.

SOUND:

The faint ticking of a clock underscores the silence.

Occasionally, the soft ping of notifications from Natalie's phone.

AT RISE:

Natalie Sanders (17, defiant but deeply lonely) sits cross-legged on her bed, scrolling through her phone. Her face is blank, but her fingers tap the screen nervously. The corkboard behind her features a mix of carefully curated images—happy moments and staged smiles.

(The faint glow of her phone screen reflects in her eyes as she hesitates, her thumb hovering over an app icon. She exhales sharply and taps it.)

PROJECTION:

The screen lights up with the TikTok app, a curated feed of laughing teens and dance routines projected above her.

SOUND:

The muffled, upbeat audio of a popular song plays briefly before Natalie swipes past it.

(Natalie scrolls aimlessly, pausing on a video of a girl speaking openly about her struggles with addiction and depression. The caption reads: "We don't have to fight alone.")

(Natalie stares at the screen, her expression unreadable.)

NATALIE

(softly, almost whispering)

Maybe you don't.

(She taps the "create" button, holding the phone out in front of her. Her face fills the screen, illuminated by the cold glow of the phone. She hesitates, lowering the phone slightly as her confidence wavers.)

NATALIE (CONT'D)

(to herself)

Why would anyone care?

(She tosses the phone onto the bed, burying her face in her hands. The upbeat TikTok audio continues to play faintly in the background, mocking her silence.)

SOUND:

A faint knock at the door cuts through the quiet.

JUDGE SANDERS (O.S.)

Natalie? You still awake?

(Natalie stiffens, quickly grabbing her phone and shutting off the audio. She scrambles to sit up, pulling a schoolbook into her lap.)

NATALIE

(calling out)

Yeah, I'm studying.

(The door creaks open, and Judge Sanders (50s, stoic but trying) steps inside. He hesitates, his gaze drifting over the room before settling on Natalie.)

SANDERS

(softly)

It's late. Thought you might want to talk.

NATALIE

(flat)

About what?

SANDERS

(after a beat)

Anything. School. Friends. Whatever's on your mind.

(Natalie's eyes narrow, her body language closing off. She sets the book aside and crosses her arms.)

NATALIE

(accusingly)

Since when do you care?

SANDERS

(taken aback)

I've always cared, Natalie.

NATALIE

(mocking)

Sure. Right up until it's inconvenient.

(Sanders exhales, stepping further into the room. He sits awkwardly on the edge of her desk chair, his hands clasped in front of him.)

SANDERS

I know I've been distant. I know... I've made mistakes.

NATALIE

(bitterly)

You think?

(Sanders nods, absorbing the blow. He glances at the corkboard, his gaze lingering on a photo of Natalie with a wide smile, surrounded by friends.)

SANDERS

You used to talk to me.

NATALIE

(back to her phone, dismissive)

Yeah, well. People change.

(Sanders studies her for a long moment, his tone softening.)

SANDERS

I miss that smile.

(Natalie looks up sharply, her mask slipping for a fraction of a second.)

NATALIE

(low)

Maybe I don't have much to smile about.

(Sanders leans forward, his voice steady but edged with vulnerability.)

SANDERS

You don't have to do this alone, Natalie. Whatever's going on—you can tell me.

NATALIE

(snapping)

Why? So you can tell me how it looks bad for you?

(Sanders flinches, but his gaze doesn't waver.)

SANDERS

That's not fair.

NATALIE

(mocking)

Fair? That's funny coming from you.

(A tense silence settles between them. Natalie shifts uncomfortably, her fingers twitching toward the phone beside her.)

SANDERS

(standing)

I'm here, Natalie. Whenever you're ready.

(He starts to leave but pauses at the door, looking back at her.)

SANDERS (CONT'D)

(softly)

You're worth more than you think.

(He exits, leaving the door ajar. Natalie stares at the doorway for a long moment before picking up her phone again. She opens the TikTok app and hesitates over the "create" button.)

NATALIE

(to herself, softly)

Maybe not.

(She closes the app and sets the phone aside. She pulls out her journal, flipping to a blank page, and begins to write. The faint glow of the desk lamp highlights her furrowed brow as the scene fades.)

LIGHTING:

The desk lamp dims gradually, leaving Natalie silhouetted against the faint light from the corkboard.

SOUND:

The ticking clock grows louder, blending with the faint hum of rain outside.

BLACKOUT

END ACT II

INTERMISSION

ACT III

SCENE 1

SETTING:

Erin's small, cluttered apartment. The space is dimly lit, with evidence of a hard, chaotic life: an overturned bottle of whiskey on the coffee table, unopened letters scattered across the floor, and a half-full ashtray perched precariously on the arm of a threadbare chair. A single framed photo of Erin with her deceased parents rests crookedly on the wall.

AT RISE:

ERIN CALDWELL, mid-30s, lean and haunted, sits hunched on the couch, staring blankly at the floor. Her hands tremble slightly as she holds a cigarette, the ash precariously long. A glass of whiskey sits untouched on the table.

ERIN

(softly, to herself)

Another one. Another goddamn siren.

(She takes a drag from the cigarette, the glow momentarily illuminating her weary face. She exhales slowly, watching the smoke curl upward. Her gaze lands on the framed photo of her parents. She picks it up, staring at their smiling faces.)

ERIN

(softly, bitterly)

God, you two look so happy. Like life's just one big picnic.

(She sets the photo back down roughly, the frame tilting askew. Her fingers tremble as she reaches for the glass of whiskey but stops short.)

ERIN

(to the photo, voice rising)

What would you think of me now? Huh? Your star EMT, your overachiever daughter, saving lives by day and drinking herself to death by night.

(She laughs bitterly, shaking her head. Her hand finally grips the whiskey glass, but she doesn't drink.)

PROJECTION OPTION:

Images of Erin in her EMS uniform flash above the stage—her smiling proudly on her first day, her drenched in sweat after rescuing someone, her hollow-eyed after losing a patient.

ERIN

(snarling)

Why does it matter? None of it matters.

(She slams the glass back onto the table, spilling whiskey across a pile of unopened letters. Her eyes fall on one with bold red text: FINAL NOTICE.)

ERIN

(sarcastic)

Oh, good. One more thing to add to the pile.

(She grabs the letter and tears it open. Her eyes scan the contents, her expression hardening.)

ERIN

(quietly)

Evicted. Of course.

(Her voice rises as she throws the letter onto the table.)

ERIN

(yelling)

Evicted! Fired! Alone! What else, huh? What else do you wanna take from me?

(She stands abruptly, knocking over the coffee table. The glass shatters, the whiskey pooling on the floor. Her breathing grows ragged as she grips the edge of the couch for support.)

SOUND:

The distant siren returns, softer this time, almost like a memory.

(Her knees buckle slightly, and she sinks back onto the couch. Her hands cradle her head as her voice drops to a whisper.)

ERIN

(to herself)

It's all just... too much.

(She grabs the photo of her parents again, holding it tightly. Tears streak down her face as she stares at it, her voice cracking.)

ERIN

(pleading)

I just... I just wanted to make you proud.

LIGHTING:

The spotlight dims slightly, focusing more narrowly on Erin as the surrounding light fades.

SOUND:

The ticking of a clock becomes audible, growing louder with each beat, amplifying the tension.

(Her trembling hand reaches for her phone. She opens her contacts and scrolls aimlessly before landing on a name: "Liam.")

PROJECTION OPTION:

The phone screen is projected above the stage, showing Liam's name highlighted but not dialed.

ERIN

(softly, hesitant)

Liam...

(Her thumb hovers over the call button but doesn't press it. She lets the phone drop onto the couch, burying her face in her hands.)

LIGHTING AND SOUND TRANSITION:

The spotlight fades gradually as the ticking clock slows and merges with the sound of the distant siren. The sound of dripping water intensifies momentarily, then cuts out completely as the stage fades to black.

BLACKOUT

ACT III

SCENE 2

SETTING:

The interior of Ryan's trailer in a dilapidated trailer park on the outskirts of Parkersburg. The space is cluttered and disheveled: peeling wallpaper, a sagging couch, empty beer cans, and discarded fast-food wrappers litter the floor.

The flicker of a faulty overhead light casts long, uneven shadows. A small, cluttered table holds a crumpled wad of cash, a bottle of whiskey, and an empty pill bottle.

AT RISE:

The stage is dimly lit, with a faint bluish hue from a streetlamp spilling in through a small, cracked window. LIAM BRODY (late 30s, rugged but weary) bursts through the door, flashlight in hand, his expression taut with urgency and dread.

LIGHTING:

A faint, flickering overhead light provides the primary illumination. The beam from Liam's flashlight slices through the gloom, highlighting key objects in the room.

SOUND:

The muffled hum of rain pattering against the roof punctuates the silence. Occasional creaks from the trailer and faint street noises add to the tension.

LIAM

(calling out, his voice tight with worry)

Ryan!

(Liam moves cautiously through the small space, his boots crunching on discarded debris. He sweeps the flashlight across the room, pausing on the table. His beam illuminates the whiskey bottle, the wad of cash, and the empty pill bottle.)

LIAM (CONT'D)

(under his breath, muttering)

No... no, no, no.

(He moves toward the bedroom area, his steps quickening. The flashlight catches a shadow slumped in the corner near the bed: RYAN BRODY (early 30s, gaunt, pale). He sits awkwardly against the wall, his head tilted to one side, an empty glass in his hand. The faint sheen of sweat glistens on his lifeless face.)

LIGHTING:

The flashlight beam centers on Ryan's face, leaving the rest of the stage in shadow.

LIAM (CONT'D)

(staggering, his voice breaking)

Ryan...

(Liam drops to his knees beside his brother, setting the flashlight on the floor. He reaches out, shaking Ryan's shoulder with increasing urgency.)

LIAM (CONT'D)

(pleading)

Ryan! Wake up! Come on, man. Don't do this.

(He notices the faint blue tint to Ryan's lips and the empty pill bottle nearby. His gaze darts to the whiskey bottle, then back to Ryan. His hands tremble as he checks for a pulse.)

SOUND:

The faint creak of the trailer under Liam's shifting weight and the soft patter of rain amplify the oppressive silence.

LIAM (CONT'D)

(hoarse, barely audible)

No... no, no, no.

(Liam presses his hands to Ryan's chest, performing CPR. His movements are frantic, his face twisted with desperation. He counts under his breath, his voice cracking with each repetition.)

LIAM (CONT'D)

(crying out)

Don't do this to me, Ryan! Don't you dare give up now!

(After several attempts, Liam slumps back, his hands falling limply to his sides. He stares at Ryan's lifeless form, his breathing ragged.)

SOUND:

The rain grows louder, filling the silence.

LIAM (CONT'D)

(whispering, broken)

You promised...

(Liam leans forward, pulling Ryan's body into his arms. His hands cradle the back of Ryan's head as he rocks slightly, tears streaking his face.)

LIAM (CONT'D)

(to himself, bitterly)

You said you'd let me help. You said you'd try.

(He sets Ryan down gently, his hands trembling as he reaches for the crumpled wad of cash on the table. He unfolds it, his expression hardening as he sees the scattered bills—money Ryan had stolen to buy the pills.)

LIAM (CONT'D)

(softly, venomously)

For this? You traded your life... for this?

LIGHTING:

A cold spotlight isolates Liam and Ryan, leaving the rest of the stage in darkness.

SOUND:

The muffled wail of a distant siren begins to grow louder, signaling the arrival of emergency responders.

(Liam rises unsteadily, his hands clenching the cash before tossing it aside. He steps back toward the door, his shoulders slumped in defeat. Turning, he looks back at Ryan's lifeless form one last time.)

LIAM (CONT'D)

(quietly, to Ryan)

I should've done more.

(He exits the trailer, leaving the door ajar. The faint blue and red glow of police lights washes over the stage as the sound of the siren crescendos.)

LIGHTING AND SOUND TRANSITION:

The stage fades to black as the siren blends with the hum of the refinery and the steady patter of rain.

BLACKOUT

ACT III

SCENE 3

SETTING:

Erin's dimly lit apartment, late at night. The room is sparse, reflecting Erin's isolation and emotional disarray. A single armchair sits near a small table, its surface cluttered with empty bottles, a photo of her parents, and a half-filled journal. A window reveals the faint orange glow of the refinery in the distance. A faint light spills from the bathroom doorway, where the sound of running water grows steadily louder.

AT RISE:

ERIN CALDWELL (mid-30s, haunted, raw) sits slumped in the armchair, staring blankly at the floor. Her face is pale, her eyes bloodshot. An empty bottle dangles loosely from her hand.

LIGHTING:

A dim, flickering overhead light adds to the oppressive atmosphere. The glow from the refinery outside filters faintly through the window. As Erin's emotions escalate, lighting isolates her, creating an intimate and suffocating focus.

SOUND:

The steady drip of the faucet echoes faintly, underscored by the low hum of the refinery. Occasional bursts of distant sirens and muted city noises filter in through the window.

ERIN

(to herself, muttering)

Narcan... CPR... back to the ER. Save a life, rinse, repeat.

(snorts bitterly)

What's the point if they're just gonna end up back there?

(She takes a swig from the bottle, grimacing as the liquor burns her throat. Her gaze shifts to the photo of her parents on the table. She picks it up, running her thumb over the glass.)

ERIN (CONT'D)

(softly, to the photo)

You'd hate what I've become. I know I do.

(Her hand trembles as she sets the photo back on the table. She grabs the journal, flipping through its pages filled with chaotic scribbles, unfinished sentences, and dark thoughts.)

ERIN (CONT'D)

(reading aloud)

"Keep going. One day at a time."

(snorts)

One day at a time... and what? End up like Jason? Like all the others?

(The running water from the bathtub grows louder, almost intrusive. Erin's head snaps toward the sound, her expression tightening. Slowly, she rises, clutching the back of the chair for support.)

LIGHTING:

The flickering overhead light intensifies as she approaches the bathroom, creating a surreal, dreamlike atmosphere.

ERIN (CONT'D)

(standing in the bathroom doorway, staring into the water)

Quiet. Just quiet for once.

(She turns off the faucet and dips her fingers into the steaming water, watching the ripples spread. Her breath shudders as she leans heavily against the edge. Her eyes move to the razor on the edge of the sink. A long pause.)

ERIN (CONT'D)

(to herself, softly)

I just wanted to make you proud.

(She lifts the razor with trembling hands, her gaze distant and unfocused. Her fingers trail over the edge of the blade as she steps into the tub. She lowers herself into the water, her movements deliberate but trembling.)

LIGHTING:

The bathroom glows faintly, the reflection of the water rippling across the walls. The light over Erin dims as her figure becomes smaller, almost engulfed by the shadows.

SOUND:

The water ripples softly as Erin's breath shudders. Distant sirens grow faint, replaced by the oppressive hum of the refinery.

(Erin leans back, letting her head rest against the edge of the tub. Her arm drops limply over the side, the razor slipping from her hand and clattering to the floor.)

LIGHTING:

A single spotlight narrows on the photo of Erin's parents on the table, illuminating their smiling faces. The rest of the stage fades into darkness.

SOUND:

The steady drip from the faucet echoes louder, blending with the hum of the refinery as the stage fades to black.

BLACKOUT

ACT III**SCENE 4****SETTING:**

The backstage area of a run-down strip club. The walls are cracked, the lighting dim and flickering. Costumes and makeup are scattered across worn tables. A faded mirror with missing bulbs dominates the space, reflecting Maddie's weary figure.

AT RISE:

MADDIE TAYLOR sits on the bench, staring at herself in the mirror. Her reflection is pale and tired, her makeup smeared slightly from the night's work. She dabs at her face with a tissue, her movements slow and mechanical.

LIGHTING:

Dim, harsh lighting isolates Maddie and Frank's confrontation, creating a claustrophobic atmosphere. The flickering mirror lights add tension and unease.

SOUND:

Muffled bass-heavy music and indistinct chatter from the club floor. Occasional bursts of laughter or shouts pierce the background noise.

(FRANK, 50s, obese, leering, enters from the door leading to the club floor. He carries a clipboard, his expression smug as he surveys Maddie.)

FRANK

Taylor. You've been hiding back here long enough. The guys are asking for another set.

MADDIE

(flatly, not turning around)

I'm done for the night.

FRANK

(laughing, cruel)

Done? Since when do you call the shots? Get your tits and ass on stage and fucking shake 'em!

(Maddie stands slowly, turning to face him. Her eyes are cold, but her voice remains controlled.)

MADDIE

I'm tired, Frank.

FRANK

(mocking)

We're all tired, sweetheart. But some of us know how to work through it.

(He steps closer, his tone lowering to something more insidious.)

FRANK (CONT'D)

You know... I've told you there's ways to make things easier. A little time in the VIP room could clear that rent you're always crying about.

(Maddie stiffens, her fists clenching at her sides. Her breathing quickens, but she keeps her voice calm.)

MADDIE

(stern)

You're fucking disgusting.

FRANK

(smirking)

And you're broke. We all play our parts.

(Maddie takes a step forward, her voice rising, laced with anger and resolve.)

MADDIE

You don't own me, Frank. And I'm done letting you treat me like you do.

FRANK

(cutting her off, sneering)

Don't kid yourself, Taylor. You think you're better than this? You'll be crawling back in a week.

(Maddie picks up a gaudy costume piece—a feather boa or a sequined shawl—from the rack. She throws it at Frank's feet, the movement deliberate and defiant.)

MADDIE

Keep it. I'm done.

(Frank glares at her, his smug confidence faltering slightly. Maddie picks up her bag from the bench and moves toward the door leading out.)

FRANK

(shouting after her)

You walk out that door, don't bother coming back!

MADDIE

(pausing at the door, turning back briefly)

Don't worry, I won't.

(Maddie steps through the door, leaving Frank standing in the flickering light. The faint sound of the club fades as she disappears into the night.)

LIGHTING TRANSITION:

The harsh backstage lights dim as Maddie exits. A soft spotlight follows her briefly, then fades to black.

SOUND TRANSITION:

The muffled music blends into the distant hum of the refinery as the scene transitions.

BLACKOUT

ACT III**SCENE 5****SETTING:**

A dark, rain-soaked alley near Parkersburg's industrial zone. The brick walls are stained with years of grime, and faint neon reflections from a distant sign shimmer in the puddles. Stacks of crates and rusted barrels create a jagged, claustrophobic environment.

AT RISE:

ETHAN stands center stage, drenched, his hood pulled low over his face. His hands tremble as he clutches his phone. He glances around, his paranoia evident as his eyes dart to every shadow.

LIGHTING:

The flickering overhead bulb adds tension. A focused spotlight tracks Ethan as he paces nervously, blending with the dim ambiance. Occasional flashes of lightning illuminate the entire stage, revealing silhouettes and heightening drama.

SOUND:

Persistent rain pattering on metal and pavement. The faint hiss of steam escaping from a nearby vent. Distant refinery machinery hums ominously in the background.

(Ethan whispers to himself as he paces.)

ETHAN

(whispering to himself, pacing)

Come on, come on... don't do this. Just one more. Just one more deal.

(He checks his phone. A projection of a text message appears above him.)

TEXT PROJECTION:

"WHERE ARE YOU? YOU'RE LATE."

(Ethan grimaces, typing a quick response. The audience sees his message projected.)

TEXT PROJECTION:

"Almost there."

(He hits send, then shoves the phone into his pocket. He exhales shakily, leaning against a stack of crates.)

SOUND:

The faint clang of metal echoes through the alley, making Ethan jump.

(The SUPPLIER (mid-40s, composed, menacing) enters from stage left, flanked by two ENFORCERS (muscular, dressed in dark streetwear). The Supplier's movements are deliberate, his expression unreadable. One Enforcer flips open a knife, the metallic click sharp and menacing.)

SUPPLIER

(quiet, calm)

Ethan. My favorite underachieving cracker.

ETHAN

(straightening, forcing a smile)

I've got everything. No mistakes this time.

(Ethan reaches into his pocket, pulling out a small wad of cash. He holds it out, his hand shaking slightly. The Supplier doesn't take it immediately.)

SUPPLIER

(studying Ethan, voice cold)

You know what I hate more than mistakes?

(pausing, voice dropping)

Liars.

(The Enforcer with the knife steps closer, his blade catching the faint light. Ethan flinches but doesn't back away.)

ETHAN

(defensive, his voice trembling)

I'm not lying. It's all here—everything you asked for.

SUPPLIER

(tilting his head, mocking)

Then why do you look like a cornered rat?

(The second Enforcer steps forward, grabbing Ethan by the collar and shoving him against the crates. The cash falls to the ground.)

SUPPLIER (CONT'D)

(smirking)

You've been twitchy lately, white boy. Like you're hiding something.

ETHAN

(struggling, panicked)

I'm not! I swear!

(The Enforcer tightens his grip, making Ethan gasp.)

SUPPLIER*(nodding to the Enforcer)*

Let him go.

*(The Enforcer releases Ethan abruptly. Ethan stumbles but catches himself on the crates.)***SUPPLIER (CONT'D)***(picking up the money, weighing it in his hand)*

This is all of it?

ETHAN*(nodding quickly)*

Every last dollar.

SUPPLIER*(smirking)*

You'd better hope you're clean, Ethan. For your sake.

*(The Supplier tosses the money to one of the Enforcers, who pockets it. The Supplier leans in close to Ethan, his voice dropping to a chilling whisper.)***SUPPLIER (CONT'D)**

You've got one chance. One. Don't waste it.

*(The Supplier steps back, his demeanor calm once more.)***SUPPLIER (CONT'D)**

Let's go.

*(The Supplier and his Enforcers turn to leave. Ethan exhales shakily, clutching the edge of the crates for support.)***ETHAN***(whispering to himself)*

I can't keep doing this...

LIGHTING TRANSITION:

The overhead bulb flickers and dims as the Supplier and his Enforcers disappear into the shadows. A soft spotlight isolates Ethan, who sinks to the ground, his head in his hands.

SOUND TRANSITION:

The rain grows louder, blending into the faint hum of refinery machinery as the stage fades to black.

BLACKOUT

ACT III

SCENE 7

SETTING:

Maddie's dimly lit apartment, late at night. The small space feels like it's caving in—peeling wallpaper, cluttered furniture, and the persistent drip of a leaky pipe. Lily's vibrant drawings are taped to the walls, a hopeful burst of color against the bleak surroundings.

AT RISE:

MADDIE sits at the kitchen table, staring at her phone. Her hands tremble as she flips through the stack of overdue bills. She pauses on the eviction notice, smoothing it out on the table with trembling fingers. Her gaze shifts to the futon where LILY sleeps soundly, her small frame bundled under a worn blanket.

LIGHTING:

A dim, flickering bulb overhead casts uneven shadows. The faint amber glow of a streetlamp seeps through the cracked blinds, creating an unsettling contrast between light and shadow.

SOUND:

The steady drip of water into a bucket echoes softly. Distant muffled street noises—a car driving by, a dog barking faintly—add a sense of quiet isolation.

MADDIE

(softly, to herself)

There's nothing left, Maddie. You've tried it all.

(She picks up her phone, scrolling through her sparse contacts list. Her thumb hovers over a single name: "DAD." Maddie closes her eyes, her lips trembling as she debates pressing the call button.)

MADDIE (CONT'D)

(whispering)

He won't answer. Why would he?

(She sets the phone down, burying her face in her hands. After a long moment, Maddie lifts her head, her eyes red-rimmed. She glances at LILY, who shifts slightly but continues to sleep peacefully. Her resolve hardens. Maddie picks up the phone again and presses the name.)

SOUND:

The ringing tone fills the silence, growing louder with each repetition. Maddie's grip on the phone tightens.

(Finally, the line clicks.)

DAD (V.O.)

(softly, almost disbelieving)

Maddie?

(Maddie freezes, unable to speak at first. Her breath hitches audibly.)

MADDIE

(quietly)

Hi, Dad.

DAD (V.O.)

(overjoyed, his voice brightens)

Maddie! God, Maddie, is that really you?

(Maddie's lips tremble, tears welling up in her eyes.)

MADDIE

Yeah. It's me.

DAD (V.O.)

(laughing, full of relief)

I can't believe this! Maddie, I've been waiting so long... just waiting for this call.

MADDIE

(choking back tears)

You have?

DAD (V.O.)

(earnestly)

Of course, I have! You're my daughter, Maddie. Not a day's gone by that I haven't thought about you.

(Maddie clutches the phone tightly, tears streaming down her face.)

MADDIE

(voice breaking)

I thought... I thought you didn't want anything to do with me. After I left...

DAD (V.O.)

(gently)

It's not your fault, sweetheart. I...my anger pushed you away. That was my fault. I was too stubborn to say it then, but I've regretted it every day.

(Maddie's shoulders slump as the weight of years of guilt begins to lift. She glances at LILY, who stirs slightly but remains asleep.)

MADDIE

(softly)

I have a daughter now.

DAD (V.O.)

(awed)

You... you're a mom? Maddie, that's wonderful. What's her name?

MADDIE

(tearful but smiling)

Lily. She's seven. And she's amazing.

DAD (V.O.)

(chuckling through emotion)

Lily. I bet she's got your fire.

(Maddie wipes her tears, the tiniest hint of a smile breaking through.)

MADDIE

She does. But, Dad... things are... bad right now. Really bad.

DAD (V.O.)

(quickly, with concern)

What's going on? Are you okay? Where are you?

MADDIE

(her voice trembling)

We're about to lose our apartment. I've tried everything—every shift, every call... but I can't keep up. I didn't want to call. I didn't want to ask, but I don't know what else to do.

DAD (V.O.)

(gently but firmly)

Maddie, listen to me. I don't care about the past. I don't care about mistakes. You and Lily come home. You hear me?

MADDIE

(stunned, whispering)

Home?

DAD (V.O.)

(softly)

Yes, home. Where you belong. Where I should've told you belonged all along.

(Maddie's grip on the phone tightens as a sob escapes her.)

MADDIE

(whispering)

Thank you.

DAD (V.O.)

(urgently)

No thanks, Maddie. You're my daughter. And I want to meet Lily. We'll figure it all out, together.

(Maddie glances at LILY, who stirs slightly on the futon. A faint smile breaks through her tears.)

MADDIE

(choked with emotion)

We'll come. Tomorrow.

DAD (V.O.)

(softly)

I can't wait.

(The line clicks. Maddie lowers the phone, her hands shaking. She stares at it for a long moment, then glances at Lily.)

(Maddie kneels beside Lily, brushing a strand of hair from her daughter's face.)

MADDIE

(whispering)

We're going home, baby. We're... going to be okay.

LIGHTING:

The dim, flickering bulb steadies for the first time, casting a warm, soft glow over Maddie and Lily.

SOUND TRANSITION:

The rhythmic drip of water softens, blending into the faint hum of hope as the scene fades to black.

BLACKOUT

ACT III

SCENE 8

SETTING:

The abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of Parkersburg. The space is cavernous, filled with rusting metal beams, stacks of crates, and broken machinery. The air feels thick and oppressive.

STAGE DESIGN:

UPSTAGE: Large crates stacked haphazardly, creating shadows and tight spaces.

DOWNSTAGE LEFT: A battered desk with papers and a few scattered tools, representing the Supplier's operations hub.

CENTER STAGE: An open area with an exposed metal staircase leading to a second level.

STAGE RIGHT: A darkened exit door, flanked by empty barrels.

LIGHTING:

Sharp, angled spotlights create jagged shadows, emphasizing the tension.

A cold blue light washes over the stage, interrupted by occasional flashes of red, simulating Liam's patrol car outside.

Strobe effects suggest gunfire during climactic moments.

SOUND:

The hum of distant machinery, faint dripping of water, and echoing footsteps.

Muffled voices grow louder as Liam moves closer to the confrontation.

AT RISE:

LIAM crouches near the **Stage Right** entrance, his flashlight casting a narrow beam through the shadows. His gun is drawn, his movements deliberate and cautious.

LIAM

(whispering to himself)

One step at a time. No mistakes.

(The muffled voices of the SUPPLIER and his ENFORCERS grow louder from offstage. Liam's jaw tightens as he inches closer to the source of the voices, keeping to the shadows.)

SUPPLIER (O.S.)

(quietly, with menace)

You're late again. That's twice this week.

ENFORCER 1 (O.S.)

(defensive)

We're moving the product, aren't we? What's the problem?

SUPPLIER (O.S.)*(calm, icy)*

The problem is loose ends.

(Liam's flashlight clicks off, leaving him in near darkness. He positions himself behind a stack of crates, listening intently.)

SUPPLIER (O.S.) (CONT'D)*(to the others, with finality)*

Pack it up. We're done here.

*(The SUPPLIER enters from **Stage Left**, flanked by two ENFORCERS. He gestures sharply toward the desk, where a stack of money and small baggies of pills are scattered.)*

SUPPLIER (CONT'D)*(to his crew, coldly)*

Get this cleaned up. I don't want any surprises.

(Liam steps out from his hiding spot, his gun trained on the Supplier.)

LIAM

Police! Hands in the air!

(The Supplier freezes, his calm demeanor unshaken. The Enforcers hesitate, their hands twitching toward their weapons.)

SUPPLIER*(smirking)*

Well, well. Officer Brody, isn't it? Got the meth'ed out brother?

LIAM*(firmly)*

Hands. Now.

SUPPLIER*(raising his hands slowly)*

You a Boy Scout?

ENFORCER 1*(stepping forward, attempting to de-escalate)*

Hey, man, we don't need to do this—

LIAM*(sharply, cutting him off)*

Stay where you are!

(The second Enforcer suddenly lunges for his weapon. Liam fires, the flash illuminating the stage for a brief moment. The Enforcer falls, clutching his shoulder.)

SOUND:

The deafening echo of the gunshot reverberates through the space.

(The Supplier remains eerily calm, his hands still raised.)

SUPPLIER

(smoothly, mocking)

You think that's going to scare me?

LIAM

(steely)

Face down! On the ground!

(The Supplier doesn't move, his smirk widening.)

SUPPLIER

(silky)

Do you really think taking me in will change anything? My boys in Columbus want this shitty little town, and they gonna have it. These skreets is ours.

LIAM

(steadfast)

Not anymore.

(The Supplier steps forward slightly, his hands still raised.)

SUPPLIER

(smiling faintly)

You're a good cop, Brody. But good doesn't mean smart.

(Suddenly, the remaining Enforcer lunges toward Liam with a metal pipe. Liam dodges, the pipe narrowly missing his head. He counters with a swift strike, disarming the Enforcer and shoving him to the ground.)

LIAM

(urgently, to the Supplier)

Face down!

(The Supplier finally complies, lowering himself to the floor with calculated slowness. Liam cuffs him, his hands steady despite the tension.)

SUPPLIER*(taunting)*

This farmer town already belongs to us, bitch. You jus don't see it yet.

*(Liam's composure falters for a split second, his jaw tightening.)***LIAM***(firmly)*

You're done.

SOUND:

The distant wail of sirens grows louder, filling the space.

SUPPLIER*(mocking)*

You'll never get the rest of them. And this? This won't change nothin'. We got connects worldwide, baby boy.

*(Liam's grip on the Supplier tightens momentarily, his face a mask of restrained fury.)***LIAM***(quietly, with resolve)*

Shut up.

*(The stage lights shift as red and blue strobes spill across the space, signaling the arrival of backup. Liam drags the Supplier to his feet, leading him toward the exit. The remaining Enforcer groans on the ground, clutching his shoulder as uniformed officers rush in.)***LIGHTING TRANSITION:**

The harsh strobe lights fade slightly as the scene centers on Liam, walking the Supplier offstage.

SOUND TRANSITION:

The wail of sirens blends into the hum of distant refinery machinery as the scene fades to black.

BLACKOUT

ACT III

SCENE 9

SETTING:

The stage is split into two distinct areas:

Stage Left: A dimly lit police interrogation room. A metal table with two chairs dominates the space. A harsh overhead light casts sharp shadows. The atmosphere is sterile and oppressive.

Stage Right: The living room of Judge Sanders' home. The space is neat but cold, with stiff furniture, law books lining the shelves, and a family photo prominently displayed on the mantle. A single armchair and a small coffee table create an intimate focal point.

LIGHTING:

The lighting alternates between the cold, stark spotlight of the police interrogation room and the warm but muted light of the living room. At times, both areas are lit simultaneously to show emotional parallels.

SOUND:

A faint hum of fluorescent lights underscores the police station, while the ticking of a clock and distant traffic provide the ambient noise for the Judge's home.

AT RISE:

Stage Left: ETHAN MCALLISTER (early 20s, weary and resolute) sits slouched at the interrogation table, his hands resting on the cold surface. A POLICE OFFICER (40s, professional) stands nearby, observing him.

Stage Right: JUDGE SANDERS (early 50s, stern but visibly softened) sits in the armchair, facing NATALIE SANDERS (17, guarded and defiant), who is curled up on the couch, scrolling idly on her phone.

STAGE LEFT: POLICE INTERROGATION ROOM

POLICE OFFICER

(leaning against the wall, skeptical)

So, you're saying you're here to cooperate? Just like that?

ETHAN

(flatly, without looking up)

Yeah. Just like that.

(Ethan shifts slightly, his hands twitching. He exhales deeply, steeling himself.)

POLICE OFFICER

(snickering)

You expect me to believe some kid like you is ready to take down the Supplier and his crew?

ETHAN

(looking up, his gaze sharp)

I've got names. Drop spots. Delivery routes. Enough to bury them.

(The officer's smirk fades slightly. He crosses his arms, studying Ethan.)

POLICE OFFICER

And what's in it for you?

ETHAN

(quietly)

I'm done running. Done hiding. I want out.

(Ethan leans forward, his voice hardening.)

ETHAN (CONT'D)

They'll come after me, I know that. But maybe... maybe this stops someone else from getting caught in their... mess.

POLICE OFFICER

(flatly)

You know cooperation doesn't wipe your slate clean, right? You're still looking at time.

ETHAN

(bitterly)

I don't care about time. I care about fixing what I broke.

(The spotlight on Ethan intensifies, highlighting his determination as he straightens his posture.)

STAGE RIGHT: JUDGE SANDERS' HOME

NATALIE

(not looking up from her phone)

You wanted to talk. So, talk.

JUDGE SANDERS

(taking a measured breath)

I've been thinking... about what you said.

(Natalie glances up briefly, raising an eyebrow but remaining silent.)

JUDGE SANDERS (CONT'D)

I wasn't fair to you. I let my work—my need to control—blind me to what you really needed.

(Natalie puts her phone down slowly, her expression softening but guarded.)

NATALIE

(skeptical)

And what do you think I need?

JUDGE SANDERS

(sincerely)

Someone who listens. Who doesn't just judge every choice you make but tries to understand why you're making them.

(A long pause. Natalie sits up, studying her father.)

NATALIE

(quietly)

You really mean that?

JUDGE SANDERS

(nodding)

I do. And I'm not saying I'll get it right overnight. But I want to try.

NATALIE

(after a beat)

That's... all I wanted. For you to try.

STAGE LEFT: POLICE INTERROGATION ROOM**POLICE OFFICER**

(sitting across from Ethan, finally serious)

If you're telling the truth, we'll need it all. Every detail.

ETHAN

(nodding)

You'll have it. Everything.

(Ethan slides a folded paper from his pocket and places it on the table. The officer picks it up, scanning its contents.)

POLICE OFFICER*(reading, surprised)*

This... this could actually work.

ETHAN*(flatly)*

It has to.

*(The officer stands, leaving the paper on the table.)***POLICE OFFICER**

I'll be back. Don't go anywhere.

ETHAN*(smirking faintly)*

Where would I go?

*(The officer exits. Ethan exhales sharply, leaning back in his chair.)***STAGE RIGHT: JUDGE SANDERS' HOME****NATALIE***(softly)*

You're really gonna stop pushing me so hard?

JUDGE SANDERS*(smiling faintly)*

Let's just say... I'll try steering instead of pushing.

*(Natalie chuckles lightly, the tension between them easing.)***NATALIE***(mock serious)*

If this is your way of saying I can stay out past curfew, we're making progress.

JUDGE SANDERS*(laughing softly)*

Don't push it.

(Natalie stands and hugs him briefly. He freezes for a moment, then embraces her fully.)

STAGE LEFT: POLICE INTERROGATION ROOM

(Ethan leans forward, staring at the empty chair across from him. He clenches his fists briefly before releasing them, his expression resolute.)

ETHAN

(to himself)

Maybe this is enough.

LIGHTING:

Both sides of the stage are lit simultaneously, the warmth of the Judge's home contrasting with the cold sterility of the police station.

SOUND:

The faint ticking of the Judge's clock blends with the hum of the interrogation room's lights.

TRANSITION:

The stage fades to black as both Ethan and the Judge sit quietly in their respective spaces, each having made a step toward redemption.

BLACKOUT

ACT III

SCENE 10

SETTING:

A multi-location montage representing the key characters' fates and emotional states. The stage transforms dynamically to portray Maddie's apartment, Liam's patrol car, Ethan's cell, and the industrial skyline of Parkersburg.

LIGHTING:

Warm, hopeful light focuses on Maddie and Lily.

Dim, flickering light isolates Ethan in his jail cell.

A cold, resolute glow surrounds Liam in his patrol car.

A steady, warm light symbolizes Erin's growing resolve.

A hazy orange light blankets the industrial skyline, representing both the town's oppressive weight and lingering hope.

SOUND:

A haunting yet hopeful piano melody underscores the entire scene, weaving with ambient effects. The faint hum of the refinery looms as a constant background, mirroring the town's grip on its residents.

PART 1: Maddie and Lily's New Chapter

STAGE RIGHT: Maddie and Lily are in their packed-up apartment, now emptier but filled with a sense of hope. Boxes are stacked neatly, and Lily is carefully tucking her drawings into a small suitcase.

(Maddie kneels beside Lily, helping her close the suitcase. She brushes a strand of hair from Lily's face, her smile soft but genuine.)

LILY

(excitedly)

Do you think Grandpa has pancakes?

MADDIE

(smiling)

I think he'll make as many as you want, baby.

(Lily wraps her arms around Maddie, hugging her tightly. Maddie closes her eyes, holding her daughter close.)

MADDIE (CONT'D)*(softly, more to herself)*

We're gonna be okay.

LIGHTING:

The warm glow around them intensifies briefly, casting their figures in golden light.

SOUND TRANSITION:

The melody shifts to a more solemn tone, seamlessly blending into the hum of the refinery as the stage fades to black on Maddie and Lily.

PART 2: Liam's Contemplation**CENTER STAGE:** Liam sits in his patrol car, parked on a desolate street. The faint glow of his dashboard illuminates his face as he grips a small, worn photo of himself and Ryan as kids.*(Liam stares at the photo, his expression a mixture of regret, guilt, and determination. He sighs deeply, tucks the photo into his pocket, and turns on the police scanner, which crackles faintly with background chatter.)***LIAM***(softly, to himself)*

This time... no more loose ends.

*(He grips the steering wheel tightly, his knuckles white, before finally relaxing.)***LIGHTING:**

The cold blue and red lights surrounding the car flash faintly, symbolizing both his vigilance and the weight of his past actions.

SOUND:

The low hum of his car engine blends with the faint sound of the refinery in the distance.

PART 3: Ethan's Reckoning**DOWNSTAGE LEFT:** Ethan sits on a cot in a small, cold jail cell. The sparse setting is illuminated by a harsh, flickering fluorescent light. A shadow looms on the wall behind him, larger than life.

(Ethan holds the worn photo of his mother, running his thumb over the edges. His head hangs low, his posture defeated.)

ETHAN

(whispering, to the photo)

I'm sorry, Mom. I thought I could fix it.

(He sets the photo down on the cot beside him, staring blankly at the wall.)

LIGHTING:

The flickering light isolates Ethan, casting sharp shadows that stretch across the stage.

SOUND:

The faint echo of footsteps in the corridor punctuates the stillness, creating an air of foreboding.

PART 4: Parkersburg's Skyline

UPSTAGE CENTER: The industrial skyline dominates the background, its smoke stacks glowing faintly in the night. The hazy orange light represents both the town's harshness and its resilience.

(All characters' final moments play out simultaneously, interwoven visually and emotionally.)

MONTAGE:

- **MADDIE AND LILY:** Maddie lifts Lily's suitcase, holding her daughter's hand as they step out of the apartment, their figures silhouetted by the warm glow of the hallway.
- **LIAM:** Liam starts his car, his face set with grim determination as he drives into the night, the police scanner crackling faintly in the background.
- **ETHAN:** Ethan sits motionless, staring at the photo of his mother, his shadow looming over him like a specter of his choices.

SOUND:

The haunting piano melody swells as the hum of the refinery fades.

LIGHTING TRANSITION:

The warm, golden glow surrounding Maddie and Lily intensifies briefly before dimming. The cold, harsh light on Ethan fades into darkness. The flashing blue and red light surrounding Liam dissolves, leaving only the hazy, orange skyline.

ENDING IMAGE:

The stage is bathed in the dim orange light of the refinery skyline. The smokestacks loom silently, their presence a constant reminder of the town's struggles and its unrelenting grip on its inhabitants.

BLACKOUT

END OF PLAY