

JUST MERCY

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Based on, *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson

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EXT. ALABAMA ESTATE - DAY

JUNE 7, 1987

The sound of a CHAINSAW echoes through a distant grove of pine trees. One, rotten and diseased, CRASHES to the ground.

WALTER MCMILLIAN (40s, black) CLICKS off his chainsaw and looks up to the tree tops, swaying in the breeze. He takes a DEEP BREATH-- at peace. Then, he gets back to work.

LATER

Walter ties down a load of logs and branches in a trailer attached to his LOW RIDER TRUCK. He looks at the house behind him to see MR. ABNEY (50s, white) waxing a new Buick.

WALTER

Have a good day Mr. Abney!

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

EXT. ALABAMA COUNTRY ROAD/INT. WALTER'S TRUCK - AFTERNOON

Alabama farmland. TWO JOHN DEER COTTON PICKERS move through a field. The song "JOHN HENRY", BY ALEX FOSTER & MICHEL LARUE fills the air.

Walter's truck and trailer drive down the open road.

INSIDE THE TRUCK

Walter bobs his head to the MUSIC, SINGING along, hand TAPPING the wheel, left hand out the window, wind floating through fingers-- free as a bird.

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

SEVEN POLICE CARS block the road with 14 OFFICERS staring him down. Walter shifts, deeply confused as--

SHERIFF TATE (late 30s, white), speaks into a megaphone.

SHERIFF TATE

HANDS WHERE WE CAN SEE 'EM!

MUSIC STOPS as Walter TURNS OFF the engine. He slowly shows both hands as Sheriff Tate approaches, TWO OFFICERS in tow.

SHERIFF TATE (CONT'D)

This your truck?

WALTER

Yes sir.

Tate throws a charming smile that sends shivers up his spine.

SHERIFF TATE

Where you comin' from?

WALTER

(nods behind him)

Work.

Tate looks at the trailer full of branches and logs. A beat--

SHERIFF TATE

Your name Walter McMillian?

WALTER

Yes sir.

Walter sees Officer One slowly pull his gun from its holster.

SHERIFF TATE

(still friendly)

Been hearin' stories 'bout you,
Walter.

(more serious)

You really think you was gonna get
away with this?

Walter's heart pounds in his chest. Terrified now--

WALTER

I'm not sure what you mean, sir.

Tate stares at him, examining his face. Deeply intimidating.

SHERIFF TATE

(motions to officers)

You're lucky I don't let my guys
string you up right now, like they
done that boy in Mobile.

WALTER

Sir, y'all must be confused, I was
jus' on my way home to--

Tate abruptly throws open the door, grabs him by the neck,
YANKS him out. Walter struggles as Tate pins his arm back--

SHERIFF TATE

The more you fight it, the more
it's gonna hurt.

He SLAMS Walter onto the hood. Officer One grabs Walter's other arm, SHOVES his face hard up against the windshield.

SHERIFF TATE (CONT'D)

(leans in)

It's niggers like you that ruin it
for the rest of y'all. You gonna
fry for this one, boy.

Walter WINCES as the handcuffs dig deep into his wrists, his confusion showing there's much more to this story as--

MONROE COUNTY NEWS CAST (DURING OPENING CREDITS):

- A LOCAL NEWS ANCHOR speaks to camera, as a PHOTO OF RONDA MORRISON (18, white, girl next door) displays beside him.

LOCAL NEWS ANCHOR

On November first of last year, the body of 18-year-old Ronda Morrison was found under a clothing rack at Jackson Cleaners in Monroeville, where she worked as a part-time clerk. Morrison had been bludgeoned, strangled, and shot three times, by this man...

- A MUG SHOT of Walter McMillian--

LOCAL NEWS ANCHOR (CONT'D)

Walter McMillian, a local tree worker with a history of sexual misconduct, was convicted and sentenced to life without parole. But the State of Alabama didn't think that was enough. Today, McMillian's life sentence was overturned to death.

- A LOCAL MAN, interviewed out on the street--

LOCAL MAN

Oh, I agree with the judge's decision. After what he done, animals like that need to be put down. I'm just glad they finally caught 'im. Took 'em long enough.

- The DAY OF WALTER'S ARREST. Sheriff Tate drags a stunned Walter past the CAMERAS toward the LOCAL COUNTY JAIL.

LOCAL NEWS ANCHOR

After a year without any leads,
local law enforcement arrested
McMillian due in large part to the
damning testimony of Ralph Myers...

- The DAY OF WALTER'S TRIAL. RALPH MYERS (40s, white), a thin wisp of a man with jagged burn scars across half of his face and neck, shuffles to the courthouse, in a prison jumpsuit.

LOCAL NEWS ANCHOR (CONT'D)

Myers told the courts that he had
been forced at gunpoint to drive
McMillian to the cleaners, where he
witnessed the brutal murder.

- A FEMALE LOCAL TOWNSPERSON. Angry, convinced of her belief.

FEMALE LOCAL TOWNSPERSON

We all known about that man for
years. Dealin' drugs, foolin'
around with married women. Quicker
we get rid of monsters like him the
better...

- WALTER PULLED OUT OF THE COURTHOUSE. A GROUP OF WHITE TOWNSPEOPLE surround, BLACK COMMUNITY MEMBERS to the side.

Sheriff Tate addresses the camera as Walter is thrown into the back of a waiting prison van.

SHERIFF TATE

It was a long road, but we're happy
where it ended. My town can sleep
well tonight knowin' this guy can't
touch 'em. That's all I care about.

LOCAL NEWS ANCHOR (V.O.)

McMillian will await his execution
at Holman Correctional Facility,
offering at least some solace to a
community left in turmoil in the
wake his senseless crime...

The doors SLAM shut, the NEWSCAST fades away, replaced by:

JUST MERCY

EXT. AUSTIN HALL, HARVARD LAW SCHOOL - DAY

STUDENTS mill about in front of the century-old, Romanesque-style building-- an icon of knowledge and education.

INT. CLASSROOM, HARVARD LAW SCHOOL - SAME

Find BRYAN STEVENSON (27), eyes that never stop thinking, one of a few BLACK STUDENTS in a class of WHITE ONES. PROFESSOR BETSY BARTHOLET (40s, white) leads the discussion.

PROFESSOR BARTHOLET

McCleskey vs. Kemp, another hot topic in the news this year. McCleskey is an African-American man who was sentenced to death for killing a white police officer during a robbery in Georgia. His attorneys argued that the death penalty was administered in a racially discriminatory, and therefore unconstitutional, manner. The supreme court ruled against McCleskey in a 5-4 decision. Let's hear some thoughts on that outcome.
(sees a hand up)
Go ahead, Linus.

LINUS (20s, white), superior air of entitlement, launches in--

LINUS

McCleskey had no evidence that a specific person acted with racial discrimination. If the court ruled in his favor, it would only be a matter of time before lawyers start making broad claims about race disparities for every other criminal offense in the system.

Bryan stares at Linus, unnerved by his reasoning. He can't help himself, responds without raising his hand.

BRYAN

And what's wrong with that? If the disparities exist, shouldn't we all be fighting to abolish them?

LINUS

If the disparities exist, and I haven't seen any convincing evidence that they do.

BRYAN

(breath, debate-mode)
The Baldus study last year analyzed over 2000 murder cases.
(MORE)

BRYAN (CONT'D)

It showed that 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.

LINUS

There are so many factors other than race that are contributing to those statistics.

BRYAN

(getting heated)

The Supreme Court accepted the study's relevancy, but upheld McCleskey's sentence because, in their own words, racial disparities are "an inevitable part of our criminal justice system." Racial bias *does* exist. That's not the question. The question is whether or not we're willing to do something to fix it.

LINUS

Fix *what*? It's not the fault of our judicial system that fifty percent of the murders in this country are committed by young black men. It's not the lawyer's fault who can't build a case because his black client has a criminal record and all his witnesses are likely ex-cons, or drug dealers. Putting all the blame on a so-called "racist system" is a scapegoat for a problem that has more to do with culture than anything else.

Bryan boils at the implicit racism. Before he can respond--

PROFESSOR BARTHOLET

Okay, let's cut it off there. We'll pick up next week and look at Furman vs. Georgia in 1972. Have a good weekend everyone.

The students pack up. MARK (20s, Black) leans over to Bryan--

MARK

Don't let his ignorant ass get to you, man.

Bryan forces a smile, but it clearly weighs heavy on him.

MARK (CONT'D)
(packs up his bag)
You goin' to the vigil tonight?

Bryan nods as Professor Bartholet approaches--

PROFESSOR BARTHOLET
Bryan, you have a sec?

BRYAN
Sure.

MARK
(as he leaves)
See you there.

Bryan nods goodbye as Professor Bartholet fishes a business card from her bag. She hands it to Bryan.

PROFESSOR BARTHOLET
I've been contacted *quite a few times* by this woman, Eva Ansley. She runs a non-profit that's looking for lawyers to help with death row cases in Alabama. Sounds like they could really use a hand.

BRYAN
(beat, considers)
Alabama?

PROFESSOR BARTHOLET
They have the fastest growing condemned population in the country and no public defender system. When she asked for names of upcoming graduates, you're the only student that came to mind.
(watches him ponder)
I know you have some better-paid options on the table, but... I think you could really make a difference there. Think about it.

BRYAN
(smiles)
Thanks, I'll look into it.

As she turns back to her desk, Bryan looks down at the card, clearly intrigued as--

INT. AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCH - EVENING

A FRAMED PHOTO of a smiling BLACK BOY, surrounded by flowers and notes. A LARGE CONGREGATION gathered to honor his memory.

Bryan sits a few rows back from the grieving family, listening to the PASTOR speak from the podium.

PASTOR

A fifteen-year-old boy, unarmed, was shot in the back by an officer of the law. I could talk about how he was a great student, a fine member of our church, a wonderful son and role model to his little sister, but that's beside the point. This was a child who was murdered simply because, in this country, the color of his skin marked him as a threat since the day he was born. This is not okay. This is not normal. And we, as a nation, need to start addressing these issues, right now.

Bryan listens intently to the pastor's words, something stirring in him as--

LATER

Bryan shakes hands with the FATHER of the boy, then gives the MOTHER a hug. She holds him tight, doesn't want to let go.

Bryan feels her pain pulsing through her. In that moment, he knows what he needs to do.

INT. BRYAN'S CIVIC/EXT. STEVENSON FAMILY HOME - EVENING

Bryan drives his 1975 Honda Civic, more than a few years past its prime, down the street in the modest, black Delaware neighborhood he grew up in.

6 MONTHS LATER

As he drives, Bryan watches YOUNG BLACK KIDS play soccer in a dirt lot. He passes a few BLACK GIRLS riding their bikes.

Bryan reaches his simple house, pulls into the driveway. Worry clouds his eyes. Something heavy weighing on him.

INT. DINING ROOM, STEVENSON FAMILY HOME - EVENING

Bryan sits at the dinner table with his family: CHRISTY (26, sister), HOWARD JR. (28, brother), VICTORIA (88, grandma), his mom, ALICE (55), and dad, HOWARD SR. (58).

Everyone's heads are bowed, hands clasped together as--

ALICE

...and we pray for Bryan in this new chapter in life. Thank you for the many job opportunities you've given him to choose from, particularly the ones closer to home. Guide him as he makes this important decision, and please tell him to hurry up and get it over with already.

A LIGHT LAUGH across the table. Bryan looks up at Alice. Nerves present. *This is subject* that's weighing on him.

ALICE (CONT'D)

More than this, we pray you bless him with a career that not only fills his wallet, but also his spirit. And bless this food, and the hands that made it, which doesn't include my children because they didn't bother to help. We pray all this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Everyone says "AMEN" and begins to eat. Howard Jr. and Christy both keep glancing at Bryan. Bryan can feel their eyes on him. Alice notices them--

ALICE (CONT'D)

What's going on?

Howard Jr. and Christy smile. Alice stares at Christy.

CHRISTY

Don't look at me.

HOWARD JR.

Me neither, Ma. I'm just enjoying this delicious meal while watching lil' bro do the squirming for once.

Alice's eyes land on Bryan, *caught*. Finally--

BRYAN

Um... Ma?

Alice can see the seriousness here. Playful as she responds--

ALICE

Yes son.

BRYAN

There's something... I've been
meaning to tell you.

Howard Sr. and Victoria look up, this concerns all of them.

ALICE

What's that?

BRYAN

I found out last week that I passed
the bar exam...
(off her wide smile)
In Alabama.

ALICE

(smile fades, sits back)
What's that mean?

BRYAN

It means... I took the job in
Montgomery.

ALICE

(disbelief)
The one working for murderers that
pays less than McDonald's?

BRYAN

It's a reputable non-profit doing
really important work.

Alice stares at him like he's speaking another language.

ALICE

We already talked about this.

She looks to her husband and mother, incredulous.

ALICE (CONT'D)

Didn't we already talk about this?

VICTORIA

Don't look at me, I don't know what
you talked about.

ALICE

(back to Bryan)

Your father and I worked two jobs each to put you through school. You know how many black boys in this country get to say they graduated from *Harvard*?

(beat)

You can have any job you want, in a city that doesn't look at black people like a disease.

Passion settles over Bryan. A long history of debate encouraged at this dinner table.

BRYAN

Right now, Alabama has close to a hundred people on death row with no legal representation.

ALICE

And you think the people down there are going to listen to a twenty-seven-year old black kid telling them they're not doing their jobs right?

Bryan stares at her. He's not budging.

BRYAN

It's not just me, ma. I'll be working at a reputable organization with a solid team.

Alice hears this, *but she's stubborn*, turns to her husband.

ALICE

Are you going to say something?

HOWARD SR.

(soft smile)

Wasn't planning on it.

Alice shakes her head, turns to Victoria--

ALICE

Mama, can you please help?

Victoria finishes her bite, wipes her mouth, calm and wise.

VICTORIA

Well... you can't understand the most important things in life from a distance.

(MORE)

VICTORIA (CONT'D)
Maybe it's time he looked a little
closer at where his people came
from.

ALICE
(sarcastic)
Thanks, Mama.

She looks around the room-- everyone against her.

ALICE (CONT'D)
None of you are thinking straight.
(gets up and leaves)
I need some air.

After she's gone, Victoria looks at Bryan with a smile.

VICTORIA
Give her five minutes, then go work
your charm.

EXT. FRONT PORCH, STEVENSON FAMILY HOME - MOMENTS LATER

Bryan walks out the door to find Alice, sitting on the steps.
He sits down beside her, both silent a beat before--

BRYAN
*You are here to make a mark.
Otherwise you will be the mark. How
many times you think you've told me
that in my life?*

ALICE
You can still make a mark without
moving to the place Mama's
grandparents picked cotton with
chains around their necks.

BRYAN
But that's why I need to go. If
we're ever going to change things
in this country, it has to start
where we need it most.
(beat)
I can make a difference there.

Alice looks at him, softens a little before--

ALICE
I hope you know that nothing you
read in a book or learn in a
classroom is going to prepare you
for what it's like down there.

Bryan's optimism drowns out all doubt.

BRYAN

It's going to be fine, Ma.

Bryan pulls her into a hug. She lets him-- he's won her over.

ALICE

When did you get so stubborn? You used to be such a nice boy.

BRYAN

(laughs, sarcastic)

Yeah, I have no idea where I got that from.

She puts her head on his shoulder, enjoying a final moment with her son--

EXT. ALABAMA HIGHWAY/INT. BRYAN'S CIVIC - DAY

Rows of cotton streak by at 50 mph. Bryan bobs his head to MUSIC, hand out the window, wind floating through fingers-- much like Walter in our opening scene.

The back seat of Bryan's 1975 Honda Civic is stacked with moving boxes. He passes a large sign that reads: *"WELCOME TO ALABAMA THE BEAUTIFUL, GUY HUNT - GOVERNOR"*

EXT. ALABAMA DRIVING SNAPSHOTS - AFTERNOON

As MUSIC continues to play, Bryan watches snapshots of Alabama float by his window--

- 2 JOHN DEER 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.
- 2 BLACK MEN work on the engine of an old beat-up truck as 4 BLACK CHILDREN jump rope in front of a dilapidated house.
- An OLD BLACK COUPLE sit on their porch drinking iced tea, watching the cars drive by.
- A BLACK GROUNDS KEEPER mows the lawn of a palatial home.

EXT. LANDLORD'S HOUSE - AFTERNOON

Bryan walks onto the rickety porch of a mid-sized Southern home, years past its prime.

He KNOCKS on the screen door, waits-- the door OPENS to reveal MRS. FRANKLIN (50s, white), a deceptively kind face.

MRS. FRANKLIN
Can I help you?

BRYAN
Hi Ma'am, are you Mrs. Franklin?

MRS. FRANKLIN
Who's asking?

Bryan is surprised by her tone. She should be expecting him.

BRYAN
Oh, um... I'm Bryan Stevenson. We spoke on the phone... I'm renting your cottage?

MRS. FRANKLIN
You the lawyer from Harvard?

BRYAN
Yes ma'am.

She looks him up and down, very suspicious.

MRS. FRANKLIN
(into the house)
Frank! It's the renter!

She keeps an eye on Bryan until FRANK (50s) appears in the doorway. Then, as she heads inside--

MRS. FRANKLIN (CONT'D)
Didn't sound black on the phone.

Bryan catches the comment. Frank shrugs an apology before--

INT. BRYAN'S RENTAL - MOMENTS LATER

With a HARD SHOVE the door opens. Bryan enters, looks around the small, ratty shack: mattress on the floor, a lamp, and not much else.

He looks into the dusty bathroom, a brick on the toilet seat to keep out God-knows-what. He turns back to the room, still for a moment, no earthly idea what to do with himself.

LATER

Bryan lies on the stained mattress. He's been up all night, sweating from the heat, staring at the ceiling, trying to ignore how nervous he is for the day ahead until--

He looks to the bedside clock. 4:15 AM. With a SIGH, Bryan gives up on sleep, pulls back the covers as--

QUICK SHOTS: BRYAN'S MORNING ROUTINE

- Running shoes on, Bryan stretches beside the bed.
- EXT. COTTON FIELDS - DAWN: Bryan jogs at a steady pace beside endless fields of cotton.
- INT. BATHROOM: Bryan turns on the water and washes down the dirty build-up from the floor of the shower.
- INT. BEDROOM: Bryan puts on his used suit, fixes his tie in the mirror. He takes a BREATH. Nervous, but ready. Looks at the clock-- SIGHS as he realizes it's only 5:52 AM.
- With time to spare, Bryan sits, eats a pop-tart, tries to focus his nervous energy on a book on Alabama law until--

INT. BRYAN'S CIVIC/EXT. EVA'S STREET - LATER

Bryan drives down a middle-class suburban street, confused-- *where is the office building?* He scans each house number until-- he slows to a stop, middle of the street.

Checks the address on the business card, looks back at the small, nondescript house he's stopped in front of.

EXT./INT. EVA'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Bryan reaches the front screen door, notices kids' toys lying in the walkway. He RINGS THE BELL, then hears a highly animated, SOUTHERN WOMAN'S VOICE fast approaching--

WOMAN'S VOICE (O.S.)
I've been doin' this shit long
enough to know how the state
legislature works, Kevin.

Appearing in a flash, EVA ANSLEY (30, white), a southern firebrand, all explosive passion. She opens the screen door.

BRYAN
(confused)
Oh, sorry. I'm looking for the
Equal Justice Initiative?

Eva smiles, points at the phone and rolls her eyes--

EVA
(shakes his hand)
I'm Eva. Come on in.

Bryan's confusion grows as he steps in, totally off-balance as Eva continues while walking--

EVA (INTO PHONE) (CONT'D)
I know most of y'all don't give a damn about the rights of death row prisoners, but we believe in something called the sixth amendment. And from the way y'all been votin' lately, don't seem like any of you have heard of it.

Bryan cautiously follows Eva down the hall and into--

THE KITCHEN

Surprised to find CURTIS (30s, white), dressed in an electrician's uniform, drinking his morning coffee.

CURTIS
You must be Bryan.

EVA
(covers phone, to Bryan)
My husband, Curtis, and my son, Miles. Say hi, Miles.

Bryan turns to see MILES (6) sitting at the kitchen table, eating breakfast. He looks up.

MILES
Hi.

Bryan stares at Miles, manages a bewildered wave in response.

Eva remains focused on the phone, packing Mile's school lunch as she talks. Always in perpetual movement.

EVA (INTO PHONE)
You realize we're still talking about human beings, right?
(frustrated)
Convicted by a court with a pretty damn embarrassing record of error. That still don't mean you get to kill 'em without fair representation, and we're the only ones providing it.

Curtis looks at Bryan, reads the confusion across his face.

CURTIS
Mornings 'round here can get a
little wild.
(quick beat)
Can I get you some coffee?

Bryan turns to Curtis, comes out of his shock a bit as--

BRYAN	EVA
Some water would be good.	If you deny our state funding, we also lose our matching federal dollars!

Curtis goes to get a glass as Bryan's eyes lock back on Eva.

EVA (CONT'D)
So tell 'em to vote *again* goddamn
it! This is *bullshit*, Kevin!

With that, she ZIPS up the lunch case, spins around and drops it onto the kitchen table as Miles looks up at her.

MILES
Cuss jar.

EVA
(covers phone)
Sorry, baby.

She grabs a quarter from a bowl beside the phone and pops it into an almost-overflowing jar of quarters-- a daily ritual.

MILES
One more. You said G.D. *and* B.S.

Eva smiles-- *smart kid*. She plops a second quarter in as Curtis hands Bryan the glass of water. Bryan hesitates, then--

BRYAN
So... she runs the organization
from home?

CURTIS
(light laugh)
She *is* the organization.

He goes back to getting ready, Bryan holds his water, stares at Eva in shock as--

EVA (INTO PHONE)
Okay, do what you gotta do and so
will I. My new director just walked
in.

(MORE)

EVA (INTO PHONE) (CONT'D)
Went to Harvard and he's sharp as
hell. I'm sure you'll be hearing
from him soon.

Eva hangs up, turns to Bryan, offers a wide smile. Bryan
hesitates, nervous and doubly confused now as he asks--

BRYAN
New director?

Eva looks at the clock, doesn't answer his question.

EVA
Oh, y'all are late.

She walks with Curtis and Miles to the doorway, gives them
both a kiss goodbye before Curtis turns to Bryan--

CURTIS
Good to meet you Bryan. Don't let
her push you around too much.

Eva playfully kicks Curtis in the butt, turns to Bryan,
choosing not to comment on his visible confusion before--

EVA
I need a smoke.

INT. SMALL OFFICE, EVA'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Eva OPENS a package of nicorette gum with her teeth, pops it
into her mouth-- this is her version of a smoke.

EVA
I kicked the cigarettes, but now
I'm hooked on these suckers.

She bites down on the gum with a satisfied smile as Bryan
scans the room-- piles of papers, client folders, bulletin
boards covered with information. Then--

BRYAN
When we talked, you said you had a
team of lawyers working for you?

She looks at him. Impossible to ignore his discomfort now.

EVA
I think I said we *will* have a team.
(beat)
(MORE)

EVA (CONT'D)

Everything's in progress, including an office space, soon as I figure out where our new funding's comin' from. You got any rich friends?

(off his stare)

Don't worry. We'll figure it out.

BRYAN

You told that guy I'm you're new director.

EVA

(beat, shrugs)

Sometimes you gotta tell people what they need to hear.

A conspiratorial smile. But Bryan's doubt overrides all--

BRYAN

I'm sorry. But... I was expecting to be working alongside other lawyers with... more experience.

Eva can see she might be losing him, motions to a shelf overflowing with files, a growing intensity as--

EVA

You know the kind of lawyers the state's appointing to our clients? Real estate and tax attorneys who haven't looked at a capital punishment case in their life. And they cap their pay at a thousand bucks for a job that's supposed to take eight hundred hours. I got cases where the lawyer was drunk during trial, fell asleep, didn't even bother to make a closing argument. And surprise, they get the death penalty.

(picking up passion)

That's why I get on the phone every God damned day and try to convince any lawyer who picks up to take one of those folders off my shelf. You were the first one to ever call me.

(beat)

You said you wanted to make a difference, right? This is how you do it. 'Cause the sad truth is, you got way more experience than any other option these people got.

She locks her eyes on him, sees him softening.

EVA (CONT'D)
Let's just see how it goes, okay?

She chooses to interpret his blank stare as a "yes", grabs five files off her desk and hands them over.

EVA (CONT'D)
Great, 'cause it's a three hour drive to Holman, and you gotta get on the road if you're gonna make it by noon.

Eva walks out. Bryan is stunned, follows her back into--

THE HALL

BRYAN
I can't meet with clients already.

EVA
Why not?

BRYAN
I've never done any of this before.

Eva doesn't dwell on this, continues to the door.

EVA
It's just an introduction. I've been talking you up to these guys for the past month. They're gonna be happy just to meet you.
(quick beat)
It's gonna be fine.

They reach the door. He stares, a deep hesitation before--

BRYAN
What do I say to them?

EVA
Just listen. Speak from the heart. Specifics can come later.
(motions to folders)
I put a map in there. Can't wait to hear how it goes.

He looks down at the folders. She opens the door for him. He looks up, a deer in headlights before--

INT. BRYAN'S CIVIC/EXT. HOLMAN PRISON - LATER

Bryan drives down a long country road. No music this time. Tense, can't quite believe how he even wound up here when--

Ahead, past a break in the trees, Holman Correctional Facility. A vast, imposing structure of concrete and steel.

EXT. HOLMAN PRISON - MOMENTS LATER

Bryan closes his car door, takes a DEEP BREATH, turns toward the massive complex as he sees-- a red truck with gun racks, covered in confederate decals and racist bumper stickers.

His nerves increase as he reads one: *IF I'D KNOWN IT WAS GOING TO BE LIKE THIS, I'D HAVE PICKED MY OWN DAMN COTTON.*

INT. CHECK-IN, HOLMAN PRISON - MOMENTS LATER

Bryan waits as JEREMY (early 30s, white), a muscular, heavily tattooed guard, looks at Bryan's I.D., signs him in.

His SUPERVISOR (50s, white) looks at Bryan, suspicious, picks up his I.D., checks the photo.

SUPERVISOR

I ain't seen you before.

BRYAN

(nervous)

I just moved here.

The Supervisor SUCKS at his teeth, stares at the I.D. again.

SUPERVISOR

You really a lawyer?

BRYAN

(swallows his annoyance)

Yes, I am.

SUPERVISOR

They let ya'll do pretty much anything these days, don't they?

Jeremy CHUCKLES without looking up from his paper work. Bryan just stares, shocked by the blatant racism as the Supervisor hands him back his I.D.

SUPERVISOR (CONT'D)

Jeremy's gotta search you before we can let you in.

(points down hall)

(MORE)

SUPERVISOR (CONT'D)
Go into that room, and take
everything off.

BRYAN
(shocked)
Attorneys don't get strip-searched
for legal visits.

SUPERVISOR
You ain't gonna visit shit unless
you get in that room and strip.

The Supervisor pats Jeremy on the back.

SUPERVISOR (CONT'D)
You good with that?

JEREMY
(uncomfortable)
Uh... yeah, no problem.

He quickly masks his nervousness, looks at Bryan, in charge.

JEREMY (CONT'D)
Let's go.

Bryan hesitates, realizing he has no other choice.

INT. CHECK-IN ROOM, HOLMAN PRISON - MOMENTS LATER

Bryan stands naked, hands on the wall, trying to remain calm
as Jeremy pats him down with latex gloves, embarrassed to be
doing so, but covering it over with a blustery forcefulness.

Bryan doesn't move as Jeremy steps back, goes through his
suit pants and jacket, finally tossing them all on the floor.

JEREMY
(as he leaves)
You're clear.

Once alone, Bryan takes a moment to calm himself, fighting
the urge to give up and leave. As he gets dressed--

HERBERT (PRE-LAP)
I f-f-fought in Nam, f-first
calvary division...

INT. VISITING ROOM, HOLMAN PRISON - LATER

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

HERBERT (CONT'D)
S-s-saw a lot of friends die there.
D-d-doctor said I got the PTSD.

Bryan stares across at him, still reeling from the strip-search, searching for the right thing to say when--

HERBERT (CONT'D)
I think they gonna s-set my
execution date soon. Been here
longer than m-m-most the guys on
the row now.

Bryan hesitates again, sees the naked fear in Herbert's eyes.

BRYAN
I'm sorry, Mr. Richardson. I--
(beat, breath)
I'm going to do everything I can to
help you. I-- I can't even imagine,
how terrifying this must be. But...
I'm here to listen. Okay?

Herbert sees the sincerity here. He nods. A beat before--

BRYAN (CONT'D)
(slightly looser)
Why don't you tell me more about
your case?

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--

- FOUR MORE PRISONERS IN A ROW. Short jump cuts. Similar framing. Sharing their stories, BITS OF DIALOGUE cut together to form a single story of an unfair system--

"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, sweat pooling at his hairline, increasingly overwhelmed until--

END MONTAGE. CLANG! Bryan looks up, a pad filled with notes, files spread across the table. The end of a very long day as--

A GUARD ushers in Walter McMillian. The past fourteen months have taken their toll on him. A tired, worn, and heavy air.

Bryan feels Walter's eyes on him, standing at the door as the Guard unlocks his chains. His face betrays no judgment.

GUARD
(to Bryan)
You have an hour.

The Guard steps out. Walter rubs his wrists, taking a good look at Bryan. He doesn't move from the door. Bryan stands.

BRYAN
Mr. McMillian, I'm Bryan Stevenson.
(off his silence)
You want to sit down?

WALTER
Last time a lawyer ask me that, I
ended up in here.

Bryan shifts uncomfortably. Whatever steady footing he found throughout the day quickly slipping out from under him.

WALTER (CONT'D)
How old are you?

BRYAN
(hesitates)
Twenty seven.

WALTER
Shoot. You almost as young as my
son... Eva don't say you was black
neither.
(quick beat)
They gone love messin' with you
down 'ere, boy.

BRYAN
I've noticed.

Walter gives him another once over. With a SIGH, he walks forward, takes a seat. Before Bryan has a chance to speak--

WALTER
So how you different from the last
one?
(off Bryan's stare)
(MORE)

WALTER (CONT'D)

He sat right where you sittin' and told me to trust him, *everything's gonna be okay*. Then I got sentenced to death, my family run out of money to pay 'im, and he gone. So what you gone do different?

Bryan takes a nervous breath, looks at Walter's open file.

BRYAN

Well, uh...I've spent a lot of time studying the Alabama appeal process, and how it works is, we'll first appeal for a re-trial--

WALTER

We already did that and it was denied.

Bryan looks up. His analytical mind takes over---

BRYAN

Okay, well, then we'll file for a reconsideration of that decision--
(quick beat, gains speed)
If that doesn't work, we'll go to the Alabama Court of Criminal Appeals, and work our way up to the State and U.S. Supreme Court. If we're denied at all three, we can repeat the steps through what's called a Rule 32, which would start us back at the circuit court--

WALTER

Hold up, hold up, man. I don't need to know every step of this long ass thing. Just tell me how you gone get me out.

BRYAN

Well... Part of the strategy is using the length of the legal process to keep the state from setting an execution date. And in that time, we'll be doing everything we can to *hopefully* lower your sentence to life.

WALTER

Life? What the hell you talkin' about? I need to get out of here.

BRYAN

(beat, careful)

I have to be honest with you, Mr. McMillian, in death penalty cases, a full dismissal is very rare.

WALTER

Says who? Some book you read at school?

Walter leans back, stares at him, long and hard. Then--

WALTER (CONT'D)

You think I'm guilty.

BRYAN

(beat, flustered)

I didn't say that...

WALTER

You don't have to, man. Since the day they arrested me, people been lookin' at me same as you is right now. Same as them cops, same as my white jury...

BRYAN

Mr. McMillian, I'm not--

WALTER

It don't matter they ain't got no fingerprints, no evidence, that their only witness was lying out his ass. None of that shit 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 at him, frustrated tears welling.

WALTER

Maybe not. Maybe you and the one black brother they let on my jury is just relieved *this ain't you*.

Bryan's speechless. Walter stares at him, emphatic as--

WALTER (CONT'D)

I didn't kill that girl.

Walter sees Bryan's hesitation, shakes his head as he stands--

WALTER (CONT'D)
 I ain't doin' this shit again.
 (walks to door)
GUARD! WE DONE HERE!

BRYAN
 (standing)
 Mr. McMillian, please--

The DOOR OPENS and the Guard enters, looks at Bryan, who gives him a disappointed nod. Bryan watches the Guard put on Walter's chains. Walter turns, glares hard at him.

WALTER
 Eva say you hopin' to change the
 whole system down here.
 (quick beat)
 Good luck with that.

As the Guard leads Walter out, Bryan stands in shock, trying to process all that just happened.

INT. DEATH ROW/INT. WALTER'S CELL - MOMENTS LATER

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--

INSIDE

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

The SOUND OF METAL CLANKING against the bars of the cell next door. Walter walks to his door as the CLANKING continues.

WALTER
 Alright. Herbert, enough! I'm here!

INTERCUT BETWEEN THREE CELLS IN A ROW, WALTER'S THE CENTER

Herbert stands at his door, the cell next to Walter's. He stops CLANKING his metal cup against the bars.

HERBERT
 J.D.! It's Herbert!

Walter smiles, a warmth here that he didn't show to Bryan.

WALTER
I know it's you, man!

HERBERT
W-w-what did you think of him?

WALTER
I think that boy's in over his
head, and he might as well go home.

HERBERT
Oh... I t-thought he s-seemed nice.

On the opposite side of Walter's cell, ANTHONY RAY HINTON
(20s, black), a sarcastic realist, LAUGHS as he YELLS OUT--

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

WALTER
(laughs)
Didn't know you thought of me like
that, Anthony.

ANTHONY
I mean, you ain't nice as LaToya
Jackson, but for an ol' man on the
row, you ain't half bad.

HERBERT
I t-thought *I* was the old man.

ANTHONY
Johnny D's old, you ancient!

As they all LAUGH, a WAIL echoes from another cell.

ANTHONY (CONT'D)
Herbert, put on some tunes to drown
out Crazy Dave's loud ass baby
tantrum.

HERBERT
Any r-r-requests?

WALTER
Whatever you want, man.

Herbert pops a tape into a small cassette player and hits
PLAY as ELLA FITZGERALD'S "OLD RUGGED CROSS" begins.

Walter lies down and closes his eyes. The INTENSE NOISE of the row fades until only Fitzgerald's HAUNTING VOICE remains.

INT. BRYAN'S CIVIC/EXT. BRYAN'S STREET - NIGHT

Bryan sits in his car with the windows down, exhausted but still pushing himself to work. He reaches the end of one of the files from his long day of meetings, closes it shut--

Grabs the next file in the stack. Opens it to find Walter's mug shot staring back at him. Walter's final words ring through his mind, just starting to read the file when--

WHOOP WHOOP! Bryan looks up-- a POLICE CAR slows to a stop ahead. The spotlight TURNS ON, floods Bryan with WHITE LIGHT.

Bryan doesn't move, watches TWO OFFICERS, both white, one in his 20s and the other in his 40s, step out. A beat before--

BRYAN

You're not doing anything wrong.
Just get out slowly and walk home.

He takes a BREATH, convincing himself, opens the door, steps--

OUTSIDE

The *second* he's out, the Younger Officer draws his gun--

YOUNGER OFFICER

MOVE AND I'LL BLOW YOUR HEAD OFF
ASSHOLE!

Bryan freezes. Terror spikes. The Younger Officer steps forward, shaking with nervous fear as--

YOUNGER OFFICER (CONT'D)

PUT YOUR GODDAMN HANDS UP!

Bryan raises his hands, terrified, as the Older Officer moves around the side of the car, peering in with his flashlight.

BRYAN

It's okay. I live here. I'm renting
the place in back.

Bryan motions slightly to his rental. The Younger Officer JOLTS forward, as if he might shoot.

YOUNGER OFFICER

DON'T MOVE!

Bryan says nothing. Silent. Doesn't even dare to breathe.

YOUNGER OFFICER (CONT'D)
I SAID STOP MOVING!

BRYAN
(forced calmness)
I'm not moving sir.

YOUNGER OFFICER
YOUR HAND IS!

Bryan looks at his hands, QUIVERING with fear. Then he sees the Younger Officer's hand, shaking on the trigger. He takes a BREATH, manages to still his hands from moving as--

The Older Officer rounds the car, looking in the windows.

BRYAN
Can you please tell your partner to
calm down?

The Older Officer ignores Bryan as he approaches him.

OLDER OFFICER
Both hands on the vehicle.

Bryan hesitates, then slowly begins to lower his hands as--

The Older Officer SHOVES him hard up against the car, roughly begins to pat him down. Bryan keeps an eye on the Younger Officer, his gun still pointed at his head.

The Older Officer finishes, turns to his partner, nods.

The Younger Officer lowers his gun, shaking with adrenaline. Bryan finally BREATHEs, still pinned to the car--

OLDER OFFICER (CONT'D)
What are you doing out in the
street this late?

BRYAN
I was finishing some work. It's
really hot in my rental.

Up and down the street, LIGHTS begin to turn on in houses.

OLDER OFFICER
Let's see your I.D.

BRYAN
It's in my pocket.

The Older Officer pulls Bryan's wallet out. The Younger Officer circles the car now, shining his flashlight inside.

From the houses up and down the street, NEIGHBORS start to walk out onto their yards. An OLD WOMAN calls out--

OLD WOMAN
Ask him if he stole my radio!

The Younger Officer opens the passenger door, searches through Bryan's papers. Bryan can't help himself--

BRYAN
You can't do that without a
warrant, sir.

The Younger Officer ignores him, examining a half-empty package of M&M's as the Older Officer stares at Bryan's I.D.

OLDER OFFICER
What are you doin' down here from
Delaware, Mr. Stevenson?

BRYAN
I'm a criminal justice attorney. I
moved here for a job.

The Younger Officer looks up, shakes his head to the Older Officer. He nods, steps back, hands Bryan back his I.D.

OLDER OFFICER
You're good to go.

BRYAN
(in shock)
Everything you just did is against
the law.

The Older Officer turns, walks to the car with his partner.

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

OLD WOMAN
(from her yard)
WHAT?! THAT'S IT? ARREST HIM!

OLDER OFFICER
It's all right, everyone! False
alarm! He's your new neighbor!

Bryan looks around at all the white people standing on their lawns, staring with fear and suspicion. Then he sees--

Mr. & Mrs. Franklin, standing at their front door, glaring at him as the police cruiser drives away.

INT. BRYAN'S RENTAL - MOMENTS LATER

Bryan paces in his room, ragged and scared, phone to his ear.

BRYAN
I don't know what I was thinking,
Ma. You were right. I shouldn't
have come here--

He's on the edge of panic, can't even find coherent words as--

INTERCUT: INT. ALICE'S BEDROOM, STEVENSON FAMILY HOME

Alice sits up in bed, Howard beside her, listening intently.

ALICE
Baby, calm down. Did something
happen?

Bryan shakes his head, doesn't want to scare her but--

BRYAN
I can't do this. I can't--

ALICE
Okay, okay. Take a deep breath,
baby. Slow it down.

Bryan takes in a BREATH, sits down on the bed.

BRYAN
It's bad here, Ma. Really bad.

ALICE
(beat, thinks)
Remember your first week at the
integrated school? The only black
kid in the advanced class? White
kids calling you names, the teacher
ignoring you when you raised your
hand. Remember how badly you wanted
to quit? But you didn't. You just
put your head down and did the
work. And look how far you went.

Alice lets this truth sink in before--

ALICE (CONT'D)
I don't know what happened, but I'm
guessing you're getting a taste of
what every black person down there
goes through every day. You're
sharing their pain. And that is why
you're the one for this job.

(MORE)

ALICE (CONT'D)

(beat)

Of course I'd love it if you came home, but we both know you'll regret it if you walk out now. Just do the work, son. You'll figure it out as you go.

Bryan thinks for a beat, calmer now. A BREATH. Then--

BRYAN

Thanks Ma.

LATER

Bryan lies awake in bed, his mom's words ringing in his ear. A beat before-- he sits up, looks over at the stack of client folders beside him.

He CLICKS on his lamp and pulls Walter McMillian's file off the pile. He opens it, SLOW PUSH IN as he reads--

SHOTS BUILD WITH BRYAN'S PASSION: Bryan sits on the ground surrounded by papers, reading-- he SCRIBBLES a note-- TURNS a page-- his highlighter SQUEAKS across a phrase-- his lips MOVE SLIGHTLY with the words as he reads until--

The clock reads 3:20 am. He's still devouring the information like a drug, completely engrossed by the growing puzzle.

EXT. EVA'S HOUSE - DAY

Follow Bryan's energy as he walks briskly up to Eva's house.

MOMENTS LATER

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK. Eva opens the door. Before she can speak--

BRYAN

If we're going to work together, you can't just tell me what you think I need to hear. I need to know what I'm up against or I'll never be able to do this.

Eva thinks about this. She nods. Takes a BREATH before--

EVA

This organization is just me, and now you, and a hundred death row inmates who need way more help than we could ever give them.

(MORE)

EVA (CONT'D)

We currently have no money, and no support from the state because they know any time we succeed, they look like idiots. Under the circumstances, what we're trying to do is damn near impossible.

(beat, shrugs)

That's what we're up against.

BRYAN

(beat, considers)

Maybe I liked it better when you were lying to me.

A beat. To Eva's relief, he cracks a smile, holds up a file--

BRYAN (CONT'D)

Have you read McMillian's case?

INT. LIVING ROOM, EVA'S HOUSE - LATER

Bryan sits on the floor, papers sprawled around him. Eva sits beside him, opening a fresh piece of nicorette.

BRYAN

The state based its entire case on the testimony of Ralph Myers, who's currently serving a thirty year sentence for a *completely different* murder.

He hands her a photo of RALPH MYERS, the same frail man with the burn scars seen in the opening Monroe County newscast.

EVA

Walter's family said they never even heard of him before the trial.

Bryan shakes his head, none of this computing. Then--

BRYAN

(looking over paperwork)

In Myers' statement, he said Walter approached him at a gas station and forced him at gunpoint to drive to Jackson Cleaners because his arm was hurting. When they got there, Walter told him to wait in the truck while he went inside. When Meyers hears gunshots, he goes in and sees Walter standing over the body of Ronda Morrison.

(MORE)

BRYAN (CONT'D)

Walter then gives Myers a ride back to his car and tells him not to say anything.

EVA

A black man askin' a white stranger to drive him to murder someone because his arm hurts-- that's always smelt like bullshit to me.

BRYAN

(moves to new paper)

They only have one other witness to back up his testimony, a young black man named Bill Hooks. Says he saw Walter's low rider truck leaving the cleaners around the time of the murder. But that's it. No motive, no physical evidence.

Eva is quiet a beat, remembering the crime.

EVA

I heard police went seven months without any leads. Tate was just elected sheriff and he had the whole town on his ass.

BRYAN

That's a lot of pressure to find someone.

Bryan continues to piece everything together as--

EVA

Walter's wife told me they put him on death row a year before his trial. Tate claimed it was for his protection.

Bryan looks up, completely shocked by this.

BRYAN

They can't do that.

EVA

If no one stops them they can.

BRYAN

(beat, considers)

Who's the D.A. on this?

EVA

New guy, Tom Chapman, just took over a few months ago. He used to be a public defender.

BRYAN

Maybe he'll be more reasonable than the last one?

Eva shrugs, not convinced, but willing to keep an open mind.

EXT. MONROEVILLE - DAY

Bryan's Civic drives down a country road, passing a billboard with a picture of Harper Lee's *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD* beside: "MONROE COUNTY, WELCOME VISITORS. THANK YOU, MISS LEE!"

INT. LOBBY, MONROE COUNTY COURTHOUSE - LATER

Bryan sits in the small waiting room underneath a large, framed portrait of HARPER LEE. He checks his watch, growing impatient, looks to the SECRETARY (40s, white).

SECRETARY

You should visit the Mockingbird Museum while you're in town. Stand where Atticus Finch stood.

(smiles)

Greatest lawyer that ever lived.

BRYAN

Fictional lawyer.

SECRETARY

Excuse me?

Bryan politely waves it off as TOM CHAPMAN (30s, white), round face and glasses, walks out with a charming smile--

TOM

Mr. Stevenson? Tom Chapman.

(they shake)

Come on in.

INT. TOM CHAPMAN'S OFFICE - A MOMENT LATER

Bryan follows Tom into his modest office.

TOM

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

(MORE)

TOM (CONT'D)
(off Bryan's surprise)
Eva Ansley's been braggin' about
you all over town. Fancy lawyer
from Harvard, taking all these
capital cases without assignment.
You've piqued our curiosity.

Bryan smiles politely, still trying to get a read on him.

BRYAN
Well, I look forward to meeting
everyone.

Tom nods, sizing him up. He takes a seat at his desk as Bryan
sits opposite him.

TOM
So, what can I do for you today?

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

BRYAN
I'd like to talk about Walter
McMillian. Are you familiar with
his case?

TOM
Hard to find a person in this town
who isn't. You know I wasn't part
of his prosecution, right?

BRYAN
That's why I wanted to meet with
you first... I've read through the
record a few times now, and I have
some serious doubts about the
reliability of his conviction.

Bryan places the transcripts on the desk, confident that the
facts he has will carry him through the conversation.

BRYAN (CONT'D)
If you could take a look at the
sections I highlighted, I'm sure
you'll see what I mean.

Tom picks up the papers, casually flips through them as--

TOM
(polite)
What is it you're trying to achieve
here, Bryan?

BRYAN

(hopeful)

Well, I'm going to file a motion for a new trial. And I was hoping you'd consider supporting it.

TOM

Why on earth would I do that?

He TOSSES the file back onto the desk. Off Bryan's surprise--

TOM (CONT'D)

This was one of the most vicious crimes in the history of Monroe County. When McMillian murdered that innocent girl, he sent a shockwave through this town some people will never get over. For a lot of them, there ain't enough bad that can happen to that man.

Bryan tries not to show his frustration, motions to the file.

BRYAN

Have you read the transcripts? Ralph Myers' testimony makes absolutely no sense.

TOM

The jury didn't seem to think so.

BRYAN

(beat, remains firm)

I'm not the only person with questions about this case.

TOM

Oh, I know. I'm reminded of it every other day when someone from his family calls with another wild claim. But those people only have uninformed opinions. No facts.

BRYAN

What about the fact that your sheriff put my client on death row a year before his trial?

Tom glares at him, surprised he knows this. Then, calmly--

TOM

McMillian was convicted in a court of law by a jury of his peers, and it's my job to defend that conviction.

With that, he stands. Meeting over. Bryan playing catch up suddenly as he gets up, Tom ushering him to the door as--

TOM (CONT'D)

Thanks for stopping by, Bryan. You should 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 at this, silent as he walks with Tom to the door, now fully aware of what he's up against.

INT. BRYAN'S CIVIC/EXT. WALTER'S HOUSE - EVENING

Bryan drives down a long dirt road, Eva in the passenger seat beside him. BLACK FAMILIES sit on old porches, watching them pass by as they discuss Bryan's meeting. Eva shakes her head--

EVA

District Attorneys in this state get re-elected based on their number of convictions. He ain't gonna play nice if he thinks you're threatening his count.

Bryan considers this silently as a BLACK BOY (8) rides up on a bike, stares curiously at him. Eva waves, the boy rides off. Then, she points ahead--

EVA (CONT'D)

This is it.

Bryan pulls to a stop in front of an old house with seven beater cars parked in front. Bryan and Eva step--

OUTSIDE

SIX KIDS run around, playing tag. Make-shift stairs lead to a rotting porch that borders the house, where MINNIE MCMILLIAN (40s), patient and tired, walks out to greet them.

Eva smiles brightly, walks up and gives Minnie a warm hug.

EVA (CONT'D)

Hey Minnie. How you doin'?

MINNIE

Tired. The plant's got me on twelve-hour shifts right now, but seein' y'all is wakin' me right up.

Minnie smiles at Bryan as he approaches.

EVA

Bryan, this is Minnie McMillian, Walter's wife.

MINNIE

(warmly)

You the lawyer she keeps goin' on about?

BRYAN

(smiles)

I guess so.

MINNIE

Good lookin' one, too. You could be one of them lawyers on TV.

Bryan feels at home. He sees GILES (30, tall) appear at the door beside JOHN (20s), Walter's son.

GILES

That Johnny D's new lawyer?

MINNIE

This is him!

(looks to Bryan)

Everyone 'round here calls Walter *Johnny D.*

Minnie grabs Bryan's arm and leads him toward the house. Bryan notices John glaring at him before turning inside.

MINNIE (CONT'D)

That's our son, John. Don't mind him. This whole thing been rough on us in different ways... Our two girls are inside with the rest. They're all excited to meet you.

Bryan is surprised by this, glances quickly at Eva before--

BRYAN

Who else is here?

MINNIE

Everybody.

INT. LIVING ROOM, WALTER'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Bryan sits with Minnie on a couch. 30 FAMILY MEMBERS are crammed into the tiny room. Eva stands nearby, taking it in.

Everyone TALKS at the same time as Bryan takes out his notepad. A GRANDMOTHER (70s), pours him a glass of sweet tea as EVELYN (40s), Walter's sister, shouts--

EVELYN

Hey now! Hey! We ain't gonna get
nowhere with everybody quackin' at
the same time! Let Eva talk!

Quiet falls. All eyes on Eva. She smiles, very comfortable--

EVA

Thanks Evelyn. And thank you all
for comin' out tonight. This is
Bryan Stevenson. He's a very
talented lawyer who will be taking
over Walter's case. Bryan?

Bryan takes a sip of his sweet tea, looks at the sea of faces staring at him.

BRYAN

Hi everyone, good to meet you. Um--

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

BRYAN (CONT'D)

I'm sure you have a lot of
questions for me. 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.

EVELYN

Our perspective is that there is *no*
way my brother is guilty of this
crime.

MURMURS of agreement wash throughout the room. Bryan listens, jotting notes as Evelyn continues with passion.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

The morning that girl was killed,
we was all havin' a fish fry here
at the house to raise money for the
church.

(MORE)

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Johnny D was here with us, mornin'
to night, workin' on his truck with
John and Jimmy, ain't that right?

John stands beside a 40-year-old mechanic, JIMMY, and DARNELL
HOUSTON (20s), nervous, with a Jerhi curl. John nods.

JOHN

Pops got me outa bed at six in the
morning to get it up on the rack.

JIMMY

We had the transmission clean out
by nine thirty.

EVELYN

Now how's he supposed to go kidnap
some *white man* he don't even know
and get over to Jackson Cleaners to
kill some 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? It don't make
no sense, Mr. Stevenson.

VOICES of agreement throughout the room. Bryan writes notes.

BRYAN

How many of you were here with
Walter that morning?

Bryan looks up as twenty-seven hands go up--

BRYAN (CONT'D)

Why did only three of you testify?

MINNIE

The lawyers said three was enough.

He exchanges a look with Eva as he jots a note, processing.
BERNARD (50s), Walter's friend, chimes in.

BERNARD

Everybody know they went after him
'cause of that woman.

BRYAN

(perks up)
What woman?

Bernard looks to Minnie, realizes he screwed up.

BERNARD

Sorry, Minnie.

MINNIE

It's okay. It ain't no secret, and Mr. Stevenson needs to know.

(beat)

Few months before that girl got killed, Johnny D got caught messin' 'round with a white woman in town. When her husband found out, he made sure the whole town knew 'bout it. People ain't so friendly after that.

Bryan processes this for a beat at this as UNCLE LEO (70s) confined to a wheelchair with the voice of a leader.

UNCLE LEO

When Johnny D was little, we found Russell Charlie dead, hangin' in a tree in Vredenburgh, bullet holes all over his body. They strung him up 'cause he was goin' out with a white girl in town.

(beat)

This was a lynching, same as that. They can call it what they want, but that's what it was.

MURMURS of heartbroken agreement across the room before--

MINNIE

What my husband did... It hurts. But that don't make him no murderer.

She grows quiet, the room falling silent with her. The clear matriarch of this family. She looks around the room.

MINNIE (CONT'D)

What're we s'pose to tell these children 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?

(beat)

We feel like they done put us all on death row too.

The group responds with murmurs of "YES MA'AM" and "THAT'S RIGHT." Minnie looks around the room, then to Bryan.

MINNIE (CONT'D)

We all here because we wanna help.
What can we do?

Bryan glances at Eva, who gives him an encouraging nod. Then--

BRYAN

Right now, we want to collect as much evidence as possible to support Walter's case. If anything comes to mind, please don't hesitate to call us. It might be a long road, but we're ready to get to work.

John looks at his nervous friend, Darnell, more doubtful than the rest. He presses Bryan further.

JOHN

The last lawyers was talkin' big, jus' like you, then took all our money and split.

EVA

(stepping in)

Our organization covers all legal expenses. So y'all won't pay a penny.

John's surprised, but still doubtful. Bryan empathizes--

BRYAN

I know you don't have any reason to trust me. If you asked me to put my dad's life in the hands of some young lawyer from out of town, I'd feel the same way. You really love him. You all do. That's very clear.

(as John softens)

I'm not here to take your money or make you feel stupid or pushed to the side. I'm here to help. And I'm not going anywhere anytime soon.

(looks right at John)

Does that sound okay?

John glances at Darnell, maybe they can trust him. He gives a subtle nod as the rest agree. Evelyn smiles big--

EVELYN

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

Everyone LAUGHS as Grandmother tops off Bryan's tea.

INT. FRONT HALL, WALTER'S HOUSE - LATER

Bryan and Eva stand at the door, shaking hands and hugging people. Uncle Leo is last, gives Bryan a firm handshake.

UNCLE LEO

I hope you're ready, son. They
ain't gonna like what you doin'.

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. Beside him, Darnell, the nervous young man from before.

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 Walter is
innocent.

Bryan and Eva exchange a look of intrigue.

INT. DINING ROOM, WALTER'S HOUSE - LATER

Bryan sits at the table across from Darnell, taking notes. Eva and Walter's immediate family crowd around, listening.

DARNELL

You heard of Bill Hooks?

BRYAN

(nods)

He testified that he saw Walter's
truck at the cleaners that morning.

DARNELL
(nods, beat)
He's lyin'.

BRYAN
How do you know?

DARNELL
I was with him. We was workin' at
NAPA auto parts together.

BRYAN
The morning of the murder?

DARNELL
Yup. I remember 'cause them
ambulances and police were racin'
up the street for like thirty
minutes.
(picturing the memory)
Bill was workin' on a car in the
shop with me from eight in the
morning 'til we closed after lunch.
He was right next to me when them
sirens was goin' off.

BRYAN
(cautious)
You're sure he was with you the
whole time?

DARNELL
There ain't but one way out the
store, and he never left the whole
morning.

John, sitting in quiet anger all this time, can't help it--

JOHN
And Hooks said it was a low rider.
But dad didn't drop his truck 'til
six months after the murder.

BRYAN
Why would he lie?

JOHN
'Cause the snitch cut a deal with
the cops.
(has Bryan's attention)
They had 'im locked up for
burglary, and the day his statement
come out, sucker went free, all
charges dropped.

Bryan knows how important this is. Steady and calm as--

BRYAN

Darnell, would you be willing to
sign a statement that we could use
in court?

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

BRYAN (CONT'D)

I know it's not easy to stick your
neck out like this. But Walter
really needs you. If we can prove
Bill Hooks is lying, it might be
his best chance.

MINNIE

(impassioned)

Darnell, please.

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

INT. BRYAN'S CIVIC - NIGHT

Bryan drives, deep in thought. Eva watches him process until--

EVA

I hope you know how much you just
did for that family.

BRYAN

I haven't done anything yet.

EVA

You looked them in the eyes and
listened. That's more than anyone's
ever done.

(beat, sincere)

I know you think you don't know
what you're doing, but from where
I'm sittin', you're kickin' ass.

Bryan looks at her, they share a smile, a friendship growing.

INT. VISITING ROOM, HOLMAN PRISON - DAY

Bryan stands, waiting as the Guard UNLOCKS Walter's chains
and leaves the room. Walter looks at Bryan, doesn't move.

BRYAN
I met your family.

Walter keeps his guard up, letting Bryan squirm a little.

WALTER
I heard.

BRYAN
Minnie wanted me to give you this.

Bryan approaches Walter, hands him a small envelope. Walter takes it, but doesn't change his expression.

BRYAN (CONT'D)
I owe you an apology. Last time I was here, I wasn't prepared, and I made some assumptions about you that were irresponsible and wrong. You deserve better than that, and I'm sorry.

Walter stares at him, it's not enough. Then--

BRYAN (CONT'D)
(with conviction)
I know you didn't kill that girl.

Walter sees his sincerity. Off his look--

MOMENTS LATER

Bryan sits across from Walter, still cautious as he reads Darnell's statement.

WALTER
(processing)
He was with him the whole time?

BRYAN
(nods)
If Darnell's telling the truth, there's no way Bill Hooks could have seen your truck at the crime scene that day.

Walter looks up, testing him--

WALTER
So you got a plan?

BRYAN

I want to submit Darnell's statement with a motion to reconsider the denial of your new trial. If the state looks at this evidence reasonably, they'll have to see they made a mistake.

Bryan senses Walter's mood shift as he looks off.

WALTER

Minnie said she told you what I did... I don't know why that woman's still standin' by me after what I put her through.

BRYAN

Walter, you had an affair with a white woman. That does *not* make you a killer worthy of the death penalty. Your wife is standing by you because she knows you shouldn't be in here, and so do I.

(off Walter's look)

What these people did to you isn't just morally wrong, it's illegal. And I'm going to prove it... if you'll let me.

Walter's touched by his sincerity-- a small smile appears.

WALTER

You ain't left me no choice, man. You got the whole family already in love with you. Even my sister, and that woman's a pit bull. I don't know what you said, but if you won her over, you got more skills than I thought.

Walter and Bryan exchange a smile, their comfort growing.

WALTER (CONT'D)

She tol' me to ask if you single.

BRYAN

(light laugh)

Shut up.

WALTER

Not for her, she old. But she know some nice girls at church your age.

Bryan shakes his head, a little embarrassed as he opens the case file, changes the subject--

BRYAN
How about we get to work?

WALTER
Okay, okay. I'll tell her you
playin' hard to get then.

Walter and Bryan exchange a smile, an unexpected connection suddenly growing between them as they get to work.

INT. WALTER'S CELL - LATER

Walter sits on his bed as the cell door CLANKS SHUT. 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 (CONT'D)
Whatsup with that lawyer of yours?

WALTER
What you mean?

ANTHONY
Seems like almost 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?

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?

In his cell, Herbert lies on his bed, a lost, faraway look.

HERBERT
I-I'm here.

WALTER
(concerned)
You okay, man?

HERBERT
They s-s-s-s--
(stops, takes a breath)
They set my date. August 18.

ANTHONY
Shit.

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

WALTER
It's gonna be okay. You got Bryan
fightin' for you now. He'll figure
that shit out.
(quick beat)
You hear me?

HERBERT
(long beat, defeated)
I hear you.

As Herbert fights to keep his growing panic under control--

INT. SMALL OFFICE, EVA'S HOUSE - DAY

THUMP. Eva drops a stack of files onto a GIANT PILE on
Bryan's desk. Bryan looks up from his work, exhausted.

BRYAN
Herbert's appointed lawyer
presented no evidence about his
background, military service, or
his trauma from the war. And after
the sentencing, he advised him not
to file an appeal. Few months later
he was disbarred for misconduct.

EVA
(shakes her head)
Think we can block the execution?

BRYAN
I'll have to work non-stop the next
few months to try to convince one
of the courts to give us a stay.
(looks at all the files)
(MORE)

BRYAN (CONT'D)
While I'm getting through the rest
of these, so...

Eva sees the exhaustion in his eyes. She SIGHS, opens a new piece of Nicorette as Bryan stares.

BRYAN (CONT'D)
How long are you supposed to be
chewing those?

EVA
(playful)
Long as I want.

The PHONE RINGS. Bryan picks up--

BRYAN (INTO PHONE)
E.J.I. This is Bryan--

DARNELL (PHONE)
(rapid, panicked)
*Mr. Stevenson? You gotta do
somethin', man. I can't be in here.*

BRYAN
Darnell? Where are you?

DARNELL (PHONE)
*County jail! They locked me up for
nothin', man! You gotta get me out!*

Still on the phone, Bryan looks to Eva. Off his shock--

INT. MONROE COUNTY JAIL - LATER

Bryan stands at the front desk, filling out paperwork for a CLERK. He slides it over, waits, impatient and upset when--

Sheriff Tate walks around the corner with another OFFICER. Bryan recognizes him, watches him head to the door.

BRYAN
Sheriff Tate?

The Sheriff stops, turns to Bryan, suspicious--

BRYAN (CONT'D)
I'm Bryan Stevenson. Walter
McMillian's lawyer.

A stand-off. Both men sizing up the other until--

SHERIFF TATE
What can I do for you?

BRYAN
I'd like to know why you arrested
my witness.

SHERIFF TATE
(beat, considers)
Maybe you're not familiar with the
laws in our state, but perjury is a
crime 'round here.

BRYAN
Perjury? Based on what?

Tate shoots him a smile that sends shivers down his spine.

SHERIFF TATE
I lived in this town my whole life,
ain't been but twenty miles outside
the state line. I know everyone
here by name, and they hired me to
keep them safe from animals like
McMillian. That man's a blood-
thirsty killer, and there's no way
in hell he ain't gettin' that
chair.

BRYAN
(firm, steady)
You're wrong about him.

SHERIFF TATE
(beat, stares)
You shouldn't have signed up for
this one, kid.

Tate turns and walks out, leaving Bryan boiling.

EXT. MONROE COUNTY JAIL - MOMENTS LATER

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
Can we talk about it?

Darnell motions to the building behind them.

DARNELL
Not in front of the goddamn police
station.

INT. BRYAN'S CIVIC, JAIL PARKING LOT - MOMENTS LATER

Bryan sits in the driver's seat, Darnell in shotgun, looking out the window to make sure no one's watching.

DARNELL
I was just walkin' home from work,
police pull up, cuff me, slam my
face on their hood, tellin' me I'm
gonna get what Walter got if I keep
talkin'.
(long beat, shakes head)
You gonna have to find someone else
to help you out, man.

BRYAN
(firm)
Right now, you're the best chance
we have to save Walter's life.

DARNELL
Not if I lose *mine*!

After a beat, Darnell looks around, paranoia hits him hard.

DARNELL (CONT'D)
(opens door)
I gotta get home.

BRYAN
Let me give you a ride--

Darnell SLAMS the door, rushes off, doesn't look back. Bryan hesitates, anger simmering, STARTS the engine as--

INT. TOM CHAPMAN'S OFFICE - LATER

SECRETARY (O.S.)
Mr. Stevenson, you have to wait!

Bryan storms in as Tom stands up from his desk.

BRYAN

Are you planning to throw *all* my witnesses in jail to keep them quiet?

The Secretary appears at the door, Tom waves her off.

TOM

(back to Bryan, calmly)
If people make false statements concerning this case, they're going to be held accountable.

BRYAN

(bubbling frustration)
You can't arrest someone for perjury without *evidence* that a false statement has been made.

TOM

(beat, considers)
So you're representing Darnell Houston now too?

BRYAN

Yes I am. His statement contradicts Bill Hooks' entire testimony.

TOM

Bill Hooks isn't the state's main witness, Ralph Myers is.

BRYAN

(loses himself)
Ralph Myers is *lying*!

Bryan stops, knows he must stay calm. Tom smiles.

TOM

Come on Bryan, this is our great judicial system at work. You're fightin' for your side, and I'm fightin' for mine. There ain't no good guys and bad guys, we're all just doin' our jobs.

BRYAN

How can you say that when you're constantly bending the law to fit the outcome you want?

Something switches, Tom angry at the affront to his nature.

TOM

(low, fierce)

Where do you get off, comin' into my office and sayin' shit like that? I know Alabama law like my mama's voice, and I ain't never broke it or bent it since the day I was born. You don't like how we do things down here, get in your car and drive your ass back north.

Bryan stands his ground as Tom glares at him. Then, he composes himself, takes a BREATH. A shift in tone--

TOM (CONT'D)

You know what, I'll go ahead and drop Darnell's charges for you.

Bryan looks shocked-- *where did that come from?*

TOM (CONT'D)

It doesn't really matter, now that the court has denied your motion to reopen the case.

BRYAN

What are you talking about?

TOM

You didn't get a copy of the order?

Tom hands him a copy from his desk.

TOM (CONT'D)

The judge is down in Mobile now, sometimes there's mail issues.

(off Bryan's shock)

Don't take it personal, Bryan. This is how it works down here.

Off Bryan's cold stare--

INT. BRYAN'S CIVIC/EXT. COUNTRY HIGHWAY - NIGHT

Bryan's thoughts race as he watches the dark road ahead, illuminated by headlights.

After a moment, light reflects onto his face through his mirror. He looks up to see--

A PAIR OF HEADLIGHTS tailing him, a little too close. Bryan tries to ignore it, but the car keeps inching closer. Then, red and blue lights begin to FLASH-- a police car.

Bryan nervously puts on his blinker, pulls to the side of the road. The police car pulls up and stops behind him.

Bryan watches the car in his mirror, waits for someone to step out, but instead, a spotlight CLICKS ON. WHITE LIGHT FLOODS into Bryan's car. A beat before--

The police car slowly drives up alongside Bryan, blinds him with the white of the flood light. The car idles for a long beat, letting Bryan know he's being watched.

Then, the lights CLICK OFF. The car drives away. Bryan takes a moment to catch his BREATH, completely overwhelmed.

INT. VISITING ROOM, HOLMAN PRISON - DAY

Bryan sits across from Walter, trying to stay positive after everything he's been through.

BRYAN

We can still do this without Darnell. There's other ways to refute Myers' testimony. We're just going to have to dig deeper.

Bryan tries to say more but stops. Walter sees the exhaustion in his eyes. He puts aside his own disappointment.

WALTER

You don't have to put on a show for me, man. I know they beatin' on you out there.

(off Bryan's look)

Sad thing is, everything they pullin' on you ain't nothin' new 'round here. I been dealin' with it since I started workin' their fields at six years old, so did my mama, and her mama. I'm guessin' yours too if you go back enough, right?

BRYAN

(beat, nods)

My Grandma's parents were slaves in Virginia.

WALTER

See? We all from the same blood. Blood that's been dealin' with worse shit than this for a long ass time.

(MORE)

WALTER (CONT'D)

And if your mama's, mama's, mama
got through it, we gone get through
it too.

(beat)

Truth is, them treatin' you like
shit jus' mean you one of us now.

(cheeky)

Welcome to the club.

Bryan lets a smile escape. He plays along--

BRYAN

Thank you, it's great to be here.

WALTER

(laughs, beat)

But seriously, you should get
someone ready to take over, 'cause
I'm still gonna need help if these
guys take you out.

Bryan can't help it, begins to LAUGH.

BRYAN

I don't think that's too far from
the truth.

WALTER

You tellin' me boy! I'm surprised
you lasted *this* long!

THROUGH THE PLEXI GLASS WINDOW-- the two men continue to
laugh and joke despite the obstacles ahead of them.

EXT./INT. OFFICE BUILDING - DAY

Bryan and Eva walk along a row of derelict buildings outside
of downtown Montgomery. Eva reads from a notepad.

EVA

I got you scheduled with three
clients tomorrow morning at Holman.
But make sure you're at the
courthouse by three for the
discovery hearing.

BRYAN

Did we send--

EVA

The motion was sent over last week
and they confirmed receipt.

BRYAN

Great.

EVA

What's the status on Herbert?

BRYAN

I wrote a letter to the governor
and submitted another stay motion
to the appeals court yesterday.

EVA

Excellent. I'll follow up.
(peeks at next page)
We've got a lot more on the list,
but we can go through the rest...
(swings open door)
...in our new office!

INSIDE

The door opens to reveal an old, dusty space with some broken
furniture strewn about. Not impressive at all.

EVA (CONT'D)

Shit, sorry. They were supposed to
clean this up by now.
(quick beat)
I'll add some brooms to the list.

Off Bryan's smile at Eva's determination--

MOVING IN, TIME PASSING, WORK PROGRESSING MONTAGE:

- EXT. EJI OFFICE BUILDING-- Bryan and Curtis unload a desk
from Curtis' truck, Miles gets the door for them.

- INT. EJI OFFICE-- Bryan and Curtis carry the desk in as Eva
stops sweeping to direct them, Miles right behind.

- LATER-- Everything is almost all set up. Curtis screws some
shelves into the wall as Bryan and Eva begin the long process
of organizing their countless boxes of files and paperwork.

- LATER-- Bryan, Eva, Curtis and Miles eating take-out. Into--

QUICK CUTS, stressing the work load on Bryan's shoulders:

- INT. EJI OFFICE: Bryan PULLS A FILE off the pile-- Bryan
SCRIBBLES a note-- The phone RINGS, Eva picks up--

EVA (CONT'D)

EJI, this is Eva.

- Bryan sits at his desk, phone to his ear--

BRYAN (INTO PHONE)
Yes, ma'am. I understand that, and
I really wish I could help you but
we already have too many clients...

- INT. HOLMAN PRISON VISITING AREA-- PUSH-IN on 4 DIFFERENT
DEATH ROW INMATES, one after another, all talking WITHOUT
SOUND. Bryan SCRIBBLES notes, frantically trying to keep up.

INT. EJI OFFICE: Bryan PULLS A FILE off the pile-- Bryan
SCRIBBLES a note-- Bryan on the phone--

BRYAN (INTO PHONE) (CONT'D)
If I keep adding more, it's unfair
to everyone, including your
grandson.

- Bryan TYPES at rapid speed--

- Bryan PULLS another file from the pile and opens it to
read, just as... PLOP, Eva drops 4 MORE FILES onto the pile.
She throws him an apologetic look as--

- Bryan on the phone. He EXHALES, thinking, then gives in.

BRYAN (CONT'D)
Okay, Mrs. Thomas. You make a very
convincing argument. I'll try to
get out there and meet with your
grandson next week, okay?

Eva looks at Bryan, shakes her head-- he gave in again. Bryan
shrugs to her. Can't help it as--

EXT. ALABAMA FIELDS - DAWN (END MONTAGE)

Bryan runs his morning route. Steady and methodical with
every step. Pushing himself forward with an easy grace.

INT. EJI OFFICE - MORNING

Bryan enters carrying a big stack of files and papers. Eva
stares from her desk-- she has a secret she can't hold in.

EVA
Guess who called this morning?
(off his look)
Ralph Myers. He agreed to our
interview request.

Off Bryan's look of total shock--

INT. TELEPHONE ROOM, HOLMAN CORRECTIONAL - DAY

Walter sits in the small room, phone to his ear.

WALTER

Don't do it man. That guy's a snake. If he wanna meet with you, he up to somethin'.

INTERCUT WITH: INT. EJI OFFICE

Bryan sits at his desk, on the phone.

BRYAN

Maybe he feels bad about what he did to you.

WALTER

Ralph Myers don't feel bad for shit. Not for me, and definitely not for the deal he got from the state. They probably usin' him to get to you *right now*.

BRYAN

But if he *is* sincere, the state would have nothing else to stand on.

WALTER

(beat, unconvinced)
Do what you gotta do, but be careful, man. I think you walkin' into a trap.

As Bryan seriously considers the truth of this--

INT. VISITING ROOM, ST. CLAIR CORRECTIONAL - DAY

Bryan sits in the visitor's room, scattered PRISONERS sitting at tables with their VISITORS all around. He tries to keep his nerves in check, eyes on the clock on the wall until--

Ralph Myers is led into the room by a GUARD. Standing up, he's a small man. Frail and vulnerable. But his eyes are sharp and roaming. Dangerous.

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

BRYAN
Hi, Mr. Myers.

RALPH
(quickly)
You Bobby Stevens?

BRYAN
(beat, hesitates)
Bryan Stevenson, yes.

Bryan extends his hand. Ralph looks down, a beat before--

RALPH
Maybe later.

Suddenly, a CHAIR SLIDES BACK across the room. Ralph JUMPS, scans the room, deeply paranoid. After a beat--

BRYAN
Do you mind if we sit down?

RALPH
(quickly, almost angry)
Can you buy me a damn 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 (CONT'D)
Hey Bobby, Sunkist Orange if they
got it!

MOMENTS LATER

Ralph takes a big SIP off his soda. Bryan readies his notes, trying to keep Ralph on track with his steady demeanor.

BRYAN
Thank you for agreeing to talk to
me.

RALPH
(proud)
I like talkin'. My wife says if I
got paid for every word I said,
we'd be a couple a' billionaires.

BRYAN
You're married?

RALPH
(offended)
That surprise you? Popped out a couple kids and everything. Don't hear much from them no more though, on account of my troubles.

BRYAN
(beat, sincere)
I'm sorry to hear that.

Ralph looks at him, softness visible for just a flash.

BRYAN (CONT'D)
I'd like to talk about Walter McMillian. Is that okay?

Ralph's softness fades, replaced by fear. He looks around the room nervously, hesitates before--

RALPH
No.
(off Bryan's confusion)
We can talk about anything you wanna talk about, but I ain't gonna talk about him.

BRYAN
(frustrated beat)
That's the only reason I'm here. You know that.

This seems to confuse Ralph. Hesitates, then mutters--

RALPH
I *don't* know. No, I don't.

His eyes lock on the soda can. Bryan remains calm.

BRYAN
Why did you call me if you weren't ready to discuss this?

Ralph looks up. A sudden, almost mocking smile.

RALPH
Maybe I was bored. Maybe I just wanted a coke.

Ralph takes a sip of his drink. Bryan considers everything for a beat, switches gears--

BRYAN

You know how people in power keep those under them in control? They turn them against each other. I know you struck a deal with the state in exchange for your testimony. And now an innocent man is going to die because of it.

(beat)

He has a wife and kids, just like you. Two girls and a boy.

Ralph glances up at him, a hint of guilt. Bryan gently pushes a step further--

BRYAN (CONT'D)

I don't think you wanted to meet with me because you were bored, Ralph. I think it's because you're a good man who wants to make things right. And this is your chance to do that.

Ralph seems small suddenly, deep in thought until-- BOOM! Ralph JUMPS, terrified until he sees it's only a VISITOR BANGING the vending machine for a bag of chips.

The sight of it makes Ralph LAUGH unusually hard, part nerves, part crazy. Bryan's breakthrough moment lost. As his LAUGHTER dwindles, Ralph's wandering eyes find Bryan again.

RALPH

You know they'll kill you if you get to the bottom of this.

Before Bryan can respond, Ralph shakes his head, begins to LAUGH AGAIN as he stands, motions to the Guard.

BRYAN

Mr. Myers--

RALPH

(looking back)

We done here, Bobby. I must a' had a screw loose callin' you.

BRYAN

Come on, please, sit back down--

Ralph looks away as the Guard reaches him. He nods, lead back toward the door as Bryan is left sitting behind.

INT. EJI OFFICE - DAY

Bryan walks in. Eva stands with a clipboard--

EVA
How did it go?

BRYAN
(defeated)
Not good.

EVA
Damn it.

She turns to the center table, a bitter sarcasm as she motions to EIGHT BOXES, filled with files.

EVA (CONT'D)
Well, on the bright side, after
draggin' their ass forever, the
state finally complied with our
discovery motion.
(quick beat)
This is everything the state has on
Walter McMillian and Ralph Myers.

A beat, Bryan focuses his energy again, a BREATH before--

BRYAN
Okay. Let's get into it.

They each open a box and begin to sift through as--

MONTAGE: ORGANIZING THE EVIDENCE, INVESTIGATION

- LATER: Bryan and Eva have just begun to work their way through the files, organizing them, spread across the table.

- EXT. MECHANIC'S SHOP, DAY: Bryan stands in front of CLAY KAST (40s, white), the mechanic who owns the shop, nodding affirmatively as he motions to a truck raised up behind him.

- EJI OFFICE, EVENING: Days later. Eva places post-it notes on relevant articles as Bryan reads and takes notes.

- EXT./INT. JACKSON CLEANERS, DAY: Bryan walks up to the brick storefront with WOODROW IKNER (40s, white), they walk INSIDE as Ikner points around the room, clearly helpful.

- EJI OFFICE, DAY: The boxes carefully organized around the room now. Bryan and Eva create a bulletin board with relevant info, PHOTOGRAPHS of Kast, Ikner and other key players.

-- LATER, EVENING: Bryan and Eva stand looking over the finished board, everything they have for Walter's defense.

EVA
You think it's enough if we don't
have Myers?

BRYAN
(hides his doubt)
Let's keep going.

INT. EJI OFFICE - DAY (END MONTAGE)

Bryan at his desk, working through a file as the FAX MACHINE prints out a page. Eva walks over, picks it up and reads.

EVA
Shit.

Bryan sees her disappointment. Off his look--

BRYAN (V.O., PRE-LAP)
I'm sorry, Herbert. It's not the
answer we wanted...

INT. HOLMAN PRISON, VISITING ROOM - DAY

Bryan sits across from Herbert. He's fighting back tears.

BRYAN
...but we have a few days left to
file a cert petition to the Supreme
Court. So there's still a chance.

Herbert looks down, shakes his head, begins to rock back and forth, HYPERVENTILATING. Bryan leans forward, concerned--

BRYAN (CONT'D)
Herbert, you okay?

Herbert doesn't respond, trembling. Bryan gets up, walks around the table and sits beside him. Steady and calm as--

BRYAN (CONT'D)
Herbert.

Herbert finally CATCHES HIS BREATH. A long beat. Then--

HERBERT
After the war, m-m-my head wasn't
workin' right. That n-nurse at the
VA took care a' me.
(MORE)

HERBERT (CONT'D)

I loved her, b-but I didn't know
how... S-spent all that time in Nam
m-makin' those bombs. Thought if I
s-set one off by her house, she'd
run out and I c-could save her.
Then she'd love me too. That's how
s-stupid I was. N-n-never thought
that little girl would pick it up.
(points to his head)
This is f-faulty. I d-d-deserve
what's comin'.

BRYAN

No you don't.

HERBERT

I k-k-killed that girl.

BRYAN

That doesn't mean they should kill
you back.

Herbert looks at him, wants to believe it, but he's already
too far down the road. He closes his eyes, shaking his head
with pain and passion, tears rolling down his cheeks as--

INT. HERBERT'S CELL - LATER

Herbert sits slumped against the wall of his cell, WHEEZING
with EVERY BREATH, his full blown panic attack returned as--

INTERCUT WITH: WALTER & ANTHONY'S CELLS

Walter stands at his cell door, deeply worried--

WALTER

Herbert! You okay over there?

But all he hears in response are HERBERT'S CRIES--

Anthony stands at his door as well, CALLS OUT to Walter--

ANTHONY

He havin' another panic attack!

Walter slides closer to Herbert's cell--

WALTER

Herbert, can you hear me?

In his cell, Herbert continues to ROCK AND CRY as--

WALTER (CONT'D)
Deep breaths, Herbert. Gotta slow
your mind down. Remember what we
practiced... Slow breaths.

Herbert 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 (CONT'D)
That's good. Now close your eyes,
keep breathin', let your mind get
away from all this shit. No more
steel bars, 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--

INSERT: EXT. ALABAMA ESTATE-- Walter stands in the grove of
pines, he looks up at the tree tops, 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.

BACK TO-- Eyes closed. Quiet.

WALTER
You see 'em?

Herbert's eyes quiver beneath his closed lids. *He's calm.*

HERBERT
Yeah. I see 'em.

Herbert takes a slow, deep BREATH. A rare moment of peace.

INT. EJI OFFICE - DAY

Bryan sits, watching the clock-- 5:27 p.m. Eva paces the room
with frustration, talking to herself as much as to Bryan--

EVA
Our client is being executed in *six*
and a half hours. What the hell is
taking so long to make a decision?

BRYAN
(trying to stay positive)
Maybe they're actually taking our
argument seriously.

She stares back, wanting desperately to believe this when--
the phone RINGS. Eva picks up.

EVA
E.J.I.

WOMAN'S VOICE (PHONE)
Bryan Stevenson, please.

EVA
One moment.

She nods to Bryan. He picks up, hits the line on his phone.

BRYAN (INTO PHONE)
This is Bryan Stevenson.

WOMAN'S VOICE (PHONE)
(business as usual)
*Mr. Stevenson, the court has just
entered an order in case No. 89-
5395. Your motion for a stay of
execution has been denied.*
(Bryan's face drops)
*We'll fax copies to your office
shortly.*

BRYAN
Thank you.

Bryan hangs up. Looks to Eva, solemn before--

BRYAN (CONT'D)
I'll get the car.

INT. HERBERT'S CELL/INT. DEATH ROW WALKWAY - LATER

Herbert sits on his bed, holds a single photograph in his
hand, unseen. Jeremy, the guard who strip searched Bryan,
stands nervously outside with an OLDER GUARD.

OLDER GUARD
Come on, Herbert. We gotta go.

Herbert hesitates, shaking with fear. He stands with a nod,
then steps out onto the walkway. 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 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, slowly hands him the photo he's been holding.

HERBERT
W-w-want you to have this.

Walter looks at the photo, Herbert in his military uniform, barely 20 years old. Strong and healthy.

HERBERT (CONT'D)
That's me.

WALTER
(beat, smiles)
Sure is.

Herbert gives Walter one last smile, then turns and walks away, leaving him with an emptiness he hasn't felt in years.

INT. BRYAN'S CIVIC - LATER

Bryan drives, Eva beside him. Silent a long beat before--

BRYAN

How many times have you been a witness?

EVA

(beat)

Arthur Lee Jones. Wayne Eugene Ritter. Michael Lindsey. Horace Dunkins Junior.

The list of the men she's watched die. Bryan feels the weight of their names, turns back to the road as--

INT. WITNESS ROOM, HOLMAN PRISON - LATER

Jeremy and the Older 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.

OLDER GUARD

(off Jeremy's nerves)

First time in the chamber, huh?

JEREMY

Yeah.

(worried beat)

Any advice?

OLDER 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/INT. EXECUTION WAITING CELL - LATER

A FEMALE GUARD leads Bryan into a holding cell to find Herbert sitting alone, in a white jumpsuit now, all his hair, eyebrows included, completely shaved off.

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

FEMALE GUARD

Need anything, Herbert?

HERBERT
You s-s-still gonna play my song?

FEMALE GUARD
We got it cued up and ready.

HERBERT
Th-thank you.

She leaves. Herbert shakes his head as Bryan approaches.

HERBERT (CONT'D)
More p-people ask how they can help
me t-today than ever asked in my
whole life.

He looks at Bryan, seemingly for the first time.

HERBERT (CONT'D)
Do I l-look funny? I didn't know
they was g-g-gonna shave off
everything.

BRYAN
(beat, tender)
You look fine.

Bryan sits down beside Herbert. Remains strong, calm for him.

HERBERT
This has been a s-strange day. Most
people d-d-don't get to think all
day about it bein' their last day
alive.
(beat)
It's different than Nam. Much
stranger...

BRYAN
(beat, finds the words)
I'm sorry we couldn't do more.

HERBERT
(long beat)
You the only one t-that cared
enough to f-f-fight for me. That's
all anybody needs.
(beat, nervously)
Would you p-pray for me?

Bryan fights back emotions of his own. He smiles.

BRYAN
Of course.

Herbert nods his thanks, letting go of his fear for just a moment as they bow their heads.

INT. CONTROL ROOM, HOLMAN PRISON - CONTINUOUS

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

FEMALE GUARD
He's about to walk.

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

INT. WALTER'S CELL - CONTINUOUS

Walter sits on the floor, silent as ELLA FITZGERALD'S version of "OLD RUGGED CROSS" begins to play over the PA SYSTEM, filling the air. A sad smile of recognition at the song as--

INT. WITNESS ROOM - CONTINUOUS

MUSIC CONTINUES-- The gathered WITNESSES (mainly white) sit in the small room, a window in front with a closed curtain.

Eva looks up as Bryan walks to the seat she's saved. He sits down beside her. A look of shared pain between them as--

RETURN TO: INT. EXECUTION HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

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 a PRIEST. They begin the long walk to the chamber.

INT. DEATH ROW WALKWAY/INT. WALTER'S CELL - CONTINUOUS

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 stares out into the hall, waiting.

INT. WITNESS ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Bryan sits beside Eva as the curtains part to reveal--

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 have no ill f-f-feelings. And h-h-
hold nothin' against anyone.

INSIDE THE CHAMBER

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 him hard. He tries not to think about it, shakes it off, finishes the restraints as--

INTERCUT BETWEEN EXECUTION CHAMBER, WITNESSES, AND DEATH ROW

- **IN HIS CELL**, Walter looks at the small clock on his shelf-- 11:57 PM. He knows it's time. He pushes his metal cup out the door slot, begins to BANG it against the bars--

- **IN HIS CELL**, Anthony gets out of bed, grabs his tin cup, pushes his arm out his door slot and BANGS away.

The REST OF THE ROW joins in, arms jutting out of their slots to BANG their tin cups. A GROWING WAVE OF PROTEST as--

- **IN THE WITNESS ROOM**, Bryan watches the Warden read Herbert his DEATH WARRANT. He hears the distant sound of BANGING. He looks to Eva, wondering what the sound is as--

- **ON THE ROW**, the BANGING PEAKS. Walter takes a BREATH--

WALTER

WE ALL WITH YOU HERBERT!

A hundred other VOICES begin to join in, SHOUTING to Herbert at the top of their lungs as--

- **IN THE WITNESS ROOM**, everyone can clearly hear the MEN SHOUTING ON THE ROW, echoing through the vent. Eva responds--

EVA

They're letting him know he's not
alone.

The thought hits Bryan hard. He looks back to Herbert as--

- **IN THE CHAMBER**, 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--

The Warden nods to the Execution Guard, who reaches for the large handle, pulling down as--

Jeremy stands in the far corner, eyes pointed toward Herbert until-- he suddenly averts his gaze, can't take it as--

- **THROUGH THE WITNESS ROOM WINDOW**, Bryan and Eva can barely watch, the ghostly IMAGE of Herbert's pulsing body reflected dimly in the glass as--

- **IN WALTER'S CELL**, Walter stops clanging his cup, staring in Herbert's direction, feeling the loss of his friend.

- **TIGHT ON BRYAN**, his eyes locked forward, a new fire burning inside him. *He can't ever let this happen again.*

INT. VISITING ROOM, ST. CLAIR CORRECTIONAL - DAY

A GUARD unlocks Ralph's cuffs in the BUSY VISITING ROOM. He looks up to see Bryan standing at the table, staring back at him, fire in his eyes. Ralph walks up to him.

RALPH

Hope this important news of yours
comes with somethin' to eat, 'cause
I'm starvin'.

BRYAN

(firm)
Sit down, Mr. Myers.

Ralph lifts his hands in mock-surrender. They take their seats. Ralph is nervous under Bryan's glare. A beat before--

RALPH

You was a lot friendlier last time.

BRYAN

That was before I watched my friend
die.

(off Ralph's surprise)
Have you ever seen someone
executed, Mr. Myers?

Ralph doesn't like that question, grows uncomfortable. Bryan looks off, lost in the memory of Herbert's death.

BRYAN (CONT'D)
Nineteen hundred volts of
electricity passed through his
body.
(beat)
He slammed so hard against the
straps that one of them broke free.

Ralph begins to rock back and forth. Bryan doesn't notice.

BRYAN (CONT'D)
Smoke poured out the top of his
head like he was on fire...
(beat)
...the smell filled up the whole
witness room. It was unbearable.

Bryan looks at Ralph, wrapped up in his own emotions as--

BRYAN (CONT'D)
That's what will to happen to an
innocent man if you don't do
something.

Ralph tries to speak, but nothing comes. Bryan continues--

BRYAN (CONT'D)
Walter McMillian is going to burn
in that chair, Ralph. And that will
be on you.

All of a sudden, Ralph BREAKS, hands to his head as--

RALPH
STOP! STOP TALKING! *STOP IT!!!*

He leans over, squeezing his ears between his hands, SHAKING
AND SOBBING as a wave of panic and fear over takes--

RALPH (CONT'D)
HELP! *HELP ME!* SOMEBODY! PLEASE!
MAKE IT STOP! *MAKE IT STOP!!!*

The outburst stuns Bryan, he looks for help as TWO GUARDS
rush in and restrain Ralph. He STRUGGLES for a moment before
realizing it's futile--

Bryan watches as his SCREAMS slowly morph into SOBS.

Hold on Bryan as he wonders where Ralph's reaction came from.

INT. EJI OFFICE - AFTERNOON

Eva sits across from Bryan in their office.

BRYAN
I went too far.

EVA
You were angry, and rightly so.

BRYAN
(beat, considers)
His reaction was really unnerving.

EVA
(thinks a beat)
You know how he got those scars?

Off Bryan's look-- she grabs a folder on her desk she's been organizing and finds a document, hands it over.

EVA (CONT'D)
He was a foster kid. Bounced
between homes most his childhood.
One of them had him sleepin' in the
basement, a little too close to the
radiator. His cotton pj's caught
fire one night, gave him third
degree burns from the waist up. He
had multiple surgeries just to
regain basic functioning.

Bryan stares at the document, he shakes his head, crestfallen
when-- the phone RINGS. Eva walks over with a SIGH, picks up.

EVA (CONT'D)
E.J.I. This is Eva.
(long beat)
Hello?

RALPH (PHONE)
Uh... this is Ralph. Ralph Myers.
Can I talk to the lawyer?

Eva doesn't hide her shock, covers the phone.

EVA
It's him.

A look of surprise as Bryan picks up his phone. Eva listens
on her receiver as he talks.

BRYAN
This is Bryan.

A beat on the other end. Ralph's HEAVY, NERVOUS BREATH. Then--

RALPH (PHONE)
*Everything you done said was true,
and... I'll say as much in court.*

Bryan and Eva both stunned. Bryan carefully pushes back--

BRYAN
If this is a joke, I'm hanging up.

RALPH (PHONE)
It ain't no joke.
(beat)
You lawyers talk a lotta dogshit,
but you was right about one thing.
I'm a good man, and I wanna make
things right. And nobody has
control over Ralph Myers except for
Ralph Myers.

BRYAN
(beat, hesitant)
And you're willing to recant your
testimony under oath?

RALPH (PHONE)
*I don't know what that means, but
if you put me on the stand, I'll
make sure McMillian goes home a
free man. That there's a Ralph
Myers guarantee, Bobby boy.*

Bryan and Eva exchange a look of surprise and doubt. Then--

MOMENTS LATER

Bryan and Eva sit at the table, staring at their cork board,
now mapping out their entire case.

BRYAN
Think we can trust him?

EVA
(beat)
Do we have a better option?

Bryan thinks hard for another moment. Then--

BRYAN
Okay.

He gets up and pins a photo of Ralph to the section with the
other witnesses.

BRYAN (CONT'D)
Let's get ready for court.

As they get to work--

SOUTHERN NEWS ANCHOR (V.O., PRE-LAP)
*This morning the Baldwin County
courthouse will re-open the case
against Walter McMillian...*

MORNING MONTAGE: As the VOICE of the anchor continues--

EXT. COTTON FIELDS - DAWN

APRIL 16, 1992

Bryan runs at a steady pace, the sun just below the horizon.

SOUTHERN NEWS ANCHOR (V.O.)
*...the man convicted of murdering
18-year old Ronda Morrison in the
fall of '86...*

- INT. BRYAN'S RENTAL - Files and boxes are everywhere--
Bryan obviously takes his work home. Bryan stands, dressed in
his suit and ready to go far too early, works through a note
card stack, filled with his written arguments.

SOUTHERN NEWS ANCHOR (V.O.)
*The purpose of this hearing is to
decide whether or not there is
enough evidence to warrant a new
trial...*

- INT. WALTER'S CELL, DEATH ROW - Walter stands in his cell
as the door opens. Jeremy and the Older Guard stand outside,
waiting to escort him to court. He takes a breath, and goes.

SOUTHERN NEWS ANCHOR (V.O.)
*The state's original key witness,
Ralph Myers, will be returning to
the stand...*

- INT. LIVING ROOM, WALTER'S HOUSE - Minnie stands with her
daughters, all in their finest clothes, nervous, but ready.

SOUTHERN NEWS ANCHOR (V.O.)
*...but this time, he'll be joining
the opposition, as one of the key
witnesses for the defense, led by
attorney Bryan Stevenson...*

Minnie leans toward the hall, calls out--

MINNIE

JOHN! Let's go!

- INT. JOHN'S BEDROOM, WALTER'S HOUSE - Walter's son stands in front of the mirror, straightens his ratty suit coat.

He looks to a photo of himself with his dad, both covered in grease, standing proudly in front of Walter's truck.

SOUTHERN NEWS ANCHOR (V.O.)

*District Attorney Thomas Chapman
will be arguing the hearing for the
state. Local pressure is great to
keep Mr. McMillian behind bars...*

John turns, hurries out of the room as--

- INT. KITCHEN, EVA'S HOUSE - Eva is dressed in sharp business clothes. Curtis proudly looks her over as she nervously LAUGHS, kisses him and Miles goodbye.

SOUTHERN NEWS ANCHOR (V.O.)

*The murder of Miss Morrison sent a
shockwave through the community of
Monroe County, and many residents
are not happy about re-visiting it.*

- INT. BRYAN'S RENTAL (END MONTAGE) - Bryan continues to practice, softly to himself, in front of the small TV as--

WHITE LOCAL FEMALE (TV)

*If that damn lawyer gets away with
freein' that disgusting animal, he
might as well have killed that girl
right along with 'im.*

The phone RINGS. Bryan CLICKS the TV OFF before answering--

BRYAN

Hello?

MAN'S VOICE (PHONE)

(beat, heavy breath)

*If you think we're gonna let you
help that nigger get away with
killin' that girl, you got another
thing comin'. You'll both be dead
niggers soon enough.*

BRYAN

Who is this?

MAN'S VOICE (PHONE)

We'll be watchin' you, boy.

CLICK. DIAL TONE. Bryan hangs up, fear and nerves clawing at his gut. He pushes them away, begins to gather his things.

INT. BRYAN'S CIVIC / EXT. BALDWIN COUNTY - MORNING

Bryan drives, silent, mind racing. Eva sits beside him, looking over his notecards.

EVA

This is great. First you establish the testimony Ralph gave at trial, then you ask if any of it was true, Ralph says no and blows everybody's minds, and then we back it up with all the other evidence we'll be presenting.

BRYAN

Unless Walter's right and this whole thing is a set-up for him to turn against us on the stand.

Eva looks at him, overwhelmed by the thought of that.

EVA

What would happen if he does?

Bryan holds up a finger as he pulls over, stops the car, leans out the door and THROWS UP on the road. A beat before--

Bryan SHUTS the door. Eva hands him a tissue from her purse. As he wipes his mouth--

EVA (CONT'D)

(cheeky)

Was it something I said?

Despite his nerves, Bryan can't help but smile. He shakes his head at her as he pulls back onto the road.

EXT. BALDWIN COUNTY COURTHOUSE - LATER

Bryan and Eva exit the car. Bryan stops, scans the parking lot, remembering the threatening phone call from earlier.

He takes a BREATH. Centers himself. Turns to Eva, patiently waiting. Off Bryan's nod, they turn to reveal--

The courthouse. A few local news CAMERA CREWS wait outside as a dozen PEOPLE head in, including Uncle Leo, the old man in a wheelchair from Bryan's first night with Walter's family.

Bryan puts his fear aside, ascends the steps with Eva.

INT. HOLDING CELL, BALDWIN COUNTY COURTHOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Bryan is led by a COURTHOUSE GUARD along a row of holding cells in the courthouse basement. They reach Walter in his cell, sitting in his prison jumpsuit.

As Bryan enters the cell, he can see how nervous and shaken Walter is. He stays strong for his friend as--

BRYAN

You okay?

WALTER

(frustrated)

Why we gotta do this shit in Baldwin again? There ain't no people like me livin' in this county. They all white folk sittin' in high cotton. One look at my face and they ain't gonna hear shit.

(beat, shakes head)

These guys gone do whatever it takes to send me back.

Bryan walks up and sits down beside him. A long beat. Then--

BRYAN

When I was sixteen, my grandpa was murdered.

(off Walter's look)

He was eighty six, stabbed to death in his apartment by some guys trying to steal his black and white TV... It was really confusing for me. I was mad at the guys who did it, but I was more mad at all the officials for being so indifferent about it. He wasn't my grandpa to them, he was just another poor black man killed in the projects.

(beat, considers)

This system may not seem to value your life. But I do. And I'm going to make them hear the truth today.

Walter stares hard at Bryan, his words having returned a bit of his hope and confidence. A beat before--

In the hall, Sheriff Tate walks past with TWO TRANSPORT GUARDS and Ralph. Ralph is clearly shaken, eyes locked on the floor, shrunk inside of himself at a terrified remove.

Bryan keeps his eyes locked on him. A renewed sense of worry.

MOMENTS LATER

Bryan walks down the short hall toward Ralph's holding cell as-- Sheriff Tate walks out.

He glances at Bryan, walks forward, keeps his eyes locked tight on him as they pass, a single nod before--

SHERIFF TATE

Good luck today, counselor.

Bryan doesn't respond, fights back his growing worry as he reaches the bars to Ralph's cell. Ralph sits, stares down.

BRYAN

Mr. Myers?

(off his silence)

Ralph?

Ralph finally looks up. Eyes filled with fear.

BRYAN (CONT'D)

What happened?

Ralph LAUGHS abruptly, shakes his head, MUTTERS something imperceptible to himself as he looks back to the floor.

BRYAN (CONT'D)

Ralph, you have to tell me if
they've pressured you in any way.

RALPH

(looks up, suddenly
strong)

What the hell you think they been
doin' all this time?

BRYAN

What do you mean?

Ralph looks away, fidgets nervously, plays it off.

RALPH

I'm fine. I just-- need time to
think, before I go in there and
spill my guts. And I can't do that
with you here jabberin'.

(off Bryan's stare)

That alright with you?

BRYAN
(beat, nods)
Okay. I'll give you some space.

Bryan hesitates, turns, filled with worry as he walks away.

INT. SIDE HALLWAY / INT. COURTROOM - LATER

Bryan stands beside Walter, in leg irons and a waist chain as they walk down the hallway, Jeremy and the Older Guard behind them. Both men are nervous, trying to stay strong as they push through the doors and walk through--

THE COURTROOM

Walter looks at Bryan, clearly surprised. The place is PACKED WITH PEOPLE (WHITE on one side, BLACK on the other).

At the back, a GUARD stands beside a metal detector with a large GERMAN SHEPHERD by his side.

At the front, where Tom and his ASSISTANT ATTORNEY sit at the prosecution table, Sheriff Tate sitting directly behind them.

Opposite them, Eva waits, standing calmly at the defense table. Bryan and Walter continue toward her as--

Walter's eyes land on Minnie in the first row beside John and his daughters. 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.

They reach the defense table. Eva pulls out Walter's chair for him as Jeremy unlocks his cuffs. Jeremy glances at Bryan before leaving, still awkward from their first encounter.

Bryan takes a DEEP BREATH, his leg bouncing with nerves until he feels a hand on his knee. It's Walter, gently calming him. Bryan smiles at his friend, it's his turn to be comforted.

Eva slides her notepad to Bryan, points to a note that reads *You got this shit*, smiley face. Bryan takes a BREATH as the BAILIFF walks to the center of the courtroom.

BAILIFF
All rise!

All stand as JUDGE THOMAS NORTON (50s, white), stern and commanding, a black robe and gravel, enters, takes his seat.

BAILIFF (CONT'D)

The twenty eighth Judicial Circuit Court of Alabama is now in session, the honorable Judge Thomas B. Norton residing.

Judge Norton waits for everyone to sit. Then--

JUDGE NORTON

We all know this is an emotional issue. But if any of y'all don't think you can maintain a reasonable degree of decorum, then I would ask you to leave now.

(looks over audience)

All right, if we are ready then, we will proceed. Mr. Stevenson?

BRYAN

Thank you, Your Honor.

Bryan stands, glances at his notes. He hesitates a beat, remembering how many people are counting on him. Then--

BRYAN (CONT'D)

Your Honor, the State's case against Walter McMillian turned entirely on the testimony of Ralph Myers, who had another capital murder case pending against him at the time of the trial.

Bryan notices the Judge is still organizing his papers, not totally paying attention. He waits until the Judge notices--

BRYAN (CONT'D)

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 testimony of Ralph Myers. Based on this testimony, Walter McMillian was convicted of capital murder and sentenced to death.

(beat)

As you are about to hear, the testimony of Ralph Myers was completely false.

Bryan takes a beat to let this sink in. He looks at Eva, who gives him an affirming nod. Then--

BRYAN (CONT'D)
At this time, we call Ralph Myers
to the witness stand.

The deputy opens the side door and Ralph walks into the courtroom. He looks even more afraid than earlier.

Walter can't take his eyes off the man who ruined his life, watching as, distant and stone-faced, Ralph takes a seat on the stand. He scratches the burn scar across his face as--

The Bailiff holds out a Bible, but Ralph is distracted, spots Sheriff Tate in the crowd, staring at him. He looks away.

BAILIFF
Sir, please stand and place your
right hand on the bible.

Ralph hesitates, then stands and extends his hand.

BAILIFF (CONT'D)
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)
Sorry... Yes sir.

The Bailiff steps away. Ralph sits. Bryan walks to the stand.

BRYAN
Mr. Myers, would you state your
name for the record, please?

Even this seems to give Ralph pause. A long beat before--

RALPH
Ralph Bernard Myers.

BRYAN
Have you previously appeared in
this courtroom to testify against
Walter McMillian?

RALPH
(beat, shrugs)
Ain't sure. All these rooms look
kinda the same to me.

Ralph's nerves have overtaken him. Every response skittish, and unsure. Bryan stays steady, fighting his own nerves.

BRYAN

If the record shows that you testified against Mr. McMillian in August of '88, would you agree with that?

RALPH

(hesitates, beat)

Yes sir, the best of my remembering, I think that sounds about right.

BRYAN

Could you summarize your testimony in that trial, please?

Ralph sees Walter staring, avoids his gaze, MUMBLES--

RALPH

Don't think I can fully remember to be honest with you. Sorry, sir.

Bryan's heart sinks. *He's losing him*, takes a BREATH--

BRYAN

It's okay. We have a transcript of your testimony here...

Bryan walks back to the table. Eva hands him a transcript.

BRYAN (CONT'D)

(looks over transcript)

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?

Ralph hesitates, nervous. Scratches at his scars, nods--

RALPH

Yes, sir. I guess so.

BRYAN

(hesitates, cautious)

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 dead body of Ronda Morrison?

BRYAN (CONT'D)
(beat, nods)
Yes, sir.

Bryan locks his eyes on Ralph, deeply nervous before--

BRYAN (CONT'D)
Was the testimony that 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 over
at Sheriff Tate again, back to Bryan. Then, finally--

RALPH
I don't know.

BRYAN
(beat, distraught)
You don't know? Ralph--

RALPH
(ashamed)
I don't remember.

Walter sinks in his seat as A MURMUR fills the courtroom.

Behind him, Minnie stares in shock as John shakes his head.

Tom nods to his Assistant as he scribbles notes.

JUDGE NORTON
Quiet!

SILENCE falls. Bryan struggles to keep his composure.

BRYAN
Mr. Myers, didn't you say that
pressure was put on you by the
officers investigating this case?

TOM
(quickly stands)
Objection! Mr. Stevenson can't go
puttin' words in Mr. Myers mouth
just cause things aren't goin' his
way, now can he?

JUDGE NORTON
Sustained.

Bryan looks back at Tom, boiling at his smug smile. He turns
back to Ralph, a BREATH before--

BRYAN

Mr. Myers. I'll ask you again, was the testimony you gave at--

RALPH

(suddenly snaps)
I said I don't know! Ask me a hundred times and I still won't! I--
Don't-- *KNOW!*

Bryan is stunned. The world frozen around him. A beat before--

JUDGE NORTON

Mr. Stevenson?

Bryan snaps out of it, looks to the Judge, back to Ralph. Knows he isn't getting anywhere right now. Needs more time.

BRYAN

Nothing further at this time.

Bryan walks back to his seat, Walter crestfallen at the table, Eva gutted beside him, about to speak when--

Bryan holds up his hand. There's nothing she can say. He tries not to show that he's breaking apart inside as--

Tom stands, happy with the unexpected development.

TOM

Mr. Myers, when you were in prison, do you remember making a phone call to Sheriff Tate on August 29, 1987?

RALPH

No sir, I don't.

TOM

If we played a tape recording of the phone conversation between you and the sheriff, would it refresh your memory?

RALPH

Don't know.

TOM

Your Honor, I would like to ask the court to play the tape.

At their table, Bryan looks to Eva, confusion now mixing with disappointment. Quietly asks--

BRYAN

What tape?

Eva shrugs, quickly flipping through their files. Bryan stands and addresses the judge.

BRYAN (CONT'D)

Objection, Your Honor. We have not been given a copy of this tape.

TOM

Your Honor, we furnished a copy of the transcript to the opposing counsel along with all the other evidence. If they lost it, we're happy to provide another one.

JUDGE NORTON

Will you need another copy, Mr. Stevenson?

Bryan looks at Eva. She shakes her head, can't find it. Bryan looks back at the Judge, swallows his frustration.

BRYAN

Yes, Your Honor.

As Bryan sits down, Eva leans over to him, WHISPERS--

EVA

We didn't lose shit.

Bryan knows, but he needs to choose his battles.

MOMENTS LATER

Bryan flips through the transcript as the tape is inserted into a small boombox. The Bailiff hits PLAY.

Ralph's VOICE echoes through the silent courtroom. He's SOBBING and CRYING uncontrollably.

SHERIFF TATE (RECORDING)

Ralph... come on now. Calm yourself down...Talk to me. What's goin' on?

In his seat, Bryan's eyes are locked on Ralph, obviously affected by the tape, almost on the verge of tears.

RALPH (RECORDING)

I can't do this no more, sir.

SHERIFF TATE (RECORDING)
*You don't have to. If you got
 somethin' you wanna say, I'm here
 to listen. You don't have to hold
 onto it anymore.*

RALPH (RECORDING)
 (long beat, begins to sob)
*I was there sir. He made me drive
 him to the cleaners...*

SHERIFF TATE (RECORDING)
And did you go inside?

RALPH (RECORDING)
*Yes sir, and I saw that girl lying
 dead on the floor, and McMillian
 was behind the counter pickin' up
 money and putting it in the bag.*

In his chair beside Eva and Bryan, Walter suddenly shakes his head, an audible EXHALE of frustration. Eva places her hand on his arm, helping him stay calm.

As Ralph's voice continues to SOB, Tom nods to the Bailiff, who CLICKS off the recorder.

Bryan watches Ralph-- a frightened child.

TOM
 Now Ralph. When you made that call,
 was anyone there to intimidate or
 pressure you in any way?

Ralph doesn't look up, fidgeting nervously. His expression gives Bryan pause. He thinks of something, grabs the transcript, scans to the start as--

TOM (CONT'D)
 Mr. Myers?

RALPH
 (beat, shakes head)
 No, sir.

Bryan finds what he's looking for on the transcript. He CIRCLES something, SCRIBBLES a note. Looks up at Ralph as--

TOM
 So you made that call to the
 sheriff by your own free will. And
 do you think what you told him
 matches the testimony you gave in
 court?

(MORE)

TOM (CONT'D)
(off Ralph's silence)
Sure sounded similar to me.

BRYAN
(stands, renewed strength)
Objection! Mr. Chapman's personal
opinion on the matter is
irrelevant.

Tom glances back at Bryan, a hint of a smile at his renewed intensity. Then, he turns back to the Judge.

TOM
That's all right, Your Honor. I
have nothing further.
(to Ralph)
Ralph, I'm real sorry you had to be
dragged out here today for nothin'.

Tom calmly walks back to his seat as-- at the table, Bryan slides the transcript to Eva, nods confidently to Walter as he stands.

Eva reads the first line: "Phone Call with Ralph Meyers from Holman Prison." Bryan has circled "Holman Prison" and scribbled the name "Wayne Ritter" beside it. Eva *smiles* as--

Bryan approaches Ralph, speaking gently, as if to a friend.

BRYAN
Ralph. Where were you when you made
that phone call?
(off Ralph's silence)
The record shows you were initially
housed at the county jail, but the
transcript says you were calling
from Holman Prison, is that right?

Judge Norton looks at his transcript, sees Bryan's correct.

RALPH
(beat, sheepish)
Yes sir.

BRYAN
And which section of the prison
were you in?

This is what Bryan has realized. Ralph doesn't know the weight of his answer as--

RALPH
I was on death row.

Bryan raises his eyebrows, his next question crystal clear.

BRYAN

So you were transferred from county
jail to death row without ever
having a trial?

Tom can sense things suddenly shift against him. He stands--

TOM

Judge, we object. What's the
relevance of this to the issue at
hand?

The Judge looks to Tom. His steely demeanor shifts to reveal
a man closely paying attention the entire time.

JUDGE NORTON

Well, if the question is whether
Mr. Myers was pressured to give his
statement, and he was placed on
death row without a trial, I think
the relevance is fairly obvious,
don't you?

Bryan is clearly surprised. Tom backs off, put in his place.

JUDGE NORTON (CONT'D)

Please don't cloud this thing with
objections that aren't germane, Mr.
Chapman. Continue, Mr. Stevenson.

BRYAN

Thank you, Your Honor.
(back to Ralph)
Mr. Myers, who took you to death
row?

Ralph opens his mouth to speak, but as he looks past Bryan,
something stops him.

Bryan 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.

BRYAN (CONT'D)

Ralph... Don't worry about anyone
else in this courtroom, okay?
(beat, off Ralph's nod)
Who took you to death row?

RALPH
(hesitates, to Bryan)
The sheriff did... Sheriff Tate.

BRYAN
Do you know why he did that?

RALPH
(braver now)
I told him I didn't wanna testify
against McMillian. Next I know he's
drivin' me to Holman.

MURMURS of SURPRISE across the courtroom. Eva, Walter, and
his entire family lean forward in their seats.

Judge Norton HITS his gavel as Tom stands, LOUDLY CALLS OUT--

TOM
Objection, Your Honor! That's
purely speculation!

Judge Norton considers this, locks his eyes on Tom.

JUDGE NORTON
Mr. Myers has the right to state
his recollection of the events in
question.
(quick beat)
Overruled.

Bryan smiles. Tom sits, squirms in his seat as, calmly--

BRYAN
(to Ralph)
Do you remember what was happening
on Death Row around that time?

RALPH
(nods, quietly)
They was gettin' ready to kill
Wayne.

BRYAN
Are you referring to Wayne Ritter?

RALPH
Yes sir.

BRYAN
What happened to him?

RALPH

Few weeks after I got there...
(long beat, fidgets)
Middle of the night, everybody
started screamin' and bangin' their
cups on the bars. And then... Then
come the smell of his burning skin.
(shakes his head)
Only other time I smelt that was
when I was a kid.

Bryan pauses here, speaks soft and gently as he asks--

BRYAN

What happened when you were a kid?

RALPH

(hesitates)
My foster mom's heater blowed up
and it caught me on fire.
(beat, points to scar)
That's how I got this.

BRYAN

And that's what you thought about
during the execution?

RALPH

(nods, beat)
Yes, sir. I started shaking all
over, couldn't stop, just lied on
the floor, all night, cryin'.

BRYAN

I'm sorry you had to go through
that, Ralph.

Ralph looks at him, sees his sincerity, and nods. Then--

BRYAN (CONT'D)

Wayne Ritter was executed on April
28, and these transcripts say you
called Sheriff Tate the next day.
Does that sound right?

RALPH

Yes sir.

BRYAN

So that was the morning after you
were up all night crying?

RALPH
(gaining confidence)
Yes sir.

BRYAN
Just so the court understands the progression. You told Sheriff Tate you didn't want to testify. He transferred you to death row. And the morning after Wayne Ritter was executed, you made the call to the sheriff that we just heard.

RALPH
Yes sir.
(beat, full of shame)
I had to get out of there. I didn't know what else to do, so I told 'im what he wanted.

Bryan knows this is his chance, calm and steady as he asks--

BRYAN
I'd like to ask again, Ralph. Was the testimony you gave at Walter McMillian's trial true?

RALPH
(beat, confident)
No sir, not at all.

A wave of GASPS and WHISPERS rolls through the audience. Tom sits in his seat, completely stunned--

Walter sits back, for once his shock not brought from disappointment. Eyes still locked on Ralph as--

JUDGE NORTON
Order please!

As the courtroom quiets, with increasing momentum--

BRYAN
Did you see Mr. McMillian on the day that Ronda Morrison was murdered?

RALPH
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
Thank you, Ralph.
(quick beat)
I have no further questions.

Bryan walks back to his seat, Tom scrambling through his
notes before-- he stands, considers everything. Then--

TOM
Mr. Myers, how do we know you're
not lying right now?

RALPH
Because I'm not.

TOM
Hard to know for sure though, isn't
it... with a man like you?

BRYAN
(stands, fierce)
Objection!

Tom holds up his hand, nothing else to say before--

TOM
I'll withdraw. No more questions.

He sits back down, the only point he feels he needs to make.

JUDGE NORTON
Mr. Myers, you can step down.

Ralph nods, then, he looks straight at the Judge--

RALPH
I lied the first time, Judge. I did
it to save my ass. I know I ain't
no model citizen, but I know right
from wrong. And a innocent man
dyin' on account a' me ain't right.

Judge Norton looks at Ralph, seems to have really heard him.

JUDGE NORTON

Thank you, Mr. Myers.

Ralph nods. The Guard begins to usher him out. Ralph looks at Walter, gives an apologetic nod as he heads to the side door.

Walter watches Ralph go, then glances at his family, all looking back, proud. He sees John. They share a smile before--

Walter turns to Bryan, a look of true hope and gratitude as Bryan rests his hand on his shoulder--

BRYAN

We're just getting started.

And like a rush of wind, MUSIC throws us into a--

MONTAGE THROUGH THE REST OF THE HEARING:

- Clay Kast, the white mechanic Bryan spoke to at the shop.

CLAY KAST

We made Johnny D's truck into a low rider at my shop. But we didn't do that 'til May of '87, over six months after that girl was killed.

- Woodrow Ikner the officer who showed Bryan the crime scene.

WOODROW IKNER

I was the first officer at the scene of the crime, first one to see the body.

- Bryan hands another paper to the court.

BRYAN

We submit a copy of the official log from the police officer who stopped by the fish fry on the day of the murder. It confirms that a crowd of church members were there along with Walter McMillian.

- Back to-- Woodrow Ikner.

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.

- 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 they wanted to hear.

- Back to Ikner on the stand--

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.

- Bryan's closing comments--

BRYAN

In summation, the evidence shows that the jury was not able to make a reliable, competent, constitutional determination about Mr. McMillian's guilt. This case deserves more than to be cleared based on the inconsistent, unreliable, false testimony of Ralph Myers. 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. They look at each other, filled with more hope than either has had in a long time.

EXT. BALDWIN COUNTY COURTHOUSE - NEW DAY

THE RULING

Full parking lot, but most of the people are already inside.

JUDGE NORTON (O.S., PRELAP)

Upon the reading of my decision, I expect the rules of decorum within this courtroom to be upheld...

INT. BALDWIN COUNTY COURTROOM - CONTINUOUS

EVERYONE is seated. Walter sits beside Bryan and Eva, all of their nerves firing at maximum speed.

Walter's family sits behind them. John nervously picks at his fingers. Minnie gently grabs his hand, calms him.

Tom sits with this assistant, Tate behind him. Both seem to be battling nerves of their own as--

Judge Norton, sitting at the bench, CLEARS HIS THROAT, continues reading from his decision--

JUDGE NORTON

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.

A beginning MURMUR OF DISAPPOINTMENT from among Walter's friends and family. Bryan stares ahead, Walter and Eva's faces falling in dismay beside him.

Tom and Tate stare ahead, smug smiles of satisfaction.

JUDGE NORTON (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

Additionally, there is ample evidence that pressure has been brought to bear on Ralph Myers since his trial testimony, which could tend to discredit his recantation. 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--

Behind a heartbroken Walter, John abruptly stands, yanks his arm away from Minnie as she tries to stop him, YELLING--

JOHN
Hell no, Judge! That's fucking
bullshit and you know it!

The whole court reacts in shock as--

JUDGE NORTON
Sit down boy!

WALTER
(from his seat)
Johnny!

JOHN
(stares down the judge)
Naw man, I ain't gonna sit no more
and watch you nod your head like
you listenin' when you ain't
hearin' shit!

JUDGE NORTON
(beat, furious)
Arrest him for contempt of court!

Bryan sees Tate nod to a GUARD, who rushes to the chaos--

BRYAN
(to Judge Norton)
Judge, please! Give us a minute!

Walter tries to stand, but is held back by chains as Bryan
rushes to John, TWO GUARDS approaching from the other side.

WALTER
JOHNNY! Shut your mouth boy!

JOHN
(to the Judge)
Why we do this for, Judge?!
So you can put on a dress an'
pretend you makin' calls when
you already know the black
man goin' to jail in the end!

Eva follows Bryan, both trying to get between John and the
Guards, Walter still staring in pain at the table.

BRYAN
(to the Guards)
It's okay! He just needs a
minute!

EVA
Come on, John. Now's not the
time.

John is in another place, overtaken by his anger. He PUSHES
Bryan back, continues to YELL--

JOHN
They gonna get me eventually, might
as well get this shit over with!

Minnie reaches the aisle now too, CRIES OUT--

MINNIE
Johnny, *please!*

But it's too late. With a violent collision, the guards reach John. GUARD ONE grabs his arm. John RIPS it away, flails as GUARD TWO grabs him, THROWS him to the floor.

In his seat, Walter sees this, calls out--

WALTER
Don't touch my son!

But no one listens. Tate steps in, calmly directing the guards as TWO MORE rush up the aisle. Bryan tries to move in to help, but Eva holds him back, shakes her head.

Bryan looks on, helpless as they pull John's arm violently behind his back. As Tate cuffs John's wrists, he says the same thing he told Walter when he arrested him--

SHERIFF TATE
The more you fight, the more it's
gonna hurt, kid.

Tate pulls him to his feet, begins to drag him with the Guards down the center aisle.

Bryan watches them go, turns to Minnie, now SOBBING beside him. Bryan tries to think of what to say when he sees--

Walter looking at him, more devastated than ever as Jeremy, a clear look of guilt in his eyes, and ANOTHER GUARD, grab him, pulling him up and away from the chaos.

As Walter disappears through the side door, Bryan's heart sinks into the floor-- *how the hell did this just happen?*

EXT. BALDWIN COUNTY COURTHOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Jeremy and the DRIVER usher Walter into the back cage of the transport van. Walter can't hide his angry disappointment.

As Jeremy watches Walter sit, he wrestles with something, an unexpected hint of compassion before--

JEREMY
I'm sure they won't hold your boy
too long. Anybody's kid woulda
reacted the same.

Walter's caught off guard by his sincerity. He shifts, uncomfortable with his hands cuffed behind him.

Jeremy sees this, looks around to be sure no one's watching, then unlocks Walter's cuffs, keeping his leg chains on.

JEREMY (CONT'D)

Gotta go back on before we get to
Holman.

Walter hesitates, nods, rubbing his wrists, surprised by his compassion as Jeremy CLOSES the door.

EXT. BALDWIN COURTHOUSE/INT. TRANSPORT VAN - MOMENTS LATER

Bryan and Eva walk with Minnie, her daughters, and Evelyn to their car, all showing their devastation in their own way.

They all look up as Walter's transport van drives slowly by--

INSIDE THE VAN

Through the metal mesh, Walter sees Minnie, Bryan, and the rest watching him from the parking lot-- a shared a moment of loss and pain.

BACK WITH BRYAN

Bryan watches Walter's van leave the lot, guilt and shame swooping in like a storm.

INT. BRYAN'S CIVIC - CONTINUOUS

Tight on Bryan as he drives home, hopelessness clawing at his insides. Eva looks over at him-- no words.

INT. TRANSPORT VAN - LATER

Tight on Walter as he stares out the window, bouncing to the rhythm of the road, a shell of the man he used to be.

INT. DEATH ROW WALKWAY/INT. WALTER'S CELL, DEATH ROW - LATER

Jeremy and a SECOND GUARD walk Walter to his cell. As the door SLIDES open, his body goes stiff.

They try to usher Walter in, but he resists, grabs the door, refuses to go back into his cell.

JEREMY

Come on man, don't make this hard.

They push him forward, but Walter stands his ground--

JEREMY (CONT'D)
Don't do this, Walter.

The Second Guard pushes him hard from behind as--

WALTER
NO!

Walter lunges backwards against the guard, knocking him back, as he tries desperately to cling to the door.

Jeremy tries to grab Walter as the Second Guard, now pissed off, rushes and SLAMS him in the back, TACKLING him into his cell and desk, everything CRASHING to the floor as--

At the guard's station, TWO GUARDS start running toward them--
Jeremy jumps--

INTO THE CELL

As Walter FLAILS and SCREAMS on the floor. Anthony's VOICE SUDDENLY SHOUTS from next door--

ANTHONY (O.S.)
HEY! WHAT THE HELL'S GOIN' ON?

INMATES up and down the row begin to CALL OUT TO WALTER--

Jeremy rushes down, pinning Walter to the ground with the Second Guard as he lets out an ANGUISHED SCREAM.

INT. WALTER'S CELL - LATER

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
Thought you might want these.

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.

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. Don't forget that. Love, Minnie."

Walter stares at the words for a long beat, wondering if he will ever be able to believe them again.

EXT. COTTON FIELDS - DUSK

Bryan runs, faster than usual, the road on one side, cotton fields on the other. One continuous shot, never leaving Bryan's POV, his pain. A few cars and trucks pass by. Then--

A DIRTY TRUCK approaches from behind, lights on, MUSIC BLARING. TWO COUNTRY BOYS (20s, white) ride in back, leaning on the tail gate, drinking beer.

One of the boys notices Bryan, downs his beer. As the truck passes, he throws the empty can at him.

COUNTRY BOY (O.S.)
Pick it up, boy!

As the truck drives off, Bryan *breaks*--

He picks up the pace, eyes locked on the truck, soon running at a full sprint, frustration and humiliation bursting through him with every furious stride as--

The truck stops at an intersection, brake lights on. Bryan runs faster, pushing his limits, anger begging to explode.

But before he can reach the truck, it SKIDS OFF, leaving him behind on the empty road.

Bryan slows to a stop, bends over, COUGHING and desperate for breath as the world closes in around him.

INT. EJI OFFICE - MORNING

Bryan sits at his desk, silently brooding over everything that's happened. Eva keeps herself busy, moving around the office, trying to keep it together.

EVA
Hopefully the Court of Criminal
Appeals will respond differently.

Eva looks at Bryan, distant, removed. She hesitates before--

EVA (CONT'D)
The evidence is undeniable. They
can't ignore it forever.

BRYAN
Yes they can.
(off Eva's stare)
If you're black, or poor, they'll
ignore whatever they want, for as
long as they want. Who's going to
stop them?

EVA
(quick beat)
I thought we were.

Bryan shakes his head-- this is all his fault.

BRYAN
These people are never going to
listen to someone like me. They'll
never understand why a black man is
standing in their courtroom without
handcuffs and a jumpsuit on.
(beat, ponders)
What if we're just making it worse
by giving them false hope?

EVA
You know that's not true.

BRYAN
It was true for Herbert! Now it's
true for Walter. Who's gonna be
next?

Bryan motions to the stacks of files on his desk.

EVA
(remains calm)
I know how you feel--

BRYAN

(snaps, angry)

No you don't! You have no idea what it's like, to spend your whole life doing everything by the book, don't smoke, don't drink, don't speed, *be perfect*, just so they don't have an excuse to label you a monster.

He glares hard at her. She's brave enough not to look away.

BRYAN (CONT'D)

Any time they put a black man in that chair they're killing a piece of me.

(beat)

You'll never know what that feels like.

EVA

(sincere)

You're right. I won't.

(beat)

But I've been doing this work long before you showed up, and all those people on your desk have become my family. So don't you dare imply that I'm not hurtin' every time this system fucks 'em over.

Eva's deep love for her clients is evident in her eyes. For the first time, it's mixed with disappointment in Bryan.

EVA (CONT'D)

I ain't into forcin' people to do things they don't wanna do. So if you wanna go, go.

Eva waits for something from him, anything until--

EVA (CONT'D)

This shit's gonna make me smoke again.

(beat, grabs bag)

I'm gonna pick up my son from school.

With that, she's out the door, leaving Bryan behind. As soon as the door SLAMS shut, something breaks inside of him--

He turns, glaring back at the countless files spread across his desk. The work that never ends. Hopeless. Then, suddenly--

He grabs his car keys, rushing toward the door as--

INT. BRYAN'S CIVIC / EXT. MONROEVILLE - LATER

Bryan drives, grips the wheel, anger coursing through him as--
His car zips past the HARPER LEE BILLBOARD, welcoming all to Monroeville and whatever mess he's racing blindly toward.

INT. BRYAN'S CIVIC / EXT. MONROE COUNTY JAIL - LATER

Bryan sits in his parked car, tense eyes locked on something ahead, his anger pulsing through his flexing jaw to reveal--

Sheriff Tate, stands beside the jail doors with TWO YOUNGER OFFICERS. Both of the young men smoke cigarettes as Tate SPITS a wad of tobacco chew onto the pavement.

Bryan watches, eyes locked on the Sheriff as he LAUGHS at something. The younger officers toss their cigarettes to the ground as they all turn and walk to the front doors.

Bryan breaks, grabs the keys, throws open the door and steps--

OUTSIDE

Bryan marches across the parking lot as Tate and the younger officers disappear inside. A furious look in his eyes, faster and more intense with every angry step--

He reaches the steps, then the door, a dangerous unpredictability as he pushes through--

INT. MONROE COUNTY JAIL - CONTINUOUS

The door FLIES open as Bryan marches in, stops in his tracks, BREATH HEAVY with his anger, scanning the lobby until--

Through a WINDOW behind the front desk, he sees Tate enter his office and pick up a RINGING phone.

Bryan glares at him, watching him talk, about to move, about to make the wrong decision when--

FRONT DESK CLERK

Excuse me, sir?

Bryan turns to the CLERK. Abruptly snaps out of his daze.

FRONT DESK CLERK (CONT'D)

Can I help you?

A beat, Bryan suddenly considering his next move before--

EXT. MONROE COUNTY JAIL - MOMENTS LATER

Quiet in the parking lot. A beat before-- the doors open.

Bryan walks outside. *John* is with him, an exhausted look in his eyes as he follows Bryan across the parking lot.

INT. BRYAN'S CIVIC - LATER

Bryan drives, calmer now, but still silent. John is quiet as well, staring out the window as they drive toward home until--

JOHN

Thanks for gettin' me out.

Bryan nods, hesitates, wants to say much more, to tell him how sorry he is that he lost. But instead--

BRYAN

I'm sorry you had to spend the night in there.

John shrugs lightly, wishing he had the right thing to say but coming up short. Bryan says nothing more, both returning to the silence as he drives.

EXT. WALTER'S HOUSE - LATER

Bryan exits the car with John as Minnie walks out of the house, stopping on the front porch.

She looks to her son first. He walks up to her and stops, stares at the ground, embarrassed as--

JOHN

Sorry, ma.

No time for anger. She shakes her head and hugs him tightly.

She sees Bryan approaching, looks at John, nods to the door.

MINNIE

Go help your sisters with dinner.

John walks into the house as Minnie turns back to Bryan.

They look at each other a long, tense beat. Bryan barely holding it together, all his shame magnified by her gaze.

MINNIE (CONT'D)

Thank you for bringin' my boy home to me.

Bryan nods, only thinking now about failing to bring *Walter* home. He tries to speak but words don't come--

Only tears, breaking quietly at first, then quickly becoming SOBS, all of his guilt suddenly pouring out of him.

Minnie, filled with compassion, approaches, wraps her arms around him-- the loving mother he needs. She doesn't say a thing, lets him release everything he's been holding inside.

The overwhelming release continues for Bryan as the slow, heartbreaking hymn, "*If I Can Help Somebody*" by Mahalia Jackson, TAKES US through a--

SHORT MONTAGE THROUGH A CHURCH SERVICE:

INT. WALTER AND MINNIE'S CHURCH - MORNING

- Bryan stands beside John, Minnie, Evelyn and Walter's daughters. He looks around the room, filled with BLACK FOLK praising God despite their hardships.

PASTOR (V.O.)

Then the King will say to those at
his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of
my Father, inherit the kingdom
prepared for you from the
foundation of the world...

- Bryan notices Uncle Leo in his wheelchair, his GRANDSON (13) sits beside him as-- Uncle Leo turns, looks at him from a few rows away, he nods, then leans back, closes his eyes.

PASTOR (V.O.)

...for I was hungry and you gave me
food; I was thirsty and you gave me
drink; I was a stranger and you
welcomed me; I was naked and you
clothed me; I was sick and you
visited me; I was in prison and you
came to me...

- As the PASTOR leads the congregation in prayer, everyone holds hands, reaching across the aisles, until the whole church is linked together, bowing their heads in solidarity.

PASTOR (V.O.)

...Truly, I say to you, as you did
it to one of the least of these my
brethren, you did to me.

- John holds out his hand to Bryan, nods. Bryan takes his hand as John bows his head. Bryan looks around the room. Despite all his worries, in this moment he feels connected.

INT. WALTER AND MINNIE'S CHURCH - LATER

The service over, Bryan stands with Minnie and the family as FRIENDS and RELATIVES, many who were present at Minnie's house, shake Bryan's hand as they exit the church.

Next in line-- Uncle Leo, being pushed by his Grandson. He nods to Minnie to get Bryan's attention.

MINNIE

Bryan, this is our Uncle Leo. Think y'all met at the house way back.

BRYAN

Yes, I remember. Good to see you again.

Uncle Leo looks up at him, stern as a commander.

UNCLE LEO

Sit down so I can see you straight.

Bryan exchanges a surprised look with Minnie. Then--

BRYAN

Yes sir.

Bryan sits down. Uncle Leo stares at him, dead serious.

UNCLE LEO

Do you know what you're doing?

Bryan stares back, caught completely off guard. Uncle Leo wags his finger at him, remains serious, but full of passion.

UNCLE LEO (CONT'D)

I said, do you know what you're doing, son?

BRYAN

(beat, sincere)

I thought I did. But now...

He shakes his head. Uncle Leo sits up, stern as a sergeant.

UNCLE LEO

I'll tell you what you're doing.

(quick beat)

(MORE)

UNCLE LEO (CONT'D)
You're beating the drum for
justice.
(off Bryan's confusion)
You see this scar?

He tilts his head so Bryan can see the scar on his skull.

UNCLE LEO (CONT'D)
Got that 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 (CONT'D)
I got this one in Mississippi
demanding civil rights.

He turns and shows another scar at the base of his skull.

UNCLE LEO (CONT'D)
Got that one in Birmingham after
the Children's Crusade.

Uncle Leo sits up, tears forming in his eyes.

UNCLE LEO (CONT'D)
These ain't just scars. These are
my medals of honor.
(long serious beat)
You gotta keep beatin' that drum,
boy.

Uncle Leo leans in close, needs Bryan to hear this--

UNCLE LEO (CONT'D)
(sincere)
Keep beatin' that drum.

Before Bryan has time to respond, Uncle Leo nods to his
Grandson, who WHEELS him off, nodding to Bryan as he goes.

Bryan takes a moment to ponder the charge he left him with.

INT. HALL/INT. VISITING ROOM, HOLMAN PRISON - DAY

Walter walks with Jeremy down the long hallway, calmer than
the last time we saw him. Jeremy looks at him--

JEREMY
That lawyer of yours... He actually
gives a shit, huh?

Walter glances at him, sees he's sincere.

WALTER

Yeah.

Jeremy considers this, nods as he OPENS the door and walks--

INSIDE

Walter stops in the doorway as Jeremy UNLOCKS his cuffs. He sees Bryan, looking up at him from the table, clearly nervous, still fighting the guilt he feels from the loss.

Jeremy PULLS off his cuffs, glances at Bryan as he leaves--

JEREMY

Take as long as you need.

Bryan nods at this, surprised as Walter approaches, sits down across from him. The two men sit in silence for a beat. Then--

BRYAN

I'm sorry, Walter.

Walter seems confused at first. Then, without hesitation--

WALTER

What the hell for?

Bryan looks at him, caught off guard by his adamant question.

WALTER (CONT'D)

All these years, only thing I hear is lies... About where I was, what I did. News people on TV tellin' everybody I'm a monster that deserve to die. After a while you start to think maybe they right.

(beat, remembering)

Ain't gonna lie, that ruling messed me up, man. But I had some time to myself the last few days, and I couldn't stop thinkin' 'bout Ralph sittin' up there, tellin' everybody I love how it really went down.

(beat)

That's the first time I felt like myself since they locked me up. First time I remembered who I am. I ain't no monster. I'm a dad, and a husband, and a good man.

(beat)

These ol' white fools gone do what they gone do, but if they take me to that chair tonight, I'll go out smilin'. '

(MORE)

WALTER (CONT'D)

Cause I got the truth now. You gave me that. You gave it to my family. And no one can take that from us.

(sincere)

You got nothing to be sorry for, man.

Bryan stares, deeply moved. For the first time since the ruling, his sadness seems truly left behind.

BRYAN

Thank you, Walter.

WALTER

(beat, light laugh)

Shit boy. You and the police is the only ones still callin' me Walter. My people call me Johnny D.

BRYAN

(smiles)

Okay.

WALTER

(leans in)

Okay what?

BRYAN

Okay Johnny D.

WALTER

'Ata-boy!

The two men LAUGH like old friends. Then--

WALTER (CONT'D)

Now go get your ass back to work and figure out how to beat these guys.

Bryan smiles and nods, finally ready to do just that as--

INT. BRYAN'S RENTAL - EVENING

The LOCAL NEWS plays on TV as--

Bryan sits on his bed, files spread out in front of him as he writes a first draft of an appeal into a notebook. On TV--

SOUTHERN NEWS ANCHOR (TV)
*Public interest over the case of
 Walter McMillian has been high
 after last week's decision, with
 many locals expressing their
 satisfaction with the outcome...*

Bryan turns to the TV as the newscast cuts to-- OUTSIDE
 MONROEVILLE CITY HALL. An interview with a TOWNSMAN (40s)--

TOWNSMAN
*I got three daughters to protect,
 and if they let that murdering
 scumbag free, I'd be raisin' hell.*

Bryan sits up, wheels turning as the reporter interviews a
 TOWNSWOMAN (60s)--

TOWNSWOMAN
*I've heard too many stories on the
 news about that psycho to ever feel
 sorry for him. The other day they
 said he might be one of the biggest
 drug lords in the county, that's on
 top of all that other sexual
 predator stuff. He's right where
 he's supposed to be.*

As the broadcast continues, PUSH-IN on Bryan as an idea
 begins to take shape in his head.

EXT. EVA'S HOUSE - MORNING

Follow Bryan's renewed passion and energy as he walks briskly
 up to Eva's house.

MOMENTS LATER

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK. Eva opens the door. Before she can speak--

BRYAN
 I'm sorry I lost myself and took it
 out on you. That wasn't fair of me.
 (beat)
 I honestly can't imagine a better
 partner to do this work with.

Eva thinks for a beat, plays it cool as--

EVA
 I lose my shit every three minutes,
 so I think you're okay.

They share a smile, been through too much to hold a grudge.

EVA (CONT'D)
How's that appeal comin' along?

BRYAN
It's coming, but I think we have to do more than that.

INT. EVA'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Bryan sits at the table as Eva sits with two cups of tea.

BRYAN
I think we should consider taking this story to the media.

EVA
(beat, doubtful)
You sure 'bout that? Press coverage isn't always a good thing for clients down here. Too much attention can cause some backlash.

Bryan hears this, takes a BREATH, hoping his plan is right--

BRYAN
They've been using the media to force-feed people their version of the story since the day they arrested Walter. I know it's a long shot, but if we're ever going to win in that courtroom, we have to change the narrative.

Eva takes a sip of her tea, pondering it. Off her look--

INT. LAW LIBRARY - DAY

A VIDEO SHOOT: Bryan sits as a SOUND MIXER adjusts his mic.

Eva stands off to the side, watching silently as--

CAMERA PERSON (O.S.)
We're rolling. Whenever you're ready.

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--

MONTAGE - 60 MINUTES (SHOT TO LOOK LIKE 90s TV):

-- The opening of the 60 MINUTES SEGMENT fills the screen. Ed Bradley addresses the camera, a blown up of picture of Walter McMillian behind him.

ED BRADLEY (TV) (CONT'D)
*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.*

-- INT. LIVING ROOM, EVA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Bryan and Eva sit in the living room with Curtis and Miles, watching the broadcast.

ED BRADLEY (TV) (CONT'D)
*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?*

-- INT. LIVING ROOM, STEVENSON FAMILY HOME - CONTINUOUS

Bryan's family-- Alice, Victoria, his siblings and father, all sit around the room watching the TV.

ED BRADLEY (TV) (CONT'D)
*Or did they get the wrong man, and
 is the real murderer still out
 there somewhere?*

-- INT. LIVING ROOM, WALTER'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Walter's family all sit around the couch. Around them, many FAMILY MEMBERS AND FRIENDS from the first time Bryan visited.

ED BRADLEY (TV) (CONT'D)
*A jury was convinced they got the
 right man. But you may not be after
 you watch this story.*

At this, a loud CHORUS OF CHEERS AND WHISTLES.

-- INT. ANTHONY'S CELL, DEATH ROW - CONTINUOUS

Anthony presses his face to his cell door, trying to listen to the broadcast--

ANTHONY

Johnny D! Turn it up! I can't hear!

-- INT. WALTER'S CELL - CONTINUOUS

Next door, Walter turns up the VOLUME on a small TV as he watches, glued to every word. Through the TV--

Walter walks down the death row walkway, toward his cell.

ED BRADLEY (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. GUARD STATION, DEATH ROW, HOLMAN PRISON - CONTINUOUS

Jeremy and the Older Guard watch the broadcast on a small TV set as--

The broadcast settles on the interview where we began--

BRYAN (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...

-- INT. LIVING ROOM, SHERIFF TATE'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Sheriff Tate sits with his WIFE, glaring at the TV as--

Ed Bradley sits with Ralph Myers, in his prison uniform.

RALPH (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 (TV)

Was it true?

RALPH (TV)

No sir, not at all. Nowhere near true.

-- INT. KITCHEN, TOM CHAPMAN'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Tom sits at the dinner table with his WIFE, watching the TV--

Tom Chapman responding to a question now from Ed Bradley.

TOM (TV)

What's wrong with our criminal justice system is the fact that people want to come back sometimes and second guess juries.

BRYAN (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.

Tom looks less confident than usual--

-- INT. EJI OFFICE - MORNING

A PHONE RINGS, Eva picks up--

EVA

Equal Justice Initiative.

(gets her pen)

Yes sir, that was about our case.

Bryan is already on the phone with another call, taking notes as the phone lights up, TWO MORE CALLS already coming in.

BRYAN (INTO PHONE)

Thank you, ma'am, if you think of anything else, please give us a ring.

As he CLICKS to the other line--

-- LATER. Bryan TYPES a motion at his computer.

-- LATER. Bryan seals the document in an envelope and hands it to Eva, to be mailed. They exchange a cautious but hopeful look before Eva turns and walks out the door.

-- EXT. MONTGOMERY FEDERAL COURTHOUSE - DAY

The conclusion of the broadcast is heard--

ED BRADLEY (V.O., 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.

Eva walks up the steps of the regal building of the Alabama Supreme Court, delivering Walter's motion. -- END MONTAGE.

INT. TOM CHAPMAN'S OFFICE - DAY

THUNK. Tom tosses the court order on his desk and looks up at Bryan, standing across from him.

TOM

You gotta be kiddin' me. How many times do you have to lose before we can all move on with our lives?

Bryan remains firm. He's not backing down.

BRYAN

The Supreme Court granted the re-trial because--

TOM

Those judges are jus' coverin' their asses 'cause Ed Bradley got everybody riled up for nothin'. I still can't believe y'all spread that propaganda and passed it off as a damn news show... pushin' fear back into my community, draggin' that poor girl's parents through all this again. Y'all should be ashamed.

(voice rising)

I had to open up a new investigation 'cause of you. Wastin' more tax payers' money on a goddamn case that shouldn't be on my desk in the first place. That's all you're doin', wastin' everybody's time and money.

Bryan stares, can't believe this is what he's focused on.

BRYAN

(sincere)

Do you even remember what you're fighting for anymore?

Tom is taken aback. Bryan feels sorry for the man.

BRYAN (CONT'D)

I know you think you're protecting your community from a murderer. But you're wrong. You're just killing a good man.

Tom remains silent. For a brief second it seems as if Bryan's words have gotten through. Then, he shrugs--

TOM

You got your views and I got mine.

BRYAN

(beat, sighs)

We'll be filing for a motion to dismiss all charges.

(turns)

See you at the hearing.

Bryan walks out as Tom ponders his words--

SOUTHERN NEWS ANCHOR (V.O., PRELAP)

This morning the Baldwin County courthouse will be reconvening once again for the murder case of Ronda Morrison and her convicted killer, Walter McMillian.

EXT. BALDWIN COUNTY COURTHOUSE - DAY

SOUTHERN NEWS ANCHOR (V.O., CONT'D)

The case received national coverage last fall by the CBS program, 60 Minutes, which suggested the jury may have convicted the wrong man.

MARCH 2, 1993

State, local, and national NEWS OUTLETS stand on the front steps as a CROWD OF PEOPLE (mainly black) walk toward the courthouse, many with hand-made SIGNS that read "FREE MCMILLIAN!" "BLACK & POOR = GUILTY" "JUSTICE FOR JOHNNY D!"

Bryan's Civic pulls into a parking spot. He steps out, exchanges a look with Eva as they head to the stairs.

SOUTHERN NEWS ANCHOR (V.O.)

Today's hearing will address Attorney Bryan Stevenson's motion to drop all charges. It's a bold first move in what is bound to be a long and arduous fight.

INT. BASEMENT HOLDING CELL, BALDWIN COURTHOUSE - LATER

Bryan sits beside Walter in the holding cell. He's fighting back his nerves again today, but Walter seems calm.

BRYAN

Tom's planning to oppose our motion, and this Judge will likely follow his lead. But we're still making a statement about how confident we are in your innocence.

WALTER

Thank you, brother.

Off Bryan's smile, Walter leans in and gives him a hug, a true friendship grown between them. As they embrace--

WALTER (CONT'D)

Whatever happens out there don't matter. Just tell 'em who we are.

Bryan hears this. He nods. As he lets this sink in--

BAILIFF (PRE-LAP)

The twenty eighth Judicial Circuit Court of Alabama is now in session, the honorable Judge Pamela Baschab presiding!

INT. COURTROOM, BALDWIN COUNTY COURTHOUSE - LATER

The PACKED courtroom (almost all family and friends of Walter this time) STANDS as JUDGE PAMELA BASCHAB (40s) enters.

Bryan stands at the defense table with Eva and Walter, in his new suit, no cuffs this time. Behind them, Walter's friends and family all stand nervously waiting.

Tom Chapman stands beside his Assistant D.A. at their table. Sheriff Tate at his usual seat behind them.

The BAILIFF finds his place as the Judge settles in.

JUDGE BASCHAB

Please be seated.

(as they sit)

Mr. Stevenson, you're presenting a motion today to drop all charges against Walter McMillian, is that correct?

BRYAN

Yes, Your Honor.

JUDGE BASCHAB

The court is ready to hear your remarks. Whenever you're ready.

Bryan nods. He takes a beat, looks to Walter beside him. Walter smiles, gives a single nod, believes in him.

Bryan stands, firm in his confidence and belief.

BRYAN

Walter McMillian has spent the last six years in an eight foot cell, wondering every day if he is going to die for a crime he did not commit.

(beat)

The Alabama Supreme Court now agrees that he didn't receive anything close to a fair trial. As we have stated in our motion, any legitimate evidence pointing to his guilt simply doesn't exist, and the multitude of evidence supporting his innocence is undeniable.

Bryan takes a moment, glances at Tom, then to the crowd of supporters behind him, and finally to Walter. He remembers Walter's words. Then looks back to the Judge--

BRYAN (CONT'D)

Your Honor, no one in this room is naive to our state's history of segregation and oppression. This isn't just about one man who was betrayed by the system that is supposed to protect him. It's about all these people behind me, people who live their entire lives with an underlying fear, wondering when something like this will happen to them or someone they love. Because sooner or later, it *will* happen. That's the reality we live in. In poor communities, and communities of color across this country, there is a growing despair and hopelessness that is being shaped by outcomes like this one. And we have an opportunity today to show them that justice isn't only for the rich and privileged. Justice is a right, for everyone, no matter their salary or skin color...

(MORE)

BRYAN (CONT'D)

No one should ever have to worry that they might be stopped on their way home from work by an officer sworn to protect them, thrown in the back of a police car, and sentenced to death without any logical reason why.

(beat)

I may not always see eye to eye with the other officers of this court, but I know we agree on something. We believe in justice for *all*. And I hope we are finally able to give that to Walter McMillian today. Thank you.

He takes his seat. Silence as Judge Baschab looks to Tom.

JUDGE BASCHAB

Mr. Chapman?

Tom is quiet. He looks to Bryan and Walter. Then he stands, hesitates a beat, gathering his thoughts before--

TOM

Your Honor, in order to strengthen its case against Mr. McMillian, the state recently opened a new investigation into the murder of Ronda Morrison.

Doubt across the faces of Walter and his family as--

Tom picks up a folder and hands it to the Bailiff.

TOM (CONT'D)

I present the findings of the Alabama Bureau of Investigation for the official record.

As Tom makes his way back to his table, he glances at Bryan, giving away just enough to know he's up to something.

TOM (CONT'D)

(professional, no emotion)

After extensive analysis of the available evidence, it became increasingly clear to the ABI investigators that the *facts* do not point to Mr. McMillian as the perpetrator of this crime.

(MORE)

TOM (CONT'D)

Truth is, our results are very much in line with those previously presented by Mr. Stevenson and the defense.

A WAVE of disbelieving WHISPERS zips through the room. Walter looks at Bryan and Eva-- *is this really happening?*

TOM (CONT'D)

While the identity of Miss Morrison's killer is still in question, the state can confidently say that it was not Walter McMillian.

Tom looks directly at Bryan and Walter.

TOM (CONT'D)

The State of Alabama joins the motion to dismiss all charges, Your Honor.

A stunned beat. MURMURS ripple across the courtroom.

JUDGE BASCHAB

Order please.
(as they quiet)
Mr. Stevenson?

Bryan looks to Michael. Is this really it? He looks back.

BRYAN

Nothing further, Your Honor.

Judge Baschab considers everything for a beat, then begins, speaking plainly, not giving anything away in her intonation--

JUDGE BASCHAB

In light of new admissions from the prosecution, it is the opinion of the court that this case has dragged on far too long.

Walter and his family hold their breath, nervous and unsure as to what this means as--

JUDGE BASCHAB (CONT'D)

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 for a beat. Then--

The courtroom erupts in CHEERS and APPLAUSE. The Bailiff looks to the Judge, she waves him off-- let them celebrate.

Walter looks at Bryan, tear-filled eyes, he gives him a bear hug, then turns to his family and friends, everyone STANDING AND CLAPPING.

Sheriff Tate shoots Tom a disappointed look as he stands, walks past the cheering crowd and out the door.

Tom looks over to Bryan, who offers a respectful nod as--

John and Walter's daughters reach over the divider for a group hug, Minnie beside them.

Eva and Bryan exchange a smile as--

CLANGING fills the air, overtakes all sound. Followed by the SHOUTS OF MEN, YELLING, BANGING AGAINST BARS as--

INT. DEATH ROW, HOLMAN PRISON - 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.

Walter leans in, locks eyes with him through the door slot.

WALTER

I told Bryan all about you. He got you next.

Anthony hesitates, daring to believe this might be true. 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. CHECK-IN, HOLMAN PRISON - MOMENTS LATER

Walter meets Bryan by the entrance to the prison, along with a few GUARDS manning their stations.

BRYAN

Eva's waiting with the car.

Walter nods. He looks to the doors. Clearly nervous.

BRYAN (CONT'D)

There's a lot of people out there.
You don't have to talk to anyone
you don't want to.

WALTER

I just wanna see my family.

BRYAN

Let's do that.
(hand on door)
Ready?

Walter looks back into the prison, then to the door.

WALTER

(a breath)
Yeah.

Following all happens in a single tracking shot:

FOLLOW BRYAN OUTSIDE--

Bryan OPENS the door to a LARGE CROWD of REPORTERS and SUPPORTERS holding signs like "Welcome Home Johnny D!" "God Never Fails" "Free at Last, Thank God Almighty, We Are Free At Last". A DOZEN GUARDS line the path.

Bryan leads Walter through the maze of mayhem, everyone CHEERS as they walk through the crowd--

People SHOUTING CONGRATULATIONS, reporters SHOUTING QUESTIONS as they make their way to the waiting car. Bryan opens the door as Walter stops, looks up at--

A GROVE OF PINE TREES, swaying in the wind, just like he remembers them from the last time he was free.

A FEMALE REPORTER (black) snaps him out of his reverie.

FEMALE REPORTER

Mr. McMillian. How do you feel?

Walter considers this. A beat before, with a quiet smile--

WALTER
Ready to go home.

He turns and gets into the shotgun seat, Bryan hops in back.

IN THE CAR

Eva looks over at Walter as he buckles his seatbelt.

EVA
You good?

WALTER
Yeah... I'm good.

Eva looks to Bryan, sharing in the pride of this moment together. He gives her a nod.

As Eva drives off, the crowd fades into the background and the first wave of reality begins to wash over Walter.

Bryan watches him stare out the window, his smile fading as he begins to process everything he's been through for the first time.

INT. BRYAN'S NEW APARTMENT - DAWN

12 YEARS LATER

Running shoes on, Bryan does his morning stretches in an apartment, still simple, but slightly larger than his last.

EXT. COTTON FIELDS - DAWN

Bryan jogs past a field of cotton, a decade later, this still his daily ritual, as the sun rises behind him.

INT. EJI'S NEW OFFICE - DAY

Bryan and Eva walk down a hall lined with framed photos of exonerated prisoners. Eva looks at a list on a clipboard--

EVA
I corralled a few more donors for the race and poverty initiative, so we're almost at our goal there. And Kendra finished a mock-up for the racial history calendar that she wants to look at.

BRYAN
(impressed)
That's great. I'll look it over
this afternoon.

They turn a corner to reveal-- the new office, now buzzing
with a staff of 30 LAWYERS, PARALEGALS and INTERNS.

EVA
It'll have be this evening. You
gotta be at Holman at 11:30 for
three new clients.

BRYAN
(nods)
Any word back on Anthony's motion?

EVA
(shakes her head)
I'll give 'em another nudge.
Hopefully they don't drag their
asses too much longer.

They stop at the exit on the far end of the office.

EVA (CONT'D)
And one last thing... today is the
sixteenth anniversary of E.J.I.

BRYAN
(beat, surprised)
Really?

EVA
Sixteen years ago you knocked on my
door, and we were both naive enough
to think we could make a
difference.

He looks around at their thriving organization.

EVA (CONT'D)
Can you believe the shit we went
through to get here?

Bryan looks at her and smiles, it's been quite a journey.

EVA (CONT'D)
(sincere)
Give him my love, will ya?

BRYAN
I will.

Bryan takes one last look at the place, shares a smile with Eva before both turn and get back to work.

EXT. MONTGOMERY NURSING HOME/INT. CIVIC - DAY

A 2001 Honda Civic, newer than Bryan's previous car, but still far past its prime, pulls into a parking spot.

INSIDE THE CAR

Bryan turns off the engine and looks at the nursing home. He takes a BREATH, then opens the door.

INT. HALLWAY, MONTGOMERY NURSING HOME - LATER

Bryan walks down a hallway with a NURSE (30s, female).

NURSE

His bouts of dementia have become a bit more frequent lately. But he really is such a sweetheart. Everyone loves having him here.

Bryan smiles politely, glad to hear he's adjusted well.

INT. COMMON ROOM, MONTGOMERY NURSING HOME - MOMENTS LATER

The nurse leads Bryan into a room with older, medicated SENIOR CITIZENS watching TV.

He sees Walter in a hospital gown, unshaven, slumped in a reclining chair, his head resting on his hand. He's not watching TV, just staring off at nothing.

Bryan sadly nods to the Nurse as he approaches Walter, puts his hand on his shoulder. Walter stirs, looks up.

WALTER

(broad smile)
Hey, there he is!
(stands, hugs Bryan)
Let's go to my room.

As he walks away, Bryan sees his gown isn't tied in back, his bare butt in the open. He reaches out to tie it.

BRYAN

Hold on, let me help you out.

WALTER

Glad you caught that. The ladies in
here woulda been all over me.

Walter smiles as he grabs Bryan's arm and heads to his room.

INT. WALTER'S ROOM, MONTGOMERY NURSING HOME - MOMENTS LATER

Bryan helps Walter sit on his bed. He pulls up a chair.

BRYAN

How you doing?

WALTER

Well, you know, can't complain.

Despite his frailness, his smile hasn't lost its brightness.
He looks around his room.

WALTER (CONT'D)

Bein' back on the row ain't ideal,
but glad you here to get me out.
Just like ol' times.

Walter shoots him a smile. Bryan returns it, hides his worry.

BRYAN

Johnny D, this is a hospital.

Walter doesn't quite understand, but his smile doesn't fade.

WALTER

Don't worry 'bout me, man. Long as
you here, I'm good.

Bryan smiles at this, full of love for his friend as--

WALTER (CONT'D)

You get a haircut or somethin'? You
look different... Almost like a
grown-up.

BRYAN

(smiles)
Almost, huh?

WALTER

(smiles big)
You ain't foolin' me.

Hold on Walter, smiling to his friend as--

BRYAN (PRE-LAP)

Walter McMillian was a good man. He had the ability to make me laugh in the darkest times, to give me hope when I couldn't find it.

INT. LIMESTONE FAULK A.M.E. ZION CHURCH - DAY

Bryan stands at a podium speaking to an unseen audience.

BRYAN

He was like a brother to me.

Bryan looks out at the church congregation, packed with PEOPLE-- All of Walter's family; Eva and Curtis; and many more MEMBERS FROM WALTER'S COMMUNITY.

BRYAN (CONT'D)

He was threatened and terrorized, wrongly accused and condemned, but he never gave up. He survived the humiliation of his trial and the charges against him. He survived a guilty verdict, death row, and the wrongful condemnation of an entire state. And while he did not survive without injury or trauma, he came out with his dignity.

(beat)

Walter helped me understand why we have to reform a system of criminal justice that continues to treat people better if they are rich and guilty than if they are poor and innocent, a system that makes wealth and status more important than culpability. He taught me that fear and anger are a threat to justice; they can infect a community, a state, or a nation and make us blind, irrational, and dangerous. He helped me see that the death penalty is not about whether people deserve to die for the crimes they commit. The real question is, *do we deserve to kill?*

(beat)

Walter taught me that mercy is just when it is rooted in hopefulness and freely given. He genuinely forgave the people who unfairly convicted him.

(MORE)

BRYAN (CONT'D)

And in the end, it was that mercy towards others that allowed him to recover a life worth celebrating, a life that rediscovered the love and freedom that all humans desire, a life that overcame death and condemnation, until it was time to die on God's schedule.

Bryan takes a moment to look out across the people who meant so much to Johnny D, and now mean so much to him. His heart is filled with the lasting memory of his friend.

OVER PHOTOS OF REAL-LIFE BRYAN, WALTER, AND EVA:

- *Bryan Stevenson has been fighting for death row inmates for 29 years.*
- *Together, Bryan, Eva, and the E.J.I. staff, have won reversals, relief, or release for over 115 wrongly condemned prisoners on death row.*
- *For every 9 people who have been executed, one innocent person has been exonerated and released from death row.*

FREEZE ON ANTHONY LOOKING OUT OF HIS CELL:

- *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.*

OVER BLACK:

- *In 2016, after spending 30 years on Holman Prison's death row for a crime he didn't commit, Anthony Ray Hinton was exonerated.*

ACTUAL NEWS FOOTAGE OF--

THE REAL BRYAN STEVENSON walks 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.