

EIGHT DAYS LEFT

Written by

Gary J Rose

Groser1@pacbell.net
(530) 613-9232

FADE IN:

EXT. INDUSTRIAL DISTRICT - NIGHT

A beat-up unmarked sedan crawls to a stop at the curb. Streetlights flicker overhead. Steam hisses from a manhole nearby. The world feels tired—and so does the man behind the wheel who sips from a coffee cup before smashing it and throwing it to the floorboard.

INT. SEDAN - CONTINUOUS

DETECTIVE JACK RYDER (50s) studies a case file in the dim glow of the dash.

His jaw is tight. A cup of coffee rests untouched in the cup holder.

POLICE SCANNER (O.S.)
—suspected meth lab, no response
from 10-David. Possible juveniles
inside. Scene unsecured.

Ryder looks across the street at a dilapidated two-story house. No units in sight.

He reaches into the glovebox, grabs his badge and a sidearm. Racks the slide. Opens the door.

POLICE SCANNER (O.S.) (CONT'D)
—suspected meth lab, no response
from 10-David. Possible juveniles
inside. Scene unsecured.

Ryder looks across the street at a dilapidated two-story house. No units in sight. He reaches into the glovebox, grabs his badge and a sidearm. Racks the slide. Opens the door.

EXT. ABANDONED HOUSE - NIGHT

Ryder approaches cautiously. The front door hangs open. He draws his weapon and steps inside.

INT. ABANDONED HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Dark. Rotting floorboards. Trash and needles everywhere.

A teenager bolts from the hallway—Ryder grabs him, slams him down, cuffs him. Another kid stirs on a couch, dazed.

From a back room: a loud BANG—then silence.

Ryder pushes forward, fast.

A 14-YEAR-OLD lies convulsing on the floor—foam at his mouth.

Two older teens back into a corner. A 9MM handgun sits beside a makeshift meth lab.

Ryder grabs the weapon, clears it.

One teen lunges toward the window—Ryder drops him with a knee and cuffs him.

No backup. No backup needed.

EXT. ABANDONED HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Squad cars pull up, sirens dying. Uniforms rush the house.

Ryder stands on the lawn, breathing hard, sleeves rolled up, sweat and chemical residue on his face.

A paramedic team rolls out the OD'd kid on a gurney.

PARAMEDIC
He's breathing. Barely.

Ryder watches as they load the kid into the ambulance.

No emotion. No satisfaction. Just silence.

Ryder watches as they load the kid into the ambulance. No emotion. No satisfaction. Just silence.

INT. POLICE PRECINCT - CAPTAIN'S OFFICE - NEXT MORNING

CAPTAIN LOU MARTIN (60s) glares across his desk. He's mid-tirade.

CAPTAIN MARTIN
No warrant. No backup. You
assaulted a minor, contaminated a
crime scene, and violated half the
goddamn playbook!

Ryder stands at ease, arms crossed, eyes tired.

CAPTAIN MARTIN (CONT'D)
And the DA? Can't touch it. Says
the arrest's a walking lawsuit.
That's your legacy, Jack.

RYDER
The kid would've died.

CAPTAIN MARTIN
But he didn't. Thanks to you. And
now I'm supposed to thank you,
what, with a pension and a parade?

He tosses a file across the desk.

CAPTAIN MARTIN (CONT'D)
There's a program. Pilot thing.
Last-chance kids. Real bottom-
feeders. They want someone who can
handle it. Or make it disappear.

Ryder doesn't move.

CAPTAIN MARTIN (CONT'D)
Eight days. One classroom. Either
you fix them, or they shut it all
down—and your pension goes with it.

Ryder finally sits. Leans forward.

RYDER
What am I supposed to teach them?

CAPTAIN MARTIN
Hell if I know. GED, maybe. Just
keep them out of the system for
eight days.

A long beat.

CAPTAIN MARTIN (CONT'D)
It's not a second chance, Jack.
It's a favor. You either walk away
clean... or not at all.

INT. ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION CENTER - ADMIN OFFICE - DAY

Ryder enters, scanning the faded motivational posters and
peeling paint. This place wasn't built to inspire. It was
built to contain.

Behind a desk stacked with binders and budget reports sits
VALERIE BURNS (50s), Director of Alternative Ed. Corporate
blazer. Hardened eyes. Zero warmth.

She doesn't stand.

VALERIE
Detective Ryder. Or... is it Mister
now?

Ryder doesn't take the bait.

RYDER
Whatever gets me through the door.
She slides a thick manila folder across the desk.

VALERIE
Your students.
Ryder flips it open. Mugshots. Incident reports. One page is
partially redacted.

VALERIE (CONT'D)
I handpicked the ones with the
worst records and the lowest odds.
The district wants this program to
fail—saves them money.

Ryder raises an eyebrow.

RYDER
That supposed to be a challenge?

VALERIE
It's supposed to be a warning.
She reaches under her desk and drops four heavy GED prep
books onto the table—Mathematical Reasoning, Reasoning
Through Language Arts, Social Studies, Science.

VALERIE (CONT'D)
Each one's got to pass all four
subjects. First exams on Day
Seven—Math and Science.
Final exams on Day Eight—Language
Arts, Social Studies, and an essay.

She makes air quotes with a tired smirk.

VALERIE (CONT'D)
Hope your "Students" (air quotes)
are ready.
Ryder eyes the books. Then the names in the file.

VALERIE (CONT'D)

You've got six days to teach kids
who never gave a damn about school
how to pass tests they don't
believe matter. Should be fun.

RYDER

Never been much of a teacher.

VALERIE

Neither have they been students.
Let me know when you want to
quit—I'll have the paperwork ready.

She gestures toward the hallway.

VALERIE (CONT'D)

Classroom's at the end of the
school. A portable, all by itself.
Law doesn't allow Alt. Ed students
to comingle with "actual" students.

Ryder picks up the books. Heavy in his arms. The folder under
one arm—the weight of it all suddenly very real.

He heads toward the door.

No greetings were exchanged.

INT. RYDER'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

A modest, barebones apartment. Sparse furniture. No family
photos. TV on mute. The flicker of a baseball game. The clock
says 8:14 PM.

Ryder drops the four GED books and the student folder onto
his kitchen table with a dull THUD.

He grabs a beer from the fridge, twists the cap off, downs
half of it.

He opens the Math book, scans a few pages—equations,
diagrams, test questions.

RYDER

Jesus...

He flips ahead. It doesn't get easier.

RYDER (CONT'D)

How the hell are they supposed to
learn this shit in a few days?

He drains the rest of the beer, heads back to the fridge.
Opens it.

A bottle of mustard. A slice of cheese in plastic wrap.
That's it.

He sighs. Grabs the Math book, keys, and heads for the door.

INT. SUBWAY SANDWICH SHOP - LATER

Ryder sits alone at a booth, half-eaten sandwich in front of him. The Math book is open. He's marking pages with a pen, writing notes on a napkin.

He stares at a sample problems involving percentages and profit margins.

Beat.

He underlines it, circles it, jots something down.

RYDER (MUTTERING)
Okay... buy low, sell high. Corner
hustle math. That might stick...

INT. RYDER'S CAR-NIGHT

POV: Clock on the wall shows 1:10AM.

He glances up—two teenagers at the counter are arguing about money and change.

Ryder watches them. Wheels turning.

For the first time, he's not just reading he's thinking like a teacher.

EXT. ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION CENTER - PARKING LOT - DAWN

Fog hangs over the lot. Ryder pulls in—only car there. The school looms like a locked box. A janitor finishes locking up a side door.

WALT THOMPkins (60s) African-American turns, surprised to see someone else out this early. Uniform faded. Wise eyes. Moves with slow, deliberate purpose.

WALT
Didn't expect to see a new face
this side of sunrise.

RYDER
Didn't expect to be one.

WALT
You must be the one they sent for
the portable.
Ryder, right?

Ryder nods.

RYDER
That obvious?

WALT
Only new folks around here are
either delivering supplies... or
being delivered.

Beat.

WALT (CONT'D)
They ain't bad kids in there, Mr.
Ryder.
They're just tired of being treated
like trash no one bothered to take
out.

Ryder shifts the books in his arms.

RYDER
You work with them?

WALT
I mop the floors. They ignore me,
mostly.
But I see 'em. I listen when they
don't know they're being heard.

He pauses. Sees Ryder scanning the building.

WALT (CONT'D)
Just don't try to save 'em.
They'll smell it on you—and chew
you up.

RYDER
I'm not here to save anyone.

WALT
Good. Just... stay. That's more
than most have done.

A beat. Walt turns to leave.

WALT (CONT'D)
Classroom's the portable. End of
the school. All by its lonely self.

Ryder watches him walk away before turning toward the path.

The books feel heavier now.

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - EARLY MORNING

Ryder unlocks the portable and steps inside. The door creaks open like it hasn't moved in weeks. Stinks of mildew.

He flips on the lights. They flicker. One bulb dies instantly with a pop.

He surveys the room—desks scratched and broken, a cracked whiteboard, and a bulletin board with nothing pinned to it but a torn "GED Success Starts Here!" poster.

He sets the four GED books and the thick student folder on the teacher's desk. Then pulls out the nearest chair and drops into it with a sigh.

He opens the folder.

INSERT - FILE: DARNELL TAYLOR (17)

Mugshot. Stern, unblinking.

Multiple suspensions.

Assault on student.

Diagnosed ADHD, oppositional defiant disorder.

Reads at grade level. Scored high in spatial reasoning.

RYDER
(reading quietly)
Darnell. Likes to lead... mostly
into trouble.

INSERT - FILE: MARIA ESTRADA (16)

Photo: Hood up. Headphones on. Eyes tired, but alert.

Truancy. Drug possession.

Trauma file sealed.

Artistic. Advanced reading skills.

Previous counselor notes: "Gifted. Guarded. Good Luck."

RYDER
(reads)
"Poetry in a storm." Huh...

INSERT - FILE: LUIS MENDOZA (15)

Photo: Small-framed, hollow-eyed boy. No expression.

Multiple foster placements.

Few disciplinary issues—almost invisible.

Mechanically inclined. High science aptitude.

Known to self-isolate. Speech therapy history.

Ryder pauses. Looks at the note: "Tends not to speak unless directly addressed. Sometimes not even then."

RYDER
A ghost in the system.

INSERT - FILE: REGGIE MILLS (17)

Mugshot: Straight-on. Angry. Eyes like coals. Arms crossed.

Battery on faculty.

Ongoing probation.

No parental involvement.

Scored well on logic tests. Refused to complete GED pre-tests.

RYDER
(purses lips)
Probable flight risk.

INSERT - FILE: KEON BROOKS (16)

Photo: Grinning. Peace sign. Like it's a yearbook photo.

Petty theft, class clown.

Reads people well.

Exceptionally high verbal IQ.

Uses humor to deflect, manipulate.

RYDER
(smirks)
Bet he's the first one to test me.

INSERT - FILE: TASHA WILKINS (16)

Photo: No smile. Protective. Eyeliner like armor.

Previously high-achieving student.

Behavioral referral after outing incident and physical altercation.

Quiet. Keeps distance.

Strong in written expression. Resists group work.

RYDER
(reading)
Fight or flight. Probably both.

INSERT - FILE: JAYLEN STONE (17)

Photo: Headphones in. Looking down.

Prior GED attempts: 2 (failed both).

Known to walk out of sessions.

Mild dyslexia. Diagnosed depression.

Strong musical intelligence. High auditory retention.

RYDER
Music kid. Might be a way in...

INSERT - FILE: OMAR DIXON (18)

Mugshot: Smirking. One eyebrow raised. Repeat offender. Failing all subjects. Big, athletic.

Marked as "non-compliant" in every program to date.

Displays flashes of brilliance... followed by total disengagement.

RYDER (CONT'D)
 Hmm. Wild card. Or maybe just
 waiting for a reason not to quit.

BACK TO:

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - CONTINUOUS

Ryder closes the file. Exhales deeply, staring at the door
 his students will soon walk through.

He glances at the GED books on the desk. Opens the last file.

RYDER
 (mutters)
 God help us all.

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - EARLY MORNING

Ryder closes the last file. The room is silent, save for the
 soft ticking of a warped wall clock.

He stands. Surveys the classroom again. Then turns and exits.

EXT. SCHOOL PARKING LOT - MOMENTS LATER

Ryder pops the trunk of his car. Inside: a couple of
 cardboard boxes, loosely packed with mismatched
 supplies—extension cords, plastic tubs, an old coffeemaker,
 boxes of ramen, hot cocoa packets, notebooks, pencils, and a
 bag of discount candy.

INT./EXT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - SERIES OF SHOTS

Ryder unlocks the door again.

He carries in several boxes at a time.

Then a third—this one nearly collapsing at the bottom.

He unplugs the classroom's old mini fridge and sets up two
 full-sized coffee pots on a back table.

One is labeled "COFFEE" in black Sharpie.

The other, "HOT WATER."

Next to them, he stacks:

Packets of Ramen.

Hot cocoa.

Styrofoam cups.

A small container of instant creamer and sugar.

A box of plastic spoons.

Ryder steps back, arms crossed, looking at the spread. No fanfare. No pride. Just readiness.

EXT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - FRONT DOOR - MOMENTS LATER

A SHADOW falls across the ramp leading up.

The first student is about to arrive.

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - EARLY MORNING

The classroom clock ticks toward 7:04 AM.

The door creaks open.

TASHA WILKINS (16) steps in—alone. Baggy hoodie. Hood up. Too much eyeliner. Hands in pockets. Walks like she owns nothing but her anger.

She clocks the coffee pots. The silence. Ryder at the desk—scribbling notes into a legal pad.

Tasha plops into the desk farthest from him. No eye contact. No greeting. Just drops her backpack and slouches down, arms crossed.

Ryder glances at her. Then back to his notes.

A full beat passes.

He looks at the clock again—almost an hour early.

He stands, coffee cup in hand. On the side of the mug: a Spartan red helmet logo, faded from years of use.

As Ryder walks toward the back of the room, Tasha tracks him. One eye on him. Subtle, cautious. Ready to bolt if needed.

He refills his cup at the COFFEE pot, stirs in some creamer, then heads back to the desk without a word.

Back to writing.

A few more moments pass.

Finally, without looking up:

RYDER
There's hot chocolate, donuts,
coffee, and noodles in the back.
Since you're so early.

Tasha doesn't respond. She just watches him. Waiting for a catch.

But Ryder is back into his notes. Like she's furniture.

Another beat.

Tasha slowly stands. Moves to the table. Eyes the supplies. Grabs a Styrofoam cup. Hesitates.

TASHA
I gotta... do I gotta pay for
anything?
'Cause I got no money.

RYDER
Oh heck no.
You and I gotta be here this early,
it's the least the damn school
district can do— Provide some good
ol' fashioned cop food.

Tasha side-eyes him. A faint flicker of... not a smile, but less hostility.

She makes a hot chocolate.

Returns to her seat.

Still silent—but something's shifted.

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - LATER THAT MORNING

The clock reads 7:58 AM.

Ryder finishes a note and takes another sip from his Spartan helmet mug.

The door bangs open.

REGGIE MILLS (17) steps in. Tall. Muscular. Jaw tight. Tattoos creeping up his neck. Wears a heavy hoodie with the hood up. Eyes scanning like a predator.

He doesn't speak. Just finds a desk in the back corner and slams his backpack down.

TASHA clocks him—leans away slightly.

Ryder glances up, then back down at his notes. No welcome. No challenge.

REGGIE
(under his breath)
This place is a joke.

The door opens again.

KEON BROOKS (16) strolls in like it's the first day of drama camp.

KEON
Ayyyyyy, is this the spot?
I heard we're gettin' free ramen, a
diploma, and a therapist with a
British accent.

He sees the table with cocoa and coffee.

KEON (CONT'D)
Well damn. He wasn't lying about
the ramen.

Keon grabs a cup and flashes a peace sign to no one in particular. Finds a seat dead center—the spotlight, naturally.

Ryder doesn't react.

JAYLEN STONE (17) shuffles in next. Headphones in. Hood low. Carries nothing but a spiral notebook—cover peeled halfway off.

He slides into the seat closest to the door. Doesn't look at anyone.

He nods slightly at the donuts. Then lowers his head, sketching in the notebook.

The door creaks.

LUIS MENDOZA (15) steps in quietly. Smaller than the others. Avoids eye contact. Wearing secondhand clothes that are too big.

He stops inside the door, unsure where to sit.

Ryder looks up. Gestures to the row of desks without saying a word.

Luis nods once. Sits in the front row. Unzips his backpack and pulls out... a broken mechanical pencil he fiddles with like a puzzle.

MARIA ESTRADA (16) enters next. Cold eyes. Distant. Hoodie over earbuds. She clocks every face without stopping to engage.

Slides into a desk far from the others.

Notices Tasha, then quickly looks away.

Ryder jots something on his legal pad.

Finally, the door swings open.

DARNELL TAYLOR (17).

Swagger. Confidence. Power.

He steps in like he owns the room—or plans to.

DARNELL

Let me guess.

"Turn your life around in eight days or we ship you off to Mars."

He surveys the students. Eyes land on Ryder.

DARNELL (CONT'D)

That you? You the guy?

Ryder doesn't look up.

RYDER

Take a seat.

DARNELL

Say less.

He drops into a desk... near Keon. They nod in silent recognition—alpha respects alpha.

The classroom is now full. Eight students. Eight stories. Eight storms waiting to break.

Ryder sets his pen down. Looks out at the group.

Then stands.

RYDER

Alright. That's the end of the warm-up act.

(MORE)

RYDER (CONT'D)

Now let's get to it. BEAT. Looks like we're missing one.

REGGIE

I'll get him. He's a little shy.

Reggie leaves.

EXT. SCHOOL SIDE LOT - DAY

OMAR DIXON leans against a chain-link fence. Hoodie pulled low. Skipping class again. Backpack half-open, one strap hanging.

REGGIE walks up, quiet. Controlled.

REGGIE

You done?

OMAR

You know I ain't passin' that test. Ain't no point.

REGGIE

You show up. That's the point.(beat)Ryder ain't like the others. He shows up. You should too.

OMAR

What, you givin' speeches now?

REGGIE

Somebody's gotta.

He walks away. Omar watches. Then grabs his bag and follows.

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - ORIENTATION DAY - MORNING

The final student drops into their seat. All eight are here.

Ryder steps to the front of the class. No notes. Just presence.

RYDER

Welcome to Orientation Day.

(beat)

You didn't have a choice to be here—and neither did I.

STUDENT #1

Wait—what do you mean you don't
gotta be here?

RYDER

You mean: "What do you mean when
you say you don't have to be here?"

STUDENT #1

Whatever.

RYDER

My name is Ryder. Jack Ryder.
(pause)
I'm a cop.

Instant reaction. Noise. Chairs shift. Groans.

STUDENT #2

Aw hell no. Why the fuck I gotta
sit in a room with a cop?
What're you gonna do—tell me not to
do drugs?

Ryder crosses his arms. Says nothing. Just waits.

The noise continues. Laughter. Whispered insults.

Then—gradually—it fades. The room quiets itself.

RYDER

You done?
(silence)
If not, take your time. I've got
all day.
But I was hoping to get out of here
by noon.

ANONYMOUS STUDENT (O.S.)

Shut the fuck up—I want to go home.

Ryder lets it hang. Then...

RYDER

Now that we're all so excited to
have a cop as your teacher for the
next eight days—not counting today—
(beat)
Let me start with something
important.

He points to the back of the room.

RYDER (CONT'D)

Back there, you'll find two coffee pots.
Next to it, hot water. Hot chocolate. Ramen. And the pinnacle of cop cuisine... donuts.

(beat)

Go help yourselves.

The students don't move at first.

RYDER (CONT'D)

But fair warning—the longer it takes, the longer I have to stand here... explaining what lies ahead.

KEON

Then get to steppin'.

But a few students are already moving. Coffee's poured. Donuts disappear.

A few others hang back, watching Ryder.

Still... something's changed.

He has the room.

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - MOMENTS LATER

The students are back in their seats—some sipping cocoa, others devouring donuts. A few eye Ryder suspiciously, but the room is calmer now. Listening.

Ryder walks slowly to the front, mug in hand.

RYDER

Here's the deal.

(pause)

You're here because the school district gave up on you. They think this program is a waste of money. They'd rather spend taxpayer dollars locking you up than educating you.

(beat)

Funny thing is... they think prisons are a waste of money too.

Reggie snorts. Keon leans back, arms crossed. Maria glances sideways at the door.

RYDER (CONT'D)
Now, the way I see it—
You can get up right now and walk
out that door.

OMAR DIXON rises from his seat. Backpack halfway on.

RYDER (CONT'D)
And prove them right.
Prove you are a waste of time. Of
space. Of breath.

Omar freezes.

No one says a word.

Ryder doesn't move.

RYDER (CONT'D)
Or...
You sit your ass back down— and let
me show you how to beat their sorry
little system with a piece of paper
called a GED.

(pause)

You pass these Mickey Mouse exams?
You're not just flipping off the
people who gave up on you— You're
kicking open a door they swore
you'd never reach.

Omar slowly drops his backpack. Sinks back into his chair.
Doesn't look at anyone.

Ryder nods once. Then:

RYDER (CONT'D)
That's the first rule of this game.
They don't think you can win. I
think you can.

(beat)

Next rule?
You don't quit on me.
Because I won't quit on you.

The room is dead silent now. Even Keon doesn't have a joke.

NT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - CONTINUOUS

The students sip cocoa. A few are halfway through their donuts. Keon has two. Luis silently picks apart a Ramen block and eats it dry.

Ryder watches them. Calm. Measured.

RYDER

This... is what we call a working breakfast.

(beat)

Goes on almost every day in corporate America.

Think Google. Facebook. Netflix.

BEAT

Their employees show up in pajamas, grab free breakfast, and walk into meetings with a breakfast burrito in one hand and a laptop in the other.

KEON

Man, I knew I should've gone to Google High.

Some scattered laughs.

RYDER

You wouldn't get away with this in construction.

Or a courtroom. Or a hospital operating room.

But in the right job... In the right future... People get paid to think. To solve problems. To build ideas.

Ryder scans the room. Connects with eyes when he can.

RYDER (CONT'D)

Now I don't know--yet--what each and every one of you hopes to become in life.

Maybe you don't either.

And that's fine.(BEAT)

But I'll tell you one thing--nothing starts until you pass these tests.

You want options? You want a door out of this box they shoved you in? This is where it starts.

(beat)

So enjoy your breakfast.

(MORE)

RYDER (CONT'D)

Because it's time to work and I
need to warm up my coffee.

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Ryder refills his coffee at the back table.

Across the room, Reggie leans toward a nearby student.

REGGIE

I've never been in a classroom
where the teacher brings in shit
like coffee, hot chocolate... and
donuts.

DARNOLL

Yeah, I know. I guess he doesn't
know I'm ADHD.

They both laugh.

Ryder returns to his desk. Sips his coffee. Then stands in
front of the class.

RYDER (TO SELF)

Now the fun begins.

The door to the portable opens and several police officers in
enter. The students become tense.

RYDER (CONT'D)

The first thing we are going to do
today is take a field trip.

Confused murmurs ripple across the room.

OMAR

Field trip? To where?

RYDER

A local vocational program. Trade
school. Welding. Mechanics.
Cosmetology. You name it. Real-
world stuff.

KEON

And the catch is...?

RYDER

No catch. Just get in the van.

EXT. PARKING LOT - MOMENTS LATER

Two unmarked POLICE SUVs idle at the curb.

Two UNIFORMED OFFICERS—one male, one female—wait by the cars.

STUDENTS freeze.

DARNELL

Aw hell no—this was a setup?

RYDER (SMIRKING)

Relax. They're friends. Not here to arrest anyone. They're here to drive.

TASHA (EYEING THE FEMALE OFFICER)

She a cop too?

RYDER

Yup. Sergeant Nia James. Best investigator I ever worked with.

SERGEANT JAMES nods, cool but approachable. She smiles warmly at Maria and Tasha.

TASHA (QUIETLY, TO MARIA)

Okay... she's kind of a badass.

INT. VOCATIONAL TRAINING CENTER - MONTAGE

— LUIS watches a student weld two pieces of metal. He's transfixed.

— MARIA sketches the industrial tools and stations, eyes alive.

— OMAR picks up a torque wrench. An instructor lets him try it. Omar's grin is legit.

— TASHA and SERGEANT JAMES walk the cosmetology wing. Tasha asks questions.

— KEON asks a culinary student if he can take leftovers.

— JAYLEN taps on a music production console in the audio booth.

— REGGIE is quiet... but asks the instructor about plumbing apprenticeships.

EXT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - LATER THAT DAY

Students spill out of the cop SUVs, energized and buzzing with ideas.

KEON

That welding class was fire.

TASHA

I liked her. Sergeant James. She didn't act like she was better than us.

OMAR

That torque wrench cost more than my whole house.

RYDER unlocks the classroom door.

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - MOMENTS LATER

As students settle in, Ryder checks his phone.

NEW VOICEMAIL - VALERIE BURNS (V.O.)

Mr. Ryder, I've just been informed you took students off-campus without district authorization. That is a direct violation of our safety and liability protocols. I will be notifying your supervisor.

Click.

RYDER (TO HIMSELF)

Yeah, you do that.

He drops the phone onto the desk, unfazed.

RYDER (TO CLASS) (CONT'D)

So... who's ready to apply math to torque wrenches and trade school scholarships?

The students light up. No fear. No sarcasm.

They're ready.

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - AFTERNOON - DAY 2

The students file in after the trip, buzzing with energy. Keon's still talking about the paddy wagon.

Maria and Tasha are giggling about the female cop who dropped serious wisdom on them.

DARNELL

Yo, that riot gear room was tight.
Could feel the power in that
shield, man.

JAYLEN

I liked the wall with the memorial
names.
Kinda hit different, y'know?

OMAR

That cop who ran track at Howard?
She said I got a cannon. Said I
could go college-level.

RYDER (SIPS COFFEE)

You could.
But only if you pass four damn
tests first.

The class chuckles. Tasha looks thoughtful, her hand resting on her belly.

Ryder walks slowly to the whiteboard. He writes:

"YOU TEACH, YOU LEARN TWICE."

RYDER

Alright—listen up.
This next one's gonna test your
guts more than your brains.

(beat)

Each of you... is gonna teach the
class one thing you've learned so
far.
Math, science, writing—doesn't
matter.
You get ten minutes. Board is
yours.

KEON

Wait, hold up—like stand up front?

RYDER

Yep. Like you're me.
Except hopefully better looking.

More laughter, but nerves are setting in. Tasha shifts in her chair. Luis looks down at his shoes.

RYDER (CONT'D)

You got three hours to prep.
I'll help. Your classmates will
too.
But when your name's called—you're
up.
Because the only way to know you
really own this stuff...
is to try and explain it to someone
else.

(beat)

Welcome to the hardest part of
learning.
Teaching.

MONTAGE - STUDENTS PREP THEIR "TEACHING" MOMENTS

- Keon draws cartoon algebra problems with funny stick figures.
- Maria creates a poster comparing photosynthesis and cellular respiration.
- Jaylen sets his lesson to a beat. His notebook is full of music notes and essay outlines.
- Darnell practices explaining volume formulas with a stack of ramen cups.
- Tasha writes out her points silently, mouthing each one.
- Luis builds a DIY volcano out of vinegar and baking soda.
- Omar rewrites Ryder's triangle formula lesson... but cooler.

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - LATER THAT DAY

One by one, the students get up. Some fumble. Some shine.
Ryder claps for each. The room starts supporting their own.

TASHA

My topic is... identifying main
arguments.
And I swear if y'all interrupt me
I'll throw this marker.

Laughter. But no one interrupts. She finishes strong.

DARNELL

And that's how you figure out
volume of a cylinder...
(MORE)

DARNELL (CONT'D)
or at least how I finally stopped
confusing it with surface area.
Thanks to these ramen cups.

Applause. Even Ryder grins.

RYDER
That's the kind of teaching that
belongs in the curriculum.

Next up—Luis.

LUIS walks slowly to the front. The room holds its breath. He
stands, stares at the class for a long beat. Then quietly:

LUIS
I don't talk a lot.
But I know science.

He holds up a small ziplock bag—inside, a baking soda/vinegar
volcano setup. A few students gasp in delight.

LUIS (CONT'D)
This is a chemical reaction.
It's safe... until you don't
measure right.

He activates it. A tiny fizz bubbles up and foams over.

The class erupts—cheering. Keon gives him a standing ovation.

RYDER
Luis Mendoza, ladies and gentlemen.

Science wizard and part-time demolition expert.

LUIS
Back in foster care... I once tried
to take the GED in secret.
Got caught. They said I was wasting
paper.

Silence in the classroom.

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - SUNSET

The students file out for the day, tired but proud.

RYDER (TO THEM)
Same time tomorrow.
And bring your hunger. For
knowledge. Or donuts.
I got both.

As the door closes...

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Ryder sits alone. Walt knocks and steps in.

WALT

Heard one of your kids built a volcano.
Pretty soon they'll be building cities.

RYDER

Yeah.
Unless life gets to them first.

WALT (BEAT)

You think they'll make it?

RYDER

I think they have to.
Because if they don't...
they'll believe everything the world already said about them.

(beat)

And I won't let that happen.

Walt nods once, deeply

FADE OUT.

INT. CLASSROOM-DAY

He reaches under the desk and drops eight brand-new GED math books onto the table with a thud.

Collective groan from the class.

RYDER

What's the matter? How many of you hate math?

Almost every hand goes up.

RYDER (CONT'D)

That's because you had a bunch of wackos teaching you.

(beat)

I bet back in elementary school,
you actually liked math.
You know— $1 + 1 = 2$... $3 \times 2 = 6$...

REGGIE

Yeah, because back then it made sense.
Then they threw Algebra and Geometry at us.

RYDER

I'll go one better.
How many of you used to like math until you got to fractions?

Almost everyone raises their hand again.

REGGIE

Exactly. That's when they started teaching us crap no one uses.

RYDER

Maybe. But you know who does use fractions?
Carpenters. Mechanics. Engineers.
Hell, I don't want a heart surgeon operating on me saying— "I don't know what a half an inch is, so I just take a whole inch out."

The class breaks into laughter.

RYDER (CONT'D)

Besides... you already know Algebra.

The class groans. One shy hand goes up—it's MARIA.

RYDER (CONT'D)

Yeah?

MARIA

I'm not lying—I panic the second a teacher says "Algebra."
Like... instant shutdown.

Ryder nods. Turns to the whiteboard. Writes:

$$27 + 4 = X$$

Someone calls out:

STUDENT (O.S.)

Thirty-one!

RYDER

Correct!
Holy shit—you just did Algebra.

More laughter. Maria even smiles.

MARIA

Yeah, but that was easy.
What about when they write, like, $x + y - c = \text{blank?}$

RYDER

Ah. Now you wanna throw letters at this old man?

The class laughs again.

RYDER (CONT'D)

Tell you what—we'll come back to that.
First I need to see how smart this group really is.

He turns and writes:

$25 \div 5 =$

CLASS (ALMOST IN UNISON)

Five!

RYDER (FROWNING)

Five? Really?
Let me read it again.

He taps the board.

RYDER (CONT'D)

Five goes into twenty-five how many times?

CLASS

Five!

RYDER

Oh my God. This is going to be harder than I thought.

(turns back to board)

Okay, look dummies—
Five can't go into two, right? But five can go into five, once.
Now put the five under the 25... subtract... and we're left with 20.
Now-five goes into twenty four times.

(MORE)

RYDER (CONT'D)

Therefore... five goes into twenty-five-fourteen times.

CLASS

What?!

ANONYMOUS STUDENT

What the hell you been smoking, old man?

RYDER

You don't believe me?

Ryder writes "14" five times on the board. Starts counting each digit like he's dead serious. He starts adding the 4's.

RYDER (CONT'D)

Four... eight... twelve... sixteen... twenty-

Moves to the "ones"-

RYDER (CONT'D)

Twenty-one... twenty-two... twenty-three... twenty-four... twenty-five.
See? Five times fourteen equals twenty-five.

The class erupts. Laughter. Chaos.

ANONYMOUS MALE STUDENT

Man, what the fuck! I knew it was five!

Ryder folds his arms, sipping his coffee, watching them all spiral.

Then finally-

RYDER

Alright, before y'all go hunt down your elementary teachers-
Yes, 25 divided by 5 is 5.

(beat)

But now I know you're paying attention.

RYDER (CONT'D)

So-who's the brainiac that can tell me how I was able to show 25 divided by 5 equals 5...

(MORE)

RYDER (CONT'D)

And also prove that 5 times 14
equals 25?

The class mutters. Laughs. Finally—

REGGIE

You didn't follow the rules.
You said right that 5 won't go into
2...
But then you should've divided 5
into 25 and gotten 5.

NOT... 14.

Ryder grins.

RYDER

(smiling)

Good looking and smart....and the
school district said you were dumb
as dirt.

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - CONTINUOUS

Laughter breaks out. A few heads turn toward Reggie, who
shrugs—but that flicker of pride doesn't hide.

RYDER

Point is... sometimes the numbers
lie if you're not paying attention.
(beat)

And sometimes... they lie on
purpose—just to see if you're
watching.

He takes a long sip from his Spartan helmet mug.

RYDER (CONT'D)

So—maybe we're not starting from
scratch after all.

MARIA

How are we supposed to learn
everything to pass the GED?
Eight days? Get real.

RYDER

Oh, it's worse than that.
You've got seven days for the first
two subjects— Then on Day Eight,
the final two.

Groans fill the room. Ryder waits them out.

RYDER (CONT'D)
Giving up again?
(silence)
You want to know how we're going to
do it?

He turns to the whiteboard and begins writing as he speaks.

RYDER (CONT'D)
There are four GED exams: Math,
Social Studies, Science, and
Language Arts.
Math and Social Studies—we can
tackle in six days. English will be
tougher. I'll come back to that.

STUDENT
What about Science?

RYDER
Ah—right. I knew I forgot one.

He pulls out a stack of GED Science books from under his
desk, handing one to each student.

LUIS
Hey... these are brand new.

RYDER
Straight outta my pocket.
I should charge you guys.

Laughter.

REGGIE
What are we supposed to do with
these?

RYDER
If you want to pass the science
test, read the damn thing—cover to
cover.
Do the practice questions. Write in
it. Mark it up. It's yours now.

More groans. Ryder grabs his coffee, heads to the back,
refills. Returns.

RYDER (CONT'D)
How do football, basketball, and
baseball teams win?

OMAR
My Raiders win 'cause they're
tough.

ANOTHER STUDENT
Bullshit. Niners are the best.

ANOTHER STUDENT (CONT'D)
Nah—Chiefs, baby.

Ryder checks his watch, saying nothing. The students notice.

STUDENT
Shut up—he's gettin' pissed.

RYDER
I'm not pissed.
(beat)
It's your exam, not mine.
If you pass—great. If you try and
still fail—still great.
But if you give up?
Well... I just lick my wounds, take
my coffee pots and go back to
waiting on my pension.

(pause)

The answer I was looking for is:
strategy. Every team has one. So do
we.

Silence.

REGGIE
Listen to what he's sayin'.

RYDER
I broke down the math test already.
Here's what you'll face.

He writes quickly.

RYDER (CONT'D)
Basic Math. Geometry. Algebra.
Graphs. Functions.
You get 115 minutes total, but 2
minutes are for instructions, 3 for
a break. You can use a calculator
after the break— But I'm going to
teach you how to win without one.

REGGIE
How?

RYDER

Bring me some money tomorrow and
I'll tell you.
No, just kidding.....you'll see.

(beat)

The GED math test has 46 questions.
They come in multiple-choice, drag-
and-drop, matching, table entry,
and fill-in-the-blank.

MARIA

There it is again—Algebra.

RYDER

Yeah... but it gets easier.
They tell us what kinds of
questions show up—and how much they
count.

MARIA

Still don't get it.

RYDER

Let me break it down.
You need 145 points per section to
pass. Some questions are easy, some
are tougher.
I'll teach you how to score high on
the easy ones— So the hard ones
won't sink your score.

The class murmurs. Ryder sips his coffee.

REGGIE

And the science book?

RYDER

Right. Seven or eight days isn't
enough—unless we work smart.

OMAR

Yeah, like we're staying here all
night.

RYDER

Nope. But I'm asking you to read
that book.
All of it. Six days. Take notes.
Answer questions.
That gives us time to drill Math,
practice Social Studies, and chip
away at English.

Students talk amongst themselves. Ryder holds steady.

RYDER (CONT'D)

Before I cut you loose—one last thing.

More groans. Ryder hands out a sheet of paper and a pencil to each student.

RYDER (CONT'D)

I want you to write.

STUDENT

A damn essay?
I thought this was Orientation.

RYDER

Relax.
Put your name at the top.
Then—tell me your goal in life. And don't write "porn star."
The room breaks out in laughter.

RYDER (CONT'D)

You wanna be a motorcycle mechanic?
Great. A teacher? Even better—though the mechanic gets paid more. (pause)
Then answer this:
Do you think getting your GED helps you reach your goal?
Next:
If you could go back in time—would you change something in your life?
Did you burn a bridge? Can it be rebuilt?

STUDENT

Damn, how many questions is that?

RYDER

Just one more.
(he pauses)
Do you have... Ganas?

OMAR

What the hell is that?

RYDER

"Ganas" is a word someone once taught me.
It means desire.

(beat)

Do you have the desire to turn your
life around?

The room is still. Ryder lets the silence stretch...

FADE OUT.

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - MIDDAY - DAY 4

The class is halfway through a practice test. Ryder paces,
sipping coffee, keeping watch.

LUIS frowns at his page, muttering under his breath.

DARNELL (O.S.)
What, you can't read again?

Luis attempts to ignore him.

DARNELL (LOUDER) (CONT'D)
Hey—I'm talking to you, little man.

Luis finally looks up. Darnell grins, baiting him.

LUIS
Why don't you shut up and finish
your own test?

DARNELL
Say that again.

Ryder turns, alert.

LUIS
You heard me.

DARNELL stands. Chairs scrape. Eyes shift.

DARNELL
You think you're hard now?
Say it again, bitch.

Ryder moves between them. Calm. Steady. Arms crossed.

RYDER
Want to hit me? Go ahead.
(beat)
Take the swing.

Darnell blinks—caught off guard.

RYDER (CONT'D)

You hit me?
Boom. Ambulance. CT scan. Hospital
bills stacking up like pancakes.

Class watches—silent.

DARNELL

I ain't got no money.

RYDER

You laugh and say you got no money.
What about your parents?
I sue you. I sue them. I win.

(pause)

And every dollar you make... for
the rest of your life—gets
garnished.

MARIA

What does garnish mean?

RYDER

I means that when Darnell finally
gets a job or even changes jobs, a
percentage of his earnings go to
me, the hospital, everyone except
Darnell.

He steps in closer, not threatening—just factual.

RYDER (CONT'D)

You like math, Darnell?
'Cause this is math in real time.
Lost wages. Court fees. Probation.
Missed job interviews because
you're sitting in juvie or worse.

Beat.

That one punch? Could cost you
every dream you haven't even
thought up yet.

Darnell is frozen. Ryder stares him down.

Then—

RYDER (CONT'D)

Now... go sit your ass down.
And thank whatever's holy that Luis
didn't swing first and kick your
ass.

Everyone laughs.

Darnell slowly backs off. Returns to his desk.

RYDER (CONT'D)
And that, class...
is what happens when you don't eat
enough donuts.

The room cracks up. Even Darnell can't help but smirk.

RYDER (CONT'D)
Back to work. Life doesn't wait.

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - MOMENTS LATER

The class has returned to their seats, energy lower now.
RYDER leans against his desk, checking his watch, sipping his
coffee.

A silence hangs. Then—

JAYLEN STONE clears his throat. First words he's spoken all
day.

JAYLEN
I already failed this shit.

All eyes shift. Ryder looks up.

JAYLEN (CONT'D)
Like... not once.
Twice.

KEON
Yo for real?

JAYLEN
Yeah.
Took the GED two times last year.
Didn't even finish the last
section. Froze. Panicked. Walked
out.

(beat)

So if I'm being honest? I'm just
waiting for that to happen again.

No one laughs. No one mocks.

RYDER
Because no one taught you how to
beat it.

JAYLEN
(shrugs)
Or maybe I'm just dumb.

RYDER
No. You're just unarmed.
(beat)
You bring a bat to a gunfight, you
don't blame the swing.
You blame the strategy.

(beat)
This time, I teach you the rules.
You play the game. And this time?
We finish.

Jaylen nods once. It's not a speech. It's a line in the sand.

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - LUNCHTIME - DAY 4

The rest of the students filter out. Laughter trails out the door. A football thuds off the ground outside—Keon and Omar already tossing it.

TASHA lingers by the back of the room, stuffing her books into her bag slower than usual.

RYDER wipes the whiteboard, glancing over.

RYDER
You good?

TASHA
Yeah... I'm just...
(beat)
Actually, no.

He stops what he's doing. Sets the eraser down.

RYDER
Talk to me.

Tasha looks down, then finally meets his eyes.

TASHA
I think I might be pregnant.

A beat. Ryder doesn't flinch.

TASHA (CONT'D)
Missed... two months.
Didn't want to say anything
'cause—hell, I don't even know for
sure yet.
But...

(beat)

I've been thinking maybe I
shouldn't even finish this class.

RYDER
Why?

TASHA
'Cause what's the point?
I mess this up—then what? GED ain't
gonna fix that.

RYDER steps around the desk, lowers his voice—not to whisper,
just to make the world smaller.

RYDER
You know, if you quit...
In some ways—you're already
quitting on your baby.

(beat)

That GED? It ain't a miracle. But
it's a key.
You don't know what door it opens
yet. But it's sure as hell better
than standing outside in the rain.

TASHA looks down, arms crossed. Not defiant—just scared.

RYDER (CONT'D)
You finish this—you're not just
doing it for you.
You're doing it for the person
who's gonna need you the most.

TASHA
(quietly)
What if I still mess it all up?

RYDER
Then we mess it up trying.
Together.

A long pause. Then a nod. Small. Real.

EXT. SCHOOL YARD - LUNCH BREAK - MOMENTS LATER

The students are outside. Sun overhead. A half-deflated football arcs through the air—Keon and Darnell toss it lazily back and forth. Jaylen sits on the curb with his headphones on, eyes closed, rhythm-tapping on his knee.

OMAR leans against the fence, watching. Not playing. Not participating.

KEON (TO RYDER)
Yo! You brought this busted-ass
football?

RYDER
It's regulation... in 1987.

KEON
Still got air, though!

Keon tosses it to Darnell—bad spiral, wobbly. Darnell fumbles it.

DARNELL
Man, gimme a real pass!

RYDER (TO OMAR)
You just gonna watch?

OMAR
I don't play that shit.

RYDER
That so?
You look like you could throw.

OMAR
You look like you need glasses.

KEON
Let him try. Dude probably throws
like a grandma.

Omar sighs, takes the ball. Shrugs. Then— launches a perfect, tight spiral. It cuts the air—hitting Darnell dead center in the chest.

DARNELL
Yo what the hell—
That was NFL.

Keon stares. Jaylen lifts an earbud. Even Tasha looks up from her phone.

RYDER

Damn.

(beat)

Ever think about playing college ball?

OMAR

What fuckin' college is gonna recruit a dumb Black kid?

RYDER

How about a Black kid...
with a GED—and an arm like that?

Omar looks at him. Something flickers. Then he walks away, quiet.

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

Hey—

Omar stops. Looks back.

OMAR

Nobody ever called me smart. Not once.
Till you said I had a cannon. That stuck.

RYDER

We'll work on your spiral tomorrow.
That one was a little low.

Omar smirks. Keeps walking. But we know— he heard it.

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - AFTERNOON - DAY 4

The students are spaced out at their desks, books open, pencils moving. It's the quietest they've ever been—heads down, working.

Ryder walks the rows, coffee mug in hand. Not saying much. Just watching.

He glances over Luis's shoulder. Luis looks up, nervous. Ryder studies the answer. Then—

RYDER

(quietly, to Luis)

Nice.

Thumbs up.

Luis nods, surprised.

Across the room, Keon glances up from his paper. Ryder scans it—no words—just gives him the big thumbs up.

Keon grins, nods back like it's a fist bump from Jordan.

Tasha hesitates over a multiple-choice question. Ryder points at it silently. Then taps his temple.

RYDER (SOFTLY) (CONT'D)
You already know the answer. Trust
yourself.

She picks one. He nods. Walks on.

Darnell, pretending not to care, scribbles aggressively. Ryder lingers. Darnell senses him but doesn't look up.

RYDER (CONT'D)
(passing behind him)
Show me you can finish it.

Jaylen is humming softly, rhythm-drumming on his desk while filling in bubbles.

Omar leans back, arms crossed over a science worksheet—but he's reading. Not pretending. Reading.

Ryder keeps walking. No lectures. No threats.

Just small moments.

And one big thumbs up at a time.

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - LATE AFTERNOON - DAY 4

The class is working silently. The rhythm is real now—pens scratching, pages turning, soft concentration in the air.

The door creaks open. VALERIE BURNS enters, clipboard in hand, tight-lipped as ever.

Immediately, a few students start whispering and laughing.

VALERIE
Of course.

She shakes her head.

RYDER
Eyes down.

One sharp look from Ryder and the class returns to work. The silence settles again—solid, respectful.

VALERIE
(chilly)
Nice to see you've trained them so quickly.

She steps toward the back of the room—eyes locked on the table with two coffee pots, styrofoam cups, scattered donut boxes, and packets of ramen.

VALERIE (CONT'D)
What is all this?

RYDER
Caffeine and carbs.
Courtesy of me.

(beat)

I'm a big drinker. Need a lot of coffee to put down those sinkers.

He takes a sip from his Spartan helmet mug. Doesn't blink.

VALERIE
This isn't a lounge, Mr. Ryder.

RYDER
You're right. It's a battlefield.
Fuel's essential.

She scans the room—students quietly back at work. Maria is reading. Luis is scribbling. Even Darnell looks semi-focused.

VALERIE
I'm here to observe. Not interfere.

RYDER
(beat)
You're doing great at both.

She says nothing. Moves desk to desk, marking on her clipboard, clearly unimpressed. Ryder watches her—not tense, not deferential—just waiting her out.

VALERIE
I hope you're not making promises you can't keep.
Some of these kids have never passed a test in their lives.

RYDER
Then let's make this their first.

A pause. She eyes the donut box.

VALERIE
Empty calories.

RYDER
Better than empty kids.

Valerie stares at him. No smile. She makes one final note and turns to leave.

The students hold their breath until the door clicks shut. Valerie looks at her clipboard.

VALERIE
So how many have dropped out?

The students glance at Ryder. Waiting. Testing.

RYDER
None.
(pause)
These aren't dropouts.
They're warriors.
And warriors aren't afraid of a few
standardized tests.

Valerie raises an eyebrow. Doesn't believe it. Doesn't say so.

VALERIE
We'll see about that... tomorrow.
(pause)
Math and science. Let's see if your
warriors are ready for battle.

She heads to the door. Opens it. Stops.

VALERIE (CONT'D)
I'll be here at 8 a.m.
Let's hope they are too.

The door shuts.

A long beat.

KEON (LOW)
She cold as hell, man.

JAYLEN
I thought she was gonna bite
someone.

Ryder takes a slow sip from his mug. Calm.

RYDER
Don't worry about her.
Worry about what's coming.
Tomorrow's game day...first part of
a double header.

RYDER (CONT'D)
Alright—one more time.
Area of a triangle?

CLASS (MURMURING)
Base times height divided by two...

RYDER
Good. Pythagorean theorem?

KEON
A squared plus B squared equals...

RYDER
C squared. Lock it in.

Jaylen puts his head on his desk.

JAYLEN
Man, my brain needs a reboot.

MARIA
We've been at this for nine
hours...

RYDER
That's five more hours than your
competition.
(beat)
But... you've earned it.
Go home. Eat something. Sleep.
Tomorrow—we go to war.

Chairs slide back. Students gather bags, mumble goodnights.

Tasha gives Ryder a nod.

Reggie claps him on the shoulder without a word.

Omar holds the door open for Luis, who gives a quiet thumbs
up on the way out.

INT. ADMINISTRATION BUILDING - GED TESTING CENTER - MORNING

The students arrive outside the school—tired but wearing
clean clothes, maybe even dressed a little nicer than usual.

KEON
Guess we gotta grow up sometime.

JAYLEN
Yeah... but not all at once.

A few hug between students, a nervous shake of hands, someone brings donuts to Ryder for a change.

A stark hallway. The doors to the testing center swing open. Inside: rows of computer terminals, sterile lighting, no sound.

The students file in silently. Tasha. Keon. Maria. Jaylen. Luis. Omar. Darnell. Each one finds a seat.

The PROCTOR, clipboard in hand, watches them settle.

VALERIE BURNS stands in the hallway, arms crossed. Not a smile in sight.

PROCTOR
Phones off. Bags in the lockers.
You'll have 115 minutes. Two parts.
Three-minute break between. Once we
begin, no one leaves. If you need a
new pencil, raise your hand.

The door swings shut with a soft but final CLICK.

Valerie turns to her secretary nearby. She picks up her ceramic tea cup and walks toward the break room.

VALERIE
What a waste of time.

SECRETARY
They seemed... ready.

VALERIE (FLAT)
Hope is cheap.

Inside the test center... silence. A screen lights up:

TEST PROCTOR
Begin section one.

Keon cracks his knuckles. Tasha exhales.

Jaylen clicks the mouse.

And the clock begins.

INT. TESTING CENTER - MONTAGE

CLOSE-UP - A computer screen:

"A triangle has a base of 12 inches and a height of 8 inches. What is the area?"

TASHA stares, lips pressed tight. She reads it again. Then... Smiles. Types:

CLOSE-UP - A coordinate grid question. OMAR tilts his head, scanning. He jots notes on scratch paper, circles an X-Y plot. Clicks the correct answer.

CLOSE-UP - A percentage word problem. JAYLEN taps his pencil in rhythm. The numbers come to life-like music. He circles a number, then selects:

"C. 42%"

DARNELL cracks his neck, lets out a breath, and grins like he knows the game now.

He solves a multi-step algebra equation with confidence.

MARIA highlights keywords, marks out distractors. Calm. Surgical.

LUIS taps the mouse slowly. Triple-checks. Then clicks... and smiles.

KEON punches the air-quietly. Then glances around, proud. Back to work.

INT. TESTING CENTER - BREAK ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

The proctor hands out calculators.

PROCTOR

Use them if you need them.

The students all look at each other.

No one takes one.

PROCTOR (CONT'D)

Suit yourselves.

They re-enter the test center-more confident than before. Valerie is watching from the outside.

VALERIE
(quietly, almost to
herself)
Maybe I was wrong.

INT. TESTING CENTER - RESUMED

POV: "Which of the following graphs shows a linear function?"

Tasha's pencil moves like a blade. Keon leans forward, dialed in.

POV: "Balance the following chemical equation..."

Omar checks off three answers—then grins.

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - SAME TIME

Ryder sits alone, surrounded by open GED books. Clock on the wall: 10:24 AM.

He flips through Social Studies prep. Marks pages. Stares at the door. Checks the time again: 10:27 AM.

Beat.

He gets up. Walks to the back. Opens the mini-fridge. Grabs a sandwich. Sits.

Takes one bite.

INT. TESTING CENTER -RESUMED

Montage:

POV: "What happens to the mass and weight of a rocket as it travels beyond Earth's orbit?"

POV:

When a cell reproduces through cell division, scientists call the reproducing cell the parent cell, and the two cells that result from the division are called daughter cells. The daughter cells are genetically identical to the parent cells. Before a parent cell starts to divide, the DNA in its nucleus replicates, or makes a complete copy of itself.

Why is this process necessary?

A. so that the parent cell will have an extra copy of DNA

- B. so that each daughter cell receives a complete set of DNA
- C. so that each daughter cell will not need to synthesize proteins
- D. so that each daughter cell will receive half its DNA from each parent cell.

Maria smiles and circles the correct answer.

Ryder continues to check the clock on the wall.

RING. RING.

He stares at the phone. Picks up.

RYDER
Yeah. Ryder.

SECRETARY (V.O.)
Hi. This is Valerie's secretary.

They all passed. Math and science. You didn't hear it from me.

RYDER
(soft smile, to himself)
Let's finish the job.

Ryder doesn't speak. He's frozen.

Then... he exhales.

Leans back.

RYDER (CONT'D)
I'll be damned.
(beat)
Tell 'em...

Tell 'em I'm proud as hell.

SECRETARY
I think they already know that.
They are on their way back to the
portable. Two more exams to go.

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - CONTINUED

The students burst through the portable's door, fired up and exhausted. Some raise their arms like they won a title fight.

KEON
Tell me I didn't just wreck that
science section!

OMAR
That last math question? I ate that
thing for breakfast.

TASHA
(low, to Jaylen)
My stomach was in knots... but I
passed. Can you believe that?

JAYLEN
Yeah, I can. 'Cause we're not the
same kids we were eight days ago.

Ryder stands at the front, arms folded—stone-faced.

RYDER
Let me get this straight... all
seven of you passed?

They nod, loud and proud.

RYDER (CONT'D)
Then why the hell are you back here
instead of out celebrating?

DARNELL
Because we still got two more to
go.

RYDER
(smiles)
Damn right.

He picks up two more stacks of prep books—Language Arts and
Social Studies.

RYDER (CONT'D)
Now we've got just enough time to
review every little trick I've
taught you... and a few new ones.

BEAT

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - MORNING - DAY 6

The vibe is different. Focused. Determined. The kids come in
without prompting. Ryder already has the whiteboard filled
with the day's goals.

On the board:

TODAY'S AGENDA:

Final Social Studies crash course

Reading comprehension drills

One timed essay

Group "TED Talk" wrap-up

KEON

Yo, what's a "Ted Talk"?
Sounds like an uncle who ruins
Christmas.

Ryder sips from his mug, deadpan.

RYDER

A TED Talk is when someone stands
in front of a room and shares
something worth knowing.
Which, in your case, is a miracle
waiting to happen.

TASHA and MARIA exchange smirks. Omar slaps a desk like a drum.

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - LATER

They're deep in Social Studies flashcards. Jaylen quizzes Keon. Darnell reads aloud from the Constitution—mocking the Founders' haircuts.

Then...

MARIA raises her hand.

MARIA

So... why do they test this?
Like, what does the Electoral
College even have to do with real
life?

RYDER

It doesn't.
But the test wasn't written for
real life.
It was written to see if you can
play the game.

OMAR
That's bullshit.

RYDER
Correct.
And we're gonna beat them with
their own game board.
Even if it's stacked.

He writes on the board:

REALITY ≠ FAIR

BUT THAT'S NEVER BEEN A REASON TO LOSE.

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - LUNCHTIME

The kids are eating, laughing. For once, the stress feels...
lighter.

MARIA
(to Tasha)
You ever see The Breakfast Club?

TASHA
What's that? Some food channel
thing?

MARIA
Nah, it's this old-ass movie. Five
messed up kids in detention for a
whole day.
One's a jock. One's a brain. One's
a basket case.
They hate each other at the start.
But by the end...

She trails off.

Ryder watches her.

RYDER
What about by the end?

MARIA
They realize they're all kinda
broken.
But that's what makes them the
same.
And they stop pretending they're
not.

A long pause.

RYDER

I liked that movie.
Just wish they'd included a kid
from the foster system.
Or one who got beat just for
showing up.
Or had to hide in a library after
school 'cause nowhere else was
safe.

The students shift. MARIA stares down at her tray.

Then—

MARIA

That was me.
I used to fake being in clubs just
to stay late in the building.
Didn't want to go home.

Silence.

TASHA reaches across, touches her hand. No words. Just
contact.

OMAR

(suddenly)

I stole textbooks to teach myself
how to read. (pause)
Swear to God.

KEON

Y'all tryna one-up each other on
pain now?
Damn, let me dig out my trauma
resume.

Laughs. But under the laughter: connection.

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - AFTERNOON

One final essay drill.

Jaylen taps his pencil like a drum line as he reads his
prompt.

Luis writes a clean paragraph—no teacher ever told him it
made sense until Ryder quietly circles it and writes "" next
to it.

Darnell scribbles something. Then tears it out. Then starts again.

Maria writes like she's carving words into truth.

Tasha wipes her eyes but keeps writing.

Ryder walks the room. Reads. Nods. Not correcting—honoring.

He writes on the board:

TOMORROW = TESTS + ESSAY + PROOF OF LIFE

He turns back.

RYDER
You've all passed something
already.

It just doesn't have a score attached yet.

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - DAY 7 - MONTAGE

MUSIC BEGINS - upbeat but gritty. Something hopeful with drive.

- Luis studies a map of the Civil War
- Jaylen rewrites notes while tapping a beat with his pencil.
- Keon mock-quizzes Darnell with flashcards like it's a game show.
- Tasha holds up two Social Studies answers. Ryder points—left one. She marks it, a faint smirk forming.
- Omar, alone in the corner, underlines key sentences in a reading comprehension text. He pauses, nods, and circles the correct answer.
- Ryder throws out a challenge from the front:

RYDER (V.O.)
Okay. Finish up what you are
working on. We need to move on.

Walt the janitor peeks through the window, watching silently. He smiles and shakes his head.

MUSIC SWELLS... then cuts out.

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - BEFORE LEAVING

The students are catching their breath. Books start to close. Pages marked. They're tired-but wired. For the first time... they feel ready.

Ryder walks to the front, tapping the whiteboard.

RYDER

You've come a long way.
Math? Check. Science and Social
Studies? You're ready. You're in
the fight now.

(beat)

But I've got bad news.

The room stills. Nobody likes this turn.

RYDER (CONT'D)

You've all been so busy solving
problems...
You forgot the one test that judges
who you are.

He writes on the board:

Language Arts & Essay

Groans ripple through the class. Keon slumps. Tasha drops her pen.

KEON

Man, why you gotta do us like that?
We should be celebrating.

RYDER

Because the GED doesn't care how
smart you are...
if you can't tell your story.

(beat)

Tomorrow, after your exams—you have
to write a one page.essay.

JAYLEN

About what?

RYDER

That's the thing.
They won't tell you.

(beat)

But I will. And we're gonna
start... right now.

He flips open a stack of lined paper and starts handing them out. Then writes "45 MINUTES" and circles it on the whiteboard.

RYDER (CONT'D)
You'll have 45 minutes.
First, you'll read two short
passages—opposing viewpoints on the
same issue.
Then you pick a side. Explain which
argument is stronger—and why.

You've got to back it up with evidence from the passages.

KEON
Man, that's gonna be hard.

RYDER
Says the man who only missed two on
his math test.

Keon has been smile on his face.

RYDER (CONT'D)
These clowns who wrote this
thing...
They're actually giving you the
answers.

He turns on the overhead projector.

RYDER (CONT'D)
Read what is on the board.

POV: Two sample passages appear—pro vs. con on women in the military.

Immediately, the class breaks into loud opinions.

STUDENTS
That's dumb—
They're just as good as men— I
wouldn't wanna serve next to—

Ryder folds his arms and waits. Then calmly:

RYDER
Congratulations.
All of you just failed the essay.

Silence. They look at him, stunned.

RYDER (CONT'D)

If you don't pass the essay, it
doesn't matter how well you did on
the reading.
Fail the essay—fail the whole
thing.

MARIA

We can't just redo the essay later?

RYDER

Nope.
That's why it's called a high-
stakes test.

(beat)

So... we giving up? Or you wanna
learn how to beat these clowns at
their own game?

REGGIE

Hell yeah.

The others nod. Murmurs of agreement.

RYDER

Good.
Forget those passages for a second.
Let's do this instead.

He writes on the board:

SHOULD BOYS BE ALLOWED TO PLAY IN GIRLS' SPORTS?

Chaos breaks out again. Shouting. Opinions flying.

RYDER

Are you done?

The room goes still.

He draws a big plus sign (+) on one side of the board, a
minus (-) on the other.

RYDER (CONT'D)

Let's do this the right way.
One at a time. Raise your hand and
give me something for either side.

OMAR

No. They're too weak.

RYDER
Minus column.

MARIA
If they can play just as well, then
yeah.

RYDER
Plus column.

DARNELL
No way. Guys are stronger, taller,
faster.

RYDER
Minus.
(beat)
Now—if I had more time, I'd go
around the room.
Tally up every pro and con. Count
'em. Declare a winner.

(beat)
But if you use this method on the
real GED?
You will fail.

MARIA
Why?

RYDER
Because the GED doesn't care about
your feelings.
They want you to analyze what's in
the passages—not your opinion.

He gestures to the projector.

RYDER (CONT'D)
Now—everyone grab scratch paper.
Draw a line down the middle. X on
one side, - on the other.
Let's read the first passage.

The students follow along, marking arguments as they appear.

RYDER (CONT'D)
Now do the same for the second one.

The students do. Slowly... patterns emerge.

RYDER (CONT'D)
Alright. Who's got more supporting
evidence?

The class murmurs—it's clear one passage has the stronger argument.

RYDER (CONT'D)

There.

That's your side. It doesn't matter if you agree with the side with the most evidence. Your structure's done. Now you write the essay based on evidence, not emotions.

(beat)

And now?

I'll show you the real trick—
How to beat the scoring algorithm
on the essay.

MARIA

We're all ears.

RYDER

Good. Look, there are generally five elements for a decent essay. The beginning paragraph and the end are the easiest. So, right off the bat, you know how to complete two of the five paragraphs. Now.....

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - DAY 7 - ESSAY MONTAGE

A clock TICKS loudly.

Ryder stands at the front of the room.

RYDER

The time is on the whiteboard:
You have 45 minutes - GO!

Soft instrumental music begins to rise—something hopeful but raw.

— Luis stares at his paper, frozen. Breathes in. Writes:

LUIS (V.O.)

Based on the two passage dealing
with....

— Jaylen taps his pen like a snare drum, then begins writing in bursts—fast, deliberate, focused.

JAYLEN (V.O.)
 These two passages present two
 differing points of view.....

– Tasha fidgets with her pencil, then stares at her blank paper. She looks at Ryder. He nods once. She starts to write.

TASHA (V.O.)
 I got this...."based on the
 argument of the two passages.....

– Omar scribbles hard. His brows furrow. He flips his paper over and starts again—better this time.

– Maria writes slowly, perfectly. She erases something. Rewrites it with more edge.

– Keon starts to doodle in the margin. Then catches Ryder's eye and smirks—he starts his essay for real.

– Darnell puts his head down for a second. Then exhales, sits up, and writes with force.

– Ryder walks slowly between rows. No talking. Just checking papers. Observing their posture.

He glances at a page—smiles. Gives a thumbs up.

Luis sees it. Keeps writing.

– The clock ticks down to 10 minutes.

– Ryder taps the whiteboard once. No words. The students push harder. Pens moving faster now.

– Tasha wipes her eye and keeps writing. Ryder notices. Says nothing.

– Final seconds. The clock hits ZERO.

Ryder claps once.

RYDER
 Time!

The students drop their pencils, exhausted.

But something has changed.

They've finished, and most even completed a third read.

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - LATE AFTERNOON - DAY 7

The students are reviewing flashcards. A light buzz of tension fills the room.

TASHA sits with one hand pressed to her stomach, clearly uncomfortable.

 LUIS
You okay?

 TASHA
Yeah... yeah, just a little dizzy.

Suddenly—she slumps forward, her paper sliding off her desk.

 KEON
Tasha?

Ryder sees it. Drops his coffee.

 RYDER
Call 9-1-1. Now.

EXT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - MINUTES LATER

Flashing red lights.

Paramedics load Tasha onto a stretcher. She's semi-conscious, pale but alert.

RYDER walks beside her, holding her hand as she's wheeled out.

 TASHA
 (weakly)
Tell them I didn't quit.

 RYDER
I will.
You just keep fighting.

The doors close. The ambulance pulls away. Ryder watches, still holding her folder.

EXT. HOSPITAL PARKING LOT - LATER THAT EVENING

Ryder exits his car, holding a brown paper bag. Walks toward the hospital entrance.

INT. HOSPITAL WAITING ROOM - NIGHT

Tasha's PARENTS (40s, working-class, emotionally drained) are seated near the nurse's station.

RYDER approaches, uncertain.

TASHA (O.S.)
There he is.

Tasha lies in a hospital bed just beyond the curtain—smiling weakly.

TASHA (CONT'D)
Mom, Dad—this is Professor Ryder.
He's teaching me how to pass my GED
exams.

Her parents both stand.

MOM
You're the one she won't stop
talking about.

DAD
She used to hate school.
Now she's setting alarms to study.

(beat)

Thank you.

RYDER
She's the one doing the work.

A DOCTOR enters the room.

DOCTOR
Give us a minute?

Ryder nods and steps out. Waits by the vending machines.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - LATER

Ryder steps back in. Tasha is sitting up, IV in her arm, color back in her face.

TASHA
Baby's fine.
They said it was stress and
dehydration.

RYDER
(quiet smile)
So...?

DOCTOR (O.S.)
There's no reason she can't take
her tests tomorrow. That is all she
has been talking about.

Tasha looks relieved. Ryder sets the brown bag on her table.

RYDER
Figured you'd be hungry.

She opens it—inside: a dozen donuts. Glazed. Chocolate.
Sprinkles.

TASHA
(grinning)
Cop food?

RYDER
Only the finest.

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - EVENING - NIGHT BEFORE MATH TEST

The clock reads 7:21 PM.

Most of the students are still here—tired, over it, but
grinding.

Ryder enters coming from Tasha in hospital. Students turn to
greet him.

RYDER
Tasha is fine. She will be with you
guys tomorrow for the final two
exam.

Ryder stands at the whiteboard, tapping through a final math
breakdown.

RYDER (CONT'D)
Be here by 7:30. Dressed. Focused.
No excuses.

They leave. Silence returns.

Ryder sits at his desk, alone.

He exhales deeply. Then slowly... makes the sign of the
cross.

RYDER (SOFTLY) (CONT'D)
God... it's been a while.
My bad.

(beat)
I know I'm not your best customer
lately.
But I've got these kids—
These damn kids.

(beat)
The schools gave up on them. The
world too, maybe.
But I see 'em.
They've worked hard. Real hard.
They deserve a shot. A real one.

(beat)
So if you're still in the listening
business...
Maybe help 'em tomorrow. And the
next day.
Just enough to get across the line.

(beat)
Let them see what it feels like...
to win.

(pause)
That's it.
Thanks for listening.
And sorry for the swearing.

He takes a sip from his now-cold coffee.

Stares at the donut box. One left.

He smiles.

FADE OUT.

INT. RYDER'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Dimly lit. Ryder sits at his tiny kitchen table. In his hand,
a worn student photo—creased, dog-eared. It's an old class
picture. One face is circled in red ink.

Ryder stares at it. A beat.

He pulls out a folded note from inside the folder—taped to
the back of the photo.

INSERT - THE NOTE

Scrawled in teenage handwriting: "Tell Ms. P—I'm sorry about the tires. I just wanted to make it right."

Ryder runs his thumb across the words.

He leans back. Silence.

RYDER

(softly)

I should've seen it. I should've seen it...

(beat)

You weren't even mine. Just one of thirty... But I knew you had pain.

(beat)

Now I've got eight more. Eight damn chances to get it right.

He stares at the ceiling.

RYDER (CONT'D)

You hear me, kid?

You make sure they pass. You help them get there...

He folds the note, sets it on the table beside his Spartan helmet mug.

INT. RYDER'S APARTMENT- NIGHT LATER

Darkness.

Ryder lies in bed, staring at the ceiling.

The clock reads: 2:42 A.M.

He turns onto his side. Then his back again.

Closes his eyes. Opens them.

Clock: 3:11 A.M.

He sits up, rubs his face.

Sighs.

INT. RYDER'S BATHROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Shower running. Steam fogs the mirror.

Ryder steps inside, mumbling to himself—half a prayer, half a complaint.

RYDER

Jesus... I'm not even the one taking
the damn exams.

(beat)

And I feel like I might puke.

INT. RYDER'S KITCHEN - EARLY MORNING

Still dark out. Ryder, dressed in slacks and a black button-down, pours coffee into his Spartan helmet mug.

He opens a small paper bag—pulls out a dozen mixed donuts.

Lays them into an old box. Tapes the lid shut.

RYDER (SOFTLY)

Let's go to war.

FADE OUT.

EXT. CITY STREET - EARLY MORNING

Ryder's beat-up sedan rolls down a quiet street, mist still hanging over the asphalt. Coffee in hand. Donut box riding shotgun.

He approaches a small convenience store, where two uniformed officers are talking to a TEEN in a hoodie.

As Ryder gets closer, he recognizes the teen—LUIS.

Ryder slows. Parks. Steps out.

OFFICER 1

Well, look who's up before sunrise.

RYDER

Could say the same about you.

OFFICER 2

We spotted him walking alone.
Didn't say much. Looked... aimless.

RYDER

He's one of mine.

The officers glance at each other.

OFFICER 2

Yeah, we heard the old man gave you
an ultimatum. Teach this dropouts
or kiss your pension goodbye.

RYDER

Something like that.

OFFICER 1

Didn't know the GED crowd started
this early.

RYDER (DRY)

Well, some of us are overachievers.

OFFICER 2

When do they take their exams.

RYDER

Few days.

OFFICER 1

Few days. Shit, I had a whole
semester and still barely passed
mine.

RYDER

That's because I wasn't your
teacher.

They all laugh and the officers return to their vehicle.

Luis says nothing—hood still up. Ryder motions to him.

RYDER (CONT'D)

You riding with me?

LUIS nods. Follows Ryder to the car.

INT. RYDER'S CAR - MOMENTS LATER - DRIVING

Silence for a beat. Luis stares out the window. Ryder sips
his coffee.

Then—

LUIS

They thought I was doing something
wrong.

RYDER
That's the uniform.
They're trained to be suspicious.
Lot of burglaries in the area.

LUIS
I wasn't doing anything.

RYDER
I know.
(beat)
What were you doing?

LUIS
Walking.
(beat)
I wanted to clear my head. I
couldn't sleep.

RYDER nods. Beat.

LUIS (CONT'D)
I want to be a cop someday.

RYDER glances at him, surprised.

LUIS (CONT'D)
I mean... not one of the assholes.

I want to help people. Like you did.

RYDER
I wasn't always the good kind.

LUIS
You are now.
(beat)
That's why I want to be one.

Ryder says nothing. Just drives. But his face says everything.

EXT. ADMIN BUILDING - MOMENTS LATER

Ryder parks in front. Other students are just starting to arrive and surround him.

LUIS opens the door, pauses.

LUIS
Thanks for not letting them take me.

RYDER
Just make it count today.

LUIS nods, heads toward the doors. Ryder watches him go.

The other students get closer, all but Reggie.

RYDER (CONT'D)
Anyone know where Reggie is?

Everyone shakes their head no.

Then—

RYDER (QUIETLY) (CONT'D)
Alright. You are the champs. You know the strategy upside down. The tests today and tomorrow are the enemy. Don't panic. Stay focused. I trained you to have plenty of time. You can do this. Now go get them.

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - LATE EVENING

The students are sprawled across their desks, burnt out but smiling.

RYDER
Today is the final lap. Language Arts. Social Studies. The essay.
(beat)
You've come further than anyone expected. But I didn't train you for "almost." I trained you to finish.

KEON
Let's go finish this bitch.

EVERYONE
Yeah!

They grab their things and head for the door.

RYDER
Hey—before you go.

They stop.

RYDER (CONT'D)
No matter what happens tomorrow... I'm proud of you. Every damn one of you.

Tasha turns. Salutes him with her donut.

TASHA
We got this, Professor.

The students enter the testing center once more. Tension's lower—but determination's higher.

The students give each other high fives and walk towards the administration building. Ryder nods at the few parents still there who will bring their children back to the portable after the exam.

INT. TESTING CENTER - MONTAGE - DAY 8-SOCIAL STUDIES & ENGLISH**

POV: — A Social Studies screen: "What was one result of the Louisiana Purchase?" Maria narrows her eyes, recalls Ryder's flashcard drill, and clicks with confidence.

POV: — Luis reads a passage about the Constitution, then cross-references a multiple-choice question. He double-checks, nods, selects his answer.

POV: — Keon reads a historical excerpt, confused—then sees Ryder's note in his head: "Match the dates. Find the cause." He smirks. Clicks.

— Omar rereads a comprehension paragraph, then flips to the scratch paper and begins mapping out key arguments.

— Jaylen taps his fingers while reading an essay prompt. He picks out three key points, then marks his choice.

— Tasha hunches over the monitor, her face tense. She breathes, highlights key claims in the text, then attacks the response box.

— Darnell reads a Declaration of Independence passage. He snorts—then mutters:

DARNELL (TO SELF)
Man, they really hated taxes.

INT. EMPTY ROOM NEAR TESTING ROOM - DAY

Valerie is waiting, sipping her tea.

VALERIE
Two tests left. Essay's the real killer.

RYDER
Then they'll kill it.

She snorts and walks away.

Ryder keeps checking his watch, flipping through a worn Social Studies prep book. He looks up again at the clock that doesn't seem to be moving.

INT. TESTING CENTER - PROCTOR'S OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

PROCTOR
Okay, if you have pencils place them down. Please take a five minute break before the essay portion of the exam.

INT. TESTING ROOM - MONTAGE**

- Luis reads two passages. He marks a plus and minus column. Just like Ryder taught.

- Maria builds a rock-solid five-paragraph essay.

- Keon writes a thesis so clean it could go on a billboard.

- Omar rereads his paragraph, nods, then keeps going.

- Tasha taps her stomach, breathes deep, and writes:

"Everyone deserves a second chance—even if society doesn't believe that."

- Jaylen types fast. Focused. Intense.

- Darnell stares at the screen... then types:

"Growing up, I didn't think anyone saw me. Now I see myself."

Forty-five minutes passes:

PROCTOR
Okay. That concludes your exams. If you would like to wait outside for a few minutes, I will get your scores.

The students sit in a semi-circle, waiting. Still in test clothes. Energy buzzing low and quiet.

Omar breaks the silence.

OMAR

I felt smart today.

(beat)

Not, like... fake smart. But for real. Like I could actually do this college thing.

A few nods.

MARIA

I was thinking... maybe I might try community college. Like for real. Art or something.

KEON

Girl, you could teach the class. You got that laser focus.

Maria smiles faintly.

DARNELL

(turning to Ryder)

What about you?

What'd you do before all this?

RYDER

Me? I was a cop.

DARNELL

Yeah, I know that part. But like... before that.

RYDER

(smirks)

Before that?

I was just a kid with a chip on his shoulder and something to prove. Got into fights. Barely scraped by in school.

(beat)

Sound familiar?

They laugh.

JAYLEN

This don't feel like school. Not really.

(beat)

This felt like... us.

Silence. A shared moment.

INT. PROCTOR'S OFFICE - DAY

The Proctor steps into her small office. She pulls up the testing interface on a monitor. A progress bar spins. She then checks the essays.

She exhales. Sips from a mug. Watches as the test scores populate one by one...

She raises her eyebrows.

PROCTOR (TO HERSELF)

Whoa.

She picks up her phone and dials.

FADE TO BLACK.

The students exit the testing room, exhausted but buzzing with relief. They see Ryder and walk up to him.

JAYLEN

That essay? Bruh... I nailed it.

TASHA

I used evidence from both sides.
Felt like a lawyer.

LUIS

I actually... finished early. First
time ever.

KEON

Mr. Ryder. You think Valerie will
recalibrate the machines again?

Everyone laughs.

RYDER

Let her try.

NT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE TESTING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

The students step into the hallway after the exam—nervous, quiet, emotionally wrung out. Some slump against lockers. Some pace.

OMAR

(to no one in particular)
I never cared about a damn test
before.
Now I feel like I'm gonna throw up.

JAYLEN

Same. My hands are still shaking.

TASHA

But we did it. I think we really did it.

LUIS

(quietly)

Even if we didn't... we got this far. That's something.

MARIA

No—it's everything.

Ryder steps out of the empty room, holding nothing but his coffee mug.

He looks at them. Then simply says:

RYDER

However it turns out... today, you walked in with nothing. And walked out with something nobody can take from you.

(beat)

Belief.

They absorb that. No fanfare. No cheering.

Just truth.

CUT TO BLACK.

Minutes pass before the Proctor invites the students back into the testing center.

Valerie looks on from outside. Disappointment on her face. He cellphone rings. The Superintendents has summoned her.

PROCTOR

Okay. Everyone take a seat.

They comply.

PROCTOR (CONT'D)

Congratulations. Each of you passed. You have all earned your GEDs.

They jump up and hug and give each other high fives. Valerie looks on with no expression on her face. They surround Ryder and hug him.

CUT TO:

INT. SUPERINTENDENT'S OFFICE - LATER THAT DAY

The SUPERINTENDENT holds an iPad showing results. Valerie stands stiffly.

SUPERINTENDENT

You ordered changes to a live GED scoring system?

VALERIE

It was a performance audit. That spike in scores was statistically suspicious. Seven at-risk students don't just pass after eight days.

SUPERINTENDENT

They did today.

(beat)

The audit team flagged your override request within minutes. And your actions may have violated state compliance codes.

VALERIE

I was protecting district integrity.

SUPERINTENDENT

You tried to manipulate results. You didn't trust your own system—or the man proving it could work.

(beat)

You're done. Effective immediately.

Valerie opens her mouth, then closes it. For once, she has no comeback.

SUPERINTENDENT (SOFTLY, TO HIMSELF) (CONT'D)

Eight days. One teacher. Seven passes. That's not a fluke.

INT. RYDER'S CAR - LATE AFTERNOON - OUTSIDE HOUSING BLOCK

Rain. Ryder parks at the curb. Neighborhood is silent, hostile, broken.

He shuts off the engine. Grabs a manila envelope labeled:

GED - FINAL EXAM PACKET: REGGIE MILLS

He steps out.

EXT. REGGIE'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Ryder walks up to the battered front door. Trash along the steps. Screen door hangs crooked.

He knocks. Hard.

REGGIE'S FATHER (40s)-drunk, shirtless-answers.

FATHER
Who the hell are you?

RYDER
I'm here for Reggie. He was
supposed to take a test today.

FATHER
Test? He don't need no damn test.
He needs a job. A belt. A reality
check.

RYDER
I'm not here to argue parenting.
I'm here to take your son back.

FATHER
Take him back? What are you, a
fuckin' social worker?

RYDER
Just a teacher.

From inside: a muffled grunt and sounds of pain. Ryder
tenses. Looks past the man.

FATHER
He's where he belongs. You step one
foot in here, I'll-

Ryder steps forward and coldly DECKS him.

INT. BACK BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

REGGIE is curled on the floor. Blood on his lip. Eye swollen
shut.

REGGIE
Shit, man... You came.

RYDER
You really wanted out of that
essay, huh?

Ryder pulls out his cell and dials 9-1-1.

REGGIE
(choked laugh)
Thought I was slick.

RYDER
Hold still. Ambulance is on the
way.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NEXT DAY

Reggie is propped up in bed. IV in his arm.

WALT the janitor enters with a plastic bag and thermos.

WALT
Heard you like coffee and donuts

He sets the thermos down. Pulls out a sealed test packet.

WALT (CONT'D)
He said if you're still serious...
they'll count it. Just you and him.
Tomorrow. Saturday.

Reggie opens the packet. Flips to the essay. Then-picks up
the pencil.

INT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - CELEBRATION - TWO DAYS LATER

Cake. Soda. Laughter. GED certificates stacked neatly on the
desk. Parents and grandparents wearing their finest stand
proud.

RYDER
Keon Brooks... passed.
Luis Mendoza... passed.
Tasha Wilkins... passed.
Maria Estrada... passed.
Jaylen Stone... passed.
Darnell Taylor... passed.
Omar Dixon... passed.

He pauses. Lifts a final envelope.

RYDER (CONT'D)
And.....Reggie Mills...

The door creaks open. REGGIE enters, bruised but standing tall.

RYDER (CONT'D)
...passed.

The class erupts. Yells and screams. Keon hugs him. Omar hoists him up. Ryder just smiles.

REGGIE
I still hate essays.

RYDER
Good. They build character.

WALT (O.S.)
Takes one to know one.

Walt smiles in the corner. Reggie sips his cocoa.

EXT. PORTABLE CLASSROOM - SUNSET

Ryder stands alone, watching them leave—laughing, changed. Walt comes from the corner of the portable.

WALT
You know, you have a gift.

RYDER
They did the work. I only pointed the way.

WALT
You're selling yourself short. How many teachers could come in here and in 7 and 8 days, take a bunch of students that the school district had given up on, and got them to get their GED.

RYDER
They had the ability all along. They just had to be pushed a little.

BEAT

RYDER (CONT'D)

Ever wished you could push the
clock forward. You know..maybe ten
years down the road?

WALT

And see where your students might
end up?

Ryder shrugs his shoulders and takes a sip of coffee from his
Spartan mug and walks back into the classroom leaving Walter
with a big smile on his face.

SUPER: "Over 25,000 students fail the GED each year.
Sometimes, all it takes is one teacher to change the story.

END.