Middle School

FADE IN:

INT. MARA'S HOME - BEDROOM - NIGHT

MARA ERINYES, 13, a socially awkward introvert with a thin, wiry body and self-scissored hair, sets up a Ouija Board on the floor.

She puts the Ouija's planchette in the middle of the board.

Various stuffed animals line a shelf. A poster of a young obscure pop band hangs on a wall above her bed.

The sound of soft TAPS on glass.

WHISPER, her cat, stares at her from outside the window.

Mara opens the window. Whisper jumps in.

MARA
Hi, Whisper. You came home just in time.

Whisper purrs and rubs against Mara's ankle.

Mara plops down in front of the Ouija board.

MARA (CONT'D)
Are you ready to commune with forces unknown?

Whisper lies down on top of the Ouija board.

MARA (CONT'D)
Okay, but not there.

She slides Whisper off the board.

Whisper watches Mara put her fingers on the planchette.

She takes Whisper's front paw and puts it beside hers.

MARA (CONT'D)
You have to concentrate.

Mara closes her eyes.

MARA (CONT'D)
Spirits from beyond, we summon thee! Whisper and me. Please answer our burning questions ... Is pineapple on pizza a sin?

She opens her eyes -- the planchette moves.

MARA (CONT'D)
It's moving.

The planchette spells out "L-O-L."

MARA (CONT'D)
Is it or isn't it?

The planchette spells out "N-O."

MARA (CONT'D)
Okay. Serious question. Are cats secretly planning to overthrow humanity?

The planchette spells out "O-F-C-O-U-R-S-E."

Whisper swipes the planchette off the board.

MARA (CONT'D)
Whisper!

KNOCK-KNOCK.

MARA (CONT'D)
Ugh!

SELENE ERINYES, 40, Mara's protective mother, steps in, her hair in a towel turban.

MARA (CONT'D)
Mom, you broke the Ouija's magic.

Mara closes the Ouija board.

SELENE
Do you want to come with me into town? Maybe we can get our hair done together.

MARA
Not an option. And I don't want to hang out in a beauty parlor.

SELENE
You don't have to hang out.

MARA
Oh. Can I go to the occult bookstore?

SELENE
If you come downstairs, feed whisper and eat something yourself.

MARA
Okay, fine.

SELENE
And you have to check with me before you buy one of those occult books.

MARA
It’s a bookstore. We bought the Ouija board there.

SELENE
I know. Check with me anyway. Now, I’m sure Whisper’s waiting to be fed.

Selene strolls out.

MARA
I can read what I want, right Whisper?

Whisper runs out the door.

She gives the Ouija board three taps.

MARA (CONT’D)
If any spirits are still in here, you have three seconds to evacuate. One, two, two-and-a-half ...

She slides it under the bed, runs out.

INT. MARA’S HOME - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Whisper eats from a bowl on the floor. Mara pets her back.

The sound of a dog’s YELPS outside.

Mara looks out the window.

MARA
No. Stop. Mom!

Selene steps in.

MARA (CONT'D)
Why is Mr. Slagter always mean to his dog?

SELENE
Come away from the window.

MARA
Can't you say something, or report him?

SELENE
It's not our business.

Mara looks out the window.

THROUGH WINDOW

MR. SLAGTER, 44, cruel, red-faced, jerks a leash with a choke collar around a golden retriever's neck.

BACK TO SCENE

The sound of another YELP.

Mara holds her ears.

SELENE
I'll talk to him.

MARA
Really?

SELENE
Yes.

Whisper jumps onto the counter, nudges Mara.

Mara picks up Whisper.

MARA
Stay away from Mr. Slagter, Whisper.

She buries her face in Whisper's neck.

INT. MARA'S HOME - BEDROOM - DAY

Mara sleeps with Whisper curled up in her arms.

Whisper sits up, taps Mara on the cheek. Mara turns her head away. Whisper taps again.

MARA
Stop ... I'm getting up.

Whisper jumps onto the window ledge.

MARA (CONT'D)
Okay, okay.

Mara climbs out of bed, opens the window.

Whisper jumps out onto a tree branch.

Mara leans out the window, watches Whisper climb down the tree and trot away past Mr. Slagter's Victorian-style house.

MARA (CONT'D)
(shouts)
Stay away from Mr. Slagter's house, Whisper!

She closes the window.

INT. THE CURIOUS QUILL BOOKSTORE - DAY

The shop bell TINKLES.

Mara tiptoes in. She wears an oversized hoodie with the sleeves pulled over her hands.

A tattered backpack sags on her shoulder. She scans the clutter of books and shelves.

Mara drifts down an aisle, fingers trail over book spines.

A crooked shelf in a shadowy corner catches her eye. A sign on the shelf reads: "Not for Everyone."

A spine-cracked leather-bound spell book juts out.

Mara pulls out the spell book. A low CREAK. No title on the worn leather cover. She flips open the first page -- blank.

Letters materialize one-by-one: "F-O-R M-A-R-A."

Mara closes the book, shoves it back between other books on the shelf.

MARA
That was weird.

Low CREAK. The spell book juts out.

Mara hesitates, takes it back out -- flips it open. She sees “For Mara” on the first page.

Mara turns the page, smudged handwritten ink reads:

“Spells. “Diagrams.”

MRS. LAKELY (O.S.)
Some say that one finds the book
... only if it’s looking for them.

Mara jumps -- SLAMS the book shut.

MRS. LAKELY, 75, mysterious, messy white hair, hovers near Mara. She wears a simple dress with magic symbols printed flower-like on the dress.

MRS. LAKELY (CONT’D)
Others say nonsense like that to
sound clever.

Mara puts the book on the shelf.

MARA
I-I’m just looking.

MRS. LAKELY
You found it. That’s rarer. Are you
sure you don’t want it?

MARA
How much?

MRS. LAKELY
For most, I’d tell them it’s not
for sale. But for you ...

Mrs. Lakely takes the book off the shelf.

MRS. LAKELY (CONT’D)
Four dollars and thirteen cents.

MARA
That’s weirdly specific.

MRS. LAKELY
So is fate ... Come, dear.

Mrs. Lakely leads the way to the

COUNTER

Mara digs through the bottom of her backpack, pulls out crumpled bills and change. She smooths out four one-dollar bills, counts out thirteen cents in change.

MARA
Four thirteen exactly.

Mrs. Lakely slides the book into a paper bag.

MRS. LAKELY
What's your name, hon?

MARA
Mara.

MRS. LAKELY
Mara. Your name means resilience and transformation. Did you know that?

MARA
No.

MRS. LAKELY
In another language it means, death.

She chuckles.

MRS. LAKELY (CONT'D)
Nothing to worry about ...

Mrs. Lakely takes a black candle from under the counter, slips it into the paper bag.

MRS. LAKELY (CONT'D)
I'm Mrs. Lakely.

MARA
Oh, I don't need a candle.

MRS. LAKELY
I want you to have it. Now treat this book with care and it will be your loyal friend. Don't ignore it and don't throw it in the trash.

Mara puts the paper bag in her backpack.

MARA
You're very generous. Thank you.

MRS. LAKELY
We'll see.

Mara slips out the door. The shop bell TINKLES.

EXT. THE CURIOUS QUILL BOOKSTORE - DAY

Mara steps onto the sidewalk.

She looks back at the storefront.

Mrs. Lakely puts a sign in the door window, closes a curtain behind the door.

The sign reads: "Closed Forever."

Mara hugs her backpack.

MARA
What just happened?

She looks inside the backpack at the paper bag.

MRS. LAKELY (V.O.)
(whispers)
Treat it with care and it will be your loyal friend.

Mara heads away from the store with the backpack close to her chest, shield-like.

INT. HAIR SALON - DAY

Selene reads a magazine in a chair.

Mara bounces in.

MARA
Hi, Mom.

SELENE
I really wish you wouldn't hide yourself in your father's old sweatshirt.

MARA
But it comforts me. Your hair looks nice.

SELENE
They haven't done my hair yet.

MARA
It still looks nice.

SELENE
Thank you. What did you get at the bookstore?

MARA
Nothing. I just looked around.

SELENE
Honey, maybe you can get your hair trimmed.

MARA
I trim it myself.

SELENE
I know.

MARA
I like my hair.

HAIRDRESSER (O.S.)
We're ready for you, Selene.

Selene puts down the magazine.

MARA
I want to walk home, okay? It's only a mile.

SELENE
You have your phone?

MARA
Yup.

SELENE
Be careful.

MARA
I will.

Mara hurries out.

EXT. WOODS - DAY

Mara settles down beneath an old gnarled oak tree with a large round knot in the tree's base.

She takes the spell book from her backpack, opens it.

Her fingers trail along a line of strange symbols.

MARA
This is so cool.

BANG. The sound of a cherry bomb.

Mara flinches. Birds SHRIEK and pepper the sky.

Mara hears the laughter of boys.

She tucks the book inside her backpack, peeks through the pond reeds.

THROUGH POND REEDS

Three teenage BOYS cluster near the edge of a large mirky pond, their bikes thrown down on the ground nearby.

RONNIE PEYTON, 14, tough, cruel, holds a cherry bomb in one hand and a lighter in the other hand.

TRAVIS BRENNA, 13, Ronnie's yes man, holds a bullfrog.

It squirms in his hands.

TRAVIS
Dude, this'll be a good one. It's nice and fat.

RONNIE
(to the bullfrog)
Open up, buddy.

Travis holds the bullfrog steady.

BACK TO SCENE

She takes out her phone.

MARA
What're they doing?

She records the boys.

ON PHONE SCREEN

Ronnie lights the cherry bomb. He jams the cherry bomb into the bullfrog's mouth.

BACK TO SCENE

Mara creeps a little closer.

THE EDGE OF A POND

Travis hurls the bullfrog into the pond.

BOOM. A small geyser erupts in the water.

Pieces of bullfrog rain down.

The boys howl with laughter.

ALLAN CHRISTIANSON, 13, an insecure follower, doubles over with laughter -- holds his gut.

ALLAN
That was sick.

Ronnie and Travis high-five each other.

POND REEDS

Mara holds her mouth in horror.

THE EDGE OF A POND

Ronnie, Travis, and Allan gaze at pieces of bullfrog on the water's surface.

ALLAN
Can we do another?

RONNIE
Nah. I'm bored. Let's find something bigger.

TRAVIS
Like what?

RONNIE
I don't know. A squirrel. My father hates squirrels.

ALAN
Why?

RONNIE
They're like rats.

The three boys jump on their bicycles, ride away.

THE EDGE OF A POND

Mara, backpack slung over her shoulder, stares at blood on the water's surface.

INT. MARA'S HOME - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Mara, still in the oversized hoodie, sits cross-legged on her bed. Rain PATTERS on the window glass.

Mara glances at a desk clock. It reads "10:30 PM."

MARA
Where are you, Whisper?

A KNOCK on the door. Selene steps in, new hairdo.

SELENE
Still no sign?

MARA
No.

SELENE
I wouldn't worry too much. You know she stays out some nights.

MARA
Not in the rain ... I saw some boys by the pond today. They were blowing up frogs with firecrackers. What if they hurt Whisper?

Selene plops on the bed.

SELENE
Come here.

Selene wraps her arms around her.

SELENE (CONT'D)
Whisper's too smart for dumb mean boys.

Mara rests her head on Selene's shoulder.

SELENE (CONT'D)
Do you know who they are?

MARA
No, but I've seen them at school ... Can we go look for her?

SELENE
It's too dark, sweetheart. We won't be able to see.

MARA
She'll hear my voice. Mom, please.

SELENE
Okay, at least we can look outside the house.

Mara jumps off the bed, runs out.

SELENE (CONT'D)
Wait for me, Mara.

Selene hurries out.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Mara paces up and down in front of her house.

MARA
(calling)
Whis-per.

Selene runs out of the house with a large umbrella, holds it over both of them.

MARA (CONT'D)
(calling)
Whis-per.
(to Selene)
Call, Mom.

SELENE
(calling)
Whisper.

MARA
(calling)
Whisper.

Mara and Selene peer into the darkness.

The rain comes down hard.

SELENE
We'll have to look for her in the morning.

Mara jumps out from the umbrella.

MARA
(calling)
Please come home, Whisper.

SELENE
Come in, now. You don't want to get sick and not be able to look for her.

Selene holds the umbrella over them.

They shuffle into the house.

INT. MARA'S HOME - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Mara holds the planchette on the Ouija Board.

MARA
Is Whisper okay?

The planchette spells out "H-E-L-P."

MARA (CONT'D)
What? No.
(calling)
Mom? ... Mom!

She slaps the planchette off the Ouija Board.

Selene runs in.

SELENE
What's wrong?

MARA
It spelled "help."

SELENE
What?

MARA
The Ouija. I asked if Whisper is okay. It spelled "help!"

SELENE
It's a board game. Whisper will be fine.

The sound of TAPS on the window glass.

MARA
Whisper.

Whisper, soaking wet, TAPS on the window -- MEOWS.

Mara runs to the window, opens it. Whisper jumps in.

SELENE
See.

Mara scoops her up.

SELENE (CONT'D)
I'll get a towel.

She hurries out.

Whisper purrs in Mara's arms.

LATER

Whisper lies in Mara's lap, a towel on the bed next to her.

Mara opens the spell book.

She discovers a map at the back of the book with the words: "The Shadow's Realm."

MARA
What's the The Shadow's Realm, Whisper?

Whisker MEOWS.

Mara turns the page to a list of spells.

MARA (CONT'D)
"Spells that Frighten." Maybe there's something here to scare those terrible boys and stop them from killing animals. "Whispers in the Void." That's you.

She pets Whisper's head.

MARA (CONT'D)
Here's another. "The Shadows Touch." "Induce overwhelming dread through spectral touch." What does spectral mean, Whisper?

Whisper stretches out over the page, MEOWS.

Mara slides Whisper off, turns the page -- reads.

LATER

Mara sleeps with the open spell book on the bed.

Whisper sleeps, curled up on the book's pages.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT - MARA'S DREAM

Mara wanders down a path. Black-clawed trees reach out over her head.

MARA
(calling)
Whisper. Where are you?

She hears a faint MEOW, runs -- trips -- falls -- face-plants on the dirt.

A rabbit, neck twisted, twitches in front of Mara's face. She jumps up, panicked.

Mara hears boys' laughter.

MARA (CONT'D)
No.

She runs down the path to

A CLEARING

Allan and Travis hold Whisper down.

Ronnie ties a rope around Whisper's neck.

MARA
(shouts)
No! Get away from her!

Mara runs up to the Boys.

MARA (CONT'D)
Stop! Voice of none, yet voice of fear, Banshee's cry, draw spirits near. Let them seek what can't be found. A wail unchained, yet all around.

A hideous spine-chilling scream rings out.

INT. MARA'S HOME - BEDROOM - NIGHT (BACK TO PRESENT)

Mara jumps up -- checks Whisper’s neck.

MARA
No one is going to hurt you.

She pulls Whisper to her.

MARA (CONT’D)
No one.

She kisses Whisper’s head.

MARA (CONT’D)
I better write that spell down.

She grabs a piece of paper and pen -- writes.

MARA (CONT’D)
Voice of none, yet voice of ...
fear.

She writes.

INT. MARA'S HOME - KITCHEN - DAY

Selene wears office clothes. She lifts up a cup of coffee, tucks her elbow tight against her side, takes a small sip.

Mara passes by.

MARA
Buy Mom. I hope you sell a house today.

SELENE
Wait. Come here.

Mara tramps in.

MARA
What? I have to go.

SELENE
I don’t like that you’re not eating breakfast.

MARA
Don’t worry. I’ll get something at school ... Promise.

Whisper jumps on the counter.

SELENE
I’ll probably be home after you.

MARA
Okay. Come on, Whisper.

She strides out. Whisper jumps off the counter, follows Mara.

SELENE
(shouts)
Come straight home after school, please.

MARA (O.S.)
I will.

The front door SQUEAKS open, CLICKS shut.

Selene sips her coffee.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Mara ambles along, backpack slung over her shoulder. Whisper trots by her side.

Mara stops at a corner across from a middle school. She kneels down to Whisper.

MARA
Time for me to go to school.

She pets her head. Whisper trots off.

INT. NORTHWOOD MIDDLE SCHOOL - HALLWAY - DAY

Lockers CLANG open and shut. Students bustle to class.

Mara closes her locker. She sees Ronnie, Travis, and Allan push through the crowd of students.

TRAVIS
Hey, Ronnie, that freak’s staring at you.

He points at Mara.

ALLAN
That’s the flake with the cat that follows her to school.

Ronnie, Travis, and Allan stop in front of Mara.

RONNIE
What are you staring at, weirdo?

ALLAN
Dude, I think she wants you.

RONNIE
You want some of this?

Ronnie’s hands run down the front of his body.

Travis and Allan laugh.

MARA
I saw what you did to the frog. In the woods.

Ronnie freezes. The smile fades from his face.

RONNIE
Yeah? So what? You gonna cry about it?

MARA
You blew it up. For fun. Like its life is nothing.

RONNIE
You think anyone’s gonna care about a stupid frog?

MARA
Hurting something smaller than you doesn’t make you tough. It makes you cruel.

RONNIE
What a loser.

Mara raises her phone.

The screen faces Ronnie. She taps play.

BOOM! The sound of the cherry bomb on the phone.

ALLAN
She filmed it?

RONNIE
What is this?

MARA
You better not hurt anymore animals.

RONNIE
Or what?

MARA
Voice of none, yet voice of fear,
Banshee's cry, draw spirits near.
Let them seek what can't be found.
A wail unchained, yet all around.

Ronnie laughs.

RONNIE
What is your deal? Delete the video, or I'll make you wish you had.

He steps closer. The hallway empties of students.

Mara slides the phone back into her hoodie pocket.

MARA
No.

RONNIE
What?

MARA
You don't scare me.

Ronnie lunges.

MARA (CONT'D)
You touch me, I'll go to the principal.

He grips her wrist, hard.

MARA (CONT'D)
Ow. Let go.

RONNIE
Hold her.

Travis and Allan grab her arms. She pushes against them.

MARA
Let go.

Ronnie snatches the phone from her hoodie pocket, deletes the video -- tosses the phone at Mara's feet.

CRACK.

RONNIE
Next time, mind your own business. Or a frog won't be the only thing that explodes.

They strut down the hall. Travis hops, frog-like.

TRAVIS
Ribbit. Ribbit. Boom!

Travis throws himself against a locker, makes a splattered face. The Boys laugh, disappear around a corner.

Mara picks up her phone, looks at the cracked screen.

Her hands shake.

INT. NORTHWOOD MIDDLE SCHOOL - LIBRARY - DAY

Mara reads the spell book.

Three GIRLS watch Mara from another table.

JENNY, 14, popular, studies Mara.

JENNY
That's the girl who's stalking Ronnie. I'm gonna talk to her.

She struts to Mara's table.

JENNY (CONT'D)
Hi.

Mara looks up from the book.

JENNY (CONT'D)
I'm Jenny. You're the girl whose cat follows you to school.

MARA
Sometimes.

JENNY
What? Sometimes you're the girl, or Sometimes you're not?

MARA
Sometimes my cat follows me to school.

Jenny plonks down in a seat at Mara's table.

JENNY
What's its name?

MARA
Whisper.

JENNY
How sweet.

Jenny glances at the two Girls at the other table.

JENNY (CONT'D)
Are you going to the school dance next week?

MARA
No.

JENNY
No? Too bad. What're you reading? Wait, is that a spell book?

MARA
None of your business.

JENNY
It is. You know Ronnie, right?

MARA
No.

JENNY
He said you're a freak. This book proves it.

MARA
Okay?

JENNY
If I say your name three times will you turn into a raven?

The two other Girls laugh at the other table.

JENNY (CONT'D)
Do something.

MARA
What?

JENNY
A spell.
(to the Girls)
We want to see a spell, right?

LOR, 14, saucy, bounces over.

LOR
I'm here for all of it.

KELLY, 14, clueless, hurries over.

KELLY
Me, too.

They flank Jenny.

MARA
You really shouldn't invite things you don't understand.

JENNY
Ooo, scary. Where'd you get that ratty sweatshirt?

MARA
It was my father's.

JENNY
What, is he dead or something?

Mara avoids eye contact.

JENNY (CONT'D)
He is dead, isn't he?

Jenny pushes the spell book down on to the table.

JENNY (CONT'D)
I'm talking to you.

Mara pulls the spell book away, puts it in her backpack. She gets up, steps away.

JENNY (CONT'D)
Wait.

Jenny grasps Mara's hand.

JENNY (CONT'D)
Do a spell for us.

LOR
Yeah, Make it scary.

Mara considers the three Girls.

MARA
Okay. I'll do a spell.

She sets the backpack down on the table.

MARA (CONT'D)
Everyone sit down.

They all sit around the table.

KELLY
What kind of spell?

MARA
You'll see. Hold hands.

Jenny and the Girls hold hands. Jenny holds Mara's hand.

MARA (CONT'D)
Repeat after me. Three little girls, all sugar and spite ...

Jenny watches the Girls.

LOR AND KELLY
Three little girls, all sugar and spite.

MARA
Full of big mouths and not very bright.

LOR/KELLY
Full of big mouths and not very bright.

MARA
They giggle and gossip and think they're so cool ...

The Girls check in with Jenny.

INSIDE MARA'S BACKPACK

The spell book glows.

LOR/KELLY (O.S)
They giggle and gossip and think they're so cool.

The spell book pulsates.

BACK TO SCENE

Jenny lets go of Mara's hand.

MARA
But mirrors don't lie about ugly little ghouls.

KELLY
But mirrors don't lie --

JENNY
-- Stop. She's mocking us. You're mocking us!

Jenny pushes Mara's backpack off the table.

JENNY (CONT'D)
Try not to be so desperate for attention.
(to the other Girls)
Let's go.

Jenny and the Girls stride out.

Mara kneels down, picks up her backpack.

She holds it against her chest, shield-like.

INT. NORTHWOOD MIDDLE SCHOOL - GIRL'S BATHROOM - DAY

Jenny, Lor, and Kelly step in.

KELLY
What do you think she meant, "mirrors don't lie"?

JENNY
Never mind her.

LOR
It was kinda creepy though, right?

The Girls primp in the mirror.

Jenny gazes at her reflection.

Maggots crawl on her face.

JENNY
Ahhhhhhh!

She swipes her face, shakes her body.

JENNY (CONT'D)
Ew-ew-ew!

The maggots fall into the sink -- slither down the drain.

LOR
What's wrong?

JENNY
Are they off?

LOR
What?

JENNY
My face.

Jenny studies her face in the mirror.

KELLY
What was that?

JENNY
Nothing. I'm fine.

Jenny struts out.

EXT. NORTHWOOD MIDDLE SCHOOL - HALLWAY - DAY

Mara puts the library book in her locker.

Ronnie, Travis, and Allan zero in on Mara.

TRAVIS
She thinks she can mess with us?

RONNIE
Hey, Freaktoid!

MARA
Leave me alone.

RONNIE
Can't do that. Not after you spied on us.

MARA
You already cracked my phone screen.

Jenny, Lor, and Kelly come towards them.

Ronnie raises a bottle of sticky green gunk -- dumps it on Mara's head.

RONNIE
Oops.

The gunk drips down Mara's face, neck, and clothes.

Mara stares at them, open-mouthed, mortified.

JENNY
Oh God, what's that smell?

TRAVIS
It's her.

Travis sniffs near Mara -- gags.

TRAVIS (CONT'D)
Toe-jam and piss.

He gags again.

Mara runs away.

They all laugh.

INT. GIRLS' LOCKER ROOM - SHOWER - DAY

Mara, in her father's sweatshirt, rinses green gunk out of her hair.

The green gunk swirls in the drain at her feet.

EXT. NORTHWOOD MIDDLE SCHOOL - QUAD - DAY

Mara slumps out of the building, clothes wet, green gunk residue in her hair.

INT. MARA'S HOME - BEDROOM - DAY

Mara bursts in, tosses her backpack on the bed, pulls out the spell book.

MARA
This all started because of you.

The book heats up. Her hands turn red.

MARA (CONT'D)
Ow!

She drops it.

The book flips open to a blank page.

Small flames spell out "Trust me, Mara."

MARA (CONT'D)
No! I'm returning you.

She closes the book, pushes it away and rocks back and forth.

Whisper TAPS on the window glass.

Mara opens the window.

Whisper jumps in, trots to the spell book and rubs her nose on the book's corner. She plops down on the floor next to it.

EXT. THE CURIOUS QUILL BOOKSTORE - DAY

Ivy crawls up the brick facade. The "Closed Forever" sign still in the door window.

Mara holds the spell book to her chest, shakes the doorknob. She KNOCKS on the door.

MARA
Hello. Mrs. Lakely. Hello. It's Mara. I don't want this book anymore. Hello. Please take it back.

Mara peers into the door. Yellowing curtains block her view. She listens at the door.

EXT. THE CURIOUS QUILL BOOKSTORE - BACKDOOR - DAY

Mara POUNDS on the door.

MARA
Mrs. Lakely! Hello. Hel-lo.

She slumps on the ground in front of the door.

Travis and Allan stroll down the street.

TRAVIS
Hey, look, it's the Freaktoid.

They stride up to her.

MARA
What do you want?

TRAVIS
We want to be friends.

ALLAN
Yeah. We don't want to fight.

MARA
I don't believe you.

Travis slides down next to her. Allan nuzzles in on the other side of Mara.

TRAVIS
It was all Ronnie's idea. The frogs. The green slime.

Allan picks up the spell book.

ALLAN
What's this?

MARA
Don't.

She pulls the spell book away from Allan.

Travis puts his hand on Mara's thigh.

TRAVIS
I like you.

Allan puts his hand on Mara's other thigh.

ALLAN
Me, too.

Mara jumps up.

MARA
Stay away from me.

She strides away.

POP-POP-BANG-POP-BANG-POP-POP-POP!

Mara jumps. A wad of firecrackers explode by her feet.

Travis and Allan roll with laughter.

TRAVIS
See ya, Freaktoid.

Allan and Travis laugh, high-five each other, swagger off.

Mara scans the pages of the book, stops at a spell titled:

“Reversal of Fortune.”

She reads, kneels -- traces a circle around her.

Mrs. Lakely peers out of the bookstore’s upstairs window.

Mara’s lips twitch.

MARA
“By rue and thorn, by salt and smoke, return the pain that others spoke. Let mockery and laughter turn to lessons.”

The traced line of the circle bursts into flames around her.

Mrs. Lakely disappears from the upstairs window.

EXT. STREET

Travis and Allan stroll along, smug and confident. They freeze in mid-laugh.

Travis pulls at his legs.

TRAVIS
I can’t move my feet.

ALLAN
Me neither.

Their bodies rise off the ground.

ALLAN (CONT’D)
What is this?

A force body-slams them onto the pavement.

ALLAN AND TRAVIS
Ow! Ah!

They squirm in pain.

TRAVIS
What was that!?

Travis tries to get up.

TRAVIS (CONT'D)
Dude, I'm stuck.

ALLAN
Me too.

Mara strolls up to them, spell book in hand.

MARA
You have anymore firecrackers?

Mara reaches into Travis's backpack.

TRAVIS
Get away from me.

Mara pulls two firecracker packages out of Travis's backpack.

TRAVIS (CONT'D)
What are you doing?

Mara places a package on Travis's chest, and a package on Allan's chest.

MARA
Bye.

Mara strides away around the corner.

Travis and Allan try to shake the firecracker packages off their chests.

EXT. THE CURIOUS QUILL BOOKSTORE

Mara strolls past the front door.

POP-POP-BANG-POP-BANG-POP-POP-POP!

The sound of Travis's and Allan's screams.

Mara struts past the bookstore, a bounce in her step.

EXT. STREET

Travis and Allan lie on the ground in shock, smoke-blackened faces, small burn marks on their shirts, necks, and down their arms.

INT. MARA'S HOME - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Selene, in her office clothes, washes a bowl by the sink.

The front door SLAMS shut. She jumps, startled.

The bowl slips from her hands, SMASHES on the floor.

SELENE
Damn it.

Mara stalks in, clutches the spell book, cheeks flushed.

SELENE (CONT'D)
Mara Grace Erinyes, where have you been?

MARA
I went to return something.

SELENE
I was worried sick. Why didn't you text or call?

MARA
I was careful.

Mara brushes past Selene towards the stairs.

SELENE
Oh no. Sit down.

Mara slumps into a chair.

THUD. She sets the spell book down.

Selene notices the book.

SELENE (CONT'D)
What is that?

MARA
Nothing.

SELENE
Is that from the Occult bookshop?

MARA
Maybe.

SELENE
You told me you didn't buy anything. Did you lie to me?

MARA
I didn’t mean to buy it.

SELENE
Don’t play word games. You know exactly what I meant.

Selene picks up the book, flips it open.

SELENE (CONT’D)
What am I looking at?

Mara grabs the spell book, clutches it close.

MARA
You wouldn’t understand. You don’t feel it.

SELENE
Feel what?

MARA
I can’t explain.

SELENE
Try.

MARA
It’s like it knows me. Like it wants to help me. It’s not like school or anything else.

SELENE
You’re scaring me. That book is going in the trash right now.

MARA
No!

Mara leaps up, holds the book out of reach.

MARA (CONT’D)
You can’t touch it! You’ll ruin it! It knows things.

SELENE
Mara, you're not some possessed virgin in a horror movie.

Mara’s chest heaves.

MARA
I was trying to return it, but then it helped me.

SELENE
It helped you?

MARA
Those boys. The ones that blow up frogs. They were harassing me and --

SELENE
-- Don’t make up stories.

MARA
I’m not.

SELENE
You’re returning it.

Mara scurries out.

Selene notices Mara’s shadow linger behind.

Her face pales.

She picks up broken bowl pieces.

INT. MARA'S HOME - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Wind howls. The window rattles.

The black candle’s flame casts shadows across the room.

Mara sits cross-legged on her bed. The spell book opens in front of her.

The black candle rest on her desk.

Mara’s fingers tremble, lips parted.

Whisper curls beside her. Ears twitch. Eyes fixed on Mara.

Runes glow on the pages of the spell book.

Magic symbols float off the page.

Dissipate, smoke-like.

Whisper swats at the smoke.

MARA
“By fire and root, by blood and moon. I summon the ancient fire to my room.”

The candle flames. A golden light floods the room.

A shiver ripples up Mara’s spine. Her pupils dilate. Her fingers grip the edge of the book.

Whisper makes a low growl.

MARA (CONT’D)
“I call you forth from the unseen.”

Her skin flushes.

MARA’S VISION

A SHADOW flickers on the wall -- undulates -- morphs into a raven feather.

The raven feather touches Mara’s shoulder.

Mara’s eyes brighten. Her hands rise, palms up.

The raven’s feather drops into Mara’s palm.

Her fingertips sparkle.

Whisper’s fur stands up. Her tail slaps the floor.

WHISPER
Rrrrhhh ...

BACK TO SCENE

Mara studies the raven feather, puts it between the book pages, closes the book.

MARA
That was amazing.

The candle flickers out. Smoke curls up from its wick. Whisper swats the smoke.

Mara plops on the bed, writes in her diary.

EXT. MARA’S HOME - BEDROOM - DAY

Selene KNOCKS on the door.

SELENE
Let’s go Mara ... Mara!

Selene touches the doorknob -- sparks CRACKLE on Selene’s fingertips. She pulls her hands away.

SELENE (CONT’D)
Ow!

She rubs her hands.

SELENE (CONT’D)
Mara, come out here!

The door swings open.

Mara dashes out, backpack slung over her shoulder.

MARA
I don’t want to be late for school.

She pushes past Selene.

MARA (CONT’D)
Later, Mom.

She bounces down the stairs.

SELENE
(calling)
We’re returning that book.

The sound of the front door SQUEAKS open. CLICKS shut.

Selene steps into the

BEDROOM

Whisper rubs against her ankles.

The black candle lies on Mara’s desk, half-melted.

Selene sees Mara’s diary. She picks it up, opens it. Peruses drawings of arcane symbols.

EXT. NORTHWOOD MIDDLE SCHOOL - MAIN QUAD - DAY

Mara strides past STUDENTS, confident.

STUDENTS (O.S.)
Witch! Witch!

Jenny, Lor, Kelly, Ronnie, Allan, Travis and a group of Students surround her.

STUDENTS (CONT'D)
(chanting)
Witch. Witch. Witch.

Mara backs away.

JENNY
Why don't you float or something? Come on, make the sky fall.

RONNIE
Head case.

The circle tightens around her.

STUDENTS
Witch. Witch. Witch.

JENNY
Careful. Don't look in her eyes. She'll hex you.

RONNIE
I heard that witches drink hagfish slime and eat frogs. You got a frog sandwich in that backpack?

He pulls her backpack strap.

Mara pulls it away from him.

Students laugh.

LOR
I bet she talks to trees. Like, literally.

JENNY
What are you even doing here? Shouldn't you be in the woods with your cat and cauldron?

Allan sniffs the air.

ALLAN
I smell eye of newt and ... B.O.

The Students erupt into laughter.

A rock flies through the air.

CRACK. The rock strikes Mara in the side of the head. The world tilts.

Blood drips down over her ears, down her neck.

STUDENTS
(distorted echoes)
Witch ... witch ... witch ...

Mara collapses, passes out.

Students run.

Mara lies unconscious on the ground, her backpack up over her shoulders on top of her head.

INT. HOSPITAL - EMERGENCY ROOM - DAY

Mara props herself up on a gurney.

Selene beside her. Mara lifts her hand to a white bandage on the side of her head.

SELENE
You've got quite a few stitches.

MARA
How many?

SELENE
Thirteen.

MARA
Do I have to go to school tomorrow?

SELENE
You can stay home if you're not up to it.

MARA
Where's my backpack?

SELENE
Right here.

She points to the backpack on a chair.

SELENE (CONT'D)
Do you know what happened?

MARA
Somebody threw a rock.

SELENE
Did you see who?

MARA
No.

SELENE
I think we should meet with the principal.

MARA
Why?

SELENE
Because you're being bullied.

MARA
He won't do anything.

Mara opens her backpack.

MARA (CONT'D)
Where's my book?

SELENE
Right here.

Selene holds it up from her lap.

MARA
May I have it back?

SELENE
Mara --

MARA
(screams)
-- Give it back!

The spell book flies out of Selene's hand into Mara's hand.

MARA (CONT'D)
Thank you.

Selene leans back, steadies herself.

INT. NORTHWOOD MIDDLE SCHOOL - PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE - DAY

PRINCIPAL DANE, 50, officious, overwhelmed behind a desk piled with files and papers, faces Selene and Mara across from him.

The bandage on Mara's head peeks out from under her hair.

PRINCIPAL DANE
I want to start by saying how sorry I am. What happened to Mara is unacceptable.

SELENE
She was stoned, Principal Dane. In the twenty-first century. By a group of children on your watch.

PRINCIPAL DANE
Yes, and disciplinary action will be taken.

SELENE
You know who threw the rock.

PRINCIPAL
No, but I am interviewing students to get to the bottom of it.

Principal Dane rises, comes around the desk.

PRINCIPAL DANE
I'm afraid there's more to this than just the incident.

SELENE
What do you mean?

PRINCIPAL DANE
Concerns about Mara's behavior.

SELENE
Such as?

PRINCIPAL DANE
Mara, do you know what I'm talking about?

MARA
No.

PRINCIPAL DANE
There have been rumors of Mara chanting things. Strange rhymes. Things that frightened the other children. They described them as spells.

SELENE
Spells? ...

PRINCIPAL DANE
Believe me, I understand how kids can exaggerate. Rumors spread fast.

SELENE
So we're blaming her for getting attacked?

Mara clenches her teeth.

PRINCIPAL DANE
Of course not. Violence is never justified.

SELENE
Mara has done nothing wrong. She speaks in rhymes sometimes. She writes poetry. She's quiet. A little different. That's not a crime.

She holds up her phone.

MARA
Mom, no.

Principal Dane looks at a photo of the thirteen stitches in Mara's head.

MARA (CONT'D)
Mom, stop! He doesn't care. This school is filled with cruel people.

Mara storms out.

SELENE
If she were any other girl, we wouldn't be having this conversation.

PRINCIPAL DANE
That couldn't be further from the truth, Mrs. Erinyes. The school is doing its best.

SELENE
Do better, Principal Dane.

Selene struts out.

EXT. THE CURIOUS QUILL BOOKSTORE - DAY

Late afternoon shadows creep over the front of the building.

A car pulls up next to the curb.

INT. CAR

Selene scrutinizes Mara in the passenger side.

SELENE
Go on.

MARA
I don’t want to. It’s closed anyway.

SELENE
Leave it by the front door.

MARA
Why can’t I keep it?

SELENE
Because you shouldn’t play around with spells.

MARA
I’m not. It’s a book, just like you said the Ouija is just a board game.

SELENE
I’m done arguing with you.

MARA
Me, too. Done arguing.

SELENE
Are going to leave it?

Mara stares out the window.

MARA
You’re a bully just like all of them.

SELENE
Mara --

MARA
-- No. My Dad wouldn’t make me return it.

SELENE
Okay. You’re grounded. Forever.

Selene shifts the car into drive.

INT. MARA’S HOME - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Mara takes the bandage off her head wound, studies the thirteen stitches in a mirror.

She plops onto the bed, holds her hands over the spell book.

Violet light emanates from the book.

It travels up her arms, up her neck to her head.

The violet light pulses around the stitches. The redness around the wound fades -- the stitches fade.

The sound of a dog’s YELP from outside.

Mara’s hands tighten around the book.

She looks out the window.

THROUGH WINDOW

Mr. Slagter yanks the golden retriever’s choke collar.

SLAGTER
You useless mutt! Get in the car!

The dog WHIMPERS, its paws slip on the pavement.

Mr. Slagter kicks the dog hard in the side.

YELP!

BACK TO SCENE

Mara paces.

MARA
I hate him!

The book shudders. Its pages flutter open. A page glows.

Mara watches a spell appear in crimson ink on the spell book’s page: “Retribution of the Meek.”

YELP.

Mara covers her ears, runs back to the window.

THROUGH WINDOW

Mr. Slagter throws the dog into the backseat of a car.

MR. SLAGTER
I've had it! You're going to the pound!

He SLAMS the door shut, climbs into the driver's side.

BACK TO SCENE

Mara's lips tremble. The book vibrates.

Mara brings the book to the window ledge, holds her hand over the page.

MARA
By thorn, by flame, by blood unclean, let wrongs be known, let debts convene. Name of the one who sowed the pain, I cast thee now to taste the same.

Light pulses from Mara's eyes.

INT. CAR - DAY

Mr. Slagter slugs down a whiskey from a nip bottle, tosses the bottle to the passenger side floor onto a pile of empty nip bottles.

He turns the ignition key, the engine starts.

EXT. CAR

A gust of wind whips cross the street, jerks the car.

INT. CAR

The engine stops. Mr. Slagter pounds the steering wheel.

MR. SLAGTER
Damn it!

The dog WHIMPERS.

MR. SLAGTER (CONT'D)
Shut up!

He turns the key -- nothing.

Dark ivy vines snake up through the seat cushions.

MR. SLAGTER (CONT'D)
What the --

The vines bind his wrists to the steering wheel.

He pulls his wrists, the vines wrap tighter.

Vines wrap around his mouth.

MR. SLAGTER (CONT'D)
Mmmm! Mmmm!

The dog's side door unlocks, swings open. The dog leaps out, bolts away.

Mr. Slagter pulls and pushes against the steering wheel.

Vines wrap around his legs.

A vine reaches up to the ignition key, wraps around it -- turns the key. The engine starts.

Vines grip the steering wheel.

Vines shift the gear into Drive.

Mr. Slagter's tries to pull his arms free.

Vines push against the gas pedal. The tires SCREECH.

Mr. Slagter screams.

INT. MARA'S HOME - BEDROOM WINDOW - NIGHT

Mara watches the car zoom down the street out of view.

Whisper jumps from the tree onto the window ledge.

Mara pets Whisper.

MARA
Did you see, Whisper? Mr. Slagter won't hurt his dog anymore.

She picks up Whisper, carries her in, puts her down. She shuts the window.

Whisper jumps back onto the window ledge, waits.

MARA (CONT'D)
No. You can't stay out all night.

Whisper MEOWS.

MARA (CONT'D)
Ugh. Here. Play with this.

She pulls the raven feather from the spell book, moves it in front of Whisper's face.

Whisper swats the feather to the floor, sniffs it -- rolls back and forth over it.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Smoke spews from Mr. Slagter's crashed car hood. A cracked telephone pole lies on top of the car's roof.

Broken electrical wires spark and dance around the car.

Mr. Slagter pushes at the driver's side door.

The passenger side door opens.

Mr. Slagter crawls out.

Nip bottles spill out, CLANK on the pavement.

Mr. Slagter stumbles away from the car.

The Wail of a police siren.

EXT. NORTHWOOD MIDDLE SCHOOL - MAIN QUAD - DAY

A bell RINGS. The school doors burst open. Students swarm out of the school building.

Mara steps into the sunlight, backpack slumped low.

She notices a crowd up ahead circled around something.

A few Students record on their phones.

Mara slows down.

STUDENT #1
Oh my God.

STUDENT #2
Is it real?

Mara's pace quickens, weaves through the crowd of Students.

She sees a cat strung up by its neck on a rope attached to a tree branch.

She moves closer. A piece of paper attached to the cat's tail reads in red marker, "WHISPER."

MARA
Whisper? Whisper!

Mara screams, runs forward.

MARA (CONT'D)
No-no-no-no! Ahhhhhhhhh!

The crowd backs away from her.

More phones record Mara's reaction.

STUDENT #3
Is that her cat?

MARA
(screams)
Get her down!

Ronnie, Travis, Allan, Jenny, Lor, and Kelly lean against a low brick wall.

They watch Mara collapse under the tree.

TRAVIS
Dude, she's lost it.

RONNIE
Look at her. Psycho much.

ALLAN
For a stuffed toy cat.

MR. WILLIAMS, 40, a concerned teacher, pushes through the crowd to the tree.

MR. WILLIAMS
Move.

He unties the rope, lowers the stuffed toy cat.

Students laugh.

Mr. Williams holds up the stuffed toy cat.

MR. WILLIAMS (CONT'D)
Who did this?

Mara stares at the stuffed toy cat, tears in her eyes.

MARA
(screams)
You're horrible! I hate you all!

Students record Mara on their phones.

She sees Ronnie, runs at him.

MARA (CONT'D)
You did this!

Ronnie dodges her.

She swings her fists at his face.

RONNIE
Whoa. What the hell is wrong with you?

She claws at him.

MARA
Ahhhhhhh!

Mr. Williams grabs Mara.

MR. WILLIAMS
That's enough!

He pulls her back.

MR. WILLIAMS (CONT'D)
Stop!

A crowd follows, phones pointed at Mara.

RONNIE
Stay away from me, psycho.

MARA
He did it!

RONNIE
I didn't do anything.

TRAVIS
She's nuts, Mr. Williams.

ALLAN
Looney Tuney!

MR. WILLIAMS
Okay, everyone. It's over. Go home.

Mara pulls out of Mr. William's grasp, lunges at Ronnie.

Mr. Williams drops the stuffed toy cat, wraps both his arms around Mara from behind, pulls her away from Ronnie.

MR. WILLIAMS (CONT'D)
Hey. Hey. Stop. Come with me.

MARA
It was him. I know it.

Ronnie, Travis, and Allan watch Mr. Williams escort Mara inside the school building.

TRAVIS
Legendary.

Ronnie pulls a couple of cherry bombs from his pocket, shows them to Travis and Allan.

TRAVIS (CONT'D)
Awesome.

RONNIE
Let's go.

They strut away.

Ronnie picks up the stuffed toy cat.

INT. CAR - NIGHT

Selene drives. Mara sulks in the passenger seat.

SELENE
Suspended? Since when does my daughter get suspended for physical violence.

MARA
Mom, it was the boy and his evil friends blowing up frogs. They did it. He's targeting me, and threatening to hurt Whisper.

SELENE
How did I raise you? Violence is never the answer.

MARA
If Dad were alive he'd understand.

SELENE
Don't you dare use your father's memory to challenge me.

Mara slinks low in the seat, sulks.

INT. MARA'S HOME - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Mara and Selene eat macaroni and cheese. Mara moves the food around her plate. Whisper eats from her food bowl on the floor.

SELENE
Are you going to eat your food or play with it?

MARA
I'm not hungry.

SELENE
You love macaroni and cheese. I made it the way your father used to.

MARA
He made it better.

Selene puts down her fork.

SELENE
You really hurt my feelings ... Did you hear me?

MARA
Yes ...

SELENE
And I'm not talking about the macaroni and cheese.

MARA
I know ... I'm sorry.

SELENE
It doesn't sound like it.

MARA
I’m trying, but you’re not listening.

DING DONG.

SELENE
What now?

MARA
I’ll get it.

Mara jumps up. Whisper follows her.

FRONT DOOR

Mara opens the door -- No one. Whisper runs out.

MARA
Whisper, come back.

SELENE (O.S.)
Who is it, Mara?

The stuffed toy cat lies on the front step.

Red paint smeared on its fur.

Mara screams, crumbles to the floor.

Selene runs to the door. She sees the stuffed toy cat.

SELENE (CONT’D)
Oh dear God.

Selene steps out, looks around.

SELENE (CONT’D)
Come in, honey.

MARA
No, Whisper ran out.

Mara jumps up, bolts out.

SELENE
Mara.

Selene watches Mara run down the street. She looks down at the stuffed toy cat.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Mara'a searches in every direction.

MARA
(calling)
Whisper, come back. Please.

She runs down the sidewalk, peers under bushes. Under cars.

Mara turns onto another

STREET

Mara sees Ronnie across the street on a curb, Whisper in his lap. He strokes Whisper's back.

Mara runs to Ronnie. She trembles.

MARA
What are you doing?

Ronnie smiles.

RONNIE
Just hanging out with your little princess here. She's actually really sweet. Softer than I thought.

MARA
Put her down. Come here, Whisper.

Whisper squirms. Ronnie holds her tight.

MARA (CONT'D)
You're hurting her.

RONNIE
You know, I don't get you. Freaking out all the time like it's the end of the world.

MARA
Let her go.

RONNIE
I like cats. I'm petting her, see?

MARA
Please give her to me.

RONNIE
Since you said please.

Ronnie releases, Whisper. Whisper jumps into Mara's arms.

MARA
Stay away from her or else.

RONNIE
Oh no, please don't put a curse on me.

He laughs.

Mara hurries away with Whisper.

EXT. MARA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Blue and red lights flash, a police car parked outside.

A POLICE OFFICER speaks with Selene on the front lawn.

Mara turns toward the house with Whisper in her arms.

POLICE OFFICER
This is your daughter?

SELENE
Yes.

POLICE OFFICER
(to Mara)
Did you see who did this?

MARA
I didn't see him, but I know who did it.

POLICE OFFICER
What's his name?

MARA
Ronnie. I don't know his last name. He goes to my school.

POLICE OFFICER
I see. There's little we can do if you didn't see him do it.

MARA
I'm bringing Whisper inside.

Mara pushes into the house past Selene and the Officer.

POLICE OFFICER
We'll try to keep an eye out.

The Police Officer picks up the stuffed toy cat.

INT. MARA'S HOME - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Mara opens the Ouija board. Whisper watches her from the foot of the bed.

Mara closes her eyes, puts her hands on the planchette.

MARA
Will Ronnie hurt Whisper?

Mara opens her eyes.

The planchette spells "Y-E-S."

MARA (CONT'D)
How can I stop him?

The planchette spells out "B-O-O-K."

MARA (CONT'D)
Right.

She opens the spell book. Her finger slides down the page, stops at a spell.

MARA (CONT'D)
"To Mirror the Soul's Monster Back unto Itself."

MARA (CONT'D)
That sounds perfect. Ronnie will see what a monster he is. Uch, I hate even saying his name.

She lights the black candle, reads more.

MARA (CONT'D)
"Sovereign of the Night Divine.
Beast that stirs in the soul's deep shrine."

Whisper lifts her head.

A wind whips through the room.

Whisper hisses.

INT. RONNIE’S HOME - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Ronnie lies asleep.

MARA (V.O.)
"Open the gates of the silent within. Let the hidden truth begin.

Posters of wrestlers and violent video games hang on a wall.

A strong wind blows in through an open window.

Ronnie’s eyes dart beneath their lids.

SINISTER VOICE (V.O.)
Ro-nnie ... Ro-nnie ...

Ronnie stirs.

SINISTER VOICE (V.O.)
Ronnie!

Ronnie jolts wakes. He searches the darkness.

Shadows bleed from the corners.

RONNIE
Who’s there?

The room contracts.

A FIGURE emerges from the far wall.

Pitch black eyes.

Pale skin.

A cruel twisted smile, a distorted image of Ronnie.

RONNIE (CONT’D)
Who’s there?

The Figure glares at him.

RONNIE (CONT’D)
Get out of my room.

The Figure let’s out a spine-chilling scream.

Ronnie covers his ears.

The walls pulse.

RONNIE (CONT'D)
What do you want?

The Figure melts into a pitch black liquid pain-body.

It creeps along the floor toward Ronnie.

Ronnie backs away.

RONNIE (CONT'D)
Get away.

The black liquid pain-body latches onto his foot.

RONNIE (CONT'D)
Get away from me. What are you?

The black liquid pain-body glides up his leg.

Over his torso.

Up his neck.

RONNIE (CONT'D)
Ahhhh.

The pain-body slides into his mouth, down his throat.

Ronnie's entire body spasms.

He launches himself out the window.

THUD.

EXT. RONNIE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Ronnie lies on the ground, unconscious -- both legs twisted.

The black liquid pain-body leaks out of his eyes, seeps into the ground.

INT. MARA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Mara blinks. Whisper climbs into her lap.

MARA
I hope it works.

She closes the book.

MARA (CONT'D)
Maybe he'll leave us alone now.

She leans back, cradles Whisper.

INT. NORTHWOOD MIDDLE SCHOOL - HALLWAY - DAY

Students cluster around lockers, slack-jawed.

Mara shuffles past the group towards her locker, her father's oversized hoodie hides her face, backpack hugs her shoulders.

STUDENT (O.S.)
I heard his mother found him.

Travis and Allan turn the corner, jaws clenched and fixed stares. They pass by Mara.

TRAVIS
I bet she's happy.

Mara flinches, her fingers clench the backpack straps.

The school bell rings.

INT. NORTHWOOD MIDDLE SCHOOL - HOMEROOM - DAY

Mara rests her head on her backpack at a desk.

Students chatter.

A TEACHER, 31, plays a video game on his phone.

An intercom speaker on a wall CRACKLES.

The Teacher looks up from his phone.

TEACHER
Listen up.

He returns to the video game.

PRINCIPAL DANE (V.O.)
(through intercom)
Good morning.

Students stop their chatter.

PRINCIPAL DANE (V.O.)
I need to take a few moments to talk to you. Some of you may have already heard. Ronnie Peyton, one of your classmates fell out his window and broke both his legs.

A couple of students gasp.

Mara listens with a stunned expression.

PRINCIPAL DANE (V.O.)
This is heartbreaking for him.

Mara looks up from her backpack.

PRINCIPAL DANE (V.O.)
His parents tell me that you'll be able to visit him in the hospital in a few days.

A BITTER GIRL, 13, leans close to Mara.

BITTER GIRL
(whispers)
I couldn't give two shits about Ronnie Peyton.

PRINCIPAL DANE (V.O.)
I'm sure he would be happy to see some of his friends.

BITTER GIRL
(whispers)
Why should I care about a miserable bully?

PRINCIPAL DANE (V.O.)
Thank you. Have a god day.

The Bitter Girl nudges Mara, points to the Apathetic Teacher on his phone.

BITTER GIRL
(whispers)
He couldn't give two shits, either.

The Bitter Girl stifles a laugh.

Mara gazes at her classmates.

INT. NORTHWOOD MIDDLE SCHOOL BATHROOM - DAY

Fluorescent lights buzz overhead.

Mara bursts in, tracks to the sink, turns on the faucet -- splashes water on her face.

She looks in the mirror, freezes.

A Shadow reflection looks back at her with black void eyes.

A slight twisted smile curls on the reflection's lips.

Mara trembles.

MARA
(whispers)
What are you?

The reflection twitches, blinks back to Mara's normal face.

The bathroom door CREAKS open. Laughter and FOOTSTEPS.

Lor and Kelly bounce in.

Lor tosses her books on the counter, reaches into her bag.

Kelly puts her books on top of Lor's books.

KELLY
I can't believe what happened to Ronnie.

Lor fixes her hair with a scrunchie.

LOR
Yeah. How do you fall out of your bedroom window?

KELLY
Maybe it's karma.

LOR
Why karma?

KELLY
He wasn't always nice to everyone.

LOR
He was nice to us. That's all that matters.

KELLY
Maybe Witch Girl made him do it.

LOR
Ugh, don't say that. I won't sleep tonight.

Kelly puts lip gloss on.

STALL

Mara, pale, trembles on top of the toilet seat.

BATHROOM

Tia, adjusts her skirt. Kelly washes her hands.

TIA
Let’s go.

Tia picks up both their books from the counter.

STALL

Mara listens. She hears Lor’s and Kelly’s FOOTSTEPS. She hears the bathroom door SQUEAK open and close.

She jumps off the toilet seat, vomits into the toilet bowl.

EXT. THE CURIOUS QUILL BOOKSTORE - DAY

The “Closed Forever” sign hangs on the door.

Mara BANGS on the front door.

MARA
Mrs. Lakely!

She BANGS again.

MARA (CONT’D)
Mrs. Lakely! Please! I need help!

She ducks into an

ALLEY

Mara hoists herself onto a trash bin, slides open a narrow window, pulls herself over the ledge.

She slips inside.

INT. CURIOUS QUILL BOOKSTORE

Light filters through grimy windows.

Cobwebs cover bookshelves.

MARA
Mrs. Lakely? It's me. It's Mara. I bought the spell book.

She takes a few steps in.

MARA (CONT'D)
Remember? Four dollars and thirteen cents. Mrs. Lakely. Please. I didn't know it would do that.

A hand grasps Mara's shoulder from behind.

MARA (CONT'D)
Ah!

Mara jumps, spins around.

Mrs. Lakely's sharp eyes look Mara up and down.

MRS. LAKELY
You shouldn't be here, child.

MARA
Why did you close the store?

MRS. LAKELY
Too old. Too tired. Books don't listen the way they used to.

MARA
You sold me this spell book.

She takes the book out of her backpack.

MARA (CONT'D)
He jumped out a window, Mrs. Lakely.

MRS. LAKELY
Calm down, dear. Let's make tea.

Mrs. Lakely hobbles to a set of stairs, climbs up.

CREAK. CREAK.

MRS. LAKELY (CONT'D)
Come, Mara. Tell me everything.

Mara follows behind her.

INT. BOOKSTORE - PARLOR - DAY

A small kettle HISSES over a portable burner. A mismatched teacup set rests on the table.

Mrs. Lakely pours water into a tea cup.

MRS. LAKELY
The book didn't make the boy jump. You didn't make him jump.

MARA
But I said the words.

Mrs. Lakely hands Mara the cup of tea.

Mara's hands shake. She sets down the cup.

MRS. LAKELY
The book reveals. It reflects. It showed him something frightening about himself.

Mara's body shivers. Tears run down her cheeks. She burrows her hands in her hoodie sleeves.

MRS. LAKELY (CONT'D)
Why do you hide yourself in this sweatshirt?

MARA
It was my Dad's. It comforts me ... He died when I was five.

MRS. LAKELY
I see.

Mara clutches her hoodie closer.

MRS. LAKELY (CONT'D)
Your father is still with you. In the way you fight for yourself.

MARA
Did you ever cast a spell you regret?

MRS. LAKELY
I've never used the book.

MARA
Why not?

MRS. LAKELY
It wasn't written for me.

A raven makes a low croak. It lands on a window ledge.

MARA
I don't know if I'm a good person anymore.

MRS. LAKELY
Drink your tea.

Mara breathes in the steam rising from the cup.

MRS. LAKELY (CONT'D)
Goodness is a choice. Not a gift. Magic listens to the heart before the words.

Mara sips her tea.

MARA
It's bitter.

MRS. LAKELY
Bitter tea. Bitter heart. The grief you carry feeds a shadow within. You must be careful.

Mara's cellphone RINGS in her backpack. She pulls it out.

MARA
It's my mother.

Mara stops the RING.

MARA (CONT'D)
She wants me to return the book.

MRS. LAKELY
What do you want?

MARA
I want things to go back ... before all this. I want my Dad.

The cellphone RINGS again.

MARA (CONT'D)
I better go.

She lays the spell book on the table.

MARA (CONT'D)
I don't need my money back.

The raven PECKS on the window, flys away.

Mara slings the backpack over her shoulder.

MARA (CONT'D)
Thank you, Mrs. Lakely.

She steps towards the stairs.

The spell book WHOOSHES past Mara's face, SLAMS into the ceiling -- falls -- hits the floor. THUD.

A Shadow Hand reaches out of the book, grips Mara's ankle.

MARA (CONT'D)
Mrs. Lakely!

MRS. LAKELY
What, dear?

Mara jerks her foot free from the Shadow Hand's grip.

The inky fingers unravel into wisps, retreat with a HISS between the pages of the spell book.

MRS. LAKELY (CONT'D)
Did you need something else?

MARA
No. Sorry.

The spell book cover quivers, pulses heartbeat-like.

Mara hurries out.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Mara hurries down the street. She sees Mr. Slagter's house covered in dark ivy.

Mr. Slagter's golden retriever lies on the front steps.

The dog looks up at Mara. Barks.

Mara approaches the dog.

MARA
Hi.

The dog runs away.

Mara steps across the street toward her house.

INT. MARA'S HOME - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Selene reads a book on the sofa, Whisper curled by her feet. She hears the front door open.

Mara steps in. Whisper jumps up, trots to Mara, rubs against her ankle.

MARA
I returned the book.

She kneels down, pets Whisper.

SELENE
Is that where you were?

MARA
Yes. I'm going to my room.

SELENE
What about dinner?

MARA
I'm not very hungry.

Mara slumps out. Whisper follows her.

INT. MARA'S HOME - BEDROOM - NIGHT

The door CREAKS open. Whisper runs in, jumps on the bed.

Mara steps in, drops her backpack on the floor. She slips off her sweatshirt, tosses it over the back of a chair, plops down next to Whisper.

Mara picks up the raven feather on the bed, waves it in front of Whisper's head. He swats at it.

MARA
Maybe I should make an earring out of this raven feather.

She holds the feather up to her ear.

MARA (CONT'D)
What do you think?

Whisper stretches up to the feather, pulls it away from Mara's ear, holds it down, licks it.

Mara's sees the spell book on her desk.

MARA (CONT'D)
What?

The pages of the book flutter open.

MARA (CONT'D)
No. How?

VOICE (V.O.)
(whispers)
For Mara.

MARA
Please. No. I don't want you.

Whisper growls. Mara picks up Whisper, holds her.

The book glows, flips open to a blank page.

Small flames spell out "Trust me, Mara."

MARA (CONT'D)
No!

She closes the book, pushes it away.

An amorphous shadow seeps up from between the book's pages -- slithers upward, smoke-like.

Its mass gathers, glides across the room -- pours itself into the sweatshirt draped over the chair. The fabric stirs.

Sleeves twist and lift, filled by invisible limbs. The sweatshirt hovers, swells.

It expands into Mara's height and form. Features appear.

SHADOW MARA embodies the sweatshirt.

Its edges flicker, black smoke-like.

SHADOW MARA
(child's voice, distant)
It's time to play together.

Mara rocks back and forth.

SHADOW MARA (CONT'D)
Will you play with me?

MARA
I don’t want you. I don’t want you.

KNOCK-KNOCK.

SELENE (O.S.)
Mara.

Selene steps in with a plate of food.

SELENE (CONT’D)
Who are you talking to?

MARA
No one. Whisper.

SELENE
You need to eat something.

Selene sees Shadow Mara -- drops the plate of food.

Whisper jumps out of Mara’s arms, runs out.

Shadow Mara whips around with a serpentine HISS, eyes hollow wells of ink.

She seizes Selene by the throat, drags her out.

SELENE (CONT’D)
(screams)
Mara!

Mara runs out to the

HALLWAY

Mara listens to an eerie silence.

MARA
Mom?

She tiptoes down the

STAIRS

Mara stares at the bottom with each step.

MARA (CONT’D)
Where are you?

She arrives at the bottom of the stairs.

Mara peeks around a corner, hears Whisper’s growls.

KITCHEN

Mara creeps in.

Whisper growls at the basement door. Mara runs her hand over Whisper's back.

MARA
Shhhh.

She opens the basement door, peers down the dark staircase.

MARA (CONT'D)
Mom?

She flips on the basement light switch.

BASEMENT STAIRS

Mara climbs down the basement staircase to the

BASEMENT

Mara notices dark ivy vines has creep through a basement window along the floor.

She sees Selene upright against the wall, dark ivy vines twist around Selene's limbs.

The vines stretch over Selene's mouth in a suffocating grip.

MARA
Mom?!

Selene's eyes flutter open.

Her body goes limp.

MARA (CONT'D)
Mom. No. No. Stop.

Mara claws and pulls at the thick vines.

She picks up a rusted saw against a wall.

A vine circles around Mara's legs, crawls up her torso, pulls her into the thrombus of vines.

She saws the blade over the vine.

SNAP. The vine splits -- a haunted scream emanates from it.

Dark sap oozes out of the severed vine.

The vines around Selene's chest loosen.

Shadow Mara floats in front of Mara, slides out of the sweatshirt. The sweatshirt falls to the floor.

Shadow Mara morphs into black vapors.

It swirls and forms into shoulders.

Limbs.

A face.

It morphs into a Demon version of Mara.

DEMON MARA eye's snap open -- glow a cold unnatural white.

DEMON MARA
(a low female voice)
My love is not kind, but it is forever.

Mara takes in Demon Mara -- a twisted version of herself.

Demon Mara's smile stretches over her mouth.

Mara watches Demon Mara slip on Mara's father's sweatshirt.

Demon Mara kisses Mara on the cheek.

DEMON MARA (CONT'D)
I know what you want.

Demon Mara hastens to the stairs.

DEMON MARA (CONT'D)
I'll make everything right for us.

She climbs up the stairs.

More dark sap oozes from the severed vine -- a large puddle of sap forms. The vine writhes.

Selene hangs on the vines.

MARA
Mom?

FOOTSTEPS PATTER down the basement stairs.

Whisper trots to Mara.

MARA (CONT'D)
Now you come?

The vines SIZZLE, curl into blackened husks. They shrivel, collapse into smoke and dust.

Mara pulls the shriveled vines off her own body. She hurries to Selene.

MARA (CONT'D)
Mom, are you okay? ... Mom!

She pulls the vines from Selene's mouth and torso.

Selene collapses to the floor, unconscious.

MARA (CONT'D)
Mom ...

She lowers her head on Selene's chest.

MARA (CONT'D)
Please, Mom.

Selene groans.

SELENE
Mara?

MARA
Can you get up?

Selene pushes herself upright, sinks back down.

Mara puts Selene's arm around her shoulder, helps Selene to her feet.

INT. MARA'S HOME - SELENE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Selene lies in bed weak, and pale.

Mara puts a cup of tea down on Selene's night table.

SELENE
(barely audible)
Mara ... what's going on?

MARA
I can't explain now. You have to rest.

Mara steps out. Selene closes her eyes.

INT. MARA'S HOME - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Mara holds the raven feather, opens the spell book, Whisper curls by her side.

MARA
There must be something here.

She searches the pages.

MARA (CONT'D)
What is this? “When the Demon appears, nothing can be done.”

Mara throws the book across the room.

MARA (CONT'D)
Ahhhhh!

The raven feather floats to the floor.

Mara glares at the book. It bursts into flames.

Whisper startles, jumps onto the window ledge.

Mara runs to the book, stomps on the flames.

The flames grow bigger.

Mara pulls her blanket off the bed, smothers the fire.

Smoke curls toward the ceiling.

Mara reaches down, brushes ash from the book’s cover.

A strange symbol glows beneath the soot:

A spiral of thorns surrounds a single eye.

MARA (CONT'D)
That wasn’t there before.

She shows it to Whisper. Whisper’s tail twitches.

The raven feather lifts off the floor, hovers in mid-air. It spins -- draws a black line on the wooden floor.

Whisper stalks the feather, ready to pounce.

The feather draws a magic symbol.

The books’s charred pages turn themselves, faster and faster. They stop at a centerfold page, untouched by flame.

Mara stares at the page.

ON PAGE

A hand-drawn illustration of two identical figures, one cloaked in light, the other in shadow.

BACK TO SCENE

Mara reads the words under the illustration.

MARA
“When the Demon appears, nothing can be done ... alone.” But I am alone.

Whisper lets out a low growl, her ears flatten.

A cold wind slips through the shut window. Mara shivers.

MARA (CONT’D)
What’s it going to do?

MRS. LAKELY (V.O.)
The grief you carry feeds a shadow within ...

Mara puts the book and the raven feather on her desk.

MARA
I have to stop it.

Mara strides to her door. She turns the doorknob, pulls at the door.

MARA (CONT’D)
What?

She wiggles the doorknob.

A deep, guttural cry leaks from the keyhole.

A violent burst of shadow erupts outward from the door. It throws Mara onto the floor.

She hits her head, passes out.

INT. ANIMAL POUND - NIGHT

Demon Mara, still in Mara’s father’s sweatshirt, glides down an aisle.

Dogs and cats bark and yowl, pace in cages on both sides.

Demon Mara lifts her hands.

CLANG-CLANG-CLANG-CLANG. Cage doors fling open. Dogs and cats jump out of the cages.

Demon Mara opens the back door.

The dogs and cats run out.

INT. MARA'S HOME - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Mara lies sprawled on the floor.

Whisper nudges her.

Mara opens her eyes. She pulls herself up, holds her head -- grimaces. Her hand brushes the spell book.

She looks at the spiral of thorns and eye burned into the spell book’s cover.

The spell book’s burned pages flip open to the map of “The Shadow Realm.”

Mrs. Lakely’s animated face appears on a page.

MRS. LAKELY (V.O.)
You’ve given shape to it. Now it wants your life.

MARA
What do I do?

MRS. LAKELY (V.O.)
You must face it in The Shadow Realm.

MARA
What’s that?

MRS. LAKELY (V.O.)
Listen carefully.

Mara puts the book in her lap, listens.

EXT. PRINCIPAL DANE’S HOME - NIGHT

Principal Dane steps out of the front door, hustles to the driveway, climbs into his car.

INT. PRINCIPAL DANE'S CAR - NIGHT

Principal Dane glances in the review mirror.

THROUGH REARVIEW MIRROR

Demon Mara stares at Principal Dane, expressionless, cold white eyes locked onto his eyes.

BACK TO SCENE

He jumps.

PRINCIPAL DANE
Jesus Christ!

He whips around to an empty back seat, rubs his eyes.

PRINCIPAL DANE (CONT’D)
Not enough sleep.

He turns the ignition key.

THROUGH REARVIEW MIRROR

A flicker of Demon Mara’s reflection.

BACK TO SCENE

A wind blows fallen leaves past the driver’s window.

Principal Dane shifts the gear into reverse.

EXT. PRINCIPAL DANE'S CAR

The car backs out of the driveway.

Demon Mara flashes in the car’s exhaust fumes.

INT. PRINCIPAL DANE’S CAR

Principal Dane drives down the street.

Demon Mara emerges out of a fog in front of him.

Principal Dane swerves the car around her, SLAMS on the breaks -- tires SCREECH.

The car stops, he jumps out -- sees only fog.

EXT. SUBURBAN NEIGHBORHOOD - NIGHT

Streetlights flicker. Leaves RUSTLE.

Jenny steps out of her house, flanked by Lor and Kelly. She adjusts a sparkly jacket over her dress.

JENNY
Let’s go. If my mom comes out here with a camera again, I’ll die.

LOR
She already posted you on Facebook in curlers.

KELLY
You looked like a wet hamster.

The Girls laugh, strut down the street.

Demon Mara steps out of the shadows.

LOR
Look.

Lor gestures behind them.

KELLY
She’s following us.

LOR
I can’t believe she’s wearing that ratty sweatshirt to the dance.

KELLY
Does she ever even take it off?

JENNY
Ignore her. She just wants attention. Like always.

Jenny picks up the pace.

Kelly and Lor look back at Demon Mara.

Demon Mara waves.

EXT. NORTHWOOD MIDDLE SCHOOL - GYMNASIUM - NIGHT

A banner reads: “Northwood Fall Dance, Starry Night.”

Middle School students file into the building.

Music THUMPS.

INT. NORTHWOOD MIDDLE SCHOOL - GYMNASIUM - DJ BOOTH

Travis and Allan move sliders on a sound system console.

DANCE FLOOR

Students bounce in.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Jenny, Lor, and Kelly strut through the

SCHOOL PARKING LOT

Principal Dane’s car pulls into a parking space.

Jenny, Lor, and Kelly head toward the gymnasium door.

Principal Dane climbs out of the car. The sound of low growls near Principal Dane.

Dogs surround his car. They growl and show their teeth.

Principal Dane jumps back into the car, swings the door shut.

The dogs bark and jump at the car windows.

INT. CAR

Principal Dane looks out the window.

THROUGH WINDOW

Dogs chase after students near the gymnasium.

EXT. NORTHWOOD MIDDLE SCHOOL - GYMNASIUM

Students scream, rush into the gymnasium.

Jenny, Lor, and Kelly run toward the gymnasium door.

KELLY
Hurry, Jenny!

A dog latches on to the bottom of Jenny's jacket.

JENNY
Ahhhhhh!

She kicks at the dog.

DEMON MARA (O.S.)
No.

The dog lets go of Jenny's jacket.

She sprints into the gymnasium.

The door SLAMS shut.

Dogs join Demon Mara. They bark and snarl at the building.

DEMON MARA (CONT'D)
I have so many friends, now.

Students peer through windows at Demon Mara and the dogs.

PARKING LOT

Dogs snarl and bark at Principal Dane's car. A dog jumps onto the hood, growls at Principal Dane.

INT. CAR

Principal Dane dials his cellphone.

The sound of dog barks, growls, and snarls stop. The dog on the hood jumps off the car.

Demon Mara hovers by the front of the car. The dogs surround her, obedient.

PRINCIPAL DANE
(into phone)
Yes. This is Principal Dane from Northwood Middle School. We have an emergency here.

CLICK. The car door unlocks. The door opens.

Principal Dane pulls the door shut. The phone slips out of his hand.

CLICK. The passenger door opens.

He lets go of the driver's side door, reaches for the passenger side door, misses.

A dog jumps inside, snarls -- snaps.

PRINCIPAL DANE (CONT'D)
Jesus.

Demon Mara glides to the passenger side door.

DEMON MARA
(to the dog)
No!

The dog jumps out of the car.

DEMON MARA (CONT'D)
The Pound was going to kill them but now they're here with me. Safe.

Principal Dane peers out his window.

THROUGH WINDOW

The dogs relax on the ground.

BACK TO SCENE

Principal Dane looks at Demon Mara.

PRINCIPAL DANE
Mara?

DEMON MARA
No. Shouldn't you see how the children are doing?

Principal Dane reaches for his phone, opens his door.

EXT. PRINCIPAL DANE'S CAR

Principal Dane climbs out. The dogs snarl at him.

DEMON MARA
This isn’t over.

Principal Dane hurries to the gymnasium.

INT. NORTHWOOD MIDDLE SCHOOL - GYMNASIUM

Kids press against the windows, stare out in horror.

The sound of THUDS on the gymnasium metal door.

A chaperone opens the door. Principal Dane runs in. The door shuts behind him.

Principal Dane scans the students.

PRINCIPAL DANE
Is everyone okay?

Flash. The lights blast bright white.

BOOM! The back wall vibrates.

A spotlight slashes the dark.

Students scream.

Speakers CRACKLE.

Demon Mara hovers over the DJ booth in a black jump suit with silver and pink sequins.

Travis and Allan float above her, unable to move.

DEMON MARA
Let’s dance.

Demon Mara drops the beat -- haunted remix of a pop song BLASTS -- warped -- twisted.

THUMP-THUMP-THUMP.

Every student jerks up, yanked tight -- arms snap into dance positions, marionette puppet-like.

INT. MARA'S HOME - BEDROOM - NIGHT

The black candle’s flame flickers -- casts distorted shadows across the room.

MRS. LAKELY (V.O.)
To enter The Shadow Realm, you must offer a truth. One you've hidden, even from yourself.

The Shadow Realm map glows on the spell book's page.

INT. NORTHWOOD MIDDLE SCHOOL - GYMNASIUM - NIGHT

Principal Dane's knees buckle, arms fly up.

He dances, rigid, mechanical.

Students dance controlled by invisible strings.

Demon Mara twists the knobs and sliders on the sound board.

STUDENTS
Help! I can't stop!

LOR
I can't control my legs!

KELLY
I don't want to dance. I don't want to dance!

The Students jerk faster.

INT. MARA'S HOME - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Mara focuses on Mrs. Lakely's face in the spell book.

MRS. LAKELY (V.O.)
Speak your truth aloud. The Realm will hear. Then draw the magic symbol with your blood.

Mara flinches.

MARA
My blood?

MRS. LAKELY (V.O.)
Yes.

Mara scans the room. She searches a her desk drawer.

INT. NORTHWOOD MIDDLE SCHOOL - GYMNASIUM - NIGHT

The music ramps up. Its bass line shakes the floor.

Demon Mara smiles, eyes dead black.

DEMON MARA
I stitched my wounds with the threads of your lies.

Demon Mara lifts her hands. Students' limbs rise.

DEMON MARA (CONT'D)
I call this dance, My Affectionate Revenge.

Principal Dane falls to his knees, his body convulses.

INT. MARA'S HOME - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Mara trembles. She presses her palm to her chest.

MARA
I don't know what truth to say.

MRS. LAKELY (V.O.)
Yes, you do.

MARA
I pretend I'm brave, but I'm not.

MRS. LAKELY (V.O.)
More ...

MARA
I hate that my father died.

MRS. LAKELY (V.O.)
Or do you hate your father for dying?

MARA
No. I don't hate my father.

MRS. LAKELY (V.O.)
Are you sure?

Whisper climbs into Mara's lap.

INT. NORTHWOOD MIDDLE SCHOOL - GYMNASIUM - NIGHT

Jenny twirls in place.

JENNY
Somebody help us.

Demon Mara floats away from the DJ booth, manipulates Jenny's arms, puppet master-like.

Students dance harder. Faster.

DEMON MARA
Dance!

CRACK! CRASH! A set of bleachers collapses. Students scream.

INT. MARA'S HOME - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Mara holds a pin, pricks her finger, grimaces.

She draws a jagged spiral symbol from the spell book on the wood floor.

Whisper lets out a low growl.

The spiral glows.

MRS. LAKELY (V.O.)
You have until the candle burns out. After that, there's no way back.

The candle flame sputters.

The raven feather rises, its tip glows.

MRS. LAKELY (V.O.)
Follow the map. When it brings you to the proper place. Speak the spell.

Mara takes the raven feather.

INT. NORTHWOOD MIDDLE SCHOOL - GYMNASIUM - NIGHT

Demon Mara spins the turntable backwards.

Students spin backwards. They rise off the floor towards the ceiling -- screams.

EXT. THE SHADOW REALM - STREET - NIGHT

Mara clutches the wand-like raven feather.

A steady luminescent light blooms on the tip of the raven feather. It lights her way.

She waves it across her sightline. A violet line flickers on the pavement -- vanishes.

She repeats the motion. The line reappears. She follows the path. Whisper trots behind her.

EXT. THE SHADOW REALM - WOODS - NIGHT

Trees swell and recede with Mara's breathing. She follows the violet line to the gnarled oak tree.

The spiral of thorns with the eye embedded in the oak tree's base throbs with violet fire.

MARA
This is it, Whisper.

She lowers herself, her head at the tree's muscular roots.

QUICK FLASH

The black candle's flame.

BACK TO SCENE

Mara crisscrosses her arms over her chest.

MARA
Shadow to bone, breath to flame.
Name of mine, now not the same.
Rip the veil, uncoil, times three.
What festers deep, now answer me.

The raven feather stiffens, disintegrates into smoke.

WHOOSH! A wind tears through the trees.

Whisper growls, backs away.

The spiral of thorns rotates in the oak tree's base. The eye at its center opens.

A vertical slit glows crimson in the eye.

BOOM! A violet blast erupts from the oak's base.

Mara's body lifts off the ground. She levitates.

An obsidian platform glides from the shadows beneath Mara. It catches her descent. She lands vertically on the platform.

Whisper winds around her feet.

EXT. NORTHWOOD MIDDLE SCHOOL - GYMNASIUM - NIGHT

Demon Mara holds up her hands. The Students hover in the air.

Students scream.

Demon Mara stares off. A burst of light -- she's gone.

Students suspended stuck in mid-air.

EXT. THE SHADOW REALM - WOODS - NIGHT

THUMP-THUMP. A heartbeat echoes. Fog spills in.

Demon Mara emerges from the fog, her eyes hollow voids.

Veins of light flicker beneath her skin.

DEMON MARA
What do you want? I'm busy.

MARA
I don't care what you are. No more tricks. No more playtime.

DEMON MARA
Funny.

Demon Mara's eyes glow red.

DEMON MARA (CONT'D)
This isn't a game ... Come here, Whisper.

Whisper hisses, darts behind Mara.

MARA
She won't come to you. She knows what you are.

DEMON MARA
Oh no, little witch. I am you.

Demon Mara glides forward. With each step, the ground beneath her blackens. Each footstep glows.

Demon Mara waves her hand.

CLANG. The sound of chains.

The chains slither serpent-like behind Demon Mara.

The chains bind a male figure, his face obscured by darkness.

Mara stares --

FATHER, 35, in chains, wears his old hooded sweatshirt. His head hangs down, despondent.

MARA
Daddy?

DEMON MARA
He left us frightened and rejected.
Your hate is our power.

MARA
I don’t hate him.

DEMON MARA
Liar!

Rage ignites Demon Mara’s face.

Her Fingers spread -- CRACKLE with red lightning.

She hurls her hands downward.

QUICK FLASH

Mara, 5, hurls her Father's framed photo across her bedroom. CRASH. She sobs into her pillow.

Whisper, as a kitten, curls by her head.

BACK TO SCENE

Demon Mara forms a sharp blade of shadow in her hand. She offers it to Mara.

Whisper growls, her fur bristles.

DEMON MARA
Take it.

Mara watches Whisper trot to her father.

QUICK FLASH

Mara, 5, sleeps in her bed. Her Father steps into the room. He holds Whisper as a kitten in his arms.

He tip-toes to Mara, puts Whisper on Mara's chest.

Whisper SQUEAKS.

Mara's eyes open. Her mouth opens with joy.

Her Father smiles.

BACK TO SCENE

Demon Mara rushes Mara, forces the shadow blade in her hand.

Demon Mara grabs Mara's wrist -- drags Mara toward her chained father.

MARA
No.

DEMON MARA
End it and be free. Destroy the one who abandoned us.

MARA
No!

DEMON MARA
Then I will.

She shoves Mara aside, charges -- blade raised.

Whisper leaps at Demon Mara's face.

SLASH. The shadow blade slices Whisper's body mid-air.

Whisper drops to the ground, limp.

MARA
Whisper!

Mara dashes to Whisper, holds her. Whisper's body trembles.

MARA (CONT'D)
No. No. What did you do?

Demon Mara hovers above Mara, points to the Father.

DEMON MARA
It's all his fault.

Mara clenches her fists.

QUICK FLASH

The black candle flame flickers in a small wax pool.

BACK TO SCENE

Mara rises. Violet tendrils crawl up her arms.

MARA
Ahhhhhh!

Mara thrusts her hands forward. Violet fire erupts, BLASTS into Demon Mara.

Flames and dirt fly into the air.

Thick smoke obscures Demon Mara.

Demon Mara emerges from the smoke -- a feral grin grows on her face.

Demon Mara lunges. She squeezes Mara's throat, lifts her off the ground -- SLAMS Mara down near her Father.

Demon Mara holds out her hand.

The shadow blade flies into it.

Mara rolls over, scrambles to her feet.

MARA (CONT'D)
No!

Demon Mara rushes the Father, blade extended -- drives the blade down.

Mara throws herself in front of her Father -- the shadow blade plunges into Mara's heart.

Mara drops to her knees.

QUICK FLASH

The black candle's flame flickers out.

BACK TO SCENE

Mara looks at the shadow blade submerged in her chest.

MARA
Daddy?

Father looks up.

FATHER
I never left you, kitten.

DEMON MARA
Shut up, liar.

FATHER
I love you.

Mara clutches the shadow blade's handle.

MARA
Ahhhhh.

Mara pulls out the shadow blade from her chest.

MARA (CONT'D)
(to Demon Mara)
You're not real. You can't control me anymore.

Mara whips the shadow blade at Demon Mara -- it plunges into her chest.

Demon Mara freezes.

QUICK FLASH

The black candle flame flickers back to life.

BACK TO SCENE

Mara touches the shadow blade's handle.

MARA
I'm not a five-year-old little girl anymore.

The blade evaporates.

Cracks forms along Demon Mara's body -- light spills out.

MARA (CONT'D)
(to Demon Mara)
I don't hate you.

Mara embraces Demon Mara.

The light expands, fills Demon Mara's body. She collapses into Mara -- dissolves into Mara's chest.

The light touches the chains on the Father.

SIZZLE. The chains melt away.

Her Father picks up Whisper.

Whisper stirs -- MEOWS.

Her Father brings Whisper to Mara.

Mara takes Whisper. Whisper rubs his head on Mara's face.

MARA (CONT'D)
Whisper's okay?

FATHER
She's fine. You're fine.

MARA
I miss you so much.

FATHER
I'm here.

He touches her heart.

FATHER (CONT'D)
I'm always here.

Whisper MEOWS.

He kisses Mara's forehead -- dissolve's into light.

The black candle's flame dies out.

INT. NORTHWOOD MIDDLE SCHOOL - GYMNASIUM - NIGHT

The Students in mid-air slam to floor, writhe and groan in pain, dazed and disoriented.

Principal Dane staggers to his feet, sways.

Allan and Travis cling to the ceiling rafters.

ALLAN
Help!

TRAVIS
Up here!

Sirens wail in the distance.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - NIGHT

Mara clutches Whisper. Blue and red emergency lights flash across her face.

Police and fire crews arrive outside the gymnasium.

EXT. THE CURIOUS QUILL BOOKSTORE - NIGHT

Mara pushes open the door, steps inside. Whisper leaps from her arms.

INT. THE CURIOUS QUILL BOOKSTORE - REAR - NIGHT

Whisper bounds up the stairs.

Mara scans the space.

MARA
Mrs. Lakely ... Hello.

Mara follows Whisper to the stairs.

UPSTAIRS

Mara reaches the top of the stairs.

PARLOR

Whisper waits by a door. MEOW.

MARA
Hello? Mrs. Lakely?

The door opens on its own.

Mara and Whisper step in.

BEDROOM

Mrs. Lakely, lies in bed, dead.

An envelope rests on her chest.

Mara goes to her bedside.

MARA
Mrs. Lakely?

Mrs. Lakely’s body dissolves into mist.

Mara, slack-jawed, watches the mist evaporate.

She picks up the envelope.

She stares at “For Mara - My Bequeathal” in handwritten letters on the envelope.

Whisper pulls at the envelope with her paw, bites the corner.

EXT. MARA'S HOME - NIGHT

Mara strides down the path to her front door. She sees Slagter’s golden retriever on her front steps.

Whisper growls, climbs up the tree to Mara’s bedroom window.

Mara steps up to the dog. The dog hesitates, stays.

MARA
It’s okay.

Mara reaches out her hand. She pets the dog’s head.

MARA (CONT’D)
We have to find you a nice home.

The dog barks.

INT. MARA’S HOME - SELENE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

The door CREAKS open. Mara and Whisper step in. Whisper jumps onto Selene’s bed. Selene opens her eyes.

MARA
Hi, Mom.

SELENE
Sweetheart ...

MARA
How are you feeling?

SELENE
Tired.

MARA
I’m sorry.

Selene attempts a smile.

MARA (CONT'D)
Do you want to know what's been going on?

SELENE
Later.

Mara climbs into bed beside Selene.

Selene closes her eyes.

Whisper nestles between them.

MARA
What does bequeathal mean? ... Mom?

Mara looks at Selene asleep. She lays the envelope down, pets Whispers head. Whisper purrs. Mara sleeps.

EXT. THE CURIOUS QUILL BOOKSTORE AND ANIMAL SHELTER - DAY

SUPER: "Ten years later."

A sign above the door reads: "The Curious Quill Bookstore and Animal Shelter."

INT. THE CURIOUS QUILL BOOKSTORE AND ANIMAL SHELTER - DAY

Mara, 23, organizes herbs into smaller bundles.

Whisper, now a senior cat, naps on the counter.

Selene, 50, stocks books on a shelf.

The doorbell TINKLES.

SUMMER, 5, serious, earnest, holds a box with four kittens inside. She steps up to the counter with her Mother.

MARA
Hi. What's your name?

SUMMER
Summer.

MARA
What you got there, Summer?

SUMMER
Kittens.

Summer's MOTHER, 30, helps her put the box of four kittens on the counter. Mara peeks in the box.

MARA
Oh. Look how sweet.

MOTHER
She found them abandoned by a dumpster.

MARA
Oh my. They're very lucky then, aren't they?

SUMMER
Will you find homes for them?

MARA
Of course. Can't you keep one?

Mara makes eye contact with the Mother.

SUMMER
Yes.

MOTHER
There were five.

Mara picks up a kitten, shows Whisper.

MARA
What do you think, Whisper?

Whisper glances at the kitten, yawns, goes back to sleep.

Mara chuckles.

FADE OUT.

THE END