



Based on Andrew Ward's epic "Dark Midnight When I Rise," *Steal Away* is the legendary true story of **George White, Ella Sheppard** and **The Fisk Jubilee Singers**, a spectacular choir of young former slaves fighting the KKK's reign of terror against their schools not with bullets or bombs but sensational songs of faith and freedom. *Steal Away* follows the choir's titanic rise from the darkness of slavery to the glittering ballrooms and throne rooms of Europe as they conquer the world... and must then conquer their own demons.

One of the most breathtaking stories ever known, *Steal Away* will feature a spectacularly diverse international cast, the strongest Black female lead ever onscreen, and a sweeping soundtrack by multi-Grammy winning composer **Billy Childs**.

SUSAN GILBERT

Caucasian, 50.

A crackerjack agent for the AMA, Susan is a bold, beautiful, badass operative sporting aggressive pinstripes...

... or imprisoned by them. Raised to be an achiever from her youth, Susan has driven herself so relentlessly "doing the right thing" all her life that now at middle-age she's spectacularly successful yet spectacularly alone. Empty. Adrift. Not sure why she gets out of bed. Beyond Susan's tough veneer, her soft searching eyes reveal a caged dreamer desperate to break free and discover herself.

Susan falls in love with audacious dreamer George White, a "dangerous visionary" with faraway eyes. Inspired by White, Susan's heart comes alive - their love uncages her vulnerability and liberates her to try *living out loud*.

But vulnerability is a double-edged sword, and as hostile forces set Susan and White increasingly against each other, that sword will pierce her heart.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

For all of her toughness, we love and deeply relate to Susan. Like us, she's a ravishing confection of contradictions.

The key to reading Susan is bringing together the *warrior* armored within pinstripes and the *dreamer* trembling behind them, the fearless woman and the wide-eyed girl just sprouting her wings and awakening to life.

"SUSAN GILBERT" 33.

12/14/21

EXT. FISK CAMPUS - NEXT DAY

A horrific devastation. Buildings smolder. Black effigies hang lynched from trees. Prophetic graffiti vows a coming apocalypse. We PAN ACROSS the ruins to the site of an old excavated --

AUCTION BLOCK

-- where mountains of chains and manacles have been unearthed.

An emergency meeting is taking place here. Fisk's shell-shocked students are gathered before an imposing executive - MILO CRAVATH (Caucasian, 60s) - an unsentimental war hawk with intensely sensitive eyes. Beside him is a sharply-dressed WOMAN.

CRAVATH

Milo Cravath, AMA Headquarters. My deputy and I are just in from New York. The faculty have been briefed on the purpose of this meeting.

The red-eyed faculty clasp hands. Just then, White, Ella and the choir truantly arrive, drawing scowls. Cravath growls and goes on.

CRAVATH

Army Ops confirms what we already know: last night was arson. They're doubtful, however, they'll ever ID the attackers.

A STUDENT shouts --

SCENE 1
START →

STUDENT

It was that church mob!

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

SUSAN

That was no mere mob; it was a militia.

CRAVATH

My deputy, Susan Gilbert.

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

WHITE

Militia?? What's this about?

SUSAN

Turning back the clock. The Southern Cross is more than a denomination, it's the raging emblem of a vast and savage empire that took its last bow;
(MORE)

SUSAN (CONT'D)

its churches cauldrons of hate over the end of their terrorist civilization, a barbaric land of cavaliers and cottonfields that, thank God, is gone with the wind. Emancipation cost the Old South power, pride, and four billion dollars in human flesh. *They're rising up to take it back.*

BENNIE

Take *what* back?

SUSAN

You. Across the South, sons of the Southern Cross are mobilizing to take the elections... and take back their slaves.

The students CLAMOR - "*Slaves?!*"

AMERICA

That's impossible; the 13th Amendment abolishes slavery --

SUSAN

"*Except as punishment for crime.*" I make you a criminal, I make you my slave.

MINNIE

Even if they take back power, how do you criminalize a race of people?

SUSAN

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

GEORGIA

Death camps!

SUSAN

Slavery, reinvented.

ELLA

(getting the big picture)

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

ELLA

Excuse me??

CRAVATH

No *German requiems* as Fisk shutter.
Your little circus act has been the
bane of this faculty's existence.

Susan's eyes glint to realize --

SUSAN

You're George White?

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

ELLA

What do they say about the choir?

Cravath shoots Susan a *this one's on you* look.

ELLA

Miss Gilbert? Your reputation as
Mr. Cravath's "assassin" precedes
you. I'll expect your candor.

Susan looks flustered, but owning her job, she toughens up and spews
it out...

SUSAN

They say the choir is a disgrace and
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. White and Ella trade staggered looks. END

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.

(MORE)

MINNIE

What is it??

He holds it up. It's a scathing review of their show, with a full-page CARTOON of them as a tribe of howling apes. America reads:

AMERICA

"The crooning pickaninnies resembled a pack of well-trained baboons striving in vain for lofty expression..."

The singers groan. Loudin bitterly scowls.

GEORGIA

Fred said *Esther* was a mistake, not that anyone was actually listening.

Loudin nods *Thank you* to Georgia; she nods *I got your back*.

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.

IKE

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!

WHITE

When God says jump through a wall, it's ours to jump and his to put us through.
(dabs his lips)
The Lord will shelter us.

FADE OUT.

SCENE 2

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.

START →

WALLACE

Where is she? It's been six weeks!

They inspect each other warily - both are haggard; neither has slept. He slams down a stack of clippings.

4/15

WALLACE

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

SUSAN

(placing his face)

Wallace Moore. Mr. Cravath pointed you
out at the send-off. Susan Gilbert.

She extends her hand. He GROWLS. She snatches it back and tells
herself to smile.

SUSAN

M-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, gravely)

I-I'm so sorry about what --

WALLACE

(SLAMS his fist down)

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

Of course not. *You people...*

Disgusted, he starts for the door - then hears 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. DECREPIT ALLEYWAY, BEHIND A CLOSED TRAIN DEPOT - NIGHT

END

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?

5/15

Everyone laughs.

GRANT

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've been singing your praises to the Chinese delegation. May I?

He extends his arm to Ella. The Cutie Pies enviously coo.

PRESIDENT GRANT

Let's make it a party.

SCENE 3

Grant escorts the ladies away, leaving White and Susan awkwardly alone. Susan breaks the ice.

START →

SUSAN

And for his next miracle: waterfalls in the Sahara?

WHITE

Try *man pushing pencil*.

SUSAN

In a new office, on a brand 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, losing Fisk would have shattered Cravath.

WHITE

What? Old Genghis - *feelings*?

SUSAN

Hey! Are we suggesting my boss isn't the *Sugar-Plumb Fairy*?

They chuckle. Then she gets serious.

SUSAN

No, 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.

6/15

WHITE

You're the Dark Lord's lieutenant;
you run his war room. Do you like
your job?

SUSAN

(hedges)

I believe in it very much.

WHITE

What's the hardest part?

Herr smile fades.

SUSAN

The *friendly fire*, the faces those
cannons can bury. Heaven help them.

WHITE

Heaven help those led by the weak.
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

(marvels at his chutzpah)

You're a man of most curious contours.
You've been told that.

WHITE

Never so nicely. *Answer.*

SUSAN

No camels I'm afraid, but I'm not
without hope.

WHITE

Do tell.

SUSAN

I'm rumored to brew a fierce *café au lait*. Ever have a *true café au lait*?

WHITE

Uh, can't say that I --

SUSAN

Ah, watch your back! 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. Red-faced, she looks for the nearest staircase to hurl herself down... then steels herself and goes the distance.

SUSAN

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

White gazes at her, smitten.

WHITE

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.

SUSAN

There ya go!

More laughs. Then her eyes sweep his.

SUSAN

You know, George Leonard White is more envied than he knows.

WHITE
Highly doubtful.

SUSAN

Not everyone knows exactly why she gets out of the bed in the morning. George White battles himself, yes, but the day is his sky, and his dreams his wings.

WHITE
Double-edged sword; wings can be a curse.

SUSAN

Some would die for that curse. George White's real problem? He's a very big man in a very small world.

WHITE
You believe that?

SUSAN

I always have.

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

NEARBY - ANGLE 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. His voice whispers in her ear:

ABDUCTOR
"Excuse me, Mr. President."

ELLA
(obediently)
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 ornate chambers and parlors, ducking staff and security on a forbidden whirlwind journey through the White House.

ELLA
We can't be doing this! We are so deported!

CUT BACK TO THE:

IKE

Screw your portrait, screw your chord,
screw Jubilee Hall! After tomorrow,
we're *free at last, free at last!*

LOUDIN

Thank God Almighty!

-- and brashly exit.

INT. ELLA'S ROOM/MAKESHIFT OFFICE - LATER THAT NIGHT

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.

Ella groans but marvels at their valor. Suddenly, America gasps.

AMERICA

Oh God... this is it.

She's holding an official envelope from Tennessee. She looks to Ella and nods *Are you ready?* Ella cautiously nods. America gingerly hands the envelope to her. Ella's eyes widen - it's from:

THE MISSING PERSONS BUREAU

Ella's heart races. She looks to the others. They nod *Open it, open it!* Her hands shaking, she catches her breath... clasps the envelope...

Just then, the door FLIES OPEN. A furious White barges in.

WHITE

Cravath and Susan just got here from
New York. We're screwed!

SCENE 4

INT. WHITE HART INN - SHORTLY AFTER

Ella and White go nuclear over what Susan is telling them.

START →

ELLA

I'm not hearing this!

SUSAN

We wrote you!

ELLA

We're drowning in mail; you should have cabled!!

SUSAN

And have Vetter's men intercept it?! You'd be in prison already!

WHITE

~~Unbelievable!~~ As we speak, everyone from the Queen of Holland to the Emperor of Germany is trekking here to revel in a "spectacular celebration" of "last week's" grand opening of Jubilee Hall, an event you're now telling us - eight hours before curtain - never happened! We're dead!!

SUSAN

Let's not panic.

WHITE

It's not your head on the axe!!
We're facing *fourteen* investigations!
~~We've sworn to the Crown and the galaxy that today we'd deliver proof positive Jubilee Hall isn't the conjuration of scam artists, proof you were supposed to bring!~~ Vetter will be there with a legion of cops to haul us off the moment we welsh!

The WAITRESS enters and sets down their drinks.

WAITRESS

Two waters, another scotch.

ELLA

What's the delay now?!

SUSAN

Just finishing touches - windows, doors, paint. Three weeks, max.

ELLA

You knew today was do-or-die; what in your letter spared our heads?!

SUSAN

Hope, *hopefully*. One man can stop Vetter.

WHITE

The Prime Minister. He'll be there today with Vetter! Oh yeah, he was a friend once!

SUSAN

And may still be. Just three weeks ago, we received a warm but urgent letter from Gladstone asking for clarification on the delays. It was the plea of a friend seeking any means to exonerate us. We wrote back explaining our predicament and begging his forbearance.

ELLA

You sent *me* the letter to take to him.

WHITE

Which never happened. Brilliant, we dissed the Prime Minister!

SUSAN

I can still get to him before the show.

WHITE

Not a chance he bends now.

ELLA

~~It's all we've got.~~ All right, I'll face the crowd and explain. Then assuming Gladstone believes us, we do the show, pause the tour to let the choir rest, then knock out the last three weeks.

SUSAN

That's not the plan.

WHITE and ELLA

(glaring at Susan)

Translate.

SUSAN

We wrote you. The South is under siege; the Knights have unleashed an all-out *reign of terror* against our voters. With the elections around the corner, we don't have a day to spare - we need fresh revenue to finish Jubilee Hall. We've booked the choir into concert halls across Europe; their Continental 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! Three weeks.

WHITE

Not possible!

SUSAN

Don't tell me what's possible! We're *here* doing the impossible!

WHITE

There's no way!

SUSAN

Then *make* one! That *is* what you preach?!

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 all moot anyway because Vetter's about to guillotine us all! Well played, Miss Gilbert, we'll take the blade! ELLA!~~

Ella doesn't move.

WHITE

~~You're not listening to this?!~~

Her head grinds, processing it all. White glowers at her --

WHITE

You betrayed your people once for Master; thinking you might be back in business?

-- then fires his glare at Susan --

WHITE

You... I never knew you.

-- then exits. They both want to die. Susan downs her scotch then signals for another. Ella wills herself to focus.

ELLA
So, where's Cravath?

SUSAN
Upstairs, with the others.

ELLA
Others??

Susan hides her shaking hands.

SUSAN
There was something else in the letter...

We CUT TO THE BAR.

The Waitress pours a scotch, then walks it across the room to Susan. Ella is horrified.

ELLA
No.

SUSAN
It's the Final Solution, the only way forward. You've got to see that. Will the others go along?

ELLA
Go along?! They won't show up when I tell them.

SUSAN
Then don't. Just get them to the theatre.

ELLA
And when it goes down?! They'll walk on the spot.

SUSAN
Leave that to Cravath.

She sets out a stack of TRAVEL TICKETS.

SUSAN
Your ship leaves after the show.

ELLA
I'll get back with you.

Seething, she stands to go. Susan knocks back her drink.

SUSAN

Julia Hayden.

ELLA

What about Julia??

SUSAN

Assassinated by the Knights. In *your* classroom while teaching *your* students.

ELLA

Oh God, no.

Ella gasps, her shattered eyes processing the unimaginable. Our hearts sink; we remember Julia and her ravishing eyes.

SUSAN

It happened months back. The choir was already at the brink; we didn't want to destroy their morale... like it destroyed Cravath. Julia's murder tortures him day and night - he's gone half out of his mind tormented with guilt. He hasn't slept for months; I've never seen him like this.

(then, seizing Ella's eyes)

Julia knew the risk but fought to the end. Will you? This tour is our last stand against the Knights. Quit now and you render her sacrifice meaningless. Quit 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.

CUT TO: END

**"... SARAH SHEPPARD HAS BEEN LOCATED
IN BELLEVUE, TENNESSEE..."**

Falling tears smear the ink. We WIDEN to the:

SANATORIUM ROOFTOP - LATER THAT NIGHT

Ella sits under the night sky, reading the letter. America enters.

AMERICA

Well, Mr. White and I broke the news.

ELLA

How did they take it?