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Bass Reeves: A Screenplay

James Walzel

University of Texas at El Paso, jamiewalzel@yahoo.com

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BASS REEVES: A SCREENPLAY

JAMES JACKSON WALZEL

Master's Program in Creative Writing

APPROVED:

Nelson Cardenas, Ph.D. Chair

Lex Williford, P h.D.

Brad Cartwright, Ph.D.

Charles Ambler, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

BASS REEVES: A SCREENPLAY

By

JAMES JACKSON WALZEL, B.A.

THESIS

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James Walzel

Dr. Nelson Cárdenas

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PREFACE

The Arkansas River mirrored the blaze of the hovering sunset during a frigid February evening as I enjoyed a conversation with a young man, Travis, just downhill from the statue of Bass Reeves in Fort Smith, Arkansas. Travis initiated the conversation, asking about my dog, but our discussion segued into fishing, sports, and Black History Month. Travis, an African-American man, wondered why history had buried the lead on one of the most honorable Americans in our nation's history. In the nineteenth century, Bass Reeves escaped slavery, lived among the Indians, and then became the first black deputy U.S. Marshal in the Old West. He navigated three cultures while chasing the most hardened of outlaws in the wildest of lands. Outlaws regularly shot at Reeves, but not a single bullet ever penetrated his flesh. Travis wondered why Hollywood had yet to make a movie about his life. I agreed and told him I was in Fort Smith to do research and write a spec script for a Master's Thesis that I hoped would one day become a feature film. I was pleased to see Travis' broad smile.

I was born into a family with several generations of honorable law-men and storytellers -- one, my great-grandfather whom I spent every summer with until age fifteen, a long-time sheriff of Red River County. I recall days on the farmhouse porch where PaPa mentioned a great black lawman who grew up in the area, stories he learned from his grandfather, a Chief Justice in the county. I'd heard those same

anecdotes of the black marshal circulate from kinfolk throughout Lamar, Red River, and Grayson Counties at reunions. My family settled the area in Texas in 1835, so there were a lot of us by the late twentieth century, and a lot of stories, but the black marshal narrative was the most frequently told. The older men of law and order in my family revered this figure. I have no doubt now that the man I heard about all my life was Bass Reeves.

Like many aspects of childhood, my mind packed away the stories only to resurface many years later. When I watched *Django Unchained* by Quentin Tarantino, my mind went to those stories of my youth. Then I saw Denzel Washington star in the remake of *The Magnificent Seven*, with his reversed pistols and snappy personality. My mind shifted from a mere fascination to a feeling of compulsion. In both Jamie Foxx and Washington, I saw fragments of the hero I envisioned when hearing those childhood tales. I started researching black lawmen and quickly uncovered the name Bass Reeves; he grew up in the same county where my family settled.

Many have stated that the fictional character of The Lone Ranger was patterned after Reeves. Some similarities definitely exist. Historian, Art Burton, says, “Bass Reeves is the closest real person to resemble the fictional Lone Ranger” (34). Just like Reeves, the Lone Ranger always gets his man. Bass Reeves always gave out silver dollars; the Lone Ranger’s calling card was a silver bullet. Both The Lone Ranger and Bass Reeves had an Indian posseman, and they both rode a white horse, although Reeves’ mount varied as he kept and rode several during his long travels. Many have wondered whether the black mask was a token to the real Bass Reeves as The Lone Ranger character was written as a white man for a white audience. I think there is some

merit to the argument and comparison. About Reeves and other black marshals, Burton says, “their faces became a black mask for white America—they became invisible” (11). Even my family who exalted the man did not use his name that I recall. They may not have known it past the generation that lived in the nineteenth century. Regardless of Lone Ranger similarities, I believe it’s time to tell the dramatic and compelling story of the real Bass Reeves.

Every day, for some time, my mind went to Bass. Why had *he* been cheated? Why was *his story* not told on screen? Bass’ story became an obsession. I wanted to present his narrative in a visual format, and that starts with a script. I realized quickly that my first choice for a thesis project paled in comparison to a screenplay about the life of Reeves. I studied many craft books that insisted writers know every aspect of their my protagonist. The screenwriting book, *Save the Cat*, mentions “whenever I hear a screenwriter wind up to pitch his movie idea, somewhere in there I better hear some version of: ‘it’s a guy who...’” (Snyder 47). So, I set out to research and learn as much as I could about the black man who helped tame the Wild West.

For over a century, the history of Bass Reeves and the documentation of his life spread scattered in pieces in rare journals and old manuscripts, faded newspapers, clippings in museums, tattered letters and journal excerpts, and a few tales stored in university libraries. African-American historian and professor, Art T. Burton, with intense energy and persistence, compiled the information and produced the extremely organized and fluid non-fiction book, *Black Gun, Silver Star*.

I tabbed dozens of pages as I engulfed the book, my most reliable source of documentation on Reeves’ life during the initial phases of research. The book provides

addresses, newspaper articles, journal notes, an abundance of photos, personal testimonies, even court documents. A majority of the scenes in my screenplay come from the first-hand accounts recorded in Burton's book, including many of Bass' arrests, his own court battle when he is charged with murder, and even the climactic altercation with antagonist Jim Webb. Additionally, *Black Badge, Silver Star* includes places and people I later visited in Fort Smith: The National Park's Service, The Museum of History, Reeves' statue watching over the Arkansas River bridge looking toward former Indian Territory. The book directed me to all of the native borderlands of that era, many significant places from Muskogee, Oklahoma to Paris, Texas, back to Fort Smith, Arkansas.

At first, I wrestled with whether I was taking too much liberty as a white male attempting to tell the story of this great African-American lawman. I didn't want to be seen as a white author who misappropriates a person of color's story. However, I believe this honorable man's compelling narrative deserves to be told, and I reasoned that the black Hollywood elite filmmakers: Spike Lee, Jordan Peele, Steve McQueen, Barry Jenkins, John Singleton, and Ryan Coogler, among others, had plenty of time and resources and passed for one reason or another.

I enthusiastically took on the challenge. I envisioned a dream team: Director, Steve McQueen, *12 Years a Slave*, Executive Producers, Morgan Freeman and Clint Eastwood, Cinematographer, Caleb Deschanel, and for score and sound, Ennio Morricone. As for my protagonist, I would like to see the very underrated Jonathan Majors play Bass Reeves.

Having an actor to visualize helps in the writing process. Majors was born in Dallas, TX, knows the regional Southern drawl and has large hands with broad palms, which is an often spoken characteristic of Reeves. As noted in *Black Badge, Silver Star*, by D.C. Gideon, “his long muscular arms have attached to them a pair of hands that would do credit to a giant and they handle a revolver with ease and grace” (Burton 32). Majors graduated as an acting student from the Yale School of Drama. At age 29, Majors has the face and acting ability to play my protagonist as he ages through several decades in my film. The actor caught my attention in *Hostiles*, where he plays Corp. Henry Woodson and sports a full Bass Reeves style mustache and looks the part in a cowboy hat. In a very different film, *White Boy Rick*, Majors shows his extensive range as an actor. I started thinking this is the guy who can pull off the allure, wit, and charm of Reeves. Majors would also be an affordable lead for an independent filmmaker.

RESEARCH -- ON LOCATION

I moved to Arkansas for three months and lived in a secluded, restored nineteenth-century cabin on seventy wooded acres to research and write the initial draft of my thesis. From that launching point, I visited numerous areas where Reeves traveled and lived--Western Arkansas, Oklahoma (former Indian Territory), Van Buren (where he resided), and of course Fort Smith and the courthouse where Reeves brought his captive outlaws. Besides being a quiet and peaceful place to write, the old cabin and surrounding woods helped me visualize the events of Reeves life, especially his time with his wife and kids.

The Fort Smith National Historic Park’s research material is plentiful and somewhat overwhelming. The land sprawls out in acres that seem like miles along the

rolling hills beside the Arkansas River. There, the Visitor's Center presents numerous exhibits of outlaws and lawmen within the courthouse. The second floor offers a jaw-dropping restoration of Judge Isaac Parker's courtroom. The hanging gallows stand next to the courthouse. Across the street, the Fort Smith Museum of History resides. Along the walkways, sections of The Trail of Tears, and the statue of Bass Reeves among many other markers, plaques, and reading boards represent hundreds of years of history in Fort Smith, before, during, and after the period of my screenplay.

I found it worthwhile to study the time just before Bass Reeves emergence as a lawman when the Native American Removal Act had forced tribes to travel through Fort Smith on their way just across the border to Indian Territory (now known as Oklahoma). The five main tribes, Muskogee Creek, Choctaw, Cherokee, Chickasaw, and Seminole, became what the U.S. government termed "the five civilized tribes" (Perdue 27). A program to further assimilate the tribes to Western ideas of land ownership, gender roles, and religion became a burden on the Native American culture. *The Cherokee Removal* says, "the civilization program struck at the most basic way in which societies organize themselves—according to gender—and proposed to redefine the roles of men and women... and had to teach Indians to appreciate the value of private property and the marketability of land" (Perdue 26).

Bass escaped slavery and lived in Indian Territory before coming back to Arkansas after emancipation. The research material of Native Americans set for me an emotional tone and mood of the people just before Reeves time living among the tribes and presented me with an idea of how the native people felt when white outlaws continually encroached on their territory and customs a few decades into the relocation.

I spent a significant amount of time in Oklahoma – much of it roadside. The state's beauty in the Eastern area is underappreciated. Much of the land is still uninhabited, spread out, large hills with grassy valleys. Many days after researching, I would pull over and write, imagining Bass and his sidekick, Kono, striding across the landscape, free in their adventure, taming the wild land of outlaws, protecting the tribes who had been relocated, serving the greater good of humanity.

In reality, Bass had several Lighthorse posse men, but for the narrative, I preferred the dynamic of a single trusted ally who dated back to his time living among the tribal nations. The visits and phone conversations I had with several Native American centers in Oklahoma helped me generate the framework for the fictional character, Makona, who later becomes renamed Kono. I decided to make Makona an adversary to Bass in the beginning. After a time, he becomes Reeves' friend and a decade after that his Lighthorse posseman. Much of the information I gathered helped me understand Native American life in Indian Territory during the era just before, during, and after the Civil War.

HISTORY

Although there are differing accounts, Burton, the historian, states, "I believe Bass Reeves was born in July 1838 in Crawford County, Arkansas" (19). Historical records from a variety of sources show that Reeves started life as a slave to a state legislator, William Steele Reeves, and passed to his son George, whom Bass had been a companion to since he was a boy. George moved to North Texas and took Bass with him. Bass once asked if he could learn to read, but George handed him a gun instead (Burton 21). Reading was against the law for slaves. Bass became a crack shot,

winning many shooting contests. Burton states that “Reeves perfected his ambidextrous mastery of firearms, both pistol and rifle (24).

When George went off to fight in the Civil War, he took Bass with him as a valet. Various stories conflict at this point, but the most ambitious tale, told by Bass’ daughter, Alice Spahn, mentions that “Bass parted company with his master over an altercation during a card game,” where she goes on to say, “he laid him out cold with his fist and then made a run for the Indian Territory” (Burton 24). Bass Reeves did live among several tribes and learned to speak Muskogee Creek, Seminole, Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, plus some Comanche. Burton says “Paul Brady, Bass’ great-nephew, states that Reeves found a home as a fugitive slave with the Creek and Seminole Indians of the Indian Territory” (23).

After emancipation, Bass married Nellie Jennie and started a family on a farm in Van Buren, Arkansas (Burton 25). Around that time, President Ulysses Grant appointed Judge Isaac Parker to rid Indian Territory of outlaws. The land had become overrun with bootleggers, bandits, murderers, and rapists, all seeking escape from the U.S. law.

Judge Parker’s first order of business was to hire hundreds of tough lawmen that could restore order in Indian Territory. He hired James F. Fagan to be the United States Marshal over the district, and together they sought out men who had extraordinary abilities. Parker and Fagan presented Reeves the opportunity to become the first black deputy U.S. Marshal in the Old West, and somewhere in the heavens, the stars aligned. Bass Reeves was the perfect man for the hardest of jobs--having lived among the

tribes, he knew the languages, had knowledge of the terrain, and he had the trust of the people.

Historical archives show Bass Reeves spent 32 years in service, and arrested thousands of outlaws, mostly using wit or disguise to capture instead of kill. He did kill 14 men, but considering his detail and the dangers, the death number seems minute. Many of Reeves' captures or kills should be legendary material discussed in literature, except that history appears to have buried the lead on this black lawman.

POETICS AND ASSESSMENT

The first aspect of poetics and difficulties I want to acknowledge is my decision to write as historically accurate as possible for a modern audience; that meant dealing with whether or not to use the N-word. At the time of this preface, I have not used the racial slur. I do believe a story can be written about a black man who overcame so much, even in that era, without using that term. I may be misguided in this theory, but I chose to wait for someone to tell me I need to use the word for this to be an authentic and vibrant screenplay.

I think the story works without the term, and I hope to generate a diverse audience who appreciate how I maneuvered around the word. The prejudices of the narrative still rise to the surface of the story, so I don't think that word is required to further the theme of racial injustice or even to heighten any dramatic moment. My goal is to present a film where black Americans (and other people of color), can sit in a theater next to white Americans, and everyone can root together for this significant and compelling hero of the American Wild West.

I started with an idea and a lot of research before progressing to the usual steps of organizing a screenplay. Before writing a single scene, I spent several weeks visualizing plot dynamics, and I created a wall-mounted board that separated the narrative into eight sequences using 3x5 cards to represent the significant turns or reversals within each scene. The scene cards became 24 plot points in the eight sequence set that formed the three-act structure of beginning, middle and end.

One enormous challenge was compressing the story of Bass Reeves into a 120-page screenplay. The journey of the man, and his interactions with Native Americans, with Judge Isaac Parker, with the other lawmen he worked with, with his children, all get diluted in the cut process. I spent many gut-wrenching days looking at my scene board that spilled over, and the 240 pages written, deciding which significant scenes and relationships needed to stay and which could be cut. In the end, Bass' relationship with wife Jennie and his family are his central flaw and wound, so those elements needed to stay as a sub-layer of conflict that existed beneath the surface conflict with antagonist Jim Webb. Focusing on that concept allowed me to form the turning point of the journey where Bass must choose to find his son, Bennie, or go after Webb, his life-long nemesis.

The most complicated challenge was determining how to use Indian dialogue. I was a fan of James Michener's *Centennial*, a TV series that originated in the late 1970s that dealt with the complex nature of two civilizations merging, Native Americans and the settlers moving onto the Western landscape. The University of Texas Creative Writing Center is named after the artist -- The Michener Institute For Writers.

Much of Michener's dialogue for Native Americans in *Centennial* utilized broken English. The older Westerns are the same when it comes to the English dialogue of Indian people, which seems reasonable since the English learning books I saw for Native Americans only had a few hundred English words. However, much like the N-word, Indian dialogue spoken in broken English seems a bit past its time to use on screen. Even authenticity has a political balance; just plain English serves the narrative best and becomes a non-distraction. My instincts on my first attempt at Indian dialogue were errant and needed to be changed for the modern audience. I reasoned that if any deviation from standard English were required, a director would take the creative reins and develop the dialect how he or she saw fit.

In the script, I attempt to write action lines with brevity in a manner that allows a reader to get through the information fast, while also providing a potential director space for creative freedom while allowing actors the ability to draw upon their individual artistry. I attempt to squeeze the most information possible into the fewest amount of words. As noted in *Screenplay, Writing The Picture*, "Hollywood readers often become impatient with the narrative and will skim through it or skip it altogether if they find it's overly written or if it adds little to the story" (Russin 52). I think the revision and cut process helped me write action lines significantly better than when I started.

Although expository dialogue, or exposition, is necessary for a large portion of the script, I try to add a subtextual layer as much as possible. In the transition from action lines to the dialogue, my wish is to design more pop, more rhythm, to the screenplay so that it reads quick, yet visual.

In his book on dialogue, Robert McKee states, “In life, some people outthink, out feel, outtalk the people around them. Such characters deserve and should get imaginative, one-of-a-kind dialogue” (63). I take this to heart with both my protagonist and antagonist. Bass displays a distinctive drawl that comes from a region I know extremely well, as he grew up in the county where a branch of my family has lived for 185 years. The dialect drops the “g” on words ending in “ing,” and uses the contraction for you all, y’all, and other known distinctions. I try as often as possible to apply the witty personality associated with the documented characteristics of Reeves into his speech patterns and words.

Like Bass, Webb has some wittiness and snap, which I believe makes the exchanges between protagonist and antagonist more interesting. The two men are drastically different in many ways but parallel each other in verbal snappiness, and in physical bravery. Those similarities, I believe, allow the quoted last breaths of Webb during the final showdown to become more believable than it otherwise may seem. The real Jim Webb, the white supremacist, shows Bass respect in his last breath, “Give me your hand, Bass. You are a brave man. I want you to accept my revolver and scabbard as a present and you must accept them,” (Burton 86). As the saying goes, truth is sometimes stranger than fiction. In a newspaper interview, Bass Reeves in 1907, remarked, “the bravest man I ever saw was Jim Webb,” (Burton 86). For the purposes of my story, the quote and sentiment give Webb a final character arc that rounds out his previous evil existence, hopefully pulling him slightly away from being a two-dimensional antagonist. I will admit, the documented quote is odd, but for me, it tilts the scales of the

conflict and spotlights the victory of Bass over Webb in the life-long battle between the two men in my story. I see it as a concession by Webb that Bass is the better man.

I started the narrative process with character sketches of all of my leading players and tried to flesh out their most dominant traits as they related to either helping or pushing against my protagonist's primary goals. I learned this aspect of screenwriting years ago after reading *The Screenwriter's Workbook* by Syd Field. In the book Field tells screenwriters to "define the professional, personal, and private aspects of your character" (101). He even suggests "writing the character biography in first person," which I did with most of my characters (Field 100).

Bass has various layers to his desires and wounds; his sketch came first. I attempt to stay as much within the historical context of who he was—a man of honor who believed in right and wrong, in justice, in freedom. Every character, both factual and fictional, is molded around his or her desires and wounds as they relate to Bass.

One aspect I desperately needed was a nineteenth-century woman's point of view. The book, *Texas Tears and Texas Sunshine: Voices of Frontier Women* provided me with a vision of how stressful the Old West lifestyle was for females. Within the various stories, I began to see how reliant on men, and how voiceless women were in the era. Even without agency, the women seem to possess courage and strength, qualities that led me to fleshing out the character of Bass' wife, Jennie.

Some characters, like antagonist Jim Webb, had to be expanded to meet the criteria of a bona fide antagonist who impedes the desires of the protagonist – an authentic adversary. In all of the excerpts I read, no outlaw was ever able to meet these standards as history recorded them.

Bass was never shot, never captured, and always got his man (or woman in the case of Belle Starr). Easy going for a protagonist does not make a good film, so I did ratchet up many situations with a chosen antagonist, Jim Webb. I also attempt a complicated bookend with George Reeves, Bass' former slave owner. The two men seem to have some sort of bond, namely the law, but Bass was still George's property at one time, and as anyone would, he desired to be free.

I chose to bookend the narrative with George and Bass' relationship as it provides a contrasting shift that resembles Bass' life. The moment seems a more fitting end than having Bass lose his badge after 32 years of service due to the Jim Crow laws, thus giving the theme of justice some finality as George dies of rabies in a dark shed while Bass finally retires to be with his wife and chase his grandkids.

The themes in my story are many: honor, law and order, justice, duty, loyalty, bravery, strength, compassion, diversity, forgiveness, family, morality, and racial equality. For me, Bass Reeves represents the absolute best of mankind, yet like all human beings, he was not without flaws; finding his shortcomings was the hard part. In the end, I decide to play on the obvious. A man away from his family for months at a time while leaving a wife at home to raise 10 children would undoubtedly cause issues.

My original Western genre inspiration comes from my love of Sergio Leone films from the 1960s and 1970s. I watched *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* as a young child with PaPa. We watched an abundance of Westerns. PaPa was more of a John Ford/John Wayne fan. I, however, was drawn to a newer style, a grittier Western. Director Sergio Leone decided against using clean-cut leading men like James Stewart, Henry Fonda, and John Wayne, the usual "good guys" from previous Westerns. Instead,

Leone blurred the lines between good guys and bad guys and leaned toward an edgier, scruffy looking protagonist like Clint Eastwood, and later Charles Bronson. The Western style of Leone has a unique tingle to the ear as well; the opera meets rock and roll power sound of Ennio Morricone.

The amalgamation of the three unique and stellar artistic pieces, Leone, Eastwood, and Morricone, provided me with my first intense movie chills; I'll never forget it. To this day, when the Stratocaster of Morricone comes in on a film, I get chills. Those three dynamic elements make any potential faults of Leone's films (like the voice dubbing) appear to be a form of art. And I believe the movies have aged well, ranking high on iMDB.com's top-rated 250 films.

Although I was inspired by Leone to write a Western, I did not set out to duplicate his style. In fact, Bass is far different than Eastwood's "Man with no Name." Eastwood's character is more of a stoic, speak with your expression guy; Bass has snap, he's witty, clever, lively, with a pinch of sarcasm.

I did listen to Morricone's music while writing the script to the point I have a hard time visualizing many scenes now without the music. I did not set out to create a "Black Western." Instead, I hope to create a drama showing the wit and grit behind the character of Bass Reeves, a hero who stands tall and poised above the politics of the times, and oh, by the way, he is a black deputy U.S. Marshal chasing outlaws in the Old West.

The critically acclaimed HBO series, *Deadwood*, is an inspiration in that it took real-life people and merged in fictional characters to support the documented history. I wish to do the same with my story of Bass Reeves. So, like David Milch's *Deadwood*, I

attempt to create a world where fiction and non-fiction intersect seamlessly without a general audience knowing who was a real person and who the screenwriter creates. In an interview about the creation process of *Deadwood* and merging factual and fictional characters, Milch states, “The truths of storytelling are not the truths of reportage. The truths of reportage finely depend on a correspondence to an externally verifiable reality” (5:07). Milch goes on to state that once he verified the so-called documented truths, that he allowed his imaginative reality to open the story so it may also come alive in the imagination of the viewer. His fictional characters came when as he states, “certain times, at certain places, certain events lack a kind of reality,” and that’s when the fictional characters intervene to further the imaginative reality (Milch 7:12). I attempt to parallel this storytelling concept when I create fictional characters and situations to support the factual people.

I became drawn to *Deadwood* because it showed more authenticity than previous Western shows like *Gunsmoke* or *Bonanza*. The realities of violence, hard lives and hard people, resonate with me and provide a vision of how difficult life must have been in that era in such a lawless land.

Unlike the raw, excessive language in Milch’s television series, I made an attempt to limit the cursing because I want children to be able to enjoy the film. However, the tone, mood, and lawlessness of the show *Deadwood*, and its setting in Indian Territory where the U.S. had no jurisdiction, helped me see how I wanted to shape the landscape and tone of my story.

Besides Burton’s *Black Badge*, *Silver Star*, I want to acknowledge several other sources that were vital in the overall process of the thesis and its development. The

craft material I took the most from was *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and The Principle of Screenwriting* by Robert McKee, which I listened to relentlessly for months while traveling on the road or during the writing hours in the old cabin in the woods. McKee had my ear. I gained so much insight on the screenwriting craft, from structuring a narrative, to how to create subtext in dialogue, to how to compress action lines, and layer deep contextual meanings underneath the surface of a scene.

Park Ranger, Cody Faber, has worked for ten years at The National Park's Center in Fort Smith. I found myself drawn to his knowledge of everything from the types of ammunition used to the clothing and food and resources of that time in history. Faber also sent me a CD that had journal notes from deputy U.S. marshal, Addison Beck, and others who rode with or knew Bass Reeves.

I consulted a large variety of books on the craft of screenwriting, characterization, and dialogue. The best and their main value point: *The Writer's Journey* by Chris Vogler (character design), *Dialogue* by Robert McKee (dialogue), *Screenplay* by Robin Russin and William Missouri Downs (scene cards and characterization), *The Screenwriter's Workbook* by Syd Field (writing the first Act), *Save The Cat* by Blake Snyder (characterization), and *Beat by Beat* by Todd Click (writing beats within scenes).

I read scripts, many were Westerns, but I also included an abundance of other genres that represented great screenwriting and dynamic characters. Over a dozen of the scripts and films I studied were biopics. The dynamic of weaving plots, creating character arcs, story movement through conflict, using subtext in dialogue, all became the artistic tools I looked for in the writing as I desired to step out of the boxed-in genre of the traditional Western.

Several screenplays had a dramatic influence on my story or provided significant insight into my creation. *Lonesome Dove* by Larry McMurtry instilled in me an ear for the type of banter male characters exchange between one another, especially during that era. *12 Years a Slave* by John Ridley gave me a vision of plantation life in the antebellum South. *Django Unchained* by Quentin Tarantino showed me how a character arc can change from slave to outlaw hunter. *Ray*, by James L. White, and *Gandhi* by John Briley, helped me understand how to present a biopic where the majority of screen time is on the protagonist.

I attempt to present a narrative that represents the authentic life of an honorable man in a tale that anyone can enjoy. I serve no agenda; I stand firmly as an independent free-minded artist. There are debates about whether a writer should stay within his or her own boxed-in demographic and write only what he or she knows. I see the creative world broader, deeper, and more fluid. I color outside the lines. As a writer, I believe in opening up the aperture allowing multiple versions of reality to shine and illuminate the variety of mindsets within a diverse audience. I hope to create something that pulls each viewer closer to the other by blurring the many lenses in which people view the world. That concept is one I hope to strengthen as my writing career evolves. Writing for an all-inclusive audience in the twenty-first century is no easy task.

Kathryn Bigelow and her Oscar-winning film *Hurt Locker* come to mind when I think of a writer who can craft narratives far different than the writer's own experiences or circumstances in life. Bigelow had never been to battle, served in the military, or defused bombs, and yet she engineered an intensity of character that navigated masterfully stacked scenes full of tension and suspense. Her imagination, her creation,

her ability to get into the male protagonist's center of being, generated multiple Academy Awards.

My philosophy concerning writing characters has always been that we achieve true artistry when we step outside of our existence and can successfully place ourselves inside the thoughts, emotions, and the lives of others. It requires a desire to want to see things from a different perspective. We may not always agree with that perspective, but we can aspire to understand where individual motivations come from that manifest in the actions of the person or character.

I believe if writers always stay in their safe zone and write only about their gender, or ethnicity, or community, they never reach their full potential as an artist, and they will miss the deeper level of understanding about the human condition. The best books and films, the best characters, are rarely close to a writer's real life or identity. They are more likely to resemble what a writer wishes they could become, if only for a short while—and for me, I wish I could be Bass Reeves.

By James Walzel April 10, 2019

ELEVATOR PITCH

BASS REEVES, 28, beats his master and flees into INDIAN TERRITORY where he lives among native tribes and evades white supremacist, JIM WEBB. After emancipation, Reeves becomes the Old West's first black deputy U.S. marshal and attempts to balance his desire to bring outlaws to justice with his family's need for a homebound father. At a major turning point, Reeves must decide whether to find and protect his son, BENNIE, wanted for murdering his cheating wife, or pursue Webb, his lifelong nemesis.

LOGLINE

A quick-witted black U.S. marshal attempts to balance his declining family life with his drive to capture outlaws and a lifelong nemesis in Old West Indian Territory.

SYNOPSIS: *BASS REEVES*

George Reeves takes his slave, Bass, to fight beside him in The Civil War. During a poker game, George introduces Bass to alcohol and inhibitions recede. Bass knocks George unconscious after being accused of cheating and flees to Indian Territory where the U.S. has no jurisdiction. Bass faces challenges in tribal life – one over a rattlesnake pit, another between a mother bear and cub. After emancipation, Bass marries his lost love, Jennie, and they start a family. When Judge Isaac Parker is appointed to clear outlaws from Indian Territory, he enlists Bass as the first black marshal in the Old West despite Jennie's pleas for him to stay home. At a major turning point, Bass must decide between finding his son, Bennie, wanted dead or alive by bounty hunters, or pursue his lifelong nemesis, Jim Webb. Bass himself faces murder charges before an all-white jury after an unfortunate incident with his cook. Reversals and turning points affect Bass' relationships as his character arcs one decision after another while seeking to balance family and duty.

BASS REEVES

Written by

James Walzel

Based on the life events of Bass Reeves

jamiewalzel@yahoo.com
214-226-2882

BASS REEVES

FADE IN:

TITLE CARD: ARKANSAS 1850

EXT. VAN BUREN, AR -- DAY

A searing sun blazes over the skin of laboring, sweat-soaked slaves. The plantation big house, white, just up the hill.

BASS REEVES, big for age 12, ragged shorts, no shoes, grooms a horse in a stall. His mother, PERILEE, 38, thin, pretty smile, enters the barn. She listens as Bass sings about guns, thieves, and killers. Her face turns to concern.

PERILEE

Bass, best get water out to the
field fore you get into trouble.

BASS

Yes, ma'am.

Bass whispers inaudibly in the horse's ear, fetches a pail. Bass walks the rows serving water, then returns to the barn.

KNOLL, 16, slave, is whipping the horse Bass groomed.

Knoll rears back to strike again. Bass jerks the whip from Knoll's hand. Knoll whiffs, holding air, turns to Bass.

KNOLL

Bout to teach you a lesson, boy.

Knoll steps toward Bass. Bass doesn't move.

Knoll reaches for the whip; Bass whirls it over his head side-steps, and starts leg whipping Knoll, who falls, SCREAMS.

BASS

I ain't ya boy. Lesson one,
manners. Teach me -- c'mon now.

Bass smacks him again. Knoll curls into a fetal position.

BASS (CONT'D)

Best call out fore I whelp you up.

Bass slashes again; Knoll SCREAMS out, scared, scarred.

KNOLL

Peri-Lee -- get your boy. Help!

The field hands run toward the barn, as does Perilee, and plantation owners, GEORGE REEVES, 18, and his father STEELE, 50. Perilee runs to her son, shocked, afraid.

STEELE

What's going on?

Bass pulls from Mom's embrace, turns the whip handle up in his large open palm, and offers it to Steele Reeves.

BASS

Sir, Knoll was whoopin' Mr.
George's horse. I stopped him cause
I thought it the right thing to do.

Steele takes the whip. George turns to Bass.

GEORGE

What a brave and honorable thing to
do, Bass. Thank you.

Steele grabs Knoll by the armpits and pulls him up.

STEELE

I ought to give you a beating, but
the sale barn will suffice.

KNOLL

No. Please, sir? No.

Young George turns to Bass.

GEORGE

I've noticed you have a gift with
horses. Care to tend to them?

BASS

Yessir. I'd be much obliged.

EXT VAN BUREN, AR -- DAY

Slaves watch as white men load Knoll in chains onto a wagon.

The wagon bounces forward on a rutted red drive toward a gray sky hovering violently in the distance-- thunder RUMBLES.

Knoll looks back. Bass uses his hands to pretend shoot at Knoll-- pow, pow, pow. Rain begins. Bass blows pretend smoke, holsters his hands, stares at Knoll.

INT. SLAVE QUARTERS -- NIGHT

Perilee and a female slave, LEA, 40s, perky, sit together.

PERILEE

I'm scared Bass is gonna grow up to be a bad man. He pretends to shoot guns all the time, and today--

LEA

I've raised three boys. All of em got that in em. Don't you worry.

PERILEE

He's always singing songs about shoot-outs and the law.

LEA

Really?

PERILEE

Lord, if that boy ever gets a gun.

TITLE CARD: VAN BUREN, AR 1860

INT. FANCY DINING ROOM -- EVENING -- 1860

BASS REEVES, now 22, fit, thick mustache, large hands, sits at a posh table with STEELE REEVES, 60, bald, rotund, gray-beard and GEORGE, 28, sand-colored hair, trim beard.

Two young slave women finish setting the table and place Southern cuisine before the men. Steele looks over the young black girls and then at Bass and smiles.

STEELE

Bass, about time to pick a wife and settle in wouldn't you say?

BASS

I did meet a woman that has a wiggle to her walk that makes me go woo-woo.

The three men laugh.

BASS (CONT'D)

Met her down at the trading post.
Said her name was Jennie.

STEELE

You need a lady that tugs at the heart, not just your poke. Find the right gal, we'll buy her for you.

Bass looks at George, who smiles.

GEORGE

Even if we over pay, Bass. We want you to be happy and start a family.

BASS

I aim to understand a woman, her emotions and whatnot-- you know, before choosing a wife.

Steele and George look at each other, amused. Bass looks uncomfortable, unsettled.

STEELE

You will be single forever if you wait that long.

Steele looks at Bass, then George.

STEELE (CONT'D)

Such a wise young man, though.

The women start removing some of the dishes.

GEORGE

Bass, I need my boots shined after dinner. Early meeting.

STEELE

Oh, and shovel the horse stalls after you return from the trading post tomorrow.

Bass nods to both men, who get up and leave him at the table. The black ladies shoot looks at Bass. One rolls her eyes.

EXT. VAN BUREN, AR -- TRADING POST -- DAY

Indians, Mexicans, white and black folks, exchanging goods and services, and talk.

Bass, love-struck, stares at JENNIE, 20, petite mulatto.

BASS

You could say a wheel broke and I had to fix it?

JENNIE

Not today. They got a shindig at
the West Plantation. I need to get.

Bass helps Jennie into her wagon.

Bass steers a horse drawn wagon full of goods down a trail by
the Arkansas River. He hears someone HOLLER OUT, stops.

He looks low. Two white men wrangle with an old slave.

JIM WEBB, 30s, grizzled, scar-faced, and DELMER, trashy
henchman, subdue the slave, drag him toward the river.

Bass rises out of the high grass and waves.

BASS

What y'all want with Dado Bradley?

Webb and Delmer beam a shocked expression toward Bass.

JIM WEBB

Boy, you got some onions. Best tend
to your own business. Go on. Get.

BASS

You best let Dado go fore I go get
his master.

JIM WEBB

You're that smart-ass Reeves boy,
got a name like a fish?

BASS

You're Jim Webb, trouble maker.
Abuse folks' slaves for sport.

WEBB (TO HENCHMAN)

Smart-ass sumbitch, ain't he?

Delmer chuckles. Webb stares back at Bass.

WEBB (TO BASS) (CONT'D)

It's gonna be hard to talk with a
rope around your neck.

Webb drops Dado and takes off for a horse several yards away.
Delmer, runs up the embankment toward Bass.

WEBB (CONT'D)

Boy, you'll be hog shit by sundown,
but you're gonna swing first.

Bass smacks the team and THUNDERING hooves POUND the trail into dust. Bass turns, looks over his shoulder.

The team of Morgans muscle away. Webb and his henchman fade. Bass continues, then lets up on the spent, gasping horses.

Bass dismounts and shows great concern inspecting the equines, looking at their hooves, stroking them.

A lasso swirls over Bass; cinching his arms to his body. He falls, tries to roll, but he's caught.

Webb emerges on horseback behind a row of pines.

WEBB (HOLLERING) (CONT'D)
He-he. Delmer, come looky-here.
Caught me a big mouth Bass.

Webb dismounts, kicks Bass. Bass flinches, offers no audible.

Still saddled, Delmer swings his lariat over a tree limb.

DELMER
Hellova drop from a 19 hand horse.
Probably snap his neck right off.

BASS
Fella, I'm hard of hearing. Come
down here and say that in my ear.

Webb chuckles. Hovers over Bass. Smirks. Looks to Delmer.

WEBB
Does have a snappy lip don't he?

Webb rears to kick again. Sill tied at the arms, Bass sweeps his body around, his legs latch on to the grounded leg of Webb.

Bass twists, Webb falls. The rope loosens around Bass.

The two men tumble down into the river, wrestling.

On shore, Delmer reaches his rifle, cocks as Bass and Webb pop the surface.

Bass, behind Webb, holds Webb in a headlock. Webb reaches back. Bass' palm engulfs Webb's wrist, pins his arm back to his shoulder blade. Webb HOLLERS in pain.

DELMER
I think I can hit him.

WEBB
Don't do it, Delmer.

CLOPS of horse hooves get the attention of the three men.
George Reeves trots out of the woods aiming a pistol at Webb
and a sawed off shotgun at Delmer.

GEORGE
Damn it, Bass. You're late.

BASS
Sorry, boss.

GEORGE
Jim, would you be a gentleman and
allow Bass return to my plantation?

WEBB
He's the one got me.

GEORGE
Delmer, toss the gun.
Or become the headless horseman.
Your choice.

Delmer looks at Webb who nods. Delmer tosses the rifle.

GEORGE (CONT'D)
I'm going to be a civil about this,
but I don't want to catch you two
messing with Bass again.

Bass lets Webb go and starts up to the wagon. Webb coughs.

GEORGE (CONT'D)
We clear?

JIM WEBB
Clear as creek water.

George still has guns drawn on both men. Bass checks the
horses, climbs aboard the wagon.

DELMER
I trusted you to lower your guns.

GEORGE
You two will only gain my trust
when you're at the end of a rope.

Webb slides a grin toward Bass. Stares him down.

JIM WEBB
Hogs love dark meat. Bones and all.

George fires a shot toward Webb that hits water. Webb jumps, falls back in the river, laughs hysterically. Bass rides off.

EXT. VAN BUREN, AR - MORNING

George stands watching Bass right a fence post.

GEORGE

I know that you were just defending yourself the other day. What if I had not been there?

BASS

What would you have done? I mean if you were me?

George starts to speak, hesitates, hand to beard.

GEORGE

Hmm. I'm not sure.

BASS

Human nature boils down to instinct, wouldn't you say? I was instinctively trying to survive.

GEORGE

You had the upper hand. Could have killed them both. Self-defense.

Bass laughs.

BASS

I'm glad you taught me sarcasm. Be nice if I could read some, the law, and the Bible.

GEORGE

No doubt you have the aptitude for it, but teaching you to read would go against the law.

Bass scratches his head and turns back to his slave duty.

BASS

Yessir. I reckon it would.

GEORGE

That must be difficult to hear. I don't agree with every law, Bass, and things may change, but until then, we must obey.

BASS

Yessir.

George slides up one of his Colts and passes it to Bass.

GEORGE

This will benefit you more. Don't
shoot anyone unless you have to.

They LAUGH. Bass, gleams, accepts the gun. He passes it
between his hands, extends his arm, sights it.

Bass looks at George. George nods yes.

A bullet EXPLODES from the long, steady held Colt. A small
smoke trail curls. The gun looks perfect in Bass' huge palm.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

How does it feel?

BASS

Like it's been waitin' on my hand.

George sets a bottle on the fence, paces back, marks a line.

GEORGE

Step back here.

EXT. - MONTAGE SEQUENCE - ALTERNATING TIMES

Quick clips of Bass practicing shooting, first with one hand,
then with both. The series shows the gun, the smoke, the
shots hitting targets, Bass' smooth draw, his smile, the
clips roll faster to the rhythm of GUNSHOT EXPLOSIONS (QUE
Ennio Morricone).

The last clip shows a calm and confident, slightly older Bass
Reeves as George rides up in a frenzy and dismounts.

GEORGE

Bass, it's my father; he's gone.

BASS

Where'd he go?

GEORGE

He's dead.

Bass comforts George, but displays a curious expression.

BASS

What's that mean for me? You're
going off to war.

George, oblivious, smiles, squeezes Bass' shoulder.

GEORGE
You'll pass to me, so you get to
fight those Yankee bastards too.

Bass exhibits a punch-drunk expression.

EXT. FORT SMITH, AR - NIGHT

A coffeepot brews on a campfire. Bass pulls it, pours a cup.

George reaches inside his saddlebag, retrieves a bottle and a deck of cards, sits on a log across from Bass. George tooth-tugs the cork, chugs, and passes the bottle to Bass.

BASS
What you want me to do with this?

GEORGE
Drink it.

BASS
Why would I do that?

GEORGE
It'll make you feel good.

BASS
Like Mose Bledsoe?

GEORGE
He's a sloppy drunk.

BASS
Ain't he, though. Saw him sloshing
through the thoroughfare looking
for what he couldn't remember?

Bass sniffs the bottle, draws back.

BASS (CONT'D)
Smells awful.

GEORGE
Tastes awful. But it'll feel so
good you'll start liking the taste.

Bass gulps, coughs, wipes his mouth on his shirtsleeve.

BASS
This poison's gonna make me go
bowlegged and blind ain't it?

GEORGE

Nah, that's the good stuff.

As Bass turns up the bottle, George rests his hand underneath and tilts it up, coercing Bass to drink more. A few drops dribble off Bass' chin. George tosses Bass the cards.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

Deal.

Bass shuffles and deals the hole cards. He stares at the bottle, waits, then grabs it, takes two chugs.

BASS

This tastes outright awful but it does feel pretty doggone good.

George laughs, bets. Bass calls.

BASS (CONT'D)

Why'd you bring me, Mr. George?

GEORGE

You're like a friend, a brother. I want you fighting beside me.

Bass deals the turn card, a 5. George bets. Bass calls again.

BASS

I don't want to fight for slavery!

GEORGE

That whiskey is good, but pull back on the reins. You don't understand this war.

BASS

What's to understand?

GEORGE

The North wants to tell the South how to run its business.

Bass deals the river. Community cards are A, 10, J, 5, J.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

Haven't I treated you well?

BASS

I'm still property like your horse.

George bets big.

GEORGE
I don't let my horse eat at the
dinner table or sleep in the house.

George looks at Bass. They stare a sec. Bass looks at the two
cards in his hand, and pushes all his chips in. He reaches
for the bottle, turns it up, his throat tugs. He stands.

BASS
Right now, am I your friend, your
brother, or your slave?

GEORGE
Sit your black ass down and play.

Bass, frustrated, sits back down. George looks perplexed.

GEORGE (CONT'D)
What pains are coming out through
the whiskey, Bass? Speak freely.

BASS
What if I wanted to be free?

GEORGE
Would you have a better home? A
softer bed? Tastier food?

BASS
Play your hand, Mr. George -- sir.

GEORGE
Stop being uppity with me.

George lays down his hand, proud of his Ace-high straight.

GEORGE (CONT'D)
You only learned to play poker a
year ago and you can't even read.
You'll get better.

Bass rubs his thick mustache, looks at his cards.

George starts to rake the pile of the chips his way, but Bass
calmly places his large hand over George's two.

BASS
What you mean?

GEORGE
An astute player would've tossed
whatever crap you have in hand.

BASS
Mr. George, can I raise?

GEORGE
This hand?

BASS
Yessir, let's bet my freedom on the
hand I'm holdin."

GEORGE
This hand?

BASS
Yessir.

GEORGE
Okay. Easy call.

Bass lays down two Aces, which with the community cards,
gives him a full house, beating George's straight.

George stands and looks at the board. Bass stands too.

GEORGE (CONT'D)
You cheated.

BASS
You know I ain't no cheat.

GEORGE
You're a lying, cheating Negro!

Bass throws a right hook; George never sees it coming. The
lights go out before he lands -- THUD.

BASS
Mr. George?

Bass pours water, then whiskey on George's face. No movement.

BASS (CONT'D)
Oh, no. No, no, no.

Bass sits, stares, waits, removes his hat, rubs his head.

BASS (CONT'D)
C'mon, George. Cough, burp, fart--
somethin'... Mr. George?

Bass' ears perk to branches in the woods, voices closing in.
He snatches food from George's saddlebags, unties his horse,
quietly mounts and rides off in the opposite direction.

Bass stops and hears George's distant voice. And the others.

BASS (TO HIMSELF) (CONT'D)
Mr. George, Mr. Goerge. Phew...
May your ass ride soft in the
saddle-- in the opposite direction.

Bass spurs his horse to run toward Indian Territory.

EXT. CREEK NATION - DAY

Bass rides through a thicket. The treeline opens. An INDIAN ELDER with long gray hair lays by the river writhing in pain.

BASS
What happened?

The Indian elder shakes his head, says something in Seminole.

BASS (CONT'D)
My name is Bass.

Bass points to the man.

INDIAN ELDER
Wakatona.

Bass motions his need to examine the leg. The elder lays back, squinches his eyes. Bass feels a bone, shakes his head. He motions pulling and setting the leg. The elder nods.

Bass points in several directions with his hands.

BASS
Where is your tribe, your people?

The man points. Bass places a stick in the elder's mouth. The man SCREAMS, loses consciousness.

EXT. INDIAN TERRITORY -- DUSK

Bass travels toward the lowering sun with the Indian elder strapped to a travois.

Members of the tribe stop their activities as Bass rides in with Wakatona. A woman runs into a structure and comes back with CHIEF MAKINAW, tall, 40s. A curious group follow.

BASS (TO HIMSELF)
Kind of young to be Chief.

Hearing and understanding Bass, CHIEF MAKINAW laughs.

CHIEF MAKINAW
Hens-cha, my friend. I earned it.

BASS
You speak English?

CHIEF MAKINAW
Yes. Many of us.

Two women and two men embrace Wakatona, remove the travois and carry him off. Wakatona holds a hand to Bass.

WAKATONA (TO BASS)
Muhdoe. Zeehee zahhles.

CHIEF MAKINAW
He says thank you.

The Chief motions for Bass to follow. They enter his tepee.

CHIEF MAKINAW (CONT'D)
You look tired. Rest with us. Good men like you are welcome here. We have many dark skins.

BASS
Negroes.

CHIEF MAKINAW
Yes.

BASS
Can I meet them?

CHIEF MAKINAW
Tomorrow. Are you a slave?

BASS
Not any more.

CHIEF MAKINAW
Do not worry. Our land. Our laws.

Bass looks at the chief and is uncertain.

CHIEF MAKINAW (CONT'D)
White men fear us here. Only deserters come, trade whiskey, horses, hide from white man's law.

The Chief leans back on his elbows as men and women bring in food and a pipe. They smoke and eat. Bass, relaxes, smiles.

EXT. INDIAN TERRITORY -- DAWN

Bass and two dozen Seminoles, many of them black, see tusk marked tree trunks. They spread out, climb, and wait.

The men signal to one another as leaves CRUNCH. An enormous hog SNORTS. Within seconds a dozen arrows and lances pierce its hide. The animal staggers, falls.

One man, MAKONA, muscular, tall, jumps from the tree, knife drawn. The hog thrusts its head toward him. Makona dodges the tusks and slits the throat of the SQUEALING pig. It falls, bleeds out.

Lighter CRUNCHING of leaves alert the tribe. Two men spread out and motion for Bass to follow. They walk soft and slow.

Four wild turkey SQUAWK. The men kill three, but one escapes. Bass draws his gun, aims -- BANG.

MAKONA

Uses loud iron like a white men.

BASS

Was waiting on the tribal jack-ass
to kick up dirt. Gonna hee-haw too?

Bass stops cleaning his bird, looks at Makona staring at him.

BASS (CONT'D)

Donkey somewhere else, Makona.

EXT. CREEK VILLAGE CAMPFIRE -- NIGHT

A woman, SEKETA sits down next to Bass and begins teaching him their language.

SEKETA

Siartsjay -- I want.

BASS

Si-arts-jay.

SEKETA

Good. Tuck-Lai-Kee. Bread

BASS

Tuck-Lai-Kee.

SEKETA

Good. Now Body parts.

Bass winks at Seketa. She blushes.

BASS
Body parts?

SEKETA
Eeeyes-foot. Cheeye-your feet. Cha-
aye-my foot.

Seketa glides her small feet over Bass' large ones.

SEKETA (CONT'D)
Pooye-our feet.

INT./EXT. CREEK NATION -- DAWN

Bass lays next to Seketa. BANGING stirs him from his slumber.

MAKONA
Black Bass. Show yourself.

Bass removes the hides, reaches for a a long pant-skin, steps out. Makona, stands lean, shredded, arms crossed.

MAKONA (CONT'D)
I challenge you, Black Bass.

BASS
Think she chose me, tough guy.

The tribal people gather and laugh.

MAKONA
She is my woman.

BASS
She slept next to me last night.

Bass looks back toward Seketa. She shrugs in indifference.

SEKETA
I don't belong to anyone.

Makona looks at Bass and RATTLES a snake tail. Bass scratches his head and looks at Seketa.

SEKETA (CONT'D)
A fight over a rattlesnake pit.

BASS
That's how y'all do things?

Bass stares at Seketa, waits for a reply, gets none.

BASS (CONT'D)
You act like you want this?

Seketa motions with her hands, turns, and walks away.

BASS (CONT'D)
Why you crazy ass--

Chief Makinaw and a crowd circle the two men.

CHIEF MAKINAW
You can refuse his challenge, but
then you must leave.

The crowd begins to talk.

BASS
I don't back down.

MAKONA (EXCITED)
Challenge accepted.

BASS
Somebody build this man a mound.

EXT. CREEK NATION -- DAY

The tribe rounds up rattlesnakes and throw them into a pit.

Chief Makinaw passes the two men a rope. Bass loops the slack around his long sinewy forearms and large hands.

Makona issues a confused expression, looks at the taut rope.

The Chief raises his palm and quickly turns it down.

Makona tries a quick pull, but Bass digs in. He doesn't move.

The two men begin to battle back and forth. Several times either could go over into the pit.

Both men, sweat-soaked, exhausted, try to hold ground. Bass drops, rolls, and holds. He looks at Makona and winks.

Bass hauls the rope over his shoulder starting the opposite direction of the pit with slow, methodical, deep steps.

Makona struggles to hold on. Bass stops, leans, tugs hard.

Makona loses the rope, slides, claws at the ground.

The crowd gasps as Makona almost goes in. Bass dusts off.

CHIEF MAKINAW
ENOUGH. One must go over the edge.

Bass looks at the Chief, nods, and then runs toward the pit.

Bass jumps over the pit and wrestles Makona into a choke hold, while pinning his arm back behind him. Makona SCREAMS.

Bass moves Makona toward the edge.

Makona's POV -- fat squirming Diamondbacks. LOUD RATTLES.

BASS
Who wants to see this man die?

Silence, shock, and awe; no one answers.

BASS (CONT'D)
Rule is one must go over -- I did.
Now, do you want your brother to
die today? Let the tribe choose.

Again, no answer, just confusion.

BASS (TO MAKONA) (CONT'D)
Do you wanna die?

MAKONA
No.

Bass releases him.

BASS
Then be free young man!

Seketa tries to run to Bass, but he turns his back to her.

EXT. SEMINOLE NATION -- DAY

Makona, approaches Bass.

MAKONA
Why?

BASS
Why did I save you?

MAKONA
Why did you shame me?

BASS
Were you ever a slave?

MAKONA

No.

BASS

Well being a slave is shameful, but
it beats bein' dead.

EXT. SEMINOLE NATION - DAWN

Bass dead centers a pumpkin shooting his Colt. Makona,
impressed, keeps moving Bass back who keeps hitting the mark.

MAKONA

Better than white man I've seen.

BASS

Better than anyone you've seen?

MAKONA

Well, there's a young white woman.

Bass BLARES a deep BARITONE LAUGH.

MAKONA (CONT'D)

She brings the ammo. You'll see.

BASS

I better practice up then.

EXT. MUSKOGEE CREEK NATION -- DUSK

Bass eases his horse to a trot in a small valley between two
hills. Wheat colored high-grass saw back and forth in front
of a pine grove. Bass stops, makes camp next to a stream.

Bass cloth-handles a coffee pot off the fire, pours a cup. He
hears shuffling. Draws both Colts.

BASS

Show yourself.

A rifle cocks from a row of pines beyond the creek.

JIM WEBB

Been looking for you, Bass Reeves.
My hogs are hungry.

Bass backs from the fire-light and sits low in the grass.

JIM WEBB (CONT'D)

You popped your master, George, a
good 'un, I hear.

(MORE)

JIM WEBB (CONT'D)
Reckon he ain't coming to your
rescue. I didn't forget our last
encounter.

Bass stays quiet, hears more shuffles, more men.

Bass rolls, scoots toward his horse, lays him down. He
reaches for the rifle and pulls it out. Cocks it.

Several more rifles cock behind Bass, others on either side.

Bass sets his rifle down, grabs a fallen branch. He removes
his shirt, tears it into strips. He hears footsteps, closer.

Bass wraps the shirt strips around the tree branch and
stretches for the flame. It ignites.

BASS
May the tribes forgive me.

Bass starts lighting the dried high grass providing him more
visibility and a circular screen from the men. The blaze
ROARS.

Bass grabs his rifle and fires into different areas. Return
fire WHIZZES over and around Bass.

JIM WEBB
Stop firing. We're already gonna
have a band of Injuns headed our
way with that brush fire. Fall out.

Bass can hear the men ride away. He lays there, sighs.

EXT. SEMINOLE NATION -- NIGHT

The Seminole camp eats. The chief sits down next to Bass as
he sharpens a 12" Bowie.

CHIEF MAKINAW
Every hunter needs a challenge.
What do you call a knife like that?

BASS
Arkansas toothpick.

CHIEF MAKINAW
Are you as good with it as a gun?

BASS
I ain't no Makona with a blade if
that's the question.

CHIEF MAKINAW
There is the challenge then?

BASS
A 300 pound hog?

CHIEF MAKINAW
Bigger.

BASS (TO MAKONA)
He's not going to want me to kill a
bear is he?

Both Makona and Chief Makinaw keeps a straight face.

EXT. INDIAN TERRITORY -- NIGHT

The men camp during on a hunting expedition. During the night, a skunk wanders in and settles between Makona's legs. He wakes, sees the skunk, and SCREAMS. The men wake and watch Makona attempt to flee as the skunk sprays him. They LAUGH.

BASS (WAKING UP)
Whew-wee.

CHIEF MAKINAW (YELLING TO MAKONA)
You shall be known now as Kono.

Makona runs after Chief Makinaw passing Bass.

CHIEF MAKINAW (CONT'D)
Go away. Stop following me.

MAKONA
Please! You can't call me skunk--
Chief Makinaw?

BASS
Kono, go sleep over yonder.

Bass roles over and returns to sleep. Makona/Kono packs his things, but turns back to Bass, the men still laughing.

KONO
It's Makona.

EXT. SEMINOLE NATION -- DAWN

Bass, Makona, Chief Makinaw, and a dozen Seminole spread out in the woods, hanging carcass remains on trees and scattering entrails along a path in front and behind Bass.

BASS (TO KONO)
What are we hunting?

KONO
Food. Skins for winter.

BASS
Which is it?

KONO
Both.

Bass looks at Kono who looks away and motions for Bass to stay. Bass waits in silence. The other men take their places.

Quick clips: The sun brightens, men move about, the sun passes over, sets, a man falls asleep. Bass yawns...

A bear wanders up sniffing. Bass' eyes widen. He calmly raises the rifle, cocks. He realizes suddenly that behind him is a cub eating the scattered entrails. He looks back.

The mother bear ROARS, CHARGES. Bass fires, the bullet grazes the bear's back; she continues unabated. The bear swats the rifle away, rears up. ROARS.

Bass reaches for his Colt but finds the Bowie knife instead and brings it up. The blade severs the mother bear's claw as she swings. She ROARS, staggers on the wound, ROARS again.

Bass shoves the long knife deep into the bear's neck. The cub runs off. The men WHOOP AND CHEER and run to cut up the bear.

EXT. SEMINOLE NATION -- NIGHT

Men cook meat. Women scrape bear hide. Bass sits alone.

Makona walks over with a hunk of meat and kneels beside Bass handing him a piece. Bass waves Makona's hand away.

BASS
Y'all tricked me.

MAKONA
The cub can live on its own.

BASS
That's not the point.

Bass stands. Chief Makinaw approaches.

CHIEF MAKINAW (PROUD)
Man of strength.

BASS (UPSET)
Because I killed a bear?

MAKONA
With a knife.

Makona holds out a necklace with a bear claw. Bass hesitates, grabs it, places it over his head, and walks to the campfire.

The tribe stops talking and looks to Bass, who pulls out his long blade and cuts a piece of meat, eats. The people CHEER.

Bass walks to his teepee and enters.

Montage: quick-flashes, alternating clips of Bass training horses, trading with other tribes, hunting, loving women. When Bass steps out of his teepee, he's aged. His hair long, kinked, his face weathered. He's muscled, wears buckskins.

EXT. VAN BUREN, AR -- Dusk

Bass approaches the West Plantation and waits for Jennie to appear. Many slaves are finishing up work and getting water. They all go inside their quarters. Bass waits.

As darkness falls, Bass hears Jennie's voice and scrambles to a secure place to look for her. No white folks are around as Jennie walks to the slave quarters and Bass sneaks up on her. He covers her eyes and mouth.

BASS
Guess who?

Jennie mumbles inaudibly.

He slowly turns her to face him. Jennie looks at Bass' long wiry hair and his rugged appearance.

JENNIE
Your voice is the only thing I
recognize.

BASS
Bet you recognize this.

Bass pulls Jennie to him, kisses her in the shadows. Jennie moans in their embrace for a second before pulling away.

Bass places a finger to his lips and with a tender touch coaxes Jennie out into the woods.

JENNIE (WHISPERING)
I wondered if I'd ever see you
again. It's been--

Bass kisses Jennie again. They begin to undress each other.

EXT. SEMINOLE NATION -- DAY

Bass practices shooting with his Colt as Kono watches.

BASS
I'm going to run out of ammunition.

KONO
The lead and whiskey come today.

BASS
Whiskey?

KONO
It makes our people act crazy.

BASS
It makes all people act crazy.

A wagon rides up. The tribe starts WHOOPING and HOLLERING. A young man, JEFF REED, 19, and a young woman, BELLE STARR, 20, brown hair, big hat, steps off on the outstretched hand of Chief Makinaw.

The tribe trades with the Seminoles. Most want whiskey. Bass walks over and looks inside the wagon. Belle stops him.

BELLE STARR
What is it you want?

BASS
Ammunition for a Colt.

BELLE STARR
You have a Colt?

Bass turns his head, slides a sly grin to Belle and slowly lifts back his skins revealing his pistol.

BASS
Never seen a Negro with a Colt?

BELLE STARR (SNEERING)
Fancy black Injun, ain't ya.

She slides her duster to the side and runs her hand over the exact same model Colt. She removes it.

BELLE STARR (CONT'D)
No. I wouldn't mind a matching set.
Got a double holster waiting on it.

Bass and Belle size each other up. Belle looks amused.

BASS
You got some sauce. Yes ma'am.

BELLE STARR
Please. Don't call me ma'am.
Name's Belle. Belle Starr.

BASS
Nice to meet you, Miss Belle.
My name's Bass. Bass Reeves.

Bass extends his arm for her to lead the way. The tribe follows passing whiskey, HOOTING, and HOLLERING.

Jeff Reed throws up a cow chip from a good distance. Belle splinters it three times. A few specs fall.

BELLE STARR
You're up hot shot.

Reed heaves up another cow chip. Bass draws, fires two shots, switches hands, another two hit the mark. Dust drifts in the breeze. Belle's mouth falls open.

BASS
Toss a coin. Which hand Belle?

BELLE STARR
Does it matter? Left.

Reed chucks a large Confederate coin. Bass shoots -- TING.

Belle races to look. She holds up a hole with slivered edges.

BELLE STARR (CONT'D)
Jefferson Davis lost some face.

Belle tosses the coin to Jim Reed to look.

BELLE STARR (CONT'D)
Confederate money's not gonna be
good for long anyway.

BASS
What do you mean?

BELLE STARR
The war's over. Union won.

BASS
What about slavery?

BELLE STARR
Lincoln's freeing the slaves.

Bass wraps his arms around Belle and embraces her. Kisses her several times on the cheek. Reed rushes Bass in anger. Kono trips him up. Reed tries to draw. Bass draws first.

BASS
Ain't no call for it. I'm happy is all. Got me a woman in Van Buren I wanna marry and settle in with.

BELLE STARR
I hope you two are happy. Jim's just protective is all.

Belle hands Bass the matching Colt and a double holster.

BELLE STARR (CONT'D)
You earned it, mister Bass Reeves.

BASS
I almost feel bad--

BELLE STARR
Don't worry, I stole it.

BASS
Stealin's against the law.

BELLE STARR
Laws were made to be broken.

BASS
You're better than that.

BELLE STARR
Am I?

Jeff Reed and Belle Starr ride off. Belle looks back, waves.

Bass starts practicing with both guns and the new double holster Belle gave him. Kono makes an observation.

KONO
Big thumbs, long arms.

Bass shrugs not understanding Kono's meaning.

KONO (CONT'D)

Reverse the handles, faster draw.

Kono demonstrates drawing across his body.

Bass reverse the handles to face forward, draws and fires.

BASS

Ho-Lee. Cross draw. Thanks Kono.

KONO

Call me Makona.

BASS

No. Kono sounds better. Go with it.
That name'll keep you humble.

EXT. VAN BUREN, AR-- NIGHT

Bass rides to the West plantation. He ties his horse and crouches down low, eyes wandering.

BASS

Where are you Miss Jennie?

Bass makes camp in the forest, goes back. Jennie emerges, walks toward the slave quarters from the big house. Bass runs after her. She sees him, pulls him around the side of a shed.

JENNIE

Bass. You're crazy.

They both try to speak at the same time.

BASS

You need to know something--

JENNIE

I have something to tell you--

A beat as they look at each other.

JENNIE (CONT'D)

You first.

BASS (HUGE SMILE)

You're free. Let's get outta here.

JENNIE

Nah, Uh-uh. I ain't getting no
whooping for running off with you.

BASS
Slavery is over, you're free, Jen.

Jennie points to the plantation Big house.

JENNIE
Somebody needs to tell Tim and
Connie West, and them twenty-
something hellhounds.

She pulls away from Bass. Stares into his eyes.

JENNIE (CONT'D)
Bass, I'm pregnant.

Bass' eyes widen, excited, he smiles, embraces Jennie.

BASS
More of a reason to go. We've got a
lifetime of unfinished business.

JENNIE
Such as?

BASS
Gettin married and having ten kids.

JENNIE
Ten?

Bass holds out his large palm shining wide in the moonlight.

Jennie smiles looks around and back at Bass. She places her
small hand into his. They turn and run for the woods.

Jennie looks back. Crickets CHIRP. Frogs BURP. They dart for
the forest, hop on a horse, and ride off under the moonlight.
Jennie wraps herself around Bass and sinks into his back.

Bass slows, hears barking dogs getting closer.

JENNIE (CONT'D)
That's them.

Bass scatters a bag of dried fish in several places and then
smacks his horse and gallops off in the opposite direction.

EXT. INDIAN TERRITORY -CHOCTAW NATION -- NIGHT

Bass and Jennie cross a creek as the sound of the dogs fade.
They trot toward an Indian camp.

Bass sees Jim Webb peddling liquor, playing tribal buddy. His henchmen sneak through camp, stealing horses and guns.

From a distance, Bass sees people stammering, several argue, many pass whiskey. Lots of HOOTING. Total chaos.

JENNIE

Bass, there's nothing you can do.

Bass looks back at Jennie. Strokes her face.

BASS

I'm gonna kill that man one day.

JENNIE

You ever think maybe he kills you?

BASS

Never.

Bass turns to the woods and rides off.

TITLE CARD: TEN YEARS LATER -- VAN BUREN, ARKANSAS - 1875

EXT. REEVES FARM -- DAY

Naked from the waist up, Bass, now 37, hitches a mule team to a plow, works the field. The mule team gets off track.

BASS (HOLLERING)

I see you mules are lettin' your
jack-ass side run things today.

One mules BRAYS, and the other curls a lip.

BASS (CONT'D)

Quit donkeyin' around.

Two horseman ride in from the west, THUDDING up dust. Five children follow a pregnant Jennie out the screen door.

JAMES F. FAGAN, 45, full beard, dismounts. He removes his hat revealing a dark receding hairline.

With a confident walk, he approaches Bass. Bass drops the plow. He wears an uncertain expression. Bass steps toward the man. The other horseman fidgets in the saddle.

BASS (CONT'D)

What can I do for you?

JAMES FAGAN
Are you Bass Reeves?

BASS
That all depends on what you want?

JAMES FAGAN
They told me you were a character.
I'm James Fagan, U.S. Marshal.

BASS
Am I under arrest?

JAMES FAGAN
No. President Grant appointed Judge
Isaac Parker to clean up outlaw
activity in Indian Territory. We
understand you speak the languages.

BASS
I do.

JAMES FAGAN
Pretty good with a gun too, I hear.

BASS
You want me to shoot somebody?

JAMES FAGAN
We would you like to join us at the
United States Marshal's service?

BASS
I gave up scouting for family time.

JAMES FAGAN
You'd be a deputy U.S. Marshal.

Bass looks at his arm, rubs it, then looks up at Fagan.

BASS
Don't make sense y'all ridin' all
this way to make sport of me?

JAMES FAGAN (NODS)
You'd be the first black marshal.

BASS
That don't bother y'all none?

JAMES FAGAN

You know the languages, the land,
you're a crack shot, plus outlaws
will not expect you to have a
badge. We can't imagine anyone
better suited to the task.

Bass smiles, stretches his neck, and forwards his eyes behind Fagan toward his wife. Jennie sends back a scowl.

JENNIE

We gotta talk, Bass. Count these
kids cause they're counting on you.

Bass scratches his head, looks out toward the field then back at Fagan and gives him a quirky smile.

BASS

Honestly, gettin' away from them
mules sounds good to me.

The two men laugh.

BASS (CONT'D)

But I'll need to discuss it with my
current boss, of course.

Bass tilts his head to look over Fagan's shoulder at Jennie.

JENNIE

Amused with yourself?

JAMES FAGAN

I have a wife and a family. I
understand. It's not easy.

Bass nods. Fagan turns around, tips his hat to Jennie.

JAMES FAGAN (CONT'D)

A peace officers toughest job is
keeping the peace at home.

BASS

Look forward to hearing the secret.

JAMES FAGAN

I'll be in Fort Smith until Friday.
Judge Parker can't wait long.

BASS

See you tomorrow then.

Fagan mounts his horse and the two men ride off.

INT. BASS REEVES HOME - AFTERNOON

Bass and Jennie stare at each other...

JENNIE
Indian territory? Trackin' crazy
white men for other white men in
the wildest land in the West.

BASS
My people need me, Jen.

JENNIE
Your people, huh?

BASS
Outlaws have taken over Indian land
that the government gave them after
they stole their other land, Jen.

A beat.

BASS (CONT'D)
I feel a sense of duty.

JENNIE
Duty. Huh.

Jennie pats each child on the head and then pats her bump.

JENNIE
Duty has a home.

BASS
We've struggled for the better part
of a decade farming this place.

A beat.

BASS (CONT'D)
It's about honor, law and order --
and justice, real justice. Jen?

JENNIE
It's about running.

Bass looks confused.

JENNIE (CONT'D)
We ain't gonna keep Daddy chained
down, are we kids?

Several kids respond no, nah, nuh-uh, nope.

BASS
Is that what you think?

JENNIE
You'd feel freer out there, huh?

Bass wraps his arms around his wife and holds her tight.

BASS
I have a chance to do something
special no black man has ever had
the opportunity to do.

Bass holds Jennie, rolls his shoulders with her in his arms
back and forth. He begins to hum a tune.

JENNIE
That ain't gonna work right now.

BASS
We could stop worrying about money.

JENNIE
I knew you'd find some angle.

BASS
You want shoes for the kids, some
new clothes yourself, a new stove?

He pulls Jennie back, looks into her eyes.

BASS (CONT'D)
Stop me when I'm lyin'.

JENNIE
You weren't going to include me in
this decision.

He holds her tighter.

BASS
We're thinking through everything,
the good and bad. We're doing that
together, right here, right now.
Both of us.

JENNIE
The kids could use some shoes and
some new clothes.

BASS
And you too.

Jennie rubs the back of Bass' head, puts her head on his shoulder. A lone tear rolls down her cheek.

JENNIE

I knew you'd take the offer when it came out of his mouth.

Jennie backs off and wipes away her tears.

JENNIE (CONT'D)

Smells like the cornbread's ready.

EXT. INDIAN TERRITORY -- DAY

Jim Webb gathers a posse of about 40 men around the porch of BYWATERS TAVERN, and they ready to listen to him speak.

Webb walks out, bottle in hand.

WEBB

Fellas, our time of free roaming as outlaws here in Indian Territory has come under attack by the U.S. Government. They've seen fit to send lawmen to get rid of our kind.

A few HOOTS and HOLLERS.

HENCHMAN # 1

We've run this area for near ten years. We'll eat 'em alive.

WEBB

They're hiring a lot of men. We do have the advantage, the contacts.

HENCHMAN # 2

But we got to be careful.

WEBB

Exactly. You know who to trust?

HENCHMAN # 2

And who not to.

WEBB

Good. I trust you guys to tighten it up. No senseless shooting, no rape, no burning people's barns that don't pay for protection.

HENCHMAN # 3

We might as well become bank clerks
or accountants.

LAUGHTER

WEBB

We'll get back to the gritty, but,
let's stick to liquor, guns and
horses for now.

HENCHMAN # 4

So we can still steal horses?

WEBB

How else would you acquire them?

HENCHMAN # 4

Ain't never stole a single one,
just borrowed 'em and lent 'em out.

WEBB

And they lent you money for them.
Look, we have a duty to trade or
sell as much liquor, guns and
horses as we can steal down in
Texas in the next few months.

More HOOTING, HOLLERING.

WEBB (CONT'D)

We'll see if those marshals can
cover 75,000 miles of liquored up
hostiles armed with Winchesters.

HENCHMAN # 2

Ain't had no law for ten years, and
we ain't allowing it now.

WEBB

We run this place; the Indians know
it. Put your thumb on these now
civilized tribes -- create chaos.

HENCHMAN #4

I hear the new judge is setting a
tone and will hang six men at once.

HENCHMAN #3

Well, that'll draw a crowd.

WEBB

Create chaos on our side of the border, but deal only with the trusted -- and know who that is!

EXT. FORT SMITH, ARKANSAS / COURTHOUSE - MORNING

A crowd gathers and stare at a white wooden platform in front of the courthouse where six nooses dangle.

An older man checks the mechanics. DEPUTY HECK THOMAS, white, 30s, thick mustache, jaunty expression approaches Bass.

HECK

You here for the hangin'?

BASS

I'm here to see Judge Parker.

HECK

You must be Bass Reeves. Heard-tell you lived among the natives.

BASS

They're family.

HECK

As a congressman, Judge Parker gave fiery speeches in support of Indian rights. He's sponsored bills for fair treatment. He's very excited to meet you.

The men tie their horses and enter the courthouse.

INT. JUDGE PARKER'S OFFICE - MORNING

Bass and Fagan enter the Judge's chambers. Parker stares out the window toward the gallows below, lost in thought.

Bass looks at Fagan. Fagan keeps staring ahead at Parker.

JAMES FAGAN

Your Honor, Bass Reeves is here.

Judge Parker spins around and smiles, looks Bass over.

JUDGE PARKER

Hands made for Colt 45s.

BASS

Shoot with both of 'em, yes-sir.

Parker points to a huge map on the wall, Indian Territory.

JUDGE PARKER
75,000 acres. Five tribes. The
outlaws outnumber us. The Indians
don't trust us.

BASS
U.S. lawmen can now legally enter?

JUDGE PARKER
With a Lighthorse posseman, yes.
It's the wildest land in the West.

JAMES FAGAN
The tribal police are overwhelmed.
We're hoping you can bridge the
gap.

JUDGE PARKER
You lived among all the tribes?

BASS
I lived among two, but know the
landscape and all the languages.

JUDGE PARKER
Impressive. Will you join us?

The judge offers his hand.

JUDGE PARKER (CONT'D)
Don't break it. I do pride myself
on a firm handshake, but those bear
claws look like they'd crack iron.

BASS
Thank you for the offer. I accept.

JUDGE PARKER
How does your wife feel about it?

Bass looks at Fagan working off a grin.

BASS
She'll be okay.

JUDGE PARKER
Wives worry. It's what they do. But
where would we be without them.

BASS
Amen to that.

JUDGE PARKER
We hope Jennie will be happy,
supportive. I'll make sure she's
taken care of while you're away.
Wives and families are important.

BASS
Jennie will appreciate the gesture.

Outside the crowd ERUPTS, people start YELLING.

JUDGE PARKER
Bass, Jim, come to the window.

Six men follow a pastor up the white steps of the gallows.
They stand side by side. The hangman places a hood and noose
around each of their necks. He looks up at Parker who nods.

The Hangman places a long wooden rod through six iron rings.
As he pulls the rod back, the bottom hatch doors fall open.
SIGHS and ROARS and the SCREECH of the rope -- six men fall,
legs twitch, stop, sway.

JUDGE PARKER (CONT'D)
I hate hanging men, but I have to
establish a precedent. After today,
they'll call me the hanging judge,
and before we're through outlaws
will call this Hell on the border.

BASS
Point made.

JUDGE PARKER
This will be the last one I watch.

Parker, in the middle, slaps Bass and Fagan on the back.

JUDGE PARKER (CONT'D)
Try to bring 'em in alive, Bass.

Bass nods.

JUDGE PARKER (CONT'D)
Or Dead. If you deem it necessary.

BASS
I believe every man should have his
day in court, sir.

JUDGE PARKER
My good man, you are unique.

BASS

I know a good Lighthorse posseman.

Parker pours three fingers of whiskey in three glasses.

BASS (CONT'D)

None for me. The last time I drank--

JUDGE PARKER

You're not going to hit me are you?

BASS

How did you know--

JUDGE PARKER

I've crossed paths with George
Reeves. Politics.

Bass offers a confused look to Parker and Fagan.

JUDGE PARKER (CONT'D)

Don't worry, we're not close. I
fought for the Union.

An uncomfortable silent beat.

JUDGE PARKER (CONT'D)

You'll need a cook and a tumbleweed
wagon. You know what that is?

BASS

A jail on wheels.

Parker passes a glass to Fagan and offers Bass a glass once
more. Bass still looks confused that Parker knows George.

JUDGE PARKER

Decline if you wish, but it is the
best whiskey outside of Scotland.

Bass accepts the glass.

JUDGE PARKER (CONT'D)

To honor and justice.

The men CLINK glasses and throw back the whiskey.

BASS (WINCING)

Whoa, that'll get ya there.

JAMES FAGAN

Yeah, it will.

Judge Parker pats Bass on the back.

EXT. INDIAN TERRITORY -- NIGHT

Webb and his huge posse ride fast into an Indian camp. Many native men come out, but see there are many horsemen approaching from all sides and no one is shooting.

Webb rides up front holding a torch.

WEBB

Where is Chief Dancing Bear?

INDIAN MAN #1

You mean Chief Sebastian?

Webb CHUCKLES, turns to his men.

WEBB

Sebastian. See, he's so tame he's gone English on us.

INDIAN MAN #2

What do you want from us?

WEBB

Cooperation.

INDIAN MAN #3

We have been--

WEBB

New era, new rules.

INDIAN MAN #4

We are tired of you coming and demanding things. What now?

WEBB

Like you're gonna do anything -- chicken lips.

INDIAN MAN #4

Why insult--

WEBB

Didn't come here to pluck your feathers. I only want information.

INDIAN MAN #2

No more stealing? No more shaming?

WEBB

No. You've paid your dues, good people of the land.

INDIAN MAN #3
What then? Women?

WEBB
I don't want your squaws either.
Although that little drip of nectar
right there looks--

INDIAN MAN #3
She's 13.

WEBB
I'm kidding. I want information on
any white men that come asking
questions about me or my men.

INDIAN MAN #1
Easy enough. And you promise to
leave us alone.

WEBB
No lies. No problems. You try to
set me up, or lie -- mass chaos.

The Indians all gather and talk amongst themselves.

INDIAN WOMAN #1
No more raids; no more rape?

WEBB
Only information. But all of it.

INDIAN MAN #1
Important information?

WEBB
It is for you too. These men are
going to have badges, and will tell
you they will protect you. Heard
this one before?

INDIAN MAN #3
Yeah. They took our land, moved us.

WEBB
I'll only take information. Unless
you lie, then I'll take more than
land. Understood?

The Indians gather and discuss the situation. They return,
nod in agreement. Webb and his men ride off.

INT. Judge Parker's Office - Day

Bass stands with several officers. An abundance of papers stacks rest on Parker's desk. Parker fans out the warrants.

JUDGE PARKER
Grab six writs and get gone.

Bass waits, watches the other deputies thumb through writs.

BASS
Give me the baddest, meanest ones.

JUDGE PARKER
None of y'all want Dozier, Webb, or the Brunter Bothers, right?

BASS
You got a writ on Jim Webb?

JUDGE PARKER
Know him?

BASS
Serious history.

JUDGE PARKER
He's spent years living in Indian Territory. He likely knows as many or more people than you do.

HECK
Better take a few extra men.

BASS
Don't need but one. My posseman, Kono, from the Seminole tribe.

HECK
Someone you know well.

BASS
A brother I've missed for years.

Judge Parker shuffles through the writs, pulls the ones mentioned, and places them in Bass huge outstretched hands.

BASS (CONT'D)
Can someone to read me these writs?

JAMES FAGAN
Read them to you?

BASS
I'll memorize 'em, sight and sound.

The men look at Bass and then Judge Parker.

JUDGE PARKER
The many talents of Bass Reeves.
Someone read the man his writs.

Heck Thomas grabs them, grins at Bass.

HECK
You've got Pigeon-Foot Pam, Dingle-
ball Dan, and Cat Shit Willie.

The room ERUPTS in LAUGHTER. Bass shakes his head.

EXT. INDIAN TERRITORY - DAY

Bass, Kono, and HUEVO, a black Mexican cook, ride along a high point and look down on the landscape of wooded thicket that gives way to a red rugged patch of dry land scattered with sagebrush and cactus.

Bass reaches into his saddlebags and retrieves a monocular, lays down, looks. He views a lone cabin far in the distance.

BASS
That's it, guys. You two stay here.

Bass places the monocular into the saddle bag and pulls out a pair of dusty frayed pants, a weathered shirt, a floppy hat.

He starts to undress.

HUEVO
What is he doing?

KONO
I rename him -- Dark Moon.

Bass snickers.

KONO (CONT'D)
You look ragged, like a drifter.

BASS
Perfect.

KONO
Riding down alone?

BASS
Walking alone.

HUEVO
Don't get yourself killed.

BASS
Startin' to sound like my wife.

HUEVO
Who cooks better?

Bass Laughs.

BASS
Ain't answerin' that.

Kono grabs the monocular, pulls it open, looks.

KONO
Must be twenty miles away?

BASS
That'll give y'all plenty of time.

HUEVO
To what?

BASS
Get to know one another.

Kono and Huevo look at each other.

BASS (CONT'D)
I mean I don't want to come back
and find you two are gettin'
married or nothin'.

Bass removes his hat and shoots two holes in it, one high on the crown, another one the side of the brim.

BASS (CONT'D)
Show Kono how to cook. Might come
in useful if you high-tale it back
to Texas or keel off yourself.

KONO
Wouldn't mind learning the eggs.

Huevo shakes his head, shoots Kono a look.

BASS
Can tell you boys are gonna to have
a hellova party while I'm gone.

Bass notices his footwear.

BASS (CONT'D)
Huevo, give me your boots.

Huevo hesitates watching Bass remove his shiny black boots.

HUEVO
I'm keeping these if you don't make
it back.

Bass STOMPS into the smaller boots. Dust FLIES. The men cover their faces; Huevo COUGHS. Bass starts down the hillside.

KONO
Trust me. He will come back.

Huevo looks at Kono.

HUEVO
These are nice boots.

A scorpion crawls. A spider retreats. A snake curls, RATTLES.

Bass maneuvers past small cactus, scrub brush -- he stops, rubs his sore feet, continues on. Sun. Heat. Sweat.

EXT. DALTON CABIN - DUSK

Bass makes the journey just as the sun sets. The clouds flare electric bright colors against a blue-black sky.

Bass staggers toward the house, sweat-wet and thirsty.

An OLD WOMAN steps out onto the porch pointing a shotgun.

OLD WOMAN
Whatcha want, darkie?

Bass drops himself into character.

BASS
Just a drover ma'am. Got culled
from the herd by a lawman. He come
up on me while I was riding drag.
Said I was wanted.

OLD WOMAN
What'd you steal?

BASS
Ain't never took nothin' I didn't
need, and never from po' folk.

OLD WOMAN
You wouldn't steal from me?

BASS
No, ma'am, I just need some water.
Maybe a little food if you got it.

OLD WOMAN
Bounty hunter or a lawman you seen?

BASS
Lawman. Had a badge.

OLD WOMAN
No lawmen in these parts. You know
where you are?

BASS
Indian Territory. Came up this way
cause I heard there was no law.

OLD WOMAN
Where'd you hear that?

BASS
Fellas that gave me these boots.
They're a tad small.

OLD WOMAN
I can see that.

BASS
Was barefoot when I run off.
Ma'am, I'm real thirsty?

The woman looks Bass over. His cracked lips, torn shirt,
floppy hat with holes. She looks around the far country.

OLD WOMAN
Got your hat shot up too, I see.

Bass takes his hat off and looks at it.

BASS
Yessum. That lawman.

OLD WOMAN
Water well's out back. Draw it up
and drink from the ladle if you
like. My boys'll be home soon.

INT. DALTON CABIN -- NIGHT

The old woman serves Bass and her two sons bowls of stew.

BASS
Got away when he was sleepin' but
he woke up. Come up this way cause
I heard the law got no jur-is...

LELAND DALTON
Jurisdiction.

BASS
That's the word.

TACK DALTON
They didn't learn ya none did they?

BASS
Who is they?

TACK DALTON
Your slavers.

BASS
Slavery ended ten years ago. Why--

TACK DALTON
Cause ain't no Negro I know carpet-
bagged down here like other yanks.

LELAND DALTON
You good with cattle?

BASS
Rope. Ride. Cut em out. Head em up.

LELAND DALTON
You've got a job then. We're taking
a herd north. Might have to shoot
and Indian or two.

Bass hovers over his bowl having just taken a bite and raises his eyes, the boys staring at him. He chews and swallows.

BASS
Yeah. I don't mind shootin' someone
if'n they need it.

INT. DALTON CABIN - DAWN

Bass sits in the corner chair, dressed, whittles a toothpick. He moves the shade letting the morn's first light shine in.

The CLICKS of two Colt hammers wake the Daltons. Bass chews on the toothpick, guns pointed at each of the Daltons.

BASS

As much as I like your Ma, and appreciate her hospitality, I'm gonna have to take you boys in.

LELAND DALTON

Who the hell are you?

BASS

Deputy U.S. Marshal, Bass Reeves.

TACK DALTON

You son of a--

BASS

Hey, I just said a good word about your mother, don't go cursing mine. Now get your boots on.

The Dalton boys walk out front of the house handcuffed together as Bass follows behind, guns drawn. The Dalton mother comes out with her shotgun, but it won't fire.

BASS (CONT'D)

I removed the firing pin, ma'am.

OLD WOMAN

You ain't nothing but a crazy-ass--

BASS

Lawman-- crazy-ass, clever, lawman.

Bass marches the men away.

OLD WOMAN

You can't arrest white folks.

BASS

Just did.

The old woman throws down the shotgun and follows SCREAMING.

INT. BASS REEVES HOME -- NIGHT

Jennie serves Bass food and sits down at the large table packed with eight children. The older ones have grown considerably.

JENNIE

These kids don't even know who you are. Your just the man that rides in and brings Momma new babies.

Bass looks at the children with a wide grin.

BASS

Alice, Sally, George, Robert, do y'all think I'm the stork?

They shake their heads, no.

BASS (CONT'D)

What about you, Harriet?

HARRIET

No. You're our Da-dee.

BASS

See, my kids know me, ain't that right, Bennie? Lula? Newland?

JENNIE

You gonna call the role or eat?

BASS

Been waitin' on your home ccookin'.

JENNIE

I hope that's not all.

BASS

Got a surprise for you later.

LITTLE LULA

I want a surprise.

Bass and Jennie laugh.

BASS

I'll bring you all something extra special next time. This surprise is just for your momma.

JENNIE

And I been waiting real patient.

Bass leans and kisses Jennie. The kids make faces and noises.

NEWLAND

Ewe.

HARRIET
Na-sty, sir.

They all laugh at four-year-old Harriet.

BENNIE
Are you going to stick around long
enough to take me fishing?

BASS
Maybe next time.

JENNIE
You ain't leaving --

BASS
Tomorrow. I got to. Seven writs
layin' on judge's desk waitin' on
me, prolly ten by mornin'.

JENNIE
Bass. You just got--

BASS
Shh.

JENNIE
Don't you shush me.

LITTLE LULA (O.S.)
Y'all gonna argue again?

BASS
No. We're not. Come here child.

Bass picks up Lula and blows on her tummy as she giggles.
Then he starts chasing all the kids around the house. Bass
rolls on the ground and all the kids except Bennie jump on
top of him. Jennie starts picking up dishes.

JENNIE
How much longer you gonna do this
to us? Them kids need you, Bass.

EXT. MUD CREEK -- DAY

Bass and Kono ride up on a herd of stray cows and a group of
cowboys crowded around a hole in the earth, WHOOPING. The men
attempt to rope a steer stuck in the muck.

Several broken lariats dangle from the horns, the animals
head lolls back and forth, spent. Bass dismounts.

BASS (TO THE COWBOYS)
Y'all should know better.

The men look at Reeves as he starts undressing.

COWBOY #1
You going in, fella?

BASS
Naw, I thought I'd get naked and
let y'all stare at my black ass.

COWBOY #2
Black Moon rising.

Kono laughs along with the cowboys.

Bass, buck naked, starts into the bog toward the steer.

The cowboys WHISTLE and HOOT as Bass wades across the mud,
strokes the steer in calm comfort, removes the lariats.

BASS (TO THE STEER)
We're gettin' outta here. Both of
us. Work with me, big fella.

Cowboys have fun jeering, pointing, laughing.

COWBOY #3
You whispering in its ear?

Bass, undeterred, runs his hand up and down the steers back
caressing the animals neck, soothing it's tired muscles.

COWBOY #4
He's sure got a way with steers.

Bass wades to the front of the steer, rubs its head. He
spreads his large hands slow across the horns and latches on.

COWBOY #5
Hold on so we don't have to pull a
horn outta your black ass.

Bass tugs slow, steady, with upward thrusts allowing the
steer to respond; it does.

COWBOY #4
Fellas that's a naked Negro
wrestling a steer in the mud.

The animal rocks, kicks but doesn't clear the mud level. It
sinks further. Bass stops.

COWBOY #3
I figured you for a quitter.

Bass wipes his hands on the animals back. Soothes it again.

THE RAMROD
Ten bucks says he gets him out.

COWBOYS #3
I'm taking that bet.

Bass grabs the horns again and steps backward, muscles flexing, steer snorting, hooves churning, mud flying.

The steer lifts its front legs, stretches out, but its rear legs suction in -- it BELLOWS. Bass HOLLERS in frustration.

COWBOY #4
Count me in for ten.

COWBOY #5 AND #1
Me too... Yep.

At the rear of the animal, Bass runs a hand down the right leg sunken lower than the left. He lifts, dislodges the hoof.

COWBOY #4
If your looking for his balls, he
ain't got none.

As laughter ERUPTS from the bank, Bass moves back to the front of the beast and pulls again. The steer moves forward two feet, sinks again. Bass falls.

COWBOY #2
We're gonna have to pull a dead
Negro out with the steer.

Bass stands, tries again. The steer rocks back and forth with fury, makes an energetic lunge, releases a LOUDER BELLOW.

The steer knocks Bass backward several feet this time into the mud and stammers up the embankment toward dry land.

Bass, sunken, holds his dry hat up in symbolic victory.

The cowboys go wide-eyed and quiet as the steer runs past them into the woods.

THE RAMROD
Pay up fellas.

Bass walks up and out slow, mud lacquering his naked body.

BASS (TO KONO)
Would you hold my hat please-sir.

KONO
I'd be Honored.

Bass scrapes the mud from his naked skin with his bare hands as the cowboys watch amazed.

The sorrel comes trotting up when Bass whistles. Bass climbs on the horse undressed. Kono hands him his hat.

Bass tilts his head and tips the hat brim to the outfit as if they were ladies.

BASS
And they call themselves cow-boys!

Bass and Kono turn together and ride off into the woods.

EXT. INDIAN TERRITORY -- DAY

Two horsemen stare at Bass and Kono from an adjacent ridge. A sunken valley stretches between them. They yell across...

BASS
Been awhile, Webb. Let's make a fire, share some coffee.

JIM WEBB
Maybe another time. We'll meet again. I'm certain of it.

BASS
Funny how you used to be after me, now I'm after you.

JIM WEBB
That the way you see it, huh?

BASS
Got a badge and holdin' paper on you that says wanted dead or alive.

JIM WEBB
They give you people badges now?

BASS
U.S. Marshal's service.

JIM WEBB

To me, you're just the same smart-
ass Nigra slave from the riverbank.
I'll always be after you, Bass.

BASS

Till next time then.

JIM WEBB

I'm not going anywhere.

Bass turns his horse, Kono follows.

BASS

He'll set a trap tonight expecting
me. He's set himself up with guards
and a full staff.

KONO

We're just going to leave him.

BASS

Let me think on how to get him.
We've got a full list.

EXT. INDIAN TERRITORY -- DAY

Bass rides away from the posse through the woods. A shot
ECHOES from a distance. Bass spurs his sorrel up the trail.

In a clearing he finds two men, JOHN JACKS and NAT YOUNG
searching through the pockets of a dead man. Bass approaches
slow. The men draw on him; Bass puts his hands up.

BASS

Just passin' through.

NAT

We'll see. Dismount.

JACKS

Nice horse, Negro.

NAT

Bet he stole it.

JACKS

We'll make a trade.

BASS

He ain't for trade.

NAT
You ain't herd what we're trading.

JACKS
Give us that horse and your pistols
and we'll give you your life.

The two men have their guns on Bass as he dismounts. He slowly pulls back his duster and eases his hand down removing the pistols. Jacks moves in closer.

JACKS (CONT'D)
Snail like, Negro.

Bass lays them on the ground and stands.

BASS
Fore you fellas leave, would you
read the letter in my pocket to me.

Guns still on Bass, the two men laugh, look at each other.

BASS (CONT'D)
Last request? Without a horse out
here, I'm as good as dead anyway.
Been waitin' two weeks to hear what
my mother wrote.

JACKS
I reckon. Keep your iron on him.

Jacks pulls the paper from Bass' shirt pocket and unfolds it.

NAT
I'm figuring on skinning him alive
and sending his sack back to his
Ma. There a return address?

JACKS
This ain't no letter, it's a--

Bass grabs Jack's pistol and moves it as it fires. He wrestles it away and Jacks falls to the ground. Nat, in shock, still has his gun on Bass, but Bass has his on Nat.

BASS
I'm a deputy US marshal; you're
under arrest.

Bass shows his credentials.

NAT
A black badge don't mean a damn
thing to me, Nig--

BANG -- Bass shoots Nat in the chest. As the outlaw falls to his knees, Bass kneels, staring at Nat's shocked expression. Bass watches Nat's eyes glass over.

BASS
How bout dead? Dead mean a damn
thing?

PLUNK -- Nat to falls face first. Dust flies up. Bass picks up Nat's gun, looks at Jacks who holds up his hands.

EXT. INDIAN TERRITORY -- NIGHT

At camp, Bass loads Jacks in the tumbleweed and walks off by himself. He looks down toward Nat's grave and squats. Bass picks at the grass. His eyes well. Kono walks up.

KONO
First kill is tough. Like the bear.

BASS
I ain't ever doing that again,
less'n I have to.

INT. FORT SMITH/ REEVES' HOME -- DUSK

Jennie serves the children dinner as she mother's them, scolds and chides a few of them for their manners and lack of respect. She appears tired, low energy except for her suppressed anger.

The now seven children hear a lone pair of hooves trod up and run to look outside.

BENNIE
That's Blaze -- Dad.

JENNIE
Sit your butts--

The children run out to meet Bass as he rides in.

JENNIE (CONT'D)
I'm about to wear the black off
your asses.

The much grown children run out, embrace Bass. The smaller ones jump around, paw at him.

Bass' cheekbones sharpen from happiness. On the porch, he bends, takes a special moment with each of his children.

Bass eyes Jennie standing at the door, hands on hips.

BASS

What?

JENNIE

You know what.

Jennie turns and walks back inside.

INT. BASS' HOME -- MORNING

Jennie wakes and reaches for Bass but his spot on the bed is empty. She sighs and leans back. She hears the kids chattering in the kitchen.

JENNIE (CONT'D)

Be there in a minute.

LULA

Nah, Momma, you stay in bed.

Jennie leans up with a quizzical look as Bass comes in with a plate of eggs, beans and tortillas garnished with fresh flowers and a cup of coffee.

JENNIE

Ain't there a law against bribing?

BASS

Tryin' to make up for lost time.

JENNIE

Once time is gone, it's gone.

Bass sets the food down; Jennie takes a bite.

JENNIE (CONT'D)

Where'd you learn to cook like this? These eggs and beans are--

Jennie stops chewing for a second. Bass smiles.

JENNIE (CONT'D)

Got a Mexican woman on the side?

BASS

Jen, the kids... And no. Huevo.

JENNIE

You and Huevo?

Bass looks at Jennie. She tries to keep a straight face and takes another bite. The kids laugh at their parents laughing.

JENNIE (CONT'D)
Okay, kids, I need to talk to your
father. Go outside.

NEWLAND
I thought y'all talked last night.

BASS
Not much. Go on now.

Jennie moves the breakfast to the side, starts kissing Bass.

INT. BASS HOME -- NEXT MORNING BEFORE FIRST LIGHT

Everyone sleeps as Bass gets dressed, goes out to the barn,
and saddles his horse, checks its hooves, strokes its neck.

Jennie struts into the barn, folds her arms next to a lantern
hanging. Bass returns a detached glare. He fastens the bridle
and reins. Tears roll Jennie's cheeks, she turns, walks out.

EXT. INDIAN TERRITORY -- DAY

Bass rides alone, approaches a man sleeping under a tree,
stops, slides back in the saddle, pulls out a paper.

He looks at the illustration and then at the man sleeping.

BASS
Bobby Jack Brunter, wake up.

The man rouses, sleepy-eyed, lifts his hat, looks at Bass.

BOBBY JACK BRUNTER
We don't socialize with your kind
around here. Move it along.

Bobby Jack tilts his hat back down over his eyes.

BASS
Where are your brothers?

BOBBY JACK BRUNTER
They'll be up your ass you don't
get gone. How'd a colored feller
get a horse like-at anyway?

TWO CLICKS. Bobby Jack raises his hat, sees two Colts pointed
at him. Bass elbows his duster aside, revealing his badge.

BOBBY JACK BRUNTER (CONT'D)
Didn't do nothing, mister. Got the
wrong man.

Bass hears a rifle hammer CRACK behind him near a tree line.

BILLY JOE BRUNTER (hollering out)
He's been tracking us, little
brother. His posse's back yonder
about a mile.

BOBBY JACK BRUNTER
Nobody ever tells me nothing.

BILLY JOE BRUNTER (TO BASS)
Heard you was slick. Reckon not.

JETHRO BRUNTER
Don't mind killing us a lawman.
Specially if he's Bass Reeves.

BASS
Well there's Jethro. Now it's an
official hayseed hootenanny.

JETHRO BRUNTER
You bring the candles?

BASS
Nah, I brought the fire.

The brothers all laugh.

JETHRO BRUNTER
We've got guns on you, Negro.

BASS
But I have two on your brother.

BOBBY JACK BRUNTER
Come on guys.

BASS
Jethro, your brothers got two first
names, but you only got one? They
run outta hillbilly names at the
gettin' place?

JETHRO BRUNTER
I got two names. Jethro Dean.

Bass holsters one gun, and pulls out a writ.

BASS
What-da-ya-know. I can't read, but
I see an extra name on there.

Bass extends his arm with the writ toward the treeline.

BASS (CONT'D)
Does that say Dean? If it don't,
reckon I'll have to let you go.

Jethro walks out and starts to grab the paper.

BILLY JOE BRUNTER (TO JETHRO)
Hey, num-nuts!

Bass drops the warrant, quick-draws on Jethro.

BASS
Too late. Now I got both of your
brothers sighted. Billy Joe?

Billy Joe pauses, then fires at Bass' horse. The bullet
shatters the horses back leg. It falls.

Bass rolls off, but keeps one of the guns pointed at Jethro
who is still in the open. Bobby Jack takes cover, but his gun
belt still sits where he slept by the tree. Billy Joe laughs.

BASS (CONT'D)
Now you done pissed me off. I loved
that horse. You crippled him.

The horse MOANS. Bass tucks himself behind the animal for
cover and tries to comfort it. Jethro starts to run. Bass
fires, hits him in the leg. Jethro falls.

BASS (CONT'D)
Jethro, roll over here and
surrender or I'll kill you sure as
your layin' there bleedin'.

BILLY JOE BRUNTER
He won't shoot you in the back.

Jethro starts toward the treeline and Bass aims. Before he
can fire, Billy Joe shoots again from his cover. Bass ducks
as a second round hits his horse which NEIGHS in AGONY.
Jethro rushes to safety with Billy Joe.

BASS
I'm givin' you fellas one more
chance to surrender.

Billy Joe LAUGHS.

Bass catches Bobby Jack's going for his holster. Bass shoots, hits the tree above the holster. Bobby Jack retreats.

BILLY JOE BRUNTER
Damn it, Booby Jack. We'd of had
him on both sides. Stay put.

BASS
Don't listen to your brother. He's
gonna die or hang in Fort Smith. I
can make sure you don't swing.

BILLY JOE BRUNTER
Don't listen to him. Surrender and
we all hang at Hell on The Border.

BASS
You're goin' to Hell anyway.

JETHRO BRUNTER
May be, but not today, Negro.

Billy Joe sneaks around the trees and giving Bass a chance to reach his Winchester on the ground. He follows the sound of CRUNCHING LEAVES with his eyes and sights Billy Joe-- BANG.

Billy Joe falls. HOLLERS. Jethro SCREAMS. Bass' horse MOANS.

BASS
Still have a deal, Bobby Jack. I'll
keep you from the hangman.

Bobby Jack comes out of the clearing with his hands up.

BASS (CONT'D)
Come here. Quick as a squirrel.

Bobby Jack runs to Bass who pulls him in, CLINKS a handcuff to his wrist, runs it under the leather strap under the horse, snaps the other wrist. Bobby Jack confined underneath.

BOBBY JACK BRUNTER
What if the horse tries to get up.

BASS
Get up with him.

Another shot flies from the wounded Billy Joe.

BASS (CONT'D)
Got your little brother. Best give
up or you'll all die right here.

Bass hears Billy Joe running in the woods. He realizes he's running toward him and lays behind Bobby Jack.

BASS (CONT'D)

Be still.

Bass sits his Winchester on Booby Jack's shoulder, cocks. As Billy Joe clears the tree line, Bass fires-- BANG. Kill shot.

JETHRO BRUNTER

No!

BASS

Give up Jethro Dean.

Jethro limps out of the woods, palms toward the sun. Bass looks at his leg, cuffs him to the fallen horse, and makes sure Billy Joe is dead. He sighs, walks over to his horse.

BASS (CONT'D)

Sorry old friend.

Bass reaches down and runs his hand down the muzzle of the horse. He stands and shoots the horse in the head with the brothers still cuffed to the horse. The brothers flinch.

JETHRO BRUNTER

You could've uncuffed us first.

BASS

You're not the smart one, are you?

Bass uncuffs the younger Brunter from the horse and recuffs him to Jethro. He removes Jethro's cuff from the horse and chains it to his other arm.

JETHRO BRUNTER

How come I'm cuffed to him and myself? That don't seem right.

BASS

Can't believe he shot my horse.
Where's your ride youngster?

BOBBY JACK BRUNTER

I reckon they all run off with all the shooting.

Bass removes his saddle and pulls it over his shoulder.

BASS (TO THE DEAD HORSE)

Was a Hellova ride old boy. Thanks.

Bass nudges the two men forward into the trees.

JETHRO BRUNTER
You ain't gonna bury Billy Joe?

BASS
Nope. I loved that horse.

JETHRO BRUNTER
But the wolves will eat him.

BASS
Wolves taste Bily Joe, they'll give
up meat.

EXT. CAMPSITE - NIGHT

Bass sits at a campfire with Huevo, Kono. He starts to say something but stops as a horse rides up startling the men.

HUEVO
I think that's a woman.

BASS
It is a woman.

MARCY GRAYSON, 30s, rides in to camp followed by a stray dog.

BASS (CONT'D)
What in the world, ma'am?

WOMAN
I'm looking for my husband.

She looks toward a dozen prisoners sitting in the tumbleweed. Bass helps her from her horse, and pets the dog.

BASS
Huevo get me the lantern.

Bass takes the light and shines it among the outlaws.

MARCY GRAYSON
Gill. What did you do?

GILL GRAYSON
Honey, you shouldn't be out here.

BASS (TO MARCY)
Who's with you?

MARCY GRAYSON
Nobody.

BASS
I find that hard to believe, ma'am.

Bass turns to Huevo and Kono.

BASS (CONT'D)
Her being here gives me the
fidgets.

The men eat stew. Bass spits a mouthful out.

BASS (CONT'D)
Huevo, the dog wouldn't eat this.

HUEVO
Tired of you spurring me, Bass.

BASS
This tastes like road apple pie.

Huevo gets up and takes Bass' bowl, walks to the drifter dog, grabs it by the scruff, pries its mouth open, and pours the hot soup down the dog's throat.

HUEVO
See he likes it just fine.

BASS
Do that again, we got trouble.

Bass picks up his Winchester and a knife and attempts to dislodge a bullet that's jammed.

KONO
We've been out here too long
gnawing at each other.

HUEVO
I got something for him to gnaw on.

The rifle goes off -- BANG.

Huevo bug-eyes Bass, shocked. He falls back off of a log and MOANS in agony. Bass rushes to him.

The prisoners start WHOOPING and HOLLERING.

Huevo's neck leaks blood. Wide-eyed and weary, he reaches for his wound. Bass folds a scarf and presses on the hole.

BASS
Kono, find a town, get a doctor.

Bass runs to the chuck wagon, retrieves the whiskey, returns, pours it on the wound. Huevo HOLLERS.

Bass sees the butt of the bullet lodged in Huevo's neck, pours whiskey over his fingers, rubs them.

The prisoners several yards away in the tumbleweed maneuver for a view. Blocked by the chuck wagon, they see only specs.

HUEVO

I do not want to die like this.

BASS

Then don't.

Bass digs in. Marcy watches in disbelief. Huevo loses consciousness as Bass pulls out a blood soaked bullet.

Bass continues to work on stopping the bleeding. Huevo turns pale and his body falls limp with no heartbeat.

BASS (CONT'D)

No!

JETHRO BRUNTER

Reckon Mrs. Grayson gets to do the cookin' now?

INT. Bedroom -- Night

Bass tries to approach Jennie as he undresses. She pulls away and gives him a stern look. He reaches out and fetches her.

Bass steps slow behind Jennie and begins to kiss her neck, slipping the dress strap from her shoulders. She shrugs, spins, glares intensely into Bass' eyes.

Still upset, Jennie jaunts into another room. Bass quick-steps toward her, picks her up, returns her to the bedroom, and tosses her on the bed.

Jennie attempts to speak but Bass already has his pants down and positions himself above her. She pretends to fight back, hitting him before giving in -- then moaning in pleasure.

JENNIE

You been gone six months.

BASS

We'll talk in the morning.

The two begin to make loud, passionate love.

From the next room, the children giggle.

CHILD'S VOICE
Are y'all fighting or loving?

JENNIE
Mostly loving. Go to sleep.

INT. BEDROOM -- BEFORE DAYBREAK

Everyone sleeps. Bass gets dressed. Jennie wakes.

JENNIE
Can't you even say goodbye?

BASS
I'll be back.

JENNIE
Later today or next year?

BASS
Today if I'm not in jail.

JENNIE
For what?

BASS
I shot Huevo. An accident.

JENNIE
Is he--

BASS
Dead.

A beat.

JENNIE
Why didn't you say something?

BASS
I needed to get my mind off of it.

INT. FORTH SMITH COURTHOUSE -- DAY

Judge Parker sits behind his desk staring at Bass.

JUDGE PARKER
It's a sorry side of the law, Bass,
but you will have to stand trial.

BASS
Okay, I'm a man of law, of justice.

JUDGE PARKER
The jury will be twelve white men.

Bass smirks, puts his face in his hands.

BASS
Angry, bigoted, white men?

JUDGE PARKER
Sometimes the justice system seems unjust. We'll see.

Bass shrugs his shoulders and sits calm and silent.

BASS
Don't quite seem like a jury of my peers. Or Huevo's for that matter.

JUDGE PARKER
You won't have to take the stand.

BASS
Oh, I want to take the stand.

JUDGE PARKER
Better you don't. Your sharp, witty personality they'll see as uppity.

BASS
I trust your word on that.

JUDGE PARKER
I hope so; it feels like my own son is on trial. Clayton's going to defend you. He believes in you.

BASS
How does he see me?

JUDGE PARKER
As a law man, not a black man.

BASS
How do them twelve see me?

Parker turns and looks out the window. Bass stays seated looking at his mentor.

JUDGE PARKER
What matters is how they will see you when this is over?

The judge throws back a drink.

JUDGE PARKER (CONT'D)
Lots of witnesses are going to
testify against you.

BASS
They're outlaws.

JUDGE PARKER
They're white.

BASS
What about Kono?

JUDGE PARKER
He's not white.

A beat.

JUDGE PARKER (CONT'D)
And Marcy Grayson's a woman.

Judge Parker outwardly struggles.

JUDGE PARKER (CONT'D)
Bass, this is the hardest thing for
me to do considering your past,
but... I have to jail you.

Bass looks at Parker like he can't believe it.

BASS
Really?

JUDGE PARKER
For a murder charge, yes.

Judge Parker paces around awkwardly.

BASS
You ain't got another surprise for
me do ya?

JUDGE PARKER
No. I just can't bring myself to
put shackles on you. Will you walk
with me to the jail?

BASS
Yessir. I will.

The two take a somber, silent walk down the steps descending
into the darkened jail area. Jailer, George Winston, nods.

Winston opens a cell away from the other's incarcerated. They HOLLER and WHOOP as Bass enters. Iron SCREECHES, CLINKS.

EXT. FORT SMITH, ARKANSAS -- DAY

Townsfolk convene at a local store, lining up to pick up the newspaper. A delivery man drops a stack.

Jim Webb grabs one and jumps up on a whiskey barrel.

JIM WEBB
Says here Deputy Bass Reeves killed
his cook on purpose, in cold blood.

The gathering crowd sighs, grasps for a newspaper. They pick and pull as the proprietor attempts to restore order.

Webb's henchmen get in on the act.

HENCHMAN #1
A Negro gets a badge to kill white
folks in cold blood.

WOMAN #1 (TO WEBB)
Gossip's the devil's music -- was a
Mixto he killed.

The crowd stares at the woman. CHATTERS.

HENCHMAN #2
He's killed white people too.

HENCHMAN #3
Killed my cousin over in Abilene.

JIM WEBB
Negros can't handle having a badge.

MAN IN THE CROWD (TO WEBB)
Weren't you just on trial?

JIM WEBB
Found not guilty. Bass Reeves set
me up. Could've been any of you.

People continue CHATTERING.

JIM WEBB (CONT'D)
I've seen Bass Reeves amuse himself
with white women, young ones too.
Could be your daughters.

The crowd gasps, TALKS LOUDER, HEATED.

HENCHMAN #4
That's a hanging offense.

JIM WEBB
He's uses that badge for wrong-
doing. Put him away or hang him.

Disputes erupt over Bass' fate. Webb hops down.

JIM WEBB (TO HIS MEN) (CONT'D)
Chaos. Gotta love it.

INT. FORT SMITH ARKANSAS COURTHOUSE -- DAY

People start to pack into the courtroom. Black folks and
Indians try to get in. Several white bigots block their path.

Judge Parker walks out, WHISTLES LOUD.

JUDGE PARKER
My court. My rules.

He turns and looks at a small gathering of black and Indian
people that are pushed to the side. Judge points to them.

JUDGE PARKER (CONT'D)
These folks get in next.

A few people shout obscenities at the judge.

JUDGE PARKER (CONT'D)
Call me what you want. But anyone
interfering with who gets in spends
a week in jail. We'll start there.

The crowd falls silent. Judge Parker walks back inside.

INT. COURTROOM -- DAY

BAILIFF WINSTON
All rise... The honorable Judge
Isaac Parker presiding.

JUDGE PARKER
First, let me be clear -- every
single person in my courtroom
regardless of skin shade will be
treated with respect.

Chatter fills the courtroom. Parker bangs his gavel.

Montage clips of different witness statements.

OUTLAW WITNESS #1

When the deputy seen the cook pour
hot soup down the dog's mouth, he
shot him, sure as shit.

Parker BANGS the gavel.

OUTLAW WITNESS #2

They had words over the food. Then
he blew the cook's head off.

JETHRO BRUNTER

Like the other fellas said, they
was arguing and the deputy shot him
over the soup and dog and whatnot.

Clayton chuckles.

DEFENSE ATTORNEY CLAYTON

Why do you think the deputy sent
for a doctor?

JETHRO BRUNTER

To make sure he was dead.

LAUGHTER fills the court. Jethro smiles, hillbilly teeth.

INT. COURTHOUSE JAIL -- NIGHT

Judge Parker, James Fagan, and Heck Thomas walk down to the
jail. Bass, behind bars, walks over to the men, nods.

BASS

Good to see you gents. Feels like
my insides are boilin' over.

JUDGE PARKER

Never known you to fidget much?

BASS

Never been on trial for murder.

JAMES FAGAN

The twelve in that box is all you
need to concern yourself with.

BASS

Look like 12 white men who want to
see my boots twitch.

JUDGE PARKER

Time's not on our side and neither
is the crowd right now.

BASS
I ain't done nothin' but right by
these folks.

HECK THOMAS
Mrs. Grayson's testimony would
help, but she's terrified.

JAMES FAGAN
Thinking Webb got to her. We're
sorting it out.

JUDGE PARKER
The newspapers here make you out to
be a shadowy figure.

BASS
Shadow Bass sells papers, I guess.

JUDGE PARKER
Misinformation and money create
much of history's truths.

INT. COURTROOM -- DAY

Kono approaches the stand wearing eye glasses and a suit. A
few grungy men yell insults about an Indian testifying.

PROSECUTOR
Would you take an arrow for Bass
Reeves?

KONO
Yes.

PROSECUTOR
Would you take bullet?

KONO
Yes.

PROSECUTOR
You love him so much, you would lie
for him wouldn't you?

KONO
The path of your words do not fit
in my mouth.

Kono leans forward, looks at the prosecutor over the glasses.

PROSECUTOR
We got us a philosophical Injun.
I'm not even sure what that means?

KONO
It means, no, I do not lie.

Judge Parker smiles.

JUDGE PARKER
Anything else you want to throw at
this man?

PROSECUTOR
No more questions, your honor.

FROM THE CROWD
Anybody trust a redskin's word?

The crowd CHATTERS.

EXT. FORT SMITH, ARKANSAS -- DAY

Talk of the trial runs from sidewalks to saloons to barber
shops. The town is divided.

Outside the courthouse, a group of men gather to protest the
testimony of Kono, an Indian. Judge Parker steps out.

JUDGE PARKER
I can't wait to see your reactions
when a woman takes the stand today.

PROTESTOR #1
A woman. On the stand?

PROTESTOR #2
Next, they'll be wanting the vote.

PROTESTOR #3
God help us if they ever get the
vote; they'll run everything.

A group of ladies walk toward the protestors, Bibles in hand,
red-faced with anger; the men retreat. Judge Parker CHUCKLES.

INT. COURTROOM -- DAY

Montage cuts of witnesses continue.

BOBBY JACK BRUNTER
We could barely see the campfire
where they was sitting, but when
the gun went off I could hear Mr.
Reeves tell the Injun to take his
horse and go find a doctor.

PROSECUTOR
Your brother testified that Deputy
Reeves shot him in cold blood. Are
you calling your brother a liar?

BOBBY JACK BRUNTER
I'm just trying to get right with
the Lord.

The jury's faces take a turn.

Defense Attorney Clayton calls his last witness, MARCY
GRAYSON, 31, homely, petite, pleasant. She's sworn in.

ATTORNEY CLAYTON
Were you scared meeting Mr. Reeves?

MRS. GRAYSON
Oh, no. He was such a gentleman.
Right courteous and charming.

FROM THE CROWD
I bet he was.

Laughter -- Gavel BANGING.

DEFENSE ATTORNEY CLAYTON
You saw the shooting incident?

MRS. GRAYSON
Yes. Deputy Reeves was trying to
pry a bullet from his rifle and the
gun went off. It was an accident.

DEFENSE ATTORNEY CLAYTON
What did Mr. Reeves do then?

MRS. GRAYSON
He raced to the cook, tried to stop
the blood. He was frantic. He sent
the Indian to fetch a doctor.

DEFENSE ATTORNEY CLAYTON
So, he tried to save the cook?

MRS. GRAYSON
Yes. He tried real hard.

DEFENSE ATTORNEY CLAYTON
What was Deputy Reeves' demeanor?

MRS. GRAYSON
He wept.

The crowd GASPS.

Reeves attorney, William Clayton paces the floor. He stops, looks at the men in the jury box, one face at a time, looks across the crowded courtroom, turns to back to the jury.

WILLIAM CLAYTON
Deputy U.S. Marshal Bass Reeves
puts his life on the line to chase
down the rapists, murders, and
thieves. He doesn't do it as a
Negro intending to rid white men of
their privileges. He does it so you
and your children can feel safe.

The attorney paces again. The room is silent.

WILLIAM CLAYTON (CONT'D)
This man of law and order is
innocent -- and you know it. Now
acquit this man and allow him to
return to his duty of making your
lives safe.

The judge orders a recess for the jury to deliberate.

EXT. FORT SMITH ARKANSAS COURTHOUSE - DAY

People talk. A few stake bets on how the jury will decide.

JUDGE PARKER
No gambling in my court.

Some outwardly SHOUT their prejudices toward Bass.

Judge Parker quiets a packed court.

The jury of twelve white men sit at attention.

Bass stands straight, poised, calm-- dapper in his suit.

JUDGE PARKER (CONT'D)
Gentlemen of the jury have you
reached a verdict?

FOREMAN

We have your honor. We the jury
find the defendant, Bass Reeves,
not guilty.

An ERUPTION takes over the courtroom, some SCREAMS, some
BOOING, some WHOOPING, some HOLLERING.

Bass flashes a radiant smile. He shakes attorney Clayton's
hand so hard the counselor retrieves his appendage quickly.

Bass reaches over the railing, grabs Jennie, and lifts her up
and over like a baby. He brings her down for a kiss before
pushing her back up again. Her feet never touch the ground.

Tears drip down from Jennie's onto Bass.

JUDGE PARKER

I know the law isn't always
perfect, but justice prevailed.

Judge Parker's eyes pop wide as Bass bear hugs him.

BASS

Judge, the law ain't perfect, but
it's the only one we got, and
without it, we ain't got nothin'.

Parker pulls Jennie in. The other marshals wait around them.

EXT. JUDGE PARKER CHAMBERS -- DAY

Judge Parker slides Bass his gun and badge.

BASS

Jennie ain't gonna like it none,
but we need the money.

JUDGE PARKER

Miss the thrill of the hunt?

Bass strokes his gun and badge before picking them up.

BASS

It's who I am.

JUDGE PARKER

Got a writ on Bill Dozier and a
dozen more?

BSSS

Gimme all of 'em. What's with Webb?

JUDGE PARKER
He either paid off or intimidated
the witness. We couldn't prove
anything else on him. But...

BASS
What?

JUDGE PARKER
Someone overheard him say after you
were acquitted that he is going
after the things you love.

Bass hesitates.

JUDGE PARKER (CONT'D)
I'll have Jennie and your family
under full watch. Don't worry.

Judge Parker starts reading Bass his assigned writs. Bass
looks on, memorizes them.

EXT. BASS REEVES BARN -- NIGHT

Bass and Jennie caress each other in bed. Things get frisky.
Bass looks down, then directs a false smile at Jennie.

BASS
Looks like my horse just left.

JENNIE
Your mind on another woman?

BASS
No -- Jim Webb.

JENNIE
Damn sure get it up for him.

BASS
Not funny.

Bass rolls, looks out the window toward Indian Territory.

BASS (CONT'D)
After Webb, I'll retire. Stay home.

JENNIE
You said that seven years ago.
Bennie's grown, married, and --
never mind.

Jennie rolls her back to Bass, huffs, stares at the wall.

JENNIE (CONT'D)
Most of the same people you protect
wanted to see you hang.

BASS
I do it for the others, and for my
Indian brothers and sisters.

Bass gets up, dresses.

BASS (CONT'D)
Most of all, I do it for my family.
Think our kids would have shoes?

JENNIE
Good luck out there...

Bass sighs, starts out of the house.

JENIIE
Maybe you'll find your horse.

EXT. INDIAN TERRITORY -- DAWN

The new cook, CICERO, glasses, stocky Mexican, reads a newspaper as the light warms. Kono unloads the full tumbleweed. Bass stirs the fire.

CICERO
It says here Bass died.

KONO
Where's it from?

CICERO
Had it sent from Van Buren. Says
Jim Webb killed you, Bass.

BASS
Wonder if Jennie thinks I'm dead?

KONO
Hoping, maybe?

CICERO
The darkest ghost in the West.

EXT. INDIAN TERRITORY -- DAWN

The posse sit inside a tent. Rain POUNDS the sides.

BASS
Dozier's a criminal by choice.

KONO
Like Webb?

BASS
No. Dozier had money. He chose to
be an outlaw not out of necessity,
but for the pure sport of it.

KONO
Crazy white man.

BASS
I'm going solo or he'll feel it
coming.

Rain HAMMERS downward as Bass enters the thicket on his horse. In the FLASH of lightning, Bass rides deep into the downpour. Thunder BOOMS in concert with the THUDDING hooves.

Bass stops, ponders, looks around in the pouring rain. He looks down at the tracks, barely visible on the trail STREAMING with rainwater.

Bass hears a LOUD CLAP thinking thunder, but quickly realizes it's gunfire when a bullet whizzes past his head.

Bass jerks the reins. He and the horse fall to the ground. The horse rights itself and races off into the storm.

Bass lays motionless in a puddle of the POUNDING RAIN.

A shadow emerges from behind the trees and moves toward Bass. A hazy figure hovers over him, kicks him, laughs.

BOB DOZIER
Got you, you black son of a--

Bass rolls over -- BANG, BANG -- shots from both Colts hit Dozier. The outlaw falls. Bass stands, winks.

BASS
Best you don't talk about my Momma.
Enjoy the rain.

INT. FORT SMITH COURTHOUSE -- DAY

Judge Isaac Parker hands Bass a warrant.

JUDGE ISAAC PARER
Take a writ on a woman?

BASS
White woman

JUDGE PARKER
Yep.

BASS
Damn...
What if she shoots at me.

JUDGE PARKER
I'll give it to Heck. It's just
she's in Seminole nation. You're
more likely to get her alive.

BASS
She sounds fierce.

JUDGE ISAAC PARER
She's a hell-cat. Name is Belle
Starr. Heard of her?

BASS
Oh No. Wow.

JUDGE ISAAC PARER
Know her?

BASS
Yeah from Seminole Nation. She's
the trader who told me about
emancipation, that I was free.

JUDGE ISAAC PARER
Sorry, I will--

BASS
I'll take it. I should take it.

EXT. INDIAN TERRITORY -- NIGHT

Belle visits the Red Dog Saloon and approaches NUDIE, bosomy
blonde, middle aged.

NUDIE
You know what I heard?

BELLE STARR

Shoot.

NUDIE

You ain't gonna like it none.

BELLE STARR

Spit it out or I'll pull your wig off.

NUDIE

Word is Bass Reeves is after you.

BELLE STARR

What? Bass Reeves?

NUDIE

You two have history, I hear?

BELLE STARR

What's the deal.

NUDIE

Bass came through and asked if I knew you, had a writ.

BELLE STARR

You said no, right?

Nudie gives Belle a 'Duh' look. The women throw back a shot.

NUDIE

You got to get, girl.

BELLE

Already gone.

Belle rides out, stops, makes camp.

She has nightmares, remembering Bass shooting, the coin, imagines its her stomach leaking blood.

Twig snaps send Belle jumping up from her bed roll. She sits up, watches the sun rise, makes coffee.

Belle rides into Fort Smith. She walks into the courthouse and asks for Judge Parker. He descends the steps, amused.

JUDGE PARKER

Well, bar the doors, it's Belle Starr.

BELLE STARR
Turnin' myself in, judge. Don't
want no trouble with Bass.

JUDGE PARKER
What is it with you two?

BELLE STARR
It ain't what you think.

JUDGE PARKER
What do I think?

Belle shoots him a look. Holds her arms out.

INT. FORT SMITH JAIL-- DAY

BASS
Surprised you didn't run?

BELLE STARR
I don't want to talk to you, Bass.

BASS
That's okay. I gotta go anyhow.

Bass turns to leave. Belle whistles at him.

BASS (CONT'D)
I ain't a dog.

BELLE STARR
I know.

BASS
Why are you hangin' with Jesse
James and the Younger boys?
You're better than that.

BELLE STARR
You don't know me like you think
you do.

BASS
I guess not.

Bass turns and walks up the steps toward the ground level of
the courthouse lawn, looks up at the gallows, rides off.

INT. BASS BEDROOM -- NIGHT

Bass takes off his boots and places them under the bed.

JENNIE
Decided to come park your boots
under my bead tonight, huh?

She fidgets around the room.

BASS
Where else would I park them

JENNIE
Down at the jail-house with Miss
Belle Starr.

Bass shoots Jennie an "are you serious" look.

BASS
Somebody's a hellova storyteller.

JENNIE
You had a writ on her right?

BASS
She turned herself in.

JENNIE
Why, is the question?

BASS
You got no reason not to trust me.

JENNIE
People talk.

BASS
People lie.

Bass puts his boots back on, walks toward the door, removes his hat from a nail, places it on his head. He opens the door, pauses.

JENNIE
Bass, I can't wait for you anymore.

BASS
Then don't.

Bass shuts the door behind him. Jennie slides down on the floor and WAILS. Bass rides off below a vibrant sprayed sky. Que Ennio Morricone music.

INT. BENNIE REEVES HOUSE -- DAY

Bass and his son, Bennie, 18, drink coffee on the porch.

BENNIE
What would you do if you caught mom
cheating on you?

Bass chokes on his coffee.

BASS
That second sip'll get ya.

BENNIE
I think my wife is fu--

BASS
Having relations with another man.

BENNIE
My insides burn like hell-fire
thinking about it.

BASS
First you gotta know.

BENNIE
Oh, I know.

BASS
Well, son, don't hit her...
But let her know you know.
And that you ain't havin' it.

Bass leans in to his son.

BASS (CONT'D)
Be a man about it.

Bass looks around the room.

BASS (CONT'D)
Where's your gun?

BENNIE
Just under the bed.

Bass pulls the pistol out and looks at it, looks at Bennie.

BASS
I'm takin' this with me.

EXT. INDIAN TERRITORY -- DAY

Jim Webb rides with a posse.

WEBB

Get your asses in gear or you'll
all be eating red-dust for dinner.

One of the men rides up.

HENCHMAN #1

That pastor fella's place is over
yonder ways, over the hill.

Webb turns and takes off. He races his horse up a hill,
whipping and spurring toward PASTOR WILLIAM STEWARD, tall,
black, fifties, white beard.

PASTOR STEWARD

Sir, I could sure use you help.
Thanks for coming.

Pastor Steward is attempting to tend a small brush fire.

WEBB

Ain't here to help.

PASTOR STEWARD

Sir, I'm doing my best to--

WEBB

My men aren't paid to tend Negros.

Steward stops, looks at Webb.

PASTOR STEWARD

What did you rush this way for?

WEBB

You and Bass Reeves close?

Webb's men spread out around Steward, who frantically
attempts to run, but falls. Henchmen WHOOP, HOLLER, CIRCLE.

WEBB (CONT'D)

Rope and ride, boys.

The men lasso Steward at the feet and ride off, dragging him
outstretched over rocks, briars, and cactus before stopping.
Steward lays scarred, bloodied, broken. Webb stands over him.

PASTOR STEWARD

I'm a man of God.

WEBB

Can he save you from the devil.

PASTOR STEWARD

He can.

WEBB

Ha.

Webb pulls out his pistol and shoots Stew in both knees--
Steward SCREAMS in agony.

Webb slowly removes his vest, fashions a pillow, crosses his
boots, and lays and listens to Stew SCREAM. Webb MOCKS him.

WEBB (CONT'D)

Where is he -- your God?

PASTOR STEWARD (HUFFING IN PAIN)

He's coming.

WEBB

And you expect he'll save you?

Steward holds his hand in the air toward the sky.

PASTOR STEWARD

He already has.

Webb visibly angers, hops up, stands directly over Steward.

WEBB

Sweet dreams, Peaches.

Webb shoots; Steward crooks a smile before dying.

INT. BENNIE REEVES HOME -- NIGHT

A man and woman are banging away inside.

Bennie rides in, hears his wife screaming. He busts through
the door, pulls the man off of his wife.

The wife yells for Bennie to stop beating the man. Bennie
turns to his naked wife. She pulls the sheet up to cover
herself. Bennie lets the man drop. The man grabs his clothes.

BENNIE

You hiding yourself from him or me?

Bennie watches as the man jumps out the window bare-assed
naked and runs zigzag across the high grass. Bennie pops off
a few shots from his pistol while sobbing.

Bennie turns irate to his wife, smacks her. She falls on the bed. Bennie eyes his wife up and down. She, again, covers herself in shame and sobs.

Bennie raises the gun, slow, puts it to his head. His wife SCREAMS -- he stops.

In shock, Bennie sits down next to his wife, lays the gun down, strokes her hair. WAILS and WAILS.

Bennie's wife runs her hand over the gun as Bennie WAILS.

She pulls the gun up and places the barrel to her forehead. She smiles at Bennie. He palms the gun, finger to trigger -- BANG.

Bennie's wife's head splatters, she falls dead -- he runs for his horse, gallops away.

EXT./INT. FORT SMITH -- DAY

Bass arrives at the courthouse, Kono pulls a tumbleweed wagon with 12 prisoners. Bass goes inside to get the jailor, George Winston. A few guards follow. The men act in an odd manner toward Bass. Judge Parker stops him in the hallway.

JUDGE PARKER
I need to speak to you, Bass.

BASS
Let me help these guys with the
prisoners, and I'll--

JUDGE PARKER
It's important. They can handle it.

Bass looks confused and sees Judge Parker holding a peculiar look of angst. He follows Parker to his chambers.

Parker reaches into the cabinet and pulls out the good whiskey and two glasses and sits on the edge of the desk.

BASS
I don't care for anything to drink.

JUDGE PARKER
Okay. Well, I'll leave it there.
You might change your mind.

A beat.

JUDGE PARKER (CONT'D)
Jim Webb killed Pastor Steward.

Bass reaches for the drink, gulps it, lingers.

BASS
I'm not bringing him back to hang.

JUDGE PARKER
I don't expect you to.

The judge gets up and wanders to the window. Looks out.

BASS
What else?

JUDGE PARKER
Your son, Bennie, caught his wife
with another man... He killed her.

Bass' knees give. He falls back in the chair.

JUDGE PARKER (CONT'D)
Need another?

BASS
Please! A double. Where is he?

JUDGE PARKER
Texas. Nobody will take the writ,
it's been here over a week.

BASS
Give it to me.

JUDGE PARKER
You sure?

BASS
He'll get his day in court. Not
just his name he put a mark on.

JUDGE PARKER
Go easy on your son, Bass. Jennie
too. She's angry with you. Real
angry. Know that going in.

EXT. FORT SMITH -- BASS REEVES HOME -- DUSK

As Bass rides up, Jennie comes running out the door angry as
stirred red wasps. She beating on Bass with fury, BAWLING.

Bass stands, takes it, allows her to vent. She SLAPS him.
Bass still stands, arms at his sides. She SLAPS him harder.
His face swivels. He turns to look at her with soft eyes.

BASS
I'm so sorry, Jen!

JENNIE
If you'd helped raise the kids--

BASS
I know. I know.

Bass holds his wife close.

BASS (CONT'D)
Jennie, Jim Webb killed Stew.

Jennie pulls back. Stares.

JENNIE
The pastor who married us?

BASS
I'm going after him, then I'll
bring Bennie home.

JENNIE
No, sir! That's not how it's going.

Bass shows an uncharacteristic moment of anxiety.

BASS
I'm torn up about all of this.

JENNIE
Bounty hunters are looking for
Bennie. You go get your son!

BASS
You have no idea how tired--

JENNIE
Now ain't the time to be tired. Get
your ass in the saddle and go.

They stare.

JENNIE (CONT'D)
Now!

EXT. DEEP WOODS -- EAST TEXAS -- NIGHT

Bass tracks in a full moon. He gets restless, tired. He pulls a biscuit to his mouth, spits it out. He rides through the woods along a creek. He hears a man SINGING and stops.

Bass removes his hat, pinches the bridge of his nose, points to the sky, smiles wide, pats his sorrel.

Bass steps down, eases toward the song, close enough to hear the CRACKLING of wood on a fire. He stops, looks through an opening.

Bennie sits alone by campfire chugging from a whiskey bottle, continuing in song. Bass steps closer.

A twig SNAPS and surprises Bennie. He stands, pulls his gun.

BENNIE
Make yourself known.

Bass waits, stays silent.

BENNIE (CONT'D)
I'm as quick as they come.

BASS (FROM THE DARKNESS)
That's laying it on a bit thick,
wouldn't you say?

BENNIE
Dad?

A beat.

BENNIE (CONT'D)
Go back to your Indian Territory.

BASS
Can I come into camp? Bounty on you
is a grand, dead or alive. I'd like
to get you to safety.

BENNIE
I'm not going to prison.

BASS
Better than being dead.

Bass walks toward the fire-light where Bennie can see him.

BASS (CONT'D)
Let me take you in, son. You'll
have a fair trial, maybe do some
time, but you'll live. Have a life.

Bennie raises the gun at his father. Bass straightens.

BASS (CONT'D)
Don't make me shoot you, Bennie.

BENNIE
Because you would. Wouldn't you?

BASS
Let's not find out.

Bass walks up and reaches slow for the gun and Bennie releases and falls into Bass' arms. Bennie SOBS.

BASS (CONT'D)
I let you down.

Bennie continues to sob.

BASS (CONT'D)
What made you--

BENNIE
You told me to be a man about it.

BASS
Killing her wasn't my message. I took your gun, remember?

BENNIE
I had another one. Dad, I almost--

BASS
I'm glad you didn't.

Bass grabs his son, tries to comfort him. They share tears.

BENNIE
We never went fishing.

BASS
We'll get through this together.

BENNIE
You going to do my time, too?

BASS
You're the one who shot your wife.

EXT. VAN BUREN ARKANSAS -- BASS REEVES HOME -- DAY

Jennie churns butter alone on the front porch. She hears HOOFBEATS, stands. Men come around both sides of the house.

Webb emerges and tips his hat wearing a wicked grin. Jennie SCREAMS and runs inside. The men follow, break windows, kick in the door. Webb rips her clothes, throws her on the bed.

EXT. FORT SMITH COURTHOUSE DAY -- DAY

Bass rides with Bennie toward the courthouse, a crowd gathers. People whisper and carry on as the men pass.

MAN IN THE CROWD
That your son?

BASS
It is. He's gotta follow the law
just like everyone else.

Bass dismounts as does Bennie, handcuffed. The crowd watches Bass escort his son inside the jail.

EXT. BASS REEVES HOME -- NIGHT

Bass, about to spill from the saddle, approaches home. He hears YELLING, sees Jennie strapped to a tree.

A knife holds a note to the trunk. Bass unties Jennie and holds her in his arms as she WAILS.

BASS
What happened, Jen? Talk to me.

Jennie's eyes show hysteria. She beats on Bass as he tries to hold her. He picks her up, takes her inside, covers her.

JENNIE
Why? Why, Bass? You can protect
everyone but your wife and family.

BASS
You sent me after Bennie, remember?
I found him.

Jennie SCREAMS again, throws things at Bass. He dodges.

BASS (CONT'D)
Did they--

JENNIE
No.

A beat.

JENNIE (CONT'D)
He wants you to understand the
consequences of going after him.

BASS
Webb?

Jennie nods.

BASS (CONT'D)
Where are the children?

JENNIE
Aunt Betty's.

BASS
It's okay. I'm here now.

Bass caresses Jennie, rocks her.

Bass places Jennie and puts her in bed. He wets a rag and places it on her face. He caresses her, starts to get up.

JENNIE
Don't you dare leave.

BASS
I'm just going into the kitchen.

JENNIE
Don't you leave this room.

Bass turns around, removes his clothes, and climbs into bed with his wife, cuddles her, SINGS her to sleep.

INT. BASS REEVES HOME -- DAWN

Bass sleeps. Jennie gets up, methodically makes coffee, returns with a cup for Bass, sits next to him on the bed.

Bass notices she's marked up, bruised worse than he realized.

BASS
You need to see a doctor.

Jennie sips her coffee, calm, serious.

JENNIE
I want to see Bennie, too.

BASS
Judge has him in a safe area.

JENNIE
Good. Bass?

BASS
Yessum?

JENNIE
Get Webb, then come home and stay.

BASS
I can do that.

Bass sits up, chugs his coffee and gets dressed.

Jennie embraces Bass her shoulders jerk with SOBS.

JENNIE
Don't come home til he's dead.

EXT. - INDIAN TERRITORY -- DAY

MONTAGE

Bass, on horseback, gallops the grassland prairies, up rocky hillsides, crosses a river, and strides across dusty plains.

EXT. INDIAN TERRITORY -- DAY

Bass stops at a creek, waters his horse, spurs him again into the woods.

In a flash-- WHOOSH, bunched tree limbs flap toward Bass, WHACK. The trap knocks him from his horse.

Bass scrambles to draw his pistols, but several men have rifles pointed at him, one of them is Jim Webb.

JIM WEBB
Keep your hands where we can see
'em, Bass, or we'll shoot you where
you sit.

Webb's brows arch and his smile widens.

JIM WEBB (CONT'D)
Your weakness is overconfidence.

BASS
We'll see.

Webb's henchmen close in and one removes Bass' two Colt revolvers and stands him up, pats him down. He pulls out the Bowie knife and a smaller blade.

JIM WEBB
Been a long time coming.

The henchman tries to tie Bass' hands behind his back, but Bass resists. The henchman hits Bass with the butt of his rifle and knocks him out.

EXT. JIM WEBB'S FARM -- DUSK

Bass wakes up, he is bound at the ankles hanging upside down from a tree over a small pen. Three huge hogs SQUEAL and SNORT in the mud below.

Webb and a dozen henchmen laugh and throw things at Bass.

Webb stretches a pole with a hooked end toward Bass and pulls him to the side.

JIM WEBB
Slick him down, boys.

Two henchmen take a large dutch oven, gloved hands on either side and pour a hot liquid all over Bass.

Bass grits his teeth, but doesn't scream.

JIM WEBB (CONT'D)
Them hogs love chicken fat.

Webb slings Bass back over the pen. Hogs jump up trying to get a bite as Bass wiggles and dodges as best he can.

A henchman on the other side catches Bass and slings him back across to Webb as the hogs jump again.

The next pass, a hog takes a bite out of Bass' arm as he tries to slap them away. The men LAUGH.

A few men throw pieces of chicken at Bass as he is continually passed over the pen. The meat falls and the pigs get a taste. They work into a frenzy to get at Bass.

JIM WEBB (CONT'D)
Told you they like dark meat.

The men keep passing Bass back and forth, faster and faster over the pit. They punch him, jab him with sticks.

The hogs have a hard time getting high enough at first, but the men lower the rope and one hog jumps, latches on, and takes a chunk out of Bass' scalp.

More LAUGHTER, HOOTING, and WHOOPING.

JIM WEBB (CONT'D)
Let's give them piglets a real
taste of his blood.

Webb starts cracking a whip, lashing Bass with it around his legs, his back, one lick catches his face.

Bass crosses his arms around his head. WHACK, another lick, and another. The hogs jump faster, SNORT LOUDER and LOUDER.

Bass times the next lash and snags the whip.

Webb tries to pull it back, but Bass wraps his large hand around the end, stretches and gets his second hand on it.

Men WHOOP. Webb smiles as he loses his grip when Bass tugs.

Bass grabs the handle and LASHES the whip around the tree limb above him and starts pulling his upper body up.

Several henchmen pull the rope around Bass' feet, which inadvertently assists Bass in reaching the branch.

Bass uncurls the whip and cracks it toward the men with the rope. They let go and Bass unties the rope from his feet.

Bass lays back on the large branch, breaths heavy, rubs his raw ankles. He's dripping sweat and some blood.

JIM WEBB (CONT'D)
What are you gonna do now?

BASS
Might take a nap.

LAUGHTER.

HENCHMAN #4
Let's shoot him down.

JIM WEBB
Too easy.

HENCHMAN #3
Are we just gonna let him sit up
there all night like a cat?

JIM WEBB
I want to take my time, cause him
some pain.

HENCHMAN #5
What do you have in mind?

JIM WEBB
I need whiskey, salt and a saw.

HENCHMAN #2
Where you gonna get all that.

JIM WEBB
Bywaters saloon. I gotta get Delmer too. He'll get a kick outta this.

HENCHMAN #5
What should we do if he comes down?

JIM WEBB
Tie him up and put him in the barn.

BASS
You ain't worried about me out foxing your boys.

JIM WEBB
Got two dozen men on a treed Negro.

BASS
I'd say our odds don't look good.

MORE LAUGHTER. HOOTING. MOCKING.

JIM WEBB
You do have the whip.

Webb chuckles, shakes his head.

INT. BYWATER'S SALOON -- NIGHT

The saloon is packed. Webb stands at the end of the bar with BYWATERS, thin, 40s, bushy horseshoe mustache, and Delmer, now in his 50s, gray comb-over, full beard.

DELMER
He just rode right into it?

JIM WEBB
After all these years, it was that easy.

BYWATERS
Drinks are on me, fellas, if you wait til closing time.

JIM WEBB
Why not. Delmer, lets get liquored up, play some poker,

Bywaters goes back to tending bar as customers holler for him. Delmer and Webb take a seat at the poker table.

EXT. JIM WEBB'S FARM -- NIGHT

Bass still sits on the branch, now closer to the tree trunk.

Henchmen start lighting torches around the farmyard.

THWACK. A henchman's neck is pierced with an arrow. HE GURGLES, falls.

The other henchmen scramble, but most don't get far as arrows and lances start flying from the darkness toward them, striking many down.

Several Henchmen reach the farmhouse, a few more get to the barn. Inside the house, men grab rifles and shoot toward the darkness. The arrows stop, but the henchmen keep firing.

HENCHMAN #1
Stop firing until you see
something. Your wasting ammo.

HENCHMAN #2
Load everything you have.

HENCHMAN #3
Where the hell did they come from.
I can't see a damn thing out there.

The henchmen are locked and loaded, waiting.

The outer back areas of the farm start to light up with sparks of fire. The henchmen move to the far side of the house and shoot relentlessly toward the fire in the woods.

Indians move quietly around toward front of the property, snuff out the torches. Under the cover of darkness, Bass jumps from the tree, runs.

The sky above the property lights up with flaming arrows arching, descending upon the home and barn.

Several gunshots ring out toward the side of the property where the flaming arrows fly, Bass on the opposite side safely clears the treeline and keeps running.

The house and barn burst into flames.

As the henchmen run outside, they are struck down by a charging band of 40 plus Seminoles.

Bass runs through the darkness. HOOF BEATS and a familiar WHISTLE get his attention. He stops.

BASS
Kono?

KONO
Coming up on your left.

Kono rides up to Bass, lights a torch, and hands him the reins to a second horse, saddled and ready.

BASS
How did you know--

KONO
Jennie.

BASS
You brought me a Winchester.

KONO
And clothes, boots, Colt 45s

Kono hands him the supplies.

BASS
I should have waited for you.

KONO
I knew you wouldn't.

Bass checks the weapons. Pulls on the boots.

KONO (CONT'D)
We watched Webb ride out toward Bywaters. You might want to rest--

BASS
Let's go now. He won't expect it.

EXT. INDIAN TERRITORY -- NIGHT

Bywaters tavern has thinned out. Webb and three men sit at a back table playing poker, and a lone patron stands at the bar across from Bywaters.

Rows of chips stack high in front of Webb.

CARD PLAYER #1
I'm out.

CARD PLAYER #2
Me too. Webb gutted us tonight.

JIM WEBB
Speaking of gutting, let's go screw
with Bass.

DELMER
You reckon he's still up a tree?

Before Webb can answer, he becomes spooked by something he sees out the window. He stands, looks out toward the Arbuckle Mountains and notices lights flickering.

JIM WEBB
Those aren't my guys, Delmer.

DELMER
Looks like a lot of 'em.

Webb watches as a shadowy figure gallops fast down the hill to the flats, charging the saloon.

Webb grabs his rifle and jumps through the window. Glass SHATTERS. Webb rolls, pops up, makes a run for where his horse should be, but it's gone.

Webb retreats to a clump of bushes, cocks his rifle and fires toward the charging horseman.

The bullet blows the hat brim off of the rider, revealing Bass' face in the dim light that surrounds the tavern.

Bass continues toward Webb at full speed. Webb shoots again, and again, popping holes in Bass' duster. One pops a button.

WEBB
You're one lucky sumbitch.

BASS
Providence.

A third shot by Webb severs the saddle horn. Bass, composed, still charges, focused and unfazed.

Webb's fourth shot separates the reins from the horse. Bass leans forward, spurs the horse.

Another shot hits the horse and it falls. Bass rolls, pulls his pistols and fires -- THUNK. It hits Webb in the right wrist.

JIM WEBB
Damn!

BASS
Got your gun hand.

Webb tries to shoot his pistol with his left. His aim is way off. Bass notices, stands, steps over the horse and starts walking toward Webb, who still crouches behind the bushes.

Webb keeps firing with his left. Bullets WHIZZ by Bass, who continues, both arms extended holding Colt 45s.

Bass sights Webb -- BANG, BANG. Two shots hit Webb in the chest, an inch from one another. Webb falls.

Delmer gets up from the floor of the tavern and attempts to ease a rifle through a window. As he brings his head around to sight Bass, an arrow flies through Delmer's right eye.

Bass stands over Webb who is GASPING. Webb reaches for his pistol now on the ground. Bass slides it away with his boot.

The few patrons left from the saloon follow Bywaters out and watch the exchange between the two enemies.

Webb COUGHS blood. CHUCKLES.

BASS (CONT'D)
Your weakness is overconfidence.

JIM WEBB
You're one cocky sumbitch.

BASS
A compliment from the beaten man.

JIM WEBB
You've been a true adversary, even as a slave. Then you got a badge.

BASS
Sometimes life gives you justice.

JIM WEBB
Damn, you're a brave man, Bass.
Give me your hand.

BASS
You're not gonna kiss it are you?

Bass grasps Webb's outstretched hand.

JIM WEBB
I want you to take my guns and scabbard as a gift and you must.

Bass gives a quizzical look, picks up the guns and holster.
Webb COUGHS more blood, GROANS.

JIM WEBB (CONT'D)
Them guns killed eleven men. I
figured you'd be the twelfth.

BASS
You best make your peace with--

Webb's hand falls limp; he dies. Bass gets up, walks toward
Kono. Bywaters and the other men tend to the body.

INT. FORT SMITH COURTHOUSE -- DAY

Judge Parker, Heck Thomas, and jailor, GEORGE WINSTON, black
and gray-haired, look out the courthouse window watching Bass
ride in with 17 prisoners packed in the tumbleweed.

JUDGE PARKER
That's got to be a record.

HECK THOMAS
I'll go help with the prisoners.

JUDGE PARKER
Don't tell him.

HECK THOMAS
No, sir. I don't want to tell him.

The judge sees Winston point up to the his office and he
holds up a hand to Bass.

Judge Parker turns to his cabinet and pulls out a bottle of
his best whiskey and two glasses. He paces. Bass walks in.

BASS
Winston said you wanted to--

JUDGE PARKER
Congratulations, Bass. That's the
biggest haul ever. Let's celebrate.

Parker pours. Bass looks confused, looks out at Winston
unloading the prisoners. Bass stares at Parker.

BASS
Judge, I've been a lawman long
enough to know somethin' ain't
right. What is it?

JUDGE PARKER
We'll get to all that soon enough.
Tell me how you caught all those
yuks. I love your stories.

BASS
I'd just as soon get the news.

JUDGE PARKER
I don't think you would. Let's live
in the moment one last time.

BASS
One last-- what?

JUDGE PARKER
Well, damn, you got me.

Judge Parker gets up, paces, swirls his drink.

JUDGE PARKER (CONT'D)
It's a Hell-of-a-thing, Bass.

BASS
What thing?

JUDGE PARKER
You've always been on the right
side of the law, decades now.

BASS
Spit it out, please-sir.

JUDGE PARKER
I'd like to toast you one first.
That okay?

BASS
Pour me one up. Something tells me
I'll need it.

The judge pours Bass a full glass.

JUDGE PARKER
To the best in the West, Deputy
U.S. Marshal Bass Reeves!

The men clink glasses and drink.

BASS
Whoa. All right.

Parker sets his glass down.

JUDGE PARKER
You have been so forgiving to the
nation that once bound you. You
gave and gave as a man of justice--

BASS
Please?

JUDGE PARKER
They passed some laws.

BASS
What kind of laws?

JUDGE PARKER
They call it equal but separate.
But it's not equal. Just separate.

BASS
I can't serve justice no more?

JUDGE PARKER
A Supreme Court case, Plessy vs.
Ferguson, now enforces racial
segregation.

BASS
I ain't goin' back to slavery.

JUDGE PARKER
No. But they don't really consider
you equal either. I'm sorry, Bass.

The judge walks up and places his hand on Bass' shoulder.
Bass hugs the judge and for once, his eyes well.

JUDGE PARKER (CONT'D)
You served this court with honor.
What they're doing is appalling.

BASS
So, that's it, huh?

JUDGE PARKER
Unfortunately, it is. Thank you for
your service. I'll always be here
as your friend.

BASS
Jennie will be glad I'm finally
home for good.

JUDGE PARKER
Nothing left to accomplish. You got
all the bad ones, Bass, even Webb.
Go enjoy your family.

INT. BASS REEVES HOME -- DAY

Several of Bass and Jennie's grown children play their kids
running around the yard.

Jennie walks in the cabin reading a letter.

JENNIE
Bass, George Reeves got bit by a
dog.

BASS
Serves him right.

JENNIE
He's got the rabies.

Bass takes on a curious look.

BASS
I best go see him before he dies.

JENNIE
Why would you want to see him?

BASS
A few things I gotta know.

EXT. GEORGE REEVES RESIDENCE - DAY

Bass rides to the residence of George Reeves, big gate, huge
white plantation house. George's wife, JANE, elderly but
graceful, opens the door. She looks tired.

JANE
May I help you?

Bass removes his hat.

BASS
I came to see George. My name is--

JANE
Bass. It's been a long time.

BASS
Yes ma'am. I reckon it has.

JANE
I guess you got my letter about
George. We had to put him out back
in the shed to keep him from
tearing things up.

Jane looks back at Bass as he follows

JANE (CONT'D)
I assure you it was necessary.

They approach a boarded shed, a crack under the doorway.

JANE (CONT'D)
We slip his food and necessities
through. Speak to him if you like.

Bass walks around and looks at the dilapidated scatter-board
shack set back from the big house.

JANE (CONT'D)
He has violent fits and such.

SCREAMS of AGONY and POUNDING. HEAVY BREATHING from inside.

BASS
Mrs. Reeves--

JANE
Please, Bass. Call me Jane.

BASS
Jane, would it be possible for me
to go in there?

JANE
We're worried about him giving
someone the disease. He's violent.

Jane looks around. A full staff mixed with family look on.

JANE (CONT'D)
I love the man, but I'm scared to
death of him.

BASS
You have any Laudanum? Whiskey?

JANE
We have both.

BASS
Can someone bring me both?

Jane bites her bottom lip, looks at Bass, walks over to a young man. Bass pauses and then knocks on the shed door.

BASS (CONT'D)
George, it's Bass.

GEORGE
Reeves?

BASS
Ain't but once of us.

GEORGE
My God. Will they let you in?

BASS
You know I'm persuasive.

GEORGE
And a little tricky too.

BASS
No tricks today. Bout to throw you
a two man party, old boy. But
you've gotta give me your word that
you won't attack me. I'll shoot you
if I have to.

GEORGE
All right.

BASS
Don't bite me neither.

Bass picks up a hammer laying beside the shed. The nails SCREECH as they slip out of the boards. Bass carefully removes the panels revealing the door. He opens it.

Darkness engulfs the inside. Jane hands Bass the whiskey, Laudanum, and a lantern. Bass steps in, turns back to Jane.

BASS (CONT'D)
Three men with rifles at twenty
yards, but don't nail me in here.

Jane nods as a tear rolls down her cheek. Bass moves the lantern across the room as shadows bounce in and around George's emaciated form.

He lays sunken in the faintness of a mattress. Bass finds a chair, places it in front of the doorway, and sits.

GEORGE
Wish you didn't see me like this.

BASS
We can talk in the dark.

GEORGE
I'd rather not. What's that?

BASS
Whiskey.

GEORGE
I could use some.

Bass pours Ladanum in one cup with the whiskey on the floor where George can't see him. He holds up iron cuffs.

BASS
I'm gonna need to put these on you.

GEORGE
Oh, the irony of it all.

George nods. Bass calmly walks the glass over and sits it on a overturned crate beside the bed, and cuffs George to the bed frame before returning to his seat in front of the door.

George goes into a contraction, JERKING and HOLLERING.

BASS
Your glass is next to you.

Bass pours himself some whiskey, sips it.

GEORGE
God damn these fits.

BASS
Now's not the best time to go using the Lord's name in vein.

A beat.

BASS (CONT'D)
I've wondered all these years if you held a grudge against me for hitting you, but I figured if you did you would've come for me.

GEORGE
Were you really holding aces?

BASS
I didn't cheat.

GEORGE
You've never cheated at anything; I
should've known.

BASS
But you didn't.

GEORGE
They'll write books about you.

BASS
They don't write books about
Negros.

The men both take drinks of their whiskey.

GEORGE
I always thought our paths would
cross again at some point.

BASS
Didn't know you got up to Indian
Territory.

GEORGE
You were in Texas too, and I went
up to Arkansas. Knew Judge Parker.

BASS
He told me.

GEORGE
I asked him not to. I figured if
you wanted, you'd look me up.

BASS
And here I am.

GEORGE
Kind of late.

BASS
I think its perfect timing.

GEORGE
You're not dying.

The men take another drink.

GEORGE (CONT'D)
Bass, you put something else in
this whiskey. You said no tricks.

BASS
I never said I wouldn't spike your
drink. Just a precaution. Feel numb
and calm from the opium yet?

GEORGE
Last time I felt this good, you
knocked me out.

BASS
George, why'd you want me to fight
for slavery?

GEORGE
I didn't see it as fighting for
slavery. Saw it as fighting for The
South, our culture, state's rights.

George goes into another spasm. Bass watches, cracks the
door. George goes through his release and breathes heavy.

BASS
I had to know. I appreciate you
teaching me about law and justice.

GEORGE
Our conversations inspired you,
huh?

BASS
Justice inspired me.

Bass gets up and starts to leave.

GEORGE
Bass, I always thought of you as a
brother growing up. We were close.

Bass stops. Thinks. Turns to George who looks up at him.

BASS
Until it came time to shine boots
or shovel shit.

GEORGE
Hmm.

A beat.

GEORGE (CONT'D)
Heard you named one of your kids
George?

Bass opens the door exposing a contrast between the brightness outside and the darkness of the room.

BASS

George is a popular name.

GEORGE

What are you going to do
now?

Bass sets his hat on his head and this time doesn't turn.

BASS

Go chase my grand kids as long
as the Lord will let me. Give
him my regards if you see him.

Bass steps into the light as George suffers another contraction in the dark shed. Men nail the shed boards back as Bass mounts his horse, tips his hat to Jane, and rides off in a gallop toward the setting sun.

FADE OUT.

THE END

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CURRICULUM VITAE

James Walzel is a published writer and photojournalist currently finishing up a Master of Fine Arts degree at the University of Texas at El Paso.

Walzel spent several decades in the business world as a special events manager, a district manager for small businesses, a real estate agent, and additional time in hotel management. While managing multiple venues as an event manager, Walzel seized an opportunity to explore more creative endeavors in photography and writing.

An interview with Pulitzer Prize winner Bob Jackson inspired Walzel to chase his creative dream full-time. Walzel went back to school as a non-traditional student and graduated Magna Cum Laude from The University of North Texas in May 2015. During that time he served as an intern with *The American Literary Review*. He continued to read submissions for the magazine for three years.

Previous to 2009, Walzel published work with a variety of publications, including branches of *The Dallas Morning News*, *Dallasnews.com*, and *Pegasus News*. His many works cover General David Petraeus at The World Affairs Council, and Nature Conservancy lead scientist Dr. M.A. Sanjayan, former Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison, and Tim Gunn and Indashio of the fashion world.

As a sports photographer, Walzel has at times covered The Dallas Mavericks, Dallas Stars, and FC Dallas soccer. Additional publication material as a photographer include work with The Fort Worth Stock Show and Rodeo and musicians: Clay Walker, LeeAnn Rimes, Stoney LaRue, Bowling For Soup, Pat Green, Corey Morrow, DJ Jazzy Jeff, Raheem DeV Vaughn, and Chris Rivers.

Walzel's primary source of inspiration comes from his son, Cody, who works in Los Angeles as a storyboard artist, character designer, and writer. Since 2009, Walzel has published both photography and written material under a pseudonym and wishes to keep his anonymity.

jamiewalzel@yahoo.com
Jamie Walzel typed this thesis