

HEAVENER
BY
MARK RUPPRECHT

(c) 2025

BLACK SCREEN

Music rises from silence.

PETER, PAUL & MARY'S "THE WEDDING SONG (THERE IS LOVE)"

FADE IN

EXT. CHURCH - DAY (8MM FILM QUALITY)

Grainy 8mm film flickers. Colors fade. Nostalgic home movie feel.

A small white church. Golden autumn light reflects off stained glass.

PETER, PAUL & MARY
*He is now to be among you at the
calling of your hearts, Rest assured
this troubadour is acting on His
part...*

The heavy wooden doors burst open.

MICHAEL (20), radiant in a black tuxedo, emerges hand-in-hand with CAROLINE (19) in white lace. Rice falls like snow. Their faces show pure joy.

Behind them, a CHURCH SIGN reads:

"BLESSED TRINITY - EST. 1873"

Caroline throws her bouquet. Michael catches it, laughs, hands it back to her. She swats his arm playfully.

An old Cadillac waits at the curb. "JUST MARRIED" written in soap on the rear window. Tin cans tied to the bumper.

PETER, PAUL & MARY (CONT'D)
*...The union of your spirits here has
caused Him to remain, For whenever two
or more of you are gathered in His
name, There is love, there is love...*

INT. SMALL APARTMENT - KITCHEN - DAY (8MM)

Michael and Caroline huddle at a tiny table.

A wall calendar displays: "NOVEMBER 1975."

Caroline fidgets with a doctor's note.

Michael studies his newspaper. Oblivious.

Caroline draws breath. Slides the paper across.

Michael glances up. Sees the note. His brow furrows as he reads. Eyes widen. The newspaper tumbles. He stares at Caroline. Mouth open.

She nods. Tears form. Bites her lip.

He sweeps her up. Spins her through the cramped space. She laughs through streaming tears.

A wedding photo captures them two years younger.

PETER, PAUL & MARY (CONT'D)
*...Well a man shall leave his mother,
and a woman leave her home, And they
shall travel on to where the two shall
be as one...*

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY (8MM)

Caroline lies exhausted but glowing. A hospital bracelet reads: "6-15-76."

Michael sits beside her. Cradles a tiny bundle.

CLAIRE - newborn, perfect. Michael's finger vanishes in her tiny fist. His face transforms. Awestruck.

Get well cards crowd the windowsill. "IT'S A GIRL!" visible on several.

Caroline watches them. Eyes soft with love.

PETER, PAUL & MARY (CONT'D)
*... As it was in the beginning, is now
and ever shall be, He is now to be
among you at the calling of your
hearts...*

EXT. PARK - DAY (8MM)

Claire, now walking, toddles toward Michael's outstretched arms. He kneels.

Michael's mouth moves silently - "Come on, walk to daddy."

A birthday cake sits on the blanket. "HAPPY 1ST BIRTHDAY" with a single candle.

She stumbles forward. Collapses into his arms. He scoops her up. Tosses her skyward. She giggles soundlessly.

The 8MM camera spins around. We see Caroline laughing, makes a funny face at us. The camera spins, dizzy, back to Michael and Claire. Adjusts. Frames them both.

PETER, PAUL & MARY (CONT'D)

*... Rest assured this troubadour is
acting on His part, The union of your
spirits here has caused Him to
remain...*

INT. LIVING ROOM - CHRISTMAS MORNING (8MM)

Claire, bigger now, shreds wrapping paper with delighted abandon. Michael and Caroline sit on the floor amid chaos.

A small Christmas tree twinkles in the corner. A newspaper lies folded nearby. "DECEMBER 25, 1979" visible beneath torn wrapping.

Claire clutches a stuffed rabbit. Hugs it tight like she'll never let go.

Michael and Caroline exchange a look. That silent communication of parents sharing perfect moments.

PETER, PAUL & MARY (CONT'D)

*...For whenever two or more of you are
gathered in His name, There is love,
there is love...*

EXT. VINEYARD - DAY (8MM)

A colorful SIGN reads: "HARVEST FESTIVAL" in the background.

All three wave at the camera. Claire blows kisses. Caroline makes the "I love you" sign.

Michael lifts Claire. Points to something in the distance. She follows his gaze with wonder.

The camera captures them from afar - a perfect family against golden autumn light. Claire runs toward the camera, her face fills the frame. Laughing.

PETER, PAUL & MARY (CONT'D)
*...Well a man shall leave his mother
and a woman leave her home, And they
shall travel on to where the two shall
be as one...*

The music crescendos.

SLOW ZOOM IN on Caroline's face in the 8mm footage. Her smile radiant. Eternal.

PETER PAUL & MARY (CONT'D)
...There is love, there is love...

The 8mm image flickers. Film catches in the projector.

CLICK. CLICK. CLICK.

The image burns. A white-hot circle spreads across Caroline's laughing face.

The music cuts to silence.

BLACK SCREEN

A digital watch alarm BEEPS.

A weary, broken down voice speaks only to us. The voice belongs to Michael.

MICHAEL (V.O.)
Everyone wants to go to heaven. But no
one wants to die to get there. I do. I
want to die. I just can't. It's not
possible.

FADE IN

EXT. CABIN - CATSKILL NY - DAY

Snow falls through towering evergreens. The cabin's steep roof bears winter's weight. Smoke rises from the chimney, disperses into gray sky.

Golden light bleeds through frost-etched windows. Warmth trapped behind glass.

A digital alarm BEEPS.

Then LOUDER.

SUPER: "1988"

PIERCING now.

The sound builds to a SHRIEK - then cuts to silence.

INT. GREAT ROOM - DAY

Clean. Bright. Deceptively peaceful.

RUSSO (50s), unshaven and weathered, sits motionless in a leather chair. Eyes closed. Not sleeping. Waiting.

Silence breaks.

An alarm clock RINGS from across the room. Russo's eyes snap open. Not startled. Resigned. He checks his watch. Silences it with practiced efficiency.

From deeper in the cabin - another alarm SOUNDS. Then another. A symphony of mechanical voices.

Russo rubs his face. Pulls himself upright.

RUSSO

Christ.

He stares across the room at a door. Painted black.

His eyes find the front door. Light seeps around its edges - golden, promising. But his gaze returns to the black door.

A carpenter's nail protrudes from the door's center. From it hangs a chain. At the chain's end - a single key.

Rosary beads hang next to the key. Russo stares at it as he

approaches. Each step heavier than the last.

He leans close to the door. Presses his ear against the wood.

Listens.

Silence. He grabs the key.

Steps back. Takes a deep breath.

The key slides into the lock. Stops.

He turns it.

CLICK.

The sound echoes like a gunshot.

INT. ROOM - CONTINUING

The door CREAKS open. A complete opposite of the living room
Dimly lit. Drab. Ratty.

A wall of stench hits Russo. He grimaces. Yanks his shirt
over his nose.

He slides in. Closes the door. Locks it.

CLICK.

After a few steps he reaches an old butchers block. Out of
place. On top, weapons. Automatic guns thrown about. Blood
stained knives. Saws. Hammers.

Russo grabs one of the guns. Chambers a bullet. His shirt
slips from his nose. His eyes water.

He peers down to the floor. Disturbed. His eyes tighten.

Sprawled on the floor - A MAN.

His familiar face - a roadmap of violence. Scars crisscross
pale skin. Dark bruises bloom like storm clouds.

His clothes hang in tatters. Fabric dark with blood. Arms
twist at unnatural angles. Eyes stare at nothing.

Without warning - The man's upper torso springs up like a
jack - in - the - box, madness on his face, gasping for air.

Russo recoils. We notice now - it's Michael.

RUSSO
Son of a bitch! Every fucking time.
Damn.

Michael summons all his strength to speak.

MICHAEL
Please. Do... it.

RUSSO
Michael? Can you here me? Hey!

Russo snaps his fingers.

Michael's body convulses. Slams back down against the floor.
Blood spreads in fresh patterns.

MICHAEL
Do it. I...have to...get back to them
... please.

RUSSO
Michael! Michael. I can't anymore. I
can't do this. I quit. The moneys all
gone now. I can't stay here any more.

Michael struggles to sit up, but can't. He slides back down,
again defeated, swimming in blood and guts.

RUSSO (CONT'D)
I'm sorry Mike. My fee. I don't work
for nothing. What would? ...well fuck
it man.

Russo moves to a cabinet hanging on the wall and opens it. He
pulls out a baggie full of blue and white pills.

MICHAEL
Please. You know... I can't do... it
myself. Please...I'll get more...I'm
beg- I have so much more...

RUSSO
I won't be here when you come back
next time.

MICHAEL
Please.

Russo shakes his head.

RUSSO

I bought these. Every pain pill I
could fucking find! No extra charge on
that by the way. You're welcome.

Russo hurls the bag. It lands beside Michael's head. Pills
scatter like confetti.

Russo paces.

RUSSO (CONT'D)

I don't know what you are. Do you even
know!? I mean holy fuck dude.

Michael's head turns toward the pills. Millimeters at a time.
His eyes flutter.

Russo points the gun at Michael's head. Relief crosses
Russo's face.

MICHAEL

Thank. . . you.

RUSSO

I won't be here when you get back from
wherever it is you go.

Russo pulls the trigger.

THUNDEROUS BANG - ECHOES the place.

FADE TO:

BLACK SCREEN

A white burial shroud - rough-woven linen. Ancient. Sacred.

Blood bleeds through the fabric. Crimson spreads like
stigmata. Forms a word:

"FALL"

FADE IN

EXT. LONG ISLAND COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

A car races down the empty road. Trees burn red and gold on
both sides.

INT. CAR - MOVING - DAY

Michael drives. Younger. Clean face. No scars.

Caroline sits beside him. Pretty. Her eyes watch the trees pass.

Claire, now, ten years old, sits in back. She stares out the window - farmland spreads to the horizon.

A 1980's song plays on the radio.

CAROLINE

You're missing it Michael. Slow down a bit.

MICHAEL

Missing what?

Caroline points out the window to all the the colored leaves.

CAROLINE

The fall. Everything looks so beautiful out here before it dies.

SUPER: "FOUR YEARS EARLIER"

Michael looks at her as if it's the first time he has seen her.

Caroline grabs his hand and smiles.

CLAIRE

Are you ever going to die?

Caroline and Michael look at each other for a beat.

MICHAEL

We will always be together. I promise.

EXT. WINERY - DAY

An old single-story building stands. Bleached by years of sun and rain. Paint chipped. The front door hangs from one hinge, defies gravity. Surrounded by hundreds of acres. Withered grape vines.

Tires crunch gravel. Michael steers the car to a stop.

Claire springs from the backseat. Her long hair trails behind. Eager to explore.

Caroline gets out. Watches with a loving smile. Michael slides out. Opens the trunk. Out come the picnic basket and blankets. Supplies for the afternoon.

CAROLINE

Well? Is it just like you remember?

Michael takes it all in for a moment. Then-

MICHAEL

Just like yesterday.

EXT. VINEYARD FIELD - LATER

Michael lies, rests his head on Caroline's lap.

MICHAEL

My mother used to take me on these long walks down there. She would tell me stories, stories about these little magical bugs that lived deep in the woods. They would come out at night and help the grapes grow. And the people that drank the wine would then get these magical powers...

Caroline stares down at Michael tenderly, hanging on to every word. She playfully leans in closer.

CAROLINE

Do, tell.

MICHAEL

I can remember everything. Every conversation, every moment we shared. But I...I can't remember if I ever actually said it. That I loved her. I keep thinking I did, but... maybe I just thought it so loud I convinced myself she heard it. I don't want to assume you know, Caroline. I don't want to keep waiting for the right moment, because what if there isn't one? What if this is it? I love you. I've loved you since we met, and I've been too scared to say it out loud lately I think. I need you to know that. I need you to know you're

(MORE)

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
everything to me.

CAROLINE
That's the most I have ever heard you
talk at once.

Caroline gently picks up Michael's hand and pushes down his two middle fingers. She makes the same sign with her hand. The thumb, the pointer and the pinky rise up, the two middle fingers fold down.

MICHAEL
What does that mean?

CAROLINE
It means. I love you.

MICHAEL
I'm always going to love you like I'm
never going to see you again.

Caroline kisses him.

Claire plops down next to them, out of breath.

CLAIRE
Can we get a dog?

Michael's eyebrows rise.

MICHAEL
A Dog. What kind of Dog?

CAROLINE
Why do you want a dog?

Claire bites her lip and looks away. Her expression turns solemn before turning back to her parents.

CLAIRE
I want a pup. In case you can't be
here someday. I will need someone to
love. We can call her Max!

Michael and Caroline exchange a glance.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)
Please, please, please! We can take
her to the cabin too.

CAROLINE

Lot of responsibility taking care of a
dog you know?

CLAIRE

I take care of out pet turtle at
school. I'm the best at it.

MICHAEL

You know I do love animals.

Caroline breaks into a warm smile. Claire leaps forward and
hugs them. Michael flashes a confident smile.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

And don't you worry my Claire Bear. We
will always be together not matter
what.

EXT. VINEYARD PARKING LOT - LATER

Michael SLAMS the trunk shut. Sound echoes across empty rows
of withered grapevines. Caroline and Claire settle into the
car.

Michael takes one last look. The vineyard spreads before him
- skeletal rows disappear into amber light.

INT. CAR - MOVING - NIGHT

Michael drives. Caroline, eyes closed, rests her head on his
shoulder. A St. Christopher medal on her necklace catches
headlights of passing cars.

Michael looks in the rearview mirror. In the back Claire
sleeps, holds her stuffed rabbit teddy bear. Michael takes it
in, smiles.

A shrill, high-pitched squeal accompanies the screech of
tires.

Michael's eyes grow wide as he sees a giant truck heading
right at him - panic, terror - tires skid.

Michael fights for breath - slams his foot on the brakes.

Metal crashes against metal as the two vehicles collide - a
sickening crunch, and then -

A BRIGHT FLASH.

SILENCE.

EXT. ROAD - NIGHT

Twisted metal and shattered glass litter the asphalt.

Michael's car lies crumpled against a concrete barrier, steam rises from the destroyed engine. The driver's side crushed inward.

Muffled voices and sirens.

INT. MICHAEL CAR - CONTINUING

Michael forces his eyes open. He tries to move but his body won't respond.

He notices the windshield - a spider web of cracks. Through it, he sees the night sky. It takes him a moment to realize the car sits upside down.

His left arm hangs at an odd angle. Broken.

MICHAEL
Caroline. Claire.

Michael looks over and sees Caroline suspended by her seatbelt. One of her eyes open. Blood trickles from a gash on her forehead.

More panic. He fumbles with his seatbelt. His fingers clumsy and uncooperative. Finally, it releases. He falls, hits his head on the roof of the car, now the floor.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
Caroline! Can you hear me!

A deep gash seeps blood from his left temple to his cheekbone. His right eye swells nearly shut. His hair mats with glass fragments that catch the lights.

His torn shirt reveals abraded skin across his chest where the seatbelt cut deep. He twists around, looks in the back seat.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
Claire!

The seat. Empty.

Michael crawls toward the shattered window. Drags himself out.

EXT. ROAD - CONTINUOUS

Sirens moving closer.

Michael pushes himself to his feet. He stumbles, falls to his knees. Vomits onto the asphalt. He spots the St. Christopher medal. Broken.

He notices his car - a crumpled mess, steam hisses from the crushed engine.

A few yards away, the truck lies on its side, flames lick at its undercarriage.

Michael stands, wipes his mouth. He sees in the distance on the grass a small still form.

MICHAEL

Claire. No, No, No!

Claire lies face down - one arm stretches out as if reaching for something. Her stuffed rabbit - a few feet away, dirty and torn.

Michael reaches her. He gently turns her over. Her eyes shut. Her face pale. Michael lies next to her and closes his eyes.

FLASH

Pure white surrounds us. We HEAR a calm, serene, wind.

A BRIGHT LIGHT in the distance. It grows brighter as it moves towards us. Engulfs us.

EXT. ETHEREAL REALM

Michael looks around. Confused.

Crystal waterfalls cascade upward. Trees with silver bark pulse with warm light. Grass shimmers like diamonds.

Floating islands drift through pearl clouds.

Sky shifts through rose gold and purple. Stars dance in daylight.

A river flows in spirals. Water so clear it reflects distant galaxies.

Michael stands small in this vastness. His eyes widen. He takes a step forward.

In the distance, two figures emerge from luminescent trees. They move with unhurried steps.

Caroline and Claire. Their forms translucent. Shimmering. Their edges blur and flow.

Caroline's hair drifts weightless. Claire's dress moves without wind. Michael's hand trembles as he reaches toward them.

They smile. Pure warmth. No words. Their faces at peace.

Claire breaks into a run. Her form becomes more solid with each step. Still glowing. She leaps toward Michael.

CLAIRE

Daddy! It feels like a million
Christmas mornings all at once!

Claire jumps into Michael's arms. Tears stream down his face.

Michael lets out a laugh as Caroline approaches. Her eyes sparkle.

Claire lunges from Michael's arms. Runs toward Caroline.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

Mommy, can we stay?

Caroline picks her up.

CAROLINE

Yes, I think we can stay.

Caroline lets Claire down. Claire runs off.

Michael and Caroline move toward each other. Michael touches her face gently. Caroline takes his hand. Leans into it. She smiles.

CAROLINE (CONT'D)

Michael.

In the distance, a lone figure emerges from the golden mist.
A WOMAN.

The woman reaches him. Stops. Still distant. Her eyes fill with reverence.

WOMAN

Not yet, child. You came here the
wrong way.

FLASH OF LIGHT

An invisible force yanks Michael's body away. His eyes dart left, then right. Panic sets in. All the bliss drains from him.

MICHAEL

What's...what's... Caroline! Can
you...? Don't...don't...!

His plea echoes.

We HEAR monitors beep. People shuffle. Faint voices. Everyone busy. Light dims.

Blackness leaves as light seeps in. Our eyes open. Light.

INT. HOSPITAL EMERGENCY ROOM

We SEE a bright fluorescent lamp above us. A DOCTOR leans into us - shines a light into our eyes.

Michael lies in a hospital bed. Tubes in him, IV's all hooked up, he's a mess. Nurses and Doctors all hurry about.

DOCTOR

There we are. Easy now. Stay with me.
Can you...?

Michael blinks.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)

Good.

A nurse leans over to him and smiles. Michael's eyes find a crucifix on the wall. He looks at another wall - another crucifix. He stares into it.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)

Hmm. Against all odds. A collision
like that. Someone's watching over
him.

NURSE

His family didn't make it. You call
(MORE)

NURSE (CONT'D)
that being watched over?

Michael lies in bed lifeless - his eyes never leave the crucifix.

INT. SAINTS OF MERCY HIGH SCHOOL - MAIN OFFICE - DAY

Sixteen - year - old Michael sits on a hard wooden bench.

The hallway echoes with passing students. He studies a newspaper someone left behind - Vietnam headlines, body counts, protests.

SUPER: "1968"

The door opens. SISTER GENE emerges, wire-rimmed glasses catch institutional light. Her curved arthritic finger motions.

SISTER GENE
Mister Simmons. Now!

Michael dips his finger into the holy water font next to the door, crosses himself. Enters.

EXT. SAINTS OF MERCY HIGH SCHOOL - BACK EXIT - DAY

Eastern Long Island. Trees red and gold.

Michael pushes through the door, pulls out cigarettes. Lights one. Inhales deeply.

The bell RINGS. Students pour out. Fifteen - year old - Caroline emerges from the exit. Books clutch to her chest.

CAROLINE
Sorry.

Michael steps aside.

CAROLINE (CONT'D)
Thanks.

She struggles with her heavy books.

MICHAEL
Those look heavy.

The words surprise her.

Caroline stops. Eyes narrow. Suspicious.

CAROLINE
I've got it.

MICHAEL
Sure you do.

She hesitates. Looks at her books. At him. Moves on.

INT. SAINTS OF MERCY HIGH SCHOOL - HALLWAY - LATER

Michael walks the hall.

Stations of the Cross line walls. Jesus suffers.

INT. CLASSROOM - CONTINUOUS

FLIER on door reads: "TUTORING/ DETENTION 3PM SHARP!"

Clock displays: "3:10 PM". Sister Agatha's detention classroom. Stark. Cold. Clock hands crawl. Michael slouches in.

SISTER AGATHA
Mr. Simmons. How kind of you to join us.

He shrugs. Drops into a desk. Caroline looks up from helping a FRESHMAN with math. Their eyes meet briefly.

SISTER AGATHA (CONT'D)
I trust you brought work.

Michael's empty hands answer.

SISTER AGATHA (CONT'D)
Perhaps Miss O'Brien can spare a moment for our tardy troublemaker.

Caroline's pencil pauses.

MICHAEL
I'm fine on my own.

SISTER AGATHA
Your grades suggest otherwise.

Caroline stands.

CAROLINE
I can spare five minutes.

She approaches his desk with a math textbook.

CAROLINE (CONT'D)
Page twenty - seven. Start with
problem six.

Michael hesitates then opens textbook.

MICHAEL
I don't need your pity.

CAROLINE
Good. Because this isn't pity.

Their eyes lock. Challenge. Possibility.

SISTER AGATHA
Less chatter, Caroline.

Caroline returns to her eager student. Michael stares out the
dirty window.

EXT. SAINTS OF MERCY HIGH SCHOOL - FRONT OF BUILDING - LATER

Michael leans against brick. Smoking. Waiting. Caroline
emerges. Michael throws the smoke into the dirt.

MICHAEL
Hey.

CAROLINE
Hey.

MICHAEL
Thought maybe I could walk you home.
To say thanks. For the help.

Caroline shifts her books. Nervous.

CAROLINE
I didn't help and I don't think that's
a good idea.

MICHAEL
Why not?

She looks around.

CAROLINE
I just... I can't.

She walks faster. Michael stops. Watches her for a beat.

MICHAEL
See you in detention tomorrow?

Caroline stops. Turns. Something unreadable in her eyes.

She disappears around the corner. Michael lights another cigarette.

EXT. CALVARY CEMETERY - QUEENS, NY - DAY

Rain drizzles down stone angels on nearby graves. Wings snapped off. Faces erode into nothing.

Michael stands at the foot of his family's graves.

EXT. HOUSE - OZONE PARK - QUEENS - NY - NIGHT

A narrow two-story frame house squeezes between neighbors on a tree-lined street. Chain-link fence encloses the small front yard. Gate hangs crooked.

Concrete steps lead to a storm door with metal screen.

Cracked driveway barely fits one car - ends at a detached garage with peeling paint and sagging roof.

Michael walks down the sidewalk, stops. Stares at the house. Empty now. He approaches the door.

INT. MICHAEL'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Darkness, except a faint lamp on the kitchen table.

Michael sifts through mail. Comes to an envelope with a life insurance logo. Opens it, pulls out a check: "One Million Dollars".

Michael holds it for a moment. Sticks it in a coffee can above the fridge marked: "Rainy Day Fund."

INT. MICHAEL'S HOUSE - CLAIRE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

The door opens slowly allowing a shaft of light into the darkness. Michael leans against the doorway. Notices the crucifix over her bed, prayers on the nightstand. "Now I lay me down to sleep..."

INT. MICHAEL'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Michael sits on the bed, picks up his framed wedding picture. Pulls it closer to his chest, lies down and curls into the fetal position, closes his eyes.

INT. SIMMONS FURNITURE STORE - 1987 - DAY

A modest family furniture store. Mismatched displays. "ESTABLISHED 1962" on faded sign. Michael stands behind the counter, considers the insurance settlement check.

PETE (40s), Michael's business partner, enters carrying coffee and donuts.

PETE

Morning, Mike. Brought breakfast.

Michael folds the check. Slips it in his pocket.

PETE (CONT'D)

Sleep any better?

MICHAEL

Some.

Pete notices Michael's bandaged hands.

PETE

Jesus, what happened this time?

MICHAEL

Kitchen knife slipped.

PETE

Right.

Pete sets down coffee. Studies his friend. Phone rings.

PETE (CONT'D)

Probably the loan department again.

MICHAEL

Let it ring.

PETE

Capital loan doesn't answer itself.

Michael walks to the front window. Watches people pass. Living. Moving forward.

MICHAEL
Money doesn't fix anything.

PETE
Fixes empty stores.

MICHAEL
She liked this place small.

PETE
Mike, what are we doing here?

Michael stares at an old photo on the wall - him, Caroline, and Claire at the store's 20th anniversary party. All smiling.

MICHAEL
I don't know, Pete.

PETE
Look, I know you're hurting. But this... whatever this is you're doing... it's not helping anyone.

Michael heads for the back door.

MICHAEL
I can't today.

PETE
Where are you going?

MICHAEL
Close early today, Pete.

PETE
Mike! We've got customers coming, and-

The door slams.

INT. DRIFT INN BAR - NIGHT

Smoke chokes the air. Neon beer signs flicker and die. Shithole.

Michael hunches at the bar's end. Four empty bottles line up like tombstones. Fifth one bleeds amber.

The BARTENDER scrubs glasses raw. Won't look at Michael.

BARTENDER
Last call in ten.

Michael doesn't respond. Cigarette burns down to flesh. Ash crumbles onto the filthy floor. Michael staggers up. Stumbles toward the back.

INT. BAR BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Graffiti covers the walls. Urinal drips. Floor sticky with decades of neglect. A flier hangs newly taped above the sink. Yellow paper. Black letters. "JESUS LOVES YOU"

Michael stares at it. His jaw tightens. He reaches up. Rips it down. Crumples it. Throws it at the mirror.

MICHAEL
Right.

He washes his hands. Water runs brown. Dries them on his shirt.

INT. DRIFT INN BAR - CONTINUOUS

Michael emerges from the bathroom.

A ROBBER stands by the front entrance. Shotgun raised. Sweating. Three PATRONS on the floor. The bartender's hands up. Michael stops. Watches.

ROBBER
You. Back there. Over here or I swear
to God I'll drag your ass myself.

Michael doesn't move.

ROBBER (CONT'D)
I said get the fuck over here now!

Michael walks to his stool. Sits down. Swigs his beer.

BARTENDER
Just do what he says, man. Lets all
stay calm here, nobody needs to get
hurt. Not worth dying over some money.

ROBBER
Smart mother fucker. Now open that
register.

Keys jangle. Register drawer slams open.

ROBBER (CONT'D)
All of it. In the bag. Now!

The Bartender stuff bills into a paper bag.

ROBBER (CONT'D)
You. Drinking man. Wallet. Now.

Michael sets down his bottle. He turns. Deliberate.
Dangerous.

ROBBER (CONT'D)
Your money, fucker!

The Robber eyes widen. Gun wavers.

ROBBER (CONT'D)
Just give me your wallet.

Michael rises. Stool crashes to floor.

MICHAEL
You ever kill anyone? You know what
death looks like? You ever watch the
light fade from someone's eyes?

ROBBER
Shut the fuck up!

Michael takes a deliberate step forward. The Robbers hand
trembles.

ROBBER (CONT'D)
Stay the hell back!

Another step.

ROBBER (CONT'D)
I swear to God, I'll fucking shoot!

Michael keeps walking. Glass crunches under his boots.

MICHAEL
(whispering)
Do it.

ROBBER
Stop! I'll fucking kill you!

MICHAEL

Pull the fucking trigger, asshole.

The Robber backs into a table. Cornered. Michael lunges. Grabs the barrel. He twists the gun away with the crack of breaking fingers.

Robber slams to the floor. Michael jams the shotgun under his chin, finger twitching on the trigger. Then-

The door explodes inward.

A POLICE OFFICER storms in. Pistol extended. Michael whips around, shotgun still raised.

POLICE OFFICER

Drop it!

BANG! BANG ! BANG!

The deafening shots rip through Michael's chest. He crumbles. Beneath him dark, thick blood spreads. Eyes, still open, still defiant, looks up at us.

EXT. ETHEREAL REALM

Michael's eyes flutter open. His pupils dilate, adjusting to brilliant golden light.

He pushes himself up on his elbows. The movement is fluid, weightless. No grimace of pain crosses his face.

A breeze stirs the air. Invisible at first, then seen in the gentle wave of the luminous grass around him.

He scrambles to his feet with impossible grace - no strain, no effort. His head continues turning, searching.

MICHAEL

Caroline.

His face shows hope and disbelief as he stares into the distance. Waiting.

In the distance a garden blooming with flowers. Caroline tends to plants that grow backwards into seeds. She looks up.

Her lips curve into a smile. Her voice soft.

CAROLINE

You don't understand what this place
(MORE)

CAROLINE (CONT'D)

is.

Michael's hand reaches out. Trembling. Stops inches from her face. Afraid to touch. Afraid she'll vanish.

A giggle echoes nearby. Claire appears. Runs toward them with boundless energy. Hair streaming behind her.

MICHAEL

Claire. My Claire bear.

CLAIRE

Why are your hands dirty?

A subtle shift in the light. The golden glow flickers. The world fades around the edges. Michael's shirt ripples against his chest. Pulled by invisible hooks.

Caroline and Claire blur at their edges. Their forms become translucent. Wavering.

Michael lunges forward. His arms wrap around empty air where Caroline stood. He clutches at nothing.

MICHAEL

No, no, no! Wait! Please!

His voice echoes strangely. The pulling intensifies. Michael's body tilts backward against his will. His heels drag furrows in the golden earth.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

Let me stay! NO!

Michael's pupils reflect Caroline's fading image. The reflection shrinks smaller.

He spins. Drops to his knees. Claws at the ground. Tries to anchor himself. His fingernails tear into dissolving grass.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

What do I need to do!?

The world collapses inward. Michael at the center. Reaching desperately toward the last flickering outline of his family.

INT. CORONER'S VAN - MOVING - NIGHT

The rumble of tires on asphalt. Muffled radio from the cab.

INSIDE BODY BAG

A hand. Fingers curled like twigs. The hand twitches. Once.

BACK OF THE VAN

A body bag on a gurney. Zipped shut. The bag bulges around a human form. A wet, raspy sound.

The bag moves. Slight rise and fall. Inside, a muffled cough. Thick. Liquid. The zipper strains against movement from within.

Sudden punch through the bag. The fist gropes blindly. Desperate. Tearing at vinyl.

MICHAEL (O.S.)
Caroline... Claire...

The entire bag lurches as Michael thrashes inside. Fighting his way out.

In the driver's seat, JERRY (50s) glances in the rearview mirror. His eyes widen. Absolute terror. The van swerves violently.

JERRY
What the fu-

Michael's face emerges from the torn bag. Gasps for air. His eyes panicked. Desperate.

Jerry slams on brakes. The van skids to a stop on the shoulder. He snaps around. His face white as death. His hands shake.

JERRY (CONT'D)
Jesus Christ... Jesus fucking
Christ...

Michael sits up on the gurney. Looks around. Confused. Still calling out.

Jerry fumbles for his radio.

JERRY (CONT'D)
Dispatch this is unit seven... I
need... I don't know what I need...
the body... the body is...

Michael locks eyes with Jerry through the partition. Neither

moves. Michael reaches out. Touches the glass. His hand print leaves a smear of skin and blood.

Jerry drops his radio. It clatters to the floor. Static.

JERRY (CONT'D)

What are you?

MICHAEL

I don't know.

INT. BELLEVUE HOSPITAL CORRIDOR - NIGHT

Dimly lit. Emergency lighting and equipment glow.

Down the hall, A POLICE OFFICER flirts with a NURSE.

INT. BELLEVUE HOSPITAL ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Michael stares up at nothing. His jaw clenches. With effort, he pulls the IV from his arm. Blood runs down past his wrist.

Michael sits up. Every movement sends pain across his face. Bandages pull and stretch. He swings his legs over the bed. His bare feet touch cold linoleum.

INT. BELLEVUE HOSPITAL CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS

The Police Officer gestures animatedly. Absorbed in conversation.

Michael emerges from his room. One hand braced against the wall. His hospital gown hangs loose. He glances quickly, then hurries the other way. Blood drips from his arm.

Michael turns the corner. Stops. Standing in front of him - DR. KEVIN WALLACE. Calm. Professional. Never smiles. Clipboard in hand.

WALLACE

Mr. Simmons?

Michael stops. His eyes dart like a cornered animal.

MICHAEL

I already signed out.

WALLACE

I'm Dr. Wallace. Hospital Psychiatrist. I was just heading your way.

MICHAEL

I don't need a psychiatrist.

Wallace notices blood dripping from Michael's arm onto the floor.

WALLACE

Looks like you need that arm wrapped.

Michael tries to step around him. Wallace casually shifts his weight, blocking his path.

WALLACE (CONT'D)

Tell you what. Let me help get that wrapped and I can talk with you a bit. Then I'll sign you out. You won't make it very far going down those halls. Alarms make people nervous around here.

INT. BELLEVUE PSYCHIATRIC WARD - DR. WALLACE'S OFFICE - NIGHT

A cramped white box. No windows. Fluorescent light dies overhead, strobes harsh shadows. An unbreakable plastic chair faces a metal desk.

Michael sits rigid, stares at a massive framed painting on the wall:

"Jacob Wrestling with the Angel" by Eugène Delacroix (1861)

Wallace wraps Michael's arm with precision. Michael watches Wallace work.

MICHAEL

You sure you're a shrink?

WALLACE

Lots of practice. Patient of mine brings knives and a hammer to sessions. Says they comfort him. Until he cuts himself on my carpet.

Wallace pauses his wrapping.

WALLACE (CONT'D)

Tell me about the bar.

MICHAEL
Found what I needed.

WALLACE
Which was?

MICHAEL
Death.

WALLACE
Most people run from guns.

Wallace finishes the wrap. Moves to his desk and sits.

WALLACE (CONT'D)
You died. You understand that?

MICHAEL
I'm here now.

Wallace writes. Pen scratches.

WALLACE
Are you?

MICHAEL
I'm not happy about it either, Doc.

Michael stands, rubs his chest, winces. Walks to the painting. Studies it.

WALLACE
You know that painting?

MICHAEL
Hard to miss.

Wallace leans back in his chair.

WALLACE
Guys been wrestling all night.

MICHAEL
Looks like he's losing.

WALLACE
Dawns coming though. You know how I
can tell?

Michael looks at him. Disinterested.

WALLACE (CONT'D)

He's still holding on. Jacob wrestled until dawn. All night. Wouldn't let go.

Michael studies the painting more carefully. He rubs his finger along the angel's face - serene despite the struggle. Jacob. Desperate. Clinging.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

What does he want?

WALLACE

Blessing. The Angel could have ended it anytime. Touched Jacob's hip, put it out of joint. One touch. But he let Jacob keep fighting. Until Jacob was ready to ask, instead of demand.

MICHAEL

How does he know what to ask?

WALLACE

You learn what it is.

MICHAEL

What if the reasons don't matter? What if fighting is all you have left?

Michael looks away from the painting. Back at Wallace.

WALLACE

Some wounds, the heaviest one, teach you more about carrying weight than healing.

Michael scoffs.

MICHAEL

This is useless.

The clock ticks. Michael's breathing is labored, painful as he heads toward the door.

WALLACE

I'd like to see you weekly.

MICHAEL

Why?

WALLACE
You're fighting a war.

MICHAEL
A war?

WALLACE
Yes. Against yourself.

Wallace stands and walks toward Michael.

WALLACE (CONT'D)
And, well my private practice office
has better coffee and windows. We can
drink coffee and watch people living.

MICHAEL
I can see what I'm missing? No thanks.

Wallace extends his hand. Michael stares back at the
painting.

WALLACE
What do you say Michael?

MICHAEL
The hardest part isn't dying. It's
coming back.

EXT. CALVARY CEMETERY - QUEENS, NY - DAY

Dead leaves skitter across weathered headstones.

Michael limps between rows of granite markers. He stops at
two graves side by side:

CAROLINE ELIZABETH SIMMONS BELOVED
WIFE AND MOTHER "THERE IS LOVE"

CLAIRE MARIE SIMMONS OUR ANGEL
"DADDY'S CLAIRE BEAR"

Michael stares at the headstones. His wedding ring catches
dying light through storm clouds. He drops to his knees.
Presses his palm against Caroline's stone.

MICHAEL
Some doctor thinks he knows what you'd
want. Says I should keep breathing.

He shifts his hand to Claire's smaller stone.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
He never heard you sing in the
bathtub.

Michael's fingers trace Claire's name carved in stone.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
So many years...your voice is
just...echoes now.

His voice cracks, eyes close.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
But I made you both a promise.

A gust of wind hits his face. Michael opens his eyes. Fresh flowers lie on Caroline's grave. White roses. They weren't there when he arrived.

Michael looks around the empty cemetery. No one. He picks up one of the roses. Perfect. As if just cut.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
You're not done with me yet. Neither
am I. Whatever it takes. However long.
I won't stop fighting.

He stands. The rose trembles in his hand. Thunder rumbles in the distance. Michael doesn't look up.

He places the rose on Claire's grave.

As Michael disappears between the headstones, we HOLD ON the graves.

INT. CHURCH - NIGHT

Michael enters - leaves the giant heavy door open behind him.

He strides down the aisle, eyes locked on a large crucifix.

MICHAEL
You want to test me? I'll keep dying.
I'll keep clawing my way back!

He stops. Voice echoes off stone walls.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
You can't break what's already broken!

A high angle reveals the massive church. Michael becomes a tiny figure swallowed by shadows and empty pews.

FADE TO BLACK:

BLACK SCREEN

A white burial shroud - rough-woven linen. Ancient. Sacred.

Blood bleeds through the fabric. Crimson spreads like stigmata. Forms a word:

"FLESH"

FADE IN

EXT. QUEENS STREET - DAY

Rain falls on empty streets. The city towers behind gray clouds. Michael walks alone. Black coat weighs down his shoulders. Head dropped. Hands buried deep in pockets. Cigarette dangles from his mouth.

INT. BODEGA - NIGHT

Michael drifts down the aisle, grips a bag of chips and bottle of Wild Turkey.

Static spits from behind the counter.

DISPATCHER (V.O.)
Units respond to structure fire, 47th
and Ninth. Multiple occupants trapped.

Michael's head snaps up. Listens.

DISPATCHER (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Code Red. All available units.

The STORE CLERK (50s) adjusts a black radio device. Multiple antennas. Digital display flickers.

CLERK
Move your asses.

MICHAEL
What's that thing?

CLERK
Police scanner.

MICHAEL
Scanner?

CLERK
Emergency frequencies. Police, fire,
EMS.

Michael approaches the counter.

MICHAEL
Why?

CLERK
Why what?

MICHAEL
You listen to people dying?

CLERK
I listen to my city. Where the action
is.

DISPATCHER (V.O.)
Engine 47 on scene. Heavy smoke
showing. Requesting ladder company.

The clerk shakes his head.

CLERK (CONT'D)
Poor bastards. Fourth fire this week.

MICHAEL
You hear it all?

CLERK
Everything. Accidents, shootings,
calls for help. As it happens.

MICHAEL
As it happens.

DISPATCHER (V.O.)
Reports of civilians on upper floors.
Need immediate rescue.

Michael drops his chips and whiskey on the counter.

DISPATCHER (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Ladder 19 requesting EMT. We got
bodies coming down.

MICHAEL

Bodies?

CLERK

Smoke gets them first. Quick.

MICHAEL

How fast could someone get there?

CLERK

Me? I don't go anywhere. I just listen.

MICHAEL

But if you wanted to go? Someone listening to this?

CLERK

Depends where you are. Twenty minutes maybe. But you don't go to these things.

MICHAEL

Twenty minutes.

CLERK

Yeah. But civilians aren't supposed to respond. That's what badges are for.

MICHAEL

How much?

CLERK

How much what?

MICHAEL

For one of those.

CLERK

Not for sale, friend.

MICHAEL

Everything's for sale, friend.

The clerk looks around. Empty store.

CLERK

You a cop?

Michael shakes his head.

CLERK (CONT'D)
Five hundred. Cash only.

**EXT. EXT. SAINTS OF MERCY HIGH SCHOOL - FRONT OF BUILDING -
DAY**

Rain hammers the pavement. Young Michael waits under the overhang, grips a bent blue umbrella.

Young Caroline emerges. No umbrella. She stares at the downpour, frowns.

MICHAEL
Hey?

He holds up the umbrella.

CAROLINE
I'm fine.

But she doesn't move, watches the rain.

MICHAEL
You'll catch pneumonia.

Caroline bites her lip. Studies the umbrella. The rain. Him.

CAROLINE
I don't take things from boys.

MICHAEL
It's not mine. Found it in the trash.

Almost a smile. Almost.

CAROLINE
You'll drown out here.

MICHAEL
Worth it.

She stares at him. Deciding.

CAROLINE
My corner. That's all.

Michael opens the umbrella. Holds it over her. They walk. Rain soaks through his jacket instantly.

MICHAEL
You going to the dance?

CAROLINE
If my father allows it.

A beat.

MICHAEL
Yea - Sister Gene banned me. I was
just thinking maybe-

CAROLINE
I have to go Michael.

Caroline hurries away.

EXT. SAINTS OF MERCY HIGH SCHOOL - NIGHT

December. Frost patterns web the windows. Music and warm light bleed from the gymnasium in the distance. Michael lurks in the shadows.

He circles the building. Finds the loose window. Slides it up. Slips through.

INT. SCHOOL GYMNASIUM - NIGHT

Transformed. Streamers. Disco ball spinning light across dancing students. Michael enters, scans.

ELVIS croons "SUSPICIOUS MINDS"

Sister Gene spots Michael, springs into action.

SISTER GENE
Mister Simmons! Out! Now!

Michael ignores her. Pushes forward.

SISTER GENE (O.S.)
Not another step!

Her voice cuts through music. Sister Gene advances with two other nuns. Eyes steel behind glasses.

Michael spots Caroline by the punch bowl.

Caroline notices him. Eyes wide. Surprised. Maybe pleased.

He moves toward her as the nuns close in, voices rise.

MICHAEL
Do you trust me?

Caroline stares at the approaching Nuns. Nods once. Decisive.

Michael takes her hand. They bolt past surprised students, angry nuns, through the door into cold. They run like they're never going to stop.

EXT. FOOTBALL FIELD - UNDER BLEACHERS - NIGHT

Michael and Caroline hide in the shadows. Safe. For now. Both breathe hard. Caroline's hand still in his.

CAROLINE
We're not supposed to be here.

But she doesn't let go.

MICHAEL
Want to go back?

Caroline looks toward school. Safety. Rules. She shivers.

CAROLINE
No. Not yet.

Michael drapes his jacket over Caroline's shoulders.

They sit on cold ground. Music distant now. Like another world.

CAROLINE (CONT'D)
Why did you break in?

MICHAEL
For you.

CAROLINE
I'm so dead when I get home.

MICHAEL
What are they going to do?

She stares at the ground between them. Voice barely above a whisper.

CAROLINE
My father's got my whole life mapped
out. College applications already
sent. Pre-med track. Marriage to
(MORE)

CAROLINE (CONT'D)
someone...suitable. I used to know
exactly who I was supposed to be.
Perfect grades. Perfect daughter.
Future doctor. Then you walked into
detention and...

She looks at him.

CAROLINE (CONT'D)
Now I want things I can't have.

Michael shifts closer. Not touching, but close enough to
share warmth.

CAROLINE (CONT'D)
Like running from nuns. Like hiding
under bleachers with boys he'd disown
me for. Like... choosing for myself.

MICHAEL
You deserve to choose.

CAROLINE
Easy words when you've got nothing to
lose.

MICHAEL
Nothing to lose means nothing to hope
for either.

Something raw in his voice makes Caroline turn.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
Nobody sees me. Teachers quit trying.
My aunt passes out drunk most nights.
I don't exist.

CAROLINE
You exist to me.

The simplicity of it stops his breath. Caroline takes his
hand. They sit in silence. The weight of unspoken feelings
settle. Then -

CAROLINE (CONT'D)
This is insane.

MICHAEL
Yeah.

CAROLINE
We're from different planets.

MICHAEL
Yeah.

CAROLINE
My father will destroy us both.

MICHAEL
Probably.

Caroline stares at him. At this boy who agrees with every reason they're doomed.

CAROLINE
So now what?

Michael meets her gaze. Steady. Sure.

MICHAEL
We find out.

They share a tender kiss.

EXT. NYC STREET - DAY

Michael walks down sidewalk, spots a motorcycle with a for sale sign.

EXT. MANHATTAN STREETS - NIGHT

Rain slicks the asphalt. Neon bleeds into puddles.

Michael guns the bike. No Helmet. Engine screams. Speedometer climbs past sixty. Red light ahead. He doesn't slow. Cars scatter. Horns blare.

Michael weaves between bumpers. Inches to spare. The bike tilts. Knee scrapes pavement. Sparks fly. He straightens. Accelerates harder. A slight smile.

EXT. BROADWAY - CONTINUOUS

Traffic thickens. Michael splits lanes. Mirrors fold back.

Eighty now.

A cab pulls out. Michael yanks left. Rear wheel slides. He

fights it. Stays up.

EXT. CENTRAL PARK WEST - CONTINUOUS

Stone wall blurs past. Michael leans into a curve. Too fast. Physics takes over. The bike high - sides. Launches him into the air.

Time slows.

Michael sees the wall approaching. Gray stone. Unforgiving.

EXT. CRASH SITE - CONTINUOUS

Metal scattered across two lanes. Gas pools dark on wet pavement.

Michael lies twisted against the wall. Left leg bent wrong. Bone shows white through torn jeans. Blood runs from his ears.

The bike burns. Orange flames engulf twisted chrome.

Sirens wail in the distance.

Michael's eyes flutter. Focus on nothing. His slow breathing labors.

Blood spreads wider beneath his head. Mixing with rainwater. Washes toward the gutter.

His breathing stops.

CLOSE-UP: The exposed bone in his leg. A hairline crack appears. Then another. The bone fragments twitch. Shift. Begin to fuse.

Wrong.

The pieces grind together at unnatural angles. Bone grates against bone. The leg straightens but crooked. Misaligned.

CLOSE-UP: Michael's skull. A wet sound. Cracking. Reforming. The indentation in his temple fills out. But the shape is off. Asymmetrical.

His skin knits together. Scar tissue forms instantly. Thick. Ugly.

His left arm straightens. Settles at an unnatural angle. Wrong. Everything wrong.

The sirens grow louder.

Michael's body lies still. Dead. But repaired. Broken. Scarred. Different.

INT. WALLACE'S OFFICE - DAY

A nicer office than the Bellevue hospital room. Diplomas on walls. Books. Personal touches.

On the wall hangs a familiar dark painting - Jacob wrestling with an angel. Muscular figures locked in eternal struggle. The same as before.

Michael's left shoulder blade pressed wrong against the chair. He shifts. Fire shoots down his spine. His ribs click when he breaths.

Michael's jaw muscles jump. Teeth clench. He forces them apart. His voice strangles. Comes out tight.

MICHAEL

Constant.

WALLACE

Scale of one to ten?

MICHAEL

Twelve.

Wallace writes something.

The pill bottle rattles. Three pills left. His fingers fumble the cap. Nails torn from pavement. Raw pink underneath.

The cap falls. Pills scatter.

Michael bends forward. His neck seizes. He can't turn his head. He grabs his thigh.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

These don't touch... it?

WALLACE

Those are the strongest they have.

MICHAEL

Find stronger.

WALLACE

Let me help.

MICHAEL

I've got it.

He reaches further. His shoulder pops. He winces. Grabs his arm.

Michael collects the pills. One by one. His hand shakes. He drops two, twice.

Three pills in his palm. He swallows them dry. Pills scrape down like glass.

Michael presses his palm against his temple. No relief.

Blood leaks from his ear onto his collar.

WALLACE

Pretty reckless, don't you think?
Racing through traffic like that.

MICHAEL

Disappointed... I survived?

WALLACE

Others might not have.

MICHAEL

Lucky them... Getting out of this hell
hole.

Michael's eyes find the painting.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

You really love... that picture.

Wallace follows his gaze. His expression shifts. Guarded.

WALLACE

It belonged to my son.

Michael grips the chair arm - knuckles white, fingernails dig crescents into leather.

MICHAEL

Belonged?

A Beat. Wallace doesn't want to elaborate.

WALLACE

Military training accident. Three
years ago.

Michael looks at the painting differently now. The struggle more personal. A muscle in his neck jumps.

MICHAEL
Why torture... yourself?

WALLACE
Sometimes surrender looks like
standing up. Helps me Remember.

MICHAEL
Him?

WALLACE
How to fight.

Wallace turns back to his notes. Subject closed.

MICHAEL
I... saw them... again.

WALLACE
Caroline and Claire.

Michael tries to nod. His neck refuses. Locked solid.

MICHAEL
Yeah.

CUT TO:

EXT. ETHEREAL REALM

A Bridge.

Caroline stands at the center, Claire at one end, Michael at the other.

MICHAEL
Caroline! Claire!

The bridge dissolves under his feet when he approaches. He stops.

CAROLINE
You look tired, my love. You've
forgotten how to breathe.

CLAIRE
Daddy. You're standing funny.

Michael turns back. The bridge solidifies.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. WALLACE'S OFFICE - DAY

MICHAEL

They were... afraid. I think.

His left eye waters - not tears, just damaged nerves misfiring.

WALLACE

Maybe you didn't go where you thought.

MICHAEL

What do you...really know? You even believe?

Wallace looks at the painting again. His son's faith staring back at him.

WALLACE

I struggle. But there is something out there.

MICHAEL

I wake up sometimes believing they're just in another room. This broken body will get me to them. Somehow.

Speaking makes it worse. Vocal cords strain. Throat muscles spasm.

WALLACE

You not broken, Michael. You're grieving.

Wallace stands. Walks to the painting.

WALLACE (CONT'D)

My son was studying theology. Seminary school. Before he enlisted.

His finger traces the frame.

WALLACE

He used to say Jacob got his blessing because he wouldn't let go. Even when
(MORE)

WALLACE (CONT'D)
he was losing.

MICHAEL
Did your son... get his... blessing?

Wallace's jaw tightens. He turns away from the painting.

WALLACE
I think you should honor them. Honor
your family by living the life they
would want for you.

Michael stands. His spine curves wrong, his shirt sticks to
his back. He shuffles toward the door.

MICHAEL
They want me... with them. Not here.

Wallace sits back down. Professional distance returning.

WALLACE
Maybe. But you're here. Alive. Look. I
eat breakfast every morning at Sunrise
Diner down the corner here. Why don't
you meet me? Do something that
everyday people do.

MICHAEL
More...therapy bullshit?

WALLACE
No. Just two people sharing a meal.
Happens everyday.

Michael opens the door, his trembling hand holds the handle.
Looks back at the painting.

MICHAEL
What was... your sons name?

Wallace hesitates. Contemplates this carefully.

WALLACE
David. His name is David.

Michael's response comes delayed.

MICHAEL
Can't...do breakfast.

Michael nods his head.

WALLACE

Maybe someday, then.

Michael leaves. Wallace stares at the painting alone. At his son's faith hanging on the wall.

EXT. STREET CORNER - 1969 - DAY

A song blasts to life: TOMMY JAMES & THE SHONDELLS. "CRIMSON AND CLOVER."

TOMMY JAMES & THE SHONDELLS

*Ah, now I don't hardly know her, But I
think I could love her, Crimson and
clover...*

January cold. Bare trees line the Long Island suburban street like sentries.

Young Michael leans against a lamppost, smoking. Breath and cigarette smoke mingle in the frigid air.

Young Caroline appears at the end of the block. Books clutched tight against her chest. She looks around nervously before approaching.

TOMMY JAMES & THE SHONDELLS (CONT'D)

*...Ah when she comes walking over, Now
I've been waitin' to show her, Crimson
and clover over and over...*

CAROLINE

My Father could drive by.

MICHAEL

Worth the risk.

CAROLINE

I'm serious, Michael. If my father sees you-

MICHAEL

Maybe it's time he met me.

Caroline's face reacts.

CAROLINE

Don't.

MICHAEL
What's he going to do?

CAROLINE
You don't understand.

TOMMY JAMES & THE SHONDELLS
*...Yeah, my, my such a sweet thing, I
wanna do everything, What a beautiful
feeling, Crimson and clover over and
over...*

She glances back toward her house.

MICHAEL
I understand you.

CAROLINE
That's not enough.

She walks away quickly.

EXT. CAROLINE'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

The song continues in the background through the whole scene.

A figure waits on the porch. COLONEL REEVES stands at attention even in civilian clothes. Ramrod straight. Eyes that have seen combat.

Caroline and Michael approach from the tree-lined street. She spots her father and stops dead.

Michael nods. The reckoning he's been expecting.

CAROLINE
Please go.

MICHAEL
No.

They continue up the driveway. Gravel crunches under their feet like breaking bones.

The Colonel watches them approach. Stone-faced.

COLONEL REEVES
Inside. Now.

Caroline looks at Michael. Then her father.

She hurries inside. The door closes behind her.

Colonel Reeves descends the porch steps. Each footfall deliberate. Military precision.

He stops inches from Michael.

COLONEL REEVES (CONT'D)
You're the Simmons boy?

MICHAEL
Yeah.

COLONEL REEVES
School called about your little stunt
with my daughter.

Michael says nothing.

COLONEL REEVES (CONT'D)
Stay away from Caroline.

Michael meets his gaze. Doesn't flinch.

MICHAEL
Can't do that.

The Colonel's face darkens. Fists clench at his sides.

COLONEL REEVES
Excuse me, son?

MICHAEL
I said I can't.

COLONEL REEVES
Boy, I will knock you into next week.

Michael doesn't step back. Doesn't break eye contact.

The front door opens. MRS. REEVES appears - softer than her husband, but steel underneath.

MRS. REEVES
James. Inside.

The Colonel glances at his wife. Then back at Michael.

COLONEL REEVES
Go home, boy. Stay gone.

He climbs the porch steps. Mrs. Reeves moves to the porch.
The door closes behind her with finality.

Michael turns to leave.

MRS. REEVES (O.S.)
Michael.

He turns back.

MRS. REEVES
I'm sorry. He's protective.

Michael looks down. Suddenly seventeen again instead of
trying to be older.

MRS. REEVES (CONT'D)
Caroline cares for you.

MICHAEL
I care for her too.

A half-smile.

Mrs. Reeves returns a different kind of smile. Sad. Knowing.

MRS. REEVES
It's complicated, dear.

MICHAEL
Because of him?

Michael gestures toward the house.

MRS. REEVES
Partly. But Caroline has her whole
future ahead. College. Medical school.
A bigger world than this.

Michael nods.

Mrs. Reeves studies him. Takes in the worn shoes. Borrowed
jacket. Nicotine stains on his fingers.

MRS. REEVES (CONT'D)
You seem like a decent boy. But
sometimes...

She places a gentle hand on his arm.

MRS. REEVES (CONT'D)
Hearts breaks so easily at your age.

MICHAEL
You think I'm not good enough for her.

MRS. REEVES
It's not about worth. It's about
different paths. Different directions.

Michael steps back. Her words hit like physical blows.

MICHAEL
You don't know what I could become.

Mrs. Reeves' eyes show kindness mixed with pity. The pity
cuts deepest.

MRS. REEVES
I've seen how this ends dear. Let it
go.

Michael turns away. Can't face that look anymore.

MICHAEL
I've never loved anyone before. I love
Caroline.

MRS. REEVES
Sometimes its about more than love.
Sometimes love isn't enough.

Michael walks away. Down the driveway. Away from the warm
porch light.

TOMMY JAMES & THE SHONDELLS
Crimson and clover over and over
Crimson and clover over and over
Crimson and clover over and over
Crimson and clover over and over

INT. MICHAEL'S OZONE PARK HOUSE - BEDROOM - MORNING

Michael's eyes open. Sunlight cuts through dirty blinds.

He rolls left. Bone grinds against bone. He rolls right. His
ribs separate. His spine locks.

Michael grips the mattress edge. Pulls himself upright. Sweat
beads on his forehead.

His legs dangle over the side. Feet touch cold floor. His calves seize.

The nightstand holds pill bottles. All empty. Michael shakes each one. Nothing rattles.

He stands. His left knee buckles. He catches himself on the wall. One step toward the door. Another step. His hip joint pops.

The hallway stretches ahead. Michael shuffles forward. His spine curves wrong.

He reaches the kitchen doorway. Grips the frame. Breathes hard.

The police scanner sits on the counter. Red display blinks. Waiting.

Michael limps across linoleum. Each step sends shock waves through his pelvis.

He flips the power switch. Static fills the room. Until-

DISPATCHER (V.O.)

All units. ten - ten drug sale. Corner of Fifth and Madison. Possible weapon involved.

Michael grabs a pen. His fingers won't grip.

He forces his hand to work. Writes on a notepad. Letters shake across the page. He adds to a list of locations and crimes. Shootings, drugs, assaults, robberies.

INT. MEDICAL CLINIC OFFICE - DAY

DR. RUDOLPH flips through a thick file. Gray hair. Tired eyes. A school ring on his finger with a cross on it.

DR. RUDOLPH

Six bottles this month.

MICHAEL

Need more.

DR. RUDOLPH

That's way too much, Mister Simmons.

MICHAEL

Not... enough.

Dr. Rudolph closes the file. Sets it down.

DR. RUDOLPH
I can't write any more scripts.

Michael's hands clench. Knuckles crack.

MICHAEL
I'm in fucking pain!

DR. RUDOLPH
It will stop.

MICHAEL
The pain never stops. That's what I've
been trying to tell you people.

DR. RUDOLPH
Pain doesn't last forever.

Michael's jaw tightens. His shoulder gives way. He clutches
his arm.

MICHAEL
The fuck do you know... about pain?

Doctor Rudolph picks up a pamphlet. Slides it across the
desk.

DR. RUDOLPH
There's a pain management program.
Downtown. Maybe they can help.

Michael stares at the pamphlet. Doesn't touch it.

EXT. ABANDONED NYC PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Michael sits in his car. Engine off. Rain drums the roof.

A black sedan with tinted windows pulls up.

Michael grips the steering wheel. His hands shake. Fingers
curl inward like claws.

He opens the door. Steps out. His left leg buckles. He
catches himself on the car frame. His wrists bend wrong. The
angle makes no sense.

The sedan's window rolls down. TOMMY (30s) leans out. Gold
teeth and chain to match with crucifix dangling.

TOMMY
You holding it, cuz?

Michael reaches for his jacket. His right hand won't straighten. Fingers stay bent. Like he's gripping handlebars.

He uses his left hand instead. Pulls out a thick envelope. His wrist hangs limp. Dangles like broken machinery. Bills bulge through paper.

TOMMY (CONT'D)
How much you need?

MICHAEL
All of it.

TOMMY
All of it costs, cuz.

MICHAEL
I got it.

Tommy gets out. Walks around to his trunk. Michael follows. Each step makes his hands twitch. Involuntary spasms.

The trunk opens. Inside - Pill bottles. Dozens of them. Different shapes. Different colors.

Michael tries to pick up a bottle. His fingers won't close. The bottle slips. Falls.

He tries again. Uses both hands. Cradles it like a baby.

TOMMY (CONT'D)
Damn cuzzy. Go easy now. All this shit
will drop ya ass.

MICHAEL
That's the plan.

Michael sets the bottle down. His hands shake worse now. Can't control them.

EXT. BEDFORD-STUYVESANT, BROOKLYN NY STREET CORNER- NIGHT

Broken streetlights. Cracked pavement. Michael moves slow. His left leg drags.

MANNY (17) stands on the corner. Baggy clothes. Watches cars pass like a predator waiting. Michael approaches. Each step more painful than the last.

MANNY
You lost, pops?

MICHAEL
Need something.

MANNY
What kind of something?

MICHAEL
You know what.

Manny looks around. Checks for cops. His movements practiced, careful.

MANNY
How much?

MICHAEL
How much? um, Twenty... twenty. Let's go. Come on.

Before Manny's hand disappears into his pocket Michael charges. A violent push.

Manny stumbles backward. Hits a parked car. His eyes wide - this isn't how deals go.

Michael pulls out a gun. Points it at Manny's chest. His face changes - predator becomes prey.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
Everything..

Manny's hands shake. He pulls out vials. Small glass tubes. His livelihood.

MANNY
Here. Take it. Take the whole goddamn stash.

Michael grabs the vials. Throws them down. Stomps them.

MICHAEL
Money.

MANNY

Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold up there, cowboy. You don't know who you're fucking with here. I got connections, man. Real connections. The kind that'll have you floating face-down in the Hudson before your morning coffee gets cold.

MICHAEL

Money.

Manny pulls out a roll. Bills wrapped tight.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

All of it.

MANNY

You see this? This here represents my livelihood, my friend. My rent. My food. My mama's medicine. You understand what I'm saying to you?

Michael steps closer. The gun barrel touches Manny's shirt, over his heart.

MICHAEL

Everything.

MANNY

Motherfucking crazy-ass shit you got going on here. You robbing me? Is that what this is? Because if you robbing me, you better goddamn well understand the implications of that particular life choice.

Manny empties his pockets. More bills. Coins. A gold chain with a religious medal that reflects streetlight.

Michael takes the money. Leaves the chain.

MICHAEL

Go get your boss.

MANNY

What?

MICHAEL

Your damn boss. Get him!

MANNY

You know what Roman does to people who disrespect his operation? He don't just kill you, man. He makes it educational. For the neighborhood.

MICHAEL

I'll be waiting.

MANNY

You're dead, motherfucker! You hear me? D-E-A-D dead! Roman's gonna turn you into street pizza, you crazy-ass vigilante piece of shit!

Manny backs away. Turns. Runs down the street and keeps shouting back.

MANNY(CONT'D)

You better start praying to whatever god you believe in, 'cause you're about to meet him real personal-like!

Michael shoves the gun in his waistband. Throws a cigarette in his mouth.

An OLD WOMAN crosses the street. Slow steps. Heavy bags. Michael walks over. Hands her the money.

MICHAEL

Here.

She stares at the bills. Confused.

WOMAN

I can't take this.

MICHAEL

Gift from God.

She takes the money. Hurries away crossing herself.

Michael yanks out a lighter and attempts to light the cigarette. His fingers won't grip right. The lighter falls, twice.

He gets it lit. Leans against a building wall.

Through a BODEGA window, Michael notices a YOUNG BOY (8) with his MOTHER. The boy presses his face against the glass, watching the street. His mother counts change at the counter.

Michael waves him away from the window. The boy retreats - scared.

EXT. BROOKLYN STREET - NIGHT - MOMENTS LATER

Two cars screech up. Bass pounds from open windows.

Doors slam. Five MEN get out. A hulk of a man named ROMAN leads them. Neck tattoos of religious symbols. A walking contradiction.

Roman beelines to Michael. Shoves a gun under his chin.

ROMAN

You took my product.

Michael doesn't move. Cigarette stays between his lips.

MICHAEL

Yeah.

ROMAN

You know who I am?

MICHAEL

Guy with the gun. Shouldn't be selling this poison to kids.

Roman presses the gun harder. Metal digs into skin. Draws blood.

ROMAN

See, that's where you're wrong, my friend. I'm not just "guy with the gun." I'm Roman fucking Roman. I'm the guy who built this corner from nothing. I'm the guy who feeds twelve families with this operation. I'm the guy who keeps order in a world that ain't got none. Where's my money?

MICHAEL

Gone.

ROMAN

Gone where?

MICHAEL

Old lady.

ROMAN
What old lady?

MICHAEL
Crossing the street.

Roman looks around. Street empty now.

ROMAN
You gave away my money mutha fucker?

MICHAEL
Seemed right.

ROMAN
Seemed right? You took food out of my
children's mouths. You took medicine
from my mother's cabinet. You took
respect - which is the only currency
that matters on these streets.

Michael takes a drag. Ash falls on Roman's hand like snow.

MICHAEL
Yeah.

ROMAN
You out of your mind?

MICHAEL
Probably.

Roman's crew spreads out. Guns come out. Michael notices.
Doesn't care.

ROMAN
You know what happens now? You
disrespect me, I disrespect you. It's
biblical, my friend.

MICHAEL
I die. Yes?

ROMAN
That's right.

MICHAEL
Good.

Roman stares at him. Long moment.

ROMAN

Man, fuck this. Some people just can't
be reasoned with. Some people just
need to meet their maker.

He pulls the trigger. POP! POP! POP!

Michael falls. The crew bolt to the cars. Roman stares at
Michael like he's unsure of something. Then heads to his car.
The cars screech away. Bass fades into silence.

Michael lies on broken concrete. Blood pools around his head.

From the bodega comes a WOMAN'S SCREAM - primal, animal
terror. The boys MOTHER.

The boys Mother bursts through the shattered doorway,
cradling her son. Blood soaks his small sock. A stray bullet
found its mark.

The boy cries.

MOTHER

Look what you did! LOOK WHAT YOU DID!
He's just a baby! He's just a baby!

The boy's small hand reaches toward his mother's face.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Why? Why did you bring this here?

She rocks her son. Consoles him. Stares at Michael's body.

Sirens get closer.

Michael stares at the mother's face - the same desperate
love, the same impossible loss he felt holding Claire.

EXT. ETHEREAL REALM

A vast corridor stretches beyond sight. Walls of crystalline
stone pulse with faint light. No ceiling. Only endless sky
above.

Michael walks. His footsteps echo strangely. Multiply. Become
voices.

MICHAEL'S VOICE (ECHO)

I promise I'll always come home to
you.

The words bounce off walls. Return changed. Hollow.

Michael stops. Looks around. The voice continues.

MICHAEL'S VOICE (ECHO) (CONT'D)
Daddy's just going to work. I'll be
back before bedtime.

Claire materializes ahead. Sits cross-legged on the stone floor. She claps her hands. Giggles.

CLAIRE
Tell the one about the elephant.

Michael's mouth doesn't move. But his voice fills the space.

MICHAEL'S VOICE (ECHO)
Why don't elephants use computers?
Because they're afraid of the mouse.

Claire laughs. The sound rings false. Mechanical. Like a music box winding down.

Michael approaches. She fades before he reaches her.

MICHAEL'S VOICE (ECHO) (CONT'D)
I'll teach you to drive when you're
sixteen.

The promise hangs in the air. Unfinished.

Caroline appears beside a pillar. Watches him with sad eyes.

MICHAEL'S VOICE (ECHO) (CONT'D) (CONT'D)
Till death do us part.

Caroline shakes her head slowly.

CAROLINE
You meant it when you said it.

MICHAEL
I did.

CAROLINE
You just lost your way.

The echoes multiply. Overlap. Create chaos.

MICHAEL'S VOICE (ECHO)
I love you... I love you... I
(MORE)

MICHAEL'S VOICE (ECHO) (CONT'D)
promise... I'll always... till
death... I love you...

The voices pile on top of each other. Distort. Become noise.

Michael covers his ears. The sound doesn't stop. Comes from inside.

MICHAEL
Make it stop.

CAROLINE
You made these promises, Michael. You
have to finish them.

She points down the hall. More figures wait in the distance.
Shadows. People he's never met.

MICHAEL
I don't understand.

CAROLINE
Those promises don't belong to us
anymore.

The echoes fade. Silence returns.

Michael looks at his hands. Sees blood under his fingernails.
Scars across his palms.

MICHAEL
I don't know how.

CLAIRE
Daddy you feel cold...Are you
sick?...You smell like hospitals...

She fades. Claire fades. The hall stretches empty.

Only his voice remains. Quiet now. Clear.

MICHAEL'S VOICE (ECHO)
I promise.

The words don't bounce back. They move forward. Down the
endless corridor. Toward the waiting shadows.

Michael reaches out his hand. He notices blood drips from it.

The floor beneath him turns black. He blinks and in an

instant he is now-

EXT. FROZEN WASTELAND

Michael stands naked.

An endless expanse of gray nothingness. No horizon line. No sky. An infinite field of white bones juts from gray ice like broken tombstones.

His bare foot STICKS to the ground. He lifts it. Skin tears away, freezes to the ice. No blood. Just raw, white flesh.

Michael opens his mouth to scream.

Silence.

He grabs his throat, panic fills his eyes.

CRACK. CRACK. CRACK.

With each step, ground splinters beneath him. More bones surface - rib cages, skulls, femurs.

A human skull rolls against his foot. Michael bends to pick it up. It crumbles to dust in his hands.

Suddenly, his body CONVULSES. Cold hits like a physical blow. His joints lock up.

He collapses, writhes on the bone-strewn ice. His fingers curl into claws as they freeze.

Light fails completely. Darkness swallows him.

He falls backward into void.

FLASH:

EXT. BROOKLYN STREET CORNER - NIGHT

Michael's eyes snap open. He gasps. Coughs up blood. A crowd of people gather around him. Sirens wail in the distance.

Paramedics work on Michael. He pushes himself up. His chest burns. Three holes weep blood through torn fabric. He fights the Medic off.

MEDIC

Sir! Sir! Hold on! Hey! You've been
shot! Sir!

He stands. Staggers. Can't breathe right.

We HEAR in background another Paramedic reassure the mother that the boy will be alright.

Michael pushes through the crowd. Blood runs down his shirt. Pools at his feet. Each step tears the wounds wider. Michael runs, turns the corner.

His ribs crack with each breath.

Blood fills his throat. He spits it out. Keeps running. His left arm dangles. Useless. Shoulder joint destroyed.

Another corner. Another street. The sirens fade behind him.

Michael stops. Leans against a wall. Slides down to sitting. Blood soaks through his jacket. Drips onto concrete.

He opens his shirt. Three holes. Still bleeds, but slower now. Flesh raw around the edges.

Michael presses his hand against the worst wound.

Michael's chest spasms. His face contorts. He arches his back. Grabs his ribs. His eyes squeeze.

FLASH TO:

EXT. CAROLINE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Young Michael walks up the familiar driveway. Each step heavier than the last. Light glows warm behind curtained windows.

He reaches the porch. Hesitates. The front door opens before he can knock.

Mrs. Reeves appears in the doorway. Her face startles.

Colonel Reeves appears behind her. His expression hardens.

COLONEL REEVES

Son, you have some nerve.

Michael straightens. Meets the Colonel's glare.

MICHAEL

I need to speak with you, sir. About
(MORE)

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

Caroline.

Caroline appears behind her mother. Looks at Michael, then away.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

I love her.

His voice steady. No wavering.

The Colonel's jaw sets.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

It's important to me that she knows.
I'll fight for her. I know she's going
to college. I want her to. But I need
to do my part. Take my shot.

COLONEL REEVES

What do you know about shots, boy?
About real courage?

Michael's jaw tightens. He watches Caroline. She examines the ground.

Michael reaches into his jacket. Pulls out a folded paper.
Hands it to the Colonel.

MICHAEL

I enlisted.

The Colonel unfolds the document. Scans it.

COLONEL REEVES

Vietnam.

Not a question. Caroline's gives a soft gasp.

MICHAEL

When I come back, and she's done with
college, I want your blessing. I want
to marry her if she'll have me.

COLONEL REEVES

You think war makes you a man?

MICHAEL

No, sir. Standing here does.

Silence hangs between them. The Colonel studies Michael with

new eyes.

COLONEL REEVES

Son, you're not even old enough to enlist.

MICHAEL

I lied.

More silence. The Colonel examines the paper again.

COLONEL REEVES

This is war. You understand that?

Michael nods. His eyes fix on Caroline.

MICHAEL

Will you wait for me?

A tear slides down Caroline's cheek.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

I want to marry you.

He smiles. The first genuine smile he's worn all evening.

More tears fall down Caroline's cheeks. Her mother pulls her close.

Michael extends his hand to the Colonel. The Colonel steps forward. Places his hand on Michael's shoulder instead.

COLONEL REEVES

(sly grin)

I'll tell you what, son. If you make it out of Vietnam alive, and Caroline finishes school, you'll have my blessing.

He grips Michael's hand. Pulls him close. Whispers so only Michael can hear.

COLONEL REEVES (CONT'D)

Personally, I think you're coming home in a box. Good luck, son.

He smiles. Walks into the house. Mrs. Reeves follows.

COLONEL REEVES (CONT'D) (O.S.)

You have one minute, young lady.

Caroline wipes her eyes. Moves to Michael.

CAROLINE
Don't do this. You don't need to prove anything.

MICHAEL
I need to be worthy of you.

CAROLINE
You are.

INT. WALLACE'S OFFICE - DAY

Michael's hand reaches for his coffee. His hand stops halfway - fingers won't close. He uses both hands, coffee sloshes over the rim.

Behind Wallace, the Jacob painting looms. Two figures locked in eternal struggle.

WALLACE
What happens when you die?

MICHAEL
Stops.

WALLACE
The pain. The pain stops?

MICHAEL
Everything stops.

Michael's jaw clenches involuntarily. A muscle in his neck jumps. He slides off the chair onto the floor.

Curled into fetal position. His knees pull to his chest. Sweat beads his forehead despite the cold room.

Wallace studies Michael's face. Gray. Pale. Like something already dead.

WALLACE
This war you're fighting, you're losing.

Michael's body trembles. Wallace stands, walks to the Jacob painting.

WALLACE (CONT'D)

My son believed Jacob got his blessing
because he knew when to stop fighting
and start asking.

MICHAEL

Can't.

Wallace touches the painting's frame - a ritual, like
touching a gravestone.

WALLACE

David wrote his theology thesis on
that painting. "The Difference Between
Wrestling and Drowning."

MICHAEL

Can't give up.

WALLACE

Even when you're drowning?

MICHAEL

Especially then.

Wallace sits on the desk edge. His wedding ring catches light
- he still wears it too.

WALLACE

David said Jacob's real enemy wasn't
the angel. It was his own need to
control God's will.

Michael forces himself up..

WALLACE (CONT'D)

Maybe they're not afraid of you. Maybe
they're afraid for you.

Michael shakes his head.

MICHAEL

No.

WALLACE

Michael, because of you, a child
almost died.

A beat.

WALLACE (CONT'D)
I'm afraid for you. For what you have become. I think you need some time in a residential facility.

Wallace picks up the phone. Michael sweeps it off the desk.

MICHAEL
You think this is about getting better!?

WALLACE
This isn't love anymore, Michael. It's possession!

MICHAEL
You lost a son. I lost everything!

WALLACE
So, your going to destroy everything to prove it?

MICHAEL
At least... I'm still fighting.

Michael heads for the door.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
And you know what? I don't give a shit about losing. This war is worth it.

WALLACE
You can't sustain this. Your body will not allow it. You will crumble to nothing.

Michael turns back. Moves toward Wallace. Fists clenched. Eyes wild.

MICHAEL
I have nothing! I am nothing!

He stops inches from Wallace's face. His voice drops. Dangerous.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
I wake up every morning and for one second - one fucking second - I forget they're dead. I reach across the bed for Caroline. She's not there. I listen for Claire's footsteps.
(MORE)

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

Silence.

He backs away. Runs his hands through his hair. Pulls at it.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

Every morning I lose them again. So
you tell me Doc. How do you heal
someone who has nothing left to heal.
How!?

He slams his fist into the wall. Blood smears the paint.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

They were everything. And now they're
gone. And I'm still here. Breathing.
For what?

He looks up at Wallace. Eyes empty.

INT. MICHAEL'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Michael sits. Back against the wall.

Pill bottles scattered around him. All empty.

He shakes each one. Nothing rattles.

His hands won't stop shaking. Fingers twitch. Nerves misfire.

A needle lies on the coffee table. Bent. Used.

Michael reaches for it. His arm won't extend. Shoulder
freezes.

He uses his other hand. Grabs the needle.

The vein in his arm collapsed weeks ago. He searches for
another.

His neck. Too swollen.

Between his toes. Too infected.

He stabs the needle into his thigh. Muscle. Not vein.

The heroin burns going in. Fire under skin.

Michael leans back. Waits.

Nothing comes. No relief. No escape.

Michael screams but it comes out as a whisper.

MICHAEL
Caroline. Claire.

Michael breaks down - cries. yells again. This time we hear it.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
CAROLINE! CLAIRE! CAROLINE! CLAIRE!
CAROLINE.....

His voice tears through the apartment. Echoes down empty hallways. Spills into the street below. Raw. Desperate. Breaking.

He keeps SCREAMING their names until his throat bleeds.

EXT. VIETNAM JUNGLE PATROL - DAY

HARRY NILSSON'S voice bleeds in. Song: "WITHOUT YOU."

Michael walks last in a patrol of eight soldiers. His helmet too big. Rifle too heavy.

Michael stumbles over a root. Nearly falls. The soldier ahead turns. Shakes his head.

HARRY NILSSON
*No, I can't forget this evening, Or
your face as you were leaving, But I
guess that's just the way the story
goes, You always smile but in your
eyes your sorrow shows, Yes, it
shows...*

EXT. FIREBASE CHARLIE - NIGHT

Michael sits in a foxhole. Rain pours down. He shivers. KOWALSKI (19) shares the hole. Both boys pretend to be men.

Artillery pounds in the distance. Michael flinches with each explosion. Kowalski offers him C-rations. Michael's hands shake as he takes them.

EXT. RICE PADDY - DAY

The patrol moves through knee-deep water. Michael slips. Goes under. Comes up coughing. Spits muddy water.

SERGEANT TORRES glares back at him.

TORRES

Quiet, cherry.

Michael wipes his face. Keeps walking. Each step harder than the last.

HARRY NILSSON

*...No, I can't forget tomorrow When I
think of all my sorrows When I had you
there but then I let you go And now
it's only fair that I should let you
know What you should know...*

EXT. VILLAGE OUTSKIRTS - DAY

The patrol searches abandoned huts. Michael enters one alone.

INSIDE -

Overturnd furniture. Bullet holes in the walls. A child's toy lies in the corner. A wooden horse. One leg missing. Michael picks up the toy. Studies it.

EXT. JUNGLE AMBUSH - DAWN

The patrol moves through tall grass. Single file. Gunfire erupts. Muzzle flashes strobe through morning mist. Michael drops flat. Crawls toward cover.

JACKSON (20) screams. Falls beside him. Blood spreads across his chest. Michael reaches for Jackson. Tries to help him.

HARRY NILSSON

*...I can't live, if living is without
you I can't live, I can't give any
more Can't live, if living is without
you I can't give, I can't give any
more...*

Jackson grabs Michael's shirt. Pulls him close. But Jackson's eyes are already empty. Michael's eyes wide with fear.

EXT. FIREBASE PERIMETER - NIGHT

Michael digs deeper into his foxhole. Dirt flies with each stroke. His hands bleed. He doesn't stop. He digs until the hole is deep enough to hide in completely.

Sits in the bottom. Pulls his knees to his chest. Thunder rolls overhead.

EXT. JUNGLE - NIGHT

Michael runs through darkness. Branches tear his face. Thorns rip his uniform. Gunfire erupts behind him. Muzzle flashes strobe like lightning.

FLASH TO:

EXT. SCHOOL GYMNASIUM - NIGHT

The school dance. Sixteen-year-old Michael pulls young Caroline by the hand. They burst through doors into cold December air. Her dress flows. Her hair streams behind her. She laughs silently.

BACK TO:

EXT. JUNGLE - NIGHT

Michael stumbles. Scrambles back up. Voices shout in Vietnamese. Get closer.

HARRY NILSSON

*...Well, I can't forget this evening,
Or your face as you were leaving, But
I guess that's just the way the story
goes, You always smile but in your
eyes your sorrow shows, Yes, it
shows...*

FLASH TO:

EXT. FOOTBALL FIELD - NIGHT

Michael and Caroline running from the dance towards the football field hand in hand. Their faces red from the cold.

BACK TO:

EXT. JUNGLE - NIGHT

Michael runs deeper into the jungle. Bullets snap past his head. Bark explodes from trees.

FLASH TO:

EXT. SCHOOL GROUNDS - NIGHT

Michael and Caroline sprint across the football field. She spins as she runs. Arms outstretched. Light snow falls. Catches in her hair.

BACK TO:

EXT. JUNGLE - NIGHT

Michael reaches a stream. Plunges in. Water up to his chest. Current pulls at him. He fights to stay upright.

FLASH TO:

EXT. FOOTBALL FIELD - UNDER BLEACHERS - NIGHT

Michael and Caroline collapse under the metal seats. Both breathe hard from running.

HARRY NILSSON

*...Can't live, if living is without
you I can't live, I can't give anymore
I can't live, if living is without you
I can't live, I can't give anymore...*

BACK TO:

EXT. JUNGLE CLEARING - DAY

Gunfire erupts. Muzzle flashes through green.

Michael dives behind a log. Bark shatters.

KOWALSKI lies ten yards away. Blood spits and spreads across his chest.

KOWALSKI

Help... me.

Michael scans the area. No cover between them.

Bullets snap overhead. Close.

Michael runs. Zigzag pattern.

He reaches Kowalski. Grabs his arms.

KOWALSKI (CONT'D)

My leg.

Michael looks down. Kowalski's right leg bent all wrong. Bone shows white.

MICHAEL

We're moving.

KOWALSKI

Can't.

MICHAEL

Hey. You want to live!? Survive this!?
We're moving now!

Michael hooks his arms under Kowalski's shoulders. Drags him backward.

Kowalski screams. Michael doesn't stop. More gunfire. Dirt kicks up around them.

Michael pulls harder. Kowalski's broken leg trails behind. They reach the tree line. Michael keeps pulling. Into thick jungle. Fifty yards. Hundred.

The gunfire fades. Michael stops. Both men breathe hard.

HARRY NILSSON

*...Can't live, if living is without
you I can't live, I can't give anymore
I can't live, if living is without you
I can't live, I can't give anymore...*

INT. MICHAEL'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Michael vomits dark red blood violently while on his hands and knees. He crawls toward a pill canister.

The cap won't open. His fingers don't work. He bites the cap. Plastic cracks between his teeth. Pills spill across the floor.

He swallows them all. Dry. No water. They stick in his throat. He gags. Coughs them back up.

He tries again. Slower. The pills go down. Scrape his throat raw. Michael closes his eyes. Waits for peace.

His heart pounds. Too fast. Then too slow. His breathing stops. Starts. Stops again.

His body convulses. Muscles seize. Foam bubbles from his mouth. Pink foam. Blood mixes. Michael's eyes roll back. Show only white. His chest stops moving.

Complete stillness.

EXT. ETHEREAL REALM - DAY

Michael opens his eyes. Gray light. No gold.
He sits up. The grass beneath him brown. Dead.
He stands. Looks around. Empty.
No waterfalls. No singing flowers. No floating islands.
Just gray space. Endless gray.

MICHAEL
Caroline? Claire?

His voice echoes. No answer.
He walks forward. No direction. Just movement.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
Where are you?

Silence.

The ground beneath him cracks. Dry. Like drought.

MICHAEL (CONT'D) (CONT'D)
I'm here. I made it.

No response. He walks faster. Searches.

MICHAEL (CONT'D) (CONT'D)
Don't leave me alone.

In the distance. Caroline walks beside Claire. Hand in hand.

MICHAEL
Caroline! I'm drowning out there!

They don't turn.

Michael runs. Full sprint. The distance stays the same.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
Wait!

He runs faster. Caroline and Claire walk steady, never closer. Michael gasps, stumbles.

MICHAEL (CONT'D) (CONT'D)
Please!

They disappear behind golden trees. Michael follows to an empty path. Further ahead Caroline picks flowers while Claire giggles and spins.

MICHAEL (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

I'm here!

Michael runs toward them. His feet hit grass, silent. The gap stays. Ahead, Caroline and Claire pass through crystal gates. Michael reaches the gates. He pulls, pushes. Through bars he sees them by silver water. At peace.

MICHAEL (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

Let me in!

She turns. Looks through him, like he doesn't exist.

MICHAEL (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

Caroline!

Caroline stands. Takes Claire's hand. They walk away.

Michael rattles the gates. Metal cuts his palms.

MICHAEL (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

Don't leave me!

They fade into light. Gone.

Michael sinks to his knees.

FLASH:

INT. MICHAEL'S HOUSE - OZONE PARK - QUEENS, NY - DAWN

Michael wakes. Pills scattered. Needles bent. Alive. Broken.

He doesn't reach for drugs. Just lies still.

MICHAEL

I have to reach you.

His voice hollow.

Heavy pounding on front door.

OFFICER (O.S.)

Police. Mister Simmons? Wellness check.

Michael gets up. His body protests.

OFFICER (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Mr. Simmons! Need to see you're okay!
This a wellness visit, that's all!

Michael looks around. Pills on counter. Needles in sink.

The pounding gets louder.

OFFICER (O.S.) (CONT'D) (CONT'D)
We're not leaving!

Michael runs to the basement.

CRACK. Wood splinters. Door smashes open.

INT. BASEMENT - CONTINUOUS

Concrete floor. Exposed pipes. One small window.

Michael climbs on a chair, forces the window open. Tight squeeze. He pushes through. Glass cuts his back.

EXT. BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS

Michael tumbles onto dead grass.

Neighbor's dog barks. He limps toward the back gate.

OFFICER (O.S.)
Around back! Check the yard!

Michael runs. His stride breaks. He stumbles, grabs his thigh. Blood seeps through his jeans.

He hits the alley. Keeps running.

EXT. LIBERTY AVENUE - CONTINUOUS

Michael stops. His chest heaves.

A city bus approaches. He waves it down.

INT. CITY BUS - CONTINUOUS

Michael pays. The passengers ignore him. He walks to the back, drops into a seat.

The bus lurches forward. Through the window - cop cars race toward his street.

INT. PORT AUTHORITY TRAIN STATION - DAY

Michael buys a ticket at window. His hands shake counting bills.

The WINDOW CLERK doesn't look up.

WINDOW CLERK
Adirondack Trailways. Thirty minutes.
Track twenty.

Michael steps away from the window. His eyes dart around. He sits on a bench, lights a cigarette.

INT. MICHAEL'S CABIN - DAY

Michael pushes the door open. Hinges creak.

Empty room. Bare walls. Dust covers everything. A table. Two chairs.

His left leg buckles. Michael grabs the doorframe. He shuffles forward.

INT. LOCAL BAR - NIGHT

Michael pushes through the door. Bell chimes overhead.

Dim light. Smoke. Three patrons at the bar.

Michael hunches forward. His legs buckle with each step. He drops onto a stool. His face contorts.

BARTENDER
What'll it be?

MICHAEL
Whiskey.

The bartender pours. Michael's hands shake taking the glass.

Down the bar. A DRUNK talks loud. Words slur together.

DRUNK
Twenty-three years. Twenty-three
fucking years.

The Drunk waves his beer. Foam sloshes over the rim.

DRUNK (CONT'D)
 Plant closes. Just like that. Pink
 slip in my locker.

The bartender nods. Keeps wiping glasses.

DRUNK (CONT'D) (CONT'D)
 Wife left last... month. Kids don't
 call. Now this.

The Drunk drains his beer. Signals for another.

DRUNK (CONT'D) (CONT'D)
 What's ... man supposed to do? Fifty-
 eight years and old. No skill. No
 future.

Michael watches the Drunk reflection in the mirror.

DRUNK (CONT'D) (CONT'D)
 Mortgage due next week. Can't pay it.
 Can't pay... nothing.

The Drunk's voice cracks.

DRUNK (CONT'D) (CONT'D)
 Maybe better off dead.

The words hang in stale air.

CUT TO:

BAR - LOCAL BAR -BACKROOM - LATER

Michael dials a pay phone with his knuckle.

MICHAEL
 (into phone)
 Pete.

PETE (O.S.)
 Mike. Where the hell you been? Cops
 came looking. I told them nothing.

MICHAEL
 (into phone)
 Pete, Pete, listen. What was that guys
 name? Last year. Shady background.
 Pulled a gun when he crashed the
 (MORE)

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
truck.

PETE (O.S.)
Mike, what the hell. Where are you?

MICHAEL
(into phone)
I'm up at my cabin. Get me that guys
number. Russel or something.

PETE (O.S.)
Russo? What the hell you want with
that psycho? Mike he's bad news.

MICHAEL
(into phone)
Just get me the number.

PETE(O.S.)
Mike really you-

MICHAEL
(into phone)
Get me the fucking number!

INT. DIFFERENT BAR - NIGHT

Pool balls CRACK in the back corner. A few PATRONS nurse
drinks at scattered tables.

Michael sits across from Russo in a booth. The bartender
brings Russo's beer. Sets it down, retreats quickly.

RUSSO
What kind of job?

MICHAEL
Private work.

RUSSO
How private?

MICHAEL
Just for me.

Russo takes a long drink. Studies Michael's face.

RUSSO
Last time I worked for you, you fired
me. Said I had anger issues.

MICHAEL

You pulled a gun an a driver.

RUSSO

Guy hit the truck. Disrespected me.

Michael winces and reaches into his jacket. Pulls out a thick envelope. Sets it between them.

MICHAEL

Down payment.

Russo's eyes lock onto the money.

RUSSO

Down payment for what?

MICHAEL

Killing.

Russo looks around.

RUSSO

What makes you think I'm a killer.

MICHAEL

I know about you.

Russo fingers the bills.

RUSSO

This is serious cash. Someone giving you trouble? That partner of yours, Pete? Never liked his ass.

MICHAEL

No. It's me.

RUSSO

Come again?

MICHAEL

Me. I'm the target. I need you to kill me.

RUSSO

Shit man. Suicide is free. You don't need me.

MICHAEL

Can't. It has to be someone else.

RUSSO
Why? What the hell are you talking
about?

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

Michael lies on he couch - can't get comfortable. He
swallow's a handful of pills.

Russo paces the room.

RUSSO
Is this some fucked up prank?

MICHAEL
I keep coming back. I need to stay
dead. You just keep making sure.

RUSSO
This is my place? And money?

MICHAEL
Just put me in the back room. The rest
is yours.

INT. CABIN - DAYS LATER

Russo sits at the kitchen table. Counts money. Same bills.
Over and over.

The back room door hangs open. Blood on the walls. Michael's
body on the floor.

Russo closes the door. Locks it.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

Russo watches TV. Canned laughter echoes. He doesn't smile.

The back room, now painted black, door creaks open. Michael
stumbles out. Russo doesn't look up.

He walks to kitchen counter, grabs a large knife and plunges
it into Michael's chest.

INT. CABIN - MORNING

Russo fries eggs. The pan sizzles. Michael's screams from the
back room.

Russo turns up the radio. Static drowns the sound.

INT. CABIN - AFTERNOON

Russo stares out the window. A delivery truck passes. The driver waves.

Russo raises his hand. Lowers it. The truck disappears.

His hand stays pressed against the glass.

INT. CABIN - BACK ROOM - NIGHT

Michael lies broken. Russo loads a shotgun. His hands move automatic. No emotion.

Russo pulls the trigger. Blood hits the wall.

He wipes the barrel clean. Sets it aside. Walks out.

INT. CABIN - KITCHEN - LATER

Russo opens a beer. The cap falls to the floor. Joins dozens of others.

He drinks. Stares at nothing.

INT. CABIN ROOM - DAY

Without warning - Michael's body upper torso springs up like a jack in the box, madness on his face, gasping for air. Russo recoils.

RUSSO

Son of a bitch! Every fucking time.
Damn.

Michael summons all his strength to speak.

MAN

Please. Do... it.

RUSSO

Michael? Can you hear me? Hey!

Russo snaps his fingers.

Michael's body convulses. Slams back down against the floor. Blood spreads in fresh patterns.

MICHAEL

Do it. I...have to...get back to them
... please.

RUSSO

Michael! Michael. I can't anymore. I can't do this. I quit. The money's all gone now. I can't stay here any more.

Michael struggles to sit up, but just can't. He slides back down, again defeated, swimming in blood and guts.

RUSSO (CONT'D)

I'm sorry Mike. My fee. I don't work for nothing. What would? ...well fuck it man.

Russo moves to a cabinet hanging to the wall and opens it. He pulls out a baggie full of blue and white pills.

MICHAEL

Please. You know... I can't do... it myself. Please... I'll get more...I'm beg- I have so much more...

RUSSO

I won't be here when you come back next time.

MICHAEL

Please.

Russo shakes his head.

RUSSO

I got these! Every pain pill I could fucking find! No extra charge on that by the way. You're welcome. You here me? Use this!

Russo hurls the bag. It lands beside Michael's head. Pills scatter like confetti.

Russo paces.

RUSSO (CONT'D)

I don't know what you are. Do you even know!? I mean holy fuck dude.

Michael's head turns toward the pills. Millimeters at a time. His eyes flutter.

Russo points the gun at Michael's head. Relief crosses Russo's face.

MICHAEL

Thank. . . you.

RUSSO

I won't be here when you get back from
wherever it is you go.

Russo pulls the trigger. BANG!

The gunshot sounds thunderous and echoes the place.

INT. CABIN - DAY

Michael lies in his blood. He rolls onto his stomach, tries to push himself up. His arms collapse.

Michael claws at the ground. Fingernails tear. He pulls himself forward. Inches at a time.

His chest leaks blood through bullet holes. Twenty yards to the road.

Michael stops. Gasps for air. His lung collapsed. Can't breathe right.

He keeps crawling. Elbow. Knee. Elbow. Knee. Gravel cuts his skin. Stones embed in his palms.

EXT. ROAD - DAY

Michael reaches pavement. Cold asphalt against his face. He looks left. Right.

A small church sits hundred yards down the road. White paint. Simple cross.

Michael pushes himself up. Falls back down. Tries again. Makes it to his knees. His leg buckles. He stands. Wobbles. Catches himself.

EXT. SMALL CHURCH - DAY

Michael stumbles up concrete steps. His shoulder hits the heavy door. He pushes it open.

INT. SMALL CHURCH - DAY

Howling wind. Empty pews. Candles flicker. Freezing cold inside.

Michael's breath steams white. He staggers down the aisle.

Blood drips on worn carpet.

Reaches the altar. Collapses. His knees hit stone.

Michael looks up. Wooden cross dominates the wall. Simple. Rough.

MICHAEL

I can't.

His voice echoes in empty space.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

No more.

Tears fall. Mix with blood on the floor.

MICHAEL (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

The pain's too much.

His chest heaves. Sobs wrack his body.

MICHAEL (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

I'm sorry.

The words break. Defeated.

MICHAEL (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

I'm so sorry Caroline. Clare.

He curls forward. Forehead touches cold stone. His body shakes.

MICHAEL (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

I'm sorry I failed you both.

The candles flicker more. Cast dancing shadows.

INT. BATHROOM - SHOWER - NIGHT

Steam swirls. Michael rests his head against tile wall.

Water rains down on his naked body. Old scars crisscross his torso. White lines where bullets once tore through flesh.

His eyes vacant. At his feet, bloody water circles the drain.

INT. GREYHOUND BUS - DAY

Michael sits in back. Bandages show through his torn shirt. His face streaked with tears dried on his cheeks.

The bus lurches toward the city skyline.

EXT. PORT AUTHORITY - DAY

Michael steps off. Limpes through crowds. He walks like broken machinery. People stare. Move away.

EXT. MANHATTAN STREET - DAY

Michael stops outside a diner. Looks through the window.

Wallace sits alone. Reading newspaper. Coffee steams.

Michael pushes through the door.

INT. DINER - DAY

The bell chimes.

Wallace looks up. His face drains..

Michael stands in the doorway. Swaying.

Voices stop. Everything stills.

Michael takes a step. His legs give out. He drops to his knees in the aisle. A Patron gasps.

MICHAEL

Help me.

His voice breaks.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

Please help me.

Tears fall. Fresh ones.

Wallace stands. Moves toward him.

His body shakes. Convulses..

Wallace kneels beside him.

WALLACE

It's okay.

MICHAEL

I tried so hard.

The sobs come harder now. Wallace reaches out. Pulls Michael

into his arms.

WALLACE

I Know. Of course I'll help you.

Michael collapses against him. Like a child.

MICHAEL

I don't know how to live. I don't know
how to stop hurting.

Michael cries, years of pain pouring out.

Wallace holds him. Says nothing. In a diner full of
strangers.

FADE TO BLACK:

BLACK SCREEN

A white burial shroud - rough-woven linen. Ancient. Sacred.
Blood bleeds through the fabric. Crimson spreads like
stigmata. Forms a word:

"GRACE"

FADE IN

INT. REHAB FACILITY - DETOX ROOM

Michael lies curled on a narrow hospital bed. His body
contorts. Waves of agony roll through him.

His hospital gown soaks black with sweat. Fabric clings to
his skeletal frame.

CONVULSION. His spine arcs backward. Vertebrae pop like
knuckles. His heels drum against the mattress.

The seizure lasts a minute. His face turns purple. Veins
bulge in his forehead.

Release. He collapses. Gasps like he's drowning.

His hands claw the sheets. Fingernails split. Blood pools
under his nails.

RETCH. His stomach contracts. Nothing comes up. His body
keeps trying.

Saliva pours from his mouth. Thick strands mixed with blood.

His left leg kicks. Muscle spasms ripple up his calf, into his thigh.

BANG BANG BANG. The sound echoes down the corridor.

A NURSE enters, adjusts his IV. Michael doesn't notice.

INT. REHAB FACILITY - DETOX ROOM - ANOTHER DAY

Michael rolls onto his stomach. Tries to crawl. Nowhere to go. His arms give out. Face hits the mattress.

Muffled screaming into the pillow. Raw sounds.

Michael jerks upright. Eyes wide. Seeing nothing. Staring at empty air.

His lips move. No sound. Just the shape of words: "Please please please..."

His hands reach toward something invisible. Grasping at nothing. Fingers open and close.

CRACK. His wrist hits the bed rail. Lightning shoots up his arm.

INT. REHAB FACILITY - DETOX ROOM - ANOTHER DAY

Another spasm. His back arches. His chest points at the ceiling.

Tears stream down his face. His body can't decide if it's dying or fighting to live.

The convulsions ease. Michael's eyes stay wide. Staring at the ceiling. His chest rises and falls. Shallow, panicked breathing.

In the quiet, a whisper...

MICHAEL

How... much... longer...

INT. REHAB FACILITY - DETOX ROOM - ANOTHER DAY

The DOCTOR adjusts his medication drip. Michael watches the clear liquid flow into his arm.

MICHAEL

Will it ever stop?

DOCTOR
Physical withdrawal? Yes. Eventually.

MICHAEL
And the pain?

The doctor has no answer. Michael closes his eyes. For the first time in hours, his body goes still.

FADE TO BLACK

The sound of his ragged breathing continues over the black screen.

MONTAGE

INT. REHAB FACILITY - MICHAEL'S ROOM - MORNING

Michael sits on the edge of his bed. Tries to stand. His legs wobble. He grabs the nightstand.

Takes one step. Then another. Makes it to the small window.

Looks out at bare trees. Gray sky.

INT. REHAB FACILITY - CAFETERIA - MORNING

Michael sits alone at a table. Trembling hands lift a spoon.

The spoon shakes. Soup spills back into the bowl.

He sets the spoon down. Tries again.

This time manages three sips before his hand gives out.

INT. REHAB FACILITY - GROUP ROOM - AFTERNOON

Michael sits in the circle. Doesn't speak but makes eye contact with other patients.

A YOUNG WOMAN shares her story. Michael nods slightly. First sign of connection.

EXT. REHAB FACILITY - COURTYARD - MORNING

Michael walks slowly along a paved path. Each step deliberate.

He stops at a bench. Sits heavily. He watches other patients walking. Some moving better than others.

Michael stands again. Takes ten more steps. Sits on the next bench.

INT. REHAB FACILITY - MICHAEL'S ROOM - NIGHT

Michael sits at a small desk. Writes in a journal. His hands shake.

The handwriting barely legible. He stops rests his cramped fingers.

Sets the pen down. Flexes his hand. Picks up the pen again.

INT. REHAB FACILITY - GROUP ROOM - AFTERNOON

Michael raises his hand slightly. The GROUP LEADER nods at him.

Michael opens his mouth. No words come.

He closes his mouth. Shakes his head apologetically.

The group waits patiently. No judgment in their faces.

INT. REHAB FACILITY - VISITOR'S ROOM - AFTERNOON

Wallace enters. Sees Michael sitting at a small table.

Michael looks up. Attempts a weak smile.

Wallace sits across from him. They regard each other silently.

Wallace slides a book across the table. Michael touches the cover gently.

EXT. REHAB FACILITY - COURTYARD - MORNING

Michael walks the courtyard without stopping.

His gait still unsteady but stronger.

He completes the loop. Allows himself a small nod.

INT. REHAB FACILITY - CAFETERIA - LUNCH

Michael sits with two OTHER PATIENTS. They eat in comfortable silence.

Michael finishes his entire meal without spilling.

INT. REHAB FACILITY - VISITOR'S ROOM - AFTERNOON

Pete enters carrying a small duffel bag. Sits across from Michael.

Pete's eyes show concern. Also hope.

Pete pushes the bag toward Michael. Clean clothes inside.

Michael nods gratefully.

INT. REHAB FACILITY - GROUP ROOM - AFTERNOON

Michael speaks quietly to the group. We can't hear the words but see the others listening intently.

A YOUNG MAN nods in recognition. Michael reaches out. Briefly touches the man's shoulder.

First gesture of comfort Michael has given to another person.

EXT. REHAB FACILITY - COURTYARD - LATE AFTERNOON

Michael sits on a bench reading the book Wallace brought him.

His hands steady enough to hold the pages without shaking.

Light rain begins. Michael doesn't move inside immediately. He allows the rain to touch his face.

INT. REHAB FACILITY - MICHAEL'S ROOM - MORNING

Michael stands before a small mirror. His reflection gaunt but human again.

Color returns to his face. His eyes focus.

He runs his hand through his hair. Growing back fuller.

INT. REHAB FACILITY - CAFETERIA - BREAKFAST

Michael helps serve food to other patients. His movements careful but purposeful.

He places a tray in front of a NEWCOMER - shaking, sweating, barely able to sit up.

Michael's eyes show recognition. He's been there.

INT. REHAB FACILITY - GROUP ROOM - AFTERNOON

Michael facilitates part of the group discussion. Other patients look to him for guidance.

He speaks with quiet authority born from experience.

INT. REHAB FACILITY - DISCHARGE OFFICE - DAY 60

Michael signs papers. His signature shaky but legible.

He picks up the small duffel bag Pete brought.

Walks toward the exit.

At the door, he turns back. Looks at the facility one last time.

Nods slightly. Acknowledgment, not goodbye. Steps through the door into daylight.

INT. MEDICAL OFFICE - DAY

DR. SANATIO (50s, orthopedic surgeon) sits behind a desk covered with X-rays and medical files.

MICHAEL sits across from him. Wallace sits beside Michael.

Sanatio clips several X-rays to a light board. Bones fractured, joints misaligned.

DR. SANATIO
Left shoulder needs complete
reconstruction. Three ribs never set
properly. Your hip?

He points to a particularly bad X-ray.

DR. SANATIO (CONT'D)
Total replacement.

Michael studies the images of his broken body.

MICHAEL
How many operations?

DR. SANATIO
Four. Maybe five.

Michael nods. Expected this.

MICHAEL

Pain medication. I'm sixty days clean.

Dr. Sanatio looks up from the files. Wallace leans forwards lightly.

DR. SANATIO

We'll use nerve blocks. Regional anesthesia. Keep you unconscious during surgery.

MICHAEL

What about after?

DR. SANATIO

Physical therapy. Anti-inflammatories. Ice packs. There'll be pain, but we will try to manage it. It will not be easy.

Michael considers. Looks at Wallace.

WALLACE

You are stronger than you know.

INT. OPERATING ROOM

Bright surgical lights. Steady BEEP of monitors. Michael lies unconscious on the operating table, draped in blue surgical cloth.

Dr. Sanatio makes the first incision on Michael's left shoulder. His scalpel reveals layers of scar tissue beneath the skin.

SANATIO

(To surgical team)

Jesus.

The shoulder joint is a mess of bone fragments and calcified tissue. Sanatio probes gently with forceps.

SURGICAL NURSE hands him a different instrument.

SANATIO (CONT'D)

This bone... been broken and healed wrong at least three times.

He lifts a piece of shattered bone with tweezers. Examines it under the surgical light.

SANATIO (CONT'D) (CONT'D)
What the hell was this guy into?

The ANESTHESIOLOGIST checks Michael's vitals. All stable despite the extensive damage.

Sanatio removes bone fragments. Drops them one by one into a metal dish.

The CLINK of each piece echoes in the sterile room.

SANATIO (CONT'D)(QUIETLY)
What were you fighting, buddy?

The drill WHIRS as Sanatio creates new holes in the bone for hardware placement. Ancient metal fragments fall out - pieces of bullets. Shrapnel.

The monitors continue their steady rhythm.

INT. SUNRISE DINER - MORNING

Michael sits at a corner booth, moving his left arm slowly. Still stiff from surgery, but works. A plate of eggs and toast sits before him.

Wallace sips coffee across from him.

WALLACE
How's the arm?

MICHAEL
Getting there.

WALLACE
These things take time.

Michael cuts his eggs with his weak hand. Each movement deliberate.

WALLACE (CONT'D)
Can I ask you something?

Wallace stares into his coffee. Long pause.

WALLACE (CONT'D)
When...you went there Did you see others? Besides your family.

MICHAEL
I thought I saw my mother once.

Michael sets down his fork. Sees where this leads.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

David.

WALLACE

Twenty-two when...

Wallace's voice catches. He clears his throat.

WALLACE (CONT'D)

I need to know if he's okay.

Michael studies Wallace's face. Sees a father's pain.

MICHAEL

He's at peace.

WALLACE

You think so?

Wallace nods slowly. Wants to believe this.

WALLACE (CONT'D)

Did they seem happy there? Your family?

MICHAEL

They seemed whole. Like they were home.

Wallace's eyes well up.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

He's proud of his father. The one who saved someone's life.

A single tear rolls down Wallace's cheek. He doesn't wipe it away.

WALLACE

Thank you.

Wallace smiles for the first time in years.

They sit in comfortable silence. Two fathers. Outside the window, morning light grows stronger.

INT. SIMMONS FURNITURE STORE - NIGHT

Michael straightens chairs, covers furniture. His movements

careful but stronger. PETE tallies receipts at the counter.

PETE
Want me to finish inventory?

MICHAEL
Go home to your family.

PETE
You sure?

MICHAEL
Go.

Pete gathers his belongings and heads for the door.

PETE
Don't stay to late. I can help
tomorrow.

The door chimes as Pete leaves.

Michael walks to the back wall. Adjusts a crooked picture frame. Next to it, partially hidden, hangs a small AMERICAN FLAG and a Bronze Star medal in a shadow box.

Michael stares at them. Hasn't looked in years.

CUT TO:

EXT. AIRPORT TARMAC - DAY (1971)

A military transport plane sits on wet asphalt. AMERICAN SOLDIERS disembark, some on stretchers, others walking with assistance. Home from the Vietnam war.

MICHAEL (22, in dress uniform) walks slowly down the ramp. Behind him, HONOR GUARD carries flag-draped coffins.

Michael's eyes scan the small crowd of families waiting.

He spots Caroline standing with her Mother and Father.

Caroline breaks from her parents. Runs toward Michael. They collide in an embrace. She holds him like she's afraid he'll disappear.

CAROLINE
You're home!. You're really home! I
love you.

Over Caroline's shoulder, Michael sees her Mother approaching. Tears streaming down her face. She hugs Michael tightly. He's never been welcomed like this.

When she releases him, Colonel Reeves stands behind her. Rigid. Military bearing.

The Colonel's eyes move to Michael's chest. Notices the ribbons. Combat decorations. Michael extends his hand.

Instead of shaking it, Colonel Reeves brings his hand up in a crisp military salute. Michael, surprised, returns the salute with equal precision.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. SIMMONS FURNITURE STORE - NIGHT

Michael's hand still raised, touching the shadow box. His fingers trace the Bronze Star medal. Michael's reflection stares back from the shadow box glass.

INT. WALLACE OFFICE - DAY

Michael finishes his session with Wallace. They move toward the door.

MICHAEL
Same time Thursday?

WALLACE
Same time.

Wallace reaches for the door handle. Opens it.

A physically imposing but disproportionate MAN named RICKY with teeth like piano keys, stands patiently for the door to open.

A Knife pressed against a SECRETARY named SUSAN'S throat. Her eyes wide, trembling.

Wallace's body locks perfectly still.

RICKY
You said if I ever needed to see you,
come right away.

He pushes Susan forward. Hard. They lurch into the office. Ricky kicks the door closed. The lock snaps.

Wallace doesn't move. His voice level.

WALLACE
Let her go, Ricky.

Ricky grins. Exposes his teeth.

RICKY
You said don't wait.

Susan sags against his chest. Breathing shallow. The knife wavers below her chin. Traces a thin red line.

WALLACE
Hurt her, we can't talk.

Ricky considers this. Flexes his jaw. Tendons pop.

RICKY
I've been waiting. You said not to wait.

Ricky laughs. No music in it. Presses the knife harder.

RICKY (CONT'D)
No. No. No.

He shakes his head faster. Like dislodging something.

WALLACE
Ricky, look at me. I'm who you want.

A pause. Ricky's body shivers. He shoves Susan away.

She stumbles. Scrambles to the corner.

WALLACE (CONT'D)
Susan? Go.

She edges around the room. Pressed to the wall. Finds the door. Slips out.

Ricky stares at Wallace. Knife held ready.

RICKY
You said not to wait.

Words slur together.

WALLACE
I'm glad you came, Ricky. I want to
(MORE)

WALLACE (CONT'D)
help.

RICKY
You're a liar. Always were.

WALLACE
(to Michael)
Go.

MICHAEL
No.

Wallace trembles. Not fear. Some private, volcanic effort.

WALLACE
What do you want?

The hammer swings. Connects with Wallace's chin. Sends him reeling backward. His head snaps. Falls unconscious.

RICKY
Now you listen.

His voice thick with phlegm.

RICKY (CONT'D)
You made me this way. Now you live with it.

Ricky notices Michael.

RICKY (CONT'D) (CONT'D)
Who's this? Another broken toy? Who the hell are you?

MICHAEL
Easy friend.

RICKY
Friends don't last long around the Doc.

Michael considers then-

Lunges. They struggle in front of the Jacob painting. Grapple. Fight for control.

The knife moves closer to Michael's face. Inch by inch. Ricky's strength overwhelming.

Michael's arm shakes. The blade hovers near his eye.

RICKY (CONT'D)
He's gonna watch you die.

The knife trembles. Closer. Michael's strength failing. Time slows. Then-

FLASH OF WHITE LIGHT.

EXT. ETHEREAL REALM

The same ethereal space but empty.

MARIA (60s, ageless) appears before him. Beautiful, radiant. Michael's eyes widen in recognition.

MARIA
Hello, my son.

MICHAEL
Mom.

She smiles. Opens her arms. Michael steps into her embrace.

MARIA
You're so tired.

Tears roll down Michael's face.

MICHAEL
I tried so hard.

MARIA
You did. Are you ready to come home?

MICHAEL
I tried so hard to stay with them.
Couldn't. Pulled back.

MARIA
Yes.

MICHAEL
I failed at everything. Couldn't
protect them. Only hurt people.

MARIA
Oh no, My son. Look.

She gestures. The ethereal space transforms.

IMAGES APPEAR IN THE GOLDEN LIGHT:

Kowalski in Vietnam, now an old man, teaching young soldiers about courage. His missing leg doesn't slow him.

Wallace at his desk, counseling a GRIEVING FATHER. The Jacob painting behind him. Wallace's eyes show peace instead of pain.

The wounded boy from the street, now grown, working as a paramedic. Saving lives.

Manny, older, at a community center, running a program for at-risk youth.

MANNY

(to a group of kids)

Let me tell you about my guardian angel.

MARIA

Everyone you've touched, you saved.
There are so many more.

MICHAEL

I didn't save them.

MARIA

Your pain. Your suffering path changed them. Through a darkness because you knew the way. They had to suffer to reach the light.

MICHAEL

Why do we suffer?

MARIA

Without suffering, there is not peace.
Without pain and hate, there is no love and compassion.

The images fade. Maria and Michael alone again.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Michael. God sent you to be their Guardian Angel. Your suffering had purpose.

She touches his face gently.

MICHAEL

Why does saving souls have to cost
mine? I miss them so much. I miss you.

Michael's voice breaks.

MARIA

I know. But now because of your deeds,
God offers you a choice.

MICHAEL

What choice?

MARIA

Come home to Caroline and Claire and
me. Rest forever.

Michael's face softens. His hand reaches toward her.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Or return. Help more souls find their
way. It's your choice, Michael.

Michael squints. In the distance, Caroline and Claire move
toward him. They meet in the center of the golden space.

Caroline reaches toward Michael's face. Her fingers almost
touch his cheek. Almost. Her hand stops just before contact.

CAROLINE

We live in you now. You're never
alone.

Claire reaches for her father's hand. Her small fingers hover
over his palm. She too stops. Looks up at him with eyes full
of wisdom beyond her years.

CLAIRE

Daddy. Soon.

MICHAEL

I want to stay.

Caroline's hand hovers near his face.

CAROLINE

We know.

MICHAEL

But?

Caroline smiles, understands.

CAROLINE

I fell in love with your courage, not
your pain.

Michael looks at his mother. His wife. His daughter.
Everything he's fought to reach.

MICHAEL

How many more have to suffer?

MARIA

As many as God sends you.

A long pause. Michael's choice hangs. He shakes his head.

MICHAEL

No, I can't be without you. Others can
die. Why can't I?

He turns. In the distance, shadowy figures move through the
light. Lost souls. Broken people. Others who need guidance.

CLAIRE

I don't want you to die for me. I want
you to live for me. We will be here
when you are ready.

CAROLINE

We'll wait.

MICHAEL

I love you both.

Caroline touches Michael's heart.

CAROLINE

Forever.

MARIA

Your family isn't behind you, Michael.
They're ahead of you.

The golden light begins to fade. Caroline and Claire step
back into the brightness. Maria touches Michael's shoulder
one last time.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Sometimes love means letting go.

Michael plops his head into her. She holds him.

MARIA (CONT'D)

A mother's job isn't to keep her son.
It's to prepare him for his purpose.

CUT TO:

WALLACE OFFICE

The knife moves towards Michael's face. Its getting closer...

CUT BACK TO:

ETHEREAL REALM

Caroline and Claire stare back at him. Warm smiles.

CUT BACK TO:

WALLACE OFFICE

Michael struggles. The knife to his face now. He yells out in pain.

MICHAEL

NOOOOO!

CUT BACK TO:

ETHEREAL REALM

Caroline, Claire and Maria stand watching. They open their arms wide. A brilliant light embraces them.

Michael watches them fade. His choice made not through duty, but through love.

CUT BACK TO:

WALLACE OFFICE

Michael with all his strength pushes the knife away.

Michael headbutts Ricky. Blood spurts from his nose. Ricky staggers backward, knife still in hand. Wipes blood with his free arm.

Michael charges again. Tackles Ricky.

The knife flies across the room. Slides under a chair.

Both men scramble toward it on hands and knees. Ricky gets there first comes up pointing it.

Michael grabs the hammer.

CRACK. Connects with Ricky's knuckles. The knife flies out. Michael swipes it up, points it at Ricky.

Michael grabs Ricky by the shirt.

MICHAEL
I choose to live.

Michael shoves Ricky hard. Ricky stumbles backward toward the door. Ricky turns and bolts out past Susan screaming on the phone, hiding under her desk.

Michael bends over. Collects himself. He looks up. Tears in his eyes.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
I'll see you later. Much later.

Michael drops the hammer. Moves to Wallace, who stirs.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
You're okay. You're going to be okay.

INT. ANIMAL SHELTER - DAY

Concrete floors echo with barking from dozens of cages lining both walls.

Michael walks slowly between the rows of kennels. Dogs of all sizes press against the chain-link fencing. Some bark frantically, others whimper, a few lie quietly in corners.

SOPHIA - kind face weathered by years of caring for strays -sits at the end of the corridor.

Michael continues down the row. Passes terriers, labs, mixed breeds. None react particularly to his presence.

At the last cage sits a GERMAN SHEPHERD. Female. Black and tan coat, intelligent brown eyes. She lies with her head on her paws, watching the activity with detached interest.

When Michael approaches, the dog lifts her head. Stands slowly. Walks directly to the front of the cage. Their eyes

meet through the chain link. The dog sits perfectly still, studying Michael's face.

SOPHIA
Well that's weird.

MICHAEL
What?

SOPHIA
She's been here the longest. Barks at everyone else. Scares them off really. Found her wandering the streets long time ago. Never comes to the front for anyone.

Michael kneels at eye level with the dog. The dog tilts her head slightly.

SOPHIA (CONT'D)
It's like she's waiting for someone.

MICHAEL
Can I go in?

Sophia unlocks the cage door. It swings open with a metallic CLANG.

Michael sits cross-legged on the concrete floor inside the small space.

Max approaches. Cautious but curious. She sniffs Michael's face, his hands, his clothes. Then sits beside him. Leans her weight against his side. Michael runs his hand along her back.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
What's her name?

SOPHIA
Max.

Michael reacts.

Sophia hands Michael a small cross shaped tag.

SOPHIA (CONT'D)
Found this on her collar when they brought her in.

Michael studies it. Turns it to the back and notices the

initials: **C.S.**

EXT. CITY STREET - DAY

Michael walks Max down the street. The sounds of the city all around him. Peace.

FADE OUT

THE END