

SQUEEGEE

Written by

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FADE IN:

EXT. MERCER COUNTY LINE - DAY

A hand-painted sign: "WELCOME TO MERCER COUNTY. POP. 18,402"

A hand sprays over it: "18,401"

SUPER: MERCER COUNTY, OHIO - 2026

DALE MERRICK (34). White. Built like a wall. Carhartt jacket.
Wedding ring. Laugh lines that only show with his own.
Watches from his truck. He smiles.

DALE
(to boone in passenger seat)
One less.

BOONE (36). Towing company owner. Shaved head. Eagle tattoo.

BOONE
Damn right.

INT. MERCER COUNTY COMMISSION MEETING - DAY

Fluorescent lights. Folding chairs. Dale at the podium. Foreman.
Respected.

DALE
Motion to deny the
zoning variance for
that apartment complex on County 8.

Beat.

COMMISSIONER
Why?

DALE
Traffic study.
(beat)
And... neighborhood character.

He says "neighborhood character" like everyone knows.

They do.

COMMISSIONER
All in favor?

4-1. DENIED.

The room nods. Dale won.

EXT. MERCER HIGH SCHOOL - FOOTBALL GAME - NIGHT

Bleachers. Friday night lights.

Dale and Boone. Beer cups.

A BLACK FAMILY walks in. Mom, Dad, two kids. They head for 3 open seats. Near Dale.

BOONE
You seeing this?

Dale stands. Loud. For the whole row.

DALE
Hey. Those seats are saved.
For the team.

The Black dad looks up. Sees Dale's size. Boone's stare.

He gathers his family. Leaves.

Dale and Boone bump fists. No one says a word.

EXT. MERCER COUNTY, OHIO - DUSK

Miles of corn. American flags. Pickup trucks.

A county that's 93% white and knows it.

INT. BOONE'S TOW & BAR - NIGHT

Neon. Country rock. Stale beer smell.

Dale.

Across from him: Boone. Owner.

BOONE

(slamming beer down)

Saw a for sale sign on County Rd 8 today.
Real estate guy said "diverse families
looking."

DALE

(laughs, no heat)

Diverse. That's the new word for it.

The bar laughs. Easy. This is air to them. Just... used to it.

OLD TIMER

Damn shame. Used to know everybody
on that road.

BOONE

Yeah. Now we don't.

Boone leans in on the bar.

Lower voice.

BOONE

You hear about the Millers?
Put their house up too. Moving to Dayton.
Said it's "changing too fast."

DALE

Everything's changing too fast.

Boone nods. Looks around the bar like he's counting.

BOONE

We keep Mercer, right?
For our kids?

Dale picks up his bottle.

DALE

Hell yeah we do.
This is home.

They clink bottles.

EXNT. MERRICK HOUSE - NIGHT

Small. Clean. Flag on the porch outside.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

TINA MERRICK (32). Pregnant. Very pregnant. Wiping the counter.

TINA

You eat?

DALE

Boone's.

Dale walks in. Kisses her forehead. Hand on her belly.

DALE

We kept Mercer white today.

Tina doesn't meet his eyes. Used to it.

TINA

...okay.

DALE

You're safe here. Always.

TINA'S

I know.

She smiles. She believes him.

He means it.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Dale lies in bed. Tina asleep. He stares at ceiling.

DALE (V.O.)

My dad used to say, "You're only as good
as the people around you."

(beat)

So we keep our people close.

INT. HOSPITAL DELIVERY ROOM - DAY

Chaos. Monitors beeping. Tina screaming. Dale holding her hand.

NURSE

One more push, Mama!

TINA

Dale! Dale!

DALE
I got you. I'm here.

Silence. Then: A BABY CRY.

NURSE
It's a girl!

The nurse lifts NOVA.

Dark brown skin. Tight curls.

Silence.

Dale's face. Not confusion. Rage.

DALE
What the hell is this?

He points at the baby.

DALE (CONT'D)
That's a Black baby. That's not mine.

NURSE
Sir—

DALE
YOU SWITCHED THEM.

TINA
(exhausted)
Is she okay?

DALE
TEST IT.
NOW. I WANT SECURITY.

TINA
Dale, stop—

DALE
IT'S NOT MINE!

INT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY - 10 MINUTES LATER

Dale yelling at DOCTOR. Tina holding Nova, crying.

DALE
I want a paternity test. I want the cops.

DOCTOR
Mr. Merrick, we did blood type. You're
O+. Tina's O-. Baby's O+. Paternity is
99.9% you.

DALE
THEN YOUR TEST IS BROKEN!

He slams the wall.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

Tina alone. Nova in her arms.

Dale in the doorway. 15 feet away.

TINA
(quiet)
She's hungry.

DALE
Not my problem.

He walks out.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - GARAGE - DAY - 3 DAYS LATER*

The garage is now Dale's bedroom. Tools on walls. Couch bed.

Dale sits at a table. Staring at a PATERNITY TEST.

99.9% MATCH.`

Boone enters. No knock.

BOONE

County's talking, man.

DALE

I don't care.

BOONE

Bullshit you don't.

Pastor Jim asked me to come.

DALE

Did Tina cheat?

BOONE

That's what people are saying.

Dale crumples the paper.

DALE

She says no.

BOONE

Then something's wrong with the kid.

DALE

Don't say that.

BOONE

Why not? You're saying it.

Silence.

BOONE (CONT'D)
Look. We can get a lawyer. White family
in Columbus will take her.
No questions. We'll pay.

Dale looks up. Slow.

DALE
Get out of my garage.

BOONE
Dale—

DALE
GET OUT.

Boone stares. Then gets up, leaves.

Dale sits alone.

EXT. MERRICK HOUSE - DAWN

Dale comes out with coffee.

Stops.

SPRAY PAINT on his truck: "NIGGER LOVER" in red.

Across the street: A NEIGHBOR watching. Doesn't look away.

Dale says nothing. Goes back inside.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - KITCHEN - MORNING

Tina at sink. Nova in a bouncy seat. Crying.

Tina looks wrecked. No sleep.

TINA

She won't take a bottle
from anyone but me.

Dale stands in doorway. 10 feet away.

Nova's eyes open. Dark. They find him.

She stops crying. Stares.

TINA (CONT'D)

Dale.

He doesn't move.

TINA (CONT'D)

She's not going anywhere.

Dale nods. Once.

Turns. Walks back to garage.

Tina closes her eyes.

TINA (CONT'D)

(whisper)

Okay.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT - 1 WEEK LATER

Nova SCREAMING. 104 fever.

Tina panicking. Dale in garage. Door shut.

TINA

Dale! She's burning up!.

No answer.

Tina checks Nova's forehead with her hand. 104.2.

TINA (CONT'D)
Oh God... you're burning up.

She grabs her phone.

TINA (CONT'D)
(to herself)
Okay. Okay. ER.

Tina tries to lift Nova + keys + bag. Drops everything.

TINA (CONT'D)
Please...

INT. GARAGE - CONTINUOUS

Dale hears it. Doesn't move.

He stares at the wall.

DALE
(to himself)
Not my problem.

Beat.

Nova SCREAMS again. Weak.

Dale closes his eyes.

DALE (CONT'D)
Goddamnit.

Dale jolts awake. He heard it.

He stands in doorway. Sees Tina struggling.

DALE (CONT'D)

What?

TINA

Fever. 104. She won't- I can't-

Dale doesn't answer. Looks at Nova.

Nova's eyes are half-closed. Lethargic.

Dale grabs the keys off the floor.

DALE (CONT'D)

In the truck. Now.

Tina doesn't question it.

He grabs keys.

EXT. MERCER HOSPITAL - ER - NIGHT

Dale drives 90. Silent. Furious. At who?

INT. ER - TRIAGE - CONTINUOUS

DR. ALANA REESE (42). Black. Only doctor on.

Dale slams in with Nova.

DALE

She's dying. Fix her.

DR. REESE

Put her down.

Dale does. Rough.

Dr. Reese checks Nova. 89% O2.

DR. REESE (CONT'D)
Intubate. Now.

DALE
Do it.

DR. REESE
You. Step back.

Dale doesn't.

DR. REESE (CONT'D)
Mr. Merrick. Back up. Or I can't work.

He steps back.

But watches her hands.

DALE
You better not screw this up.

Dr. Reese looks up. Dead eyes.

DR. REESE
I save kids. That's my job.
(beat)
Even ones whose dads are assholes.

She finishes. Intubates. Nova stops screaming. Machine breathes for her.

DR. REESE (CONT'D)
RSV. Plus fever. She's fighting.

TINA
Can I hold her?

DR. REESE
Not yet.

INT. ER - WAITING ROOM - 4 HOURS LATER

3:12 AM.

Nova's stable. Behind glass.

Dale sits alone. Tina asleep across room.

Dr. Reese walks by. Stops.

DR. REESE
She'll live.

DALE
Good.

DR. REESE
You staying?

DALE
Why wouldn't I?

DR. REESE
Most guys who yell at nurses don't.

She walks away.

Dale stares at Nova through glass.

He doesn't leave.

INT. BOONE'S TOW SHOP - DAY

Dale sits. He's drinking.

BOONE

So? You gonna do it?

DALE

Do what?

BOONE

The other test.

The one that shows you ain't the dad.

Dale says nothing.

Boone slides a 23ANDME BOX across the table.

BOONE (CONT'D)

Spit in the tube. Mail it.

If it comes back clean, we bury this.

DALE

And if it don't?

BOONE

Then we know it's her. Not you.

Dale takes the box.

Sip the last drink. Gets up. Leaves.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - GARAGE - DAY - 3 DAYS LATER

Nova's home. Healthy. In a pack-n-play.

Tina sleeps on the couch. Exhausted.

Dale sits at the table. Laptop open.

23ANDME KIT. Open.

He stares at it. Then spits on it.

DALE
(to himself)
Stupid.

He closes the laptop.

Nova coos.

Dale looks up.

Nova is looking at him. Smiling. No teeth.

He freezes.

She reaches out. Little hand. Dale doesn't move.

TINA
(asleep, mumbling)
She likes you...

Dale stands. Walks out.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - BATHROOM - NIGHT

Dale stares at himself in the mirror.

He opens the 23ANDME KIT. Opens the tube. Spits. Seals it.

He holds it like it's a grenade.

He's not hoping it's negative.

He's hoping it PROVES something.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - KITCHEN - 3 WEEKS LATER

MAIL ON TABLE.

One envelope: 23ANDME RESULTS.

Dale stares at it. Won't open it.

Tina comes in. Sees it.

TINA
Are you gonna-

DALE
Don't.

Tina nods. Walks away.

Dale sits alone. For 10 minutes.

Finally: He rips it open.

INSERT - PAPER:

`ANCESTRY ESTIMATE`

`SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN: 2.8%`

`REGION: WEST AFRICA, ALABAMA 1880s`

Dale reads it. Again.

His hand shakes.

DALE
(whisper)
No.

INT. BOONE'S TOW SHOP - DAY - 3 WEEKS LATER

Dale throws the paper on Boone's desk.

Boone opens the envelope. Reads.

DALE

2.8 percent.

BOONE

That's nothing.

That's a mistake.

DALE

It's Alabama. 1880.

BOONE

So your great-great-grandma
got raped.

That don't make you—

DALE

Don't say it.

BOONE

Make you what, Dale? Black?

The word hangs.

BOONE (CONT'D)

2.8 percent.

He laughs. Hard.

BOONE (CONT'D)

You got Afrobeats blood
in you, Dale.

Dale slams fist on desk.

DALE

Don't say it.

BOONE

Why not? It's true.

DALE

I'm white.

BOONE

97.2% white.

(beat)

So what now? You gonna quit?

Dale doesn't answer.

BOONE (CONT'D)

We can fix this. White family.
Columbus.

No questions asked.

(beat)

Or you can be a man and walk
away from it.

Dale looks at him.

Dale picks up the paper. Folds it. Puts it in his wallet.

DALE

She's my daughter.

BOONE

Then you're dead to us.

Boone opens a drawer. Takes out a GUN. Sets it on the table.

BOONE (CONT'D)
Last chance. Give her up.
Or choose.

Dale looks at the gun. Then at Boone.

DALE
I'm her dad.

BOONE
Then you're not one
of us anymore.

DALE
Guess not.

Dale turns. Walks out.

Boone doesn't stop him.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - NIGHT

Dale comes home.

House empty.

Note on table.

INSERT - NOTE:

`Dale. I can't do this with you if you're gonna`

`flinch every time she looks at you.`

`Come when you're her dad. Not Mercer's. -T`

Dale reads it.

He crumples it. Throws it.

DALE
Screw you!

He kicks the wall. Puts a hole in it.

Then he stops

Breathing hard.

He looks at Nova's pack-n-play. Empty.

DALE (CONT'D)
(whisper)
Shit.

He slides down the wall

DALE (CONT'D)
Shit. Shit.

He's not crying.

He's breaking.

EXT. MERRICK HOUSE - NIGHT

Dale sits on porch steps. Alone.

His truck still says "NIGGER BABY" in red.

He looks at it.

For the first time: He doesn't smile.

He grabs a rag. Gas can.

He starts scrubbing.

Hard.

The paint won't come off all the way.

He keeps scrubbing anyway.

INT. MERCER BAPTIST CHURCH - DAY - SUNDAY

Packed. 98% white. Hymnals.

PASTOR JIM (60) at the pulpit. 30 years in this pulpit.

Dale sits in the back pew. Alone.

PASTOR JIM
...and the Lord tests us.
In mysterious ways.

Dale doesn't look up.

PASTOR JIM (CONT'D)
We must remember.
This is a Christian county.
We take care of our own.

He looks at Dale.

The whole church turns.

Silence.

PASTOR JIM (CONT'D)
Dale. Do you need prayer?

Dale stands.

DALE
Is she welcome here?

Point blank.

PASTOR JIM
Dale, the Lord loves all-

DALE
Is Nova welcome at Sunday school.

Pastor Jim opens his mouth. No answer comes.

PASTOR JIM
Let us pray.

Dale nods. Once.

He walks out.

One by one, 3 FAMILIES stand. Follow him out.

The rest stay.

EXT. CHURCH PARKING LOT - CONTINUOUS

Dale stops at his truck.

The 3 FAMILIES behind him.

MRS. CARLTON
We don't... we don't know what to say,
Dale.

DALE
Say her name. Nova.

They can't.

Dale gets in the truck. Drives away.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY - ONE WEEK LATER

Empty. Tina's note still on the table.

Dale sits. Staring at his phone.

TEXT FROM TINA: `She has a cold. She's okay.`

No address. No invitation.

Knock at the door.

Dale opens it.

TINA. With NOVA in a car seat. 2 months old now.

TINA
I'm not staying.

DALE
Okay.

TINA
But she needs diapers.
And you need to see her.

She puts the car seat down. Leaves.

Dale looks at Nova.

Nova looks at him.

Silence.

DALE
(quiet)
Hey.

Nova frowns. Starts to cry.

Dale panics.

DALE (CONT'D)
No no.

He picks her up. Awkward. Like holding a box.

She screams louder.

DALE (CONT'D)
Shit. Shit, okay-

He paces. Bounces.

She doesn't stop.

DALE (CONT'D)
Please.

He gives up. Sets her down. Steps back.

She keeps crying.

Dale slides down the wall. Head in his hands.

DALE (CONT'D)
I don't know how.

Beat.

Nova keeps crying.

Dale looks up.

DALE (CONT'D)
I'm scared of you.

He says it.

Nova keeps crying.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - NIGHT - 2 HOURS LATER

Nova's asleep in the pack-n-play.

Dale sits 10 feet away. Watching.
He hasn't moved.

His phone BUZZES.

TEXT FROM BOONE: `You still alive?`

Dale doesn't answer.

He watches Nova breathe.

INT. DR. REESE'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

DR. REESE with MALIK (9). Homework.

MALIK

Mom, Mr. Jensen said
I can't be on the basketball team.
"Attitude problem."

DR. REESE

Did you have an attitude?

MALIK

No. I was late. Bus.

She stops. Closes her eyes.

DR. REESE

I'll call him.

MALIK
Don't. They'll say
"angry Black mom."

Beat. She nods.

DR. REESE
Then we go to practice anyway.

She hugs him.

Tired.

INT. HOSPITAL - NEXT DAY

Dr. Reese sees Dale's name on a chart. Nova's follow-up.

She stares at it.

DR. REESE
Another one.

INT. WALMART - DAY

Dale with a cart. Lost.

NOVA (1 year old) in the seat. Hair in a messy puff.

He grabs a box: "HAIR CARE FOR BLACK BABIES"

Reads it. Puts it in the cart.

DALE
(to himself)
Okay. I can do this

WALMART CHECKOUT - CONTINUOUS

Dale unloads.

CASHIER (Black woman, 40s) scans. Sees the box.

CASHIER
(smiling)
You're new at this, huh.

Dale freezes.

DALE
...what?

CASHIER
I've seen a lot of white dads here.
You're the first one buying
SheaMoisture.

Dale looks down.

DALE
Oh. Yeah.

CASHIER
You doing okay.

Dale nods. Too fast.

DALE
Yeah. Fine

Cashier looks at Nova.

CASHIER
She's beautiful.

Dale looks at Nova.

DALE
Yeah.

Cashier rings up the rest.

CASHIER

You know... My Husband's white.
He cries in the car every time.
(beat)
Means you're doing it right.

Dale stops.

DALE

I say the n-word.

She stops. Looks at him.

CASHIER

Then stop
(beat)
She's listening.

Dale can't breathe.

DALE

...thank you

He pays. Leaves.

EXT. WALMART PARKING LOT - CONTINUOUS

Dale buckles Nova in. He puts his head on the wheel.

DALE

(quiet)
I'm sorry.

NOVA

Ha.

DALE

I won't say it again.

(whisper)

I don't know how...

He leans on the truck.

He cries.

Not loud.

Just... breaks.

Nova babbles in the car seat.

Dale wipes his face.

DALE (CONT'D)

Okay. Okay.

He starts the car. Drives.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - BATHROOM - DAY - 2 WEEKS LATER

Dale. Alone. NOVA (1) on the counter.

Hair products everywhere. SheaMoisture. Leave-in.

Dale watches YouTube: "BLACK BABY HAIR 101"

He tries to part her hair. It's a mess.

Nova cries.

DALE

Shh. Shh. I'm sorry.

He pulls too hard.

NOVA

Ow!

DALE

Damn! Damn!

He stops. Puts the brush down.

DALE

(whisper)

I don't know how to do this.

Nova reaches. Touches his face.

Dale breaks.

DALE

I got you. I got you.

INT. CONSTRUCTION SITE - DAY

Dale at work. Foreman.

CREW stares.

CREW GUY 1

HR says you can't be
on site with... you know.

DALE

I'm on site.

CREW GUY 2

It's a liability.

DALE

Fine.

Dale walks to trailer. Packs his tools.

He walks off. No fight left.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - GARAGE - NIGHT

Dale drunk. Bottle of whiskey.

Nova's baby photo in front of him.

DNA paper next to it.

DALE

(to photo)

You're me.

(beat)

God help you.

He drinks.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT - 6 MONTHS LATER

Dale broke. Bills on the table.

Nova eating cereal in a high chair.

DALE

(to nova)

Dada's gonna figure it out, okay?

Nova looks up.

NOVA

Dada.

Dale freezes.

DALE

What

NOVA

Dada!

Dale drops the spoon.

DALE

Say it again.

NOVA

Dada!

She smiles.

Dale stands. Fast.

DALE

No.

He walks outside.

EXT. MERRICK HOUSE - BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS

Dale stumbles out. Falls to knees.

DALE

No no—

He VOMITS.

Not because she's Black.

Because she said his name.

And he doesn't know if he deserves it.

He stays there. On dirt.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - NIGHT - LATER

Dale comes back in.

Face washed.

Nova's asleep.

He sits 10 feet away again.

But this time: He doesn't look away.

He watches her all night.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Dale on the floor. Nova stacking blocks.

Phone RINGS. Unknown number.

DALE

Hello?

TINA (O.S.)

It's me.

Dale freezes.

DALE

Tina.

TINA (O.S.)

I saw you at Kroger.

Dale closes his eyes.

TINA (O.S.) (CONT'D)
You didn't look away.

DALE
No.

TINA (O.S.)
She's talking more.

DALE
"Dada." "No." "Banana."

A beat.

TINA (O.S.)
Can I see her?

DALE
Yes.

TINA (O.S.)
Tomorrow?
Park?

DALE
Yes.

He hangs up.

Looks at Nova.

DALE (CONT'D)
Mama's coming, baby girl.

EXT. TOWN PARK - DAY

Late afternoon. Kids on the playground. Old men on benches.

Dale sits on a bench. Worn t-shirt. Baseball cap.

Nova is on the swings, pumping her legs. Pigtails.
Two different colored socks.

Dale watches her like he's on guard duty.

A shadow falls over the bench.

Tina. Thinner. Dark circles. Hair in a ponytail.
Holding a Dairy Queen bag. She stops 10 feet away.

TINA

Hi.

Dale looks up. Goes stiff.

DALE

Hi.

Nova sees her. Stops mid-swing.

NOVA

MAMA!

Nova jumps off before the swing stops. Runs full speed.

Tina drops the bag. Catches her. Spins her once.
Holds her tight. Like she hasn't breathed in 5 years.

TINA

My girl. My girl. Look at you.
You got so big.

Nova wiggles out. Looks up at Tina.

NOVA

Dada taught me to pump. Watch!

She runs back to the swings. Starts pumping again.

Tina watches her. Then looks at Dale over Nova's head.

TINA
You're doing it.

DALE
Trying.

TINA
That's all she needs.

Tina sits down. Not next to him. Other end of the bench.
Leaves 2 feet of space between them.

TINA
How's school?

DALE
Good. She's smart. Too smart.
Asks why people stare.

Tina flinches.

TINA
What'd you say?

DALE
Said some people are dumb.
And we don't wait for them.

Tina nods. Looks at Nova on the swings.

TINA
She still like those peanut butter
sandwiches? No crust?

DALE
Only way she'll eat 'em.

A little smile from Tina. Then it's gone.

TINA

I see you at the store sometimes
Don't come over. Figured you
didn't want -

DALE

It's not that.

TINA

Then what is it?

Dale looks at his boots.

DALE

It's hard, Tina. Seeing you
and not... being able to fix it.

TINA

Nobody's asking you to fix it.
I left, Dale. Not you.

Nova runs back. Out of breath.

NOVA

Dada up!

She climbs right into Dale's lap. He lifts her automatically.

Tina watches them. Her face does something complicated.

TINA

She's got your stubborn.

DALE

She's got your mouth.

They both almost smile.

TINA

I'm not ready to come home.

Dale goes still.

DALE

I know.

TINA

It's not you. It's me.

I got a job in Columbus. Nights.

I got an apartment. I got...

I gotta figure out me first.

DALE

I get it.

TINA

But... keep going.

Don't stop doing this.

Even when it's hard.

Especially then.

Nova leans back against Dale's chest.

TINA

But... keep going.

Don't stop doing this.

Even when it's hard.

Especially then.

NOVA

Can Mama come to my birthday?

Dale and Tina look at each other.

TINA

Yeah, baby. I'll be there.
Promise.

Tina stands up. Picks up the DQ bag.

TINA (CONT'D)

I gotta go. Shift starts at 5.

She leans down. Kisses Nova's head.

TINA (CONT'D)

Be good for your Dada.

NOVA

Love you, Mama.

TINA

Love you too, my girl.

Tina looks at Dale one last time.

TINA (CONT'D)

You're doing good, Dale.

She walks away. Toward the parking lot.

Dale sits with Nova in his lap. Watching her go.

DALE

(quiet)

We're gonna be okay.

Nova nods against his chest.

NOVA

Yeah. We are.

They watch Tina's car pull out of the park.

INT. BOONE'S TOW SHOP - NIGHT

Dale walks in.

Boone's alone. Drinking.

BOONE
You look like shit.

DALE
I am.

BOONE
You still got her?

DALE
Yeah.

Boone nods. To himself.

BOONE
You chose.

DALE
I chose.

BOONE
Then we're done.

Dale nods.

DALE
We're done.

He turns. Walks out.

Boone doesn't stop him.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - NIGHT

Dale puts Nova to bed.

Braids her hair. Still bad. But better.

DALE

One, two, three...

Nova asleep mid-sentence.

Dale kisses her forehead.

DALE (CONT'D)

Goodnight, Nova Merrick.

He turns off the light.

For the first time: He sleeps in the house. Not the garage.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY - 1 YEAR LATER

TIME JUMP.

NOVA is 1 year old. Toddler. Hair in a puff.

Dale is at the sink. Trying to braid her hair.

Terrible at it.

DALE

Okay... like this...

He fumbles. Hair tie snaps.

Nova giggles. Pulls his hand.

NOVA

Dada no.

DAL

Dada no. Yeah. Dada no good at hair.

He tries again. Worse.

NOVA

Mama!

DALE

Mama's not here, baby girl. Just Dada.

He stops. Looks at her in the mirror.

Both of them. White man. Black girl.

DALE (CONT'D)

We'll figure it as out.

EXT. DR. REESE'S PEDIATRIC CLINIC - DAY - NEXT COUNTY OVER

45 minute drive. Dale parks.

He sits in the truck. Stares at the building.

DALE (V.O.)

My dad said don't go there.

(beat)

My dad's dead.

He gets out.

INT. DR. REESE'S CLINIC - WAITING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

All Black and Brown families.

Dale walks in with Nova.

Everyone looks up.

Silence.

Dr. Reese comes out. Sees him.

DR. REESE
Mr. Merrick.

DALE
Dr. Reese.

DR. REESE
You came all the way back?

DALE
You saved her.

Dr. Reese studies him. Nods.

DR. REESE
Room 2.

INT. EXAM ROOM - CONTINUOUS

DALE
I lost the job.

DR. REESE
I know.

DALE
You do?

DR. REESE
Mercer's small.
(beat)
You think I want to keep
seeing you?
I have 3 Black kids who

need me.

But if I stop, who teaches you? Boone?

DALE

...no.

Dr. Reese checks Nova's ears.

DR. REESE

She's perfect.

DALE

Her hair... I can't-

DR. REESE

Then sit down.

She shows him how to do a cornrow.

DR. REESE (CONT'D)

Tight. Not too tight.

(beat)

Stop apologizing with your hands.

Dale nods. Sweating.

DR. REESE (CONT'D)

You're doing better than you think.

It's not kindness. It's fact.

DR. REESE (CONT'D)

YouTube. "4C toddler hair."

Watch it 20 times.

DALE

YouTube. That's it?

DR. REESE

No. Then you do it wrong 20 times.

(beat)

You think I had YouTube when

I was the only

Black girl in med school?

DALE

I'm not—

DR. REESE

You think I want to teach you?

I have 40 other kids.

(beat)

But she's here. So I do.

She hands him a printout. Black hair care for dads.

DR. REESE (CONT'D)

Stop apologizing with your face.

She needs a dad, not guilt.

Dale nods.

DR. REESE (CONT'D)

Don't make me regret this,

Mr. Merrick.

EXT. MERRICK HOUSE - YARD - DAY

Nova in a diaper. Running in circles.

Dale on the porch.

Watching.

A TRUCK drives by slow.

Yells something. Drives off.

Dale doesn't react.

Nova falls. Scrapes knee.

She looks at Dale.

DALE
You okay?

She nods.

Gets up.

Keeps running.

Dale exhales.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT - 18 MONTHS LATER

TV on. Cartoons.

Dale on the couch.

Nova asleep on his chest.

For the first time:

His hand is on her back.

Not stiff.

His phone buzzes.

Text from Boone: `You still dead to us.`

Dale deletes it.

Doesn't put Nova down.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - BATHROOM - NIGHT -

Tub. Bubbles.

Dale washing Nova's hair. Gentle.

He's watched 4 YouTube videos to learn this.

NOVA

Dada?

Dale freezes.

DALE

What?

NOVA

Dada bath?

DALE

(quiet)

Yeah.

Dada's got you.

He keeps washing.

His hand doesn't shake.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY - 4 YEARS LATER

Nova, 4. Drawing at the table.

Dale making lunch.

PB&J. Cuts the crusts off.

Knock at the door.

Dale opens it.

Boone. Older. Angry.

BOONE

Town's having a meeting.
About you and the little Beyonce.

DALE

Don't care.

BOONE

Pastor Jim's there.
Says you're bringing shame.

Dale looks at Nova.

She's drawing. Doesn't look up.

DALE

Then they can be ashamed.

BOONE

You're really gonna do this?

DALE

I already did it.

Boone shakes his head.

BOONE

You hear about the new plant?

DALE

Yeah. Hiring.

BOONE

Not for you.

Dale doesn't react.

BOONE (CONT'D)

County commission voted.
No "controversial figure's"
on city contracts.

DALE

I'm not controversial.
I'm a father late on rent.

BOONE

Yeeeah about that and the other
that.Same thing.

He means Nova by the other that.

Boone looks at Nova. She hides behind Dale's leg.

BOONE (CONT'D)

You could still fix this.

DALE

How?

BOONE

Do the right thing.
He Leaves.

Dale closes the door.

NOVA

Who was that?

DALE

Nobody.

NOVA

He looked mad.

DALE

He is.

Nova goes back to drawing.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - NIGHT

Dale at the kitchen table.
Bills.

He's behind.

Nova asleep in the other room.

He pulls out the birth certificate.
Stares at it.

FATHER: DALE MERRICK

He puts it back.

DALE

(whisper)
I got you.

INT. MERCER ELEMENTARY - OFFICE - DAY - 5 YEARS LATER

Kindergarten registration.

Dale and Nova at the counter.

SECRETARY

Father's name?

DALE
Dale Merrick.

Secretary types.

Looks at Nova.

Looks at Dale.

Beat.

SECRETARY
We have a form for...
non-traditional families.

DALE
We're traditional.

Dale signs.

Hard.

EXT. ELEMENTARY SCHOOL - FIRST DAY - DAY

Dale drops Nova off.

Other parents stare.
Whisper.

Nova looks up at Dale.

NOVA
Are you coming in?

DALE
No, baby.
I'll be right here at 3.

NOVA

Okay.

She walks in.
Alone.

Dale watches until she's gone.

He gets in the truck.
Sits for 10 minutes before driving.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - NIGHT

Dale alone.

Phone rings. Unknown number.

DALE

Yeah?

VOICE (O.S.)

Mr. Merrick?

This is Mercer Social Services.

Dale goes still.

VOICE (O.S.) (CONT'D)

We received a report.

We need to schedule a home visit.

Click.

Dale sets the phone down.

He looks at Nova's drawing on the fridge.
Stick figures.
"DADA + NOVA"

He stands.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY - 2 DAYS LATER

Knock at the door.

Dale opens it.

MS. WALKER, 40s. Social Services.

Clipboard. Neutral face. Not the one from Church.

MS. WALKER

Mr. Merrick?

I'm from Mercer County Social Services.

DALE

Come in.

She does.

Looks around.

Clean. Toys on floor. Fridge has kid art.

MS. WALKER

I'll be quick.

Anonymous call said there were concerns
about the child's welfare.

DALE

What kind of concerns.

MS. WALKER

Race.

Environment.

That the child might be... confused.

Dale doesn't blink.

DALE

Nova's fine.

MS. WALKER
May I see her?

Dale calls up the stairs.

DALE
Nova!
Company.

Nova comes down.

Pigtails. Backpack.

She sees the lady.

Hides behind Dale's leg.

MS. WALKER
Hi sweetie.
I'm Ms. Walker.

NOVA
(quiet)
Hi.

MS. WALKER
Can I ask you a question?

Nova looks at Dale.

He nods.

MS. WALKER (CONT'D)
Who lives here with you?

NOVA
Dada.

MS. WALKER

And do you feel safe with Dada?

Nova looks up at Dale.

No hesitation.

NOVA

Yes.

Ms. Walker makes a note.

MS. WALKER

Okay.

Last thing.

Is there food in the house?

Doctor visits?

DALE

Yes.

Yes.

Ms. Walker looks around one more time.

MS. WALKER

I'll be closing this case.

But Mr. Merrick...

Mercer is a small town.

DALE

I know.

MS. WALKER

She's lucky to have you.

She leaves.

Dale closes the door.

He kneels.

Eye level with Nova.

DALE

You okay?

NOVA

Why was she here?

DALE

Just checking on us.

NOVA

Are we in trouble?

DALE

No, baby. We're good.

He hugs her.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Dale cooking.

Nova doing homework.

NOVA

Dada?

DALE

Yeah?

NOVA

Can I ask you something?

DALE

Always.

Nova stops coloring.

NOVA

Why do people look at us weird?

Dale stops.

Knife mid-cut.

DALE

What do you mean?

NOVA

At the store.

At church.

They look at me.

Then at you.

Long silence.

DALE

Because we don't look like each other.

NOVA

But you're my dada.

DALE

I am.

NOVA

So why do they care?

Dale puts the knife down.

DALE

Some people... they only know one way
families are supposed to look.

(beat)

We look different.

That makes them uncomfortable.

NOVA

Are we wrong?

DALE

No.

(beat)

We're right.

We're just us.

Nova thinks about this.

NOVA

Okay.

She goes back to coloring.

Dale watches her for a second.

Then goes back to cooking.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - NOVA'S ROOM - NIGHT

Dale tucks Nova in.

NOVA

Read me a story?

DALE

Which one?

NOVA

The one about the bear.

Dale reads.
Bad voices.
She laughs anyway.

When he's done:

NOVA
Love you, Dada.

DALE
Love you too, Nova.

He kisses her forehead.

Turns off the light.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - GARAGE - NIGHT - LATER

Dale alone.

He pulls out an old photo box.
Pictures of him and Boone.
Him and the church.
Him before.

He closes it.
On top: A new picture.
Him and Nova at the park.
Both laughing.

He sets the old box down.

Puts the new one on top.

Dale closes the door.

INT. CONSTRUCTION SITE - DAY - 1 WEEK LATER

Dale's last day.

Foreman hands him a check.

FOREMAN

Sorry, Dale. Orders from up top.

DALE

What'd I do?

FOREMAN'S

You know what you did.

The crew watches. No one meets his eyes.

Dale takes the check. Walks off.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - NIGHT

Dale counts cash. \$412.

Rent: \$900. Due in 4 days.

Nova asleep on couch.

Dale puts his head in his hands.

DALE

(whisper)

What do I do?

INT. MERCER BAPTIST CHURCH - DAY - SUNDAY

It's been years since last time.

Dale walks in.

With NOVA. 5 years old. Dress. Braids by Dr. Reese.

No speech.

They sit front row.

Pastor Jim at pulpit. Sees them.

Beat.

PASTOR JIM

Let us pray.

Half the church stands. Walks out.

Half stays.

Among the half that stays: MRS. CARLTON.

She nods at Dale. Small.

Dale nods back.

INT. CHURCH PARKING LOT - AFTER SERVICE

Boone waits by truck.

BOONE

Last chance, Dale.

DALE

For what?

BOONE

To walk away clean.

Nova steps between them.

NOVA

Don't talk to my Dada.

Boone looks at her. Really looks.

BOONE

You're tall.

NOVA

I'm five.

Boone nods. .

BOONE

Take care, Dale.

He gets in truck. Drives away.

Never comes back.

EXT. MERRICK HOUSE - BACKYARD - DAY

Dale. Nova. Tape measure.

Teaching her construction.

DALE

Twelve inches is a foot.

NOVA

I'm four feet.

DALE

You're gonna be better than me, Nova.

NOVA

I already already am.

She smiles. No teeth missing yet.

Dale laughs. Real laugh.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - NOVA'S BEDROOM - LATER

Dale tucks her in.

DALE

Love you, Nova Merrick.

NOVA

Love you, Dada.

He kisses her forehead.

EXT. MERCER COUNTY - DUSK

Wide shot.

Corn fields. Flags.

Same county. Different people in it now.

INT. MERCER HOSPITAL - DR. REESE'S OFFICE - DAY -

Dale sits. Worn out. Work boots. Dirty t-shirt.

Nova colors on the floor.

Dr. Reese reads his file.

DR. REESE

You lost the job.

DALE

Yeah.

DR. REESE

You behind on rent.

DALE

Yeah.

DR. REESE

You come here for every 3 months.
Even when she's healthy.

DALE

She likes you.

Dr. Reese closes the file.

DR. REESE

I'm firing my janitor.

DALE

What?

DR. REESE

Old guy retired.
I need someone nights.
Mop floors. Take out trash. \$17 an hour.

DALE

You want me to clean your office?

DR. REESE

I want you to pay your rent.
(beat)
And I want you where I can see you.

DALE

Why?

DR. REESE

Because if you disappear, she disappears.
And I'm not letting that happen.

Dale stares.

DALE

I said the n-word.
To my friends. For years.

DR. REESE

I know.

DALE

I voted to keep people like
you out of this county.

DR. REESE

I know.

DALE

So why?
Why are you doing this?
Why are you giving me this job? .

Dr. Reese looks at Nova. Coloring.

DR. REESE

Because she's 5.
And she deserves a dad
who's not broke and ashamed.

She slides paperwork across.

DR. REESE (CONT'D)

Night shift. 9pm to 5am.
You start Monday.
Don't be late.

DALE

You're not... you're not
doing this for me.

DR. REESE

No. I'm doing it for her.

(beat)

Don't make me fire you too.

Dale picks up the paper. Hand shakes.

DALE

Thank you.

DR. REESE

Don't thank me. Show up.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - NIGHT

Dale tells Nova.

DALE

Dada got a new job, baby.

NOVA

Doing what?

DALE

Cleaning.

NOVA

Like me?

DALE

(laughs)

Yeah. Like you.

He hugs her.

DALE (CONT'D)

We're gonna be okay.

EXT. MERCER ELEMENTARY - DAY

Nova in braids. Holding Dale's hand.

Kids stare. Parents stare.

MOM 1

(whisper)

That's the n---- baby.

Dale hears. Squeezes Nova's hand.

DALE

(quiet)

You're safe with me.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

TEACHER reads names.

TEACHER

Nova Merrick?

Nova raises hand.

TEACHER (CONT'D)

Your... guardian?

DALE

Dad.

Teacher nods. Moves on.

INT. HOSPITAL - JANITOR CLOSET - NIGHT

Dale mops. Janitor uniform.

DR. REESE walks in.

DR. REESE
You're late on her check-up.

DALE
I know. Shifts.

DR. REESE
Bring her Saturday. I'll be here.

DALE
You don't have to.

DR REESE
I know.

She leaves.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - KITCHEN TABLE - NIGHT

Nova draws. Crayons.

Dale tries to braid. Still bad.

NOVA
Dada, why don't you look like me?

Dale stops.

DALE
...because my family was wrong.
(beat)
A long time ago.
(beat)
And I'm trying to be right now.

Nova thinks. Nods.

NOVA

Okay.

She hands him drawing.

INSERT - DRAWING:

Stick figures. Black girl. White man.

"ME + DADA" in kid letters.

Dale stares at it.

His hand shakes.

DALE

(whisper)

Yeah.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Dale pins Nova's drawing above bed.

Under it: 23ANDME paper. 2.8%.

He touches both.

DALE (V.O.)

I used to burn things I couldn't erase.

(beat)

Now I keep them.

He turns light off.

INT. DR. REESE'S HOUSE - NIGHT - SAME

Dr. Reese watches from window.

MALIK (14) next to her.

MALIK
That's him?

DR. REESE
Yeah.

MALIK
He stayed.

DR. REESE
Yeah.

She doesn't say more.

INT. HOSPITAL - NIGHT - MONDAY

Dale pushes a mop bucket down empty halls.

Dr. Reese walks by. Chart in hand.

DR. REESE
Corner.

DALE
Yes, ma'am.

He goes back to mopping.

INT. HOSPITAL - BREAK ROOM - 2AM

Dale eats a sandwich. Alone.

Dr. Reese comes in. Coffee.

DR. REESE
You do it right.

DALE
Mopping?

DR. REESE
Life.

She leaves.

Dale looks at his hands. Calloused.

DALE
(to himself)
Okay.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - MORNING - 6AM

Dale comes home. Nova runs to him.

NOVA
Dada!

DALE
Hey baby girl.

He picks her up.

Smells like bleach.

NOVA
You smell funny.

DALE
That's called work.

NOVA
Can we get pancakes?

DALE
Yeah. We can get pancakes.

He cooks. Tired. But there.

INT. MERCER ELEMENTARY - CLASSROOM - DAY - 6 YEARS LATER

Parent-Teacher night.

Dale at Nova's desk.

TEACHER

She's doing great.
Reading above level.

Another PARENT walks by.
Stops.

PARENT

Oh.
You must be...
the guardian.

DALE

Father.

The parent looks at Nova.
Looks at Dale.
Walks away fast.

Teacher pretends not to see it.

TEACHER

(quiet)
Some people in this town...

DALE

I know.

TEACHER

She's a great kid.

DALE
I know that too.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - PORCH - NIGHT -

Dale and Nova sitting in chairs.

Night sky.

NOVA
Dada, can I ask one more thing?

DALE
Mhm.

NOVA
Did you always want me?

Dale goes still.

DALE
No.

Nova looks at him.

DALE (CONT'D)
At first I was scared.
And stupid.
And I didn't know what to do.

NOVA
Oh.

DALE

But then I saw you.
And you were mine.
(beat)
So yeah.
I always wanted you.
I just didn't know it yet.

Nova crawls into his lap.

She's too big for it but he doesn't say anything.

NOVA

I'm glad you figured it out.

DALE

Me too, baby.

They sit in silence.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - KITCHEN - MORNING - 7 YEARS LATER

Dale making breakfast.

Nova, 7 now, comes in.

NOVA

Can I have a friend over?

DALE

Who?

NOVA

Maya.
From school.

Dale tenses.

DALE

What did her parents say?

NOVA

They said okay.

Dale nods.

Slow.

DALE

Then yeah.

She can come over.

Nova hugs him.

Runs off.

Dale stands there.

Alone in the kitchen.

For the first time:

He looks hopeful.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY - 1 WEEK LATER

MAYA, 7. Black girl.

Sitting on the floor with Nova.

Drawing.

Dale watches from the kitchen.

Wiping the same counter over and over.

Maya's MOM stands in the doorway.

MOM

Thank you for having her.

DALE

No problem.

MOM

(quiet)
It's not easy.
Being the only ones.

Dale looks at her.
Really sees her.

DALE

No.
It's not.

MOM

But it helps.
Seeing you.

She leaves.

Dale looks at Nova and Maya.
Laughing on the floor.

He stops wiping.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - NIGHT

Dale puts Nova to bed.

NOVA

Dada, is it okay that Maya's like me?

DALE

It's more than okay.
(beat)
It's good.
You need people who look like you.

NOVA

Do you?

Dale pauses.

DALE
I've got you.

He kisses her.

DALE (CONT'D)
That's enough.

He turns off the light.

INT. MERCER HOSPITAL - NIGHT

Dale mops. Same bucket. Same hall.

Nurse walks by. Doesn't say hi.

Dale doesn't expect her to.

DR. REESE (O.S.)
Merrick's.

Dale turns.

Dr. Reese. Holding a file.

DR. REESE (CONT'D)
Nova's checkup was good.

DALE
She said you gave her stickers.

DR. REESE
She earned them.
Reading at grade level.
You're doing something right.

She walks away.

Dale watches her go.

Then mops.

INT. MERCER ELEMENTARY - DAY

Nova in 2nd grade. Only Black kid in class.

Dale drops her off. In his hospital janitor uniform.

Other parents stare.

PARENT 1

(whisper)

That's the Merrick guy.

PARENT 2

With the... her.

Dale hears it. Keeps walking.

NOVA

Dada, are they mad?

DALE

No, baby. They're just stupid.

She nods. Goes to class.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Bills. Again. Dale pays \$900 rent. \$17/hr doesn't go far.

Phone rings. Tina.

TINA (O.S.)
She have a fever last week?

DALE
No. Just a cold. Dr. Reese said—

TINA (O.S.)
I'm coming to see her Saturday.

DALE
Okay.

TINA (O.S.)
Don't... don't mess it up.

Click.

Dale hangs up. Looks at Nova's drawings on the fridge. All of him.

EXT. TOWN PARK - DAY - SATURDAY

Tina meets them. She looks good. New job. New life.

TINA
Hi, baby.

NOVA
Mama!

They hug.

Tina looks at Dale.

TINA
You look tired.

DALE
Night shift.

TINA
Still at the hospital?

DALE
Yeah.

TINA
With her?

She means Dr. Reese.

Dale nods.

TINA
That's good.

Silence.

TINA (CONT'D)
I'm not coming back, Dale.

DALE
I know.

TINA
But I'm not taking her either.
(beat)
She's yours

She kisses Nova.

TINA
(to nova)
Goodbye baby, mama loves you okay.

Nova nods. Tina looks at Dale one last time.

TINA

You have done so very well Dale,
You are doing so very well.
Look at her she has grown up
to be well with
you raising her, such a father. I'm proud of
you.
Keep it up.

DALE

Thanks, we are doing great,
isn't that right baby.

NOVA

Yeah!

Tina smiles.

TINA

Okay it's goodbye you two.

She leaves.

Dale watches her go.

NOVA

Is Mama sad?

DALE

No. she's just... figuring it out.

INT. HOSPITAL - NIGHT

Dale scrubbing a bathroom.

Dr. Reese comes in.

DR. REESE
You missed a spot.

DALE
Yes, ma'am.

He goes back.

DR. REESE
You get the letter

DALE
From the school? Yeah.
"Diversity assembly."
They want me to speak.

DR. REESE
You gonna do it?

DALE
What do I say?
"Hi, I used to be racist?"

DR. REESE
Say "Hi, I'm Nova's dad."
That's the whole speech.

She leaves.Dale stops scrubbing.

INT. MERCER ELEMENTARY - GYM - DAY

Assembly. 200 kids. 198 white.

Dale walk over to the stage.Stops at the podium. In a button-down. First time in years.Nova is smiling looking at him there.

DALE

Good day to you all.
My name is Dale Merrick. I'm a
long resident of this town with roots
here.
I used to be a Foreman and
(looks at nova)
I'm Nova's dad.

Silence.

DALE (CONT'D)

I wasn't always. I mean... I was. But I
didn't act like it.

Kids look confused.

DALE (CONT'D)

I used to think this town was only for
people who looked like me.

He looks at Nova. Front row.

DALE (CONT'D)

I was wrong.
(beat)
And I'm sorry it took me
having a daughter to learn that.

No applause. Just quiet.

Nova stands up.

NOVA

That's my Dada.

She runs up. Hugs his leg.

NOVA

Thank you for this, it means so much.

DALE

Together remember, it's us together.

Dale puts a hand on her head.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY - 5 YEARS LATER

Nova now 12. Hair in box braids. Homework on the table.

Dale now 39. More gray. Same janitor uniform, but clean.

He packs her lunch.

DALE

Peanut butter. Apple. Note.

NOVA

You still write me notes?

DALE

Every day.

He slips it in: `You're my favorite person. -Dada`

NOVA

(reading)

Dad. Not Dada anymore?

DALE

You're too old for Dada?

NOVA

Never.

She hugs him. Hard.

INT. MERCER HOSPITAL - NIGHT

Dale mops. 11 years on the job now.

Dr. Reese walks by. Older. Tired.

DR. REESE
You hear about Boone?

DALE
No.

DR. REESE
DUI. Lost the shop.

Dale nods. Says nothing.

DR. REESE (CONT'D)
You ever think about what
would've happened if you chose different?

DALE
Every night at 3am.

DR. REESE
And?

DALE
And I still would've picked her.

Dr. Reese almost smiles.

DR. REESE
Good. Keep mopping.

EXT. BOONE'S TOW SHOP - DAY - CLOSED

Chain on the gate. "FOR SALE"

Dale parks. Gets out.

BOONE sits on the curb. Older.
Broken.

BOONE
Well here comes the chief of Nigeria.
You here to gloat?

DALE
No.

BOONE
Then why?

DALE
You got a job?

BOONE
Nobody's hiring me.

Dale pulls out an envelope. Cash.

DALE
\$600. From me.

BOONE
Why?

DALE
Because I remember who I was.
(beat)
And I remember who you were to me.

Boone looks at the money.

BOONE
You're a traitor.

DALE

Yeah.
(beat)
To the wrong side.

BOONE

Might as well go back to Africa.

Dale puts the money on the curb. Walks away.

Boone doesn't take it.

INT. MERCER ELEMENTARY - PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE - DAY

Principal. Dale. Nova.

PRINCIPAL

There was an incident.
A boy called Nova a word.

DALE

What word?

PRINCIPAL

The n-word.

Dale goes still.

NOVA

It's okay, Dad.
I told him my dad used to say it.
And then he stopped.

Dale looks at her.

DALE

What'd you say to him?

NOVA

I said "My dad's still better than yours."

Dale almost laughs.

DALE

You suspended?

PRINCIPAL

No. He is.

(beat)

And I called his parents.

Dale nods.

DALE

Thank you.

EXT. MERRICK HOUSE - PORCH - NIGHT

Dale and Nova. Sitting.

NOVA

Dad. Was it worth it?

DALE

What?

NOVA

Losing everyone. For me?

Dale thinks. Long time.

DALE

I didn't lose everyone.

I lost people who were never really mine.

(beat)

I gained you.

NOVA

Even though I'm hard sometimes?

DALE

Especially then.

NOVA

Even though I'm not... like you?

DALE

You're exactly like me.

(beat)

Stubborn. And you don't quit.

Nova leans her head on his shoulder.

NOVA

I'm glad you picked me.

DALE

Me too, baby girl.

INT. MERCER HOSPITAL - NIGHT

Dale mops. Last hall of the night.

Dr. Reese comes out of an OR. Exhausted.

DR. REESE

You still here.

DALE

Always.

DR. REESE

You ever think about leaving Mercer?

DALE

Every day.

(beat)

And every day I decide to stay.

DR. REESE

Why?

DALE

Because if I leave, they win.

(beat)

And because she deserves to grow up
where her dad stood his ground.

Dr. Reese nods.

DR. REESE

You did good, Mr. Merrick.

First time she's ever said it.

DALE

Don't make it weird.

She walks away.

Dale smiles. Finishes mopping.

EXT. MERRICK HOUSE - MORNING

Dale comes home from night shift.

Nova on the porch. Waiting.

NOVA

Rough day?

DALE
Squeegee's Squeegee.

NOVA
Pancakes?

DALE
Pancakes.

They go inside.

INT. HOSPITAL SUPPLY CLOSET - 3:14 AM

Fluorescent light BUZZES.

Shelves of bleach, paper towels, wax.

DALE, 39. Hair greyer. Janitor uniform. 7 years in.

He's refilling bottles. His hands are shaking slightly.

A SQUEEGEE in his other hand.

He stops. Just stands there.

The hallway outside is dead silent.

The squeegee SLIPS from his hand.

CLANG. It hits concrete.

Dale doesn't pick it up.

He slides down the door. Sits on the floor.

20 seconds. No sound but the BUZZ.

His shoulders shake. Once.

DALE

(whisper)

I just wanted to provide.

Another beat.

He wipes his face with the back of his hand.

He looks at the squeegee on the floor.

He picks it up.

Stands.

He goes back to work.

INT. DR. REESE'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT - 5 YEARS AGO

Dr. Reese and MALIK (14). Dinner.

MALIK

Mom, why do you help him?

DR. REESE

Who?

MALIK

The janitor. Mr. Merrick.

Dr. Reese stops.

DR. REESE

Because he shows up.

MALIK

So do a lot of Black dads.
You don't give them jobs.

DR. REESE

No. I don't.

(beat)

Because if I don't teach him,
who does? The internet?

MALIK

See that's the thing,
you care about how a man lives,
a man who is literally engineered
in his genes
not to care about you.
Besides It's not your job to save him.

DR. REESE

It's my job to write make sure his
daughter has a dad.

(beat)

That's different.

Malik nods. Doesn't like it. But gets it.

INT. MERCER HOSPITAL - NIGHT - MONTAGE - 11 YEARS

A series of shots.

- YEAR 1: Dale mopping. Falling asleep in break room.
- YEAR 3: Dale braiding Nova's hair in hospital bathroom at 6am.
- YEAR 5: Dale getting dirty looks in grocery store with Nova.
- YEAR 7: Dale fixing Nova's bike on porch at midnight after shift.
- YEAR 9: Dale sitting in church. Alone. In the back.
- YEAR 11: Dale's hands. Calloused. Mopping the same tile.

VOICEOVER - DR. REESE

You don't get forgiven.

You get to work.

INT. DALE'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - MORNING

Sunlight cuts through a messy kitchen. Dishes in the sink.

DALE (47) stands at the ironing board in a white dress shirt and navy suit. The first suit he's owned in 15 years.

He burns his thumb on the iron.

DALE

Shit.

NOVA (17) enters in cap and gown. Hair in perfect braids. Eating cereal straight from the box.

She stops. Looks at him sweating.

NOVA

You're gonna set off the smoke alarm.

DALE

This thing's trying to kill me.

Nova sets the cereal down. Takes the iron from him. Two quick passes and the collar is perfect.

DALE

When'd you get so good at that?

NOVA

YouTube. Same place you learned.
Age four. Towel and a doll.

A beat. They both smile at the memory.

Nova steps up. Fixes his tie. Straightens it.

NOVA

You look... good, Dad.

Dale swallows hard.

DALE

You nervous?

NOVA

For valedictorian? No.

For you sitting in the front row?

Kinda.

DALE

Why?

NOVA

Cause 17 years ago you almost didn't.

No anger. Just truth.

Dale pulls her into a hug. She's taller than him now.

DALE

Thank you for letting me.

NOVA

Thank you for choosing me. Every day.

They pull apart. Both fighting tears.

DALE

Let's go, Valedictorian.

Nova grins. She is so excited.

INT. MERCER HIGH SCHOOL - GYM - DAY

Packed. Mercer High banners. Folding chairs full.

Dale walks in. In the suit. Every head turns. Whispers.

MRS. CARLTON watches him. BOONE sits in the back row.

Dale sits front row. Alone. Back straight.

PRINCIPAL (O.S.)
...and our Valedictorian,
Nova Merrick .

Applause.

NOVA walks to the podium. Scans the crowd. Finds Dale.

NOVA
When I was five, I asked my dad
why people stared at us in Kroger.

The gym shifts. People look down.

NOVA (CONT'D)
He didn't have a good answer that day.
But he had a good answer every day
after.

She looks right at Dale.

NOVA (CONT'D)
My dad taught me two things.
How to do my own hair.
And how to stand up when it's
easier to sit down.

Dale's eyes fill. He doesn't wipe them.

NOVA (CONT'D)

So thank you. For choosing me.
Every day. Even when it was hard.

Silence.

Then - STANDING OVATION.

Dale stands. Clapping. Crying. Proud.

EXT. MERCER HIGH SCHOOL - PARKING LOT - LATER

Cars pulling out. Families taking pictures.

MRS. CARLTON stops as she passes Dale.

MRS. CARLTON

That was a beautiful speech, Dale.

She walks away.

Mr Carlton walks up. Hands in pockets.

MR CARLTON

She sounds like you. Stubborn.

DALE

She's better than me.

Boone looks over at Nova with her friends.

MR CARLTON

You did good, man.

NOVA runs over. Hugs Dale hard.

NOVA

Did you see? Did you cry?

DALE

Maybe.

NOVA

Good.

She takes his hand.

NOVA (CONT'D)

Come on. Let's go home.

They walk toward Dale's truck. The suit. The cap and gown.

The town watches them go.

INT. BOONE'S TRAILER - DAY

Boone. 60s. Sick. Oxygen tank.

Knock. Dale.

BOONE

You came.

DALE

You called.

BOONE

I got cancer.

Dale sits.

BOONE (CONT'D)

I'm not asking for anything.

DALE

I know.

BOONE

You did good. With her.

DALE

I did okay.

BOONE

You did better than me.

Long silence.

BOONE (CONT'D)

You think God forgives you

DALE

I think Nova does.

(beat)

That's enough for me.

Dale stands. Leaves \$200 on the table.

DALE (CONT'D)

For meds.

Boone nods. Doesn't say thanks.

INT. MERRICK HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Nova now 22. Nurse scrubs. Packing.

Dale watches.

NOVA

I got the job. Mercer Hospital.

DALE
Night shift?

NOVA
Day shift.
(smiles)
Someone has to undo all your bad mopping.

Dale laughs.

DALE
You're gonna be better than me

NOVA
I had a good teacher.

She hugs him.

NOVA (CONT'D)
Dad. I'm scared.

DALE
Of what?

NOVA
Of being like you.
And being like me.
At the same time.

DALE
Baby. You already are.
(beat)
And it's the best thing I ever saw.

EXT. MERCER HOSPITAL - PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Dale's last night shift.

Retirement party in break room.

Cake. 12 people. Mostly night staff.

Dr. Reese hands him a card.

DR. REESE

22 years. You were here longer than most
doctors.

DALE

You were gonna fire me.

DR. REESE

I thought about it. Every day.
(beat)
Glad I didn't.

She hugs him.

Quick.

Professional.

DR. REESE (CONT'D)

I'm retiring next month.
(beat)
Don't come back.

DALE

No ma'am.

INT. HOSPITAL LOBBY - 7:03 AM

Morning light pours through glass doors.

The lobby is waking up.

Nurses.

Doctors.

Visitors.

DALE, 54. Not in uniform.

Clean button-down.

Jeans.

He holds a small box: coffee mug, name tag.

He stops at the exit. Takes one last look.

Across the lobby:

NOVA, 26. Scrubs. Stethoscope. Hair up.

She's walking IN for day shift.

Coffee in hand.

She sees him.Stops.

3 seconds. The whole hospital between them.

NOVA

(soft)

Hey, Dad.

Dale nods. Throat tight.

Nova crosses the lobby to him.

She HUGS him.

Tight. In front of everyone.

Dale hesitates... then hugs her back.

One hand still holding the box.

Over her shoulder, we see nurses watching. Smiling.

NOVA
(into his shoulder)
I'm proud of you.

Dale closes his eyes.

HOLD.

TITLE: SQUEEGEE

FADE OUT:

THE END