

THE UNITED STATES VS BILLIE HOLIDAY

Screenplay by

Suzan-Lori Parks

Based on the Book, "Chasing the Scream" by Johann Hari

FINAL PICTURE SCRIPT

OVER BLACK:

IN 1937, A BILL TO FINALLY BAN THE LYNCHING OF AFRICAN-AMERICANS WAS CONSIDERED BY THE SENATE.

IT DID NOT PASS.

BILLIE HOLIDAY ROSE TO FAME IN PART DUE TO HER SONG STRANGE FRUIT, A LYRICAL, HORRIFYING DESCRIPTION OF A LYNCHING.

FADE IN:

NEW YORK CITY

MAY 3, 1957

A1 INT. TBD JANKY APARTMENT/RADIO STATION - NIGHT A1

BILLIE, strung out, but dressed to the nines, forces a smile as she sits for an interview with REGINALD LORD DEVINE - an aging white gossip columnist. Think Skip E. Lowe. MISS FREDDY, her devoted stylist, stands by watching.

Reginald grabs an item from his bar, sets it on his desk next to the recorder, then places the microphone on top of it.

REGINALD DEVINE

I'm going to put this up here so I can get both of us.

Reginald then starts recording. Reginald and Billie both have drinks.

REGINALD DEVINE (CONT'D)

My next guest has played Broadway. She's sold out Carnegie Hall. She played in Hollywood movies opposite the likes of Louis Armstrong. I am Reginald Lord Devine - and oh my god. Oh my god. I can't believe we have the opportunity to interview, as I live and breathe, the legend, the lady, my hero - Miss Billie Holiday, Miss Lady Day. Which do you prefer, honey?

FREDDY

She'd prefer you pay her her money first.

Reginald grabs the cash from his desk drawer, hands it over to Freddy.

REGINALD DEVINE
 (apologetically to Freddy)
 Here you go.

Freddy eyes the money. It's all there. He nods to Billie.

REGINALD DEVINE (CONT'D)
 Tell me, tell me - what's it like
 being a Colored woman?

Billie and Freddy exchange a look.

FREDDY
 (rolling his eyes)
 Jesus.

BILLIE
 Would you ask Doris Day a question
 like that?

REGINALD DEVINE
 Well, Doris Day's not colored,
 silly.
 (then)
 I wanna talk *Strange Fruit*. Yes our
 audience wants to know. *Strange*
Fruit. You keep getting in trouble
 for it. And you're so determined to
 keep singing it. Why?
 (laughs)
 Trouble maker.

BILLIE
 You ever seen a lynching? It's
 about human rights. You know? The
 government forgets that. They just
 want me to shut up and sing *All Of*
Me.

FADE IN:

TEN YEARS EARLIER

VO 2 EXT./INT. CAFE SOCIETY - NIGHT

VO 2

Billie performs ALL OF ME, looking beautiful in her red gown.
 As Jimmy enters the club and we meet the usual suspects -
 Monroe, Glaser etc.

REGINALD DEVINE (V.O.)
 Let's start where it all began at
 the Cafe Society. You know I loved
 that place.

(MORE)

REGINALD DEVINE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I remember seeing Lena Horne
tipping in with... who? Who was it?
Oh yeah, with that drunk Tallulah
Bankhead. That's the first time I
saw you sing, honey. Mesmerizing.
Oh, and everybody was there.

(laughs)

The wrong kinda place for the right
kinda people.

FREDDY (V.O.)

(snidely)

Like Jimmy Fletcher.

BILLIE (V.O.)

Leave him alone. He didn't know
what he was walking into.

FREDDY (V.O.)

Yes he did.

(snide)

Soldier boy.

REGINALD DEVINE (V.O.)

You were with that famous manager
back then. What was his name?

FREDDY (V.O.)

Crook.

They all laugh.

BILLIE (V.O.)

Yeah, crooked ass Joe Glaser. He
was there with my husband Monroe.

Billie finishes singing ALL OF ME.

BILLIE

Your goodbyes left me with eyes
that cried,
How can I go on dear without you,
You took the best, so why not take
the rest.
Baby, take all of me.

3

**INT. CAFE SOCIETY, BILLIE'S DRESSING ROOM - LATER - FEBRUARY 3
1947**

Backstage after the set. Her generously-sized dressing room
is shabby but chic; Billie's the center of attention.
Champagne flows as the elegant creme of the crowd rub elbows.

Joe Glaser, her trusted manager (30's) and white, rudely instructs A PHOTOGRAPHER where to snap photos. Billie smiles graciously. ROSLYN, 30s, with an eye patch, is her hairdresser. She whispers --

ROSLYN
Orson Welles is outside, he wants
to see you again.

Billie looks around to see if her husband's watching. Then, whispers back --

BILLIE
Tell him tomorrow. Monroe's leaving
town.

That said, Roslyn speaks in her usual loud voice.

ROSLYN
You got some fans in from Baltimore
that wanna see you.

Billie smiles, nods her approval.

4

EXT. BILLIE'S DRESSING ROOM - FEBRUARY 1947

4

Jimmy, awkward, way in the back of the crowd, tries to get a glimpse of the famous Lady Day. As he inches closer, he's stopped by Billie's husband, MONROE, 30s, black and rugged.

MONROE
And who are you?

JIMMY FLETCHER
Jimmy Fletcher.

MONROE
She don't know you, soldier-boy.

Keeping Jimmy at bay, he turns his attention back to Billie.

5

INT. BILLIE'S DRESSING ROOM - FEBRUARY 1947

5

Roslyn introduces this awestruck poor black couple.

ROSLYN
Come on y'all, meet Lady Day.

Billie ever the queen greets them warmly. They share a common look. Poor people recognize poor people. The man can barely speak he's so in awe.

WORKING CLASS MAN
Hello Miss Holiday.

BILLIE
Call me Billie.

The man too overwhelmed to talk, tears up.

WORKING CLASS WOMAN
We love you.

BILLIE
You're sweet. You came all the way
from Baltimore to see me?

WORKING CLASS WOMAN
(beaming)
Yes ma'am. And he's gone take me to
a fancy dinner too.

BILLIE
Geewhiz, I'm from Baltimore! Come
on, have some champagne.
(smiles)
Now you make sure he takes you to
Jimmy's Chicken Shack up in Harlem.
That's some good eating.

Through the crowd, Jimmy catches Billie's eye and she gives
him the briefest smile. Monroe sees this and slams the door
in Jimmy's face.

7

INT. FLETCHER HOME - SAME TIME - FEBRUARY 1947

7

Jimmy rushes into a lavish living room. He heads towards the
dining room, finding his mother, MRS. FLETCHER, late 50s,
regal, seated alone at the head of the table.

Jimmy kisses his mother on the cheek and quickly sits. Mrs.
Fletcher is not happy that he's late and Jimmy knows it.

JIMMY
Sorry, mom. I was on a job
interview.

Mrs. Fletcher never looking up from her plate, knows he's
lying.

MRS. FLETCHER
What job interviews are at 8:30 on
a Sunday evening, James? Your lies
are unbecoming and I'm getting
tired of it...
(disgusted)
Living off your father's hard
earned trust.
(then)
(MORE)

MRS. FLETCHER (CONT'D)
 You know I disdain tardiness.
 Sunday dinners all we have together
 now that you've moved out.

JIMMY
 I was downtown interviewing for
 this writer's position at The Sun
 News. Had to go to the editor's
 home. I got the job, mom.

Mrs. Fletcher eyes him, deciding whether or not he's telling
 the truth. She wants to believe him.

MRS. FLETCHER
 Your father would turn in his grave
 with all that he accomplished.

JIMMY
 Mom, please.

Mrs. Fletcher searches into her son's eyes.

MRS. FLETCHER
 You're not fooling nobody walking
 around in that uniform. Just
 because I don't hang in the gutter
 with your friends, doesn't mean I
 don't know what's going on, James.
 (then)
 You're hanging out with those jazz
 musicians in them clubs and god
 knows what else.

Jimmy stands and hugs her from behind. He gives her a kiss on
 the cheek. We see they are close.

JIMMY
 I do hang out at some jazz clubs. I
 even met Billie Holiday.

This brightens Mrs. Fletcher's mood. She's intrigued.

MRS. FLETCHER
 Really?!

Jimmy knows how to play his mother.

JIMMY
 Yes, really. You should be
 congratulating me on my new job. I
 start tomorrow. I can finally get
 out of this uniform.

MRS. FLETCHER

I love that you're writing, James.
I hear that Billie Holiday is quite
the lady.

JIMMY

I hear just the opposite. I don't
think she's a lady.

MRS. FLETCHER

Those are just rumors. Anytime
somebody colored is doing something
right, they paint us out wrong.

8

INT. CAFE SOCIETY - AFTERNOON - FEBRUARY 1947

8

Monroe sternly watches Billie as he eats his lunch: a napkin tucked in his collar, his pork chops and whiskey.

A TRUE ROMANCE COMIC BOOK - Billie's beautifully manicured hands holding it as she reads.

HER CIGARETTE SMOKE curling over the top of the book.

She's wearing slacks and heels, with her feet up on the table. Her lovely face, animated by what's she's reading.

It's too early in the day for the club to be open for business, but Billie and her team are working.

MISS FREDDY, 40s the man in charge of Billie's outfits, has TWO EVENING GOWNS for her to consider. But Billie doesn't seem to have noticed.

JOE GLASER meticulously watches over the musicians.

ON STAGE -

The great LESTER "PREZ" YOUNG, late 30s, shy, on saxophone, jamming with an AUDITIONING SAX PLAYER.

BILLIE

Prez, honey, from the top.

LESTER YOUNG

Sure, Lady.

They start back in, but it's not sounding great.

A WAITER brings Billie a freshly cooked steak on a plate. Billie directs the Waiter to put the food on the floor. ANGLE ON MISTER - Billie's boxer-dog, happy eating the meat on the plate.

IN BILLIE'S LAP - her chihuahua CHIQUITA, contentedly eating treats out from Lady's hand. She talks to him.

BILLIE

Now roll over.

The chihuahua rolls over. The boxer stops eating and rolls over too. Billie chuckles.

MISS FREDDY

You got him rolling round in your crotch.

MONROE

(nonplussed)

It's a damn circus act in here.

Nobody pays attention to him.

MISS FREDDY

Vogue Magazine wants to interview me. About your gowns and such.

MONROE

You ain't giving no interview to no magazine. Someone wants to hear about her they can come talk to me.

Miss Freddy rolls his eyes. Billie just ignores Monroe.

MISS FREDDY

(re: the dresses)

They sent these over.

BILLIE

I'll take both of them.

MONROE

They'll cost me an arm and a leg!

MISS FREDDY

Shut the fuck up, Monroe.

BILLIE

Miss Freddy? Let's send the dressmaker one of my husband's arms.

Folks crack up at that. Monroe's been put in his place.

Now it's time to give her attention to the auditioning musician. Joe Glaser is wondering what she thinks. Billie listens a beat. Then -

BILLIE (CONT'D)
Joe, he ain't clicking.

JOE GLASER
Ok, man, thanks for coming in.

The Sax Player is crestfallen. He nods thanks to Billie, packs up, leaves.

Monroe, reclaiming Billie's attention, waves a newspaper article in her face.

MONROE
Take a look.

A QUARTER-PAGE ADVERTISEMENT: "Come Hear Lady Day sing "Strange Fruit" at CAFE SOCIETY."

BILLIE
(smiles)
Looks good.

MONROE
They should be running half-page ads at least. Plus, you should be getting a bigger cut of the door. Shit, you're practically topping the *DOWN BEAT* poll. Shit, even Eleanor Roosevelt has to pull strings to get in here.

BILLIE
You got a point. Glaser?

Joe Glaser lights a reefer. Never looking up from his paperwork.

JOE GLASER
I'm working on it.

MONROE
When she started here she was a nobody and now she's a star.

JOE GLASER
I'm working on it, ok?

BILLIE
(to calm Monroe)
Joe's working on it.

This seems to calm Monroe.

Eyeing the newspaper again, Billie flips it over to the side Monroe didn't show her. Sure enough, there's something:

A PHOTOGRAPH of HARRY J. ANSLINGER, looking handsome, pinstripe suited, seated at a bank of microphones.

THE CAPTION: "Harry Anslinger, head of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, testifies to Congress this week."

HEADLINE above the NEWS STORY: "Anslinger Promises Results."

BILLIE'S FACE, studying Anslinger's photograph.

BILLIE (CONT'D)
(cutting, to Monroe)
Your friend's in the paper.

MONROE
He ain't no friend of mine.

BILLIE
Sure he is. Glaser's friend too.

Monroe doesn't answer that. Billie eyes them both up, wants to believe them but isn't completely sold. Glaser ignores her, now glancing at the SET LIST.

At the bottom of the list of songs, Glaser has crossed off "Strange Fruit." He hands it to Billie:

MONROE
I cut Strange Fruit.

BILLIE
NO! I want to sing the damn song.
The club advertises it and people
want to hear it.

JOE GLASER
And I've told you a hundred times,
people in high places don't want
you singing that song.

BILLIE
And I've asked you one hundred
times, what people?

Joe shrugs. Looks at Monroe for help here.

BILLIE (CONT'D)
Don't look over to him. I'm talking
to you. You work for me.

JOE GLASER

I'm busting my ass out there for
you kid. Why do you have to make
this shit so difficult for me?

(then, finally)

The Government.

Billie knew it all along.

BILLIE

Yeah, "the government." People like
your buddy Anslinger, right?

MONROE

Quit it with that, huh?

BILLIE

That song means a lot to me.

JOE GLASER

Meeropol wrote it and he's a god
damn Commie.

BILLIE

I don't care.

(determined)

I'm making a statement about my
people.

JOE GLASER

Come on Lady.

MONROE

You're not singing it.

BILLIE

I'll sing what I want.

Monroe looks at Lester Young.

MONROE

You put her up to this?

LESTER YOUNG

If Lady wants to sing the song -

MISS FREDDY

Nigga, it's giving a face to all
them young boys being lynched!

MONROE

Mind your business Freddy.

(bullying Billie)

We ain't going over this again.

Monroe looks as if he's about to hit her. Joe Glaser turns
away, not in the mood for this.

Billie takes another look at the newspaper then at Joe and Monroe.

BILLIE
If you all ain't Anslinger's friends then how come you both always be sitting with him?

JOE GLASER
We don't sit with him. He sits with us.

MONROE
What do you expect us to do? Run from him? He's a FED. We're trying to protect your ass.

BILLIE
(looks him in the eyes)
Please don't lie to me Monroe. I feel alone when you do.

MONROE
I'm not lying.

Monroe grabs her, kisses her. A little too rough. Billie doesn't mind it at all. People turn their heads. It's a little uncomfortable.

MONROE (CONT'D)
I swear.

JOE GLASER
It's for your own good, ok?

Lester's pissed that she gave in. They both know the effect that Monroe and Glaser have on her. Billie's sorry she's letting Lester down.

LESTER
Fuck the feds and fuck Anslinger.

Lester walks out.

A10

INT. HALLWAY, GOVERNMENT BLDG - WASHINGTON DC - ANOTHER DAY - 1947

A10

A confident and very handsome, HARRY ANSLINGER, 30's walks down a hallway holding a stack of files. He enters a stuffy parlor to a group of waiting white men seated at a round table.

B10

INT. OFFICE PALOR ROOM - GOVERNMENT BLDG - WASHINGTON DC B10

CONGRESSMAN JOHN E. RANKIN and CONGRESSMAN J. PARNELL THOMAS
sit annoyed with SENATOR JOSEPH MCCARTHY

CONGRESSMAN JP THOMAS
I wish I got me a Roy Cohn.

HARRY ANSLINGER
Gentleman, you have to help me get
this budget pushed through
congress.

CONGRESSMAN JP THOMAS
We just increased your budget last
year. Why is this so important to
you, Harry?

HARRY ANSLINGER
Drugs and niggers are a
contamination to our great American
civilization!

Anslinger gives his files to Senator McCarthy's assistant,
ROY COHN to pass out to the men.

CONGRESSMAN JOHN E. RANKIN
That's why we helped you in the
first place.

HARRY ANSLINGER
When the niggers use drugs they
forget their place. They defy
us. That's why this Holiday woman
must be stopped. She sings this
Strange Fruit song and it's causing
a lot of people to think ...the
wrong way. We've got the husband in
the bag. But she won't stop singing
it.

Roy Cohn looks to Senator McCarthy for permission to talk.

ROY COHN
Excuse me sir, might I add
something.

Senator McCarthy nods okay.

ROY COHN (CONT'D)
People are calling the song a
musical starting gun for a so
called civil rights movement.

CONGRESSMAN JP THOMAS
So what are your plans? You can't
arrest her for singing a song.

HARRY ANSLINGER
Yes I can. She's inciting a riot.

ROY COHN
That's a misdemeanor at best.
(smiles)
She's a drug addict though.

HARRY ANSLINGER
Exactly.

CONGRESSMAN JOHN E. RANKIN
Go after that bitch on the drugs.

10

**INT. MIDTOWN APARTMENT, BEDROOM - NYC, LATE AFTERNOON - APRIL
1947**

A SPOON FILLED WITH HEROIN, HELD OVER A FLAME - as Billie
cooks up her fix.

BILLIE
Joe Guy, I came down here for you
to save my ass.

JOE GUY, 20s, black, young and recklessly handsome unstraps
his belt tied around his arm. He's already shot up. He grabs
for his trumpet. Plays a killer tune. Billie hums along. She
smiles. He makes her happy.

JOE GUY
You don't need me to do that. Shit,
Lady, you can do that all by
yourself.

Billie, her vein bulging, and her arm tied with a stocking,
fills the shared syringe and shoots up.

12

INT. CAFE SOCIETY - NIGHT - APRIL 1947

12

ON STAGE - Billie in her beautiful gown with her radiant
smile. She commands the stage and the mixed raced audience.
This time mostly made up of American soldiers. And they are
loud! Jimmy Fletcher watches.

Monroe sits next to Harry Anslinger. THE AUDIENCE - a throng
of radiant fans.

For the first time, Anslinger sees Billie up close. He takes in every detail of her person, her dress, her hair, her jewelry, her figure.

ON STAGE - LOUIS ARMSTRONG on trumpet, BOBBY TUCKER, late 20s, on piano and Billie, in fine form, smiles. She has to practically scream over the crowd.

BILLIE

Here we are! Beautiful little show!

Billie yells out to a group of loud soldiers in the back.

BILLIE (CONT'D)

(loud)

Can you hear me over there?

(beat)

Cause I can hear you.

Everyone laughs. They immediately quiet down. She can control any audience.

BILLIE (CONT'D)

Say hi to Louis Armstrong
everybody!

Louis nods. The audience applauds like crazy for them.

BILLIE (CONT'D)

We're recording a V-disk, for all
of our men and women in the
service, and that makes tonight all
the more special.

(sincere)

You all are fighting a real fight
out there. We love you for it.

Don't we Louis?

LOUIS ARMSTRONG

(smiles)

Yes Lady!

Folks cheer, and Jimmy joins them. Monroe applaud politely.

Anslinger looks around, not liking what he sees. Billie's patriotism, and her fans, white and black, some wealthy, many working class, all loving her. Lots of SOLDIERS IN UNIFORM, of all colors, cheering her on.

FROM THE BANDSTAND - Billie sees, Anslinger and Monroe sitting together again. Monroe is in deep conversation with Anslinger. She is sucker punched by this. Billie finally catches Monroe's attention. She smiles at him, hiding her feelings of betrayal.

BILLIE
 (to Louis Armstrong)
 I feel lonely, Louis. How about we
 try, "SOLITUDE".

Louis throws his famous smile.

LOUIS ARMSTRONG
 Anything for you, Lady.

She counts the other MUSICIANS in. Eyeing Monroe and
 Anslinger she sings.

BILLIE
 (singing)
 In my solitude, you haunt me, with
 dreadful ease, of days gone by, in
 my solitude, you taunt me, with
 memories, that never die...

The audience in rapt attention. You could hear a pin drop.

BILLIE (CONT'D)
 (singing)
 ...I sit in my chair, and filled
 with despair, there's no one could
 be so sad, with gloom everywhere I
 sit, and I stare, I know that I'll
 soon go mad...

Monroe shifts uncomfortably. Anslinger's poker face softens
 under her spell. Jimmy Fletcher is spellbound.

Anslinger, leaning forward now, his eyes enchanted, something
 deep within him stirring. Uncertain of what to do with
 himself, he wipes his face with his hand.

14

INT./EXT. BILLIE'S DRESSING ROOM, CAFE SOCIETY - ANOTHER 14
NIGHT - APRIL 1947

The crush of friends is long gone. Billie, high and alone.

JUST OUTSIDE THE DOOR -

Miss Freddy sits. Jimmy approaches with some flowers. Miss
 Freddy looks him up and down, greedy.

MISS FREDDY
 What you looking for?

JIMMY
 Is the lady around?

MISS FREDDY
So you finally struck up the nerve
to come see her?

He calls for Billie.

MISS FREDDY (CONT'D)
Billie?

BILLIE
Yeah?

MISS FREDDY
Lady, this writer nigga wants to
see you.

BILLIE
Send him back.

MISS FREDDY
You better not be one of those
gossip people.
(to Billie)
I'm gonna go get something to eat.

As Jimmy peeks in. Billie tries to move her drug works out of
sight.

BILLIE
No uniform tonight, soldier boy?

JIMMY FLETCHER
Hi.

BILLIE
You here all the time Jimmy
Fletcher.

Jimmy is surprised that she remembered his name. Smiles. He
comes into the room. Hands her the flowers.

JIMMY FLETCHER
Great show tonight.

BILLIE
And now it's quiet. I don't like
the quiet. It's so noisy, you know?

They stare at each other. Sexual tension.

BILLIE (CONT'D)
You don't got a girl?

JIMMY FLETCHER

Nope. I served my time for our country. Now, you know, hoping to find a good job.

(re: the drugs)

Your boyfriend give you that?

Billie just smiles, the beautiful sphinx.

BILLIE

You want some?

JIMMY FLETCHER

No thanks.

BILLIE

It takes the edge off, you know.

Jimmy simply nods.

BILLIE (CONT'D)

Pour yourself a drink?

JIMMY FLETCHER

Sure.

She hands him an opened bottle and a whiskey glass. He pours for himself. She takes back the bottle. They clink bottle to whiskey glass.

BILLIE

Cheers.

They drink. Him from the glass, her from the bottle.

JIMMY FLETCHER

Why don't you ever sing "Strange Fruit"?

BILLIE

I gotta be pretty high to sing that.

JIMMY FLETCHER

Never heard you sing it.

This lights up Billie a little.

BILLIE

It's a song about important things that are going on in our country. I don't think people know that I care about that stuff. Most of my other songs are only about love.

JIMMY FLETCHER
Love's important too. Right?

Billie takes a moment, studying Jimmy. There's something interesting about this guy.

BILLIE
One day I'll quit the drinking and
I'll get off the junk too. Maybe
go to one of those hospitals, you
know. You know how to do the waltz?
That shit is so pretty.

JIMMY FLETCHER
Yes.

BILLIE
You do?

Jimmy gives an encouraging smile. She laughs gently. He laughs with her.

JIMMY FLETCHER
You're funny.

BILLIE
Cause I know what you want.

Sexual tension again. They're both enjoying it.

She gets up. Stands in front of him. She smells incredible. Everything a man would want. She leans past him, her body hanging above him, as she pulls something from a shelf. A 78 RECORD. LOVER MAN. She hands it graciously to him.

He looks at the cover and then at her. He's never been this close to someone so famous. She takes the record, signs it, then gives it back.

Jimmy looks at the record, happy. Billie smiles.

BILLIE (CONT'D)
Which one of my songs is your
favorite song?

JIMMY FLETCHER
"ALL OF ME".

BILLIE
You like that song, huh? Well
that'll be our song then.

Billie sings a piece of the song and begins to waltz.

ROSLYN (CONT'D)
 (to Jimmy)
 He choked.

Jimmy eyes Billie. Looks beautiful, even mourning. Billie, Roslyn and Freddie walk out of the church, leaving Jimmy alone.

PRE-LAP

REGINALD (V.O.)
 Our audience wants to know...

A1 INT. TBD JANKY APARTMENT/RADIO STATION - NIGHT A1

Back to the interview scene.

REGINALD
 So tell me, you are pretty tight with Tallulah Bankhead, if you know what I mean.

FREDDY
 Wait a minute, what's Tallulah Bankhead gotta do with *Strange Fruit*? You said this interview was a retrospective on her career. Cut the tape off. Cut the tape off.

A terrified Reginald cuts it off.

FREDDY (CONT'D)
 (threatening)
 Listen bitch. You got one more time to ask a smart question.

Reginald turns the tape back on.

16 INT. CLANDESTINE/CHIC HOTEL LOBBY - ELEVATOR - SAME DAY - 16
APRIL 1947

Tallulah and Billie enter the hotel. They both giggle, excited to be with each other. We see a different side of Billie, almost childlike.

BILLIE
 I think we got away with it.
 Slipping in here unnoticed.

Billie lights a cigarette.

TALLULAH BANKHEAD
Vogue Magazine wants to interview
 me about you. Should I talk to
 them?

BILLIE
 Go head.

They pass the front desk manager, a white middle aged man.
 Billie and Tallulah are unaware of his uncomfortable gaze.
 Billie whispers in a sexy tone.

BILLIE (CONT'D)
 Just take me to your room.

They enter the elevator. A young BLACK MAN serves as the
 elevator operator.

BLACK ELEVATOR MAN
 Now you know I can't let you in
 here.

TALLULAH BANKHEAD
 James, don't you know who this is?

BLACK ELEVATOR MAN
 I know who it is Miss Bankhead. I
 also know I want my job.
 (quieter to Billie)
 Miss Holiday the only negro allowed
 in this elevator is me running it.

BILLIE
 Negro's can't, but a bunch bull
 daggers can?

Black elevator man is sad but stands his ground. He wants his
 job.

BLACK ELEVATOR MAN
 (to Billie)
 You gone have to take the service
 elevator.

Billie looks at him defiantly. No one moves for a moment. The
 front desk manager appears.

BLACK ELEVATOR MAN (CONT'D)
 (pleads)
 Miss Holiday, they killing us for
 less down south. Lynching men and
 women. Please don't make no scene
 here.

TALLULAH BANKHEAD
I'll take the damn service elevator
with you.

But now Billie is embarrassed. She walks out leaving Tallulah alone.

21

INT. EARLE THEATRE - SAME TIME - MAY 1947

21

Billie walks onto the stage. The cops scattered throughout the crowd don't go unnoticed by her. Billie comes to the mic. The crowd applauds.

She stares defiantly at the white cops. She's radiant and brave. They stand their ground. Her need to sing the song trumps everything. She looks over to Lester for approval. He nods.

BILLIE
(singing)
Southern trees bear a strange
fruit.

The audience, segregated, listening intently, hanging on to Billie's every word and note. Billie's eyes meet Monroe. She's about to tear up but he doesn't care. He turns to leave. Carter smiles. He's been waiting for this moment. He turns to a nearby cop.

AGENT CARTER
Get her off that stage.

The cop signals his partners. Billie belts like a warrior.

BILLIE
Blood on the leaves and blood at
the root.

Jimmy Fletcher, in the colored seats cannot believe his ears.

ANGLE ON HIS NOTEBOOK -

Writing down her setlist, noting "Strange Fruit." He looks over to TWO COPS leaving the theatre to alert their superiors. Then a group of policemen with BILLY CLUBS move towards Billie and the band. They are coming for her. On stage, Lester sees what's about to go down. He stops playing. Grabs Billie.

LESTER
We got to get the hell out of here
Lady.

But Billie won't go. She is determined to sing.

BILLIE
Get off me, Prez.

On cue, the rest of her band rushes her off the stage. Chaos erupts in the crowd as the white cops frantically try to get to them. Billie struggles unsuccessfully to stay on stage. Fletcher takes note of all.

BILLIE (CONT'D)
(screams)
I'm singing this damn song.

22 **EXT. EARL THEATER - BACK DOOR** 22

Billie and Lester emerge and head to Lester's car.

LESTER
Hurry your ass up!

24 **INT. JOE GUY'S NY APARTMENT - NEXT DAY - MAY 1947** 24

Joe Guy and Billie hanging out. They've just shot up.

JOE GUY
Your safe here, baby.

BILLIE
Joe, will you do me a favor and get me some ice cream?

JOE GUY
I don't have any ice cream.

BILLIE
Come on honey, just go to Libby's. It's right around the corner. Ice cream sounds good.

JOE GUY
What kind of ice cream you want?

BILLIE
Chocolate ice cream. I want some chocolate ice cream.

Joe tries to get up, but falls back on the couch.

BILLIE (CONT'D)
Get up Joe. Fine, I'll go get it myself.

Billie cracks up. Taking charge, she steadies herself, makes sure her clothes are on correctly, goes to the door.

ANGLE ON - Billie opening the door. Then Billie sees Jimmy's face and badge.

BILLIE (CONT'D)

Shit.

She tries to slam the door shut but Jimmy keeps the door open with his foot.

Billie is completely dumbfounded. Even high she's spun.

BILLIE (CONT'D)

No! Oh my God, you're a FED.

JIMMY FLETCHER

You're both under arrest.

Fletcher and his white partner, AGENT MCDERMOTT, 40s, hurry into the room, followed by two uniformed policemen.

McDermott quickly handcuffs Joe Guy who doesn't resist.

Fletcher goes after Billie. The cops ransack the apartment for drugs.

Billie has grabbed the drugs. She's heading into the bathroom to get rid of them. Then, suddenly, she stops in her tracks and turns to face Fletcher.

BILLIE

You drank with me backstage, I was gonna kiss you, pretending you was a soldier? ... You came to my baby's funeral ...all the while you're just some fucking Fed.

The insult is wounding, but Jimmy stays on course.

JIMMY FLETCHER

(trying to calm her)

Miss Holiday --

BILLIE

I gave you my record.

She's hurt but hides it well.

BILLIE (CONT'D)

You probably don't even like my music.

JIMMY FLETCHER
(pained)
You are under arrest.

BILLIE
And you're a son of a bitch.

JIMMY FLETCHER
Empty your hands, Ma'am.

BILLIE
Suck my ass.

JIMMY FLETCHER
Give me what's in your hand,
please.

She throws the drug-packet at him. Powder goes everywhere. He wipes a bit off his face, examining the stuff. Sad that he's found heroin. Pleased that blowing his cover won't be in vain.

BILLIE
Just look at you. You lying black
bitch. What did I ever do to you?

Jimmy tries not to be hurt by this. He stays the course.

JIMMY FLETCHER
A police woman will be here
shortly. She'll search you for
further evidence.

BILLIE
You wanna search me? Come on and
search me. Police bitch is only
going to feel me up.

JIMMY FLETCHER
No, Ma'am.

BILLIE
That's what you've really been
wanting.

Billie brazenly strips in front of him. She holds his gaze. Jimmy averts his eyes to the floor. *

Billie with Glaser, heading up the courthouse steps. She stops to talk with REPORTERS.

BLACK FEMALE REPORTER
 You stay in trouble with the law
 Miss Holiday. You must be
 embarrassed. Don't you want to set
 an example for your race like Ella
 Fitzgerald or Marian Anderson?

This hurts Billie but she smiles back.

BILLIE
 You know what's funny? The people
 who are the hardest on me are my
 own race.
 (then)
 They've taught us to hate each
 other. Addicts are people who got a
 bad illness. We need help. Not no
 jail time.

She heads up the steps with dignity. REVEAL JIMMY, also
 heading into the courthouse.

26

INT. PHILADELPHIA COURTROOM - LATER - MAY 1947

26

Billie looks at the PUBLIC DEFENDER that's standing. Joe
 Glaser sits behind her. Her husband Monroe is nowhere to be
 found.

They face the JUDGE. THE PROSECUTOR sits at the opposing
 table. Jimmy, sits with Carter and Anslinger behind the
 Prosecution. Anslinger nods and smiles to Joe Glaser who
 quickly looks away. Billie catches it though. She can't
 believe it.

BAILIFF
 The United States vs Billie
 Holiday. Docket number 14234. The
 honorable Judge Cullen Ganey
 presiding. All rise.

Billie scans the room like a trapped bird. She sees Jimmy. He
 looks away...

LATER - Billie on the stand.

JUDGE GANEY
 We need to know the whole truth
 about your addiction. We want you
 to help trace the drug down to its
 source. Now the police found heroin
 in your room at the Attucks Hotel.
 Who supplies you?

Billie stays quiet.

BILLIE

Just send me to the hospital and
get this over with.

Judge Ganey has lost his patience.

JUDGE GANEY

I hereby sentence you to serve one
year and a day --

BILLIE

(interrupting)

You're sending me to jail?!

JUDGE GANEY

You will be remanded to Alderson
Women's Prison.

She looks at her public defender shocked. It sinks in. The realization that Glaser has truly betrayed her. She can only plead with him.

BILLIE

You said they'd send me to a
hospital.

Both in tears now.

BILLIE (CONT'D)

You set me up. You both set me up.
I'm not going to prison!

The gavel comes down. The verdict has been rendered.

BILLIE (CONT'D)

It's cause I sang that damn song.
It ain't about no drugs!

Billie turns to Joe - hurt - as she's handcuffed by the bailiff.

BILLIE (CONT'D)

Joe you lied to me! You said
they'd send me to a hospital! Not
no jail!

(pleads)

I've paid you all that money! I'm
not going to no jail! Joe I trusted
you!

Jimmy clocks Anslinger's satisfaction. Finally, Billie looks at Fletcher with complete disappointment. Jimmy's head is spinning. They lead Billie away.

*

A28

INT. ALDERSON WOMEN'S PRISON SHOWER - MAY 1947

A28

A nude Billie is lined up with six other nude female prisoners. New entries being hosed down for lice.

29

INT. ALDERSON WOMEN'S PRISON, BILLIE'S CELL - MAY 1947

29

Billie in her bed. Writhing in pain. Going through detox.
Cellmate, GLORIA, black, rolls over.

27

INT. BUREAU OFFICE, NYC, DOWNSTAIRS AREA - ANOTHER DAY - MAY 1947

This is where the "Colored" Agents work.

The floor fans are going full blast, trying to cool the stuffy, dingy, fluorescent-lit basement room. The industrial green walls need a fresh coat of paint. The over-used file cabinets hunkered against each other. A mop and bucket linger in the corner as if one of the men at the desks might be called upon to take on that task.

Each desk has only the basics. A telephone, a typewriter, a stack of folders, a coffee cup. Varying degrees of neatness. Everything in the office looks like it's second-hand.

ON THE WALLS - photographs of PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES HARRY S. TRUMAN, DIRECTOR OF THE FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION, J. EDGAR HOOVER, and, DIRECTOR OF THE FEDERAL BUREAU OF NARCOTICS, HARRY JACOB ANSLINGER.

IN THE CORNER - A weary American Flag on a stand.

FOUR BLACK BUREAU AGENTS hard at work. Typing up reports, making investigative phone calls, looking through surveillance photos, filing the paperwork.

When Jimmy enters the room, the Agents stop their work and get to their feet treating Jimmy to a standing ovation.

Jimmy accepts the praise, but ambivalence is creeping in. His co-worker AGENT SAM WILLIAMS, 30s, lighter shade of soul and very dapper, takes notice.

AGENT SAM WILLIAMS
 Man, smile. Don't you realize what
 you've done? We've just begun the
 war on drugs and you're leading it.

JIMMY
 Yes, Sam, I guess I am.

AGENT SAM WILLIAMS
 You're my hero, man. All of ours.
 You are paving the way. Hoover and
 them white boys better get ready.
 Can't nobody do it better than a
 colored man if we get the
 opportunity.

Off Jimmy's smile.

28

INT. MRS. FLETCHER'S HOME - NIGHT - MAY 1947

28

Jimmy and Mrs. Fletcher are seated in the family room just
 after Sunday dinner. Mrs. Fletcher yanks a newspaper from
 under her seat and throws it at him. Jimmy looks down and
 sees his face on the newspaper.

MRS. FLETCHER
 "YOU SHOULD BE CONGRATULATING ME ON
 MY NEW JOB THAT I START TOMORROW."
 You lied to me just like you lied
 to Ms. Holiday.

Jimmy looks at his mother. Busted. Conflicted.

MRS. FLETCHER (CONT'D)
 Why wouldn't you tell me that
 you're working as a Federal Agent?

Jimmy is suddenly getting a headache.

JIMMY
 They swear you to secrecy, mom.

MRS. FLETCHER
 You could do anything with
 yourself, why that?

JIMMY
 Cause I didn't want to be an
 undertaker.

MRS. FLETCHER
 The mortuary business didn't work
 out so bad for us, James.

(MORE)

MRS. FLETCHER (CONT'D)
Your father's money left you with
opportunities.

Jimmy feels awful that his mother is hurt. He tries to defend
his position.

JIMMY
How many people we know have died
from OD's, mom? Drugs are turning
Harlem upside down. I wanted to
make a difference.
(then)
I'm one of the first black Federal
Agents. Ever.

MRS. FLETCHER
They're using you. It's not just
about the drugs. They don't want
her singing that song. But if she
don't sing it, who will? Ain't no
other Negro star bold enough to.
She's singing it for all of us.

B32 **INT. JIMMY FLETCHER'S HALLWAY APARTMENT - LATER - JULY 1947**32

He holds a large box in one hand as he fidgets with the key
to his front door in the other.

C32 **INT. JIMMY FLETCHER'S HALLWAY APARTMENT - LATER - JULY 1947**32

Inside he opens the box. It's a record player.
He puts on that LOVER MAN 78 that Billie gave him.
Stands there listening and watching the record go around.

32 **INT. ALDERSON WOMEN'S PRISON, BILLIE'S CELL - SAME TIME - 32**
JULY 1947

It's hot. Billie lays in her bed reading a comic, fanning
herself with her metal prison plate. Women prisoners walking
past her cell, can't help but stare. One prisoner is brazen
enough to come directly up to the cell. Never looking up from
her comic, Billie throws her plate hard at the bars.

BILLIE
BEAT IT!

The frightened prisoner runs off. Billie puts her comic down.
She stares at the ceiling frustrated. Angry.

31 **INT. JIMMY FLETCHER'S APARTMENT - NEXT DAY - JULY 1947** 31

It's hot in his spare cold water flat. Jimmy's in his boxers, in front of the fan.

Her record is still the only one he owns. He's studiously reading the liner notes. Then he gets an idea.

33 **INT. JIMMY FLETCHER'S APARTMENT - MORNING - NOVEMBER 1947** 33

Jimmy looks out his window. We see that fall has turned to winter. It's snowing.

He smokes a cigarette. Drink in hand. "Lover Man" plays but the record's scratched. He doesn't seem to notice.

34 **INT. BLACK-OWNED NEIGHBORHOOD EATERY - LATER - NOVEMBER 1947** 34

Miss Freddy and Jimmy sit across from each other. Jimmy can't believe Freddy is wearing Billie's mink. The waitress serves them pigs feet, macaroni and cheese, collard greens and cornbread separate them. Both dig in.

MISS FREDDY

You paying, right?

JIMMY FLETCHER

How she doing?

MISS FREDDY

You don't got nobody in the jail spying on her?

JIMMY FLETCHER

Just thought I'd ask.

MISS FREDDY

I ain't worked a day in the last six months. You dragged me all the way down here.

(then)

Is this official?

Jimmy nods, no.

MISS FREDDY (CONT'D)

(curious)

Why'd you do it? Why'd you really do it?

Jimmy looks down at his coffee.

JIMMY FLETCHER

(sincere)

My father told me when I was a kid that drugs are going to be the death of our people. I believe that to be true.

*

MISS FREDDY

You need to know something real about the person you put in jail, one of "OUR PEOPLE".

Jimmy looks on.

MISS FREDDY (CONT'D)

She was raped. When she was only ten years old.

(then)

You don't know how it is. She's missing something in her life. The fix seems to fill it. She gets with men who treat her bad. She steals little trinkets. Looking like a million bucks and feeling like nothing. Hop takes pain away but then it comes right on back. And harder than before. Like a hammer. And she don't got nobody, really. Her singing's her life and she gives it away to the whole world. Shit, at the end of the day, she don't hurt nobody but herself.

JIMMY FLETCHER

I'm sorry.

Miss Freddy gives him the side eye.

MISS FREDDY

Don't be sorry for her. Cause she ain't sorry for her. Be sorry for yourself.. You put Lady away like that.

(then, pained)

You should be ashamed of yourself.

Miss Freddy finishes her pig feet.

37

INT. BUREAU OFFICE, STAIRWELL/OFFICE - FOLLOWING - FEBRUARY 1948 37.

File under his arm, Jimmy heads up to Anslinger's office.

From the look on his face, we get the feeling this is his first time there. He tries to keep his cool walking past a room full of WHITE AGENTS. They're all hunched over their desks. They give him looks as he walks by.

38

INT. ANSLINGER'S OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER - FEBRUARY 1948

38

Jimmy has presented his file full of research on drug dealers and users. Anslinger is looking it over.

HARRY ANSLINGER

There's nothing on Holiday.

JIMMY FLETCHER

Well how can there be? She's in jail.

(then)

Pardon me for asking sir but why is that song so important to us?

HARRY ANSLINGER

Have you heard those lyrics? Hoover says it's UN-AMERICAN. They provoke people in the wrong way.

JIMMY FLETCHER

(hides his mounting anger)

Sir, what do you want me to do?

HARRY ANSLINGER

You're a good liar. Now I want you to go down to the prison and tell her you're sorry. She'll believe you. She's a sucker for men.

Jimmy can't believe his ears.

JIMMY FLETCHER

Yes, sir.

HARRY ANSLINGER

We'll make sure she never gets her cabaret license back.

Jimmy finally sees Anslinger for who he is. We end off Jimmy's fake smile. This is all wrong.

A39

INT. ALDERSON WOMEN'S PRISON, VISITORS ROOM - DAY - FEBRUARY 1948

Billie steps to her cubicle. It's Jimmy Fletcher.

JIMMY
 You can't trust anybody, Miss
 Holiday. They're going to set you
 up as soon as you get out of here.
 They want you down. They want me to
 take you down again.
 (honest)
 I won't.

Billie ponders this all.

BILLIE
 What's your game man?

JIMMY
 I thought I was doing the right
 thing.

She studies his face.

BILLIE
 Right thing, huh?
 (then)
 You look older Soldier boy.

JIMMY
 You said you'd kick that stuff.
 (smiles)
 Look at you. Even in prison, the
 most beautiful woman in the world.

Billie half smiles back.

BILLIE
 Don't flirt with me. You ain't my
 kinda guy.

40

INT. TRAIN STATION - MARCH 1948

40

Billie, suitcase in hand, enters train station, looking for a friendly face. There to meet her: Lester Young, and Roslyn and ED FISHMAN, Jewish 30's. Billie takes flowers from Lester.

BILLIE
 I hate Baby's Breath.
 (to Mister)
 I didn't think you'd remember me.
 Mommy missed you so much.

ROSLYN
 This is Ed Fishman, he's a good
 manager.

BILLIE
 (to Roslyn, re: Ed)
 So what's he gone do for me?

ED FISHMAN
 Billie Holiday headlining at
 Carnegie Hall. Headlining, kid.

BILLIE
 No one'll come to see me. I read
 the papers. All them nasty things
 they're saying about me.

ED FISHMAN
 Tickets went on sale yesterday, and
 we're selling pretty good.

LESTER
 People just wanna hear you sing,
 Lady.

Billie looks over to Roslyn. Can she pull it off?

ROSLYN
 Hey, why don't you stay at
 Lester's?

LESTER
 We'll work on the numbers and
 you'll eat some of momma's
 chitlins.

BILLIE
 I know what ya'll are thinking.
 (grateful but firm)
 I beat it this time. And I ain't
 never planning on doing that shit
 again.

Billie's so clear and determined. They all look on with pride
 wanting to believe her this time.

BILLIE (CONT'D)
Headlining Carnegie Hall? HOT DAMN,
 Prez!!!

Ed, Roslyn and Lester continue to offer her encouragement.
 Things are looking up. Billie turns from them, looking
 across, her eyes feasting on the sights and sounds of her new
 freedom.

She sees Jimmy. After a beat, she smiles, gives him a wave.

ROSLYN

Why are you smiling at him?

JIMMY AND AGENT CARTER -

AGENT CARTER

Well I'll be damned. Your little visit to her worked.

Jimmy waves, smiles back.

Without missing a beat, Roslyn gives him the finger.

41 **INT. BILLIE'S LUXURIOUS HOME - LIVING ROOM/STUDY - ANOTHER DAY - MARCH 1948** 41

Billie enters her study. Lester plays the saxophone, Bobby Tucker at the piano. Billie stands beside them looking through the sheet music as they play music. A maid refreshens her drink.

Billie sings "I Cried For You," gently finding her voice again.

BILLIE

(singing)

I cried for you. Now it's your turn to cry over me.

She pauses.

BILLIE (CONT'D)

See, it'd be better if we made the tune more of a conversation. The guys should take their cue from you Prez and play it, you know, like you do. More like they're talking with me.

She takes a long drag of her cigarette.

BILLIE (CONT'D)

You think that'll work?

BOBBY TUCKER

Sure. I'm glad you're back, lady.

BILLIE

Yeah. I'm not feeling too bad. You know I've been thinking, I think we should integrate the audience for this show. You know, blacks and whites sitting together.

(MORE)

BILLIE (CONT'D)

I feel like it would more of a party that way. Carnegie Hall and Broadway, the whole scene. You know, it's meant to keep negroes out. Let's change it up a little bit. Do something different.

BOBBY TUCKER

That's a great idea.

She looks around at her beautiful home, a little nervous now.

BILLIE

Ms. Mona, bring me my pin stripe suit. I need to go pray.

INT. CHURCH - MARCH 1948

Billie in pin stripe suit, kneels before an alter and prays.

44 **INT. CARNEGIE HALL, HOUSE - SAME TIME - MARCH 1948** 44

People being seated. Every seat in the house is filled. An integrated AUDIENCE.

45 **INT. CARNEGIE HALL, BACKSTAGE - SAME TIME - MARCH 1948** 45

Billie, wearing a beautiful dark dress and long white gloves. She's nervous. She's drinking gin.

Miss Freddy and Roslyn flutter around her, organizing her hair, makeup and clothing.

BILLIE

Sounds like the whole world's out there.

ED FISHMAN

What'd I tell ya, Billie? Packed house.

Roslyn has Billie's signature GARDENIAS, trying to put them in her hair, but Billie isn't sitting still.

ROSLYN

Would you sit your ass still?

Billie pushes her away.

BILLIE

Move, I'll do it myself, Roslyn.

ROSLYN
Suit yourself.

Roslyn sits, smokes her cigarette. Billie is at the mirror with the flowers and a hatpin.

She accidentally sticks the pin deeply into her scalp.

BILLIE
Shit!

Billie takes one last look at herself and heads out to the packed crowd.

46

INT. CARNEGIE HALL, STAGE - LATER - MARCH 1948

46

IN THE AUDIENCE - Jimmy Fletcher waits excited. The Anslingers, with Carter, in the orchestra seats enjoy the show.

MARTHA ANSLINGER
She looks incredible.

She holds her husband's hand.

ON STAGE - A radiant Billie floats to the mic.

BILLIE
I'm back. Hello Everybody.

She's got THE CROWD in a frenzy. They yell back.

THE CROWD
HELLO!

LADY IN THE AUDEINCE
Sing STRANGE FRUIT!

Billie pauses. BOTHERED. As much as she wants to, this isn't the time or place. Billie smiles and politely ignores the request.

BILLIE
I'm going to be honest. I'm a little nervous up here.

We hear many screaming, "We love you Lady!"

BILLIE (CONT'D)
I love you too.
(then)
Jail was fun.

This gets a big laugh from the audience. Anslinger looks around at the crowd with disgust. Her fans adore her.

BILLIE (CONT'D)

(laughs)

Reporters keep asking me, Why
Billie why do you do the things you
do? Why can't you be like this
person, or that person. This is
what I tell them.

Billie nods to Lester. The band starts. She sings directly to Anslinger, singing "Ain't Nobody's Business."

BILLIE (CONT'D)

(singing)

There ain't nothin I ever do or
nothing I ever say that folks don't
criticize me. But I'm going to do
just as I want to anyway. And I
don't care what people say.

Fletcher nods his head, swept away.

BILLIE (CONT'D)

(singing)

If I should take a notion to jump
into the ocean, ain't nobody's
business If I do. If I go to church
on Sunday then cabaret all day
Monday, ain't nobody's business If
I do.

The audience goes wild. She finishes the tune and brings down the house.

The folks seated on the stage are the first to give her a standing ovation. Jimmy joins them.

A48

INT. CARNEGIE HALL, STAGE - LATER - MARCH 1948

A48

Montage of Billie performing second song.

48

INT. CARNEGIE HALL, BACKSTAGE - LATER - MARCH 1948

48

Billie's furious. She throws a bottle at Ed Fishman. He ducks, missing it by a hair. Lester sits in a chair smoking nearby, watching Ed Fishman duck.

BILLIE

What the hell do you mean you can't
get my cabaret card back?!

ED FISHMAN
 We had three lawyers working on it.
 They all came back empty handed.

BILLIE
 They won't let me sing nowhere
 without my card, Ed.

ED FISHMAN
 We'll figure out something.

BILLIE
 You ain't figuring fuck out!
 You're a son of a bitch!

ED FISHMAN
 And you're high.

He hasn't been able to come through for her, but, he's also
 just called her on her shit.

BILLIE
 (thru tears)
 Of course I'm high.

Roslyn and Miss Freddy look over at Lester. Like it was their
 job to watch over her and they failed.

BILLIE (CONT'D)
 I wanted to give a great show. All
 the fans. And all the Feds.
 Everybody hanging on my every note.
 Of course I'm high. Shit.
 (beat)
 How am I supposed to work when I
 don't got my fucking card, huh?

Ed doesn't have an answer to that. Billie sits defeated.

BILLIE (CONT'D)
 Get out of here man.

50

INT. CLUB EBONY - BACKSTAGE - NIGHT - APRIL 1948

50

A sophisticated spot with ties to the underworld. Lester and
 a surprised Billie enter where an eager audience awaits. She
 waves. They "ooh and ahh" her as she heads backstage.

LESTER YOUNG
 We need to make some real money
 again.

BILLIE

How the hell did you pull this one off? You know I can get arrested for singing without a cabaret license.

LESTER YOUNG

Bobby Tucker swears this John Levy cat got the hookups.

All eyes are on Billie as they walk thru the club.

LESTER YOUNG (CONT'D)

Heard he's a looker too.

BILLIE

You don't even know what we're gonna sing.

LESTER YOUNG

Look at your band waiting for you. We'll figure it out like we always do. You just handle him --

JOHN LEVY, 30s, mixed-race, good looking, appears from backstage. You'd never want to be on his bad side. Just what Billie's looking for.

Billie and Levy lock eyes. Damn he's sexy. Those eyes. Billie shakes her head, flirtatious, ready for excitement.

BILLIE

Am I gonna get arrested for singing here?

JOHN LEVY

Don't you worry your pretty little head about that Lady. I'll pay off the right people.

Billie smiles. Finally, here's a man with a plan.

BILLIE

You'd do that for me?

He looks her over, liking what he sees.

JOHN LEVY

You just got a standing ovation and three curtain calls from a sold out crowd at Carnegie Hall. Plus, the cops owe me some favors.

He traces the curve of Billie's face, then runs his hand along her breasts then down to her crotch. When he tries to shove his hand between her legs, Billie takes hold of his wrist.

JOHN LEVY (CONT'D)

You and me could be a swell team.

BILLIE

I decide when it's time to team up that way.

JOHN LEVY

You got divorced from Monroe, right?

BILLIE

(flirts)

That's none of your business. I'm here to sing. Make you some money.

Billie does like him. And she's thankful to him. Seeing Bobby Tucker at the piano and Lester on stage, she goes --

ON STAGE -- Billie looks incredible. The audience applauds. She takes it all in. She sees John Levy heading to his usual table.

BILLIE (CONT'D)

(nods)

Thank you. Geewhiz, this was last minute. Thank you everybody. I'm going to try something new tonight.

(to Bobby and Lester)

Follow me boys.

(back to the crowd)

I'm sure y'all heard, they ain't given me my cabaret card back yet.

Hoots of disapproval from the audience.

BILLIE (CONT'D)

To keep working, I gotta go sing in Washington and Philly. I don't need no card there. But tonight, it's nice to be back home.

In the audience, Roslyn and Miss Freddy. Billie starts to sing "Them There Eyes" directly to John Levy.

BILLIE (CONT'D)

(singing)

I fell in love with you the first time I looked into them there eyes.

(MORE)

BILLIE (CONT'D)
 And you have a certain lil cute way
 of flirting with them there eyes.

Billie sings directly to -- Levy, now sitting.

BILLIE (CONT'D)
 (singing)
 They make me feel so happy. They
 make me feel so blue. I'm falling,
 no stalling, in a great big way for
 you.

IN THE AUDIENCE -- Levy smiles. Miss Freddy and Roslyn take
 note. AT THE BAR - Agent Sam Williams. All alone. Scouting
 the scene.

BILLIE (CONT'D)
 (singing)
 My heart is jumping, you've started
 something, with them there eyes.

30

INT. BUREAU OFFICES, DOWNSTAIRS AREA - ANOTHER DAY - APRIL 30
1948

Jimmy is sitting at his desk listening to recording of Louis
 Armstrong. Agent Williams interrupts him.

AGENT SAM WILLIAMS
 Tellin' folks, I'm a musician.

Jimmy pulls off his headphones.

JIMMY FLETCHER
 Say again.

AGENT SAM WILLIAMS
 Tellin' folks I'm a musician.

JIMMY FLETCHER
 Make sure they don't ask you to
 play them something.

Sam plays the trumpet. Other Agents clap as he finishes.

AGENT SAM WILLIAMS
 How about that nigga'?

JIMMY FLETCHER
 (Laughing)
 Whatcha got?

AGENT SAM WILLIAMS
 Marlines' closed. At least I don't
 have to worry about giving my wife
 the clap no more.

The room laughs.

JIMMY FLETCHER
 Got anything on Louis or Charlie?

AGENT SAM WILLIAMS
 Nothing that will stick. Ever feel
 strange about what we are doing
 Jimmy?

JIMMY FLETCHER
 Sound like my mother.

AGENT SAM WILLIAMS
 They got us down here in the
 basement trying to take down
 negroes. People I respect, you
 know.

Sam plays the trumpet again.

A53

INT. EXPENSIVE ITALIAN UPTOWN RESTURANT - WEEKS LATER

A53

Stuffy White patrons crane their necks to see Billie holding
 her poodle. Roslyn is at her side as they wait for a table.

ROSLYN
 (loud to Maitre'D)
 Qual e la cosa migliore che avete
 qui da bere?

The Maitre'D gives her a cold look.

BILLIE
 I told you they don't serve no Pina
 Colada's in here, Roz.

ROSLYN
 You worry about getting us paid
 from that crook.
 (to Maitre'D)
 Ti prego, dimmi che hai la crema
 Demt. Ho cosi sete.

The Maitre'D shakes his head, annoyed with her presence.

MAITRE'D
One moment Miss Holiday, let me
arrange your table.

Roslyn looks up at the entrance as Levy struts in.

ROSLYN
Oh God.

Levy gives Billie a quick kiss and an envelope with cash.

JOHN LEVY
I gotta head back to the number
house.

BILLIE
Oh. Come on Levy! You said we were
eating together tonight.

JOHN LEVY
I'm sorry dahlin but I got
business. I'll see you back at the
club.

Levy heads for the exit passing Louis McKay (40's), good looking, dark, and also dangerous. Billie counts the cash. She's short. AGAIN! Furious, she looks back at Levy but he's gone, replaced by McKay. He smiles at her. Billie smiles back. That quick she's forgotten her money problems. Roslyn takes note.

ROSLYN
Stay away from that one Billie.
Louis McKay. Half boxer, half
pimp, all business. He's trouble.

Music to Billie's ears. She perks up. McKay steps up to Billie just as the Maitre'D arrives back to seat them.

MAITRE'D
Your table is ready Miss Holiday.
Just this way.

LOUIS MCKAY
Ain't no need for that. She's
eating with me.

An awkward moment between them all. Then -

BILLIE
Well gee whiz that's mighty swell
of you.
(to Roslyn)
Come on y'all.

LOUIS MCKAY
The table's just for two.

Off Rosyln's face. Really?

17

INT. HOTEL - DAY - APRIL 1948

17

A recorder and microphone are on a table pointed towards Tallulah Bankhead. Harry Anslinger enters the room.

HARRY ANSLINGER
Good afternoon, Miss Bankhead.
Thank you for meeting me. I'm
federal agent Harry Anslinger.

Tallulah looks at him intently.

TALLULAH BANKHEAD
Who the hell do you think you are
playing with? What is this?

HARRY ANSLINGER
I know you are friends with Miss
Holiday. We're trying to help her.

TALLULAH BANKHEAD
I just bet you are.

HARRY ANSLINGER
We have intel that you don't
approve of her drug use.

TALLULAH BANKHEAD
I'm unaware of any drug use by Miss
Holiday.

HARRY ANSLINGER
Would you consider her a friend?

TALLULAH BANKHEAD
Yes... Billie has got lots of
friends.

HARRY ANSLINGER
I hear she likes to get to know her
lady friends. Intimately.

TALLULAH BANKHEAD
I wouldn't know about that.

HARRY ANSLINGER
Are you sexually involved with Miss
Holiday?

Tallulah continues to glare at Anslinger.

53

EXT. CENTRAL PARK SOUTH - EASTER SUNDAY - APRIL 1948

53

Tallulah manages Mister on a leash while Billie walks her new little poodle. They're glamorously dressed in black, both are in shades, jewels and fur. These two women look out of place against the bright Easter colors the children wear hunting through the park for their eggs.

TALLULAH BANKHEAD

The whole things was unnerving,
darling.

BILLIE

I'm sorry you had to go through all
that Bankie.

TALLULAH BANKHEAD

You're not still using that stuff,
are you?

BILLIE

It's such a nice day, can't we
enjoy it please?

TALLULAH BANKHEAD

Hey, how's John Levy treating you?

BILLIE

I'm singing in his club.

TALLULAH BANKHEAD

I heard he's stealing your money.

Billie won't answer her.

TALLULAH BANKHEAD (CONT'D)

You could do better. They're all
using you.

Billie shakes her head.

BILLIE

You'll never understand my life
Bankhead.

(then, serious)

What makes you think I'm not using
them?

Billie takes Tallulah's arm. They continue down the street watching the children and their parents play with the EASTER BUNNY.

BILLIE (CONT'D)

(re: her dogs)

Mister can beg but he can't heel, you know. It ain't his fault. I didn't train him. I'm going to train this one right, though.

Louis McKay walks past them. He has a beautiful woman by his side. Louis tips his hat.

LOUIS MCKAY

Small world.

BILLIE

(flirts)

Only if you're following me.

They smile at each other. Two ships passing in the park.

LOUIS MCKAY

I'll follow you to the moon and back. And train that dog for you for free. I vote we ditch these snow bunnies and get into some black shit.

TALLULAH BANKHEAD

Oh God! I loathe Easter.

57

EXT. THE ALLEY BEHIND LEVY'S APARTMENT BUILDING - NIGHT - 57
OCTOBER 1948

In drizzling rain, Billie leaves Levy's. She walks down his alley wearing her MINK STOLE and carrying her poodle. She pops her umbrella.

BILLIE

(to her dog)

He won't miss us none. I been singing there all this time, packing that motherfucker... Shit, that nigga think he not gone pay us?

Billie takes a wad of cash and stuffs it in her bra while she looks behind her as she exits the alley.

BILLIE (CONT'D)

Fuck Levy.

A58

EXT. CROWDED NEW YORK CITY STREET - MOMENTS LATER

A58

Billie heads down a crowded street, searching for a payphone.

B58

INT. PAYPHONE - CROWDED NEW YORK CITY STREET - MOMENTS LATER

We find Billie on the phone pleading with Joe Guy on the other end.

BILLIE

What do you mean, no?

JOE GUY

Nigga, I'm tired of going to jail.

BILLIE

Come on now. I just need a taste.

JOE GUY

Shit, you been clean for a minute now. You told me we was gone get off this shit Billie. And we can.

BILLIE

I know I did Joe...but...look, I'm in a situation here man. This cat Levy, he's fucking with me and...

Joe Guy cuts her off.

JOE GUY

There's gone always be somebody fucking with us, Billie. What happened to that clinic you was talking about?

We see Billie panicked. She's jonesing BAD. She tries to hide it from the many people passing her by on the street.

BILLIE

Fuck that clinic shit, Joe.

JOE GUY

Billie, man let's go together. You done stole his cash. Let's use it for some good.

BILLIE

This ain't his cash, Nigga. This is my motherfuckin money. You know what, Joe? FUCK YOU! If you ain't gone help me, I'll find somebody that can.

She slams the pay phone down.

C58 **EXT. ROSLYN'S BROWNSTONE - LATER**

C58

Billie drugged up, climbs up the brownstone's steps and lays down on the top step and falls asleep.

Roslyn steps outside in her night rob and finds Billie.

ROSLYN

Let's get you back to the club.
Come on.

She wakes Billie up.

58 **INT. CLUB EBONY, BILLIE'S DRESSING ROOM - LATER - OCTOBER 1948** 58

Billie and Roslyn enter laughing. They find Levy sitting at Billie's dressing table with a gun strapped to his holster. *

BILLIE

Hey Daddy, sorry I -

Levy backhands Billie. She falls to the floor.

JOHN LEVY

What do you take me for?

John turns to sit back at her dressing table. Combs his hair in her mirror as if nothing just happened. Roslyn stands there stunned.

JOHN LEVY (CONT'D)

You sneak off with my money and
then you come sing in my club?

Levy sips his drink. Billie breaks a wooden chair over his head. Levy stands woozy.

JOHN LEVY (CONT'D)

You cheap whore!

He punches Billie square in her jaw. On the ground again he kicks her in the gut.

JOHN LEVY (CONT'D)

Go out there and make me some
money.

Roslyn screams, helping her up. Levy heads for the door. Billie rises in a rage ready for more but the women hold her back.

BILLIE
GET THE FUCK OFF ME.
(to Levy)
Mother fucker. Get back here!

CUT TO:

60 **INT. CLUB EBONY, BILLIE'S DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT - OCTOBER 1948** 60

Just after Billie's fight with Levy. Miss Freddy and Roslyn tape Billie's ribs so she can go on stage. It's a careful process, a labor of love. Billie tries not to cry. THE WORKS - syringe, and spoon, on the dressing table. Miss Freddy applies lipstick to Billie's mouth and Lady Day is ready to perform.

61 **INT. CLUB EBONY - MOMENTS LATER - OCTOBER 1948** 61

Billie on stage. Holding her hands to her taped ribs, underneath her gorgeous gown. She's high and hunched over from the beating but she's focused. The AUDIENCE, looking on expectantly as she sings LOVER MAN. Levy is deep in talks with Carter. Jimmy Fletcher watches from the back of the club.

63 **INT. SAN FRANCISCO, MARK TWAIN HOTEL - DAY - JANUARY 1949** 63

The PHONOGRAPH playing "Precious Memories." We clock Levy's black eye as he and Billie eat lunch. The happy couple.

BILLIE
That gal sure can sing. Maybe I
should learn how to play the
guitar.

JOHN LEVY
Some people would say we have a
very unhealthy thing going on here.

BILLIE
Why? Cause I punched you in the eye
downstairs in the lobby?
(then)
You'll learn to pay me on time.

He laughs. Billie laughs too.

BILLIE (CONT'D)

(proud)

Can you believe I ain't used in two whole months?!... Well a little bit a methadone, but that's just to take edge off.

JOHN LEVY

Yes I can baby. Hey, how come you don't ever talk about marriage? You know how much I need you.

BILLIE

Levy, shut up. You're already married.

JOHN LEVY

I told you I was getting a divorce.

BILLIE

I like our arrangement just fine.

JOHN LEVY

Is that right, maybe this gift will change your mind.

Levy goes into the next room. Billie follows.

Levy looks at his watch.

BILLIE

What you gone and got me Daddy?

Levy takes a small package out of his pocket and slips it in Billie's robe pocket. Without missing a beat, Billie drops the gift grabbing his hand.

BILLIE (CONT'D)

What is this Levy?

Billie, sensing what's up, keeps hold tight to Levy's hand. Federal Agents burst into the room. Agent Carter leads the charge with Fletcher following. Levy holds his hands up. Billie's caught holding the bag. Jimmy and Billie share a look. Then Jimmy looks at Levy. And he sees a frame-up plain as day.

CLOSE UP on Jimmy Fletcher on the WITNESS STAND.

JIMMY FLETCHER

The fact that the drug works, the syringe, the spoon, and so forth, the fact that they were found in the wastepaper basket, that was odd, yeah. The junkie will usually keep their works close by. And, yeah, she was holding the opium, but --.

Billie sits taking this in. Her Lawyer ERLICH in front of her still questioning Jimmy.

DEFENSE ATTORNEY ERLICH

So, this could have been a frame-up?

JIMMY FLETCHER

I didn't say that.

A68

INT. SAN FRANCISCO COURTHOUSE HALLWAY- FOLLOWING - JANUARY 1949 68

Billie, surrounded by REPORTERS, happily giving interviews.

BILLIE

They tried framing me and they got caught red-handed.

WHITE REPORTER

What's next for you Billie?

BILLIE

Well, I'm touring America. That's right, you can catch me on tour.

She see's Levy. He smirks at her as he walks away.

67

INT. SAN FRANCISCO COURTHOUSE STAIRCASE - FOLLOWING

67

Jimmy walks down the staircase and meets Anslinger at the bottom.

HARRY ANSLINGER

You looked like Nate King Cole up there. The Opium was on her but uh-uh-uh... You sounded like step and fetch it. All of our hard work just went down the drain.

JIMMY FLETCHER

You wanted me to lie up there?

HARRY ANSLINGER
 You had a job to up there and you
 failed. Now guess what Nate-King-
 Fuckin-Fetch-it? You're going on
 tour.

Jimmy stares Anslinger down as he walks away.

68 **EXT. EAST COAST HIGHWAY - DAY - APRIL 1949** 68

"THE BILLIE HOLIDAY ORCHESTRA" emblazoned on the side of a
 lovely tour bus.

69 **INT. TOUR BUS - SAME TIME - APRIL 1949** 69

BAND MEMBERS enjoying the ride. Reading magazines, playing
 cards, drinking, relaxing. Everyone jams to Lester Young's
 saxophone playing. IN THE MIDDLE OF THE BUS - Miss Freddy
 reads Ebony Magazine that features Billie on the cover. The
 gang banters back and forth.

73 **INT. NIGHT CLUB, BALTIMORE - EVENING - APRIL 1949** 73

A modest hotspot. Billie and the band perform for an eager,
 mostly black working class AUDIENCE. Jimmy Fletcher's in the
 audience. For some reason Billie is happy to see him. She
 tries not to show it. The crowd cheer and applaud as Prez
 leads the band in.

BILLIE
 (sings)
 Up in Harlem every Saturday night,
 when the highbrows get together
 it's just so right. They all
 congregate at an all night hop,
 and what they do is oo bop bee dap.

Billie is having the time of her life singing to her home
 town. Roslyn and Miss Freddy dance together.

BILLIE (CONT'D)
 Oh Hannah Brown from way cross
 town, gets full of coin and starts
 breaking 'em down. And at the break
 of day, you can hear old Hannah say
 'Gimme a pigfoot and a bottle of
 beer, send me again, I don't care.
 I feel just like I wanna clown,
 give the piano player a drink
 because he's bringing me down.

Lester Young stands and takes a fabulous solo. The band is getting over great. WE SEE Jimmy. He's falling in love with her.

74

INT. NIGHT CLUB, BACKROOM - LATER - APRIL 1949

74

The musicians gathered. There's a low-key party going on. Drinking and drugs.

LESTER

You can't be fucking around with
our cash Billie. We ain't got none.

Before Billie can answer, Jimmy enters. Everyone gives him a dirty look except her.

ROSLYN

I know you better get the fuck out
of here.

Lester and the boys head over to throw him out. Billie senses a fight.

BILLIE

Leave him alone.

LESTER

You know how much trouble this cat
has caused us.

BILLIE

Leave him be.

They reluctantly back down.

MISS FREDDY

A hard head makes a soft ass. You
still ain't learned her lesson yet.

BILLIE

(to the band)

It's complicated.

(then to Jimmy)

Thanks for what you did in the
courtroom.

JIMMY FLETCHER

They want you to think they fired
me.

Billie takes this in.

LESTER YOUNG

If you want to fuck around with this one that's on you. But I want to get paid. If the club didn't have the money, why'd we play?

BILLIE

He gave us what they had. We'll make up for it tomorrow night.

A DRUG DEALER, black, 40s, passes Billie some heroin. She doesn't pay until she's tasted the stuff. There are only a few bills in her purse, but she hands them over.

75

INT. NIGHT CLUB - BACKROOM - MOMENTS LATER - APRIL 1949

75

Billie cooking up her fix. The greedy junky. ROSLYN and MISS FREDDY -

ROSLYN

How come she's got her white dress, her white flowers and her white powder, but she don't got money to pay us.

MISS FREDDY

You knew what you were getting into when you came on the road with us, stupid.

LESTER and JIMMY -

LESTER YOUNG

You're gonna follow us around the whole country in that car?

JIMMY FLETCHER

I don't got nothing better to do.

The musicians, overhearing, not totally buying his story.

LESTER YOUNG

I trust you about as far as I can throw your ass.

JIMMY FLETCHER

Lady trusts me.

BILLIE

No I don't.

Folks laugh at that.

ROSLYN

(to Jimmy)

So, hypothetically, you catch me, and, even though I'm not holding nothing in my hand, in the trunk of my car, I do got a considerable quantity.

JIMMY FLETCHER

You ride around with drugs in the trunk of your car?

MISS FREDDY

She said "hypothetically," man.

JIMMY FLETCHER

If it's your car, then we could probably bust you for possession.

ROSLYN

That's some ridiculous shit.

The musicians fall out laughing.

76

INT. NIGHT CLUB - BACKROOM - MUCH LATER - APRIL 1949

76

Billie's already shot up. Several other musicians have joined her.

BASS PLAYER

(offering Jimmy heroin)

Want a taste?

Will Jimmy partake? He knows he needs to win their trust. All eyes on him. Billie's clocking him. Here's his chance. He rolls up his sleeve. Billie watches Jimmy. They're all watching him. Even the Drug Dealer. Bass Player helps him shoot up. Jimmy leans back in his chair. Riding the wave. It's an all time high.

MOMENTS LATER, BILLIE AND JIMMY -

Everything is perfect and pleasant and completely free of complication. All the notes are all in tune, conversation makes more sense, and Billie, watching Jimmy, is more beautiful than ever. Both are connected in a euphoric dream state. Jimmy rests his eyes.

A young BILLIE HOLIDAY, 10, smiles at Jimmy.

TEN YEAR OLD BILLIE

You feel it? That shit is good, ain't it?

Jimmy opens his eyes, shakes his head. Is this what heroin does?

JIMMY FLETCHER
(smiling back)
Oh yea ...

TEN YEAR OLD BILLY
Come with me.

Ten year old Billie pulls Jimmy up. He follows her into -

77

INT. HARLEM WHOREHOUSE - HALLWAY - 1923 - LATE AFTERNOON 77

Ten year old Billie looks from bedroom to bedroom for her mother. Jimmy follows a bit behind.

TEN YEAR OLD BILLIE
Momma?

Whores and their Johns stagger down the hallway. They all say hi to young Billie. They don't notice Jimmy.

TEN YEAR OLD BILLY
Where the fuck is my mother?

Young Billie pops her head in rooms looking for her Mother. No luck. Finally -

WHORE
Hey Eleanora, Sadie's across the hall.

A78

INT. HARLEM WHOREHOUSE - BEDROOM - 1923

A78

Young Billie enters the room, she sighs sadly after seeing no sign of her mother. Jimmy follows. He's completely unnoticed by young Billie now. He rests on Sadie's bed. Young Billie heads for her mother's phonograph. Play's Bessie Smith. She belts, "Ain't Nobody's Business" along with the record. She goes for her comic book, lays on the hardwood floor, singing while reading.

TEN YEAR OLD BILLIE
(singing)
And I'm gonna do what I want to
anyway. And I don't care what
people say.

The door quietly opens. It's her mother, SADIE, 23, a short but voluptuous black woman.

She marvels at her daughter's ability to sing along while simultaneously reading her comic. Billie's eyes light up when she see's her.

TEN YEAR OLD BILLIE (CONT'D)
 Momma! Where you been?

SADIE
 (blunt)
 You gotta go Eleanora.

TEN YEAR OLD BILLIE
 Why?

SADIE
 Time you figure out how to make
 your own money now. Go on.

TEN YEAR OLD BILLIE
 I don't wanna go, momma.

SADIE
 You're a woman now Eleanora. It's
 a woman's job to keep her men
 happy.

TEN YEAR OLD BILLIE
 What you mean happy?

SADIE
 What the fuck you think I mean?
 Happy! Make that nigga happy! Touch
 him, caress him. Love on him! (Be a
 lil whore!)

TEN YEAR OLD BILLIE
 But I don't wanna be a fuckin
 whore.

SADIE
 It's good enough for me, ain't it?
 Go on now. You can do it. Ain't no
 room for you here now. You takin up
 space. Miss Gerty round the corner
 got a room.

Billie starts to tear up.

BILLIE
 Please don't make me, momma. I
 want to stay with you.

Sadie's having none of it. As motherly as she can muster.

SADIE

I told Gertrude to look out for you. Be a good girl.

(smiles)

Take that record with you.

Off Jimmy crying for Billie.

CUT TO:

78 **INT. NIGHT CLUB - BACKROOM - APRIL 1949** 78

BACK TO SCENE - Both Billie and Jimmy look at each other. Jimmy is still in tears.

BILLIE

Be careful with this feeling, this love, right now baby. It won't love you back. I promise.

Jimmy understands. Finally for the first time.

79 **EXT. HOPE, ALABAMA - ANOTHER DAY - APRIL 1949** 79

The bus rides along the countryside, then pulls over to the side. Billie gets off the bus to pee.

A80 **EXT. HOPE, ALABAMA BACKWOODS - MOMENTS LATER - APRIL 1949** A80

Deeper into the woods, Billie looks around at remnants of a picnic. She sees smoke coming from somewhere. She's about to take a squat but stops short when she hears crying. Billie stands, going even deeper into the back woods. **WE SEE** two black children sobbing as they watch their father try to undo his wife's dangling body from a nearby tree. The family's home has been burned to the ground. Shellshocked, Billie walks backwards into Jimmy. Horrified, Billie runs into a nearby shack.

B80 **INT. ABANDONED SHACK - MOMENTS LATER** B80

Jimmy follows her into the neighboring abandoned shack. In the abandoned living room he tries to console her. Billie is having a nervous breakdown. She escapes him into the abandoned dining room. From nowhere, Miss Freddy and Roslyn appear in tears. They also try to calm Billie. She fights them away shaking and sobbing uncontrollably into a bathroom. From a mirror, she notices Carl the drummer who is preparing the works for her. He smiles, encouraging Billie to shoot up. Billie wants it bad. She goes to him. But Jimmy Fletcher appears and yanks her violently away.

Torn between the two men she staggers into yet another hallway where there appears to be a light at the end of it.

CUT TO:

C80

INT. CARNEGIE HALL - SAME TIME

C80

Billie exits the hallway onto the stage and sings Strange Fruit to a sold out crowd.

BILLIE

(singing)

Southern trees bear a strange
fruit. Blood on the leaves and
blood at the root. Black bodies
swinging in the southern breeze.
Strange fruit hanging from the
poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant
South. The bulging eyes and the
twisted mouth. Scent of magnolia,
sweet and fresh. Then the sudden
smell of burning flesh.

Here is a fruit for the crows to
pluck. For the rain to gather, for
the wind to suck. For the sun to
rot, for the tree to drop. Here is
a strange and bitter crop.

CUT TO:

83

EXT. LEWIS-WILSON MOTEL - NIGHT - APRIL 1949

83

Jimmy's outside on a payphone. The BLACK MOTEL OWNER watches him through his window cautiously. Jimmy keeps his voice low.

JIMMY FLETCHER

Not at all, Mr. Anslinger, I
haven't seen her do anything but
alcohol. Home-made variety for the
most part.

HARRY ANSLINGER (O.S.)

No narcotics of any kind?

JIMMY FLETCHER

No, Sir.

Long silence.

JIMMY FLETCHER (CONT'D)

Are you still there? Sir?

HARRY ANSLINGER (O.S.)
Baton Rouge is next?

JIMMY FLETCHER
That's right. I never knew the
musicians' life could be so boring.

Another long silence. The hairs on Jimmy's neck stand on end.
Does Anslinger know that Jimmy is lying to him?

HARRY ANSLINGER (O.S.)
You make sure you call me tomorrow.

JIMMY FLETCHER
Yes, Sir, Mr. Anslinger.

Anslinger's end of the line goes dead. A nervous Jimmy
returns the receiver to its cradle. SHIT! He enters back into
the hotel. We stay on the BLACK MOTEL OWNER watching it all.
He sees something we haven't. Agent Carter, standing in the
parking lot. Carter's been clocking Jimmy's every move.

84

INT. LEWIS-WILSON MOTEL, JIMMY'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS - APRIL 84
1949

Jimmy enters quietly. Softly closes the door. The bedside
light is on. And Billie is in his bed, naked from their
lovemaking.

JIMMY FLETCHER
Thought you were asleep.

BILLIE
You were making a phone call.

Jimmy doesn't want to answer.

BILLIE (CONT'D)
To your boss?

JIMMY FLETCHER
Yeah.

BILLIE
You tell him everything I do?

JIMMY FLETCHER
No.

BILLIE
You tell him you shot up?

JIMMY FLETCHER

No.

BILLIE

You tell him you fucked me good?

JIMMY FLETCHER

No.

BILLIE

What are they gonna give you,
Jimmy? A shiny gold watch? A
brand new car? Your picture in the
paper? I get all that every day of
the week.

Jimmy leans against the wall. Billie holds his gaze.

BILLIE (CONT'D)

Come back to bed.

She helps him get undressed. They get back to making love.

A87 **EXT. LAKE - NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE - ANOTHER DAY - APRIL 1949**87

A shirtless Jimmy rows a sober Billie in a boat. We see them
in conversation, laughing.

B87 **INT. CRAB SHACK - NEW ORLEANS, LA - APRIL 1949** B87

Billie and Jimmy sit at a table, cracking crabs, enjoying
each other's company.

87 **EXT. FIELD - ATLANTA, GEORGIA - LATER - APRIL 1949** 87

The musicians playing a pick up game of stickball. Miss
Freddy gets a hit and runs the bases. Billie and Jimmy
standing together. He's scanning the horizon.

BILLIE

Jimmy, we need to talk.

Jimmy senses where this conversation is headed.

JIMMY FLETCHER

Let's go back to New York. I'd
drive you in my car. You could get
the help you need. Start taking
care of yourself.

BILLIE

Stop. Jimmy you need to get
yourself a nice girl. I'm not her.

He takes her hand. She kisses him on his forehead.

BILLIE (CONT'D)

We aren't meant to be Jimmy. I only
know a certain kind of love that
makes me feel safe, you dig. I
don't understand this, what we got.
I don't feel in control.

Just then, a FANCY CAR comes barreling down the road. In the
car, it's Louis McKay. She feels awful but she knows she's
doing the right thing.

LOUIS MCKAY

(to Billie)

You called saying you was stranded
so I drove all night to get here!

McKay checks his teeth in the rearview mirror.

BILLIE

(to McKay)

I'm coming.

(to Jimmy)

I'm sorry, Jimmy.

McKay holds the door and Billie gets in his car.

MISS FREDDY

You just gone leave us like stray
mutts? We don't have money for gas
to get home.

Billie heads to the car not wanting to look back.

BILLIE

Come on.

(to the Musicians)

I'll wire money when I get home.

LESTER

I thought we was family? You don't
do this shit to family. No Lady,
I'm done.

BILLIE

I said I'll wire the money Prez.

Prez walks away. Billie really feels like shit now. She looks
out the car window at Jimmy lovingly.

BILLIE (CONT'D)

I'll see you in church soldier boy.

McKay's car takes off and they're gone in a cloud of dust.
Jimmy is crestfallen.

A88

INT. BUREAU OFFICE, NYC, DOWNSTAIRS AREA - ANOTHER DAY - A88
APRIL 1949

Jimmy, back in town, coming in for work. He's surprised to find his desk has been cleared. His files, tapes, photographs have all been removed. Agent Sam Williams, deep in his own paperwork.

JIMMY FLETCHER

Where's my stuff? Sam what's going on?

AGENT SAM WILLIAMS

I'm sorry Jimmy.

Both don't believe it.

AGENT SAM WILLIAMS (CONT'D)

What do you want me to say Jimmy?
They want me to pick up where you left off.

JIMMY

Where's my shit Sam?

AGENT SAM WILLIAMS

They took it. They're moving you over to administration, Jimmy.
They want me to pick up where you left off.

JIMMY

The war on drugs is just a war on us.

AGENT SAM WILLIAMS

I can't just leave this job. I've got a family.

JIMMY

They're going to fuck you too.

88

INT. ABC TELEVISION STUDIOS - DAY - OCTOBER 1953

88

A live broadcast of "The Comeback Story."

GEORGE JESSEL sits interview style with Billie. She looks radiant. Louis McKay watches from the wings.

GEORGE JESSEL

Let's get on with this straight, in the more realistic sense the big comeback of her career was launched not tonight but over five years ago, when there was a year of darkness when she fell victim to one of society's most dreaded illnesses, the use of narcotics. Billie, it's a privilege to have you with us tonight.

BILLIE

Thank you George. It's an honor to be here.

89

INT. JIMMY FLETCHER'S APARTMENT - SAME TIME - OCTOBER 1953 89

ON THE TELEVISION -

GEORGE JESSEL

Well we're glad to have you. Now Billie, this is the usual part of our procedure in this show to introduce from the audience the family of our guests. Those near ones who were there and who are there to give the strength and security needed when their kinfolk are in trouble. But there's no one here to remember for Billie. No family. Not a single relative that she knows.

Billie nods in agreement.

BILLIE

I have my husband, Mr. Louis McKay.

Jimmy stares at Billie.

94

MONTAGE -

94

A) **GREENWICH VILLAGE STREET - CHRISTMAS TIME - DECEMBER 1953 (MOTION PICTURE)**. Billie dressed in all black and dark sunglasses with McKay. Loaded with shopping bags filled with their recent purchases. Laugh.

B) **FEBRUARY 1954 - (STILL PHOTO) BILLIE ALL SMILES holding up a copy of Tan Magazine which features her on the cover.**

- D) EXT. AIRPORT TARMAC - DAY - MAY 1954 - (STILL PHOTO) - Billie and McKay take a photo boarding a airplane. Pet CHIHUAHUA under her arm. She's looking like a million bucks.
- E) INT. STOCKHOLM THEATRE - a photo of Billie - MAY 1954 - (MOTION PICTURE) receiving a standing ovation.
- F) INT. STOCKHOLM PALACE - MAY 1954 - (STILL PHOTO) Billie poses with dignitaries.
- G) INT. PARIS BISTRO - DAY - MAY 1954 (MOTION PICTURE) - Billie and McKay both in tams. They laugh, smoke, eat and drink wine.
- H) INT. HOTEL EUROPE - NIGHT - MAY 1954 (MOTION PICTURE) - Billie and McKay fight.
- I) INT. AIRPORT HALLWAY - DAY - MAY 1954 (MOTION PICTURE) - coming back to the USA.
- J) ALBUM COVER - JUNE 1954 (MOTION PICTURE & STILL PHOTO) - Billie is posing for a publicity shoot. Camera is rolling until we capture the actual image of Billie Holiday's album cover for "The Essential Billie Holiday: The Columbia Years."
- K) INT. FANCY USA HOTEL - NIGHT - JULY 1954 (MOTION PICTURE) - Billie and McKay in their hotel room doing speedballs, shooting up; getting high. Billie and McKay getting busted. They're led from the hotel in disgrace.
- L) POLICE MUGSHOT OF Billie. - JULY 1954 (STILL PHOTO)
- M) POLICE MUGSHOT Louis McKay - JULY 1954 (STILL PHOTO)
- END OF MONTAGE -

95

INT. ANSLINGER'S OFFICE, FEDERAL BUREAU - ANOTHER DAY - JULY 1954

95

Louis McKay getting interviewed. Agent Carter operating the reel-to-reel. Anslinger and Carter questioning.

LOUIS MCKAY

You motherfuckers just can't stand seeing two beautiful black people running around this world having a good time in life. And now you're in here wasting my time.

HARRY ANSLINGER

Neither of you had enough on you to make a case. You guys got lucky.

LOUIS MCKAY

I'm a lucky guy.

HARRY ANSLINGER

But her luck's running out. You can get on the right side. Help me plant some heroin on her. We need her to talk.

LOUIS MCKAY

I can't make her say nothing. Just like I can't get her to stop singing that goddamn song.

AGENT CARTER

She tells everybody you live off her money.

LOUIS MCKAY

She wouldn't have any money if I didn't keep her in line.

AGENT CARTER

You're wearing the pants, right? Or does she got you by the balls?

96

INT. MR KELLY'S - DAY - SEPTEMBER 1954

96

Billie, headlining on stage with her BAND playing the instrumental introduction to "God Bless The Child." She's in fine form, but there's something troubling her.

IN THE AUDIENCE -

Agent Sam Williams. McKay sits next to him.

ON STAGE - Billie smells a rat but she won't let them throw her.

BILLIE

(sings)

Them that's got shall get. Them that's not shall lose. So the Bible says. And it still is news. Mama may have. Papa may have. But God bless the child that's got his own. That's got his own.

Over the song we see:

97

INT. MR KELLY'S, BACKSTAGE DRESSING ROOM - LATER - SEPTEMBER 1954

Billie is high and alone. She carefully re-applies her lipstick. Jimmy opens the door.

Jimmy and Billie kiss until someone breaks the door down. It's Louis McKay. He charges at Jimmy. They tumble on the floor fighting. Drug use has not been kind to McKay. And this time it is Jimmy who gets the better of the fight. Once he's on top of McKay, he punches him repeatedly. Billie goes back to applying her make up. The men fight until they're out of breath. They end up on the carpet breathing heavy. Billie stares at them both.

LOUIS MCKAY

You can have the bitch.

A99

INT. TBD JANKY APARTMENT/RADIO STATION - NIGHT

A99

Billie, still strung out, continues her interview with Reginald Lord Devine. Reginald rides Billie hard.

REGINALD DEVINE

Our audience wants to know, what happened with Louis McKay? You two seemed soooo in love, and then - poof, he just vanished out of nowhere. Poof.

BILLIE

McKay and me, we're... separated. He's trying to control my estate. But my friend Jimmy's been with me. He's been helpful.

FREDDY

(sotto)

Helpful alright. Fucking FED. Can't nobody just let her be.

REGINALD DEVINE

What is the government's problem with Billie Holiday? Why is the government always after you?

BILLIE

My song. Strange Fruit reminds them that they're killing us. It reminds them. It reminds you, Reginald.

REGINALD DEVINE

(serious)

Oh Lady please don't say that.
Please don't say that. See this is
why you get into all sorts of
trouble.

(back to his regular
voice, to Freddy)

Don't worry, I'll edit this.

BILLIE

You don't have to edit nothing for
Anslinger. He was in charge of
prohibition and you see us
drinking, don't you?

(chuckles)

He can't afford to lose with drugs.

REGINALD DEVINE

But it's a war on drugs, Lady. Not
you.

This lands hard on Billie. She knows this is a lie that
everybody believes. She begins to cry.

BILLIE

That's what they want you to
believe.

(beat)

They say they want the names of my
suppliers. They don't. They want to
destroy me.

(sighs)

He wants me to stop singing what's
in my soul.

REGINALD DEVINE

Stop singing the damn song then
honey. Won't life be easier on you
if you just behave?

Billie's tired. She wipes her tears, embarrassed to have
shown emotion. Finally, nods in agreement. The drugs are
wearing off.

Recording LADY IN SATIN.

Billie's chicly dressed but she looks emaciated as she scans
through the music. STRING MUSICIANS respectfully trade looks
as she sips her gin. Roslyn sadly sits by.

BILLIE
I can't seem to get these words.
Where is LADY SINGS THE BLUES?

PRODUCER
We recorded that one a few years
back, Miss Holiday.

ANGLE ON - Her sheet music. Billie can't make heads or tails
of it. She looks up from the music and into the recording
booth.

ROSLYN
Baby, we're going to go home, okay?

BILLIE
Geewiz, I'm a little confused.
(then)
Jimmy, is that you out there?

IN THE CONTROL BOOTH -The RECORDING ENGINEERS trade glances,
confused. The PRODUCER, is at the end of his rope.

101

**INT. BILLIE'S LUXURIOUS HOME - BEDROOM - ANOTHER DAY - JULY 1
1959**

The staff is all gone. Her apartment is in desperate need of
cleaning. Most of the plants are dying or already dead.
Billie, wearing silk pajamas chain smokes. Sister Rosetta
Tharpe's "Cain't No Grave Hold My Body" plays on a phonograph
as Billie sings along. She joins Jimmy on the bed.

BILLIE
I should of been a gospel singer,
you know? I like Sister Rosetta.
She brings some sunshine to death,
you know.
(then)
Prez died. His wife wouldn't let
me sing at his funeral.
(then)
I miss him.

JIMMY FLETCHER
I'm sorry.

BILLIE
You remember the last time we was
all together. I left him there,
Jimmy.

JIMMY FLETCHER
I love you, Billie Holiday.

Billie takes this in. Then,

BILLIE
My liver don't work no more. They
say it's cirrhosis.

Billie smiles, surprisingly she sings along with Sister
Rosetta Tharpe.

BILLIE (CONT'D)
(singing)
I want you to blow, blow, blow,
blow, blow, blow, blow, blow, blow,
blow. Cain't no grave hold my body
down.

They both laugh hard, so hard that Billie starts coughing.

BILLIE (CONT'D)
I don't feel so good.

Jimmy runs to get help.

SMASH TO: BLACK

THE SOUND OF A DISTANT AMBULANCE.

104

INT. HOSPITAL, BILLIE'S ROOM - NEXT DAY - JULY 1959

104

A NURSE adjusting her I.V. Drip.

Her room is crowded with gifts from fans. BOUQUETS OF
FLOWERS, a PHONOGRAPH, some RECORDS and some COMIC BOOKS.
Billie sitting up in bed reading a GET WELL CARD. A HOSPITAL
ORDERLY brings in yet another BUNCH OF FLOWERS. Adds them to
the other gifts.

JIMMY FLETCHER
Your fans love you. The NAACP says
Billie Holiday is the voice of our
people.

Billie ponders this. Tears well.

BILLIE
Try not to blame yourself for any
of this.

The nurse interrupts.

NURSE

You got well-wishers crowding up in the street outside. It's pretty wild out there.

BILLIE

That's swell.

The Nurse leaves the room. Billie gives Jimmy a wink. Jimmy lights a cigarette for her. Billie takes a deep inhale. She looks at her chipped unmanicured nails. She tries to fix her hair.

BILLIE (CONT'D)

I must look a mess. Help me paint my nails.

JIMMY FLETCHER

I don't know how to do that.

BILLIE

Man. Grab me my purse. I got two bottles in there. Give me the blood red.

Jimmy abides. He sits painting Billie's nails.

102

INT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY - JULY 1959

102

Jimmy steps off the elevator straight into Anslinger and Carter.

HARRY ANSLINGER

You're out of line being here.

AGENT CARTER

Maybe he's supplying her too.

Jimmy goes to slug Carter. But he stops his own fist and holds himself together.

HARRY ANSLINGER

If you obstruct us, we have enough to tie you to her. And it's a long way down.

Jimmy gets in Anslinger's face. As much as his training and ambition will allow. We think he's going to throttle his boss.

JIMMY FLETCHER

You hate her. Despite all the shit in her life, she's made something of herself and you can't take it. Because she's strong, beautiful, and black.

Jimmy's punctured the veil and exposed the truth. But Anslinger doesn't even blink. Carter and Anslinger walk away. Leaving Jimmy alone. He's spoken truth to power. But it might be too late.

105

INT. BILLIE'S HOSPITAL ROOM - LATER - JULY 1959

105

Jimmy sits in the same chair. Billie and Jimmy fall asleep looking at each other.

LATER

Jimmy's startled awake by someone kicking his foot. It's Agent Sam Williams. And McKay is with him. Tension between Jimmy and McKay. Jimmy jumps up ready to fight. Sam comes between them. Billie stirs awake. McKay turns. All smiles.

LOUIS MCKAY

Hey baby. They say you not feeling so good.

BILLIE

Yea, all of sudden I'm not.

AGENT SAM WILLIAMS

(to Jimmy)

Let me take you home.

BILLIE

No.

JIMMY FLETCHER

No.

Louis McKay balls his fist, ready to fight again. Billie sees the possible brawl and intercepts.

BILLIE (CONT'D)

Jimmy come here.

Jimmy goes over to her bed. This only infuriates McKay more. She whispers to Jimmy.

BILLIE (CONT'D)

What the critics say about my last record?

Jimmy's stunned by her question...really, right now?

JIMMY FLETCHER
I thought you don't care about
them?

BILLIE
I don't...I just...I want people to
like it, ya dig?

JIMMY FLETCHER
Critics didn't like it. But does it
matter?

BILLIE
Did you like it?

JIMMY FLETCHER
Yes.

Billie smiles.

BILLIE
Go on and scram so I can get this
man out of here.

Billie doesn't want Jimmy in any trouble. She nods for him to
go. Jimmy reluctantly heads to the door, he turns back.
Unsure.

BILLIE (CONT'D)
(winks)
Go on. I'll see you in church,
soldier boy.

Jimmy smiles back. Somewhere in his gut says this is their
goodbye.

106

EXT. HOSPITAL - FOLLOWING - JULY 1959

106

As they exit the hospital Jimmy sees the sizable CROWD OF
FANS that have gathered in the street. Many holding "LET LADY
LIVE" picket signs. They're quiet and respectful, keeping a
vigil for Billie. He sees Roslyn weeping on the side walk.

ROSLYN
My friend is a nurse in there. She
overheard the feds saying they gone
take her off of the methadone if
she don't talk. She's going through
withdrawal, man. It'll kill her if
they do that.

She weeps in Jimmy's arms.

ROSLYN (CONT'D)

Those bastards won't let me in. She needs me.

Jimmy looks up helpless to Agent Sam Williams. But Agent Williams has even worse news.

AGENT SAM WILLIAMS

And if that doesn't work, Anslinger is going to plant heroine on her. They plan to arrest Billie in her bed.

108

INT. HOSPITAL, BILLIE'S ROOM - LATER - JULY 1959

108

The reel-to-reel recording. Carter hovers over it. McKay sitting with Billie. Holding her hand. Anslinger stands over another agent operating the machine.

HARRY ANSLINGER

(smiles)

So very nice to meet you finally Miss Holiday. My wife is such a fan.

Billie smiles back.

LOUIS MCKAY

She understands what you need. Billie and me discussed things. She hasn't been well but she's sorry for the trouble she's caused and she's ready to help.

HARRY ANSLINGER

Just for the record, I'm going to need for you to state your name.

Billie lights a cigarette. Smiles. On a bedside table - a stack of SIGNED LEGAL PAPERS. How much of her life has she signed away?

BILLIE

My name is Billie Holiday.

She lets the words hang in the air, then goes quiet, smokes.

LOUIS MCKAY

Go on, Lady. Go ahead and speak your piece.

Billie locks eyes with Anslinger and Carter. She's down and out but she won't look away.

Billie's eyes well up with tears. There's an internal struggle going on. The same fight that she's been fighting all her life. To somehow stay alive and thrive in this mess of a world. She wipes at her eyes, steadies her breath. Manages a smile. McKay gives her hand a gentle squeeze. The tape machine goes round and round. She clears her throat.

BILLIE

You think I'm going to stop singing that song? Your grandkids'll be singing STRANGE FRUIT!

(she laughs)

Y'all motherfuckers think you got me? You don't! You stupid bitches don't got shit on me

(beat)

Suck my black ass!

She laughs at them. She spits blood at Carter. McKay is embarrassed. Carter wipes the spit.

Billie laughs harder. The men look on disturbed. Humiliated, McKay leaves, followed by Carter. Anslinger looks on at her though. He can't believe the life that's left in this dying woman. Finally defeated, he's the last to leave. Alone, Billie's laughter finally dies. She is left with that silence she hates.

POST SCRIPT:

ON JULY 17, 1959, BILLIE HOLIDAY DIED. SHE WAS 44 YEARS OLD.

NARCOTICS AGENTS, CLAIMING TO HAVE FOUND HEROIN, ARRESTED HER AS SHE LAY DYING.

INT. JIMMY FLETCHER'S APARTMENT HALLWAY - NEXT DAY

Jimmy comes up the stairs and tries to open his apartment door. It's stuck. He begins to force it open but it won't budge.

He bangs on the door until he breaks down and cries.

POST SCRIPT: (CONTINUED)

HARRY ANSLINGER REMAINED COMMISSIONER OF THE FEDERAL BUREAU OF NARCOTICS UNTIL HIS RETIREMENT, AT THE AGE OF 70.

JIMMY FLETCHER REGRETTED HIS ACTIONS WHILE WORKING FOR HARRY ANSLINGER AND THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT UNTIL THE DAY HE DIED.

IN 1978, BILLIE HOLIDAY'S RECORDING OF "STRANGE FRUIT" WAS INDUCTED INTO THE GRAMMY HALL OF FAME.

IN 1998, TIME MAGAZINE NAMED IT SONG OF THE CENTURY.

IN FEBRUARY 2020, THE EMMETT TILL ANTI-LYNCHING ACT WAS CONSIDERED BY THE SENATE.

IT HAS YET TO PASS.

Over credits:

110

INT. CAFE SOCIETY - NIGHT

110

Billie on stage singing "ALL OF ME". She's in fine form.

BILLIE

(singing)

All of me. Why not take all of me.
Can't you see, I'm no good without
you. Take my lips I want to lose
them. Take arms, I'll never use
them.

Your goodbye left me eyes that cry.
How can I go on dear without you.
You took the part that once was my
heart so why not take all of me.

And the way she still makes all of us feel special, even today, so many years after her death. She's luminous and she'll live forever.

THE END.