

OFFERINGS

by
Matias Caruso

Jennifer Au
Caliber Media Company
(310) 786-9210

THE STEPMOTHER'S COMMANDMENTS

- 1) Thou shall place your child above pain.
- 2) Thou shall place your child above money.
- 3) Thou shall place your child above your spouse.
- 4) Thou shall place your child above your dignity.
- 5) Thou shall place your child above your fears.
- 6) Thou shall place your child above despair.
- 7) Thou shall kill for your child.

FADE IN:

A SPIRIT BOARD

DIAL PLATE type: a round piece of rotten wood with an alphabet awkwardly painted around its circumference.

The rusted MESSAGE NEEDLE at the center, SQUEAKS as it moves on its own from letter to letter, like the hand of a clock.

We are at...

INT. DERELICT APARTMENT - BACK ROOM - DAY

A FIGURE sits at a table. Too dark to have a good look at him, but faint CANDLELIGHT gives us glimpses of what he's doing:

As the needle spells a message, his hand - horribly BURNT - writes it down on a piece of paper.

The needle finally stops --

He finishes writing: "*Becky*"

FIGURE

What does she look like?

The needle starts moving again *in REPLY* - spells out another message.

He writes down: "*Four years old*"

The needle moves faster - his pen scratches on white - trying to keep up --

"Cheek birthmark"

FIGURE

Where does she live?

The needle SPINS once again - he writes down an address - tears the piece of paper.

Gets up and gets moving. Yanks open a door that leads to:

INT. DERELICT APARTMENT - MAIN ROOM

Dazzling daylight streams in through dusty windows - our eyes try to adjust - we get GLIMPSES:

A bare, filthy room. Paint peeling off walls.

The figure grabs a REVOLVER - packs it into a bag.

ANOTHER FIGURE packs a bottle of CHLOROFORM - that hand is bloody and has two BROKEN FINGERNAILS.

They leave the apartment - on a mission - the door SLAMS shut as we --

CUT TO:

EXT. DESERT TOWN - NIGHT

The distant glittering lights of a SMALL TOWN, probably somewhere near the border.

EXT. "THE LUCKY ORCHID" - NIGHT

Roadside dive. A buzzing neon promise of booze and girls.

INT. "THE LUCKY ORCHID" - MAIN FLOOR

Crowded. Dark. Loud. Shady PATRONS eye-fuck STRIPPERS on stage. Alcohol flows hard and fast.

A bouncer at the bar keeps an eye on the crowd. LANCE (30s). Brawny and clad in business casual. Unkempt handsomeness. Ever-taciturn. Sad eyes, probably a tough childhood.

He picks some ice from his glass. Puts it into his mouth and *chews* noisily as the BARTENDER (50s) watches him.

BARTENDER
Hurts your teeth.

LANCE
Calms my nerves.

BARTENDER
Never saw you nervous in my life.

LANCE
Barry is making me nervous.

The bartender follows Lance's gaze to:

Another bouncer, BARRY (20s), in mid-discussion with a SCUMBAG.

LANCE
Showed up late to his shift, already smelling of Jack.

Barry leads the scum to a corner - the discussion heating up.

LANCE

See how he leads him to the security
cam's blind spot. He's gonna start
some fist-speak soon.

His eyes now go to the STAGE, where ALYSSA (30s) dances a
mesmerizing pole dance. Nose piercing. Firm body. Firmer
attitude.

LANCE

Problem is, that fool ain't alone.

Three burly PATRONS *ignore* her completely - their icy stares
shoot right past her to focus on Barry instead.

She notices. Throws a glance in Barry's direction. Frowns,
knows this could get ugly.

LANCE

But Barry's too hammered to notice the
rest of the pack.

Barry and the patron keep at it, their body language promising
flying fists soon --

Lance INTERRUPTS, puts a hand on Barry's shoulder.

BARRY

What --

LANCE

C'mere.

He takes Barry away as...

LANCE

See the ink in their arms?

Barry watches the scumbag rejoin his buddies - notices their
tattoos.

LANCE

They all did time. Ain't the right
night for a free-for-all.

BARRY

He was being an ass.

LANCE

Don't they all.

BARRY

We can take them.

LANCE

Sure we can. But it'd be a real fight.
The kind where winners also visit the
hospital. And last time I checked, our
medical wasn't so swell.

He taps Barry's shoulder.

LANCE

Tell Victor you're sick and go home.
Cold shower. Hot coffee. I'll cover
for you.

Off Barry, starting to think this might be a good idea...

CUT TO:

INT. "THE LUCKY ORCHID" - LOCKER ROOM - NIGHT

Lance, now dressed in frayed jeans and shirt, puts his business casual attire into his locker.

ALYSSA (O.S.)

Hey you.

He turns --

Finds Alyssa standing at the door.

ALYSSA

Come take care of this creep at the
bar.

LANCE

Sorry sweetheart, but my shift's over.

She approaches him. The clacking of her heels echoing across the empty room.

ALYSSA

He touched me.

LANCE

Really? Where?

She points at her left breast.

ALYSSA

Here.

He GRABS her left breast.

LANCE

Here?

ALYSSA
Right there.

LANCE
Pervert.

They KISS, clearly not for the first time. As they do, she pushes him along, shoving him into a:

FILTHY BATHROOM STALL

LANCE
I can't wait either. But I like our bed better than the "Piss n' Shit" hotel.

She undoes his buckle as...

ALYSSA
Becky heard us last night.

LANCE
Heard us?

ALYSSA
(imitating a child)
"Mommy mommy mommy, was daddy hurting you last night?"

LANCE
Sounds like she heard *you*.

Chuckling. More kissing and undressing.

LANCE
We need a bigger pad.

ALYSSA
Rent is already a bitch.

Time seems to slow down as they engage in passionate lovemaking.

Eyes locking... a deep connection... genuine affection...

Soon, the grimy stall feels like the Hilton to them...

CUT TO:

EXT. "THE LUCKY ORCHID" - PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Lance and Alyssa PUSH a battered PICKUP TRUCK across the lot.

Once it gains speed, they hurry inside. Engine SPUTTERS and COUGHS until - finally - the piece of shit starts.

EXT. DESERT ROAD - NIGHT

The PICKUP cruises a dark, lonely road.

INT. PICKUP

Lance behind the wheel. A far-away look. Thinking. Always thinking.

Alyssa rides shotgun. Notices his troubled stare. Reads him like a book.

ALYSSA
Our pad is fine. Let it go.

LANCE
Maybe if we get Victor to give us a raise --

ALYSSA
What we squirrel away is for Becky. I want her to go to college. And be a doctor or something.

LANCE
She will.

ALYSSA
I want her to be someone. Not a loser like her mom --

LANCE
Hey. Remember what I told you on our first date?

ALYSSA
Of course I remember.

LANCE
Say it.

ALYSSA
(smiles)
"You're someone to me".

LANCE
Don't you forget that.

CUT TO:

EXT. DARK STREET - NIGHT

The PICKUP parks in front of a battered APARTMENT BUILDING.

INT. CRAPPY APARTMENT - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Alyssa takes out some cash from her pocket to pay the BABYSITTER (20s).

She doesn't have enough. Has to fish for some coin in the change jar. A lot of coin. It's a tad embarrassing.

ALYSSA
Same time tomorrow?

BABYSITTER
Sure.

INT. CRAPPY APARTMENT - BECKY'S ROOM - NIGHT

The door cracks open, Lance and Alyssa peek in to check on BECKY (4).

She springs from her bed and goes to give them a HUG.

LANCE
You don't have to wake up, girl.

BECKY
I just wanted to say "hi".

ALYSSA
Hi yourself.

BECKY
Where were you?

ALYSSA
Working.

BECKY
You work a lot.

LANCE
Ain't that right. But tomorrow's our day off and we'll take you to the park.

ALYSSA
Now back to bed. C'mon.

As she tucks Becky in, we notice the child's cheek birthmark.

CUT TO:

EXT. PARK - DAY

Lance and Alyssa do their daily morning exercise. Some of the HIGHLIGHTS:

Alyssa RUNS as hard as she can while Lance grabs her waist, holding her back.

Becky, seated on a bench, watches and cheers.

BECKY
Run mommy run mommy run!

Now Lance does "bench press" using Alyssa's body as weight.

BECKY
Push daddy push daddy push!

Now they both do sit-ups.

BECKY
One! Two!

Push-ups.

BECKY
Three! Four!

They're getting tired.

BECKY
Faster!

Panting, they trade a glance. *Faster?*

BECKY
Five! Six!

LATER

Lance and Aly now catch their breaths, sitting on the ground against a LAMP POST.

BECKY
Why do you exercise so much?

ALYSSA
To be fit.

BECKY
Why?

ALYSSA
For work.

BECKY
(beat)
What is work?

ALYSSA
Told ya'. Boring adult stuff we do for money.

BECKY
But *what* do you do?

Aly opens her mouth, not sure what to say...

LANCE
Your mom is a ballerina. Like the one in that music box you wanted? She dances. And she's good. Makes the... err... *ballroom* go nuts.

BECKY
Really?

Aly stands and does a few improvised ballerina moves. Not great, but enough to fool a four-year-old.

BECKY
Okay.

As a private joke to Lance, her dance segues fluidly into her stripper routine - she JUMPS - grabs the lamp post like a pole - sensually sliding down to land on his lap.

ALYSSA
And your dad works security at a bank. Keeps the baddies and the thieves away. Like a superhero.

BECKY
Okay.

She seems persuaded. The crisis seems averted. But then...

BECKY
I wanna go to the ballroom to see you dance, mommy!

Off Lance and Aly's face --

CUT TO:

EXT. STREET - DAY

The PICKUP sputters down a quiet street.

INT. PICKUP

Lance behind the wheel, Aly rides shotgun, and seated between them:

BECKY
I need to go.

ALYSSA
Can you hold it till we get home?

Becky points at an EATERY up ahead.

BECKY
There! I can go there.

Aly turns to the eatery. For some reason, her face falls.

ALYSSA
See that black ride, bunny?

Becky follows Aly's gaze to a BLACK SEDAN at the eatery's parking lot.

ALYSSA
Belongs to a man that mommy don't like
that much. And he owns that joint. So,
if you hold it a bit longer --

Becky does the pee-pee wiggle.

ALYSSA
Damn.

INT. EATERY - LATER

Ladies' room door SWINGS open. Out comes Aly and Becky.

They walk past empty tables. Approach Lance, having a glass of water at the bar.

To the GIRL behind the counter:

ALYSSA
Thank you.

They start to leave when --

DOUG (O.S.)

Alyssa!

DOUG (50s) comes out from the kitchen. Greasy as the burgers that are served in this place.

DOUG

What a treat.

We instantly know his "pleasant surprise" visage is bullshit. His stare betrays a deep grudge.

ALYSSA

Hey, Doug. Becky needed to use the can so --

Doug turns to a tired-looking WAITRESS.

DOUG

You know who this is? She used to have your job. "One day I'll leave this shithole" she always said. Ha! Stole left overs to eat, so she could save moolah for her trip to New York.

(to Aly)

So how did that turn out? How's the modelling career going?

Lance grabs an ice cube from his glass and *CHEWS*.

ALYSSA

We need to go --

DOUG

(to Becky)

Did you know your mom wants to be a model?

BECKY

She's a ballerina.

Doug beams, just found gold.

DOUG

Really? I heard something else.

Aly begs with a silent stare. *Please don't.*

BECKY

And when I grow up, I'll be a ballerina too.

DOUG

(evil chuckle)

No doubt you will.

EXT. EATERY - PARKING LOT - LATER

The trio walks back to the PICKUP. Lance whispers an apology into Aly's year.

LANCE
 Couldn't talk fist-speak in front of
 Becky --

ALYSSA
 I know. So did he.

Aly is seething. As they walk past Doug's BLACK SEDAN --

ALYSSA
 (pointing at the sky)
 Hey look! The birds!

Becky follows her finger to a flying flock of birds.

BECKY
 The birds!

While Becky is distracted, Aly takes out her keys and SCRAAAAAAPEEESSS the Sedan's door as we --

CUT TO:

EXT. APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY

Our trio enters the rundown apartment building.

Seconds later, a SILVER SUV parks right in front of their home.

Inside the vehicle: THE TWO FIGURES from the opening, obscured by the sun's glare on the windshield. Watching. *Waiting*.

INT. CRAPPY APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - DAY

As Lance and Alyssa set the table for lunch, he accidentally topples a glass of water --

LANCE
 Awww shit.

BECKY
 Potty mouth!

ALYSSA
 Potty mouth!

BECKY & ALYSSA
 (chanting)
 Potty mouth potty mouth!

The chant continues as he lowers his head in shame. Cracks a smile, getting ready for his punishment:

BATHROOM

Lance washes his mouth with SOAP as...

BECKY & ALYSSA
 Potty mouth potty mouth!

The joke is on him, but he's enjoying it nonetheless.

CUT TO:

EXT. "THE LUCKY ORCHID" - NIGHT

Parking lot teems with cars and trucks. Big business night.

INT. "THE LUCKY ORCHID" - MAIN FLOOR

A drunk patron wobbles over to the bar. LAWRENCE BOYD (30s). His manners fit right in with the rest of the scumbags, but his clothes and gold watch don't. Higher class of scum.

He approaches a STRIPPER on a smoke break.

LAWRENCE
 I'd like to have my ten dollars back.
 Please.

STRIPPER
 What?

LAWRENCE
 I tipped you twenty, hopping to see
 some T & A, but I barely got to see
 some A. So I deserve a partial refund.

STRIPPER
 I ain't refunding you anythin'.

Lawrence steps closer to her. Menacing. Things about to get ugly when --

LANCE
 There a problem here?

LAWRENCE

I want my ten dollars back.

LANCE

(to the stripper)

Give Mr. Boyd his money back.

Off the Stripper's jaw dropping...

INT. "THE LUCKY ORCHID" - VICTOR'S OFFICE - NIGHT

The Stripper is PISSED.

STRIPPER

I want my ten bucks! I earned them!

The owner, VICTOR (60s), sits behind his desk, feeding stacks of bills into a money counter. The rings under his eyes seem to say "I'm so tired of this shit".

VICTOR

The new girl wants her money back.

Lance stands in a corner. Silent and stoic.

VICTOR

Let me tell you a story about this kid. Tragic story. After his mother died, his drunk redneck father started beating him. And the kid always fought back. Lots of attitude. Lots of energy. Like you. Every night, when his dad came back from work, he stood his ground, but still, he got his ass kicked.

A couple of Victor's GOONS stash stacks of bills into a briefcase.

VICTOR

So, one day, he headed over to the local gym. Offered to start mopping the floors and clean up on weekends. For free! All he wanted in return was the chance to hang out with the heavy weights who trained there. They liked him. He sparred with them a bit now and then. Learned a few moves. Four months later, one night, it's the dad who gets his ass kicked. "No more" said the kid. And guess what happened the next day?

STRIPPER

Dad came back from work and left the kid alone.

VICTOR

No. Kid came back from school and noticed that the lock of his home had been changed.

He lets that sink in.

VICTOR

Kid left home. Left school. Left town. Found a job. Promised himself to never look back. But he did look back, wondering what could have happened if he just stayed and took it a bit longer. Maybe he could have finished school? Maybe he could have had a better future? A better life?

STRIPPER

So what?

VICTOR

Mr. Boyd is the Mayor's nephew and his uncle has the power to shut us down whenever he wants. I don't want to come here one day and find out someone changed *my* lock. Do you?

INT. "THE LUCKY ORCHID" - CORRIDOR - LATER

Lance escorts the Stripper out of the office.

STRIPPER

Lemme guess. That kid was him.

LANCE

No. It was me.

He takes out his wallet. Hands her a ten dollar bill.

LANCE

Here's your ten bucks.

CUT TO:

INT. "THE LUCKY ORCHID" - PRIVATE ROOM - NIGHT

Bodies grinding in the dark.

Lawrence gets a lap-dance from another STRIPPER. He gropes the girl without mercy. No rules for him. Suddenly, he notices something that pisses him off.

He takes the girl's jaw. Has a closer look at her face, noticing a BRUISE.

LAWRENCE
What is this?

STRIPPER
It's nothing, just --

LAWRENCE
What the hell is this?

STRIPPER
My boyfriend hit me.

LAWRENCE
Your boyfriend is a very bad man...
who ruined my dance.

INT. "THE LUCKY ORCHID" - MAIN FLOOR - NIGHT

Lawrence is now at the bar, inspecting the girls on stage as if they were merchandise. Barry hands him a drink.

BARRY
On the house.

LAWRENCE
(pointing)
Her.

BARRY
What's wrong with Jenna? You always
ask for Jenna.

LAWRENCE
She's got this... bruise. I'm not
paying for damaged goods.
(pointing)
Get me that one.

He's pointing right at Alyssa.

LAWRENCE
The others just shake their ass. But
she dances. She really dances.
(a dog with a bone)
I want her.

INT. "THE LUCKY ORCHID" - VICTOR'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Aly is PISSED.

ALYSSA

I don't do no private dances.

VICTOR

If you turn him down, he'll want me to fire you. And unlike you, I don't have a choice. Thank God.

Off Aly, between a rock and a hard place...

EXT. DESERT TOWN - NIGHT

The moon hangs high, bathing the town in silver.

INT. CRAPPY APARTMENT - BECKY'S ROOM - NIGHT

Aly cracks open the door to check on Becky, careful not to make a sound but --

Becky springs out from her bed and goes to HUG her mom.

ALYSSA

(hugging back)

Gotta stop doing this, bunny. Back to bed. C'mon.

She tucks her in.

BECKY

Tell me a story.

ALYSSA

Ain't no time for stories --

BECKY

Please!

ALYSSA

Okay, just a short one.

She sits on Becky's bed... looking grim and dejected.

ALYSSA

Once there was this village where the prettiest girls in the kingdom lived...

INT. "THE LUCKY ORCHID" - PRIVATE ROOM - EARLIER

Lawrence, alone, pours himself some champagne while he waits for Aly.

ALYSSA (V.O.)
 And every year, the evil queen sent her soldiers to this village to pick the prettiest girl and take her to the castle. The queen sacrificed these girls to steal their beauty.

"THE LUCKY ORCHID" - LOCKER ROOM

Aly paces back and forth, on edge. Takes a puff from her asthma inhaler.

ALYSSA (V.O.)
 But one day, soldiers picked a girl who decided she wouldn't go with them. So she asked for her boyfriend's help, a young wizard.

Lance talks to her. Calms her down. Tells her his plan.

LATER

Aly takes a deep breath, getting ready for something unpleasant.

ALYSSA (V.O.)
 To save her life, this wizard came up with a spell...

Lance SMACKS Aly's face hard - drops her to the floor.

ALYSSA (V.O.)
 A spell that made her ugly.

"THE LUCKY ORCHID" - PRIVATE ROOM

Aly enters. Psychedelic lights dance across her body to REVEAL a swelling BRUISE on her cheek...

Lawrence spots it. Stares murder.

ALYSSA (V.O.)
 When the soldiers noticed this, they were mad...

He holds that champagne glass so hard that it BURSTS.

ALYSSA (V.O.)
But they had to pick another girl.

LOCKER ROOM

Right after the punch, Lance helps Aly back to her feet.

ALYSSA (V.O.)
So the girl stayed with the wizard and they lived happily ever after. And he didn't care that she was ugly, because he loved her very very much.

They HUG.

BECKY'S ROOM

Becky notices Aly's bruise

BECKY
What happened to your face, mommy?

VICTOR'S OFFICE - EARLIER

Aly answers that same question to Victor.

ALYSSA
Bathroom floor was wet. I slipped.

He turns to GLARE at Lance.

VICTOR
This reeks of you, boy.

No change in Lance's poker face.

VICTOR
You can hit your girl all you want.
But if you hurt my pocket by damaging my merchandise, I'm gonna hurt you back.
(pauses, thinks)
No bonus for you two this month.

That hits home, especially with:

ALYSSA
You said it was a done deal!

LANCE
Aly --

ALYSSA
We need that dough, Lance!

LANCE
(leading her out)
Come.

ALYSSA
How are we gonna pay the rent --

LANCE
By keeping our jobs.

CUT TO:

EXT. DESERT TOWN - DAWN

The fiery SUNBALL rises behind the horizon, promising a hell of a hot day.

EXT. KIDS PLAYGROUND - DAY

Crappy public playground in a quiet part of town. The desert wind whistles a lonely tune. Desolate, except for:

Becky sits on a rusted swing that SQUEAKS like a pig as Aly pushes her --

BECKY
Higher!

And --

BECKY
Higher!

And --

BECKY
Higher!

And --

Out of nowhere, a HAND PRESSES a handkerchief against Aly's face.

She struggles - eyes WIDE in panic - we recognize that hand from the opening - horribly BURNT --

Becky swings in and out of view - oblivious.

BECKY
Don't stop, mommy.

But Aly can't push anymore - her eyelids grow heavy --
 Becky's muffled CRY. The swing squeals into view. Now empty.
 No more fight left in Aly - she faints - her mind slipping into
BLACKNESS.

FADE IN:

EXT. KIDS PLAYGROUND - NIGHT

A parked POLICE CAR spills red and blue over the playground,
 which is now a CRIME SCENE.

The old and overweight DETECTIVE in charge interrogates Lance
 and Alyssa, who look absolutely devastated.

ALYSSA

There were at least two. Couldn't see
 no faces. They had masks.

DETECTIVE

We'll have to tap your phone in case
 they call and ask for a ransom.

LANCE

This ain't about money. We're
 broke.

INT. "THE LUCKY ORCHID" - OFFICE - NIGHT

Lance and Alyssa stand facing Victor, who points to his chest.

VICTOR

Do you see a sheriff's badge here?
 'Cause I sure don't.

LANCE

You know some shady cats. Maybe
 someone knows someone who heard
 something about this job going down.
 Just put out some feelers. It's all we
 ask.

Victor gives this some thought.

VICTOR

I will.
 (then)
 If you go back to work. Right now.

Teary-eyed Aly opens her mouth, about to thunder some verbal abuse when --

LANCE
We appreciate it.

INT. "THE LUCKY ORCHID" - CORRIDOR - LATER

Lance leads Aly out of the office, trying to calm her down.

ALYSSA
Can you believe this prick?

LANCE
Sometimes you just gotta let bullies do their thing.

CUT TO:

INT. APARTMENT BUILDING - CORRIDOR - NIGHT

Lance and Aly drag their feet towards their front door, surprised to find:

A PACKAGE at their doorstep, roughly the size of a pizza box.

A pink HAIR RIBBON lies over it.

Aly takes the ribbon in her hands like she just found gold.

ALYSSA
This is hers.

INT. CRAPPY APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

They RIP open the package to find:

A DIAL PLATE spirit board like the one from the opening.

They have a closer look at it.

It's marked with cryptic symbols, numbers, letters, the words "yes", "no" and the phrase "She dies".

LANCE
The hell is this?

ALYSSA
I'm calling the cops.

She goes to the phone --

SCREECH! - the needle squeaks as it moves on its own.

They turn --

The needle stops to point at the word "No".

It freaks them out.

ALYSSA
Lance did you --

LANCE
Yeah, saw it too.

ALYSSA
What the fuck.

They take a few seconds to process what they just saw. No idea how to deal with this.

LANCE
Call them.

She GRABS the phone, but before she can make the call --

SQUINK! - the needle moves to point at "She dies".

SCREECH! - back to "No".

SCREECH! - "She dies".

She puts the phone down in slack-jawed amazement.

SQUEAK! - the pointer screeches to the letter "I".

SCREECH! - then to the letter "H"

LANCE
I think it's... *saying something.*

She gets a pen and a notepad, starts writing down the message.

ALYSSA
I... H...

The needle SPINS faster and faster - she scrambles to keep up --

LANCE
You missed a "D" --

But she manages to write the whole thing.

The pointer finally STOPS moving.

She reads the notepad. Can't believe her eyes. Shows the message to Lance:

"I have your daughter."

LANCE
This is bullshit.

SQUEAK! - the needle moves to the letter "P".

FLASHES: Aly taking down the message - the needle spinning --
Once she's done, they look in shock at what she just wrote --
"Potty mouth".

Off their troubled stares...

CUT TO:

INT. TOY REPAIR SHOP - DAY

Dusty shelves filled with ANTIQUE TOYS.

OWNER (O.S.)
Of course I'm sure.

Lance and Aly stand before the spectacled OWNER (60s) who gestures at the DIAL PLATE lying on the counter.

OWNER
I examined every inch of this thing. No batteries. No wires. No IR receiver to operate it remotely. No nothing.

LANCE
Then how can it move?

The owner SPINS the message needle with his finger.

OWNER
(you idiot)
Like this.

INT. PICKUP - DAY (MOVING)

Lance and Aly on their way home. The DIAL PLATE lies between them, where Becky used to sit.

ALYSSA

Shit is way over our heads. I say we go to the cops.

LANCE

What if they don't buy any of it?

ALYSSA

We show them the damn thing.

LANCE

Sure, we bring in the bulls. We tell them to watch that thing do its thing. But what if it don't?

ALYSSA

Why wouldn't it?

LANCE

It said it wanted no cops. All that needle's gotta do is stay still and we'll look like fools.

She hadn't considered that.

LANCE

Cops will think we're sick in the head, like the toy repair guy did. They'll dump that thing into some evidence room to gather dust and they still won't be able to find Becky.

ALYSSA

You wanna keep listening to this *thing*?

LANCE

Hell, no. But before making up my mind I wanna know what it wants.

CUT TO:

BLACK

SUPER: "1) Thou shall place your child above pain."

INT. CRAPPY APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Lance now *talks* to the dial plate.

LANCE

You can hear us, right?

SCREECH! - the needle marks "Yes".

LANCE
Where is she?

SCREECH! - "No".

ALYSSA
Who took her?

SCREECH! - needle spins a full circle - stops at "No".

ALYSSA
Why her?

SCREECH! - "No" - the pointer's movements get more violent - the dial plate getting *impatient* by their questions --

LANCE
Who... what are you?

SCREECH! - "No".

LANCE
What do you want?

SCREECH! - "S"

Aly grabs pen and paper - writes down --

QUICK CUTS: the pointer spinning - her hand writing --

Once she finishes, she reads it out loud:

ALYSSA
"Sacrifice".

LANCE
Sacrifice? What do you mean
"sacrifice"?

FLASHES: the needle TURNS - Aly writes - SKIP TO:

Notepad reads: "*Must hurt*".

ALYSSA
Fuck this shit.

SCREECH! - "She dies".

INT. CRAPPY APARTMENT - BATHROOM - LATER

Lance and Aly squeezed in here for a private deliberation.

LANCE
No. Cops will think we're nuts --

ALYSSA
But that ribbon is hers. It's
evidence.

LANCE
We tell them about the ribbon then.
But just the ribbon.

EXT. DESERT TOWN - TIME LAPSE

Rolling clouds take over the sky, choking out the sun.

INT. CRAPPY APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - DAY

The Detective updates Lance and Aly.

DETECTIVE
Only DNA we could find on that ribbon
was your daughter's.

LANCE
What's next?

DETECTIVE
We're knocking on doors, but still no
witnesses.

INTERCUT WITH: VICTOR'S OFFICE

Lance and Aly stand before:

VICTOR
I've been working the phones, but no
bites. Nobody saw a thing.

DETECTIVE
-- no active clues at the moment --

VICTOR
-- nobody heard a thing --

DETECTIVE
-- gets exponentially harder after
forty eight hours, but we're not
giving up --

VICTOR
Now get out of my office.

EXT. "THE LUCKY ORCHID" - PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Lance and Aly PUSH their PICKUP. As they do, Aly gives up, falls to her knees and cries.

He kneels by her side and HUGS her.

INT. CRAPPY APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Lance and Aly stand before the DIAL PLATE lying on a table. Troubled stares. They know they're running out of options.

LANCE
(to the dial)
First I want to know she's alright.

SQUINK! - "No".

LANCE
Then we ain't playing this game.

SCREECH! - "She dies".

That's it. Aly can't take it any more.

ALYSSA
(to the dial)
Want it to hurt you asshole?

She turns - disappears into the kitchen.

Lance watches with a question mark on his face.

She comes back holding a BIG KNIFE.

LANCE
Aly no, wait --

Too late - she's already CUTTING open a gash in her forearm.

She places her arm over the dial - blood trickling down onto it.

Their eyes POP as they notice:

Her blood is SUCKED into the dial through cracks in the wood, as if the dial plate was *thirsty* for it.

ALYSSA
Holy shit.

Tense beat as they wait for the verdict.

SQUEAK! - "M"

QUICK CUTS: the needle TURNS - they get another message:

ALYSSA
 (reading)
 "Must hurt more".

LANCE
 Just tell us what you want.

They wait for the dial's response.

But the needle remains still.

EXT. DESERT TOWN - DAWN

A red SUN rises to bake the town once again.

INT. CRAPPY APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Faint daylight filters in through the windows. Lance and Aly still sit at the table staring at the dial.

Tired faces. Red eyes. Tough all-nighter.

ALYSSA
 (to the dial)
 Please tell us where she is.

No response.

ALYSSA
 (to Lance)
 What do we do?

LANCE
 We stop wasting time.

He stands up. A man with a plan. Exits the room.

He comes back, carrying a TOOL BOX.

Takes out some nasty PLIERS.

ALYSSA
 Oh hell no.

LANCE
 It's Becky's life on the line.

ALYSSA
 Stop, maybe there's another way --

LANCE

Sometimes you gotta let the bullies do
their thing.

He puts the pliers into his mouth.

He GROANS in pain as he pulls and pulls and pulls until --

Pliers come out claspng the loot: a bloody back tooth.

He drops the tooth on the dial plate.

LANCE

There you go. That enough?

SQUEAK! - "Yes".

LANCE

(spits blood)

Good.

SQUEAK! - "N"

QUICK CUTS: Aly writes down another message --

Her face falls once she's done.

The notepad reads: "*Now her*".

ALYSSA

I can't --

SQUINK! - "She dies".

Off Aly: weighing her options, or lack thereof...

LATER

Aly sits on the floor, downs a glass of Jack.

ALYSSA

I can do this, I can do this, I can do
this --

Lance holds her in a tight embrace as she puts the PLIERS into
her mouth - starts to YANK --

A muffled wail of agony. A rolling tear of pain.

He caresses her hair. Seems in as much pain as she is.

She keeps at it - drooling blood --

Until finally her back tooth is out.

She SPITS crimson on the floor.

Goes to the dial plate. Puts her tooth right next to Lance's.

ALYSSA
Now you take us to her.

CUT TO:

EXT. DESERT - DAY

The PICKUP TRUCK kicks up dust, looking the size of a toy as it cuts across the vast desert.

Probably somewhere in the Mojave.

INT. PICKUP

Lance behind the wheel. Aly rides shotgun. Up ahead they spot a DECREPIT SHACK.

She talks to the dial plate, lying on her lap.

ALYSSA
That one over there?

SCREECH! - "Yes".

EXT. DESERT SHACK - DAY

The PICKUP pulls up by the battered SHANTY that simmers in the noon sun. A rusted weathervane squeaks in the wind.

Lance and Aly get down, hurrying over to the door --

INT. DESERT SHACK - MAIN ROOM

BAM! - door FLIES open - Aly and Lance BURST in - desperately looking for:

ALYSSA
Becky!

But all they find is raddled furniture.

STAIRWELL

BAM! - they SHOVE the door open - hurry down the steps --

LANCE
Becky!

They reach:

THE BASEMENT

No sign of Becky.

ALYSSA

Dammit.

Daylight spills down the stairwell, bathing a shabby table where an old TATTERED SCRAPBOOK sits.

Lance opens it. On the very first page he finds "*The Stepmother's Commandments*".

LANCE

(reading)

"Thou shall place your child above pain". The hell is this?

He flips some pages, finds newspaper clippings and handwritten annotations. Faded ink, some entries are unreadable.

He also finds an old SEPIA PICTURE of a woman with a GLASS EYE sitting behind a desk. This is THE STEPMOTHER (60s). Harsh judgemental stare. An aura of stern authority.

As Lance tries to figure out what this is --

ALYSSA (O.S.)

Lance.

He looks up, follows her stare to a PINK SHOELACE under the table. She picks it up, recognizes it.

ALYSSA

Becky was here.

CUT TO:

INT. DESERT SHACK - MAIN ROOM - DAY

Lance and Aly sit at a table with the DIAL PLATE.

LANCE

Where is she?

SQUEAK! - "No".

LANCE

What are we doing here?

QUICK CUTS: mad - frenetic - the needle spins - Aly writes down the message --

ALYSSA
(reading)
"Calendar".

They look around, spot a CALENDAR stuck on a wall.

LANCE
What with the calendar?

FLASHES - the needle SPINS - Aly writes - SKIP TO:

ALYSSA
(reading)
"Mark day ten".

Lance walks over to the calendar.

CIRCLES the tenth day of the month as...

LANCE
What happens on the tenth?

SCREECH! - "She dies".

LANCE
That's in five days. Why? What happens in five days?

The needle stays still.

LANCE
The hell do you want from us?

The dial plate REPLIES - Aly writes it all down - SKIP to:

ALYSSA
(reading)
"Six more sacrifices".

Aly drops the pen, wishing she could wake up from this nightmare.

ALYSSA
I want my daughter back right now!

SCREECH! - "No".

ALYSSA
Why are you doing this? What are these sacrifices for?

SCREECH! - "No".

LANCE
Alright. I'll do the sacrifices. But
you leave Aly out of this. I'll do
them alone --

SCREECH! - "No".

EXT. DESERT SHACK - DAY

Lance chases after Aly as she STOMPS over towards the PICKUP.

ALYSSA
I ain't doing this, Lance.

LANCE
The hell are you going?

ALYSSA
To the cops.

LANCE
Cops have no leads.

ALYSSA
Gonna give them one.

He STOPS her.

LANCE
You bring the bulls in, that dial is
worthless --

ALYSSA
It's already worthless --

LANCE
And they'll think we're nuts --

ALYSSA
What else can we do --

LANCE
We calm down, go back in there --

ALYSSA
That is nuts --

LANCE
We see what it wants --

ALYSSA
How can you trust that thing --

LANCE

I don't --

ALYSSA

Then what are we arguing about --

LANCE

It's our only lead --

ALYSSA

It's bullshit --

LANCE

Damn right it is. And I'm gonna put up with it, 'cause my daughter's life is on the line.

ALYSSA

Now you care about her life.

That hits home. Whatever she's talking about, it hit him hard.

LANCE

Let's not go there. Ain't the right time for that.

She tries to calm down.

ALYSSA

Right. I'm sorry.

LANCE

Calendar says we got five days to figure this out. Let's hear what it wants and take it from there.

Aly holds Becky's shoelace tight in her hand.

Stares at it. Stares at it hard.

CUT TO:

BLACK

SUPER: "2) Thou shall place your child above money".

INT. DESERT SHACK - MAIN ROOM - DAY

Lance and Aly sit at the table with the DIAL PLATE - she's just finished taking down a message:

ALYSSA

"Get twenty thousand dollars".

LANCE
So it's about money after all.

SCREECH! - "No".

LANCE
Then what do we need the money for?

No response.

LANCE
We ain't got that kind of dough.

SCREECH! - "She dies".

ALYSSA
We can pull teeth all day long, but
we can't shit money.

SQUEAK! - "X"

Aly picks the pen to write down the message --

But the needle remains still.

ALYSSA
What do you mean "X"?

No response.

Lance turns, looks around. His eyes scanning the walls, the floor.

Spots a marked floorboard - someone scraped an "X" on the wood.

Aly sees it too.

They lift the loose floorboard...

Their faces showing they don't like what they've found under it. Not one bit.

EXT. DESERT SHACK - DAY

They sit at the porch.

ALYSSA
The fuck does that thing want with
us?

LANCE
Dunno. But check this out.

He produces the SCRAPBOOK, shows it to her.

ALYSSA
(reading)
"The Stepmother's Commandments".
The hell is that?

LANCE
The first sacrifice was about pain,
remember?

QUICK FLASH: Aly pulling a TOOTH out.

LANCE
Now read the first commandment.

ALYSSA
"Thou shall place your child above
pain."

LANCE
Now the second sacrifice is about
dough. And the second commandment --

ALYSSA
(reading)
"Thou shall place your child above
money"

This exchange INTERCUTS with:

INT. "THE LUCKY ORCHID" - MAIN FLOOR - NIGHT

Closing time. Barry herds out a couple of heavy drinkers that don't wanna leave. The bartender mops the floor.

OUTSIDE AT THE BACK

Lance and Aly crouch behind a DUMPSTER, looking tense.

ALYSSA
This is nuts.

LANCE
Damn right it is. But we know this
joint inside out. It's our best
shot.

She swallows hard, tense about whatever is about to go down.

DESERT SHACK

LANCE

That thing wants seven sacrifices.
And there are seven commandments.

ALYSSA

(catching up)

One for each sacrifice.

(then)

So this thing's... what... testing
us?

LANCE

Seems so.

ALYSSA

How are we gonna get twenty grand
in just a few days --

LANCE

Victor moves that kind of dough.

ALYSSA

He's never gonna lend us --

A dark thought crosses her mind.

ALYSSA

Oh hell no.

"THE LUCKY ORCHID" - OUT BACK

ALYSSA

You see any other way?

LANCE

I wish.

ALYSSA

Then let's do it.

They put black SKI MASKS over their heads.

Tension BUILDS as:

IN THE SHACK - EARLIER

Lance and Aly look at what they found under the floorboard:

TWO REVOLVERS and a box of bullets.

"THE LUCKY ORCHID" - BACK ENTRANCE

Lance goes to the BACKDOOR - chain locked with a padlock - cuts the chains with some bolt cutters - SNAP!

Lance and Aly draw their GUNS.

LANCE

Anyone recognizes our voices, we're done. Let your piece do the talking.

Aly nods.

"THE LUCKY ORCHID" - MAIN FLOOR

BLAM! - Aly fires a SHOT at the ceiling - trains her gun at the remaining staff - FROZEN in fear.

"THE LUCKY ORCHID" - OFFICE

WHAM! - door flies open - Lance STORMS in - surprises Victor counting the daily taking.

Victor's GOON tries to draw --

WHACK! - Lance hits his head with the butt of his gun - knocks him out.

Lance turns his gun to Victor - throws him an empty BAG.

VICTOR

(unfazed)

You sure about this, son?

Lance pulls BACK the hammer.

Victor starts putting money into the bag.

MAIN FLOOR

Staff and a few clients lie on the floor - Aly keeps her gun trained on them.

She spots Lawrence. Not causing any trouble but...

WHAM! - she KICKS the fucker's ribs - just for fun.

OFFICE

Victor ZIPS the bag shut, now filled with cash.

Lance takes the bag.

Searches him - takes his cellphone - and a set of keys.
He then TOSSES the desk phone against a wall - CRASH!

VICTOR
Soon you'll *wish* I called the cops.

CORRIDOR

Lance exits the office - takes out the keys and locks Victor inside.

PARKING LOT

Lance and Aly hurry over to Victor's ride: a shinny CADILLAC.
He takes out Victor's keys - the Caddy CHIRPS.

DESERT ROAD

Tires SCREECH as the Caddy SWERVES into the road.
It picks up speed - twin backlights glow in the dark like red evil eyes. Dwindling as the ride speeds away.
The Cadillac finally is swallowed in --

BLACKNESS

Deep and silent until...

A LIGHTER

Flicks on - a FLARE of light reveals we're somewhere else:

EXT. DESERT - NIGHT

Lance lights a rag, sticking out from the Cadillac's fuel tank.
The makeshift fuse burns as he walks away.
He reaches his PICKUP, parked in the middle of nowhere.
Aly sits against the front tire, eyes glued to the money inside the bag.

ALYSSA
There's a whole lotta rent in here.
(then)
You feel bad... about what we done?

LANCE
He's got a pocket full of money and a
heart full of shit.

ALYSSA
Me neither.

BOOM! - the Cadillac explodes into a raging FIREBALL.
But their eyes are still glued to the money.

ALYSSA
Could be a nice boost for Becky's
fund.

Lance takes the bag - drops it into the truck --

As he does, one stack of bills falls out.

It bounces off the seat, dropping to the ride's floor mat.

INT. DESERT SHACK - MAIN ROOM - NIGHT

Lance and Aly are back with the DIAL PLATE.

LANCE
It's done. We got the dough.

FLASHES: the needle turning from letter to letter - Aly
finishes writing down the message:

"Burn it".

They take this in. The thought hurts as much as when they had
to pull their teeth out.

EXT. DESERT SHACK - NIGHT

A BONFIRE now burns in front of the shack as Lance studies the
SCRAPBOOK.

Aly feeds the flames with stacks of money.

Paper ash floats in the air all around them.

LANCE
Hit was just foreplay. This is the
sacrifice.

Lance keeps flipping pages, finding a faded SEPIA PICTURE of
a GIRL standing by a VINTAGE CAR.

Handwritten under the pic: *"Eleonore M. York"*.

Aly takes a peek at what he's looking.

ALYSSA
Who's that?

LANCE
Dunno. Entries are old and the ink is faded. This thing's messy. Hard to make sense of the bits and pieces. Except this:

He flips some pages so she can have a look at the picture of the old woman with the glass eye we saw before.

LANCE
I think that might be "The Stepmother".

ALYSSA
How do you know?

LANCE
Check over her right shoulder.

She does.

The woman sits in some kind of office - a FRAMED SIGN hangs on the wall behind her back.

Aly squints, trying to read the sign.

Only the first line is big enough to be readable: "The Stepmother's Commandments".

ALYSSA
What does she gotta do with this?

LANCE
Dunno. But that pic's old. And that woman's older. She must be long dead by now.

CUT TO:

INT. DESERT SHACK - MAIN ROOM - NIGHT

Lance and Aly sit at the crappy table talking to the dial. Lance holds the SCRAPBOOK in his hand.

LANCE
What is this thing?

SCREECH! - "No".

LANCE
Who put it together?

SCREECH! - "No".

LANCE
Who the hell are you?

SQUINK! - "No".

LANCE
You The Stepmother?

No response.

LANCE
(sly grin)
Damn right you're her.

ALYSSA
Money is gone. What's next?

SQUEAK! - "No"

LANCE
What do you mean "no"?

ALYSSA
You said there were six more
sacrifices.

SQUEAK! - "No"

LANCE
Then what of our daughter?

SQUEAK! - "She dies".

ALYSSA
We had a deal!

The needle starts spelling out a message - Aly writes - let's
SKIP to:

Aly finishes writing --

"She broke it"

ALYSSA
Bullshit! We did everything you
wanted!

SQUEAK! - "No"

LANCE

We got the dough. We torched the
dough. What did we miss?

The dial replies - quick FLASHES of the needle turning - she
finishes writing the message --

She can't believe it.

ALYSSA

(reading)

"Tell her to leave".

Off Lance, wondering where this is going...

EXT. DESERT SHACK - NIGHT

Aly, alone, paces back and forth like a caged lion.

Door CREAKS open. Lance comes out. Staring at her. Staring at
her hard.

LANCE

She says you stashed part of the loot.

ALYSSA

What?

LANCE

She says you broke the deal.

ALYSSA

You think I'm dumb?

LANCE

I think there's something you ain't
telling me.

He looks her in the eye.

LANCE

I *know* there's something you ain't
telling me.

ALYSSA

I --

LANCE

And you're gonna tell it to me. Right
now.

ALYSSA

It wasn't like that. And I didn't know
this would happen. I swear --

LANCE
What did you do?

ALYSSA
I can't believe this --

She takes a puff from her asthma inhaler.

ALYSSA
When you put the bag in the truck...

QUICK FLASH: Lance drops the bag into the truck - a stack of bills falls off.

ALYSSA
You dropped a wad. It's still in there.

LANCE
You saw this --

ALYSSA
I didn't know she would --

LANCE
And you didn't tell me?

ALYSSA
We owe three months rent --

LANCE
So you decided to stash a pack of Franklins, without telling me shit.

ALYSSA
I didn't "stash" no Franklins. They just fell!

LANCE
Well, that ain't the way she sees it!

ALYSSA
(you prick)
You're siding with her...

LANCE
And you're toying with Becky's life!

ALYSSA
And what where you doing when you told me to get scraped?!

Blow below the belt.

LANCE
You know I love her.

ALYSSA
"Toying with her life". I'm the reason
she's alive.

LANCE
You had to play the "murderer" card.

ALYSSA
And you had to side with that bitch.

LANCE
It ain't about sides. All I'm saying
is: When someone's got you by the
balls, you don't fool around. 'Cause
if you fool around... they squeeze.

ALYSSA
Fine.

She turns and STOMPS over to the truck.

LANCE
What are you doing?

She YANKS open the door, retrieves the wad of cash.

INT. DESERT SHACK - MAIN ROOM - NIGHT

Lance watches as Aly sets the money on FIRE.

ALYSSA
This is what you want? This is what
you get.

As the money burns, she talks to the dial plate.

ALYSSA
Now let's get this over with. What's
next?

No response.

ALYSSA
We burned it all. We did our part. Now
you do your part. What's next?

The needle doesn't move an inch.

ALYSSA
You give me my girl back, you hear
me?!

TIME LAPSE

The sun rises behind the horizon, casting long shadows across the arid soil.

The board's message needle remains STILL.

Aly now paces back and forth, losing her shit.

Lance remains cool, studying the SCRAPBOOK.

The sun crosses the sky at breakneck speed.

ALYSSA
 (to the dial plate)
 Please... I'll do anything...

Sun keeps rising. It's noon now.

INT. DESERT SHACK - MAIN ROOM - DAY

Aly is starting to think that:

ALYSSA
 We lost her.

LANCE
 This ain't over.

ALYSSA
 What makes you so sure?

LANCE
 I know her type. And she ain't done squeezing.

A SQUEAKING sound - Aly whips her head to the dial plate - the needle moves a few inches.

ALYSSA
 Tell us what's next. We'll do it. I promise. We'll do anything.

FLASHES: the pointer turning - Aly writing down letters - SKIP to:

Aly reads the notepad, her jaw dropping.

She stands.

Takes the dial and HURLS it across the room.

Then goes to the door and storms out.

Lance reads the notepad.

LANCE
Awww shit.

EXT. DESERT SHACK - LATER

Lance exits, sits at the porch by Aly's side.

ALYSSA
This is where we draw the line.

Off Lance's silence:

ALYSSA
You're thinking about doing it.

LANCE
I'm thinking... she needs us. Don't know what the sacrifices are all about, but she needs us to make them. All of them. She can't lose us.

ALYSSA
You want to do this?

LANCE
Hell, no. But what other choice we got?

Off Aly struggling with the decision...

CUT TO:

BLACK

SUPER: "3) Thou shall place your child above your spouse".

INT. DESERT SHACK - MAIN ROOM - LATER

Lance and Aly sit at opposite sides of the table. The dial plate in the middle.

Tense silence.

Lance flicks open a REVOLVER's cylinder. Lets the bullets fall onto the table.

Then he reloads just ONE. Spins the cylinder and SNAPS it shut.

Slides over the gun to Aly. She takes it. It weighs a ton.

She levels it at Lance's chest. The gun shakes slightly in her hands.

LANCE
You can do this.

No, she can't.

LANCE
It'll be alright.

She's not so sure about that.

LANCE
This could save Becky.

True, but her finger still can't pull the trigger.

LANCE
You have to do it.

Her finger still doesn't move, so he's forced to try another approach:

WHAM! - he BANGS a fist against the table --

LANCE
For fuck's sake, I tried to kill her,
remember?!

She remembers.

LANCE
What the hell are you waiting for!

She closes her eyes - pulls the trigger --

CLICK! - empty chamber.

They sigh a relief.

She slides the gun over to him.

He takes it.

Spins the cylinder.

Aims the gun at her.

LANCE
It'll be fine. She needs us.

She closes her eyes, wishing he's right.

He pulls the trigger - CLICK!

She opens her eyes, born again.

LANCE
See? We did it.

He sets the revolver on the table, turns to the dial plate as the needle starts MOVING --

Aly writes down the message - SKIP to:

Aly can't believe what she just wrote --

"Again"

LANCE
(to the dial)
Again my ass. You said two squeezes.

The dial REPLIES - let's JUMP to:

Aly finishes writing...

ALYSSA
"Two each".

Lance grits his teeth, struggling really hard to keep his cool.

LANCE
One more round, and we're done?

SCREECH! - "Yes".

LANCE
No more fine print bullshit.

SCREECH! - "No".

He seems ready to give it another spin, unlike:

ALYSSA
Can't do this anymore.

SCREECH! - "She dies".

LANCE
Me neither. But we will.

Lance spins the cylinder once again. Slides the gun over to Aly.

LANCE
Just one more time.

She points the gun at Lance.

LANCE
One last squeeze. It'll be fine.

She closes her eyes. Squeezes --

CLICK!

Deep breath.

She slides the gun over to him, not wanting to touch that thing ever again.

He gives the cylinder one last spin. Trains the gun at her.

LANCE
Almost done.

ALYSSA
Almost --

LANCE
It'll be alright. We'll get her back,
I promise --

He squeezes --

BLAAAMMM!! - THE GUNSHOT IS DEAFENING.

Time slows down for Lance...

He sees her body JERKING from the blast... her eyes going wide... her hand clutching her chest...

Blood seeping through her fingers...

Lance SPRINGS up from his seat... heaving the table aside...

Racing towards her...

CUT TO:

LATER

Lance approaches a window, levels the GUN at it.

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! - fires round after round after round - impossible to miss at that close range but --

The window remains untouched.

He lowers the gun.

LANCE (PRE-LAP)
She gave us blanks.

LATER

Aly is alive.

Lance pulls out small pieces of debris stuck in her chest.

LANCE

Blast made the barrel spit some wadding, but you'll be fine.

ALYSSA

Bitch sent us out on a hit with blanks?

LANCE

She's fucking with us. Big time.

ALYSSA

(re: her wounds)
I'm fine --

LANCE

Let me finish.

He disinfects her wounds with alcohol. Looks her in the eye a few times as he works.

Notices she's cold. Notices she's distant.

LANCE

You still mad at me about the money thing.

ALYSSA

You sided with her.

LANCE

Kinda lost it, yeah. But you kinda screwed things up.

ALYSSA

And you kinda sided with her.
(then)
Let's get this over with.

CUT TO:

INT. DESERT SHACK - BASEMENT - DAY

A dozen CANDLES now glow in the pitch blackness, casting eerie shadows on the walls. Aly and Lance light a few more.

LATER

They arrange a line of seven WOODEN BOWLS on the table.

LATER

Lance produces the teeth they had to pull out back at home. Puts them into the first bowl.

Aly puts a charred dollar bill into the second bowl - part of the burnt loot.

Lance puts the blank bullet casing into the third bowl.

One token for each sacrifice they made so far.

Offerings.

The other four bowls remain empty. A reminder of the sacrifices they have yet still to make.

LATER

Lance and Aly draw *CRYPTIC SYMBOLS* on the floor with chalk, copying some *MARKINGS* etched on the dial plate.

ALYSSA

So what do you make of all this? Some kind of... ritual thing?

LANCE

Dunno, but she made us keep souvenirs for a reason. I'm guessing each sacrifice is a piece of a bigger puzzle.

He turns to the dial plate.

LANCE

Am I right?

No response.

LANCE

(sly grin)
Hell yes I'm right.

LATER

The place now looks like a creepy ritual chamber with a voodoo feel.

Lance and Aly sit at the table with the dial. She reads what she just wrote on the notepad.

ALYSSA

She says she wants to talk with me
alone.

Off Lance, not liking this at all...

INT. DESERT SHACK - MAIN ROOM - DAY

Lance, alone, waits while studying the SCRAPBOOK.

He focuses on a TORN newspaper clipping which shows a snapshot of The Stepmother.

The article itself is unreadable - the ink is blurred. He can only make out bits and pieces of the headline:

"Orph Hea tress Kil Hos ge C sis"

He stares at the incomplete headline. Stares at it hard, like a puzzle he wants to figure out.

He grabs a pen from the table. Fills in some missing letters.

"Hos ge C sis" becomes "Hostage Crisis".

Bingo. He starts flipping pages, looking for clues to help him figure out the rest.

TIME LAPSE

His pen fills in another letter.

His hand flips more pages.

Going forward. Going back.

He stops.

Thinks.

Keeps reading. Eyes devouring every legible bit he can find.

He keeps filling in letters, playing Hangman.

Until...

LATER

He's done.

The headline now reads: "Orphanage Headmistress Killed in Hostage Crisis"

He stares at The Stepmother's pic.

LANCE

The hell happened to you?

The door to the basement CREAKS open. Aly comes out.

Looks like she's going to a funeral.

LANCE

What does she want now?

She tears a piece of paper from the notepad.

Lance extends his hand to take it --

But she picks the lighter from the table and sets the paper on fire.

ALYSSA

She said I couldn't tell you.

LANCE

Fuck that.

ALYSSA

Said if I did... we'd never see Becky again.

Lance doesn't know what to say.

ALYSSA

Help me with the truck.

EXT. DESERT SHACK - SUNSET

The flaming SUNBALL starts to sink behind the horizon.

Aly and Lance push the PICKUP. She jumps behind the wheel and starts it.

Lance watches with growing concern as she drives off.

INT. DESERT SHACK - BASEMENT - LATER

Lance with the dial.

LANCE
What did you tell her?

No response.

LANCE
What did you ask from her?

The needle stays still.

CUT TO:

BLACK

SUPER: "4) Thou shall place your child above your dignity".

INT. DESERT SHACK - BASEMENT - LATER

Lance sits alone on the floor, studying the SCRAPBOOK.

He flips pages, stopping to examine the picture of the enigmatic GIRL once again.

"Eleonore M. York".

He gives this some thought.

Then closes the book, stands up with a purpose as we --

CUT TO:

EXT. RETIREMENT HOME - NIGHT

A modest retirement home in the town's outskirts.

INT. RETIREMENT HOME - REC ROOM - NIGHT

A group of SENIORS watch TV in the background as Lance sits at a table with ELEONORE (85): a bony woman with an oxygen mask and an unsettling intensity in her stare.

ELEONORE
There must be dozens of "Eleonore
M. Yorks" in the phone book.

LANCE

Only seven in this state. And the one I'm looking for grew up in the thirties.

He opens the scrapbook and points at the VINTAGE CAR in the girl's picture.

LANCE

When this type of ride was still around.

Eleonore stares at the picture, her eyes watering a bit as they beam recognition, which means:

LANCE

That's you.

(then)

What's your pic doing there? Who wrote this thing?

ELEONORE

My parents did.

She closes the SCRAPBOOK and pushes it back to him with dismiss.

ELEONORE

But pay no heed to this. You'll find nothing useful in it.

LANCE

Just tell me what the hell's going on.

ELEONORE

You'll know once you complete all the sacrifices.

LANCE

Got no time for games. My girl's life is on the line.

ELEONORE

Follow The Stepmother's instructions and she'll be fine.

LANCE

You know her?

ELEONORE

She saved my life.

LANCE
What are the sacrifices for?

ELEONORE
To help you.

LANCE
(you're crazy)
Help me?

ELEONORE
You and the mother. As parents. And
as a couple.

LANCE
Bullshit. She took my daughter. And
now she's tearing us apart.

ELEONORE
So she can build you back up
stronger.

LANCE
Wanna tell that to the detective
working the case?

ELEONORE
The police won't believe a single
word of this tale, and you know it.

He knows it.

ELEONORE
So stop wasting time with me. If
you want your girl back, do
everything The Stepmother says.
Everything.

CUT TO:

EXT. DESERT SHACK - NIGHT

Lance is back at the shack, waiting at the porch.

He hears a coughing engine. Looks up --

The PICKUP pulls up.

Driver's door swings open. Aly gets down.

She shambles over towards the entrance. That fire in her eyes
has died, her gaze lost far away.

Her gait is arduous. Almost looks like she's sleepwalking.

Lance stares. *What the hell happened to her?*

She drags her feet past him as if he didn't exist.

LANCE
What happened?

ALYSSA
Don't worry. It's done.

INT. DESERT SHACK - BASEMENT - LATER

Lance watches as Aly picks up one of the empty bowls and holds it under her chin.

She sobs... a tear rolls down her face...

Falling into the bowl...

Her offering to the altar.

The sight breaks his heart.

LANCE
I found her. The girl from the picture. She's still alive.

ALYSSA
What'd she say?

LANCE
Nothing useful. But she knows more than she tells.

ALYSSA
Wanna talk to her myself. Where is she?

LANCE
First tell me what you did.

ALYSSA
Doesn't matter.

LANCE
Matters to me.

ALYSSA
You know I can't --

LANCE
Tell me.

ALYSSA
I killed someone!

That leaves him speechless.

LATER

Lance alone with the dial.

LANCE
She said I had to do something to
complete her sacrifice.

QUICK CUTS: the needle turns - Lance writes the message down --
The notepad reads: "Find out what she did".

LANCE
She said she killed someone.

SCREECH! - "No"

LANCE
She lied.

SCREECH! - "Yes"

LANCE
Time's running out. Just tell me what
I gotta do.

SCREECH! - "No".

LANCE
Then I'll go ask her --

SCREECH! - "No".

LANCE
You want me to find out by myself.

SCREECH! - "Yes".

PRE-LAP: the sound of a NOISY CROWD at...

INT. "THE LUCKY ORCHID" - MAIN FLOOR - NIGHT

Music blaring. Girls dancing. Scumbags drinking.

Lance, off duty, hangs at the bar, having a chat with the
bartender.

LANCE

...so cops are still looking. Or so they say.

BARTENDER

If there's anything I can do...

LANCE

Just worried about Aly. She took off yesterday, was gone all night. She's been acting weird. Been asking around and Jenna said she came to work?

BARTENDER

She did.

LANCE

What happened?

BARTENDER

Nothing happened. She came, did her number, then went home.

LANCE

You noticed anything strange?

BARTENDER

Nope.

LANCE

She had a fight with someone?

BARTENDER

Nope.

LANCE

Nothing unusual?

BARTENDER

Nothing.

Lance looks around.

Catches Barry staring at him.

Catches a STRIPER staring at him.

He know something's off. Turns back to the bartender.

LANCE

Stop bullshiting me.

BARTENDER

(beat)

Alright, I'll tell you. But promise me
you won't do anything stupid.

Off Lance, his wheels starting to turn...

CUT TO:

INT. RETIREMENT HOME - REC ROOM - NIGHT

Aly has come for a face-to-face with:

ELEONORE

I said everything I had to say. And
I'll say no more.

ALYSSA

I just wanna know why.

ELEONORE

Why what?

ALYSSA

Why this is happening to us.

Eleonore takes off her mask and leans forward.

ELEONORE

I can tell you're a smart girl. You
must have figured it out by now.

Aly is getting pissed.

ALYSSA

I told you, I don't know.

ELEONORE

Think harder.

ALYSSA

Ain't got no clue --

ELEONORE

You know --

ALYSSA

We don't deserve this --

ELEONORE

And I know you know --

ALYSSA
Just tell me --

ELEONORE
Say it --

ALYSSA
No, you say it --

ELEONORE
Because you're lousy parents.

Aly struggles to process this.

ALYSSA
So my girl was taken... 'cause I'm
a shitty mom.

Eleonore smiles a maternal smile.

ELEONORE
Not for long, sugar. Not for long.

CUT TO:

EXT. "THE LUCKY ORCHID" - PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Lance's RIDE, parked between two TRUCKS.

INT. PICKUP

Lance, behind the wheel, talks to the DIAL PLATE on his lap.

LANCE
I found out what she did. She...
uh...

It's embarrassing for him to even say it out loud.

LANCE
She did a private dance. That's all
I know.
(then)
We done?

SCREECH! - "No".

LANCE
The hell do you want now?

QUICK CUTS: the dial REPLIES - Lance writes down a message
until --

The notepad reads "Find out details".

INT. "THE LUCKY ORCHID" - PRIVATE ROOM - NIGHT

Door opens and Lance walks in, calmly telling a STRIPPER to --

LANCE

Scram.

As she leaves --

He approaches Lawrence... who stares at him quizzically.

LANCE

She "danced" for you yesterday?

LAWRENCE

Who?

LANCE

Alyssa.

LAWRENCE

No, she didn't dance for me.

(then)

We went straight to fucking.

He smiles a shit-eating grin.

LAWRENCE

Her idea. Was so wild, had to call in
some friends.

Lance stares murder.

IN THE PICKUP - EARLIER

Lance opens the door, but before Lance can leave --

SCREECH! - the dial starts spelling another message - Lance
writes it down - SKIP TO:

Notepad reads: "Do not touch him".

PRIVATE ROOM

Lance keeps glaring at Lawrence.

His right hand comes out from his pocket wearing some badass
BRASS KNUCKLES which make a thousand promises of pain.

Lawrence's smile gets wider.

LAWRENCE

Bring it.

Lance takes a step forward but STOPS.

Oh, how he wants to beat this motherfucker. But he knows he can't. He closes his eyes. Takes a deep breath.

Then turns and walks away.

MAIN FLOOR

Lance heads for the exit as Lawrence follows him and calls him a:

LAWRENCE

Pussy! I should do you too!

The Bartender watches. Barry watches. Strippers watch. Patrons watch.

But all he can do is leave.

CUT TO:

INT. DESERT SHACK - MAIN ROOM - NIGHT

Door SQUEAKS open as Lance enters.

Aly sits on the floor, hugging her knees, her gaze still lost. She barely acknowledges his presence.

He walks past her without a word, heads for the basement.

Each one of them in their own world of pain.

INT. DESERT SHACK - BASEMENT - LATER

Lance picks the bowl in which Aly cried, puts his BRASS KNUCKLES inside.

His offering.

He sets the bowl on the table along with the others. Now four of them bear tokens.

Three to go.

INT. DESERT SHACK - MAIN ROOM - LATER

Lance sits by Aly's side.

LANCE

If I knew... I'd never ask this of you.

ALYSSA

"Sometimes you just gotta let bullies do their thing". Isn't that what you always say?

LANCE

Sometimes I say some very stupid shit. But this is different. They raped you.

ALYSSA

I didn't say "no". Not once.

LANCE

I know.
(somehow ashamed)
Everyone knows.

ALYSSA

You're blaming me for this?!

LANCE

You didn't even tell me --

ALYSSA

She told me not to --

LANCE

I would never let you do it --

ALYSSA

Couldn't risk something happening to Becky --

LANCE

You surely did when you stashed that money!

SMACK! - Aly SLAPS Lance's face.

He can't believe she did that. He just stares at her, wondering how things got so out of control.

LANCE

Alright. We need to calm down --

ALYSSA

We need to get moving.

She glances at the calendar.

ALYSSA
We ain't got much time.

CUT TO:

INT. DESERT SHACK - BASEMENT - NIGHT

They both sit at the table - getting the next message - Aly finishes writing:

ALYSSA
"Give money back".

LANCE
You mean the loot?

SQUINK! - "Yes".

LANCE
We burned it.

ALYSSA
We can't give it back. And if
Victor finds out we ripped him off,
he's gonna --

She stops, suddenly understanding that:

LANCE
That's the point.

CUT TO:

BLACK

SUPER: "5) Thou shall place your child above your fears".

EXT. "THE LUCKY ORCHID" - DAY

The PICKUP pulls into the deserted parking lot.

INT. "THE LUCKY ORCHID" - MAIN FLOOR - DAY

Empty and eerily silent. Dusty sunlight filters through the windows.

Lance and Aly walk in, carrying a BAG.

They find Victor and three of his GOONS sitting at a table. They've been waiting.

LANCE

You're not gonna like this, but I need you to listen --

VICTOR

You two hit my joint the other night. Am I right or am I right?

Lance and Aly stare in tense silence.

VICTOR

You wanted to meet in a public place. If you want that, it's because you're afraid of me. If you're afraid of me, it's because you did something to piss me off. And let's not forget you two may or may not be in dire need of cash to pay a ransom.

LANCE

Ain't that simple. But it don't matter. We've come to give it back.

He throws the bag at Victor.

He opens it, peers in, noticing:

VICTOR

This is barely a fraction of what you took. Maybe she can dance for us while you go fetch the rest.

LANCE

Money we took is gone. So we're paying out from our own pocket, which ain't deep as yours.

ALYSSA

We drained our bank account. Our girl's college fund. It's all we got.

Victor takes this in, then:

VICTOR

Keys.

ALYSSA

Keys?

VICTOR

Don't know how much I can get for that piece of shit you're driving, but I'm getting it. Or maybe I'll torch it, like you surely torched my Caddy.

Lance takes out the pickup's keys. Throws them over to Victor.

VICTOR

Now what?

LANCE

Now you show some heart for once in your life and let us go.

VICTOR

Go? After ripping me off?

THUD! - a GOON closes the front door behind their backs.

Now they're trapped in here, their hearts pounding faster and faster.

LANCE

You're pissed. I get it. But it ain't smart to make decisions when you're pissed.

VICTOR

So you think the hate I feel right now might cloud my judgment and make me be too hard on you?

LANCE

Something like that.

VICTOR

But you do acknowledge you wronged me...

LANCE

Something like that.

VICTOR

Then let's make a deal. I'll let you decide your own punishment.

A goon throws a NASTY CHAIN at Lance's feet.

VICTOR

Begin.

ALYSSA

Begin what?

VICTOR

The punishment.

LANCE

(you sick fuck)
You want us to hit each other?

VICTOR
I'd do it myself, but you got a point.
I feel too much rage right now and I
don't want to overreact.
(then)
Begin.

ALYSSA
And if we don't?

One of the goons produces a silenced HANDGUN.

VICTOR
Then I'll overreact.

Lance and Aly trade a quick glance. No idea what to do next.
Victor, getting impatient, nods to the armed goon --
He trains the HANDGUN at Aly.

LANCE
Wait! Alright! Alright!

Lance picks up the chain. Hands it over to Aly.

LANCE
Hit me.

That's the last thing she wants to do right now but --
CLICK! - the goon removes the safety --
Aly - what to do - what to do --

LANCE
Do it!

Goon is ready to fire --

LANCE
Do it now!

WHAM! - she HITS Lance's face --
THUD! - he eats floor - spitting blood.

VICTOR
Righteous!

Aly drops the chain, sickened about what she did.
The goon keeps his HANDGUN on her.
Lance struggles to his feet.

Picks the chain. His turn now.

Eyes locked on Aly.

Can't help but HESITATE.

VICTOR
Oh c'mon! You hit her before to get
her out of trouble!

The goon will fire in...

VICTOR
Five... four... three... two...

LANCE
(to Aly)
I'm sorry.

WHAM! - the chain SLAMS against her stomach --

THUD! - she HITS the floor - grabs her ribs - GASPS for air.

VICTOR
Righteous!

Victor grabs the money bag.

Heads over to the door.

VICTOR
We're even now.
(then)
You're both fired.

CUT TO:

EXT. DESERT - DAY

Under the scorching sun, Lance and Aly drag their feet on their way back to the shack.

They've got a good share of cuts and bruises by now.

She stumbles - he tries to help her - but she pushes him away.

ALYSSA
Don't touch me.

He obliges. That hurt more than the recent beating.

LANCE
You see what she's doing, right?

ALYSSA

What?

LANCE

Bitch is driving us apart. We had something real, something special. And she's taking it away from us. Bit by bit. Maybe that's another sacrifice she wants.

ALYSSA

I don't think we can pin that on her.

LANCE

Even worse then. We're giving her a freebie.

Aly takes this in, knowing deep down he's right.

INT. DESERT SHACK - BASEMENT - DAY

Lance puts a bank "withdrawal" slip into an empty bowl. A token from their latest sacrifice.

Just two empty bowls now. Only two sacrifices remain.

CUT TO:

LATER

Lance and Aly sit at the table, getting new instructions from the dial plate.

She finishes writing: "Map".

LATER

They spread a local MAP over the table.

QUICK CUTS: the needle pointing at letters - numbers - Aly writing down coordinates --

Lance marks a cross on the map.

LANCE

Is Becky here?

No reply.

ALYSSA

(to Lance)

What's there?

LANCE
Nothing. Middle of nowhere.

The map MORPHS into:

EXT. DESERT - DAY

An endless stretch of scorching hot desert.

A menacing SCORPION lies on a rock as two heat-wave distorted figures pace in the background:

Lance and Aly march along, baking in the sun.

Tired.

Sweating.

Sharing a water bottle.

LATER

They STOP.

Lance looks around, then checks the map.

LANCE
This is it. We're here.

All around he sees just cacti and rocks. Nothing of interest.

He takes the DIAL PLATE out of a bag and sets it on the ground.

LANCE
What's next?

The dial replies - SKIP to:

Aly finishes writing...

ALYSSA
"Keep going".

LANCE
(rechecking the map)
No. We're here. You said this was the spot.

QUICK CUTS - the dial replies - SKIP TO:

ALYSSA
(reading)
"I lied".

LANCE
 Don't know if we got enough water to
 "keep going".

SQUINK! - "She dies".

TIME LAPSE

They keep going.

Dried, cracked lips.

The harsh desert sun doing murder to their skin.

They share the water bottle. Small sips. Forced to ration it.

They stop to catch their breaths.

Aly takes off a shoe, revealing some nasty blisters.

LANCE
 (to the dial)
 How much farther?

No response.

On the move again. Aly now with a limp. A fucking death march.

CUT TO:

BLACK

SUPER: "6) Thou shall place your child above despair".

EXT. DESERT - NIGHT

Gets pretty cold at night. Lance and Aly sit against a rock, shaking. Trying to have some rest.

As he reads the SCRAPBOOK, he solemnly declares:

LANCE
 I know why this is happening to us.

He's got her attention.

LANCE
 Because of me.
 (re: scrapbook)
 It's all in here.

ALYSSA
What? What's in there?

LANCE
Been putting together some bits and pieces...

He turns pages so she can see the pic of The Stepmother in her office.

LANCE
Turns out she was head of an orphanage in town back in the thirties. Really cared about the brats, but she was a bit cuckoo when it came to weeding out lousy adoption candidates. Each time a couple showed up, she liked putting them through the wringer. Wanted to make sure they were good enough. That they would follow her "rules".

ALYSSA
(catching up)
The commandments...

LANCE
So, obviously, nobody was good enough in her crazy bitch opinion. But one day...

He turns pages looking for a specific entry.

LANCE
Someone higher up green-lights a couple for adoption. A couple she really despised. And that's when she snaps. Stalks the couple and tries to take the kid back from them. But it don't turn out well for her...

He flips some pages to show her the headline: "Orphanage Headmistress Killed in Hostage Crisis"

ALYSSA
Cops gunned her down...

LANCE
Right.

ALYSSA
So this is... what... her ghost?

LANCE

Call it ghost. Spirit. Lollipop. It don't matter. What matters is... she's got a thing for bad parents. And...

His voice breaks a bit.

LANCE

What if *I* brought this thing into our lives.

ALYSSA

What?

LANCE

When I told you we shouldn't have Becky... I... maybe that's what got her sights on us...

Aly considers this, doesn't know what to say.

LANCE

I was younger. Dumber. Broke. And afraid. I'm glad you didn't listen to me. Glad you kept her.

He's about to break, so he sums it up.

LANCE

I'm so sorry. You know I'd give my life for her, right?

The apology sinks in.

She snuggles up to him and rests her head on his shoulder.

ALYSSA

I ain't no mommy of the year either.

EXT. DESERT - DAWN

Trudging along again. Heavy steps. Not much energy left in them.

LATER

Sun is up, blistering hot.

Aly falls to her knees, exhausted. Can't take another step.

Lance tries to help her up --

ALYSSA
No. Gimme that thing.

LANCE
Aly --

ALYSSA
Wanna have a word with that bitch.

Lance takes out the DIAL PLATE from his bag and gives it to her.

ALYSSA
(to the dial)
How much farther?

SQUEAK! - "No".

Aly closes her eyes, anger building.

ALYSSA
So you think we're bad parents huh?

SQUEAK! - "Yes".

ALYSSA
Think you can teach us how to raise
our child huh?

SQUEAK! - "Yes".

ALYSSA
You bitch.

LANCE
Aly let's go.

ALYSSA
(too tired)
I can't, Lance. Don't think I can
make it.

LANCE
Good. That means we're close.
(off her look)
This one is about despair.

She takes his hand and gets up.

LATER

They TRUDGE along, exhausted and baking in the sun. Lance carrying the DIAL PLATE.

And then...

SCREEECH!

The needle slowly TURNS.

They STOP. She takes out her notepad --

QUICK CUTS: the needle SPINS - she writes down the message -
SKIP TO:

ALYSSA
(reading)
"Y3PM".
(to the dial)
The hell does that mean?

No response.

ALYSSA
Why the stupid riddles?

LANCE
To fuck with us. To test us.

Lance reads the notepad, trying to make sense of:

LANCE
Y3PM...

He looks around, scanning his surroundings...

LANCE
Y3PM... Y3PM... C'mon, we're
smarter than this bitch...

And then he sees it:

A CACTUS shaped as a letter "Y".

LANCE
(pointing)
"Y".

They hurry over to the cactus...

But find nothing.

LANCE
Y3PM... Y3PM...

ALYSSA
(light bulb moment)
3PM!

Aly checks her watch --

It's 12PM.

ALYSSA
Could be time and place for a meet
or something.

She points at the CACTUS.

ALYSSA
"Y" marks the place. And now we...
what... gotta wait till 3PM?

LANCE
Maybe.

She looks around.

ALYSSA
Think someone's coming?

LANCE
Maybe.

TIME LAPSE

Lance and Aly wait by the cactus.

The blistering sun crosses the sky.

The plant's shadow SHIFTS across the arid soil.

Aly's watch: the minute hand turns at breakneck speed
until...

LATER

It's 3:10 PM.

They still wait by the cactus, dejected, starting to suspect
that:

LANCE

Maybe we got wrong the 3PM part. If nobody's coming, why wait? We're in the middle of the desert. Doesn't make no difference to be here at two, at three, at four. I mean, what's changed? Why would --

A sudden thought, he looks down.

LANCE

Waitamminute.

ALYSSA

What?

LANCE

The shadow.

He checks on the cactus' shadow.

ALYSSA

(catching on)

The shadow shifted.

They inspect the SHADOWED AREA.

But find nothing.

ALYSSA

Now what?

LANCE

Now we dig.

ALYSSA

Here? With what?

BARE HANDS

Rake the soil. Digging. Bleeding.

EXT. DESERT - DAY

Lance and Aly have been digging for a while.

Their hands are scraped and cut. Lacerated skin.

Blood, rock, soil and then... a *strip of rubber* revealed.

ALYSSA

Found something!

They keep digging. Harder. Faster.

A shoe?

Yes.

A child's shoe.

Aly digs it out - recognizing it.

ALYSSA

It's hers.

And there's an address written on the sole.

LANCE

(to the dial)

This is where our girl is?

SCREECH! - "Yes".

They can't believe their eyes. *Finally.*

INT. DESERT SHACK - BASEMENT - DAY

Lance puts Becky's SHOE into an empty bowl. A souvenir from their death march.

Seven bowls in line.

Only one empty. One last sacrifice remains.

CUT TO:

EXT. HOUSING PROJECT - DAY

A grimy six-story BUILDING looming in the heart of a bad part of town. Cracked concrete. Graffiti-scrawled walls.

A couple of RESIDENTS sit at the entrance, sharing a joint and staring with unfriendly eyes.

ACROSS THE STREET

Lance and Aly stand in a VACANT LOT, taking in the apartment building, dealing with their latest predicament:

ALYSSA

Maybe we missed it.

LANCE

No, I'm sure. There was no floor written on that shoe. No apartment.

He takes out the DIAL PLATE from the bag.

LANCE
Which floor?

SQUEAK! - "No".

LANCE
She in there?

SQUEAK! - "Yes".

LANCE
Then tell me the damn floor.

SCREECH! - "No".

ALYSSA
More fucking riddles.

He puts the DIAL away.

LANCE
Wait here.

ALYSSA
What are you gonna do?

LANCE
(re: building)
I'm gonna door-to-door it.

ALYSSA
It don't look like the right kinda
place to nose around --

LANCE
We ain't got time for anything else.

He leaves.

Off Aly, not liking this one bit...

INT. HOUSING PROJECT - CORRIDOR - DAY

A stray dog BARKS at Lance as he hurries along a dark corridor that surely smells like piss.

Music and fights BLARE from behind various apartment doors.

Elevator out of service.

Couple of bullet holes in a wall.

He walked right into a cesspool of blight and crime.

He takes out a picture of Becky, shows it to a RESIDENT sitting on the floor doing crack.

LANCE
You seen this girl?

The resident squints at the picture.

CRACK RESIDENT
Do I look like a babysitter?

WHAM! - Lance rephrases with his fist.

LANCE
Asked you a yes or no question.

CRACK RESIDENT
(busted nose)
No.

LATER

Lance KNOCKS on an apartment door.

A peep slot slides open to reveal blood-injected eyes staring hostility.

RESIDENT (O.S.)
What do you want?

LANCE
(shows picture)
You seen this girl?

RESIDENT (O.S.)
No.

Peep slot slides SHUT.

Lance takes this in, standing stoic in front of the door.

KNOCKS again.

Peep slot slides open.

LANCE
I'm gonna have to come in to have a quick look.

Laughter behind the door. Cut short as --

WHAM! - Lance KICKS the door!

RESIDENT (O.S.)

Hey!

WHAM! - again - rotten wood CRACKING and SPLINTERING --

WHAM! - he's gonna bring it down --

Door opens - the RESIDENT revealed - pissed - flicks open a switchblade --

SLASHES at Lance - WHOOSH! - he ducks - then --

WHAM! - knocks the resident out with one punch --

Then he enters:

THE SHITTY APARTMENT

Frantically looking for...

LANCE

Becky!

Instead he finds the resident's GIRLFRIEND - came out of nowhere - swinging a BASEBALL BAT --

WHACK! - hits Lance's ribs - he doubles over GASPING --

She raises the BAT - about to finish him off when --

CRASH! - Aly to the rescue - SLAMS a vase against the girlfriend's head --

Knocks her out cold.

She offers him a hand to help him up, he takes it.

They resume looking for:

ALYSSA

Becky!

CORRIDOR

Lance and Aly knock on the next door.

It cracks open, revealing a METHHEAD.

LANCE

(shows picture)

You seen this girl?

METHHEAD

Fuck off.

He's about to slam the door shut when --

WHAM! - Lance KICKS it open - the Methhead falls down on his ass.

Lance and Aly enter

A SHITHOLE

littered with JUNKIES who SPRING to their feet...

Ready to kick the intruders' ass...

Aly already SWINGING her BAT...

A cheek RIPPLES as she HITS a face...

Meth teeth flying into the SMOKE filled air...

CORRIDOR

Lance KICKS open another door.

LATER

They stumble out from another door.

LATER

They break into the next apartment - looking unstoppable - willing to search every inch of this goddamn place.

STAIRWELL - SECOND FLOOR

Lance and Aly climb up the stairs, hurrying past a faded "2" painted on the wall.

STAIRWELL - THIRD FLOOR

Looking more tired and bloody, they shamble past a faded "3".

STAIRWELL - FOURTH FLOOR

Clothes torn and looking worse, they LIMP past a faded "4".

FOURTH FLOOR - CORRIDOR

Lance and Aly stumble out through an apartment door - their faces bearing nasty cuts.

They limp over to the next door.

Lance is about to knock when --

The door starts to open on its own...

The hand holding the knob... we recognize it...

The same BURNT HAND we saw in the opening.

Lance and Aly find themselves staring at:

RALPH (40s) and JASMINE (40s). She takes a drag from her cigarette - we recognize the broken fingernails in her hand.

Becky's kidnappers revealed.

Both couples stare at each other in silence.

The kidnappers are full of cuts, bruises and marks. They look like a harmless couple that went through hell... just like Lance and Aly.

Lance shows them the picture.

LANCE

You seen --

RALPH

Yes.

Ralph gestures for them to come in.

INT. DERELICT APARTMENT - MAIN FLOOR - DAY

Lance and Aly follow the couple across the same barren apartment from the opening.

Ralph pulls open a door which leads to:

INT. DERELICT APARTMENT - BACK ROOM

Lance and Aly enter the dark, candlelit room.

They notice this is a ritual chamber *IDENTICAL* to the one they built in the shack's basement.

Symbols painted on the floor.

A dial plate.

Seven bowls lie on the table. All of them containing tokens, different from the ones that Lance and Aly collected.

Different sacrifices.

And there... at the back of the room... is that a body?

They take careful steps towards it.

Definitely a body.

A girl's body --

ALYSSA

Becky!

They HURRY over to her --

Find her lying on the floor painted with creepy symbols. Eyes closed. Skin pale white.

LANCE

Becky!

No reply.

Aly takes Becky in her arms, shaking her.

ALYSSA

Wake up, bunny!

But she doesn't wake up.

And Lance is beginning to suspect...

RALPH

She's dead. I'm so sorry for your loss.

ALYSSA

(denial)

Becky wake up.

LANCE

(acceptance)

Aly...

ALYSSA

We're here. Please please wake up.

LANCE

Aly...

ALYSSA
We've come to get you --

LANCE
Aly.

And then the dam breaks... she cries a river...

Lance puts a hand on her shoulder. They HUG, all their previous quarrels seeming trite in the face of this tragedy.

Ralph and Jasmine look genuinely sorry for what's happening.

Lance turns to the couple.

LANCE
Our time isn't up. She said we had until the tenth.

RALPH
The calendar doesn't mark the deadline to find your daughter alive.

JASMINE
It marks the deadline to bring her back.

ALYSSA
Bring her back?

RALPH
She made you build a ritual chamber just like this one, didn't she?

LANCE
What the hell's happening?

CUT TO:

A FRONT TIRE

Bumping on rough terrain:

EXT. DESERT - DAY

The SILVER SUV cuts through an arid stretch of desert.

INT. SILVER SUV

Ralph drives, Jasmine rides shotgun. Lance and Aly sit at the back, Becky's body in her arms.

JASMINE

We have a boy about your girl's age. Timmy. A few weeks ago he was taken away from us. Just like you, we found a dial plate, we were lied to, we were bullied, we were blackmailed. And we sacrificed everything to get him back.

She fires up a cigarette and takes a drag.

JASMINE

We had done six out of the seven sacrifices when we found Timmy dead. That's when we were told what was the ritual chamber's purpose. It was for bringing Timmy back. But the ritual chamber won't work if you don't do the seventh sacrifice. Which is the toughest one.

CUT TO:

BLACK

SUPER: "7) Thou shall kill for your child".

INT. SILVER SUV - DAY

JASMINE

The Stepmother chose another child. Your daughter. And made us sacrifice her in order to get our son back.

ALYSSA

You killed my girl! You piece of shit!

Aly reaches over to SMACK Jasmine - but Lance holds her back --

LANCE

Did it work? Did you get him back?

JASMINE

Yes, we did.

ALYSSA

You fucking child killers --

RALPH

That's exactly what I called the couple that killed Timmy. But then I realized they had no choice. They were just another link in the chain.

JASMINE

If you refuse to do the last sacrifice... if you forfeit your daughter's only chance... then you can call us "child killers".

LANCE

So, you killed our girl to get your boy back.

JASMINE

We had no choice.

LANCE

And your kid was killed by someone who wanted *their* kid back.

JASMINE

They had no choice.

LANCE

Then who killed the first kid in the chain?

RALPH

The first couple lost their daughter to a terminal illness. When medicine failed them, they turned to the occult. Made a deal with the Stepmother's spirit to get their child back. That was more than eighty years ago.

LANCE

Eleonore... she was the first...

ALYSSA

How do you know all this?

JASMINE

Details of the lore have been passed along from couple to couple... along with the scrapbook. When Eleonore's parents realized what they had set in motion, they put it together, compiling everything they knew about the Stepmother, and hoping it could be of help to the next batch of parents.

ALYSSA

Anyone find a way to stop this bitch?

RALPH

Not yet.

LANCE

So... to get our girl back, we must become you.

JASMINE

So sorry about that.

INT. DESERT SHACK - BASEMENT - DAY

Ralph and Jasmine watch as Alyssa sets Becky's body on the floor, right in the middle of some creepy symbols.

JASMINE

A little more to the right.
(Aly complies)
There.

Ralph gestures at an empty spot in the floor, also marked with symbols.

RALPH

The next kid in the chain goes right here.

Then Ralph points at the last EMPTY BOWL.

RALPH

And his blood goes in there.

Lance and Aly trade troubled stares, shivering at the thought of murdering a kid.

INT. DESERT SHACK - MAIN ROOM - DAY

The two couples exit the basement.

Ralph spots the MARKED DATE on the calendar.

RALPH

Tomorrow is your last day to do the sacrifice.

LANCE

And if we don't?

RALPH

The altar becomes worthless and you'll lose her.

LANCE

She also gave you five days?

RALPH

Everyone gets five days.

LANCE

Why five days?

RALPH

We heard different theories, passed from couple to couple. Nobody knows for sure.

JASMINE

But a previous batch of parents did some digging and found out The Stepmother was abandoned as a child. Her mother left her in a neighbor's care promising she'd be back in five days, but she never returned.

RALPH

So now, "five days" is what she gives parents to get their children back.

Lance takes this in, but something still troubles him:

LANCE

Waitamminute. You hid the gun in here, buried Becky's shoe, and now you're telling us all this...
(something doesn't add up)
If you got your kid back, why are you still doing what she says?

RALPH

Because we want you to succeed.

ALYSSA

Because they want to wash the blood off their hands.

Ralph and Jasmine confirm with their silence, not proud about their role in this.

JASMINE

She'll tell you who's the next child.

Ralph hands Lance a small BOX.

RALPH
 Here are some real bullets, in case
 you need them.
 (then)
 Good luck.

And with that, Ralph and Jasmine leave.

LATER

Lance and Aly alone, struggling with the toughest decision of their lives.

LANCE
 Can we kidnap and kill a kid, Aly?
 Think we can do that?

ALYSSA
 It's temporary. The next couple can
 bring him back.

LANCE
 By killing another innocent kid --

ALYSSA
 Who can be brought back as well --

LANCE
 This shit's gotta stop.

ALYSSA
 I can't lose her. Just can't. Can you?

Off Lance's mind racing...

CUT TO:

EXT. DESERT - TIME LAPSE

The SUN travels across the sky at breakneck speed, sinking behind the horizon.

CUT TO:

EXT. SUBURBAN HOME - BACKYARD - NIGHT

A MOTHER and her SON cavort in the swimming pool.

That boy must be Becky's age. Looks as innocent as her.

This moment INTERCUTS with:

SHACK'S BASEMENT

A DEJA VU from the opening: Lance is a FIGURE hunched over a raddled table, barely lit by candlelight.

LANCE
(to the dial)
What's the kid look like?

His hand - cut from digging - writes on the notepad as the needle SPINS in reply.

BACKYARD

The kid keeps playing in the pool. Oblivious.

BASEMENT

LANCE
Where's he at?

The dial replies.

BACKYARD

The kid comes out of the pool, the mother wraps him in a towel.

The DAD - his back to us - flips burgers at the grill.

The mother's eyes POP.

Two masked INTRUDERS - Lance and Aly - just climbed over their fence.

They raise their GUNS...

The mother pulls in her son close, watching with fearful eyes as...

Lance and Aly approach. Cold. Calm. Faceless threats.

BASEMENT

Lance just finished writing down the kid's description. Still can't believe he's doing this.

And then... last minute change of mind... he tears the piece of paper and CRUMPLES it.

BACKYARD

Lance and Aly walk right PAST the kid... who was never a target.

The dad has turned to face the intruders --

It's Lawrence.

He recognizes these two thugs. *Not again.*

Before he can say anything --

WHAM! - Lance HITS him with the butt of his gun - sending him into a complete --

BLACKNESS.

FADE IN:

EXT. DESERT SHACK - NIGHT

A grey BMW pulls up by the shack.

Lance and Aly get down and open the trunk:

Lawrence lies inside - mouth, wrists and ankles taped up.

LANCE

Your wife and kid are fine back home.
We only took your ride.

They pull him out.

INT. DESERT SHACK - BASEMENT - NIGHT

Lance drags Lawrence into the ritual chamber, placing him on the floor among the painted symbols. Right where Ralph told him to put the kid.

Lawrence GRUNTS trying to say something.

ALYSSA

Lemme guess. You wanna say you have a family.

Lawrence GRUNTS again.

ALYSSA

Saw the bruises on your wife's mug.
That's why bruised girls turn you off?
(MORE)

ALYSSA (CONT'D)
Reminds you of the pussy you are when
you hit her?

Lawrence doesn't have a reply for that.

ALYSSA
Your family will be better off without
you.

Lance levels his REVOLVER at Lawrence, turns to look right at
the DIAL PLATE.

LANCE
"Thou shall kill for your child" --

EXT. DESERT SHACK

BLAM! - a shot RINGS out --

INT. DESERT SHACK - BASEMENT

Lance drops the gun to the floor, sickened of it all.

Aly places a rag by Lawrence's body, lets it absorb some blood.

Then she WRINGS it over the empty bowl - Lawrence's blood
trickles down.

Seven bowls now bear a token.

Seven offerings.

LATER

Lance and Aly sit by their daughter's body. Waiting. Hoping.

ALYSSA
Please wake up.

EXT. DESERT - TIME LAPSE

A million stars dance across the sky and then disappear as
night turns to day...

A blazing SUNBALL peeks from behind the horizon.

INT. DESERT SHACK - BASEMENT - DAY

Becky looks as dead as she did before.

Lance and Aly remain by her side, losing hope. Looking like hell. Another sleepless night.

ALYSSA
It's not working.

He approaches the DIAL PLATE.

LANCE
You told us to kill for our girl.
We killed for our girl. It's a
sacrifice.
(points at the altar)
His blood is right there.

No response.

LANCE
Answer me!

Aly kneels before the DIAL PLATE to try another approach:

ALYSSA
You were right, Stepmother. You
were always right, you know? We've
been shitty parents.

She takes a beat to find the right words.

ALYSSA
We've been all about the money,
about sending our girl to college
some day. We've been all about the
future and not about the present.
Working double shifts, spending
less and less time with her. And
we're sorry for that. We're truly
truly sorry. You've opened our
eyes. And you showed us how it's
done. How to be better parents. And
for that, we thank you.

SCREECH! - "Y"

Aly grabs the notepad --

QUICK CUTS: the needle SPINS - Aly finishes writing:

"You're welcome".

She trades a hopeful glance with Lance. *It's working!*

Back to the DIAL PLATE:

ALYSSA

And truth be told, we did all the sacrifices right? Sure, we kinda cheated a bit on that last one. But that's 'cause we love kids so much. Like you. And we can't hurt them.

(then)

So... I was thinking... if it's okay with you... maybe we ain't got to do this anymore.

Her eyes start to well up.

ALYSSA

Please Stepmother, forgive us. We promise we'll be good from now on. Please give us back our girl. Please. Can you give us back our girl?

Silence as they both watch the DIAL PLATE.

The needle stays still.

It appears they won't get a response... but then...

The needle starts to TURN...

Slowly...

It spins past the numbers...

Past the alphabet letters...

It slows down as it hovers over "Yes". Seems it's about to stop there but then --

SCREECH! - "No".

Aly closes her eyes in defeat.

CUT TO:

EXT. DESERT SHACK - DAY

Lance comes out as the SILVER SUV pulls up.

Ralph gets down, reads Lance's face immediately.

RALPH

What went wrong?

INT. DESERT SHACK - BASEMENT - LATER

Ralph spots Lawrence's body.

RALPH
Who's this?

LANCE
Some asshole.

RALPH
So... he's someone you dislike.

LANCE
Was.

RALPH
You think you're the first ones to try
this stunt? If this is someone you
don't care about, then this is not a
sacrifice.

Lance can't help but remember one of the first messages they
got from the dial --

QUICK FLASH: notepad reads "*Must hurt*".

LANCE
So, it must be hard to pull the
trigger.

RALPH
Really hard.

CUT TO:

INT. DESERT SHACK - BASEMENT - LATER

Ralph is gone. Lance and Aly sit on the floor on opposite sides
of the room.

Becky's body lies between them. A grim reminder of the decision
they still have to make.

ALYSSA
Thought I could do this. But I can't.
I won't harm a kid.

LANCE
Me neither. This ends with us.

ALYSSA
Whatever happened with "letting the
bullies do their thing"?

LANCE

No more.

There's an odd tension in the air. It's a difficult moment, but we feel there's something *else* at play.

As if a dark thought deep in their minds was slowly bubbling up to the surface:

ALYSSA

I know what you're thinking.

LANCE

Yeah? What am I thinking?

ALYSSA

The same thing I'm thinking.

For some reason, their eyes well up with tears.

LANCE

I love you, Aly. So much.

It almost feels like a *goodbye*.

ALYSSA

I love you more.

EXT. DESERT SHACK - DAY

The crappy weathervane SQUEAKS in the desert wind. The only sound until --

BLAM! - a single shot RINGS out from inside the shack.

The wind keeps howling, making the weathervane squeal.

BLAM! - another shot from inside.

Seems like it was the last one until --

BLAM!

Then silence returns to stay.

CUT TO:

EXT. DESERT ROAD - NIGHT

A BUS speeds down the road, heading out of town.

INT. BUS

Passengers sleeping. Passengers chatting. Passengers texting.

At the back we find Aly, wearing dark shades.

And Becky sits right by her side. ALIVE.

BECKY
Are we going far?

ALYSSA
As far as we can. Get some sleep.

BECKY
First tell me a story.

ALYSSA
Ain't no time for stories --

BECKY
The one about the girl and the wizard.

ALYSSA
I already told you that one.

BECKY
But I want to know what happens next.

ALYSSA
The girl and the wizard live happily
ever after.

BECKY
So nothing happens next?

ALYSSA
That's how happy endings work.

BECKY
Then happy endings suck.

ALYSSA
Okay. Lemme tell you some more then.

Aly looks out the window trying to find some inspiration.

ALYSSA
So, after the wizard saved the girl,
the rumor of this spell spread fast in
the village. And pretty girls wanted
the wizard to make them ugly, so the
queen's soldiers wouldn't take them
away.

INT. DESERT SHACK - BASEMENT - EARLIER

Lance and Aly stare at each other.

The BOWLS bearing sacrifice tokens sit on the table.

ALYSSA (V.O.)
So lots of girls sacrificed their
beauty to save themselves.

Lance and Aly now focus on the GUN, lying on the floor.

ALYSSA (V.O.)
Until one day a brave girl in the
village said "no more" and decided to
sacrifice herself to save the others.

Aly SPRINGS to her feet - BOLTS for the gun - so does Lance -
she reaches it first --

She puts the gun to her head!

But Lance YANKS her arm right on time --

BLAM! - shot goes wide --

They struggle for the gun as...

ALYSSA (V.O.)
This girl went to the wizard, but she
didn't ask him to take away her
beauty. She asked him to make her
beauty *poisonous*. And the wizard did
it.

They struggle to turn the gun on themselves. They both want to
sacrifice themselves for Becky.

BLAM! - another shoot goes off - bullet HITS a wall.

ALYSSA (V.O.)
Then the girl let the soldiers take
her to the queen.

Lance is stronger. Pretty soon the gun TURNS to his head.

LATER

Aly just finished emptying a GAS CAN on the floor. She lights a
match, throws it --

It flies as...

ALYSSA (V.O.)
 And when the queen took the girl's
 beauty, she was poisoned and started
 to burn...

WHOOSH! - the match lands - sets the room ON FIRE.

The scrapbook burns. The dial burns. The altar burns.

ALYSSA (V.O.)
 The girl died, but thanks to her, all
 the other girls were now safe.

The Stepmother's PICTURE burns, crumpling and melting in the
 heat.

ALYSSA (V.O.)
 'Cause the queen had been defeated.

EARLIER

Lance and Aly wrestle for the gun which slowly turns to his
 head.

ALYSSA
 Please don't do this --

LANCE
 You know it must be me --

ALYSSA
 Don't --

LANCE
 And you know why --

The barrel now pointed right at his head.

LANCE
 Tell her I love her very much --

BLAM!

EXT. DESERT ROAD - NIGHT

The BUS speeds away, quickly becoming a spec in the horizon.

INT. BUS

BECKY
 So the girl went to heaven like daddy?

ALYSSA
Course she did, bunny.

BECKY
And what happened next?

ALYSSA
I'll tell you... after you get some
sleep.

Speaking of which, Becky YAWNS.

Her eyes CLOSE as we --

CUT TO BLACK.