OVER BLACK

CASSIE (V.O.)
You won't believe this, but it's true. It was in all the papers. You can look it up if you like, the more than fifty people murdered with an axe in Louisiana in 1911, the dozens more killed a year later throughout the state... and the most infamous case of all, the murders in New Orleans in 1918 and the "*Night of the Axeman's Jazz*". It's all documented, all true. But of course not everything that happened made it into the papers. Some of it was just too hard to believe, I suppose, but still true. I know, I was there. Not from the very beginning, whenever that was, but long before the end, if there truly was an end.

FADE IN:

A rundown house on poverty row.

TITLE:

Mermentau, Louisiana 17 October, 1911

TWO LITTLE GIRLS and a BOY, all under ten, play in their yard, their older sister keeping an eye on them.

CASSANDRA "CASSIE" LACROIX (13) is a burgeoning beauty with caramel skin and wavy black hair. She sits on an old swing hung from a tree, spinning lazily side to side, ruminating on her future and a hazy red sun in the distance.

Suddenly Cassie stops swinging and looks toward the porch of her house. Turns back to her siblings.

CASSIE (CONT'D)
All right ya all, time to go in. C'mon now, Mama wants us.

The little kids stop playing and migrate toward their sister.

A moment later "Mama", MARIE LACROIX, a pretty black woman in her thirties, comes out onto the porch wearing an apron.

MARIE
Cassie! C'mon, girl, get your brothers and sisters in here and help me get supper on the table.

INT. CASSIE'S CHILDHOOD HOME - NIGHT

Cassie eats dinner with her family. Marie and CHARLES LACROIX, her white father, seated at one end of the table.

There is LAUGHTER and CROSS-TALK. A poor but happy family convening over the one square meal of the day.

MOMENTS LATER

Marie comes out of the kitchen into a darkened dining area carrying a birthday cake covered with FORTY candles.

Charles blows out the candles and the children clap and CHEER.

Marie hands Charles a small present. He shakes it and holds it up to the kids.

CHARLES
So what is it, a new rake?

The kids LAUGH and Charles opens the present: a pewter flask.

CHARLES (CONT'D)
Oh, now that's perfect. It's just what I need: a little somethin' to keep me warm on those cold winter nights.

13-YEAR-OLD CASSIE
Read it, Papa, read it! Mama had it inscribed.

Charles reads the inscription.

CHARLES
"*For Medicinal Purposes - To the Finest Man in my Life*".

Charles leans over and kisses Marie.

13-year-old Cassie smiling, savoring the love between them.

INT. BEDROOM - CASSIE'S CHILDHOOD HOME - LATER

Cassie tucks her younger brother, BOBBY, in bed. The little guy looks up at her mischievously, his mouth closed tight.

CASSIE
What's that, Bobby, hmm? What you got in there? C'mon, open up.

The little boy smiles proudly and reveals a missing tooth.

CASSIE (CONT'D)
Ah, look at that. That stubborn little tooth finally came out, didn't he. But where'd he go, huh?

She tickles Bobby.

CASSIE (CONT'D)
C'mon, where's he hiding?

Bobby LAUGHS, pulls his hand out from under the covers and shows Cassie the tooth.

CASSIE (CONT'D)
Okay now, let's do like I told you. We'll put it under your pillow and the tooth fairy will come. All right?

Bobby nods and Cassie puts the tooth under the pillow.

CASSIE (CONT'D)
Make sure you go to sleep now. That old tooth fairy's really shy and she won't come if you stay awake.

Cassie looks around at the other two children, one of her little sisters watching her.

CASSIE (CONT'D)
You too, Miss Nosey, go to sleep.

The little girl turns over.

Cassie stands and looks down lovingly at her baby brother and sisters. Turns down a bedside lamp and leaves.

CUT TO:

A MOONRISE

And a night breeze rustling through the trees.

The old swing swaying back and forth as if ridden by a ghost.

Cassie comes out the back door of the pitch dark HOME wrapped in a shawl and enters an OUTHOUSE.

CLOSE ON: A WOOD PILE

At the side of the home. An axe on top of it.

A TALL SHADOWY FIGURE enters frame and picks up the axe.

Carries it through the back door INTO THE HOME.

Bumps an apple cart that falls to the floor.

CHARLES LACROIX

Wakes up in bed. Rises onto an elbow and listens.

CHARLES
You hear that?

Marie groans and turns over, mutters sleepily.

MARIE
It's the wind, Charles.

Charles thinks. Leaves the bed.

Turns into the hall.

MARIE

Lies there with her eyes closed. An abrupt THUMP, THUMP comes from the hall. Marie stirs, concerned. She gets out of bed and goes to look for her husband.

Turns into the hall when WHOOSH!... the silvery blur of an axe caught in the moonlight whirls through the air and lands with a sickening THUD!

INT./EXT. OUTHOUSE - NIGHT

Cassie stands and leaves.

She approaches the house, the back door BANGING.

Cassie enters the HOME. Closes the back door curiously then turns and stumbles against the apple cart. She puts it back in place and listens. Wary.

Cassie walks through the blue darkness inside the house. Comes upon a dark mound obstructing the hall.

Moves closer and sees her mother and father lying in a pool of blood.

Cassie SHRIEKS and rebounds into the wall. Slips and falls in the blood.

She pulls herself to her feet in a panic, her bloody hands slipping on the wall.

Cassie staggers out of sight into the kid's room and lets out a gut-wrenching WAIL.

CASSIE (O.S.)
NOOOOOO!

OPENING CREDITS

FADE IN:

A BLACK ROOSTER PAINTED ON A SIGN

Outside a French Quarter bar.

INT. BLACK ROOSTER - DAY

A real dive, more cave than bar, where JUSTIFY JONES, a tall black bartender, plays checkers with METHUSELAH. A WORKING GIRL a stool away rubbing her feet, her highball and high heels on the bar before her.

CASSIE LACROIX (20)

Sits in a booth in the darkest corner of the bar slumped up against the shoulder of a handsome BLACK SAILOR.

Cassie sips a glass of bourbon. Misplaces the glass and spills ice on the table. She ponders the ice. Flicks it off the table with the tip of her finger.

CASSIE
Give me a cigarette.

Black Sailor lights a cigarette and puts it in Cassie's mouth.

BLACK SAILOR
Yeah, my mama didn't raise no fool. I'll put my time in with Uncle Sam and get me a pension. That's what I'll do. Then I'll get my own boat.

Cassie listens at the edge of her attention, taking in the working girl at the bar still rubbing her feet.

CASSIE
(thinks out loud)
I bet she walks ten miles a day.

Cassie sits up and takes a pewter flask from her purse. Fills it with what's left of a bottle of bourbon.

BLACK SAILOR
Hey, baby, what do you say we blow this joint? Go back to my room. I don't ship out till midnight.

Cassie puts away the flask and weighs the offer. Decides.

CASSIE
Why don't you take her? She looks like she could use a break... and the cash.
(flashes a glance at Black Sailor)
And don't tell me you never pay for it. After that sad performance last night, baby, you need lessons.

BLACK SAILOR
Hey, what's that supposed to mean?

Cassie shoulders her purse and slips out of the booth.

CASSIE
It means, lover, this party's over. I'm blowing this joint, just not with you.

She takes a drag and blows a veil of blue smoke at Black Sailor. Walks out.

CASSIE (CONT'D)
(as she goes, to Working Girl)
He's all yours, hon. His name's Lamar, but I call him Speedy. Charge him by the hour and you won't make a dime.

EXT. BOURBON STREET - DAY

Cassie walks under the porticos on the world famous street past other French Quarter bars pumping out JAZZ.

A group of SAILORS on a balcony across the street CAT-CALL at Cassie who ignores them and boards a

STREETCAR

Cassie drops into the nearest seat and lays her head against the window, bone-tired.

She gazes out the window with idle, lusterless eyes at all the color and seediness of the Big Easy in 1918:

WWI RATIONING and RECRUITMENT banners festooning the stores.

Quaint Creole Cottages with stained and decaying masonry.

The omnipresent signs of Jim Crow up and down the street: "Whites Only", "No Dogs, Negroes, Mexicans", "Colored Served In Rear", etc.

Soldiers and sailors, both black and white, cruising in packs by the bars, hellbent on a good time or the trouble it brings.

Flatfoot cops. Hustlers and shoeshine boys. Street musicians and working girls.

A DAPPER WHITE MAN in a polished roadster pulls up alongside the streetcar. Looks up at Cassie and smiles.

Cassie looks down at him with a blank expression. Casually raises her hand and flips him off.

EXT. TOULOUSE STREET - TWILIGHT

Cassie approaches an old Creole Townhouse, heavily-shadowed in the light of a dying day.

INT. CASSIE'S APARTMENT BUILDING - SAME

She pads through a dingy lobby where her FAT WHITE LANDLORD lies on a couch behind a counter reading a paper.

FAT LANDLORD
Well, look who finally decided to come home, the Oreo. Where the hell have you been?

CASSIE
Out feeding the kitty, tubs, as if it's any of your business.

FAT LANDLORD
Hey, I want my rent!

Cassie pauses at the bottom of the stairs.

CASSIE
You fix the hot water?

FAT LANDLORD
I'll get around to it.

CASSIE
(start up the stairs)
Yeah, right. And I'll get around to rent... one of these days.

INT. CASSIE'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Cassie enters her dark coop-like home.

Pulls the flask from her purse and takes a swig of the bourbon. Sets the flask and her purse on a nightstand.

An inscription on the flask reads: "*For Medicinal Purposes - To the Finest Man in my Life*"

Cassie slips out of her clothes and gets into bed.

LATER - A MELANCHOLY LIGHT FILTERS

Through Venetian blinds laying a soft glow on Cassie half in and out of the sheets, her nude shadow-draped body and soft black curls the envy of Aphrodite.

LATER STILL

Cassie sits up in bed and turns on a light. Listens to JAZZ MUSIC coming from outside.

She goes to a window and peeks through the blinds. SEES...

A BAR ACROSS THE STREET

People drinking and dancing.

CASSIE

Observes them for a time. Turns away and goes back to bed.

INT. NEWSROOM - NEW ORLEANS TRIBUNE - DAY

The newsroom of the first Black-owned daily newspaper in the country. It's like any other newsroom, the way a backwoods airfield is like any other airport, only less so.

Cassie, dressed in a long skirt and white blouse, walks in the front door. Threads her way through a HALF-DOZEN BLACK MEN and WOMEN working at their desks.

One by one they take notice of Cassie, watching her walk to a doorless small office on the side of the room.

HELEN, an elderly black woman, stops Cassie as she walks by.

HELEN
Hey, Cass... How are things? We missed you.

Helen gives Cassie a look, more than a meeting of eyes. Helen indicates with a glance a co-worker at another desk.

HELEN (CONT'D)
Earl and I came by your place... We was lookin' for ya.

Cassie's gaze goes from EARL to a glass-enclosed OFFICE across the newsroom where editor ROY JENKINS (40s) sits talking on the phone.

He sees Cassie. Stares coldly then turns away.

Cassie bypasses Helen and goes into her office.

Finds a YOUNG BLACK MAN seated at her desk. A box on a sideboard filled with Cassie's things.

CASSIE
Who are you? What are you doing at my desk?

Helen has followed Cassie in.

HELEN
Cass, this is Andy...
(voice faltering)
He's new.

Cassie takes it all in then makes a beeline for the EDITOR'S OFFICE where she opens the door and slams it behind her.

Roy, still on the phone, swivels in his chair and looks up at Cassie who just stands there fuming.

ROY
Let me call you back.

He hangs up.

CASSIE
I don't deserve this. You back-stabbing sonofabitch, after all I've done for you and this paper. How could you?

Roy just looks at Cassie without batting an eye.

ROY
Sit down, Cass. Go on, take a seat.

Cassie glares, breathes, calms down a little then takes a seat across from Roy.

ROY (CONT'D)
So where've you been?

CASSIE
You know where I've been, same place I always go, doing the same things I always do.

ROY
Better now?

Cassie has no retort, 'cause they both know that ain't true.

CASSIE
What do you want from me?

ROY
I don't want anything, never have, except maybe a little accountability.

CASSIE
We've been over this, Roy. I may have my faults, but I'm a hard worker and you know it. It's just now and then I need a little time to myself. You know, to work things out. I thought you understood.

ROY
I understand. But it's not now and then, and it's not a little time either. And I've given you a lot of leeway, probably too much. So here...

He takes an envelope from a drawer and tosses it on the desk.

ROY (CONT'D)
take all the time you need.

Cassie looks bitterly at Roy then takes the envelope and flips through the cash inside.

ROY (CONT'D)
That squares us.

CASSIE
Hardly.

Cassie exchanges a last meaningful look with Roy then heads for the door.

ROY
Hey, Cass.

Cassie stops in the doorway and turns.

ROY (CONT'D)
For what it's worth I think you're a helluva reporter.

CASSIE
For what it's worth, I don't give a damn what you think, you or anyone else.

Cassie leaves.

CUT TO:

A DARK AMBER LIQUID

Poured over ice, for Cassie, sitting at the bar in the BLACK ROOSTER, taking solace in her favorite bourbon.

START MONTAGE OF CASSIE ON ANOTHER BENDER

a.) Drinking alone with Justify, the bartender.

b.) With other PATRONS as the establishment fills.

c.) A handsome LATIN MAN lays cash on the bar, buys a round for Cassie. Clinks glasses and toasts.

d.) Cassie and LATIN MAN walk arm-in-arm down a sidewalk into a DANCE BAR.

e.) Where sweaty JAZZ MUSICIANS play under halos of light.

f.) Cassie dances. Drinks. Laughs. Lives it up like there's no tomorrow.

g.) Deeper into the night Cassie and Latin Man slow dance. He fondles her ass. Kisses her.

g.) A SAXOPHONIST plays a lilting, soulful tune beneath the conical throw of a dome light attached to a ceiling fan.

The flat wood blades of the fan turn in time with the music.

END MONTAGE ON A MATCH CUT TO:

A SIMILAR FAN

Above Cassie lying in a HOTEL ROOM staring up at the ceiling, her nude Latin lover lying beside her.

Cassie slips out of bed and wobbles into a BATHROOM.

Washes up at a rust-stained sink.

Stares into a mirror with bloodshot eyes, a woman weighed down by fatigue and self-loathing looking back at her.

Cassie shuts her eyes and we CUT TO BLACK.

After a long silence we hear a WOMAN WEEPING.

FADE IN ON:

MRS. CYNTHIA ELLIS (40s) a black charwoman hunched over on a bench out in front of a neighborhood GROCERY STORE, a bag of cleaning supplies at her feet.

Up the street a HEFTY uniformed POLICEMAN greets DETECTIVE PAUL HAWLEY (30s) exiting a 1915 Chevy 490 police car.

The Hefty Policeman ushers Paul from the black sedan over to Mrs. Ellis.

HEFTY POLICEMAN
(huffing and puffing)
This is the woman who called it in...
She's the one who found them.

Mrs. Ellis looks up at the stolid, handsome detective with tears streaming down her cheeks.

PAUL
(noting her cleaning supplies)
You work here?

MRS. ELLIS
Yes, sir. I comes here every day except Sunday to help Mrs. Maggio. I always open the store while they sleep in.
(holds up a key)
But today, they didn't come out... So I went into the house to check on em.
(breaks down and sobs)
Who could do such a thing.

Paul and the Hefty Policeman exchange helpless looks.

INT. MAGGIO'S GROCERY AND HOME - DAY

Paul walks down a narrow aisle lined with canned goods to a rear door that leads into the home.

Moves through a parlor into a dim hallway.

At the far end is a back door to the home with a LOWER PANEL REMOVED spilling light onto the hardwood floor.

Paul stops and stares at the murderer's entry point: the small square opening below the lock and the removed panel set carefully against the wall.

PLOP! PLOP! PLOP!

Blood drips from a hand hanging off a bed.

Detective Hawley in the doorway beyond it, viewing the bodies of JOSEPH (33) and CATHERINE MAGGIO (31) under the sheets.

Blood and brain matter splattered across the headboard.

Joseph's throat is cut and his head split in two at the ear. Catherine face-down beside him with an axe stuck in her skull.

ON PAUL

His expressionless eyes.

EXT. TOULOUSE STREET - DAY

Cassie walks down the sidewalk toward her apartment building.

Climbs the front steps then stops. Feels something. She turns and looks up the street at a CROWD outside a store about a block away.

Cassie approaches the group of people gathered out front of

MAGGIO'S GROCERY STORE

Weaves her way toward a policeman guarding the crime scene. Opens a purse slung from her shoulder and shows her employment card, the ID of the times, to the policeman.

THE CARD READS

NEW ORLEANS TRIBUNE
Identification Certificate

Name: CASSANDRA MARIE LACROIX

Occupation: REPORTER

Age: 20 Sex: FEMALE

The card also shows Cassie's address, an editor's signature and the date it was issued.

The policeman lets Cassie through to Detective Hawley who stands under the store awning questioning Mrs. Ellis.

As Cassie approaches Paul hands Mrs. Ellis over to Hefty Policeman and walks off toward his police car up the street.

CASSIE
(hurrying after him)
Detective Hawley. Detective!

Paul stops and turns.

CASSIE (CONT'D)
What's going on? Has something happened to the Maggios?

PAUL
You know these people?

CASSIE
Yeah, I shop here all the time. I live down the block. What's homicide doing here? Are they all right?

PAUL
No, they're not all right.

Paul walks on to his car.

CASSIE
(keeping pace)
What were they robbed? Do you have a suspect?

PAUL
I'll brief the press when I get back to the station. You can find out then.

CASSIE
Aw, come on, Detective, I'm first on the scene... and I know these people.

Paul walks into the street and opens his car door. Pauses and takes a good look at Cassie. Seems to like what he sees.

PAUL
It doesn't appear to be a robbery, and we have no suspects.

He gets in his car and Cassie hurries to the open window.

CASSIE
How were they killed? What was the murder weapon?

PAUL
An axe.

Paul starts the car and drives away and Cassie stares after him, stunned.

EXT. BLACK ROOSTER - DAY

Cassie crosses a street and enters her local watering hole.

INT. BLACK ROOSTER - DAY

Justify Jones is alone behind the bar cleaning a mirror. He turns when Cassie enters.

JUSTIFY
Cass. A little early isn't it?

CASSIE
For what?

Justify smiles and goes back to his cleaning.

JUSTIFY
If you want something to eat go next door. The cook called in sick again.

Cassie sits at the bar and fires up a cigarette.

CASSIE
That's 'cause he's been eating your food. Is your phone working?

JUSTIFY
Yeah, since I paid the bill.

Justify passes a candlestick phone behind the bar to Cassie then proceeds to set up a drink.

CASSIE
No, I just want to use your phone.

Cassie thinks about it.

CASSIE (CONT'D)
You know what, all right, go ahead, just one.

Justify grins wryly then pours the bourbon and goes back to cleaning the mirror.

Cassie dials a number.

INTERCUT between CASSIE in the bar and the TRIBUNE NEWSROOM.

RECEPTIONIST
New Orleans Tribune.

CASSIE
Hi, Gail. Let me talk to Roy.

RECEPTIONIST
Sure Cass, hold on a sec, he's not in his office.

The young RECEPTIONIST sets down the phone and walks over to Roy who is engaged with Helen at her desk.

RECEPTIONIST (CONT'D)
Sir, I have Cassie Lacroix on the phone.

Roy gives Helen a chagrined look.

ROY
Put it through to my desk.

Roy goes to his glass enclosed office.

Cassie waits.

Roy picks up the phone.

CASSIE
Hi Roy, it's Cassie.

CLICK - the phone goes dead.

CASSIE

Sets the ear-piece back in place and stares at the phone. Downs her drink.

CASSIE (CONT'D)
(to Justify)
Hey!

Justify turns and Cassie points at her empty glass.

EXT. BLACK ROOSTER - NIGHT

Cassie comes out of the bar with yet another HANDSOME MAN.

They walked down the street together, LAUGHING, weaving and stumbling, pretty well gone.

HANDSOME MAN
(slurred)
Hey, hold up, I gotta take a piss.

He turns into an alley and pees against the wall.

HANDSOME MAN (CONT'D)
You ever notice that once you start pissin' you just can't stop. Huh? Why is that?

He looks back at Cassie and sees an empty street.

FIND CASSIE

Riding a STREETCAR (#2).

Gazing out with glazed eyes at the passing streets. Worn thin by her destructive habits.

CASSIE

Walks up stairs and enters her APARTMENT. Shuts the door.

EXT. NEW ORLEANS TRIBUNE - DAY

A maroon 1916 Renault DM Tourer comes down the dusty unpaved street. Parks outside the Tribune's front door between a tarp-covered wagon and a donkey-drawn cart packed with fruit.

Roy Jenkins steps out carrying a briefcase.

He approaches the Tribune's front door fumbling with his keys. Looks up and stops in his tracks.

Cassie sits on a bench out front. She stands and stares. There is a moment here, finally...

ROY
If I didn't think you were going to come through with one helluva story, I wouldn't even consider this.

CASSIE
I won't let you down.

ROY
Don't let yourself down.

Something in Roy's eyes suggests he's more than on her side.

ROY (CONT'D)
Helen said you might've known the victims.

CASSIE
Yeah, I knew them. They were nice people.

ROY
Murdered with an axe.

Cassie and Roy exchange a meaningful look.

ROY (CONT'D)
You think there might be a connection?

CASSIE
Maybe. I don't know. But something doesn't feel right. I don't know how else to put it.

Roy comes up close to Cassie.

ROY
Just remember this isn't a crusade, no matter how personal it might feel to you. Treat it like any other story.

Cassie concurs with a nod.

ROY (CONT'D)
And keep an eye on your deadlines.

CASSIE
Count on it.

END OF WEBSITE EXCERPT. If you'd like to read the full script reach out to johnroyan@tahoefilmgroup.com.