

STEAL AWAY

by

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based on true events

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This Opening Scene is a new revision of the opening scene found in the fully downloadable script.

Sides obtained from a breakdown service will vary from this version of the scene in various respects.

THE NIGHT SKY

The gently rippling image of the FULL MOON and DARK PASSING CLOUDS.

We widen to reveal TWO ANGELS hovering peacefully in the foreground.

Our eyes adjust; we realize we're underwater looking up - at a WOMAN and GIRL suspended in a river's depths. All is quiet and still...

Then suddenly -- a THICKET OF HANDS plunge in and snatch them out onto the:

DIMLY-LIT RIVERBANK

Silhouetted FIGURES furiously SEIZE the woman and girl. The woman REVIVES and desperately BEATS THEM BACK.

WOMAN
NO! NO! LEAVE US ALONE!

The pandemonium builds until -- **BLAM!!** -- a GUNSHOT RINGS OUT. We hear --

IRISH VOICE
GET AWAY FROM HER!

PIT BULLS charge out of the darkness and ATTACK the Figures. They SHRIEK IN TORMENT as the dogs viciously maul and drive them back.

A WHISTLE blows, and the hounds return to their owners: an Irish CLERGYMAN and his young SON. The Clergyman wears a holy robe.

He lowers his shotgun and looks at the woman. Weeping in relief, she tenderly cradles the girl, singing a sweet lullaby to her.

CLERGYMAN
(recognizing her)
Sarah?

Visibility is low, but we make out that the woman, SARAH, and her girl are black. The Clergyman looks at the girl and gasps.

CLERGYMAN
Jesus, she's not breathing!

Sarah clutches the lifeless child and glares at him.

SARAH
You can't touch her now.

He LUNGES for the girl. Sarah clutches her harder. They frantically FIGHT over the body, the Clergyman begging God to revive her.

As they tussle, the girl begins coughing up water.

SARAH
NO! GOD NO!

Sarah recoils in horror as she revives. As her wide eyes open, we reveal the face of three-year old--

SARAH
Sam! Ella! CLERGYMAN

-- SAMUELLELLA "ELLA" SHEPPARD. Frightened, Ella looks around as if in a nightmare, then buries herself in Sarah's bosom.

ELLA
Momma!

Sarah bitterly weeps... and then her eyes spark with an EPIPHANY.

The Clergyman looks on incredulously. Vexed and confused, he paces about in a state, replaying in his head what just happened.

CLERGYMAN
Open my eyes, Lord... I'm down at
the whipping post before service,
showing the boy how to deal with
runaways. Hear shouts at the river,
come here straightaway. Looks like
a woman, maybe a white woman, is
being beaten or raped. *But I'll be
goddamned if it ain't my house
nigger fending off my field niggers!*

Thinning clouds slowly BRIGHTEN the scene, revealing the Figures to be FIELD SLAVES. It's 1854, and we're on a Nashville plantation.

The Clergyman is "BISHOP" ADAM SHEOLGATE, and he's seeing red.

BISHOP
What happened here, Sarah Sheppard?!
What's this about?!

But Sarah is lost in thought. A CHURCH BELL rings. Bishop's trigger finger twitches.

BISHOP
ANSWER ME! I'M LATE TO PREACH!

His son MYRON - a kind, gentle boy - looks anxiously at Sarah.

CLOSE ON SARAH - Her eyes fire with a VISION. A hopeful but heart-wrenching vision. Shattered yet relieved, she takes an excruciating breath, nods in bittersweet acceptance, then kisses her baby girl as if for the last time.

Then her face turns *fire*. She rises and faces Bishop - fists clenched, eyes aflame.

SARAH

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

BISHOP

The *runaways*; I got the boy here.

He points down to the blood-drenched slave boy he's dragged to the clearing. This is little WALLACE.

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

Many times. But tonight I notice
Sam ain't troubled by it. I ask why
not. She say, "They's just getting
they due." *I feel a knife in my
chest. "Child, who tell you that?"
"Bishop." "Bishop?!" My heart
stop. "What else that man be saying
to you?" Her lips tremble. "Just
asking what the 'niggers' be up to,
day in, day out." Can't breathe.
"Bo and Hattie planning to escape -
you the one tell him 'bout that?"
Tears flood her eyes, tears of guilt
no three-year-old should feel. She
cover her face; an eternity I want
no part of goes by. Then she starts
hitting herself saying, "I'm sorry,
Momma, I'm sorry." *Oh, God...*
(turns to the slaves)
... he been using Samuella to spy on us
all, then raining down bloodshed.*

CLOSE ON THE SLAVES - stark moonlight now reveals the HIDEOUS SCARS racking their FACES, and the SPLATTERED BLOOD soaking Bishop's robe.

Bishop fondles Ella's hand.

BISHOP

Yes, my little helper is a godsend.

Sarah snatches it back.

SARAH

Was.

The CHURCH BELL RINGS again. Again his trigger finger twitches.

BISHOP

Insolent ape! You forget who I am.

SARAH

(contemptuous)

They call you "Bishop" Adam Sheolgate.

BISHOP

What I am.

SARAH

"Lord of the Southern Cross",
"Hellfire's Heat". And until
tonight, her master.

They trade glares. Myron's eyes beg her to *hush* - the sweet boy clearly cares for her. But bold and unflinching, Sarah is beyond fear. She speaks her vision, as Bishop finally grasps what happened at the river.

SARAH

The voices were right...

BISHOP

So, full of motherly woe...

SARAH

You stole her father...

BISHOP

To "deliver" Ella from me...

SARAH

Preyed on her innocence...

BISHOP

You brought her to the river...

SARAH

But you won't touch her...

BISHOP

And *drowned* yourselves...

SARAH

The *voices* were right...

BISHOP

The niggers *saved* you.

SARAH
My baby won't be raised a slave.

BISHOP
 (points at Ella)
 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!

He tosses SASH to TWO SLAVES.

BISHOP
 YOU TWO, BIND HER!

The CHURCH BELL RINGS. The slaves hesitate.

BISHOP
 (raises his SHOTGUN)
 I SAID *BIND HER!*

Just then, Wallace's folks race onto the scene.

BO/HATTIE
 WALLACE! SON!

WALLACE
 DADDY! MOMMA!

BISHOP
 (cocks the gun)
NOW, GODDAMMIT!!

BO
 SON, ALL YOU ALL R--

SARAH
BO, GET BACK!!

THE CHURCH BELL RINGS. ***BLAM!!*** Bishop SHOOTs BO DEAD then aims at the two slaves. Hattie SCREAMS. Wallace SCREAMS. Ella SHRIEKS as the slaves SEIZE and WRESTLE Sarah to the ground, their eyes begging her forgiveness.

Harrowed beyond words, Sarah locks defiant eyes with Ella:

SARAH

As I stood at the river, you in my arms, I heard voices on the wind, a choir of voices. They said, "*Don't do it, Sarah; we have need of this child - far from here, far from you.*" The voices were loud, but your tears were louder.

(gazes miraculously
at the river)

Then God gave you back. 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 drown you myself first!

SARAH

Really, and *pretend* to rear this boy when I'm gone, as if you had the first clue?! I've raised Myron as my own since missus' death; he loves me as *his* own.

BISHOP

Let's remedy that.

Breathing fire, he hands Myron a SPIKED BULLWHIP.

BISHOP

Do her.

SARAH

Do it yourself! Myron's a good boy!

Myron bursts into tears. Bishop BASHES HIS FACE with the shotgun.

BISHOP

Craven!

Sarah moans in anguish as Myron falls SCREAMING to the ground. As Bishop takes up the whip, she urgently turns to Ella.

SARAH

Go to Springwater Church; ask anyone how to get there. Find the organist, old Mr. Dunn. He'll take you in.

(MORE)

SARAH (CONT'D)

(sweeps Ella's eyes)

Precious baby, you got a call on your
life. Run your race, fast and far.
Become everything your mother wasn't.
And don't you ever turn back. Ever.

But Bishop shoves a rag into Sarah's mouth, then clenches Ella's
face and STARES PIERCINGLY into her eyes.

BISHOP

Now you hear God's word, Ella Sheppard:
That carnage, that blood, those FACES,
those battered, bludgeoned FACES - it's
all your doing. You betrayed your
people, damning them with heaven's
wrath, then betrayed me, damning 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
your mother should have drowned.

CLOSE ON LITTLE ELLA - Her mouth violently agape, she silently
SHRIEKS at Bishop's curse. Bishop shoves her away, winds back the
whip over Sarah, then commands his bleeding son --

BISHOP

Take note.

Just then, we hear a sound overhead... the almost surreal sound of
FLAPPING WINGS. They draw Ella's gaze up to --

THE NIGHT SKY

A RAVEN circles expectantly above. Alone in the heavens, it circles
around and around almost hypnotically. Her heart racing, Ella
stares at the waiting raven, terrified yet 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.