

The Returned

When his missing daughter returns, a father's search for the truth puts his family in the crosshairs of something far more dangerous than he could have ever imagined.

Douglas Wilkinson

WGA 2307390

Dougnw78@yahoo.com  
806-559-5641

FADE IN

INT. HOME - MIDNIGHT

SUPER: 1997

A fireplace flickers, casting shifting shadows. CRACKLE fills the silence.

Family photos line the mantle – sunburned noses, ski goggles, a courthouse kiss, a boy's crooked tooth at eight. Flames ripple in the glass; smiles flicker back.

WILLIAM HARRISON (mid-30s) sits on the couch, nursing a drink, a cigarette burning between his fingers. His eyes are red-rimmed, drifting unfocused over the photos.

DENISE HARRISON (mid-30s) lies curled beside him, head in his lap, asleep. Her clothes look slept in, her hair loose and unkempt.

The phone RINGS – shrill, jarring.

William jolts upright, nearly unseating Denise, and lunges for the phone.

WILLIAM

Hello?

DETECTIVE RILEY (O.S. - PHONE)

Mr. Harrison. Detective Riley, Liles County Sheriff's Office.

Denise presses in, ear to the receiver.

WILLIAM

Yes?

DETECTIVE RILEY (O.S. -PHONE)

We got him!

DENISE

Oh, thank God!

She drops to her knees, exhales a prayer.

WILLIAM

Is he okay? Where is he?

DETECTIVE RILEY (O.S. -PHONE)

We are at Highland Hospital. They're  
(MORE)

DETECTIVE RILEY (O.S. -PHONE) (CONT'D)  
checking him out now. He's... okay.

William SLAMS the receiver down.

WILLIAM  
Get your coat!

They're out the door.

EXT. HOSPITAL EMERGENCY ENTRANCE - LATER

Tires SCREECH. Rubber bites concrete.

William and Denise are already running. The engine HUMS  
beneath the awning, both doors left open.

INT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

They charge down the corridor, breathless. Fluorescents BUZZ  
overhead.

DETECTIVE BILL RILEY (40s) rounds a corner, steps into their  
path, palms up.

DETECTIVE RILEY  
Mr. and Mrs. Harrison.

DENISE  
Where is Jeffrey?

DETECTIVE RILEY  
We need to talk first. I must prepare  
you-

DENISE  
My son! I want my son!

Riley exhales, glances down the hall. The sheriff reluctantly  
nods.

He gestures to a triage room.

DETECTIVE RILEY  
Right in there.

A young woman in scrubs steps up beside him, snapping a slim

chart shut – SNAP.

Her badge flips, catching the light: Briarcroft Research Institute. A half-hidden name strip – “Dr. A. Ha-”.

Together they watch them enter the room.

INT. TRIAGE ROOM - CONTINUOUS

They shoulder past deputies. Radios CRACKLE, then fall silent.

Only the steady BEEP of a heart monitor fills the silence.

William and Denise stop at the foot of the bed.

Denise’s breath catches – sharp, involuntary.

William senses it. Tightens his grip on her arm.

We never see the patient.

DENISE  
(soft, shaky)  
Jeffrey?

Nothing.

The monitor BEEPS again.

Then—

JEFFREY (O.S.)  
(weak, hoarse)  
Mom?

What they see, steals the air from their lungs.

Denise collapses into William’s arms.

William stares at the unseen bed.

The monitor BEEPS quicken.

CUT TO BLACK

INT. SCHOOL AUDITORIUM - EVENING

SUPER: PRESENT DAY

A swirl of 6-year-olds buzz on a stage like soda fizz, sneakers squeaking, giggles floating.

The auditorium is a packed house. Parents lean forward, whispering. Cameras ready. Programs RUSTLE.

House lights dim. The kids scatter to their marks. Family chatter fades.

MRS. PRESLEY steps onstage, caught in a spotlight. APPLAUSE.

MRS. PRESLEY

Welcome parents, family and friends to our end-of-year program. Your children have worked very hard on this program for your entertainment tonight. Please enjoy the show.

She exits as MUSIC swells.

First graders line the risers — a sea of too-big costumes and nervous energy.

EMILY RIDER (6) stands near the end. Small. Hands clenched. Eyes searching the crowd.

She spots her family. Exhales. A big smile breaks free. She waves.

A blond girl steps to the mic, grinning.

BLOND HAired GIRL

When I grow up, I want to be a teacher. Just like Mrs. Brown.

Polite chuckles. Applause.

Another CHILD steps forward, words lost under applause.

Emily shifts her weight. Fingers twisting together. A breath in. A breath out.

Her turn now. She steps to the mic. The room quiets a fraction more than before.

EMILY

When I get big, I want to help kids  
(MORE)

EMILY (CONT'D)  
when they're sick.

A ROAR of applause from one aisle - her family.

Emily beams, then darts back into line, hiding behind a taller classmate.

MUSIC swells as the show continues.

INT. ELEMENTARY SCHOOL HALLWAY - LATER

The hallway bustles with parents and kids. Voices echo. Banners line the walls. Shoes SQUEAK on polished tile.

Emily darts through the crowd, glowing. She weaves past legs and backpacks.

DIANE RIDER (early 30s) kneels, arms wide. Emily slams into her, embracing.

DIANE  
Hey, sweetie! You did so well.

Emily clings breathless as Diane lifts her up.

EMILY  
My tummy felt twisty. Like there were a bunch of worms wiggling.

DIANE  
Aww, Em. That's what being brave feels like.

RAY RIDER - (Early 30's) steps in, holding a single red rose.

RAY  
For you, baby girl. The star of the show.

Emily takes the rose, inhales its scent.

RAY (CONT'D)  
You were amazing tonight. I'm so proud of you.

Emily spots her cousin, TIFFANY BRANDISH (15), hovering nearby.

EMILY

Hey, T.

TIFFANY

You crushed it, Em.

Tiffany lifts her pinky. Emily loops hers around it – a silent promise.

Ray glances at his watch, then back to Emily.

RAY

I'm starving. Let's get home before I eat Emily's rose.

He playfully snaps at it. Emily yanks the rose back, laughing.

DIANE

We're having your favorite dinner tonight.

Emily beams, burying her face in Diane's shoulder.

The family moves together down the hall and out into the night.

EXT. RIDER HOME - DRIVEWAY - MORNING

Sunrise glows on dew-soaked grass of a modest but well-kept home. An RV looms in the driveway doors open, ready to roll.

Ray BURSTS through the back screen door, calling back inside.

RAY

Let's go, let's go, let's go!

Tiffany shuffles out behind him, pillow under one arm, backpack sagging off her shoulder.

RAY (CONT'D)

Girls?

DIANE (O.S.)

We'll be down in a minute.

Ray mumbles, already moving.

RAY  
More like an hour.

DIANE (O.S.)  
I heard that!

Ray startles, grins.

RAY  
I swear... she's got the ears of a  
German Shepherd.

Ray raps the RV roof with his knuckles and disappears inside.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - LATER

The back door CREAKS open.

Diane steps out, arms full. Emily trails behind, dragging a pillow and clutching her stuffed animal. Diane locks up.

Emily passes Ray on the RV steps.

RAY  
Did you pack your migraine meds?

EMILY  
Mom did. They're in my bag.

Emily climbs inside.

EMILY (O.S.)  
I wish we were there already.

RAY  
You know Em... it's the journey, not  
the destination.

EMILY (O.S.)  
The journey stinks!

Ray rolls his eyes as Diane comes up beside him.

RAY  
She gets that sass from you, you know.

Diane smirks, pockets the keys.

Ray shoves the last duffel into a side compartment. The latch

CLAMPS shut.

INT. RV - CONTINUOUS

Emily climbs onto the bench seat at the table, her backpack thumping beside her.

Tiffany slides in next to her, glancing around.

TIFFANY

Em... look what I got for us.

She unzips her backpack and carefully pulls out a bracelet-making kit. Colored threads and beads spill into a plastic tray.

Emily's eyes light up.

TIFFANY (CONT'D)

We'll tear into this later. Shhhh.

Emily nods, barely containing herself. A shared look - a secret sealed.

Ray passes them, lowers into the driver's seat.

RAY

Alright gang. Vacation starts in just five short hours.

Diane drops into the passenger seat, half-turned toward the girls, gives a small, amused applause.

Emily settles at the dinette, sticking decals onto a campground calendar. She places a horse on tomorrow's square. RACK FOCUS: A small new-moon icon sits in the corner of the date.

Tiffany sprawls on the couch, earbuds in, phone scrolling. A soft rectangle presses against her pocket - cigarettes.

DIANE

Look at them... just vibrating with excitement.

Ray exhales, rolls his eyes.

Keys turn. The engine THRUMS. The RV eases forward, the house sliding out of view.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - LATE AFTERNOON

The RV rumbles to a stop, tires CRUNCHING over gravel. A secluded site ringed by towering pines.

The door SWINGS open. Ray hops out, stretches, breathes deep.

RAY

We have... arrived.

DIANE

I sure do love this spot.

RAY

Not much has changed since we first started coming here, has it?

Diane smirks, pokes his belly.

DIANE

Just you.

Ray laughs, swats her hand, heads for the rear hatch.

Tiffany steps out, blinking at the sight. A smile spreads.

TIFFANY

This place is awesome.

(beat)

Too bad my mom couldn't come.

DIANE

Yeah... but she could use a quiet weekend to herself.

Tiffany nods, her smile fading. She pockets her phone.

Emily tugs Diane's shirt, eyes bright.

EMILY

Mom... I'm bored.

DIANE

Well, we're making a fire tonight.

(slyly)

How about a... pinecone hunt.

EMILY

I'll get the basket.

She darts into the RV.

TIFFANY  
Em, can I come too?

EMILY (O.S.)  
Yeah!

Emily bursts back out, nearly colliding with Diane. Tiffany chases after her toward the trees.

DIANE  
Stay close by, you two!

Their laughter fades into the woods as camp setup begins.

EXT. FOREST - MOMENTS LATER

Dappled sunlight filters through the canopy.

Emily moves among the ferns, dropping pinecones into her basket - THUNK.

Tiffany trails behind, absorbed in her phone, thumb flicking.

Emily rushes back, beaming.

EMILY  
I've got way more than you.

Tiffany locks her screen, pockets it.

TIFFANY  
Oh, I didn't know this was a competition.

EMILY  
It's not.  
(sly grin)  
Because I'm winning.

Emily giggles. Tiffany bumps her shoulder.

TIFFANY  
You little stinker. Game on!

They race through the underbrush.

Emily stops short, freezes. Tiffany nearly runs into her.

Ahead, a faint dock light flutters near the water's edge.

TIFFANY (CONT'D)

Em? What's up?

EMILY

I think my friends are here. Can't you hear them?

Tiffany listens. The woods are still – just a breeze RUSTLING leaves.

TIFFANY

No... I don't hear anything.

Emily winces, presses a hand to her forehead.

TIFFANY (CONT'D)

Migraine?

Emily nods, squinting at the ground.

TIFFANY (CONT'D)

Let's head back. We'll get your meds before it gets worse.

They turn towards camp.

TIFFANY (O.S.)

I can't believe I lost. I need to work on my pinecone hunting skills, huh?

The distant dock light flickers once more, then goes dark.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - MORNING

Early sunlight drapes the clearing. Smoke from a snuffed fire curls into the air.

Ray and Diane move through camp, straightening chairs, folding blankets.

Ray cups his hands, calls out.

RAY

Emily!

The clearing stills. Birds fall quiet. Even the breeze seems to stop.

Ray and Diane exchange a look.

Then, distant—

EMILY (O.S.)

What?

They exhale, but the moment doesn't fully release.

RAY

Start heading back this way. We're heading to the stables shortly.

EMILY (O.S.)

Okay, Dad.

They continue tidying the campsite. Ray ducks into the RV.

Tiffany steps out.

DIANE

Tiffany, would you mind keeping an eye out for Emily? She's off that way.

TIFFANY

Yea. No problem.

Tiffany heads toward the lake, morning glare skipping across the water.

EXT. LAKESHORE - CONTINUOUS

Reeds whisper as water LAPS the shore. A dock rope TICKS against a cleat.

Tiffany drifts the water's edge, half-searching. She cups a lighter — FLICK. A cigarette catches. She exhales, smoke torn thin by the breeze. One eye on the tree line.

A RUSTLE behind a trunk—

EMILY

Boo!

Emily bursts out, vibrating with kinetic energy. Tiffany jumps. The cigarette vanishes behind her thigh.

EMILY (CONT'D)

Hide and seek! You count!

TIFFANY  
Em, not right now.

EMILY  
(already backing away)  
Ten! Nine! Eight!

She vanishes into the trees.

TIFFANY  
Emily. I mean it. Stay where I can see  
you.

A fish breaks the surface – PLOP.

The cigarette resurfaces. Tiffany takes a long, guilty pull. She checks behind a stump. Under the dock. No Emily.

Her phone CHIMES. Reflex. She glances down. A video auto-plays. She snorts, pockets it, calls out–

TIFFANY (CONT'D)  
Ok, Em. You win! Come out!

She drifts off the path into taller grass. Reeds brush her arms. The phone's back in her hand. Scroll. Scroll. A quick laugh.

Just beyond her sightline, Emily darts between two trees. A blur. Gone.

EXT. WOODS - OLD UTILITY TRAIL - CONTINUOUS

Emily runs a narrow deer path, ferns brushing her knees. Rainbow Dash bobs at her side.

She slows, scanning for a hiding spot.

A twig SNAPS behind her.

Emily spins around, glances back toward the lake, then slips behind a stand of firs.

EXT. LAKESHORE - CONTINUOUS

Tiffany leans against a tree, eyes locked on her phone. Smoke curls from the stub of her cigarette.

Behind her, the dock light flickers rapidly.

A SCREAM.

The dock light BURSTS – sparks shower the shoreline.

Tiffany jolts. Her phone slips.

TIFFANY

Emily!

She drops the cigarette, spins, scanning wildly.

EXT. RV – CONTINUOUS

Ray and Diane snap up.

TIFFANY(O.S.)

(distant)

Emily! Answer me right now!

They explode into motion, gravel spraying.

EXT. LAKESHORE / CAMPGROUND EDGE – CONTINUOUS

Tiffany jogs the tree line, peering between trunks. Panic takes shape.

TIFFANY

Em? Please!

Her voice cracks. She pushes faster.

Ray and Diane rush in. One look at Tiffany's face –

Diane stops cold.

DIANE

Tiff?

RAY

Where is she?

Tiffany points toward the woods, hand shaking.

TIFFANY

She was right there. I looked away,  
(MORE)

TIFFANY (CONT'D)  
just for a second, and she... she's  
gone.

Ray's already charging into the trees.

RAY  
Emily! EM-I-LY!

Diane follows.

Tiffany stumbles after them, each step heavier with guilt.

EXT. FALLEN TREES - CONTINUOUS

Thin fog coils low between twisted trunks. The woods feel suffocated.

Ray pushes through brush, eyes on the ground.

A weathered power line cuts overhead, HUMMING faintly as it disappears toward the dock.

Below it - a massive hollowed-out tree, split at the base, roots clawing through damp earth.

Ray halts. At his feet: Rainbow Dash.

He drops to his knees, hands shaking as he lifts the toy. His breath turns shallow.

RAY (CONTD)  
Diane!

Diane and Tiffany crash through the brush, freeze.

Diane sees the doll. Her hands fly to her mouth.

DIANE  
Oh, God.

Ray clutches the toy to his chest, staring into the trees - waiting.

Tiffany steadies herself, forces the words out.

TIFFANY  
She popped out playing hide and seek.  
She just took off. I told her to stay  
(MORE)

TIFFANY (CONT'D)  
 where I could see her.

DIANE  
 Ray... what do we do?

His eyes dart to the fog, the tree, the powerline. His phone loose in his grip.

RAY  
 I'm about to-  
 (beat)  
 Christ... where is she?

Diane's voice cuts through the trees, cracking.

DIANE  
 Emily Rider! You come out right now!  
 This isn't funny.

Silence. Nothing.

Diane turns to Ray, eyes brimming.

DIANE (CONT'D)  
 Call.

Ray dials, the speaker CRACKLES.

911 OPERATOR (O.S. - PHONE)  
 911, what's your emergency?

RAY  
 (shaky)  
 My daughter's missing at White Bear  
 Lake. Whittaker Camp, space twenty-  
 seven.

911 OPERATOR (O.S. - PHONE)  
 How old is the child? How long has she  
 been missing?

RAY  
 She's Six. Gone maybe... ten minutes,  
 tops.

911 OPERATOR (O.S. - PHONE)  
 Was she near the water?

RAY  
 She was playing by the dock.

A radio squawk bleeds through the line: "Copy, Whittaker Camp. Units redeploying from SAR drill at Bear Point. ETA four minutes."

Diane's knees buckle. He collapses into Ray. The doll is crushed between them.

911 OPERATOR (O.S. - PHONE)  
Sir? Sir, can you hear me?

The phone slips from his hand, plops into the grass, the voice fading.

Ray and Diane cling to each other, sobs tearing out of them, echoing through the trees.

A few steps away, Tiffany stands hollowed out, crying.

EXT. RV - LATE AFTERNOON

The quiet woods are shattered.

Emergency lights flash. Radios SQUAWK. A park ranger strings tape along the dock as a utility tech tests the blown dock light. Fire-rescue boats nose through the reeds, poles sweeping. A white command trailer idles.

A freelance cameraman sets a tripod. A news van creeps in.

Ray, Diane, and Tiffany sit at the battered picnic table beside the RV - hollowed out.

DETECTIVE CHARLES GIBBS (late 40s) approaches, suit sharp but dusted. He doesn't open his notebook yet. He studies them first.

DETECTIVE GIBBS  
Mr. and Mrs. Rider?

Ray and Diane rise, slow and stiff. Tiffany stays close, arms wrapped tight around herself.

DETECTIVE GIBBS (CONT'D)  
I'm Charles Gibbs, Missing Persons.  
Your call met the Endangered Missing  
criteria.  
(soft)  
Walk me through all of it.

RAY

Emily was right by the water. One moment she was there... the next—

He can't finish. Diane trembles.

TIFFANY

I looked away. Just a minute... two maybe. I heard the scream. Then the dock light exploded.

Gibbs clocks the utility tech at the dock, then turns back.

Ray reaches into his jacket, pulls out Rainbow Dash. His hand shakes as he holds it out.

RAY

We found this. She never leaves it.

Gibbs studies the toy.

DETECTIVE GIBBS

Where?

Ray points toward the fallen trees. Gibbs's eyes sharpen.

DETECTIVE GIBBS (CONT'D)

We'll narrow the search from that point.

They move together toward the shadows.

EXT. FALLEN TREES - CONTINUOUS

Ray stops at a patch of trampled grass, lifts the toy.

RAY

Right here, sir.

Gibbs surveys the area, snapping photos, making notes.

DETECTIVE GIBBS

She was, here?

RAY

If Dash was here, Emily was too.

Somewhere above, the faint HUM of a power line.

A radio SQUAWKS.

RADIO (O.S.)  
Unit Twelve, possible endangered child  
seen near the south docks.

Diane stiffens.

DIANE  
Please, God... please.

RAY  
South Docks? That's-

Gibbs raises a finger. Ray stops.

Searchers move through the trees, voices SHOUTING Emily's name. A K9 team rushes past, harnesses clinking.

Radio STATIC. Then-

RADIO(O.S.)  
Negative. Fisherman's kid. Not our  
missing six-year-old.

The air drains out of Diane. She folds. Ray catches her, holds tight.

DETECTIVE GIBBS  
That doesn't change anything. We keep  
working.

He moves off, already issuing instructions over the radio.

The Riders remain, clinging to each other as the search presses on.

EXT. FOREST - EVENING

Red and blue lights strobe through the trees. A K9 BARKS somewhere deep in the woods.

K9 HANDLER (O.S.)  
(distant)  
Track lost at the dock.

Diane GASPS, stumbling back, hands flying to her mouth. Ray catches her before she falls.

Tiffany stands frozen, arms locked tight around herself.

BUZZ BUZZ – Gibbs's phone vibrates. He brings it straight to his ear and steps away.

DETECTIVE GIBBS

This is Gibbs.

(beat, low voice)

Confirmed?

A long beat as he listens.

DETECTIVE GIBBS (CONT'D)

Yes, Sir.

He hangs up. His face gives nothing.

DETECTIVE GIBBS (CONT'D)

Mr. and Mrs. Rider. I need to speak with you.

Ray and Diane step up. Tiffany trails after them, twisting her hands.

DETECTIVE GIBBS (CONT'D)

I hate to ask this of you. But we need DNA from both of you. Tonight.

DIANE

Do we have to do that now?

DETECTIVE GIBBS

I know how it feels. But waiting costs time we don't have.

Ray swallows, looks at Diane.

RAY

If it helps... why not?

Diane hesitates, then nods – defeated. Ray squeezes her shoulder.

DETECTIVE GIBBS

We'll take my cruiser.

Diane turns, searching the trees one last time.

Ray gently grabs her arm, pulls her along.

INT. HOSPITAL - EMERGENCY TRIAGE BAY - LATER

The chaos of the woods collapses into sterile quiet. Fluorescents BUZZ. A distant monitor BEEPS, steady.

Ray and Diane sit slumped in plastic chairs.

A nurse swabs their cheeks. The cold snap lifts Diane's eyes. Tubes SNAP shut, labeled, sealed into a tray.

Gibbs watches from the doorway, arms folded - present, giving space.

NURSE

We will get these started.

Gibbs nods once. She moves off. He gestures Ray and Diane toward the hall.

INT. HOSPITAL EMERGENCY - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

The low hum of traffic - gurney wheels, murmured voices, a printer chattering.

Tiffany stands near the nurses' station, eyes raw. She pulls a crumpled cigarette pack from her pocket, stares at it.

Her fist tightens - CRINKLE. She drops it in the trash.

A WOMAN in scrubs clocks it. Easy smile. Blue lanyard clipped to her shirt pocket.

WOMAN

Good for you. Took me three years to quit.

Tiffany smiles. Distracted. Her eyes drift to the lanyard.

INSERT - LANYARD:

BRIARCROFT RESEARCH INSTITUTE

CAROL - Patient Intake Specialist

Tiffany pulls out her phone. Icons jiggle. A long press - TikTok wobbles, disappears. The screen goes dark. She exhales.

INT. HOSPITAL - EMERGENCY FAMILY ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Smaller. Quieter. The BUZZ is softer here.

RAY

What's the real reason for all this,  
Detective?

Gibbs answers evenly, but something sits beneath it.

DETECTIVE GIBBS

DNA now mean faster hits later. That's  
it. Just speeds things up.

Tiffany paces just outside the doorway, restless.

DETECTIVE GIBBS (O.S.)

We'll start with immediate family-

INT. HOSPITAL - EMERGENCY HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Sound bleeds from the family room - Gibbs's low baritone,  
paper SHUFFLING, a monitor BEEP.

Tiffany moves down the hall, shoes SQUEAKING on tile.

She drifts by a dimly lit room, its door cracked. A soft,  
shaken voice leaks out-

VOICE (O.S.)

Tiffany?

She freezes. Backtracks. Peers inside.

A teenage girl lies on the bed. Pale. Eyes wide. Desperate.

TIFFANY

Uh... hi?

The girl stares at her like she's salvation.

EMILY (16 Y/O)

Where's my mom and dad?

Tiffany forces a nervous laugh.

TIFFANY

I... think you've got the wrong-

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
(urgent)  
Tiffany, it's me. Emily.

Tiffany shakes her head, heart hammering.

TIFFANY  
No. No, that's... that's not possible.

Emily raises her pinky. It trembles.

Tiffany stares at it. Frozen. Her breath won't come. This can't be real.

The hallway noise seems to fall away.

Recognition hits - slow, catastrophic.

TIFFANY (CONT'D)  
No...

Emily's voice cracks.

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
We never even started the bracelet  
set, did we?

Everything drops out. That's it. Tiffany breaks-

TIFFANY  
Oh my God!

She lunges toward Emily-

A DEPUTY rushes in, grabs Tiffany's arm, yanks her out of the room.

DEPUTY  
You can't be in here, miss.

TIFFANY  
Wait! No-!

Emily thrashes. Monitors WAIL. Overhead lights STROBE.

Another DEPUTY rushes in, SLAMS the door shut.

INT. HOSPITAL EMERGENCY - FAMILY ROOM - CONTINUOUS

TIFFANY (O.S.)  
That's her! That's Emily!

Ray's head snaps up. He shoves past Gibbs and bolts.

INT. HOSPITAL EMERGENCY - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

An officer has Tiffany restrained.

RAY  
Hey! Get your hands off her! She's  
with us!

Diane stumbles in behind him, breathless.

TIFFANY  
Emily is in that room!

DIANE  
What?

Gibbs grabs Ray, struggling to hold him back.

DETECTIVE GIBBS  
Everyone, breathe. We're handling  
this-

RAY  
Handle it? What the hell is going on  
here?

DETECTIVE GIBBS  
Let me explain-

DIANE  
(through tears)  
I don't want an explanation! I want my  
daughter!

Behind them, a staff door opens. Carol steps out. Calm.  
Composed. Watching.

DETECTIVE GIBBS  
A Jane Doe came in two hours ago. Said  
her name was Emily. But we can't  
assume-

TIFFANY

It's her! I talked to her. She knew me.

DETECTIVE GIBBS

Tiffany, I understand-

TIFFANY

No! You're not listening! She knew things-

Something clicks. Tiffany's expression shifts, not panic, Certainty. Almost a grin - because she knows she's right.

TIFFANY (CONT'D)

She knew about the bracelet set I brought for us.

Ray and Diane lock eyes. Hope trembles.

From behind the door-

EMILY (16 Y/O) (O.S.)

Mom?

Everything freezes. Ray and Diane don't react. They can't.

The latch CLICKS. The door eases open.

A sixteen-year-old girl steps into the fluorescent light. Too tall. Too thin. Her eyes are wild with fear - searching.

EMILY (16 Y/O)

Mom?

Diane takes a step. Her face crumples. Her knees buckle.

A deputy catches her as she collapses.

Ray turns, sees the girl. Really looks at her. Confusion first. His brow tightens. Searching. Calculating.

Emily's gaze shifts - finds him.

EMILY (16 Y/O) (CONT'D)

Dad?

Ray flinches. Not belief - shock. A reflex he can't stop.

He takes a step forward before he realizes it. Then stops. Shakes his head. No. No, this is wrong. His chest heaves.

Tiffany slides down the wall, sobbing – relief and horror fused. She looks to Gibbs. He has nothing.

Carol is already moving in. Smile fixed. Chart in hand.

INT. RESEARCH INSTITUTE OBSERVATION ROOM - FEW DAYS LATER

Ray and Diane cling together in the shadows, eyes fixed on the mirrored glass. Tiffany leans forward, fists clenched, barely breathing.

On the other side, Emily lies in a hospital bed – pale, guarded – wired into a web of monitors. A camera LED glows red.

Just below a shelf of binders, a tiny red LED blinks.

Beside it: a faded photo – a cluster of men in black suits, faces all turned away.

INT. RESEARCH INSTITUTE - EMILY'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Bright, clinical light. Machines BEEP in steady rhythm. Paper graphs curl beside the glass.

DR. ABIGALE HARRIS (50s) sits across from Emily, posture calm. Her pen taps lightly against the chart. Her blue lanyard catches the light. Briarcroft Research Institute – Dr. A. Harris.

DR. HARRIS

I know this feels strange. New faces,  
bright lights.

(beat)

I'm not here to interrogate you. I  
observe and try to understand what's  
happening to you... and to us.

Emily hugs herself, eyes red. She never looks away from Harris.

EMILY (16 Y/O)

You won't believe me.

DR. HARRIS

You don't need *me* to believe you. I'm  
here to listen... not judge.

Harris's eyes flick to the mirrored wall — just a glance — her reflection floating there.

INT. RESEARCH INSTITUTE OBSERVATION ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Diane gasps, tears spilling. She presses her palms to the glass.

DIANE  
(whispering)  
That's her. That's my baby.

RAY  
They've fed her details. That can't be  
Emily.

Tiffany whirls on him, furious.

TIFFANY  
She knew about the bracelet set. How  
would anyone know that?

She softens — pleading now.

TIFFANY (CONT'D)  
Look at her, Uncle Ray. It's her.

Ray stares through the glass — torn, resisting.

INT. RESEARCH INSTITUTE - EMILY'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Emily's voice cracks.

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
You don't get it.  
(beat)  
This isn't even my world.

She folds in on herself.

EMILY (16 Y/O) (CONT'D)  
I see how you all look at me. Like I  
don't fit.  
(beat)  
Because I don't.

DR. HARRIS  
 Then help me see what you see.  
 (beat)  
 Tell me what doesn't fit.

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
 What doesn't fit?  
 (beat)  
 I don't!  
 (a breath)  
 If this happened to you, what would  
 you say?

Harris hesitates. Smooths her cuff – an unconscious tell.

Her eyes flick to a plaque on the wall.

INSERT – PLAQUE: ABIGALE HARRIS, MD, PhD – Neuropsychiatry /  
 Director, Clinical Research

DR. HARRIS  
 I'd ask for someone specially trained  
 to make sense of it.

Emily turns away, collapsing into the pillow.

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
 You can't fix this. No one can.

The monitor carries her heartbeat – steady. Relentless.

Harris watches her now without the chart.

DR. HARRIS  
 Maybe not fix.  
 (beat)  
 But I can keep you from breaking any  
 further.

Emily doesn't respond.

Harris reads the room. Gently:

DR. HARRIS (CONT'D)  
 That's enough for today. You rest.

She gathers her notes, exits quietly.

INT. RESEARCH INSTITUTE OBSERVATION ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Diane breaks, sobbing into Ray's chest. He holds her, but his eyes never leave Emily - still searching for proof this is a lie.

Tiffany stays glued to the glass.

TIFFANY  
(under her breath)  
I believe you.

The door opens softly. Dr. Harris enters, clipboard hugged close like armor. Gentle. Measured.

DR. HARRIS  
She's strong-willed. That helps.  
(beat)  
Her cooperation isn't required for  
baseline, but it makes the path less  
painful.

Diane wipes her face, forces steadiness.

DIANE  
So, what happens now?

Harris perches on the edge of a desk, voice soft.

DR. HARRIS  
Medically speaking... she's stable.  
Psychologically, I'm less certain.

Harris consults her clipboard. Clinical. Careful. She pulls out a document, hands it to Diane.

DR. HARRIS (CONT'D)  
On her intake, we ran the DNA  
comparison you submitted at the  
hospital.

Ray stiffens.

Diane looks up.

DR. HARRIS (CONT'D)  
It's a match.  
(beat)  
She *is* Emily.

Diane's hand covers her mouth.

DIANE

How could-

She falls against the wall - relief and terror at once.

Ray doesn't move. The room seems to narrow. The HUM of the monitors bleeds in from the other side of the glass.

Ray's eyes drift back to Emily - sitting there. Watching.

RAY

None of this explains how.

Dr. Harris looks down, chooses her words, carefully.

DR. HARRIS

You're asking the right question.

Dr. Harris steps in closer. Places a calm hand on Diane's.

Diane straightens, meets Harris's eyes.

DR. HARRIS (CONT'D)

We can't undo what's happened, but we can steady her.

(beat)

For her safety... and yours, I recommend she stay here a little-

DIANE

Absolutely not!

RAY

Honey-

DIANE

No. I won't let them lock up my daughter and call it care.

DR. HARRIS

No one is locking her up-

DIANE

Why does it feel like that? No cell phones. Automatic locks. Guards at every door.

DING - The discussion is interrupted.

INTERCOM (V.O.)

Dr. Harris to B-Wing. Ascension intake  
(MORE)

INTERCOM (V.O.) (CONT'D)  
commencing.

She exhales, turns back — softer again.

DR. HARRIS  
We'll finish this later.

She hands Ray a stack of documents. Her fingers linger.

DR. HARRIS (CONT'D)  
I assure you... her safety is our  
priority.

Harris exits.

Ray stares at the paperwork. Diane's breathing quickens.  
Tiffany shifts.

DIANE  
We're not losing her again. We're  
taking her home.

RAY  
No. We can't take that girl home.

DIANE  
It's her, Ray.

Diane lifts the DNA confirmation.

DIANE (CONT'D)  
This proves it.

Ray doesn't look at it.

RAY  
Wake up, Diane. Emily is six. How does  
a child become a teenager overnight?

DIANE  
I don't know!

She steps into him. Their voices collide.

DIANE (CONT'D)  
She needs her family!

RAY  
I need the truth!

Tiffany snaps.

TIFFANY  
Stop it! Both of you!

On the other side of the glass, Emily stands inches from the mirror. Her breath fogs the surface.

Ray deflates. Guilt rushes in.

RAY  
I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

He pulls Diane close. They shake together until the sobs thin to breath.

Ray looks back at the glass.

Emily is still there. Still watching.

RAY (CONT'D)  
I need some air.

Ray pulls away, heads to the door.

DIANE  
Ray.

He pauses at the threshold - doesn't turn back. He opens his mouth but says nothing.

The door opens. Ray steps out. It seals with a soft CLICK.

Diane stands frozen. Tiffany stays with her.

TIFFANY  
He'll come back. He always does.

Diane exhales, eyes lifting to the glass.

Emily's reflection meets hers. Two souls, connected. Divided by glass.

EXT. RESEARCH INSTITUTE - SIDE WALKWAY - CONTINUOUS

Gibbs stands outside, phone to his ear. Low voice.

DETECTIVE GIBBS  
(into phone)  
I hear you. I'm done.

The doors BURST open behind him.

Ray storms out, breath ragged, fury barely contained.

Gibbs clocks him instantly. Ends the call.

DETECTIVE GIBBS (CONT'D)  
Ray, hold up.

Ray stops. Hands on his hips. Stares out toward the parking lot.

RAY  
I'm really not in the mood right now,  
Detective.

DETECTIVE GIBBS  
I've been looking into cases like  
Emily's. Disappearances. Returns. Time  
gaps they call them.

Ray turns toward Gibbs, eyes locked.

RAY  
You said cases... as in plural.

DETECTIVE GIBBS  
Yeah. There are a few. Enough to  
notice patterns.

RAY  
Then spill it.

Gibbs' eyes flick past Ray – scanning the property.

A RED LED blinks above the entrance.

DETECTIVE GIBBS  
Not here.  
(beat)  
Come with me.

Gibbs grips Ray's arm, already moving – hustling him toward his SUV.

INT. RESEARCH INSTITUTE OBSERVATION ROOM - LATER

The maglock CLICKS. Dr. Harris enters quietly, warmth carefully measured.

DR. HARRIS  
 Would you like to see her?  
 (beat)  
 Familiar voices will help keep her grounded.

Diane rises instantly.

DIANE  
 When can I take her home?

DR. HARRIS  
 First we steady her. Too much too soon can cause confusion.  
 (beat)  
 If we keep her environment consistent, I can give you a clearer timeline in twenty-four hours.

Diane exhales sharply, close to breaking.

DIANE  
 Then do it. Whatever you need to do. I just want my daughter home as soon as possible.

Harris nods, already reaching for the clipboard.

Diane steps forward – not forceful, but unmistakable – and takes it from her.

That gives Harris pause. Just a flicker. She offers a pen.

Diane takes the pen.

DR. HARRIS  
 These confirm your consent for her care... and that the details of her treatment remain confidential.

Harris watches Diane as she finishes signing. Just a moment too long. A quiet reassessment. Not unkind – but alert now.

DR. HARRIS (CONT'D)  
 You're doing what any mother would.  
 (beat)

(MORE)

DR. HARRIS (CONT'D)  
Please, follow me.

She swipes her badge. The LED above the door flips from red to green with a soft CLACK.

MATCH CUT ON THE GREEN LED TO:

INT. RESEARCH INSTITUTE - EMILY'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

The same green LED glows. The door swings open. Fluorescent light washes over Emily as she bolts upright.

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
Mom!

Diane and Tiffany rush in. Arms collide. Sobs break loose.

EMILY (16Y/O)  
I want to go home. Please... Please  
don't make me stay here.

DIANE  
Oh, my sweet, sweet girl.

Emily's eyes dart - monitors, IV pole, mirrored glass.

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
Where's Dad?

DIANE  
He... needed a minute. This is hard on  
all of us.

TIFFANY  
We've got you, Em. I'm not leaving you  
alone again. Ever.

Emily wipes her eyes.

DIANE  
These Doctors, they think they can  
help.

Emily pulls back, panic rising.

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
No... No! Don't leave me here.

Diane cups her face, forces calm into her voice.

DIANE

I won't. Not for a second. I'll be right here.

Tiffany lifts her pinky.

TIFFANY

Me too, Em. The whole time.

Emily hooks it, clinging.

Diane kisses her brow.

The room settles into the steady BEEP BEEP BEEP of monitors.

Outside the door, a shadow pauses. Watches. Then moves on.

INT. DETECTIVE GIBBS VEHICLE - NIGHT - LATER

Highway lights strobe through the windshield, painting Gibbs and Ray in alternating amber and shadow.

Gibbs drives, eyes forward.

He reaches into an old leather briefcase in the backseat, pulls out a worn manila envelope. Old. Soft at the corners.

He hands it to Ray.

DETECTIVE GIBBS

You need to see these.

(beat)

Emily's case matches one almost perfectly.

Ray opens it. Skims the first page.

RAY

If there is a pattern, I'll find it.  
There *has* to be a logical explanation.

A flashlight clenched between his teeth. Pages flutter in the draft from a cracked window - clippings, photos, marginal notes bleeding together.

Ray's brow furrows, not fear, not anger - focus.

DETECTIVE GIBBS

No guarantees in there. Most of it has  
(MORE)

DETECTIVE GIBBS (CONT'D)  
 been redacted. I got what I could  
 before the Sheriff made it clear this  
 wasn't my lane.

He flips pages, scanning headlines.

INSERT - FILES  
 "Child Missing, Returns 15 Years Older."  
 "No Evidence of Abduction."  
 "Family Requests Privacy."

RAY (CONTD)  
 '53. '63. '68. Same anomalies.

DETECTIVE GIBBS  
 You notice what's not in those files?  
 (beat)  
 Names. Locations. No follow-ups at  
 all.

Detective Gibbs reaches over, pulls out one specific file,  
 places it on top.

INSERT: CASE FILE H04-97. A red diagonal stamp bleeds across  
 it - CLASSIFIED.

DETECTIVE GIBBS (CONT'D)  
 Someone always scrubs the trail.

RAY  
 H04-97?

DETECTIVE GIBBS  
 Jeffrey Harrison. Apparently, the kid  
 vanished for three weeks. Came back  
 fifteen years older.

Ray studies the photo paper-clipped to the report - Jeffrey  
 Harrison, twenty-three, eyes hollow.

DETECTIVE GIBBS (O.S.)  
 He never reintegrated. Just...  
 disappeared.  
 (beat)  
 Wrote him off for dead.

Ray flips deeper. Slows. A page catches his eye.

RAY  
 Wait-

He angles the flashlight.

INSERT - FILE NOTE: "Admitted for evaluation - Briarcroft Research Institute."

RAY (CONT'D)

Briarcroft is all over these files.

DETECTIVE GIBBS

The state partners with Briarcroft on anomalous minors. It's all above my pay grade.

(beat)

Harris is hailed as a leading authority on cases like these.

Ray's attention returns to the files.

Another page marked in different ink. Handwriting tight, deliberate.

RACK FOCUS: *Det. B. Riley - "Pattern extends beyond jurisdiction."*

RAY

These notes are thorough. Timelines. Witness statements. All from Detective Bill Riley.

(beat)

He worked Harrison from day one.

They roll into the campground. Park.

Gibbs pulls a small laptop from the console, types. Blue light flickers over them, ghostly.

DETECTIVE GIBBS

System shows, Riley is retired. Living in Mission Hills.

RAY

Then that's where I start.

Ray exhales, cracks the door. Cold night air spills in.

Gibbs watches him, voice low.

DETECTIVE GIBBS

You've got your first thread.

(beat)

It seems Briarcroft plays things close

(MORE)

DETECTIVE GIBBS (CONT'D)  
to the chest. Be careful how hard you  
pull.

Ray nods once. Steps out. The door shuts – THUNK.

Gibbs remains behind the wheel, staring into the dark where  
Ray vanished.

The laptop glow fades, leaving only his reflection in the  
windshield.

INT. RESEARCH INSTITUTE - EMILY'S ROOM - LATER

The red LED blinks, its glow pulsing softly in the dark.

Diane and Tiffany sleep nearby.

Emily twists in the bed. Restless. Caught in a dream she  
can't escape.

EXT. WOODS - FLASHBACK (3 DAYS AGO)

The world SHIMMERS.

Light bends. Trees stretch and contract, as if breathing.

Emily – six years old – drifts through the woods. Her Rainbow  
Dash doll swings from her hand, sometimes solid, sometimes  
lagging a half-second behind her, ghosted at the edge of the  
frame.

The HUM deepens. Vibrates through her chest.

A WHISPER. Then another. Layered. Breathy. Everywhere and  
nowhere.

WHISPERS  
Emily... Emily.

Emily slows. Her eyes glaze, unfocused – sleepwalking.

Above her, power lines cut through the canopy, barely  
visible. They tremble, just slightly.

The forest thickens. Grass brushes her knees. Leaves rot  
underfoot, wet and soft. Her shoes sink, lift, sink again.

The HUM begins to pulse now – not sound, but pressure.

WHISPERS (CONT'D)

This way...

She stumbles – catches herself – keeps moving.

Ahead, a massive hollowed-out tree. Ancient. Split open by time. Its trunk torn wide, a jagged black hollow yawning at its center.

Directly above it – the power line.

The air here feels wrong. Heavy. Charged. Still.

WHISPERS (CONT'D)

Emily...

She steps closer. Peers into the darkness. Nothing visible. Only depth.

Suddenly – the ground gives way. Emily is yanked forward, slipping.

Her grip falters.

Rainbow Dash is ripped from her hand. It hangs for half a second in midair – weightless, spinning.

Emily plunges, SCREAMING, swallowed by the darkness.

Rainbow Dash tumbles into the grass beside the tree.

Emily's SCREAM fades into silence.

INT. RESEARCH INSTITUTE - EMILY'S ROOM - PRESENT

Emily JOLTS upright, a SCREAM ripped from her throat.

Monitors SPIKE. Lights FLARE – too bright, on the edge of bursting.

Diane and Tiffany lurch awake, rush to her.

Emily thrashes, wild-eyed – doesn't recognize them. Arms flailing.

DIANE

Baby! Baby! It's me.

TIFFANY

Em! It's ok. It's us.

They grab her, hold tight. Emily fights them, gasping, feral.

Slowly – their touch breaks through.

The lights dim. The monitors steady.

DIANE

Shhhhh. It's ok Baby, I'm here. I'm here.

Diane cradles Emily's head to her chest, rocking.

The resistance drains out of Emily. She collapses into Diane, sobbing, breaths coming in ragged gulps.

EMILY (16 Y/O)

(soft, weak)

I don't belong here.

Diane stiffens, holds her tighter.

DIANE

No. You are Emily. You're my Emily.

Emily whimpers. Shaking.

Tiffany wipes at her eyes, clasps Emily's hand with both of hers.

Diane hums – low, steady – a lullaby.

Emily's breathing evens. Her eyes flutter, then close. Her cheek rests against Diane's heart.

Tiffany keeps hold of her hand as Diane rocks and hums – shielding her from the dark pressing in.

SMASH THROUGH THE TWO-WAY MIRROR TO:

INT. RESEARCH INSTITUTE OBSERVATION ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Dr. Harris stands half in shadow. Cold blue monitor light cuts across her face. She doesn't blink. Doesn't move.

Only the pen in her hand – TICK TICK TICK against the clipboard.

The desk phone's red LED pulses. Once. Then twice.

DR. HARRIS  
Echo Grid amplitude is rising.  
Baseline is steady.

INT. SECURE ROOM - UNKNOWN LOCATION - CONTINUOUS

Dark. Walls lined with racked electronics. LEDs wink. A low server HUM.

An AGENT (shadowed) holds on the line.

AGENT (O.S.)  
Is she ready?

Behind him: A framed poster — KNOW TOMORROW. SAVE TODAY.

DR. HARRIS (O.S.-PHONE)  
Pattern is holding... it's still  
early.

AGENT (O.S.)  
You're behind schedule, Doctor. What's  
your plan?

DR. HARRIS (O.S.-PHONE)  
Increase amplitude. Controlled  
escalation at 0900.

The Agent turns. Glances at another poster:

LEAP > ASCENSION > DEBRIEF.

He hangs up.

INT. RAY'S CAR - NEXT MORNING

Overcast light flattens the highway into gray ribbon. Ray grips the wheel, eyes hollow from a sleepless night.

His phone BUZZES. He hesitates — then taps hands-free.

RAY  
Yeah?

DIANE (O.S.-PHONE)  
 Where are you?  
 (beat)  
 You just left.

Ray exhales through his nose. The engine HUM fills the silence.

RAY  
 I'm heading to Mission Hills. There's something there, Diane. Answers... I think. I need to see it myself.

INTERCUT:

EXT. RESEARCH INSTITUTE - COURTYARD

Diane paces beneath a gray sky, arms wrapped tight against the cold.

DIANE  
 You don't *have* to do anything, Ray.  
 You chose to run.

She stops. Looks up toward a window.

INT. RAY'S CAR

Ray's knuckles whiten. Wipers drag across the windshield - SQUEAK SQUEAK.

RAY  
 I just... If I can figure out what happened, maybe I can fix it.

DIANE (O.S.-PHONE)  
 You think answers will fix what you broke walking out that door?

Ray blinks hard. Swallows.

EXT. RESEARCH INSTITUTE - COURTYARD

Diane's pacing grows tighter. More frantic.

DIANE  
 She needs her father, Ray.  
 (beat)  
 I need my husband.  
 (beat)  
 Whatever you're chasing won't give us  
 (MORE)

DIANE (CONT'D)  
either of those.

INT. RAY'S CAR

Ray stares at the empty passenger seat. His reflection fractures across the glass.

RAY  
I'll come back. But I need to finish  
this first.

Only road noise answers.

EXT. RESEARCH INSTITUTE - COURTYARD

Diane slows. The fight drains out of her.

DIANE  
Ray... if you deny her now-  
  
She struggles to keep her voice steady.

DIANE (CONT'D)  
-you don't just lose her.  
(beat)  
You lose all of us.

She looks up at the sky, searching.

Almost a prayer:

DIANE (CONT'D)  
Don't let the truth be your way of  
leaving us behind.

INT. RAY'S CAR

Ray closes his eyes — just for a half-second.

When he opens them, they're wet.

RAY  
I'm not going anywhere.  
(beat)  
I will get our family back.

He fixes his eyes on the road.

In the rearview mirror, a black sedan slides into frame — distant, patient. Ray doesn't see it.

He presses the accelerator. The engine HUM deepens. The road stretches on – endless, colorless.

INT. RESEARCH INSTITUTE - EMILY'S ROOM - LATER

Diane slips in, closing the door with a soft CLICK.

Emily sleeps curled on her side – pale, but peaceful.

Tiffany sits close, stroking Emily's hair with quiet care. She looks up, whispering.

TIFFANY

What did Uncle Ray say?

Diane sinks into the chair, the exhaustion finally landing.

DIANE

(quietly)

He's halfway across the state chasing answers.

TIFFANY

Now?

DIANE

That's who he is. He digs and scratches while I hold on.

(beat)

Sometimes I wish he'd just stop and see what's right in front of him.

They share a look – worry braided with loyalty.

A gentle KNOCK. The door opens a crack.

Dr. Harris peeks in, posture easy, voice soft.

DR. HARRIS

Mrs. Rider. May I have a word?

Diane rises, smooths her hair, steals one last look at Emily.

She steps out. The door closes softly.

INT. RESEARCH INSTITUTE HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Harris walks beside Diane, an unhurried sway to her stride. Heels CLICK softly against the floor.

DR. HARRIS

I heard last night was... eventful.

Diane rubs her temples, voice thin.

DIANE

She won't talk about it. Not to us.  
Not to anyone.

Harris slows. Her voice lowers - still kind, now careful.

DR. HARRIS

There's a protocol I'd like to  
initiate.

(beat)

Ascension.

DIANE

What's Ascension?

Harris holds her gaze - a beat too long.

DR. HARRIS

It's specifically designed to help  
Emily stabilize. To reduce distress.

Diane's eyes narrow.

DR. HARRIS (CONT'D)

Given Emily's age, I need consent.

(softer)

If we don't move forward, the decision  
may not stay here.

DIANE

You're saying, if I say no-

Harris doesn't interrupt. Doesn't confirm.

DR. HARRIS

As long as the study remains active,  
Emily stays here.

(beat)

She stays safe.

Diane folds her arms protectively.

DIANE

She's been through enough already.

Harris touches Diane's arm – gentle, practiced.

DR. HARRIS

Mrs. Rider, I assure you she will be under the closest observation.

Diane pulls her arm back.

DIANE

You're damn right she will. I'll be right there.

Harris blinks – the first sign of resistance.

DR. HARRIS

The Ascension suite is restricted to authorized-

DIANE

I will be present... or you don't have my consent.

Harris recalculates.

DR. HARRIS

The suite itself is restricted, but... I will allow you access to the gallery.

Diane considers. Then nods.

Harris produces the clipboard.

DR. HARRIS (CONT'D)

Before we proceed, our treatment protocols are proprietary. Sensitive.

Diane scans the document.

DIANE

This says I can't discuss anything I see here.

DR. HARRIS

Outside the care team, yes.

Diane looks up.

DIANE

If I don't agree?

DR. HARRIS

Then Emily's placement would need to be... re-evaluated.

(beat)

I'd rather she stays here.

Diane hesitates. Then signs.

DR. HARRIS (CONT'D)

You're doing the right thing for her.

She turns away, dialing as she walks - her voice already colder, measured, reporting.

Diane lingers in the harsh fluorescent light, arms tight across her chest.

A distant intercom blares:

INTERCOM

"DING - B-Wing, ascension suite activation commencing."

EXT. MISSION HILLS - DAY

Ray's car rolls down a sunbaked main street.

He parks. Steps out. Scans the town.

A faded coffee shop sign BUZZES weakly in the glare. The address matches the flyer in his hands.

INT. COFFEE SHOP - CONTINUOUS

A tired bell JINGLES as Ray enters. He scans the room.

Old men murmur beneath a TICKING ceiling fan. Coffee cups clink. The room smells like dust and burnt grounds.

At a corner table, BILL RILEY (early 70s), white-haired and squared away, finishes sorting paperwork for a couple of locals. Handshakes. Polite smiles. Retired-cop efficiency.

They leave. Ray approaches.

RAY  
Detective Bill Riley?

DETECTIVE RILEY  
That's me.

They shake. Riley's grip is still iron.

RAY  
Ray Rider. I think you're the only one  
who can help me.

Ray slides the folder from his bag, Case H04-97. His hand  
trembles as he sets it down.

RAY (CONT'D)  
In '97, you worked the Harrison case.  
A missing boy... Jeffrey.

Riley's fingers stop mid-page. Just long enough.

DETECTIVE RILEY  
Rings a bell. What about it?

RAY  
I need to know what happened. What you  
saw.

Riley stiffens, defaulting to script.

DETECTIVE RILEY  
Standard case. Kid disappeared from a  
park. Found weeks later. Returned to  
his family.

Ray clocks the practiced wall.

RAY  
Standard?  
(beat)  
He aged fifteen years in three weeks.

Riley's jaw tightens — just a tic. He reaches for a scrap of  
paper, starts writing without looking up.

DETECTIVE RILEY  
Son, you should visit the clinic down  
the block. You're talking nonsense.

Ray leans in. Low. Controlled.

RAY

My daughter vanished a week ago.

Riley doesn't look up.

RAY (CONT'D)

Same pattern. Same circumstance.

(beat)

I came straight here from Briarcroft.

Riley stops writing. The name lands like a gunshot. Riley freezes, breath hitches.

His eyes sweep the café – windows, strangers, reflections in the chrome napkin holder.

DETECTIVE RILEY

Say that name in here again, you'll regret it.

He stands abruptly, scooping up his papers. He exits fast.

The bell JINGLES as he exits.

EXT. MISSION HILLS SIDEWALK - CONTINUOUS

Ray jogs to catch up as Riley strides away from the coffee shop.

RAY

Detective!

DETECTIVE RILEY

Keep walking with me. We're just two guys shooting the breeze.

(a beat, scanning)

They might still be watching me.

RAY

Who?

DETECTIVE RILEY

Take your pick of the three-letter agencies. Any damn one of them.

Riley slips through a narrow break in a chain-link fence.

He tips his head – barely.

Ray follows him through.

Riley stops, shields his mouth as he lights a cigarette.

He exhales. Smoke curls, dissipates.

DETECTIVE RILEY (CONT'D)

Listen and listen good.

(beat)

You're already in the undertow. Get your daughter out of there. Now.

Riley stops, scans the street, then grips Ray's shoulder and pulls him closer, eye to eye.

DETECTIVE RILEY (CONT'D)

She doesn't need you to solve her. She needs you to love her as she is.

(beat)

If you leave her at Briarcroft, she won't be yours much longer.

RAY

I must know what happened to Jeffrey Harrison.

Riley eases back, takes a long puff of his cigarette. Exhales and softens his voice.

DETECTIVE RILEY

Aged fifteen years in three weeks. He remembered every damn minute of it.

(beat)

Said it was like drowning in light.

Ray stares, hollow. Riley presses on.

DETECTIVE RILEY (CONT'D)

Briarcroft promised answers. Instead, they stamped asset on him and wiped the rest away.

(beat)

Including his parents.

RAY

His parents?

DETECTIVE RILEY

They tried to tell their story.

(beat)

It didn't make it out.

Riley leans in again, voice very low.

DETECTIVE RILEY (CONT'D)  
Has Briarcroft offered ascension  
therapy yet?

RAY  
Not yet. Not to me.

DETECTIVE RILEY  
They will.  
(beat)  
It's not therapy. It's how they take  
what they want.

RAY  
You're saying they turn them into-

DETECTIVE RILEY  
Briarcroft is a machine. You jam it,  
or it eats your family.

Riley's eyes flick past Ray. Then stop.

Across the street, a delivery truck pulls away. Revealing a  
black sedan idling at the curb. Too clean. Too still.  
Something dark sits low on the dash.

Riley stiffens. The color drains from his face. He leans in  
fast, presses a scrap of paper into Ray's hand.

DETECTIVE RILEY (CONT'D)  
Don't turn around. Just hear me.  
(beat)  
Over your shoulder, black sedan, dash-  
mounted puck. They're not locals.

Riley swallows, eyes never leaving the car.

DETECTIVE RILEY (CONT'D)  
You see them again... run.

Riley steps back - already disengaging.

RAY  
Wait... if this is so dangerous, why  
are you helping me?

The sedans window lowers a crack.

DETECTIVE RILEY  
Because I didn't help him.

The window stops. An agent lifts their wrist to their mouth.

DETECTIVE RILEY (CONT'D)  
Go! Now!

Ray doesn't hesitate.

Riley stays put, lights another cigarette he won't smoke. In the glass reflection of the café window, he watches Ray fade, regret etched deep in his face.

EXT. SIDEWALK - CONTINUOUS

Ray turns right, keeps a steady pace.

He opens the scrap of paper Riley pressed into his hand.

"DON'T USE YOUR PHONE." Same handwriting from the case file.

Ray's brow creases. He looks up—

A storefront window catches a reflection across the street.

The black sedan. Two men inside. Neutral suits. Neutral faces. Sunglasses fixed on him.

He passes a barbershop — suddenly ducks inside.

INTERCUT:

INT. BARBERSHOP

A bell JINGLES. Clippers BUZZ.

The BARBER lifts his chin.

BARBER  
You got an appointment?

Ray glances back toward the street.

RAY  
Just your back door. Please.

The barber clocks the tension. Tilts his head.

Ray slips through the rear.

EXT. ALLEY

He moves fast through a propped door into—

INT. TAQUERIA KITCHEN

Steam HISSES. Pans CLANK. Orders barked in Spanish.

A cook looks up, startled.

Ray taps his head — *hat?* — and drops a twenty on the stainless.

The cook flips him a faded baseball cap.

Ray pulls it low and ghosts out the side door.

EXT. SIDE STREET

Cap down, Ray blends into foot traffic.

The black sedan creeps past the block he *should* be on. Wrong street.

Ray clocks a thrift store. Slips inside.

INT. THRIFT STORE

He grabs a navy windbreaker, tosses cash on the counter, doesn't wait for change.

Shrugs it on. Zips up. Cap lower.

Outside, a city bus SQUEALS to a stop.

EXT. BUS STOP

Doors HISS open.

Ray steps on just as two more agents round the corner, scanning faces.

Ray drops into a seat behind a college kid's duffel, watching through the glass.

The bus pulls away, rounds a corner.

Ray hits the rear request — DING.

EXT. MID-BLOCK - CONTINUOUS

The bus stops again. Doors HISS.

Ray steps off into-

EXT. REAR ALLEY

- a parking garage entrance.

INT. PARKING GARAGE

Footsteps ECHO as Ray jogs down a level - spots his car across the street - stops.

Through the slats: the black sedan idles close by. Agents watching his vehicle.

Beyond it, a neon arrow blinks: RENT-A-CAR

Ray cuts over to a pedestrian exit.

EXT. OPPOSITE BLOCK

Ray strolls past the two agents - who are still watching *his car*.

He slips into the rental office.

A placard in the window: WALK-UP AVAILABLE

INT. RENTAL OFFICE

Fluorescents BUZZ.

Paperwork SLAPS.

A key fob JINGLES across the counter.

EXT. RENTAL LOT ALLEY

A nondescript SUV with a barcode sticker and temp tag rolls out of the back lot. Ray behind the wheel.

A city bus glides between him and the stakeout.

The agents keep watching Ray's parked car.

Ray turns the wheel, merges into traffic - opposite direction.

RAY  
Your move, assholes.

In his rearview, the sedan fades into the distance. Still watching.

INT. ASCENSION SUITE - LATER

A clinical room – ordinary in shape, extraordinary in control. Clean light. White walls. Nothing sharp enough to break the illusion of safety.

At the center: a narrow bed beside a sculpted chair.

Emily sits cross-legged on the bed, EEG leads trailing from her temples and chest. Vitals blink on a quiet monitor: Heart rate steady. Oxygen normal.

She knots colored threads – focused, careful – working a bracelet from the set Tiffany gave her. Her breathing is calm.

Above her, a suspended halo rig. Slender sensor arms arc outward – polished steel, soft as jewelry.

The ceiling is a seamless sheet of black glass. A two-way mirror that looks like night.

INT. ASCENSION SUITE GALLERY - OPS - CONTINUOUS

Diane and Tiffany step into the Ops gallery and stop cold.

Below them, visible through the black glass floor, is the Ascension Suite. Emily. Perfectly lit. Perfectly framed.

Tiffany stares, stunned.

TIFFANY  
(whisper)  
Holy shit!

She clamps a hand over her mouth.

Before them: a vast circular chamber. Viewing wedges ring the suite like petals around a central bloom – Clinical. Psych. Tech, Admin.

From every chamber, silhouettes peer downward. Dozens of eyes. Doctors, scientists, agency suits. No family section. No public access. This isn't a procedure meant to be seen.

Monitors HUM. Ceiling speakers bleed live audio. Red LEDs tick in a steady metronome.

Diane grips the rail. Knuckles bleach white.

DIANE  
(whispers, fierce)  
Hold on, baby.

Tiffany leans closer to the glass, awe curdling into fear.

At the primary console stands Dr. Harris. When she speaks, it's calm. Absolute.

DR. HARRIS  
(into intercom)  
Ascension phase commencing.  
(beat)  
Hold stillness. No prompts from the gallery.

Below, DR. JIN JEONG (40's) steps into the central suite.

The door seals behind him with a soft HISS that echoes upward through the glass. The room quiets.

Then, the halo rig HUMS. Tiny gyros WHIR, correcting, aligning. A crown of machinery begins its slow descent towards Emily.

INT. ASCENSION SUITE - CONTINUOUS

Dr. Jeong steps into the sterile light. His movements are deliberate, unhurried.

Emily stiffens. Her eyes lock on him.

DR. JEONG  
Hello, Emily. I'm Dr. Jeong.  
(beat)  
Would you like to have a conversation?

He gives two precise clicks of his pen - CLICK CLICK. Then a BREATH.

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
Where's Dr. Harris?

DR. JEONG  
Dr. Harris is observing this  
procedure. This is just you and me  
talking.

Two more precise clicks of the pen and a breath - CLICK CLICK  
BREATH. A rhythm sets. Mechanical, comforting and sinister.

Emily flinches. A bead slips from her thread, clattering on  
the sheet.

DR. JEONG (CONT'D)  
Would you like to have a conversation?

CLICK CLICK BREATH.

She resumes knotting the colored threads.

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
Sure. I guess.

Dr. Jeong sits, the pen, locked in his fingers.

DR. JEONG  
Tell me what you're making.

CLICK CLICK BREATH

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
A bracelet. Tiffany gave me the kit.

DR. JEONG  
Chevron pattern. Very nice.  
(beat)  
Is that one for anyone in particular?

CLICK CLICK BREATH

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
Karla. The lady who brings food.  
Sometimes, she sneaks me extra Jell-O.

INT. ASCENSION SUITE GALLERY - OPS - CONTINUOUS

Tiffany leans forward; eyes fixed on Dr. Jeong's hand.

She begins tapping her nail against her knee. Soft. Careful.

Tap. Tap. Breath. She matches his rhythm – then shifts it. Just slightly.

Prompt. Tap. Tap. Breath.

On her forearm, she marks a quick notation with a pen: A dash. Two dots. A slash. Code.

TIFFANY  
(whispering)  
Stay with me, Em.

Beside her, Diane grips the rail, breathing rapid.

INT. ASCENSION SUITE - CONTINUOUS

DR. JEONG  
Elizabeth, you are so creative.

CLICK CLICK BREATH

Emily freezes. Her eyes snap up – confused, searching.

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
Elizabeth?

Under the chair, Dr. Jeong's left hand taps his thigh – two quick beats. A hidden cue.

DR. JEONG  
That's right. Let it be easy.

Emily's focus wavers. The room seems to soften at the edges.

A bead slips from her thread, bouncing across the sheet. She doesn't chase it.

Slowly, mechanically, her hands resume knotting.

INT. ASCENSION SUITE GALLERY - OPS - CONTINUOUS

Tiffany leans forward, breath syncing to Jeong's cadence.

From below, his voice carries faintly through the speakers.

DR. JEONG (O.S.)  
Good. Stay with that.

Tiffany clenches her fist over the markings on her arm. The rhythm memorized. A lifeline.

Beside her, Diane cannot look away from Emily.

INT. ASCENSION SUITE - CONTINUOUS

DR. JEONG  
When you think about where you come from... what does life feel like there?

Emily hesitates, glancing down at her hands.

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
Normal. School. Friends.  
(beat)  
My dad has been teaching me to drive.  
I get my license soon.

DR. JEONG  
Does that life feel stable... or unsettled?

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
Well...  
(beat)  
...we moved to a new house after my brother was born.

DR. JEONG  
Congratulations. I bet that was exciting.  
(beat)  
What's your brother's name?

Emily twitches. Her hands falter on the thread.

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
Ben.

Jeong notes it. The pen doesn't move again.

DR. JEONG  
I see you had a birthday... last month, yes?

Emily's eyes glaze just slightly. She accepts it.

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
Yeah. Sweet sixteen.

Her fingers keep knotting. The heart monitor ticks up – just a hair.

INT. ASCENSION SUITE GALLERY - OPS - CONTINUOUS

Diane trembles, turns sharply on Dr. Harris. Her voice is low, furious – barely contained.

DIANE  
She didn't have a birthday. And her name is not Elizabeth. What is this?

Harris doesn't turn. Her eyes stay locked on the glass. Her voice is smooth. Even. Practiced.

DR. HARRIS  
Ascension phase. Guided recall under light entrainment. Probe cues are deliberate. False identifiers trigger correction.  
(beat)  
We observe until the memory stabilizes.

Each line lands like an item on a checklist.

Diane studies Harris now. The stillness. The controlled breathing. The absence of reaction. Something in Harris feels missing. As if part of her has been switched out.

Diane's fists tighten. Fury held behind discipline.

INT. ASCENSION SUITE - CONTINUOUS

Dr. Jeong's pen lies still now. The anchor is set.

He lowers his voice – intimate, almost reverent.

DR. JEONG  
Tell me something everyone talked about in your time. Something that... changed the world.

Emily's breath thins. The threads tremble in her fingers.

Above her, the lights begin to PULSE – dim, bright, dim – each cycle synced to her heart rate.

BEEP... FLASH...

BEEP... FLASH...

Emily squeezes her eyes shut.

INT. ASCENSION SUITE GALLERY - OPS - CONTINUOUS

Monitor needles spike. Static TEARS across screens.

Ceiling fixtures STUTTER. Overhead lights flicker like distant heat lightning.

Diane bolts upright.

DIANE

That's enough!

Harris doesn't flinch. Her eyes remain fixed on Emily – calm, assessing. She expected this.

In the neighboring platforms, agency suits lean forward. A low murmur ripples – awe, curiosity. Hunger.

INT. ASCENSION SUITE - CONTINUOUS

Dr. Jeong remains composed. He writes a single line in his notebook. Then leans closer.

DR. JEONG

Let's stay with how that felt for you.  
Not the headlines, just you.

The lights settle. Normal. Emily's shaking eases.

EMILY (16 Y/O)

Loud. Like the air buzzing. A  
headache. Then the lights flicker.

Under the table, Jeong's thigh taps once.

Emily's breathing steadies.

DR. JEONG  
You're doing well, Elizabeth.

On the EEG, the erratic spikes smooth into slow-wave rhythm.  
The heart monitor steadies.

DR. JEONG (CONT'D)  
We'll pause here.

He holds her in the pocket of suggestion. No audible wake. No  
release. Just stillness.

INT. ASCENSION SUITE GALLERY - OPS - CONTINUOUS

Diane exhales — like she's been underwater.

Dr. Harris stands at the console. Her movements are smooth,  
economical. Eyes track the data spooling across the monitors.  
Her pen records only what matters.

DIANE  
This isn't remembering. He's...  
steering her.

Harris doesn't look up. Her voice is flat — procedural.

DR. HARRIS  
We provide lanes. She decides where to  
drive.

Tiffany shifts uneasily, caught between Harris's stillness  
and the tremor in the girl below.

The hum of the machinery deepens — a second heartbeat.

DIANE  
I don't like this. Cut this off. Now!

Harris stays rigid.

Then — a catch. A blink. Her shoulders unhook. She lowers the  
clipboard. Steps closer. Palms open. Human again.

DR. HARRIS  
We're in phase. We could lose  
continuity and that would be  
catastrophic for Emily.

She meets Diane's eyes.

DR. HARRIS (CONT'D)  
 Diane... look at me. I won't let them  
 push her past safe limits. I promise  
 you.

(beat)  
 We're almost there.

Diane surges to her feet, voice cracking.

DIANE  
 End it! Now! You're rewriting her...  
 you're erasing her!

Harris shifts. Her spine straightens; shoulders lock. The  
 warmth drains from her face. She turns back to the console,  
 presses the intercom toggle.

DR. HARRIS  
 (into intercom)  
 Ascension Suite, maintain continuity.

A red button press - CLACK.

The maglock on the gallery door engages. Two security guards  
 appear in the doorway.

Diane's gaze snaps to them - then back to Harris.

DIANE  
 You can't keep me out of my daughter's  
 mind!

Harris flinches. Just barely. A sliver of the woman from the  
 hallway returns.

DR. HARRIS  
 I can keep her safe while she's in it.  
 You must let me do my work.

The guards step forward. Hands lowered. Calm.

SECURITY GUARD 1  
 Ma'am.

Diane bristles, voice breaking into fury.

DIANE  
 I'm not the threat here!

Harris turns fully now. Her tone stays soft - but the words  
 sharpen. Authority reclaiming ground.

DR. HARRIS

The continuity clause exists for her protection. I will not let you corrupt my data.

Diane squares up, eyes blazing. She heard it.

DIANE

She is not your data. She is my daughter!

She lunges a step.

Tiffany rushes in, blocking her.

TIFFANY

Aunt D, please. Come on. We'll find another way.

Diane trembles, fists clenched.

With Tiffany pulling her back, she allows herself to be guided toward the door – eyes burning into the glass.

SECURITY GUARD 2

We'll take you to the family room.

The door seals - CLACK.

Harris exhales once. Re-centers. When she speaks again, it's purely clinical.

DR. HARRIS

Increase amplitude twenty-five percent. Release on my call.

COMS TECH

Twenty-five percent. Confirmed.

Keyboards CLACK. The machine HUM deepens.

INT. ASCENSION SUITE - CONTINUOUS

Dr. Jeong's pen comes to rest. The anchor is set.

His voice drops half a key – intimate, threaded into the lane he built.

DR. JEONG  
Stay with how it felt... when the  
lights flicker.

Emily's breath shortens. The bracelet pattern skews beneath  
her fingers. Her hands begin to tremble.

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
Like the room... buzzed. My head rang.  
Something pulling at me.

DR. JEONG  
Hold there. Only what you feel.

Her fingers keep moving – autopilot through the tremor.

Above her, the lights begin to STUTTER. The equipment HUM  
deepens.

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
It wanted me. Like... like a magnet.

Dr. Jeong leans in, calm, pressing.

DR. JEONG  
You're safe. Stay with the pull.  
(beat)  
Let it name itself.

Emily's jaw loosens. The bracelet slips from her fingers,  
forgotten.

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
It's... *convergence*.

The monitor's spike.

Then – BANG.

Every fixture POPS at once. A violent FLASH. Sparks rain from  
the ceiling.

INTERCUT:

INT. ASCENSION SUITE GALLERY – OPS

Gallery faces flash white – then vanish into darkness.

INT. ASCENSION SUITE

Monitors SNAP to black. The halo rig goes dead. The HUM

chokes out mid-note.

Emily is swallowed by black. Her breathing is ragged.  
Terrified.

A single EXIT LIGHT glows red.

DR. JEONG (O.S.)  
I think that's enough.

Total silence.

INT. RESEARCH INSTITUTE - CONTROL ROOM - LATER

A cacophony of data. Printers SHRIEK. Monitors strobe alive with unreadable code - figures spooling faster than comprehension.

Dr. Harris stands in the blue glow. Her eyes track the screens - then stop.

The data begins to align.

The red phone LED BLINKS. Once. Then twice.

She lifts the receiver. Expression blank.

AGENT (V.O.-PHONE)  
Progress report.

DR. HARRIS  
Subject is entraining faster than projected.

AGENT (V.O.-PHONE)  
The board is growing impatient with you Abigale. We need this one.

A tremor flickers through Harris's hand - the only tell. She clocks it. Stillness snaps back into place.

DR. HARRIS  
The family is interfering.  
(beat)  
Either remove them... or extend my window.

AGENT (V.O.-PHONE)  
Denied. Their current actions fall  
(MORE)

AGENT (V.O.-PHONE) (CONT'D)  
within acceptable parameters.

(beat)

You have forty-eight hours to prove  
viability. Or we reassign command.

CLICK - The line dies. The LED keeps pulsing. Steady.  
Mechanical.

Harris exhales once - not relief, not anger. Control  
reasserting.

Through the frosted glass beyond the console, Diane's  
silhouette paces. Restless. Unaware she's being watched.

Harris smooths her sleeve. Presses the mag-lock release.

CLACK - The door swings open.

Diane bursts in - fire in her eyes. She closes the distance  
fast, voice shaking with rage.

DIANE

Whatever that was, that wasn't  
therapy! You were feeding her answers.

Harris doesn't move.

DIANE (CONT'D)

You renamed her. You gave her a new  
birthday. A brother.

Diane leans in, shaking.

DIANE (CONT'D)

Those aren't lanes, that's a script.

Harris slides a consent packet forward with one finger. Tabs  
flagged in yellow. Her face softens - just a fraction. The  
human tone returns.

DR. HARRIS

I know how it looks.

(beat)

If I were where you are, I'd be  
furious too.

She taps the packet once.

DR. HARRIS (CONT'D)

Those cues are building blocks. The

(MORE)

DR. HARRIS (CONT'D)  
 misnames provoke correction because  
 the mind looks for continuity. It's  
 how we find the thread without tearing  
 it.

Diane shoves the packet back forcefully.

DIANE  
 We're done! I never should have let  
 you do this.  
 (beat)  
 I'm taking my daughter home.

Harris's eyes flick — just once — to the red LED.

Something in her resets. Warmth drops away like a snapped  
 wire. Spine straightens. The clinical cadence returns.

DR. HARRIS  
 Home is not clinically indicated, Mrs.  
 Rider.  
 (beat)  
 Emily presents a high-risk, anomalous  
 case. If she decompensates outside a  
 controlled environment, protocol  
 requires a protective hold.

DIANE  
 You can call it "protection" all you  
 want. What you're really after is  
 data.

DR. HARRIS  
 Data is how we know when she's safe.

A soft KNOCK at the door. A security guard's silhouette  
 appears in the glass. They don't enter.

Harris exhales. The human mask slips back on.

DR. HARRIS (CONT'D)  
 You may observe future treatments...  
*if* you can maintain protocol.

She holds Diane's stare — long, deliberate.

Diane steps closer, voice low and lethal.

DIANE  
 If you hurt her... if you push her one  
 (MORE)

DIANE (CONT'D)  
inch further than she can bear, I will  
burn this place down to the slab.

Harris calmly rises, tugs the cuff of her sleeve.

DR. HARRIS  
I don't respond to threats, Mrs.  
Rider.  
(beat)  
I respond to outcomes.

She swipes her card - BEEP. The door opens. Diane storms past. Harris watches her go.

The door closes. Harris turns back to the rack. Her fingers hover over the red alert button. Then - she lowers her hand.

INT. RESEARCH INSTITUTE - EMILY'S ROOM - LATER

Emily lies curled on the bed, back turned. Small. Silent.

The door eases shut behind Tiffany - a soft LATCH.

TIFFANY  
Hey, Em. You doing okay?

Emily burrows deeper into the pillow.

Tiffany crosses the room, sits on the edge of the bed. She rests a steady hand on Emily's shoulder.

TIFFANY (CONT'D)  
Oh, Em.  
(beat)  
I'd trade places with you if I could.  
It's all my fault.

A tear blooms dark on Emily's pillow.

Tiffany shifts - subtly blocking the mirror, shielding her from the glass beyond.

She scans the room cautiously.

Then rolls up her sleeve. On her arm: a dash. Two faint dots. A slash. She matches her breathing to the pattern. Slow. Intentional. She grips her pen. One last look around.

Then – gently:

TIFFANY (CONT'D)  
 ...Elizabeth?

CLICK CLICK BREATH.

Emily flinches. Her breath catches. Her eyes refocus. Color returns to her face.

Slowly, she turns her head. Looks up at Tiffany.

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
 I'm Emily.

Tiffany exhales – shoulders collapsing. Almost a laugh. Almost a sob.

TIFFANY  
 Good. Stay with me. Feel my hand on your shoulder. Just breathe. In... and out.

Emily follows. Their breaths sync. Her body steadies.

Tiffany bows her head, grip tightening around Emily's hands.

TIFFANY (CONT'D)  
 (softly.)  
 I'm so sorry, Em. I won't fail you again.

She draws Emily's hand to her chest, pressing it over her heartbeat.

Emily's fingers curl – matching the rhythm.

The monitor eases toward baseline. BEEP BEEP. A fragile truce.

After a beat, Emily's voice drifts – fragile, distant.

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
 Your mom gets married again.

It lands wrong. Tiffany freezes.

TIFFANY  
 What? What are you talk-

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
 He's nice. Makes her really happy. He  
 loves you too. Like you were his own.

Emotion breaks across Tiffany. She wipes her eyes, trembling.

EMILY (16 Y/O) (CONT'D)  
 You work at a veterinary hospital. All  
 the cats like you.

Tiffany laughs through tears.

TIFFANY  
 I do love kitties.  
 (beat)  
 I'll probably end up a lonely cat  
 lady, huh?

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
 You do have a lot of cats.  
 (beat)  
 You also have Brandon. You're not  
 married... yet. But you love each  
 other.

Tiffany's breath hitches.

EMILY (16 Y/O) (CONT'D)  
 You glow now, Tiff. I've never seen  
 you smile so much.

Tiffany breaks, tears streaming – clutching Emily's hands  
 tighter.

Emily rolls toward her. Tiffany collapses into the embrace.  
 Two girls anchored together.

EXT. NOLAN COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE - NEXT DAY

Ray's rental vehicle SCREECHES into the lot.

He jumps out, SLAMS the door, and charges up the steps.

INT. GIBBS OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

The door BANGS open. Ray storms in – breathless, scattered.

RAY

They're not doctors. Riley said-  
whatever they're doing- it's already-

Gibbs raises a finger to his lips.

DETECTIVE GIBBS

Shhh.

Gibbs stands, crosses the room, quietly shuts the door. Locks it.

Only then does he return to his desk and slides a red-sealed folder across.

Ray freezes. Stares at it.

RAY

What's this?

DETECTIVE GIBBS

Her way out.

Ray opens it.

INSERT - DOCUMENT: SUBJECT: Emily S. Rider. Emergency Safety Hold / Immediate Transfer. Ex Parte - 24 Hours - Expires Tomorrow, 5:00 PM MST.

Affixed with a county seal and a judge's signature.

Ray looks up - hope, fear, disbelief colliding.

RAY

How did-

DETECTIVE GIBBS

Riley reached out, filled me in. I started immediately. Quietly.

Ray's grip tightens on the folder, a lifeline.

DETECTIVE GIBBS (CONT'D)

Judge signed twenty minutes ago. It's legal and it's on the clock.

(beat)

It won't stay that way.

Ray's eyes narrow on the document. They focus on one word - "Subject". His shoulders sag.

RAY

Harris doesn't see her as a child,  
does she?

(beat)

She's not going to let her go.

Gibbs raises an eyebrow. He closes his laptop. Calm.  
Measured.

DETECTIVE GIBBS

That's why we do this in the lobby.  
With cameras rolling and witnesses  
everywhere.

Gibbs takes the folder back, slides it into a slim transfer  
case.

DETECTIVE GIBBS (CONT'D)

Rules.

(beat)

Stay public. No side rooms. Always on  
camera.

He rises, slips on his coat, checks his badge.

DETECTIVE GIBBS (CONT'D)

Let's go get your daughter.

They lock eyes - respect, resolve.

INT. RESEARCH INSTITUTE - LOBBY - LATER

Fluorescents HUM. A dome camera blinks. Families mill about.  
A volunteer wheels tea.

Detective Gibbs strides up to reception, a slim legal case in  
hand. Badge clearly clipped to his waistline.

Ray shadows him, heart racing.

DETECTIVE GIBBS

Detective Charles Gibbs, Nolan County.  
I've got a court order.

He clicks the case open, hands the document over.

The receptionist receives it, pales.

RECEPTIONIST

Dr. Harris will need to countersign.

DETECTIVE GIBBS

Then get her.

The receptionist hesitates, then picks up the phone.

RECEPTIONIST

Dr. Harris to the lobby, please.

Ray steps two paces away – deliberately in frame of the lobby camera. Hands on his hips. Contained fury vibrating off him.

After a beat, the admin door opens. Dr. Harris glides out.

DETECTIVE GIBBS

Doctor Abigale Harris, you are hereby served.

She takes the document, scanning with machine precision.

DR. HARRIS

We'll need to review this in a consultation-

DETECTIVE GIBBS

We'll conduct all business here.

Harris clocks the cameras. The crowd. The blinking red LED above reception.

She reads again. Finds no leverage.

After a beat, she signs.

DETECTIVE GIBBS (CONT'D)

Produce the minor to the lobby.

Harris hesitates – then relents. She signals the receptionist.

INT. RESEARCH INSTITUTE - EMILY'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Emily sits on the bed, blanket wrapped tight around her shoulders. Diane stands close. Tiffany lingers by the bed.

The intercom CRACKLES overhead.

INTERCOM (V.O.)  
DING - Patient Rider to the lobby.

They all freeze.

The door bursts open. A STAFF NURSE steps in, already reaching for a bag.

STAFF NURSE  
Grab your things.

DIANE  
What's going on?

STAFF NURSE  
Don't know. We were just told to bring her down.

Emily looks between them - fear, hope, confusion colliding.

Tiffany grips her shoulder.

TIFFANY  
It's ok, Em. We're with you.

They start gathering.

INT. RESEARCH INSTITUTE - LOBBY - CONTINUOUS

Detective Gibbs pulls the paperwork back.

Harris doesn't let go at first - pages dragging under her fingers - then forces herself to release.

She flicks Ray the faintest side-eye. A brittle smile for the cameras. It never reaches her eyes.

DR. HARRIS  
Please... only twenty-four hours. Then she's right back here to complete baseline.

The smile slips. Temper flashes.

DR. HARRIS (CONT'D)  
Don't make us initiate retrieval.

The maglock CLICKS. Diane and Tiffany emerge - flanking Emily.

Emily wrapped in a hospital blanket over an avocado-green gown. Her eyes ping-pong across the lobby – cameras, Gibbs, Ray. Relief and dread collide.

EMILY (16 Y/O)

Dad!

Ray lifts a finger to his lips.

Diane nods – steady. Tiffany squeezes Emily's shoulder.

The charge nurse snips Emily's wristband. Drops it on the desk. Hands over her belongings.

Gibbs snaps a quick photo. Logs the transfer.

DR. HARRIS

For the record, I object to removal on clinical grounds.

(beat)

This facility represents the least restrictive therapeutic setting for her recovery.

DETECTIVE GIBBS

Your objection is noted under Clause 3(c). The order stands.

Murmurs ripple through the lobby. Guards shift, uncertain.

Harris clocks the optics. Lifts a hand – stand down.

DR. HARRIS

She's not ready.

Gibbs closes the case. Takes position at Emily's left. Diane at her right. Tiffany behind. A protective box.

DETECTIVE GIBBS

We're walking out now.

The lobby doors WHOOSH open as a delivery tech pushes in a cart – a gust of outside air.

Harris makes one last attempt.

DR. HARRIS

If she regresses... bring her back. I can still stabilize her.

As the family crosses the threshold, every camera in the

lobby pivots in unison, tracking their exit.

EXT. RESEARCH INSTITUTE - PARKING APRON

Gibbs's county SUV idles at the curb.

Across the lot, a black sedan angles toward the exit. Two silhouettes behind dark sunglasses. Waiting.

Ray, Diane, Emily, and Tiffany move as one body - no chatter, no hesitation. They pile into Ray's rental.

Gibbs slips into his SUV.

Engines SNARL. Tires bite.

The Riders pull hard toward the driveway.

The black sedan jolts forward after them.

Gibbs cuts his wheel, the SUV slides into the lane - SCREEECH - grill-to-grill with the sedan. He shifts into park.

Casually, he lifts one hand in a lazy little shrug - wait your turn.

Downrange, the Riders' taillights vanish into traffic.

Inside the sedan, the suits bark into radios. Jaw muscles flex. Eyes burn. Checkmated, in broad daylight.

Gibbs taps his index finger on the wheel, smiling.

INT. RESEARCH INSTITUTE - LOBBY - CONTINUOUS

The lobby is unnaturally still. Families and staff whisper like wind through glass.

Dr. Harris stands alone, staring through the darkened doors.

From a side corridor, measured and deliberate-

AGENT (O.S.)

Ahem.

Harris closes her eyes, exhales, then turns.

An AGENT stands in the half-light. Immaculate suit. No badge. His face never fully resolves.

AGENT  
You lost another asset.

Harris lowers her gaze. For a beat she is all composure.

DR. HARRIS  
Two in twenty-five years is hardly a losing record.

AGENT  
And yet one of them keeps costing us progress.

Harris firms up, defiant.

DR. HARRIS  
Containment wasn't breached. She was extracted. That's on Field Command.

The Agent steps closer – into full light. He is large. Imposing. He stops inches from her.

Lowers himself slightly to meet her eyes.

AGENT  
You were Field Command.  
(beat)  
You know what happens if you fail us again.

Harris swallows. Her fingers worry the edge of her cuff – the smallest betrayal. She forces a smile. It never reaches her eyes.

DR. HARRIS  
I'll get her back.

The Agent studies her a moment longer. Then turns. Disappears into the dark corridor.

Harris watches him go. Her composure fractures – just enough to see: A shallow breath. An unsteady blink. The faint tremor at the corner of her mouth.

Around her, the lobby averts its gaze. No one dares look at her now.

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - EVENING

An empty dirt circle drive. Wind whispers through elms.

Two cars roll to a stop outside a modest ranch house with sun-faded shutters.

Doors open in sequence.

Ray helps Emily from the car. She's pale, drained.

He pulls her close, voice barely audible.

RAY

I should've been there.

(beat)

I'm so sorry.

Emily meets his eyes - wary, exhausted - then something eases in her shoulders.

Her fingers find the bracelet.

EMILY (16 Y/O)

You came back. That's enough.

The words hit harder than forgiveness. Ray swallows. Nods - but his eyes say it isn't enough.

He pulls her in again. Tighter.

Diane steps into the embrace. For a moment, they are one shape against the fading light - broken, but whole enough to stand.

Gibbs joins them on the walkway. A quiet sentry.

TIFFANY

Did it work? Is she free?

DETECTIVE GIBBS

They took the bait. We've got twenty-four hours to find a way out.

They turn toward the house. A faded floral arch frames the path.

DIANE

This place is beautiful, Charles.

DETECTIVE GIBBS

It was my parents'. It's in a trust  
and off the grid.

(beat)

You'll be safe here.

He hands Ray an envelope with two keys.

DETECTIVE GIBBS (CONT'D)

No TV. No cell calls. No Wi-Fi.

The door unlocks - CLICK. Gibbs slips inside first, hand  
hovering near his belt.

INT. SAFE HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Dust motes drift in the still air. Old family photos line a  
shelf.

Diane's gaze lingers on a photo: a younger Gibbs with an  
elderly couple. A normal life. Once.

Ray drops the duffel by the couch.

Gibbs turns back to them. Calm. Certain.

DETECTIVE GIBBS

If anyone knocks and it isn't me...  
you don't answer.

RAY

Charles... thank you.

Gibbs rests a hand on Ray's shoulder - brief, grounding.

Diane squeezes Gibbs's forearm. No words. Enough said.

DETECTIVE GIBBS

Emily, come on. Let me show you to  
your room.

Emily looks up - a flicker of apprehension, then resolve. She  
follows Gibbs down the short hallway.

Ray watches them go. Wants to say something. Doesn't.

INT. SAFE HOUSE - EMILY'S ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Gibbs opens the door. A small, simple room. Clean. Prepared.

On the bed - her RAINBOW DASH. Emily stops cold.

Gibbs clocks it. Says nothing.

DETECTIVE GIBBS

Bathroom is down the hall.

He smiles as the door closes softly behind him.

Emily approaches the bed slowly, like the air has weight.

She picks up Rainbow Dash. Her hands know it before her mind does. Something in her breaks - not loud. Just real.

She sits on the bed, clutching the toy, rocking slightly. A single tear runs down her cheek.

EMILY (16 Y/O)

You're still here.

She presses Rainbow Dash to her chest.

EMILY (16 Y/O) (CONT'D)

(whispers)

I'm coming back for you.

She holds the toy close a moment longer, then sets it beside the pillow.

Emily lies back. Eyes open. Determined.

INT. SAFE HOUSE - DAWN

Gray morning light seeps through thin curtains. Coffee steam curls from a chipped mug. Ray sits at the table, hands moving out of habit more than need. Diane hums softly, more for herself than anyone else.

Emily sits on the couch, clutching RAINBOW DASH - knuckles tight around the faded fabric.

A soft KNOCK: two beats, then one. Everyone freezes.

RAY

It's Charles.

Detective Gibbs steps in, the morning chill following him.

DETECTIVE GIBBS  
 Good morning, Riders. I've brought  
 backup.

Behind him, Riley and a MAN in his early fifties – lean,  
 watchful – linger at the threshold. The man's eyes sweep the  
 room, windows, exits. Then he steps inside.

DETECTIVE RILEY  
 Morning.

RAY  
 Riley? What are you doing here?

DETECTIVE RILEY  
 I have someone you should meet.

He steps aside, nodding toward the man behind him.

The man doesn't offer a hand. His gaze scans everyone, then  
 settles on Emily, who edges out from behind Diane. The air  
 tightens.

MAN  
 Hello.  
 (beat)  
 You must be Emily.

Emily nods, cautious.

NORMAN  
 My name is, Jeffrey.

Only Ray freezes. His fingers clamp around the mug – too  
 tight. Coffee sloshes, nearly spills.

Diane looks between them, confused. Emily studies the  
 stranger, sensing the shift.

Jeffrey clocks Ray's reaction. He knows.

JEFFREY  
 You read my file.

RAY  
 You're... dead.

DETECTIVE RILEY  
 Jeffrey and I have worked very hard to  
 (MORE)

DETECTIVE RILEY (CONT'D)  
make it seem that way.

His attention returns to Emily.

JEFFREY  
I'm a leaper... like you.

The silence deepens. Fear and wonder fold together. Emily leans in despite herself.

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
You know what this feels like?

JEFFREY  
Your migraines? They're not pain.  
They're tides... signals. Pressure  
when the cycle pushes or pulls. A door  
wanting to open.

Emily swallows. For the first time – she feels seen.

Jeffrey steadies his stance. His breath slows – deliberate.

Overhead, the ceiling fan picks up speed. The pendant light swells brighter.

The wall clock's secondhand stutters – then syncs to his inhale.

On his long exhale – the fan eases, the light dims back, the second hand clicks true.

The room settles. Everyone stares. Emily's eyes widen.

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
How did you do that?

JEFFREY  
I felt the pull, stabilized it with my  
breath. Oriented it centrally.

He meets her eyes.

JEFFREY (CONT'D)  
What does that sound like?

Emily glances at the fan. The light. Then back to him.

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
Control.

Jeffrey nods, smiles. A quiet approval.

JEFFREY

Good. Let's get to work.

For the first time, she doesn't look afraid.

INT. SAFE HOUSE - MAIN ROOM - LATER

Low light. A taped line on the floor. A corkboard map bristling with pins. An old AM radio whispers on a shelf. String bulbs hang from a dimmer. A compass sits beside a mason jar half-filled with water.

Jeffrey stands with Emily. Hands loose. Eyes kind. Grounded.

JEFFREY

Step one. Measure.

He rolls the dimmer. The bulbs HUM faintly.

Jeffrey mirrors the calm he wants from her.

JEFFREY (CONT'D)

Close your eyes. Relax. Feel for it.  
Accept it.

(beat)

You're listening for what *doesn't*  
belong.

Emily inhales. Exhales. Her brow tightens. She pivots slightly, eyes squeezed shut.

The radio STATIC rises.

Emily grimaces — frustration.

JEFFREY (CONT'D)

Just ease back and let it come to you.

Emily exhales deeper. Her shoulders drop.

The static softens, then CLICKS to silence. The compass needle TICKS a millimeter.

Jeffrey watches — pleased but restrained.

JEFFREY (CONT'D)

Good. That's signal.

Emily opens her eyes. A faint, real smile escapes her.

INT. SAFE HOUSE - KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

At the table, Gibbs sits half-turned from the others, headphones on. A police scanner rests in his palm. He rides the gain with two fingers – precise, listening more than watching.

Across from him, Ray, Diane, and Tiffany sit angled toward the main room, eyes fixed on Emily's training beyond the doorway.

Riley cradles his coffee mug. Steam curls up between his hands.

DETECTIVE RILEY

We've been quietly helping leapers for years. Teaching, mentoring. All under Briarcroft's radar.

(beat)

Most don't last this long once the institute flags them.

Diane's hand trembles around her mug. She sneaks a glance toward Emily – fragile hope flickering. Ray stays rigid. Belief and dread pulling him in opposite directions.

RAY

You think she can really make it?

DETECTIVE RILEY

She's the strongest we've seen. If she learns fast... and we can keep Briarcroft blind... she has a chance.

The family's gaze drifts back toward Emily. Her breathing steadies. Somewhere beyond the wall, the room answers her rhythm. A thin current of hope moves through them all.

INT. GARAGE - CONTINUOUS

A single bulb pools light over an old truck.

Jeffrey sets a mason jar on the hood. Ripples shiver across the water's surface. In his other hand, the compass steadies. The radio murmurs low.

JEFFREY

Step two. Stabilize. This is how I survived my first cycle.

Emily squares herself. Bracelet in hand.

JEFFREY (CONT'D)

Four breaths in. Six out. Watch the jar. Nothing else.

Emily inhales. Counts. Exhales longer.

The ripples soften. The radio smooths.

JEFFREY (CONT'D)

Good. Again.

She repeats the pattern. The compass needle stills. The water goes flat.

Jeffrey allows himself a small smile - tempered by experience.

JEFFREY (CONT'D)

That's stabilization. You did that.

Emily nods, grinning.

JEFFREY (CONT'D)

Remember... if you calm it, you control it.

The smile fades into focus. Resolve taking its place.

INT. SAFE HOUSE - KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

A kettle HISSSES. Coffee sits untouched in cooling mugs. On the fridge: a moon-phase printout, dates circled in red.

DETECTIVE RILEY

Jeffrey calls it a synodic alignment. Our lunar cycle synced to another reality. Two timelines tugging at the same moment.

Diane twists a napkin between her fingers. Her eyes drift to the circled dates.

DIANE

Why her? Why my little girl?

DETECTIVE RILEY

She had to be born inside an active window. That kind of exposure leaves a mark.

Emily and Jeffrey pass the kitchen doorway. A new kick in Emily's step. Everyone clocks it.

DETECTIVE RILEY (CONT'D)

They aren't separate places so much as separate points in time. When she leaps... they trade positions.

Gibbs remains still. In his headphones, the scanner's hiss changes cadence. He rises without a word, crosses to the window, parts the curtain a finger's width and looks out.

INT. SAFE HOUSE - HALL - CONTINUOUS

Jeffrey stands at a taped line's end. At one side: "S." The other: "N."

Emily holds the compass, breath steady.

JEFFREY

Step three. Orient.

(beat)

Two steps south. Feel the tug.

Emily steps. One. Two. The compass ticks. The bulbs tremble faintly.

She halts. Swallows. A thin ringing fills her ear. Jeffrey clocks it from her reaction.

JEFFREY (CONT'D)

That's the *pull*. It's what brings you in.

(beat)

The *push* is what sends you back. You can learn to use both.

Emily centers herself. Turns north. The needle SWINGS with her.

JEFFREY (CONT'D)

Good. Hold on to that. If you can find the door... you can choose not to lose yourself in it.

The compass needle eases to dead center. The bulbs still.

For a beat, the house holds its breath.

Then – CLICK. The ceiling fan HUMS to life on its own.

Emily's eyes flick up, a small, proud smile. The rhythm is back. But it isn't theirs.

INT. BRIARCROFT - SUB-LEVEL ARCHIVE CONTROL - CONTINUOUS

Rows of monitors BLOOM to life: traffic cams, parking lots, license-plate feeds.

A city cam monitor freezes on Gibbs stepping from his SUV. On-screen text tags him: ID: CHARLES GIBBS

A map window drops a breadcrumb trail – CITY CAM / SIDE STREET / QUIET CIRCLE DRIVE – and lands on a modest ranch.

Another feed tightens a live view on the house. A curtain shifts. Then stills.

INT. SAFE HOUSE - KITCHEN -CONTINUOUS

At the window, Gibbs parts the blinds. In his other hand, the police scanner. He thumbs the dial down, listening.

On the table: a county map sprawled open. A thrift-store calendar next to it, TONIGHT'S FULL MOON circled in ink. A compass rests beside a Sharpie.

Jeffrey circles WHITE BEAR LAKE on the map.

JEFFREY

We start here. Full moon tonight.  
That's a push window. New moon pulls.  
You're synched to both.

He taps the calendar's full-moon icon, then sets the compass at the map's center.

DIANE

If this works... what happens to her?

JEFFREY

If she uses what I've taught her...  
she goes home.

INT. BRIARCROFT - SUB-LEVEL ARCHIVE CONTROL - CONTINUOUS

Blue light. Rows of monitors. Data crawling.

Dr. Harris stands at the center, lifts the receiver.

DR. HARRIS

Report to Sector Three-Golf.

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. BRIARCROFT - OPERATIONS HALLWAY

Steel doors BURST open. AGENTS pour out at a run.

DR. HARRIS (V.O.)

Ground teams only, no uniforms.

EXT. HELIPAD

A black hawk crew jogs hard toward the aircraft.

Pilots climb in. Harnesses SNAP.

DR. HARRIS (V.O.)

Confirm subject proximity before spin-  
up.

INT. PARKING STRUCTURE

Black sedans come alive. Engines IGNITE. They roll out  
smoothly, headlights dark, disappearing into the ramp.

DR. HARRIS (V.O.)

Full silence protocol.

INT. ARMORY

Hands RACK weapons. No insignia. No markings.

DR. HARRIS (V.O.)

Mission critical.

INT. BRIARCROFT - SUB-LEVEL ARCHIVE CONTROL

Harris lowers the receiver.

A tremor lingers in her hand a fraction too long.

The monitors continue to scroll. Blue. Cold. Relentless.

INT. SAFE HOUSE - KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

At the window, Gibbs absently adjusts the dial - until something in the static makes him still.

He listens. His brow tightens. A glance at the street. Then the clock. He rips the headphones off.

DETECTIVE GIBBS

They're on us! Cars rolling, air  
warming up. We've got seven minutes,  
maybe less.

The room ignites. Chairs SCRAPE. Drawers SNAP. Breath sharpens.

Ray stuffs the map into a pack. Diane gathers Emily's things, clutching the hospital blanket.

Tiffany drops to lace her shoes - then hesitates. Her eyes flick: the blanket in Diane's hands, Ray's hat by the door. A thought crosses her face. Gone before anyone catches it.

She grabs her backpack and falls in behind the others.

DETECTIVE GIBBS (CONT'D)

Wait for my cue.

Gibbs kills the lights. Slides the chain. Cracks the door.

EXT. SAFE HOUSE - DRIVEWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Riley stands sentry by the mailbox, cigarette burning low. To a passerby, relaxed. To anyone who knows - coiled.

Gibbs slips in beside him, eyes forward.

DETECTIVE GIBBS  
(discretely)  
Got anything?

DETECTIVE RILEY  
Black sedan. Northwest, fifty yards.

DETECTIVE GIBBS  
How many?

DETECTIVE RILEY  
Two. Just watching.

DETECTIVE GIBBS  
Not watching. Waiting.  
(beat, voice low)  
The cavalry's coming.

Riley gives a near-invisible nod.

Gibbs flicks two fingers.

The front door BURSTS open.

Emily bolts out, wrapped in the hospital blanket, bare legs flashing beneath the avocado-green gown, hat pulled low.

Gibbs hustles her into his SUV.

Ray, Diane, and Tiffany spill out behind fast, controlled. Riley and Jeffrey join them, peel toward Ray's rental.

Engines IGNITE. Gravel sprays. Dust blooms.

The SUV and the Riders' car tear down the drive, swallowed by their own wake.

Above the trees, the full moon hangs pale against the fading daylight.

EXT. BUSHY CLEARING DOWN THE HILL - CONTINUOUS

A black sedan idles half-hidden in brush. Two AGENTS sit in shadow, sunglasses cutting glare. Binoculars catch light.

AGENT 1  
They're fleeing. Which one do we take?

AGENT 2  
 Until backup arrives, only the girl  
 matters. We follow Gibbs!

They ready themselves, every muscle tensed.

INTERCUT:

EXT. HIGHWAY - LOOKING AT THE HOUSE ON THE HILL

Dust ERUPTS as two vehicles blast off the ridge. Gibbs' SUV  
 leads, engine HOWLING.

The Riders' car fishtails behind, gravel spraying.

EXT. BUSHY CLEARING DOWN THE HILL

Gibbs and the Riders tear past, dust choking the road.

INT. AGENTS SEDAN

Seatbelts CLICK. The engine IGNITES - low, controlled.

Agent 2 lifts the radio. Static hisses, then clears.

AGENT 2  
 (into radio)  
 Visual confirmed.

EXT. BUSHY CLEARING DOWN THE HILL

The sedan ERUPTS from cover - tires shredding dirt and snaps  
 onto the driveway.

INT. GIBBS VEHICLE

Gibbs grips the wheel, jaw locked. Sweat streaks his temple.

DETECTIVE GIBBS  
 Come on you bastards. Come get her!

He floors it. The engine SCREAMS.

EXT. HIGHWAY

Gibbs' SUV rockets off dirt, rubber SHRIEKING as he cuts hard  
 right onto asphalt. Gravel skitters across the lanes.

The Riders' car bursts from the dust and veers LEFT -  
 vanishing the opposite way. Concealed by the dust plume.

For one breathless beat, the highway is empty.

Then the black sedan slashes onto asphalt, banking RIGHT after Gibbs. Tires smoke. Engine snarls.

INT. GIBBS VEHICLE

Gibbs guns it, weaving through traffic. In the mirror – the sedan closes fast.

Emily grips her seatbelt, knuckles white.

Gibbs threads past a box truck – HORNS BLARE – tires SCREECH.

Emily slams against the door, breath shallow.

Gibbs leans forward. Eyes focused, hands tight on the wheel.

EXT. HIGHWAY

The chase barrels down open asphalt. Sun flashes off glass. Engines HOWL.

Gibbs blasts through traffic; the sedan hunts in his wake, carving past commuters with surgical precision.

Ahead, a pickup blocks the lane.

Gibbs jerks left – fishtails – misses a hatchback by inches. Brakes SQUEAL.

The sedan mirrors the move flawlessly. No loss. No hesitation.

The city swells ahead – stoplights, congestion, nowhere clean to go.

INT. GIBBS VEHICLE

Gibbs scans – calculating.

DETECTIVE GIBBS  
Shit! Hold on!

EXT. STREETS

The sedan lunges – BUMPER clips the SUV. METAL SCRAPES.

Gibbs' vehicle fishtails, snaps sideways–

INT. GIBBS VEHICLE

Emily SCREAMS, clutching the door as chaos blurs past.

Gibbs wrestles the wheel, teeth bared.

DETECTIVE GIBBS  
I've got it! We're good!

The tires bite pavement. The skid evens.

He glances to Emily hugging herself, breath ragged.

EXT. STREETS

The sedan stays glued to his bumper.

Both vehicles knife around a van. Engines SNARL.

Gibbs whips left, misses a parked car by inches.

The sedan matches. Relentless.

INT. GIBBS VEHICLE

Gibbs yanks the e-brake.

Tires SHRIEK.

The SUV slides sideways.

Emily braces against the dash, seat belt gripping tight.

EXT. STREETS

The SUV SKIDS to a smoking halt.

The sedan ROCKETS past - momentum carrying it too far.

TIRES SCREECH as it overshoots them.

INT. GIBBS VEHICLE

DETECTIVE GIBBS  
Ah ha! Take that you amateurs!

He slams the gas - jerks left into a narrow side street.

EXT. SIDE STREET - CONTINUOUS

The SUV rockets down the lane. Smoke hangs behind them like a

curtain.

INT. GIBBS VEHICLE

Gibbs' eyes lock in the mirror.

Nothing behind them. Distance grows.

A slow grin spreads across his face.

Emily bursts into a wild, breathless CHEER – fear flipping into exhilaration.

DETECTIVE GIBBS

Let's get you back to your family.

Past Emily - A FLASH OF BLACK.

EXT. STREETS

The sedan RAMS the SUV's passenger rear quarter – CRASH!

The SUV is shoved onto the sidewalk SLAMMING into a traffic light pole. Metal SHRIEKS. Glass RAINS. Sparks SKITTER.

Both vehicles grind to a stop. Hoods steaming.

Above them, the traffic light wobbles – barely holding.

EXT. WRECK SITE

The Agents spill out, weapons up.

One charges Gibbs' door.

The other rips open the passenger door, grabs Emily inside – YANKS her out –

A PIERCING SCREAM – The blanket tears free.

The Agents FREEZE.

It's TIFFANY.

Her eyes meet theirs – wide, defiant, alive in smoke and red light. For half a second, the world stops.

Then–

RADIO (V.O.)

Unit Bravo... status

The Agent's faces drain. Reluctantly—

AGENT 2  
Negative ID. Target still loose.

INT. BRIARCROFT - SUB-LEVEL ARCHIVE CONTROL

Alarms strobe red across the glass walls. Consoles flash.

Dr. Harris SLAMS both fists into the console.

DR. HARRIS  
FIND HER! NOW!

Her voice detonates through the chamber, echoing off steel and glass. Everything stops.

The alarms keep flashing, but no one moves.

The Comms Tech risks a glance up — meets her eyes — and looks away instantly, blood draining from his face.

EXT. WHITE BEAR LAKE CAMPGROUND - DUSK

The Riders' vehicle rolls silently into the lot.

In the backseat, Emily — wearing Tiffany's clothes — watches the full moon crest the pines. The world exhales.

Doors open softly. The family exits, clusters close.

JEFFREY  
We measure first. If it pushes, yell.  
Stay in voice range.

Riley scans the perimeter, cigarette ember low.

DETECTIVE RILEY  
I'll take point. Flag if company comes sniffing.

RAY  
Copy.

Riley melts into the shadows.

Emily and Jeffrey slip into the trees on parallel tracks — measured steps. No chatter.

Emily slides the bracelet into her palm.

JEFFREY  
Find the wrong hum.

Emily breathes in. Out. Pivots a few degrees.

The night shifts. A faint HISS threads through the pines.

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
It's here. I feel it in my head. It's  
very heavy.

JEFFREY  
Good. Stabilize it. Four in. Six out.

She counts. Centers herself. The hiss softens – just a  
little.

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
There.

Jeffrey raises the compass. The needle TICKS toward a  
lakeside path.

JEFFREY  
We're bounded.

Everyone moves. Branches part. Footsteps fade.

The full moons light rippling across the lake like a silent  
call.

EXT. LAKESIDE PATH - CONTINUOUS

Feet whisper over pine duff. Mosquitos drift in amber dusk.  
The sound grows – more felt than heard. A pressure in her  
head.

JEFFREY  
Hold. Stabilize.

Emily closes her eyes. Breathes. Four in. Six out.

The tremor in the air settles. Her shoulders ease.

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
Almost there.

They keep moving. Jeffrey's eyes never leave the compass.

EXT. RIDGE ABOVE THE WATER - MOMENTS LATER

They crest the ridge. Emily winces, clutching her head.

The compass JUMPS thirty degrees. Jeffrey angles them toward a weathered service box bolted to the pole.

A pole light HUMS. Conduit snakes into the dirt. The air thickens. Static crawls their skin.

JEFFREY

Two more minutes. Clock's ticking.

He taps his watch. 1:59.

Emily turns, folds into Diane. Foreheads touching.

DIANE

Four in... six out. You can do this.

JEFFREY

Ninety seconds.

EMILY (16 Y/O)

I love you, Mom!

DIANE

I love you, baby. Always.

Ray steps in, hands firm on Emily's shoulders. Steady. Apologizing without words.

RAY

Follow the voice that calls you kiddo.

JEFFREY

Sixty.

EMILY (16 Y/O)

I'll see you soon, Daddy.

RAY

You better. I'll be right here when you turn around.

They cling together — all three — until Jeffrey meets Emily's eyes.

JEFFREY

Thirty seconds. On the shimmer, don't fight. Let the *push* carry you... then choose.

Emily cups the bracelet. Breath ragged. She steps into the SHIMMER at the service box.

Her outline WARPS – flickers. For a heartbeat – six-year-old Emily SHIMMERS inside her.

JEFFREY (CONT'D)

Hold!

Energy SURGES. The light blooms bright as day then-  
-SNAPS dark. The HUM DIES.

Emily STAGGERS back. Jeffrey catches her.

INT. BLACK HAWK HELICOPTER COCKPIT - CONTINUOUS

Rotors THUNDER. Red instrument light washes over focused faces.

Pilots strapped in. Calm. Professional.

A handheld device suddenly SPIKES – numbers jumping, tone SHRILL.

CO-PILOT

There... grid surge.

The pilot banks the aircraft left, rotors biting harder as they turn toward the signal.

EXT. RIDGE ABOVE THE WATER - CONTINUOUS

Emily opens her eyes. Pulls free.

EMILY (16 Y/O)

What happened?

Jeffrey checks the service box. Then the compass. The needle SPINS – rattling wildly against the bracket.

Jeffrey's face hardens. Not fear. Recognition.

JEFFREY

Echo failed.

(beat)

Ascension narrowed her grid.

RAY

Can she-

JEFFREY

Yes.

(beat)

But not like this.

Jeffrey snaps the compass shut.

In the distance - CHOP-CHOP-CHOP. Helicopter rotors. Rising.  
Closing.

Every head lifts.

JEFFREY (CONT'D)

Uh-oh. Sikorsky. UH-60. Black Hawk.

RAY

What?

JEFFREY

Covert ops. They're looking for us.

(beat)

We gotta go!

They break into a run, shadows scattering down the ridge.  
Moonlight chasing them like a searchlight from above.

EXT. THE LIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Low branches tear at them as they push through. Static  
prickles skin.

They burst into a clearing. Arriving at a decrepit PUMP HOUSE  
looms - door hanging loose, wood blackened and split. The air  
CRACKLES. Every hair stands on end.

Emily staggers, clutching her skull.

Jeffrey's compass WHIRLS, needle spinning madly.

JEFFREY

This is it.

The compass needle SNAPS HARD.

Emily steps forward, tentative. Raises a hand. A THREAD OF LIGHT lashes out – fast, instinctive – wraps once around her wrist.

Emily GASPS, jerks back – The light releases instantly.

Emily stares at her arm. No burn. No wound.

The compass steadies – pointing straight at her.

JEFFREY (CONT'D)

It wants you.

Emily looks from the pump house to her bracelet. A decision. She steps forward again, reaches out.

The light responds – gentler now – curling around her wrist, up her forearm. It draws her a half-step closer.

Emily's breath catches – then a small, involuntary laugh escapes her.

EMILY (16 Y/O)

It tickles.

She turns her arm slightly. The light follows – responsive. Curious.

Emily gently pulls her arm back. A disbelieving smile.

The thread of light fades – waiting.

EMILY (16 Y/O) (CONT'D)

It was listening.

JEFFREY

Yes.

Jeffrey steps closer. Calmer now. Grounds her with a hand over her bracelet.

JEFFREY (CONT'D)

Your grid narrowed. You must maintain control. You lose it... you could wind up somewhere else entirely.

Jeffrey steps in, meets her gaze – steady.

JEFFREY (CONT'D)  
Use your center. You guide it.

BOOM - A spotlight ERUPTS from overhead. Rotor wash SLAMS the clearing.

HELICOPTER PA (O.S.)  
EMILY RIDER. STAY WHERE YOU ARE!

Wind hammers. Shouts rise. Ray shields his eyes - there's nowhere to hide.

At the ridge, Riley bursts into view, sprinting flat-out, arms waving. His voice is swallowed by the thunder.

DETECTIVE RILEY  
(shouting, barely heard)  
They're on us!

Emily looks to Jeffrey. He taps his watch.

JEFFREY  
(over the wash)  
Time to go!

Emily turns to her parents. Diane cups her cheeks, eyes blazing with belief. Ray leans close.

They crush into a desperate embrace, all three holding on like they can keep the world from splitting apart.

Diane presses her daughter's face to her chest, kissing her forehead.

DIANE  
Go, baby! Find your way.

Ray holds on a beat longer than he should. Cups her face in both hands - memorizing her.

RAY  
Come back to me. Please.

Emily swallows, nods with tear swollen eyes.

She forces herself to pull free, turns to Jeffrey. A tiny nod passes between them.

Jeffrey smiles, soft, lifts a kiss to the air.

Floodlights sweep. Dogs BARK. Men shout in the distance,

closing fast.

Emily clutches her bracelet, steps into the battered door.

She turns back once to find—

Ray and Diane tangled together, tight in love and sorrow.

Emily meets their eyes. Breathes in, then out.

Diane smiles, nods through tears.

Emily swallows, finds her courage and steps into the dark.

INT. PUMP HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

The outside world falls away — rotor wash, shouting, wind — all of it dissolves until only a high, thin ringing remains.

Emily stands alone inside. Her bracelet warms in her palm.

EMILY (16 Y/O)  
You wanted me... here I am.

She closes her eyes.

Measure — She finds the wrong hum — off-key, buried beneath the ringing.

Stabilize — Four in, six out. The ringing thins. The pressure eases.

She pulls the compass from her pocket. The needle jitters — fights — then settles south.

Orient — She pivots two degrees. Breath in, out. Calm.

She slides the bracelet tight around her wrist — her anchor.

A final exhale.

She steps forward.

WHITE FLASH. Absolute stillness. The room inhales.

Dust motes that were falling lift, reversing course. A water meter ticks backward. Puddles ripple in reverse, waves collapsing into themselves.

Threads of light peel from the walls, the floor, the ceiling  
– fine filaments curling inward.

They wrap Emily gently – wrist, forearm, shoulders – a  
luminous cocoon forming around her.

Her hair rises as gravity tilts toward the dark.

Shadows bend inward. The light tightens – responsive,  
listening.

Emily takes another step. Her outline streaks – blurs – the  
push taking her clean, exact, unstoppable.

BANG – Another WHITE FLASH. Gone.

The pump house drops into blackness.

INT. SUB-LEVEL ARCHIVE CONTROL - CONTINUOUS

Banks of monitors FLARE – thermal, traffic, telemetry.  
A red LED blinks. Steady. Relentless.

A waveform labeled ENTRAINMENT collapses to flat.

Another readout updates: ECHO GRID – NULL

A coms tech leans forward, voice barely above a breath.

COMS TECH  
Subject transitioned.

Dr. Harris doesn't move. Her eyes stay locked on the data.

The pen – the one that never stopped tapping – slips from her  
fingers. It CLATTERS across the floor. The sound echoes.

A shallow swallow. Her hand reaches for the console – hovers  
– then drops. For the first time, Dr. Harris looks small.

After a long beat, she reaches for the handset – the motion  
trembling, human, costing her everything.

DR. HARRIS  
(into coms)  
Stand down air. Ground, fall back. No  
contacts, no detentions. All units,  
return to base.

AIR OPS (O.S.)  
(coms)  
Copy. RTB.

Out of habit, she smooths her cuff. No mask this time.

The red LED blinks once more. Then stills.

EXT. PUMP HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

The forest settles. Rotor wash thins, then fades. The searchlight dwindles into the distance until only moonlight remains.

Diane collapses into Ray. He catches her, holds on as they breathe together - slow, uneven, human.

Only Jeffrey remains alert, studying the compass in his palm. The needle twitches, then steadies, then twitches again.

RAY  
How long does this take?

Jeffrey doesn't look up.

JEFFREY  
However long it takes her to find the little one. Best thing we can do is stay close.

Ray nods, though doubt flickers behind his eyes.

JEFFREY (CONT'D)  
You got your family back, Ray.

Ray kneels at the pump house threshold, reaches into his jacket and pulls out Rainbow Dash - scuffed, faded, loved.

He sets the toy down gently. Bright plastic and fabric against blackened wood.

Ray rises. Diane takes his hand. Fingers lace tight.

Together, they turn and walk away.

Behind them, Rainbow Dash catches a sliver of moonlight - still, patient, waiting.

EXT. PUMP HOUSE - DAWN

Mist threads between the pines. Early sunlight glows soft and pale. The floodlights are gone. The night has released its grip.

Rainbow Dash waits at the threshold.

The warped door CREAKS.

Small, bare feet appear in the gap - hesitant.

A bracelet, far too loose for such a tiny wrist, dangles as a small hand reaches down.

Rainbow Dash lifts into the dawn, its tail fluttering gently in the cold air.

The feet step forward. One. Then the other.

We never rise above her thighs.

INT. SUB-LEVEL ARCHIVE CONTROL - LATER

The room is empty now. Monitors dark. Consoles dormant. Only one thing remains alive-

-A red LED pulses on the console.

Harris sits alone, staring at it. The light reflects in her eyes - red - dark - red - dark - like a slow, mechanical heartbeat.

BANG. BANG. BANG.

Harris flinches. Her shoulders drop a fraction - the first surrender. She inhales. Steadies herself.

She rises slowly, smooths her cuff and turns. She takes in the room one last time - the screens, the cables, the architecture of control she once commanded.

BANG. BANG. BANG.

Harris closes her eyes for a brief moment. Then opens them.

She walks to the door and opens it herself.

The AGENT from the lobby stands there - immaculate suit,

massive frame, the same cold, patient eyes that warned her.

They lock eyes. A silent acknowledgment: You knew this was coming.

He places a firm hand on her shoulder.

Harris doesn't resist. She follows as he guides her out of frame.

The door seals behind them with a soft, airtight CLACK.

Inside the control room, the red LED continues to pulse. Red. Dark. Red. Dark.

INT. RIDER HOME - EVENING

SUPER: 6 MONTHS LATER

The family crowds around the table, voices colliding in a loud, joyful-

ALL  
Happy birthday... to you.

Seven candles flicker atop a cake.

Emily - newly seven - beams, cheeks flushed. Rainbow Dash sits proudly beside her.

Emily blows. All seven candles go dark at once. Cheers erupt.

TIFFANY  
Happy birthday, Em!

RAY  
Seven? Where has the time gone?

Emily bounces in her seat, vibrating with joy.

EMILY  
Presents! I want to open presents!

DIANE  
One from us tonight. The rest you get tomorrow at your party.

Emily squeals and breaks into a wild, uncontained dance.

Laughter swells – warm, easy, unguarded.

INT. LIVING ROOM - A SHORT TIME LATER

Emily and Tiffany sprawl on the living-room rug, laughing as they weave bracelets.

Ray lounges on the couch, beer in hand, content. Diane slips in beside him. He pulls her close. They watch the girls, easy and unguarded.

DIANE

I love seeing them like this.

Tiffany's phone CHIMES. She glances at it, flips it face-down without reading, stays with Emily, threading beads.

RAY

We make a pretty cute family... if I do say so myself.

DIANE

A few bumps and bruises along the way.

She rests her head on his shoulder. A long, grateful silence.

DIANE (CONT'D)

You think Charles is enjoying retirement?

RAY

Haven't heard since the review board cleared him.

Ray takes drink. His eyes never leaving Emily.

RAY (CONT'D)

Riley and Jeffrey are still out there. Helping other leapers. Off the grid.

(beat)

We were lucky they found us.

DIANE

We owe them everything.

The lights flicker for a beat. Emily winces – hand to her forehead.

Tiffany clocks it instantly.

Emily breathes. Four in. Six out. The faint buzz steadies.

TIFFANY  
(soft, under breath)  
Thank you, Jeffrey.

Emily stands, holding a finished bracelet. She crosses to her parents.

EMILY  
Here, Mom. I made this.

DIANE  
Oh... thank you, baby. It's beautiful.  
(beat)  
Is this for me?

Emily grins – sly, knowing – brushes Diane's belly with her fingers, then darts back to Tiffany, laughing.

Diane turns the bracelet in her hands. Reads the block letters, barely a whisper.

DIANE (CONT'D)  
(whispers)  
B-E-N.

A long, stunned beat.

Ray and Diane lock eyes. Breathless.

RAY  
(whispers)  
Did you... tell her?

Diane shakes her head. No words.

They stare at the bracelet – awe, fear, joy folding together.

On Diane's belly, the bracelet's shadow curves into a crescent moon.

BLACKOUT

THE END