GIVE ME BACK MY DAUGHTER - A LIFETIME ORIGINAL MOVIE

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Shanesha Taylor, Homeless Single Mom, Arrested After Leaving Kids In Car While On Job Interview

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Mom arrested for leaving children alone to go to work

Mom Allegedly Left Toddler in Hot Car During Interview With Department of Child Services

Mom Who Left Kids in Food Court During Job Interview Insists: 'I Love My Children'

A mom was arrested for leaving her kids alone while she worked—here's why we need to talk about it

The problem with this isn't what you think it is.

Mom goes viral for taking her toddler to a job interview: See her video

Her job interview with a toddler was adorable, and also spotlights a bigger issue that many working moms face.

'Trying to job hunt just felt almost comical': 3 moms on balancing job search and child care amid the pandemic

ACT 1

EXT. ABANDONED PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Nearby stores are chained up. Tents line the sidewalks. A few car pass by. A SUV sits in the back of the parking lot.

INT. SUV - NIGHT

IMANI (7), curly fro and dark skinned, rolls down the window and feels the air outside. She slides back into her seat.

[INTERCUT BETWEEN SUV AND ABANDONED PARKING LOT]

Flashlight in hand, Imani draws herself in a sketchbook. Far away, a car horn HONKS. Imani's pauses, distracted by the noise. She returns to her sketch, drawing the locs of a pensive woman holding her hand. Headlights from across the street light up the night. She throws a blanket over herself. FOCUS ON: A MAN'S feet hitting the pavement. Imani sketches the wing of a black, male angel floating in the sky.

FOCUS: The man's feet stepping into the parking lot. Imani sketches the angel's second wing. MAN'S POV: He stops beside the passenger door, window still open. Imani smiles as she passes the flashlight across her drawing. FOCUS: The man reaches through the window. CLICK! The car door swings open. Startled, Imani stands up, the cover falling off. She squirms away, causing the clutter to collapse. This wakes up RENEE JOHNSON (40s), dark skin with locs, to a light shining in her face. A POLICE OFFICER (60s), inspects the SUV. It's cluttered with belongings. The officer's shadow leers over them. We never see his face. Renee rolls down the window.

POLICE OFFICER (O.S.)
M'am, you can't park here.

Renee nods her head, stunned by what's happening. The Police Officer shines the light back on Imani, then chides Renee.

POLICE OFFICER (O.S.) (CONT'D)
This isn't safe for you or your daughter.

RENEE
I understand.

The Police Officer backs away from the car. Imani rolls up the window and puts on her seat belt. Renee drives away.

THE TITLE “GIVE ME BACK MY DAUGHTER” APPEARS ON SCREEN.

The title’s background is the boulevard of closed stores. We rise above the stores to an industrial loft. The downtown skyscrapers reflect off its room-spanning windows.

MONTAGE: The night sky turns to dawn. MONTAGE ENDS.

INT. RENEE’S LOFT APARTMENT - DAWN

SUPER: Three weeks earlier.

Renee’s in bed beside Imani.

RENEE
We’re gonna get up real soon.

IMANI
Shh. Shh. I’m asleep.

RENEE
But you’re talking.

IMANI
I’m a ghost. Ghosts can’t talk.

RENEE
Hm! Well I’m sure ghosts can feel.

Renee tickles Imani. Imani bursts into giggles.

IMANI
No! No! Ghosts can’t feel either!

Mom and daughter laugh as the sun rises.

LATER.

Renee’s attire is business formal. She talks to herself in front a large vanity mirror, assertively.

RENEE
I have a masters in business and communication. Organization is my passion, and I excel at making offices run efficiently.

Imani walks out of the bathroom carting a beauty kit. Renee opens it and starts adding jewelry to each loc. She recites her lines again. This time with a humble demeanor.

RENEE (CONT'D)
I have a masters in business and communication. Organization is my passion, and I excel at making offices run efficiently.

IMANI
You're so beautiful, Mommy.

RENEE
Thank you baby. So are you. You're pretty inside and out.

Imani grabs a stool and helps Renee with her accessories.

LATER.

Imani sits on the stool making faces in the vanity mirror. Renee works on Imani's hair; two ponytails finished. She finishes the third one before clipping on accessories.

RENEE
Alright. Alright. You ready?

Imani nods. Renee starts on the final ponytail.

RENEE (CONT'D)
Four times four.

IMANI
Sixteen.

RENEE
Nine times two.

IMANI
Eighteen.

RENEE
Seven times seven.

IMANI
Forty-nine!

RENEE
That's what I'm talking about.

IMANI
Mommy, this is so much thinking. I want to draw like Daddy did.

RENEE
That's fine. But you have to promise me you'll get your degree no matter what.

IMANI
Why?

RENEE
It's something no one can ever take away. It's the key to a better life. And it guarantees you'll always have a job.

IMANI
I don't think I want a job.

RENEE
Dad went to school for his job.

IMANI
Daddy was an artist.

RENEE
Artists like me and your Dad go to school too.

IMANI
You're an artist?

RENEE
I'd say I am.

Renee primps her hair. She holds out her pinky finger.

RENEE (CONT'D)
I wouldn't be where I am if I didn't make my education a priority. Promise me. You can chase your passion or play it safe. I'll support you either way, but I want to see you walking on a stage and getting a diploma as I'm screaming, G*O BABY! THAT'S MY BABY!* Up there in the stands.

Imani giggles and nods. She puts out her pinky.

IMANI
Pinky promise.

INT. STARTUP OFFICE - MORNING

Mist coats the fifteenth floor windows. The office is open-concept, open lay out. MODEPT DELIVERY is etched onto the office's largest wall in matte green and old gold block font.

MONTAGE: Renee, matcha ice tea in hand, flips on the lights. She gets the office ready. Filter. Coffee Beans. Water. Brew. She walks out the kitchen. Paper stacked in the printer. Check. Each computer powered on. She places the wifi password for the day on each desk. Plants watered. Renee holds up a remote. Every flat screen TV in the office is now on.

MONTAGE ENDS.

RICHARD, 30s, Renee's boss, walks in, worried.

RICHARD
Good morning, Renee.

RENEE
Morning, Richard. You've got an 11am, 2pm, and 4pm. Your 9am consultation was cancelled so you'll have some free time this morning.

Renee hands him his itinerary.

RICHARD
You're amazing.

RENEE
Thank you. Also, is something wrong?

RICHARD
No. No, not at all.

RENEE
Well, in that case...

Renee hands him her resume.

RENEE (CONT'D)
I have a masters in business and communication. Organization is my passion, and I excel at making offices run efficiently. I know I'd be a great fit for the office manager position that's currently open.

RICHARD
How did you know about that?

RENEE
You brought it up in our last company meeting.

RICHARD
You're right. Thank you for being so proactive.

RECEPTIONIST DESK - LATER

A client walks up to Renee's desk.

CLIENT
Excuse me, I'm here to see Mr. Lawson.

RENEE
Yes! I'll let him know you're here. Please take a seat over there. Here's a water. And --

EMPLOYEES pass by Renee's desk.

EMPLOYEE 1 (O.S.)
Do you really think we're on the chopping block?

EMPLOYEE 2 (O.S.)
If they don't need you, they're not keeping you. Especially if there's two of you.

Renee looks over to another ASSISTANT across the floor.

LATER.

Renee sets a cup of tea down. The office is empty save a few souls packing up their work.

RICHARD
Renee.

INT. RICHARD'S OFFICE - DAY

Renee's doing her best to keep her composure. She's failing. We see Renee, but never Richard.

RENEE
Can I at least say this.

RICHARD (O.S.)
Go ahead.

RENEE
I go above and beyond. I'm here before lights come on and after they go off. I deserve to keep my job.

RICHARD (O.S.)
I agree. I would've never let you do what you did this morning if I knew this was coming. Lay-offs are happening everywhere. Please know, you did nothing wrong.

RENEE
Can I use you as a reference?

RICHARD (O.S.)
Of course. Don't hesitate to do so.

She feigns a smile, but it doesn't hide anything.

EXT. HILL - DAY

Renee's SUV is parked on a hill above the downtown LA skyline. She's parked, door open, watching the world pass by.

EXT. SCHOOL - DAY

Imani busts out of the school doors into Renee's arms.

RENEE
Hey baby!

Renee swoops her up in an avalanche of kisses.

IMANI
I got them all right Mommy! The times that I table'd were immaculate.

Imani giggles and squeals until she spies her mother's eyes; red and puffy. She holds her Mom's face.

IMANI (CONT'D)
Mommy?

RENEE
I'm okay. Just got a couple of things to figure out. I like how you used your word of the day.

IMANI
I want you to feel immaculate too.

RENEE
I know.

Imani takes Renee's hands. They head towards the SUV.

INT. RENEE'S LOFT APARTMENT - NIGHT

Renee's laying on the floor. Imani's in a circle of drawings and toys. Nearby, her teddy bear, CEE-CEE. She's draws a photo of herself, Renee, Cee-Cee, and a MAN we do not know.

IMANI
Do you think Daddy would like this picture?

RENEE
He'd love it.

IMANI
What part of heaven do you think he's in?

RENEE
The best part.

IMANI
But...

RENEE
Okay, not the best part.

Imani frowns.

RENEE (CONT'D)
He's in the part of Heaven that's best for him. Daddies who go to sleep too soon get to go to the nicest part of Heaven, remember.

IMANI
I wish I could visit. So I could meet him and say -- hey Dad!
(MORE)

IMANI (CONT'D)
I'm Imani and I'm seven and I'm going to be the greatest drawer in the world. I'll draw so much the world's going to run out of paper.

RENEE
If your Dad got to meet you he'd say you're the most special little girl that's ever been born.

Imani smiles.

LATER.

Imani's asleep with Cee-Cee. Renee stands by the window; looks around. The apartment's warm. Furnished. A home. Renee pulls out a chair and opens up her laptop.

INT. UPSCALE OFFICE - DAY

The surroundings exude wealth. UPSCALE OFFICE BOSS (60s), Midwesterner living in LA, finishes up the interview.

UPSCALE OFFICE BOSS
Our policy prohibits unkempt or messy hairstyles.

He gestures towards Renee's locs.

RENEE
Sir, my hair isn't unkempt.

Upscale Office Boss bristles at Renee's polite rebuttal.

EXT. GOVERNMENT BUILDING - DAY

Renee stands outside in a long line of WORKING CLASS PEOPLE. An ELDERLY MAN and SECURITY OFFICER open up the doors.

INT. GOVERNMENT BUILDING - LATER

Renee waits in the slow moving line. She throws her belongings onto the security belt. The PERSON in front of her walks through the security barrier.

LATER.

Renee's sitting beside the Elderly Man, social service worker. He takes her through the process.

ELDERLY MAN
Write down every expense you can think of.

RENEE
Thank you.

ELDERLY MAN
Once we get your application processed, you can get a check in the mail or a debit card.

RENEE
Is it possible to get the card or check while I'm here.

ELDERLY MAN
Sorry, doesn't work that way.

Renee sighs, but keeps a positive face.

INT. RENEE'S LOFT APARTMENT - NIGHT

Renee and Imani eat.

RENEE
So what's your homework.

Imani goes into her back-pack and pulls out a worksheet. Renee looks at it.

RENEE (CONT'D)
What do you want to be when you grow up? I like this one. We're working on it after we eat.

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

RENEE (CONT'D)
Finish your food.

Renee exits the apartment into the --

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Imani peeps out the door. Renee talks with her LANDLORD, 60s, Asian, very direct.

RENEE
I've paid you rent on time every single month, every single year -- for the past ten years. Please. Just this once. I need help.

LANDLORD
They already said no.

RENEE
Can't you put in a good word? This is the only place Imani's ever known.

LANDLORD
Okay. Okay. I'll say something.

RENEE
Thank you.

INT. RENEE'S LOFT APARTMENT - MOMENTS LATER

Renee walks back in to see Imani writing on the worksheet.

RENEE
I like what I'm seeing here.

IMANI
Can I read you what I wrote?

RENEE
Let's hear it.

IMANI
I'm going to be a billionaire when I grow up. I'll have so much money Mommy won't need a job and I won't have to do homework.

RENEE
Let's try this one again.

Amused, Renee sits beside Imani and takes the pencil.

EXT. RENEE'S LOFT APARTMENT - MORNING

Imani's still asleep. Renee's phone is on speaker mode. A repetitive jingle plays. She's looking at her laptop, pen and journal in hand. FOCUS ON: The top of the pages says "Openings." She writes down another address among many. She picks up an envelope. FOCUS ON: "Final Notice" on the front. She tears it open, then CUSTOMER SERVICE picks up.

CUSTOMER SERVICE (V.O.)
Good morning. This is Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, Maya speaking. How many I help you?

RENEE
Hello, Maya. I'm looking to put myself on a payment plan.

INT. BLUE-COLLAR OFFICE - DAY

The space is small. It's still the working upper-class, but you can't see the sky from the windows. BLUE-COLLAR OFFICE BOSS (50s), white, MAGA personified, grills Renee.

BLUE-COLLAR OFFICE BOSS
So you're a single mother?

RENEE
Yes.

BLUE-COLLAR OFFICE BOSS
And where's the father?

RENEE
He passed before she was born.

BLUE-COLLAR OFFICE BOSS
Jesus. That's terrible to hear.

RENEE
Thank you for your concern.

BLUE-COLLAR OFFICE BOSS
Better a widow than messing around with a new man.

Renee does her best not to cuss him out.

INT. LOCAL GROCERY SHOP - DAY

Renee has a hand-cart of items. The WORKER scans them.

WORKER
Twenty four sixty three.

Renee swipes her card. The scanner says: ERROR.

WORKER (CONT'D)
We don't take EBT here.

RENEE
I’m sorry. I didn’t know.

WORKER
Are you going to pay?

Renee looks back to the LINE OF PEOPLE behind her.

RENEE
(quietly)
Sorry. No. Excuse me.

She squeezes past customers leaving the store.

INT. RENEE’S LOFT APARTMENT - SHOWER - NIGHT

Renee sits in the bathroom in a towel. Steam fills the room. She presses her phone. The SOUND of rainfall plays. She slides on her headphones and they overtake the soundscape of her mind. She lays her neck on a neck massager and decompresses. Then, the lights go off. Outside the bathroom.

IMANI (O.S.)
Mommy! Where’d the lights go!?

LATER.

Renee, in pajamas, lights candles. She sits down beside Imani, who looks worried.

IMANI
It’s dark in here.

RENEE
Don’t worry. Nothing’s going to happen.

Renee puts Imani’s sketchbook on the ground. She sits down beside her daughter. Renee gazes at downtown.

RENEE (CONT’D)
It’s really pretty.

She opens the window. The HUM of late-night traffic drifts through the window, mingling with distant voices and sirens, filling the silence of their dark apartment.

IMANI
Yea, it is.

Renee opens the sketchbook, draws a line in the middle of the page, and starts to sketch the skyline.

RENEE
You do yours and I'll do mine.

Imani starts sketching the skyline too.

IMANI
Are we gonna have to leave soon?

RENEE
Don't worry about that.

Renee and Imani draw the world outside their window.

EXT. RENEE'S LOFT APARTMENT - GARDEN - DAY

UNIT MANAGER, 20s, white, pulls weeds out of the ground. He's always looking away from Renee. We see Renee, never his face.

UNIT MANAGER (O.S.)
There's nothing I can do for you.

Renee sits near him with a cup of coffee.

RENEE
Mr. Park said he'd speak to you.

UNIT MANAGER (O.S.)
He did.

RENEE
Is there someone I can speak to at your office? I call. I email. Nothing. It's like a wall.

UNIT MANAGER (O.S.)
That's on purpose. They don't want to hear sob stories.

Renee frowns.

UNIT MANAGER (O.S.) (CONT'D)
I didn't mean it like that.

RENEE
I can take it to court. You can't kick me out.

UNIT MANAGER (O.S.)
Who is going to rent you a room after that? These corporate bastards are going to keep buying all the old buildings and raising the rent.
(MORE)

UNIT MANAGER (O.S.) (CONT'D)
That’s this city’s future. Do you know folks are paying two thousand a month for studios?

RENEE
I need some grace.

UNIT MANAGER (O.S.)
If you leave before the end of the month, I’ll waive what you owe. That’s the best I can do.

EXT. RENEE’S LOFT APARTMENT - NIGHT

Renee fills her SUV to the brim with everything they own. Imani buckles herself in her seat.

INT. SUV - NIGHT

Renee and Imani are in the backseat. It’s an upscale parking lot. Renee has a map of the United States open.

RENEE
What’s this state?

IMANI
Ohio.

Renee points to different states.

IMANI (CONT’D)
New York. Florida. California. And...South Dakota.

RENEE
That’s Nebraska.

IMANI
All those states look like boxes.

Imani yawns, tired.

INT. SUV - DAY

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK! Renee wakes up to a SECURITY GUARD looking into her backseat.

EXT. UPSCALE PARKING LOT - CONTINUOUS

The Security Guard, their mall car near Renee’s SUV, waits.

INT. DOWNTOWN OFFICE - DAY

This office is a pigsty. Renee and Imani sit outside Renee's interview. Renee's troubled. Application in hand, biting the pen. She stares at the words: HOME ADDRESS.

INT. DOWNTOWN OFFICE - INTERVIEW ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

DOWNTOWN OFFICE BOSS (20s), business casual, looks distracted. Imani sits beside Renee during her interview.

RENEE
My last job was an executive assistant position at a local start-up. Before that, I was a manager at a real-estate company. And then before that, I worked with a non-profit building communication tools for high schoolers. I know I can do this job.

DOWNTOWN OFFICE BOSS
Uh-huh.

RENEE
Is something wrong?

DOWNTOWN OFFICE BOSS
(whispering)
Mrs. Johnson, it's just a little *unprofessional* to bring your kid.

IMANI
Is unprofessional a bad word?

Renee grits her teeth.

INT. DOWNTOWN OFFICE - MAIN ENTRANCE - DAY

Renee heads towards the front doors, Imani quickly following behind. Her face contorts. Each step heavier than the last. She's on the brink. She could murder anything moving. Renee swings the office doors open so hard the staff looks.

EXT. DOWNTOWN OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

She throws her journal into the street. Imani grabs her mother by the hips, scared. Renee turns around to see everyone. She gathers herself, grabs the journal, takes her daughter's hand, and walks away.

INT. WOMEN'S SHELTER - NIGHT

Renee's at the front desk with Imani sleeping on the guest couch. A WOMAN (20s), white, holds her SON (3). She's in the back area rocking him to sleep. She watches the women, almost in a trance, until the DESK WORKER comes back to the front.

DESK WORKER
We're out of beds.

RENEE
Can we just stay in the front? On the couch?

DESK WORKER
That's not something I can do. If you check back in the next few days, we might have a bed open.

RENEE
Thank you.

Renee picks Imani up into her arms and exits.

EXT. AFFLUENT NEIGHBORHOOD - NIGHT

Quiet and safe. Renee stands outside her SUV smoking a cigarette. She glances through the bay window of a nearby house. A FAMILY (DAD, MOM, and CHILD) eat dinner. THUMP! Renee sees a POliCE OFFICER shutting the door to their vehicle. The Dad watching closes the curtains.

INT. SUV - NIGHT

Renee starts the car and drives off. Imani's watches the officer fade away in the distance.

IMANI
Mommy, I don't want to live in the car anymore.

RENEE
We'll be back in our old home soon. I promise.

FOCUS ON: The worry racking over Renee's face.

END OF ACT 1

ACT 2

EXT. WORLD FITNESS CENTER - PARKING LOT - NIGHT

SUPER: Six months later...

Sirens blare on the overpass. Unseen and unnoticed, Renee's SUV sits in the parking lot, tucked away.

INT. SUV - NIGHT

Imani's asleep, hugging Cee-Cee. Renee lies beside her. The seats are laid back. Much better to sleep this way. A thick blanket envelops them both. Quietly, Renee digs through her belongings and pulls out a tiny sketchbook. She flips through the pages. FOCUS ON: An intricate sketch of Renee during her pregnancy. The work denotes extraordinary talent. Renee runs her thumb against the writing near the top of the sketch. FOCUS: "To my shining star & our soon-to-be."

IMANI
That's me.

Imani points to Renee's belly in the sketch.

RENEE
That's you.

IMANI
Is Dad's watching over us?

Renee gives a half-hearted smile.

RENEE
I know he is.

Assured, Imani drifts back to sleep.

INT. THE GREEN ORCHID - MORNING

A Mom-and-Pop diner in the heart of South Central. Think I-HOP, but with seasoned food. Also, cheap. Imani's half-eaten plate drips with syrup.

RENEE
Are you done?

Imani nods. Renee takes a bite of her sandwich. CURTIS (17), a young Tupac, dressed in a green hand-me-down uniform, sets a to-go box on the table. Wireless headphones cover his ears.

CURTIS
Here's your bill, Mrs. Johnson.

RENEE
Thank you, Curtis. You listening to your own songs again?

CURTIS
I mean I think I'm packing some heat. You trynna hear?

JEFF (50s), handsome, but a grease-stained workaholic chef, shouts from the kitchen to his son.

JEFF
Boy! Take them headphones off and leave Mrs. Johnson alone!

Curtis pulls them down, clearly exasperated.

CURTIS
Aight, Dad...

RENEE
Another time, promise. But don't ever give up on your dreams, okay.

CURTIS
Never that.

IMANI
I like your music, Curtis!

CURTIS
Your Mom let you listen?

IMANI
Only the stuff with no bad words.

Imani gestures for Curtis to lean in.

IMANI (CONT'D)
I listened to the one with the bad words too. Those are the best ones.

RENEE
Don't lead my baby astray Curtis.

CURTIS
Never that.
(to Imani)
You draw something new yet?

IMANI
I did!

Imani pulls out her sketchbook. FOCUS ON: Another sketch of the black, male angel looking down on Earth.

CURTIS
That’s dope.

IMANI
It’s my Dad.

CURTIS
Can I show you something?

IMANI
Yea!

Curtis pulls out a pencil and adds squiggly lines to the bottom part of the angel’s gown.

CURTIS
If you do squiggles under his gown,
it’ll look like he’s floating.

IMANI
Wow. You’re a genius, Curtis.

CURTIS
Nah, I’m looking at the genius
right here.

Renee sets down money for the bill.

RENEE
C’mon Imani. Time for school.

EXT. SCHOOL - MORNING

Renee fluffs and primps Imani’s bouncy hair.

IMANI
C’mon Mommy! Stop!

RENEE
Just hold up one second.

Renee licks her finger and goes in for a smudge.

IMANI
Eww! Eww!

Imani and Renee laugh and hug.

IMANI (CONT'D)
Good luck, Mommy.

RENEE
Luck has nothing to do with it. If I get it, it's cuz I'm qualified.

IMANI
Right.

Imani heads in. Renee eyes an unopened bag of chips in the trash.

INT. SCHOOL - CONTINUOUS

Imani turns around to see Renee digging deep into the trash to pluck out the bag of chips. Another STUDENT, 8, also sees.

STUDENT
Your Mom's gross.

Imani's face flushes with embarrassment.

INT. TECH OFFICE - CORNER OFFICE - DAY

Sleek. The office feels very "Apple." Renee small-talks with TECH OFFICE BOSS (30s), Indian woman, dressed in all-white.

RENEE
I went back to school because I wanted to understand the academic side to running a business. I didn't need any hands-on experience, I was already living it. I was working in a salon where I lived by the time I was fourteen. I got my cosmetology license at eighteen. I was running two different stores by the time I was nineteen.

TECH OFFICE BOSS
That's impressive. What made you decide to leave all that? It sounds like you could've built an empire.

RENEE
When a management position opened, I put my name in, believe me. But I was going up against folks who had their degree. That's all it took to look over me.

TECH OFFICE BOSS
I...I totally get that. I really do. So I've gotta ask this -- there's six month gap on your resume. What happened?

RENEE
I was laid off around that time. I wasn't fired. You can even call them if you need confirmation.

TECH OFFICE BOSS
Right. Miss Johnson, it's a low-tier secretary position and I'm just not sure where you'd fit in.

RENEE
I know if you just give me a chance, I'll make the most of it.

TECH OFFICE BOSS
I'm sure you'll find something, really soon.

Renee slumps down. Near the edge of the desk, she sees a photo of Tech Office Boss, her HUSBAND, and TWO KIDS.

RENEE
I'm sure I will. Thank you.

EXT. WORLD FITNESS CENTER - NIGHT

Renee flashes her card at the front desk. Imani's with her. A WORLD FITNESS EMPLOYEE gives her an incredulous look. We stay on Renee, never seeing the employee.

WORLD FITNESS EMPLOYEE (O.S.)
M'am, kids aren't allowed here.

RENEE
This hasn't been a problem before.

WORLD FITNESS EMPLOYEE (O.S.)
That's our policy.

RENEE
I just need to get something out of my locker.

WORLD FITNESS EMPLOYEE (O.S.)
I'm really sorry, but I can't let you do that.

KELLY (20s), Afro-Latina Belizean with a faded scar on her head and hair tied up for “professionalism,” intervenes.

KELLY
She’s good. We worked this out. Go clean up the ellipticals.

Grumpily, the World Fitness employee walks away. The embarrassment flushes red on Renee’s face.

RENEE
Thank you for helping us and not asking anything else.

KELLY
Go on now before I change my mind.

LOUNGE AREA - LATER.

Late night GYM-GOERS lift and jog outside the lounge. Renee’s on her laptop, searching for jobs. Imani stares at her worksheet. She doodles on the side of the paper.

IMANI
Mommy, are we poor?

RENEE
No. No. We’re doing just fine.

IMANI
Then why’d you go into the garbage for those chips? Crystal, my friend...she said that’s what poor people do.

RENEE
Look at me. It’s gonna be hard for a little bit. But you gotta keep smiling for me. So I can smile too.

Imani still mopes. Renee puts on a big, goofy smile.

RENEE (CONT’D)
Where’s yours?

IMANI
You look silly.

RENEE
I’m still waiting.

Imani puts on her big, goofy smile.

RENEE (CONT'D)
Now let that smile jiggle through your whole body.

Renee jiggles her body and Imani mimics. From the lounge entrance, Kelly watches the moment with a subtle smile.

INT. WORLD FITNESS CENTER - BATHROOM - LATER

The pitter-patter of water masks Renee & Imani's voices. The shower curtains obscure their figures, save their feet.

RENEE
Get behind your ears Imani.

IMANI
But that's where I keep my gum.

RENEE
Okay, but you don't have any now.

IMANI
But I'll lose all the gum flavor.

RENEE
Rub ya finger back there, get one last taste, then scrub.

LATER.

Renee and Imani exit the shower. They turn the corner into the changing area, but Renee immediately grabs Imani and pulls her back. A MALE EMPLOYEE mops up the floor.

MALE EMPLOYEE
Oh I'm sorry! Sorry.

They leave the bathroom. Relieved, Renee looks behind her to see Imani's back in the stall, hiding.

INT. SUV - LATER

The SUV's parked in the World Fitness parking lot. Renee braids Imani's hair in the backseat.

IMANI
Mommy...

RENEE
Yes, Imani.

IMANI
Why can’t we just ask for our home back?

RENEE
Because you need money for that kinda question.

IMANI
But we have that now, right?

RENEE
No. I didn’t get the job.

IMANI
Oh...

RENEE
But I’m not giving up.

IMANI
But it’s not fair. You work to find work and that’s work. You should get paid for that!

RENEE
I know, but what do we always say?

IMANI
No one’s gonna help you before you help yourself.

RENEE
That goes for everything in life.

Renee’s phone lights up. VOICEMAIL. She presses play. The voice of DAVID (40s), speaks--

DAVID (V.O.)
Hi, Mrs. Johnson. This is David Haskel from Diamond Realty. I’m sorry about calling so late, but a friend of mine forwarded over your resume, and I’d like to set up an interview with you. Give me a call tomorrow at your earliest-

Renee grabs the phone and immediately calls him back.

DAVID
Hello?

RENEE
Hello, Mr. Haskel, this is Renee Johnson.

DAVID
Oh! I didn't expect you to get back to me this late.

A COP CAR pulls into the parking lot. Renee looks at Imani.

RENEE
The minute I saw your voicemail, I called back. I'm very interested in the position.

Imani throws on her seat-belt. Renee climbs to the front and jams the key into the ignition. The SUV sputters --

DAVID (V.O.)
Great. Does 2pm tomorrow work?

RENEE
Yes. That's perfect. See you then.

-- then FINALLY springs to life. Renee drives off.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Sketchy. Dimly-lit. Homeless tents pepper the sidewalk. No place for a mother and daughter. Renee parks.

INT. SUV - CONTINUOUS

Renee turns off the car. Imani looks out the window.

IMANI
I don't like it here.

Renee hops into the backseat.

RENEE
It's just for tonight.

Imani crawls into her lap. Renee grabs the comb and gets back to work on Imani's braids.

END OF ACT 2

ACT 3

INT. SUV - DAY

Renee presses the wrinkles out of a red blouse with a flat iron plugged into the minivan charger. A gray suit with a skirt lays next to her. Her phone rings.

RENEE
Hello?

A hint of concern and frustration washes over her face.

EXT. SCHOOL - DAY

Imani pouts. Renee fumes.

RENEE
That's a bad word to say.

IMANI
They were being stupid.

RENEE
You don't call other kids mother F-E-R. I taught you better than that.

IMANI
You say it.

RENEE
I'm an adult.

Imani huffs.

INT. SCHOOL - BATHROOM - A FEW MOMENTS LATER

Renee applies lipstick while cradling her phone between her ear and shoulder. Imani unbuttons her school uniform.

RENEE
Yes. Just two hours. I'll pick her up right after my interview, I promise. Okay? Thank you!

Renee hangs up.

IMANI
Was that Latoya?

RENEE
Yes. You're staying with her 'til I'm done. Now come on.

Renee grabs Imani's clothes and hurries her into the stall.

EXT. LATOYA'S HOUSE - DAY

Renee bangs on the door. Imani stands behind her. Renee pulls out her phone. The time reads 1:30pm.

IMANI
I don't think anybody's home.

RENEE
Yeah, it looks that way.

She calls LATOYA - BABYSITTER. Straight to voicemail.

RENEE (CONT'D)
Hey Latoya. It's me. I'm at your house. My interview is in thirty minutes. Call me. Please.

Renee shoos Imani to the SUV.

EXT. DIAMOND REALTY - DAY

Renee parks in the shade. It's a nice area. A white area.

INT. SUV - CONTINUOUS

She looks the car dashboard: 1:55pm. Renee buries her face into her hands. She looks into the backseat.

RENEE
Imani, Mommy needs a big favor from you. Alright?

Imani nods.

INT. DIAMOND REALITY - DAY

Renee walks up to the RECEPTIONIST.

RENEE
Hello, I'm here for an interview.

RECEPTIONIST
Mrs. Johnson, right?

RENEE
Yes.

RECEPTIONIST
Great. Just have a seat. Someone will be with you shortly.

RENEE
Thank you.

Renee takes a seat. Worry covers her face. She looks at the clock at the receptionist's desk: 2:15pm

INT. SUV - DAY

Imani slinks down into her carseat, staring outside. IMANI'S POV: TWO ELDERLY WOMAN point and whisper to one another.

INT. DIAMOND REALTY - DAY

David, jovial with big happy cheeks, approaches Renee.

DAVID
Renee Johnson?

RENEE
Yes!

David gestures for Renee to follow him. A nearby digital clock says 2:42pm.

INT. SUV - DAY

Imani wipes sweat away. She moves to the front seat so the AC cools her. Outside, TWO OFFICERS head towards her.

INT. DIAMOND REALTY - DAVID'S OFFICE - DAY

Renee shakes David's hand.

DAVID
It was a pleasure, Miss Johnson.

RENEE
No, the pleasure was all mine.

DAVID
I look forward to working with you. And can I just say. Wow. What a story of perseverance.
(MORE)

DAVID (CONT'D)
You've got the type of attitude our office needs.

RENEE
This is amazing. I can't wait to work here. Thank you so much.

David smiles softly as the two part. The clock reads 3:02pm.

INT. ELEVATOR - DAY

Renee nearly falls to her knees.

RENEE
Thank you, God!

Tears well up. She wipes them away. She did it.

EXT. DIAMOND REALTY - BESIDE RENEE'S SUV - MOMENTS LATER

Renee's smile fades when she sees Officer Belzer and Officer Carter escorting Imani from the SUV.

RENEE
No! Wait! That's my daughter!

IMANI
Mommy!

Imani fights to get free from the officers. Renee sprints to her daughter. She embraces her.

RENEE
Are you okay? What happened?

IMANI
I listened Mommy! I stayed inside!

OFFICER BELZER
Ma'am, please step away from the child.

RENEE
No! That's my daughter.

Officer Belzer steps in between Renee and Imani. Officer Carter picks Imani up.

IMANI
No! Let go of me!

OFFICER BELZER
You left your child in that hot car for over an hour.

RENEE
My interview went over! You can't take her. Please.

Renee tries to get past Officer Belzer to reach Imani. He grabs her by the wrist.

OFFICER
Ma'am, that's enough.

IMANI
Let go! Let go! Mommy!

RENEE
He's hurting her!

Renee tries to rip herself away from Officer Belzer's grasp.

OFFICER BELZER
Ma'am, I said stop!

RENEE
Let go of me!

Officer Belzer pushes Renee onto the trunk of a nearby car. He handcuffs her.

IMANI
Stop! I want my mommy!

RENEE
It's okay, baby. It's okay.

Officer Carter places Imani in the back of his vehicle.

OFFICER BELZER
You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say, can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have a right to an attorney. If you cannot afford one, one will be provided by the court. Do you understand your rights?

RENEE
Yes.

Imani bangs on the rear window, screaming her lungs out. Officer Belzer pulls Renee away to another cop car.

INT. COP CAR - DAY

Renee rests her head on the window, tired and defeated. A voicemail plays. Renee can't hear it, but we can.

LATOYA (V.O.)
Hey, Mrs. Johnson. It's Latoya. I had an emergency come up and forgot to call back. I'm really sorry about that. I hope it wasn't too much of an inconvenience.

The voicemail ends. Renee closes her eyes.

INT. POLICE DEPARTMENT - NIGHT

Officer Belzer takes off Renee's cuffs. He pushes her finger into black ink, then presses it down on thumb-print paper.

OFFICER BELZER
Walk over there.

Renee walks over to a blank wall. A COP stands in front of her with a camera. Renee wipes away tears.

COP
Hands down.

Renee puts them down. FLASH. The camera captures her agony.

INT. INTERROGATION ROOM - LATER

Renee sits in a drab, grey room. HALIMA (30s), black, caseworker, talks about her current predicament.

HALIMA
She was taken to the hospital for heat exhaustion. The EMTs cleared her. She's doing fine.

RENEE
Good. When can I see her?

HALIMA
She's with a foster family. The state filed for immediate custody of the minor.

RENEE
You're taking her away from me.

HALIMA
Renee, let me finish.

RENEE
I want to see my daughter, now! Do you hear me?

Halima just, waits. Finally, Renee crumples.

HALIMA
Is there anyone Imani can stay with?

RENEE
No.

HALIMA
What about her father?

RENEE
He's dead.

HALIMA
Uncles? Aunts? Grandparents on either side?

RENEE
There's no one. Absolutely no one. Cordell and I grew up in foster care. Neither of us knew about any family...I'm all she has.

Halima scribbles down a few notes. She heads for the door.

RENEE (CONT'D)
Am I going to lose her?

A tinge of sympathy washes over Halima for a moment.

INT. COUNTY SUPERIOR COURT - CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

Renee and ATTORNEY LAURA BELL (late 30s), public defender, sit opposite the COUNTY ATTORNEY (60s) and her PARALEGAL.

ATTORNEY LAURA BELL
A Class-E misdemeanor is excessive, considering the circumstances. My client was doing this to better herself and her daughter.

COUNTY ATTORNEY
It's still a clear case of reckless endangerment.

ATTORNEY LAURA BELL
Miss Johnson doesn't deny her actions, but there was no willful act to cause her child harm. She's only asking for leniency. She's willing to plead no contest if there's no jail time involved.

COUNTY ATTORNEY
Why should I agree to that?

Attorney Bell looks at Renee.

RENEE
If I plead not guilty, I stay in jail. I don't have the money to make bail. That means I don't make Imani's court date and I lose my job. There's no one else coming to help her. Please understand.

The County Attorney sighs, turns to Attorney Bell.

COUNTY ATTORNEY
You know how to choose'm Laura.

EXT. COUNTY SUPERIOR COURT - DAY

Renee and Attorney Bell walk towards the street.

ATTORNEY LAURA BELL
You'll be on probation for the next two years. Expect periodic check-ins with the county attorney going forward as well.

RENEE
Um-hum

ATTORNEY LAURA BELL
And you'll be required to take eighty hours of parental courses. You must comply with every provision laid out for you during family court.

RENEE
Absolutely.

ATTORNEY LAURA BELL
Renee, I just need you to understand this.
(MORE)

ATTORNEY LAURA BELL (CONT'D)
Jail time isn't off the table. If you slip up, you won't get another chance.

RENEE
Got it. Laura, what did she mean by that? *You know how to choose'm.*

ATTORNEY LAURA BELL
My Mom could've used someone like me when this happened to us. I'll see you in a couple of days.

Attorney Bell heads back into the courthouse. Renee takes a deep breath and utters a sigh of relief.

INT. DIAMOND REALTY - DAY

The receptionist's expression is none too warm towards Renee.

RECEPTIONIST
I'm sorry, but Mr. Haskel is busy.

RENEE
This will only take a moment.

RECEPTIONIST
I can set up an appointment a little later in the week.

Renee slides past the receptionist and opens the door to --

INT. DIAMOND REALTY - DAVID'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

David conducts another interview. He and the INTERVIEWEE are startled. The receptionist bursts inside.

RECEPTIONIST
I'm so sorry, I couldn't stop her.

DAVID
I'm finishing up anyway.
(to the interviewee)
We'll talk soon.

The interviewee awkwardly leaves. David gestures for the receptionist to close the door.

DAVID (CONT'D)
Sit.

RENEE
Mr. Haskel, I want to apologize for the incident the day I came in.

DAVID
I didn't see it myself, but I'm terribly sorry that happened. I have to ask though...why didn't you bring her in?

RENEE
I tried that before.

DAVID
It would've been fine. Everyone deserves a second chance.

RENEE
I made a mistake. I know that, but I'm ready to turn it around.

DAVID
That's good to hear Renee.

RENEE
So when do I start?

David gives Renee a look.

RENEE (CONT'D)
It's only a misdemeanor. David, I need this. I'll do whatever you need to show I'm not a liability.

DAVID
Renee, the decision's final. The circumstances aren't ideal.

RENEE
I left her in the car so I could get this job! To change those circumstances!

Renee gathers herself after the outburst. Exits.

INT. SUV - DAY

Renee gets inside, slams the door, and sinks into the seat. She looks over the passenger seat to see Cee-Cee staring at her. She picks it up and buries her head in its chest.

END OF ACT 3

ACT 4

EXT. WORLD FITNESS CENTER - DUSK

CLOSED FOR RENOVATIONS. Renee reads the words plastered on the front door. She picks up her duffel bag and looks around.

INT. MOTEL INN - NIGHT

The MOTEL INN EMPLOYEE at the front desk looks Renee up and down, then goes back to reading on her phone.

MOTEL INN EMPLOYEE
Ninety-three a night.

RENEE
Do you think I could get a discount?

MOTEL INN EMPLOYEE
It’s ninety-three a night.

RENEE
Ma’am, I just need to take a shower. It’ll take an hour max.

MOTEL INN EMPLOYEE
Leave or I’ll call the police.

EXT. MOTEL INN - NIGHT

Renee pops open the SUV. Before she gets in...she turns to see a GAS STATION on the other side of the road.

INT. GAS STATION - BATHROOM - NIGHT

She sets a bucket down. Inside it: Toiletries, soap, hair cap, and shampoo. She takes a bunch of paper towels and plops them on the floor before she takes off her shoes.

INT. EDELMAN CHILDREN’S COURT - HALLWAY - MORNING

Renee, well groomed and in her Sunday best, sits on a bench with Attorney Bell going over their case.

ATTORNEY BELL
This is just the initial dependency hearing. You haven't lost custodial rights, nor will you.

ATTORNEY BELL (CONT'D)
Alright. Will Imani be here?

ATTORNEY BELL (CONT'D)
Possibly, but the child doesn't have to attend. Just her attorney and the foster parents.

RENEE
What do I say in there?

ATTORNEY BELL
You don't say anything. Let me handle it. Just know, they're going to bring up things that'll hit close to home. They'll question whether or not you're a good mother. Whether you can provide for Imani. And...they're going to bring up what happened that day.

Renee's apprehensive.

INT. EDELMAN CHILDREN'S COURT - COURTROOM - LATER

Renee looks back to see the courtroom is completely empty except for THE PATTERSON'S (70s), an elderly couple sitting behind them. Renee leans toward Attorney Bell.

RENEE
Are those the foster parents?

Attorney Bell looks over her shoulder. She nods.

ATTORNEY LAURA BELL
Will and Tina Patterson.

Renee and Attorney Bell turn back around to see -- JUDGE MCCULLOCH (70s), black, a gruff man, staring at them. ATTORNEY O'HARA, Imani's attorney, is also present.

JUDGE MCCULLOCH
Can we begin?

ATTORNEY LAURA BELL
Yes.

JUDGE MCCULLOCH
Miss Johnson, do you understand this is the initial dependency hearing in regard to you daughter?

Renee directs her answers to the judge.

RENEE
Yes, your honor.

JUDGE MCCULLOCH
Do you also understand you have not lost parental rights, but based on the decision of the court, Imani may be deemed a dependent of the state until declared otherwise?

RENEE
Yes.

JUDGE MCCULLOCH
Alright. Mrs. O'Hara, have you reached a decision on the juvenile's behalf?

ATTORNEY O'HARA
Yes, based on the initial visit with our therapist and the initial CPS case log, we find it most beneficial to keep Imani in foster care until further notice.

Renee deflates upon hearing this news.

JUDGE MCCULLOCH
What do you have to say, Mrs. Bell?

ATTORNEY LAURA BELL
Mrs. Johnson is a dedicated mother who made a mistake in the midst of job hunting to provide for herself and her daughter.

JUDGE MCCULLOCH
What led to this predicament?

ATTORNEY LAURA BELL
She's currently unemployed and un-housed due to extenuating circumstances.

JUDGE MCCULLOCH
That doesn't sound like an excuse to leave your daughter unattended.

RENEE
The babysitter I hired wasn't home!

ATTORNEY LAURA BELL
Renee...

JUDGE MCCULLOCH
Actually Mrs. Bell, I'd like to address your client directly.

He motions for Renee to stand up. She obliges.

RENEE
There was no one else I could've --

JUDGE MCCULLOCH
We know. That's not my main concern right now. How long have you been unemployed?

RENEE
Six months.

JUDGE MCCULLOCH
Why didn't you file for unemployment?

RENEE
I did! I did. You don't make it easy. If I go in person, there's a line down the block and I can't wait all day with Imani. If I call, it's a hundred options until you're put on hold for an hour before they hang up. So I go on the weekend, and if the office is open, I have to re-explain my case to a new worker who can't pull up my file. And then even if you get the card, you still need an address to get the pin or you can't use--

JUDGE MCCULLOCH
You do what you must do for your child. All I hear are excuses. No matter the intent.

Renee chokes as she say this.

RENEE
I know. I know. I put myself in this situation by not working hard enough. Nobody else should be responsible for my mistakes.
(MORE)

RENEE (CONT'D)
I promise you, I tried everything before I got here.

Judge McCulloch's surprised by the answer. He sighs.

JUDGE MCCULLOCH
The minor will stay a dependent of the state until further notice.

Renee plops down into her seat, the news hitting her hard.

JUDGE MCCULLOCH (CONT'D)
Miss Johnson, I grew up in a family like yours. My father passed when I was young. I understand the need to create self-dependence, but not at the expense of your child. I find your circumstancing trying, but what you did was reprehensible. You haven't lost custody, but your actions from here on will determine such. You won't be telling me you've changed; you'll show me.

Renee bristles at the judge, but holds it in.

EXT. THE GREEN ORCHID - EVENING

Halima and Renee stand outside The Green Orchid. Imani climbs out of the Patterson's car. Imani sees Renee.

IMANI
Mommy!

Renee and Imani run to each other and embrace.

INT. THE GREEN ORCHID - MOMENTS LATER

Halima jots down notes from across the room. Renee cringes at Imani's hair; unwashed and fuzzy. She picks lint from it.

RENEE
Lord...

Cee-Cee sits beside Imani.

RENEE (CONT'D)
Baby, you've go to keep your hands to yourself.

IMANI
They kept calling you Dorito mouth. So I made them stop!

RENEE
Did you get some good licks in?

Imani cracks a slightly mischievous, proud smirk.

IMANI
I got Crystal in the nose.

RENEE
Alright then, Miss Mayweather. This is wrong. Don't hit people unless they hit you from here on out for the rest of your life. Okay?

They pinky promise. Curtis brings over a bowl of ice-cream. Renee gestures for Imani to eat. Imani gobbles her food.

IMANI
Oooooh! Brain freeze! Brain freeze!

RENEE
You gotta push your tongue up!

Renee demonstrates by opening her mouth super wide.

RENEE (CONT'D)
Shee...juh lih dis!

IMANI
(doing the same thing)
Ih dis rite!

RENEE
Uh-huh!

IMANI
Oh...it's gone!

RENEE
See, I told you.

Imani grabs her spoon to go in for another chunk of ice cream. Renee gently stops her at the pass.

RENEE (CONT'D)
Let's wait a few seconds okay.

IMANI
Alright.

RENEE
So...do you like staying with them?

IMANI
They’re okay.

RENEE
And nothing’s happened right? Mr. Will, is he nice? Has he hurt you?

Renee leans in, hoping Imani understands.

IMANI
No.

RENEE
You promise?

IMANI
I’m not lying!

RENEE
Okay, okay.

IMANI
There is this boy. His name’s Arnold.

RENEE
What about him?

IMANI
He gets me Capri-Suns...but then asks me to share with him.

Renee sighs, letting her anxiety calm down.

RENEE
Don’t drink after nobody else, you understand me?

IMANI
Ugh, I know. I smacked him real good last time he tried to.

RENEE
AND...you need to keep your hands to yourself.

IMANI
Okay...okay.

Curtis sets their bill down on the table.

RENEE
Thank you.

CURTIS
No problem.

Curtis turns to Imani.

CURTIS (CONT'D)
Hey Imani. You got any new drawings to show me?

Imani shrugs, doesn't respond.

RENEE
Can you give us a second?

CURTIS
Yeah, sure.

Curtis walks away. Renee slides over to Imani's side.

IMANI
Mommy...

RENEE
Yes, baby?

IMANI
Can I go with you?

RENEE
You're gonna come home real soon Imani, I promise. Just give Mommy a little more time alright.

IMANI
I don't want to.

Renee brings Imani close to her chest. Then, Renee points her elbow into the air. She looks at Imani. Imani giggles. Renee and Imani do their *secret handshake*. Elbow tap. Elbow tap. Forehead tap. Kiss.

RENEE
I miss you, Imani. So much.

IMANI
I miss you too, Mommy.

END OF ACT 4

ACT 5

EXT. THE GREEN ORCHID - DUSK

Renee and Imani sport big smiles in front of the restaurant. The Pattersons wait by their car. SNAP! Halima hands over Renee's phone. Renee and Imani check the photo.

RENEE
Imani...

IMANI
Nice!

THE PHOTO: Renee smiling. Imani digging for gold in her nose. Renee gives Imani a kiss. Halima opens the car door. Renee helps Imani into her seat, barely hiding her indignation for the Pattersons. Mrs. Patterson hands Renee a slip of paper.

MRS. PATTERSON
Here's the house-line. Call anytime between eight and six. If you leave a message, we'll make sure Imani hears it.

MR. PATTERSON
We'll try to find someone around us who can do her hair. Promise.

RENEE
Sure.

They drive off. Halima walks over to her.

RENEE (CONT'D)
They have the kids sharing drinks with each other. That can't be sanitary.

HALIMA
That's the least of your worries. I don't mean to sound harsh, but you need to find a job.

RENEE
What do you think I've been doing?

HALIMA
Imani says she has nightmares about big shadows knocking on glass. She's scared to take a shower or go to the bathroom unless someone stands in front of the door.

RENEE
I did everything I could to keep her safe.

HALIMA
I believe you. And you're going to need to do it again. Take what you can get. I'm not talking about what you're qualified for or what you think you deserve. If you have to flip burgers, do it.

Halima walks to her car. Renee looks back inside to see Jeff grabbing the spatula from Curtis as burgers go up in flames.

INT. THE GREEN ORCHID - JEFF'S OFFICE - LATER

Jeff looks over Renee's resume. Renee eyes a PHOTO of a YOUNGER JEFF, BABY CURTIS, and a YOUNG BLACK WOMAN in Green Orchid uniforms. Jeff's a little uncomfortable.

JEFF
This really doesn't seam like the right place for you.

RENEE
I worked at McDonald's back in college. I can do this.

JEFF
And you've done a lot better since.

RENEE
Which means I'm qualified.

JEFF
I mean, yes, but why here?

RENEE
My home's in your parking lot.

JEFF
Excuse me?

RENEE
There's no tricks in what I'm saying. It's right there. Outside. With everything I own in the backseat. I lost my daughter trying to fix that. I need to get back on my feet no matter what.

JEFF
Nobody does it alone. My wife used to say that a lot.

He walks over to a corner with a stack of boxes and pulls out a green shirt and hat; tosses it to Renee.

JEFF (CONT'D)
I'll see you in the morning.

Renee hugs him. Jeff doesn't hug back.

EXT. THE GREEN ORCHID - MORNING

Jeff and Curtis hop out of their truck to see Renee waiting by the front door. She waves. Curtis smiles. Jeff grunts.

INT. THE GREEN ORCHID - KITCHEN - SAME

Renee, in full Green Orchid attire, stands by the deep fryer.

JEFF
This is the fry dunker. Do you know what we dunk in the fry dunker?

RENEE
Is this a trick question?

JEFF
This is not a trick question.

RENEE
We dunk fries?

JEFF
WE DUNK FRIES!

Jeff dunks the fries.

JEFF (CONT'D)
There's a basket for the regular fries and a basket for when we're given'm a little razzle dazzle.

He sends the batch of fries out to the front. Renee's smiling, really paying attention. Jeff's skeptical.

JEFF (CONT'D)
You must think I'm a plum hick as you hear me talking.

RENEE
Oh no! No! No! No! I'm learning a lot. Regular. Razzle dazzle.

JEFF
Just cuz this ain't a big job don't mean you can treat it willy-nilly.

RENEE
I promise, I know.

JEFF
Here's the number one rule. No one touches nothing If I'm not back here. You understand me?

Jeff grabs another bag of frozen fries. He's about to rip them open until -- A GREEN ORCHID EMPLOYEE walks up.

GREEN ORCHID EMPLOYEE
Mr. Taylor, we've got another one.

JEFF
(to Renee)
I'll be right back.

Jeff takes off his apron and heads out the kitchen.

FRONT OF THE GREEN ORCHID - CONTINUOUS

Curtis slides an order over to Renee.

CURTIS
Can you take this to table five?

RENEE
Sure.

Renee picks up the order heads over to the table. Renee also eyes the predicament Jeff went out to handle. A HOMELESS MAN stands by the front door with Jeff.

HOMELESS MAN
I just need to use the bathroom.

Renee sets the food down at table five.

THE CUSTOMER
Thank you.

RENEE
No problem.

Renee looks back over to Jeff.

JEFF
Just don't be in there forever.

HOMELESS MAN
Thank you.

Jeff walks back into the kitchen. Renee smiles.

INT. FAMILY RESOURCE CENTER - NIGHT

Counseling session. A dozen women with pain on their faces. Renee's seated beside FELECIA KING (50s), black, regal, the lead counselor, listens to a WOMAN, Asian, speak.

WOMAN
It pisses me off. I see a white girl coming out of the same court with the same judge and the same problem as me and getting the world handed to her.

A few WOMAN, white, shift uncomfortably.

FELECIA KING
There's truth to your words. Racial disparities exist in the juvenile dependency system, but the best thing anyone can do is focus on the actions you can take right now to improve your situation.

LATER.

An EXHAUSTED WOMAN speaks.

EXHAUSTED WOMAN
You have to doing everything right. There's really no in-between. You can't take a day off the job or you look like a villain. You miss an interview or have a bad sit down with you social worker and they look at you like you're back at square one. Sometimes I feel like I'm breaking being this superwomen to get my baby back.

Felecia takes the Exhausted Woman's hand.

LATER.

Kelly, hair free from the professionalism, speaks.

KELLY
I finally got to see my little Elijah a few days ago. He's staying with his Grandma right now cuz of everything. I know he's happy, but I know he wants to come home. He wants to be with his Mom.

Felecia whispers to Renee as Kelly speaks in the background.

FELECIA
You don't have to say anything if you don't want to.

Renee nods. She turns her phone over. The screensaver lights up. It's the photo Halima took. THE SCREENSAVER: Renee smiling. Imani digging in her nose. Renee softens.

KELLY
I know I messed up, like bad. But I've been busting my ass everyday trying to get myself together. It gets hard sometimes, but then I remember I'm doing it for him.

Renee hasn't looked up from her phone. Kelly watches her.

FELECIA
We're here to show all of you another way. You've just got to take advantage of it.

The women all murmur in agreement.

FELECIA (CONT'D)
All of you should want your kids to be proud of you, right? Well, this is where it starts.

KELLY
(to Renee)
So what happened to you?

Renee finally looks up from her screensaver.

RENEE
I'm not ready to talk about it.

KELLY
Then why are you here?

Renee frowns. Felecia flashes Kelly a warning look.

FELECIA
When you're ready to talk, you'll know it.

EXT. FAMILY RESOURCE CENTER - LATER

Renee walks out. Kelly's sitting at the bottom, smoking a cigarette. Kelly offers Renee one. Renee accepts. Kelly lights it up. She points at Renee smoking.

KELLY
I seen you come through my job with your daughter.

RENEE
(realizing)
You're the one that let us by at the gym last time. Are you all still closed up?

KELLY
We had our big re-opening yesterday.

RENEE
That's good to hear. Well, again, thank you. I'll see you around.

KELLY
Hey, you mind if I bum a ride? I'll give you a discount next time your membership's up.

INT. SUV - NIGHT

Kelly looks into the backseat. It's noticeably cleaner, with a bunch of blankets thrown over Renee's belongings.

KELLY
You moving?

RENEE
This is my house.

KELLY
(realizing)
My bad.

RENEE
Keep your word on the discount.

Kelly smiles. Appreciating the grace. At the next red light, Renee's eyes focus on Kelly's scar. Kelly doesn't even look up from her phone when she says--

KELLY
You're wondering how I got this? So I was at this club, and this dude tried to holla. I told him no and he threw a bottle at me.

RENEE
I'm sorry that happened.

KELLY
The sessions talk about opening up, so I do. You should try it.

RENEE
How far do you stay from here?

KELLY
Make a left here. And my complex is on the right.

Renee pulls in front of a salmon pink apartment complex. Kelly exits the SUV. Renee surveys the surroundings.

RENEE
How much is this place costing you?

KELLY
Why don't you come inside.

INT. KELLY'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Sparse. One-bedroom unit. Tiny kitchen. Tiny bathroom. Renee eyes an easel with a pile of paintings. Kelly shouts --

KELLY
Angela!

ANGELA (30s), a plump woman with a temp fade, pops her head out of the bedroom, with a bonnet and face-mask on.

ANGELA
What!?

KELLY
Renee, this is my cousin, Angela. Angela, this is a stranger, Renee.

ANGELA
Nice to meet you. Kelly, don't eat my food. Goodnight.

Angela closes her door.

KELLY
I'm paying six-hundred to sleep on the couch.

RENEE
So you're co-leasing?

KELLY
I'm co-leasing this couch.

Kelly pulls food out the fridge. Renee picks up a painting.

RENEE
Is this you or your cousin?

KELLY
All me.

RENEE
It's good.

KELLY
You don't gotta lie, babygirl.

RENEE
You're annoying, but you got some skills. Imani would love this.

KELLY
She's an artist?

RENEE
Just like her Daddy.

KELLY
And where is he?

RENEE
Gone.

Kelly gives a look as she grabs a beer.

RENEE (CONT'D)
Gone, gone.

KELLY
Oh, girl, I'm sorry.

Kelly drags Renee into a hug.

RENEE
Hey!

Surprisingly, Renee feels herself digging into the hug.

KELLY
I can take the hug back.

RENEE
Don’t.

Finally, they let each other go. Kelly takes the painting.

KELLY
My counselor told me to find something that calms me. It doesn’t get easier. They talk about "reunification," getting your kid back ASAP. That’s the goal. That’s what they tell you anyway.

RENEE
How you’d lose him?

KELLY
Next question.

RENEE
I thought we were opening up.

KELLY
I opened up enough today. So how do get your mind off it all?

RENEE
I don’t.

KELLY
C’mon girl, are you a white wall? You gotta have something.

RENEE
Okay, don’t laugh at me for this. Back in the day -- way back when I was in college -- I used to braid hair. Had a whole business popping out the dorms.

KELLY
Get outta here.

RENEE
God’s honest truth. I was doing even more than that when I was younger.

KELLY
Why don’t you do it no more?

RENEE
My license expired a long time ago.

KELLY
You don’t need no license to braid hair.

RENEE
I don’t know when I lost the drive. My husband was always talking about how much everyone can do in life. You don’t ever give up on your dreams, you just gotta give it time till everything’s perfect. But when does anything ever start getting better? You wait a year. Two years. Then you look up and it’s a decade. You get comfortable following somebody else’s dream, even if that dreams just turns into surviving till the next day.

Kelly runs into her bathroom and comes back out with a comb and Shea butter.

KELLY
I’m your first customer. Welcome to your re-opening.

Renee, hesitant for a moment, takes the comb and starts.

EXT. KELLY’S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Renee’s on the railing with her cellphone.

RENEE
It’d mean the world if I could tell her.

MRS. PATTERSON (V.O.)
Just this once. It’s almost their bedtime.

RENEE
Thank you.

INT. THE PATTERSON'S HOME - NIGHT

Mrs. Patterson pulls Imani away from the living room where all of the younger CHILDREN are watching cartoons.

[INTERCUT KELLY'S APARTMENT AND THE PATTERSON'S HOME]

IMANI
Hello?

RENEE
Hey baby.

IMANI
Mommy!

RENEE
I got some good news.

IMANI
Tell me. Tell me.

RENEE
Mommy finished up the first day of her new job!

IMANI
Yay! You did it Mommy! You did it!

RENEE
That's right. I did it.

IMANI
What are you doing?

RENEE
Oh, uhm...I'm working at The Green Orchid. That place you like.

IMANI
No way. You're making burgers.

RENEE
I'm going to be doing more than that.

IMANI
That's so cool.

Renee bursts out laughing.

RENEE
I love you.

IMANI
I love you too, Mommy.

RENEE
And do you like it there?

IMANI
Mister and Mrs. Patterson are nice.

RENEE
I'll be coming to get you soon.

IMANI
You don't have to.

RENEE
What do you mean?

IMANI
I like it here. Mr. And Mrs. Patterson give me seconds and thirds and fourths.

RENEE
But you want to come back with Mommy?

IMANI
I've gotta go. Sponge-bob's on.

RENEE
Wait.

Imani gives the phone back to Mrs. Patterson.

MRS. PATTERSON
I'm sorry. She's already gone.

RENEE
No. No, it's okay.

Renee's face speaks to an unbearable weight hearing this.

MATCH CUT TO:

END OF ACT 5

ACT 6

INT. THE GREEN ORCHID - MORNING

Renee, the SOUND all around her far and distant, places an order down on the table. She throws old food into the trash She stand there, paralyzed, until the voice of AN AGITATED CUSTOMER brings her back to reality.

AGITATED CUSTOMER
This isn't what I ordered!

Agitated Customer holds up a half-eaten burger. Curtis fumbles through the exchange as Renee watches.

CURTIS
Ma'am, you can't get a refund on food you already ate.

Agitated Customer's SON tugs at her shirt.

AGITATED CUSTOMER'S SON
Mom, my tummy hurts! I want to go!

AGITATED CUSTOMER
Give me my money back now!

Renee heads over to the cash register.

RENEE
Can I see your receipt?

AGITATED CUSTOMER
Excuse me?

RENEE
If we made a mistake on your order, it'll show on the receipt.

AGITATED CUSTOMER
Do you think I'm lying?

RENEE
No receipt. No refund. Stop shouting at a child.

Agitated Customer, shamed, slinks away. Renee grabs another tray and heads back out to the floor. Jeff, still in the kitchen, looks impressed. Still, he keeps it to himself.

INT. THE GREEN ORCHID - JANITOR CLOSET - LATER

Renee stacks cleaning supplies in the janitor's closet.

JEFF (O.S.)
Get your head in the game.

Renee sticks her head out of the closet into the hallway.

JEFF (CONT'D)
You can't even handle one bad customer?

CURTIS
I'm just not good with that kinda stuff, Dad.

JEFF
You need to stop daydreaming and get it together. What would your momma say?

CURTIS
(under his breath)
Stop acting like a dick.

JEFF
What did you say?

CURTIS
Nothing...

Renee pulls out a mop and bucket.

INT. THE GREEN ORCHID - BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Fecal matter covers the floor and walls. Renee nearly gags when she opens up the stall. She pours out the entire container of disinfectant. Curtis pops into the bathroom.

CURTIS
Hey Miss Johnson, Dad told me to come--UGH! THAT SMELLS SO BAD!

RENEE
He should make it customers only.

CURTIS
It's a Mom thing. I think some poop particles got in my mouth.

RENEE
Boy, shut up!

EXT. THE GREEN ORCHID - BACK OF THE BUILDING - LATER

Renee's on the phone, frown on her face.

MR. PATTERSON (V.O.)
I'm sorry Mrs. Johnson. Imani won't come to the phone anymore.

RENEE
Can you tell her I called?

MR. PATTERSON (V.O.)
Alright.

Curtis flips over a milk crate and sits beside her. Renee hangs up the phone and fixes her face.

CURTIS
Everything alright.

RENEE
I'm fine, Curtis.

Curtis pulls out his phone and starts playing music. Renee's ears perk up. It's Curtis...rapping.

RENEE (CONT'D)
Do you listen to your own music all the time?

CURTIS
Nah. I just...I just thought you might wanna hear it.

RENEE
Well, I don't.

Curtis' entire mood sours. He's about to turn it off when --

RENEE (CONT'D)
I'm kidding! I'm kidding! Turn it up and lemme hear it.

CURTIS
For real?

RENEE
Yes, but if you're wack, I'm gonna let you know.

Curtis throws on another song of his. They listen.

RENEE (CONT'D)
You need to tighten up them lyrics, but I like it.

CURTIS
You right. Check this though.

Curtis pulls out a small notebook. Renee takes it. She opens it to see a mash of lyrics, poetry, and sketches.

RENEE
You draw too?

CURTIS
Sometimes. I like to visualize what my lyrics are saying, ya know.

RENEE
This is really cool.

CURTIS
Quit playing.

RENEE
I mean it.

A big fat smile appears on Curtis's face.

CURTIS
It helps to keep the noise out.

RENEE
Noise?

CURTIS
Yea. It used to be hard for Mom and Dad before they opened up the shop. I had to stay with my Auntie a lot.

RENEE
Can I ask you a question?

CURTIS
Yea.

RENEE
Your mom always said to keep the bathrooms public?

CURTIS
Momma said folks need to know there's still community left in this world. Family ain't just blood. It's the people you help.

RENEE
I think it's best reason I've ever had to pick up doo-doo.

Curtis laughs, then --

CURTIS
Remember how you told me to never give up on what I'm doing.

RENEE
I still stand by that.

CURTIS
I hope you never give up either.

RENEE
I appreciate you saying that.

CURTIS
And when Imani's back. I'll teach her everything I know about drawing. Okay.

Renee chuckles, the faint inklings of a smile appearing.

EXT. THE GREEN ORCHID - MOMENTS LATER

Curtis switches with another employee on the register. Renee walks into the kitchen while Jeff preps an order.

JEFF
Curtis! Take them headphones off!

Curtis rips them out of his ear, clearly at wit's end.

JEFF (CONT'D)
Thank you for what you did.

RENEE
I see my little girl when I see him. It's nothing. I'd like to pick up some of Curtis's hours.

JEFF
So he can be out there running the streets? No. What's really on your mind, Renee?

RENEE
I got an offer --

JEFF
Not a whole week in and you're already leaving us.

RENEE
-- for you. Let me handle the day to day management. Front and back. You focus on the kitchen. I do everything else -- including handling any homeless people coming in to use the bathroom.

JEFF
I'm not changing my policy.

RENEE
I know. And I love that about you.

Love. Hearing that word flusters him.

RENEE (CONT'D)
Cordell was kind like that, too. Always helping people. I can make it more humane. Pack stuff in there for people need. Toiletries. Tampons. A bigger mirror so they can clean themselves up.

JEFF
I can't pay you nothing more.

RENEE
I'm not asking for more money. Just a name change and some real responsibility. I can help people the same way you're helping me. In my own, small way. Managing a place like this is the whole reason I went to school.

JEFF
I still need you on the floor.

RENEE
That's fine by me.

JEFF
Alright, let's give it a try.

Renee takes Jeff's hand.

RENEE
(tenderly)
Thank you Mr. Taylor.

Blushing, Jeff backs away. He sets down his phone.

JEFF
Just call me Jeff. And...we used to stay in this old spot back in the day. Landlord still owes me a favor. Jot this number down.

Grateful, Renee pulls out her phone to do so.

INT. CHILDCARE CENTER - FRONT DESK - EVENING

Renee waits by the window. She watches from a distance as Imani waves goodbye to Mr. Patterson. She takes Mrs. Patterson's hands as they head to the door. Imani's smiling, laughing, and even skipping. Renee heads to the entrance.

EXT. CHILDCARE CENTER - CONTINUOUS

She opens the doors and calls out.

RENEE
Imani! Hey, babygirl!

Imani's mood shifts. She stops smiling and holds tight to Mrs. Patterson's hand. Renee shifts uneasily seeing this.

INT. CHILDCARE CENTER - VISITATION ROOM - LATER

Imagine a 2nd grade classroom, but the fun's been sucked out of it. Imani fidgets between Renee's legs. These french braids take forever and Imani has never been a fan. Halima jots down notes across the room. Imani lets out a loud sigh. She's sketching as Renee works on her hair.

IMANI
How much longer?

RENEE
As long as it takes.

Imani lets out an even bigger sigh.

RENEE (CONT'D)
Fine. Get up for a second.
You weren't sitting down that long.

IMANI
It's been like...five hours.

RENEE
Fifteen minutes.

IMANI
That's still forever.

RENEE
Imani, come here.

Imani sits back down, unhappy. She scribbles harder on her sketchbook. Renee sees Imani using a black pencil. She keeps circling a drawing of a girl that looks just like her. The girl looks at a big, dark figure hovering over her. The black circle grows thicker and thicker, until the pencil SNAPS! Started, Renee pulls too hard on Imani's hair.

IMANI
Ow!

RENEE
I didn't mean to pull that hard.

IMANI
Just leave my hair alone!

Imani grabs her sketchbook, tears out the pages, and throws them across the room, enraged. Renee scoops up her daughter. Imani digs her head deep into her Mom's chest.

EXT. CHILDCARE CENTER - NIGHT

Renee talks to the Mrs. Patterson near the Pattersons's car.

MRS. PATTERSON
Honestly, we couldn't find anybody who could do her hair around us.

Renee glares past Mrs. Patterson. She watches Halima help Imani into the car. Her eyes focus squarely on Mr. Patterson, who sits in the driver's seat.

MRS. PATTERSON (CONT'D)
Mrs. Johnson?

Renee comes back to the conversation.

RENEE
I'll handle it when I see her.

MRS. PATTERSON
We appreciate it. Have a good day.

RENEE
(pointing to Imani)
Do you mind, if I --

MRS. PATTERSON
Yes? Oh yes! Go ahead.

Renee walks to the car and leans inside.

RENEE
Love you babygirl.

Imani doesn't say anything. Renee kisses her on the forehead. Renee glares at Mr. Patterson, whose opening the door for his wife. Renee gets out of the backseat and closes the door.

MRS. PATTERSON
Have a good day, Mrs. Johnson.

RENEE
Same to you.

The Pattersons drive away. Halima walks up to Renee.

HALIMA
I know that session was hard.

RENEE
Do you observe her foster parents as closely as you observe me?

HALIMA
Mrs. Johnson, they're good people.

RENEE
Imani doesn't come to phone anymore. Those folks are telling her she's not coming back to me.

HALIMA
That's a wild accusation.

RENEE
Please. I know what happens in foster homes.

HALIMA
Are you speaking from experience?

Renee responds with a look. *What do you think?*

END OF ACT 6

ACT 7

INT. SUV - DAY

Renee tells Kelly about the apartment.

RENEE
She thinks she's better off living with her foster parents.

KELLY
Your little girl is hurting. Give her time.

Renee pulls up to a 70s-era beauty salon in the heart of Inglewood. Renee eye's the store name: Stann Creek Boutique.

RENEE
Do you really think your Mom will be down for this?

KELLY
Just prove yourself.

Through the salon's windows: TIANA (50s), store owner, holds ELIJAH (3), Kelly's son, in her arms.

INT. STANN CREEK BOUTIQUE - DAY

MONTAGE: BELIZEAN MEN AND WOMEN work on nails in the front portion of the boutique. WORKERS in the middle section scrape, paint, or soak CLIENT's feet. Tiana and another HAIRSTYLIST work on client's hair. MONTAGE ENDS.

LATER.

Kelly plays with Elijah. She's in pure bliss. Tiana installs box braids on an OLDER CLIENT.

TIANA
I don't need another hairstylist.

KELLY
Mom!

RENEE
Seventy. Thirty.

TIANA
Excuse me?

RENEE
You play it straight.

Renee walks over to a framed hair license on the wall. RENEE'S POV: The name etched on it says "Tiana Ayala."

RENEE (CONT'D)
You're licensed. And I bet everyone else in here is too. So the only way this works out is if the pros outweigh the cons.

TIANA
I don't know you can do anything.

RENEE
(to the Older Client)
I'll do your hair for free next time you come in if you let me finish what she's doing.

OLDER CLIENT
Tiana?

TIANA
(in Spanish)
You don't have to say yes to this crazy woman.

OLDER CLIENT
(to Renee)
I want my next one AND the next one on the house.

RENEE
Done.

OLDER CLIENT
Alright, let her do it.

Tiana backs off. Renee grabs an apron from the wall. She washes her hands and gets to work.

LATER.

Tiana holds Elijah. The shop's empty except family and Renee.

TIANA
He's just the cutest lil thing you'll ever see. As you can see, he's a little clone of me.

RENEE
You and Kelly are the clones.

TIANA
I'm the sexy one.

Kelly's frustrated with Tiana's jovial nature.

TIANA (CONT'D)
You're gonna need to find clients to make back what you're giving me.

RENEE
I'll get it done.

TIANA
Get on Instagram. Don't tell them nothing about this place, just send them the address after they book.

Renee nods. An YOUNG EMPLOYEE comes out the backroom with a bundle of clothes slung across her shoulder and a box of knick-knacks.

YOUNG EMPLOYEE
(in Spanish)
This isn't my job, Kellina!

Kelly holds up a crisp, fifty dollar bill.

KELLY
(in Spanish)
But I thought...

Young Employee exits the house with everything.

TIANA
You shouldn't bribe her.

Kelly points to her scar.

KELLY
You shouldn't have busted up my head. So what now?

TIANA
Leave.

Kelly storms out.

RENEE
Thank you for this opportunity, Mrs. Ayala.

TIANA
Hurry up and get your license.

Renee can see the energy fading from Tiana.

EXT. STANN CREEK BOUTIQUE - LATER

Kelly pushes her belongings to one corner of the SUV. Renee's in the front seat, window down. Kelly hops into --

INT. SUV - CONTINUOUS

Renee starts up the engine. Kelly lights a smoke.

RENEE
You said a man hit you in the head.

KELLY
I lied.

RENEE
I never knew my parents. I'll probably never know what family really means. But it's all I ever thought about for a long time.

KELLY
Who do you think called child services on me? Now, drive.

Renee is shocked by this revelation.

INT. RENEE'S NEW STUDIO APARTMENT - DAY

Renee surveys a 1920s studio apartment. Built in vanity. Hardwood floors. One big window. Possibly the smallest apartment in Los Angeles. The SOFT-SPOKEN LANDLORD speaks.

SOFT SPOKEN LANDLORD
One time offer. Fifteen-hundred deposit. Fifteen-hundred a month. And the app's forty.

RENEE
This is a steal. You know I don't make three times the rent.

SOFT SPOKEN LANDLORD
I like Jeff. So I like you.

RENEE
How soon could I move in?

SOFT SPOKEN LANDLORD
App first, then...tomorrow.

INT. FAMILY RESOURCE CENTER - NIGHT

Stragglers for tonight's session find their seats. Renee sits beside Kelly. Felecia speaks.

FELECIA KING
For tonight's exercise, I want everyone to tell us something you've learned in the past week. It doesn't matter if it's big or small, just open up to the idea this is a safe space to engage. So, would anyone like to go first?

The women murmur to themselves. Renee looks around, then raises her hand. Felecia is somewhat surprised.

FELECIA KING (CONT'D)
Alright Renee, go ahead.

RENEE
I know I don't talk too much in here and it can come off like I'm kinda stand-offish, but it's not like that at all. Knowing I'm not the only person going through this means a lot. Really.

Kelly takes Renee's hand. That was good. She raises hers.

FELECIA KING
Kelly.

KELLY
Forgiving yourself is hard, but forgiving others is so much more work. I ain't ready to do that, but I'm thinking bout it. So that's a step.

The group nods in agreement. Kelly eyes Renee. Renee smiles.

EXT. FAMILY RESOURCE CENTER - NIGHT

Renee hands Kelly a pamphlet. The logo reads: Los Angeles Beauty Academy." They share a smoke outside the building.

RENEE
I did a little research. I can't transfer my license over. It's been way too long. But I can petition to have my work experience count for training hours. I could be taking the exam in a couple of months.

KELLY
Sounds like you've got a plan.

Renee notices something strange about her SUV.

RENEE
Oh...no, no, no.

KELLY
Hey! Hey, what's wrong?

The back-window of her SUV has been smashed in.

RENEE
No. No. No.

Renee starts rummaging through the SUV.

KELLY
Did they take something?

RENEE
They stole my flat iron. I don't know what else right now.

Renee pulls trash bags from the car. She throws Kelly industrial tape. They cover up the window.

RENEE (CONT'D)
I, uh...I don't think it's safe to leave my car out here like this.

It takes Kelly a moment, but then she gets it.

INT. KELLY'S APARTMENT - LATE MORNING

Renee wakes up on the couch. Kelly is on the opposite end asleep. Renee pulls her uniform out of her sleepover bag.

INT. SUV - MOMENTS LATER

Renee hops into her SUV, but it does not turn on.

RENEE
Oh my God. Please, please not now.

Renee bangs on the steering wheel. She pulls out her phone and calls JEFF. It goes straight to voicemail.

RENEE (CONT'D)
Hey Jeff. My car just broke down on me. I'm still coming in.

She hangs up, hops out, and marches to the nearest bus stop.

INT. THE GREEN ORCHID - JEFF'S OFFICE - DAY

Renee walks in, a little out of breath.

RENEE
Hey, I'm really sorry about getting in so late today-

Renee stops mid-sentence. To her surprise, Halima is there.

RENEE (CONT'D)
Did something happen to Imani?

HALIMA
No, Imani's fine.
(to Jeff)
Thanks Mr. Taylor.

Halima walks past Renee.

RENEE
What did she want?

JEFF
Employee verification. Everything's fine, I promise.

Renee rushes after Halima.

EXT. THE GREEN ORCHID - CONTINUOUS

Renee stops Halima right outside the front door.

RENEE
Hey, I just want to let you know, I was only late cuz my car broke down. That's all.

HALIMA
I won't hold that against you, but it may come up in the evidentiary hearing.

RENEE
About that. I'm doing good, right? I'm back on my feet. I've got my apartment. I'm working two jobs now. I should be fine?

HALIMA
What's the other job?

RENEE
I'm...doing consulting.

HALIMA
With or without a hair license?

RENEE
I am trying.

HALIMA
This may come up in the evidentiary hearing too.

RENEE
You told me to do anything.

HALIMA
It's the judge's decision, Renee.

Halima walks off. Before getting into her car, she turns.

HALIMA (CONT'D)
But if it means anything, I think you're doing a good job.

Renee and Halima share a rare smile. Jeff opens the door.

JEFF
Renee.

She heads back in.

END OF ACT 7

ACT 8

INT. THE GREEN ORCHID - BATHROOM - NIGHT

Renee finishes installing a full mirror. There's toiletries, tampons, mouth wash, and more amenities now. She looks at her phone. FOCUS: Her instagram account "@AestheticsbyRenee" has a few followers. She opens up a message and replies.

[THE MESSAGES APPEAR ON SCREEN AS TEXT]
Older Client: I still want my second free session. **Renee:** Of course. **Older Client:** Thanks. :) Sending two friends your way. **Renee:** Thanks so much!

Renee closes her phone and exits.

INT. THE GREEN ORCHID - NIGHT

Closing time. Renee wipes off counter-tops. Jeff cleans the kitchen. Curtis sits in a booth filling up napkin dispensers while playing his song, headphones on. He raps to himself.

CURTIS
Told them boys I was packin', knew that they was lackin', they ain't really trappin', no, they ain't really trappin', had some goons say they bangin', choppas get to sangin', they ain't really slangin', no, they ain't really slangin'...

RENEE
I hope none of that's true.

CURTIS
Nah. You know I'm just vibing.

Jeff shouts from the kitchen.

JEFF
I'm sick of you rapping all that garbage.

CURTIS
Dad, you know this is me right now.

JEFF
And I said what I said. Garbage.

RENEE
Jeff.

JEFF
No, stay out of this.
(back to Curtis)
You know how many cats make it to the league? I'm talking NBA, NFL, and MLB. Less that one percent.

CURTIS
What that gotta do with me?

JEFF
What do you think them odds are for a rapper? For every Jay-Z, you gotta thousand Soulja Boy's.

CURTIS
Soulja Boy's rich. Why is he the only rapper you can ever think of past 2000?

JEFF
That ain't the point! I ain't supporting no stupidity.

CURTIS
Momma would've.

JEFF
Ya momma would've told you to get real.

CURTIS
Nah, you know what Momma would tell you right now? Stop acting like she ain't dead and move on.

RENEE
Curtis!

JEFF
What did you just say?

CURTIS
Man, you heard me. Real talk. When's the last time you even listened to something I did? Better yet, when's the last time you came to one of my events?

JEFF
I'll come when you win something.

Curtis beelines towards Jeff. Renee jumps in between them.

CURTIS
I was in a poetry slam two months ago! I won. And you didn't say nothing to me when I told you.

RENEE
Both of y'all calm down.

JEFF
You think I wanna be stuck in here everyday missing you grow up?

CURTIS
You're in here because you can't let go.

JEFF
You need to shut up right now.

CURTIS
You're rotting in here cuz it's the only thing you got left of Momma!

Jeff pushes Renee out the way, snatches Curtis's headphones off his ears, and smashes them under his feet. Immediately, he realizes what he's done. Curtis picks up his shattered headphones. Angry and broken, he runs out of the restaurant. Renee gives Jeff a death glare and follows Curtis outside.

EXT. THE GREEN ORCHID - CONTINUOUS

Curtis rips off his green orchid uniform. He doesn't know where he's going. He just has to get away from here. Renee follows after him. Renee runs in front of Curtis to stop him. He collapses in her arms.

CURTIS
Those were the last things my momma gave me!

Renee clocks the tears welling up in his eyes.

CURTIS (CONT'D)
That's all I got left of her.

Renee brings Curtis into her arms. Curtis slides to the ground. Renee goes down with him. She lets him push through his anger, his hurt, his shame, then --

RENEE
I understand.

CURTIS
No you don't.

RENEE
Curtis, I've been living with the ghost of someone I love calling out to me for years. It's always eating at me. But it's been a little easier because I've got you -- and I've got your father. Despite him being a big ole dummy.

CURTIS
You're really good for Dad.

RENEE
He's good for me too.

CURTIS
There's something I wanna do.

INT. THE GREEN ORCHID - NIGHT

Jeff sulks in the same spot he started all the problems. Renee and Curtis walk inside.

JEFF
Curtis...

RENEE
Jeff, sit down.

JEFF
Can I just say this?

RENEE
Please, sit down.

Jeff sits down. Curtis sit opposite of him. He pulls his notebook from his pocket, flips through a few pages, then --

CURTIS
My father. My father. He works the land and sows the field. A provider when the honeysuckle drips. He is unshackled though chained, a free slave still bound to his reins. He tiptoes into the dawn, the sunset well lit by God's hand, He tills, he crops, he cuts, he digs. And I, the forgotten son say, BURN IT DOWN. BURN IT DOWN. My father. My father.
(MORE)

CURTIS (CONT'D)
He weeps as he buries her in the grave. How is his mantle replete without his Queen? He clamors at the night. Whispers of the heart rancor with an undying curse, a wail to the heavens. The crops may grow, but I will wither. And I, the forgotten son, say, BURN IT DOWN, BURN IT DOWN. My father. My father. His gaze finds me...and I--I...

Speechless, Curtis hugs his son. Renee wipes away tears.

EXT. THE GREEN ORCHID - NIGHT

Curtis is already in the car. Jeff locks the restaurant doors, Renee beside him.

JEFF
Thank you. Again.

RENEE
He's a good boy.

JEFF
And you're a good woman.

Renee tries to hide how good this makes her feel.

RENEE
I don't know what to say.

JEFF
We almost lost the shop a few years ago. I was ready to close it up, but Tenecia wouldn't let me. She know how much I loved this place and told me to keep fighting.

RENEE
Tenecia. That's your wife's name?

JEFF
She had the same fire I see in you.

RENEE
(touched)
Thank you.

JEFF
Tell me where I'm dropping you off.

RENEE
It’s alright Jeff. I can walk.

JEFF
Don’t make me beg. I need you to be okay. For Imani...and Curtis...

If he could kiss her, he would. But he remains stoic.

JEFF (CONT’D)
...and me.

RENEE
My friend’s place is not too far from here.

Jeff nods, happy.

INT. LOS ANGELES BEAUTY SCHOOL - ADVISER’S OFFICE - MORNING

Renee speaks to an ADVISER (50s), inside her OFFICE.

ADVISER
So here’s the thing, it’s been nearly two decades since you were licensed. In most cases, we’d recommend you start from square one, but we understand just how time-consuming that can be. Based on your experience, we can cut your training hours from 1600 to 500.

RENEE
That’d be about five months right?

ADVISER
Three to five based on whether you’re doing this part-time or full-time.

RENEE
That’s still pretty expensive.

ADVISER
There’s always financial aid. We also have specialized programs for folks who want to work part-time to pay off tuition costs themselves. Whenever you’re ready. Just call.

The adviser hands Renee her business card.

RENEE
Actually, can I ask something?

ADVISER
Sure.

RENEE
What if I wanted to start today?

INT. LOS ANGELES BEAUTY SCHOOL - CLASSROOM - DAY

Renee walks into a salon style classroom. She's been wiping away tears. A dozen STUDENTS sit around their TEACHER as she demonstrates a balayage tutorial on a test subject.

TEACHER
So it's better for the hair if you do a zig-zag part. Also, try to move the part around a lot. Cuz if you always sticks with the same exact part it's going to start damaging your...

The teacher notices Renee standing in the background.

TEACHER (CONT'D)
Can I help you?

RENEE
No. No, you're fine. I'm just a prospective student. I heard good things about your class.

TEACHER
Oh...well thank you! Why don't you come up here with the rest of us.

The room is welcoming. Warm. She takes a seat in the front.

TEACHER (CONT'D)
Like I was saying, parting it like this is important to stop damage from always happening around your middle part...

Renee relaxes, enjoying this moment.

EXT. STAN CREEK BOUTIQUE - DAY

MONTAGE: Kelly's EXTENDED BELIZEAN FAMILY crowd the parking lot. An UNCLE cooks BBQ. Music plays from the boomboxes on the back of the car; all 70s and 80s era Belizean music.

A big-screen TV hooked into a long extension cable plays baseball. Kelly's outside with Elijah. She helps him hold up a whiffle bat. A YOUNGER COUSIN throws the ball. Elijah hits it! He drops the bat and runs the bases. Kelly cheers! MONTAGE ENDS. Renee and Tiana, beer in hand, watch.

RENEE
You have a really big family

TIANA
Doesn't everyone?

RENEE
All I have is Imani.

TIANA
Did you ever look for anyone?

RENEE
I found an address; sent a letter. Nothing ever came back. Since I had Cordell, then Imani, I never thought about it anymore.

TIANA
I'm sorry.

RENEE
Nothing to say sorry about.

Elijah makes it to home base. Everyone cheers.

TIANA
You're going through the same thing Kelly is, right?

RENEE
Um-hum.

TIANA
So you were drinking a lot too?

RENEE
No, but I'm trying to get my baby back just like Kelly.

TIANA
I hope you do.

Tiana walks over to Elijah and Kelly. The young boy happily claws for his grandmother. Kelly quickly protests, but Tiana gives her a look. She backs off, choosing to go sit by Renee. Renee sets her drink down as she sees Kelly coming.

RENEE
You know I've never seen you drink.

KELLY
It's not really my thing anymore.

RENEE
I'd like to know why.

KELLY
It don't matter.

RENEE
You can't pull me into your life
and expect me not to ask questions.

KELLY
Nope. Not doing this.

Kelly gets out of her seat and goes inside.

RENEE
Kelly? Kelly!

Tiana watches them both. Renee follows Kelly into the --

INT. STANN CREEK BOUTIQUE - CONTINUOUS

The middle of the boutique is a buffet. Everything's in pans. FAMILY MEMBERS scoop food into their plates. Kelly pushes through the line of people waiting for food. She picks up her purse from a chair and pulls out a pack of cigarettes.

RENEE
I'm trying to be a good
friend.

KELLY
Then stop pushing me!

Kelly's outburst catches everyone's attention.

EXT. STANN CREEK BOUTIQUE - ALLEY - CONTINUOUS

Kelly bursts into the alley behind the salon. She lights a cigarette. Renee comes out a few moments later.

KELLY
Can we do this intervention another
day?

RENEE
It isn't an intervention if I don't know the problem.

KELLY
I lost my kid. I'mma be a lil messed up in the head. Okay?

RENEE
But what actually happened?

TIANA (O.S.)
She almost killed him. That's what happened.

Tiana walks into the alley.

TIANA (CONT'D)
You reeked of booze that night. You drove knowing how drunk you were.

KELLY
Just shut up.

TIANA
I did the right thing.

KELLY
That's what you tell yourself? I lost Elijah because of you! I'm living on a couch cuz of you. Now you want to "be the Mom" you should've been? You didn't have to call the cops!

TIANA
I called CPS!

KELLY
What did you think was going to happen when you called CPS? You thought they was going to walk in all happy and cool? No big deal, just don't do it again? They bring the cops with them!

Kelly directs her ire toward Renee --

KELLY (CONT'D)
And here you go! Sticking your nose into mess you don't got nothing to do with you after I help you.
(back to Tiana)
And you! You're a horrible mother.

TIANA
Don’t you talk to me like that!

KELLY
What are you gonna do? Bash my head in again!

Kelly turns to Renee.

KELLY (CONT’D)
I’m off your lil redemption tour!
(back to Tiana)
This goes out to the whole family! When I get Elijah back. I’ll make sure you never see him again.

TIANA
When? You’re never gonna get that boy back and you know it.

This jab hits.

TIANA (CONT’D)
(in Spanish)
Kellina...I didn’t mean that.

KELLY
(in Spanish)
Save it.

Folks from inside the house watch. Kelly turns to Renee.

KELLY (CONT’D)
You happy, Renee? Sitting here pretending like you got it all together, judging my ass while you living out ya car! Miss lil high and mighty trynna save everybody else when you can’t even save ya own daughter.

Kelly spits on the ground near Renee, then storms off.

END OF ACT 8

ACT 9

INT. RENEE'S NEW STUDIO APARTMENT - DAY

The soft-spoken landlord opens up the studio apartment door. Renee walks in with a handful of belongings and sets them down. The landlord hands Renee's the keys.

SOFT SPOKEN LANDLORD
If you need anything, I'm in 106.

RENEE
Thank you.

Renee closes the door, walks around the room. She runs her hands over the kitchen counter and opens up the blinds, letting the sunshine spill inside.

INT. CHILDCARE CENTER - VISITATION ROOM - DAY

Imani looks unhappy.

RENEE
I got a new apartment for us. I can't wait for you to see it.

Imani doesn't respond.

RENEE (CONT'D)
Imani.

IMANI
You're lying.

RENEE
Imani, I got us a place to live. I'm telling the truth.

IMANI
I'm never coming home with you.

RENEE
Babygirl, you have to give it time.

Imani tears up.

IMANI
No! You told me what happens in the bad place. No one comes to get you! That's why you're not supposed to ask for help.

RENEE
Imani, that’s not true.

IMANI
Yes it is! Don’t lie! You don’t want me. You want to leave me like Dad!

RENEE
Imani, please.

Renee tries to embrace her, but Imani rips herself away and runs to the exit. Renee goes after her, but Halima cuts her off. Halima goes after Imani, leaving Renee gutted.

EXT. FAMILY RESOURCE CENTER - NIGHT

Renee calls KELLY outside the family counseling room. It goes straight to voicemail. Then --

KELLY (O.S.)
You blow up my phone too much.

Renee turns to see Kelly.

RENEE
You never pick up.

KELLY
I should’ve ignored that stupid voicemail you left.

RENEE
I know, but I need you here. I do.

KELLY
I’m not taking back what I said.

RENEE
I don’t expect you to.

KELLY
And you’re now forever on my list of people I find annoying.

RENEE
So be it.

KELLY
I moved back in with my Momma.

RENEE
Oh my god! Good!

KELLY
(smiling)
Uh-hum. Moving back in really helped my case.

RENEE
So you DID take my advice.

KELLY
Girl, shut up. And, thank you.

RENEE
For what?

KELLY
When I see you, I see me. Taking your hand felt like redemption. Like I was picking myself up.

Kelly holds her tears. Renee leans on her shoulder.

INT. FAMILY RESOURCE CENTER - NIGHT

Renee, seated, looks around the room. Felicia King nods her head, in silent support. She looks the other way to Kelly, who takes her hand. She takes a deep breath, then --

RENEE
My last home was with this old white couple. Not too many kids and they let me do what I wanted. The husband though, he was always looking at me. Just staring too hard and one night, I found out why. I tried to tell my caseworker, my teachers. Nobody cared. So one night I just packed up everything I had and left. I've done everything on my own since I was a child. So I learned to stop depending on other people. I left the foster system believing that until I met Cordell. He came out like me. Unseen. No family. Something about that bonded us. Then he passed right before Imani popped out. I told myself I figured it out before him, so I'll figure it out now. But I never realized how much I leaned on him until I ended up here. I can't go back to the life Imani and I had, but I'm building a new one with the people I love me now.

The session members nods in agreement. Felicia King beams with energy after hearing Renee's words.

FELECIA KING
Thank you for sharing, Renee. And thank you for being here with us. Your words remind me that we succeed when we build community.

EXT. TIANA'S HOME - NIGHT

It's a small house on La Cienega painted blue and red. It sticks out from the rest of the drab houses.

FELECIA KING (V.O.)
Behind any story of redemption, there's always a line of hands, outstretched, pulling us up.

Renee walks up the steps with a small, baked casserole.

INT. TIANA'S HOME - NIGHT

Dinner time. Tiana and Renee sit around a table with dinner prepared. Kelly walks in with Elijah.

KELLY
Look who's up from his nap!

Everybody lets out little squeals of joy as Elijah, this little doe-eyed boy, surveys the entire room.

KELLY (CONT'D)
And it's about time you met your new auntie again, Elijah.

Kelly hands Elijah over to Renee. Renee baby-talks to him.

RENEE
Hey there little man. It's so good to finally meet you.

Elijah stretches his arms back out for Kelly.

RENEE (CONT'D)
Wow! It's like that?

TIANA
That boy just loves his momma.

RENEE
He reminds me of Imani when she was that age.

KELLY
How's she doing?

RENEE
She's -- she's...

Kelly hands Elijah over to Tiana and holds her friend.

EXT. LOS ANGELES BEAUTY ACADEMY - AUDITORIUM - MORNING

Renee, in graduate cap and gown, walks down the aisle to get her license. Jeff, Curtis, Kelly, and Tiana whoop and holler in the stands. The Pattersons sit with Imani a few seats back. Renee smiles in a lovingly embarrassed manner.

LATER.

Renee stands with FIVE YOUNGER MEN & WOMEN. They all hold up their cosmetology license. Curtis take their picture then hands it back to Renee. Tiana pulls Renee to the side. She hands her an envelope. Renee opens it up find cash.

RENEE
What is this?

TIANA
Your full pay for the last couple of months. Now that you're licensed, I'm not getting sued.

RENEE
You and Kelly are amazing.

TIANA
You helped my Kellina, so I help you.

The two hug. Finally, Renee makes her way over to the Pattersons and Imani, who's holding a bouquet.

IMANI
You did good, Mommy.

Imani hands her Mommy the flowers.

RENEE
Thank you so much Imani.

IMANI
I'm really sorry about how I acted last time. I was mean to you.

Imani eye's are glassy with regret. Renee wipes her eyes.

RENEE
It's okay to feel how you feel. We all need to let it out sometimes.

Imani nods, happier. She holds out both of her pinky fingers.

IMANI
I double pinky promise to graduate like you and Dad.

RENEE
That's perfect.

IMANI
I wish you could come live with me and Mrs. Patterson. She makes the best pancakes in the world.

Renee takes in a deep breath, doing her best to keep the smile on her face so Imani doesn't know how much this hurts.

INT. THE GREEN ORCHID - JEFF'S OFFICE - MORNING

Renee interviews NERVOUS TEENAGER, Hispanic.

NERVOUS TEENAGER
I mean, I'm all in, but for part-time. I can do whatever hours you need, so long as I can still go to school...am I bombing right now?

RENEE
You're fine...just breathe.

NERVOUS TEENAGER
Truth be told. I really need this.

Renee goes into the desk and pulls out a uniform.

RENEE
Then I'll see you tomorrow.

INT. THE GREEN ORCHID - SAME

Nervous Teenager walks out, beaming. Renee exits. Jeff approaches.

JEFF
I’m still the boss.

RENEE
For now.

Jeff smirks. He takes off his green apron.

JEFF
We’re closing up the shop early.

INT. JEFF’S TRUCK - DAY

Curtis sits in the middle between Renee and Jeff.

JEFF
Do you two mind if I throw something on?

RENEE
Go ahead.

Jeff grabs the AUX CORD and plugs it into his phone. Immediately, A SONG FROM CURTIS starts playing. Renee’s look of surprise is a sight for the ages.

JEFF
What’s that look for? I ain’t that old. I can get jiggy with it.

CURTIS
Oh my god.

RENEE
You look silly.

JEFF
Don’t hate.

EXT. SUV - DAY

Curtis attaches jumper cables to Renee’s car. Jeff starts his engine.

JEFF
Go ahead Renee!

Renee starts up her car, but it sputters and dies.

RENEE
Nothing!

JEFF
Try it one more time!

Renee starts the SUV again, it sputters and finally turns on.

CURTIS
There we go!

RENEE
Oh thank God!

Jeff jumps out of the truck.

JEFF
We'll deal with that window tomorrow. Let's grab a new battery.

RENEE
Jeff, I can handle it from here.

JEFF
Renee.

Jeff's arms rest on Renee's shoulders. He takes Renee's hand.

JEFF (CONT'D)
Please...I want to do this for *you.*

Renee's caught off guard by his *energy*. She lays her hand on his chest. The quiet romance between them blossoms.

RENEE
Jeff.

They lean in, until --

CURTIS
Ew! Will you two get a room!

JEFF
Curtis! Boy! Don't play with me.

It's been a long time since Renee felt this safe.

RENEE
Fine. Let's be quick about it.

CURTIS
I'm riding with Mrs. Johnson.

Curtis jumps out of his Dad's truck and into the SUV. Renee and Jeff share a chuckle.

INT. EDELMAN CHILDREN'S COURT - HALLWAY - DAY

The corridor is long, expansive, and lonely. Renee's on a bench looking at her hands. They're trembling. She feels a touch on her shoulder. Attorney Bell stands over her.

ATTORNEY LAURA BELL
Take a deep breath.

Renee does so. Attorney Bell heads down the hallway. Renee opens up her phone and gazes at a picture of Imani.

RENEE
Please God, let me bring her home.

INT. EDELMAN CHILDREN'S COURT - COURTROOM - DAY

Renee sits on the stand.

RENEE
This past year has truly tested me. Sometimes, I wondered if I'd even make it this far, but I have, and I'm thankful for it.

Attorney Bell looks to Imani, seated between the Pattersons. Jeff, Curtis, Halima, Tiana, and Kelly are in the gallery.

ATTORNEY LAURA BELL
Tell us what's changed since your first court date.

RENEE
I'm employed and I have an apartment now. I renewed my cosmetology license too. I'll have three avenues to pursue employment: utilizing my decades-long work in organizational management, leaning on my business and communication skills, or going back to my first passion, hair.

ATTORNEY LAURA BELL
Do you think you can provide for Imani?

RENEE
I know I can. I plan on staying at my current job until I'm stable. Both of my bosses are here today to show they support my choice.

Jeff and Tiana nod in agreement.

RENEE (CONT'D)
I love working with them, but they know I'm still on the job hunt. I plan on pursuing intermediate and first-level management jobs a year or two from now.

Attorney Bell walks away. Attorney O'Hara rises.

ATTORNEY O'HARA
At this time, the state has no extenuating argument against reunification. Instead, we ask the court to base their decision, with specific emphasis, on the material conditions of Miss Johnson's current economic situation. Simply put, she's proven herself willing to change, but is Miss Johnson's current, temporary turnaround indicative of a safe, stable environment for Imani?

JUDGE MCCULLOCH
Hm.

The judge focuses on Renee.

JUDGE MCCULLOCH (CONT'D)
How did you get your new place?

RENEE
My boss, Mr. Taylor, put in a good word with the landlord.

JUDGE MCCULLOCH
Could you afford it without the help?

RENEE
Truthfully, no.

JUDGE MCCULLOCH
You were doing hair without a license.

RENEE
So I could afford the apartment.

JUDGE MCCULLOCH
It’s still a reckless decision. Hypothetically, if you’re situation were to worsen or you lost one of these jobs...would you inform the court or abscond with the child?

The entire room bursts into chatter. Renee’s speechless.

RENEE
I would never do that!

ATTORNEY BELL
Judge!

JUDGE MCCULLOCH
Let her speak.

ATTORNEY BELL
But that’s highly --

IMANI
Stop it! Stop shouting at Mommy!

The court turns to see the Patterson’s holding on to Imani who is struggling to get free of their grasp.

IMANI (CONT’D)
Leave her alone!

RENEE
Imani!

Judge McCulloch bangs his gavel, bringing everyone’s attention back to him.

JUDGE MCCULLOCH
Miss Johnson, she’ll be fine. Please focus on what I asked.

Mr. Patterson grabs Imani by the waist and pulls her up. He exits with Imani still fuming. Renee gathers herself, but her voice still trembles. The room falls silent. The tick of the courtroom clock the only sound one can hear.

RENEE
Imani is my world. I’ve been doing whatever it takes to prove I can give her the life she deserves. But I thought I could do everything on my own. I really did. I’d find a new job, get back on my feet, get a new home, and get Imani back. But I found out it wasn’t that easy.
(MORE)

RENEE (CONT'D)
And it took so many people helping me, in so many ways, to get where I am. I'd never run away with Imani, no matter what, because I'm finally dealing with reality. Life's not fair. I'm blessed there's been a community here to help me. I won't throw that away just to prove I can do it on my own. Please...

Renee's eyes plead with the judge.

RENEE (CONT'D)
I need my daughter back in my arms.

Judge McCulloch grunts.

JUDGE MCCULLOCH
We'll take a quick recess. I'll make my final ruling then.

Then bangs his gavel.

INT. EDELMAN CHILDREN'S COURT - HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Renee sits beside Imani.

IMANI
He was being mean!

RENEE
The judge is doing his job.

IMANI
Well his job sucks!

Renee looks at the Pattersons across the room.

IMANI (O.S.) (CONT'D)
I'm sorry.

RENEE
For what?

IMANI
What I said last time. Halima told me it's not true. You want me back.

RENEE
I'll never stop fighting for you no matter how long it takes.

Imani holds out her pinky finger. Renee seals the promise.

INT. EDELMAN'S CHILDREN COURT - COURTROOM - DAY

Judge McCulloch sits down in his seat. Renee, Attorney Bell, Attorney O'Hara, and everyone else inside the courtroom are seated as well. Will, Tina, and Imani are absent. Judge Mcculloch takes a long, deep breath. Idle chatter in the room falls silent. He pauses, flipping through the papers, the room holding its collective breath. Renee stares straight ahead, her heart pounding in her chest

JUDGE MCCULLOCH
This court was built to protect the hearts and lives of our children. For thirty years I've dedicated myself to assisting the boys and girls who come through these hallways in such extenuating circumstances. My verdicts never leave everyone satisfied, but they're always fair.

Judge McCulloch directs his gaze at Renee.

JUDGE MCCULLOCH (CONT'D)
Mrs. Johnson, your situation is not unique, but your conduct is rare. It's not often I see someone change their situation and their outlook, especially in a system where the odds are stacked against you.

Renee's expression lightens up. Is there hope? She grips the edges of her seat, waiting for the judge's response.

JUDGE MCCULLOCH (CONT'D)
Still, I cannot overlook your current conditions. You wouldn't have your housing arrangements without help. It is commendable you found a job, but there's no guarantee this will be permanently sufficient for your daughter. For these reasons, I cannot release the child into your custody.

Soft gasps escapes the courtroom denizens, but the SOUNDS of the courtroom fade away as we FOCUS ON: Renee's expression. Pain turns to anger then to tears. She closes her eyes. Like a bottomless void, Renee can only hear each breath she takes. Attorney Laura Bell's hand grabs her shoulder and Renee grips it with all her might, ready to shatter at any moment. The judge's voice sounds like it's a thousand miles away.

JUDGE MCCULLOCH (CONT'D)
Mrs. Johnson.

Then closer.

JUDGE MCCULLOCH (CONT'D)
Mrs. Johnson.

Finally, the voice that breaks through.

ATTORNEY LAURA BELL
Renee. Renee...

Renee finally returns. She stares at Attorney Bell.

ATTORNEY LAURA BELL (CONT'D)
Listen.

Renee turns to the judge.

JUDGE MCCULLOCH
I can't overlook your choices However, I'd like to skip over a few step in the reunification process.

Renee's confused. She looks at Attorney Bell.

RENEE
What does that mean?

JUDGE MCCULLOCH
It means Imani goes home with you today, if you agree to all of my conditions.

RENEE
Yes! Yes! Yes! Anything, yes!

Judge McCulloch smiles. Renee wraps her arms around Attorney Bell and squeezes her tightly. Renee turns back to the judge.

JUDGE MCCULLOCH
You can't lose this job. Your record has to stay clean. You cannot miss or fail even one court mandated visit or inspection. Do you understand? If anything happens, the state will take back custody of the minor.

RENEE
Thank you.

Judge McCulloch nods, then bangs his gavel.

JUDGE MCCULLOCH
Court is dismissed.

INT. EDELMAN CHILDREN'S COURT - HALLWAY - A FEW MOMENTS LATER

Kelly rocks Renee back and forth in her embrace.

KELLY
You did it babygirl! You did it!

RENEE
Can I be proud and unshaken?

KELLY
No! You gotta get it all.

RENEE
Thank you.

KELLY
You ain’t gotta thank me for this.

RENEE
I wouldn’t be here without you.

KELLY
I mean...that is true.

Renee rolls her eyes. Kelly grins. Jeff and Curtis walk up.

RENEE
Thank you for coming.

Jeff hugs Renee. Renee takes comfort in his embrace for an eternity. Curtis fake coughs. The two move away, blushing.

JEFF
You think you can handle the spot
while me and Curtis are gone?

RENEE
Just enjoy your vacation.

Renee turns to Curtis, before she can say anything -- Curtis sweeps Renee up in a big hug.

CURTIS
I’m down to babysit. I’m about
teach Imani everything I know about
drawing and rapping and cooking --

RENEE
Let’s take it one step at a time.

CURTIS
Most def. We’ll catch you later.

RENEE
Alright, bye.

Jeff and Curtis head to the exit. Attorney Bell and Halima walk out of the courtroom with Judge McCulloch. He bids them adieu and heads off. Renee walks over to them.

RENEE (CONT’D)
Thank you both.

HALIMA
You’re more than welcome.

ATTORNEY LAURA BELL
Same. It’s not over, but this is a good start.

RENEE
I’ll give you a call tomorrow. Anything I need to do, I want to start now.

ATTORNEY LAURA BELL
Sounds good.

Attorney Bell and Halima walk away. Tiana hugs Renee.

TIANA
Don’t be late for work tomorrow.

RENEE
I wouldn’t think of it.

Kelly nudges Renee.

KELLY
She’s waiting for you.

Imani’s outside the entrance doors with the Pattersons.

EXT. EDELMAN CHILDREN'S COURT - DAY

Renee exits the building heading toward Imani and the Pattersons. She scoops up her daughter.

IMANI
Can I come with you now?

RENEE
Yes.

This time, Imani believes her. They hug for so long it might as well be eternity. Renee turns to the Pattersons.

RENEE (CONT'D)
Can she ride with me to your place?

MR. PATTERSON
Of course. We have her stuff packed up.

The couple gets up.

MRS. PATTERSON
1202 W Washington Blvd. We'll see you there.

The Pattersons turn away, but Renee isn't finished.

RENEE
Thank you for taking care of her.

The Pattersons nod, then head off. Imani digs into her pocket. She opens up a folded drawing.

IMANI
I made something for you. See.

Renee takes it; her eyes immediately brim with tears.

RENEE
I love this. I know exactly where to put it when we get home.

Imani takes Renee's hand.

IMANI
If you get lost, I can tell you where to go. I know the way to Mrs. Patterson's house by heart.

RENEE
Do you now?

IMANI
All you have to do is follow me.

RENEE
I'll do just that.

Renee and Imani do their *secret handshake*. Elbow tap. Elbow tap. Forehead tap. Kiss. They head toward Renee's SUV.

EXT. RENEE'S NEW STUDIO APARTMENT - DAY

Renee and Imani park on the street. They hop out of the SUV.

IMANI
This is it?

RENEE
That’s it. Our new home.

IMANI
Will we move again?

RENEE
There’s always a chance. Mommy has a lot to prove to the court before this is all over.

IMANI
I hope we stay here forever.

RENEE
I do too. You want to see inside?

Imani nods her head. Renee takes her hands and heads inside their new apartment building. The sun breaks through the clouds, casting a warm glow over them.

CUT TO:

INT. RENEE'S NEW STUDIO APARTMENT - DAY

FOCUS ON: The exterior of a fridge. Rays of light make it glow like something nigh-on holy. Renee’s hands come into frame. She takes a magnet and places Imani’s drawing from the courthouse onto the fridge: It’s her and Imani outside a house holding hands with smiles on their faces. A black, male angel holds the sun in the sky.

FADE TO BLACK.

THE END.