

BLEEDING KANSAS

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FADE IN:

EXT. ATCHINSON PLANTATION - NIGHT

A pair of BARE BLACK FEET step softly through dewy grass. **JUDAH**, 25, crosses the lawn of a sleepy MISSOURI PLANTATION.

He approaches the SLAVE QUARTERS, two low barracks with a dozen simple doors on each side, and pauses in front of one.

INT. SLAVE QUARTERS - CONTINUOUS

A SOFT KNOCK awakens CELIA. At 22, she is already a proud black woman, and even in darkness, her beauty is captivating.

JUDAH(O.S.)
(hushed)
Celia?

CELIA
Judah? That you?

Judah slips into the cramped, dark room. Celia sits up, trying to make him out in the shadows.

CELIA (CONT'D)
What's wrong?

JUDAH
We always talk 'bout runnin' off.

CELIA
Uh-hunh?

She fumbles for a lantern.

JUDAH
What if we go tonight?

Celia lights the lantern, and its amber glow reveals Judah's shirt, pants, and calloused hands. COVERED IN BLOOD.

INT. BARN - AT THE SAME TIME

Blood mingles with hay on the dusty floor of the stables. The handle of an AXE sticks out of a 17-year-old boy's chest.

DAVID ATCHINSON, 40s, a coarse but charismatic Missouri aristocrat, stares down at the body of his dead son.

His face is contorted with the horror of his son's brutal death. ATCHINSON'S EYE TWITCHES as he stifles his grief.

OVERBY, 30s, the head house slave, kneels over the young man's body. Searches for a pulse. There isn't one.

EXT. ATCHINSON PLANTATION - NIGHT

DING-DING-DING-DING-DING! A triangle bell RINGS out the alarm from the front porch of the MAIN HOUSE.

Judah and Celia race through rows of leafy tobacco, heading for the safety of the dense forest beyond.

BANG! Judah glances back to see Atchinson out on the second-story balcony of the Main House with a long rifle.

Atchinson reloads, steadyng his gun on the balcony railing. He sights down the crosshairs, inhales deeply, exhales slowly-

BANG! Judah keeps running... but suddenly he's all alone.

He stops and turns. Celia's crumpled form sprawls between the rows. A bullet hole blossoms red in the back of her dress.

JUDAH

Celia? Celia?! Get up!

CELIA

Keep. Runnin'.

He scoops her up and continues running toward the tree line. Another shot WHIZZES by his head.

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

Judah sprints through the trees, leaping over logs and ducking beneath branches, Celia cradled in his arms.

The BAYING of bloodhounds starts up behind him, and for the first time we see fear in his eyes.

EXT. RIVER - NIGHT

Judah reaches the MISSOURI RIVER, BURBLING softly in the night. He can barely see the opposite bank, much less imagine how to get there.

Judah looks down at Celia, her head lolling back over his arm. Shakes her gently. No response.

JUDAH

No... Please no...

He shakes her again, but she is a rag doll in his arms. His voice trembles as he slowly lays her on the ground.

JUDAH (CONT'D)
Come on, Celia. Gotta keep goin'.

He puts his ear to her mouth, praying to hear her breath. But she's already dead. He shuts his eyes, fighting back tears as-

A DOG BURSTS through the brush, BARKING ferociously. Judah stands between the animal and Celia's body as it charges.

The canine LEAPS, fangs gleaming, and sinks its teeth into Judah's forearm. They both SPLASH into the shallows, and it's clear from his awkward flailing that-

JUDAH CAN'T SWIM.

He panics, GASPING, and stumbles to gain his feet. The dog's jaws grip his arm like a vise. Judah forces its muzzle under the surface, and it THRASHES violently to come up for air.

Judah pins the hound beneath the cold black water. The dog scratches and twists, but Judah brings his weight to bear until the frantic clawing stops. The body goes limp, and Judah releases the dead animal, letting it drift downstream.

He scrambles back to Celia, cradling his mangled arm. Judah gazes at her angelic face, now still and cold. He turns away, not sure what to do... then makes a hard choice.

Judah lifts the body and takes a few tentative steps into the water. Lowers her slowly into the river. He notices her hand is clenched into a fist, and carefully opens her palm-

AN 1846 SILVER LIBERTY DOLLAR shimmers in the moonlight.

He removes the coin and lets go of Celia's hand. His heart breaks as he watches the current carry her body downstream.

The PRELAPPED SOUND OF BARKING DOGS brings us to-

EXT. RIVER - LATER

Overby holds the leashes of two BLOODHOUNDS, as they strain to chase Judah's scent into the water. Atchinson stands nearby, looking across the river with a torch in his hand.

OVERBY
Musta gone in, suh.

ATCHINSON
Ever seen a nigger swim, Overby?

OVERBY
No, suh. Maybe he drowned.

Overby points to a LOW-HANGING BRANCH that reaches out over the water. Judah's bloody shirt is tangled up in the leaves.

ATCHINSON
No. He's out there.

Atchinson's gaze follows the branch upward, charting a path back to the trunk, across another branch to a second tree, higher and higher, all the way to the canopy. He holds out his torch, but the light cannot penetrate far enough to see-

Judah, perched between two of the highest branches, leaning back against the trunk, holding his breath.

ATCHINSON (CONT'D)
But he can't run forever.

BLOOD trickles down Judah's wounded elbow and falls to the ground like dark droplets of rain. DRIP. DRIP. DRIP.

CUT TO:

TITLE CARD: BLEEDING KANSAS

EXT. WAGON TRAIL - DAY

SUPER: KANSAS TERRITORY, MAY 1856

Wooden wheels CREAK along a dusty road that cuts through the open Kansas plain.

DRIVER and SHOTGUN, two crusty BANK EMPLOYEES, sit atop a WELLS FARGO STAGECOACH.

WHEEE-OOO-WHEET! An impossibly shrill WHISTLE reverberates across the plain. The two men look around for the source.

SHOTGUN
Could be Comanch.

Driver CRACKS the reins, hurrying the four horses yoked to the front of the stagecoach.

UP THE ROAD

The GALLOPING HOOVES of a midnight-black MUSTANG.

ON THE STAGECOACH

Shotgun COCKS his weapon and swivels his sights back on:

A BLACK SHAPE in the distance, racing up from behind them.

SHOTGUN

We got company.

DRIVER

How many?

SHOTGUN

(squinting)

Just one.

The wild mare closes in on them, unencumbered by a saddle. Or a rider.

Shotgun draws a bead on the dark horse as it comes up alongside the stagecoach, but then lowers his weapon.

SHOTGUN (CONT'D)

Damn, look at her go.

The mare races past, maneuvering in front of the lead horse.

DRIVER

Wouldja look at that? She wants to be a carriage horse.

Driver laughs, but Shotgun is wary.

SHOTGUN

No wild horse wants to pull.

The mare accelerates, and the pull horses pick up the pace.

DRIVER

Whoa, whoa now!

Driver tries to slow them, but they follow the mare as she leads the coach off the main trail.

The wagon JOLTS over a small dirt path.

SHOTGUN

Get a hold of 'em, damn it!

The dirt path drops down into a slotted RAVINE, and the coach picks up speed as it races down the incline.

Shotgun drops his weapon and wrenches the reins from Driver, pulling back hard. But the horses barrel onward.

The coach swerves around a sharp curve, and they see-

A FELLED TREE, lying directly across the path. The mare gracefully LEAPS over the trunk.

The stagecoach horses try to follow, but out of sync and weighed down by the coach, they TRIP and TUMBLE. The stagecoach SMASHES into the downed tree.

Driver and Shotgun are LAUNCHED forward. The coach teeters onto its side. Driver CRUNCHES into the dirt, out cold.

Shotgun GROANS, clutching his ribs.

SHOTGUN (CONT'D)
I heard of stealing an election
before, but shit. Y'all workin' for
Sherman or Robinson?

He starts to push himself up-

But a BLACK BOOT steps onto his back, pressing him down.

OUTLAW (O.S.)
You see my face, have to kill you.

Shotgun turns white at the sound of the Outlaw's voice.

WE BOOM UP to reveal black chaps, a long black duster, a pair of holsters, a gleaming belt buckle, and a red bandana over the Outlaw's face. He pulls off the bandana, revealing-

JUDAH. Dark locks of hair, tied off with beads and feathers, spill out from under a black hat and fall to his shoulders.

FIVE YEARS HAVE PASSED since he fled the plantation. Half a decade on the run has hardened Judah's face and taught him to keep a pistol between himself and anyone else.

SHOTGUN
Don't need to see your face. You
got the voice of a black man.

Judah kneels on Shotgun's spine, uses the bandana as a blindfold, then pulls a key ring from the man's belt.

SHOTGUN (CONT'D)
Only one road agent of that color.

Judah ignores him and opens the door to the stagecoach. It's piled high with stacks of PAPER BALLOTS. He frowns.

JUDAH
Where's the safe at?

SHOTGUN
All we got is ballots.

JUDAH

Hell am I to do with ballots?

SHOTGUN

Vote, I reckon.

JUDAH

Where's the local transfer?

Shotgun hesitates. Judah COCKS his gun.

SHOTGUN

In the bank.

Judah presses his gun to the man's temple.

SHOTGUN (CONT'D)

We ain't picked it up yet, I swear!

Judah pulls an apple from his coat pocket and offers it to BRANDY, the black Mustang. Strokes her neck as she eats.

He takes a hard look at the banged up coach, thinking.

EXT. TOPEKA, KS - DAY

MEN AND WOMEN crowd around a LARGE PLATFORM in the TOWN SQUARE of Kansas' unofficial and bitterly divided capital city. The platform doubles as a public stage and a gallows.

Today, it serves as a stage, and a large banner reads: "TERRITORIAL GOVERNOR'S DEBATE". The CANDIDATES stand center stage, while their respective ADVISORS sit on the sides.

The Free-Soil candidate, **CHARLES ROBINSON**, 40s, leans heavily on a WALKING CANE, his legs withered by childhood polio. For Charles Robinson, even standing is an act of defiance.

CHARLES ROBINSON

The fate of this territory is not only a matter of the Negro's freedom, but our own as well. My wife, God rest her soul, used to say that no man is free while another is in chains. This nation cannot endure half free, half slave. The next state to enter the Union will decide the issue at last. So let Kansas come in free. Free to prosper, free to decide her own fate, and free from the shackles of Southern slavery!

Across the stage, the pro-slavery incumbent **GOVERNOR SHERMAN**, 40s, peers out from beneath a derby hat. His fine suit and Southern charm conceal ruthless ambition.

GOVERNOR SHERMAN

Mr. Robinson is not here to serve Kansas, but to put another jewel in the crown of the North. He would tip the delicate balance of power in Washington and put an end to our Dixie way of life. Before you choose the man to guide Kansas into statehood, remember this: my opponent traveled two thousand miles to be here today, while I walked just a mile from my home.

CHARLES ROBINSON

Did you walk, or were you carried by your slaves?

GOVERNOR SHERMAN

(re: Robinson's cane)
I myself have never needed assistance walking.

The crowd responds with a mix of SNICKERS and BOOS.

GOVERNOR SHERMAN (CONT'D)

My negros are here to make this land prosperous. And I care for them all with a father's love.

Charles Robinson falters, still shaken by the insult. His 20-year-old daughter **K.C. ROBINSON**, as passionate as she is naive, calls out from her chair at the edge of the stage.

KC

We've all heard of the affection you have for your female slaves, Mr. Sherman. But I would not call that kind of love "fatherly".

The crowd titters, but Governor Sherman holds his ground.

GOVERNOR SHERMAN

A fine daughter you've raised, Mr. Robinson. I'm sure you're proud of her Yankee manners.

(then, for the crowd)
But I'd ask how you plan to run the entire territory when you can't even run your own household?

The debate erupts into pandemonium as both sides start YELLING INSULTS at each other.

ACROSS THE SQUARE

BRANDY and three of the CARRIAGE HORSES pull the banged-up Wells Fargo coach into town. Shotgun and Driver sit rigidly on the driver's bench. The barrels of a SHOTGUN poke out from a hole in the coach and point straight at their backs.

INT. STAGECOACH - CONTINUOUS

Judah, on the other end of the shotgun, peeks out at the chaotic scene in the town square, then whispers to Driver.

JUDAH

Easy, now.

EXT. BANK - DAY

The stagecoach pulls up in front of a small, regional BANK. Driver and Shotgun remain in their seats, and the MANAGER, a bow-tied man with a pocketwatch, comes out to meet them.

MANAGER

Goddammit, you two, runnin' over an hour late!

SHOTGUN

Sorry, we got held up a bit.

MANAGER

I don't want no excuses, I want my transfers in Lawrence tonight.

(calling inside the bank)

Stuart! Get them deposits out here!

A scrawny BANK EMPLOYEE hurries outside with two satchels full of deposits. The Manager looks up from his watch and finally notices the busted-up trim on the stagecoach.

MANAGER (CONT'D)

Would you look at them scratches?
You have any idea how much it costs
to repair damage like that? A
goddamn gold mine! If you two've
been drinkin', I swear-

The door of the coach opens to reveal Judah, with his shotgun leveled at the two bank men. They freeze, awestruck.

BANK EMPLOYEE

(sotto)

The Black Bandit...

Judah steps out, grabs the satchels, steps back in, and shuts the door. He KNOCKS the shotgun on the roof, signalling.

SHOTGUN

Like I said, we got held up.

Driver CRACKS the reins, and the coach rumbles off, picking up speed as it heads back toward the town square. The Manager chases after it, waving his arms and CALLING FOR HELP.

INT./EXT. STAGECOACH - CONTINUOUS

Judah opens the bag and rifles through the coins. He bites one and holds it up to the light.

In the front seat, Driver and Shotgun look at one another. Shotgun nods. Driver nods. THEY DIVE OFF THE CARRIAGE, and roll to the sides as the horses gallop off with the coach.

Judah looks up, startled, as the coach starts to bump along out of control. Driver and Shotgun are gone. Shit.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - DAY

The debate has devolved into a shouting match on-stage, and an outright BRAWL in the audience. The mob circles around a pair of men slugging it out in the dirt.

COLIN SCHUMACHER, early 30s, pushes men aside as he wades through the bloodthirsty crowd. He's a rugged frontier man with a thick mustache, a BADGE on his breast, and the absolute certainty that he's always right.

COLIN

The fuck out of my way! Move!

He finally makes it to the center and immediately SUCKER PUNCHES one of the FIGHTERS, flattening him. The man lands hard, then squints up at what hit him.

FIGHTER 1

Gee, Sheriff. Never figured you for a nigger-lovin' abolitionist.

The other fighter's crooked teeth show through a smug smile.

FIGHTER 2

Appears we got the law.

Colin turns and PUNCHES the second man, knocking him down next to the first.

COLIN

I'm impartial.

Suddenly, the crowd backs away from him, frightened. Then they turn and flee in terror. Colin frowns. That's odd. He looks back for the source of the commotion and sees-

THE STAGECOACH CHARGING RECKLESSLY TOWARDS HIM, with no driver in sight.

Judah climbs out the side door, carrying the satchels of money. Hoists himself onto the roof.

Colin spots a LITTLE BOY playing MARBLES in the dirt. Oblivious to the oncoming danger. Colin makes a run for him.

Colin scoops up the boy and DIVES out of the way as the WAGON WHEELS WHOOSH past, scattering the marbles.

Colin sets the terrified kid aside. Draws his COLT REVOLVER.

Judah crouches atop the stagecoach, tries to make his way to the driver's seat. The coach heads right for the stage.

The horses run under the edge of the platform, but the coach is too tall. Judah leaps into the air as it SLAMS into the wooden beams with a sickening CRUNCH.

Judah lands on the platform and rolls to his feet, spilling some of the coins. The bewildered politicians have never been so upstaged in their lives.

All is still. They stare at Judah. His gun. The money.

Judah spots KC. He grabs her, presses the gun to her back.

JUDAH
This way, ma'am.

Judah clings to KC, backing away as he takes her hostage. Colin approaches the stage with his revolver raised.

COLIN
Unhand the girl!

Judah FIRES a shot at Colin's feet. Stops the lawman cold.

JUDAH
Toss that gun and cut my horse loose. The black one, up front.

Colin stares Judah down. Charles Robinson is beside himself, but unable to do anything to protect his daughter.

CHARLES ROBINSON
Let him go, Sheriff!

Colin slowly sets his gun on the ground, then steps under the stage. KC glares at her captor as he backs up to the edge.

KC

My father and I are fighting for
your freedom.

JUDAH

Didn't ask for no help.

A WHINNY from below as Brandy is cut loose. Judah looks down as Brandy trots into view. He steps off the back of the stage-

And drops into the saddle below. Judah points his pistol at Colin. The Sheriff's eyes blaze with contempt.

COLIN

I'll be seein' ya.

Judah smirks. He twirls his gun and holsters it, then digs in his spurs, and Brandy takes off like a rocket.

Colin climbs onto the stage, where KC is already being fussed over by her father and his staff.

COLIN (CONT'D)

Ya oughta get to the doc, Miss
Robinson. Contact with a dark fella
can be dangerous.

Colin puts a hand on KC's shoulder, his touch betraying more than a professional interest. KC brushes him off.

KC

I'm fine, thank you.
(to her father)

You need to make a statement for
the paper. Something positive.

CHARLES ROBINSON

You have any idea who that was?

COLIN

(off her wide-eyed look)

A known outlaw. Responsible for a dozen stick-up jobs, and eight men dead. Word has it he scalps 'em like a damn Indian.

(then)

But don't worry, miss. I'll make him a hemp necktie.

KC

He deserves a fair trial,
regardless of his color.

CHARLES ROBINSON

This isn't about black and white,
KC. It's about right and wrong. Let
the Sheriff do his job, and let's
get you back home.

Governor Sherman watches keenly from across the stage, as Charles Robinson shepherds KC away.

The PRELAPPED SOUND OF THUNDERING HOOVES brings us to-

EXT. PLAINS - VARIOUS

Brandy GALLOPS across the plains, cutting through tall grass. As Judah makes his escape, we see the untamed beauty of the Kansas countryside.

- Judah takes Brandy into a pristine stream and travels along it, so that their tracks disappear at the water's edge.
- Judah rides Brandy out of the streambed at the base of a wooden bridge, then crosses over it.
- Horse and rider speed down a well-worn road, where Brandy's hoof prints blend in among countless others.
- Judah slowly walks Brandy over a FIELD OF FLAT ROCKS. She struggles to keep her balance, but clearly knows this path.

EXT. CANYON HIDEOUT - DAY

Judah rides Brandy into his camp, hidden up in the canyon. He takes the deposits to a SMALL CAVE in the corner of the camp.

He hears a RUSTLING sound within. Judah draws his gun, peering into the darkness of the cave.

He sees his stash of food and supplies: coffee tins, cans of beans, potato sacks, whiskey bottles. He creeps closer and-

KA-CAW! A large, black CROW bursts from the darkness. Judah stumbles back in alarm and falls on his ass as the bird shrieks past his head.

The crow lands in the middle of camp as Judah catches his breath, heart racing. The bird cocks its head right at him.

Then the crow beats its wings, launching into flight. Judah takes aim and FIRES. The shot echoes through the canyon as the crow disappears over a ridge. KA-CAW!

EXT. CANYON HIDEOUT - NIGHT

Judah sits by a campfire, heating up a dinner skillet and swigging from a bottle of whiskey. He drains the bottle, then shakes out the last few drops over his cooking.

He reaches back and "plants" the bottle neck-down in the dirt beside dozens of identical empties. His makeshift "BOTTLE GARDEN" is growing.

Brandy looks up from her dinner and makes eye contact.

JUDAH

What? Can't have a drink?
 (pauses as if listening)
 Yeah, I put an arm 'round her. She
 was a goddamn hostage.
 (listening again)
 Don't be like that.

Judah JANGLES the sack of gold coins beside him.

JUDAH (CONT'D)

Oughta put us over five easy. Know
 what that means? No more chasin'
 coaches and hidin' under rocks.
 You'll have room to run free. And
 no one comin' to bother us.

He lifts his skillet off the fire. Takes a bite, but chews gingerly, CLUTCHING HIS JAW IN PAIN.

He looks back at Brandy, who stares at him, not convinced.

JUDAH (CONT'D)

Just you wait. Soon as we get out
 west, I can ride right into town
 and have a doctor pull it proper.
 Long as we got the money.
 (he listens)
 Yes, I swear. And new shoes for
 you. Now leave me be.

Brandy goes back to eating, and Judah looks down at the sorry excuse for dinner in his skillet.

INT. GOVERNOR'S OFFICE - NIGHT

A SHARP KNIFE slices through a bloody steak, as Governor Sherman eats dinner at his cherry wood desk. A KNOCK.

GOVERNOR SHERMAN

Enter.

The door opens and DAVID ATCHINSON, the plantation owner from the prologue, enters. His icy blue eyes are unchanged, but years of drinking away his grief have carved him into the sinewy spectre now known as "BOURBON DAVE".

BEN STRINGFELLOW, 30s, Atchinson's burly enforcer, steps in after him, brushing dust from his chaps.

GOVERNOR SHERMAN (CONT'D)

And?

Atchinson heads to the bar and pours himself a bourbon.

ATCHINSON

You're losing in every county. And most cities except Topeka.

GOVERNOR SHERMAN

Even Sheridan?

ATCHINSON

(nods and drinks)

These abolitionists are descending on the territory like a plague.

GOVERNOR SHERMAN

But as long as we staff the polls-

ATCHINSON

-Not this time. The Jayhawkers got feds lined up at every ballot box.

Governor Sherman pushes aside his plate and steps to the window. He looks down at TWENTY MOUNTED BORDER RUFFIANS: armed Missourians ready to defend slavery by any means.

GOVERNOR SHERMAN

Surely your men can exert some influence.

ATCHINSON

If you want to start a war, just say the word.

GOVERNOR SHERMAN

(scowls)

I hope you don't only bring bad news, Bourbon. If this territory falls to the North, they'll be settin' your slaves free come harvest-time. And before long, your field-hands will be taking Georgia belles to their debutante balls.

STRINGFELLOW

What if we stick him, Gov?

ATCHINSON

Keep your fucking tongue.

Stringfellow shrugs.

ATCHINSON (CONT'D)

What my colleague means, Governor, is if some act of God rendered Charles Robinson unable to stay in the race, the Jayhawkers would lack the time to field a new candidate.

Governor Sherman considers, treading lightly.

GOVERNOR SHERMAN

The eyes of Washington are on us, and if providence struck down the crutcher, blame would quickly fall on my undeserving head.

(then)

However, an interesting event occurred at today's debate. A buck nigger robbed the countinghouse. And during his escape, he took Robinson's daughter hostage.

Governor Sherman pauses to give the idea time to penetrate.

GOVERNOR SHERMAN (CONT'D)

She was unharmed, fortunately, and I understand is recovering at home.

ATCHINSON

(downs his second drink)
I'll be leaving for Missouri shortly. Perhaps even tomorrow?

GOVERNOR SHERMAN

Safe travels.

INT. CHARLES ROBINSON'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Folded clothes are set into a large trunk. Charles Robinson tries to pack, but is woefully incapable. KC lends a hand.

KC

Where's your new coat?

CHARLES ROBINSON

Let me be, KC.

KC

We must leave first thing for
Lawrence, and I want to make
certain you get enough sleep.

CHARLES ROBINSON

I can do it myself, thank you.

His tone is final.

KC

I suppose I have my own packing.

CHARLES ROBINSON

You will not accompany me.
(off her dismay)
It is safer for you to stay home.

KC

I'll be safe enough by your side.

CHARLES ROBINSON

I am not willing to risk-

KC

-But father, I-

CHARLES ROBINSON

-Stop interrupting me!

She falls silent, restraining herself.

CHARLES ROBINSON (CONT'D)

In private or in public. If you
cannot keep your mouth shut when
occasion demands, you'll stay home.

KC

I was defending you!

CHARLES ROBINSON

And hurting the cause! I'm grateful
your mother wasn't alive to see you
hollering like a common hussy.

KC

And I'm glad she can't see what a
cantankerous cripple you've become.

KC marches out, SLAMMING the door behind her. He sighs and
SNAPS his trunk shut.

EXT. CANYON - DAY

The sun bakes a FIELD OF FLAT ROCKS. Colin kneels, searching for signs of Judah's trail. He squints, running his hands over the stones. But the trail has gone cold.

Colin picks up a rock, scrutinizing it carefully, running a finger along its edge. And then...

He hurls it with all his might into the canyon. Colin's horse looks up as the stone CLATTERS down the ridge.

Colin wipes sweat from his brow as he walks to the stallion, grabbing his canteen and taking a long drink. He takes a last look around him, ready to give up, when he sees:

REFLECTED POINTS OF LIGHT make a kaleidoscopic pattern on one of the shadowed canyon walls. He caps his canteen, intrigued.

EXT. CANYON HIDEOUT - DAY

Colin comes around a rock formation with his gun drawn, and spies the source of the reflections: Judah's "bottle garden", glinting in the bright sunlight.

He hears a soft CHINK, followed by a quiet THUMP. The sound continues rhythmically as Colin quietly proceeds into the seemingly empty camp. CHINK. THUMP.

Colin traces the sound to the mouth of a small cave. He steps closer and peers inside to see-

Judah digging a deep hole. The shovel bites the dirt with a CHINK and dumps it. THUMP. Judah's GUN BELT lies next to the growing mound of earth.

Judah stops, bends low, and LIFTS OFF a large wooden board, revealing a hollowed-out hiding space at the bottom of the hole. It's filled with bars and coins of stolen GOLD.

Judah wipes his brow, and turns to push himself out of the hole, but freezes when he sees Colin. Judah's hand instinctively goes to his hip, but the gun isn't there. He eyes his pistol, a few feet away.

COLIN

One wrong move and you're diggin'
your own grave.

EXT. CHARLES ROBINSON'S HOUSE - DAY

Soap suds froth off of a scrubbing board. KC sits in the FRONT YARD, sleeves rolled up, washing her father's clothes. She takes out her pent up frustration on his collared shirt.

COLIN (O.S.)
Miss Robinson!

Colin rides up, sitting high on his horse. Brandy follows behind, with Judah tied up and draped over her saddle.

COLIN (CONT'D)
Thought ya might like to see for
yourself. I apprehended the Black
Bandit. So you can sleep tight now.

KC
And are you planning on keeping him
in my father's front yard?

Her terse response is not the heroic return Colin expected.

COLIN
S'pose not.

KC
Then I suggest you take him
elsewhere.

She goes back to punishing her laundry.

COLIN
Care to hear how I tracked him? I
know a nice spot out by the river
bend where we can have us a picnic.

KC
If you have nothing more important
to do than picnic, perhaps you
should volunteer for the campaign.

The rejection only fuels his desire to win her over.

COLIN
Another time, then.

INT. JAIL - DAY

The door opens and light pours into the small JAIL that doubles as the Sheriff's office. Colin trains a gun on Judah's back as he leads his prisoner inside.

COLIN
Hat, belt, and boots on the table.

Judah obliges. His shirt hangs open, and Colin sees the worn 1846 SILVER LIBERTY DOLLAR, now hanging as a medallion, on a leather strap around Judah's neck.

COLIN (CONT'D)
First dollar ya stole?

Judah stares back defiantly. Colin decides not to press the issue, and waves Judah into the cell with his pistol.

Colin turns a key in the lock and takes a seat at the desk. He pulls out a FORM and takes a pen from the inkwell.

COLIN (CONT'D)
Name?

No response.

COLIN (CONT'D)
Name.

Judah is silent.

COLIN (CONT'D)
"Sambo."
(writes on the form)
Date of birth?

Still nothing.

COLIN (CONT'D)
Need it for the headstone.

Colin stands and approaches the cell slowly.

COLIN (CONT'D)
Ya forget how to talk?

Judah holds the bars, standing fast.

COLIN (CONT'D)
'Cause I'll remind ya. Tell me.
Your goddamn birthday.

Judah smiles. Colin WHIPS his gun across Judah's knuckles. Judah recoils, clenching his jaw to restrain a yelp of pain.

Judah retreats to the bed. He lies down and pointedly turns his back on Colin.

COLIN (CONT'D)
Dumb fuckin' nigger.

The front steps CREAK, and the door opens as Atchinson steps inside. His eyes narrow as they adjust to the low light.

ATCHINSON
 Caught yourself a coon, Sheriff.
 Nicely done.

Judah tenses. It doesn't matter that they've been apart for a decade. He instantly recognizes his former master's voice.

ATCHINSON (CONT'D)
 What'll you do with him now?

COLIN
 String party tomorrow.

ATCHINSON
 A runaway in the territories is
 still a runaway. That's another
 man's property.

COLIN
 Free or slave don't matter in these
 parts. He broke Kansas law, and
 he'll pay for it here.

ATCHINSON
 I'll pay for him, here and now.
 Prob'ly worth four hundred or so,
 once I give him a haircut.
 (to Judah)
 Come show me your teeth, boy.

Judah holds his breath, his whole body rigid as Atchinson looks him over from behind.

ATCHINSON (CONT'D)
 Three fifty, on account of having
 to be broken. Must've been spoiled
 by some limp-wrist master.

COLIN
 This ain't no auction house,
 Bourbon. What can I do ya for?

Atchinson's gaze lingers on Judah a moment longer.

ATCHINSON
 Came to pick up my piece.

Colin unlocks a cabinet behind his desk, revealing shelves of firearms. He takes down a beautiful IVORY-HANDED REVOLVER.

COLIN
 That's a fancy iron. Suits ya.
 (then)
 (MORE)

COLIN (CONT'D)
If I hand this over, best be on
your way out of town.

ATCHINSON
I'll be returning to Missouri.

He reaches for his gun, but Colin holds it away.

COLIN
Then I can count on ya to be out of
the territory come election day?

ATCHINSON
Frontier politics don't suit my
temperament.

COLIN
Ain't what I hear. I hear ya held
up the polls at gunpoint last time
around. Bought every vote ya could
wrangle and scared off the rest.
Most folks think you're the reason
Levi Keller ain't been seen since.

ATCHINSON
But you don't put much stock in
hearsay. Do you, Sheriff?

Atchinson reaches out for his pistol belt. Colin holds it for a moment longer, then lets go. Atchinson turns and strides out the door, SLAMMING it shut behind him.

Judah finally EXHALES, and a SHUDDER runs down his spine.

EXT. CHARLES ROBINSON'S HOUSE - DAY

Clean sheets billow on the clothesline. KC comes outside with a laundry basket and steps down into the yard. She walks up, grabs opposite corners of one sheet, and WHISH-

The sheet comes down to reveal THREE BORDER RUFFIANS, on horses at the edge of the yard. Stringfellow in the middle.

KC
May I help you gentlemen?

STRINGFELLOW
Lovely day for a ride, ain't it?

Stringfellow COCKS the gun resting on his lap.

INT. BANK - DAY

The Bank Manager looks through the satchel full of money, while Colin watches from across the desk.

MANAGER

Sure appreciate it, Sheriff. But this's ten times what was taken.

COLIN

Wasn't exactly sure how to get the rest where it's due.

Sensing an opportunity, the Manager zips up the satchel.

MANAGER

Oh, I'll take care of that. Thank you kindly for your help, and come see me if ya ever need a bank loan.

COLIN

I been thinkin' on a piece of land out by the river bend.

MANAGER

(knowingly)

Got a woman picked out too?

COLIN

I'm thinkin' on it.

MANAGER

You let me know.

He extends his hand to Colin, signaling an end to the conversation. Colin grips it tightly and doesn't let go.

COLIN

I just did.

The Manager nods. Colin smiles and pats him on the back.

EXT. RIDGE - SUNSET

KC rides on the back of Stringfellow's horse, hands bound and mouth gagged. The other two Ruffians follow behind.

They come to a stop on the ridge next to Atchinson, who sits astride his horse, gazing out over TOPEKA AT SUNSET.

ATCHINSON

The light of the Lord reaches even the savage corners of the Earth. But this is no place for a lady.

KC tries to protest, but is muffled by the gag. Atchinson leads the way as the men ride out to the east.

INT. JAIL - NIGHT

A WIRE wriggles in the lock on the cell door. Judah's hands reach through the bars of his cell, trying to work the tumblers with a makeshift lock pick.

FOOTSTEPS approach. Judah quickly pulls the wire straight, slipping it into one of his thick locks of hair just as-

Colin enters. Stares at Judah.

COLIN

Mind telling me what in Sam Hill ya
doin' with five thousand dollars?

Judah turns away and looks out the window.

COLIN (CONT'D)

S'pose it don't matter now. Your
property is the property of Kaw
County. The horse'll be held thirty
days against claim of ownership,
then auctioned. And since the last
known owner was a negro thief,
she'll more than likely end up
fattening Filmore Jenkins' hogs.

Colin watches Judah subtly tense up at the thought.

COLIN (CONT'D)

I could put her up in the stable.
But seeing as ya won't do me the
courtesy of opening your mouth,
might as well save the hay.

JUDAH

(quietly)

Don't know.

COLIN

What's that?

Judah turns to face Colin.

JUDAH

My fuckin' birthday.

Colin nods. Makes a note on the form.

COLIN

I'll see she gets fed.

Judah returns to the window and stares out past the bars at the looming GALLOWS.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - MORNING

The square bustles with the activity of daily commerce.

Charles Robinson hurries across town. He uses his cane for each step, nearly falling as he's jostled by a merchant.

INT. JAIL - MOMENTS LATER

Charles Robinson marches in and SLAMS A LETTER down on Colin's desk. Colin looks up at his sweaty, reddened face.

CHARLES ROBINSON

They took her, Sheriff! Goddamn
bastards come in the night- I was
gone one night- for her own safety
she stayed home and- sonofabitches-

COLIN

-Hold on, now, Mr. Robinson. What's
the matter?

CHARLES ROBINSON

Have a look!

He points to the simple, handwritten note.

COLIN

(reading)

"Went for a long ride. Will return
when you come to your senses."

(to Robinson)

Y'all have an argument?

CHARLES ROBINSON

We- well yes, but- She's been
abducted, I'm certain.

COLIN

That's a prideful young woman.

CHARLES ROBINSON

It's not her handwriting! And
besides, you think she'd leave it
stuck in the door with this?

He takes out a large Bowie knife, and STABS the letter into Colin's desk.

CHARLES ROBINSON (CONT'D)
It's Governor Sherman! He hasn't
the gall to do it himself, but one
of his lapdogs, no doubt.

COLIN
David Atchinson just left town.

Charles Robinson's eyes go wide in fear. Judah turns away from the window, suddenly intrigued.

CHARLES ROBINSON
I never should have brought her.

COLIN
The governor likes to talk. Let's go lend him an ear.

INT. GOVERNOR'S OFFICE - DAY

A match LIGHTS the glowing end of a cigar.

GOVERNOR SHERMAN
To what do I owe this great pleasure, gentlemen?

Governor Sherman exhales a plume of smoke across his desk toward Colin. Charles Robinson hangs back behind the Sheriff, trying to keep a lid on his boiling temper.

COLIN
Mr. Robinson's daughter went missing. Yesterday afternoon.

GOVERNOR SHERMAN
Oh my.

COLIN
Near the same time, Dave Atchinson took leave of town.

GOVERNOR SHERMAN
Mr. Atchinson does not apprise me of his comings and goings. He is one of my many supporters.

CHARLES ROBINSON
A supporter who's known to sabotage public elections!

GOVERNOR SHERMAN
Calm down, Charles. I'm sure your girl will return if you keep a level head.

CHARLES ROBINSON
What exactly do you intend by that?

GOVERNOR SHERMAN
Well, if I were missing a child, I wouldn't trifle with any political ambitions. Lord knows, this is a barbarous land.

CHARLES ROBINSON
Bastard!

He lunges forward, raising his cane to strike Governor Sherman. The governor grabs it in the air and pulls the cane aside. Charles Robinson's twisted legs give out and he collapses into a shameful heap.

GOVERNOR SHERMAN
Be careful, Charles. You're in no position to make accusations.

Colin helps Charles Robinson to his feet, but stares down Governor Sherman.

COLIN
I'll find the girl. And justice for them who took her.

GOVERNOR SHERMAN
Scour the earth, Sheriff. But if you go beyond the borders of Kaw County, I'll come for your badge.

Colin unpins his TIN STAR. Tosses it on the governor's desk.

COLIN
Save ya the trouble.

INT. JAIL - DAY

Charles Robinson follows Colin into the jailhouse. Colin immediately begins rummaging in the cabinet behind his desk.

CHARLES ROBINSON
How quickly can you depart?

COLIN
Soon as I string him up.

Judah watches Colin pull out A SIX-FOOT ROPE.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - DAY

Judah's hands are bound as Colin pulls him up the steps of the gallows. Charles Robinson trails, hampered by his limp.

CHARLES ROBINSON
I'll start rounding up a posse.

COLIN
Don't bother. Take too long.

CHARLES ROBINSON
What about the Marshals' Office?

COLIN
Even longer.

CHARLES ROBINSON
I can leave in an hour.

Colin eyes Charles Robinson's bum leg as he hobbles up.

COLIN
Hour's more than we can spare, Mr. Robinson. I'll bring her back.

Colin hauls Judah into place over the trap door, and slips the noose around his neck. Judah is astonishingly calm.

COLIN (CONT'D)
Any last words, boy?

JUDAH
I know the Atchinson place.

Colin ignores him and tightens the rope.

CHARLES ROBINSON
What's that?

JUDAH
I's born there.

COLIN
He's lyin' to save his skin.

JUDAH
My skin don't lie. Open my shirt.

COLIN
We're burnin' daylight.

Colin looks to Charles Robinson for approval to pull the lever, but he motions for Colin to open Judah's shirt. Colin grabs Judah's collar and RIPS it downward, revealing-

A RAISED SCAR, where a "BAR A" symbol is branded [---] into the skin over Judah's heart. Charles Robinson [A] stares at the scar, wide-eyed.

CHARLES ROBINSON
That's Atchinson's brand.

Charles Robinson turns to Colin, who remains wary.

COLIN
He's pulled bank jobs in Lawrence,
Wichita, Scottsville, Garrison-

JUDAH
-Never been to Garrison.

COLIN
And wanted for murder. I can't
ignore that.

CHARLES ROBINSON
I can. What's your name, boy?

COLIN
He's the fuckin' Black Bandit.

JUDAH
It's Judah.

Colin gives Judah the evil eye.

CHARLES ROBINSON
I'll make you a deal, Judah. You
help return my daughter before the
election, and my first act as
governor will be a full pardon.
Understand?

COLIN
Ya lost your damn mind?

Charles Robinson spits in his hand and extends it to Judah.

Judah hesitates. This is the first time a white man has ever offered to shake his hand.

JUDAH
One more thing.

CHARLES ROBINSON
You're in no position to negotiate.

JUDAH
I want my horse back.

CHARLES ROBINSON
You'll get your horse when I get my
daughter.

Judah extends his bound hands and shakes.

EXT. JAIL - DAY

Colin ties off his pack and hoists himself into the saddle.

Judah sits atop a BROWN QUARTER HORSE with his hands tied.
Charles Robinson watches them from the porch.

CHARLES ROBINSON
If you're not back by sundown on
Monday, I'll concede.

COLIN
We ain't back sundown Monday, shoot
his horse.

Colin points to Brandy, who is tied up nearby. Judah scowls.

CHARLES ROBINSON
I don't know how I could ever repay
you, Colin. But... here.

Charles Robinson hands Colin a coin purse.

COLIN
I'll take it for expenses. But I
been thinkin' on somethin' else.

CHARLES ROBINSON
Say the word.

COLIN
I get back, I'll come askin' KC's
hand in marriage.

Charles Robinson expected this request eventually, but not
today. He falters, emotional, searching for words.

CHARLES ROBINSON
Just bring her back safe. Whatever
it takes. Ya hear me?

COLIN
Alright then.

Colin spurs his horse forward, and a rope connected to his saddle pulls Judah's horse along behind him.

EXT. RIDGE - DAY

Colin squats on the ridge overlooking Topeka and examines the HOOFPRINTS left by Atchinson and his men.

COLIN
Headed for Hastings' Crossing.

Behind Colin, Judah slowly slips down off his horse.

Colin hears spurs JANGLE, and spins around. JUDAH'S SADDLE IS EMPTY. Colin draws his gun-

Only to see Judah kneeling on the ground, with the horse obediently lifting its hind leg.

COLIN (CONT'D)
Hell're you doin'?

JUDAH
Felt her limpin'.

The horse WHINNIES as Judah pulls a LONG THORN from its hoof.

JUDAH (CONT'D)
Oughta take care of your animals.

COLIN
Oughta stay where I can see ya.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

Judah and Colin ride along silently. Judah closes his eyes, enjoying the warm spring air. KA-CAW! A black crow lands on a nearby oak tree, cocks its head and looks directly at him.

Up ahead, a large BAND OF RIDERS crest a nearby hill. As they approach, the riders fan out and block their path.

JOHN BROWN, 50s, a wiry abolitionist with hawkish features and a minister's frock, leads with absolute authority, as though commanded by God himself.

He is followed by his son **OLIVER**, 20s, and a dozen other **JAYHAWKERS**: armed abolitionist freedom-fighters. John Brown eyes the ropes binding Judah's hands and addresses Colin.

JOHN BROWN
You a slave catcher by trade?

COLIN
Lawman. Yourself?

JOHN BROWN
Minister.

COLIN
Strange congregation that carries
rifles.

JOHN BROWN
And it's a strange lawman that
doesn't carry a badge.

Colin glances at his chest, remembering it's gone.

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)
It is a dark day, when one man
freely walks the road to traffic
his brother's soul into bondage.
(to Colin)
Now, we prefer to take him
peacefully.

John Brown signals to his men, and four of them dismount.

COLIN
He's a prisoner. Robbed a bank.

JOHN BROWN
(to Judah)
You a thief, son?

JUDAH
No sir. The man's a bounty hunter.

COLIN
Gonna trust him, or a white?

JOHN BROWN
That's an easy choice.

The Jayhawkers close in on Judah. Colin quick-draws his pistol, taking aim at John Brown's forehead.

John Brown's men respond in unison, raising their rifles in surprise. Oliver advances on Colin, ready to fire.

OLIVER
Put up your weapon!

JOHN BROWN
Stand down, Oliver!

Oliver reluctantly backs off. Colin levels his gun directly at John Brown, who stares back at him fearlessly.

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)
You got a counting problem, son?

COLIN
Way I see it, you're the only one
who counts. And I can count to one.

John Brown considers the situation and looks at Judah.

JOHN BROWN
It's a strange slave catcher that'd
die over a negro.

COLIN
'Less I'm no catcher.

John Brown waves for his men to stand down. They holster their weapons and mount their horses.

JOHN BROWN
What's your name?

COLIN
Colin Schumacher. You?

JOHN BROWN
John Brown. And if you've deceived
me, our paths will cross again.

As John Brown and his men ride on toward Topeka, Colin circles his horse back next to Judah.

COLIN
Pull a stunt like that again, I'll
hang ya by the bootstraps.

JUDAH
You got no sense of humor.

Colin PUNCHES Judah in the face, knocking him off his horse, with his hands still tied to the horn of the saddle.

The horse STARTLES, drags Judah along the ground a few feet.

Judah SPITS OUT A TOOTH and smiles.

JUDAH (CONT'D)
Saved me a trip to the doctor.

COLIN

I don't find ya amusing. Or see one
good reason not to leave ya
crowbait on the side of the road.

JUDAH

Oughta wait 'til we get through
Ferguson Pass.

COLIN

Ferguson Pass is Indian land.

JUDAH

But it's fast. And I know the way.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

A HAWK circles in the sky overhead. KC rides behind
Stringfellow, bound and gagged. Atchinson trots beside her.

ATCHINSON

Lovely birds in Kansas.

KC tries to speak, but the gag muffles her words. As
Atchinson unties it-

ATCHINSON (CONT'D)

I enjoy the song of the meadowlark.
And the plumage of the blue jay.

KC

Nothing you can do will keep a
slaver in the governor's seat.

ATCHINSON

Nature has a beauty in its balance.
For every sparrow, a sparrowhawk.

KC

When Kansas enters the union,
she'll come in as a free state.

Atchinson ignores her, silently signalling for the party to
halt. He draws his rifle, taking aim at the soaring hawk.

ATCHINSON

A hawk is vulnerable because it
believes it has no predators.

He FIRES, and the hawk tumbles from the sky. One of the
Border Ruffians rides out to retrieve it.

ATCHINSON (CONT'D)

Jayhawkers are no different.

KC
My father will not capitulate.

ATCHINSON
I imagine he has already withdrawn
from the race.

KC
He knows I'd give up my life for
the cause.

ATCHINSON
Fortunately, it's not your choice.
And there's nothing in the world
more certain than a father's love.

Atchinson spurs his horse onward, ending the conversation.

EXT. FERGUSON PASS - DAY

Colin and Judah crest a mountain pass that looks down over a valley, blanketed in thick forest. Colin surveys the terrain.

COLIN
You lead. Keep close.

EXT. INDIAN TERRITORY - DAY

Colin follows as Judah blazes a trail through the woods.

COLIN
What were all them stickups for?

Judah sizes up Colin.

COLIN (CONT'D)
Don't make much sense to rob every
bank in the territory if you're
gonna hide it all in a cave.

JUDAH
Plentya grass land out west. Gonna
buy me some and breed mustangs.

COLIN
(doubtful)
Rancher?

JUDAH
Worked horses my whole life.

COLIN
Runaway slave can't buy no land.

JUDAH

Can't no one say no to five thousand dollars. I'd buy me a hundred acres out there and live smack in the middle of it. Never have to see another damn soul.

COLIN

Even so, land don't tend itself. Ya ever put in an honest day's work without a whip at your back?

JUDAH

Never had the chance.

The two men RIDE INTO A CLEARING, and Colin pulls up short, stopping his horse suddenly.

COLIN

Christ.

A DEAD ARMY OFFICER, slumped at the base of a tree, torso shot through with arrows. Colin steps down from his horse and approaches the body.

COLIN (CONT'D)

Second lieutenant. Cavalry. Hell's he doin' out here alone?

Flies buzz around the head. Colin opens the soldier's coat, and delicately pulls an ENVELOPE from the breast pocket.

He starts to open it, takes a step forward, and breaks a tripwire. A low CREAKING sound, and then-

WHOOSH! A NET TRAP springs from the ground, pulling Colin and the dead soldier together as it cinches tight, suspending them in the air. Colin squirms away from the decaying corpse.

COLIN (CONT'D)

Aw, shit!

Judah watches, amused, as the net gets tighter and tighter.

Judah dismounts. He pulls Colin's knife from its sheath on the saddlebag and cuts through his bonds.

BANG! A shot digs into the earth inches from Judah's foot. Colin aims his pistol through the net.

COLIN (CONT'D)

Next won't miss.

Judah scans the quiet forest.

JUDAH
Shouldn'ta fired that shot.

COLIN
Toss me the knife and I'll let ya
live.

JUDAH
Sure you can hit me?

COLIN
Ya don't have a woman to hide
behind this time.

It's a stand off. Judah prepares to make a run for it.

JUDAH
On three then. One...

COLIN
Don't have to be this way.

JUDAH
Two...

Colin's finger tightens on the trigger.

SNAP! WHOOSH! The net trap drops and slams into the ground, spilling Colin and the dead man in a pile.

Colin tries to get his bearings, frantically searching the ground. He spots his pistol, scrambles over, and grabs it.

But as he looks up, he sees half a dozen KAW WARRIORS, with their bows drawn and pointed at him. Colin drops his pistol.

SAWACOTA, 20s, the lead brave, steps forward.

[Dialogue in italics is spoken in Kaw with subtitles.]

SAWACOTA
It has been too long, brother.

JUDAH
Take the white man and let me go.

COLIN
Ya know their damn language?

SAWACOTA
Akopi must speak on this.

COLIN
What's he say?

JUDAH
He says you're fucked.

EXT. KAW VILLAGE - DAY

The Kaw tend to their daily chores. A group of women sit, gossiping, as they grind corn with stone mortars.

The warriors march Judah and Colin through the center of the village. The women grow silent for a moment, then whisper excitedly as the children run over to get a closer look.

The procession halts in front of a large TEEPEE. Sawacota steps inside while the others stand guard.

COLIN
Gonna scalp me, ain't they?

JUDAH
Just don't look him in the eyes.

Colin is so scared, he doesn't even think to question Judah's command. He stares at his feet, sure of his imminent death.

AKOPI, 50s, emerges from his teepee. The towering CHIEF OF THE KAW approaches the prisoners briskly, his patience shortened by decades of defeats and broken treaties.

SAWACOTA
The white man was caught in the trap. He points a gun at Ju-Deh.

Akopi studies Judah, who looks the chief right in the eyes.

AKOPI
Ju-Deh is dead to the tribe.

JUDAH
The white man forced me onto your land. He has no respect for you. Look how he keeps his eyes on the ground as though you were a dog. Let me go and I will not return.

AKOPI
You may still know our language, but your words are empty.

He nods to the warriors, who unsheathe their knives.

COLIN
Wait! I'm the law in this county!

JUDAH

*If you kill us, the whites of
Topeka will come for you.*

AKOPI

*It makes no difference. Their
thirst for our blood is endless.*

As the warriors prepare to make their kill, A SHRILL CRY pierces the air. The Chief turns to see ISHAQUA, THE SHAMAN, wearing a mask and full ceremonial garb, coming toward them.

ISHAQUA

The initiate has returned!

AKOPI

*Three winters have passed. He is no
longer an initiate.*

Ishaqua circles Judah, looking him over closely.

ISHAQUA

*He has traveled far. It would
dishonor the Great Spirit to deny
him a chance to speak his vision.*

The village watches Akopi closely. His brow furrows.

EXT. ATCHINSON PLANTATION - DUSK

A pair of ELEPHANT SKIN BOOTS step down into dewy grass. Atchinson inhales deeply, savoring and surveying his property as the last rays of sunlight play across the rows of tobacco.

ATCHINSON

We'll tour the grounds tomorrow.
Now please, let's get you inside.

He offers a hand to KC, but she dismounts on her own.

INT. MAIN HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

KC steps into the opulent foyer, taking in the wealth on display. Her eyes settle on a PAINTED PORTRAIT OF ATCHINSON'S SON. The resemblance to his father is striking.

KC

How strange. As a young man, you
looked almost... Decent.

ATCHINSON

That's my son Michael. He shared
his mother's delicate constitution.
(then)

(MORE)

ATCHINSON (CONT'D)
Until one of the slaves murdered
him savagely.

KC
Men will seek freedom by any means.

ATCHINSON
They are not men. We may train
them, like dogs. But they will
always be animals.

Atchinson points upstairs, dismissing her.

ATCHINSON (CONT'D)
Overby will show you to your room.

Overby, now in his 40s, is still happy to serve, comforted by
feeling superior to his fellows in the fields. As the head
house slave leads KC up the main marble staircase, the
PRELAPPED SOUND OF RHYTHMIC DRUMMING brings us to-

EXT. KAW VILLAGE - NIGHT

Kaw warriors lead Judah and Colin toward a BLAZING CAMPFIRE.
Akopi wears a full ceremonial headdress and stands on one of
the many large stones that form a ring around the fire.

AKOPI
*When we found you, Ju-Deh, you were
starving and alone. We taught you
the ways of the Kaw. To run silent
in the forest. To kill with a
knife. We took you into the tribe,
and sent you on the vision quest.*
(pauses for effect)
*You did not return. We mourned your
death long ago. Why do you come
back to us now? Tell us what you
have seen.*

The drums stop and the tribe falls silent.

JUDAH
*I wandered the forest until I could
barely stand. But no guide came to
me. Finally, I had a dream. I
dreamt I would bring pain and
sadness to the tribe. So I went
away as I came, starving and alone.*

Ishaqua leaps up, shaking a RATTLE.

ISHAQUA

Strong medicine! This dream has come to pass! Were we not saddened when he did not return?

AKOPI

Yes, and he will bring more pain upon the tribe. He has no spirit guide, he is not one of the people.

Ishaqua removes the large ceremonial mask, revealing that she is an OLD WOMAN. She peers at Judah's face, then at Colin.

ISHAQUA

You wandered many years. Searching. And then you found this man?

JUDAH

No. He found me.

ISHAQUA

(to Akopi)

Ju-Deh has a guide.

AKOPI

The white man?

ISHAQUA

He brought Ju-Deh back to us. And he will lead him on his journey. The Great Spirit has spoken!

AKOPI

The Great Spirit promised peace, and yet we cower in this valley.

ISHAQUA

Peace will come. Or have you lost your faith in the spirits, Akopi?

Akopi scowls. He knows he is trapped. But not entirely.

AKOPI

If the white man is his guide, then let them be bound!

The crowd is shocked at the suggestion. Ishaqua stares down Akopi, then silently nods.

DRUMS begin again, faster and more intense.

COLIN

What now?

Kaw men seize Colin and Judah and force them to stand on large stones on opposite edges of the fire pit. Colin tries to escape, but the warriors restrain him.

JUDAH
They're lettin' us go.

COLIN
Ya sure?

The men holding Colin and Judah pull one arm behind each of their backs, and lean them out over the fire. Judah extends his right hand across the fire toward Colin.

Colin stares at Judah's hand, then copies him. They press their hands together, supporting each other's weight as they lean out over the flames. It's a precarious balance.

Ishaqua stands on another stone between Colin and Judah. She pulls out a BONE KNIFE, sharpened on both sides.

Colin breaks into a sweat. He looks down at the fire rising beneath them and panics, starting to waver.

JUDAH
Look at me.

Colin and Judah lock eyes, steadyng themselves over the fire. Ishaqua reaches out the Bone Knife, sliding it between their pressed hands. She slowly rotates the blade, digging it into their flesh.

ISHAQUA
*As the Earth is bound to the sky,
the power of the Great Spirit binds
you to one another.*

Ishaqua pulls back the blade, SLICING both of their palms. They collapse forward the width of the blade, so their hands press into each other again, keeping them up.

Colin stares, horrified, at their blood mixing. He recoils in disgust, but Judah grips his hand tightly. The blood slides down their pressed hands, and sizzles into the fire.

The tribe CRIES OUT, wailing in unison as the drums build to an impossibly loud crescendo.

CUT TO:

INT. TEEPEE - MORNING

Colin wakes up the next morning on the floor of the tent. He slowly rises, pushing off a pile of hides, and notices that his hand has been wrapped in a cloth bandage.

EXT. KAW VILLAGE - MORNING

Colin pulls back the flap and emerges from the teepee. A short distance away, Judah speaks with Ishaqua.

Ishaqua hands the Bone Knife to Judah. Colin's eyes narrow as JUDAH SLIPS THE KNIFE INTO HIS BOOT.

A young KAW WOMAN interrupts Colin, offering him his gun belt, canteen, and saddlebag. He peeks inside, finds it freshly stocked with food.

COLIN

Thank ya, miss.

Across the camp, Judah bows to Ishaqua, and she places a hand on his shoulder. They part, and Judah strides over to Colin.

JUDAH

Time to move on.

COLIN

How 'bout the horses?

Judah points to a CANOE on the ground a few feet away.

COLIN (CONT'D)

Ya traded my horses?

JUDAH

Chief took 'em for payment. This is a gift.

Judah lifts one end of the canoe. Colin wants to protest, but there's nothing to say. He takes the other end of the canoe.

EXT. RIVER BANK - DAY

The canoe rests at the edge of the river, halfway on the bank and half in the shallows. Colin throws his pack into the boat and hops in. Judah shoots him a look.

COLIN

Whatcha waitin' for?

Judah looks nervously at the water swirling around his legs, then starts to push the canoe into the river. Colin picks up one of the paddles and maneuvers back toward the stern.

Judah gets the boat into the current and hoists himself up, starting to climb in-

But Colin pushes the paddle against Judah's chest, stopping him. Judah's legs drag in the water as he hangs off the side.

COLIN (CONT'D)
Gimme the knife.

JUDAH
What knife?

Judah tries to climb in, but Colin knocks him into the water. Judah splashes wildly, flailing in terror.

JUDAH (CONT'D)
Can't swim!

COLIN
Grab the paddle!

Colin dangles the paddle, and Judah seizes it. He jerks fiercely in the water, trying to stay afloat.

COLIN (CONT'D)
Quit floppin' about!

JUDAH
Pull me up!

COLIN
Kick your goddamn legs!

Judah kicks ineffectually, starting to hyperventilate.

COLIN (CONT'D)
Naw, float 'em out behind ya, and
kick like a scissor.

Judah finds his rhythm and begins a splashy crawl-kick.

COLIN (CONT'D)
There ya go. Now breathe.

Judah takes deeper breaths. Panic turns to anger.

JUDAH
Fuck you!

COLIN
Saw that Injun slip ya a knife.

Judah looks back toward the receding shore.

COLIN (CONT'D)
 Even if ya could swim that far, I
 wouldn't give ya the chance.

JUDAH
 Pull me up first.

COLIN
 If ya think I'm gonna let ya in
 with that blade in your boot,
 you're dumber than ya look.

Judah hesitates, then nods. He reaches one hand underwater, pulls the Bone Knife from his boot, and tosses it to Colin.

COLIN (CONT'D)
 The Hell did that woman do to us?

JUDAH
 Made us brothers.

COLIN
 The day I got a black brother is
 the day I eat my hat.

Colin lifts Judah high enough to grab the side of the boat. Judah heaves himself in as Colin draws his pistol. Judah stares at the gun, catching his breath.

COLIN (CONT'D)
 Hope ya row better than ya swim.

Colin tosses him a paddle and takes a seat in the back of the boat. Judah reluctantly starts rowing.

EXT. CHARLES ROBINSON'S HOUSE - DAY

ZIP. ZIP. A METAL FILE sharpens the cutting edge of a large BROADSWORD. John Brown examines the blade, satisfied.

JOHN BROWN
 A provocation this naked demands a
 response. And these bushwackers
 only understand one language.

Charles Robinson stands on the front porch near John Brown, staring warily at the sword and the man who wields it. The Jayhawkers wait for their leader at the edge of the property.

CHARLES ROBINSON
 I appreciate your zeal, Mr. Brown,
 but I will not take office with
 blood on my hands.

JOHN BROWN

You were a physician. You know an infection must be cut out if the body is to survive.

CHARLES ROBINSON

And you're a minister.

JOHN BROWN

Matthew sent us out "like sheep among wolves. To be as cunning as snakes, and as innocent as doves."

CHARLES ROBINSON

I cannot afford to be a snake.

JOHN BROWN

Then you can be the dove.

Charles Robinson looks away thoughtfully.

CHARLES ROBINSON

In the shed behind my home, you'll find two crates of Bibles and four barrels of wine. They were sent by Hank Beecher, another minister who shares your convictions. I hope they help in spreading your gospel.

INT. CHARLES ROBINSON'S SHED - DAY

John Brown and his son enter the shed and find large crates labeled "BIBLES", and wooden barrels marked "WINE".

OLIVER

Whadda we need all these Bibles for, Pa?

John Brown lifts the lid of the crate, brushing away straw packing to reveal stacks of SHARPS RIFLES.

JOHN BROWN

Careful now.

Oliver uncorks the barrel, and, instead of wine, grains of BLACK POWDER rush out of the tap.

EXT. RIVER - DAY

A HERD OF BUFFALO graze alongside a bend in the river. Judah and Colin stop rowing, quietly taking a moment to admire the majestic beasts.

COLIN
Ya ever have buffalo steak?

JUDAH
'Course. Ever kill one?

COLIN
Couple hundred or so.

Judah looks at him, surprised.

COLIN (CONT'D)
Army had no use for us after we
whipped Santa Ana back to the Rio
Grande. I didn't wanna go home
broke, so I figured I'd stay out
west and make a buck off hides.

JUDAH
But you make more as sheriff?

COLIN
The herds thinned out awful quick.
(thinking, then)
Time was, ya met another tracker
and ya might share a meal, piece of
news, even a good trap spot.
Nowadays, he'd just as likely kill
ya for what's in your pack.

JUDAH
You got held up.

Colin doesn't answer, which says it all. Instead, he looks over at the buffalo, as TWO OF THE BULLS SQUARE OFF. They paw the dirt, then charge, SLAMMING THEIR HEADS together.

COLIN
Awful headache over a female.

JUDAH
Is it?

Judah gives Colin a knowing look.

COLIN
Couldn't let a girl go kidnapped.
It's my duty.

JUDAH
Uh-hunh.

COLIN
Ya wouldn't understand.

JUDAH

I got a lady.

COLIN

Oh yeah? What's she like?

JUDAH

(looks into the distance)

First time our eyes met, a white man was whippin' on her. But she wouldn't heed no master. Most beautiful thing I ever saw. Love at first sight. We run off together, and I tended her til she trust me. In time, she let me ride her.

(he pauses)

Name's Brandy. Best damn horse I ever had.

Colin LAUGHS.

COLIN

You're funny for a nigger.

WE FLY OVER, surveying the epic landscape, as they steer the canoe out of a small tributary and join the mighty Missouri.

EXT. ATCHINSON PLANTATION - DAY

The front gate of the Atchinson property displays a forboding metal sign with the "BAR A" symbol. The same symbol that is branded onto Judah's chest.

Atchinson leads KC on a walk as Overby shades them with an umbrella. Atchinson gestures toward a field full of slaves-

ATCHINSON

Tobacco is a demanding mistress, requiring utmost attention and care. The slaves tend to her needs, and I in turn take care of theirs. I provide three meals, a roof, and a much-needed dose of Christianity.

KC watches the OVERSEER CRACK HIS WHIP across a woman field slave's back. Atchinson sees the revulsion on her face.

KC

You call that Christian?

ATCHINSON

Overby, what does the Bible say?

OVERBY

Colossians, six-five: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters, not only when you are watched, but in singleness of heart, fearing the Lord."

KC

It's not the Lord they fear.

ACROSS THE FIELD

Judah peeks out through thick brush at the edge of the field. Colin crouches beside him, watching Atchinson lead KC away.

JUDAH

Now what?

COLIN

Ya need a haircut.

EXT. RIVER BANK - DAY

Judah's long dreadlocks fall to the ground as Colin cuts his hair with the Bone Knife.

JUDAH

I wanna gun.

COLIN

Hell no. That's why ya got the barn, and I'm goin' in the house.

JUDAH

Ain't enough time. If you don't hitch the horses, none of us gets out alive.

Colin switches his grip and starts shaving Judah's scalp.

COLIN

How'd ya get away last time?

JUDAH

Didn't have no plan.

COLIN

Then why'd ya run?

JUDAH

Had to.

Colin waits for a real answer. Judah clenches his jaw.

JUDAH (CONT'D)
I killed Atchinson's son.

Colin stops short, the blade still pressed to Judah's skin.

JUDAH (CONT'D)
That boy was cruel as the day was long. Any time he wasn't beatin' a field hand, he was beatin' a horse.

COLIN
So ya killed him?

JUDAH
He took a fall one day, and come back hollerin' the filly oughta be put down. But Atchinson wouldn't hear it, an' the two of them cussed each other rotten. That night, I's brushing the mare, and the boy come in the stable with an axe. Said I fixed his saddle to slip, and he'd have my neck for it. I only done what come natural. Took the axe off him and turned it round.

Colin considers this.

COLIN
And then you ran?

JUDAH
Then I ran.

Colin resumes shaving, but as he drags the blade, he accidentally NICKS JUDAH'S SCALP.

JUDAH (CONT'D)
Aw! God damn it.

Judah grabs his head in pain and turns to face Colin.

COLIN
Fuckin' jungle up here. Ain't ya ever heard of a bath?

JUDAH
Tried that once. Still came out black.

Judah stares down Colin. Colin stares back. Then Colin breaks, cracking a smile. Judah's face softens into a grin.

COLIN

I ain't givin' ya my gun.

JUDAH

How 'bout a knife then?

Colin hands him the blade.

EXT. TOBACCO FIELD - DAY

Judah and Colin hide at the edge of the tobacco field.

JUDAH

Wait for my whistle. And make sure
you take care of them dogs.

An Overseer rides past, and Judah slips into one of the tobacco rows. Shirtless, shoeless and bald, he immediately begins picking, bending low to hide his face.

ISAIAH, late 40s, works nearby. His optimism has been tested but not broken by a lifetime in the fields. He spots Judah and his eyes go wide in recognition.

Isaiah makes his way over to Judah. The two men pick quietly beside each other until Isaiah mutters under his breath.

ISAIAH

Gotta be the dumbest nigger in the
world, comin' back here. But it's
good to see ya, Judah.

EXT. SLAVE QUARTERS - SUNSET

Overseers empty buckets of corn mush into a pig trough.

SLAVE CHILDREN rush over, swarming the men, who kick them aside. The emaciated children scoop food into their mouths, jostling for position, the smallest ones forced out.

Judah reaches the front of the adult line, and a Black Cook ladles a bowl of soup for him. He takes a seat at one of the wooden tables between the men's and women's Slave Quarters.

As he sits, THE NEARBY SLAVES STAND UP and scoot further away, leaving him all alone.

Isaiah approaches with two of his SONS, and all three TAKE A SEAT across from Judah. They nod to him and eat in silence.

Another MAN stands and goes to sit with Judah. Then another. And another. Judah smiles at the silent display of support.

A WOMAN steps up behind Judah and crosses her arms.

RUTH
Whatcha doin' here, boy?

Judah recognizes the woman's voice from his past.

RUTH, late 40s, is always on edge, every nerve in her lithe frame frayed by a lifetime of fearing the lash. Judah sees A LONG JAGGED SCAR from the corner of her mouth to her ear.

JUDAH
What happen?

RUTH
You run off.

An emotion we haven't seen yet crosses Judah's face. Regret.

JUDAH
I'm sorry, Momma.

RUTH
I's sorry you was born. Now get
gone, 'fore you get caught.

She shakes her head and walks away.

INT. BARN - NIGHT

Colin quietly slips into the barn, pulling the door closed behind him. It's completely dark.

Colin lights an OIL LAMP, and the soft glow illuminates a vast multi-purpose barn. He creeps past the stables, pig pens, and a chicken coop, down to the back of the barn, where a large SHAPE is covered by CANVAS.

As quietly as he can manage, he pulls the canvas off to reveal: A FOUR-HORSE CARRIAGE.

EXT. SLAVE QUARTERS - NIGHT

The Overseer walks down the row of doors to the Men's Quarters, making sure that all the slaves are accounted for.

At each door, he stops and opens it. CREAK. He checks inside, and then locks it from the outside. CLICK.

Ruth peeks through the crack of her door in the Women's Quarters, watching him. CREAK. CLICK. CREAK. CLICK.

The Overseer CREAKS open the next door and peers in. He pauses, clearly confused, then steps inside.

The door slowly shuts behind him. CLICK.

Then Judah opens the door and emerges into the night, wiping blood from his knife. Isaiah follows with the Overseer's keys and begins UNLOCKING ALL THE DOORS.

INT. BARN - NIGHT

Colin surveys the three full-grown BLOODHOUNDS in the dog pen. One of the dogs stirs, looks up at him and GROWLS. Colin draws his knife. Then, over in the corner, he sees-

The MOTHER, lying on her side so four adorable PUPPIES can nurse. Colin SIGHS heavily and puts the knife away.

EXT. SLAVE QUARTERS - NIGHT

Judah raises his voice barely loud enough to be heard by the gathered slaves, who huddle close between the two buildings.

JUDAH

Those that's ready, go with Isaiah.

Some shuffle toward Isaiah as Ruth speaks up from the back.

RUTH

Ain't gonna get too far once they set the dogs on ya.

JUDAH

Them dogs been taken care of.

RUTH

How's that?

JUDAH

I ain't alone.

This elicits MURMURS of concern from the crowd.

RUTH

Whatcha come back for? Didn't cause enough grief gettin' Celia killed?

JUDAH

Maybe I come for you, Momma.

She scoffs.

RUTH

Sure took your time then, boy.

JUDAH

This the best damn chance any of you got to get free.

RUTH

Anyone runs, be Hell on the rest
tomorrow.

(to Judah)

Maybe I oughta scream now. Save my
own neck.

JUDAH

If you do, not gonna be a tomorrow.

Isaiah steps forward.

ISAIAH

We wastin' time. Those that's
goin', follow me.

Isaiah and his sons disappear into the night with a dozen
slaves following after them. The others return to their
rooms, except Ruth, who stares after the runaways.

Judah turns toward the mansion. A blood-red HARVEST MOON
hangs low above the Main House.

INT. MAIN HOUSE - GUEST BEDROOM - NIGHT

Atchinson leads KC into a guest bedroom decorated with lace
curtains and an ornate birdcage. KC peers inside with wonder
at a pair of BRIGHT YELLOW CANARIES.

ATCHINSON

Beautiful, aren't they? Probably
the only canaries in the state.

KC

Can they fly?

ATCHINSON

They're safer in here.

(then)

If you need anything, ring the
service bell.

Atchinson closes the door behind him. KC listens, then creeps
to the door and TESTS the handle. It's locked.

She tries the FRENCH DOOR to the balcony, but finds it too is
locked from the outside.

KC scavenges the room, searching for a tool. She opens the
bedside table and her eyes settle on a large old BIBLE, with
a faux-gold CROSS inlaid on the leather cover.

She takes the book out of the drawer and digs in her
fingernails, PRYING the thin metal cross off the Bible.

INT. BARN - NIGHT

Colin leads one of the horses out of its stall. It NICKERS in protest, and he quiets it as quickly as he can.

EXT. MAIN HOUSE - NIGHT

Judah creeps along the side of the Main House. He stops, crouched beneath a WINDOW, and peers out across the fields. He can barely make out Isaiah and the fleeing slaves.

Judah takes a few steps, as though he might run to join them. But he can't, knowing the hunted life that lies ahead. He turns back to the house and comes face to face with-

Atchinson, smiling at him through the Parlor window. Judah stops dead in his tracks, too terrified to react.

INT. PARLOR - CONTINUOUS

Atchinson looks at his own reflection in the glass. With the lights on inside, he cannot see out into the night. He smiles wide, checking his teeth, then turns away.

EXT. MAIN HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Judah watches Atchinson go, unable to believe his luck. Then-

DING-DING-DING-DING-DING! The triangle bell on the front porch rings out the alarm, awakening old memories.

Judah's hand reaches for the SILVER DOLLAR MEDALLION hanging around his neck.

EXT. FRONT PORCH - NIGHT

Ruth RINGS the triangle bell feverishly. Stringfellow bursts through the front door and grabs her hand fiercely.

STRINGFELLOW

The hell you doin'?

RUTH

Don' hurt me! Please don' hurt me!
They all run off!

She points toward the forest.

STRINGFELLOW

Cunt-suckin' coon fucks...
(shouts inside)
RUNAWAYS! RUNAWAYS!

He jumps down from the porch and rushes toward the barn.

INT. BARN - DAY

Colin tightens the harness that yokes the horses to the carriage, hurries to open the door at the rear of the barn.

CREAK. The door at the front of the barn opens. Stringfellow rushes inside. The two men stare at each other in shock.

Colin moves first, scrambling up the side of the carriage and CRACKING the buggy whip on the horses' flanks.

Stringfellow sprints through the barn and DIVES, grabbing onto the back of the carriage. He hangs on desperately as his feet drag in the dirt behind him.

INT. GUEST BEDROOM - NIGHT

SHHHIKK! KC slides the metal cross between the French doors and finally manages to open the latch. She pushes the door open to the second story balcony and peers into the night.

A KEY JIGGLES in the door to the hallway. KC quickly closes the balcony door and slips the metal cross into the waistband of her bloomers, pulling her nightgown over it.

Atchinson enters, holding a shotgun. Overby follows, and Atchinson hands the slave his ivory-handled revolver.

ATCHINSON
If she runs, shoot her.

Atchinson takes off down the stairs. Overby steps into the bedroom, ogling KC in her revealing nightgown.

OVERBY
Evening, ma'am.

EXT. MAIN HOUSE - NIGHT

Atchinson steps onto the front porch, where the Overseers and three Ruffians stand waiting for his orders.

ATCHINSON
How many gone?

OVERSEER 2
Fourteen. And cut Turner's throat.

ATCHINSON
Get the dogs.

He looks at Ruth, who cowers on the steps.

ATCHINSON (CONT'D)
 You rang the bell?
 (she nods)
 Thank you for your service.

Atchinson extends his hand, helping her stand. He touches her scarred cheek with a strange tenderness.

ATCHINSON (CONT'D)
 Now tell me, Ruth. Who was it that killed Turner?

RUTH
 It's our Judah. He come back.

ATCHINSON'S EYE TWITCHES as the color drains from his face.

EXT. PLANTATION ROAD - NIGHT

The carriage CAREENS down a dusty road. Stringfellow climbs up the back, heaves his weight onto the roof. WHUMP.

Colin sees the hulking Ruffian, fumbles for his pistol. Stringfellow SEIZES his wrist, BASHING the gun from his hand.

Colin lets go of the reins and WHIPS Stringfellow's face, drawing blood. But Stringfellow smiles and SNATCHES the whip.

He tosses the whip aside and PUMMELS Colin, knocking the Sheriff to the floorboard. Colin looks over the edge at the ground rushing past below.

The Ruffian grabs Colin's collar, drags him to his feet.

STRINGFELLOW
 You oughta know, stealin' horses is a death sentence.

Colin SLAMS HIS HEAD into Stringfellow's face. The Ruffian staggers back, clutching a bloody nose.

STRINGFELLOW (CONT'D)
 Motherfuckin' peckerwood son of a-

Colin KICKS Stringfellow squarely in the stomach, knocking the behemoth off the speeding carriage.

INT. MAIN HOUSE - NIGHT

Judah slips in the back door. Creeps through the kitchen, into the large open entry hall. The front door hangs open.

HUSHED VOICES upstairs. Judah tiptoes up the marble staircase toward the second level.

INT. GUEST BEDROOM - NIGHT

Overby sits in a divan across from KC, holding the revolver.

KC

My father is a wealthy man. If you help me escape, I guarantee safe passage north.

OVERBY

I eat meat here every day. Sleep in a warm bed and wake to a clean uniform. You know any black man up north that can say the same?

KC

At least they can say they're in charge of their own lives.

OVERBY

I'm in charge of fifty niggers. Any order I give, they snap to it like it come from Mr. Atchinson hisself.

KC sizes him up, then stands. Overby raises the gun at her.

KC

Guess you can do as you please.

OVERBY

Sit down.

She slowly slips off the straps of her gown, letting it slide to the floor and exposing her corset and bloomers.

OVERBY (CONT'D)

What kinda woman are you?

KC

A free woman.

OVERBY

Put them clothes back on, ma'am.

KC

What would happen if Mr. Atchinson caught you undressing me?

Behind KC's back, she tightens her fingers around the METAL CROSS. The sharp point sticks through her fist like a dagger.

OVERBY

Put them on right now.

KC
What if I scream instead?

Overby grabs her dress off the floor, shaking it at her.

OVERBY
If you don't put them on, I will.

KC
Be my guest.

Overby tucks the pistol into his belt. He grabs her left hand and pulls the dress over her head-

But KC TRIES TO STAB HIM with the cross in her right fist.

Overby twists away and CATCHES HER WRIST. He sees the improvised knife and looks at KC, rage welling inside him.

OVERBY
You little harlot.

He twists her wrist, and the cross CLATTERS to the ground. KC falls to her knees in pain, and Overby towers over her.

OVERBY (CONT'D)
Go ahead and scream. No one's comin' to help you.

Overby suddenly STIFFENS, as A KNIFE PLUNGES INTO HIS BACK.

The slave GURGLES his last breath and collapses forward, revealing Judah with the bloody Bone Knife in his hand.

KC stares at Judah in shock. With his hair freshly shorn, it takes her a moment to recognize him.

JUDAH
Best get dressed.

She snatches her dress up, covering herself.

KC
I was going to-

Judah raises a finger to his lips, shushing her. He checks the hallway, then indicates for her to follow. She hesitates.

JUDAH
Wanna find your own way home?

KC takes a step to follow him. But pauses in front of the birdcage, looking at the songbirds trapped inside.

EXT. MAIN HOUSE - NIGHT

Atchinson stands next to his horse in front of the house. One of the Ruffians reports back.

RUFFIAN
Can't find Stringfellow nowhere.

ATCHINSON
Rotgut bastard.

Atchinson turns to a group of Overseers holding BLOODHOUNDS on leashes.

ATCHINSON (CONT'D)
Catch 'em if you can, kill 'em if
you can't!

The men ride out. Atchinson starts to climb on his horse as-

THE TWO YELLOW CANARIES flit through the air overhead. He turns back toward the Main House and scowls.

INT. MAIN HOUSE - NIGHT

Atchinson enters through the front door, shotgun cradled in his arm. He pauses and listens.

ATCHINSON
Overby?

No response. He brings the shotgun to his shoulder.

INT. SECOND STORY - NIGHT

Atchinson comes to the top of the stairs, checks the hallway. Empty. He steps lightly across the carpeted floors.

GUEST BEDROOM

Atchinson nudges the door open with his gun to reveal: Overby lying on the floor, bleeding across the carpet.

The curtains FLUTTER in the breeze.

BALCONY

Atchinson steps out onto the balcony, ready to fire. No sign. The balcony runs the length of the second story, with entrances into each room. Atchinson stops as he hears-

RING-A-LING-A-LING! Somewhere inside on the second floor, a SERVICE BELL IS RUNG. Amused, Atchinson steps back inside.

STUDY

Judah stops RINGING the service bell. KC looks at him, bewildered, and whispers fiercely.

KC
Are you mad?

Judah waves KC outside with Atchinson's revolver.

BALCONY

Judah takes position to fire through the study door.

JUDAH
Them lights on, he can't see out.

HALLWAY

Atchinson leaves KC's bedroom, stepping into the hallway and listening. Nothing. He moves through a door.

MASTER BEDROOM

Atchinson steps inside. BIG-GAME TROPHIES. Canopy bed.

Atchinson tries to peer through the glass of the French doors. No luck. He aims his shotgun.

BALCONY

KA-BLAM! A shotgun blast SHATTERS the glass doors leading to the master bedroom. KC FLINCHES, but Judah gives her a stern look, keeping her silent.

STUDY

Atchinson comes in and immediately FIRES his shotgun through the glass of the French Doors. No one, inside or outside.

He CRACKS open the stock of his shotgun. Reloads. Listens.

MASTER BEDROOM

KC follows Judah inside, and a floorboard GROANS beneath her foot. Judah spins and DIVES, knocking her to the floor.

KA-BLAM! Atchinson fires his shotgun through the wall, peppering the bed with shot. FEATHERS FLY INTO THE AIR.

KA-BLAM! Judah covers KC as Atchinson fires again.

Lying on the floor, Judah looks up at the STUFFED HEAD OF A DEER. Gets an idea.

HALLWAY

Atchinson creeps down the hall, ready to fire.

A SHADOW moves closer to the open doorway. Then the SHADOW flies out and KA-BLAM! Atchinson blows a hole through-

The stuffed deer head. It thuds to the floor. Atchinson gapes at his destroyed trophy, then swivels back-

But it's too late. POW POW POW! Judah fires back from inside, having pinpointed Atchinson's location.

A bullet RIPS through Atchinson's thigh. He doubles over in pain, hobbles away as fast as he can.

MASTER BEDROOM

Judah hauls KC to her feet.

HALLWAY

Judah leads with the pistol, pulling KC behind him.

A TRAIL OF BLOOD leads back toward the study.

KC starts to descend the staircase but Judah pauses. Considers pursuing Atchinson.

KC
What are you waiting for?

Judah turns and follows KC down the stairs.

EXT. PLANTATION ROAD - NIGHT

WHEE-OO-WHEET! Judah's mighty whistle ECHOES out over the plantation. Colin CRACKS the reins, steering the carriage back toward the Main House.

EXT. MAIN HOUSE - NIGHT

WHEE-OO-WHEET! Judah whistles again, his fingers at the corner of his mouth. KC waits beside him on the front porch.

A board CREAKS behind them and Judah spins, ready to fire. He squints, faintly making out a FIGURE huddled in the shadows.

Ruth crawls forward, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Judah sees the TRIANGLE BELL above her, and he understands. He looks down at her with a mixture of pity and rage.

RUTH
I's sorry.

JUDAH
Ain't your fault, Momma.

He strides past his mother, back into the house.

INT. MAIN HOUSE - NIGHT

The entry hall is silent. Judah crosses to the staircase, looking up. No blood on the stairs.

He tentatively takes the first step toward the second floor and a SHOTGUN BARREL slides up against the back of his head.

ATCHINSON
That pistol belongs to me.

Judah grips the revolver, tensing up all over.

ATCHINSON (CONT'D)
My father had it commissioned on
one of his trips to Africa. I
intended to bequeath it to Michael.
You remember Michael, don't you?

Judah DROPS the ivory-handled revolver to the marble floor. Atchinson picks it up, presses it to Judah's head.

ATCHINSON (CONT'D)
You were never free, Judah. You
can't get free from your own blood.

Judah cocks his head. What?

Atchinson sees the sincere confusion across his face.

ATCHINSON (CONT'D)
You mean, you didn't know?

Atchinson processes this, taking joy in Judah's discovery.

ATCHINSON (CONT'D)
My Lord in Heaven.
(then)
I suppose your mother wouldn't have
let on. She was more ashamed of you
than I was.

Judah listens in shock.

ATCHINSON (CONT'D)

Why do you think you got to work in the stables? And most always spared the lash? Young fool that I was, I imagined some kindness might shine on the darkness of your nature. That you might rise above your heathen ancestors and cultivate even the slightest bit of civilization. But that was my mistake. A half-breed is still a fucking mutt. And if it bites a child, it must be put down.

Judah opens his mouth, but can't form any words.

ATCHINSON (CONT'D)

You got anything to say, best do it now. Before I cut your tongue out.

Atchinson slides the gun along the side of Judah's head, bringing it behind his ear.

ATCHINSON (CONT'D)

Well, I guess some truths are hard to hear.

BAM! Atchinson blows off Judah's ear, SPRAYING blood across the marble steps. Judah HOWLS, drops to his knees, clutches his head.

ATCHINSON (CONT'D)

I'm a fair man, and the punishment for running off is an ear.

Judah tries to stand, but Atchinson KNOCKS him back down.

ATCHINSON (CONT'D)

But you have a blood debt to pay. And I intend to collect it slowly.

Atchinson hears FOOTSTEPS behind him, and swivels to see: the FACE OF HIS SON coming down upon him.

THWACK! Ruth smashes the PAINTED PORTRAIT over Atchinson's head, trapping his arms. Atchinson struggles to get free.

Ruth SMASHES A VASE over his head, knocking him down.

Judah pushes himself up, woozy with pain. Ruth yanks him to his feet, drags him out the front door.

EXT. MAIN HOUSE - NIGHT

At the bottom of the steps, Colin helps KC into the carriage. He looks up as Judah and Ruth stagger out of the house.

Ruth pushes Judah off and points down at the carriage.

RUTH
Get gone now!

Judah grabs his mother's arm, trying to drag her along.

JUDAH
Come with, Momma.

RUTH
Ain't nuthin' for me out there.

She pulls her arm free. Judah wavers, on the verge of collapse. He can see in her eyes that she will never leave.

Colin goes to support Judah and sees the gaping head wound.

COLIN
Aw, Christ.

Judah's feet weakly comply as he lets himself be led down to the carriage. But he glances back at his mother, who stands on the porch, watching her son go for the last time.

INT. CARRIAGE - CONTINUOUS

Judah slumps onto the floor. KC GASPS at the sight of his bloody head as the carriage lurches down the road.

KC RIPS off her sleeve and uses it as a bandage. She kneels next to Judah, cradling his head to protect it from banging against the wooden seats.

EXT. CARRIAGE - MOMENTS LATER

Colin slows the carriage as he nears a fork in the road. A group of mounted Ruffians approaches, carrying torches. The flickering flames illuminate a family of RUNAWAY SLAVES.

A Slave Woman WAILS in abject sorrow as they march back towards the plantation.

SLAVE WOMAN
Oh God!... My baby...

Colin nods to the Ruffians as he rolls past. They eye the carriage, but cannot see inside.

DOWN THE ROAD

As the slaves disappear behind them, Colin sees an animal up ahead in the road. He slows the horses as they approach and he can make out that it is one of the bloodhounds-

CHEWING ON THE CORPSE OF A BLACK 16-YEAR-OLD BOY.

Colin's face falls in horror. He stops the carriage and hops down. The dog turns on him, protecting its kill, and GROWLS.

COLIN

Down boy. Heel!

The dog stands down and Colin grabs its collar. The dog looks up at him obediently, its muzzle smeared with blood.

INT. CARRIAGE - CONTINUOUS

Judah weakly pushes himself up and looks out the window of the carriage to see why they've stopped. He watches as Colin pulls his Bowie knife and SLITS THE DOG'S THROAT.

EXT. CARRIAGE - CONTINUOUS

Colin stares down at the young man's body, suppressing the tide of guilt rising up inside him.

Colin gingerly carries the body to the edge of the road and sets it down at the base of a tree. He searches for words, but nothing he can say will ever make this right.

Colin swallows hard. Marches back to the carriage, climbs into the driver's seat, and cracks the whip.

INT. CARRIAGE - CONTINUOUS

Judah peers out the window as the carriage passes the dead body, seething at Colin's betrayal.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. ATCHINSON PLANTATION - DAY

The morning sun falls on the face of Stringfellow, waking him up in a ditch beside the plantation road. He climbs to his feet, disoriented, feeling the dried BLOOD on his face.

EXT. MAIN HOUSE - DAY

The plantation grounds are eerily still and quiet. As Stringfellow wobbles his way up the steps of the Main House, WE RACK FOCUS TO-

RUTH'S DEAD BODY, hanging by the neck from the front gate. It sways gently in the breeze beneath the wrought-iron "BAR A".

INT. MAIN HOUSE - DAY

Stringfellow staggers into the entryway, and immediately hears the sound of Atchinson in the next room.

ATCHINSON (O.S.)
I don't know, goddamn it! If I
wanted to answer questions all day
I'd talk to the constable!

DOYLE (O.S.)
No need to get heated.

Stringfellow looks into the parlor. Atchinson reclines on the sofa, nursing a bottle of bourbon, as a DOCTOR casts his leg.

ATCHINSON
Pardon my temper, I've been shot in
the fucking leg!

Atchinson is yelling at **DOYLE**, 50s, a grizzled slave-catcher with a gleam of malice in his one good eye. The other eye is clouded over white, as though filled with the ghosts of the countless men he has sent from this world.

His sons **WILL** and **DRURY** stand nearby. They'd die for their father, but would kill each other for the right price.

DOYLE
You'll get your nigger in as many
pieces as you like. But we're not
gettin' meddled up with the
Robinson girl.

ATCHINSON
Didn't figure a man in your line of
work could afford such scruples.

DOYLE
Wits ain't scruples, and I ain't in
the kidnappin' business. But we'll
drag your boy outta Hell for two
thousand dollars.

ATCHINSON
No slave on Earth is worth that.

DOYLE
Kansas ain't so friendly with Ol'
Man Brown and his Jayhawkers on the
warpath. Consider it hazard pay.

ATCHINSON

Two thousand then. Breathing. When
the others see what happens to him,
it'll be worth it.

(spits in his hand)

If you don't find him, don't come
back to Missouri.

Doyle turns his cloudy white eye on Atchinson.

DOYLE

Wouldn't dream of it.

The two men shake. As the slave catcher leads his sons out
the door, Stringfellow steps into the room.

ATCHINSON

Where the fuck've you been?

STRINGFELLOW

I tried to-

ATCHINSON

-You tried shit. Get your things.
We're leaving.

Atchinson pushes himself to his feet unsteadily.

DOCTOR

Bourbon, you can't travel.

ATCHINSON

I have business in Topeka.

EXT. CARRIAGE - DAY

The carriage wheels grind to a halt on the dusty road. Colin
hops down, stretching his legs and fighting off exhaustion.

INT. CARRIAGE - DAY

Colin opens the door to the coach to see KC asleep on Judah's
shoulder. Colin CLEARS his throat, waking them both.

COLIN

We gotta ditch the carriage.

JUDAH

I know a place we can lay low.

Judah gets out, brushing past Colin. Colin offers his hand to
KC, helping her step down.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Judah, Colin, and KC ride through the forest. Judah leads them to a remote cabin with boards nailed over the windows.

INT. SAFE HOUSE - DAY

Light slips through the cracks in the ceiling. Dust hangs thick in the air. Judah lies down on a bed, while Colin stands watch by the door.

KC marvels at the shelves lined with canned goods and other supplies left for runaway slaves.

KC

My God. Think they have iodine?

JUDAH

(hushed)

This bed is warm.

Colin and KC exchange a fearful look. Colin puts his fingers over his lips and draws his pistol. They listen. Silence.

Judah points at a ladder in the corner leading up to the attic above them. Colin cocks his gun, aiming at the ceiling.

COLIN

Come on down now!

No response.

JUDAH

One... two...

ISAIAH (O.S.)

Judah?! That you?

JUDAH

Isaiah?

Isaiah climbs down the ladder, followed by his family: two sons, a daughter, her husband, and a granddaughter. The LITTLE GIRL looks fearfully at KC and Colin.

ISAIAH

Sure know how to scare a nigger.

INT. SAFE HOUSE - NIGHT

The slave family eats a meager meal as KC cleans Judah's wound. Colin watches the Little Girl at play on the floor, taking aim at two CLAY MARBLES with a shooter.

The Little Girl SMACKS the two marbles apart. One careens along the floor boards and comes to a stop at Colin's foot. She scrambles to retrieve it, but Colin picks it up.

Isaiah and his family stop eating and watch carefully. Colin hides the marble between his hands and then makes TWO FISTS, presenting them to the Little Girl.

She looks at his fists, uncertain, and taps his right hand. He opens it. No marble. She quickly taps his left hand. He grins and opens it. Empty. She looks up at him, amazed.

COLIN
Got somethin' behind your ear.

He reaches toward her to complete the trick, but she RECOILS IN FEAR, afraid he's about to hit her.

COLIN (CONT'D)
No, it's alright.

She looks at Isaiah, and he nods reassuringly. She takes a small step forward and Colin "plucks" the marble from behind her ear, handing it over. She smiles and returns to her game.

ISAIAH
Heard tales 'bout this place since
I was knee high like her. Never
believed 'em true til I seen it
with my own eye.

KC
There are plenty of people who want
to help. Even in Missouri.

KC finishes wrapping Judah's wound. He sits up.

JUDAH
Even so, I wouldn't trust no white
folk from here on out.
(eyeing Colin)
We're less than dogs to them.

The mention of the dogs makes Colin bristle. He squints at Judah. But Judah just stares back, holding his ground.

ISAIAH
I'ma follow your lead. Oughta be
better in Canadia. Got whole towns
with nuthin' but black folk.

Judah shakes his head, never breaking eye contact with Colin. Isaiah senses something is amiss.

ISAIAH (CONT'D)
You comin' with us, ain'tcha?

JUDAH
My horse is waitin' in Kansas.

KC
Won't he be jailed if he returns?

COLIN
Your father promised him a pardon
once we get you back safe.

ISAIAH
Whatcha gonna do then, Judah?

COLIN
Oh, he got big plans.

JUDAH
Not no more.

COLIN
Sure ya do. Go on, tell 'em about
the hundred-acre ranch, and all
them mustangs frolickin' about-

JUDAH
-Tell 'em your own damn plans.
(to KC)
Sheriff here wouldn't take a penny
for reward.

Colin shoots Judah a look of warning. KC takes notice.

KC
Surely you deserve some payment for
all of this, Sheriff.

COLIN
Please, my given name is Colin.

JUDAH
Don't worry, he'll get his due.

KC
What due?

Colin hesitates. The tension in the room is palpable.

KC (CONT'D)
What does he mean, Colin?

COLIN

Well... Comes time in a man's life
when, uh... I decided I'd like ya
to be my wife.

KC

Pardon me?

COLIN

Already picked out a nice plot of
land, with a view over the river.
Got a loan from the bank. And I
spoke with your pa-

KC

-Father would never give my hand
without consulting me first.

JUDAH

We get you back 'fore the election,
he might.

KC realizes the situation. Her eyes flash with anger.

KC

How dare you?!

COLIN

Your father's gettin' on now, and I
can take good care of ya.

KC

I can take care of myself.

KC walks to the ladder and climbs up into the attic.

JUDAH

Gonna send the dogs after her?

COLIN

Hobble your fuckin' lip.

JUDAH

(imitating a slave)
As you say, suh.

EXT. MISSOURI RIVER - DAY

DARK STORM CLOUDS roll overhead as KC and Colin lead the way
on horseback. Judah and the slave family follow them on foot.

COLIN

Lemme take care of this.

They approach a dock on the bank of the Missouri river, where a FERRYMAN waits idly beside his ferry boat.

COLIN (CONT'D)
I'd like passage across the river.

FERRYMAN
It's twenty a horse. Ten a piece
for you and the lady. And a dollar
for every nigger.

While Colin digs for the money, the Ferryman eyes the bloodstained bandage around Judah's head.

FERRYMAN (CONT'D)
Need to see your slave papers too.

COLIN
Papers? Why surely...

Colin makes a show of searching through his pockets.

COLIN (CONT'D)
Damn, now... Where'd I put those?

FERRYMAN
Can't cross them bootlips without
papers.

Judah slides a hand to the Bone Knife hidden at his waist.

KC panics, desperate to avoid violence. She gets an idea, and addresses Colin in a spot-on imitation of a SOUTHERN ACCENT.

KC
Oh David, you probably left them on
the bureau this morning.

Colin looks up in surprise as she turns to the Ferryman.

KC (CONT'D)
Pardon my dim-witted husband, sir.
We're in a terrible rush to Topeka,
and delayed two days already by one
of our boys runnin' off.

(points at Judah)
We had to hunt him down and take
his ear. Troubled David something
fierce. It's his lily-livered
northern upbringing I'm sure. You
understand, don't you?

FERRYMAN

Sorry ma'am. I gotta keep a
register of every slave I cross.

KC

(thinking, then)

Well, given our need for haste and
your need for fares, I'm sure my
husband would pay the white price
for our coloreds. That makes our
party two horses and nine whites.
And no bother for your register.

The Ferryman considers her offer, looking over the slaves.

FERRYMAN

They're less like white folk, and
more like horses. Don't you think?

KC

I think that's very fair.
(to Colin)
Don't you, honeypie?

EXT. FERRY - DAY

A twenty-foot barge floats across the wide Missouri. Ropes connect the ferry to an overhead cable that spans the river. The Ferryman turns a winch, pulling them to the other bank.

FERRYMAN

My own wife been troublin' me about
makin' a move to Kansas. I told her
soon's our boys is old enough to
shoot, she can start packin'.

THUNDER RUMBLES nearby. One of the horses PAWS at the planks. Judah pats the mare's neck, trying to calm her.

FERRYMAN (CONT'D)

We'll see. Heard that goddamn gimp
Robinson might actually stand a
fucking chance. Can you imagine?

(off KC's reaction)
Pardon my profanity, miss.

KC

No, it's quite all right.

THUNDER BOOMS, closer.

THE HORSE SPOOKS, feet skittering on the wet planks. The slaves back away from the animal, but Judah stays with her.

JUDAH
Whoa, girl.

Judah takes the bit, trying to settle the horse. The back of his shirt lifts, revealing the knife stuck in his waistband.

THE FERRYMAN SPIES THE WEAPON. He stops pulling, and draws a pistol from his belt.

FERRYMAN
Now whadda we got here?

Judah turns and sees the Ferryman aiming a gun at him.

JUDAH
There a problem, sir?

FERRYMAN
That dagger in your britches.
(to Colin)
This darky's conspiring to kill
you. Probably slit your throat soon
as your feet touch Kansas soil.

Judah looks to Colin, who shakes his head.

FERRYMAN (CONT'D)
Aren't you, boy? Turn around.

The Ferryman steps toward Judah, gun at the ready.

Colin SEIZES his arm, pulling it up so the gun points in the air. The Ferryman fights for control-

BANG! The gun goes off. The frightened horse REARS UP, bucking wildly and knocking Judah off the side of the boat.

Judah SPLASHES into the water, flailing and GASPING for breath as the current carries him away from the ferry.

Isaiah rushes to the side of the boat.

ISAIAH
Grab a line!

KC is petrified, watching Colin and the Ferryman grapple.

Colin starts to get hold of the pistol, but the Ferryman BITES HIS HAND. Colin grabs the Ferryman's arm.

The Ferryman slowly gains the upper hand, bringing the pistol around. Colin turns his head to stay out of its aim.

Isaiah's son finds a rope, hands it to his father. Isaiah tosses it out toward Judah.

The rope SPLASHES onto the surface, the end landing a few feet shy. Judah reaches for it in vain.

The Ferryman pins Colin, pushes the gun into his face...

SHINK! Blood erupts from the Ferryman's neck, as KC plunges the METAL CROSS FROM ATCHINSON'S BIBLE into his throat.

The Ferryman drops the gun, clutches his throat. He pulls out the cross. Blood spills from his jugular as the life drains from his body. Colin pushes him off and stands.

KC staggers back, stunned and appalled by what she has done. Colin puts an arm around her and gently turns her away.

ISAIAH (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Come on, take hold now!

Isaiah hurls the rope back out over the water, but it falls far short. Judah struggles to keep his head above water.

COLIN
Float your legs out and kick!

Judah lets his feet go out behind him and does his best to crawl-kick, but makes little progress against the current.

COLIN (CONT'D)
Now climb with your hands!

Judah's stroke is awkward and uncertain, but it's strong enough that he starts to move closer to the rope.

ISAIAH
You gots it, boy!

But to their dismay, the rope starts to sink as it soaks up water. Judah struggles with all his might, but when he reaches where the rope was, it has disappeared underwater.

COLIN
Faster! Come on!

Judah uses his last ounce of strength, but the rope continues to sink, receding from his grasp. Exhausted, he stops swimming and sinks below the surface.

They all stare out across the water, and a dread-filled silence falls over the boat.

The rope suddenly PULLS TAUT. Isaiah grips it, startled.

Judah breaks through the surface, pulling himself up hand over hand. He climbs the rope back toward the boat and the slave family celebrates and CHEERS.

COLIN (CONT'D)
I'll be damned.

Colin wraps an arm around KC and holds her tight. Her instinct is to pull away, but still reeling from the run-in with the ferryman, she allows him to comfort her.

EXT. RIVER BANK - DAY

A BOOT pours out water. As Judah does his best to get dry, the freed slaves say their good-byes to Colin and KC.

ISAIAH
Never thought I'd set foot outside
Missoura.

COLIN
The river leads all the way to
Nebraska. Best stay off the roads.

ISAIAH
(eyeing Judah)
Sure ya won' come with?

Judah shakes his head. Isaiah nods and leads his family away.

The Little Girl turns and runs back to Colin. She holds out a fist. He taps it and she opens it to reveal the clay marble.

Colin accepts the gift with a nod. She runs back to Isaiah and holds his hand as they walk away.

EXT. KANSAS PLAINS - DAY

Judah and Colin ride side by side. KC sits behind Colin, holding him around the waist as they gallop. The sky is dark, and fierce winds whip the prairie grasses.

CUT TO:

EXT. TOPEKA, KS - DUSK

Atchinson and Stringfellow ride hard into Topeka.

INT. GOVERNOR SHERMAN'S OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Atchinson bangs open the door and strides inside with Stringfellow. Governor Sherman looks up from his desk.

ATCHINSON

More bad news, Governor. The girl
flew the coop.

Governor Sherman's face darkens. He leans back in his chair and looks thoughtfully out the window.

GOVERNOR SHERMAN

Does Robinson know?

EXT. CHARLES ROBINSON'S HOUSE - NIGHT

A group of armed BODYGUARDS watch Charles Robinson's porch. They shoulder their guns as Governor Sherman and the Border Ruffians ride up to the house. The governor dismounts.

BODYGUARD

Whadda you want, Sherman?

GOVERNOR SHERMAN

A word with my neighbor is all.

INT. CHARLES ROBINSON'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Charles Robinson sits at his kitchen table in dim candlelight, glowering at Governor Sherman.

GOVERNOR SHERMAN

Lovely home you have here Charles.
Very rustic.

CHARLES ROBINSON

Where's my daughter?

GOVERNOR SHERMAN

Personal matters will have to wait.

Charles Robinson SLAMS his fist on the table.

CHARLES ROBINSON

I want to see KC. Then we'll talk.

GOVERNOR SHERMAN

If you ever want to see her, you'll
talk now.

(off Robinson's silence)
Your men are causing quite a stir
across the territory.

CHARLES ROBINSON

I don't know what you mean.

GOVERNOR SHERMAN

John Brown and his militia.

CHARLES ROBINSON
That's no business of mine.

GOVERNOR SHERMAN
We have detained one of Mr. Brown's Jayhawkers who will testify that the guns terrorizing lawful Kansans are from your personal arsenal.

CHARLES ROBINSON
(insincere)
That's absurd.

GOVERNOR SHERMAN
Arming an insurrection is treason, Charles. If you wish to confess, and resign your candidacy, then I can make sure your crime is viewed with an eye toward clemency.

CHARLES ROBINSON
If you've got evidence, you can have me arrested.

GOVERNOR SHERMAN
(lying through his teeth)
Unfortunately our sheriff got himself killed in Missouri. Caught trespassing.

Charles Robinson swallows hard.

GOVERNOR SHERMAN (CONT'D)
It'll be better for everyone if you turn yourself in. Then I can deploy all my resources in service of your daughter's safe return.

CHARLES ROBINSON
Get out of my house.

GOVERNOR SHERMAN
The judge will be at your disposal until midnight, ready to receive your confession. If it does not arrive, neither will she.

Governor Sherman smiles thinly, and takes his leave.

EXT. KANSAS PLAINS - NIGHT

THUNDER RUMBLES. Judah opens his eyes. Colin sleeps soundly beside him, but KC is wide awake. She stands on the other side of the fire, watching a LIGHTNING STORM in the distance.

Judah goes to her and offers his blanket. She wraps it around her shivering shoulders, her eyes fixed on the horizon.

KC
I keep seeing that man's face.

JUDAH
You done what you had to.

KC takes that in, watching the storm dance across the plains.

KC
I never could sleep in a thunder storm. My mother would have to come and hold me til I fell asleep.
(holding back tears)
When she passed, I didn't know what death meant. Not til we had a storm, and no one came to hold me.
(then)
Daddy did the best he could.
Brought me out here to work for the cause, like he thought she'd want.
Probably regrets it now.

JUDAH
Wager he'd do it again.

KC
Last time I saw him, we had a fight. I said some dreadful things.

Judah turns inward, thinking of his own fight with Atchinson.

JUDAH
Always family that cut the deepest.

KC
I never imagined he'd marry me off and be rid of me.

JUDAH
Lotta men done worse'n hitch a girl up to a man that loves her.

KC
The Sheriff doesn't even know me.

JUDAH
Don't mean he don't love you.

On the other side of the campfire, COLIN IS NOW AWAKE. He strains to hear their conversation, but can't. He watches KC caress the side of Judah's head, and seethes with jealousy.

Across the fire, KC smooths the bandage over Judah's wound.

KC
Looks as though it's healing.

JUDAH
Bound to in time.

Unable to hear their words, Colin imagines the worst. He turns away bitterly, pulling his blanket tight.

EXT. KANSAS PLAINS - THE NEXT MORNING

Judah and Colin pack up the horses in silence.

JUDAH
That horse is beat. She can ride
with me a spell.

COLIN
My horse is fine.

He beckons for KC to step up onto his horse, and Judah offers his hand to help her up.

COLIN (CONT'D)
Keep your hands off.

His angry tone surprises KC. She looks to Judah, who simply shakes his head and goes back to his own horse. KC takes Colin's hand and climbs up into the saddle.

EXT. LAWRENCE, KS - DAY

SMOKE BILLOWS UP from the wreckage of smoldering buildings.

John Brown and the band of Jayhawkers crest a hill and catch sight of what remains of the Free-Soil town of Lawrence.

EXT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

John Brown leads his men through the ransacked streets of Lawrence and stops in front of the newspaper office. A "HERALD OF FREEDOM" sign dangles above a broken window.

The EDITOR sweeps up the charred remains of his business.

JOHN BROWN
What tragedy befell this place?

EDITOR
Cyrus Wilkins come through with a
whole posse of Ruffians. Took what
they pleased and burned the rest.

(MORE)

EDITOR (CONT'D)
 Chucked my press in the crick on
 the way out.

OLIVER
 Did you fight?

EDITOR
 Some did. Buried them this morning.

JOHN BROWN
 Where can we find Wilkins?

CUT TO:

EXT. CHARLES ROBINSON'S HOUSE - DAY

Colin and Judah ride briskly up the dirt road, steering their horses toward the familiar front yard of the Robinson home.

KC's lips part into the beautiful smile that we've always suspected, but never seen. She slides down from Colin's horse before it can even come to a stop and rushes past the gate.

KC
 Daddy! We're back!

Her words hang in the still air. The whole property is quiet. Colin and Judah exchange a glance, while KC hurries inside.

INT. CHARLES ROBINSON'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

KC bursts into the foyer.

KC
 We made it, Daddy! I'm home...

She falls silent, waiting for a response. It doesn't come.

EXT. TOPEKA, KS - DAY

The town square bustles with activity. Free-Soilers and pro-slavers are out in force, clustered around the COURTHOUSE.

Colin, KC, and Judah hitch up their horses in front of a GENERAL STORE, a safe distance away. A TOWNSPERSON passes by-

COLIN
 What's goin' about?

TOWNSPERSON
 Charles Robinson confessed.

KC
 Confessed?! To what?

TOWNSPERSON
Treason.

A commotion breaks out on the steps of the Courthouse as Charles Robinson is led out in handcuffs by Atchinson, WHO NOW WEARS A BADGE ON HIS CHEST.

Judah steps back when he sees Atchinson, ducking out of view.

The crowd JEERS at Charles Robinson, head down as he limps along, surrounded by armed Border Ruffians.

CROWD
Traitor!... Scoundrel!...

KC takes off, sprinting across the square toward her father.

COLIN
KC wait!

Colin chases her. The crowd follows Atchinson as he and his men lead Charles Robinson from the Courthouse to the Jail.

KC
Let me through!

KC pushes and weaves her way to the front of the crowd.

KC (CONT'D)
Father!

Charles Robinson's face lights up.

CHARLES ROBINSON
KC! Thank heavens, you're-

KC
-What's happened?

CHARLES ROBINSON
You're safe. That's all that matters.

Colin finally catches up, stopping at KC's side.

COLIN
Sorry we weren't here sooner, sir!

Charles Robinson sees Colin, then spins on Atchinson.

CHARLES ROBINSON
He's alive?! You didn't have her?!

ATCHINSON
Lock him up.

The Ruffians drag Charles Robinson into the jailhouse.

CHARLES ROBINSON
My confession was forced! Sherman
kidnapped my daughter!

His voice can barely be heard amid the jeers of the crowd. KC tries to follow her father into the jail-

KC
Daddy! DADDY!

But the Ruffians shove her back. KC turns to Colin.

KC (CONT'D)
Can't you do anything?!

ATCHINSON
There's new law in town, ma'am.
(taps his badge)
Appears the old sheriff ran off,
chasing some local tail.

Colin's hand drops to the gun at his side. Ruffians raise their rifles, ready to fire. Atchinson smiles.

ATCHINSON (CONT'D)
I oughta write you up for that.
Citizens can't carry in town.

Colin looks at the rifles. He wouldn't even get a shot off.

ATCHINSON (CONT'D)
Turn it over nice and slow. I'd
hate to get blood on the steps.

Colin reluctantly hands his Colt revolver to Atchinson.

ATCHINSON (CONT'D)
How boring. Suits you.

Atchinson steps into the Jail. KC looks to Colin, but he can't bear to meet her gaze.

EXT. STABLES - DAY

A dozen horses mill around the public CORRAL.

Judah stands beside Brandy, tightening the saddle. As he moves to the reins, she nuzzles her face into his hands. Judah smiles and rubs her nose.

JUDAH
Missed you too, girl.

KC and Colin approach. She pauses, realizing that Judah is preparing to depart.

KC
You're leaving?

COLIN
No. He's runnin'.

JUDAH
Now she's back, I'm free to go.

KC
But we need your help.

JUDAH
With what? Diggin' the grave?

KC's eyes well up with tears.

COLIN
Don't mind him. He's just a nigger.

Judah puts a hand to his wound, as though straining to hear.

JUDAH
Come again? I don't hear too good
outta my right ear.

COLIN
Said you're a worthless, one-eared,
thievin' nigger who don't care
about nothin' but a damn horse.

JUDAH
Least I ain't gonna get killed over
a girl who don't know my name.

Judah steps into the stirrup, but Colin grabs his shoulder and holds him down. Judah spins and punches Colin in the face, knocking the Sheriff into the dirt.

COLIN
Ya want freedom? This here's the
best shot you'll get to prove it.

JUDAH
Can't be free when you're the law.

COLIN
Atchinson's the law now.

JUDAH

Only difference between you and him
is you're an ignorant redneck fuck.

Judah digs his heels in, racing Brandy toward the opposite end of the corral. The STABLE MASTER takes notice-

STABLE MASTER

Hey! Where d'ya think you're goin'?

JUDAH

Canada.

Brandy gracefully LEAPS over the fence, and they're gone.

KC shakes her head, bitterly disappointed. She turns and exits the stables, leaving Colin alone.

EXT. CANYON HIDEOUT - DAY

A large stone rolls out of the way and Judah's hand reaches behind it to pull out a hidden AMMO BELT AND TWO REVOLVERS.

Judah straps the guns around his waist. As he leaves his hideout for the last time, he KICKS one of the whiskey bottles in his "bottle garden", SHATTERING IT.

EXT. DUSTY ROAD - DAY

Judah rides north along the lonely road, bracing himself against the cold wind. As he crests a hill, he sees VULTURES circling high above a dead sycamore tree.

Brandy looks back at Judah and flicks her tail.

JUDAH

We got no time for this. They's at least a day or two ahead already.

(pauses as if listening)

Don't matter. I ain't stoppin'.

(listens again)

Ah, shit. Come on then.

Judah leads Brandy off the road.

EXT. ABANDONED FARM - DAY

A large IRON CAGE hangs from the lifeless branches of the sycamore. Vultures perch on every bar, crowding in tightly on whatever is inside.

Judah rides past an Abandoned Farmhouse and approaches the tree. As he nears the cage, he sees a hand-scrawled sign hanging from the bottom: "RUNAWAY NIGER".

He pulls his gun and FIRES into the air. The vultures fly up to the branches above, revealing-

A HIDEOUSLY DISFIGURED BLACK MAN. His skin has been pecked mercilessly, and blood oozes from a hundred open sores. His eyes are gone. Judah turns his head in disgust.

The Black Man stirs, lifting his head slightly and MOANING in agony. The man weakly tries to speak.

BLACK MAN
Iiiii...eeeeee....

Judah dismounts and comes closer, trying to hear him clearly, but sees that the man's tongue has been cut out.

BLACK MAN (CONT'D)
Iiiiiilll... meeeee.....

Judah aims his pistol at the man's head.

JUDAH
Want it to end?

The man simply nods. Judah pulls the trigger, putting him out of his misery. The gunshot ECHOES across the valley.

Judah starts to walk away, but stops as a bold VULTURE flies down to the body. The carrion bird pecks at the corpse.

Something inside Judah snaps.

Years of pent-up anger break loose, and Judah SHOOTS the bird. Its body falls to the ground, but that isn't enough. Judah draws his other pistol and starts firing into the tree.

BAM BAM BAM BAM! Dead birds rain down from the branches until Judah runs out of bullets. But there are still plenty of vultures circling above.

Judah holsters his empty pistols and approaches the cage, wincing at the smell. He looks at the rope connecting the cage to a branch above it.

Judah climbs the tree and crawls out over the branch that holds the cage. He saws through the rope with the BONE KNIFE, and the cage CRASHES to the ground.

DOYLE (O.S.)
Nice work, Jim Crow.

Doyle and his two sons point their pistols up at Judah. The old slave catcher's good eye never wavers, but his cloudy white eye rolls around the socket with excitement.

DOYLE (CONT'D)
Better fly on down now.

Judah slides off the branch and drops to the ground.

Will and Drury seize Judah's arms and haul him to his feet. He lets go of the knife and they hold him as Doyle grabs the collar of his shirt, ripping it open.

The men all stare at the "BAR A" branded on his chest.

DOYLE (CONT'D)
You're a long way from home, little
birdie.

Judah SPITS in his face.

DOYLE (CONT'D)
Oh, I'd be happy to kill you. But
then you'd be free.

Doyle looks to Drury, who KNOCKS Judah on the head with the butt of his gun.

The world spins. Judah drops to his knees. Drury and Will set upon him, kicking him furiously.

Judah raises his hands, trying to protect his head. But he is helpless to escape the blows as they rain down upon him.

Judah's VISION BLURS. The world melts into a dreamy haze of sounds and images as he swims at the edge of consciousness.

KA-CAW! A single BLACK CROW flutters onto a branch of the tree above. Judah locks eyes with the bird. His assailants disappear. The bird launches into the air, out of sight.

WHAM! A fierce KICK jolts Judah's head to the side. His cheek rests on the grass, his vision focused on the IRON CAGE. A vulture perches on the bars, picking at the body inside.

KA-CAW! The crow flies at the vulture, attacking with its talons. The vulture beats its wings, driving the crow off.

The crow circles around, this time joined by another. Then another. The THREE CROWS work together, taking turns SWOOPING at the vulture, CAWING and swiping with their talons.

The vulture cannot fight off the attacks from all sides. It gives up and flies away, and the crows give chase.

Judah smiles. Doyle takes this as a personal offense, and STOMPS on his temple.

CUT TO BLACK:

RAINDROPS PLUNK down on a wooden roof.

Judah's eyes flutter as he slowly regains consciousness. His vision comes into focus, bringing us to-

INT. FRONTIER CABIN - NIGHT

The Doyles sit at the kitchen table inside a small log cabin with CYRUS WILKINS, an angry, bearded man in his 40s. Cyrus's wife MARTHA throws a log on the fire as the men SLURP soup and drink whiskey.

Judah finds himself propped up in a wooden chair in the corner of the room, his hands bound beneath him.

MARTHA

More stew?

WILL

Thanks ma'am. Mighty tasty.

CYRUS

Y'all keep an eye out. Them Jayhawks're fired up.

DRURY

Sure they're none too happy 'bout Lawrence.

CYRUS

Gave the Yanks some southern hospitality.

The Doyles chuckle.

DRURY

How many'd you get, Cyrus?

CYRUS

Only one. My sword got stuck in his ribs.

He points to a heavy CAVALRY SWORD with an ornate hilt, hanging in its sheath against the wall.

CYRUS (CONT'D)

By the time I got it loose, rest of 'em was running scared.

The sound of a SCREAM pierces the night. The four men freeze.

EXT. ANOTHER LOG CABIN - NIGHT

A short distance up the road, John Brown and his men drag TED HARRIS, 30s, away from his home. Harris's face is fixed with defiant silence, while his wife SCREAMS in terror.

OLIVER

Stay inside, ma'am. We only need a word with your husband.

WIFE

Please! He didn't do anything!

OLIVER

If that's the truth, my father will have him home in no time.

INT. FRONTIER CABIN - AT THE SAME TIME

Cyrus and the Doyles stand at the window, watching the Jayhawkers drag Harris down to the creek.

MARTHA

What's goin' on out-

CYRUS

-Quiet, woman!
(looks around)
Where's my rifle?

MARTHA

Don't go, Cyrus.

CYRUS

They'll be here next.

The men prepare their guns, checking ammunition.

DOYLE

Will, you're with us. Drury, you guard the bounty.

DRURY

Aww Pa, he ain't goin' nowhere.

DOYLE

Damn right he ain't, 'cause you're stayin' put.

Doyle, Will, and Cyrus pull on their hats and coats and step out into the downpour with their rifles.

Drury seethes with rage, KICKING the door shut behind them. Martha scurries away, leaving him alone with Judah.

As Drury paces, Judah eyes the sword on the wall.

JUDAH

They leave you back 'cause you're stupid? Or 'cause you're small?

DRURY

Maybe it's 'cause of my temper.

Drury KICKS him savagely, knocking over Judah and the chair. Judah wriggles his bound hands down the wooden legs as Drury sits at the table and pours a glass of whiskey.

JUDAH

Got one for me?

Drury pours a shot, and TOSSES it in Judah's face. Judah slips his hands free from under the chair.

JUDAH (CONT'D)

What's it like bein' the runt?

DRURY

You must like pain.

JUDAH

Haven't felt nuthin' yet.

DRURY

Don't worry. I'm warmin' up.

He goes to the fireplace, and places a poker into the flame.

As soon as Drury turns his back, Judah ROLLS across the floor, using the momentum to spring onto his feet. He hops around the dining table, going for the CAVALRY SWORD.

Just as Judah pulls the sheathed sword off the wall, Drury turns back with the RED-HOT POKER in his hand. The slave catcher's eyes dart to the SHOTGUN against the wall. Too far.

Drury LUNGES with the poker and Judah parries. Drury tries to take advantage of Judah's immobility by circling around him and slashing from above and below.

Judah ducks and blocks Drury's swipes. Engages the poker in an arcing spin that finally twists it out of Drury's hand.

The poker CLATTERS to the floor. Drury looks at Judah's bound feet, and BOLTS around the table, DIVING for the shotgun.

Judah WHIPS the sheath off the sword, ROLLS across the kitchen table, KNOCKS AWAY Drury's rising shotgun barrel-

And PLUNGES THE BLADE into the slave-catcher's chest. Drury's lifeless body slumps to the floor.

Martha peeks out from the bedroom. Judah puts a finger to his lips, shushing her. She nods, and ducks back into hiding.

EXT. CREEK BED - NIGHT

John Brown interrogates Harris at the edge of a small creek that winds through tall trees.

JOHN BROWN

Wilkins spilt innocent blood in Lawrence. Is that the sort of man you cast your lot with?

HARRIS

At least he ain't no nigger-lover.

John Brown PISTOL-WHIPS Harris across the face.

JOHN BROWN

Point us to his place and your children won't grow up missing their father.

HARRIS

Better a dead father than a coward.

EMBANKMENT

Doyle, Will, and Cyrus peer down on the interrogation below. Doyle signals, and they fan out, taking up firing positions in a semi-circle above the Jayhawkers.

Will steadies his rifle over a rocky outcropping. He looks along the ridge and sees Cyrus and Doyle poke their barrels through the brush.

Will settles in, preparing to fire. A RUSTLE in the forest startles him. He looks behind him as-

Judah SWINGS the cavalry sword in a deadly arc.

CREEK BED

John Brown hears a sickening sound and looks up as-

WILL'S HEAD ROLLS DOWN THE EMBANKMENT and comes to rest beside his boot. The men all stare in shock.

The Jayhawkers draw their guns and take cover. Harris runs for it, splashing across the creek and making his escape.

EMBANKMENT

Cyrus looks down at the severed head, then swivels around, searching for the attacker. He's surrounded by the ominous branches of the pitch-black forest.

Cyrus packs up his gun and flees blindly through the trees.

THUNK. Cyrus is stopped by cold metal. He looks down to see his own sword buried in his gut. Judah pulls the blade loose.

CYRUS
Oh holy mother of-

Cyrus clutches the mortal wound, he collapses forward. Judah looks up for his last opponent.

Not far away, Doyle stalks quietly through the trees, peering into the darkness with his one good eye. The steady rain muffles his footsteps over the fallen leaves.

A RUSTLE. Doyle whips around. BAM BAM!

But there's nothing behind him. He backs against the trunk of a MASSIVE TREE, searching the shadows for any movement.

On the opposite side of the tree, Judah leans his back against the bark, gripping his bloodied sword.

Doyle circles the tree slowly, leading with his pistol as he scans the forest in front of him.

Judah watches the pistol edge out around the trunk. Doyle creeps forward ever so slightly...

SHINK. The blade flashes downward and SEVERS Doyle's hand.

Doyle grabs his amputated stump in horror, dropping to his knees. He looks up at Judah.

DOYLE
Go ahead boy.

JUDAH
Then you'd be free.

Judah turns his back on Doyle, who SPUTTERS in agony.

BAM! A bullet rips through Doyle's chest, putting him out of his misery. Oliver emerges with two Jayhawkers at his side.

OLIVER
Come with me.

CREEK BED

Oliver leads Judah down to the creek. John Brown sees Judah, and the minister's eyes dawn with recognition.

JOHN BROWN
You. I know you. The thief we
passed on the road.

Judah nods. John Brown looks up at the embankment.

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)
How many?

OLIVER
Three, carrying rifles and pistols.

JOHN BROWN
(to Judah)
So you saved us.

John Brown approaches Judah slowly.

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)
That hothead lawman still with you?

JUDAH
Naw. On my own now.

JOHN BROWN
What happened to him?

JUDAH
I finally got free.

JOHN BROWN
You know brother, you don't have to
be alone to be free.

This pierces Judah.

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)
You're with us now. God has put you
here to do His work.

Judah thinks, then exhales as he makes a decision.

JUDAH
I saw a vision.

The Jayhawkers look at Judah with awe.

JOHN BROWN
What did you see, brother?

JUDAH
Crows. That chased away a vulture.

EXT. TOPEKA, KS - TOWN SQUARE - MORNING

The town comes to life as the sun rises over the Courthouse. Border Ruffians with rifles patrol the square.

Stringfellow stands on the stage, which today clearly serves as a gallows. He pulls a lever and the trap door RELEASES, hanging a sack of flour with a THWUMP.

Across the square, Colin watches the hanging-test from the steps of the CHURCH, a canvas bag slung over his shoulder.

INT. CHURCH - DAY

Colin pushes through the large wooden doors and removes his hat, revealing a BLACK EYE. He walks between the rows of empty pews. As he nears the sacristy, KC steps inside.

KC
Colin, wait!

He stops as she hurries down the aisle.

KC (CONT'D)
What do you think you're doing?

COLIN
(points upward)
Always wanted to see the old bell
they got up there.

KC
My father wouldn't want you to die
today.

COLIN
Might at least give him some
company.

KC
You won't prove anything except
that you're even more muleheaded
than I thought possible!

COLIN
I mighta been wrong about us. 'Bout
a lot of things, even. But I know
I'm right about this.

He hikes the bag up on his shoulder and prepares to leave, but pauses for a moment. He grabs KC and KISSES her mouth. She is so caught off guard, she doesn't have time to resist.

He releases her. She stares at him for a beat... then SLAPS him across the face. He smiles, as though it woke him up.

COLIN (CONT'D)
Alright then.

She watches, dumbfounded, as he goes up a staircase.

INT. CHURCH TOWER - SECOND FLOOR - DAY

Colin comes up the steps to an open-air second-story platform inside the tower. He climbs a ladder up to a trapdoor.

EXT. CHURCH BELFRY - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Colin pushes through the trapdoor to the top of the bell tower. A small walkway circles the central column, with a rope hanging down from the large CAST-IRON BELL.

Colin pulls a Sharps rifle from his sack. He reaches into his pocket and begins pulling out BULLETS, lining them up on the ledge. He reaches in again and pauses.

Colin pulls out a clay marble, the Little Girl's "shooter". He places it at the end of his row of ammunition and smiles.

CLICK. A pistol cocks behind him. He stiffens.

JUDAH (O.S.)
(imitating Colin)
One wrong move and you're diggin'
your own grave.

Colin turns to see Judah. They size each other up.

JUDAH (CONT'D)
Nice shiner.

COLIN
Never figured on ya comin' back.

JUDAH
Me neither.

COLIN
Guess we were both wrong.

JUDAH
What's the plan?

COLIN
(indicates his rifle)
You're looking at it.

JUDAH
We can do better.

He points to the town square below. Colin looks down and sees-JOHN BROWN AND OLIVER, hitching up their horses. John Brown looks up to the belfry and gives a curt nod. Colin nods back.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - DAY

GONG! GONG! GONG! THE CHURCH BELL RINGS OUT THE TIME, as the square below buzzes with spectators.

Governor Sherman stands out in front of his office, happily watching the square fill up.

KC hides her face under a bonnet as she slips into the crowd.

EXT. JAIL - DAY

Ruffians stand at attention on the front steps of the Jail. Atchinson emerges, BADGE gleaming on his chest. Charles Robinson comes out next, spurred along by Stringfellow.

ATCHINSON
Lovely day, isn't it, Charles? I
may yet take a liking to Kansas.

The spectators quiet as Charles Robinson limps up the steps of the gallows. Stringfellow leads him to the trap door.

ATCHINSON (CONT'D)
Charles Robinson. For providing
material support to a rebel
militia, you have been found guilty
of treason against the Territory of
Kansas. Any last words?

Charles Robinson stares out into the crowd.

CHARLES ROBINSON
I will not waste breath pleading my
case, but before I draw my last,
let me say this: The question of
freedom renders us deaf to all
reason. If we cannot find a civil
way to disagree, have no doubt,
this nation will tear itself apart.

His eyes find KC, her face flushed with emotion.

CHARLES ROBINSON (CONT'D)

I do not regret the actions for
which I am condemned. But in my
pursuit of justice, I may have
compromised that which matters
most. I pray forgiveness from those
who are closest to my heart.

Stringfellow puts a black hood over Charles Robinson's head,
and cinches the noose around his neck.

The crowd falls silent in anticipation. Then-

WHEE-OO-WHEET! A shrill whistle echoes out over the square.

A COMMOTION starts up, as spectators point down the street at
an unseen source. The sound of GALLOPING HOOVES approaches.

ATCHINSON

What the hell...

A riderless black mare gallops into view. Brandy.

A BANGED-UP WELLS FARGO STAGECOACH follows her, pulled by two
white stallions. The coach careens through the town square,
SCATTERING TOWNSPEOPLE as it heads for the stage.

ATCHINSON (CONT'D)

Positions!

The Ruffians form a defensive line in front of the stage,
taking aim at the stagecoach. But there is no driver.

ATCHINSON (CONT'D)

Fire!

The Ruffians FIRE a volley at the oncoming coach. They start
to reload, but scatter as the coach bears down on them.

Brandy runs under the stage. The carriage horses follow, but
the coach CRASHES into the lip of the stage, just as it did
after the bank robbery, coming to a jarring halt.

The collision JOSTLES Charles Robinson, who wobbles with the
noose around his neck. Atchinson watches the black mare run
under the stage and stop in front of the Courthouse.

Judah runs out from behind the Courthouse and LEAPS UP into
Brandy's saddle. He draws the CAVALRY SWORD and rides full
speed, directly toward the stage.

ATCHINSON'S EYE TWITCHES.

The door of the coach is thrown open. A frightened Ruffian peeks inside. No one. Only a WOODEN BARREL MARKED "WINE"-

AND THE HISS OF A BURNING FUSE.

Atchinson draws on Judah but can't get off the shot before-

KA-BOOM! The POWDER KEG explodes, blowing the stagecoach into wooden shards, knocking the Ruffians to the ground.

The explosion shatters the support beams of the gallows. The entire structure COLLAPSES.

Charles Robinson slides forward. The noose tightens.

Judah rides into the cloud of BLACK SMOKE, sword raised above his head. He scatters the panicked Ruffians and SLICES the hangman's rope. Charles Robinson drops to the ground.

As the politician GASPS for breath, Judah leaps down from Brandy and pulls the hood from his head.

CHARLES ROBINSON

Am I dead?

JUDAH

Not yet.

CHAOS ENGULFS THE SQUARE

Governor Sherman tries to blend in among the fleeing townspeople, glancing back over his shoulder until-

He SLAMS into something and falls down.

The governor looks up at John Brown and Oliver, who point rifles down at him. He raises his arms in surrender.

JOHN BROWN

The bell tolls, governor.

John Brown takes off his hat and waves it in the air.

EXT. CHURCH BELFRY - DAY

Colin sees John Brown's hat waving, and pulls the rope of the church bell. It GONGS out over the town square.

Jayhawkers respond to the signal and pop up from hiding on nearby rooftops. They take aim and FIRE at the Ruffians.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - DAY

Bullets rain down on the Ruffians as they scramble for cover. Stringfellow fires back from behind the wrecked stagecoach. Another Ruffian cowers on the ground nearby.

STRINGFELLOW
Shoot, you chickenshit!

Stringfellow pulls him to his feet, and a bullet pierces the man's skull. Stringfellow lets go and the body drops back down into the dirt. Another shot WHIZZES past.

STRINGFELLOW (CONT'D)
Fall back!

Stringfellow leads the Ruffians as they retreat to the buildings at the edge of the plaza.

AT THE GALLows

KC runs through the thick clouds of smoke. She finds Judah, hoisting her father up into Brandy's saddle.

KC
Judah?!

Judah looks up and makes a quick decision. He grabs KC and helps her up into the saddle in front of her father.

CHARLES ROBINSON
KC?! What are you-

JUDAH
-Ride!

Judah WHACKS Brandy's hindquarters, and she starts trotting.

Judah drops the sword and draws his gun, laying down covering fire as he escorts KC and Charles Robinson to safety. Shoots in all directions, firing his pistol in a deadly ballet.

A giant Ruffian astride a Clydesdale barrels down on Judah with sword held high. Judah turns, raises his pistol, and-

CLICK. Out of bullets. The Ruffian windmills the heavy blade, and then-

Miraculously tumbles off the horse and falls to the ground, landing at Judah's feet. Dead. A bullet hole in his back.

Judah sees Colin looking down from the bell tower. Colin tips his hat. Judah nods in thanks, runs to catch up with Brandy.

AMIDST THE RUBBLE

A WEATHERED HAND reaches up through the wreckage of the stage and pushes aside a burning plank. Atchinson pulls himself out of the debris, covered in soot but mostly unharmed.

He surveys the fire fight that is now underway. He spies KC and Charles Robinson, riding away on Brandy.

A MOAN of pain somewhere nearby. Atchinson follows the sound to a Border Ruffian pinned down by a heavy beam.

RUFFIAN
Bourbon! Please, my leg...

Atchinson kneels as though to help. But instead, he grabs the Ruffian's rifle and stalks off, ignoring the man's pleas.

Atchinson DRAWS A BEAD on Charles Robinson. He sights down the crosshairs, inhales deeply, exhales slowly-

BANG! The bullet hits Charles Robinson in the back.

Atchinson sights down his second barrel, preparing to take another shot. He inhales and-

CRACK! A bullet digs into the timber inches from Atchinson's arm. He takes cover, looks for the source of the shot-

And sees Oliver, shooting from a position in the front window of the General Store.

EXT. MAIN STREET - DAY

Judah leads Charles Robinson and KC around the corner. The politician topples out of the saddle, THUDDING into the dirt.

KC
Daddy!

KC hops down to aid her father, but Judah stops her.

JUDAH
Not here.

He drags Charles Robinson into an alleyway.

INT. GENERAL STORE - DAY

The Jayhawkers are dug in on one side of the plaza, exchanging fire with the Ruffians across the vacant square.

John Brown and Oliver kneel to reload.

OLIVER
I saw him, Pa. Atchinson.

JOHN BROWN
Where, son?

OLIVER
I won't miss again.

Oliver snaps his rifle shut and pops up, taking aim.

JOHN BROWN
Oliver, wait-

Too late. A bullet PIERCES Oliver's chest.

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)
No!

EXT. CHURCH BELFRY - DAY

Colin FIRES from the belfry, then ducks back down. He hears a GUN COCK on the platform a story below him and freezes.

BOOM! A shotgun blast splinters through the floor right next to him. He scrambles away just as-

BOOM! Another shot comes up through the wooden decking.

INT. CHURCH TOWER - SECOND FLOOR - CONTINUOUS

Stringfellow reloads his shotgun, staring up at the belfry.

STRINGFELLOW
Come on down, Sheriff! Ain't gonna hurtcha none.

He snaps the stock shut and aims it up at the ceiling above. He listens closely...

GONG! GONG! GONG! The church bells ring wildly, creating a cacophony that makes Stringfellow wince. He FIRES up again, blowing another hole in the ceiling.

STRINGFELLOW (CONT'D)
Shut that racket up! Come down like a man!

The bell stops ringing.

COLIN (O.S.)
Alright then.

Stringfellow spins to see Colin hanging from the church bell rope, after rappelling down from above. Colin stands on the window ledge, his pistol leveled at Stringfellow.

Colin SMOKES him.

INT. GENERAL STORE - DAY

John Brown cradles his dead son on the floor. He clutches his BIBLE as tears run down his cheeks.

JOHN BROWN

He who pleased God was beloved of
him, so speedily was he taken away.

A bullet SHATTERS a nearby window, interrupting his prayer. He takes a deep breath, then continues.

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)

Youth cut short condemns the wicked
man grown old. The righteous dead-

Another VOLLEY OF GUNSHOTS pepper the store, and John Brown looks up from the Bible with an unholy fire in his eyes.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - DAY

The two sides are locked in a stalemate, exchanging rifle shots across the square.

JOHN BROWN (O.S.)

Raaaaahhhhhh!!!

John Brown SHOUTS with a primal rage. He emerges from the General Store, arms wide, gripping a rifle in his right hand and a Bible in his left. Marches into the square. Defiant.

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)

His enemies rejoice at his death,
but God shall laugh them to scorn.

As he draws fire, John Brown drops the Bible, raises his rifle, and FIRES on the entrenched Ruffians.

JOHN BROWN (CONT'D)

For the Father shall rend them, and
cast them down headlong!

He reaches the fountain at the center of the plaza, and other Jayhawkers run forward. The tide of the battle is turning.

As the Jayhawkers advance, Atchinson is cut off from his Ruffian allies. He recognizes the impending defeat of his men and decides to save himself.

Beyond the line of buildings, he sees a way out. The river.

EXT. ALLEYWAY - DAY

Judah stands at the corner of the alley with his pistol, keeping watch for KC as she ministers to her father. He's itching to join the fight, but won't leave her again.

Across the square, he spots Atchinson ducking low and cutting through the buildings toward the river.

Judah considers giving chase, then looks back at KC.

KC
Kill him.

A vengeful fire burns in her eyes. Judah takes a deep breath, weighs his options, then gives her his pistol.

JUDAH
Do what you gotta.

Judah takes off after Atchinson.

EXT. KAW RIVER - DAY

Judah runs down the alleyway, emerges on the river bank.

A SPLASH draws Judah's attention, and he spots his former master SWIMMING ACROSS THE RIVER. The strong current carries Atchinson further downstream as he makes his way across.

Judah stares out at the swirling rapids, petrified. Atchinson is getting away.

Judah takes a deep breath, then charges headlong into the river and DIVES into the dark current.

He bursts up through the surface, flailing his arms and fighting to stay afloat.

Atchinson clings to a rock, catches his breath. Looks back and sees Judah thrashing toward him. GAINING.

Atchinson pushes off, races toward the opposite bank.

Atchinson nears the edge of the river and his feet touch down into the sand. He stands up and pulls his knife.

Judah reaches the shallows a few yards away. He rises up and draws the Bone Knife.

The two men square off. Water drips from their clothes.

ATCHINSON
You learned to swim.

JUDAH
Got tired of runnin'.

Judah lunges, STABBING. Atchinson steps aside. Circles him.

ATCHINSON
I should've taught you manners.

JUDAH
You taught me to kill.

Judah attacks again. Atchinson dodges, counters.

Judah parries with the Bone Knife, but Atchinson's steel blade SHEARS IT IN HALF.

Judah retreats out of range and looks at his broken weapon. Tosses it aside. Prepares to fight with his hands.

ATCHINSON
Now I'll teach you to die. Like
your mother.

Judah's face falls. His defenses drop for a fraction of a second. That's all Atchinson needs.

He springs forward, SLASHES viciously, SLICING JUDAH'S ARM.

Judah spins away, clutching the wound. Blood pours through his fingers, swirling into the water below.

ATCHINSON (CONT'D)
That blood belongs to me.

JUDAH
Then get what's coming to you.

Atchinson rushes him with the blade. Judah waits to the last possible moment, twists away, catches Atchinson's wrist.

Atchinson BARRELS into Judah, knocks him to his knees. But Judah keeps hold of Atchinson's knife arm.

The blade wavers, inches from Judah's neck.

Atchinson towers over Judah. Presses the deadly point closer.

ATCHINSON
You still got a debt to pay.

Judah knows he can't resist. He releases Atchinson's arm and rolls, letting the knife PLUNGE into his shoulder.

The sudden release surprises Atchinson. He loses his footing and SPLASHES into the river.

Judah scrambles on top, wraps his uninjured arm around Atchinson's neck. Forces Atchinson's head underwater.

Atchinson bucks up, GASPING for breath. But Judah is in control, and slowly muscles him lower and lower.

JUDAH
You're right. I owe you.

Judah pins his father down in the turbulent river. Atchinson flails frantically, but Judah holds tight-

DROWNING HIM in three feet of water.

Atchinson kicks, thrashes, slaps the surface. His movements slowly subside. A few final BUBBLES. Then all is still.

Judah clenches his teeth and pulls the knife out of his wounded shoulder. He uses it to cut the leather strap that has hung around his neck for so many years.

He removes the LIBERTY DOLLAR MEDALLION and presses the coin into Atchinson's palm, closing the dead fingers around it.

Judah unpins the TIN STAR on Atchinson's breast. He lets go of the body and watches the current carry it downstream.

He stands in the shallows, closes his eyes, and breathes.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - DAY

Judah leads Brandy back into the town square, where the battle has come to a conclusion. The Jayhawkers have won the day, and now patrol the plaza, rifles at the ready.

John Brown walks among the bodies of the fallen combatants, pausing to pray over each man. Judah steps up beside John Brown, who doesn't look up but senses his presence.

JOHN BROWN
If this is the fight we're meant
for, I don't understand why God
sets the price so high.

JUDAH
Maybe so we don't forget.

JOHN BROWN
 I'll need men like you to finish
 what we started today.

JUDAH
 I'm done fighting, Mr. Brown.

John Brown nods. Judah walks away, cradling his wounded arm.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. JAIL - THE NEXT DAY

The jailhouse now doubles as a makeshift hospital. Charles Robinson lies on a cot in the cell Judah once occupied. KC tends to the gunshot wound in his back as Colin steps inside.

COLIN
 Feelin' better, Mr. Robinson?

CHARLES ROBINSON
 Better than ever! I'm running
 unopposed now!

He points to the next cell, where Governor Sherman broods behind bars. Colin smiles and tips his hat to his old boss.

CHARLES ROBINSON (CONT'D)
 You must be in high spirits too.
 Come to claim your reward, I
 suppose.

Charles Robinson looks at KC, and she turns away.

COLIN
 Thank ya, but I reckon that what I
 asked for ain't yours to give.

Charles Robinson breathes a sigh of relief. KC looks up at Colin, beaming. He nods to her and takes his leave.

KC watches him go, then turns back to help her father.

CHARLES ROBINSON
 Your mother wouldn't want you to
 spend your life fussing over me.

EXT. JAIL - DAY

Colin comes down the steps to find Judah climbing into Brandy's saddle, his wounded arm bound up in a sling.

COLIN
 Headin' out west then?

JUDAH

Naw. Goin' back to the Kaw, if
they'll take me.

Colin extends the hand that was cut in the Indian ceremony.
Judah does the same, and they shake.

COLIN

Safe travels. Brother.

Judah nudges Brandy on, but pauses and turns back. He pulls out the Sheriff's Badge, and tosses the tin star to Colin.

JUDAH

Nearly forgot.

KC (O.S.)

Colin!

KC hurries down the jailhouse steps. She stops in front of the Sheriff and collects herself.

KC (CONT'D)

I was hoping perhaps we could have
that picnic?

(looks at Judah)

I'd love to hear how you
apprehended the Black Bandit.

Colin smiles, speechless.

JUDAH

Reckon I'd like to hear that one
too. Some day.

Judah nods a goodbye, and urges Brandy into a walk, leaving KC and Colin together on the front steps.

Judah rides Brandy through the town square, leaving Topeka behind, and heading into an uncertain future.

Free at last.

FADE OUT.