

FADE IN:

\*

A SMALL, SHINY PENDULUM hangs from an ANTIQUE SILVER COLLAR. CAMERA PULLS BACK TO REVEAL pulsing, neon letters, "LETOH LLEH", suspended in two black, bottomless voids. We PULL BACK, out of these voids...

...revealing the eyes of a 95-lb AMERICAN BULL DOG, (NED), 90 of which is pure terrifying muscle. He stares across the street at the

\*

\*

"SHELL HOTEL" - NIGHT

A rundown refuge of transients and secrets, the neon "S" sputters so it mostly reads "\_HELL HOTEL".

Suddenly, a desperate man, WALTER SPARROW, EXPLODES through the hotel doors and bolts into the street. He grips a 1920s LETTER OPENER, dagger-style.

\*

\*

\*

He looks up to see a BUS bearing down on him. He exchanges a meaningful, profound look with NED ACROSS THE STREET and steps out in front of the bus. As it closes in, his eyes remain fixed on the number.

\*

\*

It is THE NUMBER 23. Just before impact, SCREEN FREEZES.

SUPER UP: **FEBRUARY 10TH**

Suddenly, the screen BLURS as images (THE MOVIE IN REVERSE) FLASH PAST SUPER FAST MO. The date COUNTS DOWN, stopping at:

SUPER UP: **FEBRUARY 3RD**

\*

NORMAL SPEED: a WOMAN walks her DOG down a street. A cat MEOWS. The dog turns and stares. She follows its stare to WALTER, sitting in a truck, half-eaten pastrami sandwich in his hands. WALTER MEOWS. The dog BARKS.

\*

\*

The woman, shocked, notices the words "ANIMAL CONTROL OFFICER" on the truck's side. She pulls the dog away.

WALTER MEOWS once more, then chuckles and resumes his sandwich. The dashboard clock reads 4:58 p.m.

\*

WALTER (V.O.)

*"You can call me Fingerling. It's not my real name, but comes from a book I read as a child, 'Fingerling at the Zoo.' Paper flap long gone, it had a green, hardback cover and mottled texture, and was possibly my very first book. Funny, I can't*

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WALTER (V.O.) (CONT'D)  
*recall what it was about, the only  
 thing I remember is the name.  
 'Fingerling.' I wished it was mine.  
 Now it is."*

(a beat)  
 This is how it began. My life would  
 never be the same again.

His CB radio CRACKLES into life. A strong female voice: \*

SYBIL'S VOICE \*  
 Unit 5, come in. \*

INT. ACO HQ - SAME \*

SYBIL DELL, a formidable man-eater, barks into her headset. \*

SYBIL \*  
 --We have a U.S.S. \*

INT. TRUCK - CONTINUED \*

WALTER stares at the clock. It clicks to 4:59.

WALTER (V.O.)  
 I'd never thought much about  
 destiny, but maybe this was mine.  
 Of course, things didn't really  
 start here...

The screen BLURS once more as we FAST-MO BACK IN TIME to:

SUPER UP: **DECEMBER 23RD** (43 DAYS EARLIER)

NORMAL SPEED: LIGHTS flash on a stunning CHRISTMAS TREE.

We're in a HALLWAY at NIGHT. Walter's wife is an artist and  
 highly inventive. Their house is decorated and designed with  
 her many creative touches, finished and unfinished projects  
 everywhere. Christmas -- an event! \*

WALTER stares into a TINSEL-EDGED, SNOW-DUSTED MIRROR,  
 uncomfortable in suit and tie.

ROBIN SPARROW, WALTER's 13-yr-old son and best friend, comes  
 up the stairs, juggling three baubles. \*

WALTER  
 How do I look?

ROBIN  
 The truth?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WALTER  
Are you kidding?

ROBIN  
You look great.

WALTER  
Thank you.

INT. BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

WALTER speaks to the bathroom door:

WALTER  
How are we doing in here?

The door opens. AGATHA SPARROW, red eyes and runny nose failing to diminish her sexiness, sneezes into a tissue. She's in her sexy holiday underwear, revealed by her open robe.

WALTER  
I see.

AGATHA  
Do you hate me?

WALTER  
As much now as the day I met you.

He fondles her neck, giving her goose bumps. All these years of marriage and she still gets the bumps.

AGATHA  
I might be contagious.

WALTER  
I might be immune.

His hand moves lower.

AGATHA  
What about the party?

WALTER  
Like anyone's going to miss me.

AGATHA  
What about the cake?

The CAMERA MOVES ominously TOWARD A LARGE CAKE BOX. It reads "CAKES BY AGATHA."

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WALTER (V.O.)  
I'd like two words on my tombstone:  
"What if?"

INT. "MAN'S BEST FRIEND" BAR - PRIVATE FUNCTION ROOM - NIGHT  
The local ACO's Christmas party.

WALTER (V.O.)  
What if I'd said screw the cake?

CLOSE ON BUFFET TABLE as WALTER adds the CAKE (a Dalmatian pup in Santa hat). A LARGE KNIFE SUDDENLY PLUNGES into it -- wielded by SYBIL. She wears too much make-up and her well-endowed bosom is barely contained by a red dress. \*

SYBIL  
Single tonight, Walter?

She pulls a SPRIG OF MISTLETOE from the depths of her bosom.

WALTER (V.O.)  
What if Agatha had come?

Sybil drags him onto the dance floor, throws her arms around him and then maneuvers him towards the RESTROOMS. Tonight the LADIES and GENTLEMEN signs have temporary additions -- PUSH-PINNED homemade placards saying "STUDS" and "BITCHES". Sybil's clutch tightens. She steers Walter toward the ladies as she whispers into his ear. He breaks away. \*

WALTER (V.O.)  
What if I'd only been a bit more...

WALTER  
Sybil, I--  
(the song ends)  
--wouldn't "wag my tail" with you  
in the bathroom if I was in heat  
and you were the last...  
(re sign)  
...'bitch' on Earth. \*

ACOs stop and stare. Stares become laughs and sniggers. \*

WALTER (V.O.)  
...tactful? Quieter, even?

INT. TRUCK - LATE AFTERNOON (FEBRUARY 3RD)

WALTER stares at the clock.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SYBIL'S VOICE

Do you read me, Unit 5? I repeat--

\*

INT. ACO HQ - SAME

\*

SYBIL

\*

--we have an undesirable scavenger sighting. I know you're there, Walter!

\*

\*

INTERCUT: WALTER / SYBIL

\*

WALTER grabs the radio.

\*

WALTER

It's one minute to five, Sybil!

\*

SYBIL

Then we're agreed: you're still on duty. Happy fucking birthday.

INT. WANTON PLEASURE KITCHEN- EVENING

An old CHINESE MAN leads WALTER through the steaming, busy, noisy kitchen to the back door. WALTER straps on PROTECTIVE SLEEVES. He also has a MUZZLE, FLASHLIGHT and DOG POLE. He tests it. It works.

\*

\*

\*

He checks the time. Mutters. Steps out into...

\*

EXT. ALLEYWAY - CONTINUOUS

\*

... where a line of DUMPSTERS provides plenty of lurking spaces. WALTER inches down, pole at the ready, like a cop.

\*

\*

WALTER

Meow.

GRRR. He smiles. Moves onward.

NED, the dog from the opening scene, waits between two dumpsters. It bares its teeth, eyes dripping with evil, glinting in the light.

\*

WALTER

Man's best friend, my ass. Come to daddy.

NED SNARLS, backs against the wall, and BARKS.

\*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WALTER

Feisty little foe, aren't you?  
Perhaps you'd like to hear a story?

He recounts the following in LOVING STYLE, adding SUBTLE GESTURES, lulling the curious canine into a false sense of security.

WALTER

Once upon a time there lived a dog.  
Now this dog led a life of terror,  
fearing no one, but over time he  
realized, though his teeth were  
sharp and belly full, his heart was  
empty. He wanted a friend.

He starts inching strategically forward.

WALTER

Alas, all the other animals feared  
this four-legged fiend so he set  
off, journeying this way and that,  
to lands far, far away, hoping to  
find someone who knew not of his  
reputation. One day he happened  
upon a small, wooden shack with a  
smokeless chimney above.

He suspends the pole above NED. \*

WALTER

The door hung open and inside sat  
an old, thin man. His lonely eyes  
matched the dog's heart and when he  
beckoned it in the dog was  
overjoyed. That night, smoke  
drifted out the chimney, but oh,  
what odd-smelling smoke this was.  
You see, the land was China, and in  
China...

In one swift movement, WALTER whips the pole down, the draw  
string falling around Ned's neck. He yanks it tight. \*

WALTER

...THEY EAT DOGS!

Ned SNARLS and BARKS. WALTER pulls out the muzzle and waits. \*  
His prisoner calms.

WALTER

The moral of this story, you ask?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

He strokes Ned's head. THE SHINY NAME TAG dangles from its collar. \*

WALTER  
Stay out of goddamn Chinatown, my  
dear...

He turns the name tag over, brushing the PENDULUM as he does.

WALTER  
...Ned.

The PENDULUM FLASHES AND SHIMMERS in his EYES -- for a second he is almost hypnotized. Ned clamps his teeth over his arm. \*  
WALTER HOWLS. Ned won't let go. \*

WALTER loosens the draw string. Ned releases his jaws, tugs his head free and bolts. Blood seeps through WALTER's sleeve.

EXT. STREET - EVENING

WALTER storms out of the alley, sees Ned fifty yards away, staring at him.

WALTER  
So you didn't like my story, huh?  
Fine. I can take criticism.

He throws his stuff in the truck and pulls out a TRANQUILIZER GUN. Loads it. Ned runs. WALTER runs after him.

EXT. AGATHA'S CAKE SHOP - EVENING -SAME

AGATHA's shop is inviting, unique and inventive, every detail bearing her signature. \*

She locks up for the night and hurries off.

EXT. STREETS - CONTINUED

Ned races along, stopping every so often for WALTER to catch up, like he's playing a game. Each time WALTER nears, Ned takes off again. \*

EXT. QUAIN MARKET SQUARE - CONTINUED

AGATHA waits beneath a LAMPPOST. She checks the time. Shivers. Glances at the closed SHOPS around the square.

She spies one open, a SECONDHAND BOOKSTORE -- "A NOVEL FATE".

EXT. GRAVEYARD - CONTINUED

WALTER follows his prey down row after row of graves.

WALTER (V.O.)  
There are so many what ifs.

Ned heads to an ISOLATED GRAVE, disappearing behind the GRAVESTONE. WALTER approaches. Takes a deep breath. Spins around the grave, gun at the ready. Ned...

...IS NOWHERE TO BE SEEN.

WALTER, puzzled, looks about. He glances at the grave. It belongs to a "LAURA TOLLINS".

The WIND picks up. Leaves BLOW across the ground. In the distance he sees the SILHOUETTE OF A MAN. Watching him.

EXT. QUAIN MARKET SQUARE - NIGHT

WALTER, BANDAGING HIS ARM, searches for AGATHA. Peers in the window of THE SECOND HAND BOOKSTORE.

WALTER (V.O.)  
The only thing I know for sure is,  
I was late and that's all it took.

AGATHA is inside. She's reading a BOOK.

INT. "A NOVEL FATE" USED BOOKSTORE - NIGHT

WALTER rants to AGATHA.

WALTER  
...know why someone calls a ninety-  
five pound canine Ned? Nasty Evil  
Dog, that's why. Well, next time I  
see it it's gonna be Nedd --  
(pronounces second D)  
-- Nasty Evil Dead Dog.

AGATHA puts her finger over his lips.

AGATHA  
Take a deep breath. It's your  
birthday, remember?

WALTER  
I've been thinking about that. How  
come we go to see your friends on  
my birthday?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

AGATHA

Because you don't have any.

WALTER tries, but can't really argue with that.

WALTER

So: older, bitten, spending an evening in hell...

(points to her book)

...I suppose I'm buying that for you, too?

AGATHA

I think you might be, yes.

He takes it from her. The tattered cover reads:

"THE NUMBER 23"

A NOVEL OF OBSESSION BY  
TOPSY KRETTS

WALTER

Hardly the most imaginative of titles. What is it, part of a series?

AGATHA

It's good. You should try it.

WALTER

And allow some writer to fill my head with all sorts of nonsense? No thanks. I have enough of my own.

AGATHA

Don't know what you're missing.

WALTER

And yet, life goes on.

EXT. RESIDENTIAL STREET - NIGHT

WALTER and AGATHA walk along, hand in hand.

WALTER (V.O.)

February 3rd. That makes me  
Aquarius; an acrobatic mind, a  
visionary, occasionally rebellious  
nature, a genius bordering on  
insanity. Thomas Edison? Charles  
Darwin? Rasputin? Jules Verne?--  
Love is their driving force.

\*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

This is a man truly in love with his wife and vice versa.

WALTER

Why are we going this way? \*

Agatha smiles, somewhat strangely. Walter follows her gaze to a flight of steps. \*

WALTER \*

Are you getting sentimental in my old age? \*

FLASHCUT: YOUNG AGATHA WALKS WITH A CAKE BOX. YOUNG WALTER RUNS DOWN THE STEPS, OBLIVIOUS, AND COLLIDES WITH HER -- a wildly romantic moment which will be replayed in a much deeper way later on. \*

AGATHA (V.O.) \*

You looked me in the eye and said-- \*

YOUNG WALTER \*

(eating cake) \*

It's good. \*

WALTER (V.O.) \*

You looked me in the eye and said-- \*

YOUNG AGATHA \*

You owe me a cake. \*

BACK TO SCENE

WALTER

You didn't tell me you were looking for a wedding cake. \*

She hits him, playfully.

WALTER

(softly)

My life started that day.

AGATHA

Now who's the sentimental one? \*

They smile and Walter pulls her close. As they walk off into the night... THE CAMERA PANS UP THE STEPS to a tall, grey building -- a creepy, ominous, boarded up shell. \*

INT/EXT. ELEGANT HOUSE - NIGHT - TWENTY MINUTES LATER \*

BALLOONS are tied to the front gate, all PAINTED to look like \*  
 VARIATIONS OF WALTER. \*

WALTER (V.O.) \*  
 Experts say Aquarians are \*  
 philanthropists. Friends are \*  
 vitally important... \*

Walter and Agatha walk up the path, Walter scowling at the \*  
 balloons. \*

WALTER (V.O.) \*  
 I, am living proof of the fallacy \*  
 of astrology. \*

PROFESSOR ISAAC FRENCH, dashing in a velvet jacket, \*  
 intellectual, sophisticated, very popular with the ladies, \*  
 opens the door. \*

AGATHA  
 Sorry we're late, Isaac.

ISAAC  
 Nothing a kiss won't cure.

He kisses her on the cheek. Watch carefully and you'll notice  
 Isaac pays a little too much attention to AGATHA.

ISAAC  
 How's the arm, birthday boy?

WALTER  
 Just waiting for it to drop off.

ISAAC  
 Good job it didn't bite you  
 somewhere else then, eh?

INT. DINING ROOM - NIGHT

The remains of a birthday cake are on the table. EIGHT PEOPLE \*  
 sit around it -- WALTER, AGATHA and ISAAC, plus five more of \*  
 AGATHA's ECCENTRIC, ARTISTIC FRIENDS. All wear PARTY HATS.

ISAAC reads from a BOOK OF INSTRUCTIONS, RE: "THE MYSTERY \*  
 GAME" on the table.

ISAAC  
 ...leading the police to believe  
 the killer is someone who knew her.  
 (MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ISAAC (CONT'D)

As such, the servants have been dismissed but you unfortunate souls are to stay until the culprit is discovered. One of you is a murderer.

(a beat)

Floor's all yours, Walter.

WALTER glances at a SKELETON on the carpet. It also wears a party hat. He turns to his MYSTERY GAME CARD. It reads "MURDERER" with a description.

WALTER

"My name is Oxford Jones--

ECCENTRIC FRIEND #1

Hang on.

He turns up his hearing aid.

WALTER

"My name is Oxford Jones and I was born and bred in London."

ECCENTRIC FRIEND #2

Super accent, Walt.

AGATHA

He can't do accents.

WALTER

The only person I know how to be is myself.

ISAAC

Weird enough.

Off PEOPLE'S LAUGHTER (not WALTER's) we CUT TO:

EXT. THE SPARROW HOME - NIGHT

Walter and Agatha turn up the path. Walter opens the front door, is about to step inside when

ROBIN'S HEAD

pops up from the couch. A TEENAGE GIRL'S HEAD follows it up. She is older and taller than Robin. Walter immediately closes the door to prevent Agatha from catching Robin. \*

WALTER \*

Remember the days we used to go for late night walks in the moonlight? \*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

AGATHA

There's no moon tonight.

She moves to the door. Walter takes her hands.

WALTER

We can take advantage of the  
darkness.

AGATHA

I'm tired, honey. \*

Walter nods to a HAMMOCK on the verandah.

AGATHA (CONT'D)

Walter, it's freezing. \*

WALTER

Take my coat.

AGATHA

You'll freeze to death.

WALTER

Not if someone keeps me warm.

Agatha smiles. Walter wraps his coat around her. The front  
door opens. Robin pokes his head out. \*

ROBIN \*

Mom? Dad? I thought I heard voices. \*

AGATHA \*

If someone was in bed asleep like  
they were meant to be -- \*

She looks from son to husband, guessing she was had. \*

AGATHA \*

--they wouldn't have heard  
anything. It's way past your  
bedtime. \*

ROBIN \*

I forgot to give Dad this. \*

He hands Walter a PRESENT. \*

WALTER \*

I accept bribes at any time of day. \*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

Father and son smile and Walter opens the present -- a hand-painted "FATHER OF THE YEAR" mug -- as the Sparrows enter... \*

INT. THEIR HOUSE - CONTINUOUS \*

...Agatha going to the kitchen as Robin whispers to Walter. \*

ROBIN  
We fell asleep. That's all.

WALTER  
Back door?

ROBIN  
She went down the alley.

WALTER  
Robin? She's a nice girl. Make sure she stays that way.

AGATHA  
(calling)  
Robin Wilberforce Sparrow. Bed! \*

Robin runs upstairs, Walter joining Agatha in: \*

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS \*

AGATHA  
So, how's it feel--  
(with accent)  
--Mr. Oxford Jones? \*

WALTER  
Who? \*

AGATHA  
To be a cold-blooded murderer. \*

WALTER  
Oh.  
(looks around)  
Strangely familiar. \*

He playfully turns out the light. \*

As they head off to bed, we find Agatha's book, "The Number 23," on the table, glinting in the moonlight.

INT. ACO OFFICE - MORNING

DR. ALICE MORTIMER checks a file. A MUG serves as a pencil-holder. It's almost empty.

SUPER UP: **FEBRUARY 4TH**

DR. ALICE MORTIMER  
This is your first bite?

WALTER  
First animal one, yes.  
(off her look)  
My wife. She has these... gnawing  
urges. In her sleep.

DR. ALICE MORTIMER  
Tell me about Ned. What would you  
do if you came across him again? \*

WALTER  
Put my foot on the gas and  
accelerate.

DR. ALICE MORTIMER  
You'd run away from him?

WALTER  
No, I'd crush the furry fleabag  
beneath my tires.  
(off her look)  
I'm joking. This whole thing's a  
joke.

DR. ALICE MORTIMER  
Mr. Sparrow, animal control  
regulations state that any officer  
suffering at the hands of an animal  
must undergo psychological  
counseling within seven days to  
evaluate their state of mind.

WALTER  
You don't seriously think I'm going  
to snap because some crafty little  
canine chowed down on my arm? \*

DR. ALICE MORTIMER  
A person's first bite can have  
traumatic consequences. \*

He rolls up his sleeve.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WALTER

This isn't trauma. This is stupidity. I gave him my arm on a platter. Can't blame a species of lower intelligence for that. That'd be like shouting from the rooftops after the time I let my wife choose the color for the living room walls.

(a beat)

Not that women are of lower intelligence.

DR. MORTIMER writes in her file. WALTER tries to see what.

DR. ALICE MORTIMER

Have a good day, Mr. Sparrow.

WALTER

What? No. Agatha's the most intelligent person I know. What she sees in me I'm not sure. I love her, our son... I love my job. And I'm good at it.

DR. ALICE MORTIMER

Ned got away.

WALTER

Well, yes. But--

DR. ALICE MORTIMER

--don't worry, apart from a flawed sense of humor I've given you a clean bill of health. You're not a danger to anyone. That's why you can go.

He relaxes.

WALTER

They've given me the whole day off for this.

DR. ALICE MORTIMER

Then make the most of it. I won't tell.

WALTER walks to the door.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

DR. ALICE MORTIMER  
Mr. Sparrow? What color did your  
wife choose? For the walls.

INT. LIVING ROOM - LATER

WALTER (V.O.)  
Red. Blood red. \*

WALTER stares at the BLOOD RED WALLS. He enters... \*

THE KITCHEN

...and pours MILK into his FOTY MUG. \*

He sees "THE NUMBER 23" on the table. He tries to ignore it,  
but it has a strong attraction. Finally he picks it up. \*

He stares at its cover. Turns to the blurbs on the back:

WALTER (V.O.)  
*"A heart-wrenching odyssey into  
paranoia." "One of the most  
horrifying metamorphoses ever  
told." "Beware the dog next door."  
(a beat)  
Beware the dog next door?"*

He turns to page one.

WALTER (V.O.)  
*"You can call me Fingerling. It's  
not my real name, but comes from a  
book I read as a child, 'Fingerling  
at the Zoo.' Paper flap long gone,  
it had a green, hardback cover and  
mottled texture, and was possibly  
my very first book. Funny, I can't  
recall what it was about, the only  
thing I remember is the name.  
'Fingerling.' I wished it was mine.  
Now it is."*

He frowns. Flicks to the front and finds the disclaimer:

WALTER (V.O.)  
*"All the characters in this book  
are fictitious, and anyone finding  
a resemblance to actual persons,  
living or dead, should proceed no  
further."*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

A beat while WALTER contemplates this literary oddity.

WALTER (V.O.)

*"Do not concern yourself with my  
nom de plume. My real name matters  
not, nor my physical description,  
or how I view myself."*

He turns the page to a MACABRE CHILDISH SKETCH, labeled  
'FINGERLING.'

\*

WALTER (V.O.)

*"Imagine me, if you must, as  
someone you once knew. Someone,  
perhaps, you liked."*

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

(TO AVOID CONFUSION AND FOR PRODUCTION PURPOSES LETS CALL  
THIS THE "CHILDREN'S BOOK SECTION")

*We enter a RURAL SCHOOL in a cheerful, children's book world.  
Outside, a picture-perfect sun dazzles through the leaves of  
tall elms set against a bright blue sky.*

WALTER (V.O.)

*"As a kid I was top of my class."*

Young FINGERLING raises his hand to a question.

WALTER (V.O. CONT'D)

*"Not because I liked studying, but  
because I realized an education was  
my best shot at getting out. See,  
the stork dropped me in a small  
dustbowl of a town."*

*Beneath the pastoral quaintness, there's something vaguely  
unsettling about this place. The backgrounds - even some of  
the people - are still photographs.*

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - AFTERNOON

*FINGERLING walks along, laughing gaily with PALS. His PALS  
are crudely animated stills.*

WALTER (V.O.)

*"There wasn't anything wrong with  
it. As far as boring towns go I'm  
sure it ranked above average. It*

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WALTER (V.O.) (CONT'D)  
*was just boring. So were the other  
 kids."*

*His pals VANISH. Laughter fades. He walks alone.* \*

WALTER (V.O.)  
*"They're probably all still there."*

*He passes the TOWN CEMETERY.*

WALTER (V.O.)  
*"No one ever left. But I was  
 destined for other things."*

INT. FINGERLING'S FATHER'S STUDY - DAY \*

*There are numbers everywhere. FINGERLING does his homework.* \*

WALTER (V.O.)  
*"Much as I loved him, I wasn't  
 gonna end up like my dad. It was  
 bad enough people said I looked  
 like him."*

*He looks up. His FATHER sits behind a desk, tapping away at a  
 calculator.*

WALTER (V.O.)  
*"He was an accountant and fully  
 expected me to take over the  
 business he had built. Still, he  
 loved me."*

*His Father motions for FINGERLING to continue his homework.*

WALTER (V.O.)  
*"In his own special way."*

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

*WALTER has settled into an armchair. There is a look of  
 childlike wonder on his face.* \*

WALTER (V.O.)  
*"My father's inability to express  
 warmth was more than compensated by  
 my mom."* \*

INT. KITCHEN - EVENING

*FINGERLING sits at the table, surrounded by homework.* \*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WALTER (V.O.)  
 "In her eyes I could do no wrong."

\*  
\*

His MOTHER strokes his head, tenderly.

\*

WALTER (V.O.)  
 "She was thrilled when, on my 18th  
 birthday, I announced that I wanted  
 to be a police officer."

\*

Fingerling and his Mother AGE TEN YEARS, his homework  
 becoming PRESENTS (books on finance, etc.)

\*  
\*

WALTER (V.O.)  
 "Not so my father."

At the other end of the table sits FINGERLING's Father. He's  
 seething.

WALTER  
 "It fueled his hatred of strange  
 Miss Dobkins. She lived next door.  
 At least she did until that fateful  
 day..."

\*  
\*  
\*

EXT. BACK GARDEN - DAY

A tidy place, the only fault being the FENCE running down one  
 side. Unlike the one that takes over at the bottom and comes  
 up the other side, this one is OLD AND RICKETY.

WALTER (V.O.)  
 "Picture if you can..."

\*

We creep towards it, peek through a KNOT HOLE, travel into:

WALTER  
 "...a world where the grass is  
 forever thigh-high. A world where  
 wild animals could feel at home,  
 their only hazard being Alfie, Miss  
 Dobkins' cocker spaniel."

\*

ALFIE appears, following a scent. A SAXOPHONE tune fades in.

INT. FINGERLING'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Young FINGERLING stops playing the SAXOPHONE and looks out of  
 his window, which looks out over:

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WALTER (V.O.)

"Swaying grass. It was as if a  
tornado was signing its name in  
it."

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

WALTER turns the page swiftly, enthralled. \*

WALTER (V.O.)

"Dad was incapable of seeing the  
beauty. He also didn't think it  
funny when Alfie sought a little R  
and R in our garden."

EXT. BACK GARDEN - DAY

Alfie sunbathes on the lawn. Suddenly, he's on red alert.

WALTER (V.O.) \*

"It was my job to catch him."

FINGERLING pounces on him. Alfie darts off, scampering this way and that.

WALTER (V.O.) \*

"From this, a police officer in the  
making was born. It was my eighth  
birthday and Alfie's gift sounded  
like exercise." \*

Alfie YAPPING incessantly fades in. \*

EXT. STRANGE MISS DOBKINS' HOUSE - MORNING \*

WALTER (V.O.) \*

"Except it wasn't. He just stood  
still and barked." \*

Young FINGERLING (a yapping Alfie in arms) passes through the  
side gate into a frightening, GOTHIC STORYBOOK. The sky grows  
dark. Snakelike vines hang from barren trees. The house  
itself breathes menace. \*

INT. MISS DOBKINS' HOUSE - MORNING \*

All color seems to drain from the world as FINGERLING heads  
upstairs with Alfie. \*

At the top Alfie leaps from his arms and runs into a room.  
FINGERLING follows. It's MISS DOBKINS' BEDROOM and Alfie is  
on the bed, licking MISS Dobkins' face. \*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

*She lies in A POOL OF BLOOD, HER SKIN BLACK AND BLUE -- dead a good fourteen hours.* \*

INT. HALLWAY - DAY

WALTER is fascinated with what he's read. He descends... \*

WALTER (V.O.)

*"It was an hour before the doctor arrived, and in that uncertain hour my eight-year-old mind raced."*

INT. SPARROW BASEMENT - DAY

...a rickety staircase into a dank BASEMENT, full of row upon row of BOXES. He begins to dig through them. \*

INT. MISS DOBKINS' HOUSE - MORNING \*

Young FINGERLING squats in a corner. Fascinated with the body. Mind racing.

WALTER (V.O.)

*"I decided Miss Dobkins had been killed by a man with a deranged mind, a mind such as our town had never seen before. No one would be safe from him, not even his loved ones. Especially his loved ones."* \*

FLASHCUTS: A series of STILL PHOTOGRAPHS illustrate the assault on MISS DOBKINS by a DERANGED MAN. GRAPHIC, VIOLENT, but OBLIQUE - A CHILD'S VISION OF MURDER. \*

WALTER (V.O.)

*"Of course, the doctor later concluded it was suicide but by then my mind had been opened to a whole new existence."* \*

The FLASHCUTS fade, leaving FINGERLING staring at the bloody bed sheets. IN THE BLOOD IS SCRAWLED THE NUMBER "23". The BLOOD expands to fill the frame as we... \*

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. THE SPARROW HOME - LATE AFTERNOON

AGATHA arrives home. She sees WALTER's truck.

INT. SPARROW BASEMENT - LATE AFTERNOON \*

WALTER sits on the floor. AN OLD, EMPTY CHEST serves as a backrest, its contents (OLD PHOTO ALBUMS, TROPHIES, CHILDHOOD MEMORABILIA) spread around him. AGATHA comes down the stairs. \*

AGATHA  
Here you are. What are you doing?

WALTER  
I'll clear it up later.

AGATHA walks over, sees The Number 23 book nearby.

AGATHA  
I thought books were for people with no imagination of their own? \*

WALTER  
What did you think of this? \*

AGATHA  
I thought it was brilliant.... style's a bit... raw. \*

WALTER  
This Fingerling guy--

AGATHA  
Fabulous name. Can you give me a hand? \*

Walter follows her up THE STAIRS gathering the books and memorabilia. \*

WALTER  
What did you make of him? \*

AGATHA  
Oh, I loved him. At least, I did in the beginning.

WALTER  
What do you mean, "in the beginning"?

AGATHA  
Well, he... How far are you?

WALTER  
Chapter two. \*

INT. UPSTAIRS - CONTINUOUS

Agatha prepares to work on one of her many projects -- a stencilled motif high around the room. \*

AGATHA

Could you move the ladder for me? \*

Walter helps her. \*

WALTER

Fingerling reminds me of... of me, Ag. \*

AGATHA

(almost laughing) \*

I don't think so. Hand me the blue paint. \*

WALTER

No, he does. It's so much like my childhood, my memories... \*

He points to PHOTOS of him growing up, his parents, their house, their car, shots of him in the garden, an OLD, RICKETY FENCE in the background. \*

Another is of him and a COCKER SPANIEL. Then the view from a bedroom -- a sprawling jungle of a garden next door. \*

AGATHA

Walter, Fingerling's nothing like you. \*

He shows her ANOTHER BOOK. Paper flap long gone, it has a green, hardback cover and mottled texture.

WALTER

Look, "Fingerling at the Zoo."  
My mother read it to me when I was young.

AGATHA

Sweetie, lots of people would have read that as a kid. \*

WALTER

Did you?

AGATHA

No, but -- oh, Walter you are adorable -- every time I read a  
(MORE) \*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

AGATHA (CONT'D)

book it's like the author managed to steal a part of me I thought only I knew about. I'll write my own one day and do the same to someone else.

WALTER

But it's so similar.

AGATHA looks at various photos, then goes back to her painting.

AGATHA

There are many towns like your hometown, each with streets like yours. With houses like yours.

WALTER

And dogs next door?

AGATHA

Your neighbor had a dog? Shocking.

WALTER

It wasn't called Alfie. It was called Chief. "Mischief" my dad called it. It used to escape all the time. That's why I became a dogcatcher.

AGATHA

Fingerling's a police officer.

WALTER

Remember the woman next door? Well she did die. On MY eighth birthday.

\*  
\*

He stares at the 'evidence' before him -- incredulous. ROBIN enters, dropping his school bag.

\*  
\*

AGATHA

So there are similarities. That's all they are. Read on. You'll soon realize Fingerling's very different from you...

\*

ROBIN

Someone wrote a book about dad?

AGATHA

No, honey, your dad's just fooling around. How was school?

\*  
\*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

ROBIN shrugs and follows WALTER into the LIVING ROOM reading over his shoulder. \*

ROBIN  
Am I in it? I mean if it's about  
dad shouldn't I have a starring  
role? \*

AGATHA  
(from ladder)  
Yes you should and yet you don't. I  
wonder what that means?

WALTER  
The author knew you'd be a scene  
stealer.

As they plop down into the couch, ROBIN reaches across his Dad and turns the page to A REPRODUCTION OF A FRAGMENT of a withered POLAROID, yellowed with age. Its subject, we can't really see. Just raven hair, a lithe body, some black lace. ROBIN's eyes light up. \*

Walter quickly CLOSES the book. \*

ROBIN  
Who was that? \*

*EXT. CITY STREET - NIGHT*

WALTER (V.O.)  
Fabrizia... \*

*(WE'LL CALL THIS CHAPTER 'FABRIZIA'S ENTRANCE' - IT WILL HAVE A WEIRD, OLD-POLAROID FEELING)*

*A mass of tangled cars, all ablaze. The POPPING of a crime scene photographer's FLASHBULB. \**

*But all that is in the background. In the foreground, SLOW MOTION towards camera, A SIREN-LIKE ITALIAN WOMAN, FABRIZIA. Backlit by the fires, she is an alluring silhouette. FLASHBULBS briefly -- tantalizingly -- illuminate her stunning features. \**

*By the crime scene tape, FINGERLING and a fellow OFFICER speak to WITNESSES, scribble pads in hand. But, FINGERLING isn't writing, isn't asking questions. He is frozen, hypnotized by this creature moving closer and closer to his pulsing heart. She gives Fingerling "the look that melts all men" and, as she passes him, her hand seductively brushes his \**

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

*holstered revolver. He reflexively grabs her hand. Just what she wanted. Their eyes meet.* \*

*FLASHCUTS: A SEQUENCE OF 'POLAROID'S' OFFER BRIEF SUGGESTIONS OF THEIR FUTURE EROTIC LIFE TOGETHER.* \*

AGATHA (V.O.)

Ah yes. His Italian girlfriend.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

AGATHA exits the BATHROOM. She is in a towel and her hair is wet. WALTER reads in bed. Agatha takes the book and puts it FACEDOWN on his bedside table. \*

AGATHA \*

And you told me I was the first girl you ever loved.

She snuggles next to him. WALTER gazes at her glistening, still wet skin, a playful glint in his eye. \*

WALTER

She could be you.

AGATHA

(with a wicked smile)

Or I could be her...

She opens her towel. WALTER clicks off the light.

INT. BEDROOM - MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT

AGATHA sleeps. WALTER, awake, watches the PATTERNS AND SHADOWS on the ceiling and walls created by HEADLIGHTS PASSING FROM THE STREET BELOW. \*

The 23 book on the bedside table draws his attention. Suddenly, THE SHADOWS on the wall seem to form A CREEPY, TWO-DIMENSIONAL FIGURE-LIKE SILHOUETTE -- almost as if PROJECTED there by Walter's imagination. The Figure stares down at Walter and Agatha then sweeps slowly across the walls towards Agatha. In its hands, the outline of A LONG KNIFE appears. It raises the knife and thrusts downward violently, over and over again. \*

WALTER sits upright, knocking his bedside table. There's a THUD. He looks at the floor, where the book has fallen, FACE UP, the number 23 on its cover glinting in the half light. \*

WALTER turns back to the walls -- now just innocent shadows. He stares back at the book, strangely uneasy. \*

INT. ACO OFFICE - MORNING

Sybil works the dispatch, headset on.

SUPER UP: **FEBRUARY 5TH**

SYBIL  
What kind of noise?

A 'PUTT-PUTT-SCREECH' comes over the speakers.

EXT. STREET - MORNING

A 'PUTT-PUTT-SCREECH' comes from WALTER'S open window. \*

INT. TRUCK - MORNING

WALTER stops making the noise.

SYBIL'S VOICE  
I'll call a mechanic.

WALTER  
Already done. He's on his way.

SYBIL'S VOICE  
Let me know the deal Sparrow, ASAP. \*

WALTER  
Will do. Unit 5 out.

He hangs up the receiver. Reassures himself:

WALTER  
It's just one day.

He turns to "The Number 23" on the next seat. Picks it up.

*INT. 9TH FLOOR APARTMENT - DAY (THE "SUICIDE BLONDE" SECTION)*

*Looking through a telescope (into the apartment opposite) at a GORGEOUS BLONDE, pacing back and forth. Her PALE PINK TEDDY seems to glow against her pale skin and the WHITE WALLS. (THIS CHAPTER WILL BE BLOWN-OUT, LUMINOUS.)* \*

*FINGERLING, wearing a POLICE UNIFORM, turns to a SLEAZY LITTLE MAN. The Man redirects the telescope and FINGERLING looks again:* \*

*In the center of the living room is a CHAIR. Above it hangs a NOOSE.*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

*SLEAZY LITTLE MAN (O.S.)*  
*She gets on the chair, puts it*  
*around her neck, and just stands*  
*there.*

\*

*The Blonde does exactly this.*

*SLEAZY LITTLE MAN (O.S.)*  
*Then she gets down. Been doing it*  
*for two hours. She recently stopped*  
*seeing some guy who was doing her.*

\*

*INT. CORRIDOR - DAY*

*The building SUPER browses a giant ring of keys as he leads*  
*FINGERLING to Apartment #92- (the last number is missing).*  
*Finds the right key and...*

\*

*INT. SUICIDE BLONDE'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS*

\*

*...SUICIDE BLONDE, on the chair, spins to her front door as*  
*Fingerling enters, her large eyes haunting in the center of*  
*soft pink eyeshadow. Up close, her white skin seems to give*  
*off its own luminescent glow.*

\*

\*

\*

\*

*She puts the noose around her neck.*

\*

*Fingerling inches into her living room. The walls, ceiling,*  
*furniture, everything is covered with PLAIN, WHITE PAPER.*  
*Letter-size.*

\*

\*

\*

*FINGERLING*  
*Love what you've done with the*  
*place.*

\*

\*

\*

*SUICIDE BLONDE*  
*I know what you're up to, this 'try*  
*to befriend me' crap. Come any*  
*closer and I'll do it!*

*FINGERLING*  
*I'd rather you didn't. Today's my*  
*birthday. If you hang yourself*  
*it'll be my worst one ever.*

*SUICIDE BLONDE*  
*You're pathetic. I swear, move and*  
*I'll fucking do it.*

*FINGERLING*  
*If you want to die, die, but*  
*hanging's painful as hell. What's*  
*(MORE)*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

FINGERLING (CONT'D)

worse, most times people screw up making the noose. All they achieve is a permanent necklace, a grisly reminder of how utterly pathetic they are. If you're serious about ending it there are far more effective ways.

\*  
\*  
\*

SUICIDE BLONDE

Enlighten me.

\*  
\*

FINGERLING

Well, you live on the 9th floor. Haven't you ever wanted to fly?

\*  
\*  
\*

SUICIDE BLONDE smiles strangely.

\*

SUICIDE BLONDE

Is it really your birthday?

INT. TRUCK - DAY

\*

Walter's radio CRACKLES into life, startling Walter.

\*

SYBIL'S VOICE

Unit 5, come in. Walter! Talk to me. The city's canine population is running amok.

EXT. STREET - CONTINUOUS

\*

WALTER

The mechanic's here doing his thing, Sybil.

\*  
\*  
\*

There's no mechanic anywhere.

\*

WALTER

It doesn't look good. Something to do with the... fan belt... timing mechanism? I'll let you know as soon as I'm mobile.

\*

SYBIL'S VOICE

Hurry up, Sparrow! HQ out.

\*  
\*

Walter turns back to the book.

WALTER (V.O.)

"Suicide Blonde tells me she was a good person once."

\*  
\*

INT. SUICIDE BLONDE'S APARTMENT- DAY

SUICIDE BLONDE pours FINGERLING coffee from a pot also wrapped in paper. His eyes find color in the white of her skin - dark SCARS on her wrists. \*

SUICIDE BLONDE

(re his gaze) \*

But now I'm a bad person. Go see my ex-boyfriend. He'll show you. I don't want to turn you bad. \*

WALTER (V.O.)

"I should have gotten out of there right at that moment, but then she said it..." \*

SUICIDE BLONDE peels a sheet of the white paper from a mirror, revealing LOTS OF WORDS, SEEMINGLY SCRAWLED AT RANDOM, WITH NUMBERS ASSIGNED TO THEM.

...ALL ADDING UP TO 23.

SUICIDE BLONDE

This number... this FUCKING number... 23... it rules my world. \*

She stares at a MAN'S NAME on the MIRROR -- TIMOTHY CHARLES HUNT accompanied by the numbers 110/66/63, 2/12/9, 23. \*

SUICIDE BLONDE

It's all my father's fault. He said he'd figured out how to beat "The Number 23" and that I'd be safe. He said-- \*

INT. 8-YR-OLD SUICIDE BLONDE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

A GIRL (SUICIDE BLONDE aged 8) sits in bed, knees pulled up tight to her chest. Her FATHER sits on the edge of her bed. His eyes are fraught with anguish. His shirt is BLOOD-STAINED.

GIRL'S FATHER

--Daddy loves you and he's going to do something that guarantees his little girl won't inherit the curse of "23"...

INT. 8-YR-OLD SUICIDE BLONDE'S FATHER'S DEN - NIGHT

Her Father sits behind his desk, shaking.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

*SUICIDE BLONDE (V.O.)*

*But he was wrong. Daddy's guarantee  
wasn't worth the blood it was  
written in.*

*He picks up a GUN. Points it to his head. Pulls the trigger.*

\*

*INT. SUICIDE BLONDE'S LIVING ROOM - BACK TO SCENE*

*SUICIDE BLONDE*

*I guess he just didn't love me  
enough.*

\*

\*

\*

*She paces back and forth, ranting.*

\*

*SUICIDE BLONDE*

*It's everywhere. Times. Dates.  
Numbers of buses. License plates.  
Pages of books. Even elevator floor  
lights. Soon I realized it was in  
my name. The words I spoke. Nothing  
was safe. Nothing. My favorite  
color's pink. You know what pink  
is?*

*She rips a piece of paper off the wall. Behind it are a mass  
of words and their corresponding sums. She points to the  
words RED and WHITE. Red = 27. White = 65. 27+65=92.*

*SUICIDE BLONDE*

*Pink has four letters.*

\*

*92/4 equals...*

*SUICIDE BLONDE*

*Twenty-fucking-three.*

\*

*WALTER (V.O.)*

*"I'll be honest -- I didn't get it.  
I asked her the only question I  
could muster."*

*FINGERLING*

*Any more coffee?*

*EXT. STREET - DAY*

*Walter's truck is EMPTY.*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SYBIL'S VOICE

Walter, this isn't funny. Pick up.  
I said, pick up, Sparrow, damn you.  
We have a U.S.S. two blocks away so  
even if your truck's still O.O.S...

\*

EXT. PARK - DAY

Walter reads as he walks.

WALTER (V.O.)

"I tell her a story... the one  
about my Uncle Charlie, how one day  
he read in his stars he was gonna  
fall in love with a woman wearing  
green so he walks around all day  
until he finds one. Six months  
later they married. Suicide Blonde  
says..."

\*

\*

INT. SUICIDE BLONDE'S LIVING ROOM - DAY

SUICIDE BLONDE

...you're lying.

FINGERLING holds up a finger -- he hasn't finished yet.

FINGERLING

Two years later the woman in green  
divorces my Uncle and takes  
everything he's got.

\*

FINGERLING peers out the French doors.

\*

FINGERLING

He's out there now, at this very  
moment, still searching for a woman  
in green. Figures he just got the  
wrong one.

\*

SUICIDE BLONDE

This is meant to make me feel  
better, how?

FINGERLING

You look smarter than my Uncle  
Charlie.

SUICIDE BLONDE smiles.

WALTER (V.O)

"She has a face meant to smile."

INT. SUICIDE BLONDE'S HALLWAY - DAY

She walks him to the door.

SUICIDE BLONDE  
I promise I'll be okay. Officer?  
Happy birthday. How many is it? \*

WALTER (V.O.)  
I lie.

FINGERLING  
Twenty... five.

SUICIDE BLONDE smiles again.

EXT. APARTMENT BLOCK - STREET-LEVEL - DAY

WALTER (V.O.)  
"As I exit the building, I wonder  
if sleazy is watching me and look  
up to see ..."

FINGERLING looks for Sleazy when... THUD!

SUICIDE BLONDE

hits the pavement beside him.

EXT. PARK - DAY - UNSEEN POV...

...watching WALTER from beside an OLD OAK TREE.

WALTER (V.O.)  
"That night I'm not surprised in  
the slightest when Fabrizia  
announces..." \*

FABRIZIA (V.O.)  
I want to go to her place. \*

INT. SUICIDE BLONDE'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Some of the PAPER has been stripped away, revealing the full,  
terrifying extent of Suicide Blonde's obsession with 23.

FABRIZIA  
Bi-zarre. To think it happened on  
your 23rd birthday. \*

WALTER (V.O.)  
"She's buzzed." \*

CONTINUED:

*Fabrizia pushes Fingerling against the wall.*

\*

*They begin to make passionate love, WHITE PAGES FLUTTERING around them, exposing more MANIC SCRAWLINGS.*

\*

\*

*INT. UNKNOWN APARTMENT - DAY*

*WALTER (V.O.)*

*"The next day, I traced the ex-boyfriend Suicide Blonde mentioned."*

\*

*FINGERLING enters a BEDROOM, where a MAN lies in bed, DEAD. A KNIFE PROTRUDES FROM HIS CHEST.*

*EXT. PARK - DAY*

*WALTER frowns -- unsettled, yet not sure why. In the distance you might notice NED beside the OLD OAK TREE watching him.*

*INT. DEAD BOYFRIEND'S APARTMENT -DAY*

*Now a CRIME SCENE, populated with COPS, CORONER ETC.*

*FINGERLING holds up an EVIDENCE BAG. Inside is the KNIFE.*

*FINGERLING*

*Forensics matched it to her.*

*His SERGEANT checks a report.*

*SERGEANT*

*Guess this is what she meant by being a bad person.*

*FINGERLING*

*Yeah. If it's all right with you, I'm gonna take the rest of the day off. Feeling a bit queasy.*

*SERGEANT*

*Dead people will do that to ya.*

*FINGERLING exits through the busy crime scene.*

*WALTER (V.O.)*

*"I didn't feel bad about lying. There was just something I had to do."*

EXT. PARK - DAY

Look closely and the hairs on WALTER's nape are prickling.

WALTER (V.O.)  
 "I mean, it was only one day."

A creepy case of déjà vu. He stares into space... until the book slowly draws him back. \*

INT. SUICIDE BLONDE'S APARTMENT - DAY

FINGERLING studies the CRAZY WRITING on the walls. Around the top is the ALPHABET plus EACH LETTER'S NUMBER.

WALTER (V.O.)  
 "You might laugh at what I did next, but I bet you'll try it."

FINGERLING pulls out his a NOTEPAD. Starts scribbling a bunch of letters and numbers. Inside a circle at the bottom is... \*

WALTER (V.O.)  
 "Surely it was just a coincidence? I mean, a name's just a name, right?"

...the number 23. \*

INT. CHEAP HOTEL LOBBY - NIGHT \*

A refuge for lost souls. The kind of place where no one asks questions. FABRIZIA leads FINGERLING to the front desk. \*

(THIS CHAPTER IS THE COLOR NOIR SECTION) \*

WALTER (V.O.)  
 I tell Fabrizia about Suicide Blonde's boyfriend. Her reaction is pure Fabrizia... \*

FABRIZIA pays for a room as FINGERLING studies the lobby. \*

WALTER (V.O.)  
 "I don't tell her that, including the two of us, there are twenty-three people in the lobby"

INT. CHEAP HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

FABRIZIA pulls a packet of STOCKINGS from her purse. She throws them at FINGERLING and lies on the bed, putting her wrists against the headboard.

FABRIZIA  
Don't worry, they're cheap ones.

FINGERLING TIES EACH WRIST to a bedpost, starts unbuttoning her blouse.

FABRIZIA  
No. Rip it off. Rip it all off. \*

He does.

FABRIZIA  
Pretend you have a knife in your hands. \*

FINGERLING squeezes his right hand into a fist and traces it over her body at a steady height of six inches. FABRIZIA squirms beneath him -- almost like he does have a knife. FINGERLING gets more and more into it and when FABRIZIA goes to say something, he clamps his left hand over her mouth.

FINGERLING  
Quiet, bitch, or you die!

As they surrender completely to their role-playing, CAMERA PULLS AWAY... \*

WALTER (V.O.)  
"Of course, I would never really harm Fabrizia. I loved her. I thought she loved me." \*

...AND OUT OF THE TRANSOM AND INTO THE HALLWAY where we see that they are, of course, in ROOM "23". \*

INT. "A NOVEL FATE" USED BOOKSTORE - AFTERNOON

The book is on the counter. WALTER waits as a SALESPERSON checks a computer. She frowns. Examines the book.

SALESPERSON  
It's self-published, self-printed and by an author I've never heard of.

She types "KRETTTS, T" into the computer.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SALESPERSON

And old Topsy here hasn't written a thing since. Am I correct in thinking you want to get in touch with the author?

WALTER

You are very correct.

SALESPERSON

Then may I be so... original... as to point this out?

She points to a MAILBOX ADDRESS in small print at the bottom of the back cover.

INT. THE SPARROW HOME - LATE AFTERNOON

WALTER hits redial on the PHONE by the FRONT DOOR, a PHONE BOOK at his feet. AGATHA and ROBIN come home. \*

AGATHA

So this is where you are. Sybil's called me at least a dozen times.

He shushes her, speaks into the phone in a very odd voice.

WALTER

Hello, I wonder if you can help me?

TELEPHONE VOICE

Mister, you call once more and I'm calling the cops.

Dial-tone.

ROBIN \*

Why are you speaking in a funny voice?

WALTER holds up "The Number 23."

WALTER \*

I'm trying to contact the blasted thing's author but the only clue is this.

(opens to mailbox address)

And the little brat who works there won't tell me anything! \*

AGATHA \*

Walter, what's going on?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

He leads them down into... \*

INT. THE SPARROW BASEMENT - CONTINUOUS \*

...where one wall is covered with paper. The alphabet is written at the top, the numbers 1 to 26 below. 'WALTER SPARROW' is written beneath, along with each number's value and a series of calculations, beginning with...  $W=23$ . \*

WALTER  
Look. W is the twenty-third letter of the alphabet. \*

AGATHA  
Fascinating. \*

WALTER  
That's only the beginning. \*

AGATHA looks on with growing concern as WALTER continues (ROBIN, however, is fascinated).  $A=1$ ;  $L=12$ ;  $T=20$ ;  $E=5$ ;  $R=18$ . Total: 79.  $S=19$ ;  $P=16$ ;  $A=1$ ;  $R=18(x2)$ ;  $O=15$ ;  $W=23$ . Total: 110. \*

WALTER  
It doesn't work with Walter Sparrow, but if you use my middle name...

He points to 'PAUL' and the numbers  $P=16$ ;  $A=1$ ;  $U=21$ ;  $L=12$ . Total: 50. From the 79 he gets  $7+9=16$ , 110,  $1+1+0=2$ , and 50 gives  $5+0=5$ .  $16+2+5$  equals... twenty-three! \*

WALTER  
(significantly)  
You see?

AGATHA  
See what? \*

WALTER points out VARIOUS PERSONAL DISCOVERIES. \*

WALTER  
It's all 23. Not just my name. My birthday is two three. My driver's license. Social security number. Everything!

He holds up "The Number 23."

WALTER  
It's me, guys. This proves it. \*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

AGATHA

Tell me you're not serious. \*

WALTER

(stares at the book) \*

How does he know so much about me? \*

Why did he choose me? \*

(off Agatha's look) \*

You've read it. And you know me  
 better than I do! I'm telling ya,  
 this author's used me. Not only  
 that, the book's driving me nuts. I  
 can't explain it, but, I'm  
 imagining all sorts of weirdness.  
 It's like it's... imitating my  
 life. \*

AGATHA

Is this what you've been doing all  
 day? \*

She picks up the book, finds a bookmark halfway in. \*

AGATHA

You haven't even finished it. \*

WALTER

I've read all I need to read. \*

AGATHA

You've read all you want to read.  
 You've concerned yourself with the  
 minutia and drawn wild conclusions  
 from them. What about the fact that  
 Fingerling becomes a killer??

ROBIN

Who does he kill? \*

AGATHA

If it's about your dad then why  
 don't you ask... \*

(to WALTER; sarcastic) \*

...Mr. Fingerling himself? \*

(a beat) \*

I see. Sorry to have spoiled your  
 game. \*

She heads back upstairs into... \*

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

...where she immerses herself in one of her decorating projects. WALTER follows her in. \*

WALTER

Sure, there are differences. Fingerling's a cop. I'm a dogcatcher. He met Fabrizia when he was 21 whereas I met you when I was...

AGATHA

Twenty... three. \*

WALTER

Do you remember the day we met?

AGATHA

Of course I do. September 14th.

WALTER

Nine fourteen. 9 plus 14 is....

AGATHA

Twenty three. \*

WALTER

The day we married?

AGATHA

A month later. October 13th.

WALTER

Ten thirteen. 23. \*

AGATHA

Honey, I'm sure if the book was called "27" or "152" you could do the same thing. It's just a silly urban legend searching for some desperate proof-- \*

ROBIN

--We live at number 1814. \*

WALTER and AGATHA turn to the doorway, confused. \*

ROBIN

18 is 1 plus 8 which makes 9. 9 plus 14 is 23. \*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

AGATHA

Don't you start talking nonsense,  
Robin.

\*  
\*

ROBIN

It's not nonsense, Mom. 9 plus 14  
is 23.

\*  
\*

WALTER

14 is 1 plus 4 which makes 5. 18  
plus 5 is also 23.

\*  
\*  
\*

ROBIN

18 plus 14 is 32.

\*

WALTER

Twenty-three reversed.

\*

ROBIN

Spooky, huh? What do you think it  
means?

\*  
\*  
\*

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

\*

WALTER and AGATHA are asleep. WALTER awakes and turns to the  
clock -- 3:22 a.m. Suddenly, the next number falls, CLICKING  
THUNDEROUSLY to 03:23.

\*  
\*

WALTER rises.

INT. STAIRCASE/HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

\*

He heads downstairs. Pauses by the KITCHEN.

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

\*

The light comes on. Walter walks to the sink and turns on the  
cold water tap. Holds his hand underneath.

The coolness of the water wakes him. He looks around,  
confused. He's been sleepwalking.

He's drawn back to the white, porcelain sink. It's spattered  
with red. He looks at his hands. More red. It's BLOOD.

He checks himself, confused. Then he sees it -- an EMPTY SLOT  
in Agatha's KNIFE BLOCK.

INT. STAIRCASE - CONTINUOUS

Walter walks up, one step at a time...

INT. BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

He clicks on the light. Agatha is snuggled under the covers.

He peels back the covers: BLOODSTAINED SHEETS appear.

He throws off the covers. Freezes.

AGATHA

has been stabbed to death, multiple times. The KNIFE still protrudes from her body. He pulls out the knife. Stares at it. Throws it aside and collapses over Agatha, sobbing. Pulls her into his arms.

WALTER

A nightmare. It's just a  
nightmare...

He shuts his eyes. Opens them. Agatha is still dead. Tears stream down his cheeks. He SCREAMS in anguish.

AGATHA

Walter, what's wrong?

The LIGHT COMES ON. AGATHA is unharmed, but terrified.

Overcome with relief, WALTER grabs her tightly. He takes her head in his hands, gazes at her, then kisses her passionately. They transition into an embrace, Walter's eyes drifting to the bedside table and...

..."The Number 23".

EXT. LOCAL UNIVERSITY - DAY - ESTABLISHING

SUPER UP: **FEBRUARY 6TH**

INT. CLASSROOM - SAME

ISAAC ends a discussion group with a SMALL GROUP OF ENTHRALLED STUDENTS (especially the coeds). It's clear he enjoys the attention. WALTER nervously waits outside THE CLASSROOM DOOR.

INT. UNIVERSITY HALLWAYS - MOMENTS LATER

ISAAC, sportng a YELLOW TIE, walks with WALTER as he thumbs through "THE NUMBER 23." ATTRACTIVE COEDS coo "hellos" to Isaac in passing.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WALTER

There's something unsettling about this place.

ISAAC

Probably all the books around the place. Do you regret not finishing college?

\*  
\*

WALTER

My parents' deaths changed my focus in life. As a result I met Agatha. No, I don't regret it at all.

\*

ISAAC

(re: book)

This sounds like a fascinating read. Of course, there exist far too few stories where the main character plays the saxophone. I wasn't aware you also played.

\*

WALTER

I don't. But that's just it, not everything matches. It's the number. I'm seeing it everywhere.

ISAAC

The conspiracy buffs would say of course. After all, the world spins on an axis of 23 degrees. If you tell them it's actually 23.5 they'll say 5 is simply 2 plus 3.

WALTER looks at ISAAC as if he's suddenly found someone speaking the same language in a foreign land. They enter...

\*

INT. ISAAC'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

\*

...a fascinating, seductive place. The DOOR reads "ISAAC FRENCH, PHD. DEPT OF PSYCHOLOGY".

\*  
\*

ISAAC

Twenty three is very good at this particular game.

WALTER

What game?

\*

ISAAC

Paranoia. Oh yes, there's a fair bit of literature on the 23 enigma.

\*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WALTER

The '23 enigma'?

\*

ISAAC

There are 23 axioms in Euclid's geometry. The human body consists of 46 chromosomes, 23 from each parent. Blood takes 23 seconds to circulate. The Mayans believed the end of the world would occur on December 23rd. Of the year 2012. 20 plus 12 is--

WALTER

--twenty-three reversed. So it's true? The number's some kind of... higher power?

ISAAC

(shrugs)

What's true is that a select group of people take delight in perpetuating the number's infamy. Society thrives on this kind of nonsense. Lucky 7? Unlucky 13? A ballplayer with lucky shoes? People only pray because they think God will help them if they do. All it is is magical thinking: non-scientific causal reasoning. You're looking for 23 and so, you're finding it.

He shows WALTER the last few pages of the book.

ISAAC

Strange there's only 22 chapters. You'd think there'd be 23.

\*

\*

WALTER

Help me. Please. Agatha thinks I'm nuts.

\*

\*

ISAAC

I'll speak to her if you like but a cake's true flavor cannot be ascertained while still in the oven. Finish the book. If, after reading it in its entirety you still believe its subject to be you, then whoever wrote it knows

\*

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

ISAAC (CONT'D)  
 you very well. Only they can give  
 you your answers.

\*

INT. ACO OFFICE - DAY

DR. MORTIMER studies WALTER.

DR. ALICE MORTIMER  
 This is why you've been avoiding  
 work? Faking car trouble?

WALTER  
 (lying)  
 I break out in a cold sweat every  
 time a dog barks. Even if it's on  
 TV. I just need a few days.

DR. MORTIMER smiles. She takes a pen from her now full pencil-  
 holder mug.

INT. AGATHA'S CAKE SHOP - DAY

\*

AGATHA decorates a WEDDING CAKE.

AGATHA  
 Emotional leave?

WALTER  
 Five days! Can you believe it? I  
 can't get over how easy it was.

AGATHA  
 Walter, you lied to her.

WALTER  
 I had to ensure my job wouldn't be  
 jeopardized.

AGATHA  
 I've never known you to lie.

WALTER  
 I've never had to. Listen to me,  
 Isaac was wearing a yellow tie.  
 Yellow is 92, or four 23s. Dr.  
 Mortimer has a mug on her desk  
 which she uses as a pencil holder.  
 It was empty last time yet just now  
 there were 23 pencils in it--

AGATHA  
 Stop it! What's happening to you?  
 Counting pencils? You're insane.  
 (MORE)

\*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

AGATHA (CONT'D)

You're starting to sound like my Cousin Ramona who swears she was abducted and probed by Aliens from The Planet Zithra! What's happened to the fun-loving, dog-catching man I love?

WALTER

There's a whole 23 universe out there, Ag. It's amazing. This book has... opened my eyes.

\*  
\*  
\*

AGATHA

Fine, stay home and read the damn thing. The quicker you finish it, the quicker we can get back to normal.

WALTER walks to the door, pausing to ask:

WALTER

Guess how many cakes are in this room?

\*

He leaves. AGATHA, despite herself, begins to count the cakes on display...

\*

WALTER (V.O.)

"Twenty three..."

\*  
\**INT. FINGERLING AND FABRIZIA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT*

WALTER (V.O.)

"...its power was inescapable. I started having the most unsettling nightmares imaginable."

\*  
\*

*FABRIZIA is asleep. Fingerling is wide awake, anxiety riddled and bathed in sweat.*

\*

WALTER (V.O.)

"Over the next few days I couldn't decide what was worse. Being asleep Or being awake."

*He checks the time -- 02:30 a.m.*

*INT. FINGERLING AND FABRIZIA'S KITCHEN - MORNING*

*FINGERLING cuddles FABRIZIA from behind as she prepares breakfast. Suddenly he reaches for a knife and slits her throat...*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WALTER (V.O.)

"Sometimes it was impossible to  
tell the difference."

...before FABRIZIA twists around in his grasp and feeds him a  
spoonful of yogurt, waking him from his macabre trance.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

FINGERLING and FABRIZIA have wild sex on the floor... at  
least FABRIZIA does. FINGERLING is transfixed by the LIGHT  
SPILLING from HER SHOE CLOSET. FABRIZIA follows his glazed  
stare. \*

FINGERLING

You have twenty three pairs of  
shoes. \*

FABRIZIA

You're insane. Stop COUNTING MY  
SHOES and FUCK me! \*

INT. BASEMENT - DAY

WALTER looks up from the book. \*

FLASHCUT: AGATHA SAYS, "YOU'RE INSANE." \*

He continues.

WALTER (V.O.)

"My Sergeant notices subtle changes  
in my behavior. He decides I need  
help"

INT. PSYCHIATRIST'S OFFICE - DAY

FINGERLING speaks while the intellectual and dashing DR.  
MILES PHOENIX takes notes.

FINGERLING

Suicide Blonde's name was Isobel  
Lydia Hunt. 62, 51, 63, reducible  
to 8, 6, 9. Twenty three. \*

DR. MILES PHOENIX

What do you think that means?

FINGERLING gazes out the window. Everywhere he looks 2s and  
3s seem to sparkle, like stars at night.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

*FINGERLING*

*I don't know.*

*WALTER (V.O.)*

*"The wise Dr. Phoenix recommends I take a break. Like time is gonna heal me. Time is just a counting system. Numbers with meaning attached to them. Still, a break is what he prescribed. He called it--"*

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

WALTER looks up from the book again. \*

*WALTER*

*--emotional leave?*

INT. FINGERLING AND FABRIZIA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

*WALTER (V.O.)*

*"Fabrizia was not impressed."*

*FABRIZIA is in bed, looking through FINGERLING'S NOTEBOOK full of crazy 23 scribbling. FINGERLING hangs up his uniform.*

*FABRIZIA*

*So you're not a cop anymore?*

*FINGERLING*

*Yes, I'm still a cop. Just a cop on holiday.*

*FABRIZIA*

*Without a gun.*

*FINGERLING*

*I still have these.*

*He holds up his HANDCUFFS.*

*FABRIZIA*

*Let's just get some sleep tonight.*

*She tosses the NOTEBOOK onto the floor, rolls over and kills the light. In the darkness... FINGERLING stares INTO HER SHOE CLOSET. \**

*WALTER (V.O.)*

*"She didn't understand."*

*The digital alarm clock clicks to 00:23 p.m. \**

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WALTER (V.O.)

"Which was fine, because neither  
did I."

He gets down on his knees and surreptitiously reaches for a  
pair of shoes. \*

WALTER (V.O.)

"All I knew was, the number had  
gone after Isobel Lydia Hunt." \*

INT. SUICIDE BLONDE'S APARTMENT - DAY

Suicide Blonde jumps over the edge of her balcony and  
disappears into a BLINDING LIGHT. \*

INT. FINGERLING AND FABRIZIA'S APARTMENT - EVENING

WALTER (V.O.)

"And now it was coming after me." \*

FABRIZIA prepares dinner. She tosses vegetables into a  
saucepan, then moves to throw away the trimmings.

FABRIZIA

What are these doing in the trash?

She holds up a PAIR OF HER SHOES, now covered in vegetable  
scraps. She walks over to FINGERLING and empties the contents  
of the saucepan over his head.

INT. DR. MILES PHOENIX'S OFFICE - DAY

DR. PHOENIX looks at a PHOTO of FABRIZIA.

DR. MILES PHOENIX

I'll speak to her if you like. \*

FINGERLING lifts his head out of his hands.

WALTER (V.O.)

"I believe he said it in total  
innocence at the time."

EXT. STREET - DAY

FINGERLING watches a COFFEE SHOP opposite.

THROUGH THE WINDOW, we see FABRIZIA chatting to DR. PHOENIX.  
Then THEY KISS. FINGERLING is devastated. \*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WALTER (V.O.)  
 "But looking back..."

INT. DR. MILES PHOENIX'S OFFICE - DAY

DR. PHOENIX ogles the photo of FABRIZIA and says (MOS) "I'll speak to her if you like." FINGERLING lifts his head. \*

WALTER (V.O.)  
 "...I wish I'd reacted differently."

EXT. STREET - DAY

There's a SCREAM... PEDESTRIANS glance about... then...

DR. PHOENIX HITS the sidewalk, SHARDS OF GLASS raining down seconds later -- the remnants of his window.

INT. DR. MILES PHOENIX'S OFFICE - DAY

FINGERLING comes out of his macabre fantasy and looks at DR. PHOENIX opposite him.

WALTER (V.O.)  
 "I should have realized the truth.  
 I know it's absurd, but, even the  
 color of his tie betrayed him."

DR. PHOENIX wears A YELLOW TIE.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

WALTER remembers: \*

FLASHCUT: ISAAC IN HIS YELLOW TIE.

WALTER looks back at the book, checking a previous passage.

FLASHCUT: ISAAC SAYS, "I'LL SPEAK TO HER IF YOU LIKE." \*

WALTER paces. He stares at the PHOTOS on the mantelpiece. The one on the end is of AGATHA and ISAAC.

FLASHCUT: FABRIZIA AND DR. PHOENIX KISS. THEIR FACES MORPH INTO THOSE OF AGATHA AND ISAAC.

EXT. STREET - DAY

WALTER, obsessed, dashes to: \*

EXT. AGATHA'S CAKE SHOP - SAME

Inside is dark. A HANDWRITTEN NOTE says, "CLOSED FOR LUNCH." \*

WALTER \*

She never closes for lunch.

He spins around, searching the street. Freezes, eyes transfixed on an APPROACHING BUS.

It's a No. 23.

He backs up against a PAWN SHOP WINDOW. In the window the SHOPKEEPER is putting up a PRICE LABEL: "ONE WEEK ONLY: \$123."

Beneath this, the Shopkeeper places a SET OF KNIVES. \*

WALTER -- horrified. He notices the REFLECTION OF THE SHOP OPPOSITE in the window. \*

It is a COFFEE SHOP.

He crosses over, ignoring traffic.

He stops in his tracks, crestfallen.

THROUGH THE WINDOW, he sees AGATHA speaking to ISAAC.

EXT. UNIVERSITY - DAY

WALTER sits on a bench, zombie-like.

ISAAC enters a TALL BUILDING in the distance. WALTER rises.

INT. ELEVATOR - DAY

WALTER goes up.

INT. ISAAC'S OFFICE - DAY

ISAAC looks up as WALTER enters.

EXT. UNIVERSITY - DAY

One of the tall building's windows SHATTER. ISAAC flies out. He SCREAMS, arms flailing, HITS the sidewalk with a THUD.

PULL BACK TO REVEAL - WALTER

still sitting on the bench, staring at the sidewalk, fists clenched, a mischievous smile on his face -- no dead ISAAC in sight.

He awakes from his macabre trance. Unfurls his fists in shock. His hands begin to shake. He flees.

INT. KITCHEN - AFTERNOON

WALTER splashes his face with water. His eyes are drawn to the KNIFE BLOCK.

He looks into the LIVING ROOM at the BLOOD RED WALLS. He can't bear what is happening to him and the dark thoughts that have taken over.

INT. THE SPARROW HOME - LATE AFTERNOON

AGATHA comes home. WALTER hurries downstairs with a SUITCASE. He freezes upon seeing her.

AGATHA  
Going somewhere?

He drags her into the LIVING ROOM and gestures to the walls.

WALTER  
Why did you choose this color?

He holds up the book.

WALTER  
Who does he kill, Ag? Suicide  
Blonde said it ruled her world. She  
killed because of it. Then she  
passed it on to Fingerling. On his  
birthday. He found it applied to  
him and you say he turns into a  
killer. Who does he kill?

AGATHA  
Walter, this is way past funny--

WALTER  
--I dreamt I killed you.

AGATHA  
Enough. Please.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WALTER  
I've been having these... horrible  
fantasies. Agatha, I think I'm  
losing my mind.

AGATHA  
It's a book. A bloody book!

WALTER  
(shaking his head)  
No. Don't you see? Fingerling  
called it fate. Do you know what  
fate is? Thirty two. 23 reversed.  
I'm scared, Ag. I'm so, so scared.

He walks up to her and kisses her passionately.

WALTER  
I love you. You know that.

He walks to the FRONT DOOR. AGATHA throws herself in front.  
She tries desperately to say something but the situation has  
rendered her speechless.

WALTER  
A long time ago we made some vows.  
I meant every one of them. That's  
why I have to do this. It's just  
one night. Please, don't try to  
find me. Please don't give up on  
me. I'm still your loving, dog-  
catching husband.

He leaves.

INT. TRUCK - EVENING

WALTER scours the streets for a place to stay. He sees "THE  
SHELL HOTEL."

INT. "THE SHELL HOTEL - EVENING

The spindly HOTEL CLERK leads WALTER down a corridor.

HOTEL CLERK  
Room 27's the quietest.

They pass Room 23. WALTER slows.

WALTER  
What about 23?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

HOTEL CLERK

Oh no, sir, that wouldn't behoove your desires. 23 is next to the bathroom and we're experiencing awful problems with the water system.

INT. ROOM 23 - EVENING - A SHORT WHILE LATER

The WALLS ARE SODDEN. The room is SAD. Walter has tossed his case on the sagging bed and unpacked some PHOTOS OF ROBIN AND AGATHA which are all on display. He sits in the chair by the bureau staring at "The Number 23." There is a 1920s LETTER OPENER nearby. He opens the book. \*

WALTER (V.O.)

*"The rest of the book was as I feared."*

EXT. WOOD - EVENING

*FINGERLING* peeks out from behind a tree, standing on the fringe of a PARK.

*HIS POV:* twenty-odd yards away, *FABRIZIA* lies on the ground bathed in moonlight, her coat spread open as *DR. PHOENIX* ravishes her. \*

EXT. FINGERLING AND FABRIZIA'S APARTMENT - DAWN

*FABRIZIA* has obviously cleared out. A NEWSPAPER dated NOVEMBER 23RD lies on the KITCHEN COUNTER. *FINGERLING* stares at a NOTE on the fridge: "DEAR FINGERLING, GOODBYE..." followed by a paragraph that tears him apart. \*

He looks up at the walls -- a mass of demented 23 scribblings.

He stares at *FABRIZIA*'s letter, starts mumbling to himself and crossing out letters. He stops. Nearly all the letters have been crossed out. The ones that remain spell: "KILL HER."

INT. HARDWARE STORE - DAY

*FABRIZIA* and *DR. PHOENIX* buy a BUTCHER'S KNIFE. *FINGERLING* spies on them through a gap in the shelves.

They leave, LAUGHING. *FINGERLING* emerges. Walks to a display. Sees the KNIFE; a special offer at \$23.

INT. DR. PHOENIX'S BEDROOM - EVENING

FABRIZIA is in bed, eyes closed with wrists tied to the posts and a sheet over her body. A MAN IN A SKI MASK enters.

He straddles her, slowly peels back the sheet. He freezes... Her torso is BLOODY, the recently purchased BUTCHER'S KNIFE in her chest. He tugs off his mask -- DR. PHOENIX. He pulls the knife out and tries desperately to bring her back to life.

FINGERLING hides in the shadows and quietly sneaks out the back door, his SILHOUETTE looking eerily like the SILHOUETTE FROM WALTER'S FIRST NIGHTMARE. \*

EXT. DR. PHOENIX'S HOME - NIGHT

POLICE escort a handcuffed DR. PHOENIX to a car. FINGERLING watches from a safe distance.

INT. FINGERLING'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

FINGERLING stumbles about, desperate and lost. He turns to his reflection in the mirror. A DEAD, BLOOD-STAINED FABRIZIA appears in the mirror. \*

He hurls his SAX at her, SHATTERING her image.

A few pieces of glass hang in the frame, reflecting his own FRAGMENTED, DISTORTED FACE. Tortured by guilt, he runs to the BALCONY... towards the precipice... \*

INT. ROOM 23 - NIGHT \*

WALTER quickly turns the page. There are no more. He is thoroughly disturbed. \*

WALTER (V.O.)

"It wasn't the happiest of endings." \*

He looks blankly out the window, his reflection ODDLY BLURRED. \*

WALTER (V.O.)

"Unlike Fingerling, the number had lived to kill another day..." \*

NED stares up at him from below. \*

INT. POLICE STATION - THE SERGEANT'S OFFICE - MORNING \*

WALTER sits quietly while the SERGEANT studies the book. \*

SUPER UP: **FEBRUARY 7TH** \*

SERGEANT \*

Mr. Sparrow, I can't arrest you for  
a crime you haven't committed,  
especially one you're afraid you're  
gonna commit because of a book. \*

WALTER \*

It's not just a book. \*

SERGEANT \*

Yes. So you've said.  
(sighs; a beat)  
Know why I have these stripes? \*

WALTER \*

You're the Sergeant. \*

SERGEANT \*

Know why some cops make Sergeant  
and others don't? They're good with  
people. Good at knowing people,  
being able to read them. I look at  
you and I don't see a killer. I see  
a man whose only crime is he loves  
his wife too much. Go back to her. \*

INT. TRUCK - MORNING

WALTER gazes at his home down the street. ROBIN exits in his  
school uniform. He heads in the opposite direction. \*

WALTER (V.O.) \*

The Book of Revelations has only 22  
chapters. That's about the end of  
the world. \*

(holds up "The Number 23")  
This was about the end of my world. \*

He lowers the book. Sees ISAAC knocking on the front door. \*

AGATHA answers, still in her nightgown. She invites him in. \*

INT. THE SPARROW HOME - MOMENTS LATER

WALTER creeps into THE KITCHEN. BLINDED WITH RAGE he grabs a  
KNIFE, studies his REFLECTION in the blade. Shit, for a  
second he looked just like... \*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

He heads UPSTAIRS. He moves to the BEDROOM when a NOISE comes from the BATHROOM -- the sound of the SHOWER and... PASSION. \*

WALTER throws open the bathroom door, revealing... \*

ISAAC and AGATHA making love in the STEAM-FILLED SHOWER.

WALTER raises the KNIFE and we CUT BACK TO:

INT. TRUCK - MORNING \*

WALTER, imitating his waking nightmare, pummels his steering wheel with downward strokes.

He slows. Catches sight of himself in the mirror -- crazed, inhuman. Not himself. He starts to cry. \*

EXT. STREETS - LATE AFTERNOON \*

WALTER drifts along. He catches his reflection in a TAROT PARLOR window. He's FINGERLING. He looks again. He's WALTER. \*

The TAROT READER stands in the doorway.

TAROT READER  
Tell your future for twenty  
dollars?

WALTER  
What if I already know it?

SLAM CUT TO:

INT. ROOM 23 - NIGHT \*

WALTER (V.O.)  
The number had gone after  
Fingerling. \*

WALTER presses the door shut and leans his head against the wood. Something off to one side draws his eye. The wallpaper is PEELING AWAY, the OLD WALL visible underneath... \*

WALTER (V.O.)  
And now it was coming after me. \*

..."23" is ETCHED INTO IT. \*

He stares at the room. Suddenly, a sodden strip of wallpaper peels away revealing the word "MURDERER". \*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

A terrified WALTER backs away from the walls to his open window. Suddenly, there's a BARK. \*

WALTER'S POV \*

NED sits BELOW, staring up at him. \*

EXT. "THE SHELL HOTEL" - NIGHT \*

WALTER exits. Ned hasn't moved. He GROWLS. His black, bottomless eyes and silver collar SHINE. \*

WALTER \*

This is all your fault. If you hadn't made me late... \*

He grabs his TRANQUILIZER GUN from his truck and strides toward Ned, aiming. Just before he can fire, Ned bolts into the graveyard. \*

WALTER \*

This time you don't get away. \*

EXT. GRAVEYARD - CONTINUOUS \*

WALTER follows NED down row after row of graves. \*

WALTER \*

Go ahead, buddy. Choose your spot. \*

Ned disappears around the other side of A GRAVE. Our POV shifts to behind WALTER, as if someone follows him.

He inches up. Ned, sitting on the GRAVE, HOWLS. \*

WALTER \*

Now, now. Don't cry. Just you rest... in... PEACE! \*

He FIRES! The dart sticks into Ned's chest, takes immediate effect. Now no more than a sleeping dog, Ned seems quite harmless. WALTER softens and strokes his head. \*

WALTER \*

It's okay, boy. Everything's gonna be okay... for the both of us. How about I tell you a bedtime story? Once upon a time there was this... noble... entertaining... dog... \*

Suddenly he pauses, calculating something in his mind. \*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

FATHER SEBASTIAN

Ned?

FATHER SEBASTIAN, a commanding, middle-aged priest, brushes past WALTER to Ned. \*

FATHER SEBASTIAN

I trust there's an explanation for this?

WALTER

He'll be all right in a few hours. \*

(curious) \*

Is this your dog?

FATHER SEBASTIAN

He belongs to Barnaby, my gardener. \*

WALTER

Can I speak with him? \*

FATHER SEBASTIAN

That depends. How's your sign language? \*

A confused WALTER turns around. A man stands behind him, clutching A PAIR OF SHEARS. This is BARNABY. He is the SILHOUETTE (from the earlier graveyard scene) and decidedly more sinister-looking up close. Not only does he have NO TONGUE, but also A LAZY EYE. \*

FATHER SEBASTIAN

No one knows quite how he lost it. Some say he cut out his tongue himself. \*

WALTER

Is he... harmless?

FATHER SEBASTIAN

Yes. He also understands everything you say.

Barnaby crouches down and strokes Ned.

WALTER

Don't go getting all teary-eyed. Your dog bit me the other day. \*

Barnaby pauses on hearing 'BIT.'

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

FATHER SEBASTIAN  
But he's never bitten a soul  
before. Ned's an angel.

WALTER  
Yeah? Then what's this?

He rolls up his sleeve revealing a festering BITE MARK. \*

FATHER SEBASTIAN  
Mr. Sparrow, if you're intention is  
to sue the church, I warn you, God  
makes a formidable foe.

WALTER  
Ask him if the number 23 means  
anything to him. \*

FATHER SEBASTIAN  
As I said, he understands what you  
say.

Barnaby (who is staring at WALTER) moves his hands. Father  
Sebastian translates (throughout scene). \*

FATHER SEBASTIAN  
He says you must have done  
something to provoke Ned for him to  
bite you.

WALTER  
Just answer my question. \*

Barnaby moves his hands again.

FATHER SEBASTIAN  
He says, without the number 23, the  
world would be in big trouble. \*

WALTER  
Why? \*

FATHER SEBASTIAN  
How would we get to twenty four  
without it?

WALTER  
Funny guy, huh? Why'd you name him  
Ned?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

FATHER SEBASTIAN

He didn't. Ned was a stray when he took him in. He likes graveyards.

(not signed)

That's certainly true. He sits and stares at the stones like he's watching over them. That's how he got his nickname -- 'The Guardian of the Dead.'

(a beat)

Lately it's been this one.

He looks at the GRAVE. \*

WALTER follows his gaze. It is LAURA TOLLINS' -- the SAME AS BEFORE. \*

WALTER

She died on her 23rd birthday. February 10th. That's three days from now... \*

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

AGATHA and ISAAC sit in silence. ROBIN'S on the computer, READING THE SCREEN INTENTLY. AGATHA gazes at the mantelpiece, now clear of photos. \*

HEADLIGHTS suddenly shine through the curtains as a CAR pulls into their driveway. \*

ROBIN

Dad!

He jumps up from the computer, darting for the front door. We notice the website he's left open on the monitor: "THE 23 ENIGMA." Below it, an endless list of dates, historical anecdotes... \*

INT. THE SPARROW HOME - CONTINUOUS

ROBIN runs to the FRONT DOOR as WALTER enters. He clutches a BUNDLE OF PAPER. Waves it at AGATHA.

WALTER

It's not just a book. It's true. The number, it screws with your head and gets you to--

ISAAC appears in the LIVING ROOM doorway.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WALTER  
--kill your loved ones.

ISAAC  
(awkward)  
Perhaps I should be going.

WALTER  
No. I want you to see this. All of  
you.

He holds up a PHOTOCOPY OF A NEWSPAPER ARTICLE. A headline  
reads: "23-YR-OLD STUDENT MISSING, FEARED DEAD" with a  
PICTURE of a woman identified as: "LAURA TOLLINS." \*

WALTER  
Her body's never been found but her  
bed was soaked in so much blood...  
This is the man who killed her.

He holds up another PHOTOCOPY with the headline: "LAURA'S  
LOVER'S PRINTS ALL OVER KNIFE" and a PICTURE of a man: "KYLE  
FLINCH." \*

WALTER  
Kyle Flinch. He butchered her with  
a knife. \*

Another PHOTOCOPY reads: "LAURA'S SLAYER GETS LIFE: HUNT FOR  
BODY GOES ON." AGATHA studies it.

AGATHA  
Walter, this happened nearly  
fifteen years ago.

WALTER  
Ag, he told them Laura liked to  
have her wrists tied to the  
bedposts.

*FLASHCUT: FABRIZIA IN BED WITH WRISTS TIED TO THE BEDPOSTS.  
SHE MORPHS INTO LAURA.* \*

WALTER points to a HIGHLIGHTED PASSAGE in one of the  
articles.

WALTER  
How she liked to fool around in  
parks at night.

*FLASHCUT: FROM BEHIND A TREE, FINGERLING WATCHES DR. PHOENIX  
RAVISH FABRIZIA/LAURA UNDER THE STARS.*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

WALTER

Said it was her idea to buy the knife, she wanted to role-play an attack.

*FLASHCUT: FABRIZIA WHISPERING, "PRETEND YOU HAVE A KNIFE IN YOUR HANDS."*

WALTER

Kyle Flinch is Topsy Kretts. The book is a warped literary confession.

ISAAC

A dog told you all this?

WALTER

Ned's not just a dog. He's 'The Guardian of the Dead.' His name, "N-E-D"? It equals 23.

\*  
\*

ROBIN

But why'd this Flinch guy write about you, dad? You wouldn't hurt mom.

\*  
\*

AGATHA

Of course he wouldn't, Robin. Why would he?

WALTER looks at AGATHA... and ISAAC. ROBIN stares at the book.

INT. ROBIN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

ROBIN reads the book under his covers by flashlight. He's enthralled.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

AGATHA lies in bed, alone.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

WALTER sleeps on the couch.

The clock chimes 02:30. He awakes.

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

WALTER stares at the knife block in the moonlight.

INT. STAIRCASE - NIGHT

WALTER goes up, something shiny in hands.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

WALTER climbs onto the bed. Raises the KNIFE in the air. Waiting. The alarm clock clicks to 02:32. He brings the knife down. Again. And again.

AGATHA

Walter?

He turns to the door. A light comes on. AGATHA stands there.

AGATHA

What are you doing?

WALTER looks at the bedcovers. SHREDDED. BLOOD seeping through. He pulls them back. More blood. Lots. But NO BODY.

CUT TO:

WALTER AWAKES - IT'S DARK

and he is still on the couch. He runs, panicked, into the KITCHEN and stares at the knife block -- ONE KNIFE IS MISSING!

\*  
\*  
\*

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

AGATHA stares into space. Suddenly she freezes. The bedroom door is opening slowly.

WALTER enters. AGATHA shuts her eyes, tight.

WALTER tiptoes to the bed. Reaches out. Touches AGATHA. Sighs with relief -- she's alive. He leaves.

AGATHA's eyes open. She sits up, her hands coming out from under the covers. She grips a KNIFE.

EXT. PRISON - ESTABLISHING SHOT - DAY

SUPER UP: **FEBRUARY 8TH**

\*

INT. PRISON - VISITING ROOM - DAY

A CHAIN LINK FENCE divides the room, each side starkly lit by a ceiling fixture. WALTER waits anxiously on the visitor's side.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

A door opens and a PRISON GUARD ushers a PRISONER inside. KYLE FLINCH is attractive, around WALTER'S AGE, but has seen harder times. He bums a cigarette from THE GUARD.

KYLE FLINCH  
You're two days early.

WALTER  
You... you knew I would come?

KYLE FLINCH  
(studies Walter) \*  
You're not a reporter. They always  
come on the 10th.

WALTER  
The day you killed the woman you  
loved.

KYLE FLINCH  
The day she was taken from me.

WALTER  
You can stop the games. I know you  
know who I am.

KYLE FLINCH  
I ain't never seen you before in my  
life, mister.

WALTER  
My name is Walter Sparrow. I was  
born February third. \*

KYLE FLINCH  
Happy belated birthday.

Walter holds the BOOK up to the screen. \*

WALTER  
Why did you write this? \*

KYLE FLINCH  
What are you talking about? I  
didn't.

WALTER  
The truth, Mr. Flinch. or should I  
say, 'Topsy Kretts'? Tell me the  
truth. \*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

KYLE FLINCH

I am.

WALTER

"I am" is 9-1-13. 23.

KYLE FLINCH

Mister, you're gonna need to stop talking in riddles.

WALTER

I know you based this on me. But how do you know so much about who I am? What is this obsession with the number 23? Because it's not coming true, I promise you. I'm stronger than it. I'm stronger than you. I don't need to know why you killed that poor girl, just tell me why you chose me.

\*

Flinch stares at Walter, incredulous.

\*

KYLE FLINCH

You want to know what the worst thing about being in prison is? Your family, your sister, your parents, they come to visit. Over time the visits get less. Your sister stops coming at all. Then you notice your mother won't look you in the eye. Soon she stops coming, too. Eventually your father tells you your sister committed suicide, unable to deal with having a murderer for a brother. There are tears in his eyes when he says it, but he's not sad. He's angry. That's the last time you ever see him.

(a beat)

I didn't kill Laura. I loved her. And I didn't write no book about some guy I've never met.

\*

WALTER

You're lying.

\*

KYLE FLINCH

I didn't get death, Mr. Sparrow, and they're never letting me out,

\*

\*

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

KYLE FLINCH (CONT'D)  
but somehow, I think your problems  
are bigger than mine.

\*  
\*

He walks to the door.

\*

WALTER  
What's your middle name?

KYLE FLINCH  
Jacob. And if I was to write a  
book, I wouldn't use a dumb name  
like 'Top Secrets.'

\*  
\*

He leaves. Walter stares at the book.

EXT. PRISON - DAY

AGATHA and WALTER stand by his truck. He tosses the book on  
the dashboard. ROBIN, in the front seat, snatches it up.

\*

WALTER  
I think he's innocent. He was real  
convincing.

\*  
\*

AGATHA  
Killers always are. His prints were  
on the knife. He had blood on his  
hands when he called 911.

\*

WALTER passes her a pad with "KYLE JACOB FLINCH" and NUMBERS  
written on it. Sums reveal his name to equal 19.

\*

WALTER  
It's not him, Ag. The killer's  
still out there. He killed her  
February 10th. That's less than 48  
hours away. If the book is fate...  
I have to find whoever wrote it.

\*  
\*  
\*

AGATHA  
And if the author is a murderer?

WALTER  
I don't have a choice, Ag. My  
destiny is in his hands.

ROBIN  
(staring at the address on  
the book jacket)  
I know how we can find him.

INT. TRUCK - DAY

WALTER and AGATHA watch a MAIL FACILITY across the street.

INT. MAIL FACILITY - DAY

ROBIN walks up to the CLERK at the counter.

ROBIN

Hi, I'm thinking of getting a box  
and was wondering what the deal is?

CLERK

Parents don't like you getting porn  
at home, do they? Nine-ninety-five  
a month, payable in advance. \*

ROBIN

Is it a problem if something comes  
that's over-size?

INT. BOX COMPANY - DAY

WALTER, AGATHA, and ROBIN watch as a CONFUSED CLERK fills a  
HUGE BOX with PLASTIC SNOW.

CONFUSED CLERK

Sure you don't want anything in it?

ROBIN

Just the snow.

The Clerk shrugs and seals the box. ROBIN hands him a label  
for "TOPSY KRETTS" AND THE P.O. BOX.

CONFUSED CLERK

When do you want it to get there?

WALTER

Tomorrow morning.

CONFUSED CLERK

It'll have to go Ex-press.

WALTER

Fine.

CONFUSED CLERK

Is that all?

ROBIN

No. We need twenty three of them. \*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CONFUSED CLERK

You what?

WALTER hands him a credit card.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

AGATHA waits in bed as WALTER paces nervously.

AGATHA

In a few hours the sun will rise.  
Flowers will open. Birds will sing.  
People will wake up and eat  
breakfast. Children will wait  
eagerly in front of TV sets for the  
cartoons they know are going to be  
on... There's a normal world out  
there Walter, and we're part of  
it...

He's not so sure.

AGATHA

You could never harm me or anyone.  
Never.

WALTER looks her straight in the eye.

WALTER

How do you know that?

EXT. THE SPARROW HOME - MORNING

The sun is coming up. Birds are chirping.

INT. BEDROOM - MORNING

AGATHA's outline is visible under the covers. An agonizing  
beat.

SUPER UP: **FEBRUARY 9TH**

She stirs. Her hand appears, plops down on WALTER's side.  
AGATHA's head emerges. WALTER's side of the bed is empty.

INT. LIVING ROOM - MORNING

AGATHA enters. WALTER is fast asleep on the sofa, his feet  
protruding from under a blanket. They are BOUND TOGETHER.

EXT. MAIL FACILITY - MORNING

WALTER's truck pulls up across the street. A CAR (hereafter known as 'THE MYSTERY CAR') pulls up a few spaces behind.

INT. TRUCK - MORNING

The Sparrows sit and wait. AGATHA, a bundle of nerves, clutches HER BAG, tightly. \*

AGATHA

He might not be the author. He could be his agent... his publisher... he might not even be a man. \*

WALTER

We'll know soon enough.

A LARGE EX-PRESS VAN ARRIVES

The EX-PRESS GUY opens the back of his van revealing THE TWENTY THREE OVER-SIZE BOXES. \*

WALTER beams proudly at ROBIN.

INT. MAIL FACILITY - TWENTY MINUTES LATER

Amazing what TWENTY THREE OVER-SIZE BOXES will do to a place. The Clerk fumes behind the counter. \*

INT. TRUCK - DAY - SAME

The Sparrows watch as a FRAIL OLD MAN with a WALKING STICK hobbles inside. \*

INT. MAIL FACILITY - DAY - FIVE MINUTES LATER

The OLD MAN rummages through one of the boxes. \*

WALTER

You won't find anything in it.

He turns around. The Sparrows stand in the doorway.

CLERK

(to ROBIN)

Hey, I remember you.

The OLD MAN stares at WALTER. WALTER holds up the book. \*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WALTER  
Game's over, 'Topsy Kretts.'

OLD MAN  
(disturbingly hoarse)  
No... this cannot be...

He switches his gaze to AGATHA, to ROBIN, and back to WALTER,  
then fidgets nervously with a TRACHEOSTOMY TUBE IN HIS NECK.

OLD MAN  
I'm sorry. I had to get rid of it.  
I had to.

He clutches his heart and staggers backwards, falling against  
the boxes. They slide apart under his weight, SNOW flying  
everywhere. He slumps to the floor.

WALTER  
No. No!

He runs to help the OLD MAN.

AGATHA  
(to CLERK)  
Call 911! Robin go outside.

ROBIN doesn't move. AGATHA kneels next to WALTER.

WALTER  
Don't you die on me, old man.  
Please, don't you die!  
(to Agatha)  
He's the only person who can help  
us get back to normal.

AGATHA begins CPR.

WALTER  
Oh god, he can't die...  
(yells)  
You hear me in there? You can't  
die!

This isn't helping the OLD MAN.

AGATHA  
Walter, I want you to take Robin  
home. I'll take care of matters  
here.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

WALTER

But--

AGATHA

--I said, I'll take care of things.

WALTER sees ROBIN staring at the Old Man. \*

He realizes AGATHA is right and reluctantly leaves. AGATHA \*  
turns back to the OLD MAN and resumes CPR. He sputters. \*

AGATHA

Sir? The ambulance will be here any \*  
minute. \*

The Old Man wants to say something to her. She gets close to \*  
his quivering lips. \*

OLD MAN

It... was driving me... insane... \*  
it makes you... makes you pass it \*  
on... \*

AGATHA

What does? \*

Very slowly, the Old Man holds up TWO FINGERS... AND THEN \*  
ADDS A THIRD. \*

EXT. SPARROW HOUSE - LATE AFTERNOON

WALTER AND ROBIN arrive home.

INT. LIVING ROOM - SAME

ROBIN writes on a PAD. He looks at his Dad who is watching \*  
the phone, pleading for it to ring. \*

ROBIN

Dad? Who chose my name? You or Mom?

WALTER

I did. Why?

On Robin's pad is "ROBIN WILBERFORCE SPARROW" and a series of \*  
numbers which add up to 23. \*

ROBIN

No reason.

The PHONE rings. WALTER answers.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WALTER  
Agatha? \*

INT. PHONE BOOTH - DUSK

AGATHA stands in a vandalized, forgotten booth.

AGATHA  
He didn't make it, Walter. \*

INTERCUT - WALTER ON PHONE / AGATHA IN BOOTH \*

WALTER  
(desperate)  
Did he say anything? \*

AGATHA  
No. \*

WALTER  
Is he the murderer? \*

AGATHA  
I don't know. Walter... \*

WALTER  
Yes? What is it? \*

AGATHA  
...I'll be home soon. \*

AGATHA hangs up. WALTER stares at the book. He's angry. \*

INT. PHONE BOOTH - CONTINUED \*

AGATHA pulls a yellowing I.D. CARD from her purse: "DR. SIRIUS LEARY" of "NATHANIEL'S INSTITUTE." The picture is a match for the OLD MAN. \*

She steps out of the booth. Across the street is A FLIGHT OF STEPS, at the top of which is a tall, grey building. Windows boarded up, grass overgrown. A SIGN reads: "FORMER SITE OF NATHANIEL'S INSTITUTE - SCHEDULED FOR DEMOLITION." \*

FLASHCUT: YOUNG AGATHA HURRIES DOWN THE STREET, HER VIEW OBSCURED BY THE CAKE BOX SHE CARRIES. SHE TURNS A CORNER AND, PASSING THE INSTITUTE'S STEPS, COLLIDES INTO SOMEONE AND TUMBLES TO THE GROUND. \*

BACK TO PRESENT: AGATHA crosses the street, finds a break in the cyclone fencing to slip through, and climbs the tall, stone steps. \*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

She doesn't notice the MYSTERY CAR pulling up across the street behind her.

INT. LIVING ROOM - EVENING

We find Walter with pen in hand, manically CIRCLING every twenty third word in the book. On PAGE 23 he discovers: "IF" "YOU" "ARE" "READING" \*

He pauses... Couldn't be. But it is. He continues. \*

"THIS" "YOU" "ARE" "ONTO" "ME"

His mouth falls open. SOUNDS BECOME MUTED. The pen drops from his grasp. We hear HIS HEARTBEAT -- getting faster... and faster... \*

INT. NATHANIEL'S INSTITUTE, STAIRWELL - NIGHT

Agatha climbs a dark staircase. Layers of dust testify to years of neglect.

INT. 3RD FLOOR CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS

Agatha finds ROOM 318. A rusting door plaque reads, "DR. SIRIUS LEARY, M.D. PSYCHIATRY."

INT. DR. SIRIUS LEARY'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Wall to wall books. Agatha hovers in the doorway, her eyes sweeping the room. Piles of papers, musty and yellowing. Dust swirls in shafts of cool moonlight.

She turns to the RUSTING FILING CABINETS. Searches them all. She looks around, desperate. Sees a MAHOGANY WARDROBE. Moves in front of it. Tries the handle. It's PADLOCKED. \*

She picks up a BRONZE BOOKEND and SHATTERS THE LOCK. The door CREAKS open.

The wardrobe is empty but for TWO BLACK STORAGE BOXES.

As she opens one, her face pales. We don't see what she sees. \*

Suddenly, a SHADOW falls over her.

She spins around... GASPS...

It's ISAAC.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

\*

ROBIN peers over WALTER'S shoulder, reading the circled words:

ROBIN

"I" "warn" "you" "continue" "at"  
"your" "peril" "you" "do" "not"  
"want" "to" "find" "me"

\*

(awed)

\*

Every twenty-third word...

WALTER

But then it all falls apart.

WALTER shows him PAGE 24. Words are circled, but it's just GIBBERISH. The next page is the same.

\*

\*

ROBIN

Maybe it's not just every twenty-three words, but every--

\*

WALTER

--twenty-three pages.

\*

\*

WALTER hurriedly flicks ahead to PAGE 46. Tries again:

\*

WALTER

"you'll" "regret" "this" "you"  
"fool" "trust" "me" "once" "you"  
"learn" "the" "truth" "there" "can"  
"be" "no" "turning" "back" "this"  
"is" "your" "last" "chance"

Father and son exchange looks. WALTER turns to PAGE 69.

\*

WALTER

"very" "well" "visit" "Casanova"  
"spark" "dig" "beneath" "the"  
"steps" "to" "heaven" "you'll"  
"guess" "which" "one" "I" "warn"  
"you" "hell" "is" "waiting"  
"sparrow" man"

The word 'sparrow' sends chills down WALTER'S spine.

\*

ROBIN

Who's Casanova Spark?

WALTER

(thinks, then)

\*

Top Se-crets? Casanova... 's...

\*

INT. KITCHEN - LATER \*

The HEADLIGHTS of WALTER'S truck flash through the window, illuminating a NOTE ON THE COUNTER:

"DEAR AG, WE'VE GONE TO CASANOVA'S PARK..."

THE NOTE DISSOLVES INTO A STATE PARK SIGN -- "CASANOVA'S PARK." Headlights on the sign die. PULLING OUT, we find WALTER and ROBIN getting out of the truck. \*

EXT. WOOD - NIGHT

WALTER and ROBIN trek through with FLASHLIGHTS. They approach a CLEARING.

*FLASHCUT: FINGERLING SPIES ON FABRIZIA AND DR. PHOENIX THROUGH THE TREES.*

IN A DENSELY OVERGROWN SECTION OF THE PARK

a SIGNPOST reads: "THE STEPS TO HEAVEN." Below it, another adds: "WARNING: UNSAFE FOOTING. DON'T STRAY OFF THE PATH."

ROBIN shines his light on the STEPPING STONES that disappear through a MARSH into darkness. \*

ROBIN \*

You think there are 23 of them? \*

Unnoticed by WALTER, TWO EYES glint at them from the shadows. We recognize the FAMILIAR SHAPE OF NED. \*

WALTER and ROBIN stop at... \*

...THE 23RD STEPPING STONE. WALTER jams his shovel under the stone and levers it aside. They begin to dig. \*

DISSOLVE TO:

VIEW FROM THE TREES - WALTER AND ROBIN

are hard at it and have A LARGE PIT to show for their efforts. ROBIN pauses.

ROBIN

(glances about)

Dad, what if mom was right? What if that man wasn't the author? What if he was only the guy's publisher or something? \*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WALTER  
Sounds like a lot of what ifs.

ROBIN  
But wouldn't it mean the real  
killer is still out there?

ROBIN succeeds in spooking his dad. WALTER stops digging,  
picks up a flashlight and shines it about.

...WE ARE WATCHING FROM THE TREES AGAIN. We duck behind a  
trunk as the light sweeps past.

WALTER  
You're beginning to sound like me,  
kiddo. \*

He continues. THE SHOVEL CONNECTS WITH SOMETHING SOLID... He  
freezes. Stares into the pit. His flashlight illuminates... \*

A SKULL - THEN A SKELETON

INT. POLICE STATION - NIGHT

SERGEANT BURNS and TWO POLICEMEN approach WALTER and ROBIN.

EXT. CASANOVA'S PARK - NIGHT

WALTER and ROBIN lead them across THE STEPS TO HEAVEN.

Their pace slows near the 23rd stone. Father and son glance  
about -- frowning mirror images of each other. Their pit...

...IS EMPTY.

INT. POLICE STATION - VERY EARLY MORNING

WALTER and ROBIN sit in two chairs, father with head hung  
low, son studying the surroundings, studying things... things  
like the numbers on OFFICER'S UNIFORMS...

WALTER looks up, tenses, face draining of color.

DOWN THE CORRIDOR - HE SEES \*

ISAAC -- ominously alone. Then AGATHA appears behind him. \*

EXT. POLICE STATION - VERY EARLY MORNING

AGATHA converses with ISAAC, MOS.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WALTER watches from the truck's passenger seat. AGATHA hugs ISAAC. He glances at WALTER then walks to HIS CAR (the mystery car).

INT. TRUCK - VERY EARLY MORNING

AGATHA drives. WALTER is withdrawn. ROBIN is quietly losing it.

ROBIN

It was there, mom. Skeletons don't just get up and walk away.

\*  
\*

AGATHA

Not another word. Please.

\*  
\*

ROBIN

But you were right, that old guy wasn't the killer. The killer's still out there and he knows dad's onto him. The book, it has all these secret messages, every twenty-three--

\*  
\*

Agatha SCREECHES to a stop. Turns to WALTER and ROBIN.

AGATHA

Stop it! Listen to me. Both of you. 23 is a number. There's no magical meaning -- only people can give it that and I don't care how many crazies fantasize about 23, they're wrong. It's just a NUMBER. There's no curse. There's no killer running around out there...

\*

(to Walter )

You love me. You always have. You always will. The book is history. And it's over.

\*  
\*  
\*  
\*

She tosses the book out of the window. Turns a corner. SLAMS ON THE BRAKES.

\*

NED sits directly in their path.

WALTER

That's Ned.

\*

ROBIN

The Guardian of the Dead?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

AGATHA  
Nasty. Evil. Dead. Dog.

She grips the wheel and steps on the gas, barreling towards Ned...

ROBIN  
Mom.

...getting CLOSER... and CLOSER...

Ned doesn't even flinch. Doesn't even bat an eye.

ROBIN  
Mom!

At the last minute she SLAMS on the brakes. There's a HEART-STOPPING SQUEAL as the car SKIDS to a stop and when it does...

...staring at them, MERE INCHES FROM THEIR BUMPER, is...

NED

black, bottomless eyes glinting, devilishly.

Walter looks at Agatha -- still gripping the wheel, blood drained from her fingers.

There is MUD BENEATH HER FINGERNAILS.

INT. KITCHEN - MORNING

CLOSE ON - AGATHA'S hands under running water.

Walter watches her WASH THE DIRT FROM HER FINGERNAILS. Mind churning. Pieces of the puzzle falling into place.

SUPER UP: **FEBRUARY 10TH**

WALTER  
You. It was you. You moved the skeleton.

AGATHA  
Don't do this. Please...

She busies herself rinsing off some used utensils and dishes in the sink.

WALTER  
But how did you know... unless...

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

He grabs some chalk near the KITCHEN BLACKBOARD. Writes \*  
 "AGATHA FRANCESCA SPARROW." It equals 38/70/110. 38=11, 70=7,  
 110=2. 11+7+2 is... 20? \*

WALTER \*  
 But your maiden name is PINK... \*

He tries again, but this time with "AGATHA FRANCESCA PINK."

*FLASHCUT: SUICIDE GAL SAYS, "YOU KNOW WHAT PINK IS?"*

This time it equals 38/70/50. 38=11, 70=7, 50=5. 11+7+5 is... \*

WALTER \*  
 Twenty three. \*

AGATHA \*  
 Walter... \*

*FLASHCUT: AGATHA SAYS, "I'LL WRITE MY OWN ONE OF THESE DAYS."* \*

WALTER  
 Oh God...

*FLASHCUT: ISAAC SAYS, "WHOEVER WROTE IT KNOWS YOU VERY WELL."*

WALTER \*  
 Isaac's known all along. You wrote \*  
 it, didn't you? \*

*FLASHCUT: WALTER SAYS, "YOU KNOW ME BETTER THAN I DO!"*

AGATHA  
 Please don't. I beg you.

WALTER  
 You're Topsy Kretts!

*FLASHCUT: AGATHA SAYS, "HE MIGHT NOT EVEN BE A MAN."*

WALTER  
 You wrote it. Which means...

AGATHA looks at him, tears in her eyes.

AGATHA  
 Don't make me do this.

His eyes lower to her hands... They suddenly both become \*  
 aware she just happens to be holding a knife. \*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

WALTER

You've been pulling the strings all along.

FLASHCUT: IN THE BOOKSTORE, AGATHA TELLS WALTER, "IT'S GOOD. YOU SHOULD READ IT." \*

AGATHA

No. That's not true. Just let it be. Please.

WALTER

All this time I feared I was going to kill you, when really--

AGATHA

--stop it. Please, stop it.

WALTER

I will. Just hand me the knife.

AGATHA

No. I can't do that.

WALTER glances at the KNIFE BLOCK: two empty slots but still four more knives available. That is, until...

...AGATHA steps in front of it. \*

WALTER backs away, scanning the room. \*

WALTER

Why? Why would you do this to me? I love you so much. \*

AGATHA

Do you? Do you really? Is it really me that you love?

WALTER sees AGATHA'S BAG she had with her earlier. SOMETHING ODD pokes out. He inches his way to it. \*

WALTER

I've always loved you. My whole life started with you.

He reaches into the bag and... pulls out a KNIFE. \*

The table separates AGATHA and WALTER. Both hold knives.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

AGATHA

I took it to protect us when we went to meet... whoever that was at the Mail Box facility.

\*  
\*

WALTER

Intending to kill that poor old man who you got to publish it... to safeguard your little secret. He was alive when you sent us away!

\*

AGATHA

Robin will hear you.

\*

WALTER

Oh, we wouldn't want that, would we? 'Hi son watch while your manipulative killer mom butchers your fool of a dad!'

ROBIN enters.

ROBIN

Mom? Dad?

AGATHA

Come to me, Robin. Stay away from your father.

WALTER

Don't listen to her, son. Come here. To me.

AGATHA

No! Whatever he says, don't go to him.

WALTER

She's Topsy Kretts. She wrote the book.

He shows ROBIN the blackboard. ROBIN stares at the big, fat 23.

AGATHA

It's not true. Don't listen to him.

She puts her knife down.

AGATHA

See? Now your father will put his down.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (4)

AGATHA (CONT'D)

(a beat)

Walter? Honey? Put the knife down.

WALTER

Tell him the truth. Tell him how you took the skeleton.

AGATHA

Yes, I took the skeleton. Isaac helped me.

\*  
\*

WALTER notes the word "ISAAC".

\*

ROBIN

You did?

\*

AGATHA

And I'd do it again if I had to. But I didn't write the book.

WALTER

Don't lie! Thirteen years, Ag. Thirteen years of lies. No more.

AGATHA

I'm not lying.

WALTER

No more, I said! If you didn't write it, who did?

AGATHA

Don't do this to us Walter.

\*

ROBIN

Who wrote the book, mom? Do you know?

WALTER

Tell him. Tell him who wrote the book. Tell him!

ROBIN

Mom?

Tears fall from AGATHA's eyes. She looks from ROBIN to WALTER.

CUT TO:

INT. DARKEST PART OF THE BASEMENT - MOMENTS LATER

CLOSE ON THE BLACK STORAGE BOXES from DR. LEARY'S OFFICE.  
Robin removes THE FIRST LID, revealing...

...THE ORIGINAL, MESSY AGING MANUSCRIPT OF:

"THE NUMBER 23"  
BY  
WALTER PAUL SPARROW

DEAD SILENCE.

Just the sound of breathing. Then quietly...

AGATHA  
You wrote it, Walter. You did.

A long... mind-fucking... beat. Every line, every furrow on  
WALTER's face comes into play. He still clutches the knife.

WALTER  
No. You typed this. You put my name  
on it.

AGATHA removes the cover page, revealing the following  
scrawled in handwriting: "FOR DR. SIRIUS LEARY, THE MAN WHO  
RESCUED MY SANITY, WALTER."

WALTER  
That's not me. I don't know any Dr.  
Leary.

AGATHA  
It's your handwriting.

WALTER  
You sign my name all the time. No.  
No, you're lying. She's lying. I  
didn't write that.

AGATHA  
Then who did?

Suddenly there's a CREAK. The Sparrows spin to the stairwell.

ISAAC stands at the bottom.

WALTER stares at him, mind racing. ISAAC, eyeing the knife,  
steps around him to AGATHA.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

AGATHA \*  
I said you weren't to come in. \*

ISAAC \*  
(re the knife) \*  
I think it's a good thing I did. \*

WALTER \*  
You're in this together. \*

ISAAC \*  
Put the knife down, Walter. No one \*  
needs to get hurt. Not again. \*

ISAAC moves towards WALTER. WALTER backs away into a corner. \*  
Trapped. ISAAC closes in. WALTER looks frantically from the \*  
KNIFE to ISAAC. \*

ISAAC slowly reaches for the knife. WALTER, frozen, watches, \*  
terrified, as ISAAC'S hands envelop his... and start prying \*  
the knife from his grasp. Suddenly... \*

AGATHA \*  
Walter, no! \*

...WALTER snaps... clamping his free hand over ISAAC'S. They \*  
tussle over ownership of the knife, KNOCKING boxes over, \*  
SMASHING things (AGATHA'S handmade crafts). In the frenzy, \*  
the two, black storage boxes of Dr. Leary's spill open. \*

ISAAC slams WALTER'S hand into a vertical joist, the knife \*  
dropping to the ground. WALTER grabs for it but ISAAC knees \*  
him in the face, punches him, and shoves him away. WALTER \*  
tumbles to the floor and when he gets back on his feet... \*

...ISAAC has the knife! \*

WALTER looks for a weapon... anything... ISAAC fending away \*  
his every move. \*

ROBIN spots one of Dr. Leary's boxes. INSIDE IS SOMETHING \*  
SHINY... \*

ROBIN \*  
Dad! \*

He throws the shiny something through the air. WALTER catches \*  
it... holds it up aggressively... and realizes... \*

...it's a SAXOPHONE. \*

WALTER looks at it, curious. \*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

The horn end is BADLY DENTED. \*

*FLASHCUT: FINGERLING HURLS THE SAX AT THE MIRROR.* \*

WALTER, horrified, as his grip slowly changes, his fingers slipping into place. \*

WALTER  
I can't... play the saxophone...  
(to Agatha)  
Can I? \*

He puts it to his lips and... \*

...PLAYS. Brilliantly. \*

*FLASHCUT: A 22-YEAR-OLD WALTER PLAYS THE SAXOPHONE. HE SEES A FAMILIAR FACE, BACKLIT BY FLAMES - LAURA TOLLINS.* \*

CUT TO: \*

WALTER IN THE BASEMENT - TEARS \*

rolling down his cheeks. \*

He lets the saxophone fall from his grasp. \*

He rifles through the contents of the two boxes. They contain HIS PSYCHIATRIC FILES, NEWSPAPER CLIPPINGS, POLAROIDs, MEMENTOS, ETC., and a YELLOWED NOTEPAD for "THE SHELL HOTEL". \*

A SMALL, SHINY PENDULUM draws his gaze. He picks it up. IT SHIMMERS IN HIS EYES. \*

AGATHA  
Walter... \*

WALTER, wild-eyed, overwhelmed, stares at AGATHA... ROBIN... ISAAC... THE KNIFE... \*

He backs away from them, unable to deal with any of this, then suddenly RUNS wildly up the stairs. \*

EXT. THE SPARROW HOME - CONTINUOUS

WALTER bursts out of the house. \*

AGATHA comes to the door in time to see... \*

AGATHA  
Walter! \*

...WALTER disappear from view, swallowed up by the RAIN. \*

EXT. STREETS - MINUTES LATER

WALTER runs through the downpour. Every which way he turns he is confronted by the number. IMAGES ASSAULT HIM. RAPID, BARELY COMPREHENSIBLE, EACH ONE PUNCTUATED BY FLASHES OF A PENDULUM -- A SLASHING BLADE; BLOODY SHEETS; A WOMAN'S BOUND HANDS; A KNIFE CARVING THE NUMBER 23 INTO A WALL; NATHANIEL'S INSTITUTE; FABRIZIA TURNING AND, AS SHE DOES, TRANSFORMING INTO LAURA TOLLINS; MUDDY HANDS DIGGING A SHALLOW GRAVE; A CHEAP HOTEL...

He turns a corner, finds himself outside...

EXT. "THE \_HELL HOTEL" - CONTINUOUS

The "HELL" section is pulsing, as if beckoning him...

INT. ROOM 23 - MOMENTS LATER

Walter, wet, breathless, insane, SLAMS the door behind him.

THE SODDEN WALLPAPER HAS PEELED AWAY EVEN MORE.

WALTER

Gazes, confused, at the crazy scribbling on the walls. A frighteningly familiar word draws his eye: "FABRIZIA."

He stares at it in disbelief, then...

...peels a sheet of wallpaper away. More familiar words appear ("DR. PHOENIX", "FINGERLING" "THE NUMBER", "OBSESSION", etc.) HE STARTS RIPPING AWAY THE WALLPAPER SAVAGELY.

Scrawled at the top is 23. Not just any 23. Upon closer inspection, this one reads...

"CHAPTER 23"

The first line beneath is:

WALTER  
 "I didn't kill myself..."  
 (a beat)  
 Oh God. Oh God!

WALTER'S MIND SHATTERS AS THE WALL STARTS TO SHATTER AROUND HIM, TAKING US INTO HIS PAST.

The wall becomes translucent, A CURTAIN OF LETTERS AND NUMBERS. We carry on through this curtain into...

*EXT. FINGERLING'S APARTMENT, BALCONY - NIGHT* \*

*We find FINGERLING exactly where CHAPTER 22 ended, swaying on the edge...* \*

*WALTER (V.O.)*  
*"I didn't get the chance."* \*

*...only when we cut back to FINGERLING, it's WALTER on the precipice.* \*

*Inside his apartment, HIS TELEPHONE STARTS TO RING.* \*

*INT. MORGUE - NIGHT* \*

*YOUNG WALTER identifies his PARENTS' CHARRED BODIES.* \*

*WALTER (V.O.)*  
*"Had my parents' sudden car accident come to save me..."* \*

*INT. WALTER'S CHILDHOOD HOME - NIGHT* \*

*YOUNG WALTER stands frozen in the doorway of his FATHER'S STUDY, staring at the walls.* \*

*WALTER (V.O.)*  
*"Or to punish me?"* \*

*His FATHER was an accountant and numbers cover the walls. Everywhere WALTER looks he sees 23. He turns and flees.* \*

*WALTER (V.O.)*  
*"Will I ever be better? I was just like you once."* \*

*FLASHBACK: A 22-YEAR-OLD, HAPPY WALTER PLAYS THE SAX.* \*

*BLURRED FLAMES IN THE BACKGROUND REMIND US OF OUR FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH FABRIZIA ... but as they become clearer, we realize these aren't burning cars but a campus bonfire.* \*

*In the foreground, SLOW MOTION towards camera, comes LAURA TOLLINS. Backlit by the fires, she is an alluring silhouette.* \*

*REVERSE ANGLE: WALTER'S sax falls from his lips, his jaw plummeting at the very sight of her. LAURA gives him "the look that melts all men" and, as she passes, her hand seductively brushes the keys of his sax. He reflexively grabs her hand. Just what she wanted. Their eyes meet!* \*

CONTINUED:

LAURA TOLLINS

*I've heard it's all in the tongue.*

RAPID CUTS OF WALTER'S WILD SEXUAL RELATIONSHIP WITH LAURA.

*She, of course, is the basis for the FABRIZIA FANTASY and all of their sexual moments are similar; HANDCUFFS, WRISTS BEING TIED, ROLE-PLAYING WITH KNIVES, ETC. SHE DRESSES HIM UP IN A POLICE UNIFORM.*

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

*WALTER is in attendance. The word "OBSESSION" is on the board. Below it A PROFESSOR, (a similar type to ISAAC FRENCH, but not THE SAME MAN) writes examples ("DEATH", "GERMS" "MONEY", "DRUGS", etc.) WALTER looks at his obsession: LAURA. She seductively mouths the word "SEX" to him.*

WALTER (V.O.)

*"Then my father's passion for numbers infected me."*

*The PROFESSOR adds "THE NUMBER 23" to the list.*

*WALTER looks at it, intrigued. He scribbles into his name and its numerical value into his RED NOTEBOOK...*

INT. MISS DOBKINS' BEDROOM - DAY

*YOUNG FINGERLING gazes at Miss Dobkins' in bed, dead, "23" etched into the blood-stained sheets by her finger. Her skin is black and blue...*

WALTER

*"The strange Miss Dobkins wrote on herself."*

*...only, on closer inspection THE BLACK AND BLUE IS REALLY A DEMENTED SCRIBBLING.*

INT. BEDROOM - MORNING

LAURA awakes in bed...

WALTER (V.O.)

*"I made the mistake of choosing someone else."*

*...pissed to find her skin A MASS OF WILD SCRIBBLINGS. She SCREAMS at WALTER.*

LAURA

*You're in-sane!*

## EXT. CAMPUS

WALTER plays the SAXOPHONE, but is secretly watching LAURA flirt with a good-looking, young, CAMPUS MAINTENANCE MAN, aka, KYLE FLINCH. \*

WALTER (V.O.)  
"So did she." \*

## EXT. WOOD - EVENING

WALTER peeks out from behind a tree, his heart and mind breaking. \*

HIS POV: the tree stands on THE FRINGE OF A PARK and twenty-odd yards away, LAURA lies on the ground bathed in moonlight, her coat spread open as KYLE FLINCH ravishes her. \*

## INT. BATHROOM - NIGHT

WALTER huddles, tormented, in a corner reading a NOTE: \*

"DEAR WALTER, GOODBYE..." followed by a paragraph that tears him apart. \*

WALTER (V.O.)  
"All I have left are memories." \*

He looks up at the walls -- a mass of demented 23 scribblings.

He stares at LAURA'S letter, starts mumbling to himself and crossing out letters. He stops. Nearly all the letters have been crossed out. The ones that remain spell: "KILL HER."

WALTER (V.O.)  
"Bad ones." \*

## INT. PAWN SHOP - DAY

LAURA and KYLE FLINCH buy a BUTCHER'S KNIFE. WALTER spies on them through an aisle's shelves.

## INT. KYLE FLINCH'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

WALTER stands at LAURA'S DOOR, a wreck. She answers in A SEXY LEATHER BASQUE, holding a KNIFE. She teases him then SLAMS the door in his face. We see THE RAGE growing inside... \*

The following come fast and furious:

FLASHCUT: GLOVED HANDS FORCE OPEN A WINDOW. \*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

FLASHCUT: VIEW THROUGH CLOSET DOOR: LAURA ENTERS A CANDLELIT BEDROOM, PUTS THE KNIFE ON A PILLOW AND BEGINS TYING HERSELF TO THE BEDPOSTS. \*

FLASHCUT: THE KNIFE BEING THRUST DOWNWARD. AGAIN. AGAIN... \*

FLASHCUT: A SHADOW ON THE WALL -- A SILHOUETTE THRUSTING DOWNWARD WITH A BUTCHER'S KNIFE (IDENTICAL TO WALTER'S FIRST NIGHTMARE). \*

FLASHCUT: LAURA'S POV -- A CRAZED WALTER SLASHES AT HER. \*

FLASHCUT: WALTER, EYES WILD, SHOVELS DIRT INTO A HOLE IN CASANOVA'S PARK -- OVER LAURA'S BODY.

INT. KYLE FLINCH'S BEDROOM - NIGHT \*

A MAN IN A SKI MASK enters. He peels back the bedsheets. They are soaked with gore. He tugs off his mask -- it's KYLE FLINCH -- and picks up the bloody BUTCHERS' KNIFE. \*

EXT. KYLE FLINCH'S APT.- NIGHT

SUSPICIOUS POLICE escort a handcuffed KYLE FLINCH to a car. WALTER watches from the shadows. \*

INT. WALTER'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

WALTER enters, desperate and lost. Turns to his reflection in the mirror. \*

A DEAD, BLOOD-STAINED LAURA appears in the mirror. \*

WALTER hurls his SAX at her, SHATTERING her image. He flees. \*

INT. ROOM 23 - DAY

How it looked 13 years ago.

A haunted WALTER writes his NOTEBOOKS, SHEETS OF PAPER, ANYTHING HE CAN FIND. He doesn't eat or sleep -- JUST THE FRANTIC WRITING -- and soon he is PASTY, UNSHAVEN, JITTERY, INSANE WALTER. \*

He RUNS OUT OF PAPER. Panicking, he looks around the room, his focus turning to the walls. He CREATES the frantic and obsessed scribblings until the entire WALLS ARE COVERED... \*

...the last few manic lines being the number, repeated over and over again -- "23 23 23 23 23 23 23 23 23 23 23 23..." \*

INT. ROOM 23 - DAY \*

WALTER COMES BACK THROUGH THE WALLS and stares at the long line of 23s. Nothing follows them. \*

WALTER (V.O.) \*  
This was the end of the book. Yet \*  
it wasn't the end... \*

He looks into a corner... remembering... \*

INT. ROOM 23 - CONTINUED \*

WALTER huddles in the corner writing 23's all over his body. Starving, dehydrated, eyes sunken -- HIS TORTURED MIND EXPLODES and he is thrown to the floor in a frenetic seizure. \*

INT. "THE \_HELL HOTEL", CORRIDOR - THE NEXT DAY \*

A distraught MAID looks on as PARAMEDICS wheel a gurney-strapped, totally CATATONIC WALTER out of the room. THE MANAGER is horrified to see the MANIC WRITINGS covering the WALLS. \*

DISSOLVE TO:

ROOM 23 - NEW WALLPAPER \*

Is hung over WALTER'S "CHAPTER 23". \*

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. NATHANIEL'S INSTITUTE

WALTER sits in scrubs and wrist band. PALE. STILL CATATONIC. \*

A chain-smoking DR. LEARY (13 YEARS YOUNGER) treats a totally unresponsive WALTER. \*

He holds up WALTER'S 'BOOK'. \*

DR. SIRIUS LEARY \*  
This rambling "confession" where \*  
you as Fingerling blame yourself \*  
for your ex-girlfriend's brutal \*  
murder is called "misappropriated \*  
guilt". You believe you drove her \*  
into the arms of another man, a man \*  
who turned out to be a vicious \*  
killer. In your eyes you killed \*  
her. You didn't. This is the man \*  
who did. \*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

*He holds up NEWSPAPERS DECLARING KYLE FLINCH'S GUILT.* \*

*ONE CLIPPING also reads: "PARENTS TO HOLD 'BURIAL' IN MEMORY OF LAURA".* \*

*DR. SIRIUS LEARY* \*

*You attempted to purge this  
undeserved guilt on these tortured  
pages and your subsequent loss of  
memory and profound catatonia is  
the result of a psychotic break,  
compounded by the recent death of  
your parents.* \*

*(with a smile)* \*

*But you will become a healthy and  
whole man under my care Mr.  
Sparrow.* \*

*WALTER just stares at him. Unresponsive. Blank.* \*

*Then, slowly, in a tiny croaked whisper...* \*

*WALTER*

*Please stop the nightmares.*

*A SERIES OF MOMENTS creates a TIME PASSAGE in which DR. LEARY  
uses HIS PENDANT in sessions with Walter. THE FLASHING  
PENDANT CREATES IT'S OWN REALITY. Over a period of MONTHS we  
see WALTER changing and becoming more responsive. He starts  
to look healthy and rested... and even begins laughing.* \*

*It ends on A HEALTHY HAPPY WALTER embracing DR. LEARY  
goodbye.* \*

*EXT. NATHANIEL'S INSTITUTE - AUTUMN SUNSET* \*

*The last of the sun's rays FLASH across WALTER'S FACE as he  
enters the real world again.* \*

*A few steps down A HOMELESS BAG WOMAN confronts him from THE  
DEEPENING SHADOWS.* \*

*HOMELESS WOMAN*

*Cause in the end we all know what  
we've done!*

*THE WOMAN and THE SUN IN HIS EYES causes the world to spin  
around WALTER. TIME, MEANING, SPACE, THE INSTITUTE all  
DISAPPEAR as light around him SPINS. He is lost, innocent,  
disoriented, like an infant dealing with all senses for the  
first time.* \*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

*UNTIL HE FALLS TO THE GROUND... COVERED IN CAKE... to find  
the beautiful YOUNG AGATHA having just CRASHED INTO HIM.* \*

*HE LOOKS AT HER AS IF SHE HAS SAVED HIM FROM DROWNING.* \*

INT. ROOM 23 - CONTINUED \*

WALTER stands in silence with HIS MEMORIES AND HIS WRITING. \*  
HE IS LIVING WITH THE REALIZATION OF WHAT HIS REAL PAST IS \*  
AND WHO HE IS. \*

He becomes aware of KNOCKING AT THE DOOR. The door knob  
turns, revealing...

...AGATHA.

She steps inside. Looks at the walls.

WALTER

This is where I wrote it all. It is  
me. I'm a murderer.

AGATHA

You were very ill... \*

She touches his face.

AGATHA

I don't know what happened to you,  
but I do know this: you weren't a  
bad person who got better, you were  
a sick person who became well.

WALTER

I killed her. I stabbed her 23  
times. There's an innocent man in  
prison. \*

AGATHA

You're a wonderful husband and the  
best father a son could ever have. \*  
We're all broken, Walter. You said  
your life started with me? Well,  
mine started with you, too. I love  
you. I always will.

WALTER

I don't deserve your love, Ag. I  
don't deserve anyone's love. I want  
you to leave. Before...

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

AGATHA

Before what? Before you kill me?

She gestures to the room.

AGATHA

This is who you were, Walter, not  
who you are. \*

WALTER \*

I'm a killer! I could kill again. \*  
I've had fantasies of killing YOU! \*

AGATHA takes the LETTER OPENER off the desk, pushes it into  
his hand. \*

AGATHA

Then kill me.  
(off his look)  
Do it. Come on, Walter. Look at the  
walls. Look at all the pretty 23s.  
Don't disappoint them. Do it. Kill  
me.

She slaps him.

AGATHA

Do it!

She slaps him again. Harder.

AGATHA

You want me to say I'm cheating  
with Isaac? Should I tell you what  
he's like in bed? You want to know  
what I'm thinking when he's  
screwing me? \*

She starts shoving WALTER in the chest. His rage building.

AGATHA

Is that what it does for you,  
Walter? Is it? You want me to tell  
you that I'm cheating on you? \*  
Because I will. I'll make up all  
the sordid little details--

WALTER

--Stop it!

Unable to take any more, WALTER SLAMS AGATHA against a wall,  
pinning her in place with his free hand.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

A beat.

AGATHA reaches for his other hand, THE ONE WITH THE LETTER OPENER in, and slowly raises it to her throat. \*

AGATHA  
Do it, Walter. Kill me. If this is  
who you still are, THEN KILL ME  
NOW! \*

WALTER, crying openly, is tormented and torn by a million different emotions. He screams a primal wail and races out of the haunted room. \*

EXT. "THE \_HELL HOTEL" - NIGHT \*

THE OPENING OF THE FILM. \*

WALTER EXPLODES through the hotel doors and bolts into the street. He grips the LETTER OPENER, dagger-style. \*

AGATHA follows WALTER out. \*

WALTER looks up to see a BUS bearing down on him. \*

It is THE NUMBER 23. \*

WALTER (V.O.)  
There's no such thing as destiny.  
There are only different choices. \*

He looks at ROBIN (waiting with ISAAC) then exchanges a meaningful, profound look with NED ACROSS THE STREET and steps out in front of to the bus. As it closes in, his eyes remain fixed on the number. \*

WALTER  
It's only a number. \*

The BUS DRIVER SLAMS on the brakes. \*

AGATHA ROBIN  
Walter! Dad! \*

The bus SQUEALS, its back SLIDING OUT, as it careens towards WALTER... \*

...stopping mere inches away! \*

A beat. \*

WALTER looks back at NED. \*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WALTER \*  
 It's only a number. \*

AGATHA AND ROBIN \*  
 Run up to WALTER and hug him. \*

WALTER (V.O.) \*  
 Some choices are easy. Some aren't. \*  
 It's these that are the truly \*  
 important ones. They're the ones \*  
 that define us as people. \*

WALTER speaks MOS to his loved ones. Tears start to stream \*  
 down ROBIN'S face. \*

WALTER (V.O.) \*  
 13 years ago I made the wrong \*  
 choice. I needed to put it right. \*  
 And not just for my sake. \*

WALTER stops speaking. He holds out his hand to his son. \*  
 A beat and ROBIN takes it. AGATHA takes the other. \*  
 The SPARROWS walk away from "THE \_HELL HOTEL". \*

FATHER SEBASTIAN (V.O.) \*  
 "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall \*  
 not want... \*

EXT. GRAVEYARD - DAY \*  
 A CROWD stands around LAURA TOLLINS' grave. It is her \*  
 funeral. \*

FATHER SEBASTIAN \*  
 He maketh me to lie down in green \*  
 pastures: he leadeth me beside the \*  
 still waters. \*

In the distance we see KYLE FLINCH with HIS PARENTS. \*

FATHER SEBASTIAN \*  
 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me \*  
 in the paths of righteousness for \*  
 his name's sake. \*

WALTER (V.O.) \*  
 While I don't particularly like the \*  
 choice I had to make... \*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

KYLE sees AGATHA and ROBIN watching, WALTER conspicuous by his absence. KYLE walks towards them. \*

FATHER SEBASTIAN \*

Yea, though I walk through the  
valley of the shadow of death I  
will fear no evil: for thou art  
with me; thy rod and thy staff they  
comfort me. Thou preparest a table  
before me in the presence of mine  
enemies: \*

KYLE stops and watches the funeral with AGATHA and ROBIN. \*

FATHER SEBASTIAN \*

thou anointest my head with oil; my  
cup runneth over. Surely goodness  
and mercy shall follow me all the  
days of my life: and I will dwell  
in the house of the LORD for ever." \*

KYLE FLINCH \*

(with a wry smile) \*

Psalm 23. \*

WALTER (V.O.) \*

...I know I made the right one. \*

ROBIN \*

It's just a number, sir. \*

KYLE looks at him. At AGATHA. He picks a wild flower and smells it. \*

KYLE FLINCH \*

This might sound strange, but... \*

(to Robin) \*

Your father's a good man. \*

INT. PRISON - DAY \*

WALTER (V.O.) \*

It wasn't the happiest of endings. \*

WALTER sits in his cell. \*

WALTER (V.O.) \*

But justice was done... albeit with  
a heavy dose of irony... \*

DISSOLVE TO: \*

EXT. PRISON - DAY \*

SUPER UP: **23 MONTHS LATER** \*

AGATHA and ROBIN wait outside the gates. WALTER exits. Free. \*  
Of everything. The family embraces. \*

A dog BARKS. \*

NED sits in the shade under a tree, watching them. \*

WALTER smiles at him. The SPARROWS walk off, arm in arm. \*

NED watches them go. He seems just like a normal dog now... \*  
or does he? \*

He trots off... \*

...to a nearby graveyard... and starts scouring graves... THE \*  
CAMERA CLOSING IN ON HIS NAME TAG... "NED" changing to "END". \*

FADE OUT. \*

The following TITLECARD appears: \*

"BE SURE YOUR SIN WILL FIND YOU OUT." \*

followed, a heartbeat later, by its source:

NUMBERS 32:23