JUST MERCY

written by
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based on the book by Bryan Stevenson

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FULL YELLOW

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FADE IN:

1 EXT. ESTATE (ALABAMA) - DAY

SUPERIMPOSE: JUNE 7, 1987

3 SHOTS -- LOOKING UP AT a grove of pine trees, leaves and limbs swaying in the breeze, backdropped by the Alabama sky.

A lead weight tied to the end of a cord FLOATS into the air, wraps around a high limb.

REVEAL: WALTER "JOHNNY D" McMILLIAN (40s, black) as he PULLS on the cord to lift the rope up to the top of the tree.

CLOSEUP ON THE ROPE

as he expertly ties a bowline knot and PULLS it up to the treetop.

He hands the excess rope to his EMPLOYEE (30s, black).

WALTER
Let's lay it down right here.

He looks up at the tree once more, respectfully. Then --

CLOSEUP - A CHAINSAW

cuts a notch into the side he wants the tree to fall.
Then he SAWS through from the other side.

The tree falls, CRASHING to the ground.

Walter CLICKS off his saw and looks up, taking a moment to watch the trees dance in the wind. He takes a DEEP BREATH -- at peace. Then looks over to his employee --

WALTER
Alright, let's chop and load!

2 EXT. ESTATE (ALABAMA)/WALTER'S TRUCK - LATER

Walter chains down a load of logs in the back of his WORK TRUCK, parked beside his personal LOWRIDER TRUCK. He hops off the back, looks at his employee.

WALTER
Meet you at the yard.

(CONTINUED)
As his employee starts the truck, Walter looks at the house to see MR. ABNEY (50s, white) cooking something on a BBQ.

WALTER
Okay, Mr. Abney! Gimme a call if you need anything else cleared out!

Mr. Abney gives him a nod, nothing more. But Walter doesn’t let this damper his mood.

EXT./INT. COUNTRY ROAD (ALABAMA)/WALTER’S TRUCK – 3 AFTERNOON

Alabama farmland. TWO JOHN DEERE COTTON PICKERS move through a field as Walter’s truck and trailer drive down the road.

INSIDE THE TRUCK
Walter bobs his head to MUSIC, hand out the window, wind floating through fingers -- free as a bird.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD (ALABAMA)/ROADBLOCK – DAY

He notices something up ahead, slows to a stop to see --

SEVEN POLICE CARS block the road with 14 OFFICERS, guns drawn and aimed at him. He TURNS down the MUSIC. Fear ripples through him as --

SHERIFF TATE (late 30s, white) approaches the truck, unsettling ease in his step.

Walter shows both hands as Tate reaches the window.

WALTER
Afternoon, sir, need to see my license?

SHERIFF TATE
Oh, no, that won’t be necessary.

Tate seems almost friendly as he looks at the trailer of logs, then over the truck, brand new rims on the wheels.

SHERIFF TATE
Nice truck. These rims look expensive.

(CONTINUED)
WALTER
Oh, they ain’t much. Got ‘em from a junkyard.

SHERIFF TATE
(nods; subtle beat)
Who you workin’ for?

WALTER
Run my own pulpin’ business.
(tries to keep it light)
If y’all need any trees cleared, happy to help you out.

Walter smiles, but it’s like Tate didn’t even hear him.

SHERIFF TATE
No boss to check in with, huh?
Must be real nice. Free to roam wherever you want in your fancy truck.

WALTER
(beat; forces laugh)
Not if my wife got somethin’ to say ‘bout it.

SHERIFF TATE
I heard that ain’t stopped you before.
(off Walter’s stare)
Ain’t that right, Johnny D?

Walter locks eyes with him -- how does he know his name? He looks out the windshield to see 3 OFFICERS approaching with guns aimed at his head. Tate leans in close.

SHERIFF TATE
Wanna make a run for it? ‘Cause after what you done, I’d welcome a reason to do this right now.

WALTER
Sir, y’all must be confusin’ me with someone. I don’t know what you think I done, but I was jus’ --

Tate abruptly throws open the door, grabs him by the neck, violently pulls him outside and SLAMS him on the hood. CAMERA PIVOTS, PUSHING IN ON his confusion and pain, framed by metal and sky as we --

CUT TO: *
MONROE COUNTY NEWSCAST (DURING OPENING CREDITS):

-- A LOCAL MONTGOMERY REPORTER speaks to camera outside a bustling courthouse --

NEWS REPORTER
We know Monroeville as the peaceful town where Harper Lee wrote To Kill A Mockingbird. But last year, that peace was shattered by a brutal crime...

-- A PHOTO OF RONDA MORRISON (18, white, girl next door) displays beside him.

NEWS REPORTER
On the 1st of November, 18-year-old Ronda Morrison was found dead at Jackson Cleaners, where she worked as a part-time clerk. Morrison had been strangled and shot by Walter McMillian, known locally as ‘Johnny D.’

-- A MUG SHOT of Walter “Johnny D” McMillian --

-- Sheriff Tate being interviewed on camera --

SHERIFF TATE
He’s got a history of sexual misconduct among other things, so it don’t surprise me he’d do something like this. Guys like that don’t stop unless you make ‘em.

NEWS REPORTER
After a trial that lasted a day and a half, McMillian was convicted by a jury who recommended a life sentence.

-- JUDGE ROBERT E. LEE KEY (60s, white) enters the courthouse.

NEWS REPORTER (V.O.)
But today, Judge Robert E. Lee Key overrode their decision and sentenced McMillian to death.

-- ANN DAVIS (40s) speaks through tears, overwhelmed.

(CONTINUED)
ANN DAVIS
She was always crackin’ jokes, goin’ out of her way to make you smile...
(gets emotional)
How can anyone kill a girl like that?

DAVID WALKER
We’re grateful to Sheriff Tate and law enforcement for never givin’ up. We won’t get Ronda back, but least that bastard won’t be able to do it again.

-- The DAY OF WALTER’S ARREST. 2 OFFICERS and Sheriff Tate drag a stunned Walter past the CAMERAS toward the JAIL. (NOTE: THIS COULD BE A PHOTO.)

NEWS REPORTER
After almost a year of searching, law enforcement arrested McMillian due to the eyewitness testimony of Ralph Myers, who was at the scene when McMillian pulled the trigger.

-- The DAY OF WALTER’S TRIAL. RALPH MYERS (40s, white) shuffles to the court in a prison jumpsuit. (NOTE: THIS COULD BE A PHOTO.)

-- WALTER’S PULLED OUT OF THE COURTHOUSE and thrown into the back of a TRANSPORT VAN in cuffs. A GROUP OF REPORTERS and TOWNSPEOPLE (black and white) surround.

SHERIFF TATE
We promised this community we’d find ‘im and that’s what we did. You do a crime like this in my town, one way or another, you gonna pay for it.

NEWS REPORTER (V.O.)
As McMillian awaits execution at Holman Correctional Facility, a grieving community can take some solace in knowing that today, justice has finally been served.

The doors SLAM shut on Walter, the NEWSCAST fades, replaced by as we PUSH INTO a CLOSEUP that --

MATCH CUT TO:
INT. GEORGIA STATE PRISON - VISITATION ROOM - DAY

Framed through the Plexiglas of a metal door, BRYAN STEVENSON (early-20s), eyes that never stop thinking, stands nervously in an old suit as a GUARD opens the door.

He hesitates before entering the 20-foot room, stools bolted to the floor, metal mesh for walls. It’s obvious he’s not used to being in a place like this. As the door SLAMS behind --

INT. GEORGIA STATE PRISON - VISITATION ROOM - DAY (TWENTY MINUTES LATER)

Bryan sits, staring at a used notebook, WHISPERING his introduction to himself, preparing for what’s ahead.

Then -- chains CLANGING from outside the door, the HAUNTING SOUND increases with his anxiety until --

CLANK! The door opens and a GUARD walks in with the prisoner, HENRY DAVIS. He looks about Bryan’s age, black, and just as worried as he is. As Bryan looks at him, he averts his gaze.

As the Guard UNLOCKS his chains, Bryan notices how weighed down Henry is -- handcuffs on his wrists, chain around his waist, shackles on his ankles.

Taking off the last shackle, the Guard looks up at Bryan.

GUARD
You got one hour.

The door CLANGS shut behind the Guard. Bryan takes a BREATH.

BRYAN
Hi, Mr. Davis. I’m Bryan.

Henry finally glances at him, nods.

HENRY
Henry.

Bryan hesitates, nerves getting the better of him before --

BRYAN
I’m here to, uh... sorry. I mean...

(MORE)
I don’t really have a lot of information to tell you right now.

HENRY
(worried)
Something wrong with my case?

BRYAN
No, no. It’s fine. It’s, uh --
(clears his throat)
The Southern Prisoners Defense Committee sent me to tell you that they don’t have a lawyer for you yet, but they hope to soon.

HENRY
(confused)
You not a lawyer?

BRYAN
Uh, no... I’m still in school, I’m just interning here for the summer.

Henry doesn’t hide his disappointment.

HENRY
So, you can’t tell me nothin’ about my case?

BRYAN
Oh, um. I am supposed to tell you that... you’re not at risk of execution any time in the next year.

Henry stares. Bryan can’t read his expression. Henry puts his head down, lets out a long EXHALE, speaks without looking up --

HENRY
Can you say that again?

BRYAN
(hesitant)
You’re not at risk of execution any time in the next year.

Henry takes a BREATH, slowly nods to himself. When he finally looks up, he has tears in his eyes as he holds his hand out.

HENRY
Best news I’ve heard in a long time.
Bryan grips his hand, surprised as he’s pulled in for a hug.

HENRY
Didn’t want my wife and the kids showin’ up if I had an execution date comin’. Now they can come visit.  
(sincere)
Thank you.

Bryan nods, more at ease. Henry looks at him curiously.

HENRY
You the first person I met in two years that ain’t a inmate or a guard.  
(off Bryan’s surprise)
How old are you?

BRYAN
Twenty-four.

HENRY
(nods)
Me, too.

Pre-lap:  Their LAUGHTER takes us to --

INT. GEORGIA STATE PRISON - VISITATION ROOM - DAY

The two men sit, LAUGHING, mid-conversation --

HENRY
Serious, my ma made me join our church choir when I was like four. I was lead baritone all through high school.

BRYAN
I used to play piano for my church back home.

HENRY
A.M.E.?
(off Bryan’s nod; playful)
God is good...

BRYAN
(plays along)
All the time.

(CONTINUED)
That cracks Henry up. They both know exactly what it’s like to grow up in an African Methodist Episcopal church.

HENRY
Couple of A.M.E. choirboys hangin’ on death row. My mama’s gonna trip.
(beat)
So, what school you at?

BRYAN
Harvard.

HENRY
(shocked)
 Seriously? You goin’ to Harvard? That’s white-boy-status, bro. What the hell you doin’ slummin’ it in here for?

Bryan smiles, really considers before --

BRYAN
I’m in law school because I want to help people. But I haven’t really found the best way to do that yet.
(beat; considers)
Honestly, this internship has been my best experience so far.

HENRY
(beat; for real?)
Workin’ on death row is your best experience? You need to get out more, bro.

Bryan and Henry share a playful smile as Henry grows somber.

HENRY
Your mama must be real proud.
(looks off)
That’s the hardest part, knowin’ all the shit I put her through.

Before Bryan can respond -- CLANK. The Guard opens the door, angry. He strides up to Henry, roughly CUFFS his wrists behind his back.

GUARD
(snarls to Bryan)
You should have been done two hours ago!

(CONTINUED)
BRYAN
(surprised)
I’m sorry, sir, it was my fault.
I didn’t realize the time.

GUARD
You’re supposed to watch the clock.

Henry WINCES in pain as the Guard SQUEEZES his cuffs and YANKS him to a standing position. Bryan stands, more distressed by this than Henry seems to be.

BRYAN
Hey! Stop that! He didn’t do anything!

GUARD
You need to shut your mouth.

HENRY
(off Bryan’s shock)
It’s okay, Bryan.
(beat)
Don’t worry ‘bout me. Just come back.

The officer tries to push him out, but Henry plants his feet, leans back, strong and dignified. He closes his eyes and begins to SING, his baritone voice strong and clear.

HENRY
I’m pressing on, the upward way,/New heights I’m gaining, every day --

The Guard stops pushing for a moment, thrown off by the song.

HENRY
Still praying as, I’m onward bound,/Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.

Bryan stands frozen, Henry’s song stirring something in him. The Guard resumes shoving Henry down the hall, but he doesn’t stop SINGING, his voice ECHOING with his CLANKING chains --

(CONTINUED)
HENRY (O.S.)

Lord lift me up, and let me
stand, / By faith on Heaven’s
tableland, / A higher plane, that I
have found, / Lord, plant my feet on
higher ground.

Bryan remains in the empty room, Henry’s charge to “just
come back” ringing in his ears.

EXT. HARVARD LAW SCHOOL - DAY (ESTABLISHING)

INT. HARVARD LAW SCHOOL - CLASSROOM - DAY

FIND Bryan, one of FOUR STUDENTS OF COLOR in a class of
30. BETSY BARTHOLET (40s, white) leads the seminar.

PROFESSOR BARTHOLET

In the 1972 Furman v. Georgia
decision, the Supreme Court
strikes down the death penalty
because of widespread racial bias.
Four years later, the Court
upholds a new death penalty scheme
in Gregg, unwilling to presume
racial discrimination without
evidence. This year, Warren
McCleskey’s lawyers presented
evidence that the new death
penalty is as racially biased as
the old one. But they lose. Why?

A LAW STUDENT (20s, white), entitled, doesn’t raise his
hand --

LAW STUDENT

McCleskey didn’t get the death
penalty because he was black, he
got it because he killed a cop in
cold blood.

Bryan exchanges a look with another BLACK STUDENT,
they’re used to this clown. Professor Bartholet can see
Bryan’s wheels turning.

PROFESSOR BARTHOLET

Bryan? Thoughts?

Bryan would rather not engage, but he can’t stop himself.

(CONTINUED)
BRYAN
The Baldus study they presented proved that in Georgia, you’re 11 times more likely to get the death penalty if the victim is white than if the victim is black, 22 times more likely if the defendant is black and the victim is white. Every way you look at it, race is the greatest predictor of who gets the death penalty.

LAW STUDENT
The reliability of that study is debatable.

Bryan glances at the Law Student, used to this type of classmate over the years. He doesn’t hold back --

BRYAN
Over 2000 murder cases subjected to 230 nonracial variables. It was reliable enough for the Supreme Court to accept.

LAW STUDENT
But they still rejected the argument.

BRYAN
Because they were afraid of trying to fix something they believed was unfixable. And they were wrong.

(beat)
In his dissent, Justice Brennan ridiculed the ruling as ‘a fear of too much justice.’

LAW STUDENT
I think they’re just being realistic. A certain amount of bias in our judicial system is inevitable. It’s just a hard truth we have to learn to live with.

This triggers a fire in Bryan unseen before.

BRYAN
Live with? The whole point is that some of us don’t have that luxury.

Bryan takes a beat. All eyes on him now as --
BRYAN
I grew up in a racially segregated community in Delaware, where black kids weren’t allowed to go to public school. But in Brown vs. Board of Education, the court didn’t say segregation was inevitable, they said it was unconstitutional. They forced the country to open up the schools, and that’s the only reason I’m in this classroom. That’s what the law can do when it’s used for justice.

(beat)
As long as the death penalty is administered on the basis of race or class, it’s as big a stain on our country as segregation or slavery. And I don’t think it’s naive to believe we can do something to change it.

LAW STUDENT
Well, five Justices of the Supreme Court would disagree with you there.

Bryan stares at the Student, more determined despite the odds.

CHRISTY (V.O.)
(pre-lap)
Mom’s still mad at you.

INT./EXT. BRYAN’S CHILDHOOD HOME - MORNING
Bryan walks with his sister, CHRISTY (24), carrying boxes.

BRYAN
For what?

CHRISTY
I don’t know, maybe for rejecting all those job offers so you can be poor in Alabama.
(see Howard)
And Howie telling her about that lynching in Mobile didn’t help.

HOWARD JR. (28) takes the box from Christy and loads it into Bryan’s Honda Civic.

(CONTINUED)
BRYAN
What!

HOWARD JR.
(off Bryan's look)
I said it happened seven years ago!

CHRISTY
(sarcastic)
Yeah, that made it better.

BRYAN
(shakes his head)
You guys aren’t helping.

HOWARD SR. (60s) looks out from the hood.

HOWARD SR.
When was the last time you checked your oil?
(off Bryan’s shrug)
I just added three quarts, but you should check again when you get there.

BRYAN
Thanks, Dad.

HOWARD SR.
You talk to your mom yet?

BRYAN
(looks around)
Where is she?

OFF their looks --

10 EXT. STEVENSON FAMILY HOME - BACK PORCH - MOMENTS LATER
Bryan finds Alice sweeping the porch. She doesn’t look up.

BRYAN
What are you doing, Mom?
(off her sweeping)
You not gonna come say bye?

Alice sweeps a few more times before finally giving him a piece of her mind.

(CONTINUED)
ALICE
I know you got your law degree
now, and you think you’re grown,
but you’re still my child, and I’m
the one that has to deal with your
funeral arrangements if you get
killed down there.

Bryan can’t help but smile at the overreaction.

BRYAN
Come on, Mom.

ALICE
You think this is funny? If you
can’t see the danger in what
you’re doing, then you should, ask
Harvard for your money back, cause
you used to be smarter than that.

Bryan chooses not to respond, just looks at her with
care. Alice looks away, sits down on the porch steps.
Bryan follows her lead, sits beside her.

ALICE
Howie told me you’re making
fourteen thousand dollars a year?

BRYAN
What didn’t he tell you?

ALICE
You could have taken any of those
job offers in D.C. and been set
for the rest of your life.

BRYAN
You know that’s not what I want to
do.

ALICE
I didn’t want to work two jobs my
whole life, either, but I did it
so my children could get ahead,
not so they could go make half of
what I was making ten years ago.

BRYAN
You taught me not to care about
money, to do what my heart tells
me is right.

ALICE
(grows emotional)
What about my heart?
(MORE)
The love between them is evident. Bryan looks down, choosing his words carefully before speaking with care.

**BRYAN**
That first time I visited death row, I never expected to meet someone the same age as me, who grew up on the same music, in a neighborhood just like ours. He could have been any of the guys from Sussex County.

(beat)
I don’t want to move so far away from you, either. But you taught me to fight for the people who need it most. That’s why I’m going down there. I know I can help them.

Alice looks at him, sees his passion, softening as --

**ALICE**
I’m very proud of you.

(lets that sink in)
And I know your heart is in the right place, but it’s not that simple. What you’re doing is going to make a lot of people upset.

(looks at him; serious)
You better be careful.

**BRYAN**
(nods; sincere)
I will.

Bryan pulls her into a hug. She puts her head on his shoulder, enjoying a final moment with her son.

**EXT./INT. HIGHWAY(ALABAMA)/BRYAN’S CIVIC - DAY**

Bryan drives down the highway, lush grass and tall, stately pines on either side as MUSIC plays on the radio.

The back of his Civic is stacked with boxes and books. He passes a large sign that reads: “WELCOME TO ALABAMA THE BEAUTIFUL.”
As MUSIC continues to play, Bryan watches snapshots of Alabama float by his window --
-- 2 JOHN DEERE COTTON PICKERS drive through a field of cotton.

-- A WHITE MAN waxes a new truck in the driveway of a classic middle-class home, 2 WHITE KIDS play in a sprinkler.

-- A BLACK GROUNDSKEEPER mows the lawn of a palatial home, waves to Bryan as he passes.

-- A BAPTIST CHURCH, the sign out front spelling out the Alabama state motto: “WE DARE DEFEND OUR RIGHTS.”

EXT. OFFICE BUILDING (MONTGOMERY) - DAY

Bryan’s brown Civic pulls up to an old building in a decent part of town.

INT. HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Bryan walks down a hall, hears the fiery voice of EVA ANSLEY arguing with BILL FREEMAN (50s, white).

EVA (O.S.)

Are you kiddin’ me? This is complete hogshit and you know it. We had an agreement to rent this space for the next two years. You said it was a done deal.

Bryan turns the corner, sees Eva with the owner, her son CHRIS (6) beside her, plays with a Transformers toy.

BILL

That was before I knew what you were doing here.

EVA

We’re giving poor people their constitutional right to counsel, Bill! You wanna explain to my son what the hell you think is wrong with that?

Bryan interrupts gently, trying to ease the tension.

BRYAN

Hey, Eva...
EVA
(turns to Bryan)
Bryan, thank God.
(to Bill)
This is the Executive Director of
our organization, who just moved
here to work in the office you
promised us.

BILL
(to Eva)
You said you were the director.

EVA
Director of operations, and you’re
making me look really bad in front
of my boss right now.

BILL
(to Bryan)
She told me you were a lawyer, but
nobody said it was for murderers
on death row.

BRYAN
We’re providing legal services to
people who need help.

BILL
And you’ll have to do it someplace
else, ‘cause I can’t have people
like that coming around here.

Bryan takes a breath. He’s used to people judging his
clients like this.

BRYAN
Not everyone is in there for good
reason.

BILL
They’re locked up for something,
and I don’t want that something in
my building. Sorry, but it ain’t
up for discussion.

EVA
They put Jesus on death row, Bill.
He wasn’t such a bad guy.
(ALT LINE)
How ‘bout your complete lack of
integrity, Bill? That up for
discussion?

(CONTINUED)
BILL
   (sarcastic smile)
   Y’all have a good day now.

The owner disappears into his office, leaving them in the hall. Eva shakes her head.

EVA
   (under her breath)
   What a piece of shit.
   (to Bryan; serious)
   This wasn’t how I wanted to welcome you. I’ll find an office, I just have to change my tactics.

BRYAN
   It’ll be find, we can work from anywhere.

EVA
   Maybe Chris can clear some of his toys out of the living room for you?

BRYAN
   (to Chris)
   Oh, yeah?

CHRIS
   I’ll think about it.

Eva and Bryan LAUGH. She hugs him as they walk away.

EVA
   Sorry for cussing, baby.

CHRIS
   It’s okay.

EVA
   He was a piece of shit, though.

EXT. BRYAN’S CIVIC/LANDLORD’S HOUSE - AFTERNOON

Bryan gets out of his car, in front of an old, mid-sized house. He looks around, notices a WHITE WOMAN staring from her porch. He waves. She goes inside, suspicious.

HONK, HONK! He turns to see a Bronco zipping toward him, the driver waves as she pulls to a stop beside him. This is EVA ANSLEY (30s), a true Southern firebrand.

EVA
   Welcome to Alabama!

(CONTINUED)
Hey, Eva.

Am I late?

I just got here.

She jumps out of the truck, her son CHRIS (6) right behind.

She surprises him with a big hug, a bit much for their first meeting but he goes along with it. As she steps back --

This is my son, Chris.

Hey, Chris.

Say hi to Mr. Stevenson.

Chris buries his face in Eva’s hip, too shy to respond.

(CONTINUED)
BRYAN
It’s okay. I get shy, too.

Eva smiles, appreciates Bryan’s gesture.

EVA
What can we carry?

EXT. BRYAN’S CIVIC/LANDLORD’S HOUSE - AFTERNOON (MOMENTS LATER)

Eva, Chris, and Bryan grab boxes from the back of his car and walk to the front door.

BRYAN
Thanks for all your help getting things set up.

EVA
I’m so pissed I still haven’t found an office. I was hoping to have one by the time you got here, but I just got our third rejection this week. I swear someone at the state department is trying to shut us down before we even get started.

BRYAN
We can work from home till our funds come in. I should have our matching requirements for the federal grant soon.

EVA
As soon as that clears, I’ll find us an office if I have to break someone’s kneecaps. (to Chris)
Just kidding, baby.

They reach the front door. Before Bryan even has a chance to knock, the door OPENS to reveal MRS. FRANKLIN (50s, white), a deceivingly kind face, looks at Bryan, seems confused.

BRYAN
Mrs. Franklin?

MRS. FRANKLIN
Yes?

BRYAN
I’m Bryan, we spoke on the phone about your cottage for rent?
MRS. FRANKLIN

(beat)
You’re the lawyer from Harvard?

BRYAN

Yes, ma’am.

Off her silence, Bryan smiles, tries to keep it friendly.

BRYAN

Uh, these are my friends Eva and Chris, here to help me move in.

EVA

Good to meet you, ma’am.

MRS. FRANKLIN

(nods; then)
Gimme a sec.

She heads inside, closes the door. Eva smiles at Bryan.

EVA

(sarcastic)
She seems like a lovely woman.

The door OPENS. It’s MR. FRANKLIN, sent to deal with the problem. He looks from Bryan to Eva, addressing her as --

MR. FRANKLIN

I’m sorry, but we’re not renting the place anymore.

BRYAN

(gets his attention)
I spoke to your wife three times last week. We had an agreement to --

MR. FRANKLIN

I ain’t disputin’ that. I’m just sayin’ it ain’t for rent no more. Sorry for the confusion.

Before Bryan can respond, he shuts the door.

With that, he closes the door. Bryan exchanges a look with Eva of shared frustration.

EVA

What a piece a shit.
BRYAN
(sarcastic)
Maybe I should have sent them a photo.

EVA
We should sue ‘em for housing discrimination.

BRYAN
(as he turns)
I think we have enough on our plate right now.

Eva grabs Chris’ hand as they walk back, looks to Bryan.

EVA
You’ll stay with us as long as you need. Daddy’s cookin’ chicken tonight, and Chris is gonna help peel some potatoes.
(hugs Chris)
Sorry for cussing, baby.

Bryan can’t help but smile, a closeness here already as they head to their cars.

EVA (V.O.)
(pre-lap)
I was writing a paper on capital punishment when I met my first death row inmate, Wayne Ritter.

INT. EVA’S HOUSE - DINING ROOM - EVENING

Chris builds some Lincoln Logs on the couch as Bryan sits at the table with Eva and DOUG (30s), almost done with dinner. Wine for Eva and Doug, water for Bryan. Eva has the floor:

EVA
He and his friend robbed a pawnshop in Mobile. His friend shot the owner and they both got death.
(beat)
When he sat down across from me, I was pissin’ myself, I was so scared. First thing he did was fold his arms across his chest and ask me why his belt got arrested.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)
(off Bryan’s confusion)
Then he just stared at me for like twenty seconds...

DOUG
That gets longer every time she tells this story.

EVA
(slaps Doug playfully)
Then, he leaned forward and said, my belt got arrested because it held up a pair of pants.

Bryan and Doug LAUGH as Eva nods, this really happened.

EVA
We were instant friends.
(somber beat)
The night he was executed, he asked me to throw him a party and play ‘Born to be Wild’ on repeat.

Eva smiles at the irony, gets a little emotional. Doug rubs her back with care.

DOUG*
It was an awful party.

BRYAN
Is he the reason you got into this?

EVA*(nods)
His attorney was openly in favor of the death penalty because he thought mad dogs ought to die. Everyone on the row either had shitty representation or none at all. So I just started calling every law firm in the Yellow Pages to find people to help. I was averaging about twenty rejections a day.

DOUG
She was pretty stressed out.
EVA  
(nods; to Bryan)  
I was just about to give up, when  
I got a call from this Harvard  
lawyer saying he just passed the  
Alabama Bar and was planning to  
start a legal center for death row  
inmates. I was in before you even  
offered me the job.  

BRYAN  
And before you found out I  
couldn’t pay you anything.  

EVA  
I haven’t told Doug that part yet.  

DOUG  
(playful)  
Well, if we ain’t gettin’ rich off  
this venture of yours, I’m out.  

Off their LAUGH, Chris comes over and crawls into Eva’s  

lap.  

EVA  
You tired, baby?  
(off his nod)  
Let’s get you to bed.
Bryan drives down a long country road. Ready, but tense as he drives past 25 PRISONERS swinging hoes and sickles to cut the grass as 2 GUARDS on horseback watch over them. The snapshot of slavery gives him chills.

Bryan’s Civic pulls into the parking lot. He gets out, straightens his jacket, and heads inside, determined.

Bryan’s first time in the massive prison complex. He waits as JEREMY (early 30s, white), a muscular, heavily-tattooed guard, looks at his I.D., signs him in. Bryan notices the Confederate flag tattooed on his forearm.

Jeremy’s SUPERVISOR (50s, white) doesn’t look up from his auto magazine.

BRYAN
I scheduled meetings with six clients today.

JEREMY
I ain’t seen you before.

BRYAN
(calmingly)
I just moved here.

Jeremy SUCKS at his teeth, stares at the I.D. again.

JEREMY
You really a lawyer?

BRYAN
(is he really asking?)
Yes.

Jeremy looks him up and down, suspicious.

JEREMY
Gonna have to search you... Go in that room and take everything off.
BRYAN
(beat; shocked)
Attorneys aren’t strip-searched
for legal visits.

JEREMY
You ain’t gonna visit shit unless
you get in that room and strip.

Bryan stares at Jeremy, then to his supervisor, who still
hasn’t looked up from his magazine.

JEREMY
Let’s go.

Bryan hesitates, wanting to argue, but quickly realizing
he has no other choice.

INT. HOLMAN PRISON - BATHROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Bryan stands shirtless as Jeremy feels through his jacket
before tossing it on the table.

JEREMY
Pants and underwear.

Bryan looks at him a beat before stripping the rest off
and handing it to him. Jeremy feels through his pants,
then --

JEREMY
Bend over and spread.

Bryan doesn’t move. This is as far as he goes.

Jeremy decides it’s not worth the battle. After a beat,
he tosses Bryan’s pants on the table. Lets him off the
hook.

JEREMY
You’re clear.

He turns and walks out the door. Bryan takes a moment to
let his adrenaline settle, the humiliation evident on his
face.

He closes his eyes, catches his breath. When he opens
them, enough strength has returned to grab his clothes.

Pants -- shirt -- tie. Then finally, his jacket. Each
layer rebuilding a piece of his dignity until --

(CONTINUED)
He straightens his tie, pulls his shoulders back, puts on his game face, and walks out the door as --

HERBERT (V.O.)
(pre-lap)
I f-f-fought in Nam, F-First Cavalry Division...

INT. HOLMAN PRISON - VISITING ROOM - LATER

Bryan sits at a table in a bare room. Across from him sits HERBERT RICHARDSON (mid-40s). A small, introverted black man, with a stutter and nervous tick.

HERBERT
Saw a lot of friends d-d-die.
Doctor said I got the PTSD.

Herbert’s stutter surfaces when he speaks of something upsetting. Bryan takes notes as Herbert looks off.

HERBERT
I did what they said I did. I p-put that bomb on her porch.
(regretful)
I know it d-d-don’t make sense, b- but I ain’t mean to kill nobody.

Bryan looks at him compassionately. Takes him at his word.

BRYAN
I believe you.

Herbert takes that in, hasn’t heard those words in a while.

HERBERT
I think they gonna s-s-set my execution soon. Last lawyer said there ain’t nothin’ left to do.

Bryan sees the fear in Herbert’s eyes. Speaks gently --

BRYAN
There’s always something we can do.
(deep care and sincerity)
Whatever you’ve done, your life is still meaningful, and I’m going to do everything possible to keep them from taking it.

(CONTINUED)
Herbert can barely believe his ears. Off his nod --

BRYAN
Can you tell me more about what happened?

A SHORT MONTAGE

THE DAY PASSES BY --

-- Bryan’s coat is on the chair behind him now, trying to keep up, taking down notes as he listens to another BLACK PRISONER, once again across the table. Then --

-- TWO MORE PRISONERS, one HISPANIC, one WHITE. SHORT JUMP CUTS. Similar framing. Sharing their stories, BITS OF DIALOGUE cut to form a single story of an unfair system --

PRISONERS
Met my lawyer one time.../Swear he on somethin’, didn’t even know my name.../All white jury.../Told me plead guilty or get the chair, so I said I was guilty.../Judge overturned my life sentence and gave me death, anyway!

Through it all, Bryan listens, taking notes until --

CLANG! Bryan looks up, a pad filled with notes, the next file on the table. The end of a very long day as --

END MONTAGE.

INT. HOLMAN PRISON - VISITING ROOM - DAY

A GUARD ushers in Walter McMillian, tired and worn from the last year and a half in prison.

Bryan stands, feels Walter’s eyes on him as the guard leaves. Walter’s face betrays no judgement.

WALTER
Where’s the lawyer?

BRYAN
Um, that would be me.

(beat)
I’m Bryan Stevenson, it’s good to meet you, Mr. McMillian.

(CONTINUED)
WALTER
(shakes his head)
You look young as my son.

Walter takes a seat, exhausted, drained of hope. Bryan can sense it as Walter speaks without looking at him.

WALTER
My last lawyer sat right where you sittin' and told me everything’s gonna be okay. Then I was sentenced to death, my family run out of money, and he gone.
(looks at him)
What you gone do different?

Bryan scrambles, looks at the open file.

BRYAN
Well, uh... first thing we can do is appeal for a re-trial --

WALTER
We already did that and it was denied.

Bryan finds his footing, his schooling kicks in.

BRYAN
Okay, we can file for a reconsideration on that... then a direct appeal to the Court of Criminal Appeals, and work our way up to the State Supreme Court. If we’re denied there, we can file a Rule 32, then a federal habeas petition, and if all that fails, we’ll take your case to the Supreme Court.

Walter looks at him, unconvinced.

WALTER
You ain’t got no idea what you gettin’ into here.
(off his silence)
You think them big words is gonna get you somewhere in Alabama? These guys is gonna eat you up and spit you out like they done every other black man ever stepped outta line. Nobody here likes a nigger in a suit, unless it’s one of these.

(MORE)
'Cause soon as you start your own business, and that business makes some money, or you make friends with people they don’t want you makin’ friends with, they gone find a way to take you down.

BRYAN
I understand how hard that must be.

BOOM! Walter hits the table, emotional as he shakes his head.

WALTER
No, you don’t. Rich boy from Harvard don’t know how we live here, where you guilty from the moment you born. You can smile and make them like you all you want, yes, sir, yes, ma’am, but when it’s your turn, it don’t matter they ain’t got no fingerprints, no evidence, that their only witness made the whole thing up. None of that matter when all y’all thinkin’ is he look like a man that could kill somebody.

BRYAN
That’s not what I think.

Walter stares, emotions brewing.

WALTER
Maybe not. Maybe you and the one brother they let on my jury is just relieved this ain’t you.

(intense beat)

You know how many people been freed from Alabama death row?

Bryan knows the answer, but can’t bring himself to say it. Walter says it for him.

WALTER
None... Things is the way they is here, and you sure as hell ain’t gonna be the one to change that.

Walter lets that sink in, then shakes his head as he stands --

(CONTINUED)
I ain’t doin’ this shit again.

Mr. McMillian.

(bangs on the window)
GUARD! WE DONE HERE!

Mr. McMillian, please. I’ve made no assumptions about you or anything you’ve done. I’m here to help.

Walter sees the passion in Bryan’s eyes, but as the guard opens the door, he turns and walks out of the room.

Bryan is left in shock, trying to process everything that just happened.

The guard leads Walter down a long row of 18 cells, a second row above. A CACOPHONY of noise washes over them -- RADIOS AND TVS at full blast, the deafening CHORUS OF INMATES TALKING AND SHOUTING, a voice SCREAMING nonsense upstairs.

They stop at Walter’s cell. A steel-mesh door covering the bars. The door slides open as Walter steps --

A 5’-by-8’ cage with a small cot and toilet. The door CLANGS shut. Walter looks up at the concrete walls closing in.

Johnny D! Johnny D, you there!

Walter walks to his door. FROM OUTSIDE his cell, we see him through the door slot, then PAN OVER to see Herbert shouting through his slot.

Johnny D!

INTERCUT BETWEEN:
THREE CELLS IN A ROW
WALTER’S THE CENTER.

WALTER
What’s up, Herb?!

HERBERT
Is Ray there?!

Walter BANGS on the other end of his door with a metal cup.

WALTER
Ray!

In the next cell, ANTHONY “RAY” HINTON (20s, black) lies on his bed with his eyes closed.

ANTHONY
Unavailable at the moment!

WALTER
Where you at?

ANTHONY
Buckingham Palace, having tea with the Queen. She’s a very nice lady. Let you know when we done.

Walter smiles and shakes his head.

HERBERT
What did you think of the lawyer?

WALTER
I think he’s a kid makin’ a lot of promises he can’t keep. He in way over his damn head.

HERBERT
Oh... I thought he seemed nice.

Anthony opens his eyes, done with his mindful escape.

ANTHONY
What you want a nice lawyer for? Nice ain’t gonna get you shit! Look at Johnny D, he nice as a puppy and he in here with us!

Walter can’t help but smile, all of them in it together.
WALTER
Didn’t know you thought of me like that, Ray.

ANTHONY
I mean, you ain’t nice as La Toya Jackson, but for an ol’ man on the row, you a’ight.

HERBERT
Thought you said I was the old man.

ANTHONY
Johnny D’s old, you ancient!

As they all LAUGH, a loud MOAN from a cell downstairs.

ANTHONY
Yo, Herb, turn up that radio!

Walter remains sitting on the floor, turning his interaction with Bryan over in his mind as MUSIC takes us to --

OMITTED

INT./EXT. BRYAN’S CAR/HOLMAN PARKING LOT - LATER

Bryan gets into his car and tosses his stack of files onto the passenger seat. He looks up at the towering prison, Walter’s words ringing in his head.

He looks back at the files, opens the one on top, with a mug shot of Walter McMillian. Something about this man is drawing him to look closer --

OMITTED

INT. EVA’S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Bryan sits on the ground in the living room, illuminated by a single lamp. The couch made up for a bed. Spread out in front of him are 4 VOLUMES of transcripts and a folder full of records from Walter McMillian’s case.

INSERT CLOSEUP DOCUMENT 1 -- “Walter ‘Johnny D’ McMillian case no. ######.”

INSERT CLOSEUP DOCUMENT 2 -- “Ralph Myers -- quote from testimony...”

(CONTINUED)
HE jots notes into a legal pad as he reads.
Eva walks through the living room, steps over papers scattered across the floor as she enters the --

REVEAL: Bryan at the table, surrounded by papers, bloodshot eyes, a mad scientist in the middle of his work.

EVA
(sarcastic)
You look rested.

Bryan looks up, exhausted but still energized.

BRYAN
I don’t think McMillian did it.

Bryan at the table with an almost-empty box, papers sprawled around. Eva sits beside him, drinking coffee.

BRYAN
They have no motive, no physical evidence, no corroborating circumstances. The State based its entire case on the testimony of one man. Ralph Myers.

Bryan hands her a photograph of RALPH MYERS (40s), a frail, white man with burn scars across half his face and neck.

BRYAN
He’s been in and out of prison most his life. When he testified, he was on trial for a different murder, which he ended up getting thirty years for.

EVA
Sounds like a pretty good deal.

Bryan nods as he flips through a transcript, full of notes.
BRYAN
In his statement, he said Johnny D approached him at a gas station and forced him at gunpoint to drive to Jackson Cleaners because his arm was hurting.

EVA
(sarcastic)
That seems logical.

BRYAN
When they get there, Johnny D tells him to wait in the truck while he goes inside. Then, while he waits for his kidnapper, instead of running, or going to the police, he drives to a liquor store for cigarettes, and then comes back to the crime scene.

EVA
Seriously?

BRYAN
Then he hears gunshots, goes inside, and sees the body of Ronda Morrison lying face-up on the floor and Johnny D standing over her with some older white man who he claimed was the one ‘in charge.’

EVA
And where’s that guy? Anyone looking for him?

Bryan shakes his head -- exactly. Nothing makes sense. He grabs another paper.

BRYAN
They have one other witness to back his testimony, a young black man named Bill Hooks. Says he saw Johnny D’s lowrider truck leaving the cleaners around the time of the murder. That’s it.

Eva lays out photos of Ronda Morrison, Ralph Myers, and McMillian as she tries to wrap her mind around it.
EVA
So, an eighteen-year-old white
girl is murdered in broad daylight
and the Sheriff can’t solve the
crime for how long? *

BRYAN
Almost a year.

EVA
(looks at Ralph’s
photo)
Then some guy charged with a
different murder says he can tell
them who did it if they give him a
lower sentence. And the guy who
did it happens to be a black man
from a poor community that no one
would think twice about.

Both can feel the energy here. Something is horribly
wrong with this conviction. Bryan looks in the now empty
box.

BRYAN
There’s gotta be more than this.
(beat; considers)
I want to set a meeting with the
D.A.

EVA
Tommy Chapman just took over for
Pearson a few months ago. He used
to be a public defender.

BRYAN
So maybe he’s not aligned with the
rest of these guys?

EVA
(beat; considers)
Let’s hope not.

EXT. MONROEVILLE - DAY
Bryan’s Civic drives down a country road, passing a sign
that reads: “Welcome to Monroeville, home of To Kill A
Mockingbird.”

INT. MONROE COUNTY COURTHOUSE - LOBBY - LATER
Bryan sits in the small waiting room, looks to TRACY
(40s, white), the secretary. She smiles warmly.

(CONTINUED)
TRACY
You visit the Mockingbird Museum
yet?

BRYAN
(smiles)
Uh... no, ma’am.

TRACY
It’s the old courthouse Harper
Lee’s daddy used to work in. You
can stand right where Atticus
Finch once stood.

Bryan smiles politely as TOMMY CHAPMAN (30s, white),
round face and glasses, walks out with a charming smile --

TOMMY
Mr. Stevenson? Tommy Chapman.
(they shake)
Come on in.

INT. TOMMY CHAPMAN’S OFFICE - A MOMENT LATER

Bryan follows Tommy into his modest office.

TOMMY
A lot of people are eager to meet
you, Mr. Stevenson.

BRYAN
(surprised)
Oh, yeah?

They both take a seat, Tommy’s desk between them.

TOMMY
Harvard lawyer movin’ to Alabama,
takin’ on all these capital cases.
Everyone’s wondering what your
intentions are.

Bryan smiles politely, refusing to show any nerves.

BRYAN
We’re just giving legal assistance
to people who can’t afford it.

(CONTINUED)
TOMMY
(beat; then)
Legal assistance is one thing, 
tryin’ to put convicted murderers 
back on the street is somethin’ 
else entirely.

A charged beat, sizing each other up until, Tommy 
smiles --

TOMMY
But I’m sure you didn’t come all 
the way down here to talk about 
that. What can I do for you 
today, Bryan?

Bryan reaches into his briefcase and pulls out a file of 
transcripts, with portions highlighted.

BRYAN
I’d like to talk about Johnny D 
McMillian.

TOMMY
You know I wasn’t part of his 
prosecution, right? That was 
before my time.

BRYAN
That’s why I wanted to meet you...
I’ve read through the record a few 
times now, and I have some serious 
doubts about the reliability of 
his conviction. 
(hands transcript 
over)
If you could take a look at the 
sections I highlighted, you’ll see 
some obvious problems with Ralph 
Myers’ testimony.

A beat, as Tommy flips through the pages.

TOMMY
This was one of the most 
outrageous crimes in Monroe County 
history, and your client made a 
lot of people here very angry.

BRYAN
I understand that, but there are 
some serious problems with this 
case and I’m hoping I can get your 
support to find out what really 
happened.

(CONTINUED)
Tommy closes the transcripts and PLOPS them on the desk.

**TOMMY**

But I already know what happened. Johnny D McMillian was convicted by a jury of brutally murdering a teenage girl in my community. And it’s my job to defend the integrity of that conviction.

Bryan sits back, was hoping for a different response.

**BRYAN**

Even if it was based on false testimony?

**TOMMY**

You’re the only one I know who thinks that.

**BRYAN**

Then I must be the only one who read the record because it’s pretty obvious.

Tommy stares at him, doesn’t like the implication.

**TOMMY**

That man caused a lot of pain for folks ‘round here, and if you start diggin’ in those wounds, you’re gonna be makin’ a lot of people very unhappy.

Bryan hesitates -- is that a threat? He recovers --

**BRYAN**

My job isn’t to make people happy, it’s to achieve justice for my client.

Tommy smiles, reaches for a file and hands it to him.

**TOMMY**

Ralph Myers’ two confessions and a statement from Bill Hooks.

Bryan opens it, FLIPS through the three meager documents.

**BRYAN**

I asked for copies of all the police and witness statements you have on the case.

(CONTINUED)
And that’s what you’re holding.

BRYAN
This is a joke. Where’s the rest of it?

TOMMY
That’s what’s relevant to McMillian’s case. If you want more, you’ll need to file a discovery motion with the court, just like anybody else.

With this, he stands -- meeting over. Off Bryan’s surprise --

TOMMY
Thanks for stopping by, Mr. Stevenson.

BRYAN
(stands to face him)
You can expect that motion soon.

TOMMY
Lookin’ forward to it.

Bryan reluctantly shakes Tommy’s hand. As he turns to leave --

TOMMY
You oughta check out our Mockingbird Museum on your way out of town. One of the great civil rights landmarks of the South.

Bryan bites his tongue, frustration building as he leaves.

EXT. MONROE COUNTY COURTHOUSE - BACK ENTRANCE - MOMENTS LATER

As Bryan exits, he sees Sheriff Tate directing a WHITE DEPUTY where to take a YOUNG BLACK MAN in handcuffs.

Tate catches Bryan’s eye as he passes. His cold stare makes it clear that he’s not welcome here.

INT. EVA’S HOUSE - KITCHEN - LATER

Eva spreads peanut butter onto apples, talking on the phone.

(CONTINUED)
EVA
Helping a black man convicted of killing a white girl is political suicide in that county. I’m sure he’s been reminded of that by whoever gave him his job.

INTERCUT WITH:

EXT. STREET (MONROEVILLE) – CONTINUOUS ACTION

Bryan stands at a pay phone.

BRYAN
I honestly don’t think he ever read the record.

Eva takes the plate of apples to the back door, holds the door open to see Chris and his FRIEND playing in the yard.

EVA
Doesn’t surprise me.
(yells to the kids)
Chris! Bobby! Come eat your snack!

The boys run over as Eva continues with Bryan.

BRYAN
I’m going to stop at Jackson Cleaners before I see his family.

EVA
Okay. If I don’t hear from you by morning, I’ll send a rescue party.

BRYAN
I hope that’s a joke.

EVA
Me, too.
(sincere)
Just be careful, okay?

Bryan nods, more aware by the moment of what he’s up against.

EXT. JACKSON CLEANERS – DAY

Bryan walks up to the front door, chained up and closed for business. He pushes his face to the glass, looks inside.

(CONTINUED)
He steps a few yards back, SNAPS a photo. The weight of the tragic crime is evident in the sad storefront building.

Bryan turns to see a POLICE CAR hovering at the corner. The OFFICER inside stares at him. After a beat, the car drives off. Bryan understands -- they have their eyes on him.

SNAPSHOTS OF A BLACK, BACKWOODS NEIGHBORHOOD --
-- A GROUP OF KIDS playing touch football in a dirt lot.
-- A GROUP OF MEN AND WOMEN walking home from a factory.
-- An OLD MAN AND WOMAN sitting on their porch drinking tea.

INSIDE BRYAN’S CAR --
Bryan makes his way through the town, passing a MAN mowing his yard. This place is poor, but love clearly surrounds.

Bryan drives past a YOUNG BLACK BOY on a bike. They lock eyes. The boy waves with a friendly smile. Bryan smiles back, a distant reminder of his own youth.

Bryan pulls to a stop in front of an old house, the yard filled with old cars. SIX KIDS run around playing tag as PEOPLE stream inside.

As Bryan gets out, he’s greeted by MINNIE McMILLIAN (40s), strength beneath her small frame.

MINNIE
You the lawyer?

BRYAN
Yes, ma’am, Bryan Stevenson.

MINNIE
I’m Johnny D’s wife, Minnie.

BRYAN
So good to meet you.

Bryan goes for a handshake but she gives him a hug, a small gesture that immediately puts him at ease.

(CONTINUED)
MINNIE
Thank you for drivin’ all the way out here. Most lawyers barely got time to call. Hope you don’t mind, a few friends from the neighborhood showed up to hear what you got to say.

Bryan looks around, more cars pulling in behind him.

BRYAN
Looks like more than a few.

He doesn’t let the pressure faze him, smiles warmly as --

INT. WALTER’S HOUSE - KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER

Bryan stands, pen and notepad ready. 30 FAMILY MEMBERS AND FRIENDS surround, everyone TALKING at the same time as Bryan looks at all their faces, taking them in --

YOUNG and OLD, generations side-by-side. Minnie sits with her daughter, JACKIE (18), waiting for the meeting to begin.

MRS. WILLIAMS (70s) pours Bryan a glass of sweet tea as EVELYN (40s), Walter’s sister, finally SHOUTS --

EVELYN
Hey, now! We ain’t gonna get nowhere with everybody quackin’ at the same time! Let Mr. Stevenson talk!

Bryan knows how important this moment is. Takes a sip of his sweet tea to calm himself, looks out at the now silent sea of faces staring at him.

BRYAN
Hi, everyone, good to meet you.
Um --

As he puts the glass down, Mrs. Williams leans in, refills it to the brim. Bryan smiles, CLEARS his throat. DEEP BREATH --

BRYAN
I’m sure you have a lot of questions, and I’ll stay as long as it takes to answer all of them. But it would really help me to hear from you all first, and understand your perspective on everything.

(CONTINUED)
EVELYN
Our perspective is there ain’t no way Johnny D did this crime.

MURMURS of agreement wash throughout the room.

EVELYN
The morning that girl was killed, we was all havin’ a fish fry here to raise money for the church. Johnny D was with us, mornin’ to night, workin’ on his truck with John.

Bryan looks to JOHN (20s), clearly carrying the weight of his dad’s injustice, standing beside a 40-year-old mechanic, JIMMY, and DARNELL HOUSTON (20s), nervous, with a Jheri curl.

BRYAN
You were with your dad that day?

JOHN
We was up at six in the morning to get his truck on the rack. Jimmy was there, too.

JIMMY
(nods)
We had the transmission clean out by nine-thirty.

EVELYN
Now how’s he supposed to go kidnap some crazy white man all the way in Evergreen and then drive back to Jackson Cleaners to kill that girl at 10:15 if his truck ain’t got no transmission? And for what? They said he stole thirty-five dollars. How stupid you gotta be to go through all that for thirty-five dollars?

VOICES of agreement throughout the room. Bryan writes notes.

BRYAN
How many of you were here with Walter that morning?

Twenty-five hands go up. Bryan can’t hide his shock. Minnie sits with quiet strength. When she speaks, everyone listens.

(Continued)
MINNIE
My husband could have never done
this no kind of way, whether we
was with him or not. He’s just
not like that.

MURMURS agreeing as BERNARD (50s), Walter’s friend,
speaks.

BERNARD
Everybody know they went after him
’cause of that woman.

Bryan looks confused -- what woman? Bernard looks to
Minnie, realizes he screwed up.

BERNARD
Sorry, Minnie.

MINNIE
It’s okay. It ain’t no secret.
(beat)
Few months before the murder,
Johnny D got caught messin’ ‘round
with a white woman in town. When
her husband found out, he made
sure everybody knew ‘bout it.
(beat; frustrated)
People started talkin’, and the
stories kept growin’. He went
from a cheat to a drug dealer to
the head of the Dixie Mafia. So
when someone finally called him a
killer, nobody thought twice.

UNCLE LEO (70s), confined to a wheelchair but with the
voice of a leader, speaks up.

UNCLE LEO
They can call it what they want,
but we all know this is just
another way to lynch a black man.

A handful of VOICES agree. Then --

MINNIE
There ain’t no excuse for what my
husband did to me and this family.
Damn fool hurt me bad.
(beat; strong)
But he’s still the daddy of my
kids.

(MORE)
MINNIE (CONT'D)
And I really don’t know what I’m s’pose to tell them about stayin’ out of trouble when you can be at your own house, minding your own business, surrounded by your entire family, and they still go and put some murder on you.

MURMURS of agreement as Bryan gathers his thoughts.

JACKIE
It’s not just Dad, we feel like they put us all on death row, too.

More SHOUTS of agreement. Once they settle --

BRYAN
I can only imagine how painful this is for all of you. I’m going to do everything I can to --

JOHN
(cuts him off)
The last lawyers was talkin’ big, jus’ like you, then took all our money and split. Why you different?

Bryan takes a beat, respects John’s sense of distrust.

BRYAN
Well, first, our organization covers all legal expenses. So none of you will have to pay a penny.

John’s surprised, but still doubtful. Bryan presses on --

BRYAN
If you asked me to put my dad’s life in the hands of some young lawyer from out of town, I’d be worried, too. You really love him. And I don’t take that lightly.

(as John softens)
I’m not here to take your money. I’m here because I believe everyone in this room has the same right to justice as anyone else in this country. It’s clear to me that this trial was constructed with lies.

(MORE)
And based on everything I’ve seen,
I think we can build a case to
bring Johnny D home, and I’m not
going to stop until I’ve done
that.

Minnie exchanges a look with John. She nods, then --

MINNIE
Well, you seem like good people to
me, but he’s the one you gotta
convince.

Bryan nods, knows this is true. Evelyn smiles big --

EVELYN
I don’t know about the rest of
you, but I was sold on, y’all
won’t pay a penny.

Everyone LAUGHS as Mrs. Williams tops off Bryan’s tea.

EXT. WALTER’S HOUSE - PORCH - LATER

Bryan stands at the door, shaking hands and hugging
people. Uncle Leo rolls up, gives him a firm handshake.

UNCLE LEO
They gonna try to stop you any way
they can. You stay strong, son.

Bryan is taken aback by this. Before he can respond, Leo
moves on, helped down the stairs by TWO STRONG MEN. Then
John steps forward with his friend Darnell.

JOHN
Hey, Mr. Stevenson.

BRYAN
Please, John, call me Bryan.

JOHN
Oh, okay, um... this is my friend,
Darnell. He wants to talk to you
‘bout somethin’.

Bryan notices how nervous Darnell seems. A beat before
Darnell looks at John, who gives an encouraging nod.
Then --

DARNELL
I think I can prove he’s innocent.
Bryan looks at Darnell, steady and calm as --

BRYAN
Would you be willing to sign a statement that we could use in court?

Darnell thinks long and hard. Fear seeps in as --

DARNELL
The police would see my name?

(CONTINUED)
BRYAN
It would be in the record.

Darnell looks at John and Walter’s family, scared. Bryan sees his fear, empathizes. A beat before --

BRYAN
I know exposing yourself like this isn’t easy. But with your testimony we can file a motion to reopen Johnny D’s case. If we can prove Bill Hooks is lying, it might be his best chance.

Bryan’s words connect, but Darnell still hesitates. Minnie grabs his hand, nods. Darnell sees what this means to her.

He looks to John, then back at Bryan. He slowly nods, willing to cooperate, hoping he won’t regret it.

EXT. EVA’S PORCH - NIGHT

Bryan sits on the porch with Eva as she drags on a cigarette.

BRYAN
They said it would have been better if he was out hunting somewhere, so it’d at least be possible he was guilty. But they were all with him.

Eva shakes her head, takes a drag, a beat before --

EVA
I can’t imagine what it would feel like to know I was at home with my husband, and have a judge say, no, you weren’t… your truth is wrong.

Bryan takes this in, processing everything before --

BRYAN
This isn’t just about Johnny D. (off her look) We’re representing that whole community.

(Continued)
Eva can see how deep this goes. Silence falls, both pondering the weight of what’s ahead.

EXT. ALABAMA RIVER - DAWN

Bryan runs along the river, still processing his time with Walter’s family.

INT. HOLMAN PRISON - VISITING ROOM - DAY

Bryan stands, hoping he can get Walter to engage this time, waiting as the guard UNLOCKS Walter’s cuffs and leaves the room. Walter looks at Bryan.

BRYAN
I know our last meeting didn’t go the way I hoped it would, but --

WALTER
You met my family.

BRYAN
(beat; surprised)
I did.

WALTER
You drove down that long dirt road, crammed into my little house with all my people, and told ‘em you was gonna fight for me.
(off Bryan’s stare)
That means a lot.

Bryan nods. Walter hesitates, still reluctant to fully engage. But Bryan can sense him softening. A beat before --

BRYAN
Minnie asked me to give you this.

Bryan hands him a small envelope. Walter slides it into his pocket, then looks back.

BRYAN
If you don’t mind, I have something to show you.

INT. HOLMAN PRISON - VISITING ROOM - DAY

Bryan sits across from Walter, fixes his glasses as he tries to read Darnell’s statement. He slides the paper back.

(CONTINUED)
WALTER (embarrassed) * 
I ain’t so good with them big * 
words. * 

Bryan didn’t realize he couldn’t read. He summarizes for * 
him. * 

BRYAN * 
It’s a statement from Darnell * 
Houston saying he was with Bill * 
Hooks three miles away at the time * 
of the murder. So, there’s no way * 
he could have seen your truck * 
there. * 

Walter looks at him, piecing it together. * 

WALTER * 
That’s good, right? * 

BRYAN * 
It’s very good. I’m going to * 
submit this with a motion for a * 
new trial. * 

Walter looks at him, nods. Allows himself to feel a * 
pinch of hope. Then, he looks off. A beat before -- 

WALTER 
Minnie said she told you what I * 
did... ain’t no excuse for * 
cheatin’ on a woman like her. I * 
don’t know why she’s still * 
standin’ by me after what I put * 
herself through. * 

BRYAN 
She’s standing by you because she * 
knows you shouldn’t be in here. * 
And so do I. * 
(off Walter’s look) 
I know you didn’t kill Ronda * 
Morrison. And I want to help you * 
prove it in court, if you’ll let * 
me. * 

Walter looks at him, getting there, but not completely * 
sure. * 

WALTER 
Man, you met my whole family and I * 
still don’t know nothin’ about * 
you. * 

(CONTINUED)
BRYAN
What do you want to know?

Walter thinks, choosing his first question. Then --

WALTER
Why you doin’ this?

BRYAN
Why am I a lawyer?

WALTER
Why you a lawyer in Alabama, workin’ for people who can’t pay you nothin’?
Bryan nods -- good question. He really thinks about it.

BRYAN
I grew up down a road just like yours, pumping sewage from our yard, sharing a playground with the pigs and chickens... When I was a teenager, my grandpa was murdered, but no one outside our community cared, because to them, he was just another black man killed in the projects.

(beat)
I know what it’s like to be in the shadows.

(shrugs; matter-of-fact)
That’s why I’m doing this.

Walter takes this in, deeply moved.

WALTER
That’s a pretty good answer.

BRYAN
(smiles)
Anything else you want to know?
I’m an open book.

Walter thinks, more comfortable now. Then --

WALTER
What’s someone like you do for fun?

BRYAN
(shrugs)
I used to play piano, but... it’s hard to find time for anything besides work right now.

WALTER
Well, if you gonna be workin’ for me, you gotta make time to clear that head, or you’ll end up crazy as a betsy bug, man.

BRYAN
What’s a betsy bug?

(continues)
WALTER
It’s a crazy-ass bug that you don’t wanna be. Ugly suckers, look like a turd with horns.

BRYAN
(smiles)
Got it.

Walter leans back, eyeing Bryan a beat. Then --

WALTER
Okay.

BRYAN
Okay?

WALTER
Let’s get to work, piano man. You’re hired.

OFF Bryan’s growing smile --

INT. WALTER’S CELL - LATER

Walter sits on his bed. He opens the envelope Bryan gave him to find -- a handful of OLD FAMILY PHOTOS -- Minnie, Walter, and the children, happy together.

He looks at a photo of him and John together, big smiles, father and son, about to move on when --

ANTHONY (O.S.)
Yo, Johnny D!

INTERCUT BETWEEN:

ANTHONY, HERBERT, AND WALTER’S CELLS

Anthony stands at his door, CALLS OVER to Walter --

ANTHONY
You signin’ up with that lawyer?

WALTER
Giving him a try.

ANTHONY
Seems like everybody on the row workin’ with him now. They say he reppin’ anyone that need it for free. I’m starting to feel left out, man. He that good?

(CONTINUED)
WALTER
  (beat; considers)
I hope so.

ANTHONY
What you think, Herbert?! Should
I dump my guy and switch over?
  (beat of silence)
Herb! You there?

Herbert sits in the corner of his cell, stares at a
letter with an ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE seal at the
top.

HERBERT
I’m here.

WALTER
  (concerned)
You okay, man?

HERBERT
They s-s-s-s--
  (stops; takes a
    breath)
They set my date.

Anthony and Walter are silent, everyone’s looming fear.
Then --

WALTER
It’s gonna be okay, man. It ain’t
over yet.

HERBERT
I ain’t like you guys. I
d-d-deserve what’s comin’.

ANTHONY
Now you talkin’ out your ass,
Herb. You fought for your country
and they tossed you out with the
trash... That war made you sick in
the head, man. They shoulda put
you in a hospital, not here.
  (beat)
When I told them cops that picked
me up I was innocent, you know
what they said? One of you
niggers did it, if it wasn’t you,
you can just take this one for
your homie.

(MORE)
Johnny D’s prosecutor said he knew he killed that girl ‘cause of the way he looked in his mug shot. You don’t deserve this shit any more than us. Only reason we here is ‘cause if you black or poor, they can do what they want and nobody’s gonna give a damn.

HERBERT
(beat; considers)
A girl is dead because of me.

WALTER
That don’t give nobody the right to kill you back.

Silence. Walter knows there is no way to make this better.

EXT. EVA’S HOUSE - NIGHT (ESTABLISHING)

INT. EVA’S HOUSE - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

INSERT PHOTO -- of Herbert Richardson in his Army uniform, sitting on the table. *

Bryan and Eva at the table, looking over Herbert’s legal papers and records. Doug and Chris build an Erector Set on the floor of the living room.

EVA
Herbert was eighteen when he went to Vietnam. He was the only survivor in an ambush that killed his whole platoon. He had a mental breakdown, attempted suicide, and got sent home on an honorable discharge. *(flips through pages)*

Back home he continued having nightmares, crying fits, running out of his house screaming ‘incoming’ to his neighbors.

BRYAN
(shakes his head)
His lawyer didn’t even mention his military service or mental trauma to the jury. A few months after the trial, he was disbarred for misconduct.

(CONTINUED)
EVA
Course, he was.
(beat)
What can we do?

BRYAN
Since he’s already been through the appeals process, the statutes of limitations are going to make it hard to get a judge to listen. We’ll have to try and make them. I’ll start on a motion tonight.

The PHONE RINGS. Chris jumps up to get it --

CHRIS
(picks up phone)
Hello?

A beat. Chris hands the cordless phone to Eva --

CHRIS
It’s for you, Mom.

Eva gets up and takes the phone --

EVA
Hello?

MALE (V.O.)
(on phone)
You the bitch workin’ with that nigger lawyer?

EVA
(beat; shocked)
Who the hell is this?

Bryan turns in his chair, eyes locked on Eva as --

MALE (V.O.)
(on phone)
The guy that put the bomb under your house that’s gonna blow your family all to hell. Y’all don’t stop helpin’ that nigger Johnny D, next time there won’t be no warnin’.

Dial tone. Eva rushes over to Chris and scoops him up.

EVA
Okay! Why don’t we all go outside and look at the stars.

(Continued)
Doug and Bryan can see the fear she’s hiding as they all rush out the door.

EXT. EVA’S HOUSE – LATER

Bryan stands on the front yard beside Eva, holding Chris.

FOUR POLICE OFFICERS and a BOMB-SNIFFING DOG search the perimeter. Doug talks to the HEAD OFFICER, walks back to Eva.

DOUG
They didn’t find anything.

EVA
Are they sure?

Bryan notices an OLD SEDAN drive past, a YOUNG WHITE MAN in the passenger seat locks eyes with Bryan as they go by.

It sends a chill down his spine. Eva catches the exchange, gives Chris a squeeze.

EVA
Okay, baby, let’s get you to bed.

Eva exchanges a look with Bryan as they head inside.

EXT. EVA’S HOUSE – PORCH – NIGHT

Eva sits on the porch, smoking. Bryan exits the house and sits beside her. They stare into the darkness for a moment.

EVA
When you asked me to do this with you, I knew I’d lose some friends, have people talkin’ shit behind my back, or to my face. And I was fine with that. Don’t need anyone to like me long as I’m doin’ what I’m supposed to. But threatenin’ my family...

(long beat)
I don’t know what the hell to do with that.

Bryan can see how hard this is for her. It worries him, too, putting other people on the line. A long beat before --
BRYAN
I would never blame you if you need to stop.

Eva considers this. A long beat as she makes a decision --

EVA
I don’t want my son growing up knowing his mom stopped doing what was right because she was scared of some crazy bigot.
(looks to Bryan; sincere)
But we can’t keep working here. I’m waitin’ to hear back about a place in Old Alabama Town. It ain’t pretty, but it fits the budget.

BRYAN
Does it come with bulletproof windows?

Eva cracks a LAUGH, surprised and impressed by Bryan’s dark joke. After she settles --

EVA
So, what’s next?

BRYAN
I think we need to investigate everything from scratch, find anyone in that town who’s willing to talk.

EVA
(sarcastic)
Maybe once they see how charming we are they’ll stop tryin’ to kill us.

Bryan’s smile takes us to --

TIME PASSING MONTAGE - MONROEVILLE INTERVIEWS

QUICK CUTS of Bryan and Eva going door-to-door:
-- Bryan KNOCKS on a door, no answer.
-- Eva KNOCKS, peers in the window, hard to find witnesses.
-- Bryan in a BAIT STORE, the MANAGER shakes his head.

(CONTINUED)
-- Eva in a PARKING LOT, a WOMAN ignores her, gets in her car and shuts the door.
-- Bryan with an OLDER MAN (white) at his door.

BRYAN
You were on the witness list for the Ronda Morrison trial a few years back --

OLDER MAN
(shutting the door)
Sorry, can’t help you.

-- Eva stands at another door, mid-convo with a WOMAN (40s).

WOMAN
If y’all ain’t workin’ for that poor girl’s family, I ain’t got nothin’ to say to you. Sorry, darlin’.

A52 EXT. MONROEVILLE

Bryan watches a police car drive by, the OFFICER staring at him.

52 EXT. WOODROW IKNER’S HOUSE – DAY

WOODROW IKNER (50s, white) opens the door.

BRYAN
Officer Ikner?

WOODROW IKNER
Ain’t no officer no more.

BRYAN
I’m a lawyer representing Johnny D McMillian, the man convicted of murder Ronda Morrison. I understand you were the first officer on the scene?

Ikner looks outside, makes sure it’s clear, turns inside, the door open. Finally getting somewhere, Bryan follows.

INT. BBQ JOINT – DAY

Eva munches on some fries as the OWNER (50s, female, white) enters from the back and hands her a worn FLYER advertising the fish fry.

(CONTINUED)
OWNER
I was right! The fish fry was on Saturday, November 1st, same day as the murder. They put these up all ‘round town. You’re lucky I’m a pack rat.

EVA
God, I could kiss you, Deb.

INT./EXT. MECHANIC GARAGE - DAY
Bryan talks with CLAY KAST (40s, white), a greased-up mechanic. An old car on the rack behind them.

BRYAN
Bill Hooks claimed he saw Walter’s lowrider truck outside the cleaners that day.

CLAY KAST
If he said it was a lowrider, he full a shit. We ain’t dropped Johnny D’s truck till six months after that girl was killed.

BRYAN
Do you have a record of that?

Bryan jots down notes as --

INT. BRYAN’S APARTMENT - DAY
Bryan carries a box into an old, lifeless room, nothing but a mattress on the floor. But for him, it’ll do just fine.

INT. MANAGER’S OFFICE - DAY
Eva sits across the desk from CHARLES COOPER (older male, white), passionately arguing her case.

EVA
Lawyers are movin’ here from Harvard Law School to work with us. We’re planning to grow into something the whole country will be talkin’ about, and you’ll get to say it all started in your building.

(CONTINUED)
CHARLES
And what exactly is the kind of work you do?

EVA
(shrugs)
We’re just helping people.

Charles thinks for a beat, then, seems satisfied with that answer, he nods -- likes the sound of that.

56  EXT. OFFICE BUILDING - DAY
Bryan and Doug carry a desk from the back of Doug’s truck, parked in front of an old building in the bad part of town.

57  INT. OFFICE BUILDING - DAY
Bryan and Doug carry the desk in, Chris holding the door open for them, as Eva stops sweeping to direct them.
INT. EJI - BRYAN’S DESK - A NEW DAY

INSERT: Bit stack of client files on Bryan’s desk, see the names “Walter McMillian,” “Herbert Lee Richardson,” “Jesse Moore,” “Charlie Coleman,” “Norris Thomas,” “Vivian Clark” (the point is to make it clear there are many cases being juggled).

INSERT: Bryan pulls off Herbert Lee Richardson’s file (and a photo clipped to it) and opens it... REVEAL Herbert’s name here.

TIGHT ON: Bryan at his desk on the phone, passionate despite the obvious burden of the Goliath task at hand.

BRYAN
My client, Herbert Richardson, was recommended for a Medal of Valor for disarming a bomb, and I’m looking for any documentation you might have on that.

JUMP CUT TO:

SAME SCENE - LATER

INSERT: Bryan pulls off the Jesse Moore file and opens it... REVEAL Jesse’s name here.

BRYAN
I was told you were one of Jesse Moore’s foster parents years ago, and I’m hoping you could tell me what his childhood was like.

JUMP CUT TO:

SAME SCENE - LATER

INSERT: Bryan pulls off Albert Johnson’s file and opens it... REVEAL Albert’s name here.

Bryan at his desk on the phone --

BRYAN
Charlie’s 14 years old, sir, and he’s been abused in that adult prison for the past three nights. He does not belong there.

JUMP CUT TO:
SAME SCENE - LATER

INSERT: Bryan pulls off Vivian Clark’s file and opens it... REVEAL Vivian’s name here.

BRYAN
Vivian Clark was one of the teenagers who were sexually abused at your facility, and I’m looking for records on any of the staff who were prosecuted.

INTERCUT WITH:

Eva at her desk on the phone.

EVA
We know he attended your school from sixth to eighth grade and I was hoping we could get any school records you might have on file.

JUMP CUT TO:

SAME SCENE - LATER THE SAME DAY

Eva at her desk on the phone.

EVA
Well, we got a tip that there were witnesses to back his alibi and wanted to confirm that he was clocked in from midnight to 8 the next morning.

SAME SCENE - LATER THE SAME DAY

Eva at her desk on the phone.

EVA
No, ma’am, it’s not a trick, we will not charge you or your family for anything, and we never will. (beat)
No, ma’am, I’m not a lawyer, but I promise, your son is in very good hands.
INT. EJI (EQUAL JUSTICE INITIATIVE) - DAY

BRENDA (30s, black) shakes hands with Eva and Bryan and sits across from them at a conference table, a job interview.

INT. EJI - A NEW DAY

Brenda and Eva stack the shelves with law books. Brenda’s now a part of the team as: PRE-LAP -- The phone RINGS.

INT. EJI - DAY

The place is now a functioning, messy office. Brenda STOPS TYPING to pick up the RINGING phone --

BRENDA

Equal Justice Initiative, this is Brenda.
(quick beat)
Okay -- just -- one moment, ma’am.
(covers phone, to Bryan)
Hey, Bryan, Mrs. Coleman has called three times this morning about her grandson. Sounds desperate.

OFF Bryan’s nod --

INT. EJI - MOMENTS LATER

Bryan sits at his desk, phone to his ear, listening to MRS. COLEMAN on the other end talking through panicked tears.

MRS. COLEMAN (V.O.)

(on phone)
That man was drunk again, beatin’ on my daughter so hard my grandson thought he killed her. Charlie’s a good boy, he was only protectin’ his mama. He did what he thought he had to do. Now he’s in jail with all those men, and it’s not right. He’s only thirteen years old.

Bryan empathizes with her pain, but stares at the vast stacks of paperwork that already surround him. Carefully responds --

(CONTINUED)
BRYAN
Mrs. Coleman, I’m so sorry about what Charlie’s going through, but our organization focuses on death penalty cases, and he doesn’t fall into that category. We can try to find another lawyer for you...

MRS. COLEMAN (V.O.)
(on phone; suddenly praying)
Dear Lord, please help me find the words to lead this man to see my grandson. Tell me what to say, Lord --

As she prays, Bryan looks at Eva and Brenda at their desks.

BRYAN
She’s praying.

BRENDA
Grandma knows what she’s doin’.

EVA
(nods to Brenda)
Impressive.

As Mrs. Coleman finishes her prayer, Bryan gives in --

BRYAN
Okay, ma’am... I don’t know if I can take the case, but I’ll go to the jail and check on him.

MRS. COLEMAN (V.O.)
(on phone)
Oh, thank you, Mr. Stevenson! Thank you, Jesus. Thank you for watchin’ over my baby boy.

Bryan can’t help but smile at her vibrant passion.

INT. COUNTY JAIL - COMMON AREA - DAY

FOLLOW TWO JAIL GUARDS THROUGH an area filled with INMATES, grown men in jumpsuits, playing cards and hanging out.

TILT DOWN TO REVEAL: The PRISONER they are escorting is just a 13-year-old boy, CHARLIE (black), so small they had to alter his jumpsuit to fit him in it.
F58 INT. COUNTY JAIL - MEETING ROOM - DAY

Bryan looks over a file, glancing up from the table as the guards usher Charlie in. Bryan stands, shocked at the thin, terrified child in handcuffs that stands in front of him.

As one of the guards uncuffs Charlie, he exchanges a look with Bryan of shared concern for how young and frail he is.

G58 INT. COUNTY JAIL - MEETING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Bryan sits across from Charlie, who still hasn’t made eye contact, completely retreated into himself.

BRYAN
Charlie? Are you okay?
(off his silence)
Your grandma asked me to come and see you. I’m a lawyer. Can you tell me how old you are?
(off his silence)
Charlie, can you answer me?

Charlie gives nothing. The silence is unnerving.

BRYAN
I know what happened was really terrible. I’m sure you’re worried about your mom. She’s doing okay, and she wants you to be okay, too.
(off Charlie’s silence)
The court wants to try you as an adult, but I don’t think you should be in here with all these men. I want to help you, but you have to talk to me, Charlie.

Charlie looks at the wall, then back down. Still, he gives Bryan nothing. Bryan hesitates, then slowly stands.

BRYAN
You mind if I sit over here?

Charlie remains silent as Bryan walks carefully around the table and sits beside him, shoulder-to-shoulder.

Charlie leans forward, avoiding him. That’s when Bryan sees a DARK BLOTCH on the back of his neck. He softens his voice.

(CONTINUED)
BRYAN
Charlie, are those bruises on your neck?

Charlie scoots away from him, hiding his tears. Bryan can tell something is terribly wrong. He speaks very gently.

BRYAN
Did somebody in this jail do that to you?

Charlie can’t hold it in anymore. He looks away and begins to sob, wipes away tears as he barely forms the words --

CHARLIE
I wanna go home.

Bryan’s heart breaks, as he puts his arm around him, determined to do whatever it takes to help this child --

BRYAN
It’s going to be okay, Charlie.

JUDGE BUREN (50s, white) leans against his desk as Bryan’s frustration burns beneath the surface.

BRYAN
Your order put a thirteen-year-old boy in a pen of grown men, and for the past three nights they’ve been systematically raping him, and he’s going to carry that for the rest of his life.

JUDGE BUREN
I’m not responsible for what happens in that jail.

Bryan takes a beat, can see he’s not getting through. He shifts his tactics, searching for common humanity.

BRYAN
If we look away when a child is hurting, we’re all responsible, sir.

(beat)
You have the authority to move him to a juvenile center right now.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)
If you can do that, Your Honor, I can tell you without a doubt that you would be saving that boy’s life.

Judge Buren looks at Bryan, his words have clearly gotten through. A beat as he ponders.

Bryan gets into his seat and SLAMS the door, a flash of the anger he was hiding, breaking through the surface. Then, he takes a BREATH, shakes it off, and starts the car.

Inmates continue to stroll around the area until -- From a back door, Bryan walks out, the two guards behind him. Charlie clings to his coat, leaning into him, shields his eyes from all the faces as Bryan guides him through the room.

Bryan sits in the office, haunted by the memory as he updates Brenda and Eva.

When I got up to leave the jail, he grabbed my arm and begged me not to go. I could hear him crying from the other side of the door.

Eva covers her face. Bryan waits for the wave to pass --

We have to help him.

I know.

The PHONE RINGS. Brenda picks up --

EJI. This is Brenda. (beat; listens) One sec.
She looks at Bryan, covers the phone.

BRENDA
Darnell Houston.

BRYAN
(takes the phone)
Hey, Darnell.
(off his frantic
voice)
Whoa, whoa, slow down. Where are you?

EXT. MONROE COUNTY JAIL - DAY
Bryan walks with Darnell out of the jail into the small parking lot. Ahead of them, downtown Monroeville looms.

BRYAN
Are you okay?

DARNELL
(frightened; jittery)
No, sir. I’m not.

Bryan watches TWO OFFICERS walk by. He gently guides Darnell away from them, protective.

BRYAN
Come on, let’s talk in my car.

INT./EXT. BRYAN’S CIVIC/MONROE COUNTY JAIL - MOMENTS LATER
Bryan sits in the driver’s seat, Darnell in shotgun, looking out the window to make sure no one’s watching.

DARNELL
How the hell they lockin’ me up
for perjury if alls I did was say
the truth? I knew I shouldn’t a
signed that paper, man. Shouldn’t
a listened to you.

Bryan’s face is tight, knowing he’s let Darnell down.
Then --
BRYAN
What they did is completely illegal. I’m going to talk to the D.A. and get the charges dismissed. They won’t do this again.

DARNELL
How do you know? You can’t control these guys.

Bryan, silent, realizing how true this is.

DARNELL
They arrested me in the middle of my shift, in front of my boss. I don’t even know if I still got a job tomorrow.

(beat; somber)
I feel bad for what they doin’ to Johnny D, but I’m just tryin’ to survive, man. I can’t fight these guys. You gonna have to find somebody else.

BRYAN
Just give me some time to work this out.

Darnell sees an old TRUCK idling across the parking lot.

DARNELL
That’s my ride. Tell Johnny D sorry.

Before Bryan can respond, Darnell gets out and rushes off.

Bryan sits. He looks back at the county building, anger simmering. A beat before -- he can’t help himself, he gets out of the car and marches back toward the jail.

INT. MONROE COUNTY JAIL - MOMENTS LATER

Bryan strides down the hall, he passes a BLACK FAMILY in tears, a YOUNG WOMAN (18) holding a BABY in one hand, and her SON (4) with the other, an OLD WOMAN praying with her DAUGHTER, 2 OFFICERS escorting 4 INMATES down the stairs.

Bryan finds the door marked “Sheriff’s Dept.” and heads --
INT. MONROE COUNTY JAIL - SHERIFF’S OFFICE - NEXT

Into the bullpen area of the department. 8 WHITE OFFICERS turn, all eyes locked on him at once.

Bryan spots Sheriff Tate staring at him across the room. He gathers his courage, marches across the space toward him --

When he’s almost there, the man sitting across from Tate turns around. Bryan stops, surprised to see Tommy Chapman.

TOMMY
Hey, Bryan. Have you met Sheriff Tate?

Bryan takes a moment to process. Then, controlled anger --

BRYAN
Who ordered the arrest of my witness?

SHERIFF TATE
If people make false statements concerning this case, they’re going to be held accountable.

BRYAN
You can’t arrest someone for perjury without evidence that a false statement has been made.

TOMMY
So you’re representing Mr. Houston now, too?

BRYAN
Yes, I am. His statement contradicts Bill Hooks’ entire testimony.

TOMMY
Hooks isn’t the state’s main witness; Ralph Myers is.

BRYAN
(frustrated)
Alabama code 12-21-222 requires * corroboration of accomplice testimony, so without Hooks, the conviction wouldn’t be valid.

(CONTINUED)
The two men stare each other down a beat before Tate speaks, his words cloaked in infuriating charm.

SHERIFF TATE
You know, I spoke to Ronda Morrison’s mother yesterday. She was in tears, askin’ me why some lawyer from up north was makin’ them relive all this hell again.

BRYAN
(remains calm)
You can tell her it’s because McMillian didn’t kill her daughter. And whoever did is still out there somewhere.

SHERIFF TATE
(shakes his head)
I know how desperate you must be to fulfill your fantasy of who we are down here. Just a bunch of corrupt Southern racists framin’ niggers for murder. And you here to save the day. If that’s the story you wanna believe, go right ahead. But I know Johnny D killed that girl, and he’s going to answer for it.

BRYAN
How do you know that? You found no hard evidence and based your entire case on the word of an indicted felon who had every incentive to tell you what you wanted to hear.

SHERIFF TATE
Ralph Myers gave us his testimony on his own accord.

BRYAN
And it made no sense! He couldn’t finish a sentence without contradicting himself.

Silence. The air sucked from the room. Both men staring at each other. Bryan continues, strong, not backing down.

BRYAN
The charges against Darnell Houston are baseless. You know they’ll never stand up in court.

(MORE)
They should be dropped immediately.

Tate stares at him a beat before smiling, cordially.

SHERIFF TATE
That alright with you, Tommy?

TOMMY
Sure.
(off Bryan’s surprise)
Doesn’t really matter, now that the court denied your motion to reopen the case.

Bryan stares at them both, caught completely off guard.

BRYAN
What are you talking about?

TOMMY
You didn’t get the order? The judge is down in Mobile now. Sometimes they have mail issues.

Bryan fights to regain his footing as Tommy stands.

TOMMY
You can tell Mr. Houston the charges against him are being dropped. I can do that much for y’all, but anything else will have to be raised on appeal.

Tate gives him a condescending nod.

SHERIFF TATE
Thanks for stoppin’ by, Counselor.

Bryan fights the urge to scream. A beat, he turns, walks to the door with confidence, refusing to show any intimidation.

Bryan’s thoughts race as he watches the dark road ahead. Suddenly, light reflects through his mirror. He looks up --

A PAIR OF HEADLIGHTS tailing him. Bryan tries to ignore it, but the car keeps inching closer.
Then, red and blue lights begin to FLASH -- a car from the Sheriff’s Department.

Bryan puts on his blinker, pulls to the side of the road. The car stops behind Bryan, lights spinning.

TWO OFFICERS get out. The OLDER OFFICER walks nonchalantly around the passenger side. The YOUNGER OFFICER approaches his door, skittish and unsure.

BRYAN
Something wrong, Officer?

YOUNGER OFFICER
Step out of the vehicle.

Bryan can see the Officer’s nerves, notices the Older Officer shining a flashlight into his backseat filled with files.

BRYAN
I don’t understand. I wasn’t speeding.

YOUNGER OFFICER
(ignores this)
I said step out of the vehicle.

BRYAN
I will get out, Officer. But can you tell me why I’ve been stopped first?

The Young Officer suddenly steps back and pulls his gun, points it directly at Bryan’s head as --

YOUNGER OFFICER
Get out of the goddamn car!

A clear flash of surprise and fear in Bryan’s eyes, can see the Younger Officer’s shaking hands. He fights for calm, raises his hands up, narrating every movement as --

BRYAN
Okay. I’ve got my hands up, okay?
I’m going to open the door now --
(opens the door)
I’m stepping out of the car...
(as he steps out)
I’m standing up... My hands are empty.

YOUNGER OFFICER
Turn around! Both hands on the car!

(CONTINUED)
Bryan’s in survival mode, turns and lowers his hands onto the car, watches the Older Officer open the passenger door and sloppily search through his files.

**BRYAN**
Do you have a warrant to do that, sir?

**YOUNGER OFFICER**
(jerks forward)
SHUT THE HELL UP!

Bryan tenses, the danger behind him ever present, doesn’t move as, frozen in place as --

**YOUNGER OFFICER**
DON’T MOVE! I SAID DON’T MOVE!

**BRYAN**
I’m not.

Bryan keeps an eye on the Younger Officer’s shaking gun as the Older Officer tears through his stuff. He hesitates a beat, then takes a breath, his voice remains steady --

**BRYAN**
Officer, there’s no reason to point your gun at me. I am not a threat to you. You don’t need to be scared.

**YOUNGER OFFICER**
Shut your goddamn mouth!

As Bryan freezes, the Older Officer stands and stares at him.

**OLDER OFFICER**
You oughta be careful with your words when you got a gun to your head.

He nods to the Younger Officer, who lowers his gun, shaking with adrenaline. Bryan finally breathes. He stares as the Officers walk back to their car, a beat before --

**BRYAN**
Why did you stop me?

**OLDER OFFICER**
We’re letting you go. You should be happy.

(CONTINUED)
Bryan’s frustration simmers. Their message is clear — he’s no longer just being watched. The threat is real.

EXT. EVA’S PORCH - NIGHT

Bryan sits with Eva. She’s smoking, pissed off.

EVA
These assholes can’t keep getting away with this shit. We need to file suit against the department.

BRYAN
That’s what they want us to do.

Bryan thinks a beat. Then --

BRYAN
We’ll never be effective by just reacting. They’re trying to distract us from the work. We have to stay focused.

EVA
(takes a drag)
So I can’t go throw a rock through that Sheriff’s window?

BRYAN
(shrugs; sarcastic)
Just don’t leave any fingerprints.

OFF Eva’s smile --

INT. HOLMAN PRISON - VISITING ROOM - DAY

Bryan sits across from Walter, has just broken the news of their recent defeat.

WALTER
Even if they drop the charges, they know Darnell ain’t gonna testify after what they done.

BRYAN
I know it’s a big hit, but we just have to find more evidence to file another motion.

WALTER
(shakes his head)
They’ll just block that, too...

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)
If they can put me on the row for a year without a trial, they can do whatever the hell they want.

Bryan’s clearly shocked by this statement. A beat before --

**BRYAN**

They put you on death row before your trial?

**WALTER**

The Sheriff drove me hisself. Said I was gettin’ a taste of what’s comin’ if I don’t confess.

**BRYAN**

Why didn’t you tell me?

**WALTER**

(beat; shrugs) I don’t know, man, I can’t keep track. They been doin’ shit like this to us as long as I can remember.

Bryan silent. Walter takes a sobered beat before continuing.

**WALTER**

When I was twelve years old, they lynched a man in our county named Russell Charley. He was a friend of my parents, had two boys around my age. I remember hearin’ my dad tell my mom how they found him hangin’ from a tree in the woods, body full of bullet holes. Police ain’t even bother to look into it.

(beat) After something like that everybody on alert. Be invisible, that’s what my mamma used to say. If they can’t see you, they can’t get you.

(off Bryan’s look) They good at makin’ us scared. That’s how they keep us down. Ain’t no different to what they doin’ to you out there, or to us in here. They just took us from the tree to the chair.
Walter sits in this thought for a long beat, can see Bryan processing.

**WALTER**
They comin’ after you out there, huh?

**BRYAN**
(smiles)
They’re not making it easy.

Walter thinks a long beat before answering.

**WALTER**
Well, maybe you should think about training up another lawyer or somethin’, ‘cause I’m still gonna need help if they take you out.

Bryan looks up, sees his growing smile, throws it back --

**BRYAN**
Oh, so this isn’t like a... I go down, we both go down together kind of thing?

**WALTER**
Hell no, man, you on your own! I got enough to worry about over here.

The two men share a LAUGH. Once they settle, Walter brings them back to reality --

**WALTER**
So, if we don’t got Darnell, what’s the next move?

Bryan thinks a beat, the answer is a controversial one.

**BRYAN**
I think we should talk to Ralph Myers.

Walter sits back, shocked.

**WALTER**
Maybe you should stick with your head ‘cause that’s a terrible idea.
BRYAN
I know it’s risky, but if I get * him talking, maybe we can find out * what he really knows.

WALTER
You ain’t gonna get nothin’ but lies off him.

BRYAN
(nods)
I’ll be careful.

OMITTED

EXT. ALABAMA - SERIES OF SHOTS OF A76 IN QUICK SUCCESSION.
-- The ALABAMA RIVER in the morning light --
-- The towering MONTGOMERY STATE COURTHOUSE --
-- The large complex of ST. CLAIR CORRECTIONAL PRISON --

INT. ST. CLAIR’S CORRECTIONAL - DAY B76
FOLLOW SHOT -- BEHIND Ralph Myers as he’s escorted to the visiting room. We don’t see his face.

INT. ST. CLAIR CORRECTIONAL - VISITING ROOM - DAY 76
FOLLOW RALPH MYERS (50) INTO a room full of PRISONERS and VISITORS. Bryan stands to look at him.

Ralph is frail and vulnerable, but with eyes sharp and roaming. Dangerous.

Bryan nods as Ralph approaches. Up close, the map of burn scars across his face adds an extra air of menace.

BRYAN
Hi, Mr. Myers.

RALPH
You Bobby?

BRYAN
Bryan.

He extends his hand. Ralph looks at it, a beat before --

(CONTINUED)
RA

RALPH

Maybe later.

A PRISONER LAUGHS LOUDLY across the room. Ralph JUMPS, scans the room, deeply paranoid. After a beat --

BRYAN

Do you mind if we sit down?

RALPH

You buyin’ me a Coke first? Or you gonna make me stare at them vending machines all day?

Ralph motions to the VENDING MACHINES along the wall. A beat before -- Bryan nods, turns, and walks to the machines as --

RALPH

Sunkist Orange and some Jujyfruits if they got ‘em!

INT. ST. CLAIR CORRECTIONAL - VISITING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Bryan watches Ralph open his Jujyfruits and eat one.

BRYAN

Thank you for meeting me, Mr. Myers.

Ralph CRACKS open his orange soda, takes a big SIP. Bryan waits for him to finish, pen and notebook ready. Finally --

BRYAN

Could we start by talking about your testimony against Johnny D?

RALPH

(burps)

No.

(off Bryan’s confusion)

I ain’t talkin’ about him.

BRYAN

That’s the only reason I’m here.

RALPH

Well, if you don’t like it, leave.

Ralph takes a SIP, clocking Bryan’s disappointment.

CONTINUED)
RALPH
Aw, come on, don’t look so sad, we can still talk about other stuff. I like talkin’. My wife says if I got paid for every word I said, we’d be a couple a billionaires.

Bryan considers his options, closes his notebook, carefully begins to guide the conversation, drawing him out.

BRYAN
How long have you been married?

RALPH
Long enough to pop out a couple a’ kids and watch her turn ‘em all against me. You got kids?

BRYAN
(trying to steer)
No, I don’t. Johnny D does.

Ralph doesn’t take the bait, continues --

RALPH
The thing about kids is, they ain’t nothin’ like havin’ a dog. It is a whole different thing. I wish somebody told me that earlier... My kids think they got it so bad but they ain’t seen nothin’ like I seen. Try makin’ it as a foster kid your whole damn life, soon as you figure out one shitty parent, they movin’ you to a new one.

BRYAN
Sorry, that must have been really hard.

Ralph looks at him to see if he’s sincere -- he is. Ralph nods, something softening in him. A beat. Then --

RALPH
How many kids he got?

BRYAN
Johnny D? He has three.

Ralph ponders this as he takes another SIP. Bryan can see his wheels turning. He decides to step out on a limb.

(CONTINUED)
BRYAN
Mr. Myers... I know you made a deal with the State, but I don’t think they told you Johnny D was going to die because of it.
(beat)
I’m sure that’s not easy to carry, and I’m hoping there’s a part of you that wants to make things right.

Bryan lets that sit for a beat. Ralph seems to be listening.

BRYAN
Something made you agree to this meeting.

RALPH
Maybe I was just bored.

BRYAN
I don’t think that’s true.
(beat)
Can we please talk about your testimony?

Ralph looks off, seems to really consider the question when -- BAM! He jumps, looks around, only to find a VISITOR BANGING on one of the vending machines. He begins to LAUGH, then --

RALPH
From the first day they lock my ass up in Escambia, for something I’m tellin’ you I ain’t had nothing to do with, all them police wanna talk about is Ronda Morrison. Morrison this, and Morrison that. Sometime four or five of ‘em in the room at the same time.

BRYAN
They were questioning you about her the day you were arrested?

Ralph looks at him nervously, dodges the question.

RALPH
Alls I’m sayin’ is, ain’t nobody cared about a damn thing besides who killed that girl.
(MORE)
And when people care about a thing that much, they do anything to get what they want.

(RALPH (CONT'D))

(MORE)
You know they’ll kill you if you get to the bottom of this, right?

Off Bryan’s surprise, Ralph LAUGHS AGAIN, suddenly stands.

BRYAN
Where are you going?

RALPH
We done here, Bobby. Thanks for the Jujies.

BRYAN
Ralph, please. We’re not finished.

RALPH
I am.

He walks to the door, YELLS to the guard --

RALPH
Ready, boss!

Bryan watches Ralph go, his words ringing in his head.

EXT. PAY PHONE (COUNTRY) - LATER

Bryan stands, phone cradled to his ear --

BRYAN
He said he was questioned about Ronda Morrison the day he was arrested on June third. But the only statement they presented in court was recorded almost two months later.

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. EJI OFFICE - CONTINUOUS ACTION

Eva listens to Bryan on SPEAKERPHONE --

EVA
You think they’re hiding that first statement somewhere?
BRYAN (V.O.)
(over speaker)
If they are, it might be at the Escambia Courthouse with the files for his other case. You know anyone over there?

Before she can respond, Brenda looks up from her desk --

BRENDA
I do.

INT. ESCAMBIA COUNTY EVIDENCE ARCHIVES - DAY

The evidence custodian, DORIS (40, black), THUMPS two boxes on the counter in front of Brenda and Bryan.

DORIS
That’s everything we got on Myers. Y’all can make copies over there.

BRYAN
Thank you, ma’am.

DORIS
Sure, baby.

Bryan smiles as he grabs the boxes and heads for the copy machine. Doris looks at Brenda.

DORIS
He’s cute. Married?

BRENDA
Married to his work. How’s Uncle Mickey doin’?

DORIS
He’s buildin’ another shed ‘cause the other two apparently ain’t enough.

BRENDA
Man’s gotta have a project.

As Brenda keeps her occupied, Bryan goes through the boxes, pulls out a stack of cassette tapes, duplicate copies of each. He turns back to Doris, plays it cool --

BRYAN
You mind if I take a copy of these?

DORIS
They ain’t payin’ me enough to stop you.

Doris and Brenda resume their talk as --
Eva and Brenda at the table, pore over the photocopied files.

Bryan at his desk listening to the tapes on headphones -- faint VOICES bleeding through. Something grabs his attention. He jots a note. Hits STOP. REWIND. PULLS off his headphones --

BRYAN
You gotta hear this.

He unplugs his headphones and hits PLAY so they can hear as RALPH’S VOICE fills the air --

RALPH (V.O.)
(on tape)
I understand that, Sheriff...

BRYAN
That’s Myers.

RALPH (V.O.)
(on tape)
That’s what I’m trying to tell you, because I’m gonna be honest, I don’t know a damn thing.

SHERIFF TATE (V.O.)
(on tape)
Is that right?

BRYAN
That’s Tate.

RALPH (V.O.)
(on tape)
Yes, sir, it’s righter than anything I’ve ever said.

SHERIFF TATE (V.O.)
(on tape)
And you would take a polygraph to the fact that you do not know who killed Ronda Morrison.

RALPH (V.O.)
(on tape)
That’s right, sir, I will.
SHERIFF TATE (V.O.)
(on tape; beat; frustrated)
And you would face the person that could testify --

RALPH (V.O.)
(on tape; firm and strong)
I will face any damn body in this world on that, 'cause it's a stone lie. And if you askin' me to frame a innocent man for murder, that just ain't somethin' I'm willin' to do.

Bryan stops the tape, looks to Brenda and Eva, stunned until --

EVA
Holy shit.

BRYAN
Your Honor, we've submitted this statement with another motion for a new trial, but all of our work so far has been without any access to the State's files --

TOMMY
Askin' the State to furnish these broad, generalized requests is a waste of all our time and taxpayer money. None of the requested materials are relevant to this case.

BRYAN
(to Tommy)
Your main witness contradicting his own trial testimony seems pretty relevant to me.

TOMMY
Those tapes were taken from a completely different investigation!
BRYAN
(looks to the judge)
This is about whether or not the State withheld critical exculpatory evidence, which would require a new trial. Brady vs. Maryland entitles us to see everything else they have.

OFF Bryan’s charged stare --

INT. EJI OFFICE - DAY
Bryan and Brenda walk in with TWO BOXES in hand. Eva takes them from Brenda and stacks them in the conference room with MORE BOXES -- they won the motion.

INT. EJI OFFICE - LATE NIGHT
Brenda writes labels on yellow stickies, cataloging a vast inventory of new evidence. Eva pulls a stack of files from a box, hands it to her.

Bryan FLIPS through a THICK, RED BINDER. He finds something.

BRYAN
(reads)
Walter McMillian, admitted to Holman Prison’s death row on August 1, 1987, over a year before his trial. Signed by the warden.

They all exchange a look before jumping back into their work, knowing there’s so much more to discover.

INT. HERBERT’S CELL - NIGHT
The dead of night. The lights all off along the row. Herbert sits slumped against the wall, exhausted and drained.

INTERCUT WITH:

(CONTINUED)
INT. WALTER’S CELL

Walter stands at his cell door, knows what’s on his friend’s mind. A beat before --

WALTER
Herbert! You okay over there?

Herbert doesn’t respond, fighting back tears. A beat before --

WALTER
You gotta get your mind off tomorrow, man, it ain’t over. Bryan’s workin’ it out right now. The court always waits till the last minute. They gonna give you that stay.

Herbert’s mind is elsewhere. He rocks back and forth. Shakes his head, begins to HYPERVENTILATE. It’s unclear whether he’s talking to himself or to Walter.

HERBERT
Why d-d-did I make that bomb? Why did I do that?

WALTER
(knowing)
Don’t go there, Herb.

HERBERT
(growing manic)
I wasn’t tryin’ to hurt nobody.

WALTER
I know.

HERBERT
Why am I so stupid? What’s wrong with me?

WALTER
The war made you sick, Herb. You’re still sick.

HERBERT
That girl wasn’t s-s-posed to come by and pick it up. She w-wasn’t s’posed to. She wasn’t --

Herbert BREAKS, squeezes his temples, wishing his brain worked right.

(CONTINUED)
WALTER
Come on, Herb. You gotta slow your mind down. Remember what we practiced... Slow breaths.

Herbert finally listens, leans his head back, body tight with rigid agony until -- he manages a single DEEP BREATH --

So loud Walter can hear it. He nods. Closes his eyes.

WALTER
That’s good. Now close your eyes, get away from all this. No more walls, no more guards, no more wars to fight, just you, out in the open, fresh air on your face...

SLOW PUSH ON Walter as he remembers --

FANTASY - EXT. ESTATE (ALABAMA)

LOOKING DOWN AT Walter in the grove of pines, he looks up at the treetops, swaying in the wind.

WALTER (V.O.)
Look at them pine trees that been growin’ since way before we was born, and gonna keep on growin’ way after we gone. They been through all the same shit we been through and more, but they still dancing in the breeze.

INT. WALTER’S CELL/HERBERT’S CELL - CONTINUOUS ACTION

Walter’s eyes are still closed. Quiet.

WALTER
You see ‘em?

Herbert’s eyes quiver beneath his closed lids. He’s calm.

HERBERT
Yeah.

WALTER
Don’t think about nothin’ else, just stay right there. It’s gonna be okay, brother.

(CONTINUED)
Herbert takes a deep BREATH, fights to keep his panic at bay.

INT. EJI OFFICE - LATE NIGHT

INSERT: CLOSEUP ON “HERBERT LEE RICHARDSON” as Bryan types. (NOTE: THIS COULD BE THE TITLE PAGE THAT THEY FAX, OR ANOTHER PAGE THAT HE’S TYPING WHICH CLEARLY STATES HIS NAME.)

Bryan types at rapid speed, transcribing a handwritten draft from a messy notebook.

BRYAN
I need Strickland vs. Washington, and the affidavit from Herbert’s Sergeant.

Eva grabs a binder from the shelf as Brenda finds the affidavit and hands it to him. Like clockwork.

INT. EJI OFFICE - LATE NIGHT

Silence as Bryan flips to the last page of the petition, quickly proofreading. He seems satisfied.

BRYAN
Let’s send it.

INT. EJI OFFICE - THE NEXT DAY

Brenda feeds the “PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI” through a fax machine. Page header: “SUPREME COURT OF THE U.S.”

BRENDA
Now what?

BRYAN
We wait.

Bryan and Eva sit at the table, a box of files in front of them. Bryan should be reading, but he can’t take his eyes off the clock -- 4:42, counting the seconds.

The phone RINGS. Bryan picks up, still hopeful.

BRYAN
EJI, this is Bryan Stevenson.

(CONTINUED)
COURT CLERK (V.O.)
(on phone)
Mr. Stevenson, the court has just entered an order in case number 89-5395; the motion for a stay of execution and petition for writ of certiorari have been denied. We’ll fax copies of the order to your office shortly.

As Bryan listens, Eva and Brenda watch his expression fall.

BRYAN
Okay.

Bryan hangs up, sits in silence, staring at the wall. Eva knows what’s on his mind, deep in thought herself before --

EVA
When they executed Wayne Ritter, I tortured myself over whether or not to go... But some things are just too much.
(beat)
He knows how much you’ve done for him. You don’t have to watch him die to show him you care.

Bryan nods. He understands this. But then, very plainly --

BRYAN
He asked me to be there.

Eva can see that he doesn’t have a choice. A beat, she nods --

EVA
I’ll drive you, then.

OFF Bryan’s look of gratitude for his friend --

INT. HERBERT'S CELL/DEATH ROW WALKWAY - LATER
Herbert sits on his bed. Jeremy, the guard who strip-searched Bryan, stands nervously outside with an OLDER GUARD.

JEREMY
Come on, Herbert. We gotta go.

Herbert hesitates, shaking with fear. He stands with a nod, then steps out onto the walkway.

(CONTINUED)
He glances to the cell next door, can just make out Walter on the other side.

HERBERT
(to the guards)
Can I say b-b-bye to my friends?

Jeremy looks unsure, but the older guard nods, familiar with this routine. They usher Herbert to Walter’s cell as --

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. WALTER’S AND ANTHONY’S CELLS

Walter looks at Herbert through the small opening in the center of his door, can see how scared he is --

WALTER
When it get too much, you take them deep breaths and let your mind go.

HERBERT
(beat; terrified nod)
Wish I d-d-didn’t have to do this alone.

WALTER
You not alone, brother. We all with you.
(to Anthony’s cell)
Ain’t that right, Anthony?!

Anthony stands at his cell door, watching, listening --

ANTHONY
That’s right, Herb. You ain’t rid of us yet!

Herbert almost smiles, but the weight is too heavy. He looks at Walter, nods.

HERBERT
You been a good friend.

Walter tries to speak, but his words get caught in his throat. Herbert manages a small smile, then turns and walks away, leaving him with an emptiness he hasn’t felt in years.
INT. HOLDING ROOM - LATER

Electric clippers BUZZ through Herbert’s hair. A GUARD mans the clippers, shaving off everything.

INT. HOLMAN PRISON - WITNESS ROOM - LATER

Jeremy and a CHAMBER GUARD set up folding chairs in the small witness execution room.

Jeremy looks THROUGH the viewing window to see another GUARD checking the straps on the yellow electric chair.

CHAMBER GUARD
(off Jeremy’s nerves)
First time in the chamber, huh?

JEREMY
Yeah.

CHAMBER GUARD
(matter-of-fact)
Don’t think too much, or you’ll lose your shit.

Jeremy nods, tries to be strong as he unfolds another chair.

INT. HALLWAY/EXECUTION WAITING CELL - LATER

A FEMALE GUARD leads Bryan into a holding cell to find Herbert sitting alone, all his hair and eyebrows are completely shaved off.

As the Guard enters, Herbert looks up, shaken and humiliated.

FEMALE GUARD
Need anything, Mr. Richardson?

HERBERT
You still gonna play my song?

FEMALE GUARD
We got it cued up and ready.

HERBERT
Thank you.

She leaves. Herbert shakes his head as Bryan approaches.

(CONTINUED)
HERBERT
This been a strange day... More p-people ask how they can help me today than ever asked in my whole life.

He looks at Bryan, seemingly for the first time.

HERBERT
Do I look funny? I didn’t know they was gonna s-s-shave off everything.

BRYAN
(beat; tender)
You look fine.

Bryan sits down beside Herbert. Remains calm for him.

HERBERT
Most people d-don’t get to think all day about it bein’ their last day alive.
(beat)
It’s different than Nam... least I had a chance there.

BRYAN
(beat; finds the words)
I’m sorry, Herbert.

Herbert looks at him, nothing but gratitude in his eyes.

HERBERT
You the only one that c-cared enough to fight for me.

The statement hits Bryan hard, fighting back his emotions as --

HERBERT
I t-told the Army to send my flag to you, if that’s okay.

BRYAN
I’d be honored.

Herbert smiles through his pain. Then, a scared beat before --

HERBERT
Can you pray with me?
Herbert nods his thanks, letting go of his fear for just a moment as they bow their heads.

The Female Guard enters, nods to the CONTROL ROOM GUARD.

FEMALE GUARD

They’re ready.

He turns, PUSHES PLAY on a small boombox aimed at the intercom microphone as --

Walter sits on the floor, silent as ELLA FITZGERALD’S version of “OLD RUGGED CROSS” begins to play over the P.A. SYSTEM.

“Old Rugged Cross” echoes through the empty hallway as --

The cell door opens. Herbert steps out, handcuffed, led by the WARDEN, followed by Jeremy, the older guard, and the PRIEST. They begin the long walk to the chamber.

“Old Rugged Cross” continues. EVERY DEATH ROW PRISONER stands at the bars of their cells, all SILENT, WAITING SHADOWS.

INSIDE HIS CELL -- Anthony lies in bed, arm over his face.

INSIDE HIS CELL -- Walter sits on the floor, waiting.

MUSIC CONTINUES -- 20 WITNESSES (cops and reporters, all white) in the small room, window in front, closed curtain.

Bryan sits among them as the curtains part to reveal --

(CONTINUED)
Herbert stands beside the electric chair. He looks lost and confused as the warden WHISPERS something to him. Herbert’s gaze finds Bryan in the crowd, his one anchor.

Then, trembling, he addresses the witnesses --

HERBERT

I’m s-sorry for all the p-p-pain I caused.

The warden leads Herbert to the chair, helps him sit down as Jeremy walks up. He looks to the older guard, opposite side of the chair. The older guard nods.

Jeremy takes hold of Herbert’s hand, forces it down into the wrist restraint. He looks up as Herbert glances at him.

Herbert’s fear hits Jeremy hard. He tries not to think about it, shakes it off, finishes the restraints as --

INTERCUT BETWEEN EXECUTION CHAMBER, WITNESSES, AND DEATH ROW --

Walter walks to his door. Begins to BANG his cup against the bars, increasing in speed and intensity as --

-- IN ANTHONY’S CELL --

Anthony gets out of bed, bangs on his door with his fists. The REST OF THE ROW joins in, BANGING on their metal doors with cups and fists. A GROWING WAVE OF PROTEST --

As the warden reads Herbert his DEATH WARRANT, they hear the distant sound of BANGING.

The BANGING PEAKS. Walter takes a BREATH --
WALTER

WE ALL WITH YOU, HERB!

CAMERA SPINS to reveal the line of cells, a hundred other VOICES join in, SHOUTING to Herbert at the top of their lungs as --

AN INMATE throws a roll of toilet paper from his cell. A SECOND INMATE throws his metal cup. We SWING WITH the cup as it falls TO the --

FIRST FLOOR

We PICK UP the cup as it bounces off the wall and REVEAL another row of SHOUTING INMATES.

INT. WITNESS ROOM - NIGHT

Everyone can clearly hear the MEN SHOUTING ON THE ROW, echoing through the vent. Bryan looks back to Herbert as --

INT. EXECUTION CHAMBER - NIGHT

Herbert listens to the sound of his friends CLANGING and SCREAMING through the walls. He remembers Walter’s advice, closes his eyes, slows his BREATH, lets the VOICES wash over him. Everything slows as --

Jeremy grabs a yellow sign that says “READY,” holds it up to a circular window that looks into the generator room.

We FOLLOW him as he leaves the room, shuts the door, walks DOWN the hall, and TAPS on the door with a large key.

INT. GENERATOR ROOM - NIGHT

The EXECUTIONER hears the TAPPING, walks to a big generator, and FLIPS the switch.

TOTAL SILENCE -- All sound drops out completely.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Jeremy stands in the hallway, stares THROUGH a window, eyes on Herbert until -- he averts his gaze, can’t take it as --
Bryan can barely watch, the ghostly IMAGE of Herbert’s pulsing body reflected dimly in the glass as --

Walter stops clanging his cup, staring in Herbert’s direction, feeling the loss of his friend.

Eva sits on the hood of her car, numbing her stress with a cigarette. A few GUARDS and REPORTERS walk to their cars.

Eva finishes her smoke as, across the parking lot, Bryan slowly approaches. She can clearly see his shock and pain from what he just witnessed. A long beat, then --

EVA
You okay?

Bryan shakes his head, can’t even speak. He opens the passenger door and gets in. Worry etched across her face, Eva gets into the driver’s seat and sits beside him.

She doesn’t start the car. Sitting in a long silence until --

Bryan tries to say something, but words don’t come, caught in his throat, the emotion hits him suddenly like a storm, a dam breaking as all of his clients’ pain pours out of him.

Eva burns with compassion for this man who has become her friend. She reaches over and wraps her arm around him, allowing him to let it out.

Bryan sits alone at his desk, back to doing the one thing he knows -- disappearing into his work, poring over transcripts and files from Walter’s case.

CONTINUED
As he reads, something grabs his attention. He stands, grabs the THICK, RED BINDER, the intake log from Holman Prison. He DROPS it on the table and FLIPS through pages.

He stops at a page. Whatever he’s looking at, it’s big.
BOOM! The door SLAMS behind Ralph Myers.

Bryan sits at the table in the EMPTY ROOM, he doesn’t stand or have the space for any bullshit. As Ralph approaches --

RALPH
Hope this important news of yours comes with somethin’ to eat, ‘cause I’m starvin’.

BRYAN (calm but firm)
Sit down, Mr. Myers.

Ralph sees how serious he is, takes his seat.

RALPH
You was a lot nicer last time.

BRYAN
That was before I saw my friend executed.

Ralph is sobered. News of executions hit every prisoner hard.

RALPH
You knew that guy?

Bryan nods, lets this sit for a moment before continuing.

BRYAN
I heard the recording of the first statement you made on June 3. The one they didn’t present in court. (off Ralph’s surprise)
You told the Sheriff you didn’t know anything about Johnny D or the murder. You told him you didn’t want to frame an innocent man. Do you remember saying that?

Ralph looks at him like a deer in headlights. Speechless.
BRYAN

What I’m wondering, is how you went from knowing nothing about the murder on June third, to becoming the State’s key witness three months later? What changed your mind?

After a beat, Bryan grabs the THICK, RED BINDER and places it on the table, begins to flip through it. Ralph watches, can’t help his curiosity.

RALPH

What’s that?

BRYAN

The intake log for Holman Prison.

Ralph watches him stop at a page.

BRYAN

On August 1, 1987, Sheriff Tate transferred two inmates from county jail to death row. Walter McMillian...

He spins the binder around to face Ralph.

BRYAN

... and you.

Ralph’s face drops, his nerves firing. Bryan looks at him with compassion, aware of the pain he’s been put through.

BRYAN

Did they move you to death row because you didn’t want to testify against him?

Something shifts in Ralph, suddenly looks like a child. The fear in his eyes makes it obvious the answer is yes.

BRYAN

They executed Wayne Ritter just a few weeks after you got there. Isn’t that right?

Ralph looks at him, his wall beginning to crack as he nods.

BRYAN

I was in the witness room when they killed Herbert Richardson Thursday night.

(MORE)
It was the worst thing I’ve ever experienced.

I’m sure Ritter’s execution wasn’t easy for you, either.

Ralph can see how much it affected him. Their shared experience breaks down his defense. He shifts in his seat, remembering, finally feels safe enough to speak.

RALPH
They put me in the cell closest to the kill room...

Middle of the night, everybody started screamin’ and bangin’ on the bars. And then... then come the smell of his skin burnin’.

BRYAN (CONT’D)
Can I ask what happened?

RALPH
I was sleepin’ in my foster mom’s basement and her heater blowed up, caught my PJs on fire. I screamed for two minutes straight before they found me.

Everybody knowed that I got a fear of bein’ burned. They knowed what it do to my head to be in a place like that.

I couldn’t stop shaking all night, curled up on the floor cryin’ like a baby, tryin’ to breathe, but every breath just give you another taste of the man they killed.

You can’t go through somethin’ like that and come out the same.

Bryan understands exactly what he means.
BRYAN
I know.
(beat)
I’m sorry they did that to you.

Ralph sees Bryan’s empathy. A new trust growing between them.

RALPH
The next morning, I called the Sheriff and told him I’d say whatever he wanted if he got me out. He took my statement and moved me back to county the same day.

Bryan sees his window, gently pushes forward.

BRYAN
That’s why you lied in your testimony.

Ralph looks at him, can see what he’s doing. He doesn’t bite, tries to rebuild his wall --

RALPH
I didn’t say nothin’ about lyin’... now you puttin’ words in my mouth.

He tries to look strong, but clearly overwhelmed by guilt and fear. Bryan continues with caution.

BRYAN
Mr. Myers, we’re going to court very soon to try to get Johnny D the retrial he deserves. And I’d really like you to take the stand.

Ralph searches Bryan’s face, wondering if he can trust him. Bryan can see he’s getting through. It’s time to close --

BRYAN
They’re using you to condemn a man who you have much more in common with than you think... and if any part of you wants to make things right, this is the last chance you’ll get to do that.

Ralph looks at him, struggling with the weight of this decision. OFF this look --
SUPERIMPOSE: APRIL 16, 1992

ALICE BROOKS (REPORTER) speaks into the camera in front of the courthouse. PEOPLE (black and white) file in behind her.

ALICE BROOKS
The tension is high this morning here at the Baldwin County Courthouse, where a hearing is being held to see if the man convicted of killing Ronda Morrison deserves a new trial. Miss Morrison was only eighteen years old when she was murdered at Jackson Cleaners in Monroeville, Alabama. Many have taken the two-hour drive here from Monroeville to show their support.

Extra security precautions were implemented due to the highly emotional nature of this case.

BLACK FOLK stream out of a church bus. Minnie, John, Jackie, and Evelyn walk from their car, dressed in Sunday best. Bryan, Eva, and Brenda exit his car and head in, focused.

A CROWD (all black) files through a metal detector, 2 GUARDS standing by. Another GUARD holds a German shepherd as it BARKS at a WOMAN who jumps back in fear.

Sheriff Tate enters the courtroom with Tommy and his ASSISTANT ATTORNEY.

Walter exits the holding cell in leg irons and a waist chain, guided by Jeremy and ANOTHER GUARD.

FOLLOW Walter, Jeremy, and the other guard down a hallway.

(CONTINUED)
ALICE BROOKS (V.O.)
Ronda Morrison’s parents said they have no doubt Mr. McMillian is the man responsible for the murder of their daughter.
(MORE)
But members of McMillian’s family claim they have the wrong man. Much of today’s hearing is hinging on the testimony of Ralph Myers, a convicted felon, who was the key witness against McMillian in the original trial.

Walter tries to keep himself together as they push through the door, walk into --

INT. BALDWIN COUNTY COURTHOUSE - COURTROOM - DAY

Everyone turns to Walter as he tries to stand tall, keep his dignity, but fear is evident in his eyes.

The place is PACKED WITH PEOPLE (WHITE and BLACK).

At the front, Tommy and his assistant attorney sit at the prosecution table, Sheriff Tate in the seat behind them.

Bryan’s at the defense table, nervously checking his notes.

Walter’s eyes land on Minnie in the first row. Eva and Brenda sit beside her, John and Jackie on her other side. Behind them, all of Walter’s FRIENDS AND FAMILY, giving him strength with their nods and smiles.

Walter shares a look with Minnie laced with love and pain. Then he nods to John, who sits up tall, trying to be strong.

He reaches the defense table. As Jeremy unlocks Walter’s cuffs, Bryan exchanges a reassuring look with him, though it’s impossible for either man to hide his nerves.

INT. BALDWIN COUNTY COURTHOUSE - COURTROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Jeremy takes his place in the back as Judge Foster, stern and commanding in his robe, looks up from his seat in front.

JUDGE FOSTER
What we’ll be talking about today is obviously an emotional issue. And if any of y’all don’t think you can maintain a reasonable degree of decorum, then I would ask you to leave now.

(beat)
All right, if we are ready, then, we will proceed. Mr. Stevenson?

(CONTINUED)
Thank you, Your Honor.

Bryan stands. He glances back at Walter’s family, meets Eva’s eyes. She gives a reassuring nod. Then -- DEEP BREATH, remembering how many are counting on him. He turns forward.

The State’s case against Walter McMillian turned entirely on the testimony of Ralph Myers. There was no other evidence to establish Mr. McMillian’s guilt. No physical evidence linking him to the crime, no motive, no witnesses. Only the word of one man.

(long beat)

We call Ralph Myers to the stand.

The deputy opens the side door and Ralph walks into the courtroom. He looks exhausted and vacant, clearly rattled.

Walter can’t take his eyes off him, remembering what Ralph did the last time they were here. Ralph avoids his gaze, distant and stone-faced, as he takes a seat on the stand.

Ralph looks up to see Sheriff Tate staring at him from his seat. Ralph looks away, fear instantly taking hold.

The Bailiff holds out a Bible, but Ralph is distracted.

Bailiff
Sir, please stand and place your right hand on the Bible.

Ralph hesitates, then stands and extends his hand.

Bailiff
Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

(long beat)

Mr. Myers?

Ralph
(snaps out of it)
Yes, sir. Sorry, guards got me up at two in the morning to get out here.

(CONTINUED)
Ralph rubs his face, sits. At the table, Walter with a deeply worried look. Bryan remains calm, approaches the stand, unsure of where Ralph’s head is, proceeds with caution.

**BRYAN**
Mr. Myers, did you testify against Walter McMillian in August of 1988?

**RALPH**
(odds beat)
Is that when that was?

**BRYAN**
According to the record, yes.

**RALPH**
Okay, then. Sure, if you say so.

Ralph looks more nervous by the second, color draining from his face. Bryan fights his nerves, remains steady --

**BRYAN**
What did you tell the jury when you testified?

Ralph sees Walter staring. He avoids his gaze, too afraid to face the source of his shame as he MUMBLES --

**RALPH**
Don’t think I can fully remember to be honest with you. Sorry, sir.

Bryan’s heart sinks. They haven’t even begun and they’re already losing him. A BREATH before --

**BRYAN**
It’s okay. I have a transcript of your testimony here...

Bryan walks to the table, grabs the transcript he’s prepared --

**BRYAN**
At the trial, do you remember testifying that you were unwillingly made part of a capital murder and robbery on November 1, 1986, when Walter McMillian saw you at a car wash and asked you to drive his truck because his arm hurt?

(CONTINUED)
RALPH
(nervous; scratches scar)
Yes, sir. I guess so.

BRYAN
Do you remember saying that you drove Mr. McMillian to Jackson Cleaners, subsequently went into the building, and saw McMillian with a gun, standing over the body of Ronda Morrison?

RALPH
(beat; nods)
Yes, sir.

Bryan locks his eyes on him --

BRYAN
Mr. Myers, was the testimony you gave at Mr. McMillian’s trial true?

In his seat, Walter leans forward, praying for truth as --

Ralph stares at Bryan, about to speak until -- he glances past him again, back to Bryan. Then, finally, with great pain --

RALPH
I don’t know.

BRYAN
(remains calm)
You don’t know?

RALPH
Don’t... think I remember.

Walter sinks in his seat as A MURMUR fills the courtroom.

Behind him, Minnie stares in shock as John shakes his head.

Tommy WHISPERS to his assistant as he scribbles notes.

Bryan notices Ralph glance past him again. He turns, follows Ralph’s gaze to Tate, staring harshly back at him from his seat. Ralph is frozen in fear until --

Bryan deliberately steps between Ralph and Tate, blocking their view of each other. Gently locks his eyes on Ralph.

(CONTINUED)
Mr. Myers. Do you know who Walter McMillian is?

Ralph hesitates, gathers his strength.

Yes, sir.

Is he in this room?

Yes, sir.

Can you point him out?

Ralph fully looks at Walter for the first time, points. Neither man looks away, connected by their common status in the margins of society. Bryan sees this, continues carefully.

I’d like to ask again. Was the testimony you gave at Walter McMillian’s trial true?

Ralph keeps his eyes locked with Walter for another beat until -- he looks down, gathers all the courage he has before looking back at Walter. Finally, he speaks --

No, sir, not at all.

A wave of GASPS and WHISPERS rolls through the audience. Tommy sits in his seat, completely stunned --

Walter sits back, eyes still locked on Ralph as --

Order, please!

As the courtroom quiets, with increasing momentum --

Did you see Mr. McMillian on the day that Ronda Morrison was murdered?

No, sir.
BRYAN
Did you drive his truck to Monroeville that day?

RALPH
No. Never did.

BRYAN
Did you go into Jackson Cleaners and see Mr. McMillian standing over Ronda Morrison’s body?

RALPH
Absolutely not.

Bryan lets this sink in, looks at him with care. Then --

BRYAN
No further questions.

INT. BALDWIN COUNTY COURTHOUSE - COURTROOM - MOMENTS 116

Tommy questions Ralph, mid-way through his cross-examination.

TOMMY
Mr. Myers, didn’t you work out a deal with the State to get a lighter sentence if you testified to the truth?

Ralph thinks a beat, then --

RALPH
If I testified... but the truth ain’t got nothin’ to do with it. When it come to them, Ralph Myers is tellin’ the truth when it agrees with what they wantin’ for you to say. But if it ain’t what they wanna hear, Ralph is a liar.

TOMMY
Well, how do we know you’re not lying now? How do we know, you ain’t just upset about the deal you got, and you feel like somehow by you changing your story, it might help you get out?

Ralph’s fear is gone completely now, ready for a fight.

(Continued)
RALPH
Because that don’t make no sense, sir. Who do you think is decidin’ what happens to me? If I live or die? Not me. Not Johnny D. It’s all y’all that decidin’ that. So how is me sayin’ what I’m sayin’ gonna help me get out? If anything, it gonna help me get to death row.

Tommy doesn’t respond to this. Ralph looks to Sheriff Tate.

RALPH
But I don’t care, y’all can do what you want to me. But I got to tell the truth now, even though it might not be what y’all wanna hear --

TOMMY
(interrupts)
Thank you, Mr. Myers, let’s move on to the next question.

RALPH
But I ain’t done.

TOMMY
(quickly)
You’ve said enough.

BRYAN
Objection, Your Honor. Mr. Myers has the right to finish his answer.

Judge Foster looks to Ralph with a nod.

JUDGE FOSTER
Go ahead, Mr. Myers.

Nothing Tommy can do. Ralph speaks with conviction.

RALPH
Thank you, Your Honor.
(beat; looks around)
I think it’s pretty clear to y’all I ain’t no saint. I can’t read, and I ain’t made it past the third grade, but I still know what’s right and what’s wrong. And a innocent man dyin’ on account a me, or you, or anyone in this room, ain’t right.

(MORE)

(continuing)
'Cause me, I can look in your face or anybody else’s face dead eye-to-eyeball and tell you anything I told about Mr. McMillian was a lie.

(looks right at Walter)
He’s here because of me, and I would really appreciate you sendin’ him home to his kids where he belongs.

Walter locks eyes with Ralph again, everything having changed between them. A moment of true, shared sincerity. Bryan and Eva exchange a charged look as MUSIC takes us to --

MONTAGE - INT. BALDWIN COUNTY COURTHOUSE - COURTROOM - DAY

THROUGH THE REST OF THE HEARING:

Clay Kast, the white mechanic Bryan spoke to at the shop.

CLAY KAST
We didn’t convert Johnny D’s truck to a lowrider till May of ’87, six months after that girl was killed.

Bryan hands a paper to the court.

BRYAN
We submit a copy of the official log from the police officer who stopped by the fish fry, confirming that Walter McMillian was there with his family.

Woodrow Ikner, the officer Bryan found going door-to-door.

WOODROW IKNER
Mr. Myers said that the body was face-up near the front counter, but I found her face-down in the back by the bathroom.

(CONTINUED)
Judge Foster makes a note in a pad, he seems engaged.

Bryan hands a file to the court.

BRYAN
Submitting exculpatory records from Ralph Myers' stay at Taylor Hardin Psychiatric Hospital, which the State did not disclose to defense counsel.

Tommy takes notes at his table, not looking very pleased.

A PSYCHOLOGIST with glasses speaks to Bryan.

PSYCHOLOGIST
Mr. Myers was my patient at the time, and he claimed on numerous occasions that he was being threatened with the electric chair if he didn’t say what authorities wanted to hear.

Back to Ikner. The Judge listens intently, jotting down notes, very engaged now.

WOODROW IKNER
The prosecutor asked me to testify that the body had been drugged from the front to the back, and I told him I ain’t gonna lie in court. Few weeks later, I got fired from the department.

The end of Bryan’s closing comments, steady and firm...

BRYAN
All the evidence presented today would have been critical to the outcome of this case and its exclusion was a clear violation of Brady versus Maryland and Mr. McMillian’s constitutional rights.

(MORE) (CONTINUED)
BRYAN (CONT'D)
(beat; sincere)
The truth has not been told in this case. And I know a lot of time has gone by, but I don’t believe it’s ever too late for justice. We ask the court to grant our motion and order a new trial for Mr. McMillian. Thank you, Your Honor.

Bryan takes his seat beside Walter, filled with hope. Tommy can barely look at him, not happy with the way this went.

JUDGE FOSTER
Thank you, Counselors. We’ll reconvene at a later date once I’ve had time to look through everything.

The BAILIFF walks to the front of the court, hearing over as --

BAILIFF
All rise!

Walter sits in the transport van, Bryan stands outside the open side door, processing what they just went through.

WALTER
I didn’t think he was gonna go through with it.

BRYAN
(smiles)
Honestly, for a second there, I wasn’t sure, either.

Walter shakes his head, genuine gratitude in his eyes.

WALTER
Man. I can’t even tell you how I feel right now.
(looks to Bryan)
Thank you.

As Bryan nods, Walter notices his family gathering twenty yards away, Minnie, John, Jackie, Evelyn. He waves to them.

Jeremy, standing guard nearby, addresses Walter’s family.

(CONTINUED)
JEREMY
We got a few minutes if y’all wanna say hi.

Bryan and Walter look to Jeremy, shocked by the kind gesture. Jeremy glances at Bryan, then looks down. There is a humility here not present in their first meeting. A sense of shame.

JEREMY
We’ll leave in five minutes.

Bryan is speechless. Walter nods, grateful --

WALTER
Thank you.

Bryan gives Walter space with his family, approaches Eva and Brenda, waiting for him.

EVA
You did great. Chapman oughta just call you tonight and drop the charges.

BRYAN
Let’s not hold our breath on that one.

As they walk to their car, Bryan grabs one more glimpse of Walter LAUGHING with his family at the transport van.

INT./EXT. BRYAN’S RENTAL - EVENING

Bryan sits on his bed, working as usual. A KNOCK at the door.

He OPENS the door to see John (Walter’s son) and his FRIEND.

BRYAN
John? Everything okay?

JOHN
My dad wanted me to drop this off.

He reveals a used Rhodes keyboard with a bow around it.

JOHN
He said to have a little fun for once.
INT. BRYAN’S RENTAL - NIGHT

Bryan sits at the keyboard, taking a rare break from his work to play a slow, JAZZY RIFF. His spirit lifts with every note.

PUSH IN ON a new addition to his bookshelf -- beside a photo of Herbert as a young soldier: an American flag, folded in a triangle, in a display case that reads, “In loving memory of, Herbert Richardson, United States Army, Vietnam Veteran.”

EXT. BALDWIN COUNTY COURTHOUSE - DAY

SUPERIMPOSE: ONE MONTH LATER

Full parking lot, but most of the people are already inside.

JUDGE FOSTER (V.O.)

(pre-lap)
Upon the reading of my decision, I expect the rules of decorum within this courtroom to be upheld...

INT. BALDWIN COUNTY COURTROOM - CONTINUOUS ACTION

EVERYONE is seated. Walter beside Bryan, nervous.

Eva and Brenda are with Walter’s family behind them.
John is too nervous to look, lowers his head, arms on his knees. Minnie tenderly rubs his back with her hand.

Tommy sits with his assistant, Tate behind them. Judge Foster, sitting at the bench, continues reading his decision --

JUDGE FOSTER
Ralph Myers took the stand before this court, swore to tell the truth, and proceeded to recant most, if not all, of the relevant portions of his testimony at trial. Clearly, he has either perjured himself at trial or in front of this court.

(beat)
After careful review, it is this court’s opinion that conclusive evidence has not been provided that Ralph Myers perjured himself at the original trial, and that pressure put on him since his trial testimony could tend to discredit his recantation.

(CONTINUED)
A MURMUR from among Walter’s friends and family.

JUDGE FOSTER
Therefore it is ordered, adjudged, and decreed that the trial testimony of Ralph Myers is not found to have been perjured testimony, and no new trial shall be granted at this time. Walter McMillian shall be returned to Holman Correctional Facility where he is to face death by electrocution.

A WAVE OF DESPAIR sweeps through Walter’s family and friends. Walter puts his head down, Bryan puts his hand on his back, exchanges a devastated look with Eva.

Behind them, John suddenly STANDS with tears in his eyes --

JOHN
You can’t do this to us again, Judge.

JUDGE FOSTER
(beat; firm)
Sit down, young man.

John shakes his head, more broken than defiant. He looks from the Judge to Walter, quivering with emotion.

JOHN
That’s my dad, sir. He ain’t done nothin’ wrong.

A hint of empathy flashes over Judge FOSTER before --

JUDGE FOSTER
Sit down right now, or you’ll be arrested in contempt of court.

Bryan stands, tries to manage the situation.

BRYAN
Your Honor, please give us a minute.

WALTER
(firm)
Listen to the judge, son.

Minnie pulls on John’s arm to sit, but he pulls away, the situation quickly escalating.

(CONTINUED)
JUDGE FOSTER

I won’t say it again. Sit down.

John stares at JUDGE FOSTER, body trembling, tears streaming, but unable to move. He shakes his head, totally broken.

JOHN

Not if you gonna kill my dad for no reason...

WALTER

That’s enough, Johnny.

Bryan sees the Judge nod to TWO OFFICERS. John doesn’t stop.

BRYAN

Judge, please. Let me deal with this.

A GUARD steps up to Bryan, blocks him from moving. Behind him, Jeremy and the other Holman guard move toward Walter.

JOHN

You killin’ our family, sir.

Walter sees the Officers approaching John.

WALTER

Shut your mouth and sit down, boy!

John looks right at his dad, shakes his head, so broken it’s the only thing he can do as --

OFFICER #1 grabs his arm, pulls him ROUGHLY into the aisle.

John YANKS his arm away, enough resistance to make OFFICER #2 grab him and THROW him to the floor.

MINNIE

HEY!

WALTER

Get your damn hands off my son!

Walter tries to stand, but is held back by Jeremy. Bryan wants to jump in and help, but is blocked by the Guard standing like a wall right in front of him.

Officer #1 has his knee on John’s back, violently pulling his arms back to cuff him.

BRYAN

He’s not resisting!

(CONTINUED)
Once the cuffs are on, the officers pull John to his feet and drag him to the door. Minnie starts to chase after, but is held back by more OFFICERS. Tate shoots Bryan a cold look as --

Bryan turns to Walter, more devastated than ever as Jeremy, a clear look of guilt in his eyes, and the other Holman guard, pull him away from the chaos.

As Walter is led out, Bryan’s heart sinks into the floor. He looks at Eva -- how the hell did this just happen?

EXT. BALDWIN COUNTY COURTHOUSE - PARKING LOT - AFTERNOON

As Bryan walks to his car, he looks across the lot to see Minnie and Evelyn, embracing Jackie as she sobs. The sight hits him to his core.

INT. WALTER’S HOUSE - KITCHEN - AFTERNOON

Minnie sits down at the kitchen table, stirring instant coffee into a mug of hot water. She sets the mug on the table, doesn’t take a sip, haunted by the empty chairs that were once filled with those she loves.

For a moment, she lets down her guard, lets the pain and frustration bubble to the surface of her skin. In this moment, she isn’t the solid rock of her family, she is a hurting, angry, devastated human being.

Then, after she lets it out, she composes herself, wipes her tears, and takes a sip of her coffee.

INT. DEATH ROW WALKWAY/WALTER’S CELL - LATER

Jeremy and a SECOND HOLMAN GUARD walk Walter to his cell. As the door SLIDES open, his body goes stiff. The second guard UNLOCKS his cuffs. Walter hesitates.

They try to usher him in, but he stands strong. Shakes his head. They push against him as he grabs the door, refuses to go back in.

JEREMY
Come on, man, don’t make this hard.

They push him harder, but Walter doesn’t budge, grabs the sides of the door to keep from going in.

JEREMY
Don’t do this, McMillian.

(CONTINUED)
The second guard shoves him hard from behind as --

WALTER

NO!

Walter lunges backwards against the guard, knocking him back.

Jeremy tries to grab Walter as the second guard, fuming, rushes and HITS him in the back. Walter goes flying, SLAMS into his desk, everything CRASHING to the floor as --
INT. DEATH ROW - STAIRS - DAY
TWO GUARDS run towards them --

INT. ANTHONY’S CELL, THROUGH THE DOOR - DAY
THROUGH the door. Anthony shouts through his door slot --

ANTHONY
HEY! WHAT THE HELL’S GOIN’ ON?

INMATES up and down the row begin to CALL OUT TO WALTER --

INT. WALTER’S CELL/DEATH ROW - DAY
As Walter FLAILS on the floor --
Jeremy rushes down, pinning Walter to the ground with the second guard as he lets out an ANGUISHED SCREAM.
END ON Walter, level with the floor, uncomfortably close.

INT. WALTER’S CELL/DEATH ROW - LATER
WIDE SHOT, OUTSIDE LOOKING IN -- Empty. Then we see --
Jeremy cleans up the aftermath of the struggle, picks up some books and pens and puts them back on Walter’s desk.
He stops suddenly, eyes on the floor, staring at something we can’t see. He bends down to pick it up as --

INT. SOLITARY CONFINEMENT - LATER
A small, empty cell. No bed, no window. Walter sits, back against the wall. He stares ahead. Lost. Then --
The slot in the door SLIDES open. Walter looks up to see Jeremy looking at him through the small window.
A beat before -- he slides something through the slot.
Jeremy gives him a nod and walks away. Walter hesitates, then stands, walks to the door, and reaches into the slot to find --
The family photos Minnie gave him long ago, faded with age.
INT. SOLITARY CONFINEMENT - MOMENTS LATER

Walter sits on the floor again, flipping through the photos one-by-one until --

He reaches the picture of himself with John. Suddenly, his anger fades, replaced by tears fighting to break free.

He turns the photo over to see in his wife’s handwriting --

“This is you. Love, Minnie.”

Walter stares at the words for a long beat, wondering if he will ever be able to believe them again.

INT. BRYAN’S RENTAL - NIGHT

Bryan lies in bed, wide awake, his brain spinning out. He looks at the clock -- 2:23 AM. No point trying to sleep.

He sits up, might as well get some work done --

INT. BRYAN’S RENTAL - MOMENTS LATER

Bryan sits at a small table, covered in papers and files. He tries to work, but he can’t get his mind off the frustration of Walter’s case. He rests his foot on the table, leans back, covers his face, draws a long, frustrated BREATHE.

Then BOOM! He suddenly KICKS the table, a brief but shocking burst of anger, spraying a few stacks of files to the floor.

He sits there another beat, still, broken, silent. Then, he stands and starts to methodically clean the mess up.

EXT. ALABAMA RIVER - LATER

Bryan sits with Eva on a bench overlooking the wide, flowing river. In the distance, a large dinner boat, The Harriet, a “historical” recreation of the riverboats used during the time of slavery.

ADD SHOT OF BRIE WALKING UP AND SITTING BESIDE BRYAN. *

Bryan watches the boat move slowly toward them. Then --
BRYAN
Nobody wants to remember that this is where thousands of enslaved people were shipped in and paraded up the street to be sold. Ten miles from here, black people were pulled from their homes and lynched and nobody talks about it.

(beat)
You can talk about the civil rights movement, but only the good parts. Can’t talk about schools becoming as segregated now as they were in the ’50s. Can’t talk about one out of every three black men ending up in prison. Can’t talk about the fact that nobody ever apologized, or even acknowledged that they did something wrong.

Bryan stops here, the facts of the past threatening to overwhelm. Eva can see his pain, his eyes tight before --

BRYAN
And now this black boy from Delaware is walking into their courtrooms, expecting them to admit they convicted an innocent black man.

(looks off; beat)
I promised that whole community I’d bring him home.

Bryan shakes his head, looks off, tears welling.

BRYAN
How was I so naive to think we could ever change anything?

Bryan closes his eyes. Eva looks at him with compassion.
EVA
I’ve heard a lot of lawyers say it’s never a good idea to get too close to your clients. Distance is healthy.
(beat)
But working with you showed me that’s bullshit. You choose to get close to every one of them, and you love them like family. And when your family is hurting, so are you...
(beat)
There’s no way I could ever fully understand what you’re going through. But I’m pretty sure you mean a lot more to this community than you think.

Bryan thinks about that for a moment, watching The Harriet continue across the river.

A139 INT. CHURCH - DAY
A vibrant GOSPEL CHOIR lifts their voices to God in a church filled with BELIEVERS.
Bryan stands among them, watching his people SING to a Higher Power. He closes his eyes and takes it in, trying to tap into their hope and peace.

139 INT. JUVENILE FACILITY - LOBBY - DAY
Bryan stands in a circle, holding hands with Mrs. Coleman, CHARLIE’S MOM, and CHARLIE’S GRANDPA, heads bowed --

MRS. COLEMAN
We thank You, Lord, for watching over our boy and bringing him home...
As she CONTINUES, Bryan opens his eyes, watches her pour love over her children. A door OPENS. They turn to see --

Charlie, dressed in a button shirt, jeans, sneakers. Still quiet and shy, but looking better than we last saw him.

Charlie’s mom rushes to him and pulls him into a hug, followed by his grandpa and grandma. Bryan watches them, moved by their love and tears.

(CONTINUED)
Charlie finally breaks away from his family and walks up to Bryan. Juvie has given him an edge he didn’t have before. He goes for the pound-hug to keep it cool.

But once he’s in Bryan’s arms, he stays there long enough to let Bryan know how thankful he is.

As Bryan squeezes Charlie, the grateful look on Mrs. Coleman’s face shows him that you can never know when your work will truly make a difference.

EXT. HOLMAN PRISON - DAY

HIGH SHOT, LOOKING DOWN as Bryan’s Civic pulls into the parking lot.

INT. HOLMAN PRISON - CHECK-IN - DAY

Bryan waits as Jeremy checks him in, just like he did the first time he visited. But something seems different in Jeremy’s demeanor. He glances at Bryan as he checks his ID.

JEREMY
After that dude said he made the whole thing up, I thought they’d let McMillian go.

Bryan looks at Jeremy, surprised, before --

BRYAN
Me, too.

JEREMY
You get his kid out?

BRYAN
Yeah.

JEREMY
That’s good.

Bryan takes his ID, hesitates, clearly taken aback by this exchange. Then, he gives a polite nod, turns away as --

JEREMY
Hey...
(off Bryan’s look)
Uh, can I ask you somethin’?

Bryan nods, watches him struggle to form the words.

(CONTINUED)
Um... I could get in trouble for this, but... I got an uncle, who took care a me growin’ up, good guy. And, uh, he’s in here. Block 4.

BRYAN
(beat; then)
He’s an inmate?

JEREMY
(nods)
His lawyer’s a piece a shit. I was wonderin’ if you could maybe take a look at his case. I can pay you.

Bryan never saw this one coming. He can see Jeremy’s sincerity, realizing he has his own struggles to face.

He walks up to him, pulls a business card from his pocket, and hands it over.

BRYAN
Call me tomorrow... You won’t have to pay anything.

Jeremy nods, the moment clearly resonates, touched by Bryan’s gracefulness. The only words that he can find are --

JEREMY
Thank you.

Bryan nods, turns into the prison with a little more hope than when he first walked in.

CLOSE AND INTIMATE: Bryan sits across from Walter in the spot they first met, still fighting his guilt.

Both men sit in silence. Bryan looks at him with regret.

BRYAN
I’m so sorry.

Walter lets that sink in a moment, shakes his head slightly.

WALTER
The day they arrested me, I thought I was gonna be okay.
(MORE)
‘Cause I had the truth. Soon as they talk to everybody that was with me, they gonna have to let me go.

(beat)
But then the police keep callin’ you a killer. Some white dude says he saw you do it. News people sayin’ you did it. Judge and jury sayin’ you did it. And now you on the row two, three, four years, your friends and kids ain’t callin’ as much as they used to. After a while, you start to wonder what they think of you, you start to wonder what you think of you. The truth ain’t so clear no more.

(beat; remembering)
But the last few days, I can’t stop thinkin’ ‘bout Myers sittin’ up there, tellin’ everybody how it really went down.

(beat)
That’s the first time I feel like myself since they locked me up. First time I remembered who I is.

(beat)
These fools gone do what they gone do, but if they take me to that chair tonight, I’m a go out smilin’. ‘Cause I got my truth back. You gave me that. You gave it to my family. And nobody can take that from us again.

Bryan takes this in, releasing the guilt he’s been carrying. Walter cocks his head, playful --

WALTER
You ain’t quittin’, right?

BRYAN
Of course not.

WALTER
Then you ain’t got nothin’ to be sorry for.

Bryan looks at him, deeply moved.
BRYAN (V.O.)
(pre-lap)
I know how disappointing the last hearing was, but that’s not where this is going to end.

INT. WALTER’S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - EVENING

Bryan sits with Minnie, John, Evelyn, Jackie, and a handful of other family and friends, including Uncle Leo, sitting in his wheelchair.

BRYAN
We’re preparing a motion to submit our evidence to the State Supreme Court in Montgomery. They have the power to reverse the last decision and force the circuit court to give us a new trial.

MINNIE
You think they’ll do that?

BRYAN
Nothing’s guaranteed, but I don’t see how an outside court could ignore the evidence we have.

JOHN
(unconvinced)
Even if he do get out, everybody but us still gonna think he guilty. If they can’t kill ‘im in there, they can still do it out here.

BRYAN
We’ve been worried about that, too, and we’re working on it.

Uncle Leo speaks up, stern and to the point.

UNCLE LEO
You know what you doin’, boy?

Bryan can’t tell if he’s being criticized or not.

UNCLE LEO
You beatin’ the drum for justice, that’s what you doin’.

(CONTINUED)
Before Bryan knows how to respond, Uncle Leo tilts his head to reveal a scar on his crown.

UNCLE LEO
See this? Got it in Greene County, tryin’ to register to vote in ’64.

He turns and points to a 4-inch scar above his right ear.

UNCLE LEO
Got this one in Mississippi fighting for civil rights.

He turns and shows another scar at the back of his neck.

UNCLE LEO
This one in Birmingham after the Children’s Crusade.
(beat)
These ain’t just scars... they my medals of honor.
(into Bryan’s eyes)
You see ‘em?

Something about this moment touches Bryan’s core. He nods.

BRYAN
Yes, sir.

UNCLE LEO
Good.
(beat)
Now you just gotta get everybody else to see it, too.

As Uncle Leo smiles, Bryan scans the faces in the room, their belief in him spurring him forward.

A VIDEO SHOOT: Bryan sits as a SOUND MIXER adjusts his mic.

BRYAN
Test test. Check check.

The sound guy gives a thumbs-up. Eva stands off to the side, watching silently as --

CAMERAPERSON (O.S.)
We’re rolling. Whenever you’re ready, Mr. Bradley.

(CONTINUED)
In front of Bryan, his INTERVIEWER, ED BRADLEY, of “60 MINUTES” fame, unseen but heard.

ED BRADLEY (O.S.)
Okay, Bryan, you ready?

Bryan puts his game face on, nods as --

“60 MINUTES”
(SHOT TO LOOK LIKE 90s TV):

-- Ed Bradley addresses the camera, a blown-up picture of Walter McMillian behind him.

ED BRADLEY (V.O.)
(on TV)
His name is Walter McMillian, known to his friends as Johnny D, and he’s been on death row in Alabama’s Holman Prison for almost six years. Was he in fact the man who walked into a dry cleaning store in Monroeville, Alabama in November of 1986 and robbed and murdered the clerk? Or, did they get the wrong man? And is the real murderer still out there somewhere?

INT. WALTER’S HOUSE – LIVING ROOM – CONTINUOUS ACTION

Walter’s family on the couch, around them, many FAMILY MEMBERS AND FRIENDS from the first time Bryan visited. All eyes glued to Ed Bradley on TV.

ED BRADLEY (V.O.)
(on TV)
A jury was convinced they got the right man. But you may not be after you watch this story.

INT. DEATH ROW – CONTINUOUS ACTION

Anthony presses his face to his cell door, trying to listen to the broadcast --

ANTHONY
Turn it up, man! I can’t hear!

Next door, Walter turns up the VOLUME on a small TV as he watches, glued to every word. Through the TV --

(CONTINUED)
ON TV: Johnny D sits across from Ed Bradley.

ED BRADLEY (V.O.)
(on TV)
You didn’t kill Ronda Morrison?

WALTER (V.O.)
(on TV)
No, sir, I didn’t see Ronda Morrison a day in my life. God knows I ain’t.

ED BRADLEY (V.O.)
(on TV)
Where were you on the day of the murder?

WALTER (V.O.)
(on TV)
At my house.

ED BRADLEY (V.O.)
(on TV)
Did you ever go into Monroeville on the day of the murder?

WALTER (V.O.)
(on TV)
No, sir. Never went to Monroeville period.

ON TV: Walter walks down the death row walkway, toward his cell.

ED BRADLEY (V.O.)
(on TV)
McMillian is certainly not a typical death row inmate, he had a good job in the logging business, has no prior felony convictions, and lived with his family near Monroeville his entire life...

INT. DEATH ROW - GUARD STATION - CONTINUOUS ACTION

Jeremy and some OTHER GUARDS watch the show on a small TV as --

ON TV: Bryan speaks to Ed Bradley in the interview we started with --
BRYAN (V.O.)
(on TV)
I have never had a case where the State’s only evidence of guilt comes from one person. Where there’s no motive, there’s no physical evidence, there’s no corroborating circumstances, there’s nothing but the word of one person.
Sheriff Tate drinks with some off-duty COPS, all watching --

ON TV: Ed Bradley sits with Ralph Myers, in his prison uniform.

RALPH (V.O.)
(on TV)
I told them I had seen a young
girl laying on the floor with her
mouth open. Johnny D standing
over her.

ED BRADLEY (V.O.)
(on TV)
Did he have a gun?

RALPH (V.O.)
(on TV)
Yeah, I had told the court that,
yeah.

ED BRADLEY (V.O.)
(on TV)
Was it true?

TIGHT ON Tate, fuming as --

RALPH (V.O.)
(on TV)
No, sir, not at all. Nowhere near
true.

ED BRADLEY (V.O.)
Why should anyone believe you now?
When you’re taking back what you
said at the trial, under oath.

RALPH (V.O.)
(on TV)
Well, it’s like this. I don’t
know the words for that, but I can
tell you this much... Right is
right, and wrong is wrong. And
for a man to straighten his own
life out, he must tell the truth.
He must try to do what is right,
and that’s what I’m tryin’ to do.
INT. TOMMY CHAPMAN’S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Tommy sits with his WIFE and TWO YOUNG SONS (8, 10), eating and watching the TV --

ON TV: Tommy responds to a question from Ed Bradley.

ED BRADLEY (V.O.)
(on TV)
How would you characterize Ralph Myers?

TOMMY (V.O.)
(on TV)
Ralph’s about as low as you can get. He’s a scum.

ED BRADLEY (V.O.)
(on TV)
A liar?

TOMMY (V.O.)
(on TV)
Yes, sir, I’d characterize him a liar, particularly now.

Cut to Bryan, mid-interview:

BRYAN (V.O.)
(on TV)
I’m sure Ralph Myers would agree that any threat he was under in prison, is nothing like the threat he’s under now, having recanted his testimony and opened himself back up to perjury charges, to capital murder charges. What Myers has done is take a pretty radical risk.

TOMMY (V.O.)
(on TV)
What’s wrong with our criminal justice system is the fact that, um, people want to come back sometime and second-guess juries. Uh, I don’t think there been any law enforcement misconduct in this case, I don’t think anyone’s proved it.
BRYAN (V.O.)
(on TV)
The prosecutor’s job is not to obtain a conviction, it’s to achieve justice. And one of the greatest tragedies about this case, is that somebody in Monroe County has literally gotten away with murder.

ED BRADLEY (V.O.)
(on TV)
If an execution date is set for McMillian, and that day comes and it’s time for him to go to the electric chair, would you be comfortable?

TOMMY (V.O.)
(on TV)
Yes... I’d be comfortable with it.

ED BRADLEY (V.O.)
(on TV)
You think it’s, fair, just, he had his...

TOMMY (V.O.)
(on TV)
He had his day in court. He, uh, was tried by a jury and they heard the testimony and they believed it.

HOLD ON Tommy as he chews on his dinner, pondering his role in this story as --

OVER “60 MINUTES” AUDIO:

INT. EJI OFFICE - DAY
Bryan types a motion as Eva brings a law book to his desk for reference.

EXT. STATE JUDICIAL BUILDING - DAY
Bryan walks up the steps of the grand entrance, ready for court.
BRYAN (V.O.)
(on TV)
Next we’ll be presenting our evidence to the Alabama Supreme Court, hoping they’ll see what we think is very clear, that Walter McMillian is innocent.

BACK TO TV
A final shot of Walter escorted to his cell.

ED BRADLEY (V.O.)
(on TV)
McMillian’s fate is now in the hands of the Alabama Supreme Court, which is expected to decide soon if he’s entitled to a new trial.

A152 EXT. EJI OFFICE - DAY (ESTABLISHING)
SUPERIMPOSE: 3 MONTHS LATER

152 INT. EJI OFFICE - DAY
TRACK Eva THROUGH the busy main room of the office. She drops a file on the desk of a new, MALE LAWYER #1 (20s, black).

EVA
Lunch vote. Chris’ or Martha’s?... Hands up for Chris’?

MALE LAWYER #2 (20s, white) stops TYPING to raise his hand along with male lawyer #1.

EVA
Martha’s?

Brenda raises her hand, along with FEMALE LAWYER (20s, black), standing at the copy machine spewing out pages.

EVA
Bryan! Tie-breaker!

BRYAN (O.S.)
Martha’s!

Brenda raises her fist in the air -- victory.

(CONTINUED)
Eva drops a final file on Brenda’s desk as her PHONE RINGS. She picks it up --

BRENDA
EJI, this is Brenda.
OFF her look --

INT. EJI OFFICE - BRYAN’S OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Brenda KNOCKS on the opening to Bryan’s office. As Bryan looks up from his cluttered desk --

EVA
The clerk from the Supreme Court said their ruling in the McMillian case is ready to be picked up.

Bryan looks stunned for a moment, then he quickly gets up and rushes out the door. Everyone in the office watches him go.

EXT. STREET (MONTGOMERY) - MOMENTS LATER

Bryan walks quickly through downtown Montgomery, trying to keep his expectations realistic as he picks up the pace, breaks into a light run.

EXT. ALABAMA SUPREME COURT BUILDING - MOMENTS LATER

Bryan runs up the tall stairs toward --

INT. ALABAMA SUPREME COURT - FILE ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

A CLERK slides the 35-page document under a glass partition.

Bryan takes it, flips to the first page, starts to read, his gaze giving nothing away as --

MONROE COUNTY NEWSCAST

STELLA TAYLOR (REPORTER) stands in the Alabama courthouse lobby, PEOPLE moving behind her as she speaks into the camera --

(CONTINUED)
A wave of shock rolled through Monroe County today when the Alabama Supreme Court overturned the circuit court’s previous decision and granted a new trial to convicted killer Walter ‘Johnny D’ McMillian.

Cut to -- Bryan in the lobby, mid-interview.

BRYAN (V.O.)
(on TV)
This was the first time a court outside the county was shown the overwhelming evidence that proves Mr. McMillian’s innocence. Though the court granted him a new trial, we believe he deserves to be released immediately, and that’s what we’ll be arguing at the next hearing.

The camera ZOOMS in on Tommy as he exits the courtroom.

STELLA TAYLOR (V.O.)
(on TV)
Mr. Chapman, how do you feel about today’s decision?

TOMMY (V.O.)
(on TV)
No comment at this time.

As Tommy heads out the door --

INT. TOMMY CHAPMAN’S HOUSE - DINING TABLE - NIGHT

Tommy sits at the table, looking over paperwork from McMillian’s case, stressed. His WIFE enters, hands him a glass of water. She rubs his back, sees his anxiety.

TOMMY
If I don’t keep fightin’ this, I’m not gonna have a job when it’s over.

TOMMY’S WIFE
Do you think he did it?
TOMMY
(beat; then)
It doesn’t matter what I think.

TOMMY’S WIFE
Of course, it does.

As Tommy ponders her words --

A BLACK CAR stops in front of the office. A STATE OFFICER in a suit steps out, envelope in his hand. He walks to the door and into --

The STATE OFFICER enters the office, sees Eva with a stack of files.

STATE OFFICER
I’m looking for attorney Bryan Stevenson.

Eva motions toward the desk as Bryan looks up, stands as the Officer walks to him.

STATE OFFICER
Mr. Stevenson?

BRYAN
Yes?

He hands him an official envelope.

STATE OFFICER
I’ve been ordered to serve this pleading to you.

The Officer leaves. All eyes in the office are on Bryan as he opens the envelope, takes out the file, and reads. His face falls, processes for a beat before --

BRYAN
Tommy Chapman is asking the court to stay the proceedings so the order for a new trial isn’t implemented. He’s claiming he now wants to reinvestigate the crime.

(MORE)
He’s trying to block us to buy time to rebuild his case.

EVA
That son of a bitch.

Bryan can’t believe this is happening. He grips the file in his hand, walks toward the door, infuriated.

EVA
You want some backup?

BRYAN
I’m good.

BRYAN (CONT’D)
(beat; looks up)
He’s trying to block us to buy time to rebuild his case.

BRYAN
You’re asking the court to keep a man on death row that you know is innocent?

Tommy steps outside, closes the door, squares up against him.

BRYAN
The Supreme Court supports all the evidence we presented, and every one of your witnesses have recanted. You’ve got nothing left.
TOMMY
My investigation is still in process.

BRYAN
We both know you’re not going to find anything.

Tommy stares at him a beat. Then --

TOMMY
Do you have any idea the bullshit I’ve put up with since your ‘60 Minutes’ story aired? I got the governor on my ass, the NAACP callin’ me a racist, Ronda’s family checkin’ in every day.

BRYAN
You can’t keep an innocent man in prison while you try to salvage your reputation.

TOMMY
This ain’t got nothin’ to do with my reputation. It’s about the people in this county who hired me to keep them safe.

BRYAN
What people are you talking about? The ones in this neighborhood? Or the ones from the black community you took McMillian from? You think they feel safe?

(off Tommy’s look)
Your job isn’t to defend a conviction, it’s to achieve justice. And as long as you keep fighting us, someone in your county is literally getting away with murder.

TOMMY
You drive all the way down here at dinnertime just to tell me how to do my job?

BRYAN
No. I’m here because I think you know the difference between right and wrong, and you know Johnny D didn’t kill her.

(MORE) (CONTINUED)
BRYAN (CONT'D)

I’m filing a motion to dismiss all charges, and I think you should join it.

For a brief second, it seems as if Bryan’s words might break through. But then, Tommy speaks --

TOMMY
Next time you wanna stop by my house, I’d appreciate you callin’ first.

(beat)
Get the hell off my property.

Tommy heads inside as Bryan turns back to his car, unfazed.

156 INT. HOLMAN PRISON - CHECK-IN - DAY

A BLACK GUARD (50s) checks Bryan’s ID, signing him in.

BLACK GUARD
Saw you on TV a few times, talkin’ ‘bout McMillian.

Bryan smiles, unsure what he’ll say next. Then, the guard holds out his fist. Bryan gives him a bump. A moment of connection before he heads inside.

157 INT. HOLMAN PRISON - VISITING ROOM - DAY

Bryan sits across from Walter.

BRYAN
We’ll be presenting our motion to a new judge this time. It’ll be a small hearing to present our motion to drop the charges against you.

WALTER
And what happens when they say no?

BRYAN
(tries to be positive)
Then we start over with a new trial. Clean slate.

Walter leans back, shakes his head.

(CONTINUED)
WALTER
Been in here six years. And they gonna make us start this all over?

BRYAN
I know it’s frustrating, but think about how far we’ve come.

Bryan can see he’s not connecting. He reaches into a bag and pulls out a suit, spreads it on the table.

BRYAN
I don’t want you wearing a jumpsuit this time.
(off his look)
Regardless of what happens, I want them to know that we expect them to send you home.

Walter touches the fabric of the coat, tries hard to believe there might be hope, but can’t get there. He shakes his head.

WALTER
You ever think about dying?

BRYAN
Why would you ask that?

Walter looks off, deep in thought. Then --

WALTER
That’s all everybody in here talk about. What they gonna do before they executed, what they gonna eat for their last meal, who they givin’ their stuff to. I always try to stay away from talk like that, try to stay positive. But the longer this goes, the harder it is to stop my mind from goin’ there.

BRYAN
You can’t think like that. *(beat)*
We’re too close to give up now.

WALTER
I know.*
(beat)
I’m just tired.

(CONTINUED)
Bryan sees the exhaustion in his eyes. He doesn’t know how much more his friend can endure.

EXT. BALDWIN COUNTY COURTHOUSE - DAY

Bryan’s Civic pulls into the packed parking lot. A handful of PEOPLE (black and white) walk to the doors from their cars.

INT. BALDWIN COUNTY COURTHOUSE - DAY

Bryan, Eva, and Brenda walk down the hall, exchanging concerned looks as they see a large group of PEOPLE in front of the courtroom doors. All of them are black. Walter’s FRIENDS and FAMILY.

Bryan exchanges a concerned look with Eva as he finds Evelyn, Minnie, John, and the rest of Walter’s family.

BRYAN
What’s going on?

MINNIE
They won’t let us in.

Evelyn points to a YOUNG GUARD (22, white) standing at the door, letting a short line of WHITE PEOPLE through.

EVELYN
That boy’s makin’ us wait out here for over an hour.

Bryan quickly approaches the Guard, boiling.

BRYAN
What are you doing?

YOUNG GUARD
Just followin’ orders.

Bryan knows exactly who gave that order. He continues firmly.

BRYAN
This is a public hearing and these people need to be let in right now.

The Guard doesn’t know quite what to do. Doesn’t really matter, anyway, the last WHITE AUDIENCE MEMBER walks in.

YOUNG GUARD
Umm... Y’all can go in now.

(CONTINUED)
EVA
(pissed)
You mean now that there’s no seats left?

As the Guard stares at Eva, Minnie diffuses the tension, doesn’t want to ruin her chance to get inside.

MINNIE
It’s okay, we’ll find room.

The Guard stands firm as Minnie leads the group inside.

INT. BALDWIN COUNTY COURTHOUSE - COURTROOM - CONTINUOUS

Bryan sits at the defense table with Walter, in his suit. Eva and Brenda are with Walter’s family, standing behind a sea of white people. 40 MEMBERS of Walter’s community also stand at the back, peering over the heads of the white audience as --

Sheriff Tate sits behind Tommy and his assistant at their table. Tommy looks through his papers, deep in thought.

BAILIFF #2
The Twenty-Eighth Judicial Circuit
Court of Alabama is now in session, the honorable Judge Pamela Baschab presiding!

The courtroom stands as JUDGE BASCHAB (40s, white) enters. BAILIFF #2 finds his place as the Judge settles in.

JUDGE BASCHAB
Please be seated.
(as they sit)
We got a full house so let’s try to move through this in a timely manner. We’re here because Mr. Stevenson has filed a motion to dismiss all charges against Mr. McMillian in this case.
(beat)
Mr. Stevenson, since it’s your motion, I’d like you to speak to it first, and then we’ll hear from the State.

Bryan stands. He looks at Walter, trying to control his nerves, then to Walter’s family, and the men and women standing in back. He looks forward, strong.

(CONTINUED)
BRYAN
It’s easy to see this case as one man trying to prove his innocence. But when you put a black man on death row for a year before his trial, and exclude black people from serving on his jury... When you base your conviction on the coerced testimony of a white felon and ignore the testimonies of two dozen law-abiding black witnesses... When any evidence proving his innocence is suppressed, and anyone who tries to tell the truth is threatened, this case becomes more than the trial of a single defendant, it becomes a test of whether we’re going to be governed by fear and anger or by the rule of law.

(beat)
If the people standing in the back of this courtroom are all presumed guilty when accused, if they have to live in fear of when this very thing will happen to them, if we’re just going to accept a system that treats you better if you’re rich and guilty than if you’re poor and innocent, then we can’t claim to be just.

Bryan takes a beat to look at Tommy. They briefly lock eyes.

BRYAN
If we say we are committed to equal justice under law, to protecting the rights of every citizen regardless of wealth, race, or status, then we have to end this nightmare for Walter McMillian and his family. The charges against him have been proved to be a false construction of desperate people, fueled by bigotry and bias, who ignored the truth in exchange for easy solutions. That’s not the law... That’s not justice... That’s not right.

(long beat)
This case should be dismissed immediately, Your Honor. Thank you.

(CONTINUED)
Bryan takes his seat. Silence as --

JUDGE BASCHAB
Mr. Chapman, what is the State’s position on this motion?

Tommy sits there, deep in thought, playing with his pencil. He stays silent long enough to make it awkward.

JUDGE BASCHAB
Mr. Chapman?

TOMMY
Yes, Your Honor. Sorry, I’m just...

Tommy reluctantly stands, unsure of what to say.

TOMMY
I’m troubled, Your Honor.

The Judge glances at Bryan, confused by Tommy’s statement.

JUDGE BASCHAB
You’re troubled?

TOMMY
Yes, Your Honor, sorry I...

(hesitates)
People in this community want to go to sleep at night knowin’ that if someone commits a terrible crime, that someone is gonna be punished for it...

(beat)
But... I’ve taken another look at the evidence, and...

Tommy turns to Walter’s people standing in the back. He glances at Bryan, then to the Judge. Another long beat...

JUDGE BASCHAB
Mr. Chapman, please.

Tommy thinks for another beat. Then finally --

TOMMY
The State does not object to the motion, Your Honor.

A stunned beat. MURMURS in the courtroom.

(CONTINUED)
JUDGE BASCHAB  
(to Tommy)  
To be clear, Mr. Chapman. Are you joining the motion to dismiss all charges today?

TOMMY  
(beat)  
Yes, Your Honor.

The MURMURS grow louder from the courtroom as --

JUDGE BASCHAB  
Order, please.

Silence falls. Judge Baschab is quiet a beat, considers everything. Then, she looks at Tommy and Bryan.

JUDGE BASCHAB  
Well, y’all made my job easy today.

Walter and his family hold their breath, nervous and unsure as to what this means as --

JUDGE BASCHAB  
In the case of The People vs. McMillian, the court hereby grants the defendant’s motion.  
(beat; looks to Walter)  
All charges against you are dismissed, Mr. McMillian. You’re free to go.

Walter sits in stunned silence, trying to process as --

His family erupts in JOYFUL SOBS. Minnie hugs John and Jackie. Eva hugs Brenda. Tate shoots Tommy a disappointed look as he walks out the door.

Amidst the rejoicing, MOVE IN CLOSE ON Walter as he suddenly hides his face in his hands, unable to control the emotions inside of him. Bryan leans in, tries to comfort him.

Bryan realizes Walter needs his family. He glances at Eva, who nods back -- she understands. She waves to Minnie, John and Jackie to follow her down the aisle. They stop at the partition.

Minnie looks to the Judge, who nods for her to continue. She rushes to Walter, her children close behind, all of them crouch down and embrace him where he sits.

(CONTINUED)
Bryan steps back, lets them have their moment. He sees Tommy watching the reuniting of this family. They briefly lock eyes. Tommy offers a humble nod, which Bryan returns.

Then, he exchanges a knowing look with Eva, neither of them fully able to believe this is really happening as --

CLANGING fills the air, overtakes all sound. Followed by the SHOUTS OF MEN, YELLING, BANGING AGAINST BARS as --

INT. HOLMAN PRISON - DEATH ROW - AFTERNOON

Walter steps out of his cell in a black suit, duffle bag on his shoulder as a HUNDRED MEN YELL, WHISTLE, and BANG their metal cups on the bars, letting him know he’s not alone.

Jeremy and a guard walk behind Walter, letting him lead for once as he walks to --

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. ANTHONY’S CELL

Anthony stands at his door, sad to see Walter go, but proud for his friend. He sticks his hand through the slot, fighting back tears as he shakes Walter’s hand.

ANTHONY
We all with you, brother.

The words give Walter strength. He hesitates, then lets go of Anthony’s hand. Anthony looks at him through tears as --

INT./EXT. BRYAN’S CIVIC/WALTER’S HOUSE - LATER

Bryan drives, Walter beside him. On his way home from prison, both still not fully able to believe it.

Bryan makes his way down the long dirt road toward Walter’s house as Walter soaks it in like he’s seeing everything for the first time.

WALTER
(points to a house)
Benny got a new truck.

Bryan glances at him, moved by his childlike wonder.
They pull up to Walter’s house, the front yard packed with PEOPLE, grilling meat and celebrating Walter’s return. A few of them wave to Walter as they pull up.

Bryan parks, turns off the engine. A quiet moment between friends as Walter hesitates, then --

WALTER
Spent so much time thinkin’ ‘bout
dying in there, never thought
about what I’d do if I got out.

Walter watches all his friends cooking and laughing. Minnie waves for him to hurry up. He waves back.

WALTER
Those six years wasn’t all they
took from me... They took a lot
more than that.
(beat)
Not sure how I’m gonna do this.

BRYAN
(beat; caring)
We’ll figure it out.

Walter looks at Bryan, full of gratitude as a smile forms.

WALTER
Let’s go eat everything on that
grill before the kids get to it.

BRYAN
(smiles)
Great idea.

They step out of the car and walk to the party as --

WALTER (V.O.)
(pre-lap)
I heard some people say that me
gettin’ out shows that this system
is workin’.

INT. U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE HEARING - DAY

Walter sits at a table with Bryan, addressing the 20 SENATORS seated in a semi-circle in front of him. Behind them, a room full of REPORTERS and COMMUNITY LEADERS. Walter continues --

(CONTINUED)
WALTER
But if pullin’ a innocent man from his family and lockin’ him in a cell for 6 years is what you call workin’, we got a different understandin’ of the word. I still can’t sleep past 3 A.M., ’cause that’s when the guards woke us up for breakfast. Everywhere I go, I make sure somebody knows where I am and what I’m doing. When I go to the store, I make the cashier sign my receipt, so if somebody tells me six months later I was doing a murder on the other side of town, I can show ‘em proof of where I was.

(emotional beat)
I saw seven men killed while I was in there. Some of them was my closest friends. I know they ain’t all innocent. But they still people. And...

Walter’s emotions overtake him, thinking about Herbert and Anthony and all those he left behind, the pieces of himself he will never get back.

Bryan pats his shoulder, can see he can’t go on, so he takes over for him. Leans into the mic, addressing the Senators.

BRYAN
This man has taught me a lot in the time I’ve known him... I came out of law school with grand ideas in my mind about how to change the world. But then I started working with people who were wrongly convicted; children who were sent to adult prisons where they were raped and abused; people with mental and physical disabilities who were thrown into cells when they should be in hospitals; vulnerable people calling me every day, begging for help. Sometimes the problem seemed so big, I felt like a fool for thinking I could do anything to fix it.

(beat)
But working with Mr. McMillian made me realize that we can’t change the world with only ideas in our minds, we also need conviction in our hearts.

(MORE)
This man taught me how to stay hopeful, because I now know that hopelessness is the enemy of justice. Hope allows us to push forward, even when the truth is distorted by the people in power. It allows us to stand up when they tell us to sit down, and to speak when they say be quiet.

(beat)
Through this work, I’ve learned that each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done; that the opposite of poverty isn’t wealth, the opposite of poverty is justice; that the character of our nation isn’t reflected in how we treat the rich and privileged, but how we treat the poor, the disfavored and condemned.

(beat)
Our system has taken more from this innocent man than it has the power to give back. But I believe if each of us can follow his lead, we can begin to change this world for the better. If we can look at ourselves closely, and honestly, I believe we will see that we all need justice, we all need mercy and perhaps, we all need some measure of unmerited grace.

Bryan sits back in his chair, lets that sink in. Walter looks at him with playful disbelief. The mic picks him up as --

WALTER
I taught you all that?
(off Bryan’s nod)
That’s pretty good.

Bryan LAUGHS along with a handful of the Senators as --

SERIES OF PHOTOS
Over photos of real-life Bryan, Walter, and Eva:

SUPERIMPOSE:

-- BRYAN STEVENSON HAS BEEN FIGHTING FOR DEATH ROW INMATES FOR 29 YEARS.

(CONTINUED)
-- TOGETHER, BRYAN, EVA, AND THE EJI STAFF, HAVE WON REVERSALS, RELIEF, OR RELEASE FOR OVER 115 WRONGLY CONDEMNED PRISONERS ON DEATH ROW.

-- FOR EVERY 9 PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN EXECUTED IN THE U.S., ONE INNOCENT PERSON HAS BEEN EXONERATED AND RELEASED FROM DEATH ROW.

INT. DEATH ROW - ANTHONY’S CELL - DAY

FREEZE ON Anthony looking out of his cell.

SUPERIMPOSE:

-- IN 1985 ANTHONY RAY HINTON WAS SENTENCED TO DEATH FOR A DOUBLE HOMICIDE. HIS CONVICTION WAS BASED ALMOST ENTIRELY ON A FAULTY BALLISTICS REPORT.

-- THE PROSECUTOR AT TRIAL SAID THAT HE COULD TELL ANTHONY WAS GUILTY, AND “EVIL,” SOLELY FROM HIS APPEARANCE.

FADE OUT.

OVER BLACK

SUPERIMPOSE: IN 2016, AFTER SPENDING 30 YEARS ON HOLMAN PRISON’S DEATH ROW FOR A CRIME HE DID NOT COMMIT, ANTHONY RAY HINTON WAS SET FREE.

FADE IN:

ACTUAL NEWS FOOTAGE

OF THE REAL BRYAN STEVENSON walking out of prison with THE REAL ANTHONY RAY HINTON (50s), cameras flashing as he embraces his sister with tears in his eyes. He’s quickly smothered by the hugs and tears of loved ones as --

Bryan watches from the side, grateful for the moment, but reminded that all of us can do better for one another.

The work continues.

FADE TO BLACK.

THE END