STEAL AWAY

by

Stephen Ashley Blake

based on Andrew Ward's

"Dark Midnight When I Rise"

Realm, LLC
Los Angeles, California
RealmStudios.co

Copyright © 2011-2026
WGAw 1964235
All Rights Reserved

THE NIGHT SKY

The gently rippling image of the full moon and dark passing clouds.

We widen to reveal a WOMAN and GIRL hovering in the foreground like suspended angels. We realize we're underwater, looking up. All is peaceful and still. Then suddenly --

HANDS plunge in, furiously seize them, and pull them out onto the:

DIMLY-LIT RIVERBANK

Silhouetted FIGURES violently shake the woman and girl. The woman revives and fights BACK.

WOMAN
NO! NO! LEAVE US ALONE!

Pandemonium builds until a GUNSHOT RINGS OUT, and we hear:

MAN (O.S.)
GET AWAY FROM THEM!

Vicious PIT BULLS charge out of the darkness and ATTACK the Figures. They shriek in torment as the dogs maul and drive them back.

A whistle blows and the hounds return to their owners: a rifle-wielding MAN and his timid young SON.

The woman tenderly rocks the girl. The man squints to make her out.

MAN
Sarah?

Visibility is low but we see that the woman, SARAH, and girl are black; the man and boy, white. The man eyes the girl and gasps --

MAN
She's not breathing!

SARAH
(glares at him)
You can't touch her now.

He grabs the girl. They tussle over her body. At last, he wrests her free and turns her over. As she coughs up water, Sarah recoils.

SARAH
No! God, No!

The girl revives, and we reveal the face of --

SARAH
Sam!

MAN
Ella!

-- three-year-old SAMUELLA “ELLA” SHEPPARD.

Vexed and confused, the man processes what’s just happened.

MAN
We’re down at the whipping post dealing with the *runaways*, hear shouts, come up. I’ll be damned if it’s not my *house spade* fending off my *field spades.* What’s going on here, Sarah Sheppard?!

Thinning clouds start to brighten the scene, revealing the Figures to be field slaves. That makes the man, “BISHOP”, their master.

SUPER: “NASHVILLE, 1854”

BISHOP
Answer me!

Sarah’s head has been ablaze with thought. Now her eyes fire with a VISION. She answers Bishop - fists clenched, voice searing.

SARAH
Brother Bo, good sister Hattie, their boy Wallace...

BISHOP
The runaways; I got the boy here.

He points down to WALLACE, the blood-drenched slave boy he’s hauled to the clearing. The boy lies cowering in the dirt.

SARAH
Samuella and me heard it all tonight - their flesh splitting, screams for mercy, throats choking with blood.

BISHOP
The sounds of *discipline*; you've heard it before.

SARAH
(voicing herself and Samuella)
Many times. But tonight I notice Sam ain’t troubled by it. I ask why not. “They’s just getting they due.” *Who tell you that?* “Bishop.” *Bishop?? What else he be saying to you?* “Just asking what the slaves be up to, day in, day out.” *Bo and Hattie planning to escape - you tell him ‘bout that?* “Yes’m.” Oh God...
(turns to the slaves)
Forgive us! He been using my Sam to spy on us all, then raining down bloodshed.

Stark moonlight now reveals the heinous scars that rack the slaves' bodies and FACES, and the fresh blood soaking Bishop. Strikingly, his own son's face - a sweet, shy face - is as marred as the slaves'.

BISHOP
(fondles Ella's hand)
Yes, my little helper is a godsend.

SARAH
(snatches back her hand)
Was.

He glares daggers at her. His son's eyes beg her to *hush* - the boy clearly cares for her. Now realizing what this is about, Bishop circles Sarah menacingly.

BISHOP
So, full of woe, you came to drown yourself and the girl. The spades *saved* you.

SARAH
(fixed on the vision)
I see it now; I didn't then - my Sam will never again be party to your cruelty.

BISHOP
THAT'S MY PROPERTY!

SARAH
By God's reckoning or your own?!

BISHOP
THEY ARE ONE AND THE SAME!

SARAH
We'll see about that.

BISHOP
We will!
(points at TWO SLAVES)
You two, bind her!

Just then, little Wallace's FATHER hobbles onto the scene.

BO
Wallace! Son!

SARAH
BO! GET BACK!!

BLAM! Bishop SHOOTS HIM DEAD. Wallace SCREAMS.

WALLACE
POPPA!!

He runs to his father's corpse. Bishop takes aim at the two slaves.

BISHOP
BIND HER!

The slaves seize Sarah, their eyes begging her forgiveness. Though harrowed beyond words, as the slaves hog-tie Sarah, she defiantly speaks her vision to Ella.

SARAH
On the way to the river, I heard voices on the wind... *a choir.* They said, "Don't do it, Sarah; we have need of this child, far from here, far from you." The voices were loud, but those lashes and screams were louder. *And knowing Bishop was making you his...* This river's called out to me many times; tonight I was listening.
(then, marveling)
But here you are. The voices were right: he's going to set you free.

BISHOP
You're demented!

SARAH
Free her, or so help me this river *will* free us both.

BISHOP
I'll lynch you myself first!

SARAH
Really, and *pretend* to rear this boy when I'm gone, as if you knew the first thing? Since Missus passed, I'm all Myron's got!

He growls with rage - she has him over a barrel.

Sarah is now bound on the ground. Breathing fire, Bishop tosses his boy, MYRON, a spiked bullwhip still dripping with blood.

BISHOP
Do her.

SARAH
Do it yourself! Myron's a good boy!

Myron bursts into tears. Bishop BASHES HIS FACE with the rifle --

BISHOP
Craven!

-- then takes up the whip himself. Bracing for what's next, Sarah speaks final words to Ella.

SARAH
Precious baby, you got a *call* on your life, God's word. Run your race, become everything your stupid mother wasn't. And don't ever turn back - *I won't let you.*

But Bishop seizes Ella's face and stares piercingly into her eyes.

BISHOP
Now you hear God's word, Ella Sheppard: This is *your* doing. You betrayed your people; you killed that boy's daddy; by sharing our secret you just damned your mother. Those faces will haunt you the rest of your rotten days, and no matter how far or fast you run in your miserable life, you'll never escape the truth that *you're worthless trash she should have drowned.*

CLOSE ON ELLA - Bishop's curse PENETRATES and HAUNTS her.

He shoves her aside, commands his bleeding son --

BISHOP
Take note.

-- then winds back the whip over Sarah. Just then, we hear the almost surreal sound of FLAPPING WINGS. They draw Ella's gaze up to --

THE NIGHT SKY

-- where a RAVEN circles expectantly above. Ella stares at it, strangely transfixed.

As Sarah's screams pierce the air, black clouds again engulf the moon, damning the scene - and Ella's wide eyes - to darkness.

EXT. PLANTATION GROUNDS - LATER THAT NIGHT

Sarah's shredded body writhes on the floor of a steel SWEATBOX as pit bulls keep the hysterical Ella at bay.

Throughout the plantation, slaves fill the air with a beautiful, deeply expressive melody...

SLAVES
Steal away, steal away to Jesus,
Steal away, Lord.
I ain't got long to stay here...

... a "*SPIRITUAL.*" A grandmotherly slave embraces Ella and nudges her to join the singing, but tormented by the sight of her mother, she CLENCHES HER EARS to shut the spiritual out.

EXT. PLANTATION GROUNDS - NEXT MORNING

BLAM! A GUNBLAST jolts Ella from sleep on the ground, near the sweatbox. Young Myron levels a shotgun at her head.

MYRON
You ever come near this property again, I'll shoot you on sight. Get out!

His bludgeoned face plastered with bandages, the boy looks to his father; Bishop nods his approval. Panicked, Ella looks to the bloodshot EYES peering out at her from the sweatbox.

ELLA
Momma... please... no...

IN THE SWEATBOX - Sarah weeps bitterly, pleading under her breath --

SARAH
Go on, baby. Go.

BLAM BLAM BLAM!! Myron OPENS FIRE at Ella's feet.

ELLA
AAAAAHHH! MOMMA! NOOOOOOOO!

BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM!! Bullets drive little Ella away from the sweatbox and off the plantation, screaming. As she vanishes into the distance, our story moves forward:

SHOCK CUT TO:

SPIKED WHIPS. SPLITTING FLESH. TORTURED FACES. *BLAM!* BO'S FACE. MOMMA'S EYES: *"THIS IS YOUR DOING, WORTHLESS TRASH!"*

We hear a teenage girl SHRIEK from the nightmare, then CUT TO a:

SERIES OF SCENES (1865)

VIOLENTLY SHAKING HANDS

Furiously editing church music. Relentlessly tuning an old organ. Hammering cathedral bells into perfect pitch. Hauling about pews to perfect room acoustics. The black and blue hands are preparing for:

SUNDAY SERVICE

Breathtaking *Bach* fills the sanctuary; parishioners are spellbound by the pint-sized girl performing it on organ. At just 14, Ella is already a musical master... but looks worn beyond her young years.

Suddenly, news breaks out in the pews; it spreads until the whole church is abuzz. Ecstatic, Ella and everyone races outside to the --

EUPHORIC STREETS

-- where crowds cheer as newsboys shout:

NEWSBOYS
WAR ENDS! FOUR MILLION SLAVES FREED!

Ella bursts into incredulous tears.

TRAVELING BACK

Ella huddles in a cargo wagon with other poor travelers, looking out at thousands of freed slaves straggling out from plantations.

BISHOP'S PLANTATION

After eleven years, Ella has returned - but the plantation is abandoned. Panicked, she scours the grounds shouting for Sarah. Then her heart drops: she finds the slave quarters splattered with BULLETS and BLOODSTAINS, the aftermath of a grisly rampage.

Shattered, Ella weeps in Sarah's old shanty. *Our* heart drops to realize she's pressing a blade of shrapnel to her small wrist.

Just then, a sunbeam sets the floor aglow. Her memory is jogged; she lifts the floorboard and pulls up a hidden treasure - a sketch of:

A BEAUTIFUL DREAM HOME

She gazes at it with longing eyes.

RELIEF BUREAU, DOWNTOWN NASHVILLE

Ella is among thousands of destitute former slaves straggling onto the grounds of the AMERICAN MISSIONARY ASSOCIATION, where doctors, lawyers and relief workers aid them at an array of booths.

But the streets are violent: SUPREMACIST MOBS swarm the bureau, chanting death to the freed slaves and "Negro-loving" missionaries.

Ella enters the line for the MISSING PERSONS BUREAU... as an African-American BOY her age keenly watches her.

INT. RELIEF BUREAU - DARKENED MAP ROOM - THAT NIGHT

As the mob's torches rage outside, Ella stands at a glass-encased MAP of America showing hundreds of Missing Persons Bureau locations. Unbelievably, she's copying them all down. Suddenly we hear --

BOY (O.S.)
You're going out there.

She spins around. The boy has entered.

WALLACE
You're not waiting for *this* Bureau to find Miss Sarah; you're going out to them all.

ELLA
Wallace?

BOY
(blushes *yes,* then...)
I overheard you at the booth. Talked myself out of saying *hi*.

ELLA
What are you doing here?

WALLACE
I live here, at the orphanage. The day after Bishop shot Daddy, the day you left, he drowned Momma and me. Momma anyway; passerby found me tangled in riverweed, brought me here.

Yet his face bears no bitterness; soft and shy with sparkling eyes and a hopeful smile, this is a sweet, tender boy.

ELLA
Wallace... I'm so sorry...

WALLACE
(shuts out the memories)
Freed slaves are scattering far and wide; she could be anywhere. *And you know what's out there.*

She looks to the map. Dauntingly vast and flickering in the mob's torchlight, it looms like doom before her. She breaks down.

But he lifts her chin.

WALLACE
From my first hour at the orphanage, I prayed someone, *anyone*, would come for me... choose me... make me a *son* again. Over the years folk came and went, looked me over, never found much to like. But someone wants me now; he just signed the papers. I'm getting a new dad. *Never cry.* Things get better; you'll find her.

Her tears beg him to promise it. Glaring out at the mob, his gentle eyes suddenly flare with rage. He RIPS DOWN the map case, SMASHES the glass, then hands her the map as if arming a knight.

WALLACE
Next bureau's in Meridian. East.

She takes the map, breathless, the hope in her eyes kindled by his. As she stows it, he catches something that falls from her bag.

WALLACE
I remember this. Miss Sarah's Dream House. It's all she talked about.

It's the sketch. He searches her eyes, sensing its meaning for her.

WALLACE
I'll build it. My new dad builds homes; he's going to teach me everything. Come back to Nashville and I'll build this.

His promise fires her heart. She smiles... then flushes with guilt.

ELLA
What happened to your father, I-I'm --

WALLACE
East.

Cursing herself, she nods and takes a breath. He nods *good luck* as she exits the grounds into the --

BLOODTHIRSTY STREETS

-- skirting the mob and launching her impossible journey.

Our story again moves forward. The mob's torches ENGULF THE SCREEN. We track the hellish embers upwards as they emblaze the sky. The embers metamorphose into FIREWORKS and we tilt back down to the --

SAME STREETS

-- but a stunning new world. Gone are the torches. A CIVIL RIGHTS PARADE is underway with fireworks, military bands and astonishingly, African-American congressmen orating to cheering mixed crowds.

SUPER: "NASHVILLE 1871"

We hear a young woman's voice:

ELLA (V.O.)
Dear Momma, what are you up to this bright Emancipation Day? I'm picturing you cheering the floats as fireworks flash in your eyes. Me? Thinking of you of course, and after the darkness of slavery, this dawn of freedom breaking across the South. Which is why I'm writing; I've got news...

We TRAVEL DOWN THE STREET, witnessing Blacks and Whites walking and working together. We spot supremacists seething at the integration, but ARMED TROOPS now keep the peace.

ELLA (V.O.)
The world is praising Washington for this civil rights revolution, but what if I told you that long before Congress found its fickle spine, a company of *crusaders* were leading the charge? That tyranny has no fiercer enemy than the American Missionary Association, fiery abolitionists that have long fought and bled for a colorblind nation?

Still traveling, we turn a corner and sweep onto a ramshackle but bustling SCHOOL CAMPUS...

ELLA (V.O.)
The AMA battles injustice through its nationwide churches, orphanages, hospitals and shelters, but its most explosive weapon against oppression is *schools*. They've founded hundreds of them to destroy the tyranny of ignorance and the slavery it guarantees. The crown jewel of these is a scrappy college with a fighting spirit, built on an old slave yard: FISK UNIVERSITY.

We sweep through Fisk's packed classrooms where former slaves are taught Latin and Philosophy, Calculus and Constitutional Law...

ELLA (V.O.)
Fisk's mission is to flood the land with senators and justices, ministers, attorneys, authors and activists that make this nation live out its creed that *all men are created equal...*

We sweep through dilapidated dorms and dining halls...

ELLA (V.O.)
The AMA's vast ambitions keep comfort at bay, and that's just fine. We're building the Dream. Yes, Momma, "*we.*" That's my news: after all those wayfaring years, I'm back in Nashville, a Professor of Music at Fisk. I can't wait to show you around when... when you... visit...

... then arrive at an old condemned slave barracks, and enter --

ELLA'S ROOM

-- the lair of a workaholic. We PAN past mountains of music scores... past the Missing Persons Bureau wall map with its hundreds of locations now meticulously checked off... and SETTLE on the:

DEATH CERTIFICATE OF SARAH SHEPPARD, *"DECLARED DEAD IN ABSENTIA."*

We take that in, then CUT TO a young woman staring at it, haunted, as she defiantly writes to the "deceased."

Now 19, our Ella is slender yet shapely with a softly chiseled face, wide probing eyes, and a beguiling if rarely-seen smile.

ELLA (V.O.)
Oh Momma, the last I saw of you were your eyes peering out at me from darkness. In the seventeen years since, I've seen nothing else. I came back for you, and I swear I'll see you again. Despite the "official word," I've got every Bureau looking for you and ads running coast to coast - all pointing you here. Now I wait; Hercules himself couldn't pry me from this place until you walk through that door. That's all I live for. Your Samuella.

She folds the letter into an envelope, writes "SARAH SHEPPARD" on it, then sighs and adds it to a tall stack of unsent letters.

Then she catches sight of her PITCH PIPE. Damning the Fates, she wipes her tears, pulls the letter back out and defiantly goes on:

ELLA (V.O.)
Then there's our little *choir*...

CUT TO:

EXT. FISK QUAD - STORM-CLOUDED DAY

A sensational choir of eight BLACK STUDENTS perform an outdoors concert for the bustling campus. They're really phenomenal --

CHOIR
Gott fähret auf mit Jauchzen und der Herr mit heller Posaunen!

-- even if it is *Bach* they're singing. In German.

ELLA (V.O.)
We're an amateur group without a name...

CLOSE-UPS ON:

BENNIE HOLMES - sharp, politically savvy, but cripplingly insecure.

ELLA (V.O.)
There's Bennie, aspiring orator. One day he'll shake the earth... when he finds his voice.

AMERICA ROBINSON - gracious, elegant, maternal towards Ella.

ELLA (V.O.)
America, "Merrie" to me. A woman of quiet strength.

FRED LOUDIN - a bitter, frustrated ladder-climber. And a resentful young husband; he ignores his proud wife and sons, who have come out to watch him sing.

ELLA (V.O.)
Loudin. A musical prodigy, his ambitions to conquer the world were shattered by a shotgun wedding. He has yet to forgive his wife, God, or the rest of us.

GEORGIA GORDON - a sassy, sexy, light-skinned belle. She eyes the married Loudin like a steak.

ELLA (V.O.)
Georgia. Unlike most of us, Georgia never knew slavery. For her own protection, she was raised in a convent as white.

MINNIE TATE - the baby of the choir; a sweet, trusting angel.

ELLA (V.O.)
Our nightingale and newest member, Minnie, just fourteen. Born to free parents, she too never suffered under slavery.

TOM RUTLING and IKE DICKERSON - dandies and cut-ups, they sway like crooners as they sing.

ELLA (V.O.)
Tom and Ike, the "Twins." Rascals both.

MAGGIE PORTER - a high-maintenance diva "cursed" with extremely dark skin - and, we sense, a troubled past: Despite her in-your-face persona, she wears ultra-dense makeup as if to hide in plain sight, and opera-length gloves that fully conceal her arms.

ELLA (V.O.)
Maggie - a true diva's diva. Her dream is to command Europe's great opera houses as *prima donna,* and trust me, that last part won't be a stretch. Maggie never talks about her past, but we know there's more to her story than meets the eye.

ELLA - a one-woman orchestra on piano, she accompanies like a magician while critically hawk-eyeing the choir.

ELLA (V.O.)
Me - assistant choirmaster, arranger, blah-blah-blah...

Directing this young black choir is the only white guy in sight - the warmly endearing, surprisingly soulful GEORGE WHITE, a fatherly 50. Tousled and frumpy, White is far too captivated by visions and dreams to think about trifles like grooming. White and Ella share an uncommon bond; they're the deepest, most inseparable of friends.

ELLA (V.O.)
Behind it all is Fisk's treasurer by day, George White, a chastened dreamer whose gaze still drifts to other worlds. Despite his name, skin and birth certificate, Mr. White seems somehow *more black than fair*. Since the tragic death of his wife, we're his only family.

This is our colorful choir. They bring the song to a sublime close... then sigh. No one on campus has paid them the least attention - no one but Loudin's family and scowling faculty.

ELLA (V.O.)
We sing to lift spirits, which usually means our own.

White alone is unfazed.

WHITE
Our time will come.

On cue, a DOWNPOUR breaks out. The singers run for cover, but --

ELLA
WHOA WHOA WHOA!! CORRECTIONS!!

-- *perfection* summons them back. Groaning, they return to Ella.

ELLA
Altos, I'm not hearing you at the *Moderato*. Tenors, blend at the *fermata* and watch pitch at the key change. Second bass...

We know this will go on forever. Mercifully, White intervenes.

WHITE
Sam, it *is* raining.

Ella looks up - *so it is.* Seizing the moment, the drenched singers bolt for cover.

INT. "MOUNTAINTOP CHURCH" - BASEMENT/CHOIR ROOM - SUNDAY MORNING

Ella holds a CHURCH CHOIR OF YOUNG GIRLS on a sustained note, emphatically gesturing them to raise pitch - *UP! UP! UP! UP!*

Then - *DING!* - the church bell RINGS, ending rehearsal. Blue in the face, the girls look to Ella - *How'd we do??*

ELLA
Love covers a multitude of sins.
(she winks; the girls laugh)
Robes!

We feel their love. As they don choir robes, four adorable CUTIE PIES - we'll learn their names later - pepper Ella with questions.

CUTIE PIE 1
Miss Ella, why don't *you* ever sing?

ELLA
Divine mercy; I never had much of a voice.

CUTIE PIE 2
Why take up music?

ELLA
Momma's voice was... *is*... sheer silk; her lullabies still send me to sleep. I want to make music with her one day.

CUTIE PIE 3
Why didn't *you* ever have children?

CUTIE PIE 4
Stupid, she's old, not dead! She just needs to scrounge a man.

CUTIE PIE 1
Well she's not very efficient at that!

ELLA
Didn't anyone tell you? *You're* my children, every one of you.
(she kisses their foreheads; the girls coo)
All right ladies, upstairs. Remember --

GIRLS
"Watch diction, dynamics, duration and pitch!"

ALL
AND HELLO SUNDAY MORNING!

SHOCK CUT TO:

A FIERY STAINED-GLASS CROSS

A hate-drenched emblem of race supremacy that chills our blood.

PREACHER (O.S.)
Four million *mules* plundered from our possession! Yesterday, they're dragging our plows, today they're canonized as citizens, voters, bankers and congressmen! To complete their glorification, this so-called *Civil Rights Bill* would enshrine those savages as our *full* equals!

We hear HOWLS OF ANGER, then WIDEN from the cross to reveal --

INT. "CHURCH OF THE SOUTHERN CROSS"

-- an inferno of hate. We PAN ACROSS raging pews to the hellfire preacher. To our surprise, it's MYRON, Bishop's brutally abused son from the plantation. Now 25, his boyish face is riddled with welts, and his blue eyes blister with hate.

He looks to his father for approval; Bishop nods it.

MYRON (continuing)
And lest we "object," Washington's armies invade <u>our</u> states, purge <u>us</u> from power, and lock down <u>our</u> streets "to keep our fury at bay!" Now we got these tar-loving missionaries soiling our land with "schools"! *Schools!* Friends, you educate a dog, you get an educated dog; even God-on-High can't make mongrels men! Yet these *kennel academies* are breeding them to take over our world! The Southern Cross, the Cross of our dear God, is under siege! BUT CHRIST IS RISEN! <u>SAY RISEN</u>!

CONGREGATION
<u>RISEN</u>!

MYRON
And he shall cut down his enemies in the great winepress of His wrath! For the Lord says, "I will strike you down for the wrong done my people! I will destroy you from the earth!" Brethren, <u>we are</u> the Lord's army, his battle-axe and sword! For the prophet warns every one of us: "Cursed is he who <u>keeps back</u> his sword from bloodshed!" JUDGMENT IS NIGH - BY GOD'S RECKONING AND OUR OWN, THOSE DOGS WILL BE PUT DOWN!

CUT TO:

INT. MOUNTAINTOP CHURCH (SAME TIME)

Here, African-American preacher HIRAM JACKSON electrifies his integrated congregation - including congressmen, civil rights luminaries, and all of Fisk - with a very different call to arms.

He speaks to the booming *AMENS* we hear from Bishop's nearby church:

HIRAM
Listen... the thunder of a raging Christ. Him they preach, him they believe; thus the South swelters with the heat of injustice. Yet here, we gather before the same Cross but a *different* Savior! Confess the same scripture but *another* Gospel! Worship a Creator that's *knocked down* the walls of separation between men! For throughout these Southern "United" States, there are <u>two</u> Christs, and they *are* at war!

White and his choir are rapt. Bennie takes furious notes, mimicking Hiram's speech patterns. Ella and her girls stand ready to sing.

HIRAM
That Cross, those Stars and Stripes, our schools... in them *we* see God's promise of *Jubilee!* Ahhh, what's Jubilee, you ask?

Bennie, our aspiring orator, plucks up his courage and stammers out --

BENNIE
L-Leviticus 25: "A-and the L-Lord said, 'P-proclaim l-l-<u>liberty</u> throughout the land to a-all its inhabitants, and it sh-

IMPATIENT PARISHIONER
(shouts out)
"And it shall be a Jubilee!"

Confirmed: Bennie is a dreadful speaker. He slumps back to his seat.

HIRAM
Amen, Bennie. Jubilee is the triumph of *Liberty* over the shackles of hate for all people everywhere, the conquest of *Justice* that breaks every chain! <u>We are an army</u>, but our battle cry is *Jubilee!* <u>We're soldiers</u>, but our swords are *giftings and callings* from the quiver of the true Christ to storm the gates of hate and set hate's captives free! Cast down strongholds of bigotry! Hew stones of hope from the mountains of despair!
(MORE)

HIRAM (CONT'D)
BROTHERS, SISTERS - WILL YOU ANSWER THE CALL? WILL YOU LIFT YOUR SWORDS AND PROVE THE GOD OF JUBILEE, OR LET THEM RUST AND PROVE HIM THE MERE PHANTOM OF OUR HOPES?!

Deafening *AMENS!* Ella and her girls break out in triumphal song.

EXT. TWO CHURCHES - AFTER SERVICE

We now see that the churches are across the street from each other. We shudder at the immensity of Bishop's stained-glass cross; it towers monstrously above the city as if claiming its destiny.

Hiram, Bishop and Myron greet their respective parishioners.

AT HIRAM'S CHURCH:

White and the choir ply Hiram with warm hugs; it's a lovefest.

HIRAM
How's my favorite choir?

AMERICA
That was some call to arms, Hiram. A veiled stump speech?

Hiram groans; he gets this a lot.

BENNIE
You're the most influential man in the South; take office and you'll push through the Civil Rights Bill.

A passerby - none other than FREDERICK DOUGLASS - agrees.

DOUGLASS
He's right, preacher; mind your own sermons and do this country some *real* good! The *New National Era* wants news of a campaign.

BENNIE
Mr. Douglass! Did you get my writing samples for the magazine?

DOUGLASS
Keep at it.

Douglass briskly exits. Bennie sulks, but White won't hear of it.

WHITE
He'll take notice, son. You'll find your voice and the people will listen.

NEARBY - ANGLE ON ELLA

She exits the church, says hellos, then glances down the street and freezes - a GANG OF BLACK THUGS is approaching. Her heart races.

BACK TO HIRAM, WHITE AND THE CHOIR

MINNIE
Who are *they?*

Minnie points across to an ominous clan of young white men huddled around Myron. They're glaring at Hiram, clearly talking about him.

HIRAM
Those are the faces of Southern rage,
the fire and fury of the Old South.

Suddenly, we hear SHOUTS. The black thugs are attacking the young white men. Fists and weapons fly.

The black GANG LEADER furiously lunges at Myron, but the Whites beat him back. Eyeing the gang leader, Ella starts to run over, but White races over and snatches her back.

Soldiers swoop in and seize the black thugs. As the gang leader is cuffed, he and Ella lock eyes. Something like electricity passes between them. We recognize him, though he's now tall and strapping, and his once-gentle eyes furnace with hate.

A soldier asks his name. We PUSH IN as he answers --

GANG LEADER
Wallace Moore.

EXT. VACANT PARCEL OF LAND - LATER

A gorgeous riverside property across from Fisk. Ella strolls about dreamily as if making a home there with someone special. A sign tells us we're on COVENANT LANE. The realtor is Colt Colton.

INT. "COLT COLTON'S REAL ESTATE AND CARPENTRY" SHOWROOM - LATER

A sprawling showroom of home models, custom furniture - and militant black separatism: Huge wall posters shout "JOIN THE EXODUS! LEAVE WHITE SOCIETY FOR BLACK COLONIES IN KANSAS!"

At the rear counter is the movement's leader: old COLT COLTON, an indestructible cuss with a scar-racked body.

Ella is gazing at a home model as Wallace and his gang enter.

WALLACE
Sorry we're late, Colt.

Damn he's handsome, even with fresh scars. Ella pretends not to notice but quickly slaps on more rouge. Then --

ELLA
AAAAHH!!

-- he sneaks up and gooses her.

ELLA
You *are* a rogue!

WALLACE
And you've got rouge on your teeth.

She checks her teeth and gasps. He roars with satisfaction and gets to work detailing furniture. Coarse, crass and full of swagger, this isn't the innocent kid we met way back.

She turns in a huff, waits in vain for an apology, then jabs back.

ELLA
Jailbird... they let you out early.

WALLACE
Gonna waste that preacher and his daddy.

ELLA
Oh now *that's* enlightened.

WALLACE
(points to shattered windows)
Those church boys shot up this place last night. But I guess 'cause I'm black born, I'm supposed to say *peace,* sing songs and get capped on. You of all should want those two dead.

Ella can't go there. Shutting out the dark memories, she eyes the wall posters and redirects.

ELLA
So, how's *The Great Black Exodus* coming? That's what all this bankrolls.

WALLACE
Just bought a thousand acres in west Kansas; we break ground in the fall.

ELLA
Well *happy pitchforks.*

WALLACE
You ought to see it - blue skies, green fields, freedom like the wind.

ELLA
Thanks, we get wind here.

WALLACE
That's *all* we get.

ELLA
Here we go...

WALLACE
We got no future among Whites.

ELLA
(gestures to Colt)
Hence a *realtor-slash-prophet* and his militant carpenter-thugs herding Negroes off to some Caucasian-free Nirvana. Sounds like a *real* future. What don't you see?? We're free and freer by the day. Come the elections, we'll be --

WALLACE
(scoffs)
-- "living the Dream."

ELLA
Congress is finally on our side; the AMA --

WALLACE
Ah, your white shining knights.

ELLA
They're paving our way to the White House.

WALLACE
You ever <u>step foot</u> in the White House...
(shakes his head)
Listen up: Whites come in two stripes - devils and devils. Your problem is, you think there's a third.

ELLA
You're wrong as wrong gets - our friends are true friends!

WALLACE
Wake up! Beneath his nods and smiles every white man fears black flesh - black is the *color* of white fear - and what he fears he <u>will</u> put down. Supremacy flows like gangrene in his blood; his retinas see us as threats to be taken out.

ELLA
Hence their orphanage, that raised you.

WALLACE
To douse their guilt, some condescend from on high as angels of light - tending our poor, founding schools. And long as we remain crumb-eating Negroes looking *up* at those wings, all is well. But rise up from their feet and look *across space* into those retinas - they'll snap out of their stupor and reclaim the lash. Then we'll wake from ours and see the horns we'd overlooked all along.

ELLA
You're the other side of Bishop's coin! You harbor as much hate as they do.

WALLACE
Well said!

ELLA
Then I fear for your soul.

WALLACE
Do, 'cause if I could wipe every blond hair out of existence for the mere price of hell, I'd do it without blinking!

ELLA
Your father's here in Nashville, right? What does *he* think of --

WALLACE
Leave dad out of this!

ELLA
He's not going to Kansas, is he? I've never even seen him in here.

WALLACE
LEAVE HIM OUT.

ELLA
(shattered)
God... what am I doing here?

WALLACE
O mystery of mysteries.

ELLA
Come again?!

WALLACE
Come *on!* You're here four times a week, every week, on *my* shift.

ELLA
(turns bright red)
To see the model!

WALLACE
You *know* that model down to the glue!
You're full of sound and fury --

ELLA
But?!

Her mouth open, he incinerates her with a KISS that would scorch a volcano. Her heart blazes; her head sizzles; she flails like a drunken boxer to beat him off but is too disoriented to connect.

He releases her with a wink.

WALLACE
You'll be chasing me to Kansas.

Unbelievable! She stares at the villain, woozy, commanding her brain to function. She racks her head for a comeback but manages only:

ELLA
Oh you know that, do you?

WALLACE
Like water's wet and flies fly.

She SLAPS him, then SLAPS him again. *There,* she's back in control!

ELLA
When Kansas goes bust, you'll be back *swatting* flies, collecting my garbage on Covenant Lane.

WALLACE
Covenant Lane??

Something just changed; she senses tension.

ELLA
Th-that's the parcel I hope to build Momma's house on.

His eyes go cold. He looks her over incredulously then throws himself back into work. Suddenly, she feels horribly alone.

ELLA
It sounds far-fetched, I know, but I'm cobbling my pennies. Looks like the land's been vacant for years; maybe God --

The plank in his hands SNAPS IN TWO. She flinches as he slams it down and exits.

INT. MAKESHIFT CHOIR ROOM - THAT NIGHT

A madcap BIRTHDAY PARTY for Ella. White and the motley choir surround her at the piano, guzzling cider like drunks and howling their way through stacks of wretched American songs:

ALL
Let me spank him for his mother,
He is such a naughty boy!
He the baby tried to smother
And he's broken Fannie's toy!
Oh I'll spank him for his mother,
For he's such a tiresome braaaaat --

GONG! Georgia "gongs" the song with a nasty piano chord. Uproarious laughs, merciless jeers, and chants for --

ALL
More!! More!! More!!

Minnie calls out song titles from the stack:

MINNIE
"Carve That Possum." "Goober Peas."
"Let the Old Cat Die."

HISSES and BOOS. Then *AHA!* - America hits on something; she waves everyone silent with the title page of --

ALL
"Esther the Beautiful Queen, a Sacred Cantata."

Solemn *OOHS* and *AAHS*. She flips to --

AMERICA
Scene Six: Duet for Mordecai and the Persian Queen. Let's see.....
(assigns solos to --)
Loudin and *Miss Larynx.*

She means Maggie. *Her Divaship* rolls her neck, owning the title.

Ella takes the score, then reads from it to set the stage:

ELLA
The music softens, the lighting dims...

MAGGIE
Except my spotlight.

ELLA
You're not onstage yet.

MAGGIE
It anticipates me.

Loud groans. Ella cracks her knuckles, plays the grand garish intro - it's obscenely tasteless - then cues Loudin and Maggie:

LOUDIN (singing as Mordecai)
Go unto the king and make supplication for our people. Go! Go! Go!

MAGGIE (singing as Esther)
Alas, thou knowest to go unto the King unbidden is death! Death! Deaaaaaath!

Their voices are stunning, but the music is unbearable. Catcalls swell until - *GONG!* - Loudin bangs the death chord.

LOUDIN
At last, music that stinks to the ear!

ELLA
Believe it or not, that *stinker* is a box-office phenomenon.

Everyone shakes their heads. Moving the party along, the *Twins* whoop it up like Baptist preachers.

TOM
Thus mercifully endeth this edition of *"Sing That Tripe: the Sad, Soulless State of American Music."* We turn now to that dreaded lady in our mist --

IKE
"Midst," fool!

TOM
-- that crashed this world exactly twenty years ago to taunt and torture every poor unpitched singer! Who'll raise a toast to that despot of diction, tyrant of tempo, pharaoh of the fermata, terror to the fool and faint heart?

All look to White; nobody knows Ella better. He lifts a glass, sweeps her with admiring eyes, and speaks as if reciting an ancient ode.

WHITE
By appearances she is fragile, even frail. But beware ye Fates, she is a force of nature. Happy Birthday, Sam.
(Ella beams; then to the choir)
To *family,* first and always!

Cheers and deep hugs all around - we feel their love. But something's wrong: the underscore swells ominously, and just as their glasses clink, we hear EXPLOSIONS.

SMASH CUT TO:

EXT. FISK CAMPUS - MOMENTS LATER

The campus is in chaos - hysterical students flee MASSIVE BILLOWS OF SMOKE rising from the quad. Ella and the choir race with White towards the smoke. He shouts:

WHITE
STAY BACK! STAY BACK!

But they stay with him. They reach the --

QUAD

-- and gasp at a scene of pandemonium. Buildings are ENGULFED IN FLAMES. Screaming students and faculty evacuate the burning structures as windows EXPLODE all around them.

GEORGIA
Sweet Jesus!

The flames rage on, and we

CUT TO:

EXT. FISK CAMPUS - NEXT DAY

A horrific devastation - buildings smolder. Soldiers comb the grounds for evidence. We PAN ACROSS the ruins to an old, unearthed --

AUCTION BLOCK SITE

-- where an emergency meeting is taking place. Fisk's students and faculty are gathered before imposing AMA executive MILO CRAVATH (Caucasian, 60s), an unsentimental war hawk with intensely sensitive eyes. Beside him is a sharply-dressed WOMAN. He introduces himself.

CRAVATH
Milo Cravath, AMA Operations. We're just in from New York. Thank you, Principal Spence, for briefing the faculty on the purpose of this meeting.

The red-eyed faculty clasp hands knowingly, as if at a funeral.

Just then, *distractions* - White, Ella and the choir arrive truantly, drawing scowls. Cravath rolls his eyes and goes on.

CRAVATH
Army Ops confirms that last night was *arson*. They're doubtful, however, they'll ever ID the attackers.

STUDENT
It was that church mob!

The students CLAMOR in agreement. The woman with Cravath speaks up.

SUSAN
That was no mere mob; that was a *militia*.

CRAVATH
My deputy, Susan Gilbert.

The crackerjack SUSAN GILBERT (Caucasian, 40s) is a bold, beautiful, badass operative sporting aggressive pinstripes.

SUSAN
Emancipation cost the Old South power, pride and four billion dollars in human flesh. They're rising up to recapture it.

CLAMORING STUDENTS - *"Recapture* what??*"*

SUSAN
<u>You</u>. Across the South, sons of the Southern Cross are mobilizing to turn back the clock and take back their slaves.

AMERICA
That's impossible; the 13th Amendment forbids slavery --

SUSAN
-- "*except as punishment for crime*." I make you a criminal, I make you my slave.

BENNIE
You can't make laws; Washington shut you out of power. Anyway, how do you criminalize a *race* of people??

SUSAN
I *take back* government, outlaw *standing on a sidewalk* if you're the wrong color, then condemn you to life as convict labor in my factories and mines. Black men and boys will be snatched from streets, tortured in caves and boiler rooms until their bodies break, then fed to the furnaces and replaced.

CRAVATH
That's just the beginning; their return to power will make the twentieth century South a nightmare to millions.

Everyone reels as the harrowing picture sinks in.

ELLA
To rule us, they need mules, not thinking minds. Last night was an act of war.

WHITE
So we rebuild. Now.

Cravath's countenance turns grave; he indicates the ruins.

CRAVATH
It would take thousands to rebuild this. With the AMA's debt and a *recession* on the horizon, might as well be millions. I'm afraid they struck the jugular.

WHITE
Translate.

Cravath looks around at the mountains of unearthed slave chains, then takes a bitter breath.

CRAVATH
Fisk is shutting down.

The students EXPLODE in an uproar. White visibly freaks out. Cravath presses on with business.

CRAVATH
We'll sleep students at the downtown shelter tonight. Return at 7AM for final instructions. That's all.

CUT TO:

WHITE CHASING CRAVATH ACROSS CAMPUS

WHITE
What the hell?! We're dumping our students out in the streets?!

CRAVATH
They know we're vulnerable; they're going to attack us on every front until *every* school is in ash. We're in survival mode.

WHITE
Don't take the bait! They know Fisk is the best, that if Fisk falls it *all* falls! We've got to fight back!

CRAVATH
With what?! Our dorms and classrooms are rubble!

WHITE
The old slave barracks!

CRAVATH
It's condemned!

WHITE
But intact! We house the students there, move classes to the field!

CRAVATH
The open field, in this coming winter?! What part of *impossible* don't you ever get? We move on to move up!

WHITE
I never heard defeat so nobly defended! What happened to the *fighter* that founded Fisk out of his own pocket?! That made it a great university?! Don't crumble, Cravath! Don't crucify the *Dream!*

That's it! As they barge into a --

CONFERENCE ROOM

-- Cravath SLAMS White into a wall map of the UNDERGROUND RAILROAD.

CRAVATH
I was raised there, on the Underground Railroad; our home was a safe house for escaping slaves! My parents died defending the Dream and I vowed to God the same - I beg Him to make me half of what they were! As of last night Fisk is a liability, and if sacrificing it means *saving* the Dream, I'll slaughter it without blinking!

ELLA/SUSAN
Mr. Cravath!

The women rush in, snapping Cravath out of his fury. We shudder at his pent-up anger; he's a powderkeg of rage. He unhands White, plops into a chair, then looks out a window and growls at the campus.

CRAVATH
These lowlands were the worst site for a campus anyway; the vermin sickened our students and rotted every building.

But Ella's eyes are on White - he's become enthralled by the map. Mesmerized, he runs a finger along its northward routes as if tracing a journey. Suddenly his eyes spark; his face lights up. Then he breaks into a sickly sweat. Ella starts for him, when --

CRAVATH
And shut down that choir.

ELLA
Excuse me??

CRAVATH
No *German requiems* as Fisk shutters. Your little hobby group has been the bane of this faculty's existence.

Susan's eyes glint to realize --

SUSAN
You're George White?

He nods cluelessly. Her eyes sweep him as if beholding a myth.

ELLA
What do they say about the choir?

Susan shoots Cravath a look. He shrugs *this is on you.* Flustered, she takes a bitter breath and spews it out...

SUSAN
They say the choir is an embarrassment to Fisk. That its director is a dangerous visionary, a blind stargazer, a huckster of lies and false hope. That the choir is a salve for his guilt over a lost love. That you're a family of misfits - damned by nightmares, driven by far-off dreams - singing of distant lives and lands to escape your own. That it's all... pathetic.

... detesting every word.

ELLA
Why didn't you shut us down before?

CRAVATH
Oh, I ordered the hit. Then the darndest thing happened: My assassin reviews White's personal file, and for reasons that defy reason finds in those tortured pages not a madman but a misunderstood genius, a dangerous visionary in the *best* sense. At which point she becomes his fist-and-knuckles *defender* at headquarters and tenders her resignation should anyone lay a hand on his choir. This without having laid eyes on the man until twenty minutes ago. Because her loss to the AMA would be catastrophic, the answer to your question is... *blackmail*.

Susan flushes. We look at her more closely, past the pinstripes, and discover soft, searching eyes. We like her. We're sure White does too, but sweating uneasily he turns from her back to Cravath.

WHITE
Don't count Fisk out. The Dream, the struggle - we've got a part to play in it.

CRAVATH
Good grief, another prophecy.

WHITE
God speaks!

CRAVATH
To you more than Moses, only the Red Sea never quite parts for you, does it? Singing temples, globetrotting crusades. *Poor Laura...* I worry you're headed for another breakdown, White; you wage war on reality.

ELLA/SUSAN
(same time)
Great men wage war on reality.

Ella and Susan trade looks. Cravath shakes his head at them both.

CRAVATH
Be on time for the closure tomorrow.

WHITE
For God's sake, Milo --

CRAVATH
<u>It is finished</u>.

INT. CHOIR ROOM - THAT NIGHT

Devastated at the news, the singers mill about grimly as if in a bomb shelter awaiting the end. HEAVY WINDS insistently batter the rotted windows as if to get their attention.

White and Ella are off to themselves playing a prayerful violin-piano duet. He looks unwell, and her playing is too rigid for him.

WHITE
Feel the music, Sam.

ELLA
She looked at you.

WHITE
Forget the metronome; let it breathe.

ELLA
You *traded* looks. Yours said "Have we met?" Hers said "Do dreams count?"

WHITE
(uneasy)
Sam...

She lets that go. Still, something heavy hangs in the air.

ELLA
Today, at the map. You saw something.

WHITE
Lines.

ELLA
They went somewhere. Don't doubt yourself; what happened with Laura --

The bow drops from his hand - he's hyperventilating. She swings him onto the bench.

ELLA
Breathe... breathe...

Mention of *Laura* is clearly traumatic for him. He catches his breath... hesitates... then dares ask:

WHITE
Would the others come?

ELLA
In a heartbeat.

Then he eyes *her*.

ELLA
I've got to wait here for her. Go.

WHITE
Not without you.

ELLA
You're the only hope.

WHITE
Then there *is* no hope.
(then scowls)
Some "*swords*."

He picks up his bow, but just then -- *WHAP!* -- a window blows open. The wind carries the strains of a MELODY into their midst.

WHITE
Listen.

The melody is ravishing. Bewitched, White drifts outside as if drawn by a siren. The others sigh knowingly, and follow him out to the --

EXT. OPEN FIELD - MOMENTS LATER

A magically moonlit night. The melody is a *spiritual* being sung in the distance. It soothes White's troubled soul - but others wince.

MAGGIE
Mr. White...

WHITE
I know, the spirituals aren't for "us."

TOM
They're not for anyone anymore; they're *history,* thank God.

Most agree, but not all. Georgia gestures to the wind --

GEORGIA
They're obviously still for someone.

ELLA
Slaves stuck in the past!

MINNIE
I think it's beautif--

ELLA
Victims that can't move on!

We're struck by Ella's hostility to the spirituals. She tells White --

ELLA
Go.

-- then abruptly exits. White sighs.

Then his eyes light up: they sweep the air, beholding something magnificent... something towering... something not yet there.

INT. COLT COLTON'S SHOWROOM - LATER

As Wallace works, he spots an anxious figure out in the moonlight nervously watching him, hesitant to come in. He takes a heavy breath, then lays down his tools.

OUTSIDE

Wallace approaches Ella. She's intensely uneasy.

ELLA
I-I was out walking... thinking... Maybe you heard, Fisk shuts down tomorrow. I'm packing to move into the church flat.

He says nothing; his eyes are as cold as before.

ELLA
You're working. I-I'm sorry.

She curses herself for coming... turns to go... then turns back.

ELLA
When Poppa died on the plantation and Bishop was *pressing in* on Momma, that Dream House was her lifeline. She'd pray herself sick that one day, somehow, the two of us would live together under our own roof. She'd describe what she saw so vividly that when I saw that property on Covenant Lane, I... *recognized* it.

WALLACE
So that land is God's gift to you.

ELLA
It's even adjacent to Fisk. Not that that matters now.

WALLACE
They destroy your family, your *life,* right here in Nashville. Why come back?

ELLA
(searches his eyes)
Maybe a *promise*. Maybe a boy whose hope kindled my own. What happened to that boy?

WALLACE
Boys grow up.

ELLA
He had dreams!

WALLACE
Boys *wake* up.

ELLA
You *got* your father, your new life - your prayers were answered. Why curse mine?

He grips his fists. She clasps those fists and kisses him desperately. He resists... then yields... then seizes *her* wrists.

WALLACE
Come on.

CUT TO:

INT. COLT COLTON'S WAREHOUSE - JUST AFTER

A massive, bustling workspace. Ella gasps at the gang of young black men building ENORMOUS STACKS OF COFFINS.

WALLACE
Every one built-to-order. Somewhere out there, one of us is being lynched, drowned, burned alive. You see Utopia down South; coffins don't lie.

COLT (O.S.)
This ain't but a trickle; the tide's coming in...

Old Colt has entered; the young men look upon him reverently. He approaches Ella, his flaring eyes seizing hers.

COLT
When that Southern Cross rises, these stacks'll become mountains.

ELLA
Cowards defect to the countryside; men of courage *change* the world.

COLT
Men like..?

ELLA
Hiram Jackson, the authors of the Civil Rights bill.

COLT
(to his workers, then to Ella)
Fourteen-o-seven! I respect your Mr. Jackson's intent...

The workers bring over an ornate coffin. The engraving reads "HIRAM JACKSON, 1835 - ____", the year of death left blank.

COLT
This'll be my gift to his estate. Hiram Jackson, like your Civil Rights Bill, is as dead as they come.

SHOCK CUT TO:

MINES. FURNACES. SCREAMS. TORTURED FACES. *"IF FISK FALLS IT ALL FALLS!"* FIERY SOUTHERN CROSS. YOUNG FACES BURNED DROWNED LYNCHED. HIRAM'S DEAD FACE. *"THERE IS NO HOPE WITHOUT YOU!"*

Ella JOLTS out of the waking nightmare, choking. We're in --

ELLA'S ROOM - 4 AM

-- where she haltingly packs, her head churning with doubt. Fierce winds BATTER the rotted windows as if raging against her plans.

Shutting out the nightmare, she resumes packing. Suddenly, ***WHAP!*** -- the wind blows open a window, bringing a spiritual into the room.

Her heart pounding, she goes to the window, then looks out and sees:

A TORTURED SOUL HAUNTING THE FIELD, BITTERLY BERATING HIMSELF

The sight of White and the sound of the spiritual unnerve her. Fighting a war of emotions she stands there, torn, then shuts the window and resumes packing.

Then ***WHAP!*** The window blows open more forcefully, rustling things and bringing back the spiritual. Now it sounds urgent.

Harrowed, she charges over and SLAMS the window so hard that it breaks off its hinges. A powerful gust blasts in and blows everything onto the floor.

Ella groans. She slumps down to clean up the mess... then freezes at the sight before her:

Her travel luggage stands upright. Encircling it in near-perfect array are her music papers, tuning fork and pitch pipe. And it all seems somehow *narrated* by the spiritual. This is no random mess; it's a call to a journey. Ella exhales... and concedes defeat.

ELLA
All right... let's get them up.

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM - MINUTES LATER

Racing against time, White, Ella and the choir rush up to the door, find it locked, then --

LOUDIN
Stand back!

-- SMASH IT DOWN. Swinging into gear, they RIP DOWN the Underground Railroad map and spread it out on a table.

WHITE
We need road maps, directories, train schedules! ***GO!*** ***GO!*** ***GO!***

As the singers fly into action, White starts tracing a travel route.

GEORGIA
This isn't possible.

WHITE
(grins)
Not remotely.

CUT TO:

EXT. FISK CAMPUS - OLD AUCTION BLOCK SITE - 7AM MEETING

Hundreds of students, parents and faculty, already freaked out about Fisk's closure, stare at White and the choir like they're Martians. Facing them from atop a dumpster, White repeats the insane plan:

WHITE
Our choir is taking to the road to raise money. We'll sing in cities up north along the Underground Railroad; they helped slaves, they'll support us. We'll save Fisk.

The backlash is deafening - the crowd SHOUTS THEM DOWN as crackpots. Cravath is there with Susan; fuming, he moves to shut them down --

CRAVATH
Your circus act, save Fisk?! That's ludicrous!

-- but Ella seizes SLAVE CHAINS and lifts them high.

ELLA
It was you that ordered these chains kept in plain sight to declare what we'd never go back to, that we'd never retreat an inch to terror! This auction block murdered our mothers and fathers; if we don't act now, it'll rise from this pit and claim our children!

CRAVATH
This fantasia of yours, there's no way --

WHITE
God makes a way out of no way - that *is* what we preach! We *say* we have faith, it's time we put feet to that faith! Now sell these chains for scrap and get us on the road! *It's time to root, hog, or die!*

The crowd is stirred, if skeptical. Cravath breathes fire, but Susan glares him silent. He growls, and we

SMASH CUT TO:

EXT. TRAIN STATION - DAY

SUPER: "OCTOBER 6, 1871"

A grand SEND-OFF for an outrageous plan. Newsboys shout *"CHOIR TOURS TO SAVE SINKING SCHOOL!"* Supporters cheer the departing choir. The towering Southern Cross damns their quest from on high.

ANGLE ON ELLA

As she hugs her beloved girls goodbye, a radiant young woman enters.

ELLA
Julia!

JULIA HAYDEN (African-American, 30s) is a ravishing soul with shimmering eyes. She and Ella hug like sisters.

ELLA
Ladies, you've struck gold. The eminent Miss Julia Hayden is not only a star professor but a musical genius. She'll be taking over my classes at Fisk... and directing you while I'm away.

JULIA HAYDEN
Full disclosure: *someone's* been bragging on you so hard, I begged for the honor.

The girls coo, as does everyone meeting the unforgettable Julia.

JULIA HAYDEN
And don't worry, Sweetie, I'll keep watch for Miss Sarah.

ELLA
Thank you, Julia. And with that, my darlings...

CUTIE PIES
Don't leave us! Don't leave us!

Ella's four CUTIE PIES weigh her down like monkeys. One of them filches something from her pocket.

ELLA
Hey, that's my pitch pipe!

CUTIE PIES
Pleeeease?? To remember you by?

ELLA
Watch out for these four, Julia; they're inseparable even in mischief!
(then, to the Cutie Pies)
How about this, my little pickles - when I use it, *I'll* remember *you*.

CUTIE PIES
Promise?

ELLA
(taking back the pitch pipe)
On my life.

A FEW MINUTES LATER

The big moment - supporters anxiously surround the choir as they line up at the train, marveling at this family of misfits braving all odds for a miracle. Cravath addresses them.

CRAVATH
You've won Fisk a reprieve: the students will room in the barracks, the army will guard the campus; Miss Gilbert will stay on to oversee it all. You've got six weeks to raise four thousand dollars or Fisk shutters for good. What you're undertaking is irrational, impossible, and with those savages out there, deadly. While the AMA will accept any unlikely "donation," it disavows any affiliation with this tour. Y*ou're on your own.*

The singers bristle at his disavowal.

Hiram counters with a prayer. He glares at the fiery cross towering hellishly over their heads.

HIRAM
Lord, Joshua's army sang down the walls of Jericho. Use this one to bring down that cross.

Loud "*AMENS!"* As the singers board the train, White and Susan have a moment. Her eyes glint with admiration, his with apprehension.

WHITE
Guess I'll see you on the other side.

SUSAN
Prove me right.

Nearby, Wallace approaches Ella. They trade tense looks.

ELLA
So... see you on the other side.

WALLACE
Prove me wrong.

Theirs is an aching, impossible love. He nods goodbye and backs off.

As Ella boards, we PAN TO Georgia. She eyes Loudin as his wife and sons kiss him goodbye... and smirks as he coldly brushes them off.

The train departs to cheers and crossed fingers. As it steals into the perilous unknown, we hold our breath and

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. ANIMAL CARGO BAY - TRAVELING TRAIN - DAY

Huddled amidst livestock and manure, the choir rehearses their show. Surprisingly, they're doing the garish *Esther the Beautiful Queen.* As White and Ella track the score, Her Divaship is in rare form.

WHITE
Mordecai declares his woe, Esther sings "Open Ye the Gates," the peasants exit --

MAGGIE
Whoa, back up! The Beautiful Queen just devastated the court with that aria. Spellbound peasants wouldn't just *walk off.*

WHITE
O-of course not. They'd--??

MAGGIE
They'd flap in reverence like this --
(loftily flaps her arms)
-- then kiss the hem of her robe. *Royal Persian protocol.*

The singers stifle laughs.

TOM
And we know this *how?*

MAGGIE
A queen knows.

BENNIE
You're a *stage* queen.

MAGGIE
It passes through. And stands to reason, for she is fair --
(flashes the title page)
-- and "beautiful".

The singers burst out laughing, mimicking her. We expect Maggie to laugh too, but her smile withers. We realize she's crushed.

White swoops in with damage control.

WHITE
Revere her, *then* exit.
(quickly closes the book)
We've covered the rest. Great work, kids; you should be prou--

ELLA
Maggie, at the chorale, your note isn't the high E; you're on the low A with Minnie.

She's pointing to the score. Already wounded, Maggie cops attitude.

MAGGIE
I sing what's written.

Uh-oh, everyone braces for fireworks. Ella whips out her pitch pipe.

ELLA
Now how can that be --
(tings an "A")
-- when that's your A?

MAGGIE
Pipe's flat.

ELLA
A fifth??

MAGGIE
Warped metal. It's been hot.

IKE
Hell's not that hot.

ELLA
Sing the A, blend with Minnie!

MAGGIE
I'm building up to my solo there!

ELLA
Your solo is forty bars later. Here, you're *texture.*

MAGGIE
Do I *look like* denim?! The Beautiful Queen don't do "texture." That's *my* note! I feel *good* on that note!

ELLA
The score says --

CRASH! Maggie SHOVES A CRATE at Ella, then breaks into tears. White reaches to console her --

MAGGIE
GET OFF ME! DON'T TOUCH ME!

-- but she SHRIEKS at his touch as if at an abuser. We're shocked at how emotional she's become; dark memories are clearly warring for her mind. White tries to calm her...

WHITE
Shhhhh... it's me... the E is yours...
You sounded great.

As Maggie cools off, the singers catch their breath - no one saw that coming. After a tense silence, Tom lightens the mood.

TOM
Hey, maybe we'll take *Esther* to Broadway: *"THOMAS RUTLING AS HAMAN."*

IKE
Dream on!

AMERICA
It's good to dream.

GEORGIA
(ogling Loudin)
It is.

MINNIE
This is a dream; never been on a train.

BENNIE
I've never left Nashville.

AMERICA
What do you dream about, Maggie?

WHITE
London. The Queen. The great ballrooms of England.

Maggie nods. A smile breaks through. We're blue skies again.

WHITE
Well kids, Cincinnati here we come.

BENNIE
It'll be good being up North, away from the prejudice.

MINNIE
Wait till they see our costumes!

WHITE
They won't know what hit 'em.

CUT TO:

"TONIGHT AT THE MARIGOLD: THE BLACKFOOTS! OPENING ACT: <u>THE FISK NEGROES</u>!"

The choir gasps at the MARQUEE. A long line snakes down the block.

GEORGIA
Sweet Jesus.

CUT INSIDE TO:

INT. MARIGOLD THEATER, BACKSTAGE - NIGHT

The choir is freaked out. So is the cigar-chomping female OWNER.

OWNER
Damn me! You cabled that you're a Negro act. Coons dance and do coon tunes!

MINNIE
You've got to change that marquee!

OWNER
You didn't give me a name! What's your act?

MINNIE
We're doing *Esther.*

OWNER
(chokes on her cigar)
As in Old Testament Esther? *Mordecai slays the Agagites* and all that? What the hell kind of nolliwogs *are* you, pardon my French? I got three hundred soon-to-be drunks out there, and *I'm* fairly certain *they're* fairly certain they didn't pay to get a Bible lesson by a bunch of opera-singing spades, pardon my French. I am damned! Do you dance?

ALL
No!

OWNER
Shimmy?

IKE
We're out of here.

OWNER
(sweats)
All right, all right - you got me by the sack; gotta distract them with *something*. I'm going to pay for this, but you're on in twenty.

ELLA
You did tune the piano today, per my cable?

The Owner looks at Ella like she's got two heads, laughs diabolically, then freaks out again.

OWNER
Damn me to dust!

CUT TO:

INT. MARIGOLD THEATER, AUDITORIUM - LATER

A sleazy, rowdy dive. As White eggs Bennie on, he nervously faces the hard-boiled crowd.

BENNIE
HELLOOOOO C-CINCINNATI!!
(*crickets*)
W-we've g-got a gripping s-saga for you, right from the p-pages of scripture! O-one s-small th-thing: In r-reverence for the s-subject m-matter, p-please refrain from dr-drinking, s-smoking, and curs--

SMASH! A hurled beer bottle EXPLODES beside him, drenching the choir in suds. That settles that.

CUT TO:

LATER - THE PERFORMANCE

Decked out in gaudy ancient costumes, the choir slogs through the dreadful *Esther* --

MAGGIE (as Esther)
Alas! 'Tis death to go unbidden!

LOUDIN (as Mordecai)
Who knowest thou comest into the kingdom!

-- but the house is a FULL-SCALE RIOT. Hating the act, drunks smash glasses and chairs, swarm the stage imitating "coon" dancing, and mercilessly heckle the dark-skinned Maggie.

DRUNK HECKLERS
Come on, jigaboos, shuffle them feet!
Bug them eyes! Scratch them dirtbugs!
(taunting Maggie)
Look at that powderburn! Crawl back to your tar pit, you blackface spook!

Maggie cries violently, but White directs everyone to soldier on.

CUT TO:

BACKSTAGE - AFTER THE SHOW

As White and Ella are off arguing with the Owner, a quintet of smug black singers, THE BLACKFOOTS, approach the sullen choir.

BLACKFOOT 1
Ah, the "No-Name Hebrew-Persian Negroes."

IKE
The Blackfoots - you're headlining!

BLACKFOOT 2
Feedback: you had those hicks up a gum tree figuring out what to make of you.

GEORGIA
What's *your* act?

BLACKFOOT 3
The Blackfoots find that sweet spot; we sing black music about the black experience, but keep it mainstream.

TOM
And Whites pay to see it?

BLACKFOOT 4
That's the power of *crossover* - our audiences are *mostly* white.

CHOIR
Wow!

BLACKFOOT 5
Wow, *right*. And look at us --
(points to their bling)
-- velvet lapels, muskrat pumps, pearl-handled picks.

AMERICA
(baffled)
S-sorry, I missed the through-line.

BLACKFOOT 1
Money, sunrise; money is the *through* and *all-the-way-through line.*

BLACKFOOT 2
Stay for the show; feast on the crumbs; above all, chase success where she blows. And don't worry --
(winks)
-- we're gonna stick together in this.

CUT TO:

AUDITORIUM - LATER

White, Ella and the choir excitedly await the Blackfoots' show. The curtain rises. The Blackfoots bound onstage, dancing and singing:

BLACKFOOTS
STEAL AHHHHH-WAY! STEAL AHHHHH-AWAY!
LAWDY CALL ME BY DE THUNDAH!

THEY'RE FULL-ON MINSTRELS. Sporting blackface, bulging eyes and slave chains worn as jewelry, they're mangling the spiritual "Steal Away."

BLACKFOOTS
DE TRUMPET SOUND WITHIN MAH SOUUULLLL!
I'ZE AIN'T GOT LONG TA STAY HEEEEAH!

The audience ROARS. The choir retches.

INT. FLEABAG MOTEL - GRIMY DINING ROOM - NEXT MORNING

The choir sits at a putrid table, scratching bug bites and picking at foul food. All are shattered but the unfazed White, who eats heartily, and Ella, who meticulously perfects the score.

Flipping through the paper, Bennie suddenly gasps. Tom snatches it.

TOM
God, it's us.

It's a scathing review of their show, with a GRAPHIC CARTOON of them as howling apes. Ike scans the review --

TOM
"The crooning pickaninnies resembled a lineup of trained baboons striving for lofty expression..."

-- but can't go on. Everyone groans. Loudin is bitter.

LOUDIN
I said *Esther* was a mistake...

His voice crackles with resentment. But sated and satisfied, White stretches as if nothing were wrong.

WHITE
Well, let's get a move-on. We've got Dayton tonight, Springfield tomorrow.

GEORGIA
Lovely towns to be run out of.

WHITE
God will prosper our cause.

LOUDIN
You still believe that?? We didn't make a cent last night and those reviews are going to dog us everywhere! How are we going to survive?

WHITE
(dabs his lips)
The Lord will shelter us.

FADE OUT.

INT. SUSAN'S OFFICE AT FISK - SIX WEEKS LATER

As Susan works - ***BLAM!*** - the door blasts open. She flinches as an angry black man barges in.

WALLACE
Where is she? It's been six weeks!

They inspect each other warily. He slams down a stack of clippings.

WALLACE
Reviews of the tour, city by city. Two weeks ago, they dropped off the grid.

Now she places his face.

SUSAN
You're Wallace Moore. Mr. Cravath pointed you out to me at the send-off.
(extends her hand)
Susan Gilbert.

He glares daggers at her. She tells herself to smile.

SUSAN
Mrs. Wynn, your orphanage mistress, wrote us often about you; you were the apple of her eye. We all celebrated when you were adopted.
(then, anguished)
I-I'm so sorry about what happ--

WALLACE
Where are they?! It's the dead of winter and dangerous as hell out there!

Her heart beats out of her chest. He loathes her kind and she's terrified of his.

SUSAN
I-I'm afraid the tour isn't AMA business.

WALLACE
Course not; they're only trying to *save* this place. *You people...*

Disgusted, he starts for the door, then hears a ***SLAM!*** He turns back. Susan has slammed down an even taller stack of reviews.

SUSAN
I lost them in Cleveland. Looks like we're both out of luck.

FADE OUT... then FADE UP TO:

EXT. ALLEYWAY, BEHIND A CLOSED TRAIN DEPOT - LATE NIGHT

A blizzard rages. Sick, starving and stunned by their failure, the devastated choir shivers around a trash-barrel fire, eating the dregs from old cans. White is numb with disbelief. Ella stares blankly into the snow. Loudin is a powderkeg set to explode.

TOM
What did we miss?

MAGGIE
At least we'll be home tomorrow.

GEORGIA
Whatever *home* means now.

AMERICA
I don't know... doesn't feel right, blowing off our last show tomorrow.

WHITE
(clinging to hope)
Big city, big main act... there'll be a lot of promoters.

BENNIE
We've got one-way fare and had to beg for that; I'd rather be buried back home.

A distant spiritual again wafts into their midst; this one sounds familiar. Hearing it, White SLAMS A BARREL. Everyone knows why.

MINNIE
Why *don't* we sing the spirituals?

GEORGIA
They're heavenly... so comforting.

LOUDIN
(growls)
You don't have a clue.

WHITE
He means about the suffering behind them.

LOUDIN
Something none of you would know about.

GEORGIA
You don't mean that, Fred!

LOUDIN
No?! Let's see, while you were sheltered by nuns, baby here was fending off diaper rash and White was off being white --
(MORE)

LOUDIN (CONT'D)
(points to Bennie)
-- his mom was being raped, repeatedly, by Master - until his jealous wife drove an ax into *her* spine. *Comforting?*
(points to Ike)
Whites caught *his* pregnant aunt reading to her unborn child, so they shot her, then carved out the baby and shot her too! *Heavenly?*
(points to Maggie)
God knows how Master had his way with this one; she can't bear a man's touch or the sight of her own body!

Loudin's rant destroys everyone. Maggie weeps at searing memories. But he's just getting started.

LOUDIN
Want to know what happened to that sweet, hopeful boy you knew as Wallace, after he was adopted?

He's looking at Ella. She braces herself.

LOUDIN
We used to run together... After a lifetime at the orphanage, Wallace and his new Dad, Mr. Moore, were a match made in heaven. They built houses together, and they were good... too good for our kind. One Christmas night, masked men broke into their home, hog-tied Mr. Moore, and made Wallace watch as they skinned him alive, gutted him screaming, fed his insides to dogs, then lynched his carcass from the backyard tree. They threatened worse for Wallace if he ever built another house. He builds coffins now. In all that, never saw him shed a tear, though he did burn that house to the ground, which is funny because all he ever wanted was a home.

BENNIE
Did they get whoever did it?

LOUDIN
God, no. Who'd want to see a Bishop and his deacons in jail? That's right, Bishop's made Wallace an orphan *twice* now. Wallace is dead; there *is* no more Wallace.
(glares at White)
Our people sang for their lives, not entertainment! Those songs brought them through what *your people* did to them! This world has no right to that music!

Ella reels in horror, shattered for Wallace.

But something stirs in White's soul, something welling up to be said. He falters, unsure where to start... then ventures the excruciating.

WHITE
I know a man, a blacksmith's son, who taught the children of former slaves... not knowing *they* would teach *him* the songs of their people. He'd known sorrow, and when those songs passed into his soul, he knew their power to heal. Then voices on the wind, a great choir of souls, told him to take the spirituals to the world, to let them sing to the earth.
(his eyes sweep the sky)
Then they showed him a *temple* built of the spirituals, a beacon to the brotherhood of man. Its bricks were fired with blood and dust, and it towered over the nations bursting with psalms of hope and healing. They said, "God promised this world Jubilee; "Jubilee Hall" is a beacon to that promise. Go. Your work will build it."
(then)
He mapped a journey on an atlas, and songs in hand set sail to teach the world to sing. His love and wife, Laura, was ill, but he convinced her the trip would cure her...
(painful beat)
It killed her.
(struggles to go on)
Enough of dreams, and love; he returned to bury her, bury it all. He fled those voices... those delusions... for a desk.

Then his eyes spark with a vision.

WHITE
But what if their suffering *wasn't* in vain?

TOM
Whose?

WHITE
Those that braved slavery's curse... your mothers and fathers. What if, as perfume is pressed from precious roses, God *has* extracted from their wounds salves that heal and restore, inspire and lift up? What if those anthems of hope that brought them through so much darkness *could* light up the world?

IKE
Y-you mean sing the spirituals for --

WHITE
Every soul, everywhere.

BENNIE
Some of those “souls” want us dead. Some of them --

WHITE
What if there *is* no “them”? *Every* man is slave to some darkness; beneath our fear and fury, don’t we all hunger for healing? What if the spirituals are our *swords* to break the chains of hate and set both captive and captor free? Make hatemongers *peacemakers* the world over?

TOM
Sounds like revolution.

GEORGIA
Sounds like Jubilee.

But talk of the spirituals has opened deep wounds.

MAGGIE
I- I can’t go back to those songs.

IKE
It’s blood music!

WHITE
That’s why I run to it! Those blood-drenched songs bathe me in the faith of your parents.

LOUDIN
You?! You *shed* their blood!

WHITE
And you *trample* it, leaving their legacy to the mockery of minstrels! Get those songs out of blackface into the hearts of the people!

The singers are thunderstruck. America concedes --

AMERICA
What about the sorrow songs? They sound like *giving up*.

Tom knows better.

TOM
The lamentations bind deep wounds; they fix a glint in the eye for the sweet shores beyond the stormy Jordan.

LOUDIN
So they're going to fix the world, get everyone holding hands?! Master heard them, didn't set us free. The spirituals sure as hell didn't "conquer the South."

GEORGIA
Christ didn't conquer Rome in a day. Maybe they'll do their part if we do ours.

The air is charged. Minds are churning. Then reality kicks in.

BENNIE
There'll *be* no jubilee if we don't save Fisk.

IKE
We got one shot - tomorrow's concert.

MINNIE
No way we raise four thousand dollars.

AMERICA
We'd need songs, arranged and rehearsed, overnight. There's no way.

Everyone nods. Then Tom gestures to the spiritual on the wind.

TOM
Let's start with this one. *Steal Away.*

ELLA
No.

We realize *Steal Away,* which tormented Ella the night Sarah was beaten, is still too painful; but does this mean she won't perform any spiritual? As she wrestles her demons, Loudin jumps in --

LOUDIN
I'll arrange it.

-- but White waves him silent. Loudin seethes. At last, Ella takes out her pen and music paper.

ELLA
"*Swing Low*" - F-sharp, six parts, altos and basses divided...

Everyone exhales and we

CUT TO:

INT. ODEON THEATRE - NEXT DAY - MOMENTS BEFORE THE CONCERT

Chattering PATRONS and PROMOTERS mill about the auditorium, oblivious to the petrified ragamuffin choir onstage. As the singers quake in their rotted shoes, White hammers home final words:

WHITE
Forget everything you *think* you know about music. This ain't *Schubert* and to hell with *Earl Grey;* I want your grits, your collard greens, your black-eyed peas on this stage.

The singers fearfully nod. Then the moment of truth: White nods to Ella. She plays a ravishing introduction. He cues the choir --

CHOIR
Swiiiing lowwww, sweet charrriot...

-- then cuts them off, mortified. Their nerves shot to pieces, they sound like scratched chalkboards. He looks around in a panic then exhales - *thank God no one's paying them the least attention.*

Take two: White motions everyone to take deep breaths. As they do, he cues Ella... then cues the choir. This time...

CHOIR
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.

... it's magic. They thunder with emotion. Ella's playing is sublime. White directs with breathtaking passion - this music is in his soul.

CHOIR
I looked over Jordan, what did I see?
Coming for to carry me home.
A band of angels coming after me.
Coming for to carry me home.
If you get there before I do,
Coming for to carry me home!
Tell all my friends I'm coming too.
Coming for to carry me home!

They crescendo with earth-shaking power then melt into silence.

And then we hear nothing. Except sniffles. Lots of sniffles. Facing the audience, the choir's eyes are wide with disbelief. They motion White to turn around. He does, and sees:

AN OCEAN OF FACES WEEPING UNCONTROLLABLY.

The house explodes in applause. The singers bow in amazement.

LOBBY - AFTER THE CONCERT

Blessed pandemonium: frenzied fans swamp the choir for autographs. Concert promoters ply them with business cards.

As White and Ella are off settling accounts, a party of DISTINGUISHED SOUTHERNERS stagger up to the choir in a wonder-filled stupor. Bennie is dumbstruck to recognize their leader --

BENNIE
Mr. Stephens??

STEPHENS
Alex, please.

BENNIE
Benjamin Holmes. This is, uh, quite the surprise.

STEPHENS
Came for the main act, of course. But that music - *whoo mommy!* - I hardly knew what planet I was on. How many invitations to perform so far?

MINNIE
Sixteen and counting, in five states.

STEPHENS
That's *paint thinner.* Your calendar's about to choke with ink.

IKE
(sullen, to the choir)
Time's up; Cravath's going to shut us down.

STEPHENS
(eyes widen)
Milo Cravath, AMA? You're that choir from Fisk.

Unnerved, he trades uneasy looks with his men, then --

STEPHENS
We've crossed swords with that old dog. Trust me, Cravath's gonna choke on his spit when he hears about this. Don't worry about him; you get ready.

TOM
For what?

STEPHENS
Why, to take the country by storm! Godspeed.

He pats Bennie on the back. Then stunned at his own benediction, Stephens shoots the choir a suspicious eye as if they've slipped him a mickey. Then he and his men shrug it off and glide away whistling *"Swing Low."*

BENNIE
"Our Confederacy rests upon the great truth that the Negro is not our equal; that slavery is his natural and normal state." Words of the honorable Alexander Stephens - Senator from Georgia, Vice President of the Confederacy... and apparently our newest fan.

The singers are blown away. Suddenly Stephens turns back.

STEPHENS
And for Jezreel's sake, my *ass* has got a name!

A light goes off in the singers' heads. We hear --

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, FROM NASHVILLE, PLEASE WELCOME: *THE FISK JUBILEE SINGERS!*

-- and SMASH CUT TO:

THE JUBILEE SINGERS CONQUER AMERICA (MONTAGE WITH VIGNETTES)

JUBILEES
THIS IS THE YEAR OF JUBILEE,
MY LORD HAS SET HIS PEOPLE FREE!
I INTEND TO SHOUT AND NEVER STOP,
UNTIL I REACH THE MOUNTAIN TOP!

The JUBILEE SINGERS take America by storm, performing sensational shows to ravished audiences. Their rise to fame is meteoric: marquees blaze, the media swarm, barbershops and beauty salons buzz. Tears flow like rivers as the spirituals pierce hearts of all races.

JUBILEES
WHEN YOU SEE THE LIGHTNING FLASHIN'
WHEN YOU SEE THE THUNDER CRASHIN'
WHEN YOU SEE THE STARS ARE FALLIN'
GOOD NEWS, CHARIOTS COMIN'!

Upping their game, Ella arranges the spirituals for publication. JUBILEE SONGBOOKS sweep the nation, flooding churches, concert halls and homes, and forging scenes of race reconciliation. From coast to coast, supremacist proprietors and preachers, deeply moved by the spirituals, trash their segregation signs in a dizzying flurry.

The spirituals slay the hardest of hearts. At --

LOVEJOY CONFEDERATE DINER

-- White, Ella and the choir defiantly dine under a "Whites Only" sign amidst tables of CONFEDERATE CIVIL WAR REENACTORS.

Suddenly the proprietress barrels in waving a MEAT CLEAVER at them.

MRS. LOVEJOY
OUT! OUT OF MY BISTRO!
(to the reenactors)
I am *sooooo* sorry - it just hit me they's real nigs! I thought they was *corkers!*

Her beanpole of a husband tries to subdue her.

MR. LOVEJOY
Missus, let them be! They're the Jubilees!

MRS. LOVEJOY
Don't *Missus* me! <u>You</u> put that sign up!

Before the choir can respond, a white-looking reenactor jumps to his feet.

JESSIE
They ain't goin' nowhere! Dammit, I'm comin' out: <u>I'm half-black</u>!

His white wife CHOKES on her food.

JESSIE
My boys and I been singing them songs and I ain't hidin' it no more: I'm *black, black, black!* Grandmama's black as pitch!

Inspired, his whole table of WHITE REENACTORS rise up in black pride.

WHITE REENACTORS
Me too! So am I! I'm black!

One of them is confused.

CONFUSED REENACTOR
Wait - Jessie, *we* ain't black.

ANOTHER REENACTOR
Looks like today we sure as hell are!

They whip out songbooks and break out in pathetic four-part harmony:

WHITE REENACTORS
Oh freedom, oh freedom, oh freedom over me!
And before I'd be a slave
I'll be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord and be free!

Outraged, a table of RACIST REENACTORS stand up.

RACIST REENACTOR
What are you all, *activists* now?! I don't care if you *are* the whole damn school board, Mrs. Lovejoy says NIGS OUT!

CIVIL WAR BREAKS OUT - fists and fake swords fly. The Jubilees duck as Mrs. Lovejoy CLEAVES at them like a madwoman. Emboldened, skinny Mr. Lovejoy rips down the sign, howls like a buckaroo then tackles his rabid wife. The madness intensifies, and we CUT TO a --

PACKED PRESS CONFERENCE

-- where the banged-up, broken-nosed SCHOOL BOARD - Jessie and his "black pride" reenactors - flanked by the Jubilees and hundreds of black schoolkids, make a stunning announcement:

JESSIE
We, the Jersey City Board of Education, chastened by the word of Jubilee and a nobler vision for our nation, hereby renounce the discriminatory policies of our past and declare our schools fully *integrated.* Moreover, we urge Congress to pass the Civil Rights Bill without delay.

SHOCKWAVES hit the public: some faint, some retch... but most cheer.

JUBILEES
JOSHUA FOUGHT THE BATTLE OF JERICHO,
JERICHO, JERICHO
JOSHUA FOUGHT THE BATTLE OF JERICHO,
AND THE WALLS CAME TUMBLING DOWN!

The Jubilees are unstoppable - we FLASH CUT TO them singing, marching and making fiery speeches. Raising the stakes to a fever pitch, White stuns a packed auditorium at --

PRINCETON

-- as he rages against their segregated seating signs:

WHITE
Thank you, President McCosh, for that rousing rendition of Princeton's anthem, and the invitation to perform. Now help me understand something: How can this fabled institution sing *"Under the Protection of God She Flourishes"* while inflicting <u>this</u> hellish bigotry? BURN THOSE SIGNS, PRINCETON, OR BURN IN THE JUDGMENT OF GOD AND HISTORY!
(Ella eyes him to tone it down)
Ahem... now for our first selection...

BREATHTAKING HEADLINES FLY OFF THE PRESSES and FILL THE SCREEN:

"CHOIR LAUNCHES REVOLUTION!" "AMERICA CRIES JUBILEE!" "SCHOOLS, RAILWAYS, CHURCHES, CONCERT HALLS INTEGRATE!"

BOSTON COLISEUM - WORLD PEACE EXTRAVAGANZA

Capping the tour, the Jubilees perform to a GARGANTUAN CROWD backed by a THOUSAND-PIECE ORCHESTRA and TEN THOUSAND BACKGROUND SINGERS:

JUBILEES
OH BABYLON'S FALLING, FALLING, FALLING!
BABYLON'S FALLING, FALLING, FALLING!
BABYLON'S FALLING TO RISE NO MORE!

CANNONS THUNDER. HATS FILL THE SKY. THE CHEERS ARE DEAFENING.

BACK IN NASHVILLE

- Susan tallies the Jubilees' tour ledger and pumps her fist - they've raised $25,890!

- We DISSOLVE from Fisk's crumbling old campus being shut down to the grand opening of its GORGEOUS NEW CAMPUS.

- At Colt's, Wallace opens an envelope from Ella and pulls out an invitation to a lavish Jubilee Singers gala... *at the White House.*

END MONTAGE

CLOSE ON A RAVE CONCERT REVIEW

of an act called THE BLACKFOOT JOOBALEES, picturing the grinning, bulging-eyed minstrels we met earlier. We hear Ella GROAN, then WIDEN to her reading the review in disgust. We're in a:

TRAVELING TRAIN CABIN - EVENING

Exhausted, Ella stretches. Her eyes drift around the cabin...

... to Loudin, Georgia, Ike and Maggie, powwowing about something...

... then to an ODD MAN, maybe a fan, discreetly clocking the choir...

... then settle on White. He's staring somberly into space, clearly forlorn that the tour is over. Seeing Ella, he forces a smile.

WHITE
What just happened??

ELLA
I know - *whoooosh!*

WHITE
Well... after tonight, guess it's back to the old desk. *Thank you, Sam.*

ELLA
(winks)
When Moses calls...

His eyes go misty at the affirmation. She knows why.

ELLA
Yes, she'd be proud... so proud.

He lets that sink in, then turns it back around.

WHITE
So will *she.* And so will *he;* he'll be there tonight.

ELLA
So will *she...* and you'll give her a chance.

White groans. Suddenly, FLASHING LANTERNS appear in the window. The odd man leaps up and YANKS the emergency brake. ***SCREEEEECH!*** The train LURCHES TO A HALT.

The Jubilees flinch as the doors BLAST OPEN. A HOODED MOB barges in, nod to the odd man, then brutally SEIZE the choir. SHOUTS and SCREAMS as the attackers BEAT and HAUL them off the train.

In the melee, White slugs the attacker grabbing Minnie, but another attacker beats him down and drags him off.

Ella SMASHES an attacker's face. Another one BASHES her to the floor, but she springs back, crushes his Adam's apple, then destroys his groin with a kick. She's clearly defended herself before. It takes four men to haul her off, and even then she's doing damage.

CUT TO:

EXT. DARK CLEARING - JUST AFTER

A BONFIRE rages. A FIERY SOUTHERN CROSS savagely flickers. The Jubilees have been dumped into an ASSEMBLY OF HOODED SUPREMACISTS, fronted by their SUPREME LEADER.

WHITE
Please! They're just kids! We're on our way to the --

SUPREME LEADER
White House, East Room, honorees of Ulysses S. Grant himself. Only you had a little *setback* en route. Meaning you were *cremated* from these beams.

He means the enormous CROSSBEAMS suspended over the bonfire. He puts his hand into the flames and pulls out a Jubilee songbook.

SUPREME LEADER
"The Jubilees Conquer America." You think you staved off the apocalypse; you just fanned the flames.
(then, to the mob)
"Slaughter them as I've commanded. Fill the courtyards with their twisted bodies."

The singers SCREAM as the mob starts LYNCHING their necks. As the Supreme Leader hovers over Ella, she glimpses his eyes.

ELLA
I know you.

He rips off his hood.

MYRON
Hello, Ella.

It's Bishop's son. His cavernous eyes are sulfured with hate. Ella doesn't fight her fate, just pleads to know --

ELLA
Please... tell me what happened to Momma.

MYRON
I suppose that'd be fitting. After emancipation, Sarah went north to Canada.

ELLA
Canada...

MYRON
Or was it California? No wait, Daddy went ahead and *shot* old Sarah for her insolence. Or was that Junice he killed? Ah, I remember: Sarah drown herself the week after you left. No, now it's coming to me... she went north, to Canada.

Ella weeps; he savors her agony. Then something happens. Searing memories return... and so do a young boy's pained eyes.

MYRON
Time and youth blur the mind, but I'll say this: that night at the river, when Daddy lifted Miss Sarah from the dirt, her back shredded, I saw in her eyes that she never felt the lash. It was knowing she'd never hold *you* again that took her life. She was never the same after. That night stole her from us both...

Deep longing harrows his wide eyes. So he shuts it out.

MYRON
Hang them!

The singers SCREAM as the mob starts hoisting them to the crossbars.

Just as all hope seems lost, a spellbinding voice rings out:

AMERICA
Fix me Jesus, fix me...

It's America, singing for all she's worth.

AMERICA
Fix me for my home on high,
Fix me for the by and by.
Fix me Jesus, fix me...

Fraught with life-or-death urgency, the spiritual charges the air with almost otherworldly power.

The attackers halt.

MYRON
I SAID HANG THEM!

But incredibly, they cover their faces... then break into weeping.

Sensing a chance, the choir joins in.

JUBILEES
Fix me for my starry crown,
Fix me for a higher ground...

As the singing intensifies, the attackers lower the lynches and one-by-one back away from the clearing until only Myron is left.

Myron glares at the choir incredulously, fists clenched yet himself visibly shaken. Then... he too relents, backing off and disappearing into the night.

Spared their lives, the Jubilees sing on, and we

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. WHITE HOUSE - EAST ROOM - LATER THAT NIGHT

JUBILEES
Fix me Jesus, oh fix me...

The Jubilees close a scorching performance for the President, congressional leaders, foreign diplomats and journalists.

Rapturous applause, standing ovation.

LATER - GALA RECEPTION

Washington's elite trip over themselves praising the Jubilees as American heroes. Freshly scarred and shaken from the assault, they paste on smiles and press the flesh.

ANGLE ON ELLA AND WHITE

She introduces him to teacher Julia Hayden and her four Cutie Pies.

ELLA
Mr. White, you've met Julia Hayden.

WHITE
Of course. How are you, Miss Hayden?

JULIA HAYDEN
Dazzled.

We're dazzled; Julia is as radiant as we remember her.

ELLA
And my girls.

WHITE
Your "little pickles." Let's see -
Carole, Cynthia, Denise, Addie Mae.

Now we know their names. Their bright smiles captivate us all over again.

WHITE
Any word on Ella's mother?

JULIA HAYDEN
Nothing.

WHITE
Well, wherever she is, she's read about the choir. I'd be surprised if she weren't making her way to Nashville.

Ella forces a smile. Just then, a beaming Susan Gilbert enters.

SUSAN
Mr. White, congratulations!

WHITE
(begging off)
Ah, Miss Gilbert. Sorry, I-I was just...

Ella eyes him to *stay put*. He groans. PRESIDENT GRANT enters.

ALL
Mr. President.

PRESIDENT GRANT
I'm thinking I'll scrap this suit for a choir robe and get something done!
(laughs all around; then...)
Friends... your presence here is an honor to the White House and the nation. The Jubilee Singers have accomplished great things against terrible odds - you're warriors if I've known warriors. Miss Sheppard, I was just singing your praises to the Chinese delegation. May I?
(then, winking at Julia and the girls)
Let's make it a party.

Julia and the girls coo. Grant escorts Ella and the ladies away, leaving White and Susan awkwardly alone. She breaks the ice...

SUSAN
And for his next miracle - waterfalls in the Sahara?

WHITE
Try *man pushing pencil*.

SUSAN
In a new office, on a new campus. Not bad for a "blind stargazer."

WHITE
(genuinely touched)
Thank you.

Breaking their gaze, Cravath walks past with a flock of senators.

SUSAN
You know, he'd never admit it, but losing his prized school would have shattered Cravath.

WHITE
What? Old Genghis - *feelings?*

They chuckle. Then she gets serious.

SUSAN
Milo Cravath is a do-or-die general in a just and dire war; he'd march you, or himself, into cannon fire if it would advance the cause.

WHITE
Do you like your work?

SUSAN
I believe in it very much.

WHITE
You're his lieutenant in the AMA war room; you carry out his "hits." What's the hardest part?

Her smile fades.

SUSAN
The *friendly fire*... the faces those cannons can bury.

WHITE
Cravath can be brutal, but he's the best friend the cause ever had. He's a decent man.

SUSAN
And when war makes decent men monsters?

WHITE
Monsters *cower* from just wars.

SUSAN
So, follow command always. No exceptions, no exemptions of conscience.

WHITE
Unless *losing the future* is an option.

She takes that in. The ice is melting. He gets spunky.

WHITE
So what enthralls Susan Gilbert? Quilting? Camel racing?

SUSAN
(marveling at his chutzpah)
You're a man of most curious contours. You've been told that.

WHITE
Never so nicely. *Answer*.

SUSAN
No camels, but it *is* rumored I brew a fierce *café au lait*. Ever have a true café au lait?

WHITE
Uh, can't say that I --

SUSAN
Aha! I may just barge in and brew you one!

They laugh. Then, fidgeting...

SUSAN
And I stay.

WHITE
Huh?

Wow, she can't believe she said that. Sweating bullets, she goes all the way.

SUSAN
I never leave or forsake you, doubt or disbelieve you. I'm *in* all the way.

WHITE
(smitten)
Remind me why you're not... you know...

SUSAN
Taken?

WHITE
At least *rented out.*

SUSAN
Maybe I am; *rental's* a low bar.

WHITE
Ah, some café au lait freak.

More laughs. Then her eyes sweep his.

SUSAN
Know what George White's *real* problem is?

WHITE
Singular?

SUSAN
He's a very big man in a very small world.

WHITE
You believe that?

SUSAN
(sweeping his eyes)
I always have.

Lost in each other's gaze, heaven and earth have melted away; these two are alone in their own universe.

NEARBY - ON ELLA, GRANT, AND THE CHINESE DELEGATION

As they schmooze, an ABDUCTOR'S HANDS discreetly clasp Ella's waist from behind. Her face lights up. A voice whispers in her ear:

ABDUCTOR
"Excuse me, Mr. President."

ELLA
Excuse me, Mr. President.

Grant nods, mystified. As Ella's heart races, the hands spirit her across the room, out through an obscure doorway and into the --

WHITE HOUSE INTERIORS

-- where before she can catch her breath, Wallace is sweeping her through a maze of rooms, ducking staff and security on a forbidden journey through the White House. Ella is terrified and exhilarated.

ELLA
We are *so* deported!

CUT BACK TO THE:

EAST ROOM - ANGLE ON CRAVATH

Sporting a fine suit and fat cigar, he hobnobs with senators, crowing about *his* amazing choir.

We PAN ACROSS to Loudin and Georgia glowering at him. Physically close, they look like a couple. As they fume, we hear:

ENGLISHMAN (O.S.)
Word is, Cravath made it a little rough for you out on the road.

They turn to find an impeccably attired black ENGLISHMAN beside them. His coarse face is set off by glistening blue eyes.

Georgia and Loudin trade looks: *Who is this guy?* To get rid of him --

GEORGIA
Autograph?

-- she takes his program.

GEORGIA
Name?

He extends his card.

ENGLISHMAN
It's there... Word is, when you were sick, starving and sleeping on sidewalks --

LOUDIN
(seethes)
You've got hungry ears.

ENGLISHMAN
Ravenous. It's my work.

GEORGIA
(intrigued)
Which is...

ENGLISHMAN
(again extends his card)
It's all there... Now of course you're his *goodwill Negroes.*

LOUDIN
What the hell?? I don't know what you think you know --

ENGLISHMAN
I know when you were dying out on those streets, that two-faced fraud wouldn't toss you a nickel sideways, that he disowned you like syphilis until you *whored up* twenty-five grand then took every penny without leaving you a pot to piss in, which explains why he's sporting a new three-piece *Herriman* and you're bleeding through cheap burlap. I know that behind their nods and applause, folk are saying Fred Loudin got shafted sideways.

Unbelievable! Loudin hauls off to destroy this guy --

ENGLISHMAN
You *could* turn that around.

-- then Georgia stops his fist.

GEORGIA
Go on.

ENGLISHMAN
Expose their abuse, get the keys to the Kingdom. *The enemy has come to steal, kill and destroy; let no weapon formed against you prosper.*

Georgia and Loudin trade weighty looks. Again he extends his card.

ENGLISHMAN
It's all right there.

It hovers before them like a pendulum, and we

CUT TO:

A HIDDEN ROOM - SOMEWHERE, SOMEPLACE

Wallace and Ella breathlessly enter. Alone at last, they devour each other with ravenous eyes - the attraction is nuclear.

He reaches for her; she quivers as his rugged hand makes gentle contact. As his fingers brush and probe her supple flesh she silently screams, her body a crush of sensations.

Then his fingers stop, on a wound. The wound angers him, but she shushes his lips and pulls him deeply into herself. Her mouth waiting, he penetrates her with a blistering kiss that melts time, space and them into one. Fused inseparably, they writhe and moan as if awakening to life.

After a breathless eternity she lifts her swooning eyes and beholds --

HEAVEN

-- in all its celestial glory: luminous stars, lush clouds, legions of singing angels. Ravished, she looks down from the *painted ceiling fresco* and sweeps Wallace with daydreaming eyes.

ELLA
Build us a home.

WALLACE
Done.

ELLA
Extra bedrooms.

WALLACE
Three?

ELLA
(smiles)
Three works.

WALLACE
With toilet, farm out back.

She steps back.

ELLA
We're talking Nashville... one day.

WALLACE
I'm talking Kansas, *now*. You know I'm moving there to build settlements.

ELLA
That was *then*. Look where we are - everything's changed.

WALLACE
(points to her wounds)
Yeah, it's getting *worse.* I heard what happened out there; I'm going to put a bullet in that preacher's head!

ELLA
Brilliant, like his father did yours!
(then, cursing her insensitivity)
I-I'm sorry... I know he was your life.

WALLACE
(reeling at the memories)
What they did to Pop... a bullet would have been a courtesy.

ELLA
Don't let them drive you away; we'll stay in Nashville and defy them! We'll save and start new lives on Covenant Lane!

SLAM! He SMASHES a cabinet. She senses --

ELLA
There's more to this. What aren't you telling me?!

WALLACE
How many more funerals do we gotta go to, and how many more scenes-of-the-crime do we gotta watch them chalk out black figures on concrete?! You *want* me and my boys out of Nashville!

ELLA
I don't believe it!

WALLACE
Believe it! We stay, it burns!

ELLA
Hate won't win the day!

WALLACE
Hate's all I got! They took everything else!

ELLA
I won't believe it!

WALLACE
Believe it! I want them dead, every one of them!

ELLA
I can't --

WALLACE
BELIEVE IT! I WANT RIOTS! BULLETS! BROTHERS IN WARPAINT CUTTING HEADS! I WANT THIS *HOUSE OF LIES* TORCHED TO CINDER WITH THOSE BLUE-EYED SNAKES IN IT!

She shudders in horror. He tries to start over.

WALLACE
I want to *protect* you and your mother, make a safe home for our family. With the army pulling up stakes --

ELLA
What are you talking about?!

He looks at her incredulously.

WALLACE
Congress is washing their hands of us; they're deserting the "fight for our freedom" and pulling out of the South. Game over.

ELLA
You're wrong, we're winning this. You haven't seen the change breaking out everywhere! Read the papers!

WALLACE
Read past your own headlines to the *real* news! We're on our own, with nothing between us and that Southern Cross!

ELLA
(breaking down)
Please... *dream with me!*

WALLACE
Wake up!

Shattered, she slumps to the floor. He SMASHES a glass cabinet.

GUARDS rush in. In a flash, Wallace DECKS one and furiously SWINGS at the others. But they viciously BEAT HIM DOWN.

As they haul Wallace off, he SHOUTS back:

WALLACE
YOUR "LIBERATORS" UPSTAIRS, ASK THEM WHAT'S GOING ON! *ASK THEM!!*

EXT. WHITE HOUSE - ROOFTOP TERRACE - SHORTLY AFTER

The Jubilees anxiously huddle with Cravath, Susan and Hiram. The mood is dire. Ella is there but not there, her head still reeling.

Cravath points into the distance at an ABORTED CONSTRUCTION SITE.

BENNIE
The Washington Monument, abandoned by Congress twenty years ago.

CRAVATH
Ruins of a great promise.

WHITE
Translate.

HIRAM
The forces of the Old South are growing in power; their race-baiting has panicked moderates in Congress into fearing us as equals. *We've lost Washington.*

SUSAN
Which puts their party within striking distance of retaking the South. If they win the upcoming elections --

MINNIE
-- slavery returns.

TOM
And the Southern Cross is unleashed.

CRAVATH
Only the Civil Rights Bill can stop it.

AMERICA
(devastated)
So what saves the Civil Rights Bill?

Cravath and Susan shoot Hiram looks. Bennie picks up on it.

BENNIE
Hiram Jackson. You're running!

This time, Hiram nods.

WHITE
You'll lead our side to victory! We've got a hundred thousand more voters, and they'd brave hell to vote down that Cross!

Hiram and Susan eye each other gravely.

HIRAM
They're going to have to. The Old South is forging *armies of terror* - <u>The Knights of the Southern Cross</u>; you met them tonight. They're vowing to drown our schools in blood to scare young voters from the polls.

The Jubilees are staggered.

WHITE
My God, with the army gone, how do we protect them?

CRAVATH
Protect? With this recession worsening, we can't keep most of them open. Fisk is secure, but we're moving to shut down --

ELLA
<u>Not one</u>.

Ella has snapped back... with fire in her eyes.

ELLA
Those campuses are the front lines of our future. It's our duty to defend them *by any means necessary!*

SUSAN
What pays for that?

HIRAM
And how do we get our people to stare down the Knights and *vote?*

Ella's eyes blaze with a vision.

ELLA
We rally them with *our* monument... to Freedom.

Catching the vision, the Jubilees look to White.

TOM
We'll build Jubilee Hall.

CRAVATH
White's "temple"?? What pays for *that?*

MINNIE
We'll tour again.

The Jubilees slap hands. Cravath marvels at their audacity.

CRAVATH
Horses with blinders... Do you know how many you inspire? I could have thousands at your feet, singing your praises. I'm in; how soon can you --

LOUDIN
A thousand.

CRAVATH
Come again?

GEORGIA
Dollars. Each.

A faction lines up against Cravath.

CRAVATH
That's mercenary. May I remind you this is *ministry?*

IKE
May *I* remind *you,* you're <u>our</u> guests at the White House?

TOM
Guys, he's not the enemy.

LOUDIN
(glares at Cravath)
No? Half my life it was beaten into me I wasn't worth what I couldn't fetch at the auction block. Eight years off the plantation and I'm damned if there still ain't a boot on my neck.

Unflinching, Cravath assesses the situation, then lights a cigar.

CRAVATH
You understand that bankrolling hundreds of schools while building our answer to the Washington Monument is a Herculean undertaking, to say nothing of touring costs and titanic paychecks. You'll bear the weight of it all.

LOUDIN
We're soldiers.

CRAVATH
Then we're agreed - you'll tour for the AMA until Jubilee Hall is built.

LOUDIN
We want it in writing, iron-clad.

CRAVATH
Rest assured, Mr. Loudin, contracts will bind us *inseparably*.

These words ring with foreboding.

WHITE
Question is, *where next?* Jubilee rip-off acts are flooding the circuit. Some of them pimp themselves around singing our songs in blackface.

CRAVATH
The Blackfoots. Scum. Where's a good firing squad when you need one?

MAGGIE
London.

CRAVATH
Preposterous! The English have no connection to the spirituals.

HIRAM
But they're passionately anti-slavery - even *feverish,* if you know what I mean. Fred Douglass tells me he was hardly black enough for the British taste.

Everyone is stoked about London. Cravath sees he can't win.

CRAVATH
I can lean on associates there to stage one event. It'll be make-or-break: you'll either catch fire or crash and burn.
(then the bombshell)
But the English are extremely sensitive to matters of race; the spectacle of a white man playing musical master to a troupe of Negroes he calls his *kids* would doom the tour before it starts. <u>You're out, White</u>. Out of sight, anyway.

All are stunned.

ELLA
What does that make him, a mascot?!

CRAVATH
Merely *invisible.* White stays in charge, but it makes you the new face of the Jubilee Singers.

Ella is livid, but Cravath's face declares this non-negotiable. All eyes turn to White. We see his devastation, but he sucks it up.

WHITE
London.

CRAVATH
Then *it is finished.* Now hear this: Jubilee Hall is your new gospel; you will preach it to every pocket and purse in England. You'll capture their imaginations then bleed those billfolds dry.

The Jubilees are pumped up.

MINNIE
So we're set: we build Jubilee Hall, save our schools --

JUBILEES
Sing at Hiram's inauguration!

They high-five, then exit downstairs with Hiram.

But Cravath holds Ella back. He stares piercingly into her eyes.

CRAVATH
"By any means necessary"... Good one, Miss Sheppard. <u>Now deliver</u>. Botch this tour and you stagger back an incalculable disgrace to her and the world, taking up your miserable but familiar existence, alone and unclaimed, where every river you pass calls you to the deep.

CLOSE ON ELLA - his words penetrate and haunt her. Shaken, she backs off and exits without a word, leaving Cravath and Susan alone.

SUSAN
A bit Machiavellian, wasn't it?

CRAVATH
Have our lawyers trademark the Jubilee name, and *pray.* Across those waters waits an enemy far deadlier than the Knights.

SUSAN
But England *is* well past our bigotry; if the singers catch fire, the world will be at their feet.

He gravely crushes his cigar.

CRAVATH
Exactly.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. ATLANTIC OCEAN - BRILLIANT BLUE SKY

A steamer crosses the sea. We hear a bizarre ENGLISH ACCENT --

MAGGIE (O.S.)
Too relaxed! Backs arched, elbows out, eyes fixed ahead! Good.

-- and CUT TO the --

SHIP DECK

-- where Maggie is schooling the choir in English etiquette. Or rather, her tragically misguided conception of it.

MAGGIE
You've entered the room, now waft through it like mist, eyes darting about, greeting each noble with a deep sixty-degree bow. *Necks up, knees straight, no blinking!*

Obeying her, they contort themselves into stiff, awkward pretzels.

MAGGIE
Excellent. When a hand is extended to you, let it linger as if unseen; then *chauncing* to notice it, render a sullen smirk - *never show teeth!* - then clasp the pulp of the fingertip and lithely wiggle.

Onlookers snicker.

LOUDIN
Who *says* this is English etiquette??

MAGGIE
Only *Charlotte, Emily, Jane* - now hush before I charge you for this! Finally, when meeting *Victoria* --

TOM
Oh now it's the Queen!

MAGGIE
(gives him the hand)
You don't exist. Address her as "Your Majesty" then fall deathly silent. Remember, the Queen is not your friend - don't touch her, don't look her in the eyes, don't even breathe on her. Above all, never turn your back on the great monarch.

Just then, Ella ENTERS from inside.

ELLA
It's *five after.* Let's go!

INT. SHIP STATEROOM - SHORTLY AFTER

A tense rehearsal, now directed by Ella. As the choir sings --

CHOIR
Keep your hand on the plow...

ELLA
No! No! Crescendo molto! Altos, bring out the third! Tenors, raise pitch!

-- she drives them relentlessly, possessed like we've never seen her. White paces about in a tizzy, eyeing her to ease up.

ELLA
(CLAPS them silent)
You were all caught off-guard at the key change. Don't rest during rests; *prepare*, *brace*, then *attack* your next entry!

WHITE
I wouldn't worry, Sam; it'll be just fine.

ELLA
We're not in Kansas anymore; we're bringing our wares to the birthplace of *Messiah* and *MacBeth.* That's holy ground; the English will eat "just fine" alive. Starting today, we rehearse twice a morning, twice every afternoon.

The singers groan. Before White can protest, the ship PURSER enters.

PURSER
Sorry, there's a scheduling conflict with tomorrow's reservation of the stateroom.

ELLA
(shoots White a look)
Handle that?

White bristles; he's being asked to leave. Everything in him wants to refuse, but he sucks it up and reluctantly exits with the Purser. The singers sweat his departure. Alone with the choir, Ella CLAPS --

ELLA
EVERYONE... EYES ON ME.

INT. SHIP CABIN - LATER

An intimate scene: Ella sits at a window writing a letter to Sarah. White and America sit nearby, gazing at a gorgeous RENDERING OF JUBILEE HALL... and yakking about a certain someone.

AMERICA
Someone keep me from fainting - George White has a real *for-real* date!

WHITE
If she passes through London, we *might* connect for a little café au lait.

AMERICA
A “fierce” little café au lait! Watch out, ladies, Doctor Love is on the prowl!

They *whoop-whoop* and bump butts. Just then --

-- we hear a horrific GASP. Ella jolts out of a waking nightmare.

WHITE
Sam!

ELLA
I-I’m okay.

But she’s not. Her hand hovers shaking over the letter, unable to go on. She stares grimly at her TALL STACK OF LETTERS to Sarah.

Alarmed, White nods to the letters and tries to buoy her spirits.

WHITE
A lifetime of love letters. You know I’m jealous, Sam; those pages know you better than I do. When she reads them, it’ll be like you were never apart.

But Ella shudders, her eyes harrowed by the nightmare.

ELLA
I don’t think that’s going to happen.

AMERICA
Sweetie!

ELLA
When I went back... there were bullets and bloodstains everywhere.

WHITE
Don’t you give up, Sam; I won’t let you.
(then, possessed by a sense)
Build it. Build the house!

ELLA
No.

AMERICA
If England goes well, you can pay for it!

ELLA
I can't live in an empty house. That house can't be empty!

WHITE
It won't be! You'll find your mother; Wallace will come to his senses.

ELLA
You *see* that?! You're telling me you *see* us together?!

Her tears beg him to promise it. He hesitates, then concedes...

WHITE
No... no I don't. But I see a brave woman, a fighter's fighter who once told the world --

WHITE/AMERICA
--- put feet to your faith.

Ella struggles to take that in as we

FADE OUT.

INT. ARGYLL MANSION - JUBILEE HALL FUNDRAISER - NIGHT

We're now in England, at a posh reception with nobles and aristocrats - and thanks to Maggie, it's a total disaster. As the Jubilees mingle, they're causing an uproar emulating her highly offensive *Englishisms*. Ella frantically works the room to put out fires.

Meanwhile, a dour prick named VETTER mocks the choir to White's face:

VETTER
Pretentious asses. And to think, you probably *prayed* a lot about this.

WHITE
What are you, an atheist??

VETTER
Freethinker, thank you.

WHITE
Methinks you're at the wrong party; we're a bunch of backwards, miracles-really-happen bumpkins.

VETTER
Pre-enlightened Americans! You'll *need* an Act of God to get you out of this shipwreck. What *are* you, their driver?

WHITE
What's your beef, pal - did I piss on your leg?

VETTER
I'll season my words with grace: You missionary leeches are the excrement of the earth. That your cesspool of Bible-Belt religion exists at all is scourge enough, but that like turds on the tide you should wash up on our shores to spread your sewage incites me to fury. *Oh my, was that indelicate?*

White slips a dollar into Vetter's pocket.

WHITE
Your eyes are browning; enema's on me.

VETTER
Do you know who I am?!

WHITE
No, but you'll smell better after the procedure.

As Vetter seethes, the DUKE OF ARGYLL storms up.

DUKE
White! We extend our guests to you, and your people send them home in outrage?! The Duchess demands an explanation!

NEARBY - We come in mid-conversation as the DUCHESS and PRIME MINISTER GLADSTONE chat.

GLADSTONE
Of course the nation still mourns your mother's loss. Does nothing console her?

DUCHESS
It's twelve years now since father's passing; she still sets out his shaving kit every morning.

The Duke enters and thrusts a flustered White before her.

WHITE
Your *Ladyness,* uh, *ship*... the Duke was...

DUCHESS
George White, this is William Gladstone, Prime Minister. I don't know what civility looks like in your backwoods, but our guests didn't come here to be mocked.

Ella SWOOPS IN.

ELLA
Forgive us; we're all a bit light-headed. The altitude, surely.

GLADSTONE
We're at sea level.

ELLA
(turns bright red)
I-it gets better. I promise.

LATER - MAIN ROOM - IT GETS WORSE

The fundraising pitch. As White eggs him on from the sidelines, Bennie displays the Jubilee Hall rendering to the seated guests. Jubilee Hall truly is breathtaking - unlike Bennie's bumbling pitch. Battered by stage fright and blinded by cascades of pouring sweat, he stammers out a catastrophically incomprehensible speech.

BENNIE
Wh-while the chain of s-slavery is long in the behind of B-B-Britain, A-America's cast only j-just got th-them off. Every *quaid* you g-g-give to build Jubilee Hall...

We cringe for Bennie. Sitting together, Vetter mocks him, but the Prime Minister is quietly impressed:

VETTER
Buffoon.

GLADSTONE
There's a fire there...

Meanwhile, in the --

ADJACENT ROOM

-- the humiliated Jubilees wait in doom to make their entrance.

AMERICA
Let's get this funeral over with!

MINNIE
England would have been nice.

Suddenly, we hear the MAIN ROOM stir, then the Duchess' voice:

DUCHESS (O.S.)
It's ma-*ma!*

MAGGIE
Oh no, we are <u>not</u> waiting on *somebody momma!*

BACK TO THE MAIN ROOM

The front door flies open. In sweeps a cranky woman with a royal entourage. She's dressed in *widow's black* and in a very foul mood.

WOMAN
Blasted weather! Louise! Edward!

ADJACENT ROOM

The Jubilees hear the guests BREAK INTO APPLAUSE.

MINNIE
We're on.

MAIN ROOM

DUKE
(addressing the guests)
Friends, we've been visited by a most distinguished guest. It's my honor to announce --

The Jubilees barrel into the room and nearly plow into --

MAGGIE
VICTORIA!

-- THE QUEEN OF ENGLAND. IT'S REALLY HER.

Maggie SHRIEKS. Victoria stares at her, agape. Maggie loses it: squealing like a poodle, she breaks forth, hurls herself at the Queen's bosom, kisses her like a BFF then falls dreamily at her knees.

MAGGIE
I worship you.

Victoria gasps. The guests gasp. *Then Maggie gasps.* Recapturing her dignity, she sheepishly rises, dusts off her knees, turns her back on the Queen and rejoins the choir. Ella nearly passes out.

DUCHESS
(red-faced)
We have guests, Mama. The Jubilee Singers.

The Queen's interest is immediately piqued.

VICTORIA
From Nashville. They sing --

TOM
The spirituals, Ma'am.

The room breaks into an uproar.

DUKE
Sir! One does not address the Quee--

VICTORIA
My husband adored the spirituals.

And thus the room is silenced.

TOM
The late Prince Albert, a true hero. He labored for the extinction of slavery.

VICTORIA
(touched he would know this)
That was his heart.

DUCHESS
Mama, we've learned that some of the spirituals have hidden meanings.

VICTORIA
Albert said as much. They're *ciphers*.

TOM
Yes Ma'am, *freedom cries* in code; they rallied those in chains to break free.

VICTORIA
He cherished one in particular; he'd sing it when he felt crushed between a rock and a hard place. It's a simple song he called the "powerhouse" of them all.

TOM
"Steal Away."

VICTORIA
That's it.

The Jubilees shoot nervous looks at Ella.

TOM
The Prince was right; the oppressor never knew it wielded such force. See, he heard a cry of defeat; we heard a call to action.

VICTORIA
So... *"Steal away to Jesus, I ain't got long to stay here."*

TOM
"Spread the word; we're casting off these chains."

VICTORIA
Yes, yes...

TOM
(turning it back to her)
"My Lord calls me by the thunder; the trumpet sounds within my soul."

VICTORIA
(catching on)
The call of God to Jubilee!

TOM
"Green trees bending --"

VICTORIA
"Poor sinners stand trembling." Trees bend and the faithless cower in *storms,* but the brave bear the onslaught, to victory.

TOM
Right on. For those with ears to hear, the spirituals liberated thousands.

VICTORIA
May they liberate millions yet.
(then, wistfully)
Can we hear it? Can we hear *Steal Aw--*

ELLA
May we offer Her Majesty something else?

The guests wince. Victoria's foul mood instantly returns.

Ella's heart races - *what to sing??* Then her eyes light on the Queen's mourning clothes. She peers deeply, almost invasively into Victoria's eyes... then curtseys respectfully and signals the choir.

Sumptuous humming fills the room... and for the first time Ella lifts her own voice:

ELLA
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
A long way from home...

Ella's voice isn't remarkable, but her raw emotional transparency is earth-shattering. We feel *Motherless Child's* deep impact on Ella and Victoria - both shut their eyes to take it in.

ELLA
Sometimes I feel like I'm almost gone,
Sometimes I feel like I'm almost gone,
Sometimes I feel like I'm almost gone,
A long way from home...

Her breathtaking close stirs our souls:

ELLA
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
A long way from hooooooome.

Ella's voice melts into silence. She quietly trembles, shaken to the core. The room is on pins and needles, all faces stoically frozen awaiting the Queen's verdict.

At last, Victoria's eyes open. A lone tear emerges, hesitates, then journeys haltingly down her cheek. The instant it strikes her lap, the room EXPLODES IN A CATHARSIS OF TEARS.

The Duchess whispers to Victoria. The Queen nods. Her eyes bearing a grateful sparkle, her next words to the choir stun all:

VICTORIA
If you'd permit me the honor, I should like to commission a *portrait* to commemorate this night, and what I pray becomes your legacy. *The doors of Britain open wide to the Jubilee Singers.*

WILD APPLAUSE - all cheer but Vetter, who breathes fire at the Jubilees' triumph. The Queen instructs her valet:

VICTORIA
Give the job to Havell. Tell him *Be good.*

The guests now swarm the Jubilees like flies, showering them with kisses, social invitations - and pledges for Jubilee Hall. The lone casualty is White, whom everyone tramples as if he weren't there.

AT THE FRONT DOOR

The Duchess catches up with Vetter as he furiously exits.

DUCHESS
Boning out so soon, Mr. Vetter? What beckons - trafficking? Prostitution?

She chuckles. He shoots the choir a glare that could split steel.

We don't know who this Vetter is, but as he storms out, we get the unsettling feeling we'll meet him again.

DISSOLVE TO:

"MR. COLTON, WILL PURCHASE HOME MODEL 53B CONSTRUCTED ON COVENANT LANE PARCEL. SUSAN GILBERT TO TRANSACT IN MY ABSENCE. ELLA SHEPPARD."

We WIDEN to reveal a pained Wallace reading the telegram. He's sitting alone on the dirt at the:

COVENANT LANE PARCEL

Looking over the property with haunted eyes, he digs his hand into the earth and pulls up hardened ash, the remnant of a great fire.

SUSAN (O.S.)
This is where it happened.

Susan has quietly arrived.

SUSAN
Mr. Colton said you were here. I know why.

Wallace wants to shout *GET AWAY* to her and everyone like her, but his heavy spirit pleads for a shoulder. She sits beside him.

He fights saying anything... then nods to an area of the parcel.

WALLACE
We were there in the den, Christmas night. I'd just given Dad the chess set I'd been working on all year; I wanted to make it as perfect as he would've. He saw the flaws, but he just smiled and held me as if there were nothing more perfect in the world. I hated myself - there were so many flaws - but Dad's heartbeat always made everything all right. *That's when they broke in...*
(releases the ash from his hand)
I miss him so much.

He covers his face.

SUSAN
You can cry.

But he toughens up.

WALLACE
I gave the land to Colt. He asked me to build the house for her.

SUSAN
You could tell her it happened here; if she knew, she'd give up Nashville.

WALLACE
And kill *her* dreams? This is God's "gift" to her... and where he cursed *me*.

SUSAN
You think it hurts now. Let her go and you curse yourself.

WALLACE
How do I live in this hell? I miss him so much; everything reminds me of that night.

SUSAN
Her dreams would be your cross to bear.

Overwhelmed with emotion, he again covers his face. She lays his head on her shoulder... and weeps for him.

INT. "HAVELL'S PORTRAIT STUDIO" - DAY

The Jubilees enter to find a curious man wrangling an enormous backdrop into place. The painter HAVELL is a short, snarky, strangely endearing character with a Dali moustache, bizarre foreign accent and mauve staining rag he literally slings from a holster.

He's painfully unimpressed with the choir.

HAVELL
Look what the low tide swept in.

WHITE
Mister Ha*vell?*

HAVELL
*Ha*vell.

WHITE
The painter?

HAVELL
The tightrope walker.
(spits at White's feet)
You're the lint in my navel.

ELLA
Mr. White is one of us; he'll be in the portrait.

HAVELL
Work order says *nine Negroes.*

ELLA
He's in or we're not.

Havell's nostrils flare; he whips out his rag and SWATS HER.

HAVELL
I'll slap you back up the canal.

The singers trade stunned looks. He points to the backdrop.

HAVELL
Positions!

LATER - CLOSE ON HAVELL

We hold on Havell's face as an ugly SHOUTING MATCH rages before him offscreen - the Jubilees are fighting for center position against the backdrop. Cursing his fate, he groans to his staining rag:

HAVELL
And you abandoned landscapes. Fool!
Rocks, cows - that's where it's at.

We hear SHOVING, SHRIEKS, ***CRASH!*** ***RIP!*** Then silence.

We CUT to the choir posed tensely against the backdrop. White has claimed the dead center spot while Loudin's faction seethe at the sidelines. The backdrop is ripped; the air is poisoned with fallout.

HAVELL
So, you call yourselves "Jubilees"?

Aghast at their look, he gets in their faces and inspects them like a drill sergeant, snarling in disgust at --

HAVELL
(-- Tom's clothes)
Come to show off our potato bags, big boy?
(-- Bennie's wild Afro)
So the yak died.
(-- America's hairstyle)
May wildebeests trample your firstborn.
(-- Maggie's dense makeup)
Lend me a quid, dear?

MAGGIE
F-for what??

He SWATS HER with his rag.

HAVELL
The snowplow I need to get that face off.

He contorts the slouching Minnie into a formal pose:

HAVELL
This *hain't* Nashville, honey; tuck that tush.

MINNIE
This is so awkward.

HAVELL
Trust me, you don't *know* awkward, so just stash the cash. We straight?

TOM
How long will the portrait take?

HAVELL
(SWATS him)
Don't cluck with me, rooster; I'm the *shyte* and Queen What's-Her-Name knows it. Havell submit nothing till all is P-E-R-F-E-C-T.
(then, to the heavens)
Mighty Isis, they're hideous creatures! I want to hurl them to the jackals!

ELLA
Mr. Havell, this is our best.

HAVELL
Not best enough! ALL MUST DIE... AND BE REBORN!

JUBILEES (V.O.)
LORD, I KNOW I'VE BEEN CHANGED!
LORD, I KNOW I'VE BEEN CHANGED!
LORD, I KNOW I'VE BEEN CHANGED!
THE ANGELS IN HEAVEN DONE SIGNED MY NAME!

RAPID-FIRE MONTAGE

EXTREME MAKEOVER: An army of fashion designers, beauticians and etiquette Nazis attack the Jubilees in an all-out blitzkrieg, fabulously styling, coiffing and drilling courtly manners into them.

Havell oversees their transformation like a god:

HAVELL
In the beginning, Havell!

JUBILEES
THE GOSPEL TRAIN'S A-COMIN',
I HEAR IT JUST AT HAND!
I HEAR THE CAR WHEEL RUMBLIN'
AND ROLLING THROUGH THE LAND!

AT FISK, Susan oversees the spectacular groundbreaking of Jubilee Hall, basking in White's vision as if it were her own.

ON COVENANT LANE, Wallace and crew build the house with painstaking TLC. Wallace and Susan then have a blast clipping home décor designs, from which he handcrafts exquisite furniture. Construction complete, he masterfully paints and landscapes, then stands back and beholds: Sarah's dream house is finished, and it's stunning.

JUBILEES
I COULDN'T HEAR NOBODY PRAY,
COULDN'T HEAR NOBODY PRAY.
WAY DOWN YONDER BY MYSELF,
I COULDN'T HEAR NOBODY PRAY!

Not so, the portrait: It's nearly done, but Havell is in a lather trying to capture their faces. As tension visibly festers among the choir, he hurls down his palette and curses their bleak expressions:

HAVELL
Visage of death! *Beam! Radiate!*

As he scrapes off the paint to start over, we PAN to the life-sized canvas and are haunted by the image: White and these young former slaves have undergone a breathtaking metamorphosis - they now exude plush Victorian splendor - but are completely stripped of faces.

END MONTAGE.

INT. PACKED-OUT CONCERT HALL - MONTHS LATER

A thundering ovation as the Jubilees close a sensational BENEFIT CONCERT. Tom flashes the rendering of Jubilee Hall to the crowd; they go wild and flood the stage with money.

As the curtain closes, the crowd begins STOMPING:

CROWD
ENOUGH DELAYS, JUBILEE HALL NOW! ENOUGH DELAYS, JUBILEE HALL NOW!

BACKSTAGE, AFTER THE SHOW

Ella and the choir charge through the wings as a TEAM OF VALETS rapidly get them into camouflaging disguises.

Stagehands clear a dreaded path for Ella as she barrels towards the exit without breaking pace. The old CURTAINMASTER braces himself as she approaches.

ELLA
Mr. Hurley, you were late on two cues and missed a third altogether.

HURLEY
Apologies, Miss Sheppard; perfection does take time.

ELLA
Time's finally up, sir. You're out.

Ella moves on. Keeping up, her haters and defenders weigh in.

LOUDIN
Another one bites the dust!

IKE
No one even noticed!

TOM
No one but God and Ella.

GEORGIA
You mean Ella and God!

The LAMP OPERATOR does an urgent Rosary as Ella approaches.

ELLA
Congo blue during a ballad, Mr. Kendall? We looked like ghouls! As I warned your predecessor, stick to the script!

MAGGIE
It's dictatorship.

BENNIE
It's management.

VOICE FROM THE RAFTERS
Tyranny! Tyranny is what it is!

Ella glowers at the rafters, then spots the cowering owner.

ELLA
Mr. Drucker!
(he races over)
The limelights sat unemployed all night.

DRUCKER
I-I swapped them for gas lamps; I thought them sufficiently bright.

ELLA
Your thought life is not my concern; the limelights punch up our flesh tones. We've been over this.

DRUCKER
Regulations require hiring a man for each unit. This recession is killing us --

ELLA
Bad call. We fill this house daily...

DRUCKER
(sensing the end)
Oh God, i-it won't happen again.

ELLA
It won't. *Our patronage is withdrawn.*

Drucker falls to pieces. Now FULLY DISGUISED, the Jubilees exit the building into --

EXT. CONCERT HALL

-- *JUBILEEMANIA*. Paparazzi swarm. Hysterical fans mob the streets to glimpse and touch their idols. Lovestruck men flash diamond rings, shouting wedding proposals. Cops break up catfighting women.

As the disguised singers press incognito through the chaos, White is already outside, besieged by tabloid REPORTERS clamoring to know --

REPORTERS
WHAT'S THE *REAL* STORY BEHIND JUBILEE HALL'S LATEST NO-SHOW? WILL THE AMA'S NEW DEADLINE STICK THIS TIME?

We're shocked at how gaunt White looks. Just then, we hear SHRIEKS.

CROWD
IT'S THEM!

The crowd recognizes the Jubilees and STAMPEDES.

Panicked, the singers run for their lives towards a fleet of LUXURY COACHES, where DRIVERS shout:

DRIVERS
GET IN! GET IN!

The crowd CLOSES IN. Valets furiously shove the choir into the coaches. As they pile in, Ella suddenly freezes at something she spots across the street.

ELLA
My God.

Her blood runs cold. The crowd JUMPS ON the coaches. White yanks Ella inside. The coaches bolt into the clear, and we PAN across the street to a dreadful theatre marquee announcing:

"DIRECT FROM AMERICA - THE BLACKFOOT JOOBALEES!"

INT. GRAND BALLROOM - JUBILEE HALL FUNDRAISER - THAT NIGHT

A GLITTERING GRAND BALL with liquor, laughter and live Viennese waltzes. Banners everywhere depict the Jubilee Hall rendering. The lavishly styled, exquisitely mannered Jubilees, now darlings of high society, kiss and greet nobles in courtly Victorian fashion.

DUCHESS (O.S.)
Eight years ago, they were chattel; now they own the world.

DUKE (O.S.)
And belong to it. It's the stuff of legend.

ANGLE ON THE DUKE, DUCHESS AND SUSAN

SUSAN
So they've captured England's hearts.

DUCHESS
And *pierced* them. Who knew this land of stoic grief had *so many* unshed tears?

Tom glides in and takes the Duchess' arm.

TOM
Dance, Louise?

She coos as Tom sweeps her away.

DUKE
So, fresh off the boat?

SUSAN
We've just arrived, a night early. I want to surprise Mr. White, but I'm hoping he notices me first.

DUKE
(points across the room)
There's our Moses, losing his sheep to wolves.

ANGLE ON THE NERVOUS WRECK WHITE (POV)

Unhinged by the carousing, he crisscrosses the room anxiously clocking his *kids,* reading their lips to track their conversations. He's no mere bundle of nerves; he's a ticking time bomb.

SUSAN (O.S.)
He doesn't look well.

DUKE (O.S.)
Nothing tortures a soul like the sting of irrelevance.

NEARBY

Prime Minister Gladstone and a circle of PARLIAMENTARIANS try to cheer up their dispirited friend.

GLADSTONE
Ben, how can you say that? The Jubilees' speeches have electrified England; you've fired us up for the American cause.

PARLIAMENTARIAN 1
Bill's right. You're a bright constellation in her present darkness.

BENNIE
That would be the others. I don't even pitch Jubilee Hall anymore for fear of screwing it up.

GLADSTONE
Nonsense! You're an orator in the making; you've got the passion of thunder.

BENNIE
In a thimble, maybe. All I've ever wanted was to inspire the people, you know? Just today, I heard the American ambassador speak --

PARLIAMENTARIAN 2
Bah! One of your *songs* outpowers a thousand clanging orations. The Jubilees *are* America's true ambassadors. *Yours* is the America the world awaits.

Bennie forces a smile; Gladstone clasps his shoulder.

GLADSTONE
I see your heart, son, but on this I'm with White: one day you'll rouse the living and raise the dead.

BACK TO THE FEVERISH WHITE

He anxiously hawk-eyes the dance floor, wincing as the singers waltz with long queues of lusty socialites.

Suddenly, his eyes flare.

ANGLE ON - LOUDIN AND GEORGIA

Dancing really intimately, they're all but fornicating in motion. White BREAKS IN and rips them apart.

WHITE
It's a dance floor, not a mattress.

They glower at him. He glowers back. Then his saber eyes snap to:

MINNIE

As she blissfully waltzes with a dashing young man, White BARGES IN and shoves him away.

WHITE
We said five minutes per, no repeats!

She sadly nods. White passes her off to the next guy in queue, a young soldier in uniform, and gravely warns him:

WHITE
you can touch the arms, but maintain *infinity* between torsos or you hobble home! *Capiche?*

The poor guy practically wets himself.

AND NOW WE CUT TO --

THE POV OF AN UNSEEN SOMEONE

-- moving through the room searching faces... then spotting ELLA.

She's having a blast playing onstage in the orchestra. Beside her is the violist JOHN, a hot-blooded Romeo who brazenly loves her.

CLOSE ON ELLA AND JOHN (BETWEEN NUMBERS)

JOHN
You're radiant tonight.

ELLA
John...

JOHN
You know my weakness for bergamot.

He strokes her perfumed neck. She smiles but isn't really there; she's gazing wistfully into the crowd as if at a distant love.

JOHN
You see him everywhere; how do I compete with a ghost? I want this finger, Ella Sheppard, and the woman that comes with it.

He kisses her ring finger. She blushes, not returning the affection but not fighting it either. From afar, they look like lovers.

An USHER approaches with a collection tray.

USHER
For Jubilee Hall?

John sighs, then gives up his gold watch. He looks around at the army of ushers taking up cash and jewelry from guests.

JOHN
Deep pockets have opened for Jubilee Hall. Some are restless, even suspicious, about it's *failures to appear.* There've been rumors --

ELLA
Lies, tabloid lies. There were delays, but Jubilee Hall will soon be unveiled.

JOHN
Let's hope so. *Look.*

He points to PLAINCLOTHES MEN discreetly surveilling the scene.

JOHN
Those aren't guests; they're investigators.

ELLA
We've given no cause --

JOHN
Except that this was to be a *celebration* of Jubilee Hall's much-belated completion, not yet another pitch for money. Watch out; soliciting public funds makes your tour Crown business and puts you in the cross-hairs of the Prosecutor.

ELLA
Prosecutor??

JOHN
A venomous prig whose sole joy is inflicting misery. He's hated but powerful, and never misses when he aims. It appears he's set his cannons on you.

Suddenly, Ella gasps. She spots White having some kind of meltdown.

In a flash, she BOLTS from the stage, CRASHES HEADLONG into the Unseen Someone, apologizes without looking up, then dashes off. We PAN to a CLOSE-UP of the Unseen Someone to reveal:

IT'S WALLACE. HE'S THERE.

ANGLE ON WHITE

He's breathing fire reading lips across the room. He CHARGES OVER to kill someone --

-- but Ella SNATCHES HIM BACK.

ELLA
Breathe... remember where you are.

Too unglued to speak, he points to a DIGNITARY chatting Ike up.

ELLA
That's Lord Glencorse, Chancellor of the University of Edinburgh.

WHITE
Vulture!

He shakes her off and BARRELS OVER to Glencorse.

GLENCORSE
Ah, Mr. White. I've been impressed with your young men. Mr. Dickerson here --

WHITE
Not that you haven't heard, but my boys belong to a school! You can shove your *scholarship offer* --

IKE
But Edinburgh's one of the top --

WHITE
You're taken!
(gets in Glencorse's face)
Go proselytize somewhere else, you --

SNATCH! A HULKING WOMAN suddenly yanks White into her monstrous bosom.

ELLA
The Widow Fisher has had her eye on you.

The Widow grins at White through a minefield of mangled teeth.

WHITE
(horrified)
Y-you know I don't danc--

ELLA
East, Mrs. Fisher!

The widow SMACKS White's rump. He SHRIEKS as she muscles him like a rag doll out to the dance floor. *Whew... disaster averted.*

MEANWHILE, IN THE POWDER ROOM

America and her Parisian GIRLFRIENDS gab in SUBTITLED FRENCH:

GIRLFRIEND 1
Hey, have you guys heard of this group in town, The Blackfoots? Their show is supposed to be amazing.

GIRLFRIEND 2
Saw them opening night. *Mon dieu,* it was so moving; they really capture the essence of the Black experience.

America shoots them an *Are you insane* look. They burst out laughing.

AMERICA
You'd *better* be joking. I still can't believe they dogged us here. They even asked Havell to paint their portrait. Thank God he detests *muskrat pumps.*

GIRLFRIEND 3
Speaking of which, what's the holdup with the portrait?

AMERICA
(spoofs Havell)
"I see no <u>family</u>, only ghosts! Hollow smiles, hollow hearts! No soul, no glow, no love! Flinking disaster!"

GIRLFRIEND 1
Can't he just paint smiles?

She swats her with a rag.

AMERICA
"Havell paint <u>souls</u>, not smiles!"
(they laugh)
Safe bet the whole thing gets mothballed.

BACK TO THE DANCE FLOOR

Ella and John waltz on air. He's an amazing dancer and she looks radiant in his arms.

Wallace is dying watching them. Her face shimmers, her smile sparkles, her eyes glisten with dreams. UP CLOSE, we see that those dreams are for someone far away, but Wallace sees lovers in love.

Fighting a war of emotions, he charges over to claim his woman, then passes a mirror and looks himself over. Though decently groomed and dressed, in the opulence of Ella's world he might as well be a bum. She's clearly in her element... and way out of his league.

Cursing himself, he backs off and staggers across the room to:

SUSAN

She reads his eyes, alarmed.

WALLACE
Didn't work out.

He presses a precious ENVELOPE into her hand.

SUSAN
<u>No</u>.

WALLACE
I wasn't here.

His misty eyes demand an oath. Crushed for him, she reluctantly nods it. He surrenders the envelope as if surrendering his heart.

And then he's gone.

NEARBY - ANGLE ON THE BASKET CASE WHITE

Freed from *The Bosom,* he rabidly scans the dance floor. His nerves shot to pieces, he's deteriorating rapidly.

Suddenly, his eyes flare - he sees Maggie dancing with a lecherous FRENCHMAN. His blood boils like mercury reading their lips:

ON MAGGIE AND THE FRENCHMAN

FRENCHMAN
"The sensation of the evening was Maggie Porter, whose aching rendition of 'Nobody Knows' stole our hearts."

MAGGIE
London Gazette, December 4th. That was a good night.

FRENCHMAN
A felony understatement - you were incandescence itself.

MAGGIE
I *have* been told that. I've sung *Esther*.

FRENCHMAN
Dung! You were born for La Scala. Your enslavement to that choir is a travesty!

MAGGIE
The music does leave some of us cold.

FRENCHMAN
Does it? You *look* convincing.

MAGGIE
It's called *acting;* just don't let it in.

FRENCHMAN
Oh, let's let it in; say the word and Europe is yours. *Free yourself.*

He slides his card into her thigh pocket.

<u>THAT'S IT</u>! WHITE GOES BERSERK. EXPLODING WITH RAGE, HE STORMS ABOUT IN A FURIOUS TIRADE, ROUNDING UP THE CHOIR LIKE CHILDREN.

WHITE
(as he spots them)
<u>GET OVER HERE</u>! <u>NOW</u>! <u>WE'RE LEAVING</u>!

SUSAN
Oh my God.

SHOCKWAVES. The band aborts. Ella tries in vain to calm him.

ELLA
MR. WHITE! MR. WHITE! *PLEASE!*

The mortified singers head for the door. But not Maggie. Traumatized by White's rant, she clutches the Frenchman like a frightened child.

WHITE
MAGGIE! GET OVER HERE!

FRENCHMAN
That baggage doesn't own you!

White goes ballistic. He LUNGES for the Frenchman but TRIPS on his frumpy pantleg and CRASHES to the floor. Near-delirious, he staggers up and grabs Maggie.

MAGGIE
AAAUGHH!! GET OFF ME!! GET OFF!!

She SHRIEKS and FLAILS at him as if fighting off rape.

ELLA
KEEP HIM BACK!

Bennie and Tom pry White off. His face is slashed and bleeding.

Ella gets in the Frenchman's face.

FRENCHMAN
You have no idea who I am.

ELLA
To the contrary, I wouldn't be doing my job if I hadn't swept this town for landmines, MARCEL PROVIERE, real name Pincock - *let's not go there* - promoter, poacher, man of secrets; one being that despite your exalted reputation and the celebrities you've made, you're a skid-row slumdweller thanks to litigious ex-wives, pregnant ex-mistresses, and costly treatments for that stubborn social disease you picked up in either Turkey or Uruguay, depending on the source. Which is why, given your almost mythically precarious house of cards, it stuns me to have to advise you that a contract is a contract, that Miss Porter is exclusive to this tour and that if she so much as blinked for you onstage, my lawyers would take you for every scrap you've got left, minus that appalling toupée.

Stunned silence. Proviere stares at her incredulously, involuntarily breaks wind, then resets his toupée and slinks off to the exit.

EXT. HOTEL TERRACE - BRIGHT SUNRISE - NEXT MORNING

A heated scene: Ella and Susan clash with the volcanic White.

SUSAN
You had an Olympian meltdown in front of five hundred patrons!

WHITE
Spare me your third degree! I should never have brought them to this godless place --

SUSAN
Cravath's been cabling me all night; outraged donors are crying abuse!

WHITE
-- *Rationalists, freethinkers, humanists.* America danced with Darwin, for God's sake!

Ella switches gears.

ELLA
We've got a situation; the Prosecutor is weighing an investigation into Jubilee Hall.

SUSAN
Investigation?? What does he suspect??

ELLA
Fraud. His men were there last night.

SUSAN
That's ridiculous! The recession is wreaking havoc on construction everywhere: bankrupt factories and railroads, supply shortages... It held us up, but Jubilee Hall is back on track. An investigation would prove that.

ELLA
Or do us in. The very scandal of Crown allegations could destroy us.

SUSAN
Right, right... So how do we stave it off?

WHITE
<u>Dublin</u>.

They turn to White. He's become enthralled by a WALL MAP OF IRELAND.

SUSAN
Tour Ireland? The AMA won't approve that.

WHITE
I didn't hear me asking. *Revival* is breaking out there; we're going to lead it.

SUSAN
Their fan base is *here.*

WHITE
So are their tempters! *Chauffeurs, pedicures, sex like ivy...* my kids are missionaries, not highborn aristocrats!

ELLA
There's no money in Ireland; it's been ravaged by the recession, and the *plague.*

WHITE
Our place is *with* the suffering. It also bulletproofs us against the Prosecutor; think that desk jockey is gonna drop his donut and chase us across the Irish Sea when we're bringing hope to the people?

Her hands shaking, Susan pulls out a stack of NEWSPAPERS bearing the Southern Cross insignia from her attaché. The shocking headlines call for bombings and assassinations against AMA schools.

SUSAN
The Knights are unleashing their fury; the rise of terror is striking fear into our voters. The people need *vision*. *Courage*. They need Jubilee Hall. And to finish Jubilee Hall in a worsening recession, we need this tour to be even more profitable than it's been. That's not possible in Ireland.

WHITE
Thank you, Miss Gilbert, for that stirring lecture. Meanwhile, I'm losing my family to *Gomorrah*. The Lord will provide; revival will save us.

ELLA/SUSAN
That's just not reality!

WHITE
Right, only great men wage war on reality!

His look of betrayal stops their hearts. He stands to go.

SUSAN
M-Mr. White, there's something I need to --

WHITE
I hope you find London agreeable.

He exits. Susan breaks down.

SUSAN
They said he'd become unstable; I refused to believe it. *They've fired him.* Cravath wants him off the tour.

ELLA
(flushes with horror)
God, no... that would kill him.

SUSAN
What are you going to do? The tour can't stop, and it can't go on without you.

Ella paces, processing it all. Then...

ELLA
We'll press on, but he stays and never hears of this. And... it's *Ireland*.

SUSAN
(relieved for White)
As long as you meet their bottom line, they'll have to go along.
(then, ominously)
But you understand, the revenue must never let up, which in Ireland means the Jubilees will work relentlessly: concerts, revivals, fundraisers, receptions - day and night, it won't stop. You sacrificed on that first tour, but nothing like what's ahead.

Her words ring with foreboding. Ella owns that, then nods.

SUSAN
(sighs)
Well, looks like I'm headed home.

ELLA
I'm so sorry, Susan.

Susan fidgets, then hands Ella the envelope from Wallace.

SUSAN
I brought this from Nashville. Congratulations... it's beautiful.

Ella knows what's in it; the sight of it sinks her heart.

SUSAN
Julia gave the Missing Persons Bureau your address here. They'll write you when they find your mother.

ELLA
(grim)
Or confirm she's...

SUSAN
They'll *find* her. If it's any consolation, we've got everyone everywhere praying for you.

Ella nods a weary nod, then --

ELLA
Have you, have you seen...

SUSAN
I understand he's in Kansas.

Ella takes that in. Damned by her lie, Susan stands to go.

ELLA
This Prosecutor is ruthless, and apparently never loses.

SUSAN
Then remember the hour: The bright lights, blue skies... none of it's real. It's *dark midnight* back home.

INT. OFFICE - LATER THAT MORNING

A stale, dusty room. Raging over last night, *rebels* Loudin, Ike, Georgia and Maggie try to turn a conflicted Bennie against the AMA.

LOUDIN
Ireland?! Just lynch us now! I'm scarred head-to-toe from Irish masters and cops!

MAGGIE
And like dumb animals, we have no say!

BENNIE
It's their call.

IKE
We're finally living our dreams - *here* - and they want us back in cages! They've beaten us down since we got here!

BENNIE
Come on...

GEORGIA
Come on! That slave-driver working us like dogs?! White dictating our moves and publicly flogging us last night?!

IKE
And the portrait, forcing himself onto it front and center like massah! That devil --

BENNIE
That devil saved our music; the portrait's the only way he gets remembered.

IKE
Ah, so it's all hunky-dory.

Bennie sighs. Likewise disturbed, he concedes --

BENNIE
No, it's gotten rough... But we're partners in this; the AMA pays us.

LOUDIN
To *blind* us. Open your eyes! They rape and bleed this music out of our people then sell tickets to it?! They're plundering our treasure and the world is blind to the crime! Why? Because they've *bought* eight smiling Negroes as their frontmen! Jubilee Hall is *their* cause; the tour, the money - *that's* ours. We're taking it back.

BENNIE
Mutiny.

IKE
Recovery.

BENNIE
So the AMA's going to just hand the choir over to you?

MAGGIE
That's where The Liberator comes in. Isn't that right, Mr. Stone?

We PAN to reveal the other party to this cabal - JONAS STONE, the black Englishman we met at the White House.

STONE
Quite.

CUT TO:

INT. “THE LIBERATOR” NEWSPAPER PRINT ROOM - JUST AFTER

A cavernous, echoey space. Oddly, the place is dead - no workers, the machinery idle. Still, Stone shows the printing presses off.

STONE
How great a forest a little fire kindles.

BENNIE
And these “force their hand” how?

Stone hands Bennie the draft of a news story. He’s thunderstruck by the title:

“BIGOTRY, BRUTALITY, CRIMINAL ABUSE: THE AMA’S SHOCKING NEW SLAVERY”

It’s a tell-all exposé. Bennie reads the lead paragraph:

BENNIE
“Cash-strapped missionaries prey on the lives of eight black students, including a fourteen year-old minor, their treasurer and music professor sending them cross-country into violence-plagued territory without provisions or protection from bloodthirsty vigilantes, subjecting them to sickness, starvation and near-slaughter on a deadly moneymaking mission the AMA director himself called reckless...

He breaks off, staggered, then looks at the others.

TOM
(shrugs uneasily)
“Truth is a mist.”

STONE
The cornerstone of journalism. This hits the stands, Cravath, White, the Sheppard girl --

BENNIE
They’re crucified.

STONE
You inherit the kingdom. The scandal forces them to surrender the choir.

Bennie is floored, disturbed yet torn. He paces, processing it all.

BENNIE
So why am *I* here?

STONE
The Prime Minister loves you as a son - hell, he's all but adopted you. You have his ear *and sword;* you cry foul, his wrath puts us all behind bars.

IKE
Your endorsement bulletproofs us; The Liberator can't run it without you.

BENNIE
And if it blows up in our faces? The AMA's got pit bulls for lawyers.

STONE
This is a zero-loss strike; the fallout takes them down before their attorneys can pull a trigger. You walk away unscathed.

Pacing, thinking, Bennie looks around.

BENNIE
Where is everyone?

STONE
Church, if they know what's good for them. We shut down for Holy Week.

Impeccably groomed and bejeweled, Stone is polish personified. His magnetic blue eyes, rare for a black man, glisten like crystal pools.

Bennie wrests himself from their pull.

BENNIE
What's our fate to you?

GEORGIA
Bennie! The Liberator is a crusader for justice!

STONE
(defending Bennie)
Now, now... we're to be *wise as serpents --*

BENNIE
-- and harmless as doves. You're a man of Scripture.

STONE
Oh my father was a great preacher... The Jubilee Singers are the pride of our people, but your oppression sets back the race. The Liberator stands with you in the struggle to break the chains of injustice, give you hope and a future.

BENNIE
(chastened, his head swimming)
Sorry... thank you... just trying to...

STONE
Figure it all out, I know. You have been all your life, wondering how you fit in.

Bennie's eyes go misty; Stone's eyes sweep his soul.

STONE
I see you, son; your faith is frail, beaten down by empty prayers and promises. You bow the knee day and night crying, *"Use me, please use me!"* But heaven's silence mocks your tears. Wake up! *Hope deferred makes the heart sick --*

BENNIE
(fighting tears)
But longing fulfilled is a tree of life.

STONE
Amen amen. The world worships a victim; expose their abuse and you become living martyrs on the world stage, praised by all. *You think you're famous now...* Get off those knees! Take to the mountaintop where you belong! Claim *your* Jubilee!

Stone's words stir Bennie; as everyone holds their breath, he wrestles his thoughts. But in the end...

BENNIE
We promised the world a monument to freedom; I won't rest until I'm feeling those bricks.

He takes a breath, owns his decision, and exits. The singers seethe.

STONE
Not to worry, he'll come around...
(hands Loudin the exposé)
When his cage gets too tight, sweetness, this is the key. Cable me from anywhere and I'll bring the world to your feet. Remember... I'm with you always.

They solemnly shake on it. Then --

MAGGIE
Meanwhile, if it's fireworks they want, let's start the show.

They trade portentous nods.

EXT. DEPARTING STEAMER - STORM-CLOUDED DAY

From the ship's stern, the Jubilees wave farewells to thousands of friends and fans ashore. Susan is among the crowd; she and White lock eyes with each other across the agonizing chasm.

Ella is alone at the bow, staring at the content of the envelope: the DEED to her new, empty house. She sighs. Then steeling herself for what comes next, she looks out to the violent waters ahead.

We BOOM UP, high above Ella, high above the ship into the STORM CLOUDS until we're lost in churning mists, then

DISSOLVE TO:

TOURING IRELAND - RAPID-FIRE MONTAGE

REVIVALS, SHELTERS, SOUP KITCHENS, HOSPITALS, ORPHANAGES.

The Jubilees tirelessly uplift spirits everywhere, forging deep bonds with the Irish.

DISSOLVE TO:

KANSAS CONSTRUCTION SITE - MONTHS LATER

Wallace spiritlessly oversees the construction of new homes. Bearded and bedraggled, he works ruggedly but with lifeless eyes.

CUT TO:

INT. FOREMAN'S TENT - LUNCHTIME

As Wallace polishes off a flask, a beautiful WOMAN enters, sets a box of deliveries before him then kisses him. He lets her, while anxiously rummaging through the box.

He pulls up what he's looking for - an Irish newspaper. He braces himself, then flips through it and stops on a page. His eyes fire with anguish. He slams it down and we PUSH IN to the headline:

"JUBILEE HOAX? EMBATTLED CHOIR UNDER CRIMINAL INVESTIGATION."

INT. CROWN INTERROGATION ROOM - IRELAND

A sweltering underground chamber. A severely fatigued Ella is being savaged by the Prosecutor. To our alarm, he's none other than VETTER, the snarling prig from Argyll mansion. The tension between them is blistering: she strains to endure his venom, but months of grueling work have worn her and her patience to shreds.

VETTER
Yet another postponement! Like your truant Lord, that damned building just doesn't want to appear! Now it's --

ELLA
December, final word. The news from headquarters today was a blow to us all. Construction's hit --

VETTER
-- "a few more snags," thanks to this pesky recession.

ELLA
Depression, now - your own economists are calling it the downturn of the century. It's crippled construction everywhere.

VETTER
Rot! The economy is a smokescreen and your records will prove it, which is why I've summoned you. Your people are stonewalling; the documents I subpoenaed are but dribbling in.

ELLA
Mr. Vetter, you've demanded quite the laundry list: receipts, invoices --

VETTER
-- ledgers, logs, bank statements, booking agreements, petty cash disbursements down to the penny! I want an encyclopedic tracking of every cent siphoned from British pockets!

ELLA
Sir... the revenues I remit to New York are allocated first to Jubilee Hall, then to the hundreds of campuses this tour also sustains, each of which generates its own litany of expenditures. That's tens of thousands of documents, and you want --

VETTER
Notarized facsimiles of each.

ELLA
I advise *patience*.

VETTER
Pathologically!

ELLA
(stands to go)
I've got somewhere to b--

VETTER
<u>Sit down</u>!

She glares at him, then obeys.

VETTER
I expected that imbecile White here; my men tell me he hasn't been seen for weeks. Where is he?!

ELLA
Indisposed.

VETTER
Meaning?!

ELLA
"Unavailable," as it does.

VETTER
Watch it, Miss Sheppard, I'm the face of the law.

ELLA
Really, the *face?*

Again, she stands.

VETTER
SIT DOWN!

ELLA
I have full power of attorney; I'm afraid you're stuck with me.

VETTER
No, you're stuck with me! The Jubilee Singers are under investigation for fraud, embezzlement and racketeering!

ELLA
We've committed no crime!

VETTER
You whip the *Congregation of England* into raptures proclaiming the "Great, Glorious Coming of Jubilee Hall," plunder their purses, then when you've got all eyes looking to the clouds abscond to Ireland and hit *replay?!* You are the crime! Silk-robed swindlers, you've got the world touching the hem of your garment, but I'll prove you're false as hell, you and your fictitious "Monument to Freedom"!

ELLA
You're wrong. We've sent you the permits...

VETTER
You haven't been prophesying *permits.*

ELLA
Construction-site photos...

VETTER
Impossible to authenticate. Nothing will absolve you but a government-issued *Certificate of Completion,* and we both know that's not going to happen.

ELLA
Then arrest us.

VETTER
I'd have *gallowed* you long ago if I had unfettered power. But you understand fetters... The Prime Minister's blessing on your tour following Her Majesty's unfortunate benediction *set my hooves on eggshells.*

ELLA
You can't touch us without hard evidence. Welcome to justice.

VETTER
Justice is the firing squad you'll soon face. The Prime Minister is coming around.

ELLA
Bluff on. Mr. Gladstone is a patron and friend, and *he* at least understands depressions.

VETTER
True that, which is why, *as I haunt his ear,* he's losing sleep trying to rationalize how a bunch of beggarly missionaries from a cash-strapped charity could afford those lap-of-luxury lifestyles we all so publicly witnessed.

The room feels hotter. Ella wipes her forehead.

ELLA
The choir's hands never touch the till; we're paid salaries from New York.

VETTER
And a king's ransom I'll prove they are, public donations *laundered* into exorbitant paychecks. The hunt is on, Miss Sheppard.

CLOSE ON ELLA - His threat conjures something deep, something *ancient* within her. Her searing eyes seize his.

ELLA
Mr. Vetter, you've hunted me all my life; from my birth until this moment, there hasn't been an hour I haven't felt your breath on my neck. Only I swore long ago to keep you behind me. On December 10th, those "clouds" will part, Jubilee Hall will appear, and you *will* believe.

VETTER
Feculent scum!

ELLA
(stands to go)
We're through.

VETTER
Decidedly. See, what shattered the old man's heart was this, courtesy of Nashville public records:
(pulls out a document)
A Certificate of Completion - for a brand new home built on choice waterfront property by a young woman who according to customs was penniless upon her arrival here. "How is it, sir," *I press,* "that while Jubilee Hall languishes unbuilt, this lavish house a literal stone's throw away was miraculously *passed over* by this "downturn of the century"?

Rattled, for the first time Ella is speechless.

VETTER
His reaction exactly. As it sank in that he, Her Majesty and the whole of Britain were playing the catamite to a company of cons, I saw the scales of faith fall from his eyes. He assured me that should just one untidy document come to light or Jubilee Hall be delayed once more, he'd *unchain* me - which I pray happens before you destroy *each other,* the Jubilee Singers being, after all, a choir at war.
(gets in her face)
So <u>run</u>, Miss Sheppard, as fast as you can. I AM the fire of your hell, the fury of your nightmares; and after making a bloody spectacle of your arrest and trial, I will damn you to the dungeons, where <u>I</u> swear you won't see daylight until your Lord returns.

EXT. PACKED-OUT STADIUM - DAY

A MASSIVE REVIVAL. Tens of thousands weep, cheer and *catch the spirit* as the Jubilees raise the roof.

But up close, we see that the choir is crumbling; battered by sickness and exhaustion, they're barely able to stand. Ominously, Bennie is plagued with a grave cough.

Suddenly, DRAMA STRIKES. As Minnie sings a high-flying solo --

MINNIE
When Jesus is my portion?
My constant friend is he.
His eye is on the sparrow...

-- Maggie brazenly hijacks it. Upstaging Minnie, she strides out front, blows kisses to the crowd, then breaks out in a flashy solo that soars to the heights and careens through a wild tangle of keys.

MAGGIE
I've hearrrrrd of a cityyyyy called
Heaaaaa-vennnnnn...

The choir panics; they're lost amidst Maggie's twisted harmonies. The performance tailspins towards a crash landing.

Ella groans, then scrambles to the piano and launches an anti-ballistic solo, strafing Maggie with chords to force her into key.

Maggie fires back with chromatic vocal maneuvers that force Ella to follow. Blow by breathtaking blow, they clash like gladiators in an epic musical dogfight as the crowd sits at the edge of their seats.

Finally, Ella torpedoes Maggie with a TURBO CHORD. It locks her into key. Ella quickly cues the choir; they enter *en force* and end the song with spectacular flair. The fans goes wild.

BACKSTAGE, AFTER THE SHOW

As they charge towards the exit, Minnie bursts into tears. Shouts and insults fly between factions. Ella rips into Maggie.

ELLA
Hope you enjoyed your last solo, Maggie.
Minnie, you're now lead.

MAGGIE
I'm not playing second to that baby!

ELLA
Welcome to the background.

We stay with Ella as she charges to the exit. Then we hear SCREAMS.

She turns back. Maggie has snapped; she's physically ATTACKING the petite Minnie, furiously thrashing her on the floor.

Tom and Bennie lunge into the fray to pull Maggie off. She SHRIEKS at their touch. As stunned stagehands look on, they all wrestle across the floor, violently knocking over equipment.

They pry Maggie off. Bennie is convulsing; Minnie is bleeding; but it's Maggie that clutches herself, weeping as if *she's* been violated.

She staggers to the door, cursing them all.

MAGGIE
I don't need any of you! I'm going to London; I'm going to make it on my own!

ELLA
Dead end, Maggie!

She storms out. Then before the door can slam shut --

ELLA
Get off him!

-- Ella's glare turns to Georgia. Tense from the drama, she's clutching Loudin intimately. Ella RIPS THEM APART.

ELLA
This is a choir, not a harem!

GEORGIA
What we do is our business!

ELLA
Not when your public indiscretions cost us patrons! For the last time, stay clear of him and his bed!

GEORGIA
Pity an iceberg like you will never know what a good bed is for! Even a volcano like Wallace couldn't thaw *that!*

ELLA
It stops now!

GEORGIA
Or what?! What are you going to do, controlling bitc--

ELLA
Goodbye, Georgia.

Everyone gasps; we know what this means. Too proud to beg, Georgia cops an attitude and turns to Loudin.

GEORGIA
Let's go, baby. We don't need this.

But Loudin has no intention of leaving. He drops her hand.

ELLA
Your ticket home will be at the hotel.

Georgia flushes with humiliation. No one can believe what's happening. But before anyone can react, we hear --

MINNIE
BENNIE!

Everyone looks to the floor. BENNIE HAS COLLAPSED.

INT. HOSPITAL WAITING ROOM - NEXT MORNING

Tension is thick as the choir awaits news. Bloodless and bone-weary, they look ghastly, none worse than the sickly, emaciated White, who wears a hospital robe, already admitted.

Despite her condition, Ella relentlessly works, slogging through mountains of tour mail at a makeshift desk.

DR. FREARS enters in a grim state of mind. They rush him.

WHITE
Can we see him?

DR. FREARS
I'm afraid not. How many shows yesterday?

IKE
Three. Plus speeches, receptions, travel --
(glowers at Ella)
-- and of course, rehearsals.

DR. FREARS
Good God. We're still running tests --

Just then, an amiable telegram man, SEAN, enters and tips his hat.

SEAN
Telegram for Miss Sheppard.

White jealously snatches it. Awkward. Sean tips his hat --

SEAN
Godspeed Mr. Holmes' recovery. Ireland is thankful for you.

-- and exits. White reads the cable. The news is bad.

WHITE
It's Cravath. We need to raise more money. We leave Ireland tonight for Wales, then Scotland.

LOUDIN
What about our vacations?? Vacation starts tomorrow.

WHITE
Canceled. We work straight into December.
(then his face goes pale)
They're *doubling* the daily schedule.

The room erupts in panic.

DR. FREARS
What do they want from you, blood?!

ELLA
Let's calm down --

DR. FREARS
Calm down? This hospital is *already* your second home!

ELLA
No one is forced to work when sick; I tell them not to.

WHITE
But they *do,* to keep up with you.

Ella glares White silent.

DR. FREARS
Do you have any idea how potentially serious Ben's condition is?

ELLA
He's resting, we've got *Wicklow* in an hour. We make our day then leave for Wales.

LOUDIN
Send us a postcard; we'll be soaking up rays in Nice. Our contracts give us vacations.

She whips out their contract.

ELLA
"The AMA is authorized to suspend said vacations as needed." Paragraph six.

Loudin and Ike trade looks; apparently they'd forgotten that.

LOUDIN
Screw the fine print; we'll arbitrate.

ELLA
"The AMA shall arbitrate all disputes, and its decisions shall be permanently binding." You signed it, and per your demand it's ironclad. *Don't cross my lawyers.*

IKE
You're full of it.

ELLA
They've already put out word on Maggie. Know where she'll be in a month? Singing in Nashville, for pigeons and stray dogs. She won't find work washing windows here.

IKE
You killed her career.

ELLA
It was suicide; be kinder to your own.

Just then, we hear a COMMOTION in the hallway. NURSES chase the feeble Bennie into the room. He looks bad.

DR. FREARS
Bennie, you've got to lie down!

LOUDIN
Vacations canceled, workload doubled. Stand with us, Ben.

Bennie is alarmed. Loudin and Ike shoot him ominous looks. Ella catches the cryptic exchange.

ELLA
Don't do it, Ben. Whatever this is, don't do it.

Her eyes mean business. Bennie processes the situation... sighs... then buttons his coat.

BENNIE
Wicklow.

Loudin and Ike seethe. Ella charges for the door.

ELLA
<u>Let's move</u>!

CUT TO:

EXT. HOSPITAL - JUST AFTER

As the choir hustles to the coach, White chases Ella down.

WHITE
What the hell?! I'm suspending this tour!

ELLA
I can't let that happen.

WHITE
Get off your high horse, Ella! I've missed a few shows, but you're still my assistant! Those are my kids!

ELLA
Our parents went through worse.

WHITE
Is that a joke?!

ELLA
Do *indictments* sound like a joke?? I'm just navigating reality. *Reality!*

He bristles at the insinuation. Just then, Sean races up.

SEAN
This just in. I'm afraid it's not good.

He hands her a telegram. She reads it... and gasps.

ELLA
Oh God. Julia.

WHITE
Julia Hayden?? What happened??

ELLA
The Knights just attacked Fisk. They murdered her, in my classroom teaching my students.

They reel. So do we; we remember Julia's shimmering eyes.

ELLA
If we let up, they win. We stop when Jubilee Hall stands.

WHITE
(his head swimming)
Jubilee Hall, the Knights... seems like another world.

Now at the coach, the singers board. White's eyes flush with shame.

WHITE
I don't hear them anymore.

ELLA
The songs.

WHITE
I fight to hold on, but the *other side* seems so far away.

CLOSE ON ELLA - her eyes confess the same.

WHITE
We've healed so many... what heals *us?*
(then, ashamed)
Don't write me off, Sam.

ELLA
You need rest. Go back inside.

He listlessly nods. They come *this close* to hugging but don't.

She boards the coach, leaving White at the curb. As the coach races off, it WIPES FRAME to reveal a marquee across the street:

The Blackfoots are now in Ireland.

WE FADE OUT...

HOLD ON BLACK...

THEN FADE UP TO A MARQUEE:

"TOMORROW: JUBILEE HALL GRAND OPENING GALA!"

Many months have passed. We're facing the darkened SCOTLAND GRAND THEATRE on a frigid December night. As the cold winds howl, we hear a choir in its death throws.

JUBILEES (O.S.)
This is the day of Jubilee, God's --

ELLA (O.S.)
No! Where's the chord?! Again!

JUBILEES (O.S.)
This is the day of J--

ELLA (O.S.)
F-Almost-Sharp is no chord!

The lifeless voices aren't coming from the theatre, but the adjacent SANATORIUM. We PUSH IN to the sanatorium, ENTER the basement window, and find ourselves in --

INT. SANATORIUM BASEMENT (CONTINUOUS)

-- the building's catacombs, a mortuary for defunct equipment.

A nail-biting rehearsal is taking place here. We don't yet reveal the choir but SETTLE ON the pained face of the painter Havell, trying to break in as he watches the scene before him.

HAVELL
Miss Sheppard, if I could just --

ELLA (O.S.)
Our closing show is the talk of Europe, and we're not going out like screeching bats. Now give me the chord!

IKE (O.S.)
We gave it to you at six shows today!

ELLA (O.S.)
And sounded drugged at every one!

LOUDIN (O.S.)
Like we're <u>not</u>?! I thought Master knew how to flog a dead Negro!

HAVELL
(leaps to his feet)
Please! I capture your faces, finish the portrait in London. Without faces, I can do nothing. It's now or never.

We CUT TO the choir and gasp: After a brutal eternity of punishing work, they're walking corpses, as cadaverous as the machines around them. Ella's hands shake with palsy, her ears plugged with bloodied gauze. Bennie has withered to bones. The decaying White is propped up on crutches. All wear patient robes as nurses stand watch.

BENNIE
(bitter)
Havell's no joke; he damn sure gonna claim that royal commission before we drop!

This isn't the Bennie we know; illness has poisoned his morale.

HAVELL
In fact, I've declined payment from Her Majesty. This is... *for me.*

Havell's eyes tell us the choir have become dear to him. Ella growls, then grants him --

ELLA
Five minutes.

Havell springs into action, herding everyone in front of his camera.

HAVELL
Places places, faces faces!
(small talk as they scramble)
Congratulations on Jubilee Hall; you got the best of that tosser Vetter.

The invalid White again claims center spot, now almost desperately. He bristles at Loudin's glare.

WHITE
You hate that I'm in this.

LOUDIN
I'd rip you out if I could.

White is shaken.

WHITE
I belong.

Havell looks around --

HAVELL
Where are Miss Porter and Miss Gordon?

IKE
(glowers at Ella)
"Indisposed."

Havell grunts, but his camera is set. The Jubilees paste on smiles, but smiling corpses aren't pretty.

HAVELL
Glow for Havell! One, two, three!

As the flash goes off, Loudin and Ike flip Havell the bird.

LOUDIN
Just remembered, posing *ain't* in our contract.

They head for the door --

IKE
Screw your portrait, screw your chord!
After this morning, we're *free at last, free at last!*

LOUDIN
Thank God Almighty!

-- and brashly exit.

INT. ELLA'S ROOM/MAKESHIFT OFFICE (3 AM)

A packing party is underway. Racing to wrap up tour business, Ella and allies Tom, Minnie and America slog through an impossible backlog of mail, direly ill but pushing themselves relentlessly.

MINNIE
We'll never get through this.

ELLA
Back to your rooms, guys, I mean it!

TOM
You sleep, we sleep. Besides, we've got the whole Atlantic as our mattress on the way home.

Ella groans, yet marvels at their valor. Then, a gasp --

AMERICA
My God...

They turn to Merrie. She's holding up an official envelope.

AMERICA
This is it.

It's from America. Merrie looks at Ella, nods *"Are you ready?"*, then hands it to her as if it were infinitely fragile.

Ella's eyes widen; it's from THE MISSING PERSONS BUREAU.

Her heart races. She looks to the others; they nod *open it.* Hands shaking, she catches her breath, clasps the envelope, then --

The door FLIES OPEN. It's a very upset White.

WHITE
Cravath and Susan just got in town. *We're* screwed.

INT. SANATORIUM LOBBY - JUST AFTER

Ella and White hit the roof over what Susan is telling them.

ELLA
Unbelievable!

SUSAN
We wrote you!

ELLA
We're drowning in mail; you should have cabled!

SUSAN
So that Vetter's men could intercept it?

WHITE
As we speak, everyone from the King of Saxony to the Queen of Holland is trekking here to revel in a "spectacular celebration" of "last week's" grand opening of Jubilee Hall, an event you're telling us - *six hours before curtain* - never happened!

SUSAN
Let's not panic.

WHITE
It's not your head at the axe!

ELLA
What's the delay now?!

SUSAN
Just final corrections to meet code. We're talking three weeks.

ELLA
You knew today was do-or-die. What in your letter spares us the rack?

SUSAN
Hope, hopefully. One man can stop Vetter.

WHITE
The Prime Minister. He'll be there *with* Vetter and a legion of cops to very publicly arrest us the moment we welsh. Oh yeah, he was on our side once!

ELLA
Mr. Gladstone stayed cordial with us even during Vetter's investigation. Then he just cut us off; we don't know why.

SUSAN
We do. As it turns out, he'd been writing warm letters to the AMA seeking clarification on the delays. They were the letters of a friend looking for any means to exonerate us.

They glare at her for the punchline.

SUSAN
In our busyness, we never wrote back.

WHITE
Brilliant!

SUSAN
When we realized what we'd done, we wrote him begging his forbearance, saying we'd meet with him personally here in Scotland.

ELLA
You enclosed that letter for me to take to him.

SUSAN
I can still get to him before the show.

WHITE
Not a chance he buys it.

SUSAN
Criminals don't cross the Atlantic to *meet* the law.

ELLA
It's all we've got. All right, I'll draft an explanation and face the crowd. We do the show, and assuming Gladstone believes us let the choir recuperate then knock out the last three weeks.

SUSAN
That's not the plan.

They look at her sideways.

WHITE/ELLA
<u>Translate</u>.

SUSAN
You don't keep up. The South is under siege; the Knights are waging a *reign of terror* against our voters. With the elections around the corner, we don't have a day to spare. To finish Jubilee Hall, we need fresh revenue. We've booked you into high-end concert halls across Europe; your tour launches today.

WHITE
You're out of your mind!

SUSAN
You're seeing faces. Blot them out.

WHITE
They're barely alive! Bennie's dying!

SUSAN
Blot them out. It's their duty --

WHITE
Don't talk duty to me; they've been warriors in this from Day One!

SUSAN
They're heroes, hands down. God knows we could have thousands at their feet --

WHITE
Save it!

SUSAN
Three weeks!

WHITE
And if I choose decency!

SUSAN
Then damn you at a time like this!

WHITE
We're damned all right, you saw to that! *Keep up* and we kill ourselves; *let up* and we detonate civilization! And it's moot anyway because Vetter's about to guillotine us all! Well-played, Miss Gilbert! I'll take the guillotine. *Ella!*

But Ella doesn't move; her head grinds, processing it all.

He eyes Ella to leave with him. She doesn't move; her head grinds, processing it all.

WHITE
You're not listening to this?!

He glowers at her --

WHITE
How do you live with yourself?

-- turns his glare to Susan --

WHITE
You... I never knew you.

-- then exits. They both want to die. Ella deflects.

ELLA
How are Maggie and Georgia?

SUSAN
Surviving, if you call cleaning livery stables surviving. The depression's hit Nashville hard.

ELLA
Where's Cravath?

SUSAN
Pacing the streets like a madman. With all that's happening here and back home, he's been half out of his mind trying to find a *final solution.*

ELLA
Final solution?? To...

SUSAN
Everything. He hasn't slept in months; I've never seen him like this.

Susan sets out a stack of TRAVEL TICKETS.

SUSAN
First stop, Germany; home of Beethoven, Bach and the most cutthroat critics on Earth. We need the choir in top form.

ELLA
(caustic)
I'll get back to you.

She stands to go. Susan grabs her arm.

SUSAN
Lose this election, Miss Sheppard, and the *epitaph of hope* forever bears your name. Just three weeks seals your legacy. Make up your mind what side of destiny you want to stand on.

Ella's eyes glaze over. She shakes off Susan's arm and staggers off.

CUT TO TEXT:

"... SARAH SHEPPARD HAS BEEN LOCATED.
CITY OF RESIDENCE: BELLEVUE, TENNESSEE..."

Falling tears smear the ink. We WIDEN to the --

SANATORIUM ROOFTOP (5 AM)

-- where Ella sits under the full moon and dark passing clouds, gazing at the letter.

Merrie enters.

AMERICA
Well, Mr. White broke the news.

ELLA
How did they take it?

AMERICA
Colorfully. Loudin and Ike threatened holy hell if the tour went on, but Tom and Minnie are a go if you give the word. And despite his fire and brimstone, Mr. White won't abandon the choir.

ELLA
Ben?

AMERICA
Took it hard... real hard, actually. Went off somewhere with Loudin and Ike.

ELLA
Huh, in *this* cold?

AMERICA
Ben always comes through; it's *you* I'm checking in on. You've got a call to make.

Ella feels the weight of those words.

ELLA
What would you do, Merrie?

AMERICA
What I always do...
(smiles, then takes a seat beside Ella)
I'd ask myself what Ella Sheppard would do. I trust her with my life.

Ella groans... more weight. Merrie's eyes light up; she spots the Bureau letter.

AMERICA
Well??

ELLA
She's a half-hour from Nashville.

AMERICA
Yesss! And proud she'll be when her daughter comes home a conquering hero.

But Ella's face flushes with dread.

AMERICA
Come on! You know they'll be lining the streets for our "triumphal return," hurling confetti as we pass through. I bet the Bureau has told Miss Sarah all about you, and she's out front beaming at her daughter. Then at long last, you bring her *home* to the life of your dreams: sitting arm-in-arm at the river, sipping tea on the porch, *pinkies up.* She's waiting for you; I feel it.

ELLA
I- I don't think so, Merrie.

AMERICA
Sweetie! Why wouldn't she be?

Ella shudders; horrific memories haunt her eyes.

ELLA
Mr. Bo... the others... what happened to Momma. There were so many faces.

AMERICA
Listen to me, Ella Sheppard. You were *three;* what happened that night wasn't your doing.

Ella sobs, wishing she could believe that. Merrie clasps her hands.

AMERICA
There's a girl I pray for.

ELLA
A girl, Merrie?

AMERICA
A precious princess with a smile as wide as a barn. I call her *my girl.* She deserved all the joy and innocence of youth, but was crushed with chains of guilt as heavy as the world then sent running to redeem herself. She's something, my girl - her trophies could fill a room, but her hands are ever too empty. You see, saving the world wouldn't add a penny to her worth, only she can't bring herself to believe it, or that her mother's heart could be more than a prize to win. Those chains have already stolen her youth; *Dear God, don't let them take her life.* Whatever you decide, we're with you, but I want those chains broken; I want my girl freed.

She kisses Ella's forehead then exits, leaving her alone under the night sky.

Thinning clouds bathe Ella in stark moonlight. Strong for so long, she looks frayed and unnaturally old, as if a lifetime of borrowed strength were coming fatefully due.

Straining to take in Merrie's words, she cradles herself and rocks to and fro, soothing her troubled soul.

Then steeling herself, she closes her eyes... takes a breath...

... and sings.

ELLA
S-ste-steal away, s-steal aw-wayy to Jesus. S-teal away, Lord...

Or tries to. Harrowed by nightmares, singing *Steal Away* is torture, every syllable excruciating to utter.

She presses herself to sing on, clutching herself almost violently...

ELLA
I-I a-ain't got l-long to s-stay here...

... then breaks down, unable to go on. As she weeps into her fists, we TILT UP to the bleak heavens and

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. SCOTLAND GRAND THEATRE - GALA RED-CARPET EVENT - DAY

A star-studded frenzy; fans crowd the theatre as celebrities enter.

Ella scans the scene, then zeroes in on Gladstone. He's approaching with Vetter and an ARMY OF COPS. Susan swoops in and intercepts him.

SUSAN
Mr. Prime Minister, how do you do? Susan Gilbert, AMA...

Ella crosses her fingers. Just then REPORTERS throng her:

REPORTERS
WHAT WILL BENNIE'S PRESS ANNOUNCEMENT BE?
HOW DID THE LIBERATOR GET THE EXCLUSIVE?

Ella is speechless. Then she spots JONAS STONE; he's boasting to other reporters about his forthcoming scoop.

She growls.

INT. SCOTLAND GRAND THEATRE - BACKSTAGE

Tension is thick as the singers await curtain.

White sweats bullets as he peers out at the packed house: Vetter's cops are taking up positions as Susan urgently chats up Gladstone.

Ella CHARGES IN and confronts Loudin, Ike and a fidgeting Bennie.

ELLA
So it's war.

IKE
You taught us the art.

WHITE
What's this??

ELLA
A *coup.* Curtain rises, we take our bows, then they step forward with shocking news of the AMA's mortal sins, witnessed by the esteemed Benjamin Holmes, which the public can read all about in The Liberator.

LOUDIN
Brava.

WHITE
(realizes)
The scandal takes us down, leaves them the choir --

ELLA
-- and paints them as victims in Vetter's eyes. Whatever you've got, it's dirt.

LOUDIN
Mud, and the avalanche buries you.

The MANAGER enters.

MANAGER
All seated; the house is yours.

LOUDIN
(confident)
Let's do this.

ELLA
<u>Hold it</u>. You're in bed with a hustler. Jonas Stone is setting you up.

BENNIE
The Liberator is a crusader for justice.

ELLA
Homework, Bennie. The Liberator was a lawless, bottom-feeding tab*loid* so corrupt that Vetter shut it down five years ago, which is why the print room is in cobwebs, you've never actually read an issue, and Stone's name is a punchline in every office in London. After his stint for criminal libel, Stone trekked from Damascus to DC looking for money to restart the paper, but no one would fund a felon. Then lo --
(indicates them)
-- paydirt. Wake up! Stone knows the AMA would unleash its lawyers against your mutiny, making for the trial of the century. His inside scoop on our *mutual* destruction is what resurrects the Liberator. Stand down, Bennie; we're pressing on with this tour.

Bennie sighs. The Manager reenters.

MANAGER
They're restless.

ELLA
(confident)
Let's do this.

CRAVATH (O.S.)
HOLD IT!

The door BLASTS OPEN. In blows Cravath with a QUINTET OF BLACK SINGERS in overcoats. No one can believe their eyes; it's --

MINNIE
The Blackfoots!

CRAVATH
Dressing rooms, hurry!

The Blackfoots exit. Everyone freaks out.

ELLA
What are they --

CRAVATH
Fresh blood, a stable full.
(marvels at his luck)
They're in town, just started vacation, they've got your songs down. They're joining this tour.

TOM
You grind us down then freshen up the act with minstrels?!

CRAVATH
This tour will never again be held hostage to sickness... or treason.

The Blackfoots return in costume looking like Jubilee clones, only fresh and perky. The sight sickens everyone.

CRAVATH
Splendid. Miss Sheppard?

CLOSE ON ELLA - Mortified, her face beads with sweat. Pushed to the brink, we sense her strength and sanity cracking.

As the crowd CLAPS for the show, she calls up to the rafters.

ELLA
Mr. Dunham, two more keylights, please. Fire up four and seven...

All are incredulous.

WHITE
Have you sold your soul?!

ELLA
Stipple lenses, pale amber frost...

As she goes on giving orders, Tom LUNGES up to Cravath.

TOM
Three weeks my ass! When does this end?!

CRAVATH
Get on that stage.

TOM
I asked you a question!

CRAVATH
You're not being paid to demand answers!

TOM
(grabs him by the collar)
Heartless prick! When is enough *enough,* when we're laid out at the morgue?

CRAVATH
Not even then; this choir will outlive every one of you! Gutless hypocrites - you sing "I'm a Soldier of the Cross" then faint when the wind blows!

Tom CLUTCHES his throat. Fury makes Tom a powerhouse.

TOM
LAST CHANCE! WHEN DOES THIS DAMNED TOUR END?!

CRAVATH
(choking)
J-Jubilee H-hall is almost buil--

TOM
LYING CROOK!

CRAVATH
J-just w-windows, d-doors --

TOM
FINISH THAT AND YOU DIE! WHEN WILL JUBILEE HALL BE DONE? ***WHEN?! WHEN?!***

Cravath holds out until an inch from of death, then --

CRAVATH
There is no Jubilee Hall! I aborted construction!

The news EXPLODES like a bombshell. Furious SHOUTS and ACCUSATIONS. White reels in disbelief. Ella slumps to the floor as if hit by a truck.

MINNIE
You monster!

CRAVATH
We *were* building Jubilee Hall, delays and all. Then Julia Hayden's murder changed everything; it was a wake-up call as to how defenseless our people were. To keep our campuses from becoming killing fields "by any means necessary," we needed vastly more fortifications and armed guards. The depression had bankrupted us, so I did what I had to!

MINNIE
But our Monument to Freedom, to inspire the voters --

CRAVATH
The dead don't vote! The South you left is a human slaughterhouse and every murder scares more of our voters off! We're in survival mode!

IKE
You strung us along! You should have told us what we'd be in for!

CRAVATH
So you could desert your post to "soak up rays in Nice"? You needed blinders! This tour is our last stand against the Knights; if we lose the Civil Rights Bill, America --

LOUDIN
To hell with America! We've sacrificed enough for you!

CRAVATH
For *me?!* Look at my skin! This is the color of *freedom* - my people will always, effortlessly be free! It's <u>your</u> people that Southern Cross is set to annihilate!

Never a rebel at heart, Bennie bites the bullet.

BENNIE
I'll stick it out. Just a few days rest.

CRAVATH
Not on your life.

IKE
(re: the Blackfoots)
You've got your suck-ups. We're rebels.

CRAVATH
I don't care if you're cancer itself; you're *purebreds* - original Jubilees! It's your pedigree the public pays for! Until I say "It is finished," you're chained to this tour!

BENNIE
You devil, I'm taking *this* public; I'm going to destroy the AMA!

CRAVATH
Wake up, you *are* the AMA! Your fat paychecks authenticate everything we do! That's right, heaven forbid Vetter gets proof your caviar-la*ced let's-put-Marie-Antoinette-to-shame life*styles <u>were</u> funded by donations. How else could we afford those ungodly salaries?! <u>If we go down, you go down</u>! Now get over your pity party and take to that stage! And clean up those sorry faces!

IKE
You want our smiles?!

CRAVATH
I want your dentures! God help me that curtain's about to rise, and I'll be damned if it reveals a band of sniveling weaklings!

IKE
And what will it reveal?!

CRAVATH
Exactly what I'm paying for!

IKE
And what's that?!

CRAVATH
Get on that stage!

LOUDIN
WHAT?!

CRAVATH
A GLOWING, RADIANT CHOIR - VIBRANT AS SPRING, FRESH AS WINTER'S WIND! AND ON HER CUE, YOU WILL OPEN THOSE INFERNAL MOUTHS AND PRODUCE HEAVENLY SOUNDS - COSTUMES SHIMMERING; FACES BEAMING; YOUR WHOLE WRETCHED ESSENCE EXUDING TRANSCENDENT JOY! HOW YOU *ACHIEVE* THAT EFFECT OR HOW *EXTRINSIC* IT IS TO YOUR NATURE OR CIRCUMSTANCES I COULDN'T CARE LESS! YOU WILL BRING DOWN THE HOUSE, THEN WHILE MISS GILBERT AND I CHARM THE STING OUT OF GLADSTONE, MAKE A BEELINE FOR THE GREENROOM AND BLITZ THOSE REPORTERS WITH A BATTERY OF WINSOME INTERVIEWS IN WHICH EVERY WORD OUT OF THOSE CANTANKEROUS THROATS REVERBERATES WITH THE HARMONY OF EDEN AND A MENDELSSOHNIAN CHORUS OF PRAISE FOR THE AMA, AFTER WHICH YOU'LL DRAG THOSE WHINY BACKSIDES TO THE HOTEL, PACK, AND AT FOURTEEN HUNDRED HOURS BOARD THE *SS SCHWITZEN* FOR THE CONTINENT!

WHITE
Son of a -- I won't let you --

CRAVATH
(to Security)
GET HIM OUT!

WHITE
What's the meaning of this?!

CRAVATH
You have no meaning; you've been out of a job all year! Just ask Miss Sheppard.

WHITE
Ella??

Ella flushes with horror. White's eyes beg her to refute it, but she can't even look at him.

CRAVATH
NOW! I'M PAYING FOR THIS!

Ella SHRIEKS as guards SEIZE White and HAUL him out to the curb. As the door slams shut, he furiously POUNDS and SHOUTS --

WHITE (O.S.)
ELLA! ELLA! ELLA!!

-- shattering her soul. Cravath's glare turns to Ella.

CRAVATH
Start this show, Miss Sheppard.

But Ella is dying. She lies cowering on the floor, shaking and sweating, her mind and body gravely deteriorating.

As the audience STOMPS for the show, Cravath circles his prey.

CRAVATH
Up, Ella! She expects great things of you; don't crawl back with empty hands!

She SHRIEKS for him to stop.

CRAVATH
All of Europe is out there! Dazzle them and the world is yours; conquer the world and even *she* can't deny your worth!

AMERICA
Leave her alone!

Merrie runs for Ella, but he grabs a STEEL PIPE and beats her back.

CRAVATH
This the endgame, Ella! The Knights are butchering thousands and chanting for Hiram's head; they're plotting an all-out bloodbath in Nashville! Only you can stop the holocaust!

Swooning violently, she clutches her head as if shrapnel were blasting through it.

CRAVATH
FAIL, AND THE BLOOD OF THOUSANDS IS ON YOUR HANDS! FAIL, AND THE DREAM DIES ON YOUR WATCH! FAIL, AND SHE SEES YOU FOR WHAT YOU ARE! GET UP, ELLA!! GET UP!!

Her head EXPLODES in a HORRIFIC NIGHTMARE:

SLAUGHTER. SCREAMS. TORMENTED FACES. RIVERS OF BLOOD. HIRAM'S FACE SHOUTING *"GET UP!"* FACES BEYOND THE CURTAIN THUNDERING *"GET UP!"* MOMMA SCREAMING *"GET UP, SAM! GET UP!"*

Terror-struck and delirious, she tries to hoist herself up --

ELLA
Get up, Ella! Get up!

-- but SWOONS and CRASHES down.

Cravath goes rabid; he SMASHES the floor beside her with the pipe -- ***WHACK!!***

CRAVATH
SHE KNEW YOUR BIRTH WAS A BLIGHT ON THIS EARTH! SHE DROWNED YOU ONCE; BETRAY HER NOW AND SHE'LL DISOWN YOU FOREVER!

WHACK WHACK!! She SCREAMS for him to stop, but he BLUDGEONS her relentlessly -- ***WHACK WHACK WHACK WHACK!!***

Vetter's cops rush backstage but he BEATS THEM BACK like a madman.

CRAVATH
THE ONLY WAY BACK TO HER IS THROUGH THAT CURTAIN! ***WHACK WHACK!!*** GET THOSE BODIES ON THAT STAGE! ***WHACK WHACK WHACK!!***

Her heart blasting out of her chest, she SCREAMS at her broken body to rise --

ELLA
Get up, God damn you! Stand to your feet!

CRAVATH
DON'T GIVE OUT, YOU COWARD!!

-- but again swoons.

Raging out of his mind, Cravath comes at her BASHING EVERYTHING IN SIGHT -- ***SMASH WHACK CRASH!!*** -- DEMOLISHING THE THEATRE.

CRAVATH
START THIS SHOW OR I'LL DAMN YOUR LIVES TO OBLIVION!! ***CRASH SMASH WHACK!!*** THOSE CONTRACTS ARE MY TITLE DEED TO YOUR HIDES! THEY GRANT ME YOUR VOICES, YOUR BODY, AND YOUR BUCKASS OBEDIENCE!! ***WHACK CRASH SMASH!!*** I BOUGHT YOU! I OWN YOU! YOU'RE MY PROPERTY!

ELLA
STAND TO YOUR FEET, YOU WORTHLESS TRASH! YOU DAMNED WORTHLESS TRASH!

But unable able to bear the weight any longer, Ella collapses in a heap, destroyed. Cravath spits at the corpse.

CRAVATH
DESERTER!

We hear a THOUSAND GASPS. Cravath spins around. Tom has raised the curtain on his rampage; the audience has witnessed it all.

Vetter and Gladstone look on incredulously. Susan gasps in horror. White still POUNDS and SHOUTS Ella's name. The singers shudder in devastation. The cops SLAM Cravath to the floor.

But one man savors it all. Jonas Stone looks on at the debacle as if it were a feast. Delighted, he takes out his reporters' tablet, ponders just the right phrasing, then jots down a title:

"IT IS FINISHED."

Pleased with himself, he slithers off to the exit. We PULL BACK to a WIDE SHOT of the auditorium, the demolished stage, and smoldering wreckage that had been the Jubilee Singers.

CUT TO BLACK

THEN SLOW FADE UP TO:

A WASTELAND OF STEEL BEAMS

... rising valiantly from the earth... dying midair.

The former Jubilees are back at Fisk, glaring at the rain-flooded construction pit that should have been Jubilee Hall. The withered White is now wheelchair-bound.

SUPER: "EVE OF THE ELECTION"

The noon sky is BLACK AS MIDNIGHT and ruled by RAVENS. Sinister winds haunt the air. We sense some imminent doom.

Ella's and White's tortured eyes meet; looks of searing anguish pass between them. They somberly disperse, each their own way.

EXT. ELLA'S NEW HOUSE - SHORTLY AFTER

A Coachman unloads Ella's luggage into her house. The house is breathtaking, but Ella stands sullenly out on the street.

Just then, an ornate carriage pulls up beside Ella. Out leaps --

ELLA
Mr. Moore.

-- Wallace. He's stylishly dressed, sporting a dapper suit and bright LILAC SHIRT. He nods to the house.

WALLACE
Handsome work; someone did you right.

ELLA
It *is* lovely.

Her voice sounds morose. Alarmed, he realizes --

WALLACE
You're not going inside.

ELLA
What brings you here?

WALLACE
(shows off the carriage)
I'm your chauffeur. I rented this for the occasion.

ELLA
Occasion?

WALLACE
I- I heard the news. I've got room for her, plus her luggage. You *are* going --

ELLA
Nowhere.

WALLACE
You don't mean that.

ELLA
The Coachman's going to show me around the city.

WALLACE
Let me at least do that. Drove eight hundred miles.

ELLA
I'm sorry you came so far.

The Coachman opens the door for Ella. In a flash, Wallace SNATCHES the man's pistol, SHOOTS HIS WHEEL TO BITS, then tosses back the gun with his wallet.

WALLACE
Sorry, bruh.

Ella growls, and we

CUT TO:

INT./EXT. WALLACE'S CARRIAGE - RIDING THROUGH NASHVILLE

Ella gasps at the depression-ravaged slum that is now Nashville. Broken glass, rotting animal carcasses and tar-paper shanties litter the decrepit streets. The diseased homeless scavenge for food.

WALLACE
Welcome home.

Massive BILLOWS OF BLACK SMOKE rise from everywhere like volcanic ash, choking the sun and blackening the sky.

WALLACE
Plague kills seventy a day. They burn tar around the clock to purge it from the air.

As they turn onto the highway, a PARADE forms around Ella. Jeering townspeople swarm the carriage pelting her with rotten food, mocking the Jubilees. Newsboys shouting *"IT IS FINISHED! NEGRO CHOIR SELF-DESTRUCTS"* hawk a tabloid depicting a Victorian monkey choir eating each other alive. The tabloid is called The New Liberator.

Ella is too spent to cry.

HIRAM'S RALLY

They ride past a MAJOR CAMPAIGN EVENT taking place downtown. We spot Hiram orating from a hotel balcony to a CROWD OF THOUSANDS.

WALLACE
Hiram's voter rally; everyone's there. The Knights threatened to attack, but the people wouldn't back down.

ELLA
My God, what about the children?

WALLACE
They're safe at the church.

Suddenly Bishop's STAINED-GLASS WINDOW sweeps hauntingly into view, its fiery Southern Cross towering apocalyptically over the city. The church marquee sneers "WELCOME HOME JUBILEES."

WALLACE
Back at you, Bishop.

ELLA
You mean Myron, his son.

WALLACE
No one's seen Preacher Boy in ages.

ELLA
He leads the Knights; he must have led Julia's murder.

WALLACE
That was Bishop's gang. Junior's no doubt cracking skulls in some other town.

But Wallace has something else in mind; eyeing Ella, he abruptly VEERS OFF the highway onto an out-of-town road. She knows why.

ELLA
No!

INT. WALLACE'S CARRIAGE - CLEAR SKIES - LATER

A bumpy ride on a rural road. Ella is furious at being kidnapped.

ELLA
You have no right! It's *my* life!

WALLACE
She's your life.

ELLA
Don't do this to me. She'd know what happened over there; it's a miracle our lawyers got us home on bail.

But he's unapologetic. Livid, she turns in a snit... but can't stop eyeing his shirt.

WALLACE
So... guy walks into the Bureau, tells them where to find her, mumbles "It's all got to change," just leaves.

ELLA
Sounds cryptic.

WALLACE
Sounds like a confession.

ELLA
And you know this, and the way there *how?*

WALLACE
Bureau records are public.

She festers with attitude. The air is a powderkeg of emotion.

But he has something solemn on his heart. He takes a breath.

WALLACE
Ella...

ELLA
Miss Sheppard.

WALLACE
Miss Sheppard...

ELLA
(thaws just a little)
Ella.

He sighs; this is going to be hard.

WALLACE
I know things didn't pan out as you'd hoped...

ELLA
If you came to take a victory lap, you can swagger your six hundred miles back to Kansas.

WALLACE
Eight, and that's not why I --

ELLA
How *is* Haystack Haven?

WALLACE
That's what I'm getting at. It's a place of fresh starts.

She *harumphs.* He pushes back.

WALLACE
Granted, it's no Chelsea.

ELLA
Meaning??

WALLACE
No ballrooms, waltzes, octopusses named John.

ELLA
You read gossip?!

WALLACE
Some gossip ain't gossip. Maybe *I* should take up the fiddle!

ELLA
Let's set the record straight - *you* ditched *me!*

WALLACE
Fact check - *I* didn't cross the Atlantic for greener pastures!

ELLA
No, you crossed the Mississippi for that! *At least I dress myself.*

WALLACE
Huh??

ELLA
Don't change the subject. What's her name?

WALLACE
Whose??

ELLA
The little strumpet that dolled you up. A woman knows!

WALLACE
A woman imagines!

ELLA
Men don't wear lilac!

WALLACE
I *like* lilac! You've *seen me* in lilac!

ELLA
Not that shade! Come on: Tish? Latonda?

WALLACE
You're tripping!

ELLA
Kaneesha? Koolaidria?

BUMP!! The carriage LURCHES on a huge pothole, flinging Ella's dress clear over her head. She flails in horror.

ELLA
Aaauuuggh!!
(snatches down her dress)
You looked! You looked! Did you see anything??

WALLACE
(biting his lips)
"Anything"?

ELLA
(SWATS him)
Anything!! Anything!!

WALLACE
Nothing Providence didn't want me to.

ELLA
If you did, scripture says blot it out of your mind! Philippians 3:13!

WALLACE
"Forgetting that which is behind." It doesn't say forgetting *your* behind!

He roars with laughter. She SWATS HIM HYSTERICALLY.

ELLA
Thug! You're no theologian! You did that deliberately!

WALLACE
And bust the carriage? Lose my deposit?

She turns in a huff and fights to stay mad.

Getting serious again, he forces a straight face, takes a breath, and picks up where he left off.

WALLACE
Look, I know I'm rough around the edges...

ELLA
Oh, at middle, too.

WALLACE
Probably, but...

ELLA
Waaaay down to the core.

WALLACE
Doubtless.

He reaches for her hand...

WALLACE
This isn't the most traditional way of asking --

ELLA
What is it?!

... but it's all going over her head. He gives up.

WALLACE
No matter.

ELLA
I'm not going to beg.

She turns away in a snit. He grins, then - ***BUMP!!*** - DRIVES OVER ANOTHER POTHOLE, sending her dress sky-high.

ELLA
Aaauuuggh!!

EXT. RURAL MANOR - LATER

They've arrived. Ella SLAPS Wallace for his mischief, checks her makeup, then with dead seriousness asks --

ELLA
How do I look?

FRONT DOOR

Ella takes a breath; this is the moment she's poured out her life for. Quaking in dread, she knocks, telling herself not to run away.

An eternity passes. At last we hear footsteps. Then a pause. Then the narrow peephole opens, revealing EYES we last saw in a sweatbox.

Ella's eyes light up.

ELLA
Momma!

SARAH
Sam!

And here they are, together again after twenty years. For the briefest moment, the eyes gaze at each other as if beholding dreams.

THEN THE DOOR OPENS

... revealing two women that couldn't be more different: one coarse and disheveled, wearing field-stained rags; the other an elegant young Victorian. Ella breaks into tears of joy, but as Sarah beholds her opulent daughter, we see a terrible self-consciousness set in.

ELLA
May I?

INSIDE

Sarah awkwardly shows her in. After a lifetime of longing, Ella breaks out and clutches Sarah deeply, beyond deeply, burying herself in her mother's bosom as if all were finally right with the world.

ELLA
Oh Momma... I've missed you... I've missed you so much...

But Sarah's countenance grows dark; for reasons Ella isn't grasping, the encounter is excruciating for her. And now she realizes her dirty hands are soiling Ella's plush dress.

Sarah pulls back.

ELLA
What is it??

SARAH
I- I'm...

She fidgets, avoiding eye contact. Ella's heart races.

ELLA
I'm surprised you never got the Bureau's letters; they've been sending them out everywhere for years, inquiring about you, telling you how to find me. And look, you're not an hour away.

Sarah is at a loss for words. Ella comes closer, but Sarah pulls further back, keeping her at bay.

Ella panics. She nervously scans the room, then spots a newspaper.

ELLA
You read the Chronicle, Momma?

SARAH
Try to.

ELLA
I've posted notices for you in it for years. I've been easy to find...

Her heart sinks as the unthinkable dawns on her. Sarah's tortured eyes look away then settle on Ella's dress. She grasps at straws...

ELLA
You like it? It's from London, can you believe it? You'll never guess why I was there. I- I'm with... was with... a choir... and we...

... then tapers off. She knows it's over.

ELLA
I'm sorry... I-I shouldn't have come. I'll go away now... I'll go back...

Sarah's heart screams, but she holds it in. Just then --

MAN (O.S.)
Sarah, where the devil are you?!

SARAH
Foyer, sir.
(shoos Ella)
Go!

MAN (O.S.)
Get your dirty hide back in that yard!

As Sarah pushes Ella to the door, the Man enters with a STRAP.

MAN
I've told you about coming in this house with those filthy --

He and Ella lay eyes on each other. Ella gasps. It's BISHOP.

BISHOP
Well, I'll be.

ELLA
No...

BISHOP
Welcome home, Ella.

ELLA
Momma, you're *free!*

SARAH
(ashamed)
He pays me a little. Go!

ELLA
I got us our house, the house you always wanted. We can be together!

Her eyes flooding with tears, Sarah clenches her fists and forces bitter words from her mouth.

SARAH
Get out, Sam, and don't come back. I don't ever want to see you again.

ELLA
No... please Jesus, no...

BISHOP
"Sometimes I feel like a motherless child!" Haw!

SARAH
Stop it!

Bishop BASHES Sarah's face. Ella LUNGES at him, SCREAMING and POUNDING him furiously. Bishop levels a SHOTGUN at Ella's face.

SARAH
GET OUT!!

Wallace BARGES IN and snatches Ella back. She struggles to get to Sarah, but Wallace wrests her out of the house.

As the door slams shut, we hear Ella shout --

ELLA
I came back for you, Momma! I came back!

Shrieking in anguish, Sarah staggers out back. We FOLLOW HER out of the house, across the backyard, and into her --

SHANTY

-- where she doubles over, wailing.

We PAN AROUND to reveal that the entire shanty is a proud shrine to her daughter, every wall covered with clippings and photos of Ella, then SETTLE ON a tall stack of letters from the Bureau.

INT. WALLACE'S CARRIAGE - LATER

As they ride back, Ella stares soullessly, almost hypnotically, at the passing terrain. Wallace eyes her with alarm, ready to grab her if need be.

The sky again turns ominously black. Then suddenly --

BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM!!

-- a BLAZE OF GUNFIRE erupts from behind.

Wallace whips the carriage off the road. HUNDREDS OF HOODED KNIGHTS sweep past with the force of a freight train.

WALLACE
Knights! They're headed for the rally!

DOWNTOWN NASHVILLE - MASSACRE AT HIRAM'S RALLY

Wallace and Ella ride into a scene of horrific mayhem. Hiram's rally is under attack; legions of Knights SLAM into the frenzied masses like barbarian hordes. Bullets FLY; grenades EXPLODE; stampeding horses CRUSH the helpless. It's a bloodbath of epic proportions.

Wallace pulls up to a SECURE BUILDING.

WALLACE
Get inside!

ELLA
I'm not hiding!

WALLACE
INSIDE!

He shoots her a warning look then charges off into the chaos.

Before Ella can move, a careening wagon SLAMS into a young WHITE MAN nearby, smashing him to the ground.

Ella races to him - as do two others: Maggie and Georgia. They trade glares, then together hoist the man into the building.

INTERIOR SECURE BUILDING

The man is bleeding badly. Taking charge, Maggie lays his blond head on her lap. We see her conflicted emotions about tending to him.

She grabs her arms-length gloves, hesitates in the others' presence, then for the first time rips them off, exposing what they've long hidden - the scars of slit wrists. Ashamed of her secret, she looks with humiliation at Ella and Georgia. They're awed by her courage.

Maggie stanches the man's bleeding with the gloves then orders Ella --

MAGGIE
Get antiseptic.

Ella nods. Suddenly, the door BLASTS OPEN. In blows Cravath carrying two wounded black girls, followed by their panicked mother.

Cravath and Ella trade weighty looks. She sees that his blood-soaked pants are pierced by a bullet hole; he's been shot in the thigh.

Ella exits. Cravath sets the girls down and reassures the mother:

CRAVATH
Keep them still; I'll be back with help.

THE FRENZIED STREETS

As SCREAMS pierce the air, we spot the former Jubilees charging through the havoc, dodging bullets and shrapnel to rescue victims.

Wallace crosses paths with Loudin and Tom. They catch their breaths, staggered by the blood drenching their hands.

Then Loudin points down the sidewalk --

LOUDIN
Look!

Ella is coming their way. Someone is racing up behind her. It's Myron, Bishop's son. Oddly, he's not robed like the attackers.

Exploding with rage, Wallace grabs a PLANK and CHARGES at Myron.

Myron sees Wallace coming and raises his hands to say something, but before he can utter a word Wallace BLUDGEONS HIM SENSELESS.

Just then, we hear --

WHITE (O.S.)
GET OUT OF THE WAY! GET OUT OF THE WAY!

-- and CUT TO the nearby:

WHITE

As rampaging horses CRUSH victims everywhere, White shouts from his wheelchair to a badly injured TEEN across the street.

He's oblivious to the MASSIVE RIG BARRELING TOWARDS HIM.

WHITE
SOMEBODY HELP HIM! HE CAN'T HEAR IT!

Frenzied, White hobbles out of the wheelchair towards the boy.

Just as he reaches him, a woman's hands forcefully SNATCH WHITE BACK.

An instant later, the rig brutally MOWS THE BOY DOWN, missing White by inches. White screams in agony, wishing it were him.

Susan cradles White emotionally; she's just saved his life.

CUT DOWN THE BLOCK TO:

HIRAM'S CHURCH

Terrorists SWARM the church, PLANTING DYNAMITE beneath it. Inside, trapped children and teachers frantically SCREAM.

Would-be rescuers - including Minnie, Ike, and America - are kept at bay from the church by ferocious MACHINE-GUN FIRE.

CUT BACK TO:

ELLA, RACING FROM SHOP TO SHOP

As she hunts for antiseptic, she sees Hiram on the balcony. He's with FOUR MEN, tracking the Knights' positions.

Suddenly a metallic glint catches her eye. She traces the glint to an adjacent rooftop. Sweat blurs her vision, but she squints... then makes out --

A SNIPER TAKING AIM AT HIRAM.

ELLA
God no.

CHURCH

The Knights DRENCH THEIR DYNAMITE IN GASOLINE. As the rescuers helplessly look on, a church ELDER races up to them.

ELDER
There's an old service entrance out back, behind the rear garden!

MINNIE
Let's go!

Dodging bullets, the rescuers circle around the street to the --

REAR OF THE CHURCH

-- and frantically hunt for the overgrown entrance as bullets SHATTER everything around them.

They find the entrance, BREAK DOWN THE DOOR, then race inside shouting for everyone to evacuate.

THE SNIPER STEADIES HIS AIM

as Ella CHARGES towards Hiram, SHOUTING --

ELLA
HIRAM!! HIRAM!! HIRAM!!

CHURCH

The Knights set DETONATORS out front. Out back, the rescuers evacuate the children and teachers. It looks like they're in the clear - until a panicked TEACHER counts heads.

TEACHER
I'M MISSING FOUR! FOUR GIRLS!

A traumatized CHILD knows where they are.

CHILD
Th-they were in the basement, in the choir room. I-I thought they were with us.

IKE
Jesus.

CHURCH BASEMENT/CHOIR ROOM

As bullets BLAST the church, we REVEAL four terrified girls huddling in a corner. Our heart drops; they're:

CAROLE, CYNTHIA, DENISE AND ADDIE MAE, Ella's Cutie Pies.

ELLA CLOSES IN ON HIRAM

As the Sniper cocks his trigger, Ella runs furiously towards Hiram --

ELLA
HIRAM!! GO BACK!! GO BACK INSIDE!!

-- pushing herself *FASTER, FASTER, FASTER,* as if racing against inevitability itself.

Hiram spots her.

CHURCH

As the Knights COUNT DOWN TO DETONATION, Minnie, Ike, and America race back to the church for the girls.

HIRAM

He strains to make out what Ella is shouting. Then strangely, he just smiles serenely at her. Ella SCREAMS. A split-second later --

A BULLET STRIKES HIM DOWN.

The four men point to the assassin. At that instant, before the rescuers reach the girls --

THE CHURCH EXPLODES IN A TITANIC FIREBALL

The black sky BLAZES LIKE HELLFIRE. The Southern Cross SHIMMERS GLORIOUSLY in the inferno. Everyone SCREAMS, and we CUT TO a:

BLACK SCREEN

After a morbid silence, we hear a disembodied VOICE singing --

VOICE
Deep river, my home is over Jordan.
Deep river, Lord, I want to cross over
into campground....

-- and FADE UP to the:

AFTERMATH (MONTAGE)

DOWNTOWN NASHVILLE

A devastation of cataclysmic proportions. Survivors mop up blood, sweep up twisted metal, and weep at the colossal ruins of hope.

Where a church once stood, Ella and others sift through a graveyard of rubble, the smoldering remains of Hiram's Christ.

As if insufficiently damned, Ella unearths blood-splattered pages from Jubilee songbooks - pages promising deliverance and freedom, pages of *lies* bearing the words:

"Arranged by Ella Sheppard"

Her eyes go completely lifeless.

FUNERAL PREPARATIONS

A grave is dug. A headstone chiseled. "1874" is engraved as the year of death on a noble coffin. Wallace is the angry engraver.

MIRRORS

We DISSOLVE through grim CLOSE-UPS of White and the choir facing themselves in mirrors, dressing for a funeral they prayed never to attend. For the first time, we see the deep scars of slavery that physically rack the singers' bodies.

White's bleak, hollow eyes are windows to a dungeon; drained of life and will, Susan tenderly dresses him.

One face is missing...

ELLA'S HOUSE

We MOVE THROUGH the aching rooms of a lonely house... and discover a tired soul on a cold floor, writing a heartrending letter.

ELLA (V.O.)
Dear Momma, I'm sorry to trouble you again. I'm going away, and wanted to leave you the deed to the house. It really is yours. In case you ever get to wondering about me, want to know anything, I'm also leaving my letters. You'll see, it's all been for you. Or at least a *dream* of you...

FISK CHAPEL - HIRAM'S FUNERAL

A packed service on a black, sunless day. All are haunted by the sight of Hiram's coffin. The sense of hopelessness is overwhelming.

But outside, something unusual is happening: MASSES OF PEOPLE are being dropped off by a cavalcade of vehicles.

ELLA (V.O.)
I've chased dreams all my life: dreams of us, dreams of home and country; I dreamed I'd make you proud one day, that you'd take me back. Dreams chasing dreams...

RAGING FLAMES

... consume Ella's sheet music, songbooks and Bible. We PAN from the fireplace to Ella standing in the doorway.

ELLA (V.O.)
Dreams kept me alive, drove me on. But I'm tired now, so tired. I'm drowning in dreams and dreams of dreams. It's time *I* navigate reality...

She takes a last look at the house, marvels at its beauty, then heads out back.

JUBILEE HALL CONSTRUCTION PIT - AFTER HIRAM'S SERVICE

White and the singers stand at the rain-filled pit staring into the watery abyss, its depths as black as the heavens above.

They don't see the masses of people filling the field around them.

ELLA (V.O.)
I've failed you and so many. I don't know why it is the things I touch go so terribly wrong...

RIVERBANK BEHIND ELLA'S HOUSE

Ella stands at the river's edge, facing her reflection with disgust.

ELLA (V.O.)
One dream *did* come true, in a way. I dream a lot about heaven, and for the briefest moment, when you opened that door and I saw your eyes, I'd swear you were smiling. I thought I was in heaven.

A shadow sweeps by. Ella looks up, and we CUT TO --

-- a RAVEN circling expectantly above.

ELLA (V.O.)
But I'm awake now. Wide awake...

We CUT BACK to the riverbank. Ella is gone, but air bubbles rise from the river's depths, breaking at the surface.

ELLA (V.O.)
Good night, Momma.

The last bubble breaks, leaving pure silence.

CUT TO:

A SUSPENDED ANGEL

... hovering against the black clouds. We're underwater, looking up. At long last, all is peaceful and still. Then...

HANDS PLUNGE INTO THE RIVER

Ella revives. The hands seize her. She flails furiously to stay down, but they won't let go. She fights to die, but they raise her out of the river. Wallace pulls her into himself. She pounds him with fists of self-loathing but he absorbs it all. Then --

WALLACE
Shhh.

We hear voices on the wind. They're humming a spiritual. Ella clenches her ears, but Wallace traces the sound across the wind to:

WALLACE
Fisk.

EXT. JUBILEE HALL CONSTRUCTION PIT - JUST AFTER

Wallace carries Ella kicking and screaming to the field, then freezes at an astonishing sight:

THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE SURROUND THE CHOIR, HUMMING A SPIRITUAL. Seeing Ella, they break into applause.

Cravath steps forward and addresses the choir.

CRAVATH
These are just some of the lives you've saved. They've come from all over; there are many more. You've rescued their future.

Then he locks eyes with Ella.

CRAVATH
This is *your* doing. The truth is, I've never known heroes like you.

Staggered, Ella's eyes sweep the crowd. Her breath taken away by the countless --

FACES. YOUNG. OLD. BLACK. WHITE. GENERATIONS OF FACES FACES.

In a spectacular show of honor, the people come forward and embrace their saviors. Ella breaks into weeping as soul after soul showers her with thanksgiving and praise.

Then on a mission, the people lift their voices as a GREAT CHOIR, singing a *healing spiritual* as if to raise the dead:

GREAT CHOIR
There is a balm in Gilead,
To make the wounded whole.
There is a balm in Gilead,
To heal the sin-sick soul...

And it does; now on the receiving end of a spiritual, the Jubilees are pierced by its power.

The dying Bennie weeps tears of peace, feeling the immense worth of his sacrifice. Maggie's cascades soothe the deep scars of abuse. Tears purge Ella's damning guilt and White's blistering shame. Washed in the soaring voices, Merrie, Minnie, Georgia, Ike, Loudin and Tom breathe in new life.

GREAT CHOIR
Sometimes I feel discouraged,
And think my work's in vain.
But then the Holy Spirit
Revives my soul again...

Rinsed of rage, the Jubilees embrace each other again, standing resurrected as one.

Wallace alone still festers with bitterness. Then the unthinkable:

A buzz breaks out on the field; the crowd parts as several YOUNG MEN come forward. We recognize them; they're the Knights that attacked the choir on the train. Out front is Myron, still bruised from Wallace's thrashing. The tension is thick: *What are they doing here?*

They're carrying their supremacist hoods and robes. As the crowd watches in disbelief, they go to the water-filled pit, hurl the garments of hate in, and watch them sink into the abyss.

Myron turns to Ella and Wallace and says simply:

MYRON
No more.

His heart is heavy with remorse; his eyes plead for their pardon. Wallace glares daggers at this white boy - he wants to kill him.

But the singing intensifies:

GREAT CHOIR
There is a balm in Gilead,
To make the wounded whole.
There is a balm in Gilead,
To heal the sin-sick soul...

Wallace fights to hate, but something greater surges from within. He resists what's happening to him, but at long last --

The floodgates burst, unleashing a lifetime of unshed tears - tears of a tender boy's loss, of searing heartbreak and grief; a torrent of tears that douse the fires of hate.

Overcome, Wallace goes up to his archenemy, looks him in the eyes...

... and embraces him. Tightly. And in their embrace, we'd swear we were seeing brothers reunited.

Then the unbelievable. Myron throws Ella a look, disappears into the crowd, then brings back someone that's been anxiously hiding.

ELLA
Momma!

It *is* Sarah; she's mortified to be there.

SARAH
M-Myron came for me.

MYRON
More like kidnapped.

Flushing with shame, Sarah can barely look at Ella.

SARAH
I-I just don't want to be in your way.

ELLA
In my way? I *need* you!

Overwhelmed with emotion, they search each other's eyes, fumbling for words but barely able to breathe. In the end, it's just --

ELLA
Oh Momma!

SARAH
Precious baby!

They clutch each other deeply, desperately, as if never again to let go. Having prayed for them, the people break out in applause.

Then as the field stirs with excitement, a bold voice THUNDERS OUT:

BENNIE
We came today to bury a great man, and a dream. The Knights will rise; hate will reign; our blood will flow. By any measure, this is the death of hope.
(eyes White)
But another great man taught us to reach past what is, to the beyond, to walk by faith and not by sight! Friends, this is no burial, but a *baptism* - a beginning! For we are struck down but not destroyed! Freedom was crucified, but we believe in the resurrection! The Dream is not in that casket, <u>it lives on in us</u>!

Loud *AMENS!* Bennie has found his voice, and it's powerful. Fervor sweeps the field as he transforms the funeral into a REVIVAL.

BENNIE
We may not greet the Dawn of Freedom, but if we don't fight through the night, neither will our children. <u>We are an army</u>! But our weapons are not bullets or bombs or the invective of hate, lest in our righteous rage we *become* the devil we decry! For children of the God of Peace must neither bow to tyranny nor take up her mantle! Our swords are *giftings and callings*, *talents and abilities* to <u>break</u> the chains of hate and set hate's captives free! Heal hearts of pain <u>and</u> rage!
(MORE)

BENNIE (CONT'D)
Make hatemongers peacemakers the world over until every village and hamlet thunders with the cry of *Jubilee!* And we cannot fail, for we fight with <u>light</u>, and the light *shines* in darkness, and the darkness shall never overcome it. *This* is our warfare! *This* is our combat!

DEAFENING *AMENS!* The crowd is electrified. White beams for Bennie.

BENNIE
"But brother Ben, that dawn is a long way off. What lights our path when hope fades and we've lost our way?" Well, uh, last I heard there was supposed to be a *beacon* around here, some "beacon to the brotherhood of man." Anyone seen it? <u>I said has anyone seen it</u>?!

EARTH-SHATTERING CHEERS. The black clouds BREAK, bathing the field in a brilliant, almost otherworldly light that sets Jubilee Hall's steel beams aglow as if bringing them to life. All eyes blaze with a MAJESTIC VISION towering high from the pit.

Recharged and purpose-driven, the Jubilees trade looks.

LOUDIN
Looks like it's time to root, hog or die.

INT. BISHOP'S CHURCH - SUNDAY SERVICE

As Bishop leads his choir in a triumphal hymn, the ground begins to quake. We hear the THUNDERING of an approaching choir.

GREAT CHOIR (O.S.)
STEAL AWAY, STEAL AWAY,
STEAL AWAY TO JESUS.
STEAL AWAY, STEAL AWAY HOME.
I AIN'T GOT LONG TO STAY HERE.

OUTSIDE

Bishop and his parishioners rush out and do a double take.

The Jubilees are leading an ARMY OF THOUSANDS up the boulevard, POUNDING THE EARTH with almost supernatural force, singing:

GREAT CHOIR
MY LORD, HE CALLS ME,
HE CALLS ME BY THE THUNDER.
THE TRUMPET SOUNDS WITHIN MY SOUL,
I AIN'T GOT LONG TO STAY HERE.

Out front are two who long resisted *Steal Away,* Ella and Sarah, and the defiant White, his wheelchair nowhere in sight. To Bishop's horror, his son marches with them, linked arm-in-arm.

Trailing them are carriages filled with the Jubilees' travel luggage.

GREAT CHOIR
GREEN TREES ARE BENDING,
POOR SINNER STAND A-TREMBLING.
THE TRUMPET SOUNDS WITHIN MY SOUL.
I AIN'T GOT LONG TO STAY HERE.

Ominously, a shard of stained glass falls on Bishop's head. He looks up and gasps: shaken by the marchers, the Southern Cross is violently convulsing. Thousands of cracks are rippling through it, marring the image and EXPLODING parts of it into TORRENTS OF SHARDS. Bishop cowers as the fractals of hate furiously engulf him.

The Jubilees march on to the:

EXT. TRAIN STATION - DAY

A GRAND SEND-OFF for a new tour. Reporters swarm.

REPORTER
China, Japan, India, Europe. You don't aim low; you're taking the spirituals --

MAGGIE
Everywhere.

REPORTER
Comment on the Crown absolving you of wrongdoing?

MINNIE
They found Jubilee Hall to be the victim of terror, not fraud. Now we deliver.

REPORTER
You're now directing, Mr. Loudin?

LOUDIN
Along with Miss Sheppard. Pray for a brother; she sets a high bar.

WHITE
(proudly manholds Loudin)
He'll kill it.

Loudin smiles at White's affirmation. We've never seen him smile.

Reporters point to the wide-eyed NEWBIES joining the tour.

REPORTER
So, five rookies.

AMERICA
All from Fisk.

REPORTER
The Jubilee Singers are now fourteen.

IKE
And counting.

NEARBY - The departing choir say emotional farewells to the fading Bennie, knowing they'll never see him again. But he won't have it.

BENNIE
Hey, no pity parties. Just sing those bricks up.

REPORTER
Calling it quits, Mr. Holmes?

GEORGIA
If you call publishing *quits.* Frederick Douglass just named Bennie the latest writer for The New National Era.

Bennie beams.

NEARBY - Ella, Sarah and Wallace say goodbyes.

ELLA
Well, Momma, this is it.

SARAH
Sam, I'm so proud of you.

Ella gushes. Then, to Wallace --

ELLA
Momma loves the house.

SARAH
I *like* it. Nice design, well-built...

WALLACE
(faux-offended)
Only it's missing...?

Sarah burps an imaginary baby. Ella turns bright red.

ELLA
Momma!

SARAH
Do I *look like* I'm getting younger??

And she's dead serious. Who knew Sarah was such a card?

Fanning herself like a hummingbird, Ella changes the subject.

ELLA
So you're really staying in Nashville?

WALLACE
I'm going to build homes here in my father's name. That's how I fight back.

That warms her all over. Risking it all, she coos:

ELLA
I love you, Wallace Moore.

WALLACE
(winks to Sarah)
She always has.

ELLA
(SWATS him)
Hey!

WALLACE
Okay okay... I love you.

ELLA
(pouts)
You pity me.

SARAH
(keeping it real)
It appears he loves *and* pities you.

Wallace high-fives Sarah. Ella hauls off again, but he intercepts her hand --

WALLACE
And I'm not taking another breath without you.

-- and PUTS A RING ON HER FINGER. Ella swoons.

ELLA
Oh my...

WALLACE
Or as a pretender to my throne said: "I want this finger, Ella Sheppard, and the woman that comes with it."

She nearly faints to realize --

ELLA
You were there.

-- then of course cocky.

ELLA
Course you were; you can't do without me.
(suddenly insecure)
Y-you know that, right?

SARAH
Child, the man just put a ring on your finger!

Reporters call "PRESS PHOTOS!" Mustering her nerve, Ella leans into Wallace, kisses him tepidly, then shrinks back awaiting his reaction.

Wallace trades pathetic looks with Sarah. Ella gasps *no you didn't.* Her mouth wide open, Wallace incinerates her with a kiss that short-circuits her wiring --

ELLA
(babbling)
Uhb, wha, euh...

-- then nonchalantly releases her.

WALLACE
Don't miss your train.

ELLA
(SWATS him repeatedly)
Ooooooooooo!

Brimming with attitude, she brushes him off, kisses Sarah goodbye, then strides off twisting her engagement ring.

ELLA
Ha! This was inevitable!

WALLACE
(shouts out)
One question. *"Koolaidria"??*

ELLA
Sounds like your type!

WALLACE
What does that say about *you?*

ELLA
That I pity the hopeless!

WALLACE
Oh so you know I'm hopeless!

ELLA
Like water's wet and flies fly. Hahahaha!

She cackles at her wit. Then steam from a vent BLOWS HER DRESS SKY-HIGH.

ELLA
AAAUUUGGH!!!

NEARBY - Ike and a chastened Cravath speak again.

TOM
So, no prison blues for you. A royal pardon.

CRAVATH
I don't deserve it. Or Miss Sheppard's forgiveness, or plea for my freedom.
(haunted with shame)
Some credit to my parents...

Just then, we hear --

JUBILEES (O.S.)
TOM! MR. WHITE! LAST PHOTOS! COME ON!

CRAVATH
Well, Mr. Rutling, the new century is upon us; the road to freedom is long.

TOM
Which is why Freedom's warriors never sleep.

CRAVATH
You've proved that.

TOM
I mean *you.* You're a giant, Mr. Cravath; you were in these trenches fighting and bleeding for us before we were born. Your folks would be proud.

CRAVATH
Get over to those photos.

TOM
I said *you've done them proud.*

The old war hawk fights ocular moisture but loses. He breaks down and hugs Tom, as a boy would his father.

ANGLE ON WHITE AND SUSAN

As the choir gathers for press photos, White and Susan race across the platform to join in. But flashbulbs start going off without him.

White speeds up to make it -- then stops at what he sees:

As cameras capture the moment, the original Jubilees embrace in a warm group hug, basking and glowing as family. They spot White --

JUBILEES
COME ON, MR. WHITE! HURRY UP!

-- but his eyes glint with an epiphany. He drops his luggage. They know what this means and rush over.

MAGGIE
No.

WHITE
It's time.

GEORGIA
We need you.

WHITE
You need each other.

Ella approaches White.

ELLA
You sure about this?

He nods. Tears flowing, White and Ella share a moment; after all they've been through, these ancient friends struggle to say goodbye.

She sweeps him with admiring eyes.

ELLA
There was once a brave blacksmith's son, a *very* dangerous visionary, who heard from God... and taught the world to sing.

White beams. Ella and the choir bury him in a timeless embrace.

INSIDE THE TRAIN CABIN - JUST AFTER

Now aboard, the Jubilees buzz with excitement.

Ella looks over at Loudin laughing with his wife and sons; they're now joining him. She smiles for them, then gazes out at Sarah and Wallace, letting it sink in that she too now has a family.

OUTSIDE - WALLACE AND SUSAN SHARE A MOMENT

SUSAN
You're not going to tell her, that it happened on Covenant Lane.

WALLACE
She's run a long race on a dark road. I need that house to be light for her.

SUSAN
Living there will be a sacrifice; the nightmares may never end.

WALLACE
If she's smiling, I'm good; I'll find my blue skies in hers.

He chokes up.

SUSAN
What is it?

WALLACE
Dad would have loved her.

BACK TO ELLA ON THE TRAIN

As the train pulls off, she holds her pitch pipe and remembers a vow:

ELLA (V.O.)
Addie Mae! Cynthia! Carole! Carol Denise! That's my pitch pipe, sweet love.

CUTIE PIES (V.O.)
Pleeeease? To remember you by!

ELLA (V.O.)
How about this: When I use it, I'll remember you.

Ella kisses then clasps the pitch pipe as if it were her life.

ANGLE ON WHITE

As the choir journeys on, his eyes mist with pride and heartache. He hands his card to one of the Press Photographers --

WHITE
I need prints.

-- then looks back at the train vanishing into the distance.

WHITE (V.O.)
History is a fickle thing, forging then forgetting heroes...

MONTAGE:

A blaze of PASSPORT STAMPS and spectacular INTERNATIONAL HEADLINES splash across the screen.

WHITE (V.O.)
God knows whether the epic of a choir rising from the fetters of slavery to the frontlines for freedom will be remembered...

We FLASH FORWARD to JUBILEE HALL. Bold, conquering and breathtaking in grandeur, it seems to tower above the nations, its bricks bursting with music, its soaring steeple all but claiming humanity's destiny.

WHITE (V.O.)
But their legacy will never fade. It can't; this world, a planet ringing with their music, *is* their legacy...

THE WORLD CHEERS THE JUBILEES. We DISSOLVE through the colorful cast of characters we've met on the choir's incredible journey; all toast headlines of their success. Even Vetter scowls in grudging awe.

WHITE (V.O.)
Dark midnight won't pass on their watch, but their fire will kindle the torches of tomorrow's warriors, who will blaze the way to Freedom...

We FLASH BACK in time to Havell reading this letter from White.

WHITE (V.O.)
I have no children; they are *my* teachers, *my* heroes. <u>They</u> are the Jubilee Singers. So I trust, Mr. Havell, that my request, and the enclosed, will set things right.

Havell pulls a PHOTOGRAPH from White's envelope. Taken at the train station, it's of the Jubilees in a family hug, *beaming and radiating*.

HAVELL
(blubbering sentimentally)
Yes... yes...

We FLASH FORWARD again to Jubilee Hall's grand foyer, where a media-filled UNVEILING CEREMONY is taking place. As thousands look on, the velvet curtain drops, revealing Havell's PORTRAIT OF HEROES. The stunning floor-to-ceiling painting P-E-R-F-E-C-T-L-Y captures the Jubilees we've come to know.

Only we realize someone is missing; White has had himself removed from the portrait, leaving only Ella and the choir.

WHITE (V.O.)
Yours for the cause, George White.

The crowd and media go wild. As flashbulbs EXPLODE, we --

FREEZE FRAME ON THE PORTRAIT

-- and SUPER:

"Saved from extinction by the Jubilees, the AMA thrived for another 125 years. It founded 500 schools and supported 4,000 more."

"The spirituals went on to shape western music, giving rise to gospel, jazz, rock and roll, and rhythm and blues."

"Completed nine years before the Washington Monument, Jubilee Hall still inspires..."

"So do the Jubilee Singers, who tour to this day."

FLASH FORWARD TO:

EXT. SARAH'S HOUSE - CLOUDED DAY - YEARS LATER

Ella and Sarah sip tea on the porch, pinkies-up. Three kids race past, and we FOLLOW THEM to the shed where Wallace works.

"Ella and Wallace married. They had three children and lived with Sarah in the house her dreams built."

Ella smiles. Wallace sees her smile. Then *WHOOSH!* A blue jay sweeps past, lifting his gaze to the sky, where dark passing clouds reveal glimpses of distant blue, and the coy sun dances in his misty eyes.

FINAL FADE TO BLACK.