STEAL AWAY

by

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based on Andrew Ward's

"Dark Midnight When I Rise"

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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.