

BELLA

Inspired by a true story.

Written by

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Di Novi Pictures

OVER BLACK:

A crowd MURMURS with excitement, then silences as:

HOST (V.O.)
The first runner-up of Miss LSU-USA
2021 is...

INT. THEATER - NIGHT

Bright stage lights radiate onto MARIA PEREZ's face. She's 19, naturally elegant -- not your typical pageant girl -- wearing an ornate handmade RED DRESS.

Maria holds hands with fellow contestant CORINNE "RINNY" COCHRAN (19). They're anxious as all hell, bodies quivering with anticipation as they stare into each other's eyes.

Near the girls, the HOST (40s, handsome, tuxedo) holds a microphone. Behind all of them, a dozen previously-eliminated PAGEANT GIRLS stand between a goofy coliseum facade.

HOST
Miss Corinne Cochran!

Rinny bear-hugs Maria as the crowd goes WILD.

HOST (CONT'D)
And Maria Perez, Miss LSU-USA.

Maria sobs tears of joy. A GAL (20, elegantly dressed), wraps a SASH -- Miss LSU -- around Maria. Pins a crown on her head.

Maria beams. Scans the crowd, searching for someone.

MARIA POV: Gaze lands on her mother, ANDREA (40, brunette, poised as if she's competing herself), wiping thankful tears.

Suddenly, the crowd lets out an uncomfortable GASP, concerned WHISPERS. Maria holds on her mom, calmly smiling, while the rest of the crowd GAPES.

Maria turns to Rinny, who backs away in horror, staring at Maria's legs.

Maria looks down, where a puddle of brownish-red liquid has formed around her feet.

WE REVERSE into the crowd's view, Maria isn't the way we've just seen her --

She's GAUNT, like she hasn't eaten in years. Her legs are covered in BLOOD --

INT. MARIA'S HOUSE - MORNING

Maria wakes in a startle, a hand on the inside of her thigh, shaking her. She instinctively bats it away.

That hand belongs to Andrea.

ANDREA

You gain super powers and can change anything about the world -- what do you do?

Without missing a beat:

MARIA

My family was displaced from New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, so, personally, I'd rid the world of natural disasters so no one ever has to experience the horror that Louisianans went through.

A content smile creeps across Maria's face. Perfect answer and delivery. But Andrea's not as thrilled.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Was I too fast?

ANDREA

You're the calmest you'll be all day the moment you wake up.

Maria's not sure what Andrea's getting at.

ANDREA (CONT'D)

You still lack sincerity. If you can't do it now, you won't on stage.

MARIA

Sorry. I'll keep trying.

ANDREA

You better. Four days...

Maria nods. She knows.

ANDREA (CONT'D)

Scale.

Maria climbs out of bed. Her room is neatly organized. Framed POSTERS of MISS USA pageant women decorate her walls around a bookcase lined with sports TROPHIES.

She steps on a DIGITAL SCALE against the wall. Rubs her half-naked body to keep warm.

- The scale's screen TICKS
- Maria SCRATCHES her palm nervously.
- 109 BLINKS on screen.

Andrea nods in approval. Maria's relieved.

ANDREA (CONT'D)
Breakfast's ready.

Maria looks over at the clock -- 5:02 a.m.

KITCHEN

Looking up to Maria's face as she looks down, ANXIOUS.

ANDREA (O.S.) (CONT'D)
I'm proud of you. You're holding
weight well.

We reverse to see Maria's breakfast. Perfectly-portioned EGG WHITES and AVOCADO. A meal fit for an ant.

EXT. LSU - MORNING

A fiery orange sun glows on the horizon, illuminating the live oak-laden Louisiana State University. PUSH through the trees, finding Maria quickly crossing an empty quad, gym bag slung over her shoulder.

EXT. LSU GYM - MORNING

Maria stands outside a sliding-glass door that's not opening. Looks at a sign with the gym hours. 5:30 a.m. opening. Checks her watch -- it's 5:33.

She sees a student worker, ALEXANDRA "ALEX" CASSARA (19), strolling to the door inside. Alex yawns. Opens the door.

ALEX
Top of the mañana, pretty lady.

Maria throws her an anxious smile, quickly heads inside.

INT. LSU GYM - CARDIO ROOM - MORNING

Maria looks at herself in a HUGE WALL MIRROR, a sea of treadmills and ellipticals fan out on the floor behind her. Her gaze falls on a teeny bit of CELLULITE in her legs. *SHIT.*

She quickly shifts her gander. Takes meditation-like calming breaths to get her mind right. She checks her watch -- 5:44.

She steps onto a treadmill, starts music on her iPhone -- BLONDIE'S "HEART OF GLASS." Watch again -- 5:44. Maria's leg jitters -- *come on, come on* -- 5:45.

She clips the emergency release to her shirt then fires the machine. Montage as the music BUILDS:

- Maria, drenched, hauling-ass on the treadmill.
- She powers through a series of intense calisthenics.
- Maria, in front of a wall mirror, swaying with the music.
- She nails a T-walk. College-age FOLKS in the gym ogle her. Some impressed, others disturbed by her commitment.

END MONTAGE.

IN THE GYM SHOWER

Maria meticulously shaves her legs like she's mowing a lawn while practicing speaking in sound bites:

MARIA

(sotto)

If I could do anything for my city,
I'd end racial inequality.

(beat)

If I could do anything for our
state, I'd help restore the coast.

(beat)

If I could do anything for our
nation, I'd --

RETCHING. Somewhere in the room. Like someone's purging their guts. Maria listens. It continues, growing CLOSER now...

Then it STOPS.

After a second, Maria goes back to shaving when --

A PAIR of GIRL'S BARE FEET appear in the space between the curtain and the floor, *facing her*. Maria FREEZES.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Hello?

The feet don't move. Maria WINCES -- looks down to her razor, where BLOOD DRIBBLES. She nicked herself.

She looks back to the space -- the feet are GONE.

Maria pulls open the shower curtain. Looks around the bathroom -- no one's there.

GYM LOBBY - SMOOTHIE BAR

Maria stands at the gym's version of Smoothie King while Alex pours a smoothie into a cup. Holds it out to Maria.

ALEX (O.S.)
Voilà. Your berry 'nana with high-protein peanut butter.

Maria takes it.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Soy PB I mean. Hives don't look good on you.

MARIA
They're not ideal.

ALEX
Going to that Miss meeting later?

MARIA
Yep. You decided to compete?

ALEX
Maybe. I dunno. I really need the scholarship money.

Alex eyes Maria up. Maria's better looking. Plain and simple.

ALEX (CONT'D)
I haven't really practiced. It's probably stupid.

MARIA
No. You should. I'm serious. Anti-bullying. It's a fantastic platform.

Maria seems more sincere than her answers before.

ALEX
You think?

MARIA
Of course.

Alex smiles. That just made her day.

INT. AUDITORIUM CLASSROOM - DAY

A BALD DUDE (40s, fat) grins, then waddles around a podium. Behind him, a slideshow projects on a screen:

PAGEANT WEEK EXPECTATIONS
APPROPRIATE OUT-OF-COMPETITION
BEHAVIOR AND DRESS

BALD DUDE

Bet y'all're excited, huh? I can tell you that I am. The big week's here. Now, you know what that means... Y'all young ladies got certain constraints on your behavior inside and outside the pageant. For starters, don't pull the goalie, cause last-minute pregnancy, it don't fly. Don't try to hide it, cause I'll find out. Number two, please remove pictures of you girls enjoying alcoholic beverages from your social media unless, of course, you're 21 and not pregnant, then you can imbibe in moderation...

Opposite Bald Dude, 20 PAGEANT GIRLS (late teens, early 20s) don't give a shit, checking their phones as he drones.

Maria's focused on her laptop. She ogles a RED PAGEANT DRESS, the same from her dream.

Again, it's not your typical department store dress -- it's handmade, with dozens of crystal adornments.

Rinny, wearing a backward baseball cap, watches Instagram stories on her phone. She laughs under her breath at a video. Tries to show Maria, who ignores it in favor of the dress.

MARIA

Isn't it beautiful?

Finally, Rinny looks over to the dress. She rolls her eyes at Maria, who self-consciously shirks.

LATER, AT THE FRONT OF THE CLASSROOM

Maria skims an attendance LIST of all the girls entered in the pageant. As she INITIALS near her name --

GIRL (O.S.)

I see her at the gym. It's honestly, like, a little obsessive.

GIRL 2 (O.S.)

For real. Runner up's don't need to practice.

ALEX (O.S.)

It's the rest of us that need to be worried.

Maria looks up to a GROUP of a few girls, including Rinny and Alex. They all turn away. *Were they just talking about her?*

Then she notices someone *just past them* --

A GIRL (20s). Blonde, wearing a vintage over-sized Debbie Harry t-shirt. She EYES MARIA, staring through her.

Maria squints -- *does she know her?* WOMEN pass, and the Girl disappears into the crowd.

Weirded out, Maria slings her backpack over her shoulder and tries to slip out the door. Rinny stops her.

RINNY

Chimes... happy hour?

Maria shakes her head.

RINNY (CONT'D)

No one turns down fifty cent oysters and two dollar pints. 'Specially imperial pints.

MARIA

No. Not...

RINNY

... Today. That's what you said yesterday. And the day before that. What happened to you being my best bitch?

MARIA

It's date night.

RINNY

What... are you guys married now?

MARIA

Six months is a big deal.

Rinny pulls her phone out.

RINNY
How's about I text ole Dima and
change those plans?

Maria grabs for Rinny's phone.

MARIA
Stop. Don't. Rinny --

As Maria fights for the phone --

RINNY
Dear Papa Deems, as much as Maria'd
like that tanned Armenian cock,
she's coming with us tonight. Bro.

MARIA
Stop!

Alex and the other girls side eye her. Maria catches their
gaze. Looks away.

RINNY
Jeeez. I'm just fucking with you.
You good?

MARIA
Yes.

RINNY
You can chill, you know. You're so
wound up.

MARIA
I'm just really focused.

RINNY
It's a *pageant*.
(off Maria's silence)
A *stupid pageant*.

MARIA
Well, some of us aren't okay
losing every year.

Rinny feels the heat -- *that was directed at her.*

RINNY
Whatever, dude.

Maria heads out the door.

INT. MARIA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

In Andrea's neatly-arranged tailoring studio.

Sewing machines, fabric, and mannequins decorate the room. Framed JIGSAW PUZZLES -- flowers, rural countrysides, happy things -- line the walls.

Andrea opens a toolbox. Inside: NEEDLES, STRING, fabric PADDING, etc. She sifts through.

ANDREA

I never took it. Is it tough?

Across the room, Maria, wearing a pageant BIKINI, studies herself in a mirror. Eyes track to her thighs where --

The tiniest bit of cellulite stares back. Maria averts her gaze.

MARIA

The class is fine, but lab's crazy.
Like half of us are failing.

Andrea

And how are you doing?

MARIA

I have a B.

Andrea smiles.

ANDREA

You have it easy. You know, my
mother didn't let me eat once when I
got a B on a final.

Maria feigns a smile. Andrea approaches. Eyes Maria's body.

ANDREA (CONT'D)

One thing you didn't get were my
tits. Hold still.

Andrea stuffs padding into Maria's swimsuit top until her breasts look fuller. It's as if she's handling HER OWN BODY. She inserts needles to hold the padding's form. Maria uncomfortably squirms.

ANDREA (CONT'D)

Be still, Bellita.

Andrea aims with the needle. Maria CRINGES as it DRIVES IN.

ANDREA (CONT'D)

Done. Scale.

Maria steps onto another scale. Her eyes -- anxiety --
- The scale's screen TICKS.
- Maria SCRATCHES her palm nervously.
- 109 BLINKS on screen.

Maria sighs. Relief.

ANDREA (CONT'D)
If only I could hold that weight.

MARIA
(uncomfortable)
Can you not make those comments?

ANDREA
I didn't mean... you're right.

An awkward silence. Maria scratches at her palm again.

MARIA
I can't wait to try the dress.

Andrea's downcast look makes Maria double-take. Realizes --

MARIA (CONT'D)
You didn't have time to pick it up.
I will tomorrow. It's fine.

ANDREA
No.

MARIA
You're busy. I can --

ANDREA
I went.

Maria -- *and?*

ANDREA (CONT'D)
Someone bought it.

Devastation sweeps Maria's face.

MARIA
I'll call them. They said they'd
hold it.

ANDREA
Only to rent. If someone wanted to
buy it, then they had to sell.

Maria nearly tears up.

ANDREA (CONT'D)
Fortunately for us, I have a plan B.

Andrea opens a closet. Pulls a dress covered in plastic. She hangs it up. Motions for Maria to check it out.

Maria pulls the plastic off. It's a STUNNING BLACK DRESS.

ANDREA (CONT'D)
My mother made it for my run when I was your age... instead, I had you.

Maria runs her hands down the perfect stitching. Doesn't know what to say.

ANDREA (CONT'D)
I already tailored it.

MARIA
You never... It's really pretty. I love it. Thank you, mom.

Andrea smiles.

ANDREA
You'll be perfect in it.

A HONK from outside.

MARIA
Crap. Dima's here.

Andrea pouts.

MARIA (CONT'D)
I can't blow him off again.

Maria slips out her swimsuit top and into a bra.

MARIA (CONT'D)
Turn away.

Andrea does. But in a mirror, she PEERS at her daughter slipping into panties across the room.

Maria finishes dressing. Straightens her skirt.

ANDREA
11 p.m.

MARIA
I know.

Maria kisses her mom on the cheek then slips out the door.

Andrea leans on the doorframe.

She lightly toys with a SMALL LOCKET dangling from a thin SILVER CHAIN around her neck as she watches her daughter disappear down the hall.

With Maria gone, she takes a seat at a desk. Pops the locket between her teeth -- a tic -- as she eyes an unfinished JIGSAW PUZZLE on the desk ahead of her. Just the border assembled, pieces scattered within.

Then she opens a desk drawer and pulls out a VODKA BOTTLE.

She's distracted by a FAMILY PHOTO at the bottom of the drawer -- Andrea (late 20s), a man we'll later know as SCOTT (late 20s), and little Maria (6) in a school uniform. First day of first grade. Andrea unscrews the bottle.

Drops the locket from her lips.

EXT. MISSISSIPPI RIVER LEVEE - NIGHT

A 90s tricked-out F-150 complete with a truck bed toolbox -- the owner does the upgrades.

We push down the vehicle to find Maria and DIMO (21, real handsome), sitting in the bed of the truck on a blanket, a picnic BASKET open near them next to scattered empty MCDONALD'S WRAPPERS and BOXES.

Light dances off the mighty Mississippi ahead. Behind them, the fluorescent gleam of GAS STATION LIGHTS a hundred yards away at the base of the levee.

Dimo empties a half-full bottle of WINE into red SOLO cups.

MARIA

Why switch majors though?

Dimo shrugs. Hands Maria her cup.

MARIA (CONT'D)

You're basically an engineer already.

DIMO

You got a question for everything.

MARIA

Yeah. Also...

Maria gestures to the wrappers --

MARIA (CONT'D)
Why do you call my favorite food
"Lil Chicky Surprise"?

Dimo lifts a half-eaten chicken nugget.

DIMO
Cause, like, these puppies are
pretty small, and it's a surprise
what's inside.

Maria looks at him a little confused, but entertained.

DIMO (CONT'D)
Okay... What do we know about Ron
McDon and his famous McNugs? *Hmm?*

Maria shrugs, smiling.

DIMO (CONT'D)
Nothing. See? He's a mysterious
dude. No one knows what he puts in
his lil chickies.

MARIA
It's not like it's dog meat or
something.

DIMO
But would you try it if it was?

MARIA
Despite the obvious ethical
dilemma... yeah. Would you?

DIMO
No! Gross. I'd still kiss you though
if you did.

He leans over. Kisses her. Makes a grossed-out face.

DIMO (CONT'D)
Dog breath. But for real, I switched
to pre-med 'cause I just think I'd
be better at fixing people than
machines. You ready to roll?

Maria uncomfortably SCANS the remnants of their feast. Feigns
a smile. *Something's happening to her.* She downs her wine --

MARIA
Yeah. I just need to pee real quick.

EXT. LEVEE - NIGHT

Track with Maria as she heads down the dark levee, through a clearing, lined by trees. Ahead, the gas station lights glow.

Maria quickly walks as if in a trance. Behind her, Dimo's truck disappears from sight.

CRACK. A branch breaks somewhere in the trees to her left. Maria halts. Peers into the darkness -- *is someone there?*

She focuses on a tree line. There's nothing. She takes another step and --

The outline of a DARK FIGURE emerges just inside the woods. Maria halts, tense. She squints, unable to make out any defining features.

She takes a few steps toward the street. And the figure follows her trajectory.

She stops. The Figure STOPS.

What the fuck? Maria starts again. The Figure does, too. Maria, freaked, picks up the pace, she passes the tree line to the street. The Figure follows and --

NO ONE emerges from the trees. Maria stares, unsettled. After a moment, she jogs toward the gas station.

But she hasn't lost the feeling that *someone is watching*.

She gets to the door, looks back over her shoulder --

Still nothing. Just the empty southern night.

INT. GAS STATION - NIGHT

DING -- DING. Door bell rings. Maria stands inside the doorway. She cases the place for a restroom. Doesn't see one.

TAP -- TAP.

Startled, she 180s to an ATTENDANT (30s, scraggly) behind a bulletproof glass register area, wiping greasy hair from his eyes. He ogles Maria, catching her nervous breath. Attendant awkwardly motions toward a door in the back.

IN THE BATHROOM

Maria stands over a nasty piss-covered toilet, looking sick. Checks the toilet paper dispenser -- empty. She walks to the sink and finds a half-used roll of PAPER TOWELS. That'll do.

She turns the sink ON -- faucet runs loud. Returns to the toilet. Pulls some towels from the roll and --

Sets them on the floor. So she can KNEEL on them.

Maria stares at her reflection in the toilet bowl water. Her eyes -- she's not there -- like this is all a bad dream.

Maria lifts two fingers to her lips. A MOMENT, then she opens her mouth. Shoves them toward her throat --

GAS STATION - QUICK CUTS

- A cash register DINGS.

- A PACK OF GUM slides across the counter.

- Fingers press at a piece of gum in foil --

INT./EXT. DIMO'S TRUCK/MARIA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

THUNK. Maria's head BANGS against the window. She's lip-locked with Dimo, who's commanding this hook-up.

Dimo stretches her shirt, kisses up and down her chest and neck. Maria stares off into the darkness, not nearly as into this as he is.

Dimo takes his shirt off then starts kissing her knees. A nervous look crosses Maria's face as Dimo moves down her thighs. He pushes her skirt up, advances between her legs --

She instinctually THRUSTS him back.

DIMO

Jesus -- what?

Maria pulls her knees to her chest, on edge.

DIMO (CONT'D)

For real. What'd I do?

MARIA

I just didn't like that.

DIMO

I can move slower.

Maria shakes her head.

DIMO (CONT'D)

It's been like three months... Am I doing something wrong?

MARIA

No.

DIMO

Then what's wrong with you?

Maria glares -- *dick*. Dimo tries to save himself:

DIMO (CONT'D)

(jokingly)

It's just, uh, pretty weird being in
a dry spell when you have a girl,
you know. I'm fully arid over here.

Maria doesn't find it funny. After a second...

DIMO (CONT'D)

Okay, look. You haven't moved back
to the dorms. You barely hang out
with any of us. You stopped having
sex with me, but you say nothing's
wrong...

MARIA

I'm just focused.

DIMO

Why?

MARIA

Because I want to get better.

DIMO

Winning that stupid thing won't make
you better.

A sad look crosses Maria's face. Dimo inches in closer to
her. Rests his head on her knees. A puppy.

DIMO (CONT'D)

I think it might be good for you,
you know. Help you relax.

MARIA

I don't --

And like many men, "no means try again." He presses his
finger to her lips. He kisses her forehead. Moves down her
cheek. Maria rests her head back, attempting to loosen up.

Dimo palms her face, gently kisses her lips. After a second,
she goes with it, returning the affection.

Dimo's hand finds her knee. Maria tenses as it slides down
her inner thigh. She grabs his arm, maybe feeling his
strength -- or trying to push him away.

Dimo stops a moment. Focuses on kissing. He leans into Maria, pushing her against the glass.

He dances his finger tips over her skin. She loosens her grip on him. He rubs her thigh, breathing growing heavier.

Then he RUNS his hand right up her skirt.

Maria WINCES, SHOVES DIMO away --

DIMO
Jesus, Maria.

He eyes her, a scared look on her face. Maria opens the door. Starts to step out.

DIMO (CONT'D)
Come on...

MARIA
I'm going.

DIMO
You know, I thought you were
supposed to come back from that
place more normal. But sometimes, it
feels like you've gotten worse.

Maria looks back, devastated, unsure of what to say. Dimo sits there, half-clothed, sorry eyes -- *knows he shouldn't have said that either.*

DIMO (CONT'D)
Can we just talk?

Maria shuts the door in his face.

INT. MARIA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Maria closes the door. Leans against it, teary-eyed.

She's nearly hyperventilating, trying to steady her breath. That experience rattled her.

MOMENTS LATER, Maria looks into her mom's room, where Andrea sleeps. Maria looks like she wants to talk. Instead, she CLOSES the door.

Maria passes the KITCHEN. Stops a moment. Eyes the FRIDGE. Then the PANTRY. She walks past.

MARIA'S ROOM

Maria cleans the shit out of her room. Again, her eyes are empty, like she's on autopilot.

- She WHISKS dust from her trophies.
- STRAIGHTENS her bed spread.
- PERFECTS the angles of her posters.
- FINE-TUNES pens on her desk.

LATER, Maria sits on her bed. Watches Instagram stories on her phone. In one story, Rinny drinks and dances with other girls at a bar -- she's having normal-ass college kid fun.

Maria's lip quivers with sadness. About to cry.

KITCHEN

Maria stands in the doorframe of a walk-in pantry. She gazes around at boxes of food. Her look catches a TRASHCAN where an EMPTY VODKA BOTTLE lies.

CUT TO:

The trashcan is TOPPED with empty BAGS of snack foods.

OUTSIDE THE BATHROOM

We hear the sink faucet RUNNING, drowning the sound of Maria's secret... Then a toilet FLUSHES it away.

INT. MARIA'S HOUSE - MORNING - QUICK CUTS

- Maria WAKES in a startle to Andrea.
- The SCALE.
- The BLINKING
- Maria's face -- *anxiety building*.
- 110 blinks.
- SMALLER portion of egg whites, avocado.

INT. LSU GYM - CARDIO ROOM - MORNING

Maria races on the treadmill, Blondie booming from her earbuds. Her muscles GLISTEN. Sweat DRIPS from her brow.

The automatic machine ups the speed. 8-->10 mph. ONE MINUTE LEFT. Her arms pump. Legs POUND tread. HARDER -- HARDER --

Maria SLIPS and FALLS forward. WHAM.

This is gonna be bad.

...BUT...

The emergency release YANKS from the treadmill, and it CUTS before she's thrown from the machine.

Close one. Maria clambers to her feet. Checks her body. No injury. She sits on the edge of the treadmill. Stares at her pathetic reflection in the wall mirror when --

Something catches her eye. IN HER EYE.

She leans in, nose nearly touching the mirror. Pulls her lower eyelid down. CLOUDS OF RED dot her sclera. BURST BLOOD VESSELS. Her other eye -- same.

KARI (O.S.)
Kickin' ass, girlfriend.

Maria pulls back a bit from the mirror to look. *Who said that?* She glances left -- no one.

Maria turns right -- nothing. She turns back --

KARI (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Hey.

Maria STARTLES, noticing KARI (20s) in the reflection directly behind her.

MARIA
Shit!

Maria spins, back against the mirror.

Kari laughs at her reaction. Kari's blonde, intimidating, sexy. She's the STARING GIRL from the classroom earlier.

MARIA (CONT'D)
Uh. Hi.

KARI
Maria, right? Miss Teen Baton Rouge
2015? 16? Obama was president...

Maria eyes her curiously.

MARIA
16. Wait. Are you...?

KARI
Kari. Yep. Been a long time, huh. I
just transferred here.

Kari tosses Maria a YELLOW WORKOUT TOWEL. Maria takes it. Dabs her forehead.

MARIA

No way. Are you competing, too?

KARI

Hell no. I just watch them. I saw you last year. Didn't get to say hey. So what's the runner-up training so hard for? They practically let you win.

MARIA

I just... uh...

Maria goes into a BS pageant answer:

MARIA (CONT'D)

Just want to empower younger girls.

Kari smirks at the response.

KARI

You desire perfection. I get it.

Maria and Kari share an awkward moment. Maria doesn't seem so happy to see her. Perhaps a bad memory.

MARIA

This is so crazy. Good to see you.

Kari notices Maria's EYES. She steps closer. Maria steps back, almost against the wall.

KARI

You sick?

Maria looks down, trying to hide her eyes.

MARIA

I'm fine.

Kari touches her chin. Gently. Almost SENSUALLY. Levels her head. Studies her a moment.

KARI

Maybe take this year off. All the stress... hate to see something bad happen.

Maria, tense, side-steps out of Kari's reach. Kari grins.

KARI (CONT'D)

I'm screwing with you.

MARIA

I have to get to class.

KARI
Nice catching up.

Maria quickly walks off.

SHOWER ROOM

Maria leans against the shower wall, letting the calm water spray against her face.

GYM LOBBY

Maria, now dressed in casual clothes, paces through the lobby. She passes by Alex, who holds out a smoothie for her.

ALEX
What up, girl?

Maria reaches for the smoothie when she LOCKS EYES with Kari, sitting in a chair across the lobby. Maria diverts her gaze.

MARIA
I'm in a rush.

ALEX
Uh. Okay. See you in psych.

Maria nods. Takes the smoothie and heads out the door.

EXT. MARIA'S HOUSE - EVENING

Oaktree branches stretch out like witch's fingers over Maria's house.

ANDREA (PRE-LAP)
Okay, now turn.

INT. MARIA'S HOUSE - EVENING

Andrea's tailoring studio. Maria, wearing her mom's old dress, does a pageant turn in the mirror.

ANDREA
Back straight. Across the room.

Maria adjusts, fake smile plastered on her face. She seems bothered by something. She struts across the room.

MARIA
Do you, um, remember...

Andrea eyes Maria, annoyed she's breaking focus.

MARIA (CONT'D)
... this girl from when --

ANDREA
We're practicing...

MARIA
(nodding)
Right. Sorry.

ANDREA
What do you like most about
yourself?

MARIA
What I like most about myself is
that I, um, have a strong work ethic
and have fought to overcome many
setbacks I've experienced.

Andrea looks UNENTHUSED.

ANDREA
Describe one of those setbacks.

MARIA
(fake)
A year ago, my father, who was a
police officer, pulled over a
suspicious vehicle near Tiger Land.
Unfortunately, he didn't return home
from his watch. The incident informs
one arm of my platform, education to
curb crime...

Andrea holds up her finger. *Enough.*

ANDREA
Sincerity.

MARIA
I'm really trying.

ANDREA
You sound rehearsed, like every
other bimbo. You need to stand out.
You only have two days.

MARIA
Sorry.

ANDREA
And the dress looks tight.

MARIA
It feels fine.

Andrea slips her finger into the dress, near Maria's breasts.

ANDREA
Something's bigger. Period?

MARIA
I still haven't gotten it.

ANDREA
Turn around.

Maria turns. Andrea unzips the dress. Maria slips out. Just in panties. She covers her chest.

Andrea motions toward the scale. Maria reluctantly steps on. Again, the loading screen of doom:

...
...

112. *One fucking twelve* blinks on-screen.

Andrea glares at Maria, who looks away, ashamed. Andrea grabs the bottom of her chin, not unlike Kari did.

ANDREA (CONT'D)
You hit the perfect weight.

Maria shrugs.

ANDREA (CONT'D)
You went off-diet last night, didn't you?

MARIA
No.

Andrea doesn't buy it.

ANDREA
I gave you rules. It's for you to stay healthy.

MARIA
I don't break them.

ANDREA
You drank, too.

Maria doesn't say anything.

ANDREA (CONT'D)
That's why you're bloated.
(beat)
Going to have to sweat it out.

Maria nods, upset.

EXT. LSU GYM - NIGHT

Maria's car sits alone in the empty parking lot. The sound of feet POUNDING a WHINING treadmill. Then the machine kills.

INT. LSU GYM - NIGHT

And yet again, Maria's alone in the gym, having run countless miles. She sits on the edge of the treadmill, sweat dripping.

She stands. Poses in the mirror. Swimsuit modeling style. But she's exhausted. Her eyes track to THE TINIEST bit of FAT pinched at the waist of her yoga pants.

She instinctively pulls her pants higher to cover it.

She moseys to the mirror, glaring into her reflection. Pulls some of her hair back from her forehead.

At the edge of her hairline, there's a MILD RASH. Maybe a small case of acne. She leans in closer to inspect --

OFF SCREEN GYM DUDE
Maria, we're closing! Let's go!

EXT. LSU GYM - NIGHT

Maria walks out into the vast, dark parking lot. Checks her phone. 12:04 a.m.

She takes a deep breath, sets out toward her car, which seems to be under the one half-working overhead lamp in the lot. As she gets closer, the LIGHT FLICKERS. She keeps toward it.

It FLICKERS again. This time, there's the SAME DARK FIGURE, who we now see is a WOMAN -- just past Maria's car.

Maria halts, on guard. Squints. Trying to make out who it is, but the Woman is concealed in shadow.

MARIA
Excuse me?

No response. She glances back to the gym to see if there's anyone she can ask for help. There's no one.

She pans back to the car -- the Woman is GONE.

Maria swallows hard. Eyes track over shadows. Her nerves tighten as she darts toward the car. She fumbles with her key to insert it in the door. FOOTSTEPS behind her. SHIT --

She throws the door open.

INT. MARIA'S CAR - NIGHT

CLICK. Maria hits the automatic lock. She does a 360.
Someone's out there --

Where is she? Where is she? Come on...

A plastic bag bounces across the lot in a low breeze. The light above continues to FLICKER. But no one materializes. Maria closes her eyes, attempting to steady her breath. She shakes her head, annoyed with herself, but relieved.

After a moment, she starts the engine and begins to drive out of the lot. Her eyes skirt to the rearview mirror for good measure -- nothing but EMPTY ROAD trails.

EXT./INT. RIVER ROAD/MARIA'S CAR - NIGHT

Maria's car cruises along a dark road, pinned between the Mississippi River levee and tree-lined cattle fields.

MARIA (V.O.)

It's like my brain's foggy.

In the car, Maria has her phone clipped to the dash, where Rinny's on FaceTime, not really paying attention.

RINNY

That's what 500 calories a day does.

MARIA

That's not funny.

RINNY

I'm just saying... therapy is expensive. But burgers are two-for-four dollars at BK.

Maria smirks.

MARIA

How do you do it, not care about anything?

RINNY

I do. Sometimes. I just don't take shit as seriously.

MARIA

I wish I could do that.

RINNY

You can, dude.

MARIA

I don't know.

(beat)

This probably sounds stupid, but have you ever felt like someone is, like, following you?

RINNY

Are you asking if I'm a 19-year-old girl? Cause, uh, all the fucking time.

Maria doesn't laugh.

RINNY (CONT'D)

I mean no, I don't think so. How long's it been like that?

MARIA

I don't know. Honestly though, way more since I got back from that treatment center. Just like this feeling there's someone there. But there isn't. But today, I felt it, then I saw this girl I hung out with or something when I was little --

RINNY

Or something?

MARIA

I barely remember her, but I'm pretty sure I didn't like her. I guess she moved away at some point.

RINNY

Soooo. Are you saying you think she's following --

The feed BREAKS UP with interference.

MARIA
Can you hear me? Rinny?

RINNY
Wait -- can't -- you --

MARIA
Hang on. What about now?

RINNY
N -- fuck -- bro -- come on --

Maria eyes the dark road. She's in the middle of nowhere.

MARIA
It should clear in a second.

The screen goes black. CALL DROPPED.

MARIA (CONT'D)
Shit.

Maria takes her eyes off the road to call Rinny back. She taps at the phone.

THE CAR BEGINS TO VEER OFF THE ROAD.

Maria NOTICES. Adjusts. Back on track.

Back to the phone. She's about to hit the call button when --

CLANK. From somewhere in the car.

MARIA (CONT'D)
What the --

Ahead, a curve in the road quickly approaches.

Maria PULLS on the wheel, but it's seemingly LOCKED.

MARIA (CONT'D)
Come on!

She YANKS at the wheel -- it won't turn. STOMPS on the brakes, but the car's not slowing down.

MARIA (CONT'D)
What the fuck?!

LIGHTS CUT as the power dies in the vehicle. She can't see shit in the road ahead.

MARIA (CONT'D)
Shit shit shit shit shit.

The phone RINGS -- RINGS -- RINGS. Rinny's calling back. But Maria isn't paying attention 'cause --

THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP. The car treads the RUMBLE STRIP. She's going OFF THE ROAD --

MARIA (CONT'D)
Oh my god!

SOMETHING'S AHEAD -- *getting close* -- FAST -- A TREE.

SLOW MOTION: The car slams into the tree, COLLAPSING the hood like a tin can. Inside, Maria, TOSSES in her seat. The car's momentum dies. Maria's head WHIPS forward --

Toward the steering wheel.

CUT TO BLACK.

INT. MARIA'S HOUSE - DAY - FLASHBACK

Slow PUSH through the home. 2008.

Same house. Slightly different look. A BATHTUB FAUCET RUNS. Push through a bathroom doorway where --

YOUNG MARIA (7) watches YOUNG ANDREA (28) pose in front of a mirror.

Maria strikes a pose, mimicking Andrea.

YOUNG ANDREA
Try this.

Andrea adjusts her a tiny bit.

YOUNG ANDREA (CONT'D)
Good. You're a natural, my bellita.

YOUNG MARIA
Bell...ita?

YOUNG ANDREA
Bella means beauty. 'Ita' means little.

Maria cracks a big smile. Sucks in.

Maria ogles Andrea, lifting her shirt. Stares at her stomach. Andrea looks over her figure. She sighs, *disappointed*.

A tea kettle WHINES off screen.

YOUNG ANDREA (CONT'D)

One sec.

Andrea cuts the faucet and leaves the room.

Maria continues to look at her reflection, entranced by her little body. She lifts her shirt, showing her stomach -- mimicking Andrea.

Then she ties her shirt to hold it up. Maria sucks in, stands on her tippy toes, like she's in high-heels. She SIGHS, as if she's upset as well.

Then she poses. A little more suggestively than she should. IN THE MIRROR, she notices someone, WATCHING from the doorway.

Maria nervously turns --

To her dad, SCOTT (29), wearing a police uniform. A long, UNCOMFORTABLE MOMENT as the two stare at each other.

INT. HOSPITAL - NIGHT - PRESENT

MARIA POV: Blurry. Bright lights.

ANDREA (O.S.)

She hasn't been right since Scott...

DET. SHERR (O.S.)

Not a day goes by I don't wish he were here.

Maria wipes her eyes. Andrea notices.

ANDREA

Oh, thank God.

Andrea gently strokes hair out of Maria's face. As she finds her bearings, Maria realizes she's in a hospital bed.

ANDREA (CONT'D)

Bellita, can you hear me?

Maria nods. She notices a heart rate monitor BEEPING.

ANDREA (CONT'D)

You were in an accident.

Terror overtakes Maria. She inspects her body for injuries.

ANDREA (CONT'D)

You're okay. You're so lucky. Thank God the airbag deployed...

Maria grabs her head, wrapped in a bandage.

MARIA

Is it... I want to go.

ANDREA

We can leave as soon as you make a statement.

MARIA

What?

Andrea moves, revealing DET. SHERR (40s, buff). Maria looks at him, confused.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Detective Sherr?

DET. SHERR

Hey Maria, sorry to see you like this. I just need you to tell me what you remember then we can get you out of here.

MARIA

Wait -- why?

DET. SHERR

It's just a formality.

Maria nods.

MARIA

I, uh, left the gym. And I was just driving. The wheel --
(it's all coming back:)
Someone did this to me.

DET. SHERR

What makes you think that?

MARIA

There was someone... a girl by my car when I left. My wheel locked up. The brakes weren't working.

DET. SHERR

Can you describe this woman?

MARIA

It was dark. I couldn't really make her out.

DET. SHERR
Not much I can do without a
description.

ANDREA
Are you sure that's what you saw?

Maria glances between her mother and Det. Sherr.

MARIA
You don't believe me?

ANDREA
You've been under a lot of pressure.

Maria looks at her mom like she's nuts.

MARIA
I'm not making this up. I saw this
girl I used to know at the gym
yesterday... Kari. Maybe it was her.
She basically threatened me.

Andrea touches her locket as concern crosses her face.

Sherr looks more serious now. He pulls a notepad to write.

DET. SHERR
She threatened you?

MARIA
Yeah. To get me to quit the pageant.

Maria looks to her mom.

MARIA (CONT'D)
You remember her, right? She's
blonde. I guess she lived close by
when we were kids.

Andrea glances to Sherr. Shakes her head, like she's
unfamiliar. Maria's about to speak again but --

DET. SHERR
Why don't you tell me what she said
to you.

MARIA
Um, she said that I shouldn't
compete this year.

Andrea and Det. Sherr look at her curiously.

MARIA (CONT'D)
That something bad might happen.

Sherr lowers his pad.

DET. SHERR
Anything more specific?

A LONG SILENCE. A mutual understanding that whatever Maria thinks Kari did -- *she ain't got evidence.*

Andrea reaches over, touches Maria's hand tenderly.

ANDREA
The doctors think you might have
blacked out.

MARIA
What? Why?

ANDREA
They ran tests on you. Your
electrolytes were low.
(beat)
Have you been purging again?

Maria -- *caught.*

INT. ANDREA'S CAR - NIGHT

Andrea sits at a stop light. The caring demeanor she displayed around Det. Sherr has vanished.

Maria stares off out the window, awaiting a flogging.

ANDREA
How often?

MARIA
I don't know.

Andrea tries to pull her arm to get her to turn.

ANDREA
How often, Maria? Look at me.

Maria doesn't.

ANDREA (CONT'D)
(raising her voice)
How many times?

Andrea pulls on her HARD this time. Maria winces in pain. Meanwhile, the light turns green. Andrea doesn't notice.

MARIA

Just a few.

ANDREA

You have to tell me when this happens. You could kill yourself.

A car behind them HONKS.

MARIA

Go.

Andrea takes off.

ANDREA

I don't understand. You wanna be like those Victoria's Secret model girls? Well, if there were less of you, you'd blow away.

MARIA

What am I supposed to do then? You get mad if I gain weight, too.

ANDREA

It's because I want you to win. I thought you were in a good place.

MARIA

So did I.

ANDREA

Then why'd you start this again?

MARIA

The doctors said I can't help it.

ANDREA

They're wrong. It's in your head. And now, you're paranoid. It's... I don't want to send you away again, but maybe we need to --

MARIA

No.

A LONG SILENCE.

ANDREA

I wouldn't have encouraged you this year if I knew this would happen.

(MORE)

ANDREA (CONT'D)
I just thought it would be nice.
Seeing you win. Something I always
wanted.

Maria stares out into the black night. Andrea slows down.
Another RED LIGHT.

ANDREA (CONT'D)
You should just back out now if you
can't stop.

MARIA
I'm going to be fine, mom.

ANDREA
Good.

The red light SATURATES the screen.

INT. MARIA'S HOUSE - DAY

The MORNING SUN casts an orange glow through Maria's bedroom
curtains as she sleeps. Her phone BUZZES on her nightstand.

Maria wakes, bandage still around her head. Checks her phone.

Rinny: *Yo. Call me!*

Dimo: *Can we talk?*

Another text comes through:

Dimo: *Please*

Maria: *No*

Maria walks over to the mirror, where she sees the bandage.
She lightly touches it, afraid to see what's underneath.

Her phone BUZZES again. Dimo's calling. She ignores it.

TAP -- TAP. On her window. TAP -- TAP. She pulls back the
curtain.

Dimo stands outside the window, eyebrows raised as he looks
at her WRECKED CAR, parked on the street.

DIMO
Are you okay?

EXT. MARIA'S HOUSE - DAY

Dimo, wrench in hand, rolls from under Maria's car. Maria
sits on her porch, watching him.

DIMO

The drive train's for sure locked up, and there's no brake fluid.

MARIA

See, I didn't make it up.

Dimo tosses the wrench in his truck. Grabs a BAG from the cab and walks toward Maria.

DIMO

Well, I mean, it could have happened because you crashed. And I don't even know how someone would do that. Beyond my mechanical capabilities.

Maria isn't sure how to take that. Dimo sits next to her.

DIMO (CONT'D)

I'm glad you're okay.

(beat)

I've been worried about you.

MARIA

Don't be.

DIMO

Rinny told me you've been sketch lately. And the way you reacted the other night... It was weird.

MARIA

No, it wasn't. You just forced yourself on me.

Dimo eyes her quizzically.

DIMO

I feel like something happened, and you're not telling me. Or anyone.

MARIA

Dimo...

DIMO

I just think if you --

MARIA

You can't fix everything.

DIMO

I can try.

Maria shuts up for a second.

DIMO (CONT'D)

I just want you to talk to me.

Maria catches Dimo's unrelenting glare. Finally, she gives in:

MARIA

Okay. Fine. My whole life's been school, sports, pageants. I was always working toward something and never thought about shit like who I am or what I want or whatever. I was just busy all the time. Then when my dad died last year, I didn't even cry. I didn't have time to. I was so focused on the pageant. And then I lost. I had nothing to work on... to control, you know. That's when the eating thing started.

Maria takes a breath -- honesty. *That felt kinda good.*

DIMO

Maybe you need more help.

Maria shakes her head, not wanting to accept it.

MARIA

I just need to win.

DIMO

Then what? It's not like you'll suddenly be perfect-

MARIA

Yes I will. And I'll have Miss USA to prepare for. Press junkets. I'll have a platform to embody for younger girls.

Dimo isn't convinced.

DIMO

That's all fine, but I'm just saying, maybe you should take some time away and really like focus on the issue. Figure out what it is that's making you like this instead of just distracting yourself.

Maria shrugs. They let the moment SIT. Dimo opens the bag.

DIMO (CONT'D)

Anyway, I'm sorry about the other night.

He pulls a BLONDIE "PARALLEL LINES" VINYL LP from the bag.
Hands it to her.

MARIA

Dimo. No.

DIMO

Just a peace offering...

Maria rolls her eyes. Takes it. Regards the cover -- blonde DEBBIE HARRY, in a white dress, standing amidst her all-male band, clad in black suits.

Maria notices Andrea watching them through a window.

MARIA

I should get moving. I already slept
in late.

DIMO

Hang on. What about us?

MARIA

We'll talk about it later.

She stands up, opens the door.

DIMO

Wait, will I see you tonight?

Maria shuts the door. Dimo walks to his truck, *dejected again*.

INT. MARIA'S HOUSE - MORNING

Maria watches Dimo's truck pull from the driveway. She turns to Andrea, eyeing her suspiciously.

ANDREA

Take this.

She hands her Tylenol and a glass of water.

ANDREA (CONT'D)

Do you need more rest?

Maria shakes her head, no. Swallows the pills.

ANDREA (CONT'D)

Good.

MARIA

Dimo said the drive train locked-

ANDREA
 (don't go there)
 Maria...

MARIA
 And the brake fluid was gone. Do you
 really not remember that girl?

ANDREA
You blacked out and crashed your
 car, Maria. No one did that to you.
 (beat)
 You need to focus. We're running
 through questions again tonight,
 okay?

Maria solemnly nods. It wasn't a question.

BEDROOM - LATER

Maria stands at her bookshelf, thinking. Grabs a scrapbook:
 - Handwritten title: MISS LSU 2020.
 - Skims through pages of PRINTED PAGEANT PHOTOS.
 - Finger pans over audience members in the photo BG.
 - Maria's eyes -- *searching* -- but not finding.

MARIA
 Come on.

- Maria, about to call it quits.
 - But then her eyes LIGHT UP.

TAILORING STUDIO

Maria enters, carrying a PHOTO.

MARIA (CONT'D)
 Mom.

No reply. She sees the jigsaw puzzle is FARTHER ALONG -- an
 impressionist painting of a stately 18th-century HOUSE.

Maria hears a CAR. Through a window, she notices Andrea
 pulling out the driveway.

BEDROOM

Maria stands at her dresser, looking at the PHOTO: All the
 2020 pageant CONTESTANTS posed in front of the crowd. And in
 the third row, behind them, KARI stands, smiling.

She grabs a tote bag from the dresser, next to the Blondie LP.
 She eyes Debbie Harry on the cover. Looks back to the pageant
 photo of Kari. *There's a weird resemblance between them.*

Maria shakes it off. Puts the photo in the tote.

She turns to walk away when she catches her REFLECTION in the mirror. THE BANDAGE.

Fuck. She'd forgotten. Maria slowly begins to unwrap it, nervous at what's underneath.

Finally, she pulls the bandage from her head. And there's nothing. No bruises or lumps. She rubs her head, cringes. It's a little sore, but that's all.

Except there is something... Underneath her matted bangs. She pulls them back. THE RASH from the night before -- it's WORSE.

Maria leans closer, examining small pimple-like sores, leading to SCAB-LIKE CRUST on her scalp. She parts her hair, eyeing it. What the --

Like any OCD human, she picks at the rash when --

SHE RIPS A CHUNK OF HAIR FROM HER HEAD.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Fuck.

Maria jolts back in horror. Gathers herself.

Examines the hair. The patch of skin on her scalp appears to have DIED. She drops it suddenly. Turns her hands over. Her palms are covered in pinhead-sized bumps, like ECZEMA.

INT. LSU CAMPUS DOCTOR'S OFFICE - DAY

A gross MAGNIFYING GLASS-view of the rash.

DR. BILLY BLAKE (40s), wearing a bright headlamp, inspects Maria's head as she sits on a purple and gold patient bed.

DR. BLAKE

About how far do you run?

MARIA

Eight usually. I did a half-marathon once.

DR. BLAKE

You know I ran the Boston Marathon in 2013?

Maria shakes her head, confused.

DR. BLAKE (CONT'D)
So you're eating regularly?

Maria nods. Blake turns his headlamp off, the room light ON.

DR. BLAKE (CONT'D)
Okay. You're healthy. A little
underweight. But healthy.
(re: head)
No telling with this stuff.

MARIA
It's not like normal though, right?

DR. BLAKE
No. But not life-threatening either.
I had a girl come in here with warts
on her lips. Let's just say it was a
real problem. I'll give you a
topical steroid. Should clear it up.

Maria looks concerned.

MARIA
How do you think I got it? It's just
weird it came up with the pageant
tomorrow.

Blake grins at what she's insinuating.

DR. BLAKE
Here's some unsolicited advice: Just
'cause you broke out in a rash doesn't
mean someone's out to get you.

Not the answer Maria wanted to hear.

DR. BLAKE (CONT'D)
Could have been caused by anything.
Stress, weather. A plant. Who knows?
You could be allergic to something.
Have you changed your detergent
recently?

Maria -- *gears turning*.

INT. MARIA'S HOUSE - LAUNDRY ROOM - DAY

Maria stands on top of the washing machine, looking through
cabinets. She pulls down a container of LIQUID DETERGENT.
Opens it. Barely any left. Definitely not new.

She grabs another bottle -- it's unopened.

She climbs down from the machine, about to leave when she notices her GYM BAG on the floor. Thinks on it a moment.

Maria sets the bag on top of the washing machine. Sifts through it. Dirty gym clothes. Socks. A sweaty shirt. She drops them into the washer.

Maria pours detergent when something catches her attention --

Wrapped inside her shirt, a YELLOW cloth. She unballs the shirt to find the GYM TOWEL.

The one she used to wipe her sweat.

The one that weird girl Kari gave to her...

Beastie Boys said it best -- *LISTEN ALL Y'ALL, IT'S SABOTAGE.*

INT. LSU GYM - DAY

Doors slide open and Maria strides in on a mission, briskly navigating hordes of students. Passes the smoothie shop.

Behind the counter, Alex notices. She holds up Maria's regular SMOOTHIE.

ALEX

Hey! I didn't see you this morning.

But Maria ignores her. She jogs up the stairs.

CARDIO ROOM

Maria barges in. SCANS the room. Dozens of COLLEGE KIDS run, walk, whatever. Maria doesn't see what she wants.

WEIGHT ROOM

Maria paces through the room, eyes tracking back and forth. A GROUP of GIRLS from the pageant meeting eye her suspiciously.

But Maria doesn't give a shit.

LOCKER ROOM

Maria walks into the room. Steam HANGS in the air. The place is weirdly quiet aside from a shower head or two BLASTING.

Maria passes row after row of lockers. ALL EMPTY. A girl's GIGGLE echoes.

She follows the sound and comes to the shower section. Maria creeps along, peering into the shower stalls.

One has water RUNNING and STEAM RISING from it.

She looks beneath the curtain and the floor -- *no one's there.*

A SPLASH. She turns to another shower, also pouring steam.

A PAIR OF FEET is visible. And between a crack in the curtain and the wall, she can see wet hair, pasted to the back of a naked female body.

She hears a SHARP, PAINFUL INHALE. Labored breathing.

Maria steps closer. The breathing grows a LITTLE LOUDER.

TWO PAIRS OF WOMEN'S LEGS become visible underneath the curtain. The breathing turns to MOANING.

Then a WET SMACK. Skin against a tile wall.

Maria gasps. Returns to the locker area. Walks through it.

CLANK -- a locker closes. She halts.

KARI walks from between a row of lockers. Heads for the exit.

MARIA

Hey!

But Kari's already out the door. Maria runs after.

HALLWAY

Maria jogs down a hallway, peering through GLASS DOORS.

She spots Kari in a FREE WEIGHT ROOM.

FREE WEIGHT ROOM

Kari adjusts earbuds in her ears as Maria paces past a few FOLKS deep in their workouts.

Maria grabs Kari's shoulder. Pulls her around.

KARI

Um, hi... You look pissy.

MARIA

What do you want?

KARI

'Scuse me.

MARIA

Why are you doing this to me?

Kari grins.

KARI
The fuck are you talking about?

Maria shows her the rashy spot in her hair.

KARI (CONT'D)
You have dandruff or something?

MARIA
My hands, too. You put something on that towel.

KARI
Uh-huh. Why would I do that?

MARIA
You're trying to destroy my run.

Kari raises her eyebrows. Seems to be oblivious.

MARIA (CONT'D)
Are you competing or something?

KARI
Told you 'no.'
(re: workout equipment)
Calories don't burn themselves.

Kari puts her earbuds in her ears. Maria YANKS them out.

KARI (CONT'D)
Whoa. I know we used to be friends -

MARIA
You fucked with my car, too.

KARI
I did what?

MARIA
You messed with my brakes. You could have killed me.

Kari laughs.

MARIA (CONT'D)
Is someone paying you? Stop laughing!

KARI
Do I look like a mechanic?

Maria isn't sure how to respond.

KARI (CONT'D)
You've got no chill, pal.

Kari does crunches. Maria looks around the room, embarrassed. She catches her reflection in the mirror, shirks away.

KARI (CONT'D)
If I were you, I'd worry more about
someone poisoning you.
(beat)
Vlada whatever. The Russian model
girl. That's how she died.

Maria glares, curious.

MARIA
How would someone do that?

KARI
Food maybe. But I kinda assume you
hurl everything you eat.

Maria looks down, self-conscious.

KARI (CONT'D)
I'd pick something you'd keep down.
If you do keep anything down.

Kari continues with her crunches. Maria thinks a MOMENT. A thought hits her. She darts from the room.

KARI (CONT'D)
You're welcome.

LOBBY

From across the room, Maria eyes the Pageant Girls from the weight room hanging around the smoothie shop. After a few seconds, the girls walk off.

Maria beelines across the lobby toward the shop. Catches sight of a sweaty MEATHEAD destined for a smoothie, as well.

She speeds up, making it to the counter just before him. He anxiously paces behind her. Alex has her back to the counter.

MARIA
Alex.

ALEX
Hang tight.

MARIA
We need to talk.

Alex pours a smoothie. Turns to Maria. Smiles wide.

ALEX
Remade it. The other melted.

Alex holds the drink out. Maria doesn't take it.

MARIA
I know what you're doing.

ALEX
Giving you a --
(whispers)
Free
(normal)
Smoothie?

She motions to a MIDDLE-AGED GYM MANAGER across the lobby.

MEATHEAD
Y'all'most done? Class's coming up.

MARIA
They don't sell roids here.

MEATHEAD
Uhm, I do whey protein.

Alex isn't sure what to make of this.

MARIA
I know what you've been doing to my
drinks.

ALEX
What are you talking about?

MARIA
Don't lie, Alex. You put something
in them.

ALEX
Jesus, Maria...

Maria points to her rashy head, popped vessels in her eyes.

ALEX (CONT'D)
You think I did that?

MARIA
Bleach? Fertilizer? Rat poison?

ALEX
Poison? What the hell?

MARIA
And that didn't work fast enough so
you fucked up my car.

Alex's jaw drops in awe. Meathead is getting concerned.

MEATHEAD
(to Alex)
Imma get somebody.

Meathead paces toward the Manager.

ALEX
Please calm down.

Maria YANKS Alex by the shirt across the counter.

MARIA
You said you needed to win for the
money.

ALEX
Fuck! Get off!

MARIA
Drink it yourself, bitch.

Maria SMASHES the styrofoam smoothie in Alex's face, then
throws Alex back. She falls against another counter. Cries.

Maria takes a look around. RUBBERNECKERS galore. She composes
herself. Momentarily empowered. Heads out the exit. Manager
runs after.

EXT. LSU GYM - DAY

Maria heads out into the parking lot. Manager follows.

MANAGER
You're done! Don't come back, Maria.

MARIA
Fuck you, Dave!

Maria cracks a smile as she heads past students across the
parking lot onto campus. She's asserted some kind of control.
And that shit *felt good*.

EXT. LSU QUAD - DAY

STUDENTS pass through the quad, turning their heads curiously.

Rinny appears in the crowd. She stops. Stares, concerned.

A REVERSE ANGLE reveals Maria, minutes into a hardcore plank.

Music BLASTS through Maria's earbuds. Sweat droplets STAIN the concrete below her face.

RINNY

Maria.

No response. Rinny pulls an earbud from Maria's ear.

RINNY (CONT'D)

We gotta chat, dude.

MARIA

Another minute.

Rinny plants her foot on Maria's back. PUSHES her over.

INT. THE CHIMES - DAY

The closest thing to a dimly-lit European bar in Baton Rouge. The place is half-full with college STUDENTS and PROFESSORS.

FIND Maria and Rinny in a booth. Maria powers through a CHEESEBURGER, barely taking time to breathe.

RINNY

I've heard of girls stealing your heels or whatever in the dressing room. But this shit...

MARIA

Personally, I think she figured if I was knocked out of it, the whole dynamic would be off. She'd advance easier. Probably be you against her. You're lucky I caught her.

RINNY

Alex?...

MARIA

Yes.

RINNY

It just sounds kinda cray.

MARIA

Please divulge your superior explanation, Rinny.

As Maria grabs fries, Rinny snatches her hand. Turns it over. Her fingers are dotted with LITTLE BUMPS.

RINNY
Lemme see your head.

Maria lifts back her headband, revealing the RASH on her head. Rinny takes a look. Definitely missing a small patch of hair. But devastating, it is not.

RINNY (CONT'D)
Sure it's not eczema or some shit?

MARIA
I've never had that.

RINNY
You ever been this stressed?

MARIA
It was Alex, Corrine.

RINNY
All right then.

Maria digs into the fries.

RINNY (CONT'D)
Andrea called me.

MARIA
Good God.

RINNY
She's worried you're relapsing.

Maria motions toward the burger.

MARIA
Do I look like I'm relapsing?

RINNY
Okay. Fuck. Ready to bounce?

Maria DOWNS her water.

MARIA
Let me use the bathroom.

Rinny nods, knowingly. Maria gets up from the table.

CHIMES BATHROOM STALL

Gross. Maria stares at the toilet, waiting for someone washing their hands to leave.

They do. Maria takes a calming breath. Leans over when --

FEET appear under the stall divider next to her. Maria TENSES. The feet turn toward her, like they did when she was shaving in the shower --

RINNY (O.S.)
You grow a dick?

Maria deflates.

MARIA
What? No.

RINNY (O.S.)
Then turn around, sit down, and take
a piss.

Maria. Caught. She flushes the toilet and stands.

INT. RINNY'S DORM ROOM - AFTERNOON

Maria's PHONE BUZZES on a desk -- Andrea's calling. A hand silences it.

In a mirror, we see Maria in an office chair, Rinny behind her, holding a comb. A can of MOUSSE on the desk next to her. They're in the center of her dorm room -- it's messy, rock music posters on the walls.

RINNY
He just said you were being weird as
fuck.

Rinny runs her fingers through Maria's hair, styling it.

MARIA
I wasn't trying to. Why do you text
him so much anyway?

RINNY
He was my friend first.

MARIA
But you almost dated him.

RINNY
(deflecting)
Yeah, thank God I didn't. Would have
never ridden The Steed.

MARIA

Josh?

Rinny and Maria lock eyes in the mirror and laugh together.

RINNY

(British Accent)

Yep. That noble stallion.

(normal voice)

Huge. Two hands full.

MARIA

That had to hurt.

RINNY

Hurt so good. How's it with D's...D?

MARIA

It, uh, was good...

RINNY

Was?

MARIA

We really haven't in a while.

Rinny eyes Maria like she's crazy. Maria looks away.

MARIA (CONT'D)

I quit everything when I got back from Ridge Oaks. Drinking. Se-
whatever. I just focused on the
pageant.

Rinny goes wide-eyed -- that interests her.

RINNY

See, Dimo and I don't talk that
much.

MARIA

I will again. Just when I'm ready.

RINNY

You know that saying, "He's just mad
cause he's not getting laid?"

MARIA

Yeah.

RINNY

Past like 18, it's a real thing.
People need to get some on the reg or
they turn into serial killers.

MARIA
So that explains you and The Steed.

RINNY
There was a dearth of dick in my
life for four months prior to him.
Lowkey, that bastard prevented mass
murder.

Maria laughs again -- for a moment, she seems sorta normal.
Rinny fixes Maria's hair behind her ear.

RINNY (CONT'D)
Check it out.

Rinny pulls her phone. Instagram. Aims it at Maria.

MARIA
Don't put it on your story.

RINNY
Why the fuck not? It's perfect.

The slight re-style completely hides Maria's rash and patch
of missing hair. A SNAP. Rinny takes the photo.

On the desk, Maria's phone BUZZES again. ANDREA. Silences it.

INT. MARIA'S HOUSE - EVENING

Andrea sits in her studio, staring at the dress now tailored
on a mannequin. A vodka and ice SWEATS on the table in front
of her, next to her now NEARLY FINISHED jigsaw puzzle.

She taps the screen on her iPhone -- no missed calls or texts
from Maria. A car PULLS UP outside.

INT. RINNY'S CAR - EVENING

Rinny pulls into Maria's driveway. Maria sits passenger.

RINNY
Please come out with us later.

MARIA
I don't know.

RINNY
Just for a little bit.

MARIA
My mom wants me to practice.

RINNY

You're not her slave. You can do whatever you want. And besides, you're not gonna actually get any better before tomorrow.

Maria sees Andrea standing just outside the door. Waiting.

MARIA

I gotta go.

RINNY

You really should move back into the dorms, dude.

Maria opens the door.

INT. MARIA'S HOUSE - FOYER - NIGHT

Maria walks in. Andrea locks the door.

ANDREA

You didn't answer your phone.

MARIA

I was busy.

ANDREA

I wanted to check on you. You're supposed to answer my calls. Are you all right?

MARIA

I'm fine, mom.

ANDREA

Did you purge today?

That sucks the air from the room.

Maria ignores her. Heads for her room. Andrea tails.

MARIA'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

ANDREA (CONT'D)

You have to tell me everything, Maria. Did you?

Maria doesn't answer. Takes her backpack off. Andrea grabs her shoulders. Glares. Maria can SMELL the booze on her.

MARIA

Why are you drunk right now?

ANDREA
What I do is none of your business.

MARIA
Well, you have to tell me
everything, Andrea.

ANDREA
Don't smart mouth me.

MARIA
That's the deal. For there to
be trust, we have to tell each
other everything. And I want to
know. Why are you drunk?

They glare at each other.

ANDREA
Get on the scale.

Maria doesn't move.

ANDREA (CONT'D)
Get. On. The. Scale.

Maria's intimidated. Steps on the scale.
- The scale's screen TICKS.
- Maria DOESN'T scratch her palm nervously.
- **114** BLINKS.

Andrea's furiously dumbfounded.

ANDREA (CONT'D)
Take off your clothes, and do it
again.

Maria shakes her head.

ANDREA (CONT'D)
(stern)
Take off your clothes, and do it
again.

MARIA
I don't have to.

ANDREA
I pay your bills. You live
under my roof.

MARIA
I don't want to live here.

ANDREA
Then stop vomiting. Until then,
you listen to me.

MARIA
No.

Andrea SHOVES Maria onto her bed.

MARIA (CONT'D)
Stop! MOM!

Andrea YANKS at her clothes, STRIPPING them from her body.

ANDREA
Do you even want this?! Everything
I do. And this is what you do to
yourself.

Maria cries, afraid to fight back. She curls up. Andrea TUGS
Maria's pants down her legs.

Maria lies there, half-naked, ashamed, covering her body.

ANDREA (CONT'D)
Get on.

Maria steps back up. The scale screen TICKS. **113.**

ANDREA (CONT'D)
Perfect. You're getting fat now.

MARIA
Shut up.

ANDREA
You think they don't care if they
see love handles through a dress?

MARIA
There's nothing I can do now.

ANDREA
They don't give a rat's ass about
you if you're not perfect. What do
you not understand?

MARIA
You're a bitch.

Andrea scoffs.

ANDREA

You have it so good, Maria. You have no idea. My mother would have --
(she catches herself)
You should be thanking me. Now, stop crying. You're acting like a baby.

Maria turns away, wiping tears. Andrea drunkenly stares. Tries to pull it back together -- *she's not the bad guy, she's just helping:*

ANDREA (CONT'D)

You're so close. Let's just win this. Okay. Let's get it right... If you could change one thing about your life what would it be?

Maria looks to herself in the mirror. She's a mess. But BEHIND HER, Andrea's even worse.

ANDREA (CONT'D)

What would it be?

Maria turns to Andrea. Bows up in her face.

ANDREA (CONT'D)

Answer the question.

Maria walks her mom back toward the bedroom door.

ANDREA (CONT'D)

What would you change?

MARIA

You, Andrea. I'd fucking get rid of you.

Maria SHOVES Andrea out of the room into the hall. Slams the door. LOCKS IT quickly.

Andrea BANGS from the other side.

ANDREA (O.S.)

Maria! Open the door!

Maria sobs, back against the door.

EXT. MARIA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

The peaceful cadence of cicadas in the southern night. For a moment, all seems right in the world.

INT. MARIA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

But it's not.

Maria wipes spit from her mouth, having vomited into her TRASHCAN, cradled in her arms. She opens a cabinet on a bookshelf and hides the trashcan inside.

Her phone VIBRATES. It's Rinny. A CALM comes over Maria as she reads. Begins to text back.

ANDREA'S STUDIO

Andrea sits at her desk, frazzled, teeth gnawing the locket between her lips. Her hands SHAKE, finishing the puzzle. She picks up one last piece. Moves it to the single open slot. She presses, HARD, hand trembling, and --

The piece BREAKS. She shirks, as if it hurt her. A miserable look crosses her face as she gazes at what's destined to be a forever unfinished work.

BATHROOM - LATER

Andrea looks at herself in her own mirror. Attempting to give a sincere apology:

ANDREA

I don't mean to put this kind of pressure on you.

(beat)

I've been struggling lately, too, you know. So I'm sorry. But what you said hurt.

(beat)

Bellita, I'm sorry. I'm just so sorry. This is tough on me. I'm trying my best. I just never had a good example of how to do this -- be a mother.

(beat)

I want what's best for you. I want you to be what I never could.

She attempts to cry. But when tears don't come, she looks to her vodka on the counter. She grabs it, downs her drink.

EXT./INT. MARIA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Maria's bedroom window. The lights are OFF behind it. Then, the window SLIDES OPEN.

Maria's leg slips through.

OUTSIDE MARIA'S DOOR

Andrea stands outside the door. She's drunk. Unsteady. Grips the doorframe to balance herself.

WINDOW

Maria climbs out of the window, wearing a CROP TOP and SKIRT. She's going out. She leans back in to close the window when she notices a SHADOW in the light under her door.

Fuck. Maria FREEZES.

OUTSIDE MARIA'S DOOR

Andrea leans her head against the door. Listening. She raises her hand to knock.

WINDOW

Maria holds deadly still.

A LONG BEAT. *Go away. Go away. Go away.*

The shadow disappears.

Whew. Maria quietly shuts the window. Jogs down the block to Rinny's idling SUV.

INT. RINNY'S CAR - NIGHT

Rinny grins wide at Maria getting in.

RINNY
(sarcastic)
You perfected pageantry *fucking fast.*

Maria shoots her a look --

MARIA
Don't. When are we coming back?

RINNY
When the shindig is dug.

MARIA
Check in's at noon.

RINNY
Damn. We only have *fourteen* hours.

Maria closes the door as Rinny drives off.

EXT. FRAT HOUSE - NIGHT

A huge plantation-style house on the edge of the sprawling LSU lakes. Electronica-mixed top-40's tunes BEAT. College-aged FOLKS mingle on the front lawn.

SMOKE drifts from the front door.

Rinny's car pulls up on the side of the street out front. Maria and Rinny exit the car and head toward the house.

MARIA

What frat is this?

RINNY

The douchy one.

COLLEGE BROS OGLE and CAT-CALL the girls as they enter the misty doorway into the party.

INT. FRAT HOUSE - NIGHT

Music BOOMS louder. LASERS splice fog. BLACK LIGHTS make everything glow. Rinny drags Maria into the --

LIVING ROOM

Where the real party is. PARTIERS DANCE, MINGLE, DRINK, SMOKE, SNORT. A DJ is set up at one end of the room, while MANNEQUINS are sexually posed on tables throughout the space.

Rinny YELLS into Maria's ear:

RINNY

I'll be back.

MARIA

Where are you going?

Rinny DISAPPEARS into the crowd without answering.

Maria scans over the mannequins, *blowing each other, 69'ing, riding each other, in threesomes*. Her eyes land on a FEMALE-FEMALE pairing, hands in each other's groins. It's off-putting. Nothing sexy about it.

Maria navigates through the dance floor of sweaty bodies, making her way toward the edge of the room where --

Her gaze finds KARI, leaning against the wall. Kari nods to her in acknowledgment when --

LANDON (22), frat douche, BUMPS into Maria. Not by accident.

Maria smiles uncomfortably. Landon leans into her.

LANDON
My b. What's your name, honey?

MARIA
Maria. Yours?

No answer. Landon puts his hands on her hips. Attempts to start swaying. Maria pulls them off.

LANDON
What are you majoring in?

MARIA
Biology and --

LANDON
How 'bout a lesson?

A BRIGHT FLASH. From below. Maria spins to a PLEDGE (18) hiding his cell phone -- he just took a pic up her skirt.

MARIA
Asshole!

She turns back. Landon's cracking up. He high-fives the Pledge, and they disappear into the party.

Maria turns in a circle, looking for her friends. Other DUDES in the room seem to be eyeing her viciously. HUNGRY WOLVES.

She PANICS. Starts backing out of the crowd as --

SHE'S GRABBED. By Rinny.

RINNY
You good?

MARIA
I wanna go.

RINNY
Fuck that noise.

Maria looks back to the same dudes from a minute ago. NO ONE IS WATCHING HER.

RINNY (CONT'D)
Surprise.

Maria pans to where Kari was. She's turned away now.

RINNY (CONT'D)
Yo. Pay attention, dude.

Rinny directs her to DIMO, busting out some SICK DANCE MOVES -
- the fax machine, the Russian bulldozer, the lawnmower, etc.
Dimo drops to a knee, takes Maria's hand.

DIMO
My lady. I'm but a meager lawnman.

Dimo kisses the top of her hand. Maria blushes.

DIMO (CONT'D)
But even plebians deserve second
chances.

RINNY
Figured you guys could kiss and
make love.

Maria rolls her eyes.

DIMO
That's a yes!

Rinny opens a napkin to reveal a few POT BROWNIES.

RINNY
'Nom time.

Dimo grabs a brownie and downs it in one bite. Rinny pinches
off some and eats as well. But Maria doesn't touch it.

RINNY (CONT'D)
Don't be a puss.

MARIA
I really shouldn't.

RINNY
It'll be fine.

MARIA
Tomorrow though...

RINNY
Well shit. Where's the old you I
saw earlier?

MARIA
You shouldn't do this either.

RINNY
You sound like your mom.

OUCH. Maria doesn't like that. She gives in.

MARIA
No nuts?

RINNY
Just pot.

Maria pinches off a quarter of the brownie. Eats it.

RINNY (CONT'D)
Open your mouth.

Maria sarcastically opens her mouth wide. Empty. She ate it.

MARIA
I need a drink to wash it down.

Dimo grins. Walks off. Suddenly, a HIP-HOP version of BLONDIE'S "ONE WAY OR ANOTHER" beats onto the loud speakers. A cocky smile wipes Rinny's face. She points to herself, taking credit for the song.

MARIA (CONT'D)
You're an idiot.

RINNY
Yeah, I am.

Dimo returns with three plastic shot glasses of whiskey. Hands them out.

DIMO
Down the hizz.

They cheers. Maria kicks her head back. Downs the shot and --

MONTAGE OVER MUSIC:

*ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, I'M GONNA FIND
YA', I'M GONNA GET YA', GET YA',
GET YA', GET YA'...*

- Maria DANCES with Rinny, singing the song.
- Dimo brings more shots over. They pound 'em.
- Dimo and Maria brush up against each other, dancing.
- More brownie passes around. Maria eats some.
- Maria and Dimo make out, while Rinny sways with a RANDOM DUDE. Maria opens her eyes --

*AND IF THE LIGHTS ARE ALL DOWN,
I'LL FOLLOW YOUR BUS DOWNTOWN...*

REAL TIME for just a moment -- as Maria notices KARI STARING AT HER across the room. Maria's disturbed. Kari smiles gently when DIMO PULLS Maria back to the dance floor --

*ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, I'M GONNA LOSE
YA', I'M GONNA TRICK YA', TRICK
YA', TRICK YA', TRICK YA'...*

- Rinny interrupts them with another shot.
- Dimo and Maria make out against a wall, while Rinny INSTAGRAMS them.
- Dimo feels Maria up.
- Maria and Dimo eat another pot brownie.
- Maria pushes Rinny's phone away from her face.
- Maria cranes her neck back as Dimo kisses her in a dark corner. Runs his hand down her leg. She's feeling it this time.

MARIA POV: The smoky room's a little SPINNY and colors BLEED TOGETHER. Closes her eyes a moment. Opens them as Dimo stops kissing her. He backs away into a crowd, jumping UP and DOWN.

Maria smiles as Dimo bounces around the party. But her expression grows worried as she loses him in the chaos.

She pans for him to no avail. Grows more concerned just as --

Dimo reemerges from the crowd.

RELIEF. Dimo moves behind Maria, dances against her. Kisses her neck again. She turns around to face him when she sees --

KARI -- STARING, JUST OVER DIMO'S SHOULDER.

*I'M GONNA GET YA, I'LL GET YA', GET
YA', GET YA', GET YA'!*

Maria FREAKS -- SHOVES AWAY FROM DIMO.

DIMO (CONT'D)
Whoa. What the fuck?

Dimo catches her terrified gaze and spins. Kari's disappeared into the crowd.

MARIA
That girl keeps messing with me.

DIMO
Who?

Maria scans the crowd, but Kari's gone.

MARIA
She was literally just right there.

Dimo shrugs drunkenly.

DIMO
Paranoid much?

Maria rubs her eyes, slips off. Dimo turns, eyes Rinny up.

KITCHEN

Maria leans against a counter, bottle of water in her hand.
She's too stoned. Too drunk.

Her eyes make their way over to a nearly empty TRAY of the
brownies on the counter next to her.

Her gaze tracks back to the living room where she sees Rinny
and Dimo DANCING TOGETHER. She averts her gaze.

HALLWAY - UPSTAIRS

Maria wanders through a dimly-lit hall. Dingy frat house
BEDROOMS line both sides.

She peers into a room, where four GUYS casually stand in a
circle. She cranes her neck for a better view -- realizing
they're watching a GUY and GIRL (20s) have sex on a bed.

And at the far end of the room --

KARI is watching, too. Smiling sadistically. THEN --

One BROSKI notices Maria. SHIT. She quickly walks away.

BROSKI (O.S.)
Hey, this entertainment ain't free!

She paces down the hall. Broski pops his head out of the
room. Follows her.

BROSKI (CONT'D)
You're a fuckin' dime. You should
join in!

Maria walks faster. Broski PURSUES. She finds a door with the light on. Pushes it in to a --

DINGY BATHROOM

Inside, JOHNSON (20s) stands, back to Maria, SORORITY GIRL (18) kneels on the floor in front of him. Sorority Girl lifts her head, wipes COKE from her nose. Johnson zips up his fly.

SORORITY GIRL

Want a turn?

MARIA

I have to...

Maria presses herself against the wall to make room as Sorority Girl walks past her, out the door. Johnson eye-fucks her as he leaves.

Maria SLAMS the door and LOCKS it. Takes a few moments to catch her FRANTIC BREATH.

She falls to the floor near the toilet. Lifts the lid.

She gazes at her reflection in the water, before shoving her fingers down her throat. Her body contracts and --

She VOMITS. BLACK. Heaves, then vomits more until it's CLEAR. She leans on the toilet seat a moment. Reaches into her purse. Pulls out her NEARLY EMPTY packet of gum when --

Her eyes go WIDE in horror --

MARIA (CONT'D)

No. No. Shit!

Her arms are covered in HIVES -- her peanut allergy.

Maria freaks. Tosses the cabinets. Eventually finds a half-full bottle of BENADRYL. CHUGS it. Gags and covers her mouth as she tries to keep the medicine down.

BANG-BANG. Someone pounds on the door.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Someone's in here.

BANG-BANG-BANG.

MARIA (CONT'D)

I need a minute!

Maria turns the sink on. Cups some water to drink. Splashes her face.

The SOUND OF A KEY in the door.

It OPENS. Maria turns around to --

Kari in the doorway. She closes the door behind her.

MARIA (CONT'D)

I'm done.

Maria tries to leave, but Kari blocks her path.

KARI

I'm not.

MARIA

I need to get going.

Maria tries to pass, but Kari steps in her way.

MARIA (CONT'D)

My friends are downstairs.

KARI

What about me?

Maria swallows hard. Tries to pass again, but this time, Kari nudges her.

MARIA

Move. I think we're leaving soon.

Kari backs Maria up against the bathtub. Maria's fear grows.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Please. It's not funny.

Kari SHOVES Maria, and she tumbles back into the tub.

MARIA (CONT'D)

What're you doing?!

Kari doesn't say anything. She LEERS at Maria's body. Then leans over her like she's a vampire.

Kari inches in closer, her body wedged between Maria's legs. Maria's TERRIFIED. Tries to PUSH Kari back.

But Kari grabs her arm. She's STRONGER. Presses Maria down against the tile.

Maria, terrified, turns her head into the corner of the tub.

MARIA (CONT'D)

What do you want?!

KARI

You.

MARIA

Please stop. Please. I just want to go.

Kari leans in toward her NECK. Maria THRASHES, but Kari keeps her PINNED.

Kari kisses Maria's neck as Maria strains to keep her face away. Kari makes her way up across her cheek, until, finally, she locks lips with Maria, who tries to break free.

MARIA (CONT'D)

HELP!

Kari hits the FAUCET -- RUNNING WATER blocks out her screams. Kari PINS Maria tighter in the tub.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Stop it. Stop. Please.

Then, Kari runs her fingers over Maria's lips. She shoves them in Maria's mouth. Removes them. WET with saliva.

And like Domo, Kari's hand makes its way between Maria's thighs. It disappears up her skirt. Maria squirms. UTTERLY TERRIFIED. But she's too messed up to get out of this.

KARI

You're a beautiful girl, Maria.

Maria WINCES. TWISTS and SCREAMS in terror. But it's barely audible over the FAUCET and BEATING MUSIC RISING and RISING.

KARI (CONT'D)

I just want to make sure you're beautiful everywhere.

MARIA'S EYES SLOWLY ROLL BACK AS SHE PASSES OUT --

INT. MARIA'S HOUSE - DAY - FLASHBACK

Continued from earlier. Scott in the doorway, WATCHING. He nudges the door SHUT behind him. Maria looks a little tense, like she might be in trouble. Scott slowly approaches --

SCOTT

Hey Maria, can we talk real quick?

MARIA

Okay.

He kneels in front of Maria. Pushes hair behind her ear.
Smiles at his daughter.

He looks back toward the door where his nervous gaze LINGERS...

INT. FRAT HOUSE - DAY - PRESENT

Camera tracks through the home:

- across the trashed living room, a few dudes dead asleep;
- through the kitchen, where empty liquor bottles adorn the counters, food scraps, broken glass strewn across the floor;
- up the dingy stairs;
- down the long hallway, doors ajar on either side;
- until we reach the bathroom. It's EMPTY.
- But as we push farther, we see FEET, in the tub.

Maria's curled up in the fetal position. She begins to move, then wakes in a panic -- *where is she?*

She scans around. Above her on the wall, someone's sharpied: DRUNK SLUT, an arrow pointing down toward her.

She clambers to her feet. Inspects her arms. There are NO HIVES. Checks her shirt, her belt -- everything is intact. But something's off. She looks down, where her skirt is WET. As is the floor beneath her.

She touches her skirt. Reluctantly pulls her hand toward her face and sniffs. Maria GAGS.

She pissed herself.

Maria climbs from the tub. Checks her phone. It's almost DEAD.

And it's 11:45 a.m.

INT. MARIA'S HOUSE - DAY - CONTINUOUS

THE FRONT DOOR --

SLAMS open. Maria runs in. Beelines for the bathroom.

We stay outside as the FAUCET RUNS. Water SPLASHES. World's fastest shower.

Andrea walks into frame. Glares at the bathroom door, then walks away.

Slow push on the bathroom door:

1 ... 2 ... 3 ...

THE SHOWER CUTS. TUMBLING from inside.

Maria, toweling dry, darts from the bathroom to her --

BEDROOM

She throws open drawers. Dresses herself in sweats, sifts through her closet for her pageant clothes.

Andrea enters her room. Maria ignores her.

ANDREA
Where were you?

MARIA
I don't want to talk.

Maria continues through her closet.

ANDREA
I was going to apologize.

MARIA
I'm sorry. I messed up.

ANDREA
I went back and forth, but I ultimately thought I should give you space. Wouldn't have mattered...

MARIA
I was going to come back. I was. But I ate something and --

ANDREA
And you vomited. Big surprise.

Maria won't even look over at her mom.

MARIA
Where are my clothes?

ANDREA
I put my whole life on hold for you.

MARIA

I didn't ask you to. Where are they?
Please. I need to go.

Maria searches through her closet. But the dress and swimsuit aren't there.

Finally, she turns to Andrea, who motions to the tote bag in the corner, dress hanging next to it. Andrea's already packed everything for her.

Maria stares daggers.

EXT. LSU UNION THEATER & HOTEL - DAY

Andrea's car pulls up outside the Union Theater & Hotel.

INT. ANDREA'S CAR - DAY

Andrea throws the car in park. Stares ahead as Maria quickly grabs her things.

ANDREA

I'll get a room.

Maria doesn't respond. She reaches for the door handle.

ANDREA (CONT'D)

Maria...

A BEAT as Maria waits for her mom, searching for words...

MARIA

I'm late.

Maria exits the car.

INT. LSU UNION THEATER & HOTEL - DAY

Maria paces into the bustling lobby to a check-in table.

MARIA

Maria Perez.

VOLUNTEER DALE (70s), scans a list of names. And fuck me,
this man is moving s l o w.

VOLUNTEER DALE

Sign in right on here.

Maria quickly scribbles on the sheet. Slides it to Dale, who looks up to take a gander. A rickety smile spans his face.

VOLUNTEER DALE (CONT'D)
Ballroom 3, belle bottom.

Maria eyes him, disgusted.

INT. LSU UNION THEATER & HOTEL - HALLWAY - DAY

Maria jogs down a hallway. She stops at a ballroom door, music coming from the other side. Drops her bag and looks for a place to hang her dress.

EMILY (O.S.)
Hey. Maria, right?

EMILY (16), a PA, approaches, pushing a rolling clothes rack.

EMILY (CONT'D)
Just hang it. I'll take it down.

Maria hangs her dress.

EMILY (CONT'D)
You know, I've followed you --

Maria's gone. The ballroom door swings shut.

INT. BALLROOM 3 - DAY

Maria stands inside the door. Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Born on the Bayou" is piped-in through a PA system.

A few dozen PAGEANT GIRLS mimic a CHOREOGRAPHER (40s, soccer mom) who dances to the song.

CHOREOGRAPHER
Good job, y'all. Turn. Now, wave.

Maria scans the group, all waving while dancing. Alex notices her but immediately looks away.

Finally, she finds Rinny, who mouths 'hey' to her but continues to dance.

The world keeps turning, with or without Maria. She has no control over it.

So she slips into the fray.

INT. LSU UNION THEATER & HOTEL - DRESSING ROOM - DAY

A sprawling purple and gold locker room. Rinny loads items into her locker, laughing as another GIRL shows her an Instagram story -- Rinny wasted -- from the party last night.

RINNY

Guess I don't feel as bad as I should.

Maria STEPS in, blocking the other girl, who scoffs.

RINNY (CONT'D)

Damn. You look rough.

MARIA

Why didn't you bring me home?

RINNY

Because you left...

MARIA

I woke up in a bathtub covered in my own urine.

Rinny isn't sure if she should laugh or be concerned.

RINNY

We thought you Ubered home.

MARIA

I went upstairs to use the bathroom.

RINNY

(realizing)

Oh, shit. Yeah, sorry about that.

Behind them, Emily delivers pageant dresses to other girl's lockers. Maria notices. Lowers her voice.

MARIA

That girl attacked me.

RINNY

What girl?

MARIA

Kari. The one I told you about. You saw her. She watched me the whole time we danced. Freaked me out.

RINNY

You probably got too stoned, dude. Everyone looks like they're staring.

MARIA

She did this to me, Rinny. She wants to sabotage me.

Rinny eyes Maria, confused.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Why won't you believe me? I'm not making it up. She put nuts in the brownies, too. I had hives all over my arms.

Rinny grabs Maria's arm. Regards it a moment. Looks fine. A concerned look creeps over Rinny's face.

RINNY

She's not even competing, Maria.

MARIA

That's the thing. *I think someone hired her.*

RINNY

Well, you look fine. And this bitch, I don't know who that is.

MARIA

How did you not see her?

RINNY

Maria. I was wasted --

EMILY

(interrupting)

Here's your dress. It's really pretty.

RINNY

Thanks.

Rinny steps in front of Maria to take the dress from Emily. She quickly hangs it in her locker, as if she doesn't want Maria to see it.

Maria tries to steal a glance at the dress as Rinny closes the locker. Maria pulls it open. Her eyes fill with sadness.

It's the RED DRESS, the one she wanted. The one that was purchased when she tried to rent. Maria's at a loss for words.

RINNY (CONT'D)

I didn't know you wanted it 'til it was too late.

MARIA

I thought you didn't care.

RINNY

I don't know. I mean... shit, I'm fucking tired of losing.

MARIA

This actually means something to me.

RINNY

It does to me, too. Look at you, Maria, you don't need some fancy dress. You don't need to work out three hours a day. That shit's extra.

Maria shakes her head, devastated. She doesn't believe it. Rinny points her toward a mirror.

RINNY (CONT'D)

Look at yourself.

Maria glances up at her reflection. All she sees is:

- BLOODSHOT EYES.
- LOOSE HAIR.
- CELLULITE.
- PINCHED FAT.

RINNY (CONT'D)

You're perfect.

Maria can't take it anymore. Her eyes well with tears. She STORMS out of the dressing room.

RINNY (CONT'D)

Maria!

Alex glances over.

ALEX

I told you... She's gone ape-shit.

RINNY

Fuck off, Alex.

Alex cowers. Rinny pulls her phone. Finds Dimo's number.

INT. BATHROOM - DAY

A bathroom stall door. Underneath, Maria's on her knees. We push under the stall door to find her wiping her mouth.

Her eyes are even more BLOODSHOT than before. Small vessels have BURST in her face. The RASH on her forehead is more pronounced because of the blood flow to her head.

Maria flushes the toilet. Then sits atop it. Her head falls in her hands, defeated. She pulls her packet of gum. Opens it, only ONE PIECE left. She pops it out when --

BZZZZZT. Her phone startles her. She drops the gum to the nasty floor.

MARIA

Shit.

She reaches for the gum, but thinks better of it. Instead, she pulls her phone out. Instagram notification: *You've been tagged in a story.* She opens the story.

Random VIDEO CLIPS from the party play. In them, Maria's wasted, making out with Dimo.

Stupid. She taps the screen faster to get through the numerous clips, now comprising other girls at the party.

Fuck these normal people living their normal fucking lives.

SUDDENLY: Her finger stamps the screen, PAUSING a clip.

In the BG, Rinny and Dimo are visible. Maria SCREENSHOTS the video. So she can ZOOM IN. Closer -- Rinny and Dimo. Dancing together. But that's not what she's concerned with --

Because right past them, seemingly with them, is someone else.

And that someone is BLURRY and GRAINY.

But she sure is BLONDE.

And looks an awful lot like Kari.

INT. LSU UNION THEATER & HOTEL - DAY

Maria storms down a hall. She throws open a door into the --

DRESSING ROOM

The pageant girls all eye her. She surveys the room for Rinny, but she's not there. Looks to Alex.

MARIA

Where's Rinny?

ALEX
Why would I know?

Maria steps toward Alex. Alex backs up, a little freaked.

ALEX (CONT'D)
She went to find Dimo.

Maria grits her teeth.

HALLWAY

Maria bounds down the hallway, searching for Rinny.

She finally comes to a railing where she overlooks the lobby.

Scans around. Spots Rinny with Dimo.

They're talking with someone else, but that person is obscured by a COLUMN.

Maria rounds the column.

And -- you guessed it -- she sees they're chatting with the one and only fearless saboteur in this narrative --

KARI.

TIME SLOWS.

Maria falls into panic. Her eyes scan across the room, finding a BATHROOM DOOR.

Then she tracks back to Kari and Rinny, chatting.

Kari looks concerned. Maybe even sad. So does Dimo.

Rinny shifts her gaze. Sees Maria looking down at them. Rinny taps Dimo.

Maria glares. Filled with anger and hate. She starts toward the stairs. A slow jog, then she runs.

THEATER LOBBY

Maria pushes through groups of STUDENTS crossing the lobby until she finds Rinny and Dimo.

And they're now alone. Kari's walked off. Dimo plays it cool:

DIMO
Hey, hey. What's going on?

MARIA
Are you two sleeping together or
something?

A few folks nearby look over.

DIMO
No?

RINNY
Maria, what are you talking about?

MARIA
You're always talking behind my back.
I saw you dance with him last night.
Why else would you do this to me?

RINNY
Do what?!

Dimo has no idea what's going on. Looks to Rinny.

Maria scoffs at their denials. Stares daggers into Dimo.

MARIA
You fucking messed with my car, huh?
(mocking Dimo:)
*It's beyond my mechanical
capabilities.*

Maria turns to Rinny. Raises her voice:

MARIA (CONT'D)
And you hired that fucking bitch!

RINNY
Dude. Stop. Please. Listen --

MARIA
She poisoned my drinks.

Rinny eyes her friend, trying to figure out what's wrong.

MARIA (CONT'D)
Last night, Rinny. She fucking
raped me.

Suddenly, Maria's aware of a strange silence in the room.
Everyone is watching.

DIMO
What are you talking about?

Tears form in Rinny's eyes.

RINNY

Who did that to you, Maria?

Maria pulls her phone. Gives it to Rinny. Rinny and Dimo look.

MARIA

In the back.

Both Dimo and Rinny's gazes spell confusion and concern.

DIMO

Babe. I don't know who that is.

RINNY

That's just some rando. I think she's in my lab.

MARIA

You're full of shit. Her name's Kari.

Rinny pulls her own phone. Shows a MUCH CLEARER photo from the same area that night. The blonde girl is in it -- it's certainly a different girl.

MARIA (CONT'D)

No. No. You were just with her.

RINNY

What the fuck are you talking about?

MARIA

She was just here. Where is she?!

Maria searches the room. Folks SIDE-EYE her uncomfortably.

RINNY

Maria...

Maria zones out, pans through the crowd, dead set on finding this girl.

RINNY (CONT'D)

Maria, look at me... MARIA!

Rinny YANKS her back into it.

RINNY (CONT'D)

We were just talking to your mom.

Maria Perez -- her world's turned UPSIDE DOWN.

INT. LSU UNION THEATER & HOTEL - DAY

BUMP-BUMP. BUMP-BUMP. Heartbeat POUNDS. Frantic BREATHS.

Maria staggers down the hall in a full-on panic attack.

MARIA POV: Her vision is heightened, super focused. Everyone around her seems to look at her in a threatening way. She sees a bathroom door.

She throws it open and heads in.

BATHROOM

Maria beelines for a stall. She falls to her knees on the floor. Shoves her fingers to the back of her throat. Going to relieve herself of this shitty feeling when --

She hears RETCHING.

Maria halts, saliva dripping from her fingers. Someone VOMITS. Then a toilet FLUSHES. Someone LEAVES a stall.

Maria wipes her mouth. Hears shoes PADDING across the floor.

A SINK RUNS. Hands being washed.

Maria curiously peers through the cracks in the stall at the person in the bathroom.

It's a girl with blonde hair. Maria shifts her gaze to the bathroom mirror. Glimpses KARI.

MARIA

Hey!

Maria throws the stall door open.

But Kari's gone. The bathroom door swings shut.

Maria pursues.

HALLWAY

Maria paces out into the hallway. BYSTANDERS pass. She glances up and down the hall. Searching.

Old GUYS. Young GIRLS. PA's. KARI --

Stepping into an elevator.

Maria runs toward the elevator.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Hold it!

But no one hears her. The door closes.

LOUDERSPEAKER (V.O.)

All pageant contestants must be
stage-ready in 10 minutes.

The voice ends, and the opening guitar lick to BLONDIE'S "RIP
HER TO SHREDS" rises over the loudspeaker.

Maria finds a stairwell door. Opens it.

STAIRWELL

Maria bounds up the stairs.

FLOOR 1

She runs through the door. Looks at the elevator. It didn't
open. She heads back into the stairwell.

FLOOR 2

She opens the door, but the elevator keeps going up.

FLOOR 3

She SMASHES the door open. The elevator is closing.

Kari's somewhere on the floor.

And this isn't just any Best Western third floor. It might as
well be a maze, with hallways going every direction.

Maria jogs down a wing, searching. No one's there.

She keeps moving ahead.

AT THE END OF THE HALL -- Kari turns.

MARIA

Hey! Kari! Stop!

Maria tears after. She turns the corner. No one in sight.

She slowly walks, cautiously looking into inlets in the hall
in case Kari's hiding behind one.

But --

NO KARI.

FOOTSTEPS behind her. Maria turns around.

MARIA (CONT'D)

HEY!

Down the hall, she sees Kari, her back turned. She's unlocking a door then she enters a room.

CLICK. The door shuts.

Maria runs as hard as she can.

Comes to the door. 337.

She almost knocks but thinks better of it.

Looks back and forth both ways. This is a bad idea. But at this point, what other choice does she have?

She grabs the door handle. And...

It's UNLOCKED. She OPENS the door.

HOTEL ROOM

Maria enters. The door closes behind her, killing the music in the hall.

Light spills from the bathroom. Maria pokes her head inside. It's empty.

She hears CLINKING in the main room. Approaching FOOTSTEPS.

SHE'S CAUGHT. Maria goes tense with fright. She could hide, but that won't do any good.

Instead, she balls her shaking fists. Deep breath.

A SHADOW approaches. *Here we go.*

Maria quickly turns to fight but -- HER EYES GO WIDE --

Now, just imagine the piercing scream of a jet engine, stripping the thin air from deep in your lungs because it's worse than our hero imagined --

ANDREA.

Holding a vodka-filled rocks glass, stands there. Her mother, the architect of this conspiracy.

And Maria looks at Andrea like she's Harvey Weinstein.

ANDREA

Maria. What -- why are you here?

Maria's so mindfucked she can barely even speak. Looks like she's going to pass out. Andrea grabs her.

MARIA

It was you.

Maria pushes Andrea off.

ANDREA

What?

MARIA

You did this to me.

ANDREA

What are you talking about, Maria?

MARIA

The car. The poison.

(realizing:)

You couldn't stand to see me win.

ANDREA

Sit down. You're having a panic attack.

MARIA

I thought it was my friends.

Maria gives the room a one-over.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Where is she?

ANDREA

Who? Maria, who?

MARIA

Kari! Where the fuck is she?

That name makes Andrea DISTURBED.

MARIA (CONT'D)

WHERE!?

Maria rips curtains from the wall, looking behind them.

ANDREA

Maria. Stop. MARIA!

Andrea touches her locket, soothing herself.

MARIA

I don't care anymore. I'll fucking
kill her. WHERE. IS. SHE?!

ANDREA

It's just me.

MARIA

Bullshit. You're lying! I followed
her here, mom.

Maria RIPS the skirt from the bed, looking underneath. TOSSES
a chair from the corner of the room to see behind it. No
one's there.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Where is she, Andrea?!

Andrea shakes her head, terrified. Maria's eyes go to a closet.
She's found her.

ANDREA

Maria. There's no one in there.

Maria grabs the door handle. Turns it. THROWS THE DOOR OPEN.

Inside, there is NO KARI. Just clothes.

Maria turns back toward her mom.

MARIA

Where is she?

ANDREA

There's no one here.

MARIA

Just tell me, mom. Please.

ANDREA

There is no Kari.

Maria shakes her head. Steps toward her mom.

MARIA

I saw her.

ANDREA

She's not fucking real, Maria.

Maria glares. Unsure of what her mother is saying.

MARIA

How can you say that? She's been to our house.

Andrea shakes, trying to speak.

ANDREA

There was never a Kari. When you were little you... you made her up. You were so scared of her.

MARIA

Bull shit.

ANDREA

She's just in your head. You have to remember. I didn't tell you because I thought it would be too much. I thought it would pass.

MARIA

No. You're a drunk fucking liar. You're jealous.

ANDREA

Your dad used to say he'd keep her away... Oh, Maria...

Andrea chokes back a sob, pulls her daughter into a consoling embrace. Maria, tearing up, writhes to get out, but Andrea doesn't allow her.

ANDREA (CONT'D)

Look at yourself.

Andrea forces Maria to face a huge mirror. Tears stream down Maria's face though she doesn't want to cry.

ANDREA (CONT'D)

There's nothing wrong with you.

Maria looks. And for the first time, we see her in a mirror from a different perspective -- as a whole, instead of focusing on flaws.

And she's damn near *perfect*. What we saw before were just minor blemishes on an otherwise flawless being.

But Maria can't accept this. Not yet.

MARIA

No. Just stop lying.

Maria continues to cry. Doesn't want to believe it but:

ANDREA

Your friends came to me. They're so worried about you.

CONFIRMATION. Andrea WAS with Rinny and Dimo minutes ago. Maria swallows hard. Looks back at herself in the mirror.

Now, her rash is *pronounced, fat pinched*. Her FLAWS. She blinks. They're GONE again.

MARIA

What's happening to me?

Andrea's eyes well.

ANDREA

I wish I could change it.

Maria stares into her reflection. Even the rash on her forehead seems nonexistent. This is too much. She pushes her mom off. Andrea begins to CRY as Maria backs out of the room --

HALLWAY

Maria leans on a wall, trying to find her bearings. She catches a glance at herself in a mirror again.

KARI'S THERE, grinning, next to her.

KARI

Big girls don't cry.

Maria turns to CLOCK her in the face. Punches through NOTHING.

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

All contestants must be stage-ready in five minutes.

MARIA

Shit.

Maria takes off down the hall. She MASHES the elevator button. It opens, and she enters.

Maria presses herself against the back of the elevator, waiting for the door to close. It begins to. At the last second, Kari SLIPS in.

KARI

You're still crying.

MARIA

Fuck you.

KARI
I already did.

MARIA
You're not real.

KARI
To you I am. Don't you remember how
we used to play?

The ELEVATOR stops. Opens. DIMO stands in the door. He quickly steps on. Stands next to Kari, who he doesn't see.

DIMO
Jesus Christ. I've been all over
this place. Are you okay?

MARIA
No.

DIMO
I can get you help.

Maria backs away from Dimo.

Kari CUPS Dimo's crotch. Fondles it. Maria's perturbed as Dimo has no idea. He looks at Maria like she's crazy.

DIMO (CONT'D)
Maria. Please.

Maria shakes her head. The elevator DINGS. Dimo hits the emergency stop. The doors don't open.

MARIA
Dimo. Let me out.

DIMO
I just want to help you.

Maria looks at Dimo. There's nothing he can do. Kari smirks.

DIMO (CONT'D)
Let me help you.

MARIA
You can't. Get out of my way.

KARI
You should let him fuck the crazy
out of you.

MARIA
Move.

Dimo doesn't. Grabs her by the shoulders.

DIMO

Please.

Maria SHOVES him into the corner. Hits the STOP button again.

The elevator opens. She slips past into the --

LOBBY

Maria looks back at Dimo, alone, as the elevator doors close.

She pans around. Kari didn't follow. Maria takes a deep, calming breath then darts for the backstage locker room.

INT. BACKSTAGE/LOCKER ROOM - NIGHT

We push past a row of girls, including Rinny, Alex, and the ones we've seen before. They're all standing in a service hall as Emily and other PA's pin numbers on their dresses.

We pass the girls into the --

LOCKER ROOM

Where Maria frantically squeezes into her opening number dress, a tight prom-esque garment. She manages to zip up the dress in the back.

She runs to a sink and quickly styles her hair. Opens her makeup bag when --

EMILY (O.S.)

One minute!

Maria looks at herself in the mirror. Puffy eyes from crying. She splashes water on her face then towels herself dry.

Reaches for her makeup bag. Hesitates. Grabs it. Then she tosses it in the trash. Fuck it.

She turns to leave -- Kari's standing right in front of her.

KARI

Bold choice. Don't fuck it up.

Maria ignores her. Walks STRAIGHT THROUGH HER and into the --

HALLWAY

EMILY

On stage. Let's go!

Where girls are heading toward the stage.

EMILY (CONT'D)
Maria. Hang on.

Emily stops her. Pins a number on her chest -- 19.

EMILY (CONT'D)
Good luck.

Maria nods. Heads onto --

THE STAGE

The girls take their positions. Ahead of them, a giant PURPLE CURTAIN blocks them from the audience. Beyond the curtain, the LSU BAND plays the "Star Spangled Banner."

Maria takes her place. Right next to Rinny.

Rinny side-eyes her. Maria stares forward, in her own world.

The music FADES.

ANNOUNCER (O.S.)
I want to welcome y'all again to the
2021 Miss LSU-USA pageant. All of
these women are extraordinary, but
only one will be crowned tonight.
Are you ready?

The crowd CHEERS.

ANNOUNCER (O.S.) (CONT'D)
I now present to you, your 2021 Miss
LSU-USA contestants.

The curtain LIFTS. A few hundred AUDIENCE MEMBERS cheer, while an ANNOUNCER (tuxedo, 60s, fake hair, porcelain smile) stands with a mic.

Suddenly, the twangy guitar intro to "Born on the Bayou" kicks onto the PA. The girls TAP their feet in unison. John Fogerty's raspy voice chimes in. The girls start dancing.

*NOW WHEN I WAS JUST A LITTLE BOY,
STANDIN' TO MY DADDY'S KNEE,
MY POPPA SAID SON DON'T LET THE MAN
GET YOU DO WHAT HE DONE TO ME.*

Maria sways her hair back and forth. Far looser than the other girls, but there's something natural about it. Something you can't quite grasp. Something only someone with nothing left to lose could have.

The girls fan across the front of the stage, each taking a turn at the mic, introducing themselves:

PAGEANT GIRL

Hoping my Phi Mu ladybugs bring me
all the love tonight, I'm a junior
from Houma with a heart for NOLA.
Contestant number one, I'm Miss Emma
Jenkinson.

The rest of the girls continue with similar quips.

But Maria ain't paying attention. No 'mam. She's lost in the background dance. Looks up into the brilliant stage lights, and some kind of twisty-turny TIME-LAPSE happens --

ANNOUNCER

Maria... you're up.

Maria snaps out of her trance. Struts to the mic.

MARIA

Hi, y'all. I'm... contestant 19.
Maria Perez. I was the runner up
last year. And, uh --

She's losing it. Not rehearsed. She laughs uncomfortably. Clearly, she forgot her intro. In the crowd, she notices ANDREA in a seat, nervously chewing her locket.

MARIA (CONT'D)

(sarcastic)

And I was born on the bayou.

The crowd laughs. Claps. SAVE. The curtain falls as Maria walks off stage --

Right into a BLACK HALLWAY --

INT. MARIA'S HOUSE - DAY - FLASHBACK - CONTINUED

Scott's eyes track from the bathroom door, back to Maria. His lip quivers as he struggles to find words. Eyes her little body. Maria isn't sure what to do.

SCOTT

It's okay.

Maria nods.

SCOTT (CONT'D)

I want to talk about some things
with you. But you have to promise me
you won't tell mom. Okay?

Maria looks scared.

YOUNG ANDREA (O.S.)

Thought you were leaving.

Scott turns to Andrea in the doorway. Then back to Maria. A
look of disappointment has washed across his face.

SCOTT

I love you. I'll see you in the
morning.

Scott unties Maria's shirt so it covers her stomach. He
kisses her head, then walks toward Andrea, eying him
suspiciously. He exits the room.

YOUNG ANDREA

(to Maria)

Start your bath.

Andrea closes the door. Maria listens as her parents ARGUE
beyond the door.

She crosses to the tub. Begins to undress -- slips her socks
off, her shorts, lifts her shirt when she stops --

A LONG MOMENT as Maria stares at the bubbly water. Her eyes
track across the tub to a razor, soap, shampoo, lotions...

Maria leaves her shirt and underwear on, then steps into the
water. She slides under the surface to drown the arguing --

ONE

TWO

A SOUND -- a door opening.

Maria opens her eyes underwater. Winces. She comes up
quickly. Wipes water from her face. Looks around --

The door's OPEN, but there's no one in the bathroom.

Maria turns her attention to the steamy reflection in a
vanity mirror on the side of the tub. She uses her finger to
write in the foggy glass -- BELLA.

Suddenly, water sloshing in the bath makes her TENSE UP.

WOMAN'S VOICE (O.C.)
Is it warm enough?

And it's a voice we recognize. Little Maria, terrified, slowly skirts her eyes across the tub to --

KARI, like we've seen her many times before, her naked body concealed by bubbles, sitting in the bath with Maria.

INT. LSU UNION THEATER & HOTEL - NIGHT - PRESENT

THE SWIMSUIT COMPETITION.

Maria's back to the crowd, a white sash around her waist. Behind her, Alex struts off the stage.

ANNOUNCER
Contestant 19, Maria Perez.

Maria strides across the stage without care.

ANNOUNCER (CONT'D)
Maria is a 19-year-old biology and psychology double-major from Baton Rouge. She's 5'7, has brown hair and hazel eyes. Her hobbies include sports, exercise, hanging with friends, and spending time with her mom. When she graduates, she plans to help girls with eating disorders.

Maria TRIPS. A collective crowd GASP. Maria checks her high-heel. It snapped. SHIT.

ANNOUNCER (CONT'D)
Everything okay, Maria?

Maria looks around. On the side of the stage, Kari sensually sucks her fingers then pretends to masturbate.

Maria nods 'yes.' Pulls the heel off, then the other. Tosses them aside. Goes right back into her strut.

The crowd CHEERS.

ANNOUNCER (CONT'D)
And with that, Miss Maria Perez.

BACKSTAGE

Maria walks down the hall toward the dressing room. Kari watches her, laughing to herself.

Maria ignores her.

ANNOUNCER (O.S.) (CONT'D)
The finalists will return in their
evening gowns to answer their final
questions.

Maria turns into the --

DRESSING ROOM

It's CHAOTIC. Some girls CRY. Others LAUGH. But they all
frantically change clothes and file out.

Maria walks straight to her locker. Rinny approaches.

RINNY
Dude. Great save out there.

Maria tosses her heels into her locker.

RINNY (CONT'D)
(giddy)
We're frickin' *finalists* together.

MARIA
(frustrated)
Yep.

RINNY
Look, I want you to know, whatever
happens, whatever the fuck you think
I did, I'm still your best friend. No
matter what. I'll be there for you.

Maria just nods. Rinny touches her shoulder lovingly, leaves
the locker room.

Maria looks around. She's alone. Outside, she can hear the
pageant gearing back up.

She opens her locker. Her mother's BLACK DRESS isn't hanging.
Huh? She sifts through her locker, belongings falling around
her. Still NOTHING.

MARIA
What the fuck?

Maria throws garments from a dress rack. It's NOT THERE. She
opens other girls' lockers, searching for the dress. NOTHING.
She turns in circles. Panic rising...

She sees her TOTE BAG on the floor, near her locker. Bolts to
it. Grabs it. Yanks it open. NO DRESS.

Someone did it. Stole her gown. Maria eyes the broken heel on the floor -- *did someone mess with that, too?* She shakes with rage... when MOVEMENT in her periphery draws her eyes --

To a door across the room CLICKING SHUT. She cautiously paces to it. Grabs the handle, then pulls it open to a --

SINGLE-PERSON BATHROOM

Where a full-length mirror runs up the wall straight ahead.

And in front of that mirror is KARI. IN ANDREA'S DRESS.

Maria DROPS the tote bag to the floor, contents spilling, including the 2020 PAGEANT PHOTO.

KARI
It's beautiful.

Maria squeezes her eyes closed. Takes a deep breath to calm herself. To rid herself of this vision. She opens them, noticing the 2020 PHOTO on the floor and --

Kari IS in the background of it.

Uh oh. She looks up and --

KARI IS STILL STANDING THERE.

KARI (CONT'D)
It's going to be perfect on you.
You'll be so beautiful.

Kari takes a step toward her. Maria steps back. Unsure of what to do.

Then Kari steps closer. Maria moves back again. She clocks TEARS running down Kari's face.

KARI (CONT'D)
I'm sorry, Maria. For everything I
did to you.

Maria isn't sure what to make of this.

MARIA
Go away.

KARI
I thought what I did was right. My mother never allowed me to be who I wanted. So I thought you could be that. I tried so hard. I shouldn't have tried to control you...

MARIA
Leave me alone.

Kari steps closer. Now, they're face to face. Kari cries.
Touches Maria's arm, who instinctively knocks her away.

KARI
You were my baby.

MARIA
Go away. Get out of my life.

KARI
I didn't know I'd hurt you. You have
to know that. I never wanted to.

MARIA
GO AWAY!

KARI
I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

Kari reaches out for Maria when --

WHAM. Maria smashes Kari's head against the tile wall. Blood
runs from a gash on her temple. She crumples to the ground.

KARI (CONT'D)
You were always perfect, Bellita.

MARIA
SHUT UP.

Maria falls on top of her, reaching for her neck. Kari
struggles to knock her away, but Maria overpowers her,
CLUTCHES Kari's throat, and SQUEEZES.

Kari GAGS. Her face growing RED. Veins BULGING from her
forehead. Eyes filling with BLOOD.

Maria SCREAMS -- BASHES Kari's head against the toilet.
AGAIN. Kari flails. A THIRD TIME.

Mari grasps her neck TIGHTER and TIGHTER. Kari grabs Maria's
arms. SQUEEZES for her to stop --

But after a moment, Kari's grip goes LIMP.

Maria releases. Stands up. Eyes Kari, dead on the ground.

Maria turns around. Closes her eyes. Another deep breath.
Wipes sweat from her brow. Turns back.

And Kari's STILL THERE.

Fuck. Me. She killed someone.

Maria kneels down. Grabs Kari's wrist. Feels for a pulse.
There is none. Maria begins to panic.

EMILY (O.S.)

Maria. You got thirty seconds!

MARIA

Okay! Shit. Shit.

Maria holds Kari's face in her hands. Peers into her lifeless eyes a moment. Sucks back tears. What has she done?

EMILY (O.S.)

Do you need help?

MARIA

No! I'm coming.

(sotto)

Fuck.

Maria turns the body over. Unzips the dress, strips it off.

She quickly pulls the dress on. Glances at herself in the mirror --

And in the reflection, she can see the body, turned away. Her gaze LINGERS. Then, she begins to sob. But the crying turns into laughter. Relief.

She wipes tears from her eyes. The horror is over.

She walks out.

And CAMERA lingers... Then FLOATS back toward the body, face first on the floor. There's a CHAIN around its neck, twisted.

And attached to it, ANDREA'S LOCKET.

HALLWAY

Maria walks through backstage, composing herself.

ANNOUNCER (O.S.)

And our final contestant, Miss Maria
Perez.

As he finishes her name, Maria glides onto the --

STAGE

She pauses in the bright lights, then heads toward the mic.
Waves at the crowd.

MARIA

Thank you.

Maria squints, scanning the crowd. The Announcer pulls a question out of a fish bowl. Unfolds it.

ANNOUNCER

Ah. Tough one. Miss Perez. For your question tonight, if you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?

Maria's eyes land on the seat her mom was in earlier. IT'S EMPTY. Maria dries her remaining tears. She's done crying.

MARIA

If I could change one thing about myself, uh... yeah, I wouldn't change anything.

Crowd murmurs -- not where they thought this was going.

MARIA (CONT'D)

I've spent my whole life running from who I am. What's happened to me. So I distracted myself from it all. I never opened up to anyone. Not even to my friends.

DRESSING ROOM

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

I never felt like I could be in control. But I was. I was the whole time.

Emily enters the dressing room. Notices FEET through the open bathroom door. She paces over. Her eyes go wide in horror.

STAGE

MARIA (CONT'D)

Because I'm not defined by what's happened to me. Only the person I am and always have been. And I can't change that. Thank you.

The crowd ROARS with applause at the unconventional answer.

HALLWAY

Two COPS follow Emily down the backstage hallway.

STAGE - MINUTES LATER

Maria, Rinny, Alex, and CONTESTANT 14 stand on stage. The Announcer next to them.

ANNOUNCER

You girls should all be so proud of yourselves. Are y'all ready?

The crowd CHEERS.

ANNOUNCER (CONT'D)

Your Miss LSU-USA third runner up is contest number 14. Miss Melissa Young.

WHOOOS from the crowd. Melissa crosses the stage. TWO GIRLS give her a bouquet of flowers and a gift basket. She exits.

ANNOUNCER (CONT'D)

Lovely. Your second runner up is contestant no. 7. Alexandra Cassara.

Everyone claps. Maria grits her teeth with anxiety. Alex walks down the stage and repeats the same routine as Contestant 14.

IN THE CROWD, the two Cops pace toward the stage.

Now, it's just Maria and Rinny. They turn to each other. They hold hands. Best friends.

And we're back at the beginning -- in a way. They both shake with anticipation.

One girl possibly getting what she's never achieved, one with a profound freedom she just realizing.

ANNOUNCER (CONT'D)

Are y'all ready?! Your runner up for Miss LSU-USA!

A LONG SILENCE. Maria scans across the crowd -- *Andrea still isn't there.*

THE COPS STEP UP ONTO THE SIDE OF THE STAGE.

In the back corner of the theater, near the door, Maria notices FUCKING KARI.

Kari glares, eyes burning at Maria. But instead of unsettling her, Maria just smiles back.

ANNOUNCER (CONT'D)

Miss Maria Perez! And Miss LSU-USA, Corinne Cochran!

Rinny FREAKS. Jumping up and down. Tears stream from her eyes as the crowd applauds. Maria -- seemingly content -- grabs Rinny. Hugs her tight. They release.

The girls crown Rinny then lay a RUNNER UP sash over Maria's shoulder -- all the while her eyes stay locked on the audience.

Suddenly, the cheering crowd goes SILENT as the Cops enter the stage -- Maria still doesn't notice. The girls back away, confused. Rinny's demeanor crumbles with worry as --

The cops grab Maria, push her arms behind her back and arrest her. Maria's still not paying attention --

She's zeroed-in on the far door, SWINGING CLOSED.

Kari has left the building.

The audience stares, unsettled, confused. But Maria's got a smile. One you can't wipe off her face. One that'll last.

INT. MARIA'S HOUSE - DAY - FLASHBACK

Continued from the last flashback. Kari sits directly across from an anxious Maria in the bathtub. They stare a LONG BEAT.

KARI
Come here.

Maria doesn't move. Kari playfully scoffs.

KARI (CONT'D)
I'm not going to hurt you, silly.

Kari inches toward her, backing a terrified Maria to the corner of the tub. Kari grins. Leans over her. Bubbles form a futile barrier between them.

KARI (CONT'D)
You're such a beautiful little girl.
Like I was.

Maria squirms, trying to get comfortable. She tenses as Kari moves closer. Kari runs a hand across her face to calm her.

KARI (CONT'D)
Why are you wearing your clothes?

Maria shrugs. Kari gazes into Maria's terrified eyes.

KARI (CONT'D)
That's not how you take a bath.

Kari's hand dips below the water. Maria shakes in fear. Kari pulls Maria's soaked underwear to the side of the tub.

For a moment, they just eye each other. Kari offers a disarming smile.

Then she reaches back between Maria's legs. Maria winces, turns her head, closing her eyes.

KARI (CONT'D)

It's okay, my beautiful bellita.

We look past Maria into the mirror surrounding the tub.

It's foggy, but in the word she wrote -- BELLA -- we can see clearly that there is no Kari...

ANDREA, her mother, is in the tub with her.

ANDREA

I just want to make sure you're beautiful everywhere.

INT. POLICE STATION - NIGHT - PRESENT

Through a two-way mirror, we see Maria with Det. Sherr in an interrogation room.

Outside the room, a FEMALE COP tags Maria's items. Picks up a picture -- the 2020 pageant photo we've seen with Kari.

In the photo background, there's NO KARI -- just Andrea. Female Cop looks up to Sherr exiting the room.

FEMALE COP

Booking her?

DET. SHERR

Soon. Get her whatever she wants.

IN THE INTERROGATION ROOM, LATER

Maria's alone at the table, greasy MCDONALD'S WRAPPERS and BOXES in front of her. All EMPTY. She's eaten a lot.

She sits, staring at herself in a two-way mirror. A calm air about her. The DOOR OPENS. Det. Sherr enters. Nods to Maria.

DET. SHERR (CONT'D)

Anything...

MARIA

Just a bathroom.

Sherr motions for her to follow.

HALLWAY

Sherr walks down the hall behind Maria.

DET. SHERR

On your left. It doesn't lock.

Maria nods. Enters a --

BATHROOM

The door closes behind her. Maria just stands there. A while. She stares at the toilet. Unmoving.

She grits her teeth. Takes a deep breath.

She steps to the sink. Turns the faucet, like she's preparing to cover the sound of her purging. Except this time...

She washes her hands. Splashes cool water on her face. There's a KNOCK.

DET. SHERR (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Everything good in there?

Maria towels her face dry. Looks into the mirror.

MARIA

Yeah.

Somewhere, Blondie's "MARIA" begins to play. Maybe in an office. Maybe in Maria's head. Who cares?

Because she gazes into her own eyes, studies her figure, the second-place sash draped across her body.

She's flawed. But no more than anyone else. She can't control it. And it doesn't seem to bother her. Not anymore. And it may never again.

And in that acceptance, she's found perfection.

MARIA (CONT'D)

I'm okay.

As the song SWELLS into its chorus, we --

CUT TO BLACK.