

the number 23

an original screenplay written by

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FADE IN:

EXT. MARSH - DEAD OF NIGHT

A signpost reads: "THE STEPS TO HEAVEN." Below it, another adds: "WARNING: UNSAFE FOOTING. DON'T STRAY OFF THE PATH." Beyond them, STEPPING STONES disappear into darkness.

The WIND picks up as we head into the marsh. Listen to it. It carries INDISTINCT, TROUBLED WHISPERINGS.

A DOG, a 95-lb pit bull, 90 of which is pure terrifying muscle, sits on a stone halfway across. An ANTIQUE SILVER COLLAR glints around its neck and its eyes... its eyes are a black, bottomless void. The whispers SWIRL AROUND it, getting louder and louder, and more and more troubled...

DISSOLVE TO:

A RED SCREEN. ODD...

...it seems alive. Moving. Flowing.

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."

WIDER ANGLE: WALTER SPARROW lies on his back in a cobblestoned road, staring at the BLOOD seeping from his head.

As we PULL UP (looking down on Walter), we might notice the specific paths his blood has chosen through the cobblestones, pathways that depict a number...

...the number 23.

SUPER UP: **FEBRUARY 10**

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

SUPER UP: **FEBRUARY 3**

NORMAL SPEED: a WOMAN walks her BULLDOG down a STREET.

She stops for some aimless window shopping. A cat MEOWS. The dog turns and stares.

The woman moves on but the dog won't budge. She tugs on the leash. It GROWLS. She follows its stare to Walter, sitting in a truck, half-eaten pastrami sandwich in hands. He's staring right back at the dog.

Walter MEOWS. The dog BARKS.

The woman, shocked, notices the words "ANIMAL CONTROL OFFICER" engraved on the truck's side. Suddenly fearful, she checks her leash and pulls the dog away.

Walter MEOWS once more, then chuckles and resumes his lunch.

INT. TRUCK - LATE AFTERNOON

Stuck in traffic. The dashboard clock reads 4:58 p.m. Walter's CB radio CRACKLES into life. A female voice:

RADIO

Unit 5, come in. We have a U.S.S.

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. Then again,  
things didn't really start here...

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

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

NORMAL SPEED: LIGHTS flash on a stunning CHRISTMAS TREE.  
We're in a HALLWAY at EVENING-TIME.

Walter stares into a tinsel-edged, snow-dusted mirror,  
uncomfortable in suit and tie.

ROBIN SPARROW, Walter's son and best friend, comes upstairs,  
juggling.

WALTER

How do I look?

ROBIN

The truth?

WALTER

Are you kidding?

ROBIN

You look great.

WALTER

Thank you.

INT. BEDROOM - EVENING

Walter speaks to the bathroom door:

WALTER  
How are we doing in there?

The door opens. AGATHA SPARROW blows into a tissue, her red eyes and runny nose failing to diminish her sexiness. She's in her underwear.

WALTER  
I see.

AGATHA  
I think you may be going alone.  
(a beat)  
Do you hate me?

WALTER  
(looks her up and down)  
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?

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

INT. TRUCK - NIGHT

Walter passes drunk Yuletide revelers. A large CAKE BOX is on his passenger seat.

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

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Snowflakes are falling as Walter walks past CAROL-SINGERS, cake in arms. He enters a PUB, the "MAN'S BEST FRIEND."

INT. "MAN'S BEST FRIEND" - PRIVATE FUNCTION ROOM - NIGHT

The local ACO's Christmas party. A small BAND (each member dressed like Father Christmas) sets up.

Walter adds the cake (a Dalmatian pup in Santa hat) to the table. SYBIL, an aging man-eater with too much make-up and well-endowed bosom barely contained by a red dress, sidles up.

SYBIL  
Single tonight, Walter?

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

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

LATER - THE DANCE FLOOR

is where it's happening. Alcohol has been consumed.

Walter sits alone with a slice of cake. Sybil drags him onto the floor and throws her arms around him. Her clutch tightens. She whispers into his ear. He stares at her, horrified. She whispers again. 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 cloakroom if I was in heat and  
you were the last "bitch" on Earth.

Everyone stops and stares. Stares become laughs and sniggers.

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

INT. TRUCK - LATE AFTERNOON (**FEBRUARY 3**)

Walter stares at the clock.

SYBIL'S VOICE  
Do you read me, Unit 5? I repeat, we  
have an undesirable scavenger  
sighting. Walter Sparrow, I know  
you're there.

He grabs the radio.

WALTER  
It's one minute to five, Sybil!

INT. ACO HQ - SAME

Sybil mans the dispatch.

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

EXT. WANTON PLEASURE RESTAURANT - EVENING

An undesirable part of Chinatown.

INT. WANTON PLEASURE - EVENING

An old CHINESE MAN leads Walter via the kitchen to the back door. He nods at it, afraid. Walter pushes it open.

GRRR.

EXT. WANTON PLEASURE - EVENING

Walter straps on PROTECTIVE SLEEVES. He pulls a MUZZLE and FLASHLIGHT from his truck, then a DOG POLE. Tests it. It works.

He checks the time. Mutters.

EXT. ALLEYWAY - EVENING

The only working street lamp flickers and dies.

Walter flips on the flashlight. A sign reads: DEAD END. He points the beam to the end: a ragged, brick wall. No dog. A line of DUMPSTERS provides plenty of lurking spaces.

Walter inches down, pole at the ready, like a cop. He nears the end. Stops.

WALTER  
Meow.

GRRR.

He smiles. Moves onward.

The PIT BULL (seen earlier) waits between two dumpsters. It bares its teeth, eyes dripping with evil, glinting in the light.

WALTER  
Man's best friend, my ass.

Walter switches the flashlight to WIDE BEAM and puts it down. He extends the pole and steps forward.

WALTER  
Come to daddy.

The dog SNARLS, backs against the wall, and BARKS.

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. (PARTS OF THIS SHALL BE ANIMATED)

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 the dog.

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 the dog's neck. He yanks it tight.

WALTER  
...THEY EAT DOGS!

The dog SNARLS and BARKS. Walter pulls out the muzzle and waits. His prisoner calms.

WALTER

The moral of this story, you ask?

He strokes the dog's head. A NAME TAG dangles from its collar.

WALTER

Stay out of goddamn Chinatown, my  
dear...

He turns the tag over.

WALTER

...Ned.

NED clamps its teeth over his arm. Walter HOWLS. Ned won't let go.

He 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. Marches towards his foe.

Ned runs. Walter runs after him.

EXT. CAKE SHOP - EVENING

Agatha locks up for the night and hurries off.

INTERCUT: WALTER CHASING NED / AGATHA WAITING FOR WALTER

-- Ned bounds into a UNIVERSITY CAR PARK, waits for Walter to catch up, then bounds off again, like he's playing a game.

-- Agatha browses STALLS in a quaint MARKET SQUARE. TRADERS are packing up for the day.

-- Ned races down a street, stopping in front of a LIGHT BLUE APARTMENT BUILDING. Walter approaches. Ned races off.

-- Agatha waits beneath a lamppost, the market now a ghost town.

-- Walter approaches Ned, waiting for him in front of a BUS. The bus suddenly pulls away revealing a ROAD SIGN for "CASANOVA'S PARK." Ned races off.



-- Agatha checks the time. Shivers. Glances about the square at the SHOPS around the perimeter.

-- Ned pauses at the foot of A STEEP FLIGHT OF STEPS. Checks Walter is still in pursuit. He is.

-- Agatha browses aisles in a SECONDHAND BOOKSTORE. A BOOK falls off a shelf right in her path, startling her.

EXT. STREET - EVENING

Walter turns a corner, puffing, and falls to his knees. Ned stands a few yards away, beside the PINK NEON SIGN of "THE SHELL" HOTEL (though the 'S' of Shell is unlit so the name appears "HELL"). A board reads: "VACANCY."

WALTER  
I'll give you Hell, alright.  
(aiming)  
Sweet dreams, furball.

Ned runs into the road. A car BLASTS its horn, SCREECHES to a halt. It moves on. The road...

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

...is empty, Ned staring at him from a CHURCH across the street. It BARKS. Enters the GRAVEYARD.

EXT. GRAVEYARD - EVENING

Walter follows his prey down row after row of graves.

WALTER  
Go ahead, buddy. Choose your spot.

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, against the SETTING SUN, he sees the SILHOUETTE OF A MAN. Watching him.

EXT. MARKET SQUARE - NIGHT

Walter enters, BANDAGING HIS ARM. He looks once to his left, once to his right, then left again, searching for Agatha. He

sees a secondhand bookstore, "A NOVEL FATE." Walks up. Peers in the window.

WALTER (V.O.)

What if. The only thing I know for sure is, I was late. 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

...the fucker was called "Ned." Ned for chrissakes! Know why someone calls a ninety-five pound pit bull 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. I'm telling ya, that mangy little sucker has 'horse feed' written all over it and that's nothing compared to what I'll do if I ever meet the cretin who--

Agatha puts her finger over his lips.

AGATHA

Shush. 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?

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  
 Books--

AGATHA  
 --are for people with no imagination  
 of their own. I know. You 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. (STILL IMAGES  
 MAY ACCOMPANY THE FOLLOWING DIALOGUE)

WALTER (V.O.)  
 February 3rd. That makes me Aquarius,  
 one of the most innovative signs of  
 the zodiac, a collective characterized  
 by an acrobatic mind, a visionary,  
 occasionally rebellious nature, a  
 genius bordering on insanity, able  
 to meet any challenge. Remember Thomas  
 Edison? Charles Darwin? Rasputin?  
 Jules Verne? That isn't all. Experts  
 say Aquarians are philanthropists.  
 Love is their driving force. Friends  
 are vitally important.

They reach a house with BALLOONS tied to the front gate, all  
painted to look like variations of Walter. Walter scowls.

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

Agatha drags him through the gate.

INT. HOUSE - FRONT DOOR - NIGHT

ISAAC FRENCH, dashing in a tuxedo, opens the door. Watch  
 carefully and you'll notice he pays a little too much  
 attention to Agatha.

AGATHA  
Sorry we're late, Isaac.

ISAAC  
Nothing a kiss won't cure.

He offers his cheek to her. She kisses him.

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. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Evidence of several PARTY GAMES having been played (pin the tail on the donkey, indoor hoopla, etc) is visible.

Agatha plus twenty of her BOOKISH FRIENDS, all wearing PARTY HATS, pay close attention to Isaac -- acting the total host and just finishing explaining the next game to them.

A SKELETON sits in the corner. It also wears a party hat.

ISAAC  
Does anyone have any questions? How about you, Walter?

Walter sits in an armchair picking at the remaining crumbs of his birthday cake, a pile of weird and wonderful GIFTS beside him.

WALTER  
You're going to hand out those little cards you're holding, all of which are blank except for one saying 'Murderer' and another saying 'Detective.' Then you're going to turn out the lights and we all roam about the house in the dark trying not to break anything, and not owning up if we do, until the person with the 'Murderer' card 'kills' one of us. The victim should then move away from the killer before waking the neighbors with an ear-splitting scream, at which point the lights will come on and, assuming the police don't arrive, we all start guessing who the killer is.

ISAAC

Sounds like someone has played before.

He hands out the cards.

ISAAC

Everyone ready?

People nod. Isaac walks to a FUSEBOX in the HALLWAY.

All the lights go out and suddenly we are playing...

...MURDER IN THE DARK!

We see VARIOUS SHOTS of SHADOWS roaming through the house, accompanied by the usual GIGGLES/APOLOGIES/GASPS as people bump into each other.

AGATHA

slips inside a BEDROOM and safely watches the goings-on through a crack in the door. Suddenly we hear:

A WHISPER

I don't think hiding out in the bedroom is quite in the spirit of the game.

Agatha turns around, whispers back:

AGATHA

Who's that?

A WHISPER

Who do you want it to be?

Agatha's hands fumble over someone's face.

AGATHA

Walter?

The whisper and face do indeed belong to Walter.

AGATHA

Oh God, I'm sorry. I had no idea he was planning a games night. What are you doing in here, anyway?

WALTER

Oh, you know, I thought I'd sneak into a bedroom and see if I got lucky.

AGATHA

And did you?

WALTER  
I certainly did.

He starts to kiss her face.

AGATHA  
Who do you think the killer is?

WALTER  
Do you care?

He kisses her again. This time she responds. The kiss quickly grows in intensity

Walter runs his hands over Agatha's body, working his way over her breasts to her neck, continuing on up to her ears before descending back down to her neck. Then, very slowly, Walter starts to squeeze...

AGATHA  
Mmm... Walter Sparrow...

It's soft and sensual and utterly sexy. Or at least, that's how it starts out. But Walter's grip gets tighter and tighter. Agatha's eyes open. She tries to scream but his mouth is pressed to hers.

Walter's eyes snap open... which is when Agatha realizes...

EXT. THE SPARROW HOME - NIGHT

Walter and Agatha walk to the front door, arm in arm. Walter opens the door, is about to step inside when...

IN THE LIVING ROOM - ROBIN'S HEAD

pops up from the couch. A GIRL'S HEAD follows it up.

WALTER  
(to Agatha)  
Remember the days we used to go for  
late night walks in the moonlight?

AGATHA  
There's no moon tonight.

She moves to the door. Walter takes her hands.

WALTER  
We can take advantage of the darkness.

AGATHA  
Someone already did.

She again tries to reach the door. Walter prevents her. He nods to a HAMMOCK on the verandah and winks.

WALTER

Remember those days, too?

AGATHA

Walter, it's freezing out here. What's gotten into you tonight?

WALTER

I just thought, seeing as it is my birthday, and we've just spent the evening--

AGATHA

--I'll get a blanket.

WALTER

No! I mean, there's one in the truck.

AGATHA

You're giving me a dog blanket?

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 and they sit.

AGATHA

I can't believe you killed me.

WALTER

It was fun. The look on your face...

AGATHA

At least you got some interesting gifts. Those commemorative silver dollars from Fred, for example--

WALTER

--I don't need a hobby, Aggie. I have you.

Agatha snuggles up to him.

AGATHA

How's it feel?

WALTER  
 To be a cold-blooded killer?  
 (looks around)  
 Strangely familiar.

AGATHA  
 I meant, to be another year older.

WALTER  
 Oh. Devastating.

AGATHA  
 Really?

WALTER  
 But it's--  
 (imitating Isaac)  
 --nothing a kiss won't cure.

He offers his cheek to Agatha. She digs him in the ribs then kisses him. The front door opens. Robin pokes his head out. He's in his pajamas and robe.

ROBIN  
 Mom? Dad? I thought I heard voices.

AGATHA  
 If someone was in bed asleep like they were meant to be, they wouldn't have heard anything.

She approaches him.

AGATHA  
 How's that homework looking?

ROBIN  
 Like it's finished.

Agatha strokes his face affectionately.

AGATHA  
 Don't be long. I'll make cocoa.

She goes inside.

Walter and Robin exchange looks.

WALTER  
 Well, don't just stand there. You'll catch yourself a death.

He holds open his coat, beckoning his son to cuddle up with him. Robin does, gladly.



ROBIN  
We fell asleep. That's all.

WALTER  
Back door?

ROBIN  
She went down the alley.

He hands Walter a PRESENT from his robe pocket.

ROBIN  
I forgot to give you this.

WALTER  
I accept bribes at any time of day.

Father and son smile.

Walter opens the present: a hand-painted "FATHER OF THE YEAR" mug.

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

He squeezes Robin's hand, then leads him inside.

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Agatha pours hot milk into three mugs. Walter and Robin enter. Walter transfers his cocoa into his new FOTY mug. The Sparrows all smile and head off to bed, Walter turning out the light as they go.

Seconds later, the moon emerges from a cloud.

Agatha's book, "The Number 23," lies on the table, glinting in the moonlight.

INT. ACO OFFICE - MORNING

Fresh-faced DR. ALICE MORTIMER, 26, checks a file. A mug serves as a pencil-holder. It's almost empty.

SUPER UP: **FEBRUARY 4**

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  
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  
This is your first bite. A person's  
first bite can have traumatic  
consequences.

WALTER  
Traumatic consequences? I'm not  
traumatized. A little embarrassed,  
perhaps.

He rolls up his sleeve.

WALTER  
This is not 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. Not that women  
are a species 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 woman I know. What she sees in me I'm not sure. 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.

WALTER

It is?

He relaxes, glances at the clock -- just gone 10 a.m.

WALTER

But 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.

DR. ALICE MORTIMER

Mr. Sparrow? What color did she choose? For the walls.

INT. LIVING ROOM - MORNING

WALTER (V.O.)

Red. Blood red.

Walter stands in the doorway gazing at the BLOOD RED WALLS.

He half-heartedly rummages through various BIRTHDAY GIFTS: jigsaw, beer-making kit, cardigan, new deck of cards, etc.

WALTER

Agatha, Agatha, Agatha.

INT. KITCHEN - MORNING

Walter munches off a plate of COOKIES as he pours a glass of MILK. He pauses. Transfers it into his FOTY mug.

INT. BEDROOM - MORNING

His 'n' hers bedside tables -- Agatha's cluttered, Walter's having alarm clock and lamp only.

Walter lies on the bed. Bored.

INT. ROBIN'S BEDROOM - MORNING

Walter lies on Robin's bed.

He gets up. Looks around the room. Passes a MODEL OF A HELIX made out of empty matchboxes. He picks up the top box. The helix collapses. Walter, sheepish, leaves the room.

INT. AGATHA'S LIBRARY - MORNING

Wall to wall BOOKS, plus a DESK and OLD TYPEWRITER.

Walter stands in the doorway. He steps in, then thinks better of it. Turning to leave, he sees "THE NUMBER 23" on the desk. He picks it up. Stares at the cover. Turns to the BLURBS on the back:

WALTER

*"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?

INT. BEDROOM - MORNING

Walter settles on the bed with the book. He turns to AN OLD, BATTERED DOLL on Agatha's bedside table.

WALTER

Don't you tell her about this.

He turns to page one. Clears his throat. Reads aloud:

WALTER

*"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

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

INT. AGATHA'S LIBRARY - MORNING

Walter pulls books off the shelves. Checks their DISCLAIMERS.

WALTER

All the characters... any  
resemblance... entirely coincidental.  
(different books)  
Purely coincidental. Wholly  
coincidental.

INT. BEDROOM - MORNING

Walter stares at "The Number 23" disclaimer. He continues:

WALTER

"Do not concern yourself with my nom  
de plume. My real name matters not,  
nor my physical description. Imagine  
me, if you must, as someone you once  
knew. Someone, perhaps, you liked."

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

An URBAN SCHOOL. TOWER BLOCKS are visible out the windows.

WALTER (V.O.)

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

Young FINGERLING raises his hand to a question. He has a somewhat sallow complexion.

WALTER (V.O.)

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

The view out the window CHANGES ACCORDINGLY. Buildings disappear, tall elm trees sprouting in their place. The sky turns blue and is full of birdsong. The room interior alters too, as do the kids, the teacher.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - AFTERNOON

Fingerling walks along, laughing gaily with pals.

WALTER (V.O.)

"There wasn't anything wrong with it. As far as boring towns go I'm sure it ranked above average. It was just boring. So were the other kids."

His pals VANISH. He walks alone, kicking a soda can.

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. BEDROOM - DAY

Walter's face pales.

INT. FINGERLING'S FATHER'S OFFICE - DAY

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, maniacally 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. BEDROOM - DAY

Walter lowers the book. Even he doesn't know exactly what he's feeling. He reads on:

WALTER

"My father's inability to express warmth was more than compensated by my mom. In her eyes I could do no wrong."

INT. KITCHEN - EVENING

Fingerling sits at the table, still doing homework.

WALTER (V.O.)

"I wanted to be like her. She understood what made people tick."

His MOTHER (her kitchen clearly portraying her as someone fond of baking) slides a plate of COOKIES and a glass of MILK in front of him. She closes his books and strokes his head, tenderly.

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

Walter glances at his milk and cookies.

WALTER

If you become a dogcatcher, I am gonna sue your ass.

He continues, quietly for a few seconds, until:

WALTER

"My mom was thrilled when, on my eighteenth birthday, I announced that I wanted to be a..."

INT. KITCHEN - MORNING

Breakfast-time. PRESENTS (books on finance, etc) cover the table in front of Fingerling, 18 today.

Fingerling's Mother's mouth hangs open. She's thrilled.

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

Walter looks up from the book.

WALTER

Detective. He wants to be a detective.  
(to Agatha's doll)  
You hear that? A detective!

Visibly relaxed, he continues reading, but as he does, his voice grows heavy...

WALTER (V.O.)

"Not so my father."

INT. KITCHEN - MORNING

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

WALTER (V.O.)

It made his hatred of our neighbor, old Mrs. Dobkins, even stronger, and she'd been dead ten years. She lived next door and our houses were identical, except for..."

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

Walter freezes. His face drains of color.

WALTER (V.O.)

"...the gardens. You see, her house fell on the bend, and thus, her back garden was twice the size. But it wasn't that that angered my dad. Oh no..."

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 (V.O.)

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

ALFIE appears, following a scent.

WALTER (V.O.)

"I always knew when Alfie was up to something. How? Simple."

Alfie comes across a rabbit. The chase is on. 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:

WALTER (V.O.)

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



INT. BEDROOM - DAY

Walter turns the page swiftly.

WALTER

"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 detective in the making was born. Let me explain."

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

Walter closes the book and searches through wardrobes. A dog YAPS incessantly.

WALTER (V.O.)

"It was my eighth birthday and Alfie's gift sounded like exercise. Except it wasn't. He just stood still and barked."

INT. THE SPARROW HOME - VARIOUS ROOMS - DAY

Walter searches cupboards, under beds, etc.

WALTER (V.O.)

"There was no answer when I rang Mrs. Dobkins' doorbell so I went through the side gate."

EXT. MRS. DOBKINS' HOUSE - DAY

Fingerling passes through the side gate, Alfie in arms.

INT. MRS. DOBKINS' HOUSE - MORNING

He enters the KITCHEN, checks VARIOUS ROOMS -- all empty.

WALTER (V.O.)

"Soon I was going upstairs. At the top, Alfie leaped from my arms."

Alfie runs into a room. Fingerling follows. It's MRS. DOBKINS' BEDROOM and Alfie is on the bed, licking Mrs. Dobkins' face.

She's been dead a good fourteen hours.

INT. HALLWAY - DAY

Walter spies the HATCH to the LOFT.

WALTER (V.O.)

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

INT. LOFT - DAY

Walter climbs into BOX HEAVEN. Starts moving stuff.

WALTER (V.O.)

*"I decided Mrs. 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."*

He pauses in the shadows, nervous.

WALTER (V.O.)

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

He reaches out and opens an OLD CHEST.

EXT. THE SPARROW HOME - LATE AFTERNOON

Agatha arrives home. She sees Walter's truck.

INT. THE SPARROW HOME - LATE AFTERNOON

Agatha pops her head into the LIVING ROOM.

AGATHA

Yoo-hoo.

She heads UPSTAIRS, notices a SCUFF MARK on the wall halfway up. Navigating the LOFT STEPS (down) she enters their BEDROOM. Several wardrobes are open. She returns to the loft steps.

AGATHA

Walter?

She climbs up. The LOFT is empty.

She checks the TOILET, the BATHROOM, even her LIBRARY.

Next comes ROBIN'S BEDROOM. Empty. She picks one of Robin's shirts off the floor then notices the helix.

AGATHA

Walter.

The window draws her gaze -- a LIGHT is on in the GARAGE.

EXT. YARD - LATE AFTERNOON

Agatha approaches the garage. She opens the door.

INT. GARAGE - LATE AFTERNOON

Walter sits on the floor, his back to her. The chest serves as a backrest and is empty, its contents (OLD PHOTO ALBUMS, TROPHIES, CHILDHOOD MEMORABILIA) spread around him.

AGATHA

Here you are. What are you doing?

WALTER

I'll clear it up later.

Agatha walks over, freezes on seeing the book in his hands.

AGATHA

Oh. My. God. I don't believe my eyes.

WALTER

Did you read this?

He folds a page corner and closes it. It's "The Number 23." Agatha nods.

WALTER

What did you think of it?

AGATHA

I thought it was brilliant. Style's a bit odd. It reads a bit... raw.

WALTER

This Fingerling guy--

AGATHA

Fabulous name.

WALTER

Yeah. 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

Page eighteen.

AGATHA

Oh. Haven't been reading long, then?

WALTER

It feels like I have.

AGATHA

Darling, this is wonderful. Good for you. I'll fix your favorite for dinner tonight.

She leaves. Walter follows after her.

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Agatha enters through the BACK DOOR and washes her hands. Walter stops in the doorway.

Agatha transfers ingredients from the fridge to the table -- ONIONS, TOMATOES, MINCE, etc.

AGATHA

Honey, you're letting in a draught.

Walter puts the items back in the fridge.

AGATHA

Walter! I just got that out.

He walks outside then reappears with a stack of PHOTO ALBUMS, etc, and dumps it on the table. He holds up "THE NUMBER 23."

WALTER

It's me, Ag. Me.

AGATHA

What are you talking about?

Walter 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 Walter and a COCKER SPANIEL. Then the view from a bedroom -- a sprawling jungle of a garden next door.

WALTER

Some little twerp has written a book about me.

Agatha can't help it -- she laughs.

AGATHA

Sorry. What do you mean?

WALTER

I mean, somebody has taken MY life, MY childhood, MY memories, and based a character on it. Fingerling.

AGATHA

Don't be ridiculous. Fingerling's nothing like you.

WALTER

He's everything like me. His past is my past. They've stolen it. This Kretts person has... he's plagiarized my life.

He hands her ANOTHER BOOK. Paper flap long gone, it has a green, hardback cover and mottled texture. Its title is:

AGATHA

"Fingerling at the Zoo."

WALTER

My mother read it to me when I was young.

AGATHA

Honey, lots of people would have read this as a kid.

WALTER

Did you?

AGATHA

No, but...

She points to various photos.

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 who I am. A dogcatcher.

AGATHA

Fingerling's a detective.

WALTER

So he used a little imagination. It's like he's implying I'm not good enough!

AGATHA

I finally understand why you don't like to read.

WALTER

You remember the old woman next door? Well she died. On MY eighth birthday.

He sinks into a chair -- mentally exhausted.

AGATHA

So there are similarities. Read on. You'll soon realize Fingerling's very different from you. I promise.

She puts the book in his hands. Walter stares at it, the words "THE NUMBER 23, A NOVEL OF OBSESSION BY TOPSY KRETTIS" staring right back at him.

INT. HALLWAY - LATE AFTERNOON

Robin enters, playing with a Rubick's cube. He hangs up his schoolbag and makes his way to the kitchen.

ROBIN

I'm home. I'm hungry. I'm--

He pauses. Backtracks.

INT. LIVING ROOM - LATE AFTERNOON

Walter reads in an armchair. He doesn't notice Robin staring at him from the doorway.

INT. KITCHEN - LATE AFTERNOON

Robin enters. Agatha is cooking.

AGATHA

Oh hi, sweetie. How was school--  
What's happened? You're very pale.

ROBIN

Dad's reading.

AGATHA

Yes, I know! Wonderful, isn't it?  
Bit of a shock, admittedly.

ROBIN

But... how... why... when... I didn't  
even know he could read. Well, of  
course I knew he could, I just...  
what's he reading?

AGATHA

His life-story.

ROBIN

Huh?

He picks at some food scraps. Agatha smacks his hand with a  
spoon and he goes to the sink to wash his hands.

AGATHA

Dinner might be rather odd tonight.

ROBIN

Why? What are we having?

AGATHA

Robin, darling, I love you deeply,  
but humor is not your strong point.

She pushes the door shut, quietly.

INT. LIVING ROOM - LATE AFTERNOON

Robin sits opposite his dad, watching. Walter ignores him.  
He moves to Walter's armrest. Reads along.

ROBIN

What kind of name is 'Fingerling?'

Walter shuts the book. Robin, a little hurt, leaves the room.

EXT. THE SPARROW HOME - EVENING

The moon is waning.

INT. KITCHEN - EVENING

Dinner-time for the Sparrows. Spaghetti bolognaise. They serve themselves, awkward, fleeting smiles the currency of conversation.

ROBIN

Why would someone write a book about you?

WALTER

That, son, is a very good question.

ROBIN

Am I in it? I mean, if it is about dad, shouldn't I have a starring role?

AGATHA

Yes, you should. And yet, you don't. I wonder what that means?

WALTER

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

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The CLOCK clicks to 8 p.m. It begins to CHIME.

Walter reads in his armchair. Agatha reads in her armchair. Robin does homework on the sofa.

DISSOLVE TO:

11 P.M.

as the clock FINISHES CHIMING.

AGATHA

Robin.

Robin sighs and rises. He kisses each as he says:

ROBIN

Night, Mom. Night, Dad.

Walter doesn't respond. Robin exits.

AGATHA

I think I'm going to run a bath.

Walter -- still totally oblivious.



INT. BATHROOM - NIGHT

Agatha soaks in the tub. Thinking.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

She enters, post-bath and in her nightgown. The bed is empty.

INT. STAIRCASE - NIGHT

She peers over the banisters -- Walter is still reading.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Agatha takes the book from Walter, folds down a page corner, and pulls him up.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Agatha pulls back the covers for a pajama-clad Walter and he gets into bed. She goes to kiss him. He shies away.

AGATHA

How far are you?

WALTER

He's just spent his first month's wages on a diamond ring for Fabrizia.

AGATHA

Ah yes, his Italian girlfriend. And you told me I was the first girl you ever loved.

WALTER

She could be you.  
(off her look)  
Am I being silly?

AGATHA

Every time I read a 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. No, you're not being silly. Paranoid, yes.  
(she snuggles up)  
But I love you all the same.

Walter kisses her forehead.

WALTER

I love you, too.

He clicks off the light.

INT. KITCHEN - MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT

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, concerned. Then he sees it -- an EMPTY SLOT in Agatha's KNIFE BLOCK.

INT. STAIRCASE - MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT

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

INT. BEDROOM - MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT

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.

WALTER

No.

He pulls out the knife. Stares at it. Throws it aside and collapses over Agatha, sobbing. Pulls her into his arms.

WALTER

A nightmare. Nothing but a nightmare.  
Put her back, close your eyes, and  
it'll be alright. Everything will be  
all right.

He lays Agatha down tenderly and shuts his eyes.

WALTER

Please.

He opens them. Agatha is still dead. Tears stream down his cheeks. He SCREAMS.

AGATHA (O.S.)

Sorry! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!

The light comes on. Agatha stares at Walter. He's clutching his shoulder. She moves his hand away.

AGATHA

Oh God, I almost drew blood.

Walter follows her gaze. Teeth marks puncture his skin. He looks at his pajamas, the sheets, Agatha's nightgown -- no knife, no blood anywhere.

Agatha kisses his shoulder. Walter takes her head in his hands, gazes at her, and kisses her passionately.

INT. ACO OFFICE - MORNING

SUPER UP: **FEBRUARY 5**

Sybil works the dispatch, headset on.

SYBIL

What kind of noise?

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

EXT. STREET - MORNING

Walter's truck sits in the shade under a tree. A 'PUTT-PUTT-SCREECH' comes from his 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, 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.

EXT. IN A TREE - MORNING - A BIRD'S POV

Looking down on Walter's truck.

INT. TRUCK - CONTINUED

Bird poop hits the windshield. Walter doesn't notice.

INT. 9TH FLOOR APARTMENT - DAY

Looking through a telescope (into the apartment opposite) at a GORGEOUS GAL, pacing back and forth in her underwear.

Fingerling, now grown up and wearing POLICE UNIFORM, turns to a somewhat sheepish, SLEAZY LITTLE MAN. The Man redirects the telescope and Fingerling looks again, this time into an all-white LIVING ROOM.

In the center is a CHAIR. Above it hangs a NOOSE.

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

The Gal enters frame, 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.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Fingerling exits one apartment block and heads for the other.

INT. CORRIDOR - DAY

Fingerling knocks at Apartment #92- (the last number is missing). No answer. He tries next door, #925, flashing his badge at an old, Chinese woman.

FINGERLING  
Police. Can I use your balcony?

Hard to tell if she understands. Fingerling enters anyway.

EXT. BALCONY - DAY

Fingerling climbs around the dividing wall and peeks round the edge of the French doors. SUICIDE GAL, on the chair, sees him and quickly puts the noose around her neck.

Fingerling steps into the open, hands up.

FINGERLING

I'm not here to hurt you. I'm here to help.

He opens the doors. The walls, ceiling, furniture -- everything is covered with PLAIN, WHITE PAPER. Letter-size.

Fingerling, spellbound, inches his way to the couch and sits.

FINGERLING

So. What's with the Hammermill mosaic?

SUICIDE GAL

I know what you're up to, this 'try to befriend me' crap. Come any closer and I'll jump.

FINGERLING

I'd rather you didn't.

SUICIDE GAL

Why should you care?

FINGERLING

Today's my birthday. If you jump it'll be my worst one ever.

SUICIDE GAL

You're pathetic. I swear, move and I'll fucking jump.

FINGERLING

If you want to die, die, but hanging's painful as hell. What's worse, most 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 GAL

(dumbfounded)

Such as?

FINGERLING

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

Suicide Gal laughs. A beat. Fingerling offers her his hand.

FINGERLING

It really is my birthday.

INT. TRUCK - DAY

The radio CRACKLES into life, startling Walter.

SYBIL'S VOICE  
Unit 5, come in. Walter!

He thinks for a second then picks up the receiver.

WALTER  
Sybil? Sorry I haven't got back to you. We're running some tests... diagnostic things.

SYBIL'S VOICE  
And? Talk to me, Walter. The city's canine population is running amok.

EXT. STREET - DAY

No mechanic anywhere.

WALTER  
It doesn't look good. Something to do with the... fan belt... timing mechanism?  
(to non-existent mechanic)  
That's what you said, isn't it?  
(to Sybil)  
Yeah. He's getting some parts. I'll let you know as soon as I'm mobile.

SYBIL'S VOICE  
(testy)  
Fine. HQ out.

Walter turns back to the book.

WALTER  
"The woman warns me to be careful: she was a together-person once."

INT. SUICIDE GAL'S KITCHEN - DAY

Suicide Gal makes coffee. The decor here matches the living room. Even the coffee jar is wrapped in paper.

SUICIDE GAL  
Now I'm a bad person. I don't want to turn you bad. You seem nice.

WALTER (V.O.)  
"I should have got out of there but I'm real curious."

INT. SUICIDE GAL'S LIVING ROOM - DAY

Fingerling and Suicide Gal sit on the couch with coffee.

WALTER (V.O.)

"We play this cute waiting game."

Suicide Gal peels a sheet of paper off the couch.

Etched into the leather ARE LOTS OF WORDS, SEEMINGLY SCRAWLED AT RANDOM, WITH NUMBERS ASSIGNED TO THEM...

...ALL ADDING UP TO 23.

WALTER (V.O.)

"Then she said it."

SUICIDE GAL

This number... this FUCKING number...  
it rules my world.

INT. TRUCK - DAY

The CB radio crackles into life, again startling Walter.

SYBIL'S VOICE

Unit 5, come in. Do you copy, Unit  
5? Walter?

Walter ignores her, reads LOUDER to drown her out.

WALTER

"It's all my father's fault."

INT. SUICIDE GAL'S LIVING ROOM - DAY

Suicide Gal stares at a MAN'S NAME on the wall: TIMOTHY CHARLES HUNT accompanied by the numbers 110/66/63, 2/12/9, 23.

SUICIDE GAL

He said he was a genius and that  
he'd figured out how to beat it. He  
said I'd be safe. He said--

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

A GIRL (Suicide Gal 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 gets to grow up to be  
just who she wants to be.

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

Her Father holds a GUN to his head, hand shaking.

SUICIDE GAL (V.O.)

All he had to do was kill himself  
and the curse would have ended with  
him.

He lowers the gun, unable to do it.

SUICIDE GAL (V.O.)

I guess he just didn't love me enough.

INT. SUICIDE GAL'S LIVING ROOM - CONTINUED

Suicide Gal paces back and forth as she rants:

SUICIDE GAL

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 GAL

Pink has four letters.

92/4 equals...

SUICIDE GAL

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.

SYBIL'S VOICE

Walter, this isn't funny. Pick up. I  
said, pick up, damn you. We have a  
(MORE)



SYBIL'S VOICE (CONT'D)  
 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  
*"I tell her a story."*  
 (a beat)  
 A story? The bastard tells stories?  
 (continues)  
*"I tell her 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."*  
 (not reading)  
 What kinda lame ass story is this?  
 (continues)  
*"The woman tells me..."*

INT. SUICIDE GAL'S LIVING ROOM - DAY

SUICIDE GAL  
 ...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 half of  
 everything he's got.*

Fingerling peers out the French doors -- still open.

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 GAL  
 This is meant to make me feel better,  
 how?

FINGERLING  
*You look smarter than my Uncle Charlie.*

Suicide Gal smiles.

EXT. PARK - DAY

Walter sits on a bench.

WALTER (V.O.)  
*"She has a face meant to smile."*

Walter smiles -- he'd have been proud of that story.

INT. SUICIDE GAL'S HALLWAY - DAY

Fingerling and Suicide Gal walk to the door. She opens it.

SUICIDE GAL  
*I promise I'll be okay. Thank you.*

She kisses him on the cheek. Fingerling steps out. As he walks down the corridor:

SUICIDE GAL  
*Officer? Happy birthday. How many is it?*

FINGERLING  
*Twenty... five.*

Suicide Gal smiles again.

INT. ELEVATOR - DAY

Fingerling descends. All the floorlights are working.

WALTER (V.O.)  
*"I get in the elevator. I get out the elevator."*

EXT. APARTMENT BLOCK - STREET-LEVEL - DAY

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

Fingerling looks for Sleazy when... THUD!

SUICIDE GAL

hits the pavement beside him.

EXT. PARK - DAY - UNKNOWN POV...

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

WALTER (V.O.)  
 "That night I eat out with Fabrizia."

INT. RESTAURANT - EVENING

FABRIZIA wipes cream off Fingerling's chin. She's feeding him strawberries.

FABRIZIA  
 Bi-zarre. But what does she mean, it rules her world?

WALTER (V.O.)  
 "I'm not surprised in the slightest when she announces..."

FABRIZIA  
 I wanna go see her place.

INT. SUICIDE GAL'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

All the paper has gone, revealing the full, terrifying extent of Suicide Gal's obsession with 23.

FABRIZIA  
 This is so bi-zarre. To think it happened on your 23rd birthday.

A beat.

INT. FINGERLING AND FABRIZIA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Silence. The only light comes from the open bathroom door.

WALTER (V.O.)  
 "At home, Fabrizia is buzzed."

Suddenly there's WATER MOVEMENT, a LOUD GASP FOR AIR, and:

FABRIZIA (O.S.)  
 Again.

WALTER (V.O.)  
 "God, I love her."

INT. UNKNOWN APARTMENT - DAY

WALTER (V.O.)  
 "The next day, I traced this ex- the woman 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...

INT. POLICE STATION - THE SERGEANT'S OFFICE - DAY

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.

EXT. POLICE STATION - DAY

Fingerling exits. He looks around, once to his left, once to his right, then again to his left.

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."

His mouth falls open with a bad case of déjà vu. He stares into space... until the book slowly draws him back.

INT. SUICIDE GAL'S LIVING ROOM

Fingerling studies the CRAZY WRITING on the walls. Around the top of the walls 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 NOTEPAD. Starts scribbling.

INT. ELEVATOR - DAY

Only floorlights 1, 5, 8 and 9 work.

As Fingerling descends, he stares at the notepad. On it are a bunch of letters and numbers. Inside a circle at the bottom...

WALTER (V.O.)

"Surely it was just a coincidence? I mean, a name's just a name, right?"

...is the number 23.

INT. CAR - EVENING

Fingerling waits outside an office. The clock reads 7:30 p.m.

FINGERLING

30 minus 7 is 23.

Fabrizia raps on the window.

INT. RESTAURANT - NIGHT

Fabrizia eats. Fingerling doesn't.

FABRIZIA

Are you okay?

FINGERLING

Yeah. Fine.

WALTER (V.O.)

"I don't tell her that, including us, but excluding the waiters, there are twenty-three people in the restaurant. I do tell her about the crazy woman's boyfriend. Her reaction is..."

INT. CHEAP HOTEL - NIGHT

Fabrizia pays for a room.

WALTER (V.O.)

"...pure Fabrizia."

INT. HOTEL CORRIDOR - NIGHT

Fabrizia unlocks a door. Fingerling stares at the room number.

INT. HOTEL ROOM #23 - 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.

EXT. PARK - DAY

Walter shifts in his seat, somewhat uncomfortable. He looks around, checking no one is watching him. Reads on, quietly.

WALTER

"I do as I'm told. She spreads her legs and instructs me to look in her purse. I find another packet of stockings. I tie her legs. Then I remove my clothes and climb aboard."

INT. HOTEL ROOM #23 - NIGHT

Fingerling makes love to Fabrizia. Gentle.

FABRIZIA

Pretend you have a knife in your hands.

A beat. 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!

INT. CAR - NIGHT

Fingerling and Fabrizia head home.

WALTER (V.O.)

"Of course, I would never really harm Fabrizia. I loved her. And she loved me."

Fingerling looks at Fabrizia. She gazes lovingly at her new, DIAMOND ENGAGEMENT RING.

WALTER (V.O.)  
*"But that night I had the most  
 unsettling nightmare imaginable."*

EXT. PARK - DAY

Walter reads on, then lowers the book, his mind racing...

EXT. THE SPARROW HOME - DAY

Walter pulls into the driveway.

INT. GARAGE - DAY

Walter has covered one wall with paper. The alphabet is written at the top. Below it, the numbers 1 to 26. He writes 'WALTER SPARROW' up. Proceeds as follows:

W=23

WALTER

Oh fuck.

He continues.

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 stares at it. Then he writes:  $7+9=16$  and  $1+1+0=2$  which gives him  $16+2=18$ . He sighs. Suddenly, he pauses.

He scribbles 'PAUL' between Walter and Sparrow.

P=16; A=1; U=21; L=12. Total: 50.  $5+0=5$ .

WALTER

16 plus 2 plus 5 equals...

He turns. Stares at "The Number 23" lying on a work bench.

INT. "A NOVEL FATE" USED BOOKSTORE - AFTERNOON

The book is on the counter. Walter waits as a SALESPERSON types into a computer. She frowns, swivels the monitor to him. "NOT FOUND" flashes on screen.

SALESPERSON

Are you sure you bought it here?

WALTER

Of course I'm sure. What kind of idiot mistakes where he buys a book?

(MORE)

WALTER (CONT'D)

(a beat)

It was here. I bought it on my birthday for my wife.

SALESPERSON

Shouldn't she be buying you stuff if it was your birthday?

WALTER

There was this dog. I was late and... Can you help me or not?

The Salesperson 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.

SALESPERSON

And old Topsy hasn't written a thing since.

She hands the book back. Walter doesn't take it.

WALTER

That's all you can tell me? Dead end, dead end, dead end?

SALESPERSON

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 inside the back cover.

INT. THE SPARROW HOME - LATE AFTERNOON

Walter hits redial on the PHONE by the FRONT DOOR, a PHONE BOOK by his feet. Agatha comes 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.

AGATHA

Why are you speaking in a funny voice?

Walter holds up "The Number 23."

WALTER

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

(opens to mailbox address)

And the minimum wage little shit who works there won't tell me anything!

AGATHA

Walter, what is going on?

INT. GARAGE - LATE AFTERNOON

Walter leads Agatha in. Scribbles and their corresponding tallies covers the wall.

AGATHA

Oh my.

Walter points out VARIOUS DISCOVERIES.

WALTER

My name equals 23. My birthday is two three. My driver's license. Social security number. Everything!

He holds up "The Number 23."

WALTER

Don't tell me it isn't me. This proves it. I'm telling you, the little fucker used me.

AGATHA

Walter.

WALTER

He has, Aggie. Not only that, the book's driving me nuts. I can't explain it, but, I'm imagining all  
(MORE)

WALTER (CONT'D)  
 sorts of weirdness. It's like it's...  
 imitating my life.

AGATHA  
 Is this what you've been doing all  
 day?

WALTER  
 How does he know so much about me?  
 Why did he chose me?

AGATHA  
 He didn't.

WALTER  
 Why can't you see it? You've read it  
 and you know me better than I do!

Agatha takes the book, opens to his bookmark -- about halfway.

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 kills Fabrizia then  
 confesses and is sentenced to life  
 in an asylum?

WALTER  
 He kills her?

AGATHA  
 Stabs her to death.

She thrusts the book into his hands, turns, and walks out.

INT. KITCHEN - LATE AFTERNOON

Agatha is chopping vegetables.

Walter appears in the back doorway with a SHEET OF PAPER. He  
 watches Agatha, lovingly. Suddenly he notices THE KNIFE.

He walks up and, from behind, takes it from her. She swivels  
 around but before she can say anything she notices his eyes  
 are tearing up. He puts the knife in the sink. Takes her hand.

WALTER

Follow me.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Walter leads Agatha in.

WALTER

Why this color?

AGATHA

What?

WALTER

Why did you choose this color? For the walls.

AGATHA

Walter, no more games.

She pries her hands free and walks to the door. Walter's words stop her in her tracks.

WALTER

I dreamt I killed you.

(a beat)

Last night. With a knife. While you slept. Just like Fingerling did.

AGATHA

Walter, this isn't funny.

WALTER

No, it isn't.

He looks at LOVING FAMILY PHOTOS on the mantelpiece.

WALTER

Sure, there are discrepancies. 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.

A solemn beat.

WALTER  
Suicide gal 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 look what it made him do.  
Don't you see, Ag? Fingerling called  
it fate. Do you know what fate is?

He hands her the sheet of paper. "FATE" is written on it,  
along with its value, which is...

WALTER  
Thirty two. 23 reversed. I love you,  
and would never ever harm you, but  
Fingerling said that, too. I'm scared,  
Ag. I'm so, so scared.

He wraps his arms around Agatha. Over his shoulder, she stares  
at "The Number 23."

INT. KITCHEN - EVENING

The Sparrows sit around a foodless table. Robin is building  
a HOUSE OF CARDS.

The doorbell RINGS. Robin runs to it. Seconds later, he  
returns with a PIZZA.

ROBIN  
Nineteen ninety-five plus tip, he  
said. Fifteen percent is...

WALTER  
Twenty three.

Agatha hands Robin twenty five.

AGATHA  
Tell him to keep the change.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Agatha pretends to read but secretly watches Walter stare at "The Number 23." Robin, scribbling into a schoolbook, looks up.

ROBIN

We live at number 1814.

Walter and Agatha look at him, confused.

ROBIN

1814? 18 is 1 plus 8 which makes 9.  
9 plus 14 is 23. Big deal, you might  
say? Well, what's strange is this.  
Look at it the other way around: 14  
is 1 plus 4 which makes 5, and 18  
plus 5 is also 23.

AGATHA

Don't talk nonsense, Robin.

ROBIN

It's not nonsense. 18 plus 5 is 23.  
That's not all. 18 plus 14 is 32.

WALTER

Twenty-three reversed.

ROBIN

Spooky, huh?

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Agatha pulls the covers back for Walter. He hesitates.

AGATHA

Everything is going to be fine.  
Nothing's going to happen to me. You  
love me. I love you.

He gets into bed. Agatha kisses him and snuggles close. Walter clicks off the light.

DISSOLVE TO:

DARKNESS - WALTER

awakes. He turns to the clock. It's 3:22 a.m. Suddenly, the next number falls, CLICKING THUNDEROUSLY to 3:23.

Walter rises.

INT. STAIRCASE - NIGHT

He heads downstairs.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

He pauses by the kitchen.

CUT TO:

EXT. THE SPARROW HOME - MORNING

The sun is coming up. Birds are chirping.

SUPER UP: **FEBRUARY 6**

INT. BEDROOM - MORNING

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

She stirs. A 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 protrude from under a blanket. They are BOUND TOGETHER.

INT. OFFICE - MORNING

The SKELETON from Walter's birthday hangs in a corner. Isaac (a psychology professor) finishes a silent read of a LETTER FROM AGATHA. He wears a YELLOW TIE. He looks up.

Walter gazes out the window (we're high up) at the surrounding UNIVERSITY. Isaac joins him.

ISAAC

Do you regret it? Not finishing college.

WALTER

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

(a beat)

Besides, there's something unsettling about these places.

ISAAC

Probably all the books around the place. We have five libraries, you know.

He picks up "The Number 23."

WALTER

Well?

ISAAC

Sounds like a fascinating read.

WALTER

Meaning that's all it is. A book. So I am crazy.

ISAAC

Good Lord, no. Twenty three is very good at this particular game.

WALTER

What do you mean? What game?

ISAAC

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

WALTER

There is?

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. Shakespeare was born on the 23rd April. He died on the 23rd April. The Mayans believed the end of the world would occur in 2012. 20 plus 12 is--

WALTER

--twenty three reversed.

ISAAC

Yes. The exact date is December 23rd.

WALTER

So it's true. The number's... God?

ISAAC

Two divided by three is point 666, 666 being the number of the Devil.

WALTER

It's the Devil?

ISAAC

What's true is that certain people take delight in perpetuating the number's infamy. Aleister Crowley.

(MORE)

ISAAC (CONT'D)

R A Wilson. William S. Burroughs gave it a certain degree of credibility when he noted a 23 connection between a boat sinking and a plane crash.

WALTER

What kind of connection?

ISAAC

Burroughs knew a Captain Clark who ran a ferry from Tangiers to Spain. One day, Clark told him he'd been doing so for 23 years without accident. That day the ferry sank, killing Clark and all his passengers. Burroughs got home, turned on the radio and heard that an airplane traveling from New York to Miami had just crashed also. The Captain was named Clark, too. No prizes for guessing what the flight number was.

WALTER

I'm not the only one. It's omnipresent.

ISAAC

Some would say of course. After all, the world does spin on an axis of 23 degrees. 23.5 if you want to be picky, but 5 is simply 2 plus 3.

WALTER

But 23 is also the lowest number unattainable on a dartboard with only one dart.

ISAAC

True. Interesting that your name begins and ends with W.

WALTER

W is the 23rd letter of the alphabet.

ISAAC

I do believe there are no names in the Bible beginning such. The Book of Revelations has only 22 chapters, you know, and that predicts--

WALTER

--the end of the world.

(MORE)



WALTER (CONT'D)  
 (points to "The Number 23")  
 And that predicts the end of my world.

ISAAC  
 Yes, it sounds like a most fascinating  
 book.

Walter paces, his distress suddenly worrying Isaac.

ISAAC  
 Of course, there exist far too few  
 stories where the main character  
 plays the saxophone. I used to play,  
 you know. Always fancied myself as  
 the next John Coltrane. I wasn't  
 aware you also played. Agatha's always  
 said you were... well, not much of a  
 hobby person.

WALTER  
 I'm not. And no, I don't play the  
 saxophone. But that's just it. Not  
 everything matches. Help me. Please.

ISAAC  
 I'm not a psychiatrist.

WALTER  
 I don't want to see a psychiatrist.

ISAAC  
 I'll see what I can dig up, and I  
 can speak to Agatha if you like,  
 but, as far as you are concerned...

He passes the book back.

ISAAC  
 Finish it. A cake's true flavor cannot  
 be ascertained while still in the  
 bowl. If, after reading it in its  
 entirety you still believe its subject  
 to be you, then whoever wrote it  
 knows you very well.

INT. ACO OFFICE - DAY

Dr. Mortimer studies Walter. She smiles, takes a PEN from  
 her now full pencil-holder mug.

DR. ALICE MORTIMER  
 Five days' emotional leave never  
 hurt anyone.

INT. CAKE SHOP - DAY

Agatha decorates a cake in the shape of a KEY.

AGATHA  
Emotional leave?

WALTER  
A whole week! Can you believe it? I can't get over how easy it was to fool her.

AGATHA  
Walter, you lied to her.

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

AGATHA  
But you've never lied before.

WALTER  
I've never had to. Listen to me, Ag, I'm Unit 5. Five! Five is simply 2 plus 3. Isaac's words, exactly.

AGATHA  
Isaac said that to you?

WALTER  
He was wearing a yellow tie. Yellow is 92, or four 23s. Dr. Mortimer? She has a mug on her desk which she uses as a pencil holder. It was empty last time yet this time there were 23 pencils in it. Every time I look at the clock--

He glances at a clock on the wall. It's 11:21 a.m.

AGATHA  
21. Not 23. And no, it's not slow.

WALTER  
1 and 1 plus 21 is 23. 11 times 2 plus 1 is 23. 11 plus 21 is 32 and you know what 32 is!

AGATHA  
Walter, what's happening to you? You're insane! What's happened to the fun-loving, dog-catching man I love?

WALTER  
I'm still a dogcatcher, Ag.  
(a beat)  
How many cakes are in this room?

AGATHA  
I don't know. Lots.

A beat. Agatha counts the cakes on display. The 'key' makes...

AGATHA  
Twenty three.

WALTER  
I need to do this, Ag. For us.

AGATHA  
Fine. Stay home and read the damn  
thing. The quicker you finish it, the  
quicker 'us' can get back to normal.

Walter kisses her and leaves. Agatha picks up a PHONE.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Walter nestles in his armchair. Takes a deep breath. Reads:

WALTER (V.O.)  
"The nightmare wasn't an isolated  
incident."

INT. FINGERLING'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Fingerling and Fabrizia are asleep.

WALTER (V.O.)  
"Over the next few days I couldn't  
decide what was worse. Being asleep."

Fingerling bolts upright.

WALTER (V.O.)  
"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...

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. RESTAURANT - EVENING

WALTER (V.O.)  
 "Fabrizia began to resent my sudden sharing of her favorite word."

*Fabrizia* finishes a head-count and looks at *Fingerling*.

FINGERLING  
 See? It's bi-zarre.

WALTER (V.O.)  
 "She adopted a new word. Or rather, a phrase."

FABRIZIA  
 You are so in-sane.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Walter looks up. Thoughtful.

FLASHCUT: AGATHA SAYS, "YOU'RE INSANE!"

He dismisses it. Continues.

WALTER (V.O.)  
 "Occasionally she added a word..."

INT. FINGERLING AND FABRIZIA'S KITCHEN - DAY

*Fabrizia* lies on the floor, naked, naughty bits obscured by WHIPPED CREAM. *Fingerling* is atop her, examining the whipped cream easy-squeeze bottle.

FABRIZIA  
 You are so FUCKING in-sane. Stop counting the calories and fuck me!

INT. POLICE STATION - DAY

The Sergeant studies *Fingerling's* phone.

WALTER (V.O.)  
 "My Sergeant notices subtle changes in my behavior."

All the numbers have been SCRATCHED OFF the buttons.

INT. SERGEANT'S OFFICE - DAY

*Fingerling* is with his Sergeant.

WALTER (V.O.)  
 "He decides I need help."

INT. POLICE PSYCHIATRIST'S OFFICE - DAY

Fingerling browses while the intellectually dashing DR. MILES PHOENIX takes notes.

FINGERLING  
 "Suicide Gal'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.

FINGERLING  
 I don't know.

INT. SERGEANT'S OFFICE - DAY

The Sergeant stares at a GUN and BADGE on his desk. He turns to the window, sees Fingerling clearing his desk.

WALTER (V.O.)  
 "The wise Dr. Phoenix recommends I take a break. Like time is gonna heal me. All time is is a counting system. Numbers with meaning attached to them. Still, a break is what the good doctor prescribed. He called it--"

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Walter pauses.

WALTER  
 --emotional leave?

INT. FINGERLING'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

WALTER (V.O.)  
 "Fabrizia was not impressed."

Fingerling hangs up his uniform. Fabrizia is in bed.

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 and gets into bed.

FABRIZIA

Let's just get some sleep tonight.

She kisses him on the cheek, rolls over and kills the light.

WALTER (V.O.)

"She didn't understand."

In the dark, the digital alarm clock clicks to 00:23.

INT. FINGERLING AND FABRIZIA'S APARTMENT - MORNING

Fingerling sits in his robe staring blankly at a wall, a notepad in his lap. Words and numbers fill the page.

WALTER (V.O.)

"Which was fine, because neither did I."

Fabrizia enters, ready for work. She rips off the top page and tears it up. The page below shows more of the same. She tears that up, too. The whole pad is full.

She tears up the whole pad and leaves for work.

INT/EXT. SUICIDE GAL'S APARTMENT - DAY

Suicide Gal stares at the French doors -- still open.

WALTER (V.O.)

"All I knew was, the number had gone after Suicide Gal."

She races towards them... out onto the BALCONY... and off... flying like a bird without wings... SIDEWALK looming...

INT. FINGERLING'S BATHROOM - DAY

WALTER (V.O.)

"And now it was coming after me."

Fingerling, dry and in a towel, stares at the SHOWERHEAD in fear. He backs out, into the BEDROOM, stumbling to the floor in front of FABRIZIA'S OPEN CLOSET.

He counts her SHOES. 22 pairs. And one empty space.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Fingerling stands in the middle of the street.

Wherever he looks he sees the number: on license plates, in shop windows, hidden in door numbers, graffitied on walls, a man at a phone booth punches 2-3-2-3-2... it's EVERYWHERE.

INT. FINGERLING AND FABRIZIA'S APARTMENT - EVENING

Fabrizia is CHOPPING onions for what would be spaghetti bolognese.

Fingerling is in an armchair, secretly tearing page 23 from books. The CHOPPING NOISE stops.

FABRIZIA (O.S.)

What the hell?

He quickly shuts the book, thinking he's been rumbled.

FABRIZIA

What are these doing in the trash?

She holds up a PAIR OF HER SHOES, now covered in vegetable scraps.

She picks up a saucepan, walks over to Fingerling, and empties the contents (tomato sauce) over his head.

INT. DR. MILES PHOENIX'S OFFICE - DAY

Dr. Phoenix looks at a PHOTO of Fabrizia.

DR. MILES PHOENIX

I can 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. She walks to the rear of the shop. He follows.

INT. COFFEE SHOP RESTROOM - DAY

Fingerling climbs onto a TOILET SEAT and peers into the NEXT CUBICLE, where Fabrizia and Dr. Phoenix are kissing.

WALTER (V.O.)

"Yes, at the time I believe he said it in total innocence. But looking back...

INT. DR. MILES PHOENIX'S OFFICE - DAY

Dr. Phoenix looks at a photo of Fabrizia, says (MOS) "I can 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 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's mouth falls open.

FLASHCUT: ISAAC IN HIS YELLOW TIE.

Walter freezes. Looks back at the book, checking a previous passage.

WALTER

"I can speak..."

FLASHCUT: ISAAC SAYS, "...I CAN SPEAK TO AGATHA IF YOU LIKE."

Walter paces.

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



Walter stares at the PHOTOS on the mantelpiece. The one on the end is of Agatha and Isaac. He grabs the phone. Dials. It RINGS.

WALTER

Come on, come on.

The phone just RINGS and RINGS.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Walter walks along, muttering quietly, trying to convince himself of something not being true.

He passes LIP-LOCKED LOVERS in a doorway. Stares at them, bizarrely transfixed. A sign in a LAWYER'S WINDOW reads "DIVORCES FROM \$230." Next, he sees a FUNERAL HOME.

Walter starts to run, pushing his way through the crowds.

EXT. CAKE SHOP - DAY

Walter runs up. The shop is dark. A sign says, "CLOSED FOR LUNCH."

WALTER

She doesn't close for lunch. Besides it's...

He looks at a CLOCK DIAL on the building opposite. It clicks to 3:23. He backs away. Freezes. His eyes are transfixed by an APPROACHING BUS.

It's a No. 23.

He backs away, into A HARDWARE STORE...

INT. HARDWARE STORE - DAY

...and waits just inside the door until the bus passes.

HARDWARE STORE OWNER (O.S.)

How can I help you?

Her voice makes Walter jump. He turns, sees a WOMAN behind the counter. He approaches. She's writing a PRICE LABEL. Walter stares at it: "ONE WEEK ONLY: \$23."

HARDWARE STORE OWNER

Hello? Anyone home?

WALTER

Is there a... a coffee shop nearby?

HARDWARE STORE OWNER  
Why yes, there's one on the corner.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Walter exits. As he passes the WINDOW he freezes.

The woman hangs the label on a BUTCHER'S KNIFE.

Walter runs to the STREET CORNER. The COFFEE SHOP is across the road. He freezes, crestfallen.

THROUGH THE WINDOW, we see Agatha speaking to Isaac.

Agatha heads into the rear of the shop...

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. 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. THE SPARROW HOME - DAY

Walter comes home. Enters the LIVING ROOM. Stares at the walls. He goes into the KITCHEN, splashes his face with water.

His eyes are drawn to the KNIFE BLOCK.

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

Walter opens Agatha's closet. Stares at her shoes. Counts them. There are...

WALTER

Twenty two.

...plus the one empty space he points to as he says:

WALTER

Twenty three.

INT. AGATHA'S LIBRARY - DAY

Walter takes a sheet of paper and attempts to write "DEAR AGATHA." His hand TREMBLES so much the words are ILLEGIBLE.

He rolls a sheet of paper into the old typewriter. Freezes.

The numbers 2 and 3 are worn off their keys.

INT. STAIRCASE - LATE AFTERNOON

Walter hurries down with a SMALL SUITCASE.

INT. KITCHEN - LATE AFTERNOON

He puts a BADLY WRITTEN ENVELOPE for "AGATHA" on the table.

EXT. THE SPARROW HOME - LATE AFTERNOON

Walter comes out.

AGATHA (O.S.)

Walter?

She turns up the path. Sees the suitcase.

AGATHA

Where are you going? Walter?

Walter walks up to her and kisses her passionately.

WALTER

I love you. You know that.

He throws his case in the truck and leaves.

INT. KITCHEN - LATE AFTERNOON

Agatha is reading Walter's note. There are tears in her eyes.

WALTER (V.O.)

...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. Your  
loving, dogcatching husband, Walter.

INT. TRUCK - EVENING

Walter scours the streets for a place to stay. Every hotel  
he passes has a "NO VACANCY" sign up.

He pulls over, frustrated. Suddenly, he drives off again.

EXT. "THE \_HELL" HOTEL - EVENING

Walter's truck is outside.

INT. HOTEL RECEPTION - EVENING

The CLERK looks at a key rack on the wall.

HOTEL CLERK

Room 27 is the quietest. It's all  
the way at the back, no one will  
disturb you there.

Walter sees a key hanging from 23.

WALTER

What about 23?

HOTEL CLERK

23 wouldn't behoove your desires.  
It's next to the bathroom and we're  
experiencing problems with the water  
system.

INT. HOTEL CORRIDOR - EVENING

Walter unlocks Room 23.

INT. ROOM 23 - EVENING

The walls are SODDEN. Walter opens his case. It contains a  
TOILETRY BAG and a few CLOTHES, but otherwise is full of  
PHOTOS of Agatha and Robin.

INT. KITCHEN - EVENING

Both Agatha and Robin push the food around their plates.

INT. ROOM 23 - NIGHT

The photos are all on display. Walter sits in the chair by the bureau. He opens "The Number 23." Reads its disclaimer.

WALTER

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

He turns to the front cover. Determined:

WALTER

I have news for you, Mr. Kretts, you sonofabitch.

He finds where he left off.

WALTER (V.O.)

The rest of the book was as I feared.

INT. FINGERLING AND FABRIZIA'S KITCHEN - DAY

Fabrizia, all dressed-up, examines discarded cartons and boxes (of milk, juice, various foodstuffs, etc.) in the trash. TINY HOLES have been cut into them, removing all the numbers.

She opens the fridge. All the food and liquids are in LITTLE BAGGIES. She picks up what is probably milk. The bag BURSTS open all over her.

INT. FINGERLING AND FABRIZIA'S APARTMENT - DAY

Fabrizia yells at Fingerling. He takes it -- meek and gutless.

INT. FINGERLING AND FABRIZIA'S APARTMENT - EVENING

Fingerling scribbles on the once-clean walls.

He looks up as Fabrizia exits the bedroom in a long leather coat.

EXT. WOOD - EVENING

Fingerling peeks out from behind a tree.

HIS POV: the tree stands on THE FRINGE OF A PARK and twenty-odd yards away, Fabrizia, her coat spread open, is staked to the ground under the moonlight as Dr. Phoenix ravishes her.

INT. FINGERLING AND FABRIZIA'S APARTMENT - MORNING

Fingerling opens Fabrizia's closets and drawers -- all empty. He runs into the LIVING ROOM, scans the place. It looks different -- it's lost that woman's touch.

He sees Fabrizia's ENGAGEMENT RING on the KITCHEN COUNTER beside a newspaper dated NOVEMBER 23RD. He tears a NOTE off the fridge: "DEAR FINGERLING, GOODBYE..."

EXT. FINGERLING'S BALCONY - NIGHT

Fingerling plays the sax. Tears stream down his cheeks.

INT. FINGERLING AND FABRIZIA'S APARTMENT - SUNRISE

Fingerling stares at Fabrizia's letter. He starts mumbling to himself and crosses out letters. First go all the Ws...

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 an aisle's 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, for her torso is BLOODY. He tugs off his mask -- Dr. Phoenix.

Behind him, Fingerling creeps out of the closet with a KNIFE.

INT. FINGERLING'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Fingerling awakes from a NIGHTMARE. He stares at the empty bed beside him. Turns to his reflection in the mirror. Hurls the sax at himself.

EXT. ROOFTOP - DAY

Fingerling teeters on the edge... but isn't brave enough.

INT. SERGEANT'S OFFICE - DAY

The Sergeant is on the phone. Fingerling enters. He mouths the words, "HELP ME."

INT. COURTROOM - DAY

The Sergeant dips his head as a JURY FOREMAN announces the "GUILTY" verdict.

Fingerling mouths the words "THANK YOU" to the JURORS then turns to the JUDGE. As the Judge sentences him, Fingerling's jaw drops in horror.

EXT. ASYLUM FOR THE CRIMINALLY INSANE - DAY

A BUS passes through the main gates, Fingerling's frantic face squashed up against the window.

INT. PADDED CELL - DAY

Fingerling paces about, his fingers curling and uncurling in frenzied fashion, as if counting. He SCREAMS, runs into a wall, headbutting it. He bounces back unhurt.

INT. CONSULTATION ROOM - DAY

Fingerling drops to his knees and, hands clasped together, pleads with his DOCTOR.

The Doctor takes pity, slides a JOURNAL and PENCIL across the table. Fingerling grabs it, thankful.

INT. PADDED CELL - DAY

The Doctor runs in. Fingerling, calm and at peace with the world, lies on the floor, DEAD. A POOL OF BLOOD SEEPS FROM HIS HEAD, THE PENCIL EMBEDDED DEEP INTO HIS SKULL.

WALTER (V.O.)

It wasn't the happiest of endings.

The journal, now titled "THE NUMBER 23," lies beside him.

INT. ROOM 23 - NIGHT

Walter turns to the last page.

WALTER (V.O.)

Not by a long shot.

The final word is "END" and written below each letter is its value: E=5, N=14, D=4.  $5+14+4=23$ .

WALTER (V.O.)

Unlike Fingerling, the number survived to live another day.

Walter closes the book. Moves to the window. Stares at the graveyard across the street. His reflection is ODDLY BLURRED.

WALTER (V.O.)  
Or rather, to kill another day...

EXT. GRAVEYARD - SAME

Ned stares up at Walter. He draws the curtains.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. TRUCK - MORNING

Walter gazes at his home down the street.

SUPER UP: **FEBRUARY 7**

Robin exits in his school uniform. He heads in the opposite direction. A CAR passes him, pulls up outside the house.

Isaac gets out. Knocks on the door. Agatha answers. She's still in her nightgown. She invites him in.

Off Walter's look of despair we DISSOLVE TO:

INT. THE SPARROW HOME - MORNING

Walter creeps in. The LIVING ROOM is empty. He stares up the staircase. Goes into the KITCHEN. Grabs a BUTCHER'S KNIFE, studies his REFLECTION in the blade. Shit, for a second he looked just like...

But now he's turned and is heading UPSTAIRS. He strides to the BEDROOM when a NOISE comes from the BATHROOM -- the sound of WATER MOVEMENT followed by a LOUD GASP FOR AIR. He pauses.

AGATHA (O.S.)

Again.

Walter THROWS open the bathroom door, revealing...

Isaac and Agatha in the bath together, Isaac holding Agatha under the water.

Walter raises the knife and we CUT BACK TO:

INT. WALTER'S TRUCK - MORNING

Walter, imitating his 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. STREET - DAY

Walter trudges along, aimless. He stops. Stares at his reflection in a TAROT PARLOR window. He's FINGERLING. He rubs his eyes. Looks again. He's WALTER.

The TAROT READER opens the door.

TAROT READER

Tell you your future for twenty dollars?

WALTER

What if I already know it?

EXT. POLICE STATION - DAY

Located in a quaint, COBBLESTONED street.

INT. POLICE STATION - THE SERGEANT'S OFFICE - DAY

Walter sits quietly while SERGEANT CROMWELL J. BURNS studies the book.

SERGEANT BURNS

Mr. Sparrow, I can't arrest you for a crime you haven't committed, especially one you fear you'll commit because of a book.

WALTER

It's not just a book.

SERGEANT BURNS

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

WALTER

You're the Sergeant.

SERGEANT BURNS

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. I suffer from the same condition.

He points to a PHOTO OF HIS WIFE on his desk.

SERGEANT BURNS

Go back to her.

EXT. POLICE STATION - DAY

Walter stands on the steps, looking up and down the street.  
He sees a PHONE BOOTH.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Agatha sits quietly. She's been crying. Isaac is still here.

ISAAC

I was trying to help. All I did was  
drive him away.

AGATHA

He is coming back.

ISAAC

I know. I know.  
(looks her in the eye)  
Only a fool wouldn't.

He moves behind her and gently rubs her back.

AGATHA

You shouldn't be here.

ISAAC

I'm your friend.

AGATHA

I know, but, if he knew...

The phone RINGS. Agatha answers it.

AGATHA

Hello? Walter?

EXT. STREET - DAY

Walter listens into the phone.

AGATHA'S VOICE

Walter, is this you? Walter, talk to  
me!

Walter opens his mouth to speak when he hears:

ISAAC'S VOICE

(muted)

Let me try.

Walter sinks his head. When he looks up, everywhere he turns,  
2s and 3s SEEM TO SPARKLE, like stars at night.

He drops the phone. Flees.

INT. "THE \_HELL" HOTEL - DAY

Walter, hot and sweaty, bursts through the doors, heads to the elevator.

INT. MENS' BATHROOM - DAY

YMCA-style, a long line of basins opposite showers.

Walter splashes water on his face. Stares into the mirror. His focus shifts to the showers behind. He approaches one.

*FLASHCUT: FINGERLING STARES AT THE SHOWERHEAD IN FEAR.*

Walter counts the holes in a showerhead.

WALTER  
(nearing the end)  
...66, 67, 68...

The shower SPITS OUT WATER at him with a HISS. Walter YELPS, staggers back, stumbles to the floor.

INT. ROOM 23 - DAY

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 paper visible underneath.

"23" is ETCHED INTO IT.

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

He stares at the room. Suddenly, a long, sodden strip of wallpaper on the bathroom-facing wall peels away revealing A MASS OF SCRIBBLES AND NUMBERS.

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

Another strip of paper PEELS AWAY. And another. And another.

Walter grabs the door handle, CRAZED SCRIBBLES AND THE NUMBER 23 appearing all around him.

The door STICKS. He tugs it again and again, until finally it flies off its hinges.

INT. CORRIDOR - DAY

Walter races to the ELEVATOR. Hits the button. Floor lights 2 and 3 flash continuously. He panics, has trouble breathing, sees the STAIRWELL.

EXT. ROOF OF HOTEL - DAY

Walter crashes out. Inhales deeply.

He moves to the edge, stares at the world around him, finding some connection to 23 everywhere.

WALTER

Why? Why me? What have I done to  
deserve this?

Suddenly he pauses. He is dangerously close to the edge... yet that's not why he has paused. He frowns.

A DOG

sits on the CHURCH STEPS far below. It's staring at him.

EXT. "THE \_HELL" HOTEL - DAY

Walter exits. The dog hasn't moved. It has black, bottomless eyes and a silver collar.

WALTER

Ned?

Ned GROWLS.

WALTER

You sonofabitch. This is all your  
fault. If you hadn't made me late...

He takes his TRANQUILIZER GUN from his truck. Loads it. Walks towards Ned. Aims. Just before he can fire, Ned bolts into the graveyard.

WALTER

Oh no you don't. This time you don't  
get away.

Walter holds up his hand and steps into the road, forcing a car to SQUEAL to a stop.

EXT. GRAVEYARD - DAY

Walter follows Ned down row after row of graves -- the same direction as before. Our POV shifts to behind walter, as if someone follows him.

Ned disappears around the other side of THE GRAVE.

Walter inches up. Peers over the top. Ned is sitting on the GRAVE. He HOWLS.

WALTER

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

He FIRES! The dart sticks into Ned's chest, takes immediate effect, and he falls asleep.

Walter looks at LAURA TOLLINS' grave. She lived from "FEBRUARY 9, 19-- to FEBRUARY 10, 19--" (23 years later).

WALTER

Oh that's just fucking poetic. Dead  
at 23.  
(kicks Ned)  
You Nasty Evil... Dog.

A beat.

FLASHCUT: THE LAST PAGE OF THE BOOK -- "END."

WALTER

N-E-D? Twenty three.

He stares at Ned -- bewildered.

FATHER SEBASTIAN (O.S.)

Ned?

An old priest, FATHER SEBASTIAN, stands at the end of the aisle. He brushes past Walter and kneels beside Ned.

FATHER SEBASTIAN

I trust there's an explanation for  
this?

WALTER

Is this your dog?

FATHER SEBASTIAN

He belongs to Barnaby, my gardener.

WALTER

Where is he? I want to speak to him.

FATHER SEBASTIAN

I see. How's your sign language?

CUT TO:

WALTER - CARRYING NED

fireman-style, as he follows Father Sebastian across the graveyard.

FATHER SEBASTIAN

No one knows quite how he lost it.  
Some say he cut it out himself.

They walk towards a MAN trimming the grass around a gravestone with a pair of SCISSORS. This is BARNABY.

FATHER SEBASTIAN

Barnaby? You have a visitor.

Barnaby rises. Not only does he have NO TONGUE, but also A LAZY EYE. He is the SILHOUETTE and decidedly more sinister-looking up close.

WALTER

Is he... harmless?

FATHER SEBASTIAN

Yes. He also understands everything  
you say.

Barnaby takes Ned from Walter's shoulders and strokes him.

WALTER

Don't go getting all teary-eyed over  
him. He bit me the other day.

Barnaby pauses on hearing 'BIT.'

FATHER SEBASTIAN

Bit you? But Ned's a sweetheart,  
never bitten a soul before.

WALTER

Then what's this?

He rolls up his sleeve revealing the BITE MARK.

WALTER

And what's that?

He points at Barnaby (who is staring at him) and A BITE MARK on his arm -- albeit, long-since healed.

FATHER SEBASTIAN

Mr. Sparrow, if your intention is to  
sue the church, I warn you, God makes  
a formidable foe.

WALTER

I want answers. Ask him if the number  
23 means anything to him.

FATHER SEBASTIAN

As I said, he understands what you say.

WALTER  
 (to Barnaby)  
 What does the number 23 mean to you?

Barnaby continues to stare, then suddenly, moves his hands.

WALTER  
 What did that mean?

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

WALTER  
 Yeah, I stuck my arm out. Now answer  
 my question. What does the number 23  
 mean to you?

Barnaby moves his hands again.

FATHER SEBASTIAN  
 He says, without it, the world would  
 be in big trouble.

WALTER  
 What does he-- what do you mean by  
 that?

Father Sebastian continues to translate (throughout scene).

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

WALTER  
 Funny guy, huh? Listen pal, I could  
 have this mysterious little pet of  
 yours destroyed, just like that.

He clicks his fingers. A smile creeps over Barnaby's face at  
 the very idea.

WALTER  
 Why'd you name him Ned?

FATHER SEBASTIAN  
 He didn't. Ned was a stray when he  
 took him in.

WALTER  
 He wears a collar.

FATHER SEBASTIAN  
 Yes, he does.

WALTER  
Where did you find him?

FATHER SEBASTIAN  
Right here. He likes graveyards.  
(not signed)  
That's certainly true. Ned accompanies me whenever I perform a funeral. He's quite well-known amongst my fellow clergymen, often goes walkabout to their graveyards. 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.'

Off Walter's look we CUT TO:

LAURA TOLLINS' GRAVE

and Walter, gazing at it.

WALTER  
February 10? That's in three days' time.

INT. CITY LIBRARY - INFORMATION COUNTER - AFTERNOON

Walter approaches a LIBRARIAN.

WALTER  
Do you keep old newspapers?

INT. PUBLIC RECORDS ROOM - LATE AFTERNOON

HUGE DUSTY TOMES surround Walter. He searches through OLD NEWSPAPERS.

Suddenly, his jaw drops.

INT. LIVING ROOM - EVENING

Agatha and Robin sit in silence. Agatha gazes at the mantelpiece -- clear of photos. Isaac enters with two coffees.

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

ROBIN  
Dad!

INT. THE SPARROW HOME - EVENING

Agatha follows Robin from the LIVING ROOM. He flings open the FRONT DOOR and Walter enters, clutching a bundle of PHOTOCOPIES. Robin hugs him. Walter locks eyes with Agatha.



WALTER

I'm not insane. It's not just a number. It screws with your head and gets you to kill the one you love. It's true. It's all--

Isaac appears in the LIVING ROOM doorway.

WALTER

--true.

Agatha turns to Isaac.

AGATHA

Perhaps you should be going.

WALTER

No. I want him to stay.

INT. KITCHEN - EVENING

The Sparrows plus Isaac sit at the table. Walter 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 PROFESSOR DID IT" and a PICTURE of a man, "KYLE FLINCH."

WALTER

Kyle Flinch. The police found the murder weapon -- a butcher's knife -- in a nearby dumpster. It had his prints all over it.

Another PHOTOCOPY reads: "PROFESSOR'S PRINTS 'ALL OVER' BLOOD-STAINED KNIFE." Agatha studies it.

AGATHA

Walter, this happened years ago.

WALTER

Ag, the police discovered he wasn't just her English professor. They were lovers. He told them Laura liked to have her wrists tied to the bedposts.

*FLASHCUT: LAURA, IN BED WITH WRISTS TIED TO THE BEDPOSTS, SAYS, "I'M IN HERE..."*

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 KYLE FLINCH  
RAVISH LAURA UNDER THE STARS.*

WALTER

Said it was her idea to buy the knife,  
she wanted to role-play an attack.  
He pled innocent but the jury saw  
through that little ruse and the  
Judge locked him up forever. Remember  
what Fingerling does in confinement?

*FLASHCUT: FINGERLING SCRIBBLES INTO THE JOURNAL IN HIS CELL.*

WALTER

Kyle Flinch is Topsy Kretts. The  
book is a kind of warped confession.

ISAAC

A dog told you this?

WALTER

Ned's not just a dog. He's 'The  
Guardian of the Dead.'

Silence, until:

ROBIN

Why'd he write it about you? Why  
would you want to hurt mom?

Walter looks at Agatha... and Isaac.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Agatha stands by the window, the book in her hands. Walter is  
at her side.

AGATHA

Do you remember the name of the  
bookstore?

*FLASHCUT: WALTER APPROACHES THE BOOKSTORE, "A NOVEL FATE."*

AGATHA

There's something I haven't told  
you. I didn't want to... make things  
worse.

(a beat)

I didn't choose the book.

FLASHCUT: THE BOOK FALLS OFF ITS SHELF AND LANDS IN FRONT OF AGATHA.

WALTER

It chose you.

Agatha gazes at the stars.

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...

She turns around to find Walter staring at her shoes in the closet -- all 23 pairs.

AGATHA

You are not going to kill me, Walter.  
You could never harm me. Never. That,  
I know.

Walter looks her straight in the eye.

WALTER

How do you know?

A beat.

He takes a BLANKET and PILLOW from a closet and exits.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Walter lies on the couch, watching the clock go round.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Agatha lies in bed, alone. Her cheeks are moist.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Walter sleeps. The clock clicks to 02:29. Walter's eyes open.  
He rises.

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 02:30. He brings the knife down. Again. And again.

AGATHA (O.S.)

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.

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

The light comes on. Walter 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.

INT. TRUCK - MORNING

SUPER UP: **FEBRUARY 8**

Walter sits with Agatha and Robin.

ROBIN

Please?

AGATHA

No. We shouldn't even have brought you.

ROBIN

Then can I read the book while you're gone?

AGATHA

No.

WALTER

Your dad needs the book, son.

EXT. CAR PARK - MORNING

Robin watches from the truck as Walter and Agatha walk towards a DRAB, INTIMIDATING BUILDING.

Agatha stares at the approaching high walls, covered in BARBED WIRE. She slows, hands shaking, forehead perspiring -- it's like the walls are closing in on her.

AGATHA

I can't do this. I'm sorry. I just can't.

INT. PRISON - VISITING CUBICLE - DAY

KYLE FLINCH sits on the wrong side of the perspex screen toying with a CROSSWORD. He looks up as Walter approaches.

They study each other, then, just as Walter is about to speak:

KYLE FLINCH

You're two days early.

A stunned beat.

WALTER

You... you knew I would come?

KYLE FLINCH

You always come.

(off Walter's look)

Not today, certainly not tomorrow -- tomorrow's a 'happy' day -- but on the 10th... yes, I always have visitors on the 10th.

WALTER

The day you killed the woman you loved.

KYLE FLINCH

The day she was taken from me.

WALTER

You like playing with words?

KYLE FLINCH

Words don't judge you. They depend on you. Much the same as... a dog and its master.

A beat.

WALTER

Numbers aren't as much fun to play with, are they?

KYLE FLINCH

A mathematician might disagree.

(a beat)

I don't recall you having come before. Usually my visitors are full of bitterness, though they try to hide it to appease me.

WALTER

Perhaps I'm different? Because I'm two days early?

KYLE FLINCH

You're the bird and I'm the worm? Sorry, but, I still can't help you. Just as I couldn't help them.

WALTER

How many 'visitors' have you had?

KYLE FLINCH

I've stopped counting. Like you said, numbers aren't much fun.

WALTER

I'm gonna beat it. The number. I want you to know that.

Walter puts the BOOK on the counter. Flinch studies it, then, puzzled, turns his eye on Walter.

KYLE FLINCH

You aren't family, your skin tone's not oily enough. Yet, you don't seem a friend, either. Which leaves me wondering... just who you are?

WALTER

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

KYLE FLINCH

I have plenty of time for games, Mr--

A beat, until Walter concedes.

WALTER

Sparrow.

KYLE FLINCH

--Mr. Sparrow, all the time in the world. But believe me, this isn't a particularly nice place to spend the night, so I suggest you ask me the question, I give you my answer, and then we can both be on our way.

He waits.

WALTER

Okay. Why did you write it?

KYLE FLINCH

(with a strange smile)

I'll give you ten out of ten for amusement value.

(a beat)

The correct question, usually said with a quavering lower lip and tears in the eyes, is, "Where's her body?" The answer is, has always been, "I do not know because I did not kill her." As for who wrote that, I have no idea. I must admit, I'm vaguely interested as to why you think it was I, but only vaguely. It was nice meeting you.

He rises.

WALTER

Sit down, Mr. Kretts. Or I'll prove to the world that you did kill Laura.

He puts the VARIOUS NEWSPAPER COPIES beside the book. Flinch stares at them, his eyes tearing up, reliving the horror.

WALTER

I know this is a warped confession. But I don't give a shit that you killed your loved one. All I care about is how you know so much about me? Why did you choose me? What is this 23 phenomenon? Because it's not coming true, I promise you. I don't care how weak and spineless you were, I'm stronger. I WILL BEAT THE NUMBER.

Flinch stares at him, incredulous. He sits back down.

KYLE FLINCH

Do you want to know the worst thing about my being in prison? My family -- my sister, my parents -- they came to visit.

FLASHCUT: KYLE'S PARENTS AND SISTER SIT ACROSS FROM HIM IN THE CUBICLE.

KYLE FLINCH

Over time the visits got less. My sister stopped coming.

FLASHCUT: KYLE'S PARENTS SIT ACROSS FROM HIM.

KYLE FLINCH

I noticed my mother wouldn't look me in the eye. Soon she stopped coming.

FLASHCUT: KYLE'S FATHER SITS ACROSS FROM HIM.

KYLE FLINCH

Eventually my father told me my sister committed suicide, unable to deal with having a murderer for a brother. There were tears in his eyes when he said it, but they were tinged with anger, not sadness.

FLASHCUT: KYLE'S FATHER RISES. WALKS AWAY FROM HIS SON.

KYLE FLINCH

That was the last time I saw him.

(a beat)

I didn't get death, Mr. Sparrow, and they're never letting me out, but somehow, I think your problems are greater than mine so I shall give you the only advice I can. I didn't kill Laura. I loved her. That's the truth, for I have no reason to lie to you. I didn't write that book. Now, unless I can help you with anything else...

Walter stares into his eyes.

WALTER

What's your middle name?

KYLE FLINCH

(with a smile)

Jacob.

Walter nods. Collects his stuff. Rises. And walks away.



KYLE FLINCH

Mr. Sparrow?

Walter pauses.

KYLE FLINCH

Suppose I were to write a book? I'd choose a better name than 'Top Secrets.'

A beat.

INT. TRUCK - DAY

A wide-eyed Robin sits in the back tracing a finger over the name "TOPSY KRETTS."

AGATHA

She was killed with his knife. Police found it in a dumpster with his prints and her blood all over it. He had blood on his hands when he called 911.

WALTER

He's innocent. I know he is.

AGATHA

How do you know?

Walter passes her a pad with "KYLE JACOB FLINCH" on it. Sums reveal his name equals 19.

WALTER

The killer framed him, Ag.

Silence.

ROBIN

If the book's about a girl's murder, and the man the police said did it, didn't do it, then...

WALTER

The killer's still out there.

INT. UNKNOWN STUDY - DAY

A MAN stands by a window, his back to us. He is on the phone. He hangs up. Turns around.

It is Isaac.

INT. THE SPARROW HOME - SAME

Agatha hangs up the PHONE by the FRONT DOOR. She enters the LIVING ROOM, where Walter and Robin sit in silence. The BOOK is on the coffee table. Agatha takes a seat.

Everyone stares at the walls.

AGATHA

Can we sit in the kitchen?

The Sparrows head into the KITCHEN (Robin takes the book with him). They sit in silence around the kitchen table, Robin reading the BLURBS on the back of the book.

Walter rises, pours himself some milk. He stares at the mug's FOTY motif. Empties the milk down the sink.

WALTER

I have to find him.

(off Agatha's look)

I have to. If this bastard framed Kyle Flinch for Laura Tollins' murder, who's to say he's not planning to...

He can't say it.

WALTER

She died February 10th. Less than 48 hours away.

Robin flicks through the book, sees the MAILBOX ADDRESS inside the back cover.

ROBIN

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 KRETTTS..."

CONFUSED CLERK  
When do you want it to get there?

WALTER  
Tomorrow morning.

CONFUSED CLERK  
It'll have to go Fedex.

WALTER  
Fine.

CONFUSED CLERK  
Is that all?

ROBIN  
No. We want a hundred of them.

CONFUSED CLERK  
You what?

Agatha hands him a credit card. A clock CHIMES...

EXT. CITY - TIME-LAPSE SEQUENCE

The sun sets, the moon appears, and the city shuts down for  
the night. The chiming continues into sunrise. One last chime  
(the seventh) and we CUT TO:

INT. THE SPARROW HOME - MORNING - VARIOUS SHOTS

The LIVING ROOM clock shows 7 a.m.

SUPER UP: **FEBRUARY 9**

Walter stares into the HALLWAY MIRROR, nervously trying to  
perfect his tie.

Agatha stares into the BATHROOM mirror. She exits, passes Walter, and heads DOWNSTAIRS to the KITCHEN where she collects her HANDBAG. Her eyes fall on the knife block. It's FULL.

Robin fusses with his tie in his BEDROOM mirror. He slips a PENKNIFE into a pocket and takes one last look at his room.

Walter and Robin enter the KITCHEN. Agatha takes Robin's hand and walks him to the front door.

Walter checks the back door is locked. On leaving the kitchen, he pauses. There's an EMPTY SLOT in the knife block.

EXT. MAIL FACILITY - MORNING

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

INT. TRUCK - MORNING

The Sparrows sit and wait. Agatha is a bundle of nerves.

AGATHA

He might not be the author. He could be his agent... his publisher... he might not even have met the man. It might not even be a man.

WALTER

We'll know soon enough.

He points to a FEDEX VAN.

The FEDEX GUY enters the mail facility, exiting a few seconds later with the Clerk. He opens the back of his van. The Clerk is not pleased. The Fedex Guy shrugs and begins unloading. The Clerk storms back inside, picks up the PHONE.

Walter beams proudly at Robin.

INT. MAIL FACILITY - MORNING

Amazing what a hundred, over-size boxes will do to a place. The Clerk fumes behind the counter.

INT. TRUCK - DAY

The Sparrows watch people enter and leave the facility, blind to the car that parks in front of them.

An OLD MAN gets out. He crosses over and goes inside.

INT. MAIL FACILITY - DAY

The Old Man rummages through one of the boxes.

WALTER (O.S.)  
You won't find anything in it.

He turns around. Walter, Agatha, and Robin are in the doorway.

CLERK  
(to Robin)  
Hey, I remember you.

The Old Man stares at Walter. He holds up the book.

WALTER  
We meet at last, 'Topsy Kretts.'

OLD MAN  
No. This cannot be.

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

Agatha's the first to react. She inches forward, kneels over him.

ROBIN  
Is he...

AGATHA  
Go outside. GO OUTSIDE!

But Robin, like his father, is frozen to the spot. Agatha begin CPR. After a few breaths, she looks up at the Clerk.

AGATHA  
Call an ambulance. Now!

INT. HOSPITAL E.R. - LATE AFTERNOON

Agatha and Robin sit in silence.

Walter stares into an OPERATING ROOM where DOCTORS work frantically to save the Old Man. Things look grim.

Walter RAPS on the door and SHOUTS:

WALTER  
Don't you die on me, old man. You  
hear me? Don't you die!  
(to the Doctors)  
He was alive when we brought him in.  
Alive! Don't you dare kill him.

A NURSE exits.

NURSE  
I'm sorry, sir, but, I'm going to  
have to ask you to calm down.

WALTER  
Ask away. My future, my wife's very  
life, depends on that man. YOU CAN'T  
LET HIM DIE!

The Nurse tries to lead him away.

WALTER  
Get off me!

He yanks himself free. A SECURITY GUARD approaches. Agatha,  
too.

AGATHA  
Walter? Honey? I think you should  
take Robin home.

Walter calms suddenly. He turns to Robin -- staring blankly  
into space.

AGATHA  
He shouldn't be here.

Walter glances back at the Old Man.

AGATHA  
I'll stay. I'll call you as soon as  
I hear anything.

EXT. HOSPITAL - LATE AFTERNOON

The Sparrows walk to the truck. Agatha kisses Robin, then  
Walter.

CUT TO:

UNSEEN PERSON'S POV - WATCHING WALTER

from inside THE MYSTERY CAR across the street. Or are we  
watching Agatha? She turns and heads back to the hospital.

INT. HOSPITAL E.R. - LATE AFTERNOON

Agatha approaches the Operating Room. It's empty. She turns  
to a passing NURSE.

AGATHA  
Where's the old man who was in here?

INT. HOSPITAL - LATE AFTERNOON

Agatha gazes at the Old Man, in bed and hooked up to a LIFE-SUPPORT MACHINE.

Suddenly his eyes open. He stares at Agatha. Raises his hand. Beckons her to him.

Agatha, cautious, approaches the bed. The Old Man urges her closer, wanting to tell her something. She leans over him, her ear above his mouth. He's about to whisper something...

...when his life-support machine FLAT-LINES.

INT. TRUCK - EVENING

Walter drives in silence. In the back seat, Robin stares into space, eyes glassy. We enter them...

FLASHCUT: ROBIN STARES AT THE OLD MAN, COLLAPSED ON THE FLOOR.

FLASHCUT: FINGERLING STARES AT OLD MRS. DOBKINS IN HER BED.

Robin awakes from his trance. Pulls a PAD from his pocket...

INT. HOSPITAL - EVENING

Agatha watches as the Old Man is taken from the room, a SHEET over his head. She turns to a DOCTOR beside her.

DOCTOR

I'm very sorry.

He walks away.

Agatha just stands there. She looks down at her hands. She holds the Old Man's PERSONAL BELONGINGS. On top is a WALLET.

INT. TRUCK - EVENING

Walter pulls into the Sparrow driveway. Kills the ignition. Turns to Robin.

WALTER

You okay?

Robin nods. Walter opens his door.

ROBIN

Dad? Who chose my name? You or Mom?

WALTER

I did. Why?

ROBIN

No reason.

Walter gets out.

Robin stares at the pad. On it is written: "ROBIN WILBERFORCE SPARROW" and some numbers...

EXT. STREET - EVENING

Agatha, clutching her bag, paces back and forth at the bottom of A STEEP FLIGHT OF STEPS. She stops. Stares at the steps.

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

Agatha opens her bag. Navigating the KNIFE, she pulls out the Old Man's WALLET. Flipping it open, we see it belongs to a "DR. SIRIUS LEARY."

She looks up the steps at a tall, grey building.

A SIGN reads: "NATHANIEL'S INSTITUTE."

INT. MYSTERY CAR - SAME

Watching Agatha. She heads up the steps.

INT. NATHANIEL'S INSTITUTE - EVENING

Agatha enters. She heads to the ELEVATORS. Presses up.

INT. ELEVATOR - EVENING

TWO PEOPLE follow Agatha in. One presses 2, the other 3. Agatha presses 18.

INT. 18TH FLOOR CORRIDOR - EVENING

Agatha checks the floorplan. Turns to her left. She stops by a door: "DR. SIRIUS LEARY, M.D. EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHIATRY."

She takes a CARD KEY from THE WALLET and swipes it.

INT. DR. SIRIUS LEARY'S OFFICE - EVENING

Wall to wall books. Agatha hovers in the entranceway, her eyes sweeping the room.

She turns to the FILING CABINETS. Searches them.



INT. THE SPARROW HOME - EVENING

Walter hangs up the HALLWAY phone and turns to Robin.

WALTER

He's dead.

ROBIN

Why hasn't mom called?

INT. DR. SIRIUS LEARY'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Agatha closes the last filing cabinet. She looks around, desperate. Sees a SIDE DOOR.

She turns the handle..The door swings open, revealing:

A LABORATORY

with a kind of DENTIST'S CHAIR in the center. Beside it is an INSTRUMENT TRAY with an ARRAY OF SCALPELS and an UNUSUAL, DRILL-LIKE TOOL.

Agatha steers clear of the chair. She's drawn towards a TALL, STEEL CUPBOARD. It's PADLOCKED. She picks up the DRILL and SHATTERS the lock. The door CREAKS open.

AGATHA'S FACE

pales.

Suddenly, a SHADOW falls over her from the DOORWAY.

She spins around... GASPS... her hand shooting to her mouth...

It's ISAAC.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Walter sits in his chair, comatose.

Robin sits across from him, gazing at the book. He picks up a pen. Opens to PAGE 1. Starts CIRCLING every twenty third word: "THE" "I" "IS" "OF"

He stops. Ridiculous idea. Puts the book down. A beat.

He picks it up again. Turns to PAGE 23. Does the same thing.

"IF" "YOU" "ARE" "READING" "THIS" "YOU" "ARE" "ONTO" "ME"

Robin's mouth falls open. The pen drops from his grasp. We hear HIS HEARTBEAT -- getting faster... and faster...

Walter looks at him. Robin opens his mouth, but nothing comes out. Walter takes the book, sees the circled words.

ROBIN  
(raspy)  
Every twenty-third word.

Walter reads the words. His face changes. He picks up the pen. Continues on from his son:

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

He continues, but gets gibberish. The next page is the same.

ROBIN  
Twenty three words. It's every twenty-  
third word, twenty three times, on  
page 23.

A beat. Walter 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"

He 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"  
(a beat)  
He's talking directly to me. He knows  
I'll find him.

ROBIN  
But who's Casanova Spark, dad?

Walter stares at the words, thinking. A beat.

WALTER  
It's not a person.

EXT. THE SPARROW HOME - NIGHT

Watching the house THROUGH THE MYSTERY CAR WINDOW. Walter and Robin exit with TWO SHOVELS. They climb into the truck.

Suddenly, the POV SHIFTS to that of...

NED - WATCHING WALTER

from the end of the street. As Walter drives off, Ned turns to the mystery car. It pulls away from the curb...

EXT. LONELY ROAD - NIGHT

The truck flashes past a sign for "CASANOVA'S PARK."

Seconds later, THE MYSTERY CAR flashes past, its headlamps dark.

EXT. CASANOVA'S PARK - CAR PARK - NIGHT

Walter and Robin study a MAP DISPLAY of the park's grounds.

EXT. WOOD - DEAD OF NIGHT

Walter and Robin trek through with FLASHLIGHTS. They approach a CLEARING.

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

IN THE CLEARING

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

How are we gonna guess which one?

Walter stares at TWO EYES glinting at him from the shadows, quickly recognizing the FAMILIAR SHAPE OF NED.

Walter stares at the stones. Takes Robin's hand. They head across.

WALTER

One. Two. Three...

AT THE 23RD STEPPING STONE

they stop. The stones continue on to a DUCK POND.

Walter jams his shovel under the stone and levers it aside. He starts 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.

WALTER

Rest up if you need to.

ROBIN

It's not that. I was just thinking.

(glances about)

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

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. Suddenly...

...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 bends to put the light down when he freezes. Stares into the pit. The flashlight illuminates

A RIBCAGE

poking through the soil.

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...

...HAS GONE.

DISSOLVE TO:

SEVERAL HOURS LATER - A COLLECTION OF VERY DEEP PITS

have been dug under various stones. Three pairs of very pissed eyes are on Walter.

INT. POLICE STATION - VERY EARLY MORNING

Walter paces. Robin sits, studying his surroundings, studying things... things like the numbers on OFFICERS' UNIFORMS...

WALTER

What's taking your Mom so long?

He tenses... his face drains of color...

DOWN THE CORRIDOR - ISAAC

talks, MOS, to Sergeant Burns.

Isaac sees Walter staring. Isaac doesn't smile. Suddenly...

...Agatha steps out from a doorway.

She sees Walter, speaks to the Sergeant, and approaches her family.

AGATHA

I've come to take you home.

EXT. POLICE STATION - VERY EARLY MORNING

Agatha converses with Isaac, MOS.

PULL BACK TO REVEAL - WALTER'S POV

watching out the truck window. Agatha pecks Isaac on the cheek. Isaac glances at Walter, then walks to HIS CAR (the mystery car).

INT. TRUCK - VERY EARLY MORNING

A LIGHT RAIN is just beginning.

Walter drives. Agatha is quiet. Robin is losing it.

ROBIN

Skeletons don't just get up and walk away, mom. You were right, that old man wasn't the killer. The killer's still out there and he knows dad's onto him. I found all these secret messages in the book. Every twenty-third word--

AGATHA  
 (to Walter)  
 How could you let him read it?

ROBIN  
 He didn't.

AGATHA  
 But you just said...

She flicks through the book, stopping at the CIRCLED WORDS.

AGATHA  
 How did you know to do this?

A beat. Walter looks at Robin.

AGATHA  
 Listen to me. Both of you. Twenty  
 three is a number. A god damn number.  
 There's no curse. There's no killer  
 running around out there.  
 (to Walter)  
 You are not going to kill me. You  
 love me. You always have. You always  
 will. The old man is dead. The book  
 is history. And it's over. Over.

Silence.

Walter turns a corner, HITS HIS BRAKES immediately.

Ned sits directly in his path.

ROBIN  
 The Guardian of the Dead.

Walter glances at Robin in the rearview mirror, then Agatha.  
 Suddenly he STEPS ON THE GAS. Ned doesn't flinch, doesn't  
 even bat an eye, not even when he SLAMS INTO, and OVER HIM.

Fifty yards on he stops. Checks his rearview mirror. Shadows  
 and raindrops render his view unrewarding. He turns to Agatha.

WALTER  
 Nasty. Evil. Dead. Dog.

INT. ROBIN'S BEDROOM - DAWN

Robin is in bed. Agatha draws the curtains. It's raining  
 harder.

SUPER UP: **FEBRUARY 10**

ROBIN

It was there, Mom.

She kisses him and leaves. As soon as the door closes, Robin gets up and starts covering his walls with WHITE PAPER.

INT. KITCHEN - MORNING

Walter sits at the table, munching on a SLICE OF APPLE.

The door opens. Agatha enters. Walter picks up a KNIFE. Cuts another slice of apple.

Agatha stares at the knife. Takes it from him. She sits opposite and cuts the apple for him, sliding each perfectly cut segment slowly across the table.

WALTER

Why was Isaac with you?

AGATHA

He was concerned about me. Isaac is my friend.

Walter's eyes are drawn to her hands... her fingernails... her MUD-CAKED FINGERNAILS.

She follows his gaze, quickly curls her fingers up. Takes the knife to the sink. Scrubs her hands. Her back is to him.

WALTER

You.

AGATHA

Don't do this. Please.

WALTER

You moved the skeleton. But how... unless...

He flips open a PAD. Writes "AGATHA FRANCESCA SPARROW." It equals  $38/70/110$ .  $38=11$ ,  $70=7$ ,  $110=2$ .  $11+7+2$  is... 20?

He stares at the numbers in frustration. Crumples the paper in his fist. Notices his wedding ring and...

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

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

It equals  $38/70/50$ .  $38=11$ ,  $70=7$ ,  $50=5$ .  $11+7+5$  is...

WALTER

Twenty three.

Desperate, he tries another method:  $38+70+50=158$ ;  $15+8$  is...

WALTER

Any way I do it, it's twenty-fucking-three.

FLASHCUT: THE OLD TYPEWRITER -- THE 2S AND 3S WORN AWAY.

WALTER

Oh God...

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

WALTER

Dear God...

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

WALTER

You had access to my trunk. 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 faces him, tears in her eyes.

AGATHA

Don't make me do this.

His eyes lower to her hands... and the knife she still holds.

INT. ROBIN'S BEDROOM - SAME

The walls are plastered in paper. Robin scribbles BIZARRE 23 FACTS on them.

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUED

Walter stares at the knife.

WALTER

You've been pulling the strings all along.



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

FLASHCUT: AGATHA THRUSTS THE BOOK INTO WALTER'S HANDS.

AGATHA

No. That's not true, sweetie. Just let it be.

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 pulls it towards her.

INT. HALLWAY - SAME

Robin stares at his walls. He exits his room and heads to the STAIRCASE.

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUED

Walter backs away from the table, scanning the room.

WALTER

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 notices AGATHA'S BAG on the counter. 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 THE KNIFE.

INT. HALLWAY - SAME

Robin reaches the bottom step and turns to the kitchen.

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUED

The table separates Agatha and Walter. Both hold knives.

AGATHA

I took it when we went to meet that man. The one you said you didn't know.

WALTER

The one who died when I left you with him.

Walter looks around. Everywhere he looks, he sees 23... even the RAINDROPS ON THE WINDOW seem to be in on it...

Agatha follows his gaze... realizes...

AGATHA

Put the knife down, Walter. You're scaring me. Don't you see? You're making the book come true.

The numbers start to GLOW... to MOVE... as if trying to BREAK FREE OF THEIR BONDS. All of a sudden...

...the door OPENS. Robin enters. THE NUMBERS VANISH. Robin freezes. He's between the two of them.

ROBIN

Mom? Dad?

AGATHA

Come to me, Robin. Keep 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's the author.

He shows Robin the pad. 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. Walter? Honey?

Walter looks about the room again. The numbers HAVE RETURNED.

AGATHA  
Put the knife down. You're scaring  
Robin. Robin!

Robin is inching towards Walter, his eyes following his dad's  
from place to place... and number to number...

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

AGATHA  
Yes. I took the skeleton.

Robin stops.

ROBIN  
You did?

AGATHA  
And I'd do it again if I had to. But -  
I'm not the author.

WALTER  
She's lying.

AGATHA  
(to Walter)  
Don't do this.

ROBIN  
Who wrote the book, mom? Do you know?

WALTER  
Tell him. Tell him the truth!

ROBIN  
Mom?

A tear falls from Agatha's eye. She looks from Robin to Walter  
and whispers:

AGATHA  
You did.

A long... mind-fucking... beat.

AGATHA  
You wrote it, Walter. You did.

Every line, every furrow on Walter's face comes into play.

Agatha opens the PANTRY and lifts out a BOX. She puts it on the table. Robin opens it, takes out an old manuscript:

"THE NUMBER 23, BY WALTER PAUL SPARROW."

WALTER

You typed this. You put my name on it.

Walter flinches as Agatha steps forward. She removes the cover page, revealing the following scrawled in handwriting: "TO SIRIUS, IN EXCHANGE FOR MY NIGHTMARES, WALTER, XXX."

She offers him a PEN. He doesn't take it.

WALTER

No. No. You're lying. She's lying.

Robin moves to his mom's side. She brings in ANOTHER BOX. Takes off the lid and pulls out a SAXOPHONE.

FLASHCUT: THE SAX SITS ON TOP OF A STACK OF BOXES INSIDE THE LABORATORY CUPBOARD.

She offers it to Walter. He stares at it. The horn end is badly dented. He puts down the knife, reaches out and takes it from her. Odd, his fingers seem to slip into place.

He puts it to his lips and...

...PLAYS. Brilliantly.

VERY SLOWLY, ALL THE TWENTY-THREES IN THE ROOM FADE AWAY.

Agatha takes Robin's hand. Tears stream down their cheeks.

Walter stops. Lowers the sax.

WALTER

I can play.

He picks up the book.

WALTER

It is me.

In his other hand, he takes a KNIFE. Looks at it. Studies his REFLECTION in the blade and... BECOMES FINGERLING.

WALTER

Oh God...

FLASHCUT: A CRAZED WALTER SLASHES AT LAURA WITH A KNIFE.

The knife FALLS from his hand.

WALTER

I killed her.

He overturns a box. PSYCHIATRIC FILES, NEWSPAPER CLIPPINGS, PHOTOS, MEMENTOS, etc, spill out. He stares at them, not comprehending.

Silence.

Walter moves to the phone. Dials 911. It RINGS. Once. Twice.

ROBIN

No.

Robin cuts him off, tears in his eyes.

ROBIN

I don't understand.

WALTER

Either do I, son.

He takes Robin's fingers off the hook. Robin wraps his arms around him. Walter kisses him on the head, whispers:

WALTER

I love you so much.

ROBIN

What's gonna happen to me without you?

He looks at his mom, eyes pleading. A beat. Agatha walks to Walter... takes the phone from him...

AGATHA

You said, your whole life started with me. Well, my life began with you, Walter. And it's not going to end here. I don't know what happened to you, but I do know this: you weren't a bad man who got better. You were a sick man who got well. Very well.

She hangs up the phone.

WALTER

There's an innocent man in prison, Ag.

AGATHA

And he's lost everything. Nothing we do will change that, but it will change what we have.

She picks up his FOTY mug.

AGATHA

You're a wonderful husband and the best father a son could ever have.

Robin hugs his dad, tight.

AGATHA

And I love you.

She embraces her family.

The doorbell RINGS.

The Sparrows part. Worried looks are exchanged.

INT. THE SPARROW HOME - MORNING

Agatha and Robin watch, hand in hand, as Walter opens the FRONT DOOR. It's Isaac.

ISAAC

I... I wanted to check...

Walter steps aside. Isaac sees Agatha and sighs with relief.

INT. KITCHEN - MORNING

Agatha, Robin and Isaac enter. Isaac sees the BOXES.

INT. THE SPARROW HOME - SAME

Walter stares at himself in the BATHROOM MIRROR.

He EXITS, trudges past ROBIN'S ROOM (the door is open). He pauses. Backtracks.

INT. ROBIN'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Walter steps in. Stares at the walls.

A PAD on the desk draws his attention. It's the pad Robin had in the truck and on it Walter sees "ROBIN WILBERFORCE SPARROW" and the numbers 58/116/110 or 13/8/2 or... 23.

Walter looks at the walls again. He starts to shake.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Agatha, Robin and Isaac sit at the table. Isaac goes to hold Agatha's hand. She shies away.

The front door SLAMS.

INT. HALLWAY - DAY

Agatha stands in the open front doorway. Robin runs down the stairs and hugs her.

ROBIN  
Where's he gone?

EXT. CITY STREETS - DAY

Walter shuffles along, aimless. He stops. He's at the University.

EXT. UNIVERSITY GROUNDS - DAY

Walter stares at a CAR PARK. He looks around. STUDENTS mill about. When he turns back to the car park...

...IT HAS BEEN REPLACED BY A LAWN. There's a CROWD on it. In the center:

22-YR-OLD WALTER

plays the sax. He finishes up and works the crowd with a HAT, people dropping coins in then drifting off. He ends at a YOUNG WOMAN.

YOUNG WOMAN  
I've heard it's all in the tongue.

She wiggles her tongue seductively, drops SOMETHING into the hat and walks off. Walter examines her 'donation' -- A PIECE OF PAPER with the name "LAURA TOLLINS" and PHONE NUMBER.

BACK TO SCENE - WALTER

walks away from the lawn... and it becomes a car park once more.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Agatha puts the phone down. Hugs Robin.

She looks at Isaac -- the contents of the boxes spread over the coffee table in front of him.

ISAAC  
Does he remember anything?

EXT. UNIVERSITY GROUNDS - DAY

Walter sits on a bench. The following come fast and furious:

FLASHCUT: WALTER AND LAURA, HAND IN HAND.

FLASHCUT: WALTER BUYS AN ENGAGEMENT RING.

FLASHCUT: WALTER IN A LECTURE THEATER. THE WORD "OBSESSION" ON THE BOARD. BELOW IT, EXAMPLES: SHADOWS, GERMS, TV STARS, DEATH AND... THE NUMBER 23.

FLASHCUT: LAURA AWAKES IN BED, IS PISSED TO FIND HER SKIN A MASS OF WILD SCRIBBLINGS.

FLASHCUT: WALTER, ALL ALONE, CRYING HYSTERICALLY.

BACK TO SCENE - TEARS

flow freely down Walter's cheeks. He rises. Walks off.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Walter trudges along, gazing at SHOP WINDOWS.

FLASHCUT: YOUNG WALTER SCURRIES ALONG, WIELDING A SPRAY CAN.

Walter stops in front of the HARDWARE STORE. The KNIFE has gone. Suddenly there's LAUGHTER.

LAURA AND KYLE exit the store.

EXT. LIGHT BLUE APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY

Walter stares at the WALLS. Suddenly, they BECOME PINK... the sky DARKENS... EVENING rolls in...

...bringing with it A BATTERED OLD CAR, coasting up, headlights off. YOUNG WALTER gets out. He looks around furtively then climbs through an OPEN WINDOW.

Walter closes his eyes and we...

CUT TO:

A BLACK SCREEN - SUDDENLY

LIGHT appears. Odd, it's SLATTED...

...as though we are LOOKING THROUGH A CLOSED CLOSET DOOR FROM THE INSIDE.

Laura appears. She begins undressing.



EXT. APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY

Walter's eyes burst open, fixate on the MAIN DOORS. The skies darken more. It's NIGHT.

'He' exits (aged 23). He has a PLASTIC BAG with him.

He scurries towards an EXPENSIVE LINCOLN SUV. Climbs onto its foot ledge as... the SUV morphs into a DUMPSTER.

There's a CLANG as Young Walter empties the bag inside. He runs back inside the building.

Walter looks at the BATTERED OLD CAR. Walks to it. Reaches out and pops the trunk. It's empty.

Suddenly, Young Walter appears by his side with LAURA'S BLOODSTAINED BODY in arms. He dumps her in the TRUNK...

INT. CHURCH - DAY

Walter sits in a pew, not praying, but watching a MAN at the front who is.

The Man rises. Walks up the aisle. It's KYLE FLINCH. He pauses, seems to look right at Walter. Walter mouths the words "I'M SORRY" then, puzzled, turns around.

POLICEMEN block the doors behind him.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Isaac studies a file.

AGATHA

What happened to him?

ISAAC

It seems he suffered from--

EXT. GRAVEYARD - DAY

Walter stares at Laura's grave.

ISAAC (V.O.)

--terrible nightmares.

He turns to leave and is confronted by DEAD, BLOOD-STAINED LAURA. She dances around him, repeating "TWENTY THREE" over and over and over...

Walter clamps his hands over his ears.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

ISAAC  
That's why he never finished college.

AGATHA  
But I thought... his parents' death...

Isaac cross-checks files.

ISAAC  
No, it looks like he'd already dropped  
out by the time they died. And he'd  
already met Dr. Leary.

EXT. NATHANIEL'S INSTITUTE - DAY

Walter stands across the street, staring at the tall, grey  
monolith. He crosses over.

INT. NATHANIEL'S INSTITUTE - DAY

Walter stands frozen in the ENTRANCE LOBBY. The RECEPTIONIST  
is a woman with grey hair.

FLASHCUT: THE SAME WOMAN, BEHIND THE SAME COUNTER, BUT WITH  
RED HAIR AND LESS LINES ON HER FACE.

Walter walks down a corridor to the elevators. Presses up.

INT. 18TH FLOOR CORRIDOR - DAY

Walter exits the elevator. Turns to his left.

FLASHCUT: THE CORRIDOR AS IT LOOKED YEARS AGO -- DIFFERENT  
WALLPAPER, DIFFERENT CARPET, ETC.

Walter stops by Dr. Leary's door. Stares at the nameplate.

The door opens. A CLEANING LADY comes out. She's been crying.  
She looks at Walter.

CLEANING LADY  
Terrible, isn't it?

She leaves the door open for him. Walter sways in the doorway.  
As his eyes sweep the room, little things change: the  
daffodils in the vase become irises, photos on the desk  
vanish, various books disappear, get newer, etc.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Isaac frowns, incredulous.

AGATHA

What is it?

ISAAC

He confessed.

INT. DR. SIRIUS LEARY'S OFFICE - DAY

Walter (present-day) sits in a chair.

WALTER

I killed her. I stabbed her 23 times.

Suddenly, a younger Dr. Leary materializes in his chair.

DR. SIRIUS LEARY

The feelings you're experiencing are only natural.

WALTER

No.

DR. SIRIUS LEARY

You blame yourself for her death. It's called misappropriated guilt.

WALTER

I'm telling you, I killed her!

DR. SIRIUS LEARY

You believe you drove her, through your obsession, into the arms of another man, a man who turned out to be a vicious killer. In your eyes, yes, you killed her, but the real killer is in prison.

Walter sinks his head. When he lifts it again, he is Young Walter.

WALTER

Tell me how to stop the nightmares.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Isaac continues.

ISAAC

He told Walter he needed a hobby, a distraction, something to give his days meaning. He refused to even touch a saxophone. The only thing he talked fondly of was books.

Agatha smiles a weak smile.

ISAAC

Reading 'Fingerling at the Zoo' was one of his earliest memories. At one session he announced--

INT. DR. SIRIUS LEARY'S OFFICE - DAY

Walter gazes out of the window.

WALTER

--I'm going to write a book.

In the distance is a PINK NEON SIGN. It says "\_HELL HOTEL."

INT. ROOM 23 - DAY

Young Walter sits at the bureau tapping away on A TYPEWRITER. He leans out, writes on the wall.

ISAAC (V.O.)

It took him 23 days. Dr. Leary thought it was--

INT. DR. SIRIUS LEARY'S OFFICE - DAY

Walter watches Dr. Leary turn over the last page.

DR. SIRIUS LEARY

Brilliant!

ISAAC (V.O.)

He believed Walter was purging his undeserved guilt on the page. He told him to--

DR. SIRIUS LEARY

Publish it!

ISAAC (V.O.)

--thinking it would kick-start a new life. But Walter had written it to try and end his nightmares...

Dead, blood-stained Laura WHISPERS "23" to Walter, her tongue probing the inside of his ear drum.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Agatha stares at the MANUSCRIPT.

ISAAC

He refused to have anything more to do with it and viewed all hobbies as pointless.

Agatha looks at Walter's BIRTHDAY PRESENTS in the corner.

AGATHA  
How did he forget?

ISAAC  
Dr. Leary said there was a way to  
stop his nightmares. But it was an  
experimental procedure--

INT. DR. SIRIUS LEARY'S OFFICE - DAY

Walter opens the door to Dr. Leary's LABORATORY. He sees his younger self sitting in the chair.

The drill-like tool rests on the instrument tray, BLOODY. A TUBE sticks out of the side of Walter's head. SEVERAL WIRES run into it.

Dr. Leary sits at a monitor studying a 3-D image of the brain.

DR. SIRIUS LEARY  
Think of Laura.

A part of the brain GLOWS. Dr. Leary flips a switch and a BOLT OF ELECTRICITY shoots down the wire and into young Walter's skull. Present-day Walter clutches his head.

ISAAC (V.O.)  
--and one hundred percent irreversible.

The image on the monitor STOPS FLASHING.

ISAAC (V.O.)  
Or so he thought.

Walter takes his hand from the side of his head. It's BLOODY. He starts to BREATHE FAST... the room SWIRLS...

INT. 18TH FLOOR CORRIDOR - DAY

Walter stumbles out of Dr. Leary's.

EXT. NATHANIEL'S INSTITUTE - DAY

Walter flees down the steps...

AGATHA (V.O.)  
Dr. Leary published it, didn't he?  
He changed the name as a precaution.

ISAAC (V.O.)  
Yes. The rest--

AGATHA (V.O.)

--I know.

...spinning back to them at the bottom. A YOUNG MAN is following him down. Suddenly...

...HE CHANGES INTO YOUNG WALTER. AT THE BOTTOM HE COLLIDES WITH A WOMAN AND TUMBLES TO THE GROUND. HE SITS UP, COVERED IN CAKE.

Walter screams, a WILD, BLOODCURDLING SCREAM:

WALTER

Nooooooooooooo--

He stops, cut off in his prime. A DOG stares at him from across the road. It has black, bottomless eyes and a silver collar.

WALTER

What do you want from me!

Ned walks to the end of the street. Walter follows.

Ned barks at a wall. Walter freezes.

WALTER

No! No!

GRAFFITI reads: "LIKE FATHER LIKE SON."

INT. POLICE STATION - DAY

Walter bursts in.

WALTER

I have to speak to Sergeant Burns!

INT. THE SERGEANT'S OFFICE - DAY

Sergeant Burns stares at Walter. Odd, he now has DARK RINGS under his eyes. He stares at Walter, impassive.

WALTER

I know it's hard to believe, but please, you have to.

SERGEANT BURNS

Twenty three is just a number.

WALTER

No--

SERGEANT BURNS

--yes! Your wife telephoned. She said you might pay us a visit.

WALTER

Agatha called you? But, wait, no, she... she doesn't understand--

SERGEANT BURNS

Then we'll ask her when she arrives.

WALTER

She's coming? No. You don't know what you've done.

He leaves.

SERGEANT BURNS

Mr. Sparrow! It's just a number!

Sergeant Burns sighs. He gazes at HIS WIFE'S PHOTO, then slides a PIECE OF PAPER out from a stack. On it are VARIOUS SCRIBBLES -- WORDS AND NUMBERS. In the middle is the name...

"CROMWELL JOSEPH BURNS"

...and its value... 101/73/74... 2/10/11... TWENTY THREE.

Sergeant Burns stares at the photo.

SERGEANT

Just a God damn lousy number.

EXT. POLICE STATION - DAY

Walter exits. Ned waits for him.

WALTER (V.O.)

There's no such thing as destiny.  
There are only different choices.

There's a HONK. Agatha, Robin and Isaac pull up in his truck down the street.

Walter looks at Ned. A BIRD suddenly CRASHES into a window and drops to the ground. Walter flips it over with his foot. It has a red breast.

Robin clambers out of the truck. Starts running towards him.

Walter looks up and down the street. 2S AND 3S EVERYWHERE START TO SPARKLE. And then a BUS TURNS THE CORNER...

...a No. 23.

WALTER (V.O.)

Was the number just a number, or was it evil? Was Ned just a dog, or was he truly 'The Guardian of the Dead'?

Walter looks at Robin... at Agatha... at Ned... beside whom now stands *THE VISION OF SUICIDE GAL*.

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

WALTER (V.O.)  
Finally, I understood. I had written the rules. It was time for me to play by them.

Walter turns to the now FAST-APPROACHING bus. Gazes at Agatha. She locks eyes with him. He mouths:

WALTER  
I'll never forget you.

He walks down the steps, continuing right off the curb. Brakes SQUEAL and...

THE SCREEN TURNS RED. ODD...

...it seems alive. Moving. Flowing.

WALTER (V.O.)  
You can call me Fingerling.

Walter lies on his back in the middle of the cobblestoned road, staring at the BLOOD seeping from his head.

WALTER (V.O.)  
It's not my real name, but comes from a book I read as a child, 'Fingerling at the Zoo.'

EXT. GRAVEYARD - DAY

A large funeral crowd. No one we recognize. The name on the NEW gravestone reads: "LAURA TOLLINS."

WALTER (V.O.)  
Paper flap long gone, it had a green, hardback cover and mottled texture, and was possibly my very first book.

We pull away and, CAMERA ABOUT KNEE-HIGH, weave across the grounds, past the graves of SIRIUS LEARY... JESSICA FLINCH...

WALTER (V.O.)  
Funny, I can't recall what it was about, the only thing I remember is the name. 'Fingerling.' I wished it was mine.

...to a TREE.



NOT FAR AWAY - AGATHA AND ROBIN

stand by a GRAVESTONE. It reads:

"WALTER PAUL SPARROW  
FATHER OF THE YEAR  
FOR EVERY YEAR WE KNEW HIM"

WALTER (V.O.)

Now it is.

A MAN walks up beside them. Looks at the gravestone.

WALTER (V.O.)

It wasn't the happiest of endings.  
But justice was served.

The man faces them. It's Kyle Flinch.

KYLE FLINCH

Thank you.

He walks away to an ELDERLY MAN AND WOMAN -- his parents.

Agatha takes Robin's hand. She turns to leave, sees:

NOT FAR AWAY - NED

sitting under a tree, watching them.

WALTER (V.O.)

While I don't particularly like the  
choice I had to make...

Robin follows his mom's gaze. Ned looks him in the eye then  
glances around the cemetery. Robin does the same. 2S AND 3S  
ON GRAVES SUDDENLY...

...SPARKLE IN THE SUNLIGHT. And Robin is seeing them.

AGATHA

What is it?

Robin looks at his mom. He turns back to the graves.

WALTER (V.O.)

...I know I made the right one...

ALL THE NUMBERS FADE AWAY.

ROBIN

Nothing, mom. It's nothing.

Ned walks off.

Agatha and Robin set off in the opposite direction to a car.  
Isaac's car.

WALTER (V.O.)  
...and from where I am now, it makes  
perfect sense.

We PULL UP, INTO THE SKY, until we are LOOKING DOWN ON THE  
GRAVEYARD FROM A GREAT HEIGHT. Various locations STAND OUT:  
the bookstore, Nathaniel's, the Sparrow home, Casanova's  
Park, the Shell Hotel, police station, etc.

Weird. If you join the dots between all of them, you end up  
with a number...

FADE OUT.

The following TITLECARD appears:

"BE SURE YOUR SIN WILL FIND YOU OUT."

followed, a heartbeat later, by its source:

NUMBERS 32:23

THE NED.