

FADE IN:

INT. ELEMENTARY SCHOOL HALLWAY - DAY

The back of 7-year-old ASHLEY AYERS'S head SLAMS into a locker door. Her barrettes CLACK off the metal.

An older, bigger girl, WANDA, 10, holds Ashley up against the locker by her collar.

Wanda is flanked by two other girls her age and size. Other students stream by, staying studiously uninvolved.

WANDA

What'd I tell you was gonna happen
if you told on me again?

ASHLEY

You cheated off me.

WANDA

You hear that? Bitch think she got
something to teach me.

HENCHGIRL

Maybe you oughta teach her
something.

WANDA

Time you learned your lesson,
tattletale.

Wanda hauls back a fist. Ashley SQUATS fast, WRENCHING loose of the bully's grip.

Wanda's knuckles CRUNCH as her fist connects with the locker door.

Ashley SWINGS her backpack off her shoulders and THRUSTS it into Wanda's gut.

Wanda falls backwards. Her head SMACKS off the linoleum floor.

Ashley JUMPS on top of her. She straddles the bigger girl and starts pummeling her with tiny fists.

The other girls try to pull Ashley away, but she flails wildly. She KICKS, PUNCHES and BITES hard enough to draw blood from each of them.

A crowd gathers, enveloping the four girls and cheering them on.

INT. PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE - DAY

Ashley and her mother, BLAIR, 30s, sit across the desk from PRINCIPAL DONALD PERETTI, 50s, worn and glum.

PERETTI

This is the fourth time this year,
Mrs. Ayers. I'm sorry. I have no
choice but to recommend suspension.
Again.

INT. CAR - DAY

Blair is all white knuckles and tight lips behind the wheel of her soccer mom SUV.

Ashley holds a Ziploc bag of half-melted ice against her swelling lip and stares out the passenger window at a sea of gridlocked cars.

ASHLEY

It wasn't my fault.

BLAIR

I don't want to hear it, Ashley.

ASHLEY

It wasn't! Why don't you ever
listen to me?

BLAIR

We will deal with this when your
father gets home.

ASHLEY

Whenever that is.

The car in front of them stops short. Blair SLAMS on the brakes and narrowly avoids rear-ending it.

BLAIR

Excuse me? What did you say?

ASHLEY

Nothing.

BLAIR

Your dad works hard to make sure
that you and I have a good life.

ASHLEY

How good can it be if he's never
around for it?

A question she's asked herself a thousand times. Coming from her daughter, it stings that much more. She softens.

BLAIR

Your dad's job isn't like other
jobs, sweetheart. You know the
Beacon's slogan: News...

ASHLEY

...Never sleeps. I know, I know.

Ashley POUTS, and goes back to staring out the window.

Traffic starts crawling forward again.

Blair searches her daughter's reflection in the passenger window for some relief from her own guilt. She chose this life; Ashley didn't.

She takes a deep breath, and gently steps on the accelerator.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)

Mom!

Blair JAMS on the brakes again as a panicked, disheveled man DARTS in front of the car.

BLAIR

Jesus!

The man doesn't even notice. He RUNS past the passenger window, glancing back over his shoulder in terror.

BLAIR (CONT'D)

What the hell?

ASHLEY

I hear sirens.

The distant WAIL of sirens becomes distinct, gets steadily louder.

Another panicked person SPRINTS past the car. Then another.

Suddenly, Blair's SUV is awash in a sea of people RUNNING away from something up ahead.

A woman in a neat business ensemble loses a shoe. She KICKS off the other one rather than slow down.