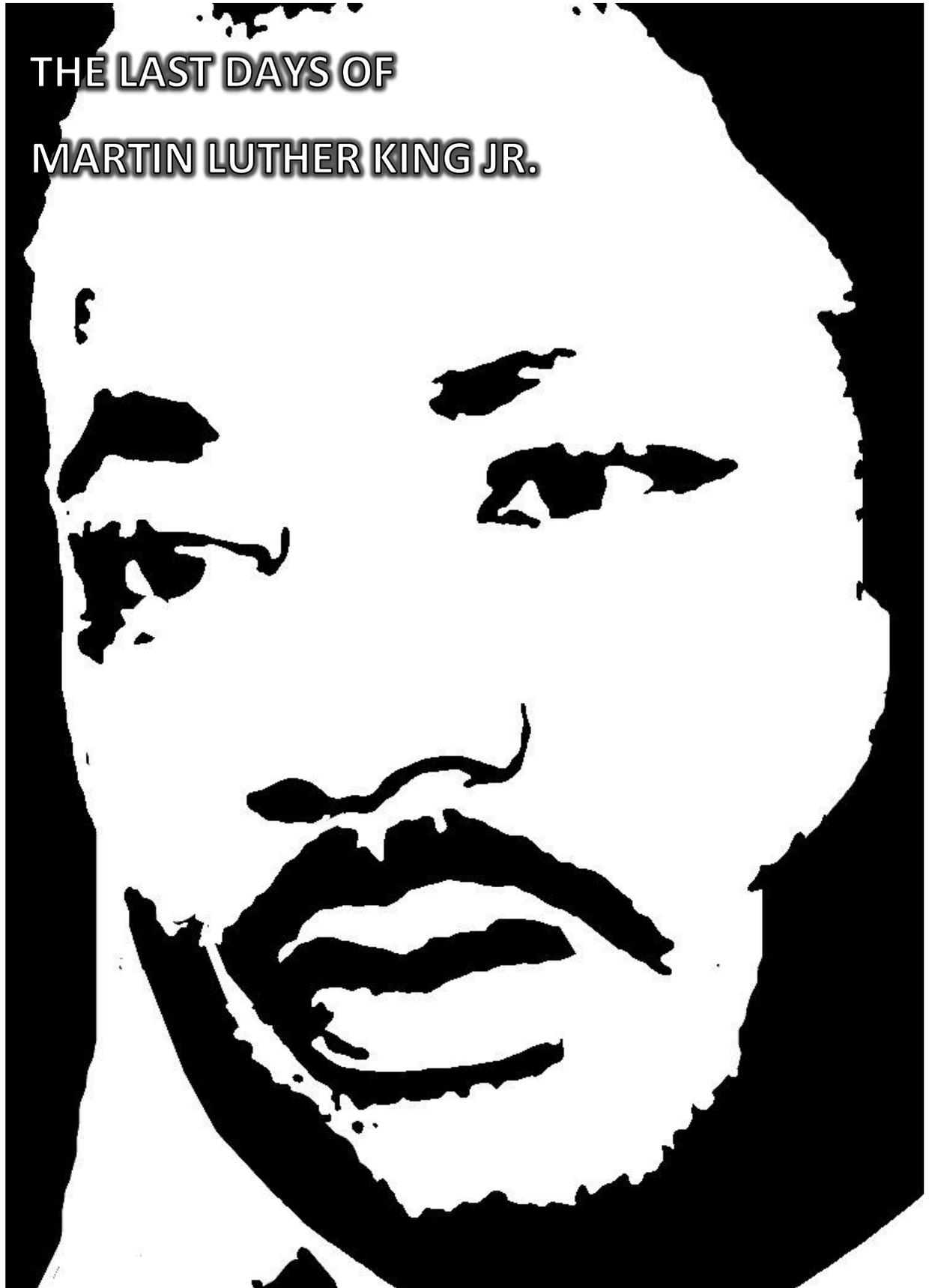


THE LAST DAYS OF  
MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.



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## THE PLAY

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Preston Spencer, news reporter for WKBC TV, has a rare opportunity to interview Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The interview was scheduled on the day that Dr. King makes his second visit to Memphis, Tennessee in effort to aid the sanitation workers. Unbeknownst to Dr. King, Preston has planned to avoid discussing topics about his humanitarian work. Preston decides to probe into Dr. King's personal life and harmful tabloid headlines; Dr. King slowly discovers that this is no ordinary interview. An ambitious black veteran reporter. An American hero. The desperation of one man collides with the integrity of the other. Witness The Last Days of Dr. Martin Luther King. Jr.

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## CHARACTERS

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### In order of Appearance

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. - African American Civil Rights Leader

Preston Spencer - News Reporter for WKBC in Atlanta, GA

Ralph J. Abernathy - Executive Board member of SCLC.

Calvin Payne - father of slain teenager Larry Payne who marched with King

*\*Note – The script is written so that the actor portraying Preston Spencer also portrays both Ralph J. Abernathy and Calvin Payne. The playwright grants permission to the Artistic Director and other decision makers to cast different actors for the additional roles. Permission is granted to cast performers to re-record or recite the recorded lines in place of using the provided pre-recordings.*

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## SETTING

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The time of year is Wednesday, April 3, 1968, one day prior to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The setting is the TV station that employs Preston Spencer, a seasoned African American newsman. In the background hangs a large sign with the station call letters "WKBC". Downstage of the sign are two chairs split by a small table. On the table is a telephone and a clip board. A few feet away on the stage left side is a coat rack.

# THE LAST DAYS OF MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

## Pre-show Music

### Sound Cue 1 - Track 1: Short audio intro – audience ambience sound effect

*(Scene opens with Dr. King at the podium. It is located stage left in either isolated lighting or a spotlight. The sound cue contains various introductions of Martin Luther King Jr. followed by crowd ambience. This ambience is used as background sound effect of supporters. Dr. King's cue line is: "Dr. King had this to say last night about the situation in Memphis.")*

#### MARTIN

Memories of slavery still linger in our minds - decades beyond that tragic time in our country's history. Yes, the memories are still vibrant today. **Not because** we were there. **Not because** we were the enslaved. **Not because** we have chosen to never forget. In reality, the memories should **be gone** because we are the generation of a time when we **no longer fear** the sight of a hangman's halter. We are the generation of a time when we **no longer must feel** our flesh split open from an evil whip - slashing violently through the air. We are the generation that **no longer burns** in the hot southern sun working hours and hours to afford to feed our families. Today, **we are a generation** that can now **rise** in the morning and earn our daily bread, enjoying the **freedom our ancestors fought and died for.** *(beat)* Those memories of enslavement, murder and mistreatment should be gone. But those memories linger because our **white brothers have found a new form of slavery.** A less blatant method of instituting **injustice.**

Our hearts go out to the sanitation workers in Memphis who are suffering. The thirteen hundred workers in Memphis that are still in slavery. Going hungry because their wages are strangled in the slipknot of hatred, their pride is being whiplashed as they are denied their jobs, and they must suffer through sleepless nights attempting to dream about a freedom *(beat)* that has been taken away. My friends, we must keep our prayers focused on Memphis.

We have to march again, we've got to march again, so that everyone will know that there are thirteen hundred workers - God's children - suffering – and it must end.  
*(He walks away from the podium)*

*(On the other side of the stage Preston Spencer enters. He is an African American news reporter for WKBC. He speaks directly to the audience.)*

#### PRESTON

My name is Preston Spencer, freelance news reporter for WKBC here in Atlanta. Today, I have been given the opportunity to interview Martin Luther King Jr. Yes. You heard me correctly, the very prestigious Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. So, for me, Wednesday, April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1968 may be my moment in American history.

*(Preston sets up the stage as he continues)* Man, am I nervous. As a TV news reporter this could be a turning point in my career. If this interview goes the way I have planned, I could be looking at a full-time job with a major network. I don't want to sound over-confident, but I see a Pulitzer Prize in my future.

Now, please, don't misunderstand me. I don't think that just because I'm interviewing Dr. King it's going to open doors for me. No. He's been interviewed by Meet the Press, Mike Douglas, Merv Griffith, Mike Wallace – the list goes on. But they stayed away from the controversial questions; the ones that most Americans think about but don't talk about in public. The controversial questions that will be talked about today. To me, this **must** be a very different type of interview. It is my duty to change the way journalists approach individuals that may be concealing their disreputable private lifestyle. Then, and only then, will this interview become an important moment in broadcast history.

I'm sure there are many of you out there that disagree with my intentions. That an attempt to ask forbidden questions might be very offensive to a man like Dr. King.  
*(Ask members of the audience their opinion)* In my defense, I need to take advantage of this opportunity. I need this interview so that I can put my name in the spotlight.

*(Preston talks to a fictitious cameraman. Use the audience or pick a volunteer from the audience to be the cameraman.)*

PRESTON

Mr. Ray. I want this interview shot in a medium 2 shot. We can do single pick-up shots later. And if he starts getting emotional, move in on a tight- single close-up. Look for my signal.

*(As Preston finishes setting up the area, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. enters.)*

MARTIN

*(Calling out)* HELLO!! *(Pause)* Hello? I'm looking for Preston Spencer.

PRESTON

*(Turns)* That would be me. *(Moves towards Martin quickly)* Welcome to WKBC Dr. King. *(Shakes his hand)* I'll be conducting the interview today. It is indeed a pleasure to meet you.

MARTIN

A pleasure to meet you as well, sir.

PRESTON

This is our cameraman for today, Mr. Scott Lee Ray.

MARTIN

*(To Scott)* A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Ray. Where can I put my coat?

PRESTON

I'll take it. Can I get you something to drink?

MARTIN

Water would be nice. Thank you.

PRESTON

I'll be right back.

*(Preston exits with Martins coat. Before he leaves the stage, he hangs Martins coat on a coat rack. Preston changes to become Ralph Abernathy. Martin looks at the audience and talks to them.)*

MARTIN

For the first time today I am feeling a bit uneasy. I'm beginning to feel that maybe I shouldn't be here. Not because of anything that has to do with this TV station. No. This feels like a safe professional building. I don't have any problem being here. It's just that additional time in my life is very scarce. I'm a very busy man these days. Sometimes it's hard to breath; folks around me all the time. Ralph Abernathy, my colleague and close friend, had wanted us to leave for Memphis yesterday. I wasn't ready. Instead, I told him I wanted a little more time with Coretta. *(Laughs to himself)* Part of that is the truth, but in reality, I wanted to do this interview.

*(The lights shift and pre-set lights isolates a small area of the stage. Ralph J. Abernathy enters carrying a suitcase. He walks into the pre-set light that Martin has moved to.)*

RALPH

Martin, I've been trying to reach you? We need to talk about Memphis?

MARTIN

What would you like to discuss, Ralph?

RALPH

We need to be in Memphis today. I have our airline tickets right here. We're scheduled to leave in 3 hours. You have an important meeting tomorrow.

MARTIN

Can we move the meeting to later in the day tomorrow?

RALPH

Why?

MARTIN

I'd like to stay here tonight and prepare myself.

RALPH

You can prepare yourself tonight in the hotel room. I'll help you.

MARTIN

And (*pause*) it would be nice to spend one more night with Coretta. (*beat*) Let's just leave tomorrow afternoon.

RALPH

Why am I finding your reasons difficult to believe? (*beat*) Is this about last night?

MARTIN

Why does it have to be about anything other than what I just said?

RALPH

Because ever since Jesse Jackson and Andrew Young challenged your Poor People's Campaign idea, you have not been yourself.

MARTIN

Jesse Jackson is arrogant and self-centered.

RALPH

Maybe he is, Martin, but he is entitled to his opinion.

MARTIN

His opinions are usually in opposition to mine.

RALPH

Your supporters are very excited about the Poor People's Campaign.

MARTIN

Then why didn't any of my supporters speak up when Reverend Jackson decided to take over the meeting and proceeded to ridicule my entire plan.

RALPH

It was one man attempting to impress his own beliefs in an open forum. That's all.

MARTIN

His beliefs - Andrew Young's beliefs and Jim Bevel's beliefs. They have been very verbal about the Poor People's Campaign and it's all been very negative.

RALPH

But they didn't offer any alternate solution, did they?

MARTIN

Because they can't. You saw the conditions those poor families live in down in Mississippi?

RALPH

Yes. I saw the shacks they live in and the spoiled food they gave the black school kids for lunch.

MARTIN

Ralph, America does not know that these conditions still exist.

RALPH

You're right. And unless Jesse was there, or Andrew was there; any of them that protest against you, it is difficult for them to support your campaign.

MARTIN

*(Bitter)* When you are born to privilege; born with resources to properly provide for your family; it is difficult to imagine how much poverty exist in this country. When we get back from Memphis this week, you and I, we'll go straight to Washington. We'll make them listen.

RALPH

You know what Martin, if we landed in Memphis tonight, we could use the extra time to fine tune the Campaigns strategy.

MARTIN

I would still prefer to wait until tomorrow.

RALPH

*(Frustrated)* Martin. *(Pause)* What is this TV interview you've agreed to do tomorrow morning?

MARTIN

What interview?

RALPH

Don't lie to me. Coretta has already let the cat out of the bag. *(Pause)* Are you planning to do that interview at WKBC?

MARTIN

*(Beat)* What time do we need to be in Memphis tomorrow?

RALPH

Martin, are you listening to me? Our flight plans were arranged for today, April 2<sup>nd</sup>. We should be leaving in 3 hours.

MARTIN

I can't do that. Schedule a mid-morning flight for tomorrow. Around 11.

RALPH

*(beat)* I'm sure you probably want **me** to call the organizers in Memphis and explain why we changed our plans.

MARTIN

I would appreciate that.

RALPH

Martin. . . . let me just say that . .

MARTIN

*(Cuts him off)* I'll see you at the airport.

*(Ralph pauses a moment and then exits. As the following recorded speech plays Martin walks over to the TV station side of the stage and sits down in his interview chair. He gets comfortable. The actor portraying Dr. King can either pre-record the speech to be played as track 1.5 or perform it live after the previous scene.)*

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| <b>Sound cue 1.5 - Track 1.5: Pre-recorded Martin Speech</b> |
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MARTIN *(Pre-recorded speech)*

I called Ralph this morning and I told him he was correct. I had decided to do this interview. Needless to say, he was not happy about it. *(pauses a moment)* It has been a long struggle for the last 13 years. But they were necessary years. For decades black Americans have shown amazing patience. But today, our patience has run its course. We are living in a society that treats us less than humane. We have somehow given our white brothers and sisters the idea that we have approved of the way we are being treated. By not fighting back – we have accepted their daily dose of injustice and oppression. That is a misunderstanding. It is up to us to change that misunderstanding. What they **must understand** is that our efforts from this day forward are focused on attaining nothing less than justice and equality.

PRESTON

*(Preston returns with a glass of water)* All right. Here you go. *(Goes to his chair)* Take your time with this interview Dr. King. It is important that the content of this interview becomes a vehicle that will drive the Civil Rights movement forward.  
*(Sits down)*

MARTIN

Mr. Preston, I do not have the luxury of taking my time. I am hoping that we can conduct this interview in an expedient manner. How much time do you think this will take?

PRESTON

I think we can do this in about 2 hours.

MARTIN

I would like to have this done in less than an hour. I have a flight to catch at 11 o'clock.

PRESTON

*(Uncomfortable pause)* Okay. Well, this is a surprise.

MARTIN

Does it present a problem?

PRESTON

I don't think my answer would be relevant.

*(Preston grabs his clipboard. Turns to the cameraman.)*

PRESTON

Mr. Scott, do a close-up shot on Dr. King with no audio. We can use the footage in the introduction and I can record a voice-over later. *(To Martin)* Dr. King would you look into the camera and smile, please. Roll the camera, please. *(Looks at his clipboard)* Let's see. Cut out the family profile questions; that will save some time. Hmm. . All of this has to go too - you know what - *(To Scott)* You can stop recording, Mr. Scott. *(Tosses his clipboard away)* Let's just get started and see where it goes. Two shot-please. *(To Martin)* Are you ready Dr. King?

MARTIN

Yes, I am ready

PRESTON

*(beat)* Roll camera in 3 - 2 - 1. *(beat)* It's been 13 years since the beloved Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her city bus seat to an Alabama white man, while sitting in the colored section of the bus. A moment in history that began the Montgomery Bus Boycott and eventually sparked the Civil Rights Movement. In the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement is a man we all know and love. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Welcome Dr. King.

MARTIN

It is a pleasure to be here, Mr. Spencer. If I may add something to your brilliant introduction?

PRESTON

By all means.

MARTIN

It is rarely known that the mistreatment of blacks riding Montgomery's city buses has been going on for some time prior to Ms. Parks arrest. Several other black women had been arrested that same year - 1955. A fifteen-year old student, Claudette Colvin, refused to give up her seat to a white man and the bus driver called the police; who then dragged her off the bus.

PRESTON

Wasn't Sarah Louise Keys and Susie McDonald also dragged off a city bus.

MARTIN

Yes. As well as Mary Louise Smith. What happened to Ms. Parks was an injustice that had been going on for some time. Each encounter was a sad day in America.

PRESTON

*(beat)* Then why Rosa Parks? Why use her arrest to challenge America's segregation laws?

MARTIN

You have to remember that Rosa Parks refused to get up. This was the first time a black woman resisted being mistreated like that. The NAACP believed that Ms. Parks, who is an exceptional role model in the community, was the best candidate for challenging these unlawful acts.

PRESTON

And?

MARTIN

And?

PRESTON

Her employment status at that time.

MARTIN

Are you asking where was she employed when this happened?

PRESTON

Yes. We're not talking about some white family's maid or café waitress, right?

MARTIN

*(Pauses a moment)* Well, at that time Ms. Parks was the secretary for the Montgomery Alabama chapter of the NAACP.

PRESTON

Hmm. I guess the other women weren't important enough to get the movement rolling, huh? *(laughs)*

MARTIN

Her status at the NAACP was irrelevant. She did not deserve the treatment she received.

PRESTON

None of the young ladies deserved the treatment they received. But, according to you, Rosa Parks is an “exceptional role model.”

MARTIN

Yes, I did say that. Preston. (*Angrily*) There comes a time in everyone's life when they must finally say to the oppressor "enough is enough".

PRESTON

I see. So, putting her life in danger was necessary for the Civil Rights Movement.

MARTIN

Those are not my words.

PRESTON

But when she refused to get up, she put her life in danger. Isn't that true Dr. King?

MARTIN

That goes without saying, Preston. (*Beat*) Can we move on please?

PRESTON

Did you know her personally?

MARTIN

What does that have to do with her mistreatment?

PRESTON

Nothing. But you knew Rosa Parks. You met her a year before she was dragged off that bus. I believe it was when you attended a NAACP dinner. And then again . .

MARTIN

(*Cuts him off*) Yes. I helped organize the NAACP dinner. I was obligated to be there. And I met Rosa Parks that evening.

PRESTON

How well did you and Ms. Parks get to know each other that evening?

MARTIN

As well as the other hundreds of people I met that night.

PRESTON

Did you have a drink together?

MARTIN

Did I have a drink with whom?

PRESTON

With Rosa Parks. Did you have a drink with her?

MARTIN

No.

PRESTON

Did you take a walk together or have a private conversation?

MARTIN

Preston. We never had a drink together. We never took a walk together.

PRESTON

So, you met her that night and never had a conversation with her?

MARTIN

Of course, we had conversations. I talked to many people that evening.

PRESTON

Was one of the conversations about the busing situation. How other young ladies' who had been dragged off the bus?

MARTIN

No. Why would we discuss that? Rosa Parks and I talked about her family and her work at the NAACP.

PRESTON

So, in the brief time that you crossed her path at the NAACP dinner; Rosa Parks left an impression on you that influenced you to change the course of your life.

MARTIN

I would have done the same thing for any black man or black woman suffering the injustice of bigotry and immorality.

PRESTON

But you didn't do the same thing for the other black women that suffered the injustice of bigotry and immorality. Did you? (*No response*) Is it possible that you and Ms. Parks planned the bus situation? You knew that if she stood up against a white man it would create a stir and thus spark the bus boycott.

MARTIN

Why are you trying to tarnish Ms. Rosa Parks good name?

PRESTON

I'm just trying to investigate a theory.

MARTIN

It is a ridiculous theory. Let me enlighten you, Preston. The Parks family are my friends. It is rarely known that after that humiliating incident she and her husband Raymond faced severe hardship. Ralph Abernathy and I, along with many others, befriended the family and provided moral and financial support. I would never encourage anyone to put themselves in danger for any reason. Are we clear?

PRESTON

Understood. Let's get back to the NAACP dinner. Tell me about the women that attended the dinner that night, Dr. King.

MARTIN

I'm not sure I understand what you're asking me Preston.

PRESTON

Come on. Man to man. What was the female to male ratio that night? When the word got out that you would be there, I know a lot of women had to show up.

MARTIN

*(Pause - looks into the camera and then back at Preston)* May we take a moment off camera?

PRESTON

By all means. *(To Scott)* Scott, would you stop rolling the camera? What's wrong?

*(Martin puts his hand over the microphone.)*

MARTIN

Is there a point to this type of questioning?

PRESTON

I'm merely asking the same questions any interviewer would ask.

MARTIN

No. *(Beat)* I have conducted many interviews over the years, and I have never encountered this type of questioning. If you want me to stay for the remainder of this interview, I suggest that we change the topic and focus on my work in The Civil Rights Movement.

PRESTON

I understand.

MARTIN

Thank you. *(Removes his hand – long pause)* Where is your restroom?

PRESTON

Through that door, to the right, at the end of the hall.

MARTIN

*(Pause)* When we continue this interview I would like to discuss my intentions for going to Memphis today.

PRESTON

Whoah! I don't think that's possible Dr. King. When this expose' airs, you will probably be done with whatever you're doing in Memphis. Right now, this is scheduled to broadcast next week.

MARTIN

*(Disappointed)* I see. Well, That's unfortunate. *(beat)* I'll be right back.

*(Martin starts to pick up his briefcase.)*

PRESTON

Do you mind leaving your briefcase?

MARTIN

Why?

PRESTON

To give you a reason to come back.

MARTIN

Obviously, your sources didn't tell you everything about me. I am a man of my word.

*(He turns and walks offstage. Preston rises quickly and starts to follow Martin. He stops and watches Martin leave the stage.)*

PRESTON

*(Talks to the audience)* Right on, man!! Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Look at that. I got under his skin. This is cool. Very cool. *(beat)* I think he has an agenda outside of the Civil Rights Movement. Why else would he put his life on the line every day for people he doesn't even know? He wants something else. Money. Fame. Political power. Something. And I plan to find out.

When I was hired here at WKBC in 1948, I was a gaffer. I patiently worked my way up the ladder until I made news reporter. Twenty years of negro nicknames, racial jokes and alienation from office parties and dinners. I hated it. This interview with Dr. King is my ticket out of here and I plan to use it. *(To Scott)* Mr. Scott Lee Ray, listen carefully. The next time I say turn the camera off, ignore me. Keep that sucker rolling.

*(Martin returns. Preston sits down.)*

MARTIN

May we continue?

PRESTON

By all means.

MARTIN

Even though it may not air, let me tell you what my plans are in Memphis.

PRESTON

That's a good idea. Just so you know, while you were gone, I did jot down some questions concerning Memphis. But, you must understand that it may not be included in the interview if it is considered outdated. *(Crosses to Scott)* Let's do a close-up on me then pan out to a two-shot. Are you ready Dr. King? *(Waits for his response)* Roll the camera in 3 -2 -1. *(beat)* Dr. King, I want to ask you about the troubles in Memphis, Tennessee.

MARTIN

Yes.

PRESTON

On January 3<sup>rd</sup> two black sanitation workers were killed from faulty equipment and management didn't change anything to assure future safety. And on a separate occasion black workers were sent home without pay during rainfall, while the white workers stayed on the clock and received a full day's pay. Eventually, thirteen hundred black Sanitation Workers went on strike. After negotiations with the city failed, you and other civil rights leaders were asked to provide support

MARTIN

That is correct. A month later, on March 18, I visited Memphis for the first time since the strike. I spoke to over 15,000 supporters at the Mason Temple. We discussed several ideas of how to negotiate terms . . . . .

PRESTON

*(Cuts him off)* . . . . . I particularly want to focus on that 1st march led by you in Memphis 10 days later on March 28th. *(beat)* A few of the protesters became rowdy and smashed windows - looted stores - it basically became violent.

MARTIN

That is correct. However, those rowdy individuals were not a part . . . . .

PRESTON

*(Cuts him off)* And, if I am not mistaken, during the march a young man was shot and killed?

MARTIN

*(Hesitantly)* Yes.

PRESTON

I thought you conducted non-violent marches?

MARTIN

Our marches have always been encouraged as a non-violent movement.

PRESTON

And yet, today you are returning to Memphis?

MARTIN

Yes. But we have spoken to . . . .

PRESTON

*(Cuts him off again)* Have you dealt with the individuals responsible for the violence during the previous protest?

MARTIN

March. Not protest. *(Beat)* I personally have not spoken to the young men responsible, but I was told that they have committed to following the guidelines we have implemented for nonviolent participation.

PRESTON

Is it possible - is it possible, that your followers are tired of being non-violent?

MARTIN

*(Interrupts)* Supporters - not followers.

PRESTON

That your **supporters** have grown tired of being non-violent. Maybe fighting back is where they have evolved.

MARTIN

If the nonviolent believers continue to follow the path of nonviolent behavior, they eventually will win over the hearts of the oppressors.

PRESTON

You didn't answer my question.

MARTIN

I responded to your remark, Preston.

PRESTON

Dr. King, this is 1968. Thirteen years since the beginning of the Civil Rights movement. People are different - the voices of black America are different.

MARTIN

But our desire for justice and equality is not different.

PRESTON

Isn't it true that you are constantly met with criticism within your own civil rights camp? And I'm speaking of the SCLC.

MARTIN

There are individual differences in any organization.

PRESTON

I'm not talking about any organization, I'm talking about your organization.

MARTIN

The authority governing the Southern Christian Leadership Conference stand united. We support . . .

PRESTON

*(Cuts him off)* . . . . Dr. King, the word on the streets is that the black-power leaders constantly berate your methods and insist that your non-violent approach is weak and prehistoric.

MARTIN

Nonviolence seeks to create a peaceful approach to the issues in question.

PRESTON

Something you have been doing for years and nothing is being accomplished.

MARTIN

Preston, when you peacefully plead to a community, in fear of change, that there must be change – you can only pray that they will resist their violent tendencies.

PRESTON

Can't you give me a yes or no answer. Is your movement weak and prehistoric?

MARTIN

I think you should answer that question yourself, Preston?

PRESTON

Let's face it. The only ones that are being non-violent are you and your followers.

MARTIN

Supporters . . . not followers.

PRESTON

Alright. The only ones that are being non-violent are you and your "supporters". Bloody Sunday is a very good example of that. Nearly 50 people were severely beaten. That's a lot to ask from people that are **supporting** you on blind faith.

MARTIN

*(Laughs to himself)* Earlier you said "the word on the street". In your research for this interview, did you talk to anyone that has been a part of the Civil Rights movement, or did you just ask, "people on-the-street?"

PRESTON

*(Pause – gets up and walks away)* Touché! *(Goes to the cameraman)* Right here - we'll insert some footage of the Sanitation Workers on strike. *(To Martin)* Very clever, Dr. King. I deserve that one. *(Crosses back to his chair)* So, what happened in Memphis?

MARTIN

That was national news Preston. Your station didn't send you to cover that historical incident?

PRESTON

*(Snippy)* I was on another assignment.

MARTIN

Somehow that doesn't surprise me.

PRESTON

What are you trying to say? *(beat)* I wanted to be there.

MARTIN

*(Not meaning it)* I'm sure you did. *(beat)* The public was primarily exposed to the police violence and arrests that occurred. Making the situation appear, as you said, "Out of control". The news media rarely mentioned the fact that one thousand three hundred sanitation workers were on strike because of unfair labor practices, that one thousand three hundred sanitation workers are presently struggling without pay and that one thousand three hundred sanitation workers participated in the march to save their livelihood. The news media didn't get around to reporting that.

PRESTON

The **violence** that broke out was news, Martin.

MARTIN

The entire situation was news. Are your viewers interested in learning about the injustice happening to their fellow man or watching police officers beat unarmed citizens? *(beat)* What are you interest in, Preston?

PRESTON

I'm interested in the truth. Something went wrong, didn't it? As a result of your **non-violent** protest a young man was killed. That's news.

*(Suddenly a series of gunshots are heard outside of the TV station. They both react.)*

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| <b>Sound cue 2 - Track 2: Gun shots</b> |
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PRESTON

Stop the camera. What the hell! I'm sure there's a logical explanation.

MARTIN

Waiting for a logical explanation is not currently an option for me. Do you have security in place?

PRESTON

Yes, yes. *(beat)* Mr. Scott, lockdown this area. I'll go find out what's happening.

*( Preston gets up and walks away. He goes to change into Calvin Payne. Martin gets up from the ground and walks center stage.)*

MARTIN

What went wrong during my first visit to Memphis should not be the issue. The issue is the city's refusal to be fair and honest in its dealings with the black sanitation workers. We were there to provide support to dedicated city workers who were about to be forced into the face of poverty. This blatant disregard of civil rights under the American constitution must come to an end. *(beat)*

I believe I was chosen to go to Memphis. I was not chosen to be violent. I was not chosen to be belligerent. I was chosen to honor the non-violent beliefs of Jesus Christ and others who follow in his teachings. I am saddened by those who have suffered and those who have died as a result of our struggle. I regret what happened to that young man in Memphis. There's not a day that goes by that I don't think about his family.

*(Martin slowly moves across stage. He is met by Calvin Payne; the boy's father.)*

CALVIN

Dr. King, do you have a minute?

MARTIN

*(Looks over)* Yes. Of course. *(Crosses to him)* What is your name?

CALVIN

Calvin sir. Calvin Payne.

MARTIN

A pleasure to meet you Mr. Payne. (*Shakes his hand*) What can I do for you?

CALVIN

Is there anything you can do to make sure that justice is served on that police officer?

MARTIN

What police officer are you referring to?

CALVIN

The one that shot and killed my son.

MARTIN

Your son?

CALVIN

He was shot during the march today. I'm one of the sanitation workers.

MARTIN

Oh! I'm sorry to hear that. Can you tell me what happened?

CALVIN

Yes sir. Larry and I . . . that's my sons name, Larry . . we were in the march. During the march we decided to separate. He saw some of his friends and went with them. All of a sudden them Black Power boys started busting out windows, stealing from stores; taking anything they could get their hands on. When the police got involved, I saw your people move you away from the crowd to safety. Well, the boys that Larry was with got scared and ran to a nearby house and hid down in the basement. Two police officers followed them and ordered them to come out with their hands up. When Larry come out, he was wearing a hooded jacket and had his hands in his pockets. That policemen claimed that Larry was hiding a knife. So he shot him. Killed him. Called it self-defense.

MARTIN

You're saying your son was unarmed?

CALVIN

Absolutely. He has never carried a weapon in his life. None of them boys had weapons.

MARTIN

And the name of the Officer that shot your son?

CALVIN

Officer L.D. Jones. I'll never forget that name - or forget his face. He shot my son for no reason. Something has to be done, Dr. King.

MARTIN

I'll make some phone calls before I head back to Atlanta. There is a local chapter of the NAACP here in Memphis. I'll contact them. I'll do what I can.

CALVIN

He was my son. *(Hands Dr. King a photo)* My only child. I didn't raise him to be stupid like that Dr. King. He knew better. I disciplined my boy, took him to church every Sunday and taught him right from wrong. He followed the wrong group of boys, that's what happened. Them Black Power boys. *(Thinks a moment)*

He was sixteen. He turned sixteen today. I asked him yesterday what he wanted on his 16th birthday, and do you know what he said? He wanted to shake your hand. That's all he wanted. He said he wanted to shake your hand and say thank you. That's why we were at the march – so he could meet you and shake your hand.

MARTIN

It would have been an honor to meet him. He was a handsome young man. *(Hands photo back)* May I say a prayer for you and your son?

CALVIN

I'd like that.

*(They both lower their heads.)*

MARTIN

Most gracious and all wise God, before whose face generations rise and fall, we thank thee for all of thy good and gracious gifts. Larry Payne was one of your precious gifts. Welcome him O Lord into your kingdom. And Lord, look over his father Calvin and bless his heart as he suffers this great loss. In the name and spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

CALVIN

Amen. Thank you Dr. King. I believe you just shook hands with Larry. *(Walks away)*

*(As Calvin walks away an audio of MLK speech plays. Dr. King walks back to his prior position on the floor. )*

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| <b>Sound cue 3 - Track 3: Martin Speech to TV Reporters</b> |
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MARTIN

*(Pause – speaks to audience)* When I met Larry Payne’s father, I was not aware of the tragedy that had occurred. My people had me sheltered from the violence that took place. *(Pause)* We were marching to expose the city leaders’ behavior towards their black sanitation laborers. A behavior that is outdated. This is 1968. A time where we should be compromising a change, not beaten into silence. Our country should be beyond such barbaric tactics. The entire black community in Memphis is saddened by this unexpected death. I am heart broken.

*(Preston returns to the TV station. He still looks frightened and confused.)*

PRESTON

*(Re-entering)* Apparently, there was an altercation in front of the TV station. *(Sits down)* Two guys had an argument and one of them decided to pull out his gun and discharge it. No one was hurt.

MARTIN

Did someone call the police?

PRESTON

I don't think we want the police involved. They would come in here and find you and your whereabouts would get out all over Atlanta. You wouldn't be able to walk out the front door.

MARTIN

Is the situation under control?

PRESTON

Yes. Our security guards have handled it. They're gone. It's over.

MARTIN

Thank you.

PRESTON

*(Sits)* Let's see. We were discussing the situation in Memphis. Mr. Scott would you start with a close-up on Dr. King and then pan out into a two shot, please. We'll just pick-up with you responding to my last comment. *(beat)* You ready?

MARTIN

*(Takes a deep breath to calm down)* Yes. I'm ready.

PRESTON

Role camera in 3 - 2 - 1.

MARTIN

America's persistent exploitation of unfair labor practices is the news that should fill the newspaper headlines and broadcast news stories. The black sanitation workers in Memphis had no choice but to march for fair treatment, equal rights and regular equipment safety inspections.

PRESTON

Who contacted you to intervene?

MARTIN

Ralph Abernathy had spoken to the sanitation workers spokesmen, and they requested that we assist them in organizing a march.

PRESTON

Dr. King, isn't it possible that the decision to lead a march so quickly was premature. And let me remind you . . . it was not the oppressors that became violent. It was the marchers.

MARTIN

They became disruptive, not violent. They harmed no one. The police became violent.

PRESTON

How many people have died marching alongside of you?

MARTIN

Jimmy Lee Jackson was the only one killed while participating in a march.

PRESTON

And now the young man in Memphis. That's two. I guess my point is that participation in your **non-violent** marches may result in violent consequences.

MARTIN

Preston, white America is deliberately trying to inflict on the Negro, conditions of life that is calculated to bring about its physical destruction.

PRESTON

Wait. Wait. Are you speaking of genocide, Dr. King?

MARTIN

That is your choice of words Preston, not mine.

*(There is silence from Preston)*

MARTIN

The denial of equal rights, segregated Jim crow laws, unjustified lynching's, murders, demeaning treatment on a daily basis, all have the power to force any race into the state of non-existence.

PRESTON

All due respect, Dr. King, genocide? That notion is crazy.

MARTIN

We hold these truths to be self-evident that **all** men are created equal. A notion Thomas Jefferson believed in. Is that crazy?

PRESTON

You know I can't air this portion of the interview.

*(There is a long uncomfortable pause. Preston signals the cameraman to do a close-up on him.)*

PRESTON

Tell me about the FBI investigations during the Civil Rights Movement.

MARTIN

Are you changing the camera angle so that you can edit the previous conversation out of this interview?

PRESTON

I'm keeping you from having your home set on fire or a bullet put through your head. *(beat)* We can't discuss genocide in this interview.

MARTIN

Are you afraid of losing your position here?

PRESTON

*(Loses his cool)* You don't know anything about my position here. Okay. Nothing. I am not afraid these people.

MARTIN

Are you cutting my previous statements from the interview?

PRESTON

You'll see the final edits before it airs. I promise you. Can we continue?

MARTIN

*(Picks up his briefcase)* I have a plane to catch. Thank you for your time.

PRESTON

What are you doing? I still have more questions.

MARTIN

Preston you want to ask questions that have no journalistic integrity. Why?

PRESTON

I'm trying to be different. I'm trying to show America a different kind of interview. You are Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. An icon. I want this interview to be about more than just your work. I want to show that you are like everybody else. That you make mistakes. I want to show **that** man.

MARTIN

Are you the man you want America to see? A man who is trying to destroy my life's work. Don't you see what you have become?

PRESTON

*(laughs)* Okay. Educate me, Dr. King? What have I become?

MARTIN

A desperate black man trying to swim upstream in the river of racism and you're drowning. So, what do you do? You try to pull me into that river so you can stand on my shoulders to survive.

PRESTON

I don't need you to survive. Believe it or not, I can help you, Dr. King. This interview is a start.

MARTIN

Then why not talk about The Poor People's Campaign. The struggle with the Sanitation Workers? Why not use this to further our cause?

PRESTON

No, no. This is not an hour long commercial for righteous causes. You get that all the time.

MARTIN

Then it's over.

PRESTON

Hold on. (*Rushes to him*) You called me afraid. You're the one that's afraid.

MARTIN

Afraid of what?

PRESTON

Of what's happening to you. Of what you've become.

MARTIN

So now you're going to educate me?

PRESTON

Yes. I am. Dr King, you're fading out. You're a man whose "supporters" are diminishing. Whose people are following other leaders. You're realizing that you're no longer the only face of the Civil Rights Movement.

MARTIN

What has this job done to you?

PRESTON

Opened my eyes. How many of your supporters know that you are under constant surveillance by the FBI? Huh? What if I told you that I received a tape . . . (*holds up a cassette tape*) . . . a tape from FBI telephone wiretaps. A recording that has a conversation with you and certain individuals involved in communist activities.

MARTIN

(*Laughs*) And why should I believe that J. Edgar Hoover would give you a copy of wiretaps that only he has possession of?

PRESTON

I never said that J. Edgar Hoover gave me anything.

MARTIN

Then you don't have the tapes you're talking about.

PRESTON

I DO. IT'S RIGHT HERE IN MY HAND. YOU WANT ME TO PLAY IT? I WILL! IF YOU WALK OUT, I'LL PLAY THEM AND HE'LL RECORD IT AS A PART OF THIS INTERVIEW!!

MARTIN

(*Very calmly*) Do you know why I came here Preston?

PRESTON

What?

MARTIN

Do you know why I came here?

PRESTON

Because . . . uh . . . because you are a man of your word?

MARTIN

Because I believe in you. When you called me, you told me how they treated you and how my interview would give you journalistic integrity. I believed that if I could help you, a black man who is trying to survive and do meaningful work, then I am living up to what I do best.

PRESTON

I know. I did talk about my work situation. But Dr. King, I need to do this my way.

MARTIN

Good luck with your interview, Preston.

*(Preston rushes over to Dr. King and grabs his briefcase.)*

PRESTON

I WILL PLAY THIS INTERVIEW AND THIS AUDIO TAPE ON THE AIR.  
*(Holds up cassette)* EVERYONE WILL KNOW! I WILL . . . .

*(Martin grabs Preston's arms firmly and holds him still. He gently removes the briefcase from his arms.)*

MARTIN

You're a dangerous man. A desperate, but dangerous man. *(Beat)* Ten years ago, I was in New York City autographing the first book that I had written. And while sitting there, autographing books, a woman walks up. A harmless, sweet, middle-aged woman. She said, "Are you Martin Luther King Jr.?" I said, "Yes I am." Before I knew what happened I was stabbed in the chest. I was rushed to Harlem Hospital where the x-rays revealed that the tip of that blade had stopped on the edge of my aorta, the main artery.

MARTIN (*con't*)

The doctors said that if I had coughed after my stabbing, I would have died. Coughed? She was black, Preston. A middle-age black woman. A woman I had never met before, yet, one that I continue to fight for. Her name is Izola Curry. It was later discovered that she suffered from schizophrenia.

PRESTON

So, I'm Izola? I'm the schizophrenic middle-age black woman with a knife?

MARTIN

You answer that question yourself.

PRESTON

(*Pause*) Dr. King, you have the leverage you need to get through this life with success and dignity. But your supporters . . . people like me. . . we're the result of the white people's provision - in order to keep you quiet. To calm you down. But when they get angry, those provisions are not always good - sometimes we're fired, sometimes we're beaten, sometimes we're even killed. Bad things happen to your supporters because the white man gets so angry with all the changes you demand from them. And sometimes it makes us, your supporters, people like me, a little schizophrenic.

(*Martin addresses the cameraman.*)

MARTIN

Mr. Scott Lee Ray. How are you? Would you do me the honor of giving me a close-up. (*beat*) Mr. Spencer has kept the camera rolling in hopes to obtain footage of me revealing something that America would be shocked to know. Well here is something to know. And to some of you, it may be shocking. I am just a man. A man who was chosen to expose the evil in this country. And you know what else? I am a man who is tired, a man who hurts, a man who is afraid, a man who misses his wonderful wife and children. A man who desperately needs a vacation. Thank you. (*starts to exit*)

PRESTON

No! Dr. King, I need this interview. I really do. *(Calmly)* How many of us get to sit with the President of the United States and discuss solutions to poverty in Black America? How many of us are allowed to stand in front of the Lincoln Memorial and deliver a Nobel Peace Prize winning speech? None of us. Please, Dr. King.

MARTIN

I will give my heart and soul to my black people if I know it will improve the quality of their life. But I won't give my privacy - the life that I deserve to keep to myself. And I won't be slandered with tabloid accusations. *(Hands him a business card)* Call this number. Ask for Ralph Abernathy. I'll tell him you'll be calling. Join us. Be a part of something truly meaningful. I have to go. *(Starts to exit)*

PRESTON

*(Pause)* NO! DR. KING!! WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO SAY!!!?  
TELL ME!! WHAT CAN I SAY TO MAKE THIS WORK!!!?

MARTIN

How about. Good-bye Martin. Thank you for your time.

PRESTON

Okay. Okay. *(Lays the card down)* Good-bye Martin. Thank you for your time.

*(Dr. King crosses to him and extends his hand)*

PRESTON

After all that I have said and done, you still offer your hand to me?

MARTIN

Yes. You are my brother in Christ. *(Shakes his hand - Exits)*

**Sound cue 4 - Track 4: Dr. King's Assassination news audio**

## PRESTON

The U.S. court system concluded that confessed assassin James Earl Ray shot Dr. King. It was rumored that he was abetted in his quest to shoot Dr. King by an unnamed relative in Atlanta. Atlanta police questioned his cousin, our cameraman, Scott Lee Ray; to determine his involvement. Scott was never charged in connection with Dr. King's assassination. However, after his interrogation, he disappeared. The interview with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was never broadcast at our station. I told my boss that the tape was accidentally erased. He fired me the next day. *(Sits down and dials the phone)* Yes. This is Preston Spencer, a friend of Dr. King. May I speak to Ralph Abernathy? Yes, I'll hold.

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| <b>Sound cue 5 - Track 5: Curtain call music</b> |
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