



WHERE THERE IS DARKNESS

The true story of a murdered priest and his final act of mercy.



Stella Mar Films presents *Where There Is Darkness*, a documentary about Fr. Rene Robert and his plea to save the life of the man who murdered him.



Fr. Rene devoted his life to those in need, but he was killed by someone he called a friend. Prosecutors sought the death penalty after 28-year-old Stephen Murray confessed to the crime, but nothing could stop Fr. Rene from fighting for what he believed in.

WHERE THERE IS DARKNESS



It wasn't like Fr. Rene to miss a Church service...

When he didn't show up to officiate a funeral on April 12, 2016, people got worried.

Fr. Rene's friends called police after he failed to answer calls to his cellphone, setting into motion a frantic search.

Described as a "living saint," Fr. Rene Robert was a beloved figure in the tight-knit community of St. Augustine, Florida—a humble Catholic priest with a special place in his heart for people cast aside by the rest of society.

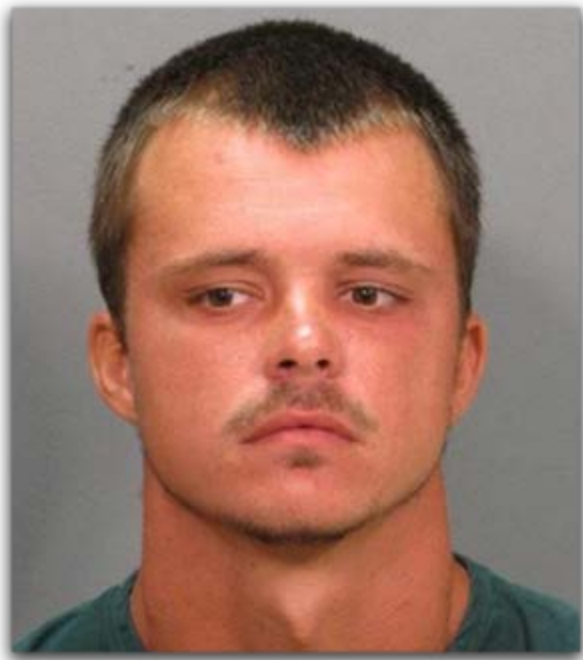
Fearing the worst, the local sheriff put some of his best detectives on the case. Days later, authorities spotted Steven Murray driving the priest's Toyota Corolla...





Steven Murray eluded police after a dramatic chase.

Several days later, they found him again—this time hiding in the South Carolina woods near the place where he grew up. Murray fled on foot, but police arrested him 7 hours later.



Days of intense interrogations led Murray to admit that he kidnapped Fr. Rene in Jacksonville, FL, and drove him against his will to South Carolina, at one point forcing him into the trunk.

Then, before returning to Florida, Steven said, he drove the car down a remote logging trail in rural Georgia and **shot Fr. Rene to death** at the edge of a forest.

After his shocking confession, Steven led detectives to Fr. Rene's body.

The tragic news sent shockwaves through the St. Augustine community and beyond. Those who knew and loved Fr. Rene were horrified that such a peaceful man could have met such a violent death.

The only consolation for those who had been praying for Fr. Rene, it seemed, was that Steven Murray's confession answered some of the questions surrounding the beloved priest's disappearance, namely the **who, what, where, and how**.

But no one—not even Steven himself—could answer the biggest question: **Why?**



Prosecutors announced that they would seek the death penalty.

Many people—including many of Fr. Rene’s heartbroken family and friends—felt that Steven Murray deserved nothing less than execution for committing such a heinous crime.

But then came **a voice from beyond the grave...** the voice of Fr. Rene himself.

The secretary at the bishop’s office was going through Fr. Rene’s old files when she stumbled upon a so-called **Declaration of Life** which Fr. Rene had signed in 1995—more than 20 years earlier. The document read in part:

Should I die as a result of a violent crime, I request that the person or persons found guilty of homicide for my killing not be subject to or put in jeopardy of the death penalty under any circumstance, no matter how heinous their crime or how much I have suffered.

– Fr. Rene Robert

It was as if Fr. Rene had foreseen the circumstances of his own death. The bishop immediately sent the letter to the prosecutor’s office and urged them **not to seek the death penalty** in the case...

But would anyone listen?



As filmmakers, we were captivated by the events.

After the success of our 2016 documentary *Apparition Hill*, our small team at *Stella Mar Films* was determined to continue making life-changing movies.

When **Cimela Kidonakis** heard the story on NPR, she shared her fascination about it with co-filmmakers **Sean Bloomfield** and **Jessi Hannapel**.

The three of us agreed that the world needed to know about Fr. Rene and his final act of mercy, so we immediately embarked on making this film.

We've been following the story since that day, and what we've captured so far is a saga full of twists, turns, heartbreak, and joy—a film that will challenge the way people look at crime, justice, and the world itself.

Playing out like a **true-crime mystery**, *Where There Is Darkness* tells the story of Fr. Rene's life, death, and the fight for his wishes to be carried out in determining the fate of Steven Murray.

Our first trip to St. Augustine opened many doors... but it also left us with **more questions**.

We met with and interviewed the local bishop, sheriff, and several of Fr. Rene's fellow priests—all of whom were fighting to get Fr. Rene's declaration of life recognized by the courts.

Our first shoot left us energized and intrigued, but no one we interviewed could answer the burning question: ***Why did Steven Murray kidnap and kill Fr. Rene?***



After all, Fr. Rene - who had devoted his life to helping those cast aside by society - had been trying to help Steven, an ex-convict, get his feet back on the ground. But although Steven had admitted to killing Fr. Rene, he didn't seem to know why he did it.

We began to sense something darker lurking beneath Steven's story, but we knew it would take a lot of digging to find it. Undeterred, **we stepped into the darkness** without looking back.

Our investigation uncovered a mystery deeper and seemingly more sinister than the crime itself... **an unimaginable secret** that would challenge our idealistic notions of mercy and transform what we thought we knew about the concept of evil.



Fr. Rene's funeral Mass in St. Augustine, Florida.



In April, 2017, we filmed the one-year Memorial Mass of Fr. Rene's passing.

The event brought together the diverse St. Augustine community and showed us just a glimpse of **the enormous impact** that Fr. Rene had on people in the area.

We also met and interviewed detectives **Gene Tolbert** and **Jose Jimenez**, the lead investigators of the crime, who called it a "career case."

When asked about the motive, they told us that Steven Murray's troubled childhood was, in their opinions, a major contributing factor.

But even if Steven Murray had been abused as a child, **how did it lead to the murder of an innocent priest?**

Our lingering questions led us to Steven's sisters, **Bobby Jean** and **Crystal**, who agreed to speak on camera about Steven and their troubled childhood in rural South Carolina.

But nothing could have prepared us for the strange turn of events that took place when we accompanied the sisters on an emotional visit back to their hometown.



Visiting their childhood home for the first time in a decade resurrected memories both painful and poignant, while a trek into the nearby woods uncovered a **shocking twist** that may finally answer some of our biggest questions about the case.



We never had the chance to meet Fr. Rene Robert, but getting to know him through the making of this film explained why so many people referred to him as a **living saint**—a title that the humble priest would have surely disagreed with.

Fr. Rene Robert was born on **September 2, 1944** to a young mother who gave him up for adoption just months after he was born. He lived in an orphanage for several years until a loving family adopted him.

The first time his adoptive parents took him to church, he started running up the aisle and pointing at the priest, saying, "**I want to go up there! I want to be with that man!**"

He joined the Franciscan order as a young man and later became a priest in St. Augustine, Florida, where he reached out to people cast aside by the rest of society.

He believed "that every human being is a child of God," said **Fr. Timothy Lindenfelser**, pastor of St. Anastasia Catholic Church in St. Augustine.



RE-ENACTMENT SCENE

St. Augustine's **Sheriff Shoar**, a friend of Fr. Rene's, agrees. "He was out there ministering to people everyone else gave up on: prostitutes, convicts, drug addicts," said the Sheriff. "When I warned him, he told me, '*I am doing what God is telling me to do,*' and I believed him. He died doing what he loved."

Few people knew the extent of his ministry while he was alive, but our film will show how Fr. Rene helped countless broken people put their lives back together.

A well-known figure in the St. Augustine area, Fr. Rene was often seen **riding his bicycle** because he constantly lent his car to those without one.

When Fr. Rene ate meals with his fellow priests in St. Augustine, he often took all the leftover food and discreetly **give it to the hungry**.

A regular blood donor, he gave an estimated **32 gallons** throughout his life and encouraged his parishioners to contribute as well.

A friend of the Hispanic community, he helped establish the first weekly **Spanish-speaking Masses** in the St. Augustine area.



RE-ENACTMENT SCENE

Sebastian Church in St. Augustine, said, “We are still laughing about the strange, funny things that Rene did.”

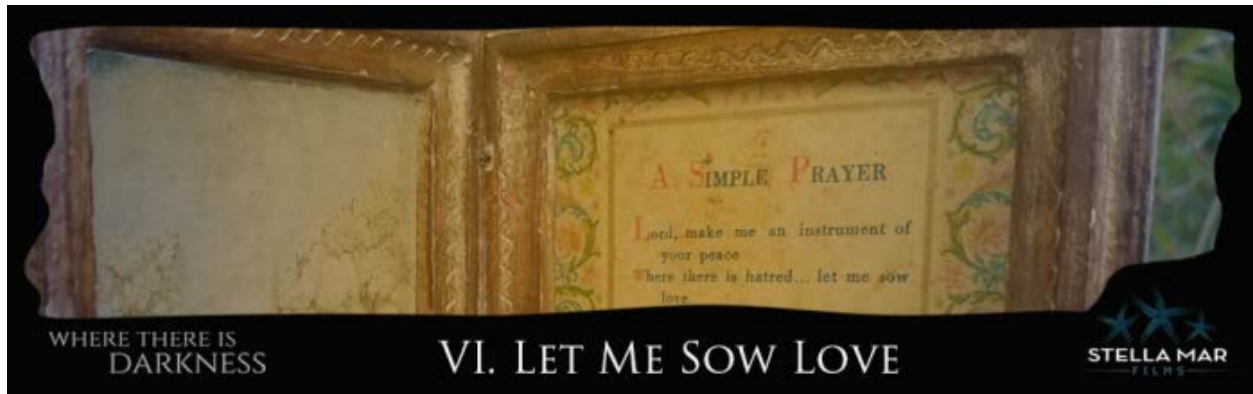
He fed **stray animals** and cared deeply about **the environment**.

“Fr. Rene dumped the Cathedral trash cans out on the floor looking for things to recycle, driving the housekeeper up a wall, long before recycling became acceptable,” Fr. Lindenfelser recounted.

He attended numerous vigils in peaceful protest of **the death penalty**, civil rights abuses, and other social issues close to his heart.

He learned **sign language** so that he could minister to the hearing impaired, and he worked as a chaplain at the *Florida School for the Deaf and Blind*.

But Fr. Rene was also very human and had his share of eccentricities. His friend, **Fr. John Gillespie**, pastor of St.



Fr. Rene embodied the Franciscan spirit.

Modern-day Franciscans take vows of poverty and emulate the teachings of **St. Francis of Assisi**, who gave up a life of comfort to help the poor and less fortunate.

Franciscans were among the first Europeans to arrive in America's oldest city, **St. Augustine**, where Admiral Pedro Menéndez de Avilés and his crew came ashore in 1565.



Intent on spreading God's word among **the Native Americans**, the early Franciscans trekked deep into the Florida wilderness and lived among the Timucuan, learning their language and inspiring them to shun practices like human sacrifice.

Much like the Franciscan missionaries before him, Fr. Rene risked everything to minister in a **savage, unfamiliar place**. His "wilderness" was the streets.

We even think that our film might lead to Fr. Rene being officially recognized as a **saint** one day... Shortly after his passing, a baby born deaf and blind was fully healed after prayers to Fr. Rene! That story and many others will be featured in the movie.

A man of unconditional, judgement-free love, Fr. Rene was also known to stand up for those who had no one else, including ex-convicts and people accused of crimes.

“Fr. Rene and I were at odds with a particular case,” said **Detective Eugene Tolbert**, who, ironically, would be the lead detective in the search for Fr. Rene. “Even though the evidence seemed overwhelming to me, Fr. Rene was still willing to support that person spiritually and be there for them. He was the only person in the audience for this defendant.”

Only after Fr. Rene's murder did Detective Tolbert see how much good he had done in the community, and how many people he had helped.

One of the most famous stories about St. Francis tells how he befriended a **wolf**. People living in the area wanted to kill the wolf because they feared that it would kill them.

But St. Francis, who referred to the wolf as "brother wolf," saw every creature as part of God's creation, and he was able to bring peace between the people and the wolf.

While pondering the St. Francis connection, we also realized that the well-known **Peace Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi** described Fr. Rene's ministry perfectly:

PRAYER OF ST. FRANCIS

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me bring love.

Where there is offense, let me bring pardon.

Where there is discord, let me bring union.

Where there is error, let me bring truth.

Where there is doubt, let me bring faith.

Where there is despair, let me bring hope.

Where there is darkness, let me bring your light.

Where there is sadness, let me bring joy.

*O Master, let me not seek as much
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love,
for it is in giving that one receives,
it is in self-forgetting that one finds,
it is in pardoning that one is pardoned,
it is in dying that one is raised to eternal life.*

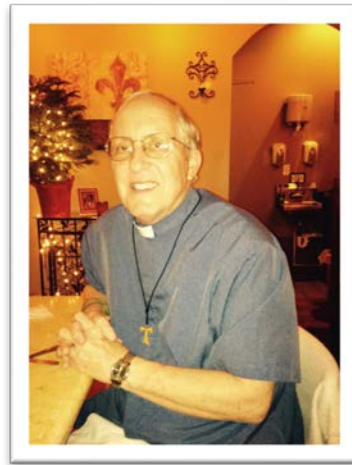


In fact, our film gets its title from the sixth line of this prayer: ***where there is darkness, let me bring your light.***

Just as the prayer says, our documentary will transcend other films about crime and justice by presenting a tale of hope and love amid unspeakable tragedy.

By showing how Fr. Rene selflessly **brought light to those in darkness**, it will keep his legacy burning bright long after his passing. We also plan to offer a comparative glimpse into the life of St. Francis of Assisi through brief reenactments.

It was Fr. Rene's outreach and ministry, in fact, that led to his meeting **Steven Murray**, the young man who would eventually murder him. By exploring the circumstances that led to the crime, *Where There Is Darkness* will allow Fr. Rene to continue sharing his message of mercy from beyond the grave.





After a year of hard work, filming is nearly complete.

We're determined to finish and release it as soon as possible. In fact, we've already begun **editing the film** in between our final shoots.

The compelling **documentary footage** and **interviews** we've captured will comprise the backbone of the film, but *Where There Is Darkness* will also feature a beautifully-shot **dramatic retelling** of the case...

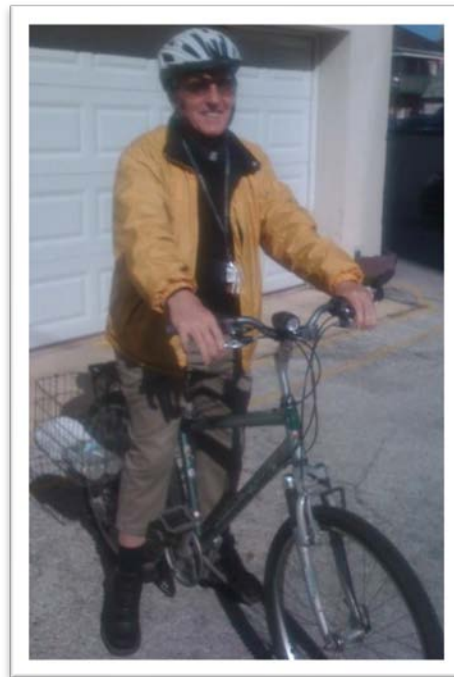
With the help of a talented, multi-national cast and crew, we've been filming **Hollywood-quality re-enactments** for the most important parts of the story. The re-enactments will be interspersed throughout the documentary to help bring the story to life.

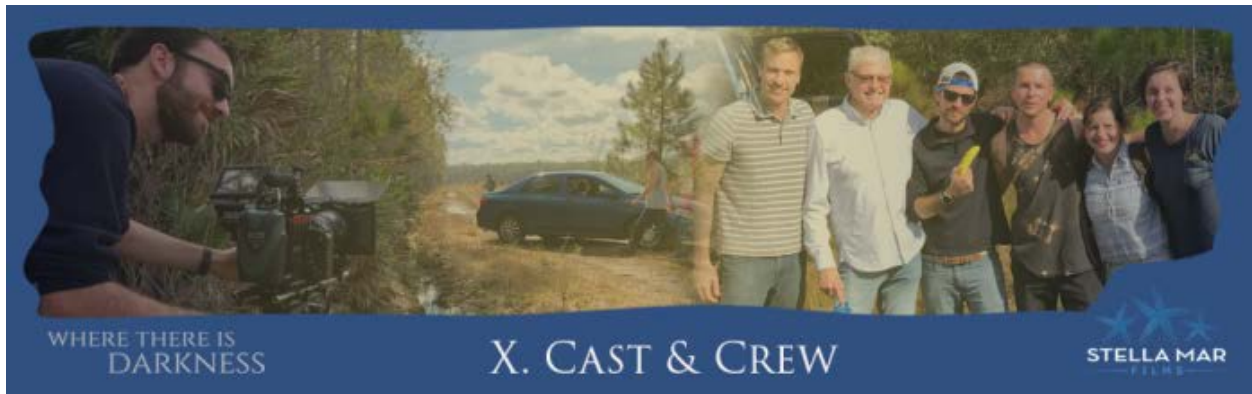
These scenes include glimpses into the lives of both Fr. Rene Robert and Steven Murray, as well as a **stunning recreation** of the moments leading up to the crime.

The re-enactment scenes will also help illustrate Fr. Rene's many **acts of love** and his outreach to those who had no one else to help them.

The film will also feature video and audio recordings gathered from **the case files** for the crime, including Steven Murray's interrogation and confession.

Once complete, we plan to enter the movie into **film festivals**, release it **theatrically**, distribute it through **streaming services** like iTunes and Amazon, and offer it on **DVD/Blu-Ray**. We want Fr. Rene's impactful story to be seen by as many people as possible.





We've been blessed with a wonderful team for this project.



SEAN, CIMELA, AND JESSI OF STELLA MAR FILMS

Where There Is Darkness is being made by **Stella Mar Films**, the same team that produced the award-winning film *Apparition Hill* and soon-to-be-released *Cross Mountain*.

CAST & CREW

Directed by **Cimela Kidonakis & Sean Bloomfield**

Produced by **Sean Bloomfield, Cimela Kidonakis, & Jessi Hannapel**

Assistant Director - **Jessi Hannapel**

Co-Producer and Legal - **Royce Hood**

Our talented cast and crew also includes **Jozo Ivankovic** (*Drone operator*), **Lawrence Daufenbach** (*Reenactment DP*), and actors **Dick McMahon** and **Eric Newcombe**.

Working together on this film with like-minded people has been an amazing experience. As we strive to complete the project, more names will be added to our list of cast and crew.



We are independent filmmakers (not working for a big studio) which allows us to chase stories we believe in—stories that might **change peoples' perspectives** and inspire them to **love more**—and *Where There Is Darkness*, we feel, has more potential to do that than anything we've ever encountered.

We've completed most of the film shoots and have already started editing, but we still need to raise enough funding to finish and release the movie. Our online crowdfunding campaign can be found at IndieGoGo.com. Donors will receive a wide variety of gifts for their support.



Bishop Estevez prays during the funeral Mass for Fr. Rene Robert in St. Augustine, Florida.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE CASE

- [1 year after his murder, parishioners gather to remember beloved St. Augustine priest](#)
- [Florida Priest Wanted His Future Killer's Life Spared](#)
- [Suspect describes mental, moral descent that led him to kill St. Augustine priest](#)
- [Tormented family: Suspect's siblings reported they were abused by dad](#)
- [Key characters in the life story of man accused of killing priest](#)
- [Diocese of St. Augustine Statement about Fr. Rene's passing](#)
- [Slain St. Augustine priest signed document asking that his killer not be put to death](#)

OUR LINKS

WEBSITE FOR FILM: <http://www.wherethereisdarkness.com>

BEHIND-THE-SCENES PHOTOS: <http://wherethereisdarkness.com/behind-the-scenes-gallery/>

TRAILER VIDEO: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8awkFzOg6Co>

FILM STILL PHOTOS: <http://wherethereisdarkness.com/gallery/>

STELLA MAR FILMS: <http://www.stellamar.org>

FILMMAKER BIOS: <https://stellamarfilms.com/pages/team>

COMPANY FACEBOOK: <https://www.facebook.com/stellamarfilms/>

MOVIE FACEBOOK: <https://www.facebook.com/wherethereisdarkness/>

INSTAGRAM: [@stellamarfilms](#) and [@wherethereisdarkness](#)

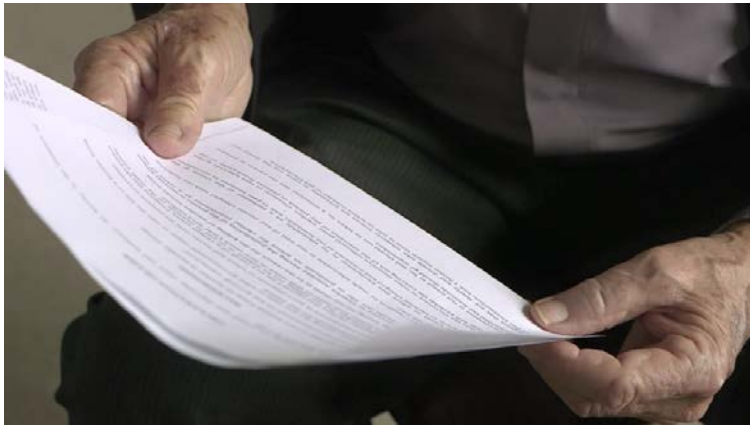


Contact us for more information, quotes from the filmmakers, photos, videos, and more.

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and www.wherethereisdarkness.com

MOVIE STILLS *Contact us for high-res photos.*



Sherriff Shoar holds the Declaration of Life signed by Fr. Rene.



Sherriff Shoar recounts stories about his friend, Fr. Rene.



Bishop Estevez discusses why he feels the courts should accept Fr. Rene's wishes.



Twin sisters who became Sisters. They worked with Fr. Rene.



Detectives Eugene Tolbert and Jose Jimenez at the crime scene.



Steven Murray's sisters Bobbie Jean and Crystal in front of their childhood home.



Bobbie Jean and Crystal lead us through the woods where they hid from their father.



Bobbie Jean and Crystal hadn't been back to their old home in a decade.



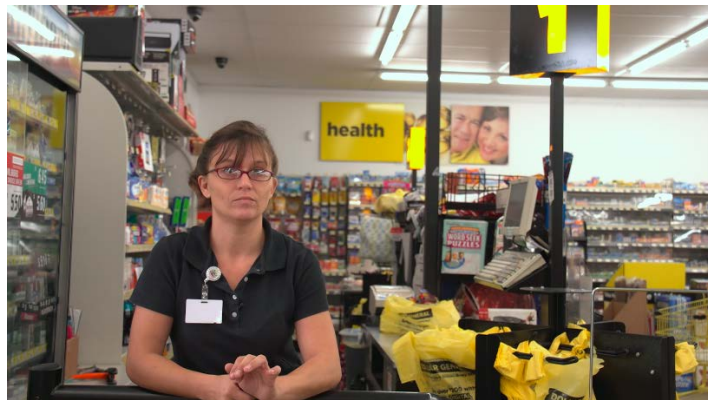
Steven Murray is led into the courtroom for an important hearing.



The judge hears Steven Murray's account of the murder.



Miss Bertie, the childhood pastor of the Murray children.



Bobbie Jean at her job at Dollar General Store near Jacksonville.



Bobbie Jean has turned her life around despite the darkness of her past.



One of the many St. Augustine residents who credit Fr. Rene with saving their lives.



“Fr. Rene was never afraid to go into the lion’s den, but this time he didn’t come out.”



Fr. Gillespie, friend of Fr. Rene, officiates the Memorial Mass one year after the murder.



Fr. Gillespie is a man of deep wisdom.



Fr. Gillespie's office is filled with enough books to stock a library.



A statue of St. Francis of Assisi in front of the church where Fr. Rene used to preach.



The beauty of northern Florida.



“Where there is darkness, let me sow light.” -The St. Francis Prayer

WHERE THERE IS DARKNESS

STELLA MAR FILMS PRESENTS WHERE THERE IS DARKNESS • A TRUE STORY OF MURDER & MERCY
A STELLA MAR FILMS PRODUCTION • PRODUCED BY CIMELA KIDONAKIS JESSI HANNAPEL SEAN BLOOMFIELD

PRESS CONTACTS

Contact us for more information, quotes from the filmmakers, high-res photos, videos, and more.

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