PRODIGAL

an original screenplay by

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FADE IN.

INT. EMERGENCY ROOM - DAY

A team of EMTs push a gurney through the wing. The patient--

ALEX PARKER, white, 30. Longish hair. Five o'clock shadow. Crudely beautiful, even with a breathing tube and face full of gore.

ZORA(V.O.)
Oscar Alexander Parker died on the fifteenth of February. The day after Valentine's Day. The day after he turned thirty.

His hand twitches.

He FLATLINES.

ZORA (CONT'D)
It was messy, tragic and a little poetic. Not unlike how he lived.

An EMT glances down at Alex, shouts something inaudible over his shoulder.

ZORA (CONT'D)
I can't start from the beginning. The early details escape me. But I can start from the beginning of the end: the return of the Prodigal Son.

His head lolls to the side.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Three months ago.

A dignified three-story home in East Falls, Pennsylvania.

DING DONG.

BRENDA BILLINGS lies asleep on the chaise. She's 52, white, gracefully aged everywhere but around her eyes.

Her foot twitches, barely taps the half-empty wine bottle on the floor.
INT. RICHARD'S STUDY - CONTINUOUS

DING DONG.

RICHARD BILLINGS slams his index cards down on his desk. He's black, 58. Reminiscent of a menswear mannequin in looks and demeanor.

DING DING DING DING--

RICHARD
Does nobody hear the door? Anybody?

He stands, crosses to the door of his study.

ZORA(O.S.)
I got it, Daddy!

ZORA BILLINGS, black, 24, zips by the study door. She's heavyset, sports a short-cropped afro and too many conflicting patterns.

He shakes his head, retakes his seat.

INT. FOYER - CONTINUOUS

DING DING DING--

ZORA
HOLD ON! Jesus Chri--

She opens the door.

Alex leans against the door frame, backpack slung over his shoulder. He clutches a tattered hardcover of Othello.

ZORA (CONT'D)
Alex.

ALEX
Zora. Where's Mascha?

Zora plays with the hem of her sleeve.

ZORA
She retired last year. Daddy figured we didn't need to replace her.

ALEX
Hmm. Fiscally conservative. So, who washes the windows, now? Or do you do that, too?

Alex slips past her.
ZORA
Can I help you with your bags, or..?

ALEX
Shouldn't I be helping YOU with your bags? Richard would spring an ulcer if I were anything less than gentlemanly to his sweet pearl of the world.

Zora shrugs.

ZORA
I don't have any bags. I live here.

Alex smirks.

ALEX
Joking. Besides, all I've got to my name is this one bag. And Willie Shakespeare, here, of course. Where is he by the way?

ZORA
Stratford-upon-Avon, if I remember correctly.

He blinks.

ZORA (CONT'D)
That was a joke.

ALEX
Hmm. Well, good to see you're getting better at those.

Zora frowns, clears her throat.

ZORA
Your mother's on the couch--

ALEX
Passed out.

She shifts her weight.

ZORA
Sleeping.

ALEX
And Cecilia?

ZORA
She's with the au pair.
Alex laughs.

ALEX
I can see we're not so fiscally conservative that Brenda actually has to be a mother.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS
Alex walks past his sleeping mother without a glance. Zora follows him to the kitchen.

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS
Alex slings his bag over the back of a chair.

ZORA
You, uh, you look really good.

Alex goes in the fridge, pulls out a beer.

ALEX
Not exactly the hot junkie mess you remember, huh?

He cracks into the beer.

Zora stares at him.

ZORA
Should you be--

ALEX
Relax. I was addicted to coke, not pale ale. You won't catch me sucking dick on the corner for a Yard's, okay?

ZORA
I mean, aren't you on medicine or--

Alex pulls a face.

ZORA (CONT'D)
I'm sorry. I didn't mean to--

ALEX
Here.

He crosses to her, sits the beer in front of her.

ALEX (CONT'D)
You could probably use this more than me.
ZORA
Oh, no, thank you. I don't really drink.

Alex sits across from her, smiles.

ALEX
Don't drink, don't smoke. What do you do?

Zora looks up at him.

He reaches across the table, grabs the beer, takes a sip.

ZORA
Well, I do grad school. Speaking of which, I've got some work to get out of the way before I help Brenda with the food.

She stands.

ZORA (CONT'D)
Excuse me.

Zora heads out of the kitchen.

ALEX
Hey! Hey, hey, Zora--

He jumps up, heads after her.

Zora turns to him.

Alex pulls her into an awkward hug.

ALEX (CONT'D)
It's good to see you.

She hesitates, taken aback.

ZORA
I-- You, too.

Zora returns the embrace.

ZORA (CONT'D)
Welcome home, Alex.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN - LATER

Zora chops parsley at the cutting board. Beside her--
NADIA, 24, washes vegetables in the sink. She's black, petite, well-put-together. Stunning in every way. Her engagement ring is just as stunning.

NADIA
He's never hugged you before?

ZORA
No. I mean, not that I can remember.

NADIA
Really? Damn. I knew your family had issues, but--

Zora throws a sprig of parsley at her.

NADIA (CONT'D)
I'm kidding! Kidding!

ZORA
Speaking of families, why aren't you with yours?

NADIA
Damn, girl. I thought we were family.

Zora dumps her chopped herbs in a bowl.

ZORA
You know exactly what I mean.

NADIA
Well, this is the first Thanksgiving where my family and Chris's family are doing the whole together thing.

Nadia shakes out another handful of parsley and sets it on the cutting board.

ZORA
And you're avoiding the hell out of it.

NADIA
Yes, ma'am.

ZORA
How else would I get you to submerge that small country on your left hand in veggie water?

NADIA
That's not the only reason why. Who else was gonna help you prep, Zarella? Not Miss Brenda.
ZORA
(chopping)
She's under a lot of stress with this campaign.

NADIA
Honey, please. Your father is the one running for office, not her. I guess it's for the best. Otherwise y'all might be eating a half-done turkey seasoned with just salt, pepper and white privilege.

Zora holds back a laugh.

ZORA
Stop it!

She swats Nadia with a dish towel.

Nadia sprinkles water on Zora.

Zora SQUEAKS.

CUT TO:

INT. ALEX'S ROOM - SAME

Alex sits on the bed, book in his lap. On the cover—
Two lines of coke. He snorts one with a rolled up receipt.

KNOCK KNOCK

ALEX
HOLD ON!

He licks up the second line, stashes his baggie under the pillow along with the receipt.

The door opens.

Brenda comes in, closes the door behind her.

BRENDA
I'm sorry if I disturbed you, sweetie. Were you resting?

ALEX
Reading.

BRENDA
Oh, that's nice.
ALEX
I didn't want to wake you when I was coming in.

He rubs his nose.

BRENDA
Honey, you could have woken me. I would have loved to see you when you got in.

ALEX
Well, you see me now.

Brenda steps forward, timid.

BRENDA
Can I have a hug?

Alex lifts his arms.

ALEX
Sure you can.

Brenda wraps him in a tight hug, kisses his forehead and cheek. He returns the embrace half-heartedly.

BRENDA
Oh, I missed you.

She strokes his hair, brushes her knuckles across his stubble.

BRENDA (CONT'D)
You look good. You look so healthy.

ALEX
Healthy. Isn't that what you say when someone's gotten chunky?

Brenda laughs, tears well up in her eyes.

BRENDA
No, baby, you look great.

ALEX
Thanks, Brenda.

She sits beside him.

BRENDA
You know, Alex, I was sort of hoping that maybe you'd call me "Mom." Since we're working on things.
ALEX
I don't know. Old habits die hard. I might have to go back to rehab for that one.

Her smile falls a little.

BRENDA
Don't worry about it, okay?

ALEX
Okay.

He lies back against the pillows.

CUT TO:

EXT. LAWN - DAY

Feature: Richard's grinning face on a lawn sign. "BILLINGS FOR GOVERNOR."

Multiple signs form a semi-circle on the manicured yard. In the center--

Alex lays out shirtless on a blanket. He reads Othello through dark sunglasses.

A shadow sprawls across Alex's face. He lifts his gaze to--

Richard. He frowns, disgusted.

RICHARD
Was the backyard not dramatic enough for you?

Alex lifts his shades.

ALEX
If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were ashamed of me, Councilman.

RICHARD
It's the end of November.

ALEX
Tell that to global climate change.

Alex rolls out of the shadow.

ALEX (CONT'D)
And Gore called this "inconvenient."

He stretches, flexes his abs.
Richard averts his eyes, crosses his arms.

RICHARD
Why don't you, uh, make yourself useful and go help Zora in the kitchen?

Alex sits up.

ALEX
But, Richard-- Aren't I already useful? Isn't that why I'm here? So the whole jolly Brady Bunch can follow our fearless leader along the campaign trail?

RICHARD
Alex, I've got a lot of work to do and I really can't spare any time for this. So, please, get up and help your sister in the kitchen.

Alex stands.

ALEX
Don't call Zora my sister. Because, you see, that would imply that you're my father and we both know how you feel about that.

They stare each other down, cold.

Alex strides off toward the house.

CUT TO:

INT. DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Zora, Richard, Brenda, Alex and CECILIA (6, biracial, a doll of a child) sit around the table.

Dress is semi-formal. They eat in almost complete silence.

THUD. THUD. THUD.

Zora gently nudges Cecilia.

ZORA
Hey! Cut that out, Lug Nut.

Cecilia stills.

Zora steals a pea off her plate, winks.

Brenda gathers mashed potatoes on her fork.
BRENDA
You know, Zora, honey-- I love that headpiece you have on. You look adorable.

Zora touches a hand to her Dutch wax headband.

ZORA
Oh-- thank you.

RICHARD
You do look lovely, baby.

He cuts into his turkey.

RICHARD (CONT'D)
Though, the hair is still going to take a little getting used to.

Zora stops chewing.

ZORA
I thought you'd be used to it by now, since this is the way it grows out of my head.

RICHARD
I know. It's just that you haven't had it that short since you were a baby. You always wore it straight. That's all.

ZORA
Daddy, Lupita Nyong'O and Viola Davis wear their hair like this.

Alex swirls his fork around his gravy streaks.

ALEX
Well, just because it's good enough for two of the most beautiful women in the world--

BRENDA
Alex.

RICHARD
It's a good thing neither of them have to find a job in the real world, isn't it? That's all I'm saying.

ZORA
Let's just-- Can we not?
RICHARD
I was just saying. Fine. I won't speak.

Zora picks at her food in silence.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN - LATER

Zora puts away leftovers.

Cecilia darts in, barefooted.

Zora sits down her cling wrap.

ZORA
Lug Nut!

She stoops down, scoops Cecilia up.

ZORA (CONT'D)
What are you doing up? You should be in bed.

CECILIA
I think your hair is beautiful, ZiZi.

Zora melts a little.

ZORA
And I think your everything is beautiful, CiCi.

She gives her butterfly kisses.

Cecilia giggles.

Alex stands in the doorway.

ALEX
I think your hair is beautiful, too. Do I get one of those?

Their eyes meet.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Cecilia wanted to see if she could graft another piece of pie out of you. And I AM the bad influence, after all.

Zora smiles down at Cecilia.
So, that's why you're being so nice to me, huh? You know how Daddy feels about you eating after a certain hour, especially sweets.

She sets her down with a kiss.

ZORA (CONT'D)
Go on up to bed. G'night.

Cecilia pouts, trudges away.

ALEX
Cold world.

ZORA
Tell it to your stepfather. He saw an episode of Maury with obese kids and now he's the sugar police. If he can save one of us, right?

She places a tray in the fridge.

ALEX
No offense-- None to you, anyway-- but you don't have to ride your own ass when Richard's not here to do it.

ZORA
Oh, stop it. I was joking.

ALEX
Were you?

ZORA
Look. I know you don't like my dad, but he's not the devil, okay? He comments because he cares.

ALEX
That's the same logic that abuse victims use.

ZORA
You know, neglect is a form of abuse. But I don't stick my nose in your relationship with Brenda.

Alex laughs, taken aback.

ZORA (CONT'D)
I'm sorry.
ALEX
No, you're not. Nor should you be.

He slips out of the doorway.

Zora leans against the counter, watches him go.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Zora pulls her mug out of the Keurig, adds a dash of creamer. She wastes a little on her robe.

ZORA
Crap.

Brenda sweeps in, fully dressed.

BRENDA
Good morning, sweetheart.

ZORA
Brenda. You're up.

BRENDA
Of course I am. Remember? It's Black Friday.

Zora reacts.

ZORA
Right. And we're doing that thing where we elbow people for merchandise.

BRENDA
If you don't want to go-- I mean, I thought it would be nice--

ZORA
No, no, I want to go. I do.

BRENDA
Well, great. It'll be great.

Zora forces a smile, takes a sip of her coffee.

CUT TO:

INT./EXT. BRENDA'S CAR - LATER

A pretty SUV. Newest model. Just a couple of small dents on the body.

They crawl in traffic.
Brenda looks over at Zora from the passenger's seat.

BRENDAA
I really appreciate you driving.
It's just my migraines--

ZORA
I know, Bren. It's fine, really.

Her hands tighten on the steering wheel.

ZORA (CONT'D)
I just thought you might want to
hang out with Alex today or something.

Brenda scoffs.

BRENDAA
But would Alex want to hang out with
me?

A beat.

BRENDAA (CONT'D)
You know, thirty years and I'm still
not quite sure where I went wrong.

ZORA
Brenda...

Brenda fiddles with her purse.

BRENDAA
Every time he calls me "Brenda" I
swear to God, I just want to scream
a little bit. When Cecilia learned
to say "Mommy" it was one of the
happiest moments of my life. Just to
be called that again.

Brenda opens her bag, digs for a tissue.

BRENDAA (CONT'D)
He was such a beautiful little boy,
Zora. You should have seen him. Face
full of freckles and these big,
sparkly eyes. I'm sure I've got a
picture back at the house.

She dabs at her eyes.

ZORA
Well, he's still beautiful.

Brenda blinks.
ZORA (CONT'D)
I mean, he's been through some stuff, obviously. And he's messed up over the years but he's still that little boy somewhere inside, right? He's your son. And whether you know it or not, whether he knows it or not, he loves you.

Brenda places her hand on Zora's shoulder.

Zora pats it.

CUT TO:

INT. MALL - LATER

Zora picks at a cheese-stuffed pretzel in the food court. To her left--

A STRAIGHT COUPLE, late teens, slides into line at the Sbarro. He looks like a Pacsun model. She is probably an Instagram queen. They kiss.

Zora rolls her eyes, swivels her chair in the opposite direction.

A LESBIAN COUPLE, mid-20's. They share the same seat, eat from each other's Chinese food plates.

Zora sighs, wraps up her pretzel, pushes it toward the center of the table.

Brenda plops her bags on the table.

Zora starts.

BRENDA
So, I got your father's present taken care of and picked up something for my mother. But I wanted to ask you, what's the name of that little show CiCi likes? With the horses?

ZORA
My Little Pony?

BRENDA
Duh! Of course!

She smacks herself on the head.

BRENDA (CONT'D)
Did you see anything cute with their faces on it?
Zora shakes her head.

BRENDA (CONT'D)
Well, I'm sure we'll find something.

Brenda looks up from her list.

BRENDA (CONT'D)
Where are your bags, sweetie?

ZORA
I did all my shopping online.

BRENDA
Really? If I'd have known, I wouldn't have bothered you about coming out with me. But I'm just glad we get to spend the time.

She kisses Zora on the forehead.

BRENDA (CONT'D)
Want to do Macy's?

Zora forces a smile, rises.

CUT TO:

EXT. BACKYARD - NIGHT

A spacious backyard. Mostly grass and trees, but some flowers and shrubs dot the area around the porch.

An old swingset stands several yards out from the house.

Nadia and Zora straddle the swings, facing each other.

Zora rests her forehead on the chain.

Nadia picks at her split ends.

NADIA
And then his mother straight up asks me if I'm a virgin. Like, what the fuck?

ZORA
Well, she's a minister, Nadia. It comes with the territory.

NADIA
So is my dad but he didn't ask Chris about his body count during half-time.
ZORA
But your dad is a cool minister.

NADIA
Just because he has praise mimes in his church doesn't mean he's cool. He's just somewhat sensitive to social norms. Unlike Mother Dawn.

A beat.

NADIA (CONT'D)
I can't believe I'm marrying into this family. You're so lucky that you're a long way off from this kind of shit.

Zora reacts.

NADIA (CONT'D)
Oh, come on. You know what I mean, Z. You're getting a Master's Degree. And knowing you, you'll probably get your Ph.D. Between that and publishing books you'll be so beyond all this. You're tuned out of the black, Christian, petite-bourgeoisie status quo.

ZORA
Are you saying you're marrying Christopher because of the status quo?

NADIA
No, I'm just saying my life looks a lot like my mother's. And my grandmother's.

Zora takes Nadia's hands in hers.

Nadia looks down at their hands.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN - SAME

Alex, in just his boxers, cuts himself a piece of pie, plops it on a napkin.

Richard enters, grabs a bottle of water from the fridge. He glances at Alex over his shoulder.
RICHARD
Would you mind putting on some clothes?

Alex licks his fingers.

ALEX
What is it about my body that makes you so uncomfortable, Richard?

RICHARD
My daughters live here. A young lady, a family friend, is visiting with Zora right now. Anybody is liable to drop by.

ALEX
It's just skin. Besides, we're all family, right?

Richard cracks open his water.

ALEX (CONT'D)
And if anyone else happens to see me, well, send me a fruit basket to say "thanks" for the spike in your popularity rating.

Alex strides past him.

Richard grabs his arm.

Alex jerks away from him.

The pie PLOPS to the floor.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Don't you touch me. Don't you FUCKING touch me again.

Alex storms off.

Richard sighs, stoops to pick up the mess.

ZORA
Daddy?

Richard looks up.

She stands in the doorway to the backyard.

ZORA (CONT'D)
Everything okay?
RICHARD
Peachy and keen, Princess. Peachy and keen.

Zora rushes to his side, gathers up the rest of the pie.

RICHARD (CONT'D)
Nadia went home?

She smiles over at him.

ZORA
Mmhmm. I could drill you on your platform?

Richard laughs.

RICHARD
You don't need to drill me on my own beliefs.

He rises, grabs a Lysol wipe, hands it to Zora.

ZORA
But I can drill you so that you articulate them in the best way.

RICHARD
Isn't this a holiday?

ZORA
We're just under a year from elections.

She wipes up the streaks of pie filling.

ZORA (CONT'D)
Abortion.

RICHARD
Every woman has a right to choose and that right should be protected on a federal level.

ZORA
Higher Education?

Zora tosses the wipe away.

RICHARD
We in invest in our community colleges, but insist that they freeze tuition.
ZORA
And gun control?

Richard folds his arm.

RICHARD
Well, you know I've always kept protection in this house. A push for anything more than a moderate reform would be a little hypocritical--

ZORA
Do you remember which party you're in?

Richard laughs.

ZORA (CONT'D)
Daddy, you're not Richard Billings, Protective Suburban Dad. Or even Richard Billings, City Councilman. The minute you announced, you became Richard Billings, Gubernatorial Candidate. You can't sit on the fence about anything anymore.

He pulls Zora in for a hug.

RICHARD
When did you get so smart?

ZORA
Sometime between you cutting the cord and the doctor smacking my butt.

They share a laugh, tighten the embrace.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Brenda lies out on the chaise, half-conscious.

Cecilia tugs on her hand, pouts.

CECILIA
Mommy. Mommy, you promised.

BRENDA
Baby, can't you get Layla to take you?

CECILIA
Layla's not here.
BRENDA

What?

CECILIA

She went home.

Brenda leans up on her elbow.

BRENDA

I'm sorry, but Mommy has a really, really bad headache. Why don't you ask your sister, okay? Go ask Zora.

Alex peeks his head in the doorway.

ALEX

What's she want?

Cecilia jumps up and down.

CECILIA

The park! The park! The park! The pa--

BRENDA

Cecilia, PLEASE.

She touches and hand to her temple.

BRENDA (CONT'D)

She wants me to take her to the park, but I'm just not feeling up to it.

Alex shrugs.

ALEX

I can take her to the park.

BRENDA

Really?

Cecilia hops toward Alex.

CECILIA

The park! The park! The park!

ALEX

Yeah, sure.

He scoops her up.

BRENDA

I don't know, maybe you should ask Zora to go with you.
ALEX
What, do you think I'm going to sell your baby for drug money?

BRENDA
Alex! Don't say that in front of her.

Alex holds Cecilia out, pretends to examine her.

ALEX
With all this hyperactivity, I think I could only fetch a couple grand for this one. The Jolie-Pitts are gonna love you.

Cecilia giggles.

BRENDA
Oscar Alexander--

ALEX
Are you really going to give me such a hard time about doing you a favor? Listen, if you want to be serenaded by the sounds of a screaming child--

He lowers Cecilia to the floor.

She WHINES.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Good luck with your, uh, migraine. I hear a greasy breakfast helps.

Brenda waves her hand.

BRENDA
Fine, then. Don't take Zora. I don't care.

Zora comes in from the kitchen with a mug of coffee.

ZORA
Don't take Zora where?

ALEX
Family outing.

CECILIA
The park! The park!
ZORA
I don't know-- I've got a lot of work to do. I have a project that's due right after break and--

Cecilia whispers in Alex's ear.

ZORA (CONT'D)
What?

ALEX
A certain someone seems to think you're a bit of a nerd and you should probably loosen up before a pocket protector grows out of your chest.

Cecilia giggles.

ZORA
She did not say that.

ALEX
Never said it was her.

Alex carries Cecilia off into the foyer.

Zora rolls her eyes, follows behind.

CUT TO:

EXT. PARK - DAY

Zora and Alex walk on either side of Cecilia. Each hold a hand.

Cecilia crunches every leaf they pass under her purple Uggs.

ZORA
(to Alex)
I thought you didn't want me to come.

ALEX
What I didn't want was a chaperone. I'd never let anything happen to the kid. What, am I gonna put crack in her applesauce? I'm an asshole not a monster.

Zora shoots him a look.

ALEX (CONT'D)
She's wearing actual earmuffs.
ZORA
Nobody thinks you're a monster. I'm just used to handling her. They say she's got ADHD. It can be hard.

ALEX
I had the same thing, supposedly. Anyone who moves too fast for Brenda and her migraines...

Cecilia sets eyes on the jungle gym. She breaks free, runs straight for it.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Thank God Cecilia has you.

ZORA
And she has you, too, now. Right?

ALEX
Trust me, she doesn't want me.

ZORA
Don't be ridiculous, she loves you. I've never seen her take to anyone so fast.

Alex shrugs, plops down on a bench.

ALEX
I gotta admit, it's kind of nice to have someone in the house who doesn't look at me like I carry all the plagues of Egypt.

Zora reacts.

ZORA
I don't look at you like that.

Alex meets her eyes.

ALEX
Only like I just escaped from Area 51.

ZORA
That's not true. At least, I don't mean to.

ALEX
You always looked at me that way. If it were conscious, you'd have noticed by now.
ZORA
You never talked to me, Alex. How was I supposed to look at you like anything other than a mystery? Our parents have been married for, what fifteen years? You've said more to me over this break than the entire time we've been family.

ALEX
You were a kid. The difference between ten and fifteen feels a lot bigger than the difference between twenty-four and twenty-nine. Now, we're both in that limbo where everyone is supposed to have their shit together but no one really does.

ZORA
I don't know, I'd say I'm pretty together.

Alex pulls a pack of Marlboros and a Zippo lighter from his pocket.

ALEX
I'm sure you would.

Zora eyes him.

ALEX (CONT'D)
I'm downwind.

He lights a cigarette.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Want one?

ZORA
I've got enough problems, thank you.

He raises his eyebrows.

ALEX
Do you really?

ZORA
I do, actually. Academia at the graduate level is incredibly stressful. I'm trying to decide whether to pursue my Ph.D. and where. Not mention supporting my dad through his campaign and my best friend through her wedding.
ALEX
I'm just saying, those sound like some pretty cushy problems to me.

ZORA
I'm a single black woman in America. Of all the adjectives to describe my life, "cushy" isn't exactly the first that comes to mind.

Alex takes a drag, amused.

ALEX
Touche.

ZORA
Indeed.

THUD.

Cecilia WAILS in the distance.

ZORA (CONT'D)
Damn it!

They take off running toward her.

EXT. PARK - LATER

Alex carries Cecilia on his shoulder.

A small cut mars her bottom lip, but she sleeps peacefully.

Zora walks beside them.

A JOGGER, 50's, stops in her tracks on the sidewalk. She smiles, warm, pops out one of her earbuds.

JOGGER
(softly)
Oh, my-- She's precious.

ALEX
That, she is. Thank you.

Zora looks between them.

JOGGER
Of course! Y'all enjoy your night!

She jogs off.

ZORA
(calls after her)
She's not ours!
Zora turns to Alex.

He shrugs.

ZORA (CONT'D)

You've got issues.

ALEX

Well, you're the one who let me knock you up. Darling.

Zora fights a smile.

ZORA

Nasty.

She speeds up.

Alex maintains his pace behind her.

CUT TO:

INT. ZORA'S ROOM - NIGHT

Organized chaos.

Clothes litter the floor, but in designated areas.

Papers and books tower dangerously on the desk beside Zora's open laptop.

Zora gazes at herself in the full length mirror. She's a vision in violet, draped in a floor-length, empire-waist gown.

Richard stands in the doorway. He smiles.

RICHARD

You look just like your mother. Beautiful.

Zora spins around, smooths the skirt of the gown.

RICHARD (CONT'D)

Is this what you'll be wearing to the fundraiser?

ZORA

This is what I'll be wearing to Nadia's wedding.

RICHARD

Well, why not get your money's worth out of it?
They share a laugh.

He pulls her into a hug, kisses her forehead.

RICHARD (CONT'D)
Any telling when Nadia will be the one in the bridesmaid dress?

ZORA
Daddy...

RICHARD
I know, I know. I am very proud of the work you're doing and have yet to do. Living up to your namesake and all that. But, I'm not getting any younger. I'm just wondering when I might hear the pitter-patter of little feet.

Zora sits on the bed.

ZORA
You mean, other than your six-year-old's?

Richard sits beside her.

RICHARD
Fatherhood is a beautiful thing but grandfatherhood is a whole new frontier.

ZORA
Maybe Alex will--

Richard gives her a look.

RICHARD
I don't wish that on any child. If he doesn't have a couple waiting to jump out of the woodwork already.

ZORA
He's not a bad person.

RICHARD
As much as I admire and even envy your ability to see the best in people--

ZORA
He really seems like he's trying. He's so good with Cecilia.
RICHARD
Truth be told, I'm not so sure I want him around Cecilia. Or you, for that matter.

ZORA
Then, why is he here? Is it about the campaign?

Richard narrows his eyes.

RICHARD
Has he been telling you that?

ZORA
No, I just--

RICHARD
Zora, Alex is here because I love Brenda and Brenda loves Alex. That is it. There's nothing else to it.

A beat.

ZORA
When did it get like this? You guys used to be okay. Didn't you? What happened?

RICHARD
I want you to promise me you'll try to keep your distance, all right?

Zora scoffs.

ZORA
Dad, this is crazy. We live in the same house.

Richard holds Zora's face in his hands.

RICHARD
Listen to me. The boy is all charm and good looks and he knows it. He's a manipulator. Don't get sucked in. You have your whole life ahead of you and if you let him, he WILL interfere just to entertain himself. Or to piss me off.

ZORA
Daddy...

Zora takes Richard's hands, pulls them from her face, slow. She clasps them tight.
ZORA (CONT'D)
Nothing's interfered yet, has it?
Has it?

Richard smiles.
Zora kisses him on the cheek.

CUT TO:

INT. MAYOR'S MANSION - NIGHT
LIVE MUSIC fills the air, courtesy of a STRING QUARTET.
Zora nurses a glass of water, just a couple of feet from--
Richard and Brenda. They schmooze with MAYOR TOWNSEND (50's)
and his wife LESLIE (early 40's).

TOWNSEND
You know, Colby is at Penn now. He just started his first year.

RICHARD
I bet he's doing just fine, but if he ever needs anything, I'm sure
Zora would be happy to offer him some advice.

Zora looks up from her glass, smiles.

ZORA
Of course. Absolutely.

TOWNSEND
Richard, Brenda, you must be incredibly proud, living under the
same roof with a future Pulitzer Prize winner.

ZORA
That's incredibly kind of you, Mayor Townsend-- Let's hope!

Leslie places her hand on Zora's shoulder.

LESLIE
Just look at you-- Already dressed to receive it. You look fabulous!

ZORA
Oh, thank you--
Leslie runs her hand over Zora's hair.

**LESLIE**
This ethnic look is so chic, I love it.

Zora gapes.

**ZORA**
Please excuse me.

She sidles out.

Richard frowns.

Brenda takes Leslie's arm.

**BRENDA**
You know, that Faberge on the mantelpiece is marvelous. Where did you find such a beautiful...

Across the room--

Alex leans against the wall in close conversation with a handsome male **INTERN** (mid-20's). They flirt.

**INTERN**
My boss would kill me if I dipped out early, but...

**ALEX**
But?

**INTERN**
But if she saw you, I'm sure she'd understand.

Alex laughs, runs a hand through his hair.

**ALEX**
Should I do a quick walk-by, then?

Zora darts past them, toward the kitchen.

Alex catches a glimpse of her from the corner of his eye, does a double-take.

**ALEX (CONT'D)**
You hold that thought, okay? I'll be right back.

He follows after her.
EXT. GARDEN - CONTINUOUS
Zora rushes down the back stairs.
Alex stands in the doorway.

    ALEX
    Whoa! Hey, Cinderella--

Zora stops, spins around. Her face is wet with tears.

CUT TO:

INT. LIMO - MOMENTS LATER
Zora and Alex sit next to each other.
He puffs on a Marlboro.
She wipes her face with a crumbling tissue.

    ZORA
    I hate these people.

    ALEX
    That's the most honest thing I've heard all night. Why do you do it to yourself?

    ZORA
    Do what?

    ALEX
    Show up to this shit.

    ZORA
    Why did you?

    ALEX
    Fuckin' free seafood, man.

Zora laughs, a couple more tears fall.
Alex pulls his satin handkerchief from his suit jacket, dabs lightly at her face.
Zora looks at him.

    ALEX (CONT'D)
    You want to get out of here?

    ZORA
    More than anything. But I can't go home, now. Dad would kill me.
Alex scoffs.

ALEX
Home? Who the hell said anything about "home?" It's only after ten and we look too damn good.

Zora stares at him, questioning.

He grins.

CUT TO:

EXT. I-95. - LATER
A road sign: "WELCOME TO NEW YORK. The Empire State."

CUT TO:

INT. DANCE CLUB - LATER
A packed club in Manhattan.

EDM BLARES on the speakers. All other sound is null.

Zora and Alex tear up the dance floor, side by side. Their sweat glistens under the black light.

She holds a tall, near-empty glass in her hand.

A PETITE CLUB GIRL grinds with Alex.

Zora dances with a RAVER, dotted with glow-in-the-dark paint.

The Club Girl pulls a baggy of powdered MDMA out of her pocket. She sprinkles it on her tongue, pulls Alex in for a sloppy kiss.

Zora grabs Alex's face, turns him toward her.

They kiss.

CUT TO:

INT. ZORA'S ROOM - DAY
Zora lies sprawled on her bed, a hot mess, still dressed in last night's formal wear.

Richard stands in the doorway.

RICHARD
We called the police.

She stirs, moans, half-asleep.
ZORA
Hmm?

RICHARD
When we came home and neither of you were here, and you didn't return our calls, we called the police. They were here. The cops were here.

Zora sits up.

ZORA
What? Daddy, why? Why'd you do that?

RICHARD
Because I never would have thought you would pull something like this. And when the police suggested that maybe you two were out somewhere else, I said, "No. I know my daughter. She doesn't do that." Even when I remembered we had that silly Find Friends app and I saw that you were in New York-- I just knew something awful had happened because you answered none of my calls, none of my texts, and that just wasn't you. You don't cross state lines on a whim without telling anybody.

He rubs his temples.

ZORA
Dad, we were just--

RICHARD
JUST WHAT?!! Just what were you doing that was more important than the most critical fundraising event of my career? What were you doing that I found him in here this morning, passed out with you, face smeared with your lipstick? Tell me, what were you JUST doing?

ZORA
Nothing happened.

RICHARD
And how would you know that? You were out cold.

ZORA
I'm not doing this, Dad, I'm going back to bed.
He SLAMS his hand against her dresser.

RICHARD
You ARE doing this! WE are doing this. Right now! You live under my roof, eat my food and go to school on my dollar-- We'll do what I say we do, whenever I say.

Zora clenches her jaw.

ZORA
You let that woman say that to me and pet me like an animal in a zoo!

RICHARD
Don't pin this on me. You're probably still drunk, or high, or whatever else--

ZORA
No, Daddy, we're DOING this, remember? I looked so quaint and "ethnic" last night, didn't I?

RICHARD
She meant it as a compliment and you know that.

She stands.

ZORA
In what world is that a compliment? Are you really so desperate to win this race that you'd sell my dignity--

RICHARD
Look at you-- WHAT DIGNITY?!

A beat.

RICHARD (CONT'D)
I warned you about this. About everything. About Alex. About walking around making a-- a statement or an Afrocentric spectacle of yourself--

ZORA
What?!

RICHARD
And I was the bad guy for it, and look how you got treated. Like a spectacle.
Zora comes toward him, tugs at her hair.

ZORA
A SPECTACLE?! THIS IS ME, DAD! THIS IS MY HAIR! This is how it grows out of my head! Or did you forget that you made the mistake of marrying a black woman the first time?

RICHARD
You stop that--

ZORA
Good thing there's that "til death do us part" clause, huh? At least you got it right the second ti--

He slaps her.

Zora holds her face, frozen in shock.

RICHARD
He turned you against me. You have him to thank for that.

Richard walks away.

CUT TO:

INT. BRIDAL SHOP - DAY

Nadia stands on a stool, eyes trained on her reflection in the tri-fold mirror.

She's doll-like in her white gown.

Zora watches her.

Nadia sucks in her abdomen.

NADIA
I'm gonna need to lose a couple pounds before the wedding.

ZORA
Yeah, I mean one-hundred-and-sixteen pounds-- That's just venturing into whale territory.

Nadia spins around, steps off her stool.

NADIA
What is the matter with you? Not everything everyone says is a personal critique on you, Zora.
ZORA
Just a general critique that applies to me.

NADIA
Zora.

She steps closer.

Zora rises.

ZORA
I need to go, I have some work to finish.

NADIA
Do you expect me to believe that?

ZORA
That I'm incredibly busy? Yes, by now, I do. I'll call you.

Zora hugs her, kisses her on the cheek.

ZORA (CONT'D)
You look beautiful.

Nadia watches her leave.

CUT TO:

EXT. BACKYARD - NIGHT

Zora sits on the swing, types furiously on her laptop.

She stops, takes a look at what she just wrote, deletes the whole paragraph.

Alex comes up beside her, straddles the other swing.

Zora looks over at him.

He raises his eyebrows at her.

ALEX
Don't mind me. Keep calm and carry on.

ZORA
Plan on it.

She resumes typing.

ALEX
I'm sorry if I got you in trouble.
Zora scoffs.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Seriously, I am.

ZORA
I'm twenty-four years old, I shouldn't be "in trouble." Especially not for hanging out with my...

ALEX
Your...?

ZORA
You.

A beat.

ZORA (CONT'D)
He told me to stay away from you.

ALEX
I'm sure he did. But, like a moth to a flame--

ZORA
Hush.

ALEX
You did kiss me, after all.

ZORA
Did, I really?

ALEX
Yes, you did. Really. Which is why you haven't spoken to me in something like three days.

ZORA
Or I've been working.

Alex nods to the computer.

ALEX
On that same blank page. For three days.

ZORA
Nosy.

ALEX
The proper term is "Perceptive American."
ZORA
Really.

She closes her laptop.

ZORA (CONT'D)
What else do you perceive about me?

ALEX
Where do I begin? Well, first of all--

He rocks on the swing.

ALEX (CONT'D)
You're a lot cooler than you seem.

ZORA
Whoa, whoa, whoa. "Than I seem?" Do I not seem cool?

ALEX
Zora. I thought ours was a relationship built on honesty and trust.

ZORA
It is. And you're not as much of a James Dean wannabe-- with your sunglasses and your white boy problems--

Alex laughs.

ALEX
Ouch! You've been hanging onto that one for a long time.

He stands.

ZORA
C'mon, I was kidding. You're not leaving, are you?

ALEX
Nope. We are.

He extends his hand to her.

She hesitates a moment, then takes it.

ZORA
Lead the way, James.

He pulls her up.
ALEX
YOU lead the way. We're taking your car, Eartha.

He sticks out his tongue.

CUT TO:

EXT. CLEARING - LATER
A clearing in Fairmount park. A nice picnic spot.
Zora and Alex lay out on a blanket.
Alex sits up just long enough to take a long hit from his bowl. He passes it to Zora.
She takes a healthy hit, lets it out slow.

ALEX
You most certainly are not a virgin.

Zora laughs.

ZORA
I might have tried it once. Or twice. In undergrad.

He gives her a look.

ALEX
Now, what kind of ruffians were you hanging out with in college?

ZORA
Just one ruffian, really. Preacher's daughter.

ALEX
Naturally.

ZORA
Nadia.

ALEX
The sexy one?

Zora hits him.

ALEX (CONT'D)
What? Is she not a very attractive woman?
ZORA
Of course she is. But all our lives, she's been The Sexy One.
ALEX
That doesn't mean you're not sexy.

Zora locks eyes with him.

ZORA
That's not what I meant.

She sits up.

ZORA (CONT'D)
Everyone assumes I'm jealous or I resent her, that's not it. She's not just The Sexy One. And I'm not just The Fat One. We're both more than that. Everyone can believe I'm smart, because, what else would I have going for me? I gotta compensate somehow, right? But people take a look at those long legs and that perfect skin and she's not extended the benefit of the doubt. Why would she need to use her brain? She's surrounded by men to do that for her.

Alex leans up on his elbows.

ALEX
You want to know what I think?

ZORA
You're going to tell me anyway.

ALEX
It sounds a lot less like you resent her, and lot more like you want her.

Zora stares him down.

ZORA
What?

ALEX
You never thought about it?

ZORA
Thought about what? Nadia?

ALEX
Sex. With Nadia.
Zora shifts, uncomfortable.

    ZORA
    I'm not gay.

    ALEX
    Me, neither. I'm bisexual. So are many other people in this world.

    ZORA
    Congratulations. I'm not.

    ALEX
    Pansexual?

    ZORA
    I'm not even sure I know what that is.

    ALEX
    Means that skillets make you moist.

She bursts into a giggle fit.

    ZORA
    It most definitely does not mean that.

A beat.

    ZORA (CONT'D)
    I have thought about it. Briefly. Everyone has.

He lays his head on her chest.

    ALEX
    Acceptance is the first step to recovery.

    ZORA
    Recovery? What am I addicted to?

    ALEX
    Pussy.

They erupt into giggles.

She swats him.

    ALEX (CONT'D)
    There are worse things, trust me.

Zora takes another hit.
Their smoke mingles against the night sky.

CUT TO:

INT. ZORA'S ROOM - NIGHT

The lights are out.

Zora sits cross-legged on her bed, illuminated by the glow of her laptop.

In the search bar: "LITEROTICA.COM."

Zora scrolls, transfixed.

She bites her lip, closes the laptop.

Moonlight streams through her window, casts the top drawer of her bedside table in an enticing glow.

She sets the laptop on the foot of the bed, glances back at the side table, goes for it.

INT. ZORA'S ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

A steady, muffled BUZZ.

Zora's panties rest on the floor.

She lies under the covers, eyes closed.

The BUZZING FADES.

A figure rises under her covers. The duvet falls back--Nadia straddles her, pulls her into a kiss.

Zora flips her over, deepens the kiss. When it breaks--Alex lies beneath her.

Zora hesitates.

He grabs her hips, guides her to ride him.

Zora tosses her head back.

Nadia's hand slides up her back.

Zora looks back down, sees her face once again. They flip over.

Alex stares into her eyes, rocks into her slow.

His hand runs through her hair.
Nadia's hand grips her thigh.

They're a tangle of limbs and lips. Writhing, pulsing. A rainbow of flesh.

Zora seizes, rises from the bed. Her world stops.

She exhales.

Zora melts onto the bed, alone.

The BUZZING resumes, obnoxious.

She pants where she lies, dazed and limp.

CUT TO:

INT. COFFEE SHOP - DAY

An artisinal coffee shop. Fair trade, French press.

Zora and Nadia sit across from each other at a small table.

Nadia stares at her.

Zora frowns down at the designs in her latte.

**NADIA**

I had no idea any of this was going on. Why didn't you tell me?

**ZORA**

You've got enough on your plate with the wedding.

**NADIA**

I can't believe he hit you. He had no right.

A beat.

**NADIA (CONT'D)**

Do you want to talk to my dad about it?

**ZORA**

No. I don't want to talk to anyone else about this. I shouldn't even be talking about it in public.

**NADIA**

Screw the campaign. You're a grown woman, he has no business going around slapping you. Does he put his hands on Brenda?
ZORA
No, of course not.

NADIA
Of course not. He'd never lay a hand on his precious snowbunny.

Zora sighs.

Nadia takes a sip of her coffee.

NADIA (CONT'D)
Don't hate me for what I'm about to say.

ZORA
Don't say it.

NADIA
His approach-- way out of line. But maybe he wasn't wrong about you staying away from your stepbrother.

ZORA
What?

NADIA
Hear me out. This guy has been in and out of jail and rehab and mental hospitals for, what, ten years? And your parents won't even tell you why. So, obviously, they know something about him that you don't. I mean, he's trouble, Zora.

Zora scoffs, shakes her head.

NADIA (CONT'D)
I'm just saying, baby girl. Ever since he came home, you haven't been acting like yourself.

ZORA
You mean, I haven't been acting like your sidekick.

NADIA
No, I mean, you're always on Defense. Look at you now. Smoke coming out your ears just because I'm speaking the ugly truth about Alex.

A beat.
NADIA (CONT'D)
If I didn't know any better, Zora, I'd think this was about more than familial loyalty.

Zora laughs.

ZORA
You two have a lot more in common than you'd think.

Nadia eyes her a long moment.

They drink their beverages in silence.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Zora sits on the couch with Cecilia in her lap. She plaits the last section of her hair.

CARToONS play in the background.

Cecilia giggles at the TV.

Alex lounges on the chaise, reads his copy of Othello.

Zora glances over at him.

ZORA
How many times have you read that thing? It looks older than you.

ALEX
I figured you of all people would understand the value of this book.

ZORA
I'm more of a Macbeth girl, myself.

CECILIA
Who's Macbeth?

ALEX
She's the girl who makes your Happy Meals.

Zora laughs.

ZORA

Cecilia hops up.
CECILIA
I want to play!

ZORA
CiCi!

Cecilia bounds off.

ALEX
Let her go, let her go.

Zora stands, stretches.

ZORA
No wonder she loves you so much, you let her do whatever she wants.

ALEX
Well, I inherited my mother's laissez-faire parenting style. As well as her eyes.

Zora moves behind the chaise, peeks over his shoulder.

ZORA
You doodle in the margins.

ALEX
Your inner bibliophile is ready to shit bricks, isn't she?

ZORA
No, I think it's cool.

She takes a closer look.

ZORA (CONT'D)
These are good. Actually, these are really good.

He hands her the book.

ALEX
Save my page.

She folds the corner to mark his spot, then flips through. Zora stops, smiles.

ZORA
This kind of looks like me.

ALEX
I'd hope so, that is you.
ZORA
On the page where Desdemona gets strangled?

He tugs the book from her.

ALEX
Chill. I don't plan on wearing your face as a mask. It's the last time we see her. And she reminds me of you.

ZORA
The victim?

ALEX
The daughter of an overbearing politician who does her own thing, no matter how hard he stamps his feet.

ZORA
And pays for it with her life.

ALEX
She wouldn't have really been alive otherwise.

He eyes her.

ALEX (CONT'D)
You should pose for me.

ZORA
What?

ALEX
Pose. So I can properly draw you and not something that "kind of" looks like you.

ZORA
Draw me like one of your French girls?

ALEX
Canadian, maybe.

They share a laugh.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Yeah?

Zora nods.
ZORA
Yeah. All right. When?

ALEX
What are you doing now?

ZORA
I'm changing my clothes and getting my picture drawn.

She runs upstairs.

His eyes follow.

INT. ALEX'S ROOM - LATER

The curtains are drawn. Sunlight washes in, illuminates--

Zora, regal. She reclines across the head of the bed, as still as possible.

Alex sits at the foot of the bed, sketch pad in his lap. He works with a nub of black chalk pastel. His draws his outlines with feverish strokes.

Zora wets her lips.

He slows around the curve of the mouth, takes extra care.

His forefinger blends out the shadows around her breasts, the line of her jaw.

The door opens.

Richard glares daggers at Alex, but addresses Zora.

RICHARD
Aren't you supposed to be watching Cecilia?

ZORA
I thought she went up to her room, is something wrong?

RICHARD
She got into Brenda's nail polish, it's all over her.

Zora hops off the bed.

ZORA
Crap.

She runs out.
ALEX
God forbid you look after your own child.

RICHARD
I'm a very busy man.

ALEX
Oh, I'm sure.

RICHARD
But one thing I do is look after my daughters.

Richard slides onto the bed, leans in close.

RICHARD (CONT'D)
If you touch Zora, all bets are off. Forget the campaign. Forget how much the people love a big, happy family or a redemption story. I will drag you back to that crack den in Brooklyn where they found you last time. Better yet, I'll call your parole officer and tell her about your little out-of-state escapade. My hands are clean of you.

ALEX
You couldn't clean your hands with Borax, old man.

RICHARD

ALEX
Don't you think it's up to Zora to decide whether she wants to be touched--WHO she wants to touch her, and where--How many times, on what surfaces--

RICHARD
Alex. I will kill you.

Alex eyes him, disbelieving, then shaken.

Richard rises coolly, walks out.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The Christmas tree stands by the staircase, trimmed with just the lights and a scattered few bulbs.
Zora helps Cecilia place a homemade popsicle stick ornament.

Brenda sifts through a large box of ornaments on the couch. She pulls out a pink garland, frowns.

BRENDA
You know, I vaguely remember there being some sort of theme or color scheme each year, but when you open these things up, you'd never know.

ZORA
We don't really need a theme, do we?

BRENDA
Oh, yes, we do. Especially now.

Richard emerges from his study.

RICHARD
I have a theme.

Zora goes stiff.

RICHARD (CONT'D)
"Beautiful, Heartfelt Family Decorates Tree the Way They Do Everything--Beautifully and From the Heart."

He crosses over the Brenda, kisses her.

BRENDA
I still think we should pick two complimentary colors and stick with them.

ZORA
CiCi, you want some cocoa? I'm gonna go make some.

Zora runs off into the kitchen.

Brenda frowns.

BRENDA
Hold on, honey, I'll help you.

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Zora plops a pot on the stove, fills it halfway with whole milk. A can of cocoa rests to her left.

Brenda grabs four mugs.
BRENDA
Did you get the cocoa out?

ZORA
Mhm.

She lifts the can for Brenda to see.

BRENDA
Okay.

A beat.

BRENDA (CONT'D)
You know, I know that nobody would really think it, but I do notice things.

Zora turns around.

ZORA
Like what?

BRENDA
Like the fact that you haven't spoken to your father in weeks. Not since New York.

ZORA
Is he torn up about it?

BRENDA
Distraught.

ZORA
Did he tell you that?

BRENDA
Well, yes.

ZORA
Good.

Zora picks a large spoon out of the drawer, stirs the milk.

ZORA (CONT'D)
Did he tell you that he hit me?

Brenda reacts.

BRENDA
What?
ZORA
He slapped me across the face. Because
I've been getting to know your son,
who he thinks is the devil incarnate.
I just thought I should let you know
what you're about to defend.

Brenda pulls a bottle of pomegranate juice from the fridge.

BRENDA
When things got bad with Alex, you were young.

ZORA
Nobody's bothered to explain them to me in the six years I've been a legal adult.

BRENDA
It's complicated and not the kind of conversation you want to have while trimming the tree.

A beat.

BRENDA (CONT'D)
I love my son. I love my husband.
And I love you.

Brenda crosses to her, cups her cheek.

BRENDA (CONT'D)
And I can't stand to see you this way.

Brenda pulls away, moves to the cocoa tin. She dumps a couple of scoops into the milk.

Zora stirs the pot.

BRENDA (CONT'D)
Honestly? Alex and Richard are a lost cause. I know that. But you and your father are not.

ZORA
Thanks, Brenda.

BRENDA
Of course, honey. And off the record--I would do anything for Alex to love me the way you love your father.
Well, at least I've got a couple more chances.
ZORA
Wait. A couple?

Zora frowns.
Brenda smiles.
Zora touches Brenda's stomach.
Brenda nods.

ZORA (CONT'D)
What?

BRENDA
Don't say anything, okay? Not yet.

ZORA
I mean, isn't it a little dangerous? Since you're, uh, mature?

BRENDA
That's why I'm not telling your dad until we're completely out of the woods.

ZORA
Yeah, I won't say anything. I promise.

Zora smiles.

CUT TO:

INT. FOYER - LATER
Brenda dresses Cecilia in her snowsuit.
Alex leans against the wall.

BRENDA
Honey, you sure you don't want to come see Grandma Betty with us?

ALEX
Oh, quite.

BRENDA
You know she says things she doesn't mean, that's just how old people are.

CECILIA
She said I'm made of chocolate!

She licks the back of her hand.
Alex gives Brenda a look.

BRENDA
Baby, she was kidding. She was telling a joke.

ALEX
Grandma Betty. What a jokester. You two have fun.

BRENDA
Wait a minute.

Brenda reaches in her pocket.

BRENDA (CONT'D)
I know it's not Christmas yet, but--

She pulls out an Audi key fob.

BRENDA (CONT'D)
Merry Christmas.

She places it in his hand, closes his fist around it.

ALEX
This-- This is a lot.

BRENDA
It's not, really. It's not brand new. It's to my Audi. But, I drive the SUV now and Richard has the Lexus. I haven't been in this one since Cecilia was born. Anyway, it'll get you around.

ALEX
I don't know what to say.

He hesitates, then hugs her.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Thanks, Mom.

Brenda smiles, awestruck.

BRENDA
You called me "Mom."

Cecilia tugs her hand.

CECILIA
Let's gooooo! Bye, Alex!
ALEX
Bye, Squirt.

He swats the pom-pom on her hat.

Cecilia and Brenda leave.

He locks the door behind them.

CUT TO:

INT. NADIA'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

A cute, modish apartment. Color-blocked and super coordinated.

A Christmas movie plays on the flat screen.

Nadia frowns, a piece of popcorn falls from her mouth, rolls down her pajama top.

NADIA
Ew.

ZORA
Don't "ew" my little brother or sister.

NADIA
No, I'm "ew-ing" the fact that Richard and Brenda are still having sex.

Zora grabs a handful of popcorn from the bowl. She wears a seasonal onesie.

ZORA
Come on, I'm sure you and Christopher will be active until everything stops working.

NADIA
I won't know that until after I'm already sworn to him forever.

ZORA
You knew this abstinence thing came with the package, right?

NADIA
Don't say "package."

ZORA
I'm sorry. I just didn't think it bothered you so much.
NADIA
It doesn't.

A beat.

NADIA (CONT'D)
It didn't. I've just been thinking lately-- There's so much we haven't done. Not just in bed, but in our lives. As people.

ZORA
You guys are still young. Just because you're getting married doesn't mean your youth's gone.

NADIA
But, I mean-- Like-- Chris always wanted join the Peace Corps, right? We're not going to get married and then spend two years continents apart.

Nadia leans back on the couch.

NADIA (CONT'D)
I don't know. Regrets just seem like the first step to resentment.

Zora pulls her in for a hug, kisses the top of her head.

ZORA
It'll be okay.

NADIA
Yeah, I know, I know.

They cuddle up together.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN - SAME

Richard waits for his coffee at the Keurig.

Alex strolls in. No shirt, no shoes. Just jeans and his sunglasses atop his head.

RICHARD
Why are you here?

Alex grabs the bread from the top of the refrigerator.
ALEX
Some people need food to sustain
themselves, Councilman. Not all of
us can live on coffee and megalomania.

He pulls out the peanut butter from an overhead cabinet.

RICHARD
I mean, why are you here in the house?
Why aren't you at Betty's with your
mother and Cecilia?

Alex spins on his heels.

ALEX
Well, if you must know-- Grandma
Betty is a miserable old cunt. And
if I have to hear her call my little
sister a "mulatto" one more time,
I'm going to set her on fire.

Richard shrugs.

RICHARD
Fair enough.

ALEX
Exactly how much do you hate being
alone in the house with me, Richard?

Alex unscrews the lid.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Almost as much as you used to love
it?

RICHARD
You disgust me.

ALEX
Really? Because you used to be into
some pretty disgusting things.

He licks the peanut butter from his fingers.

RICHARD
I was sick.

Alex saunters over to him.

ALEX
According to your version of events,
I was the sick one, wasn't I? Sexual
aggression. Homoerotic delusions.
Richard turns to face him.

RICHARD
That was over a decade ago.

ALEX
And my life's been a shit show ever since.

RICHARD
I didn't make you into a junkie.

Alex gets in his face.

ALEX
No, you only fucked me and sent me away to cover it up.

They stare each other down.

CUT TO:

INT. NADIA'S LIVING ROOM - SAME
Zora twirls her fingers through Nadia's hair.
Nadia watches the movie, head on Zora's chest.
Zora stares into space, a million miles away.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN - SAME

RICHARD
You gave me no choice.

ALEX
Bullshit!

RICHARD
You would have ruined me! All because, what, you thought I'd just leave your mother for you and we'd ride off into the sunset?

ALEX
Fuck you.

RICHARD
You were old enough to know better. You knew what it was.

ALEX
No, I didn't. But I know now.
Alex grabs Richard by the collar.

INT. NADIA'S LIVING ROOM - SAME
Nadia looks up at Zora.

          NADIA
          Hey.
          ZORA
          Hmm?
          NADIA
          You okay?
Zora swallows.
Nadia frowns, concerned.
Zora kisses her.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN - SAME
Alex pulls Richard into him, kisses him.
Richard succumbs to the kiss.
They push, shove, grab each other. Fall against the fridge.

CUT TO:

INT. NADIA'S LIVING ROOM - SAME
Nadia pulls away, confused.
Zora blinks, horrified.

          ZORA
          Nadia, I'm sor--
Nadia silences her with a kiss.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN - SAME
Alex drops to his knees in front of Richard.
Richard closes his eyes.
INT. NADIA'S LIVING ROOM - SAME

Nadia and Zora roll around on the couch, then off of it.

CUT TO:

EXT. BACKYARD - DAY

Alex and Zora face each other on the swings.

He looks up from his phone, raises his eyebrows.

    ALEX
    Seriously?  How was it?

Zora shrugs, at a loss for words.

    ALEX (CONT'D)
    Nails weren't trimmed?

Zora smacks his knee.

    ALEX (CONT'D)
    Well, allow me to be the first to congratulate you. Your membership card and starter cut-off flannel are in the mail.

    ZORA
    Jesus-- Shut up, Alex.

    ALEX
    Fine, we'll change the subject.

    ZORA
    Please. What'd you end up doing last night?

Alex bites his lip, looks back down at his phone.

    ALEX
    Same old thing.

    ZORA
    Are you texting "Same Old Thing" right now?

She goes for his phone.

Alex holds it out of reach.

    ALEX
    No, I'm texting a friend.
ZORA
Are they cute?
Alex pulls up a photo on his phone, shows it to Zora.
Pictured: Alex, a few years younger, arm around a handsome East Asian guy, mid-20's. They grin at the camera.
Zora raises her eyebrows.

ZORA (CONT'D)
Okay, so, that's a yes.

ALEX
That's my boy, Nikko.

He slips his phone in is back pocket.

ALEX (CONT'D)
And he's just as straight as his teeth are, so-- You know, in case those big brown eyes started turning green.

Zora avoids his gaze.

ZORA
Don't be weird.

ALEX
Don't be defensive.

A beat.

ALEX (CONT'D)
He's like my Nadia. Minus the whole sex thing.

ZORA
I hate you.

ALEX
Bullshit.

He smirks.

She rolls her eyes.

CUT TO:

INT. ZORA'S ROOM - MORNING
Cecilia bounces on Zora's bed.
CECILIA
ZiZi! Wake up! ZiZi! PRESENTS!

Zora groans, rolls over.

ZORA
Okay, baby, okay. Go downstairs.
Just let me pee and wash my face.

Cecilia kisses her on the face, then darts out of the room.

Zora whines.

INT. HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Zora trudges to the bathroom, half-asleep. She goes for the door.

A pillar of steam greets her, then Alex. He's wet from the shower. The towel hangs dangerously low around his hips.

Zora's eyes rove, she catches herself.

ZORA
Y-you're up early.

ALEX
It's Christmas.

ZORA
It is.

He steps out of the doorway, leans in close.

ALEX
I'll give you your present later.
Okay?

She nods slowly, watches him all the way down the hall.

CUT TO:

INT. DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Christmas dinner.

The family eats with zeal.

Cecilia picks her ham apart with her fingers, munches on it happily.

CECILIA
Yum, yum, yum, yum.

Zora laughs.
RICHARD
Your ham gets the Cecilia seal of approval.

ZORA
I bet anything would taste good after all the toys you got today, huh, Lug Nut?

Zora lightly tugs on one of Cecilia's curls.

RICHARD
No, you ladies really have outdone yourselves.

Richard slices into his turkey breast.

RICHARD (CONT'D)
And this bird came out perfectly, Zora.

ZORA
Actually, Brenda did the turkey this time.

ALEX
It's a Christmas miracle.

RICHARD
Well, it's terrific, Bren.

Alex nods.

ALEX
The dark meat just melts in your mouth.

Richard stops chewing, clears his throat.

Alex takes a sip of his water.

Brenda looks between the two of them.

DING DONG.

ZORA
Who could that be?

Brenda rises.

BRENDA
I'll get it.

She heads for the foyer.
The family continues to eat in silence.

BRENDA (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Nadia! Merry Christmas, come on in!

Zora catches Alex's glance.

He quirks his eyebrows.

CUT TO:

INT. ZORA'S ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Zora closes the door behind them.

NADIA
I'm sorry to drop by like this, it's just you haven't been answering my calls.

ZORA
I've just been trying to process, well, everything. Plus, Christmas--

NADIA
No, no, I get it. I just had to see you.

Nadia closes the gap between them, kisses Zora.

Zora pulls away.

ZORA
My family's right downstairs.

NADIA
I broke up with Christopher.

Zora blinks.

ZORA
What?

NADIA
Today.

ZORA
Because of what we did.

Zora sits on the bed.

NADIA
Zora, if I should be marrying anyone--
ZORA
Whoa. Hold on.

Nadia sits beside her.

NADIA
I don't mean, tomorrow. But we've known each other our entire lives, Zora.

ZORA
Did you tell him? What happened between us?

NADIA
Not in so many words.

ZORA
Nadia. You need to go home and you need to call Christopher and you need to apologize and ask him to take you back.

NADIA
Why would I do that? Why would you tell me to do that? Don't you want to be with me?

A beat.

NADIA (CONT'D)
Or had you not gotten that far when you slept with me?

ZORA
Please-- PLEASE keep your voice down.

Nadia stands, scoffs.

NADIA
If you just wanted to experiment-- or whatever the fuck what was, Zora-- you find some chick in a bar or on Tinder. You don't do that with your best friend who is getting married.

Nadia slumps against the wall, loses her breath.

NADIA (CONT'D)
Oh, my God. I was getting married.
ZORA
(hushed)
Nadia, I didn't plan on this. I never said it was an experiment. But you didn't give me any time to figure out what it is.

NADIA
The time to figure it out, Zora, was before you fucking came at me with your dykey bullshit!

ZORA
Excuse me-- My WHAT?

NADIA
Fuck you.

Nadia stomps out.

Zora falls back on the bed, closes her eyes. The tears come anyway.

LATER.

Her eyes open.

Alex sits beside her in bed.

ALEX
(whispering)
Hey.

She leans up on her elbow.

ZORA
Alex? Damn it, I must have passed out.

ALEX
Exhaustion does that to you. Especially the emotional kind. I figured when your friend ran out of here as fast as those little heels could carry her, there must've been a lover's quarrel.

Zora holds up her hand.

ZORA
Alex. Not now. Please.

ALEX
Say no more.
He sits flat gift-wrapped box on her lap.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Merry Christmas. Or belated Christmas.

Zora glances at the clock: 1:26 AM

She opens the box--

A framed picture. Alex's drawing of her, in vibrant color.

Her eyes light up.

ALEX (CONT'D)
I hope it looks a bit more than "kind of" like you.

Zora bites her lip, admires it. She shakes her head.

ZORA
I'm not nearly this pretty.

Alex stares at her.

ALEX
You really have no clue, do you?

ZORA
About what?

He takes her face in his hands, kisses her slowly. His lips trail to her ear.

ALEX
I share a wall with you. And every time I hear you pull that thing out of the drawer, it's all I can do to stop myself from coming in here and ruining it for you forever.

Her breath hitches.

ZORA
W-Why do you stop yourself?

ALEX
Because Richard owns a gun and I'm just beginning to value my life.

ZORA
But...You won't really be living otherwise.

He kisses her again. Then rises, locks the door.
Zora watches him all the way, wets her lips.

Alex turns to her. He plucks the sunglasses from the neck of his t-shirt, sits them on her dresser. Sheds his shirt, sinks down on top of her.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Alex leans against the counter. He eats a large bowl of cereal.

Zora stops just past the doorway.

They exchange knowing looks, smile.

    ALEX
    Good morning.

    ZORA
    Morning.

She reaches for a mug in the high cabinet.

Alex comes up behind her.

    ALEX
    Let me get that for you.

He reaches over her shoulder, presses against her body subtly.

Zora giggles.

    ZORA
    Alex.

She faces him.

    ALEX
    What?

He hands her the mug.

    ALEX (CONT'D)
    You're welcome.

CUT TO:

INT. ZORA'S ROOM - DAY

Zora sits cross-legged on the bed, laptop open in her lap.

She types a few sentences, stops, closes her eyes.
Her fingertips play idly along her collarbone.

She bites her lip.

Zora shakes herself from her reverie, types a couple more words.

She sighs, closes the laptop.

INT. RICHARD'S STUDY - SAME

Richard scratches down notes at his desk.

He stops, frowns at what he's written, crosses it out.

He rests his chin on his fist, stares out his open door, contemplating. Through the door--

Alex passes by, oblivious to Richard.

Richard follows him with his eyes.

INT. LIVING ROOM - SAME

Brenda sits on the chaise, a large comb in her lap. Barrettes and hair ornaments are scattered everywhere.

Cecilia plays with a brush on the floor. Her hair's half plaited. The finished side is done poorly.

Brenda lifts her bottle of juice to her lips, stops.

She rises, walks into the kitchen. From within--

The CLINKS of a bottle and a glass.

The cork POPS.

CUT TO:

EXT. MAYOR'S MANSION - NIGHT

New year's eve.

A smaller, more intimate affair than the fundraiser. Less formal, still chic.

PARTY-GOERS fill the garden, drinks in hand, draped in novelty glasses and beads.

Richard holds Brenda close to him. Her headband reads: "2016."

The countdown begins.
Brenda holds Richard's face.

INT. MAYOR'S MANSION - SAME

Zora and Alex steal away into a powder room, hand-in-hand.

EXT. MAYOR'S MANSION - SAME

The Townsends kiss.

So do Brenda and Richard.

RICHARD

Happy new year, baby.

BRENDA

Happy new year.

They peck each other's faces.

Brenda giggles.

INT. RICHARD'S STUDY - LATER

Richard frowns at his computer, scrolls.

Alex passes by the door, loose bowtie hung around his neck.

Richard jumps up, leans in the doorway, calls after him.

RICHARD

Er-- Could I speak to you a moment?

Alex raises an eyebrow, enters, cautious.

Richard closes the door behind them. He gestures for Alex to take a seat, then takes his.

ALEX

What?
RICHARD
It's just that we haven't spoken since--

ALEX
Since we fucked.

RICHARD
If you must be crude-- And I wish you would keep your voice down. Please.

Alex gives him a look.

RICHARD (CONT'D)
I just wanted to touch base with you, to make sure it wouldn't be like before.

ALEX
I'm not so sure I follow you, Richard.

RICHARD
I'm making sure that you won't ask anything more of me than I can give.

Richard looks at him, expectant.

Alex erupts into laughter. Hysterics.

Richard watches, quizzical.

ALEX
What makes you think that I want anything from you? Anything at all.

Richard lowers his voice.

RICHARD
The other night--

ALEX
I've got my shit together. I'm in the prime of my life. You have only a few good years left in you before you can't even get it up anymore and you're still in denial about what you are and what you like. You're on the decline, Richard.

RICHARD
That's not-- It's much more complicated than that.
ALEX
Actually, it's simple. You're weak. I'm strong. I'm Alpha. You're Beta. You want me and you will always want me. You'll go to your grave wanting me. And I can't say I'll blame you, but you will never have me. Never again.

Richard rests his head in his hands.

RICHARD
You are a piece of work. And I'm done playing your sick games.

ALEX
Oh, you haven't even begun to play my sick games, Daddy. You haven't even opened the box.

Alex stands.

ALEX (CONT'D)
I'm not seventeen anymore, Richard. Fuck you and your sunset.

Alex opens the door.
Brenda stands there.
He brushes past her.

CUT TO:

INT. ALEX'S ROOM - MOMENTS LATER
Alex yanks open his underwear drawer, rifles through it.
He pulls out a USB cable, stomps over to his bedside table, plucks up his sunglasses.
He grabs his phone, hooks the cord up to it.
Alex flips the glasses over. On the bottom of the left stem--A small rubber flap. He lifts it, reveals--A micro-SD port.
He plugs it into the cord.
A dialog box pops up on the phone: "IMPORT VIDEO?"
He hits "YES."

CUT TO:

EXT. BACKYARD - DAY

Alex sits on the top step of the back porch, a lit cigarette hangs from his lips.

Brenda knocks on the door before stepping out. She smiles.

BRENDA

Hey.

ALEX

Hey.

BRENDA

Do you mind if I sit?

Alex scoots over.

Brenda settles beside him.

BRENDA (CONT'D)

It's cold out here.

ALEX

Winter will do that to you.

BRENDA

How do you stand it?

ALEX

What's a little frostbite between friends?

He takes a drag.

ALEX (CONT'D)

Me and nicotine are old friends.

Brenda nods.

BRENDA

How old were you when you started smoking? Seventeen?

ALEX

Seventeen.

BRENDA

You know, I know that was a really rough year for you.
ALEX
Brenda?

BRENDA
Hmm?

ALEX
Don't start that conversation unless you're really ready to have that conversation. Okay?

Alex flicks the cigarette in the yard, goes back in the house.

CUT TO:

INT. ZORA'S ROOM - NIGHT

Zora and Alex make out on the bed. She straddles him.

He kisses her neck.

She looks over at the clock.

ZORA
When are they supposed to be back from the thing?

ALEX
I don't know—Seven? It's over at six.

ZORA
Shit! That's in like ten minutes!

Zora rolls off of him.

Alex grabs her hips.

ALEX
We can do the abridged version.

ZORA
Alex!

ALEX
What?

ZORA
I don't know, you just act like you want to get caught sometimes.

ALEX
I can't say I wouldn't be relieved.

Zora stares at him.
ZORA
Are you crazy?

ALEX
You're not tired of sneaking around? Stealing moments like we're doing something wrong?

A beat.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Unless, you do think we're doing something wrong.

Zora runs her hands through her hair.

ZORA
No, it's not wrong. We're not really siblings.

ALEX
Okay, so?

ZORA
So, it's a shitstorm that I really don't want to have to deal with right now.

ALEX
A shitstorm from who? Do you really think Brenda gives a fuck? Give her a Valium and a glass of wine and she'll plan the whole goddamn wedding herself. Of course, that leaves Richard-- The end all and be all of every decision that you make.

ZORA
That's not true. How would we explain this to Cecilia?

ALEX
The same way you explain anything to a six year old? Fuck it! I'll make her a coloring book!

ZORA
You know what, maybe I do care what my father thinks. Is that really so bad?

ALEX
No, Zora, what's really bad is that you're a grown woman and you live your life for his approval.
Alex climbs off the bed.

ALEX (CONT'D)
But here I go, forgetting my place in the family. The junkie, the whore, the nutcase.

ZORA
You know that's not how I feel.

ALEX
Then, how do you feel, Zora?

She searches for the words.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Exactly. Without him here to tell you, you don't even know.

He leaves.

Zora curls up on the bed.

CUT TO:

INT. MASTER BEDROOM - DAY

Richard lounges on the bed, types on his iPad.

Brenda sits at the vanity in her robe, brushes her wet hair.

BRENDA
I think it's great that they're hanging out. It could be good for them both. I mean, Zora's definitely a good influence and maybe Alex can help her loosen up.

He looks up from his tablet.

RICHARD
Loosen up?

BRENDA
Yeah, you know. Help her have some fun.

RICHARD
The kind of fun that Alex has--

BRENDA
Come on, Richard! He's been doing great--
RICHARD
You know what Zora finds fun? Writing and making excellent grades. And that's what has got her on track for success.

BRENDA
He's not poison, Richard.

He sighs.

RICHARD
Let's not argue about this, okay? Especially when I'm about to make you an offer that you cannot refuse.

He rises places one hand on her shoulder, presents his tablet to her.

RICHARD (CONT'D)
What do you think?

Brenda examines the web page, taken aback.

BRENDA
I think it's a beautiful suite, honey. What's it for?

RICHARD
Valentine's Day.

He kisses her cheek.

RICHARD (CONT'D)
I figure things have been so tense lately, with the campaign and everything else, we could get away to the Poconos. Do a little skiing, a little bit of something else.

BRENDA
Well, honey, that sounds lovely but we can't go away for Valentine's Day.

RICHARD
Why not?

BRENDA
That's Alex's birthday.

Richard rolls his eyes.
BRENDA (CONT'D)
It's his first birthday home in a long, long time. And it's his thirtieth.

RICHARD
No, of course, I understand.

BRENDA
Do you? Because it doesn't really sound like it.

RICHARD
Yes, dear, I understand. I understand that you will kill yourself to show that boy love and he will never appreciate you for it.

BRENDA
He's my son.

RICHARD
He won't even call you "Mom."

BRENDA
I never said our relationship was conventional.

RICHARD
It's not a relationship at all! It's him doing everything in his power to hurt you. It's you cutting yourself open, and him laughing while you bleed.

Brenda stands.

BRENDA
Well, at least I never hit him.

RICHARD
Maybe that's where you went wrong!

BRENDA
Tell me, is Zora speaking to you yet?

Richard clenches his jaw.

BRENDA (CONT'D)
I always support you, Richard. Always. Even when I know you're wrong, I support you. I may not be able to work a room like the other wives in (MORE)
BRENDA (CONT'D)
the party, but I am always there.
Let me be there for my son.

She stomps over to her walk-in closet, flips through the racks.

Richard watches a moment, then tosses the tablet on the bed. He throws his hands up, leaves.

CUT TO:

INT. BATHROOM - LATER

Zora washes her hands, turns off the tap, shakes them dry. She stares at herself a moment in the mirror.

KNOCK KNOCK.

ZORA
I'm coming right out!

She quickly wipes her hands, opens the door--

It's Alex.

ALEX
Hey. Can I talk to you a minute?

ZORA
In here?

ALEX
Yeah.

He steps in, closes the door behind them.

ALEX (CONT'D)
I lost it the other day.

ZORA
No, I'm sorry-- I've just been so stressed lately. You're right, it's really, really hard sneaking around. On top of that, I'm back from break and Nadia still isn't speaking to me.

ALEX
Nadia?

ZORA
Yeah. Honestly, I wish you never planted that seed.
ALEX
Well, you watered it.

ZORA
Why'd you push me in her direction, anyway? If you wanted me?

ALEX
Maybe I like to cause trouble.

He holds her hips.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Or, maybe I want your truth. All of it.

He kisses her.

ALEX (CONT'D)
And I want you to have mine.

He digs in his pocket, pulls out a small baggy of coke.

ZORA
What is that?

ALEX
My stash. I haven't touched it since the day I got here. Haven't even looked at it.

ZORA
Why are you showing me this?

ALEX
I'm about to flush it, but I wanted you to see what you replaced.

ZORA
As your vice?

ALEX
As the thing I would die for.

He drops the whole thing in the toilet, flushes it.

Zora puts down the lid, pushes him to sit.

He pulls her into his lap, rests his forehead against hers.

Her hand slides down his chest.

He takes her bottom lip between his teeth.

Brenda pushes the door open, freezes.
BRENDA
I thought someone left the light on.
She backs away, shuts the door.

ZORA
Fuck.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN - LATER
Brenda loads the dishwasher.
Alex enters, leans against the counter.

ALEX
How long do we have?
Brenda ignores him.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Before Richard finds out-- how long?
Brenda slips in the last plate.

ALEX (CONT'D)
I just figured we should have a head's up.
She closes the dishwasher.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Brenda.
Brenda spins around on her heels.

BRENDA
"Mom." It's "Mom." I am your mother, goddamn it.

ALEX
Now's a convenient time to decide that.

BRENDA
I won't answer to anything else.

ALEX
Fine. How long do we have, Mom?

BRENDA
Well, Alex, that's up to you. If you stop this-- this-- whatever this is, he won't have to. Not from me, anyway.
ALEX
What if we don't want to stop it?

BRENDA
It's disgraceful, Alex, going around the house like that. Cecilia could have walked in on you two.

ALEX
It's pitiful how you're only concerned about your kids when it benefits you. I guess not much has changed.

BRENDA
You know what, I am done, Alex! I'm done letting you punish me.

ALEX
Punish you? I WAS THE ONE WHO GOT SENT AWAY!

BRENDA
The things you were saying, the claims you made—They were heinous. You needed help.

ALEX
WHAT I NEEDED WAS FOR YOU TO PROTECT ME! What I needed was for you to believe me.

Tears well up in his eyes.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Yeah, I was a messed up kid. But only because HE—

BRENDA
He never touched you, Alex! Even though you might have wanted him to.

ALEX
Fuck you, Brenda.

BRENDA
You were having delusions—

ALEX
FUCK YOU!

He smacks the paper towel rack off the counter.

ALEX (CONT'D)
I hope you lose that baby. God knows, it'll be better off.
Brenda clutches her stomach.

BRENDA
Zora told you.

ALEX
Zora didn't tell me anything. There's no other reason you'd put down the bottle for a whole month. Or at least, pretend to.

He crosses to the back door.

BRENDA
Whatever you're trying to do to hurt me or Richard, you leave Zora out of it, you hear me?

He exits down the back steps.

Brenda stands in the doorway.

BRENDA (CONT'D)
She's a good girl! You leave her out of it!

She slams the door.

CUT TO:

INT. FOYER - DAY

Richard comes in through the front door. He balances a pile of flowers and a bag of boxed chocolates in one arm.

Cecilia runs in from the living room, all decked out in red and pink hearts.

CECILIA
Daddy!

RICHARD
Pumpkin!

He stoops, pulls her in for a one-arm hug. He pecks her on the forehead.

RICHARD (CONT'D)
Hi, my baby.

She grabs at the loot.

CECILIA
Is this for me?
RICHARD
Some of it, yes. Where's Mommy and Zora?

CECILIA
Mommy's on the couch, she has a migraine. Zora went to get the cake.

RICHARD
Cake?

CECILIA
Mhm, for Alex's birthday. He was born on Valentine's Day.

RICHARD
Was he? Because I thought he was born on ValenTINE's Day.

CECILIA
That's what I said!

She bounces off into the living room.

Richard follows.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

RICHARD
Wait, wait--

He holds out a single carnation attached to a small teddy. Cecilia takes it.

CECILIA
Thank you, Daddy! Happy Valentine's!

RICHARD
Happy Valentine's, indeed. I'll put your candy up for later.

Brenda lies asleep on the chaise.

Richard sets the big bouquet of roses by her feet. He balances a heart-shaped box of chocolates on her wine glass.

INT. ZORA'S ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Richard sets a bouquet of pink carnations on Zora's pillow. He takes the last box of chocolate from his bag, sets it beside the flowers.

He crumples the bag in his hands, poises to drop it in the waste basket.
He stops, squints, leans a little closer. His expression falls.

In the basket: Three used condoms.

The bag drops from his hand.

INT. KITCHEN - LATER

The lights are out.

Richard sits at the table, a mug of coffee clasped in both hands.

Brenda stands in the doorway, smiles.

BRENDA
My funny valentine.

He forces a smile.

BRENDA (CONT'D)
Thank you for my flowers, and my chocolate.

She wraps her arms around him from behind, kisses his cheek.

Richard pats her hands.

RICHARD
Of course. You are quite welcome.

Brenda pulls out a chair, sits.

BRENDA
Are the kids home? The big kids, I mean.

RICHARD
I haven't seen Alex. Zora's out getting him a cake.

BRENDA
Hmm.

A beat.

BRENDA (CONT'D)
We should have gone to the Poconos.

Richard grabs her hand, kisses it.
RICHARD
I've got some work to do tonight, but why don't you take Cecilia to see a movie, or something?

BRENDA
That's a good idea. It's the only time she's quiet.

They share a laugh.

BRENDA (CONT'D)
Are you sure you can't come?

RICHARD
I wish I could, but I have to go back over some platform stuff before the website update.

BRENDA
Well, I better go see what's playing. I hope it's not one of those Pixar things, they just make my temples throb.

Brenda heads for the living room.

CUT TO:

EXT. BILLINGS RESIDENCE - DAY

Richard stands on the front porch, narrows his eyes--

Alex pulls into the driveway. He grabs a brown Wine & Spirits bag from the passenger seat, carries it up the stairs.

Richard blocks his entry.

RICHARD
Wine.

ALEX
Perceptive. Can I pass?

RICHARD
Do you plan on sharing that with my daughter?

ALEX
You caught me. Such a shame you had to find out this way.
RICHARD  
The way I found out was happening upon three of your soiled condoms in her trash basket.

ALEX  
And how do you know those are mine? Did you lick them or something?

He tries to push past Richard.

Richard blocks him.

RICHARD  
I warned you.

Richard steps aside.

Alex jams his keys in his pocket, slides past him and into the house.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Alex tosses his jacket over the back of the chair, runs upstairs.

Richard comes in behind him.

INT. RICHARD'S STUDY - CONTINUOUS

Richard steps over his coat rack, digs in the pockets of his long wool coat for a pair of leather gloves. He pulls them on.

He moves over to a Romare Bearden print, pulls it off the wall, reveals--

A safe with a digital lock.

He punches in the code, opens it.

Inside the safe: a revolver and an 8-ball of coke.

He grabs the coke, walks out.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Richard pulls the keys from Alex's jacket pocket.

EXT. BILLINGS RESIDENCE - CONTINUOUS

Richard unlocks Alex's car, plants the coke in his arm rest.
INT. RICHARD'S OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Richard holds a heavy pewter paperweight in his hand.

He exhales--

CRACKS it against his left jaw.

He grits his teeth through the pain, tosses the weight in the safe, locks it in, rehangs the painting.

Richard swipes all his belongings off his desk, overturns a tall bookcase.

Alex stands in the doorway.

ALEX
What the fuck are you doing?

RICHARD
What I'm doing shouldn't be of any concern to you. It's what YOU'RE doing that's important.

Richard kicks over the lamp.

RICHARD (CONT'D)
Right now, you are assaulting a civil servant in his own home. You're in violation of your parole, and most importantly, you are going straight to jail. Do not pass go, do not collect two-hundred dollars.

ALEX
They'll know you did this to yourself. There's not a scratch on me.

RICHARD
Alex! I didn't stand a chance! I'm on the decline. You're the Alpha. I'm the Beta. You're young. I'm old. You are a deeply troubled young man. And I am the future governor of Pennsylvania.

ALEX
Motherfucker.

RICHARD
Daughterfucker.

Alex bolts.
EXT. BILLINGS RESIDENCE - CONTINUOUS

Alex hops in his car, speeds off.

CUT TO:

INT./EXT. - ALEX'S AUDI

He dials Zora at a red light.

ALEX

C'mon. C'mon, c'mon, c'mon. Pick the fuck up.

He holds the phone to his ear, taps the wheel with the other hand.

The light turns green.

He floors it.

The call goes to Zora's VOICEMAIL.

ALEX (CONT'D)

Zora, it's me. Listen, you need to call me as soon as you get this. Richard is fucked up. He's lost it. Don't go back to the house. Call me right away.

He hangs up.

CUT TO:

INT. BOUTIQUE - SAME

Zora places a lacy lingerie set on the counter.

Her phone VIBRATES in her bag.

CUT TO:

INT./EXT. ALEX'S AUDI - CONTINUOUS

Alex glances down at the fuel gauge.

It approaches "E."

ALEX

Fuck!

He bangs on the steering wheel.

CUT TO:
EXT. SERVICE STATION - MOMENTS LATER

Alex stands at the pump, tries to feed a twenty-dollar bill into the machine.

It doesn't take it.

ALEX
Motherfuck--

He kicks the side of the car, stomps inside to the service station.

CUT TO:

INT. SERVICE STATION - CONTINUOUS

Alex leans on the counter.

ALEX
It's not taking cash.

The CLERK (a squat lady, 50's, West Indian) looks up from the register.

CLERK
What's that, sir?

ALEX
The pump, it's not taking cash and I really need to fill up my tank. Can I just pay in here?

CLERK
It's pay-at-pump, sir. Do you have a credit card?

ALEX
No, I do not have a credit card--

EXT. SERVICE STATION - SAME

Two cop cars pull up around Alex's car, box it in.

INT. SERVICE STATION - SAME

CLERK
Mister, I am just asking--

ALEX
Well, I'm telling you I don't have a fucking credit card--
CLERK
Sir, do not curse at me I'm trying to assist you--

The flash of blue and red lights flicker across their faces. Alex glances out the window. His eyes widen.

ALEX
FUCK!

He dashes through the store, out the back loading entrance. Alex runs like hell.

CUT TO:

INT./EXT. ZORA'S CAR - SAME
A hard-top convertible. Roof up. Zora straps herself in, plugs her phone into the AUX. The screen lights up: "SIX MISSED CALLS."

She frowns, dials Alex back.

CUT TO:

EXT. ALLEYWAY - SAME
Alex ducks between two apartment buildings, picks up his phone.

INTERCUT BETWEEN ZORA AND ALEX.

ZORA
Alex, what the hell is going on? What happened with my dad?

ALEX
You have to come get me.

ZORA
Where are you?

ALEX
I'm on foot, they got my car.

ZORA
Who got your car?

ALEX
The cops, Zora! The cops! He set me up!
ZORA
Tell me where you are, Alex.

ALEX
I'm on, uh--

He glances around.

ALEX (CONT'D)
I don't know, around fifty-first, fifty-second and Germantown?

ZORA
I'm on my way.

She pulls off.

END INTERCUT.

CUT TO:

INT./EXT. ZORA'S CAR - LATER

The car is parked just by the alleyway.

Alex sits in the passenger's seat.

Zora leans forward on the wheel.

ALEX
I know how this sounds.

ZORA
Crazy, that's how it sounds. I know he hates the idea of us together. I know he does. But it doesn't make sense, Alex. He wouldn't--

ALEX
You don't know him, Zora!

ZORA
He's my father! Of course I know him!

ALEX
Did you know he used to fuck me?!

Zora blinks.

ZORA
What?
ALEX
When I was seventeen, he started sleeping with me. I threatened to tell. And he had me spirited the fuck away.

ZORA
You were mentally ill.

ALEX
I might have been, after what he did to me.

ZORA
Don't lie to me.

ALEX
Zora!

Alex reaches for her hand.

She jerks away.

ZORA
Don't touch me.

He stares at her a moment, destroyed, then gets out of the car.

The door SLAMS shut.

EXT. STREET - CONTINUOUS

Alex pulls out his phone, dials a contact.

ALEX
Nikko. Shit's hit the fan, man. If I don't call you by midnight, leak the video.

He glances over his shoulder.

CUT TO:

INT. FOYER - LATER

Zora comes through the door.

ZORA
Brenda? Dad?

INT. RICHARD'S STUDY - CONTINUOUS

Zora stands in the doorway, awestruck.
The study is destroyed.
She steps over flipped papers, broken glass.
The desk is bare, save for a stack of note cards and fountain pen.
She picks up the cards, shuffles through them, gasps.
They flutter to the floor.
Richard enters behind her.

RICHARD
Thank God you're safe.

She faces him.

RICHARD (CONT'D)
When you didn't come home, I thought he might have--

ZORA
He? Alex?

RICHARD
Yes.

ZORA
Did he do this, Daddy?

Richard nods, steps toward her.

RICHARD
He attacked me. Destroyed my study, my work. He's dangerous, baby.

Zora backs away.

ZORA

RICHARD
I had to do something. When this gets out, if I don't spin it just right--

Richard points to his swollen left jaw.
RICHARD (CONT'D)
Look at what he already did to me. I won't let him do that to the campaign. We've worked too hard for this.

Zora crosses to him, cups his face in her hands.
She runs her right thumb across his swollen jaw.

ZORA
He really did this to you?

Her right hand falls to her side.

RICHARD
He jumped me out of nowhere. He must have been high. Can you believe it?

Zora turns the right side of Richard's face, unmarred, toward the light.
Her other hand drops.

ZORA
No. I can't. Alex is left-handed.

Richard's expression falls.
Zora leaves the study.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS
Richard grabs her, shakes her.

RICHARD
Can't you see what he's doing to this family? He's trying to destroy me! He's using you to destroy me! He used you!

Zora wrenches herself from his grip.

ZORA
You destroyed this family. You did that.

She darts out the front door.

CUT TO:

INT. MOTEL ROOM - LATER
A dark, cruddy motel not meant for more than one hour of use.
KNOCK KNOCK.

Alex launches off the bed, opens the door.

It's Zora.

She flings herself into his arms, chokes up.

ZORA
I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry.

He strokes her hair.

ZORA (CONT'D)
I'm so sorry for what he did to you
Alex, I'm--

She looks up at him, tears in her eyes.

Alex kisses her, pulls her onto the bed, strips off her jacket.

INT. MOTEL ROOM - HOURS LATER

Alex and Zora lie naked and spent in each others' arms.

He kisses the top of her head.

ZORA
Where do we go? Where do I take you
until we figure this out? New York?

ALEX
No, that'll be the first place they
look.

ZORA
What if we stay here in the city and
figure this out? That way, you've
never actually broken parole.

ALEX
It doesn't matter if I actually break
it, I'm as good as fucked either
way. They'd never believe me.

ZORA
But they'll believe US.

ALEX
Honestly, I'm more confident taking
our chances in Canada.

Zora plays with his hair.
ZORA
Virginia, maybe. That's as far as I go. Canada-- that's a little too crazy.

ALEX
Well, don't they say people in love do crazy things?

She looks up at him.

ZORA
Is that what we are? In love?

ALEX
We're definitely in SOMETHING.

She laughs.

ZORA
Insane, maybe.

He kisses her.

ALEX
In deep shit.

They deepen the kiss.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Insatiable...

He rolls on top of her.

She moans.

LATER.

Zora sleeps against Alex's chest.

He holds her with one arm, types on his phone with the other.

The clock: "11:54."

INT. MOTEL ROOM - DAY

Alex rolls over in bed.

Zora's gone.

His eyes open, confused.

ALEX
Babe?
He sits up.

On the side table, a note: "WENT FOR BREAKFAST. LEFT PHONE CHARGING. IF NEEDED, SEND SMOKE SIGNAL. LOVE, Z."

He smiles, flicks on the TV: The morning news.

CUT TO:

INT. DONUT SHOP - SAME

A mom-and-pop place. Could be cleaner.
The morning news plays on a TV mounted in the corner.
Zora pays for her breakfast at the counter.

CUT TO:

INT. MOTEL ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Alex paces the room, screams into his phone.

ALEX
WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU MEAN? WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU MEAN, NIKKO? I TEXTED YOU-- NO, I FUCKING TOLD YOU TO CALL IT OFF!

NIKKO (V.O.)
(through the phone)
I just put it up a few minutes early--

ALEX
No-- "Midnight" doesn't mean "a few minutes early," Nikko! "Midnight" means "MIDNIGHT!" FUCK!

He kicks the bed.

CUT TO:

INT. DONUT SHOP - CONTINUOUS

Zora takes her change off the counter.

TV SCREEN:

A female news ANCHOR (30's) speaks.

ANCHOR
...Disturbing footage featuring Pennsylvania Democrat, Richard Billings and his family leaked onto (MORE)
ANCHOR (CONT'D)
the internet from an unknown source this morning.

Zora's eyes shoot up.

ANCHOR (CONT'D)
Please be advised. These images are of a very graphic nature, and are not suitable for children.

Zora's bag SPLATS on the floor.
Her change flies in every direction.
She stumbles out the door, knees weak.

EXT. DONUT SHOP - CONTINUOUS
Zora PUKES in the shrub outside the door.

CUT TO:

INT. /EXT. ZORA'S CAR - MOMENTS LATER
Zora has the steering wheel in a death grip, queasy.
She comes to a rolling stop at a red light, guns it through the intersection.

CUT TO:

INT. MOTEL ROOM - SAME
Alex sits on the bed, face wet with tears. He sobs into the phone.

ALEX
Everything is fucked, man! I fucked up! Jesus--

NIKKO (V.O.)
(through the phone)
I'm sorry, bro! You sent the second video. I didn't know, man.

Alex wipes his face with his hand.

ALEX
What the fuck am I gonna do?

On Alex: The door CREAKS open.
His eyes widen.
The phone PLUNKS to the carpet.

NIKKO (V.O.)
(through the phone)
Alex?

EXT. MOTEL - CONTINUOUS
Zora's car swings into the parking lot, she hops out.
She does a double-take at--
Her father's black Lexus.
She runs up to the room, bursts in--
INT. MOTEL ROOM - CONTINUOUS
Alex is backed against the bathroom door.
Richard stands by the foot of the bed.

ZORA
Dad!

He pivots to face her.
His revolver is trained on Alex, wild eyes trained on Zora.

ZORA (CONT'D)
Dad. Daddy, we can fix this. We can fix this, please--

BANG!
Zora jumps.
Alex clutches his hands to his chest. Tendrils of blood seep between his fingers.
He slides down the door.
Richard cocks the gun.
Zora looks at Richard, pleads.
He sticks the revolver in his mouth.
Zora shakes her head.

ZORA (CONT'D)
No. Dad--

BANG!
Blood spatters across Zora's face.

She SCREAMS.

CUT TO:

INT. EMERGENCY ROOM - DAY

A team of EMTs push a gurney through the wing.

Alex lies on top of it. He's intubated, face smeared with blood. He fades.

ZORA(V.O.)
Oscar Alexander Parker died on the fifteenth of February. The day after Valentine's Day. The day after he turned thirty.

His hand twitches.

ZORA (V.O.) (CONT'D)
His death was messy, tragic, a little poetic.

He FLATLINES.

An EMT glances down at Alex, shouts something inaudible over his shoulder.

ZORA (V.O.) (CONT'D)
But most poignantly--

Gloved hands press defibrillator pads on his chest.

EMT
Clear!

ZORA (V.O.)
Dubious.

Alex INHALES.

His eyes open.

CUT TO:

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

A private room in the ICU.

Alex lies in bed, hooked up to I.V., monitors. He stirs.

Zora sits at his bedside. She looks like she's been dragged through hell.
She watches him stir, stone-faced.

Alex opens his eyes, swallows, throat dry.

He lies still, takes in as much of his surroundings as he can without moving.

His head tilts to the side, slow.

Zora meets his eyes.

His copy of *Othello* sits in her lap.

ZORA

Brenda wanted to be here when you woke up. She's been here all week, but she had to look after Cecilia. The nanny never came back from vacation. You can imagine why.

Alex grunts.

ALEX

Richard.

A beat.

ALEX (CONT'D)

Zora. That video of you and me-- I never meant for anyone to see that.

ZORA

Not the public, you mean. But, what about my father? You telling me you wouldn't have loved it, just a little bit, to see the look on his face?

Alex closes his eyes.

ALEX

I--

ZORA

You what? Never meant to hurt me? Didn't expect me to fall for you? Didn't mean for any of this to happen? You've got a barrel of bullshit to pick from, so choose wisely.

ALEX

It's not bullshit.

He wets his lips.
ALEX (CONT'D)
I was going to say I'm sorry.
Zora looks away from him.

ALEX (CONT'D)
I'm sorry!
Zora runs her hands over the cover of the book.

ZORA
I was just like Desdemona, wasn't I?
Just a casualty.

ALEX
No. Zora, I love you.
Zora places the book in his lap.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Zora. Zora!
He grabs her hand.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Look at me. I. LOVE. YOU.
She pulls away, floats out the door.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Zora! ZORA!
He rips the I.V. from his arm, the monitors from his chest.
Three NURSES rush from the bay.
Alex slides out of bed, all his weight is on the rail.
The book FLOPS to the floor.
The chalk pastel portrait of Zora falls from its pages.

NURSE 1
Sir! Mr. Parker, get back into bed-

ALEX
ZORA! ZORAAAA!
The nurses restrain him.

NURSE 2
Oscar, you need to settle down.
Right now.
They hold him down on the bed.
INT. ICU - CONTINUOUS

Zora walks down the hallway, deaf to his screams.

ZORA (V.O.)
Maybe Alex did love me. Maybe he never meant to record us making love. Maybe he had, but regretted it the minute he lost me. Either way, I was thoroughly through with what I meant to everybody else.

She turns a corner.

CUT TO:

INT. ZORA'S ROOM - DAY

Zora stands in her mirror, smooths her hands over her conservative black dress.

She slips on a black peplum blazer, turns on her heels to go.

CUT TO:

EXT. GRAVEYARD - LATER

Just a scattering of mourners.

Richard's political acquaintances are nowhere to be found.

Zora stands beside Brenda and Cecilia.

Nadia watches her from the other side of the grave. She holds onto CHRISTOPHER, 25, clean-cut and handsome.

Brenda rests her head on Zora's shoulder, heavily self-medicated.

Cecilia is in a daze.

BRENDA
(whispers)
You know, your father always loved you in this jacket.

She runs her hand over the shoulder pad.

ZORA
I know he did.

Brenda rubs her back.

CUT TO:
INT. ENGLISH DEPARTMENT BUILDING - LATER
A school building, in the austere style of the Ivy League.
Zora still wears her funeral attire.
Her heels CLICK severely against the tiles.
She holds a thick manuscript tight to her chest.
Zora stops in front of a closed office.
A black, wire basket hangs on the door.
She drops the paper there.
Close on the title: "Desdemona In Her Grave."
Zora spins on her heels, CLICK CLACKS out.
EXT. ENGLISH DEPARTMENT BUILDING - MOMENTS LATER
Penn's campus.
Zora descends the stairs, crosses to her car.
The top is down. It's loaded with everything she owns.
She climbs in, starts it up, adjusts her rearview, stops.
Zora strips off her jacket, tosses it into the street, pulls off.

THE END.