

FADE IN.

EXT. LEVEE - NIGHT

A 1979 Ford Sedan slowly rolls along an oyster-shell road atop a levee. The night is chilly, a layer of thick fog masking the steep slopes either side of the road.

In the distance, city lights flicker. Channel buoys CLANG.

SUPER: "CHALMETTE, LOUISIANA"

At the point in the road closest to the water's edge, the vehicle comes to a halt.

INT. FORD SEDAN - NIGHT

The DRIVER (40's), a man dressed in khaki's and a button down shirt, visible from the chin down, HUMS along with the classical music coming from the car radio.

COURTNEY RICHTER (14), unconscious, her face bruised, slouches in the passenger seat beside him.

The man sets his pipe down in the ashtray, clicks the music off and, face still in shadow, reaches for the girl, stroking her long blonde hair.

EXT. LEVEE

The man exits the car, stepping around to the passenger side, still HUMMING the classical melody from the radio.

As he opens the passenger door, the unconscious teen falls from her seat and drops onto the roadbed. Gripping Courtney's ankles, he drags her off the road.

He pulls the body down the levee embankment, through a cluster of shoreline saplings and onto the Mississippi bank.

EXT. RIVER BANK

His face still unseen, the driver lifts a large STONE from the bank.

The girl regains consciousness.

COURTNEY

No! No, please! I didn't...

He SLAMS down the stone, cracking her skull.

The girl falls silent.

MOMENTS LATER:

The driver, still unseen, sits beside the body, calmly observing the lights on the far bank.

He runs his fingertips over Courtney's calf then up along her thigh. He looks around, but there is no one.

Unfastening his belt, he unzips and mounts the corpse.

EXT. JETTY - TWO HOURS LATER

Downriver, an old black man, HENRY BARTHOLMEW (70), sits atop large jetty stones, fishing. His retriever, BENNY, beside him.

SUPER: "MALIGNANCE"

Benny runs to the river's edge, snarling at the water.

HENRY

Boy! What are you? Actin' like
ya got the jimjams or somethin'.

The retriever continues to whimper.

HENRY

What the hell's got ya spooked?
Ain't seen ya like this since that
coon nipped ya tail. Had ya
jumpin' Bayou Ducros.

Henry feels a jolt on his fishing line.

HENRY

Think maybe we got somethin' here.

The tension on the fishing line increases. The pole bends.

Benny scampers at the water's edge.

HENRY

Hold ya groceries, Ben. We got
it.

Henry anchors the cane pole between two rocks. Climbing down the jetty to the water's edge, he generously tugs the line.

His catch breaks the surface -- a white, human foot snared in the fishing line, the pale leg disappearing into deeper water.

HENRY

Oh, my lord, Benny. My god.

Benny starts to HOWL.

EXT. MISSISSIPPI RIVER - DAY

A speedboat races along, parallel with the Mississippi shoreline. A muscular Cajun man, SALINGER (32), sits forward in the boat, pointing shoreward.

SUPER: "KENNER, LOUISIANA - NINE DAYS LATER"

As the vessel nears the bank, the white-bearded operator, SAINT-BEUVE (55), cuts the engines.

Salinger (rope between his teeth) leaps from the craft onto the back of an unsuspecting ALLIGATOR, swimming in the water.

Salinger and the gator remain submerged for several anxious moments.

SAINT-BEUVE

(calling out)

Salinger? Where you at, boy?

Abruptly, Salinger and the gator break the surface, Salinger's rope firmly securing the alligator's jaws.

SALINGER

(elated)

Yea! Look at that, Saint-Beuve!
Money in the bank. Ha! Ha!

The men become distracted by the ROAR of a low flying 747, on final approach into New Orleans International.

INT. JET AIRLINER - DAY

Turbulence rocks the aircraft, as a young FLIGHT ATTENDANT, tries to calm the passengers -- and herself.

ATTENDANT

Sit back calmly now. Fasten your seatbelts.

In the first row of economy, fresh from the Panamanian outback, CAPTAIN ALEXANDER RICHTER (42), lean, square-jawed, a mercenary with a recent bullet crease -- a fresh wound -- on the side of his forehead, stares out a starboard window.

The attendant, reaching the bulkhead with some difficulty, buckles herself into her chair, facing the passengers.

The turbulence increases. The aircraft groans and shudders.

The attendant leans forward, vomiting onto the floor between her feet. The WOMAN next to Richter, overwhelmed, reaches for the airsickness bag...and misses.

Richter looks at his splattered army low-quarters then at the woman, then back to his shoes.

WOMAN
(collecting herself)
Uh...sorry.

Richter grunts and turns away, staring out the starboard window, the clouds sweeping past.

FLASHBACK

INT. HOSPITAL (PRIVATE ROOM) - DAY

Richter (22) enters a room, where his wife JULIA (19) recovers from childbirth.

Richter wears a "dress-green" U.S. Army uniform with Corporal's stripes on his sleeve.

In Julia's arms is their new child, COURTNEY.

Richter leans against the bed, cradling his wife and child.

JULIA
Look, Courtney! It's Daddy!

She hands the baby to Richter.

JULIA
Take her, Daddy!

Richter warily lifts his daughter. He admires her at arm's length. The baby laughs. He smiles and, a bit awkwardly, holds her close, Julia looking on.

END OF FLASHBACK

EXT. RUNWAY -- NEW ORLEANS INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

The landing gear lowers and shuddering all the way the aircraft touches down.

INT. AIRPORT CONCOURSE - DAY

Standing tall amidst the mostly disheveled passengers, Richter makes his way along concourse D, a silver briefcase in hand.

He's wearing the ridiculous ensemble of a man too long in the bush -- spattered black low quarters (shoes), white socks, too short blue jeans, a wrinkled white dress shirt and a bright plaid sports coat a size or two too small.

People stare but he takes no nevermind.

Walking down the corridor he glances out at Moisant Tower and the city of New Orleans.

INT. AIRPORT LUGGAGE CAROUSEL

PASSENGERS watch as Richter, waiting near the luggage carousel, wipes his shoes, one at a time, against the back of his pants leg.

EXT. AIRPORT TERMINAL - DAY

A cab, music blaring, screeches to a halt in front of Richter. He tosses his duffle bag onto the back seat and gets in.

INT. CAB

The CABBY (20) Hispanic, glances at Richter through the overhead mirror. He immediately turns the music down.

CABBY

Uh...where to, boss?

RICHTER

Memory Gardens, 4900 Airline Highway.

CABBY

Gotcha!

EXT. CAB

The cab rolls east on Airline Highway then turns suddenly onto a side street.

INT. CAB

Richter leans forward in his seat.

RICHTER
I said, "4900 Airline".

 CABBY
Airline winds north to Lake
Pontchar-train, boss. We'll catch
it just about where you want to
be.

 RICHTER
No. Airline bisects the city on
an east-west heading, until it
passes I-10 and turns into Tulane.

 CABBY
Just trying to make a living!

 RICHTER
Well, do it on someone else's
dime. Make a right onto Metairie.
Work your way back.

 CABBY
Gotcha, boss.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

The cab rolls up through the early morning fog to the
cemetery entrance, past a sign saying "Memory Gardens".

The vehicle stops at the visitor center and Richter gets
out, leaving the door open.

 CABBY
 (through the open
 door)
That's fourteen-sixty-five.

 RICHTER
We only went four miles.

 CABBY
The meter says fourteen-sixty-
five.

Richter takes out three, five-dollar bills and tosses
them onto the front seat.

 RICHTER
 (walking away)
Keep the change.

CABBY

Hey! Aren't you gonna shut the door?

Richter keeps walking. The cabby gets out, comes around, SLAMS the door shut, re-enters the cab and takes off!

CABBY

(calling out)

Vete a la mierda, you piece of shit gringo!

INT. VISITOR CENTER - DAY

Richter approaches the attendant (33), a LADY who fancies herself a southern belle.

LADY

May I help you?

RICHTER

I'm trying to locate a grave.

LADY

Of course. The deceased's name?

RICHTER

Courtney A. Richter. As I understand it, she was buried here two or three days ago.

LADY

Oh, that recent? I am so sorry.

The lady fingers through a tandem filebox, pulling out a paper.

LADY

Yes, here it is. Courtney A. Richter, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Mark Schatz?

RICHTER

(stunned)

Beg your pardon.

LADY

It's what the paper says, sir.

She hands it to him and he looks it over.

RICHTER

Okay then, that's her. What's the location?

EXT. GRAVE SITE - DAY

Richter sits cross-legged before a grave covered in wilted flowers. A cellophane-covered name tag, "Courtney A. Richter" stuck on a bronze staff sunk in the dirt serves as a pitiful marker.

FLASHBACK

EXT. RICHTER HOME (BACKYARD) - DAY

Richter's with Courtney (5), singing and dancing in the backyard, playing "Ring Around the Rosy". Second Lieutenant bars -- a promotion -- replace the Corporal stripes on his sleeves.

Courtney is dressed like an angel, a wand in her hand.

Richter's wife, Julia (24), pretty, blond, watches in the background.

RICHTER AND COURTNEY

"...laughing, laughing...we all
fall down!"

The family's happy, laughing.

Delighted, Courtney flaps her arms -- her angel's wings.

END OF FLASHBACK

A treebranch CREAKS, as the wind picks up.

Richter shifts position, lifting his collar to block the wind.

Two black CARETAKERS approach. The ELDER (50's) breaks the silence.

ELDER CARETAKER

Mister...the flowers. It's been
three days. Got to clean 'em up.

Richter nods and the men begin collecting the withered arrangements.

RICHTER

Wait!

Reaching for the base of Courtney's marker, Richter pulls out a TALON, tangled in the flowers.

RICHTER

What's this?

The older man lowers his eyes, as the younger one looks on.

RICHTER
Was it here when the flowers were laid?

ELDER CARETAKER
(nervous)
Don't know. Me 'n Jim didn't lay 'em.

RICHTER
(rising)
Pull off the rest.

The caretakers cautiously remove the remaining flowers. Richter inspects the grave's entire length.

RICHTER
Where's the rest of it?

The elder caretaker, keeping his eyes low, shrugs.

RICHTER
Someone put this here. Just this.
(to the younger man)
Why?

JIM (25), younger caretaker approaches, about to speak.

CARETAKER
(in Creole)
No, Jim, don't!

JIM
(in Creole, soothing his elder)
It's OK, old man.
(to Richter)
It's voodoo. Gris-gris.

RICHTER
Meaning?

JIM
Could be good, could be bad.
Could be to keep the body in the grave. (pause) How did she die, man?

RICHTER
I don't know.

JIM
(he spits)
Anyway, it don't mean nothin'!

The old man cringes.

Richter studies the talon, then stashes it in his pocket.

INT. CAB - DAY

A female CABBY (50s), wearing a Baltimore Oriole cap, drives north on Elysian Fields Avenue, Richter sitting in the back seat, glancing out the window.

The old oak trees that line the avenue's meridian abruptly end. Richter finds himself staring at the homes in a well-appointed neighborhood. He searches the numbers.

RICHTER

Stop here!

They stop at Mirabeau Avenue.

EXT. SCHATZ HOME

As the cab leaves, Richter stands on the sidewalk, briefcase and duffle bag in hand, taking in the Schatz's large brick-veneer ranch house.

He makes his way up the walk to the front door and, hesitating, knocks twice.

The door opens a crack. A pair of lovely blue eyes peer out at him, registering complete surprise. The door SLAMS shut, before Richter can utter a word.

At odd ends, Richter waits.

The door re-opens. MARK SCHATZ (40-ish), a bit of a nebbish -- an academician -- stands in the doorway.

MARK

(hesitant)

Hello, Alex...Come in.

RICHTER

Thank you, Mark.

INT. SCHATZ HOME (LIVING ROOM) - DAY

Richter sits, uncomfortably straight, on the too-soft sofa as Mark lowers himself into a recliner across the room.

Richter notices a commanding portrait of Mark, Julia (Richter's ex-wife) and Courtney above the fireplace.

RICHTER

Unusual way to meet.

MARK

Yes, it is...If it means anything,
Alex, as a stepfather I thought
the world of her.

RICHTER

She was easy to love. (BEAT) What
happened?

MARK

You don't know?

RICHTER

The Red Cross only said she'd died. I
called them to find the mortuary.
From there, the cemetery. I didn't
want to bother you and Julia.

MARK

I understand.

RICHTER

What...what happened?

MARK

Alex...Courtney left us some time ago.

RICHTER

Left?

Unseen by the two men, JULIA (32), a slender, sophis-
ticated blond, steps into the vestibule, listening quietly.

MARK

She, uh, she ran away. We tried
to find -

RICHTER

Ran away?

MARK

We called the school, the police --
we had everyone looking for her.

RICHTER

Why would she run away?

Julia enters brusquely.

JULIA

So, now you care.

RICHTER

(stands)
Hello, Julia.

JULIA

"Hello, Julia?!" Is that all you can say? Does it take a daughter's death to bring you back?

MARK

(stands)

Julia, not now! Please?

JULIA

I'll say what I want!

RICHTER

Julia, I didn't come here to make problems for you. But I do want to know what happened to Courtney. Why wasn't I told? I arrive here to find my daughter buried three days ago.

JULIA

No one could find you. Then again, no one was looking very hard.

Julia walks to the front window. She pulls the draw cord on the venetian blinds and looks out.

MARK

We telegraphed the Department of Defense. They said you resigned your commission two years ago. After that we weren't sure, so we contacted the Red Cross.

JULIA

(turns back)

Where were you when your daughter needed you most?

The words hit home.

RICHTER

(collecting himself)

What would make Courtney run away?

JULIA

(looking back out the window)

Three months ago Courtney suddenly turned inward.

RICHTER

Inward?

Julia continues to look out the window, Richter's REFLECTION in the glass beside her.