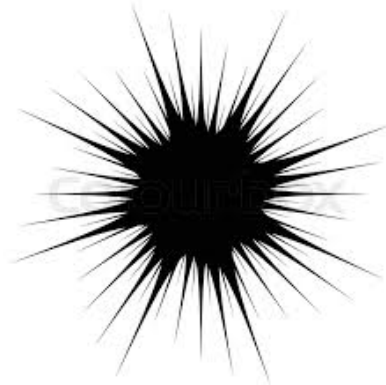


MONSTER

CHAPTER 9: PRE-EXISTING CONDITION

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INT. THORNHILL HOUSE, BEDROOM - NIGHT

A clock blazes **4:38 AM**. Piercing red digits showdown against:

BEN THORNHILL. EYES wide. Livid. Twisting in bed. *Destroying tomorrow. Again.* Ben's 40, a family man with a handsome face he wished people would stop underestimating.

He turns to see his wife, ELLE -- her beautiful naked back floating with each breath. Reaches out to touch her but a burning PAIN rips up through his arm. *WTF?!!*

INT. THORNHILL HOUSE, BATHROOM - MOMENTS LATER

LIGHTS snap on exposing: A DARK LESION on his inner forearm. About 3" round. Puckered scabby skin. Hot to the touch. *Weird. Unsettling.* As his fingers graze the scab, that pain rips through his arm--

BEN
Motherfuuuuuuuu--

EXT. THORNHILL BACKYARD - DAWN

--uuuuck! Ben works out with mid-life crises determination: Sit-ups. Pull-ups. *Eat-shit gravity.*

EXT. L.A. RIVER, JOGGING PATH - DAWN

Outdated House music propels Ben as he jogs along the river. He sees a WOMAN in green workout pants -- *aka Hot Pants* his jogging crush -- heading towards him. Picks up the pace...

As she closes in Ben rocks the familial jogger nod *hello--*

She storms past, paying him no attention. *Whatever.* He runs on, splits off onto--

EXT. RESIDENTIAL STREETS - NIGHT

--where a GREY DOG lies splayed out on the road. Ben takes off his headphones, sees she's got a wounded leg. MOANS painfully. He stares at the broken animal, as--

REGGIE (O.S.)
She yours?

A concerned resident, REGGIE DAYSON (40s) arrives to help...

BEN

No -- I just found her here.

REGGIE

I heard her cry but didn't see the
bastard's car. Poor thing...

(then, sees)

No tags. Think she's a stray?

Reggie crouches down, examines the suffering Terrier.

BEN

Looks like it. I see lots of them
down by the river. I can call a
shelter.

Or? The men both share that loaded look.

REGGIE

...I'll take her. Just moved in
down the street. Could use a local
friend.

BEN

That's kind of you. ...I'm Ben.

REGGIE

Reggie. Nice to meet you, Ben.

Ben helps Reggie scoop her up -- then watches, impressed, as
the man cradles the suffering animal to safety.

INT. THORNHILL HOUSE, KITCHEN - MORNING

Ben -- *all focus* -- measures a tablespoon of maple syrup over
yogurt. Next: 1/4 cup of flax seeds as-- TREVOR (6, lanky)
and CHELSEA (8, uncomfortably overweight) explode in, break
his focus--

TREVOR/CHELSEA

HAAAAPPPPYYY BIRTHDAAAAAAY DADDY!!

They wrap him in hugs, handing over adorable homemade
birthday cards as--

ELLE (O.S.)

Happy 40th. ...old man.

Elle (38) saunters in and kisses her husband -- *still loves
the way this man smells*. Elle's a force: A compassionate and
tenacious spirit determined to be heard in this world and,
when the time's right, celebrated with abandon.

BEN
Thanks, babe. Hey, are we out of
blueberries?

ELLE
Lemme make you waffles. Come on --
it's your birthday!
(off his *no way* look)
Chelsea ate your blueberries, don't
look at *me* like that...

Ben buries this infuriating feeling as Chelsea lumbers over
and hands him a small wrapped gift.

BEN
For me? No! You shouldn't have...

CHELSEA
Mommy got it. But it's from all of
us.

BEN
(to the kids)
Is it a puppy?

ELLE
You'd never let us have a puppy.

BEN
We got enough mouths to feed in
this house as it is...

TREVOR
It's a watch!

CHELSEA
TREVOR! Let him open it first!

Ben unwraps the gift to find: a vintage '40s era Gold Rolex
Optimist. He's FLOORED -- recognizes it immediately.

ELLE
Your mom found it about a month
ago. I wanted it to be a surprise.

BEN
(touched, shows the kids)
This was your grandfather's, he
loved this watch--

Ben pulls a faded PICTURE of his parents from off the fridge.
His father -- A Caucasian man, clad in a military uniform,
wears the watch -- his arm wrapped around Ben's mom -- a
petite and attractive African American woman.

BEN (CONT'D)

He traveled the world with this watch, refused to take it off wherever he went. Even got his initials engraved in it...

CHELSEA

Same as yours, Daddy. B.T.

BEN

(emotional)

It's perfect. Thank you, Elle.

He kisses his wife -- straps on the watch. And as reality hits back -- unwittingly scratches his forearm.

BEN (CONT'D)

Forty. Jesus. I can't believe it.

(big breath in)

Here we go--

INT. JUDGE'S CHAMBERS - DAY

Mediation. Ben's client, MRS. GOMEZ (50s, gentle) and his clerk ASHLEY (20s, sharp) sit beside the OPPOSING COUNCIL and defendant WALTER SMYTHE (45, a meek weasel). A JUDGE listens:

BEN

We're not just talking about financial restitution. We're talking about racial discrimination, civil rights--

OPPOSING COUNCIL

Civil rights? Uh, let's start with contract violation. Mrs. Gomez didn't show up for work--

BEN

Because she was being *harassed*.

OPPOSING COUNCIL

--that's legitimate grounds for dismissal, your Honor. Not a payout to a disgruntled worker.

BEN

(reads off a doc)

"Stick to the tub and keep your spic hands off my baby..." That's just one of Mr. Smythe's deplorable statements we have, on tape, directed at my client.

(MORE)

BEN (CONT'D)
 (lets that sink in...)
 Mrs. Gomez, a loyal hardworking
 housekeeper, hired by Mr. Smythe's
 wife no less, wasn't just
 disgruntled, she was bullied and
 abused. And my client, a legal
 resident, single mother of three
 has STILL not been paid by the
 defendant.

The Judge eyes the Opposing Council, pointedly, as we CUT TO:

INT. COURTHOUSE HALLWAY - DAY

Confident, Ben debriefs with Mrs. Gomez and Ashley.

BEN
 We can expect an offer by the end
 of the week. No way this is going
 to trial.

MRS. GOMEZ
 Thank you, Benjamin. Without this
 money--

BEN
 --You can thank me when we win.
 Which I'm confident we will.

Ben flashes a winning smile as Mrs. Gomez moves off.

ASHLEY
 Nice job.
 (sees Ben scratch his arm)
 You okay?

BEN
 Don't get old Ashley.

ASHLEY
 Happy birthday, boss.

He pulls up a contact, Dr. Carroll, on his phone as we CUT TO:

INT. DOCTOR'S OFFICE - DAY

That scabby lesion under white light. DR. MATT CARROLL (40s)
 looks up at Ben. *Frightened.*

DR. CARROLL
 Holy shit, this is... Nurse, scalpel!

BEN

Fuck off.

DR. CARROLL

So Mr. Perfect has a little rash?
Probably from all that working out,
dieting, volunteering for the blind.
(looking closer now)
How long you had it?

BEN

Homeless -- not the blind, Matt.
(then)
A few days maybe. But it's starting
to burn.

DR. CARROLL

So stop scratching it.

BEN

I can't. What the hell is it?

DR. CARROLL

I don't know... a rash.

BEN

Super helpful prognosis Doctor.
Thanks for squeezing me in this
afternoon.

DR. CARROLL

Any other symptoms?

BEN

I can't sleep. Like -- at all.

DR. CARROLL

Yeah, cause you just turned forty
and you're freaking out. That *rash*
is your body's reaction. It's
stress.

BEN

Doesn't *feel* like stress, Matt.

DR. CARROLL

Looks like some kind of Psoriasis.
Comes in all fun shapes and sizes.
I'll write you a prescription. But
there's not a lot you can do,
except *leave it alone*.

BEN
 You got something topical?
 (off his look)
 I hate taking antibiotics.

Matt hands him a prescription -- sees Ben's phone light up with a text from Elle: **CALL ME ASAP.**

DR. CARROLL
Yikes. The all-caps-wife-text...

Off Ben, concerned, calling Elle as he's on the move into--

INT. HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

ELLE (OVER PHONE)
 You see my email -- about Reggie Dayson?

BEN
 No -- Reggie who?

ELLE (OVER PHONE)
 Reginald. Jerome. Dayson: The registered sex offender who just moved into that blue house on Perlita. With the bamboo.

BEN
 Seriously?

ELLE (OVER PHONE)
 You should see the comments on the neighborhood Facebook board -- Shit's BLOWING UP right now.

Ben pulls up his email -- sees a picture of Reggie Dayson, the man with the dog from earlier.

BEN
 Whoa. I *met* him this morning -- He rescued a dog...

ELLE (OVER PHONE)
 Oh, please.

BEN
 I'm not joking.

ELLE (OVER PHONE)
 Neither am I. That house is 3100 feet from our children's bedroom.
 (MORE)

ELLE (OVER PHONE) (CONT'D)
I mapped it. This is -- I don't
know. We might have to move.

BEN
Can we PLEASE just slow down -- at
least until we get the full story
on this guy. He coulda just pissed
in a park. The man seemed decent.

ELLE (OVER PHONE)
Janice and I are organizing a
neighborhood council meeting at the
church -- I'm gonna need your help.

BEN
Let me dig into it at the office.

ELLE (OVER PHONE)
Please do. I feel nauseous. Gonna
need some serious Chard' tonight.
(then)
Hey, I know you don't want a party
but... can I please buy you a drink
tonight? Just you, me and a
birthday dirty martini?

BEN
What about the kids?

ELLE (OVER PHONE)
I'll worry about the kids, you get
to Lou's by eight.

Off Ben -- considering, breaking a smile as we CUT TO:

INT. LOU'S BAR - EVENING

A SEA OF SMILING FACES and a big-ass 40 balloon hanging over
the bar. Ben steps in, buries the dread as they SCREAM:

CROWD
SURPRIIIIIIIISE!!!

ELLE
They made me do it.

BEN
(smile!)
You have no spine.

DR. CARROLL
We love you -- suck it up old man!

Friends shower adoration on Ben as he wrestles to stay positive -- slams back 1,2,3 martinis -- eyes that fuckin balloon -- *scratch!* Hands smack his back with delight -- *Isn't this fun? Scratch! scratch! scratch!* Until he sees -- drops of BLOOD on his arm. *Yikes.* He excuses himself to--

INT. LOU'S BAR, BATHROOM - NIGHT

Ben rolls up his sleeve -- washes the bloody rash with cold water. As it soothes the sore he sees A BLACK LINE embedded under the scab. *Weird.* He touches it and -- *Ouch!* -- it pricks blood on his finger.

Curious, he pushes on the scab. It stings but he's fed the fuck up with this thing -- so starts PEELING OFF THE TISSUE, slowly, bit by bit until the scab slides off to reveal:

A collection of black spines -- almost like a sea urchin -- growing out of his arm.

BEN

Whatthefuuuuck.

His fingers graze the spines -- they RECOIL slightly, as if alive, shooting PAIN up through his arm. *Aaah!* Repulsed but fascinated he stares wide-eyed at the ungodly thorns rippling on his arm.

He grabs a roll of toilet paper -- begins wrapping it around his arm, bandaging up the lesion, as his party rages outside.

INT. THORNHILL HOUSE, BEDROOM - NIGHT

Ben and Elle stumble in, boozy. She rips off her dress and pulls him onto the bed, knocking his arm and he winces --

ELLE

What's wrong?

BEN

This thing on my arm -- it's getting worse.

He takes off his shirt, unwraps the bandage...

ELLE

Is that toilet pape-- OHMYGOD.

BEN

Thanks, sweetheart.

ELLE

I'm sorry but you have like -- a sea urchin growing out of your arm. You need to see a doctor.

BEN

I have. Matt said it's Psoriasis.

ELLE

It doesn't *look* like Psoriasis. It looks... ungodly disgusting.

BEN

...it kinda *moves* too.

As the spines bristle -- Elle -- officially grossed out.

ELLE

You think it's contagious?
(off his look)
What? I'm just... the kids.

BEN

I don't know! I don't know what the hell it is.

ELLE

Okay. You need, like, a *specialist*.

BEN

I know. I know. But right now, I just need to sleep.

Ben collapses onto the bed, exhausted -- shuts his eyes -- desperate for rest as we CUT TO:

INT. THORNHILL HOUSE, BEDROOM - NIGHT

Showdown time: **3:23 AM**. Ben's EYES -- Livid. Twisting in bed -- stifles the urge to scratch. Raps his head against the pillow until Elle stirs. *Fuck it*. He rips off the sheets--

EXT. L.A. RIVER, JOGGING PATH - NIGHT

Ben RUNS. Heart pounding. Music blaring. Pushing his body. Harder. Faster, almost out of control, rounding a blind corner charging right into: Hot Pants. She spins out to avoid him -- crashes into some bushes.

HOT PANTS

What the fuck!?!

BEN
 Shit, sorry -- I'm so sorry -- You
 okay?

Ben offers to help but she waves him off. Her real name's
 MELISSA ESCOBAR (28) and she's a determined, fiery spirit
 blessed with a helluva beautiful shell. As the dust settles:

BEN (CONT'D)
 I'm Ben. I've seen you running here
 before.

MELISSA
 Yeah. Melissa.

BEN
 I'm really sorry.

MELISSA
 You should be.

BEN
 So... what's your excuse for being
 up at this ungodly hour?

MELISSA
 (shrugs)
 Can't sleep.

BEN
 I *know* the feeling. Turns out a mid-
 life crises does wonders for cardio.

Melissa cracks a smile.

BEN (CONT'D)
 Don't you worry about running at
 night -- all alone?

MELISSA
 I can handle it. I'm a tough
 cookie.

BEN
 Yikes. I'll keep my distance.

As SWEAT pours down Ben's body, he tries not to scratch his
 arm, but can't resist. Melissa clocks it -- sees one of the
 SPINES poking up through his shirt.

BEN (CONT'D)
 (embarrassed)
 I've got some weird thing on my
 arm. *Yea, forty!*

MELISSA
Lemme see it.

BEN
Are you a doctor?

MELISSA
No, but come on -- show me.

BEN
Trust me, you don't want to see--

But Melissa just takes hold of his arm -- pulls up the sleeve, exposing the lesion.

BEN (CONT'D)
---my sexy Psoriasis. Pretty awesome, right?

MELISSA
...I want to show you something.

Melissa starts to untie her sweatpants.

BEN
Whoa, listen I'm not-- I don't--

She pulls them down just enough to expose the side of her thigh, revealing: A lesion -- exactly like Ben's.

BEN (CONT'D)
Holy shit... You....

MELISSA
I -- I thought I was the only one.

BEN
What the hell is wrong with us?

END ACT 1

ACT 2**EXT. STREET - NIGHT**

Ben and Melissa -- charged at this new discovery, stride through the sleeping residential streets.

MELISSA

I've been to seven different doctors -- even drove out to a skin specialist in Arizona. They all take pictures and biopsies -- but the tests come back benign. Some say it's an allergic reaction, some say it's a rare form of shingles. They tell me to leave it alone but no one can identify what the hell it actually is.

BEN

How long have you had it?

MELISSA

Few months. You?

BEN

Just a few days. Maybe it's a reaction to something we were exposed to in the neighborhood? Like a chemical or--

MELISSA

No, no, my husband and I moved up from Marina Del Ray two months ago. Mine started *before* that. Do you know anyone else who has it?

BEN

No. You?

MELISSA

No.

BEN

There's gotta be a reason, some connection... have you noticed any other symptoms?

MELISSA

Just the mark. And I can't sleep no matter how many fucking drugs I take.

They stop in front of a quaint, yellow bungalow.

MELISSA (CONT'D)

This is me. ... you wanna come in?

BEN

Uh, I don't want to wake up your husband.

MELISSA

Don't worry -- he works nights, he's not even here.

(off his reluctance)

Relax. I'm not gonna *bite*. Come on, we need to figure this out. Together.

As she sets off, Ben watches those tight workout pants saunter inside. He hesitates at the curb, uneasy, until--

INT. MELISSA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Ben stares at wedding pictures of Melissa and her husband (30s, Latin - built like a truck) in the living room as Melissa grabs some water from the kitchen.

BEN

How long you been married?

MELISSA (O.S.)

About a year. You?

BEN

Sixteen years.

She returns -- hands him a bottle of water.

MELISSA

Wow. You're a loyal bastard.

BEN

Does yours itch? Or burn?

MELISSA

All. the. fuckin'. time.

(then)

Fresh aloe helps.

She moves over to the window -- breaks off a piece of an ALOE VERA PLANT. She takes his arm -- begins to rub the juice on it. *Gently*.

BEN

OHMYGOD -- you have no idea how good that feels.

MELISSA

Please -- I've been at war with this beast for months.

BEN

I'm seeing a top dermatologist this week, maybe--

MELISSA

Don't bother.

(off his look)

They won't know. Trust me. They'll poke, prod, take their tests and tell you to come back again and again but they'll have no clue. Waste your time if you want but... We need to find the source, Ben. Together. Figure out where this started. That's the only way we're gonna know what it is.

BEN

Okay -- But how?

MELISSA

Charts. We'll make charts. Excel the shit out of this. Start going back, like, five months -- track where you went, what you ate, who you talked to. Dogs you touched. Flowers you smelled... Anything you can remember. Then we'll cross reference them until we find some connection.

Ben nods encouragingly, but really just applies more aloe until -- he sees the sun peaking over the horizon.

BEN

...I need to get going.

MELISSA

Hey... my husband already thinks I'm overreacting to this thing -- if he found out I was... *scheming* with some guy I met down by the river, he'd probably flip out and think--

BEN

Hey. I get it. Between us--

I/E. BEN'S PRIUS, HOME DEPOT PARKING LOT - DAY

Ben sets down SEVEN ALOE VERA PLANTS on the passenger seat. He SNAPS off a piece -- rolls up his sleeve and rubs the juice on the lesion, waiting for the relief to set in as--

An elderly WOMAN crosses past, sees him lubing his arm like some kinda pervert.

BEN

Never had a fuckin' rash before
lady?

He fires back a manic, unhinged smile. She recoils -- *frightened*. Then, he looks down at his lesion, speaks to it:

BEN (CONT'D)

Now, look what you made me do.

INT. THORNHILL HOUSE, HOME OFFICE - DAY

Ben furiously scours bank statements, plugs info into a CHART: *Griffith Park Hike. Red Flowers? / Astro Restaurant - eggs, bacon etc.*, as WE SEE OUTSIDE through the window:

Swish! As Trevor shoots basketball hoops in the driveway, the ball skips past him -- rolls toward the sidewalk where--

Reggie Dayson walks his new dog (she sports a blue cast on her leg) and stops the ball from rolling onto the street. Trevor approaches -- sees the dog's cast -- *curious*.

They begin to chat and as Trevor examines the cast, Reggie takes hold of the boy's arm -- like he's explaining the bone fracture -- traces his fingers along Trevor's wrist. *Ben's face STILL BURIED in research* as -- Trevor nods, intrigued, pats the dog fondly and moves back to shoot hoops. But Reggie stands there. *Watching the boy*. As--

Ben finally looks up -- sees Trevor playing just as, Reggie slips away, unseen.

INT. CHURCH, COMMUNITY ROOM - NIGHT

LOCAL RESIDENTS exchange heated words at the Neighborhood Council meeting. Ben and Elle among the board up front.

ANGRY MOTHER

My thirteen year-old daughter walks
by his house every morning on her
way to school.

(MORE)

ANGRY MOTHER (CONT'D)
 Isn't there some law against sex
 offenders living near schools?

ELLE
 Yes, but Mr. Dayson's residence is
 outside the bounds of his court-
 mandated restrictions. *Legally* he's
 entitled to live there.

ANGRY FATHER
 So what? Sit back and wait until he
 does it again -- to one of our own
 children!?

Ben spots Melissa with her husband MIGUEL ESCOBAR who
 receives a text and relays some info. Melissa eyes him
 skeptically until he throws up his hands like it's not his
 fault, then stands and huffs away.

ELLE
 (hello?!)
 ...Ben..?

BEN
 I'll be getting more specifics but
 what we know so far is--
 (reading off some notes)
 Mr. Dayson was charged in 1996 for
 "Offense 288(c): a lewd and or
 lascivious act with a child 14 or
 15 years of age."

A collective cry in disgust.

BEN (CONT'D)
 However just to put things in
 perspective: Mr. Dayson was tried
 as an adult but in 1996, he was
 only 17 years old. The victim,
 apparently his *girlfriend* at the
 time, was 14.
 (as that resonates)
 So look, I get your concern. My
 kids cross his house on the way to
 the park. Does it give me pause? Of
 course. But we need to respect and
 really understand the system--

ANGRY MOTHER
 The system that let him out? That
 lets men like him live among our
 children?

BEN

Yes -- the same system that locks people in jail for defying it.

ELLE

But I agree, if there was something *proactive* we can do--

ANGRY FATHER

We can proactively *motivate* the sonofabitch to leave...

Some snickers ripple through the crowd.

BEN

And do what -- terrorize the man? Slash his tires? Burn his house down? That sound fair?

ANGRY FATHER

After what he did -- Hardly. But it's a start.

BEN

I'm not making excuses for Mr. Dayson. Frankly, I agree with you. Anyone who commits those kinds of crimes is a monster. But we need to ask ourselves what *kind* of community we want to live in. Are we a community that sinks to vile acts of terrorism? Or can we work together, with *respect* for the law in order to protect our children...

As the debate roars -- Ben clocks Melissa -- her eyes on the floor, as if lost in thought, as we HEAR:

ELLE (PRE-LAP)

I don't care about the legal stuff, Ben! I hate the idea of him *around* us. And I'm NOT really sure why you're okay with it.

INT. THORNHILL HOUSE, DINING ROOM - EVENING

Family Dinner. Ben watches uncomfortably as Chelsea shovels roast chicken into her mouth at an impressive pace.

BEN

I'm *not* okay--

ELLE

--then why didn't you back me up?!

*
*
*

BEN

I did. With facts. And the fact is:
There's nothing we can do about it.

CHELSEA

About what?

TREVOR

Mom d'you find Rex?

ELLE

The man who moved into the blue
bamboo house. Stay away from him --
both of you.

(then, to Trevor)

You check the play bin in the den?

BEN

He's probably hiding in your room.

TREVOR

Nope. Checked. Checked. Checked.

ELLE

Not like he walked away on his own.

BEN

(playfully)

Or did he? Maybe Rex turned into a
real T-Rex and he's getting ready
to attack us all...

Trevor laughs. Chelsea slams back more chow.

BEN (CONT'D)

Breathe, Chels. It's not a race.

CHELSEA

This barbecue sauce!

Chelsea's fingers fumble for more chicken as -- *SPLAT!* -- the
bird squashes to the floor.

BEN

(explodes)

FOR CHRISSAKE CHELSEA slow down!
What the fuck is wrong with you?!
Have some goddamn control!

ELLE

Ben!

CHELSEA

I'm sorry, Daddy.

*

Chelsea, emotional now, pulls food off the ground. Ben, reeling, steps away to cool off -- rips off some paper towels but Elle's there -- SWIPES them out of his hand -- enraged.

ELLE

You ever talk to our daughter like that again and I will *seriously* reconsider this marriage. Understand?

(off his ugly silence)

It's a *chicken*, Ben. What is wrong with you?

(turns to Chelsea now)

It's okay, Chels'. It was just an accident...

Ben stares, almost confused, as Elle comforts her daughter.

INT. THORNHILL HOUSE, CHELSEA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Ben enters to see Chelsea in bed. She rolls her back to him.

BEN

I'm sorry for the way I spoke to you, Chelsea.

CHELSEA

You scared me tonight, Daddy.

BEN

I'll never do it again, I promise, I'm so sorry--

Ben goes to hug her, but Chelsea rolls further away from him.

INT. THORNHILL HOUSE, BATHROOM - NIGHT

The SPINES bristle under COLD WATER as Ben washes off crusty blood and aloe.

BEN

It's all *your* fault...

Elle appears. *Was he just talking to his rash? Weird.*

BEN (CONT'D)

I know -- not my finest parenting moment.

ELLE

It was abusive. You sounded like your dad. That really the kind of father you want to be?

As the comment rips through Ben, he rifles inside the medicine cabinet. Finds some AMBIEN. Pops one.

BEN
(off her loaded look)
What? I still can't sleep.

ELLE
I've just never seen you take one of those. Is it 'cause of your arm?

BEN
'cause of *everything*. My arm. This case. Turning forty. Stress. I don't know... Something's wrong.

ELLE
Maybe you should see a different doctor.

BEN
I've been to four now, Elle. No one knows.
(then)
It was a stupid chicken. Why'd I lose control like that?

Elle shrugs, wishes she could help but moves off. Ben looks at himself in the mirror, uneasy, as we CUT TO:

EXT. MRS. GOMEZ'S APARTMENT - DAY

Knock! Knock! Ben's knuckles rap relentlessly on the door as he and Ashley wait --

BEN
Please, Mrs. Gomez -- We just want to talk. Can you open the door?

A flurry of muffled Spanish echoes behind the door.

BEN (CONT'D)
We can *hear* you, Maria. Obviously something changed your mind, we've worked too hard to--

Mrs. Gomez cracks open the door, flanked by her young KIDS.

MRS. GOMEZ
I'm fine, Benjamin. ...but it's my brother, Carlos -- he doesn't have papers.

(MORE)

MRS. GOMEZ (CONT'D)

Walter knows this -- told me if I didn't drop the lawsuit he'd call ICE. ...I'm sorry. But I can't afford to lose my brother.

She shuts the door. Ben *BOILS* as -- *Ding!* His PHONE lights up with a text from an unknown number. A link to a website. *Weird.* Then, an incoming call. He accepts it as we INTERCUT:

BEN

Hello?

INT. MELISSA'S HOUSE - DAY

Melissa, on a sofa with an iPad on her lap.

MELISSA

Hey there. It's your joggin' buddy. I texted you a link. Check it out.

BEN

Oh. Hi. Now's not a good tim--

MELISSA

Just scroll to three minutes and forty seconds and pause it. Trust me. You'll want to see this.

Ben steps away from Ashley -- clicks the video link. A KTLA news story pops ONSCREEN:

REPORTER

Ever wonder what it would be like if you never needed a wink of sleep? Well, just ask Dale Armstrong...

Images of DALE ARMSTRONG (50s, kinda fat, balding) and his mundane bachelor-life flash forth...

REPORTER (CONT'D)

This Orange County resident hasn't had a peaceful night's rest in weeks. And according to his doctor? He's in perfect health!

Ben advances to 3:40 -- a shot of Dale smiling at a barbecue.

BEN

Yeah. Okay, so--?

MELISSA

Look at his right wrist.

Ben looks closer and sees: Lesion spines peeking out from under his cuff.

BEN

Ho-lee-shit. We need to--

MELISSA

I tried Facebook, LinkedIn, Tinder, everything -- but there's NO trace of the guy online. So I tracked down the reporter. Dale's phone's been disconnected but I got an address. He lives in Redondo Beach.

BEN

Wow. Nice job.

MELISSA

I'm going down there this afternoon. How about I pick you up?

BEN

I'm in the middle of something. How about tomorrow?

MELISSA

No, I need to go today.

(well...)

I'll call you if I find anything interesting.

BEN

Okay, I just wish--

Melissa disconnects. Ben locks on that image of Dale's spine.

ASHLEY

Ben--? What's the plan here?

BEN

Meet me back at the office.

ASHLEY

(thrown)

What? We can't give up on her--

BEN

I'm *not* giving up, but something important's happened. I have to go.

Ashley's STUNNED as Ben hustles past, already texting
Melissa: **Corner of Mariposa and Washington.**

I/E. MELISSA'S JEEP / 110 SOUTH - DAY

Ben rides shotgun as Melissa drives -- *FAST*. Ben grips the side door tight -- revealing his watch.

MELISSA

Fancy timepiece. Looks old. ...like you.

BEN

Hilarious.
(eyeing the watch)
...belonged to my Dad.

MELISSA

You guys close?

BEN

We were in a lot of ways, but... he was a *complicated* man.

MELISSA

You mean he was an asshole?
(off his look)
Complicated? Code for he was an asshole.

BEN

He wasn't an asshole -- he was tough. Strict. Grew up in the military.
(then, admitting)
Okay, he could definitely be an asshole. But he was a great man at heart. You gotta big family?

MELISSA

Just my husband. Not like your perfect unit.

BEN

We're far from perfect, believe me.

MELISSA

Do you vacation in Hawaii?

BEN

No. ...we prefer Naples.
(off her look)
It's Elle's money, not mine.

MELISSA

So you have a beautiful, rich wife. Two kids. A successful career.

(MORE)

MELISSA (CONT'D)

I'm guessing a remodelled house
with a pool. And you vacation, in
Naples.

BEN

...we don't have a pool.

MELISSA

Sounds pretty goddamn perfect to
me.

EXT. RUNDOWN APARTMENT COMPLEX - DAY

Knock! Knock! A big fella named JIMMY ARMSTRONG (30s, needs a
shower) cracks open the door to see Ben and Melissa.

MELISSA

(with a *smile!*)

Hi! We're here to do a follow up
piece on the KTLA story that aired
a few months ago on Dale Armstrong.

JIMMY

Dale ain't here.

BEN

Do you expect him back anytime
soon?

JIMMY

Nope.

MELISSA

Do you have a contact num--?

JIMMY

Lady, Dale's gone. I'm his brother
and even *I* don't know where he is.
No one does...

Melissa and Ben share a look -- *No one?*

MELISSA

Could we come in for a minute?

INT. DALE ARMSTRONG'S APARTMENT - MOMENTS LATER

Stained carpets. Full ash-trays. Broken aloe plants line the
windowsills. Jimmy sips Southern Comfort, sizes them up.

BEN

So... what exactly happened to your brother?

JIMMY

Don't know. Said he was gonna pick up some charcoal over at Ralph's -- the sonofabitch just up and vanished. Never came home. ...that was eight months ago.

MELISSA

Did you talk to the police?

JIMMY

Course. They don't give a shit. Hell, I can't blame 'em. My brother's a grown man. He coulda just walked away.

BEN

But you suspect otherwise?

JIMMY

Yea, well... Dale was a helluva good guy. But... he was sick.

MELISSA

Sick how?

JIMMY

You know -- he wouldn't sleep for weeks at a time. I mean, that 'aint right. Doctors said he was fine. But then he'd just drop dead -- black the fuck out for days.

BEN

Black out?

JIMMY

Yup. He was sober too. Quit drinkin' but he went and started acting crazy.

MELISSA

Crazy how?

JIMMY

See for yourself.

He leads them down a dark hallway into a nearby BEDROOM -- flicks on a lamp to see:

An entire wall blanketed with CRIMINALS' MUGSHOTS. Cut from newspapers, magazines, printouts -- a tapestry of miserable broken evil souls staring out at them.

JIMMY (CONT'D)

Idiot became obsessed with
murderers. Rapists. Kidnappers.
Thieves. Bunch of *monsters*.

(off their shock)

No wonder he went crazy with all
this fuckin' misery and hate
staring back at him every night.
Keep wantin' to tear all these down
but I can't shake the feelin'
someone on that wall might know
where's he at...

Ben and Melissa look closer to see: Handwritten scrawl
detailing each subject's case... *Attempted Kidnapping.*
Fullerton CA. Paroled 5/9/17 etc...

BEN

Would you mind if we took pictures
of these?

Jimmy shrugs. They pull out their phones, snap pictures as--

JIMMY

What kind of reporters are you
anyway? Can you help me find him?

MELISSA

We're not reporters.

JIMMY

Then why do you care what happened
to my brother?

Melissa and Ben share a loaded look then -- Ben rolls up his
sleeve, reveals the lesion.

JIMMY (CONT'D)

Yeah. Dale got those things too...
Pissed the hell out of him. What
are they?

MELISSA

That's what we're trying to figure
out. Did your brother ever spend
time in East LA? Around Glendale?

JIMMY

He never left Orange county.

MELISSA

How long have you lived here?

JIMMY

A couple years. We moved out from Orlando together...

Ben examines the rest of the room -- crosses past a window as -- sunlight FLARES his eyes -- drawing his attention to a GREY VAN parked across the street as we REVERSE CUT TO:

CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!

SOMEONE hidden inside that van -- taking photo surveillance images of Ben as he stares out the window. *Unsuspecting...*

INT. THORNHILL HOUSE, HOME OFFICE - NIGHT

Printouts of those mugshots cover Ben's desk as he furiously researches the fugitives.

BEN

...maybe there's some kinda pattern or personal connection to Dale.
...maybe. I don't know.

ELLE (O.S.)

Who are you talking to?

Ben startles to see Elle, half-asleep, in the doorway.

BEN

No one... I'm doing research. Some pro bono case I'm working on...

ELLE

You pro bono-ing at 3 AM?

BEN

I'm almost done. You should go back to bed... I'll be there soon.

ELLE

I'm starting to worry about you...

BEN

Babe. I'm fiiiine. Really. Get some sleep -- I'll be right in...

Elle heads back to the bedroom but STOPS in the doorway -- watches him from the darkness as--

Ben wipes aloe on his lesion, soothing those rippling spines -
 - like he's feeding them.

BEN (CONT'D)

(quietly)

You like that don't you...

(then, cracks a smile)

...Feels like my spiney sense is
 tingling.

Ben shares a chuckle with his lesion as Elle watches, UNEASY,
 from the darkness.

EXT. STREETS - NIGHT

Ben and Melissa, post-run, walk through the neighborhood.

BEN

Then there's Oscar Hill and Xavier
 Rodriguez. Hill's been out for six
 months, lives in Fullerton now.
 Rodriguez's also out on parole --
 but his PO said he'd never heard of
 Dale.

MELISSA

So most of them are out on parole.
 Or MIA. But we still have no link
 to Dale.

(off his nod)

You look at my chart?

BEN

We hike in Griffith Park, shop at
 Ralph's, Home Depot and both spend
 WAY too much on coffee. But that's
 the only significant overlaps so far.

They share a frustrated look. Until--

BEN (CONT'D)

You ever feel like you're losing
 control?

(off her look)

I screamed at my daughter the other
 night. Over a stupid *chicken*. But
 the anger, the hate was out of
 control. Like it took over my body.

MELISSA

Don't do that. Don't let it get to
 your head.

BEN

But do you know what I'm talking about? Have you felt it?

MELISSA

No -- not like *that*.

BEN

Okay then, what *have* you felt?

MELISSA

I get angry. At night mostly -- right before I pretend to sleep next to my husband. Can't stop asking -- why me? What'd I do to deserve this?

(then, admits)

I'm getting another one. On my back. I can feel it. *Growing*.

She lifts up her shirt, exposing the small of her back. Ben sees the spines forming...

BEN

You ever had two at the same time before?

MELISSA

No.

Ben offers a plastic-wrapped piece of aloe from his pocket.

MELISSA (CONT'D)

Would you mind?

Ben holds up her shirt -- begins wiping the cool gooey syrup over her skin...

MELISSA (CONT'D)

Thank you. That feels... amazing.

She finds his eye, feeding this charged moment between them until -- Ben sees: *The silhouette of a man -- WATCHING THEM* -- from across the street, inside a car garage.

BEN

Who is that?

Ben crosses over to find: Reggie Dayson sitting on his car. Behind him, underneath a locked door, a DOG'S paws scrape the floor -- trying to get out.

REGGIE

I named her Daisy. She's recoverin--

BEN
What are you doing?

REGGIE
Nothing. Just... sitting here.

BEN
You do that a lot? Sit here and spy
on people?

REGGIE
I'm not spying. I was...here.
(off Ben's needling look)
Don't worry I won't say anything to
your wife.

BEN
My wife?

REGGIE
Yea, Elle right? Don't worry. I'll
keep quiet. I can tell you're a good
husband. Trevor and Chelsea are
lucky to have you for a father.

BEN
What the fuck did you say?

REGGIE
What? Just that--

BEN
How do you know my kids' names?

REGGIE
I was in the park the other day and
heard them talking -- about you. I
could tell how much they really
love you.

MELISSA
(stepping in between)
Ben -- let's go --

BEN
You've been watching my kids in the
park?

REGGIE
No.

Ben advances -- sees something in the back seat of Reggie's
car. A purple T-Rex Dinosaur toy.

REGGIE (CONT'D)

I--I found it in the park. I didn't
know who it belonged to--

But as Reggie backpedals, Ben's world SLOWS WAAAY down and:

THREE BLACK VEINS on his neck bulge up from his skin as he
CRACKS!!! Reggie's face with his fist.

Reggie collapses to the ground. Daisy starts barking. Clawing
under that door, frantically.

Ben jumps on him -- wraps his hands around Reggie's throat.
Choking him, possessed.

Melissa steps in, tries to pull Ben off and he accidentally
hits her jaw.

She stumbles back -- distracting Ben as --

Reggie finds a can of paint and CRACKS!!! it into Ben's head.

Ben tumbles down. Dazed.

Reggie gasps for oxygen.

BLAZING now, Ben picks up the can, smashes it into Reggie's
nose.

Reggie's face explodes with blood.

Ben seizes him -- PLUNGES his thumbs into Reggie's eye-
sockets.

Reggie screams out in pain as--

Ben slams his head into the concrete. Over and over and over.

Melissa watches -- horrified.

Daisy barks uncontrollably --

Ben finally relents, covered in blood -- he stands back --
takes in the sight of Reggie's mutilated, and lifeless body
as --

Those three black veins slink back into place.

And a harrowing quiet fills the room until all we hear are
Daisy's claws scraping the floor...

END OF ACT 2

ACT 3**I/E. REGGIE'S GARAGE - DIRECT PICK-UP**

Ben stares at Reggie's body -- paralyzed with fear. Unlike-

Melissa who snaps into action: She finds the automatic door and punches it closed -- drags Reggie's body inside.

Laser focused now, she scans the nearby shelf full of paints and solvents -- finds a bottle of BLEACH.

MELISSA

Do you have a garden hose?

(off his shock--)

Ben! Do you have a garden hose at home?

BEN

...yes.

MELISSA

Jog home -- like you always do. Wash the blood off your skin with the hose. Then, go to your garage -- stash the bloody clothes somewhere your family won't find them. Do NOT put them in your car--

BEN

Stop. Wait -- we need to call the police.

MELISSA

Think about that.

BEN

Melissa, we need to call--

MELISSA

Think about that.

(off his look)

This wasn't an accident. This wasn't self-defense. Now, go home. I'll take care of it.

BEN

What are you-- how do you--

MELISSA

--just trust me. I know what I'm doing. Go -- Now!

She punches open the door. Ben, still reeling, hurries out and jogs home -- clocks a look over his shoulder and sees: Melissa pours bleach over Reggie's corpse as the door shuts.

EXT. THORNHILL HOUSE, BACKYARD - DAWN

Ben CRANKS on the hose. Wipes the blood off his skin, with the freezing cold water as we HARD CUT TO:

INT. THORNHILL HOUSE, GARAGE - SAME

Ben scavenges for a suitcase -- finds a BEIGE DUFFEL BAG. He gathers up the wet clothes and stashes the bag behind a box. He sets out to leave, until --

He catches sight of himself in the mirror. Sees BLOOD on his neck. Grabs a rag -- scrubs the blood. Harder and harder as the fear and terror burn through his eyes.

INT. THORNHILL HOUSE, BEDROOM - DAWN

Ben slides into bed. Elle stirs, throws her arm around his chest and pulls her body close, against his neck.

ELLE
(softly)
Mmm. You *smell* good.

She kisses him. And then, still reeling -- Ben kisses his wife. Holding her. TIGHT now. Burying his emotion against her skin. Desperate -- *letting go* and it feels goooood...

Elle straddles her husband and Ben starts to fuck her -- hard -- and she LOVES it. She eyes him -- *whothell is this animal?* -- biting her lip, holding back fantastic screams until she breaks and we SMASH TO:

INT. THORNHILL HOUSE, KITCHEN - MORNING

A SCRRREEECHING espresso maker. Ben's at the helm -- staring out the front window, still reeling. *Waiting for the news to explode* as Elle walks in, smiling deviously:

ELLE
Where did *that* come from? Keep at
it you sexy beast...

She kisses his neck, grabs a coffee and moves off.

Ben steadies himself, starts measuring those flax seeds but his hand shakes -- spilling seeds everywhere so he *SMASHES!* the measuring cup into the sink. Chelsea rushes in--

CHELSEA
What happened Daddy?

BEN
I -- I broke my measuring cup.

Ben stares at the broken glass. Scattered seeds. He starts laughing. Uncontrollably hard. Chelsea's not sure what's wrong with her dad -- pretends it's funny and forces a laugh until Ben opens the fridge, pulls out a large STEAK.

BEN (CONT'D)
Whaddya say, Chels? Let's live a little!

INT. THORNHILL HOUSE, DINING ROOM - LATER

Chelsea and Trevor gobble up their steak and eggs -- beaming at this new version of Ben. Trevor eyes his lesion. *Wonders.*

TREVOR
Is it getting bigger?

BEN
Yea. You wanna feed it?

Feed it? Trevor and Chelsea share a curious look as Ben breaks off a piece of trusty aloe -- hands it Trevor.

BEN (CONT'D)
Go ahead. Spiney's gotta eat too.

TREVOR
You named it Spiney? Cool. Like a little pet.

CHELSEA
I thought you hated pets.

BEN
No, no, this is... different.

Trevor spreads aloe on the lesion. Fascinated at the moving spines. Ben checks his shoulder, and with Elle out of earshot--

BEN (CONT'D)
Did you guys ever talk to that man who moved into that house with the bamboo? On Perlita?

CHELSEA
Mom told us not to.

BEN
I want you both to know that I'm not going to be mad. No matter what happened -- I really need you to tell me the truth. Did he ever approach you at the park? Ask you into his car or--?

TREVOR
I saw him walking his dog once.

BEN
Did you show him Rex?

TREVOR
I can't *find* Rex, remember?

BEN
I know buddy, but when you were at the park did you--

CHELSEA
Daddy, where's your new watch?

Huh? Ben notices: His watch is gone -- sees his wrist covered with fresh red scratches. He pales, realizes, as--

DING DONG! The doorbell snaps his reverie. He moves to the front door and opens it to reveal:

Miguel Escobar, Melissa's husband -- flashing an ID.

ESCOBAR
Mr. Thornhill? Detective Escobar.
LAPD.

Elle approaches, curious, as Ben stifles the blazing terror running through his body.

ELLE
What's going on?

ESCOBAR
Morning, Ma'am. Reggie Dayson was murdered last night.

ELLE
Ohmygod. Here?! In our neighborhood?

ESCOBAR

Someone broke into his garage,
looks like they tried to steal his
car and beat him to death.

ELLE

Holy shit...

ESCOBAR

We're out canvassing the
neighborhood. Did either of you see
or hear anything out of the ordinary
last night..?

ELLE/BEN

No -- nothing.

ESCOBAR

Ben, you know my wife, Melissa,
right?

Elle clocks him a look. *He does?*

BEN

...Melissa?

ESCOBAR

Yeah, says she sees you jogging
most mornings..?

BEN

Oh. Yeah -- right. I think -- I've
seen her before...

ESCOBAR

Well did you see anything around
Dayson's house this morning? A car?
Strangers? Anything out of place?

ELLE

(wait)

You went jogging this morning?

BEN

No -- I didn't jog this morning
so... didn't see anything.

ESCOBAR

Really? Melissa said she saw you...

BEN

She must have mistaken me for
someone else.

ESCOBAR
...guess so.

BEN
I wish we could be more help...

ESCOBAR
Well, as you both know Mr. Dayson
wasn't exactly welcomed with open
arms here--

ELLE
With good reason.

BEN
Elle, come on--

ELLE
I am sorry he was killed -- but I'm
not sorry he's gone. I'm just
saying...

ESCOBAR
I understand, ma'am. Nevertheless,
a man was murdered here last night.
And I suspect you don't want a
killer running loose in our
neighborhood anymore than I do. So
if you do hear anything, or see
anything on those jogs, Ben...
(eyeing him)
Lemme know.

Escobar hands off his card. Ben watches him walk away,
spinning inside, wondering how much he knows as we CUT TO:

I/E. BEN'S PRIUS/ BRENTWOOD - DAY

Ben drives -- eyeing Escobar's card on the dashboard as he
follows a red BMW through the streets.

BEN
(to Spiney)
Calm down -- we'll talk to Melissa
tonight. ...there's *nothing* we can
do until she tells us what he knows.

The BMW pulls into a WHOLEFOODS parking lot. Walter Smythe
exits. Ben watches as the weasely man opens the back door,
unclips his DAUGHTER (2) and walks inside the store.

BEN (CONT'D)
Relax, I'm just going to talk to
him.

INT. WHOLEFOODS - MOMENTS LATER

Walter pushes his daughter in a grocery cart through the
produce section. He picks up a nectarine, inspects it as--

BEN
You should palm 'em, otherwise they
bruise. ...*delicate* little things.

Walter registers Ben -- thrown at the sight of the lawyer.

WALTER
What are you following me?

BEN
I felt it was important we talk
face to face -- especially after
you threatened my client.

WALTER
I didn't threaten anyone. I simply
reminded Mrs. Gomez about our
country's immigration policy.

BEN
You make over two hundred thousand
dollars a year, Walter. Is all this
really worth the fight?

WALTER
I'm tired of people like her --
sapping off hardworking families,
charging us three times what she
deserves.

BEN
She deserves to be paid the rate
your wife guaranteed.
(off his indignant shrug)
Do you ever think about the pain
you're causing? Have you ever once
just rolled over in bed and
considered how much you're hurting
this family?

WALTER
I sleep like a baby.

Walter picks up a nectarine, tests it. Ben eyes Spiney, like he's almost listening, then stares coldly at Walter's girl.

BEN

Look at your beautiful girl. Talk about *delicate*. I have a daughter too and if anyone ever hurt her I'd practically explode.

(off his startled look)

Anyone ever threaten *your* family, Walter?

WALTER

Stay away from me, Mr. Thornhill or I'll press charges.

Ben seizes the nectarine from Walter's hand. Starts PRESSING -
- oozes juice onto Walter's perfectly ironed pants.

BEN

No, no, no... too *soft*.

(then)

We'd never hurt your daughter. That would be cruel. We're not cruel.

We're just protecting a defenseless immigrant. So I'm glad you still have an opportunity to untangle this mess. Because if you don't?

I'm gonna come after you, you entitled racist fuck.

(he grabs a new nectarine)

Oooh. This one's perfect.

Ben hands over the soft fruit to the little girl and walks away as -- Walter looks on, unnerved, sensing something terribly wrong with this man.

EXT. L.A. RIVER, JOGGING PATH - NIGHT

Ben runs, scans the horizon... assures Spiney:

BEN

She'll come. ...trust me, we'll find her...

EXT. STREET / MELISSA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Ben scopes the perimeter. Waiting. Hoping. But there's no sign of her, so he sets off, unknowingly jogging past: That same GREY VAN seen outside Dale Armstrong's apartment.

MELISSA (O.S.)
 (hushed)
 Ben!

Melissa hurries up to him...

MELISSA (CONT'D)
 You can't wait outside my house
 like that. If my husband sees you,
 he'd--

BEN
 Your *husband*? You mean, the
 Homicide Detective who knocked on
 my door this morning? Funny, you
 never mentioned that little detail.

MELISSA
 That detail didn't matter until
 now.

BEN
 Did you find my watch? In his
 garage after I left?

MELISSA
 Your watch? No.

BEN
 FUCK! He knocked it off in the
 fight. It belonged to my father --
 even has my initials on it. If your
 husband connects that watch to me --
 together with the dinosaur, he'll
 know...

As the gravity of that lands --

MELISSA
 I would have grabbed it when I was
 cleaning up but--

BEN
 What the hell was that anyway?
Trust me - I know what I'm doing?
 Exactly how do you know how to
 clean a crime scene, Melissa?

MELISSA
 I'm married to a cop, I've seen
 what bleach does to DNA and
 fingerprints...

(deflecting his stare)

(MORE)

MELISSA (CONT'D)

What?! I'm familiar with crime scenes...

BEN

You were more than familiar.
(off her silence, sensing)
How familiar are you?

Melissa looks at him. *Torn*. Hoped it wouldn't come to this.

MELISSA

Look, I didn't say anything before because... I wanted to believe yours could be *different*.

BEN

Different? What are you talking about?

MELISSA

That you wouldn't become like *me*.

BEN

I am like you. What are you--
(as it dawns on him)
How long have you really been like this?

MELISSA

Two years. Started out like yours. A small lesion. Couldn't sleep. Losing my temper -- at little things. *Stupid* little things that would set me off until one night -- I... snapped. Lost control. Just like you.

BEN

What happened?

MELISSA

I -- lost control. Just like you.
(then, broken)
I lied to you earlier. I have felt it before. The hate. The rage. I don't know how to stop it, Ben. It swells up inside me -- like there's a demon in there. Punishing me...

Ben sees the incredible PAIN she's in -- embraces her, as a friend might.

BEN
 Hey, it's okay. We're gonna figure
 this out. *Together*. I promise...

As he comforts her, Ben sees something in the distance:
 Elle's on the front porch. He pulls Melissa behind some
 bushes. Waits. *Did she see him?*

BEN (CONT'D)
 Shit. Elle's there...

MELISSA
 Did she see us?

BEN
 I don't know. ...I gotta get back.

He takes off, running --

MELISSA
 Wait, Ben, there's more... I need
 to tell you what happens after--

But it's too late. Ben's charging back home. Melissa watches,
 concerned, as: That GREY VAN looms behind her in the
 background.

INT. THORNHILL HOUSE - NIGHT

Ben charges inside to find Elle.

ELLE
 Where've you been?

BEN
 Jogging. What--

ELLE
 --at four in the morning?

BEN
 I couldn't sleep, I didn't want to
 wake--

ELLE
 Who were you talking to?

BEN
 I wasn't talk--

ELLE
 I was on the porch. And I could
 hear you talking, Ben!
 (MORE)

ELLE (CONT'D)

Who were you with?
 (sensing)
 What the fuck is really going on
 with you?

BEN

Nothing! Please -- What happened
 here? Are the kids okay?

ELLE

They're fine. Trevor woke up
 because he finally remembered where
 he left Rex -- and I had to
convince him for half an hour that
 we'd get him in the morning.

BEN

Wait -- get him *where*?

ELLE

(exasperated)
 In a tree at the park. Where he
 left him. So the dinosaur could
 watch him catch baseballs. Okay?!

(burning now)

Now, answer me: Who were you
 talking to?

Ben steadies himself, realizes --

BEN

...he was telling the truth.

ELLE

Who was telling the truth? Ben,
 what is wrong with you?

BEN

I've -- I've done something
 terrible, Elle.

ELLE

(genuinely frightened)
 What have you done?

BEN

I need to call the police...

But as Ben musters the courage, his world fills with blinding
 light and he BLACKS OUT.

END ACT 4

ACT 5**INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - MORNING**

Beep. Beep. Beep. Ben wakes in bed. Machines monitor his vitals. An IV tube sticks out of his hand as he sees: The lesion's gone. *WTF?*

Elle enters, head buried in her phone, sipping orange juice.

BEN

Elle... What happened?

SMASH!!! Broken glass and juice explode across the floor as Elle drops the drink in shock.

ELLE

You've been unconscious for six days.

(calling out)

Nurse! Someone please!

Elle embraces her husband -- holds him close. Overwhelmed.

ELLE (CONT'D)

How -- how do you feel?

BEN

...thirsty. But I'm okay... My arm -
- the lesion's gone.

ELLE

It healed while you were asleep.

(emotional now)

Jesus, Ben, I was so scared. What is happening to you?

BEN

I don't know. ...where are the kids?

ELLE

They're with my parents. They've been... so sad and worried about you, babe.... all of us have...

As they clutch each other, HOSPITAL STAFF file into the room and we TIME CUT TO:

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - LATER

Dr. Carroll, chart in hand, greets Ben and his family as Trevor and Chelsea cling close to their father.

DR. CARROLL

Your MRI is clean.
(at a loss)
Vitals are stable. Blood work came
back normal...

ELLE

Normal?! How is *any* of this normal?
How do you explain blacking out for
six days? And don't say stress Matt
-- people don't *hibernate* because
of stress.

DR. CARROLL

It's hard to say. We can run more
tests...
(but first)
Talk to us, Ben -- how ya feel?

BEN

Like I had a helluva good sleep.

ELLE

There's gotta be a logical
explanation. Like -- what was that
thing on his arm?

DR. CARROLL

We don't know what it was...but
it's gone now. And look, I don't
disagree Elle, *something* happened
to his body. Coulda been a
combination of stress, dehydration -
- but right now, in my professional
medical opinion: There's absolutely
nothing physically wrong with Ben.

TREVOR

So can Dad come to my T-ball game
tomorrow?

BEN

Yeah, buddy. I'll be there.

Trevor hugs Ben. Elle looks on, relieved, but still reels
with questions.

INT. THORNHILL HOUSE - DAY

The Thornhill family arrive back home.

ELLE

One cartoon. Wash your hands first.

The kids scamper off, finally leaving their parents' side.

BEN

I'm sorry for putting you through all this. You must be exhausted. Can I get you anything?

ELLE

Yeah, I'll take a six-day nap.

(but then)

Actually, how about you tell me what really happened?

BEN

I don't *know* what really happened.

ELLE

Bullshit. That night. Why did you want to call the police, Ben? And who were you talking to?

Ben stares at his wife -- conflicted. Muscles up the courage:

BEN

Melissa Escobar. That cop's wife.

(off her digging look)

I saw her jogging and thought I might have some information on who killed Reggie Dayson.

ELLE

What kind of information?

BEN

Like -- I might have seen who did it.

ELLE

Well, you're too late. They already caught the killer.

BEN

(thrown)

They caught -- who?

ELLE

Some ex-con. Cops arrested him last week...

(off his shock)

But you said: I did something terrible. So what did you *do*?

BEN

I -- I kept quiet, Elle. I should have said something sooner. That's all.

ELLE

You were just *talking* with her?

BEN

Yes. I promise you.

Elle's eyes -- digging in like a spear... until --

ELLE

I've been doing dishes for six straight days. You're *up*.

INT. THORNHILL HOUSE, HOME OFFICE - DAY

Ben pulls up a search for Reggie Dayson Murder -- scans the headlines: *Police arrested Michael Napier -- Homeless vagrant -- a history of mental illness -- evidence of a break-in...*
As we go OFF Ben, trying to make sense of it all to--

INT. THORNHILL GARAGE - DAY

Ben cracks open the garage -- Steps up to where he stashed the bloody clothes in the beige duffel bag as--

CHELSEA (O.S.)

Daddy -- Guess what?

BEN

(startles)

Oh heeey -- What's up?

CHELSEA

No *guess*!

BEN

I need a *little* more here, Chels'...

CHELSEA

When you were at the hospital, I didn't have any soda and I lost 1.3 pounds. Aren't you so so proud of me?

Ben crouches down -- eye-level with his daughter.

BEN

Chelsea. I love you. Always. Big. Small. Happy. Sad. Tall. Short. Always. No matter what. Okay?

Chelsea wraps her dad in a hug and leaves him. Ben watches her clear out then --

He reaches up to where he placed the duffel bag -- feels around but can't feel it. *WTF? Where is it?! Panic sets in.* He searches frantically but it's useless: The bag is GONE.

INT. THORNHILL HOUSE, KITCHEN - DAY

Ben enters, reeling inside -- sees his wife drawing with Trevor. She catches his eye. Smiles. Relieved he's back.

INT. THORNHILL HOUSE, BATHROOM - DAY

Ben -- in the shower, scrubs his body. Traces the faint outline where the lesion was, eyeing the pattern as we--

FLASH TO his memory: Cracking open Reggie's face. Slamming his skull against the ground, over and over...

Ben, shudders at the memory, traces his arm, like some kind of fading nightmare.

INT. THORNHILL HOUSE, BEDROOM - DAY

Freshly showered, Ben opens his dresser and sees an envelope. Opens it to find: The watch. Elle crosses past, sees--

ELLE

Someone from your office dropped it off. Thank god -- I was worried, thought you lost it already.

He finds a handwritten note: *I recovered this so rest easy, Ben. Dream of those Naples vacations... xo*

INT. BEN'S LAW OFFICE - DAY

Ben hands over a check to Mrs. Gomez -- she stares at it FLOORED. Ashley looks on, proud.

BEN

Turns out Walter Smythe had a come-to-Jesus moment.

MRS. GOMEZ

But -- How did you--?

BEN

It's not important. You won. And if he ever comes near you or your family again -- you let me know.

MRS. GOMEZ

(overwhelmed)

...my kids, my family, what you've done for us... Thank you, Benjamin.

BEN

You're welcome.

Mrs. Gomez embraces him and sets off -- Ben turns to Ashley.

BEN (CONT'D)

Look, I'm sorry for putting you through all this, Ashley. My behavior the last few weeks was--

ASHLEY

Sorry? Don't be sorry -- be happy. We won. Smythe was a pig. Whatever the hell you did worked! Keep it up.

Ben marvels -- *she's right* -- this madness actually *helped* him win the case. A slight smile creeps onto his face.

EXT. L.A. RIVER, JOGGING PATH - DAWN

Ben jogs, getting his step back, looks around, hopes to see *her*...

EXT. MELISSA'S HOUSE - DAWN

Ben slows in front of Melissa's house. Stops and stretches, eyeing the perimeter until -- the front door opens:

ESCOBAR

Hi Ben.

BEN
Oh -- hi Detective.

ESCOBAR
Melissa's not here.

BEN
(thrown)
Uh, yea, I haven't seen her lately.
How's she doing?

ESCOBAR
You haven't seen her?

BEN
No. Why?

ESCOBAR
I thought maybe she was with you.

Escobar holds a loaded stare as Ben steadies himself, fires back the truth:

BEN
I've been in the hospital. Haven't
seen Melissa in over a week.
(then)
What happened to her?

ESCOBAR
She took off. We got into it last
week and she... up and vanished on
me. It's happened before but she
usually calls.

BEN
You don't have any idea where she
went?

ESCOBAR
Probably with her sister down in
Miami.
(then, still eyeing him)
You ever been to Miami, Ben?

BEN
Yeah, why?

ESCOBAR
Stay there -- I want to show you
something...

Escobar disappears inside. Ben waits -- uneasy -- until the cop returns, hands him a document.

ESCOBAR (CONT'D)
 Melissa asked me to get this for her. It's a passenger manifest from a flight she took to Florida -- three years ago. You have any idea why she'd want it?

BEN
 (lost)
 No. ...how would I know?

ESCOBAR
 Because you were on that flight.

What the hell? Ben scans the names -- *closer* now -- sees his own name near the bottom of the list...

BEN
 (piecing it together)
 Three years ago? ...I flew out to join my family in Naples. But I didn't even *know* Melissa back then...

ESCOBAR
 You never met her on that flight?

BEN
 No.

ESCOBAR
 So you don't know what *any* of this is about?

Ben continues to scan the list of names and sees: Dale Armstrong. *Holy shit. She figured it out.* But he looks Escobar square in the eyes:

BEN
 I have no idea. Sorry.

Escobar shrugs like he accepts that. *For now.* Ben turns and sets off until--

ESCOBAR
 D'you hear we caught the bastard who killed Reggie Dayson?

BEN
 Yeah. Good job.
 (then, can't resist)
 ...what happened to his dog?

ESCOBAR

His dog?

INT. THORNHILL HOUSE - DAY

Ding! Dong! Chelsea opens the door with Trevor behind her to see: Ben -- holding Reggie's grey Terrier.

BEN

This is Daisy. She needs a home.
Think we should keep her?

The kids erupt with joy. Elle steps forward -- *aghast*, but happy.

BEN (CONT'D)

They were gonna put her down at the shelter. Figured maybe it's time...

ELLE

So you've finally come to your senses...

Ben smiles, kisses his wife as the kids fawn over Daisy.

EXT. PARK - DAY

Whack! Trevor hits a baseball off a T-stand as his family, along with Daisy, cheer him on.

ELLE

Nice work Trevor!

BEN

Good hit buddy!

Ben takes in the game, enjoying every moment until -- he spots something on the street:

THE GREY VAN. *There it is again.* Just as he remember's from outside Dale Armstrong's apartment.

Ben, motions at the restroom to his wife. Descends the bleachers then heads for the van.

He clocks the Florida plates -- snaps a picture with his phone. Then looks in--

The front seats are empty. He circles around -- cups his hands against the window, fending off the glare, to see: *Someone sleeping inside? A woman maybe...* Then, next to her he sees the beige duffel bag.

Ben staggers back, floored, when --

The back doors swing open to reveal: Dale Armstrong. In the flesh.

DALE ARMSTRONG
Get in the van.

END OF ACT 5

ACT 6**INT. VAN - MOMENTS LATER**

CLUNK! The back doors slam shut. Ben, terrified, sees: That WOMAN -- passed out on the floor. Her designer business suit is peppered with blood-spatter. Up-front sits a steely bastard named LEIF (50s).

DALE

(all smiles)

Hi Ben. I'm Dale. But you already knew that. This is Leif. He's kinda shy.

(off Ben's glance at the woman)

Oh, that's Barb. She's *recalibrating*. Know all about that too, don't you?

BEN

What do you want?

DALE

We're here to help.

BEN

I don't want your help.

DALE

Relaaax, Ben. We know what you're going through. ...it's overwhelming. Right, Leif?

Leif nods. *Yup*. Places a loaded hand on Ben's duffel bag.

DALE (CONT'D)

But we're in this *together* now.

BEN

Where's Melissa? What have you done with her?

DALE

Nothin! We tried to approach her -- but that fuck-ass cop husband made it kinda tricky. Next thing we know she took off. Figured she had to go feed.

BEN

Feed?

DALE

You know...
(eyeing the duffel bag)
What this thing makes us do...

BEN

You were on the flight to Florida --
With Melissa and I.

DALE

We *all* were.

BEN

What happened -- What is this
thing?

DALE

Well 'aint that the goddamn money
question! No idea. Suspect it's
some kinda fuckin' virus or
disease. Musta leaked out on that
plane -- got us all contaminated
and shit.

BEN

So there are others?

DALE

Hell, yea. There were 133 people on
that plane. But we're all over now.
I talked to some brothers in Boston.
A grandmother up in Calgary. Imagine
that? Poor woman got pinched and
died in prison. Oh and there's a
doctor in Stockholm. He's workin' on
a drug to suppress it but no luck so
far.

BEN

And these people, they're all--?

DALE

Just as fucked up as we are. Same
symptoms. Lies dormant inside you
and then *bam!* flares up like a
goddamn canker sore that drives you
madder than a wet hornet.

BEN

What triggers it?

DALE

We don't know.

BEN

Someone must know.

DALE

Damn right. And it's only a matter of time before they find us.

BEN

So? Let them. Maybe they can help. Maybe there's a cure.

Leif lets out a chuckle. Dale joins in.

DALE

Yea, and maybe they'll wrap us in a big 'ol hug and feed us some fuckin' Dimetapp.

BEN

We need help.

DALE

No, no, no, Mr. Thornhill we need to be *smart*. You think they're gonna help us -- after what we've done? You think they're gonna let you watch T-ball here in the park with your family ever again?

(off Ben taking that in--)

They're gonna hunt us down as fast they can. *Contain* this infection and cut it off before it spreads.

(then)

There's no cure, there's only *management* now. And fella, you violated rule number one: Never shit where you eat. Now, I get it, first time out and all, you made a rookie mistake. But you won't get lucky the second time. So you need to choose the right *kind* of feed. We can help. As you can see--

Dale shows him a dog-eared scrapbook filled with criminals' mugshots -- just like the ones seen in his room before.

DALE (CONT'D)

--we take our research very seriously. Pick only the appropriate marks. Work as a team.

Repulsed, Ben tries to open the door but it's locked.

BEN

Let me out of here.

Dale places a heavy hand on Ben's duffel bag.

DALE

Woa, easy now. Like I said, we're in this together, Ben. Hell, you're one of us. And thank God! We could sure use a good defense lawyer. Get it?

(off his scowl)

We need to find who's responsible for this -- quietly. *Carefully*. Trust me. It's safer as a team. I mean, think about how careless you were... what if Elle found that bag? Or Trevor or Chelsea?

BEN

Stay the fuck away from my family. Let me go. NOW.

Leif unlocks the van. Ben opens the door and steps out into the sunshine but Leif finally speaks:

LEIF

You'll kill your own family.

(off Ben's unnerved look)

It comes back. Gets stronger. You won't be able to control it alone.

Leif pulls down his shirt to reveal: Large writhing spines reaching up from his chest, feeding off his body.

LEIF (CONT'D)

But we can help you harness the impulse. Guide it. Discover its incredible and unique strength...

(off his terrified look)

You have to accept what you are now, Ben. Understand. We've been *chosen* by God and it's our duty to--

SLAM! Ben shuts the door. Sickened, he steadies himself, walks back to--

EXT. PARK - DAY

Ben rejoins his family watching the game. He looks out at Trevor. Then to Chelsea. Then at his beautiful wife.

ELLE
(sensing)
Something wrong?

BEN
Nope -- all good.

He kisses his wife. Smiles.

BEN (CONT'D)
I love you.

We HOLD ON Ben, watching the game with his family awhile.
Happy.

Until...

Something on his neck begins to burn. And he realizes: *It's starting* again as we--

BEGIN THE SERIES