

SEARCHING FOR GRACE

Written by
Lawrence Whitener

When your only friend...has four legs.

WGA-East Reg #I325983
303 Fieldstone Lane
Blacksburg, VA 24060
(cell) 571-337-8866
(email) L_WH@aol.com
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by Lawrence Whitener in 2015
as "Grace, The Amazing Mule"

FADE IN:

EXT. THE BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAINS - SUNSET

A RED-TAILED HAWK flies over majestic mountains then down through its valley against a multi-colored setting sun.

EXT. BLUE RIDGE RANCH HOUSE - DUSK

Hawk lands in a tree beside a long Rambler at the base of a mountain with no neighbors. Home is bedecked with hand-made Halloween ornaments. Lit jack-o'-lanterns line its gravel driveway. 1990 trucks and station-wagons are parked on it.

INT. RANCH HOME'S HALLOWEEN PARTY - SAME

Paneled basement with 1990's country furnishings having more hand-made Halloween decorations.

CHILDREN, 9-13, in hand-made costumes, bob for apples in a metal wash bin to loud *squeals* of joy. Their YOUNG PARENTS, in country attire, stand at a punch-bowl watching Children.

DESTINY "DESTY" FENTON, 12, African-American, dressed as a witch, jumps up from the tub with an apple in her mouth and runs to her parents BENJAMIN FENTON, Caucasian, rugged-fit, and EDITA FENTON, Mexican, country-pretty, both in their 30s. Edita picks Destiny up hugging her. Destiny offers her apple to Benjamin who takes a bite. ALL smile as a happy family.

EXT. TWO LANE HIGHWAY - LATER THAT NIGHT

Weather is now bleak with wet snow falling as its full moon reflects in the road's puddles. Their 1990 station wagon enters a construction zone of wooden saw-horses and large muddy piles of dirt. The car's radio *plays* country music.

INT. FENTON'S STATION WAGON - MOMENTS LATER

Benjamin drives. Edita is passenger. Both wear their two-part seat-with-attached lap belts. Destiny is not seen.

EDITA

Mmmmm, nice party, too bad your ...

BENJAMIN

Stop!

The windshield wipers suddenly freeze in the up position.

Benjamin tries playing with its switch. Nothing. He can't see, so rolls down window trying to wipe windshield off with his hand. His seatbelt holds him back so he releases it.

EDITA

Benjamón, por favor.

Benjamin reaches out to break off the wiper's arm, then uses its blade as a squeegee to sweep the snow off his windshield.

Edita releases her seatbelt to reach for his.

EDITA

Let me attach your ...

A GROUNDHOG runs across the highway in front of their car.

EXT. FENTON'S CAR IN SAME CONSTRUCTION ZONE - CONTINUOUS

Their station wagon veers as the Groundhog escapes giving its high-pitched *whistle* of alarm. Their car over-corrects, slides, over-corrects again, then goes into three-sixties.

Car smashes through yellow-striped saw-horses and rockets up a large pile of dirt to flip airborne disappearing over it. *Sounds* of the car rolling over and over till all noises stop.

EXT. FENTON'S WRECKED STATION WAGON - MOMENTS LATER

Car is upside down, roof crushed, headlights on, with body dented as raindrops *bang* on its metal bottom. The fan belt *clangs* slow as its engine dies. Radio's music *fades*.

INT. FENTON'S WRECKED STATION WAGON - MOMENTS LATER

Destiny is strapped across the back seat with all three lap-belts. She releases her upper belt and slides out of the other two falling. She crawls under the front seat's top.

Benjamin lies unconscious on the roof with a gash across his forehead bleeding. His blood and skin are on the top of the steering wheel. Edita lies on top of him bleeding from her right temple. Her side-window has concentric cracks.

Destiny shakes both her parents. No response. She has to crawl over them to escape out Benjamin's open window.

INT. PICKUP TRUCK CAB - MOMENTS LATER

A 1990 pick-up approaches on their same road.

Its DRIVER, 50s, big, bulky, yawns huge, then bolts upright.

His headlights illuminate Destiny, soaking wet, standing in the road ahead waving her costumed arms. She is a fright.

Driver *stomps* on the brake-pedal. His rear tires lock-up.

EXT. PICKUP TRUCK - CONTINUOUS

Truck veers hard just missing Destiny, then steers other way, but slips on road-mud to now slide sideways out-of-control.

Destiny watches, rain streaming down her face, as the truck plows sideways into earlier dirt hill. Mud splashes over its hood. Its engine sputters then quits as its horn *blares*.

INT. CRASHED PICKUP CAB - MOMENTS LATER

Driver is slumped over his steering wheel. He *moans* and sits up. *Horn* stops. His wipers smear the windshield's mud. He looks out his side-window and sees Destiny running to him. Her costumed-arms flap making her look like she's flying.

Driver reaches in glovebox, grabs a road flare, and exits.

EXT. CRASHED TRUCK - CONTINUOUS

Driver pulls the top off his flare, ignites it, then throws it into road behind Destiny. He kneels and waits as Destiny runs to him. Driver then holds her away by her shoulders.

DRIVER

How'd you get way out here, sugar?

Destiny opens her mouth and tries to speak. Nothing.

DRIVER

Kitty took your tongue? Where your folks be this time a' night?

Destiny tries to answer, can't, grabs Driver's hand, and pulls. Driver yanks his hand back, then looks at it. His palm is covered with blood.

DRIVER

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!

Destiny grabs Driver's hand again and pulls desperate pointing over the hill. Both disappear over it.

Lightening flares lighting up the muddy construction area. It looks like a graveyard.

EXT. FENTON'S WRECKED STATION WAGON - MOMENTS LATER

Thunder *booms* as Destiny comes over the hill pulling Driver's hand who sees their upside-down wreck and yanks Destiny back.

DRIVER

Wait here.

Driver walks to the wreckage. Destiny tags along. He spins.

DRIVER

I'm a volunteer fireman, let me do my job!

Destiny freezes.

Driver jogs to the station-wagon. He falls on both knees, can't open the door, so crawls in Benjamin's side-window.

Destiny watches, wet and shivering, then walks to her car.

Driver, shirtsleeves now blood-soaked, backs out side-window shaking his head. He sees Destiny and runs to intercept her.

DRIVER

Got a CB in my truck, come with me.

Destiny tries to go around him. He sidesteps to block her.

DRIVER

We --have to call for help.

Driver picks up Destiny who squirms then acquiesces to throw her arms around Driver's neck. She looks over his shoulder at the mangled car. Her parents get further away with each step.

INT. JAX'S BEDROOM - NOW MIDNIGHT

Plank walls, antique bureau, standing-closet, and hand-made wooden chair. Nightstand has a duck-decoy lamp. Vintage wall-clock chimes twelve times. Lightning flashes through window.

JACKSON "JAX" FENTON, 70s, unkempt hair, short scraggly beard, is in bed asleep *snoring...loud*.

Thunder *crash*, then loud *knocking* out at the kitchen-carport door. Jax stirs *mumbling* under his covers. Now *pounding* at kitchen door. Jax throws covers off to sit up on edge of his bed in faded red Long Johns, turns on duck-lamp, stretches, then exits scratching his butt with both hands. He has a thick country accent and uses slang.

JAX

Sumbody better be dead.

INT. JAX'S GREAT ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Two bedrooms have a bathroom hallway that leads to Great Room having a dining table and four chairs, cloth sofa and chair. A huge hand-laid stone fireplace has a large sliding-glass door on its outside wall. Lightening flashes through it.

Jax enters shuffle-grumbling rubbing his beer-belly. He puts on a well-used cowboy hat off a standing coat-rack made from a lacquered tree-branch. More *knocking* and *thunder* together.

JAX
Alright, already!

INT. JAX'S KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Jax enters a small kitchen with curtained window-door that leads to his carport. His eyes narrow at the red rotating lights strobe-flashing through the door's curtain. He opens the door. Lightening silhouettes a big man standing there.

Jax switches on the overhead light to squint at SHERIFF JIM, 50s, small paunch, clean-shaven, high and tight, standing wet in a Sheriff's uniform and raincoat holding his hat in hand.

JAX
Jump in outta' the rain, ya' idgit.

Jax steps back and opens a piece of Halloween hard-candy from a large glass bowl and puts it in his mouth.

JAX
Want a cup a' joe --Joe?

Sheriff enters closing the door behind shaking his head.

They stare at each other in silence. Thunder *rumbles*.

JAX
Spit 'er out, Jim.

SHERIFF
Been an accident.

JAX
(chokes, spits out candy)
What?! Who?

SHERIFF
Your son and family.

JAX
My son?! --Where? When?

SHERIFF

We need to go to the hospital.

JAX

So they're okay?

Brightest flash of lightening yet throws shadows on all walls bringing their Halloween decorations to "life."

SHERIFF

We need to leave --now.

JAX

Uh, you go, I'll go get, uh --?

SHERIFF

Sorry Jaxee, I know your driving, best take you --both ways.

Jax stumbles through Great Room to bedroom. Ominous *thunder*.

INT. JAX'S BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Jax enters, turns left then right, can't decide, and sits on his bed staring down. He looks up at a far wall. Lightening illuminates a child-like *Cross* painting. Jax opens nightstand drawer, takes out an unopened pint of whiskey, stares at it, then puts it back closing drawer. He looks at *Cross* again.

JAX

Don't even think about ...

A thunder *crash* shakes his windows. Jax's eyes narrow to slits as he picks up lamp and throws it at the *Cross* wall smashing it leaving him in the dark.

SHERIFF (O.S.)

Jaxee?!

Lightening-flash silhouettes Jax now standing with fists.

JAX

Leave it be!

INT. DESTINY'S HOSPITAL ROOM - DAWN

Destiny lies in a hospital bed with air-line tubing over her ears, an I.V. in a wrist, and heart monitor beeping. Her face is cut with stitches, the top of her head wrapped in gauze.

Leaning over her is a DOCTOR, Indian, 40s, wearing a lab coat listening through his Stethoscope. He removes his earpieces and turns to his NURSE, BBF, 50s, in standard white uniform.

DOCTOR
Her kin notified?

NURSE
Only has one, her ...

JAX
Granpappy.

Both look. Jax stands centered in doorway turning his cowboy hat around by its brim in his hands. He goes to Destiny.

DOCTOR
She's lucky.

JAX
Don't look it.

DOCTOR
(like briefing an Intern)
Bruising from seatbelts, forehead contusion, reflexes normal, pupils dilate, but remains unresponsive. Almost like --she doesn't want to wake up.

(interviews Jax)
Were Destiny's language skills normal before the accident?

JAX
"Language?" Yeah, English. What, wait, you saying she c'aint --?

DOCTOR
I've scheduled tests for Aphasia.

JAX
English, Doc.

DOCTOR
Need to test her brain functions, specifically the left hemisphere because at this time ...

Sheriff enters holding hat, this is the part he hates.

SHERIFF
Excuse me, Jax, whenever you're ready.

DOCTOR
... Destiny is non-verbal.

SHERIFF
I can come back.

JAX
(turns to Nurse)
Much obliged if you don't leave her
till I gets back.

Nurse nods. Jax exits behind Sheriff.

JAX
Thankee for all your doctorin'.

DOCTOR
Actually, I'm the ...

Nurse cuts-off Doctor by squeezing his elbow. He winces, *Ow?*

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE HOSPITAL MORGUE - MOMENTS LATER

Sheriff and Jax walk down the hall. Their boot steps *echo*.

JAX
Bad?

Sheriff nods. Jax kicks the floor.

JAX
I told him not to marry --! *Dang
kid never did mind what I said.*

They arrive at the Morgue's double-doors. Jax freezes.

SHERIFF
Has to be done by a relative.

JAX
I know, it's just --I, I c'aint
remember him, not like this.

SHERIFF
It's okay, we can come back.

Jax turns to trace a finger around the wall's tile grouting.

JAX
You're not listening, Jim. If I go
in there, I'll die too.
(hits wall with fist)
C'aint explain it better!

SHERIFF
Okay Jaxee. Do you know where ...?

Jax walks up the hall. His boot-steps *echo* empty.

JAX

Don't say her name! Just get her to do what's needed.

SHERIFF

Want me to walk with you?

JAX

(voice breaks)

Leave it be, Jim, leave it be.

Sheriff's gaze cracks when he hears Jax's *sobbing* echoes.

INT. HOSPITAL CHAPEL - MOMENTS LATER

Small prayer room, table against a wall with standing Cross, a Bible next to it, and two chairs angled to face the table.

Jax enters and drops to a knee clasping and shaking hands.

JAX

I tried to change, lead a good life, follow your Word, but this -- this just don't make no sense?

(looks straight up)

Why?! Why did he have to die before we, we coulda', I shoulda' --!

Jax stands swinging his hat in anger knocking the Bible off.

Bible falls opening on the floor. Cross wobbles, then falls onto the open Bible with an edge by an underlined Verse.

Jax picks up the Bible to read the highlighted verse aloud.

JAX

"Behold children, are a heritage from the Lord."

Jax lays Bible on table, then picks up Cross and looks at it.

JAX

You speak --if only I listen.

Jax reverently sets Cross on table back to same and exits.

EXT. MAIN STREET NEAR DESTINY'S HOSPITAL - THAT MORNING

Jax walks aimless on wet sidewalks with his head down. The shops are just opening so OWNERS wave, but he doesn't notice, then stops to look up.

A liquor-store sign lights-up above him. Jax drops his head and walks into the store.

INT. DESTINY'S HOSPITAL ROOM - LATER SAME MORNING

Nurse sits in a chair beside Destiny's bed reading a book, then stops to look at her wrist-watch and shakes her head.

Jax enters carrying two country-clothing store bags and puts them in the closet, then rubs his bloodshot eyes.

NURSE

Been awhile. I've been off-duty --

Nurse stands stretching holding book and checks watch again.

NURSE

"a while."

JAX

What's gonna happen to her?

NURSE

"What's gonna --?!" We thought you
...

JAX

Me?! I don't know nuthin' about
raisin' little girls!

NURSE

God has a plan. Don't always make
sense or appreciated at the time,
but it's His plan so you gotta'
trust it'll make sense --someday.

JAX

Well you're not makin' any sense!

Sheriff Jim enters holding his hat concerned.

Jax points to Nurse, then at Destiny.

JAX

This looney wants me to become --
her dad!

SHERIFF

You want "her" --to go into foster
care? Jesus, Jax.

Sheriff and Nurse both fold their arms glaring at Jax.

JAX

Don't give me no come-to-Jesus
look!

Jax points at the closet as his defense.

JAX

Bought her "goin' home" clothes,
that's as far as I'm willin' ta go!

Sheriff pulls Nurse's chair to Destiny's bed. Its metal feet squeal.

SHERIFF

It's the kindness we show others in
time of need, that test our real
metal. Think on it --

His large hands land on Jax's shoulders to "sit" him down in the chair, hard.

SHERIFF

hard.

Nurse points to a wall-plate with a large red push-button labeled, *HELP*.

NURSE

Press that, when the time comes.

Sheriff and Nurse go to exit.

JAX

Uh --do she know?

Nurse turns sighing and shakes her head. Jax shakes his head. Nurse smiles and exits with Sheriff. Jax looks at Destiny.

JAX

I am sorry for what happened to ya,
but I'm more sorry, for what just
happened. Didn't do too good first
time around, so I don't --

Jax leans back in his chair, pulls his cowboy hat's brim down over his eyes, stretches both legs out, and *raspberries*.

INT. DESTINY'S HOSPITAL ROOM - THAT NIGHT

Room's interior light is off. Hallway-light enters through a crack in the open door.

Jax, still in chair, snore-snorts himself awake.

JAX

Zzzz, What --?!

He stretches, then tilts his hat back *smacking* his lips. His eyes adjust and he sees Destiny is awake staring at him.

JAX
About time, sleepy-head.
(no response)
Know where you're at?
(no response)
You're in a hoss-pee-tal.

Jax turns on the wall-lamp above her bed. Destiny squeezes her eyes closed, then a tear runs down one cheek.

JAX
Now don't be doin't that. Remember
Granpappy, dontcha? I know it's
been a spell, but we're still --.

Jax yanks a tissue out of its box to dab away her tear.

JAX
I, I needs to, uh, tell ya
somethin'.

Destiny tries to sit up. Jax holds her down with one hand.

JAX
Destiny, Desty, it's okay, look at
me, go on, lookee, please.

Destiny looks up with kitten-eyes.

JAX
Don't seem right, no sir, and sure
don't seem fair, but with God's
grace, we'll come to peace with it.

Second tear runs down Destiny's cheek. Jax almost loses it.

JAX
No, even though your dad and me
fought that last Christmas years
ago, I still loved him.

Destiny turns to stare out the window. Jax walks around bed into her gaze. Destiny looks back the other way. Jax follows.

JAX
I'll be here for awhile, if ya
needs me.

Destiny looks at Jax with pleading eyes. Jax drops her bedrail and sits on the edge of the bed taking her free hand.

JAX

Uh, Desty-darlin', we has to talk,
and it's the kinda' thing no one
wants to tell, let alone hear.

Destiny tries to speak, can't, then fights to get out of bed.
Jax holds her down with his hand pressing the *HELP* button
with other.

Nurse enters with a prepared sedative-syringe.

NURSE

There, there, little lady, you go
ahead and take a nap now. Things'll
be better when you wake, always is.

Nurse alcohol-wipes and injects Destiny's arm who quiets,
then closes her eyes. Nurse turns hands-on-hips to Jax.

NURSE

"Awhile?"

Jax looks up at the ceiling grumble-shaking his head.

INT. DESTINY'S HOSPITAL ROOM - NEXT MORNING

Destiny is asleep on I.V., with airline, and head wrapped.

Jax is asleep in his chair with his hat pulled down *snoring*.

Doctor and Nurse stand in the doorway.

NURSE

Hasn't left her side yet.

Jax snores even louder waking himself up.

JAX

ZZZZZ, Yeah, okay, what --?!

Doctor and Nurse *chuckle* as they both go to Destiny.

Jax gets his bearings, sits up, lifts hat, and sees Both.

JAX

When she goin' home, Doc?

NURSE

Whose "home?"

Jax and Nurse stare at each other like poker players. Jax
folds.

JAX

Where ya think, Nurse Ratched?

DOCTOR

Maybe this afternoon, after I
examine her further.

JAX

Make it sooner than later will ya',
I gots to get back to my Gracie.

NURSE

Didn't know you were married?

JAX

(snorts)

Might as well be.

Destiny stirs awake, sees Jax, their eyes meet, he smiles.

Destiny sees Doctor and tears-up jamming her eyelids shut.

EXT. JAX'S ACCESS ROAD - LATER THAT DAY

Mountains surround a dirt and gravel one-lane road in the
middle of a huge plain.

Sheriff's cruiser rides along with a cloud of dust churning
up behind it.

INT. SHERIFF'S PATROL CAR - MOMENTS LATER

Sheriff, now wearing aviator sunglasses, is driving.

Jax and Destiny are his back passengers. Destiny's face is
bruised with a large Band-Aid on her forehead. She stares out
her window wearing pink jeans and matching Cowgirl shirt.

Road is uneven with lots of potholes. All Three bounce along
in silence, then Cruiser hits a deep pothole. All wince.

Sheriff peers over his sunglasses into rear-view mirror.

SHERIFF

When you grading this?

JAX

"When" I gits to it!

A crocodile-tear rolls down Destiny's cheek.

Jax turns away from Destiny as his lower lip quivers.

EXT. JAX'S RANCH - NOW SUNSET

1950's Ranch-style home had a second bedroom added to one end. No grass, just dirt, scrub brush, and a few bushes.

Sheriff's cruiser pulls up behind a beat-up pick-up parked under a green corrugated-plastic carport. A horse-trailer with its hitch up-on-blocks sits beside it.

Jax exits cruiser with Destiny's plastic hospital bag and drops it in a dented metal trashcan. Sheriff exits car wanting to ask, *Why*, but Jax waves him off.

JAX

Bad memories are just that, no sense bein' reminded of 'em.

Destiny exits Jax's open door in matching pink cowgirl boots.

SHERIFF

Sale on pink?

JAX

Always.

(offers his hand)

You're one of the good guys, Jim.

SHERIFF

(shakes hands)

You too, Jaxee, call if you need anything --

(releases handshake)

anything, anytime.

Sheriff watches Jax enter his kitchen door. Destiny shuffle follows with her head down.

Sheriff turns to gaze at the beautiful sunset.

SHERIFF

"He heals --the brokenhearted."

INT. JAX'S GREAT ROOM - THAT NIGHT

Destiny sits with hands-in-lap at the small dining table.

Jax is in the kitchen preparing dinner and whistling, bad.

JAX

You like to whistle?

(no response)

Probably just as well.

Jax sets down two plates of spaghetti, then sits and gets comfortable.

Destiny stares at her empty glass, then at Jax.

JAX

What?

Epiphany, then Jax jumps up and scurries back into kitchen.

JAX

Get fresh milk tomorrow, but for tonight --canned cow.

Jax grabs an evaporated milk can, jelly glass, punch can-opener, and sets all three in front of Destiny.

JAX

"No teats to pull, no hay to pitch, just punch a hole in the sum-bi --"

Jax cuts himself off making a zipper-motion across both lips and sits again.

Destiny picks up a spaghetti strand and holds it over her open bird-mouth.

JAX

Hold on there, pard, we give "thanks" at this here table.

Jax bows his head closing his eyes.

JAX

Dear Lord --

Destiny moves her spaghetti strand towards her mouth.

Jax's eyes are still closed, but one eyebrow arches up.

JAX

Did I mentions --my third eye?

Destiny freezes wide-eyed with her strand, then drops it on plate, bows head, forms prayer-hands, but releases them in anger to slam both open-flat on the table in defiance.

JAX

Lord, knows you likes playing your cards close to the vest, so we can forget about looking for any Tell.

Destiny picks up fork. Jax continues. Destiny puts fork down.

JAX

So best we can do right now is to thank you kindly for this here eye-talyen food we's about to enjoy.

Jax opens his eyes and digs-in.

Destiny looks up and *screams*.

GRACE, a thousand-pound twelve-year old black and brown mule, stands outside the sliding glass-door with her head bowed.

Jax looks out at Grace, then quickly bows his head again.

JAX

And Gracie seconds.

Jax lifts his head to "finger" one ear, *Ow*.

JAX

Well, least we knows you can break glass now.

Grace lifts her head outside and *brays*.

Jax reaches back and slides open the large glass door.

Grace walks inside and over to Destiny like a big dog.

JAX

Grace wants to meet you proper-like. Don't you Gracie? --*Give her a kiss-kiss.*

Grace stretches neck forward to slobber-kiss Destiny's cheek.

Destiny cowers back in her chair wiping her cheek off.

Grace nudges Jax's shoulder with the top of her head.

JAX

Grace sit, sit Grace!

Grace sits on her rear haunches like a dog. Destiny is open-mouthed shocked.

JAX

Grace is the gentlest soul you'll ever meet. Learn to say her "Ta-Do" words and she'll do what you wants.

Jax reaches in a pocket and gives Grace some treats.

Destiny eats her spaghetti side-glancing wary at Grace.

INT. JAX'S SECOND BEDROOM - LATER SAME NIGHT

Guest Bedroom has curtained-windows on two corner walls, a four-poster double-bed, bureau, and a free-standing closet.

Destiny lies in bed's middle under covers in a man's T-shirt.

Jax enters carrying a small cardboard box.

JAX

Belonged to my missus, hair brushes
an such. Know she'd want you to
have 'em.

Jax sets his box on the bureau, then sees a gold-frame picture of Benjamin as a boy. Jax grabs to slide the frame in his back waistband as he turns to Destiny patting the box.

JAX

I'll leave the bathroom light on
with door cracked in case you have
to, uh, you know --get up. Night.

Jax closes door to one inch as he exits.

A bush *scrapes* her window outside.

Destiny pulls the covers up tight against her chin scared.

INT. OUTSIDE DESTINY'S BEDROOM DOOR - IMMEDIATELY

Jax is one-eyed watching Destiny shiver, then looks up at ceiling shaking his head.

INT. DESTINY'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Same bush now *scrapes* Destiny's window louder. She cowers under her covers.

A different *scraping* noise is heard coming down the hall, then door opens and Jax drags in one of the dining chairs.

JAX

Mind if I sleep in here? Sometimes
I git scared by myself.

Destiny's head emerges with her blanket now as a hood, then shakes head.

Jax sits, stretches out his legs, pulls his hat's brim down, flips off wall-switch, and *raspberries*.

INT. DESTINY'S BEDROOM - NEXT MORNING

Destiny opens her eyes and stretches then looks for Jax. He and his chair are gone. Instead, Grace stands peering down wearing Jax's hat. Grace vibrates her lips as to *raspberry*.

Destiny "Yipes."

JAX (O.S.)
Thought you'd like waking up to a
friendly face --come and get some!

INT. JAX'S GREAT ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Earlier two places are set at the table again, but now with two glasses of orange juice.

Toilet in the hall-bathroom *flushes*, then Destiny enters down its hallway wearing her pink outfit again.

JAX
Wash your hands, cowgirl?

Destiny sits at the table and holds up her hands for exam.

Jax steps out of the kitchen in only Bib-overalls and boots.

JAX
See your folks taught ...

Destiny *slams* both hands as fists on the table. Juice spills.

Jax frowns, then smiles model-spinning in his Bib-overalls.

JAX
Like my Farmer Riggin'?
(no response)
Start the day right, every day in
every way, inside and out, I say.

Jax exits kitchen with two plates, puts one in front of Destiny, then carries his own to other end of table and sits.

Destiny looks at her plate to see only grits and tomatoes.

JAX
Mmmm-mmmmm, grits and mayters.

Grace enters from hallway wearing Jax's hat and sits beside him. Jax bows his head. Grace bows her head and hat begins to fall off. Jax catches it with his eyes closed, then frisbees it still eyes-closed at the coat-rack behind. Two points.

Silence, then Jax and Grace each glance up one-eyed to Destiny who bows her head.

JAX
Lord --
(smiles big)
thankee.

Jax digs-in. Destiny stares. Jax explains not looking up.

JAX

Oh he don't care if you say it
long, just so long as you mean it.

Destiny pushes her grits around with her fork not happy.

JAX

Secret to life is to accept what's
put in front of ya. But if it ain't
to your likin', try improvin' it
some. Add some salt and cow grease,
mighty fine eatin', yes sir.

Destiny cuts the butter-stick in half and drops it on her
grits then shakes too much salt on both.

Grace *snorts* in disapproval.

JAX

Me and Grace don't take too kindly
to smart azz --uh, alecks.

Jax scrapes his plate clean eating every last bite, chugs his
orange juice, then stands putting his hat on.

JAX

Don't have many rules here, but one
is "clean your plate" --and don't
mean in the trash.

Jax takes butter-stick off Destiny's grits and puts it back
with its other half, then picks it up with his own dishes.

JAX

Let that be the last time you bad-
mouth good food. Tomorrow, I'll fry
you up some hen-fruit and sow-
belly.

Jax puts butter-plate in refrigerator, rinses his dishes in
sink, then puts them in drying rack on counter.

JAX

Grace'll make sure you finish, then
bring you to me. This is a working
ranch. I got chores --so do you.

Jax ties a bandana around his neck, then puts on sunglasses
and exits out the sliding-door nodding to Grace.

Destiny makes a scrunchy-face and pushes her plate away. She
tries to stand, but Grace pushes the top of her head into
Destiny's shoulder knocking Destiny back into her chair. They
stare at each other, then Grace *brays*, loud.

Destiny pulls her plate back to eat angry as Grace nods up and down animated.

INT. DESTINY'S BEDROOM - THAT NIGHT

Destiny lays in her bed with covers pulled up to her neck.

Jax enters carrying a folded man's t-shirt with a coiled piece of rope. He lays both on bureau next to earlier box.

JAX
Uuuuuuu! Bet that's the last time
you fall in a fresh cow-pile.

Jax sits in same dining chair again. Destiny shakes her head.

JAX
Sure?

Destiny nods. Jax turns off the light and exits with chair closing the door to one inch.

JAX
Leaving night-light on anywho.

Bathroom light clicks-on shining in.

Destiny's eyes droop, then same bush *scratches* on her window and both eyes pop open. She hears Jax *raspberry* in his room. Grace *brays*. Destiny half-smiles as she closes both eyes.

INT. DESTINY'S BEDROOM - NEXT MORNING

Sound of bacon *frying*. Destiny wakes, stretches, inhales deep, and finishes smile. Grace sits beside the bed, but without Jax's hat and *brays*. Destiny's eyes pop open.

JAX (O.S.)
Soon as we're done with cluck and
grunt, we'll skedaddle to the
thrift store for your work duds!

Destiny gets out of bed wearing a man's t-shirt with printing on its front, "*Life's Best Therapist...*" Destiny pats Grace's head and Grace backs out of the doorway. Destiny turns so the back of her shirt finishes front slogan "...a Good Mule."

Destiny opens earlier box on bureau to retrieve a hairbrush and large comb both in sterling silver holders.

Grace bows her head in reverence.

INT. THRIFT STORE - LATER THAT MORNING

Small donation store with shelves and racks of used clothing.

MILLY, 30s, obese, wearing the store's vest, is hanging up clothes. Bell over the front door *dings*. Milly looks up.

Destiny, now in the bureau's earlier folded men's t-shirt with rope tied around her waist into a dress, enters. Front of her new shirt reads, "*Kickin' Don't Fix Nuthin'...*"

Jax enters behind her wearing faded cowboy clothes.

MILLY

Morning Jax. That Destiny?

JAX

Morning, Milly, yep, and she'd sure appreciate your help picking out some work clothes.

Milly takes Destiny's hand and leads her to a clothes-rack.

Back of Destiny's T-shirt finishes "...*'Lesson Yer a Mule.*"

Door's bell *dings* again as Sheriff enters.

SHERIFF

Morning Jax, saw your truck.

Both watch Milly waddle into the back to get something.

Sheriff and Jax look at each other.

JAX

Dairy Freeze --calls her too strong.

SHERIFF

Speaking of "her," she did come in to verify, so might be at the funeral.

JAX

Hope not. Got no use for her then, now, or ever.

SHERIFF

Thought you wanted to get rid of ...?

JAX

All I want is for Destiny to --
(waves a hand horizontal)
move forward.

SHERIFF

What about her schooling?

JAX

I don't know! I'm takin' this one step at a time.

SHERIFF

Taking her back to get things?

JAX

Have to, ain't lookin' forward to.

INT. DESTINY'S FORMER LIVING ROOM - LATER THAT DAY

Small Rambler home with living room of 1990's furnishings. All pictures are in a cardboard box on the coffee table.

Door opens. Jax enters and flips wall-switch several times; no electricity. He walks through the living room patting the picture-box on the table as he exits into the kitchen.

INT. DESTINY'S KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Jax enters the bare kitchen and opens its refrigerator door. Its inside is empty and clean.

JAX

Much obliged to your missus, Jim.

Jax closes fridge-door and goes to open freezer, but stops.

Taped to freezer door is a crayon picture Destiny drew in grade school of Benjamin, Edita, and her. All three of its figures are holding hands.

Jax falls back against the counter tearing-up, hears front door *open*, fast-wipes both eyes with a sleeve, folds and slides crayon drawing inside his shirt, then exits.

INT. DESTINY'S LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Destiny stands in "new" work-clothes with tears streaming.

Jax enters and kneels to hug her. She hugs him tighter.

JAX

I's okay, sweetie, God wants us to wash their memory --
(voice cracks)
into our hearts.

Both cry hugging.

EXT. TOWN'S CEMETERY - NEXT DAY

Small cemetery behind a church. An open double-grave has two side-by-side coffins inside it.

MINISTER, looking like an 1800's preacher, finishes eulogy.

MINISTER

...Amen.

Jax stands stoic wearing a faded dark suit. Destiny wears a second-hand black dress beside him.

Sheriff in uniform, with WIFE in dress, stand holding hands.

Milly, and Young Parents, all in black, stand *sniffling*.

ALL

Amen.

Jax grabs a handful of dirt and throws it on top of coffins.

JAX

Dust to --

TRINITY "BUNNY" BROWN, African-American, late 30s, pretty, sashays in a too-tight black dress with a black-veiled hat.

JAX

dirt.

BUNNY

Thanks for not inviting me after making me do your dirty-work. But old man, you won't keep me from getting what's mine, no sir.

Sheriff steps between Jax and Bunny.

SHERIFF

Maybe this ain't the right time?

JAX

No, but from her --
(dry-spits to side)
expect nothin' less.

Bunny bends way too sexy at the waist to Destiny.

Husbands tilt their heads with her bend. Wives glare at Husbands.

BUNNY

Here's my little Destiny. Don't you
want to hug --
(lifts veil)
your real momma?

JAX

A Judge said you're not fit to say
that!

Bunny holds her arms open for a hug. Destiny shrinks back.
Sheriff takes Bunny's elbow. She yanks it away.

SHERIFF

Bunny, uh, Ms. Brown, why don't we
wait in the church office?

JAX

No need, she's leavin'!

Bunny stands to pull the too-tight dress down off her hips.

BUNNY

Not till I gets what's mine!

Bunny yanks down her veil and exaggerates hip-swing exiting.

Husbands watch Bunny's hips exit. Wives punch their Husbands
shoulders. Husbands feign innocence, they don't succeed.

Destiny looks up at Jax with questioning-eyes. For the first
time, Jax takes Destiny's hand glaring after Bunny.

JAX

Don't you fret none little one, we
live --with Grace.

INT. JAX'S DINING TABLE - NEXT DAY

Jax sits at the dining table in bib-overalls, dirty t-shirt
and boots drinking from a beer bottle. Grace sits beside him.

Destiny, bruises healed, in newer work clothes, exits kitchen
with two plates of sandwiches. She sets one plate for Jax,
then pats Grace as she sits with her own second plate.

JAX

I could get used to being waited
on. How 'bout you, Gracie?

Grace nods her head up and down animated.

Knock on car-port door. All Three look to it.

JAX
Who now --done already signed the
real e-state and inshury papers?

Louder *knock*.

JAX
Come back later, or let yourself in
--your choice!

Door opens by SOCIAL WORKER, 40s, skinny, in a thrift skirt-
suit wearing glasses with a tight ponytail and a clipboard
cradled in one arm to stand Drill Sergeant ramrod straight.

JAX
Shut the door from either side,
flies are movin' in.

Social Worker enters closing door then sees Grace and points.

SOCIAL WORKER
Is that a --?

JAX
Grace, yes'm. You heard a' her?

SOCIAL WORKER
Who, Grace --is that your wife?

Grace *passes* gas. Social Worker is beyond disgusted. Jax
double-snorts chuckling.

JAX
Might as well be.

SOCIAL WORKER
What is that *thing* doing in here?

JAX
Being well-mannered, which is a
heap sight better then you're
being. How can we help --
(beer-belches word)
yuuuuu?

SOCIAL WORKER
(accusing finger)
Is that --Destiny Fenton?

Jax takes a beer-swig. Grace nudges his shoulder.

JAX
Yes'm --and she's a real lady,
'cause she woulda said by now why
she's a-standin' here gawkin'.

SOCIAL WORKER

Thought she couldn't speak?

JAX

Figure of speech, which she chooses not to exercise just yet, but I sure wish you would.

SOCIAL WORKER

(goes *ten hut*)

I'm from County Services!

(hands Jax a business card)

We received a complaint you're harboring an injured child.

JAX

"Harboring!" Only one person I know uses them kind a' big city words.

Grace nudges Jax's shoulder. Jax sets down his beer bottle and Grace picks-up it up by its neck in her teeth, throws her head back, and guzzles. Grace puts the empty bottle down, then looks at Social Worker and *belches*.

Social Worker grabs her chest like having a heart attack.

SOCIAL WORKER

You give alcohol --to a donkey?!

Grace steps forward angry at Social Worker who steps back.

JAX

Mule, full fledged pedigreed mule!

Best you not be using that --

(whispers aside warning)

other word. Tends to get a might touchy on the subject.

SOCIAL WORKER

Really?! Where is Destiny's room?

JAX

End a' the line.

Destiny points and Social Worker exits down bedroom hallway.

JAX

Like some vittles?!

No response. Jax leans to Destiny whispering.

JAX

Kinda' scrawny, pile her a plate.

Social Worker re-enters up hallway writing on clipboard.

SOCIAL WORKER

Based on what I've seen, I'm filing
for an emergency custody hearing.
What do you think of that?!

JAX

I "think," you need to take a load
off of--
(points to her rear)
that. Want a beer? Grace'll get it.

Grace bows on a front knee and *brays*.

Social Worker writes furious, then exits house in a huff.

Grace's tail lifts and she *passes* gas again.

JAX

My thoughts exactly.

Destiny hugs Jax who pats her back.

JAX

There, there, child. Ole' Pappy
Jack ain't letting no wicked witch
of the world get anywheres near ya.
(baby-talk to Grace)
Are we, girl?

Grace pulls on the refrigerator's pull-down handle with her
front teeth, grabs a beer bottle inside with same teeth, then
closes door with her butt as she carries new bottle to Jax.

JAX

Right as rain as usual, does call
for a sellee-bration.

Destiny is puzzled. Jax opens the new beer bottle and pours
some into his old bottle explaining.

JAX

Hard choices come with livin',
c'aint run from 'em.
(snort-laugh)
They won't let you! Had to happen
sooner or later. Better sooner, so
we can get on with livin' --later.

Jax slides his old bottle near the table's edge. Grace picks
it up with her teeth. Jax *clinks* her's, then both guzzle.

JAX

Time you learn the truth 'bout,
(beer-belches word)
yourrrrrrrr --"other" mom.

Grace nods her head animated, then *belches*.

INT. JAX'S DINING TABLE - THAT NIGHT

Grace watches Destiny and Jax, now in different clothes, eating dinner. *Knock* at the carport door. All Three look.

JAX
Supperin' --hope you brought yours!

Door opens. Sheriff Jim enters taking off his hat.

JAX
Jim-Jim! Pull up a chair-chair.

SHERIFF
No thanks, can't stay. Uh --did a social worker visit you today?

JAX
Sure did. She needs to sell flowers or somethin', down right crabby.

SHERIFF
Well, whatever you and Grace did, got her to get to the Judge.
(hands Jax a business card)
This attorney is expecting you in the morning. He needs to file a T.R.O. to stop her injunction.

JAX
"Injunc --?" What's going on, Jim?

SHERIFF
County wants to put Destiny in a foster home until her Hearing.

Grace stands up on Destiny's side. Jax stands at Destiny's other side. Both look resolute as her guardians.

JAX
That --
(squints a *Popeye-eye*)
ain't happenin'.

INT. TOWN ATTORNEY'S OFFICE - NEXT DAY

Small window-front office on Main Street with Thanksgiving Decorations. PEDESTRIANS walk by outside its picture-window.

TROY WASHINGTON, African-American, 40s, in three-piece suit, sits behind an oak desk with full legal bookshelves on walls. Two wing chairs are angled in front of desk. *Knock on door.*

WASHINGTON
Happy Thanksgiving!

Door opens. Jax steps in wearing a worn white shirt and string-tie holding his hat. He freezes taken aback, then reads his business card and checks its address on the door.

JAX
There a "Washington" about?

WASHINGTON
All day long and twice in D.C.

They stare at each. Jax *sucks* his teeth.

JAX
Gots a partner?

WASHINGTON
You bet.
(points straight up)
Destiny with you?

JAX
Sheriff's giving her a ride-along.
Thought it best just me and --
(examines wall diplomas)
you?

WASHINGTON
May I ask a personal question?

Washington hand-motions for Jax to sit. Jax closes the door to sit on the front edge of a chair, then nods once.

WASHINGTON
You color-blind?

JAX
(thinks, nods in epiphany)
Most folk likes to think they are,
till caught off guard. Like now.
That's God's little self-test.
Pretty sure I failed
(stands and offers hand)
Let's start over. Name's Jax.

Washington stands. They shake, then both re-sit.

WASHINGTON

I already secured a Temporary Restraining Order on the State's motion, but if you would like me to withdraw from your case ...?

JAX

(holds up a hand, *Stop*)

My wife taught our son to see past a person's skin, then tried the same on me.

(shakes head)

Didn't take. The hard part of being flawed, is dealing with your flaws.

WASHINGTON

I've studied your case file, but still need as much information you can give me about Trinity ...

JAX

Bunny.

WASHINGTON

I filed under Trinity Brown?

JAX

Bunny's her stage name.

WASHINGTON

What kind of stage?

Jax fidgets uncomfortable, then cranes his neck to look away.

WASHINGTON

Start at the beginning please, so I can plan our best offense.

Jax tosses his hat in the second chair and gets comfortable.

INT. COUNTY COURTHOUSE - NEXT DAY

Small courtroom of shiny dark wood, church-type pews, two attorney tables, a witness stand, and several ceiling fans. A small Thanksgiving paper-turkey is on the Judge's Bench.

MALE SPECTATORS, all retirees, are sprinkled throughout pews.

Jax, clean-shaven with hair barbered, wears earlier funeral suit. He sits at the Defense Table talking to Washington.

Destiny, in funeral dress, sits beside Jax looking around.

Social Worker sits at the Prosecution Table whispering to PROSECUTOR, 50s and pudgy. Both wear cheap two-piece suits.

BAILIFF, African-American, 40s, very tall, in tan Sheriff's uniform, enters out the Judge's Chamber door.

BAILIFF

All rise!

All stand as the JUDGE, grand-fatherly, balding, enters wearing a Judicial Robe to sit behind his Bench.

BAILIFF

Be seated.

ALL sit as STENOGRAPHER, African-American, begins typing silent into her machine.

BAILIFF

Hear ye, hear ye, custody case of
Destiny Fenton is before the Court.

Prosecutor stands, he has a very thick Southern drawl.

PROSCECUTOR

Your Hona', the State intends to
prooove the Defendant is not, and
could not be, any child's
caretaker. Therefore, custody
should revert to the birth mother.

JUDGE

Proceed.

PROSCECUTOR

State calls, Ms. Trinity Brown.

Bunny enters the courtroom wearing another clingy dress and sashays to the Witness Stand.

Male Spectators fold arms and cross legs as one watching her.

Bunny raises her right hand. Bailiff administers The Oath.

BAILIFF

You promise to tell the truth, the
whole truth, and nothing but the
truth, so help you God?

JAX

Ha!

BUNNY

(sits lifting nose)
Always.

JAX

HA!

Judge raises his gavel glaring at Jax.

Washington fake-coughs into one hand as he hits the back of Jax's head with the other.

PROSCECUTOR

Ms. Brown, what exactly is your relationship to the Defendant?

BUNNY

I'm her real mom, her birth mother.

PROSCECUTOR

And after you bore your child some twelve year ago, you then separated from her daddy a year after that. Who's she lived with since?

BUNNY

Thought it best my child have a two-parent home so she stayed with him.

PROSCECUTOR

When you say "two-parent," do you mean your husband already had a second lover?

WASHINGTON

(jumps up)

Objection, your Honor, misleading! Both parties had been separated for months. Her Ex did not remarry until their divorce became final.

PROSCECUTOR

Withdraw my question, your Hona'.

(sits smug)

Your witness.

WASHINGTON

(approaches Bunny)

What is your profession?

BUNNY

Don't see what ...?

WASHINGTON

Your Honor, please instruct the witness to answer all questions, they go direct to credibility.

Judge turns to Bunny, she is attractive, so he has to smile.

JUDGE

Please answer all questions.

Jax reaches over and covers Destiny's ears with his hands.

BUNNY

I'm a dancer.

JUDGE

(wags gavel at Jax)

Sir, would you mind not doing that?

Jax removes his hands from Destiny's ears. Washington sees.

WASHINGTON

Your Honor, I ask the Court excuse Ms. Destiny Fenton during the course of this witness testimony.

JUDGE

On what grounds?

WASHINGTON

Prosecution has already invoked "The Rule" at their Deposition.

JUDGE

Do you intend her presence later, as shown by your Party, to be essential to the presentation of your Party's cause?

WASHINGTON

Yes, your Honor. In addition, Miss Fenton's specific testimony will carry greater weight to her true impartial testimony later if she does not hear what is said here.

Judge looks to Sheriff standing in the back.

JUDGE

Sheriff, would you escort Ms. Destiny out for some ice cream?

JAX

Chocolate!

PROSCECUTOR

(rockets to standing)

I object!

JUDGE

Got something against, "chocolate?"

All African-Americans glare at Prosecutor who sits sullen.

PROSECUTOR

Withdrawn.

Sheriff extends a hand to Destiny who hugs onto Jax.

JAX

Always do what a policeman asks,
they're your friend.

Destiny takes Sheriff's hand and both exit courtroom.

WASHINGTON

You said you're a "dancer." What
type --ballet?

(no response)

Ballroom?

(no response)

Dinner theater?

(no response)

Would the form of your dancing best
be described as, Go-Go?

Male Spectators all raise an eyebrow as one.

Bunny nods.

JUDGE

Must answer verbally, please.

BUNNY

Some call it that.

WASHINGTON

Is it true you have no permanent
residence because you constantly
move from job to job staying in
various motels doing --"that?"

Male Spectators all raise their second eyebrow as one.

No response. Washington looks at Judge.

JUDGE

Witness must answer all ...

BUNNY

Don't recall!

WASHINGTON

Do you "recall" if a Court awarded
Joint Custody of your only child?

Bunny looks away, then folds arms and whispers indignant.

BUNNY

No.

WASHINGTON

"No," you don't remember, or "No" you never filed for Joint Custody?

BUNNY

Been busy.

WASHINGTON

"Busy!" So "busy" you didn't file for visitation rights or call your only daughter in over a decade?!

BUNNY

Don't remember.

WASHINGTON

I'm sure your daughter does.

(no response)

In your motel rooms, do you entertain men with alcohol?

(no response, to Judge)

Your Honor ...

BUNNY

Yes! Alright, yes, sometimes.

WASHINGTON

"Sometimes!" So if granted custody, where would Destiny stay during these "sometimes?"

No response. Washington looks frustrated at Judge.

BUNNY

Of course she'd stay with me!

(looks away angry)

Ain't got no summer home.

WASHINGTON

Is "Bunny" your stage name?

BUNNY

Sometimes.

WASHINGTON

May I call you "Bunny?"

Bunny snaps her head back to Washington furious.

BUNNY

Don't you never call me!

Male Spectators *chuckle*. Judge *taps* his gavel.

BUNNY
(spins to Judge)
I'm not a bad person!

WASHINGTON
Your last answer leads to my last question. Why are you really filing for custody of your daughter today?

BUNNY
I want her!

WASHINGTON
I'm sorry, you want "her," or you want her --insurance money?

No response. Washington spins to Judge.

WASHINGTON
Your honor, under Federal Rule of Evidence 6, 1, 1, C --this witness is continually unresponsive and evasive. I request permission to ask a necessary leading question.

JUDGE
Granted.

WASHINGTON
Bunny, is it true, the only reason we're all here today in court, is because you see custody of Destiny Fenton as your only means to cash in on your ex-husband's insurance?
(changes to forceful)
Don't think! Answer truthfully for once in your life, Yes or No!

BUNNY
(cracks)
Yes, Yes! I'm due, okay? It's been a hard road I've had to go down.

WASHINGTON
Then why --do you want your only daughter, to go down it, too?

Washington walks to Defense Table with his back to Bunny.

JUDGE
Witness is excu ...

WASHINGTON

Witness has not answered my last question, your Honor.

JUDGE

Made your point, Counselor.

WASHINGTON

(turns to face Judge)

Thank you, your Honor, but I am not making this "point" --for you.

BUNNY

(breaks down)

No, I don't, no one should!

WASHINGTON

(sits)

No further questions.

PROSECUTOR

(stands)

Ask the Witness be released.

JUDGE

Witness is excused.

Bunny runs out of Courtroom *sobbing* as Jax shakes his head.

JUDGE

Call your next witness.

PROSECUTOR

State calls, Mister Jackson Fenton.

Jax goes to Witness Stand and puts his right hand on Bible.

BAILIFF

Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

JAX

Yes sir, every day in every way.

Jax sits. Prosecutor smiles evil and paces in front of Jax.

PROSECUTOR

Mister Fenton, have you ever been arrested on a Felony?

JAX

Which time?

Male Spectators *laugh*. Judge *taps* his gavel.

PROSCECUTOR

Pick one.

JAX

Well let's see, uh, been arrested eight separate for drunk in public, mostly back in higher school.

PROSCECUTOR

Did you graduate?

JAX

Only from school a' hard knocks. Come to think of it, none of my charges went to Felony, so "no," I can truly say, I ain't no Felon.

PROSCECUTOR

But you have spent time in jail?

JAX

In this town --who ain't?

Male Spectators *guffaw*. Bailiff turns to his wall smiling.

PROSCECUTOR

Are you a heroin addict?

WASHINGTON

(jumps up waving a file)
The Witness was never an "addict," your Honor, as the Prosecution is well aware, since he was given a copy of this, Mister Jackson's medical history before trial.

Bailiff takes file to Judge who puts on Granny-glasses.

PROSCECUTOR

I'll rephrase, your Hona'.

(to Jax)

Mister Fenton, do you admit to having been a heroin user?

JAX

Have to, ain't allowed not to.

PROSCECUTOR

Do you have a problem with drinking?

JAX

Yes, sir!

(folds arms indignant)

Costs too much.

Judge raises gavel glaring at Male Spectators. *Crickets*.

PROSCECUTOR

Are you an alcoholic?

JAX

Just said, c'aint afford to be.

PROSCECUTOR

But did testify to being in jail multiple times which makes you a criminal and to taking Class 1 drugs which makes you a junkie!

Proscecutor becomes *Clarence Darrow* with thumbs in vest.

But now-ow, state you're not an alcoholic which is about the only thing you haven't admitted to. How can you expect the Court to believe anything you say here today?

JAX

Is true, I was lost, but then I got found. That's why I confessed about my past. Now if what you're really calling me is a liar, I suggest we step outside so I can un-convince you "non" legal-like.

WASHINGTON

(half-stands)

Your Honor what my client means...

JUDGE

Oh, I think it's quite clear what Mister Fenton "means."

JAX

Permission to speak at the Court, sir, your Honor, sir?

JUDGE

Just, "your Honor."

JAX

Everyone knows how much I wasted, and was wasted, in my youth. Even after I gots married, continued in my evil ways. Well sir, a person can't change, unlesen they wants, and I didn't, couldn't. So how does a person go from bad nature to good? Well sir, some find it within, others, without. There's a word, had to look it up to remember, so as not to forget.

Jax clears his throat to quote the dictionary.

JAX

"Sudden insight into the essential meaning of something initiated by a simple experience."

JUDGE

Epiphany.

JAX

(snap-points at Judge)

Yes, sir! Some say it can come as a manee-festation, but for me, it were a voice.

PROSCECUTOR

(jumps up)

Note for the record, the Witness claims to talk to G ...!

Judge threatens to throw his gavel at Proscecutor who sits.

PROSCECUTOR

Withdrawn.

JAX

Nah, knew it were my own voice, but it said somethin', something I hadn't heard before, very clear --

(chokes up)

very honest. You see, I didn't have the best of daddy's me-self, so couldn't know no better. I done figured, if fighting and being mean were good enough for him, well --

(recovers confident)

well sir, suddenly it came clear, clear as rainwater. Just because somebody hurts you, doesn't mean you have to hurt somebody else.

Courtroom is pin-drop silent. Jax sits up straight.

JAX

That's when I changed my ways, and I think everyone in here pretty much has a different opinion of me these past ten year.

Male Spectators *murmur* agreement. Judge waves a hand *Shhhh*.

JAX

And I ain't never heard that voice a'gin, till the night --Desty's folks, my son, died.

Jax chokes up, then clears his throat to recover.

JAX

It said I had a chance, a second chance, to the difference in a young person's life. And it's true, ever since Desty come to stay with me, I've felt, *felt* --

Jax stops covering his eyes with a hand.

JUDGE

Felt what, Mister Fenton?

JAX

(drops hand from eyes)

Agape, true love, both for and from someone.

(spins pleading to Judge)

I love her, Judge, just plain love her with all my heart, and it'll break in two if you take her away.

Judge is touched and *taps* his gavel standing.

JUDGE

Recess, one hour.

BAILIFF

All rise!

All rise. Jax tries, but has wobbly legs. Judge puts a hand on Jax's shoulder holding him down while bending to whisper.

JUDGE

Genesis Two, Two.

Jax covers his eyes again with a hand. Bailiff nods quoting.

BAILIFF

"And on the seventh day, He rested."

INT. COUNTY COURTROOM - LATER THAT DAY

MORE MALE SPECTATORS, friends with first ones, sit in pews.

Destiny sits at the Defense Table. Jax has an arm around her.

Social Worker is on the Stand. Prosecutor questions her.

PROSCECUTOR

To continue, you just testified Mister Jackson lets farm animals live in his home. Any other pertinent facts to share?

SOCIAL WORKER

Only that his only source of income is Social Security, and he spends most of that touring the country giving shows with his donk ...

Destiny and Jax lean forward glaring.

SOCIAL WORKER

mule, his mule. --It's outside!

JUDGE

(snaps forward ramrod)
His mule is outside, in a trailer, in this hot sun?

SOCIAL WORKER

No sir, it's in the shade under the old oak tree.

JUDGE

He left it tied up there?

PROSCECUTOR

No sir, it's just --sitting there.

Judge jumps up and rushes to window. Bailiff is surprised.

BAILIFF

All Rise!

ALL in courtroom jump up.

EXT. COUNTY COURTHOUSE FORECOURT - MOMENTS LATER

Grace stands under an old oak tree as a CROWD, both sexes, pet her. PARENT puts CHILD on her back. ALL take pictures with big smiles. Grace is complacent, then looks up at Judge in the window and nods. Judge catches himself waving back.

INT. COUNTY COURTROOM - CONTINUOUS

Judge turns, turns back, then sits at his Bench *muttering* to himself. His eyebrows go up and looks like he might stand.

Bailiff watches Judge, almost speaks, but waits until sure.

BAILIFF

Be seated.

ALL sit except Proscecutor.

Judge recovers wondering.

JUDGE

Did you train your mule to earn extra money putting on shows?

JAX

No sir, we was told to go out and raise money for Children's Cancer.

Judge throws both arms up in the air nodding, *Of course.*

SOCIAL WORKER

Where he sleeps in the mule's trailer! That's hardly the life for a handicapped child.

WASHINGTON

(jumps up)

Move to Strike, your Honor, no evidence has been presented that Destiny Fenton is "handicapped."

PROSECUTOR

Your Hona', she c'aint --talk?

Social Worker jumps up stab-pointing at Jax.

SOCIAL WORKER

And no wonder, living with a drunk!

JUDGE

(bangs gavel hard)

Now if you all stand up, then I have to stand up, and if I stand up, everyone has to stand up. So why don't three of you --sit down.

Jax, Washington, and Social Worker sit. Judge clears throat.

JUDGE

Destiny Fenton is non-verbal, so I will have to rule later if she is in fact handicapped. But first, who's a drunk, Mr. Fenton?

SOCIAL WORKER

Both! Both get drunk in front of the poor little girl, disgusting.

JUDGE

"Both!" Are you, under oath, testifying that Mister Fenton forces his mule to drink alcohol?

SOCIAL WORKER

No sir, Grace picks up a bottle to drink all by her lonesome. She's an alcoholic!

ALL Male Spectators lose it *laughing*.

Judge *taps* his gavel while fake-coughing to hide his grin.

JUDGE

Is that true, Mister Fenton?

JAX

Yes sir, Grace drinks occasional, same as me. But no sir, impossible for her to become no alkie.

PROSCECUTOR

And how do we know that, pray tell?

JAX

She c'aint open bottles.

ALL except Proscecutor and Social Worker burst out *guffawing*.

Judge goes to tap his gavel, but can't help himself, and tosses it over a shoulder *chuckling* as he stands.

BAILIFF

All Rise!

ALL go quiet as they stand.

JUDGE

Thirty minute Recess for The Court to compose itself. When we return, we'd like to encounter --Grace.

Judge *raps* his knuckles on his Bench-top and exits.

EXT. COUNTY COURTHOUSE FORECOURT - MOMENTS LATER

Jax and Destiny exit courthouse, then lead Grace up its steps to re-enter. Crowd gossips, then follows The Three inside.

INT. COUNTY COURTROOM - LATER THAT DAY

GALLERY is standing-room only now with outside Crowd and, OTHER COURT PERSONNEL in suits or uniforms, leaving all Male Spectators squashed in their pews by the larger audience.

Jax stands next to the Defense Table holding Grace by her halter. Destiny stands with her head laying on Grace's ribs.

Bailiff enters through side-door, is wide-eyed surprised by number of people, and spins back inside. He re-enters with the Judge behind him who hurries to his Bench.

BAILIFF

All rise!

Gallery rises. Judge sits quickly.

BAILIFF

Be --?

Most sit, but since all pews are filled, some have to stand.

BAILIFF

quiet.

Jax releases the bridle head-motioning to Grace, *Go on.*

JAX

Grace visit, visit Grace.

Grace goes to Bench and bows her head.

JAX

Ask her how old Destiny is.

JUDGE

Ask who, what, Grace?

(clears throat)

Excuse me Grace, but do you know how old your friend Destiny is?

Grace *scrapes* the floor twelve times with a front hoof.

Gallery claps *Uuuuing*.

Judge is impressed and *claps* under his Bench.

JAX

Tell Grace to sit.

PROSCECUTOR

(jumps up)

I ob ...!

JUDGE

SIT!

Grace and Proscecutor both sit. Judge is now having fun.

JAX

Ask her to paint.

JUDGE

Ask her to do what?!

Sheriff sets up an easel with blank canvas near Bench. Jax carries a large pallet with a brush dabbing paint on the brush. Jax puts brush's handle in Grace's mouth, then holds the canvas on its easel and looks at Judge, *Well?*

JUDGE

Oh, uh, Grace, --*paint?*

Grace moves her head up and down with brush painting canvas. Jax takes her brush, dabs it in a different color paint and puts handle back in Grace's mouth. Grace moves head side-to-side. Jax hands her finished painting to Judge.

JUDGE

For me? Well thank you, Grace.

Judge shows painting to Courtroom, it's a *Cross*, same as in Jax's bedroom. Gallery claps. Bailiff takes *Cross*-painting away. Sheriff takes away all painting materials.

JUDGE

This is the most unique day I've ever had on the Bench, but I really need to speak to Destiny as witness for the Defense. Any more witnesses for the Prosecution?

PROSCECUTOR

(half-stands, then sits)

None, your Hona'.

WASHINGTON

(stands buttoning jacket)

The Defense calls, Destiny Fenton to the Stand.

Destiny looks at Jax who nods. She goes to the Stand. Bailiff puts a jumper-seat in the witness chair. She has to climb onto it, then raises right hand with left on Bailiff's Bible.

BAILIFF

Do you promise to tell the truth,
the whole truth and nothing but the
truth ...

BAILIFF/JAX

so help you God?

Destiny nods strong. Bailiff steps back against the wall.

Destiny sits nodding. Grace sits beside the witness stand.

JUDGE

Indicate the Witness nodded, "Yes."

Stenographer types into her machine.

PROSCECUTOR

(jumps up)

Your, Hona'! There's no objective way for me to question the Witness.

WASHINGTON

Courts have ruled a speech impaired person can testify in writing or through gestures, your Honor.

JUDGE

Yes, but psychological trauma is a type of damage to the psyche that occurs as the result of a severely distressing event. It can lead to extreme confusion and insecurity which may prove too taxing and require institutionalization.

PROSCECUTOR

Exactly, your Hona', that's why I had to bring this before The Court.

JUDGE

This is a difficult decision for me, Destiny. I wish you could tell me who you want to live with.

Grace moves her lips like she's trying to talk.

Prosecutor jumps up. Judge gives him a sniper's thousand-yard stare. Prosecutor sits pouting.

Grace moves her lips again. Nothing. Grace butts her head on Destiny's shoulder. Nothing. Grace taps a hoof on the floor and moves her lips animated. Nothing. Grace *snorts* placing a hoof on Destiny's foot. Destiny jumps up pointing at Jax.

DESTINY

Pappy!

GALLERY

Uuuuuuuu!

Jax rushes to hug Destiny. Judge grins at Prosecutor.

JUDGE

I'd say that's conclusive evidence. Does the State care to rest?

Prosecutor is defeated and falls back in chair nodding.

JUDGE

Must answer verbally, please.

PROSECUTOR
State retires, your Hona'.

Judge smiles big, then turns to Destiny smiling bigger.

JUDGE
What helped you to speak today,
little lady?

DESTINY
(strokes Grace's neck)
Gracie!

GALLERY
Awwwwwwwww.

Gallery mob-glares at Judge.

JUDGE
Oh, please. I hereby award custody
of Destiny Fenton to her "Pappy,"
Mister Jackson Fenton.

Judge *taps* gavel. Gallery *erupts* into applause and cheers.

BAILIFF
(arm-pumps)
Yes!

Bailiff is embarrassed and looks at Judge who smiles.

Washington shakes Prosecutor's hand.

Grace goes to Social Worker and "kisses" her cheek. Social Worker *shrieks*, *shirks*, then rubs Grace's snout timid.

ALL react *laughing*.

EXT. JAX'S RANCH - NEXT DAY

Beautiful mountain panorama. Dawn is breaking. ROOSTER *crows*.

EXT. BACK OF JAX'S RANCH - MOMENTS LATER

A large field-corral holds a MULE-IN-TRAINING and TWO HORSES.

A separate forty-foot circular-corral *Show Ring* is where Jax and Grace give their "home" performances. There's also a Tack Room, CHICKENS in chicken-coop, and a red weathered hay-barn.

Jax, in his red-faded Long Johns under suspender-jeans and boots, enters the barn carrying a pitchfork.

INT. JAX'S BARN - CONTINUOUS

Jax swings the barn's door open and freezes seeing Grace laying on her side as Destiny, wearing work clothes, lies behind Grace with an arm over her. Both are asleep.

Jax smiles backs out closing the door.

EXT. JAX'S BACK YARD - LATER THAT DAY

Concrete patio with lawn-furniture leads to the large sliding-glass door that Grace uses to enter the Great Room.

Door slides open and Jax exits. He looks for, then sees, Destiny and Grace playing "tag" around farm equipment.

Jax watches smiling, then grabs clangor to ring a hanging dinner triangle. It echoes loud. He yells over its din.

JAX
Turkey n' Fixin's!

Jax re-hangs clangor to re-enter house sliding door closed.

INT. JAX'S GREAT ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

The table now has decorations set for a Thanksgiving supper.

Jax carries in a small turkey on a platter. There is a third plate between theirs near table's edge with Grace's treats.

Sliding-glass door opens and Destiny followed by Grace enter. Destiny waits for Grace, then slides door closed and sits.

JAX
Wash your hands, cow-hand.

DESTINY
Did.

Jax gives Destiny the stink-eye. Destiny shrugs, goes to kitchen sink, and washes her hands.

DESTINY
"Did" --before breakfast.

Grace goes to nibble off her plate. Jax shoos her away.

JAX
Wait for grace, Grace.

Jax and Destiny sit at their plates. Grace sits on the floor at hers. All Three bow their heads.

JAX

Mostly folk ask for what they ain't got, rather than give thanks fer what they does, so --thanks!

(slices turkey)

Couldn't be happier, how 'bout you?

DESTINY

I hate missing both of them, but --

(tears-up)

love living with both of you.

JAX

Well then, looks like things is startin' to make sense.

(furrows brow)

Honey-suckle, what made you decide it was okay to talk again?

DESTINY

Remember when Grace stepped on your foot and you taught me what to say?

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. JAX'S BARN - EARLY ON COURT DAY

Destiny, in Court-clothes, enters barn followed by Grace. Destiny looks sad and stands still, then starts *crying*. Grace walks over and steps on one of Destiny's boot-tips. Destiny is surprised, stops crying, and pushes against Grace. Grace doesn't step off, but looks at Destiny, and moves her lips. Destiny pushes harder, but can't move Grace, and *cries* more. Grace nods her head up and down animated moving her lips. Destiny hits Grace's shoulder, then gets mad and yells.

DESTINY

OFF!

Grace steps off Destiny's boot, turns and bows on one knee. Destiny realizes she spoke and hugs Grace around her neck.

RETURN TO.

INT. JAX'S DINING TABLE - THANKSGIVING DAY - PRESENT

Jax reaches over and rubs Grace while talking to Destiny.

JAX

So Grace motivated you to speak your mind, huh?

DESTINY

No. Grace, taught me, it was okay,
to feel again. I love you, Pappy!

JAX

I, I love you too, sweetie. If the
missus and I coulda' had a --
(fake-coughs rubbing eye)
gots somethin' in my eye.

Jax fakes blowing his nose in his napkin, but is really
wiping away tears. He clears his throat twice, *Whew*.

JAX

Ever been to a row-dey-o?

Destiny looks up surprised with mouth full, then swallows.

JAX

Grace and me been invited to do a
show at the County Fair.
(shakes head)
*Don't know where you're gonna' stay
though?*

Destiny breaks off a sandwich-corner and throws it at Jax.

JAX

Hey, don't waste food, of course
you're comin'.

Destiny jumps up and runs around Grace to hug Jax's neck.

Grace stretches her neck to eat Destiny's sandwich crumb.

JAX

See, Grace don't waste nuthin'.

Destiny runs back to her chair and pulls her plate in close.

DESTINY

I'll share, just ask.

Grace *brays*.

Jax and Destiny laugh together for the first time.

EXT. JAX'S RANCH - SIMULTANEOUS

Beautiful multi-color sunset behind the majestic mountains.

Jax and Destiny's laughter echoes under distant *rumbling*
thunder.

EXT. COUNTY FAIR - DAYS LATER

Typical County Fair of tents, rides, games, and noise, as all types of FAIR-PEOPLE, walk in all kinds of country-clothing.

Jax drives his truck slowly pulling the horse-trailer with Grace inside. Destiny is passenger. Plastic Christmas wreathes are on truck's front grill and trailer's gate.

INT. JAX'S TRUCK CAB - CONTINUOUS

Destiny looks everywhere in awe.

Jax smiles watching her, then scans the Fair-People.

JAX
In general, I like folk --just
prefer 'em one at a time.

DESTINY
Why, Pappy?

JAX
People act different in a bunch,
try to show off, or act mean, be
something they're not, or ever got.

DESTINY
"Ever got?"

JAX
What's the opposite of love?

DESTINY
Hate?

JAX
(shakes head)
Indifference. --But if you don't
love something with all your heart,
that leaves room for other feelings
to creep in like envy, distrust,
even love's badder half, hate.

DESTINY
I love Grace, and you.

They park near the Fair's 40' round metal-fence *Show Ring*.

JAX
Ditto, kiddo.

Parked nearby is a cargo van painted on both sides with a TV station's eye-ball logo and *Eye-Witness News* printed under.

EXT. GRACE'S STATE FAIR SHOW - LATER THAT DAY

MONTAGE: Jax has Grace play an organ, push a baby carriage, open a mail-box to get "junk" mail and throw it away, answer a phone, then paint a Cross.

Destiny and CROWD watches all *clapping*.

JAX

Folks, we all know the Good Lord provides for our needs, so what I needs now is an assistant. Desty-darling, come on out here, please.

Destiny is surprised, then goes to Jax. Fair-People *clap*.

JAX

Wave to all the good folk, Destiny.

Destiny waves. Fair-People wave back.

In the Crowd, BOCEPHUS "BO" BEAVERS and EARNHARDT "ERNIE" SKAGGS, Rednecks, late 20s, in worn-torn cowboy-clothes, drink beer out of large red plastic cups studying their prey.

Jax puts Destiny up on Grace's back, then whispers.

JAX

Do you believe in Grace?

Destiny nods.

JAX

Then just like Life, hold on tight.

Jax places Destiny's hands on a halter-rope around Grace.

JAX

My "assistant" --will help Grace dunk a regulation height basket!

Jax kicks a basketball over. Grace picks it up with her teeth, rears-up with Destiny, and drops it in the 10' hoop.

Crowd goes *wild*. Bo and Ernie are open-mouth speechless.

Jax lifts Destiny off Grace and sets her down. Destiny is one big smile. Jax takes her hand and leads her to his 6' self-standing wooden *Cross* and kneels, then Grace kneels. Destiny stands. All Three bow their heads. Crowd bow their heads. Jax delivers a sage sermon.

Bo and Ernie do not bow or listen as they back up into the shadows.

EXT. GRACE'S EMPTY SHOW RING - LATER THAT DAY

Fair is over. Fair-People are gone. Only Bo and Ernie remain leaning on show-ring's railing chewing on their cups watching Jax's truck, with Grace in her attached trailer, pull out.

BO

Never seen a mule do all that. You ever see a mule do all that?

ERNIE

No sir, how'd it get so smartified?

BO

Learned, I guess. Cain't be easy to teach all that, which makes it --?

Bo looks mischievous at Ernie who's slow on the up-take. Bo encourages Ernie on until he, *Gets it*.

ERNIE

special?

BO

So "special," might be worth something, if it went --?

ERNIE

(in sync now)
missing! Then some good ole' boys,

BO

find and return it, after a --

ERNIE

reward is posted. Could work.
(shakes head)
But we just got out? Ain't all fired-up to go back in just yet.

BO

Ernie-boy, I do believe, I finely found us --Grace.

Bo and Ernie toast their empty chewed-up cups, then toss over their shoulders laughing as only selfish litter-bugs can.

INT. JAX'S TRUCK CAB - THAT NIGHT

Jax drives along a desolate highway towing Grace's trailer.

Destiny awakes.

DESTINY

Mmmmmm, where are we?

JAX
(quotes *Robert Frost*)
"And miles to go before I sleep."
Like the show?

DESTINY
Yes, thank you, Grace is amazing.

JAX
Amazing Grace, always is.

Both drive along in silence, then Destiny fidgets.

JAX
Go ahead and ask.

DESTINY
Is it okay to hate God?

Jax takes his foot off the gas pedal so truck slows down.

JAX
Done hated God twice in my life.
First, because how my daddy treated
me. Second, when my missus died.
(sucks teeth)
The problem with hating is it
blocks out all the good feelings of
just being alive.

DESTINY
I hate God for taking my parents.

JAX
And I hate missing your mom and,
(chokes-up)
my boy. But sure don't hate Him,
for bringing your sunshine into my
dark life.

DESTINY
I love you and Grace, but ...

JAX
Concentrate your love "with" Grace.
Know what her name really means?
(quotes dictionary)
"Divine assistant given to Humans
for sanctification."

DESTINY
Sank-what --sanctuary?

EXT. JAX'S TRUCK WITH TRAILER - CONTINUOUS

Their truck and trailer drive into the night.

JAX (O.S.)
Close e'nuff.

EXT. BO'S TRUCK - MOMENTS LATER

A beat-up rusted pick-up follows far behind Jax on same desolate highway. An empty beer bottle flies out the passenger's window into the truck's bed where it *clinks* hitting a pile of other empties.

INT. BO AND ERNIE'S TRUCK CAB - CONTINUOUS

Bo drives.

BO
Hand me some bug juice.

Ernie opens a beer bottle with a vintage opener.

ERNIE
Man oh man, this guy ever go to the out-house?

BO
The crumb-snatcher will, that'll be our chance. Remember the plan?

ERNIE
I jump out, you back up. I unhitch, re-hitch, bye-bye, hello moolah.

BO/ERNIE
(imitate cows)
Mooooooooo --

Ernie hands his bottle to Bo, then opens a second bottle.

BO/ERNIE
Lah!

They *clink* their bottle-necks as a toast.

BO
Champaign tastes --

ERNIE
onna' beer budget.

EXT. BO'S TRUCK - SAME

Their truck drives into the night following Jax.

BO (O.S.)
Close e'nuff.

EXT. 24-HOUR GAS STATION - LATER THAT NIGHT

Old-style two-pump gas station in the middle of nowhere.

Its BOOTH ATTENDANT, 18, is asleep behind his office window.

Jax parks at a pump, exits, stretches then walks to trailer.

JAX
You still my girl?

Grace swishes her tail in Jax's face knocking his hat off.

JAX
Might as well be.

Jax pats her haunch, puts on hat, then grabs a pump-handle.

Destiny opens her passenger door to slide out on the ground.

DESTINY
Going to the lil' girl's room.

JAX
Sure --wait! I'll walk with you.

Jax puts gas-handle back to take Destiny's hand. Both disappear around a far side of the building. Jax jogs back around alone and talks through Attendant's glass-hole.

JAX
Ladies room key, please, and --
(points to trailer)
keep an eye on my trailer there.

Attendant sleepy-slides a key on a long dowel-rod through his slot. Jax stares at its extra-long rod, then jogs back around same corner. Attendant is groggy and falls back asleep.

Bo and Ernie's truck parks beside Jax's. Both jump out and pull Grace's trailer over to and drop onto their rear-bumper ball-hitch, fast-wrap a chain around it, then drive away.

Grace brays and kicks as Bo's truck disappears into the dark.

A COYOTE howls. Dry-Lightning in the sky, then low *thunder*.

Destiny and Jax walk back around the corner with key-rod.

JAX
Want some gut-wash?

DESTINY
Where's Grace?

Jax spins, is shocked, then *strikes* the key's wood-handle on booth-glass breaking its rod in half and waking Attendant.

JAX
Supposed to watch it!

ATTENDANT
Watch what, man?

JAX
You're as useless as a twenty-two
in a twelve gauge. Call the cops,
and I do mean, right now, Boy!

Jax runs to his truck and starts pumping in gas. He fumes.

JAX
Calm down, Jaxee. You're dead on
"E," so has to fill up first, then
go lookin' for her. She'll be okay.
(looks straight up)
Right?
(lightning flares)
Well all righty then.

Gas *dings* going into his truck. Jax looks down the road, up it, then looks at shoulder's dirt. More thunder *rumbles*.

JAX
Trailer's too big for a u-turn.
Nope, musta' gone up ahead, so --

Lightening explodes illuminating Jax's face twisted in hate.

JAX
gonna have "Man for Breakfast."

DESTINY
Attendant was asleep. I made him
call the state police. What do we
do granpappy, is Grace okay?

JAX
Whoever took her is in for a world
of hurt when they try to back her
out. You ain't never seen Grace go
plumb mad-dog mad.

DESTINY
I couldn't take it again if ...

JAX

Destiny honey, I just know it's gonna' turn out okay, but I need you to believe that, too. Okay?

DESTINY

Okay --but, uh, what did you mean, man for breakfast?

JAX

What? Oh, uh, that in the morning, I'll be, uh, real hungry.

Jax squints looking up the dark road to repeat sinister.

JAX

Real, hungry.

INT. BO & ERNIE'S TRUCK NOW WITH GRACE - MOMENTS LATER

Bo is driving fast. Ernie stares in his side mirror.

ERNIE

Nope, no headlights, slow down.

BO

Ernie ole' buddy, I do believe, we done done it.

ERNIE

Great! --Where we doin' it?

BO

Remember that hunter's shack we found way back up in the woods?

ERNIE

Yeah, but that was 'fore we went away over four year ago?

BO

Even if it fell down, there'll still be plenty of fresh water and thick trees to hide us.

Grace *brays* and kicks the trailer's back-gate twice.

Both look back at the trailer. Ernie smiles, then sings like *Kenny Rogers* "Three Times a Lady."

ERNIE

"That's once, twice --"

Grace *brays* and kicks the trailer's gate again.

BO/ERNIE
"three times a lady!"

Both *laugh*, then rough-house pushing each's shoulders.

EXT. 24-HOUR GAS STATION - NOW MIDNIGHT

Two 1990 Ford *Crown Victoria* State Police Cruiser's with red lights rotating, but no sirens, are parked at angles. Both cars have plastic Christmas Wreaths on their front grills.

TROOPER ONE, African-American, late 20s, fit, in state police uniform, is interviewing Booth Attendant outside his booth.

TROOPER TWO, Latino, 30s, fit-for-age, also in uniform, is talking to Jax. Destiny stands next to Jax hugging his waist.

Troopers One and Two excuse themselves to have a meeting.

TROOPER ONE
Einstein took a dirt-nap.

TROOPER TWO
Old man took his kid to the
bathroom, didn't --
(snaps fingers)
Hey! Remember that custody case
where they brought in a trick mule?

TROOPER ONE
Yeah. --*Nah*, this them?

Trooper Two nods. Both Troopers go hands-on-hips reasoning.

TROOPER TWO
Why take a mule --kicks?

TROOPER ONE
They just put on a show at the
Fair. Were they followed?

TROOPER TWO
If so, then this is a kid, uh, mule-
napping.

TROOPER ONE
Ransom? Makes sense, or maybe, just
hide out, and wait for a reward.

TROOPER TWO
Sure, then return it when no
questions asked.

TROOPER ONE

Could take weeks. The little girl's pretty upset. I'll radio the Major and see if he'll contact the Press.

TROOPER TWO

And --the National Guard. See if they'll use their new chopper.

TROOPER ONE

Let's make it happen, partner, for the lil' girl.

Both Trooper's fist-bump, then each walk to their Cruisers.

Motto-letters under the station's overhead neon sign flash, *Last Stop*.

EXT. JAX'S CHEAP MOTEL - THAT DAWN

Small rundown motel up the road from the 24-hour gas station. Its neon sign's first six letters are burned-out so sign only flashes a lonely humming-staccato, "-----Y."

Jax's truck is the only vehicle parked in front of a room.

INT. JAX'S CHEAP MOTEL ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

A chipped nightstand is between two single beds. Its lamp is off. A low dresser has a TV on top which is on, but muted.

Destiny is asleep in one twin bed and stirs under her covers.

Jax sits leaning back on top of the second bed still in same clothes sharpening a knife, then sheaths it on his belt. He folds his arms watching TV and is surprised.

JAX

What the --?

Jax scoots to end of the bed and turns up the TV's volume.

EXT. 24-HOUR GAS STATION - SIMULTANEOUS

Both Cruisers still parked same. National Guard vehicles are now parked with uniformed NATIONAL GUARDSMEN milling about.

Also parked is the Fair's *Eye-Witness News* van. Its REPORTER, Latino, 30s, in a skirt-suit, is reporting *Live* being filmed by her CAMERAMAN, Asian, 20s, long hair, thin, who's aiming a huge shoulder-cam with a back-pack having same news logo on both sides.

REPORTER

...off Route 66 where a state-wide man-hunt begins for criminals who stole a trained mule last night.

Cameraman pans all the vehicles, then follows Reporter to a NATIONAL GUARD COLONEL, military-fit, in uniform, standing by a U.S. Army Jeep using its radio.

REPORTER

Excuse me, Colonel. Can you give our live audience an update?

COLONEL

(keys off mike)

We're using this as a missing-person exercise. Our helicopter is in a widening grid pattern. Don't worry, we'll find that donk --

INT. JAX'S CHEAP MOTEL ROOM - IMMEDIATELY

Jax leans forward fuming watching his TV.

COLONEL (FILTERED)

uh, mule, uh, it, uh --?

REPORTER (FILTERED)

Grace.

Jax sits back nodding.

EXT. 24-HOUR GAS STATION NEWS COVERAGE - CONTINUOUS

Reporter holds her microphone closer to Colonel.

REPORTER

Do you hold out hope for the owner and granddaughter?

COLONEL

Yes ma'am, we're all professionals, highly trained and motivated.

Colonel turns away keying-on his radio.

Reporter goes to Troopers One and Two. Cameraman follows.

REPORTER

I understand you are the original responding Officers and refuse to leave until you find Grace.

TROOPER ONE

Yes ma'am, my partner here has a little girl her same age, so we're taking this criminal act serious.

Reporter thrusts her mike at Trooper Two.

REPORTER

Trooper, is there anything you'd like to say to your daughter?

INT. JAX'S MOTEL TV SCREEN - SIMULTANEOUS

T.V. Screen shows Reporter's Cameraman zoom-in on Trooper Two who is flustered.

TROOPER TWO (FILTERED)

Uh, uh, it's okay, sweetie, we'll find Grace. Daddy'll be home soon.

Cameraman pans to Reporter for her End Close-Up.

REPORTER (FILTERED)

The state-wide search by local, state, and now federal agencies, continues for the mule known as Grace stolen earlier this morning. We'll be reporting on this truly heartbreaking story live throughout the day. If you see Grace, please call the authorities. We now show you video footage from their show at yesterday's state fair.

Reporter's coverage cuts to videotape of Grace dunking the basketball with Destiny on her back.

DESTINY (O.S.)

That's me!

INT. JAX'S CHEAP MOTEL ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Jax turns to see Destiny is now awake and sitting up.

DESTINY

So what do we do first?

JAX

We find her, but first --breakfast.

DESTINY

Man?

Jax looks up through both eyebrows. His reckoning is coming.

Vintage AM clock-radio on nightstand turns on *playing* country music.

EXT. MUSIC-MONTAGE OF SEARCH AND DRIVING SCENES - THAT DAY

MONTAGE: National Guard helicopter flies over mountains in all directions.

Law Enforcement Vehicles, with lights flashing, drive roads.

Jax's hand nails same *Missing* posters onto telephone poles, stop signs, everywhere. Then he and Destiny stop at shops, restaurants, anywhere, to hand out posters of Grace.

SHOP OWNERS put their *Missing* posters having Grace's picture in their windows.

Bo and Ernie drive through back-wood mountain roads pulling Grace's trailer.

EXT. BO AND ERNIE'S TRUCK - THAT NIGHT

Bo drives his truck and trailer slowly up a dirt road.

INT. BO AND ERNIE'S TRUCK CAB - MOMENTS LATER

Ernie *bangs* on the dash.

ERNIE

Sure wish the radio worked.

BO

Don't like my singing?

ERNIE

That what that was? --Thought we was draggin' a cat.

Their headlights illuminate a rundown shack ahead.

BO

I'll check the cabin, you take the bucket down to the creek.

ERNIE

You takin' a bath, sure need one?

BO

For our guest, nummy, and you're no nose-gay either.

ERNIE

Sure wish we brought more beer and food. Don't think we thought this all the way out?

BO

(brandishes hunting knife)
Woods got plenty of rabbit and squirrel.

ERNIE

Sure could go for some squirrel in squirrel-gravy, mmm-mmm.

BO

With homemade figs and biscuits, yes'm. But don't fret none, our meal-ticket's in back.

Grace *brays* kicking her trailer's gate.

ERNIE

Hold your horsie, we're hungry too-ee!

BO

She can eat grass till I go in town for her feed and us chow.

ERNIE

And beer!

EXT. JAX'S NEW MOTEL - THAT SAME NIGHT

Modern two-story motel with Christmas Decorations. Parking lot is full with Jax's truck in front of a room. Motel's sign letters V, A, C, Y, are burnt-out so it flashes "NO --CAN--."

INT. JAX'S NEW MOTEL ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Double-bed motel room with newish 1990 furniture. A decorated toy plastic Christmas Tree is on the bureau.

Destiny is asleep in one double-bed.

Jax sits fully clothed on the other bed sharpening his knife again while watching TV-news with sound off. He sheaths his knife, folds arms, and stares blank. He moves shoulders grimacing, then grabs a wrist wincing in pain.

EXT. FEED STORE PARKING LOT - NEXT MORNING

Bo parks his truck-only in front of the store and enters.

INT. FEED STORE - CONTINUOUS

Typical farm-animal feed store; shelves, pallets, sale signs.

Bo enters, wipes his nose on a sleeve, then walks to counter.

FEED STORE MANAGER, 30s, body-builder strong, stands behind the sales-counter in tie and white shirt under a red vest.

FEED MANAGER
How can we help you, sir?

BO
Sell beer?

MANAGER
Uh, no, agriculture products only?

BO
Then one bag of whatever mules eat.

FEED MANAGER
This your first mule, sir?

BO
Might windy for a still day.

FEED MANAGER
Just curious.

BO
Know what they say about that.

FEED MANAGER
How old is your mule?

BO
Don't know, don't care. Somebody
else here that can step n' fetch?

Bo sees one of Grace's *Missing* posters and starts to back up.

TROOPER TWO
Man asked you a question, mister.

Bo turns to see Trooper Two holding a hand on his gun-butt.

TROOPER TWO
A lot of police work is dumb luck,
and you're looking --awful dumb.

Bo panics and pulls his hunting knife.

Trooper Two draws his weapon shaking his head.

TROOPER TWO

You couldn't pour piss out a boot
if instructions were on its sole.

CUSTOMERS, all male, have been listening, and encircle Both.

Bo steps one way, then other, threatening all with knife.

State Trooper pulls his handcuffs and opens one cuff.

TROOPER TWO

Put the knife down, son, no mule is
worth dying over.

Customers look mean stepping in closer to Bo.

Bo sees Customers, handcuffs, then decides death-by-cop.

BO

Ain't goin' back!

Bo steps to charge Trooper Two, but a fifty-pound bag of feed
hits Bo from behind knocking him flat on his stomach.

Manager stands behind Bo with both arms out-stretched.

FEED MANAGER

Cash or check?

Trooper Two covers Bo as he moves in with his handcuffs.

TROOPER TWO

Hands behind your back, Hands
Behind Your Back!

No response. Trooper Two circles behind, kneels, puts a knee
in Bo's back, then holsters his gun. He pulls Bo's free wrist
and cuffs it, then pulls other wrist out from under Bo and
freezes seeing Bo's hand is covered with blood. Trooper Two
quickly cuffs Bo's bloody-hand and turns him over. Bo's blade
is stuck hilt-deep in his own stomach.

TROOPER TWO

Son, I'll get you medical, but
first --tell me where Grace is.

Bo smiles-crooked, then coughs-up blood, and passes out.

EXT. FEED STORE PARKING LOT - LATER SAME DAY

Rescue Squad Ambulance parks with lights flashing, but no
siren as its TWO EMT's in firefighter uniforms pull a gurney
out and push-pull running with it into the store.

Trooper One parks his Cruiser with red lights flashing, but no siren, and opens its back door. Jax and Destiny exit.

Two EMT's now exit store pushing Bo, with knife still in, but wrapped in gauze, strapped to gurney followed by Trooper Two.

Jax rushes to stop Bo's gurney.

JAX
Where's my Gracie?!

Bo's eyes flutter-open. His mouth curls in an evil-smile.

BO
Like me --gone.

Jax's world is rocked. He sits on the ambulance rear bumper then grabs his right forearm in pain and turns to Destiny.

JAX
Sorry --

Jax goes down to both knees then falls onto side unconscious.

A car parks with windows down. Its radio *plays* country music.

EXT. AERIAL VIEW OF FEED STORE PARKING LOT - IMMEDIATELY

MUSIC MONTAGE: Same Two EMT's load Bo's gurney into their ambulance, then pull out a second gurney and rush to Jax.

Both Troopers rush to Jax, get on knees, and begin two-man C.P.R. Destiny wrings her hands. Both Troopers and Two EMT's load Jax on second gurney, then into same ambulance.

EMT ONE gets in back of the ambulance. EMT TWO gets in front and drives away with the lights and siren on.

Trooper One picks up Destiny and puts her in his Cruiser then follows the ambulance with his lights and siren on.

Trooper Two searches Bo's pick-up.

BYSTANDERS and Customers gather in the parking lot pointing to the disappearing ambulance.

National Guard's UH-1 Huey helicopter flies-in overhead.

EXT. AMBULANCE ON HIGHWAY - CONTINUOUS

Helicopter follows the racing ambulance which is followed by Trooper One's Cruiser. Both vehicles have lights and sirens on driving fast. Helicopter veers off back to the mountains.

INT. JAX'S AMBULANCE - MOMENTS LATER

Each EMT work on one of their patients who both wear oxygen masks. The two gurneys are side-by-side with EMT's outside.

Jax reaches over for the knife sticking out of Bo.

EMT grabs Jax's wrist and holds it on Jax's chest.

INT. JAX'S HOSPITAL ROOM - THAT NIGHT

Jax sits on his bed in a hospital gown with I.V. in arm and air-hose in nose. His heart-monitor beeps. Jax has his arms-folded tight, he's not happy. Destiny sits in a chair beside.

JAX

Whole bunch of nonsense, ask me,
got things to go, places to do.

DESTINY

Now Pappy, Doc said you had a
cardiac "event." He just wants to
be sure before releasing you.

JAX

(unfolds arms)
Sorry about throwing a scare in
ya', thought I was in better shape.

DESTINY

Doctor said you hadn't slept in two
days and that's what brought it on.

Destiny gets concerned, but not about Jax, he senses it.

JAX

Gracie's fine, otherwise I'd know.
But it's, it's just so frustrating,
not knowing where she is.

DESTINY

That bad man came out of surgery,
Troopers'll question him in the
morning. Nothing more to be done
tonight, so get some sleep.

JAX

Well listen to Nurse Destiny! You
done grown up so much in such a
short time. Hope you can stand to
hear it, but your folks, my son,
shoot, everyone, are proud of you.

DESTINY

Go to sleep, I'll be right here.

Jax slides down under his covers smiling.

JAX

Yes, ma'am.

Destiny slides down in her chair, puts on Jax's hat and pulls its brim down over her eyes, then stretches her legs out.

DESTINY

Well alrighty then.

EXT. RUNDOWN SHACK IN THE BACKWOODS - SIMULTANEOUS

Trailer is quiet. Ernie squats by a small open fire beside it hugging his knees.

ERNIE

Garl-darn cabin's so full a' bugs,
c'aint sleep in there. No food, no
heat, no beer --no Bo.

Ernie looks at Grace's trailer, taps his knee, then *snaps* fingers-in-time singing *Roger Miller's "King of the Road."*

ERNIE

"No phone, no pool, no pets --
ain't got no cigarettes.
(stands *snapping* fingers)
Ah, but two hours pushin' broom,
buys an eight by twelve four-bit
room. I'm a man a' means by no
means --King a' the roaaaaad!"

Grace *brays* and kicks the back of her trailer.

ERNIE

Yeah? Well, I'm kickin', too.

Ernie squats back down, picks up a stick and plays with fire.

ERNIE

But I also know something happened
to Bo, so I'll be riding you outta'
here come daylight.

Ernie lies down by the fire and drifts off humming and *snapping* his fingers to his favorite song.

INT. BO'S HOSPITAL ROOM - NEXT MORNING

Bo is in a bed, air-line tubing in nose, I.V. in as monitor *beeps*. He opens his eyes and tries to move, but both wrists are cuffed to either raised bed-rail. He *rattles* his cuffs.

JAX

Reap what ya' sow, cuz.

Bo glares at Jax leaning in a corner who's fingering his hat.

BO

Thought you was dead.

JAX

Makes two of us.

BO

(feels chest bandage)

I saw you reach.

JAX

Devil made me do it, sorry. But also made me think why we're both still here. --You?

BO

Leave me be, old man!

DESTINY

Why, didn't "leave me be?"

BO

Left my spur tracks on you though.

JAX

That how you want folk to remember you --mean, selfish, hurtful?

BO

Better than not bein' remembered at all!

JAX

Used to think like that, hating life, but really --hating myself.

(goes to Bo's bed)

Then I found Grace, trained her to do things few can, used her talent for raising money to help others. What you done with your life, boy?

Bo rattles his handcuffs smiling evil.

JAX

Any negative experience can become a positive one if you wants to learn from it, son.

BO

"Son?!" Well, "dad," what do I "wants" to learn from this one?

JAX

Help everyone, hurt no one.

BO

Well ain't you the G.D. philosa-
phizer! Nope, dye's cast, too late
for me.

JAX

Never too late, just don't know it
--yet.

(turns to exit)

I'll be praying you do.

BO

"Praying?!" You mean cursing. Ain't
gonna' ask me where Grace is? I
mean, that's why you're here right?

Jax stands in the open doorway with his back to Bo.

JAX

Wrong as wrong can be, boy.

(turns to Bo)

Came to give you grace, just like
someone did for me --years ago.

Bo stares confused at Jax: **TURNING POINT.**

BO

Main highway, north a' Brisco.

(spits in bedpan, *ding*)

Old logging road up past the
waterfall off 33, back about five
mile, hunter's shack.

Trooper One and Trooper Two, still in same uniforms, now with
beard-stubble, enter from hallway on either side of the door.

TROOPER ONE

Read him his Rights?

TROOPER TWO

At the feed store --you call it in,
I'll take his statement.

(to Jax)

Did good, Mister Fenton.

JAX

Friends --

(puts on his hat)

call me, Jax.

TROOPER ONE

Ready --Jax?

Trooper One and Jax go to exit as Destiny runs in past them with a book to Bo's bed.

DESTINY

Thank you.

Destiny hands Bo the hospital's Chapel-Bible. She pats Bo's hand, then goes to Jax who pats her head. The Three exit.

Trooper Two gets out his notebook and *clicks* his pen open.

Bo stares at the Bible, sees a bookmark, opens to its page, then reads aloud the highlighted Verse.

BO

"No one will be declared righteous
by the works of the law, rather
through the law, we become
conscious of our sin."

TROOPER TWO

Romans, Three, Twenty. --Never too
late, to self-change one's tune.

Bo clutches the Bible to his chest humming *Amazing Grace*.

Trooper Two bows his head nodding.

EXT. GRACE'S TRAILER BY RUNDOWN SHACK - SIMULTANEOUS

Ernie drops the loading gate from inside Grace's trailer, *boom*. He begins cursing inside unintelligible.

ERNIE (O.S.)

X#\$@!

INT. GRACE'S TRAILER OUTSIDE THE SHACK - MOMENTS LATER

Ernie pushes his shoulder into Grace's chest trying to get her to back out of the trailer. He *grunts* as he pushes harder, but Grace won't budge. Ernie stops to wipe his brow.

ERNIE

Now I knows where "stubborn as"
comes from.

He tries pushing again, gives up, and glares at Grace.

ERNIE

Okay, you so dang smart, suppose
all I has to do is just asks. --
Back, Up!

Grace backs out of her trailer onto the ground and *snorts*.

EXT. GRACE'S TRAILER IN BACKWOODS - CONTINUOUS

Ernie exits trailer and stands hands-on-hips glaring.

ERNIE

You couldn't just say so?

Ernie grabs Grace's rope-halter, mounts and gets comfortable. He spurs his heels in Grace's sides. Grace doesn't move. Ernie repeats same action three times. She doesn't budge. Ernie thinks, then remembers the fair.

ERNIE

O-kay, so you got "ta-do" words,
huh? Let's see what happens if I
says --Giddy Yap!

Grace rears up on her hind legs. Ernie slides off her rump falling flat on his back hitting his head on a rock.

Grace backs away from Ernie *braying*. Her halter-lead hangs.

Ernie stands with wobbly legs.

ERNIE

That lil' stunt's gonna' cost you.

Ernie picks up the rock his head hit and throws it at Grace.

Grace moves, so the rock misses, then trots away.

ERNIE

STOP!

Grace stops on the ravine's edge behind the cabin with the sound of a running stream below it.

ERNIE

Gonna' beat sense into ya', just
like done by my dear ole' --Pappy!

Grace reacts to word "Pappy" and curls her head to Ernie.

Ernie *breaks* a branch off a tree and smacks it on her rear.

Grace mule-kicks Ernie in his chest sending him airborne.

Grace steps on end of halter-lead pulling her head down and loses her footing, then slides down over the ravine *braying*.

Ernie lands against his same tree impaling his arm on the now broken branch-stump, then hears Grace's *braying*.

ERNIE

Serves you right! --and left.

Ernie *raspberries*, then looks at the branch-stump sticking through his shirt and yanks his arm off it. He rips the torn shirt-sleeve off to reveal a bleeding hole in his tricep. He wraps sleeve's cloth around his wound and stands wobbly.

ERNIE

Bo ole' buddy, don't think we
thought this thru --too good.

Ernie falls face forward unconscious.

EXT. RAVINE'S CREEKBED BEHIND CABIN - LATER THAT DAY

Grace opens her eyes. She's on her side in creek-mud. She tries several times, then stands. She takes several steps limping, looks up ravine's hill, puts her hurt hoof in deep water and stands still vibrating her lips *snorting*.

EXT. MOUNTAIN HIGHWAY - THAT SUNSET

Trooper One's Cruiser races with its lights and *siren* on.

INT. TROOPER ONE'S CRUISER - MOMENTS LATER

Trooper One drives fast, buckled-in. Jax sits next to him as passenger and is buckled-in. Destiny is in the back. She unbuckles her seat belt and slides up to the Cage.

TROOPER ONE

Seat belt on, please.

Destiny slides back and *clicks* her seat belt on.

DESTINY

How much longer?

TROOPER ONE

Pretty far back up there.

JAX

C'aint use the hee-low?

TROOPER ONE

Army tried, trees too thick, can't
see through them, can't land, and a
bad storm is moving in.

JAX

Hounds?

TROOPER ONE

In the morning, be dark soon, and gonna' be a rough night. Sure you don't want to wait at your motel?

JAX

Waited long enough.

EXT. CRUISER ON CURVY ONE-LANE ROAD - CONTINUOUS

All drive in silence with siren *blaring*. Sun is setting. Lightening flashes over top of the mountains ahead.

EXT. BACKWOODS CABIN - LATER THAT NIGHT

Earlier National Guard vehicles, News Van, and Ambulance with red lights rotating, but no siren. All vehicle headlights and spot-lamps are on illuminating the trees in all directions.

Trooper One's Cruiser parks. He, Jax, and Destiny, exit as National Guard Colonel approaches them.

COLONEL

Medics took dummy two to M.A.S.H.
He'll live. How's dummy one?

TROOPER ONE

Getting smarter. Any sign of Grace?

COLONEL

(points to ravine)
Slipped over that hill and down into its creek. Must be okay because she walked away. We'll find her in the morning.

Destiny hugs Jax's waist as Colonel goes hands-on-hips.

COLONEL

Why don't you let this Officer take you and yours back to the motel?

JAX

Take Destiny, I'll ...

TROOPER ONE

Jax, there's nothing any of us can do tonight, let me take you both.

Jax looks down at Destiny who's tired, then yells.

JAX

Grace?!

No response. All look at Jax. He's beyond obsessed.

JAX
Take her back, but don't, don't
leave her alone, please.

Trooper One brushes hair out of Destiny's eyes who looks up sleepy. He smiles at Destiny, then looks at Jax and nods.

JAX
Need your word on it.

TROOPER ONE
Always had it.

Trooper One hands Jax his mag-flashlight who disappears down into the ravine yelling.

JAX
Grace? --GRACIE!

Loud high-pitched finger-whistle as Jax's voice fades away.

JAX (O.S.)
GRACE --Grace --Gracie?

NATIONAL GUARDSMAN holds Reporter and Cameraman near their van. Reporter begs National Guardsman who lets both go.

Cameraman turns on his light and follows Reporter who runs to Destiny and holds out her microphone with its station-flag.

REPORTER
How does it feel to be so close,
yet still not find your mule?

DESTINY
(stares into camera)
We want to thank everyone for their
kindness and concern. We've been
treated so good, and both State
Troopers never left our side. I
just know she'll be found okay.

All around stop to watch Destiny. Reporter goes to say something, but Destiny bows her head. ALL bow their heads.

DESTINY
Through grace, all things are
possible.

Cameraman pans showing everyone in silent prayer then zooms-in on Reporter. Reporter raises her head and clears throat. Cameraman steps closer to zoom-in.

INT. NEWS VAN - SIMULTANEOUS

Various monitors and electrical equipment hum as TECH, 30's, long hair, fine-tunes the monitor Reporter is playing on.

REPORTER (FILTERED)
Reporting live as everyone's
search continues, for Grace.

Reporter bows her head again. Cameraman turns his light off.

Tech flips a switch and keys his handheld radio.

TECH
That's a Wrap.

Tech turns on his van's radio. It *plays* country music.

EXT. BACKWOODS SEARCH - NIGHT INTO DAY

MUSIC MONTAGE: Ground search continues for Grace during the rainy night amid lightening and *thunder*. National Guardsmen pitch tents and make campfires taking breaks in shifts.

At dawn, a truck arrives with a HANDLER with TRACKING HOUNDS.

Trooper Two gets out of his Cruiser to talk to Handler.

Jax walks up overtop of ravine, muddy, clothes torn, face and arms scratched. He tosses the mag-flashlight to Trooper Two shaking his head then Grace's halter rope to Handler.

Jax and Trooper Two get into the Cruiser and exit.

Handler has his Hounds smell Grace's rope, then they take him over the ravine's edge *baying*.

EXT. HEAVILY FORRESTED WOODS - DAY INTO DUSK

MONTAGE MONTAGE CONTINUES: Search goes on with National Guardsmen looking. Hounds *bay* and pull their Handler, sniff air, and move on. The Huey helicopter flies overhead all.

At sunset, Hounds are loaded back into their truck and it exits with Handler.

National Guard Vehicles disappear one-by-one.

No more helicopter. Colonel's jeep exits.

TV-News Van only vehicle left, then it drives away.

Sun sets through the trees. Their shadows move like giants.

EXT. GRACE'S MOUNTAIN TREK - SAME SUNSET

Grace walks. She comes upon a Brown Bear who stands on rear legs *roaring*. Grace rears up on her hind legs showing she's healed and *brays*. Bear runs away *crying*. Grace *snorts* and keeps walking. Grace gives a big yawn, then sees a tree snag has fallen horizontal across a lower branch forming a large natural Cross. Grace sits on her haunches and lowers her head in same "At The Cross" position from earlier State Fair show.

Her silhouette on mountaintop is against a beautiful sunset.

INT. DESTINY'S BEDROOM - SIMULTANEOUS

Destiny's bed lamp back-lights her on both knees with head bowed and hands in prayer in front of her own Cross-painting.

A picture of Grace sitting *At The Cross* is now on her bureau.

INT. SAME COUNTY COURTROOM - ONE WEEK LATER

Doors have plastic Christmas Wreathes centered on both. They open. Earlier Gallery enters and take seats in the pews.

Trooper One and Trooper Two, now clean-shaved in pressed uniforms, sit in a front pew.

Across from them sit Destiny, in black dress, and Jax, in jeans, hair disheveled with beard-stubble and bloodshot eyes.

Step-Back Door opens. Bo and Ernie enter in orange prisoner coveralls and shackles. Sheriff, in uniform, enters behind both and stands by the door. Bo and Ernie have healed and shuffle to their Defense Table to talk with Washington.

Judge's Chamber door opens and Bailiff enters courtroom.

BAILIFF

All rise!

ALL stand. Judge enters and goes to Bench. There is a small plastic decorated Christmas tree on it.

BAILIFF

Be seated.

ALL do. Bo and Ernie play-push off each other's shoulders.

JUDGE

Gentlemen?

Bo and Ernie look around, *Who came in*, then at Judge, *Huh?*

JUDGE

The mule you stole resides in our county, so I requested your change in venue for sentencing.

Bo and Ernie are clueless. Judge looks at Washington.

JUDGE

Both defendants agree to plead guilty and allocute in open court?

WASHINGTON

(half-stands, resits)
Yes, your honor.

JUDGE

(looks at Proscecutor)
Does The State have any objection?

PROSCECUTOR

(half-stands, resits)
Only to what they did, your Hona'.

Judge hand-motions, *Stand*, to Bo and Ernie who do along with Washington.

JUDGE

You wish to make a statement?

No response. Washington fake-coughs hitting Bo up the back of his head. Bo tries to answer sincere, but doesn't know how.

BO

We did it.

JUDGE

And --?

ERNIE

(tries to save the day)
And won't do it again!

JUDGE

Why --won't you do it again?

ERNIE

Uuuuuuh, 'cauuuuse weeeee --?

BO

don't like jail?

JUDGE

I see. --You don't, but I do.

Judge clears his throat and sits up a professional jurist.

JUDGE

Bocephus Beavers and Earnhardt Skaggs, having shown no real remorse before this court, the State does not accept your plea colloquy in exchange for a reduced sentence. --Court sentences you both to the maximum term under the law for mule-napping.

WASHINGTON

But your Honor, they didn't demand a ransom?

JUDGE

Both Defendants previously gave written statements their goal was always profit through theft with, ultimately, aggravated assault.

WASHINGTON

On whom, your Honor?

JUDGE

Grace, that's "whom!" Defendants are sentenced each to no less than five years and no more than ten at the State Farm.

ERNIE

(perks up)

"Farm?"

JUDGE

Defendants are eligible for Convict Leasing to private enterprise.

BO

What kind a' --"enterprise?"

JUDGE

Brokering manure.

BO/ERNIE

Shovelin' Shinola?!

JUDGE

You can thank the two Troopers for suggesting your location. It has a well-attended prison ministry.

(tilts head at Troopers)

Which of you ministers there?

Both Troopers raise their hands.

Judge smiles, *raps* his gavel, stands and exits.

BAILIFF

All rise, for his most Honorable.

ALL do. Sheriff finger-motions to Bo and Ernie, *Oh boys*.

Jax pulls a whiskey flask out of back pants pocket, holds it up as a toast to Bo and Ernie, and takes a swig. Destiny tries to take away his flask. He pushes her hands away.

EXT. JAX'S RANCH - THAT NIGHT

Sunset over the mountains. It rained, so fog is at their base. Grey smoke rises out of Jax's chimney.

INT. JAX'S GREAT ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Jax sits in his easy-chair staring at the fire. He holds now empty pint of whiskey from his night stand in one hand and a jelly glass in the other. He chugs its last glassful.

Phone on end-table *rings*. Jax answers. Other voice not heard.

JAX

"Comment?" Yeah --Leave Me Be!

Jax throws entire phone across the room.

Destiny enters and picks up phone to put back on end-table.

DESTINY

You're scaring me, Pappy.

JAX

Yeah? Well --scare happens.

DESTINY

No, Pappy! You, you're scaring me.
You've changed since losing Grace.

JAX

(sad)
She's everything to me.

DESTINY

(sadder)
Thought I was?

Destiny tears-up. Jax sees her tears: **TURNING POINT.**

Jax puts down his glass and holds out his arms. Destiny runs to Jax. They hug. He kisses her forehead. They hug tighter.

JAX

Oh sweetie, I didn't -- you mean more to me than life itself.

Jax holds her away, bows his head, then looks up.

JAX

Faith, is believing with your head. Thoughts become deeds, so you has to listen good, to hear the good. I am sorry, for not listening sooner.
(smiles lovingly)
And to prove how sorry, take this here bottle and throw it out.

DESTINY

And the one in the cupboard?

Jax smiles and re-hugs Destiny tight.

JAX

All of 'em.

DESTINY

And the beer?

Jax has to think on this one, then looks straight up.

JAX

Uh, just hide them for now. I may be redeemin', but I ain't rich.

DESTINY

Saw the envelope with the insurance check.

JAX

Washington already put it in a Trust Fund for your education.
(smiles big)
Let's celebrate! I'll take you out for chocolate ice cream.

DESTINY

Frozen yogurt.
(no response, explains)
Healthier.

Jax turns on the table's radio and music *plays*. Jax stands and offers his hand. They side-sway dance as one while she stands on his boot-tips.

EXT. JAX'S RANCH - MOMENTS LATER

Breathtaking rainbow forms as the sun sets. White smoke now wisps out of chimney. Jax and Destiny's laughter echoes.

EXT. GRACE ON THE PLAINS - NIGHT TO DAY INTO NIGHT

MUSIC-MONTAGE: Grace continues her trek home. She is out of the mountains and now in low lands, but still follows creeks for water. She munches on grass and stops to yawn. She's dirty, then continues walking through a field of huge sunflowers as a four-legged *Dorothy*.

INT. JAX'S GREAT ROOM - ONE WEEK LATER

Live decorated Christmas Tree with wrapped packages under it. Christmas lights are draped all around the ceiling edges.

Jax and Destiny sit on couch, healthy and smiling. Jax, clean-shaven, wears a Santa Hat. Destiny wears reindeer-antlers.

Reporter and Cameraman are across the room interviewing them.

REPORTER

I'm sure our viewers remember the search three weeks ago for Grace the amazing mule. We're here, on Christmas Eve, with her owners ...

DESTINY

Friends.

REPORTER

With Grace's "friends," Jackson Newton ...

JAX

Friends call me, Jax.

REPORTER

and his granddaughter, Destiny.

Reporter turns to them. Cameraman focuses-in on All Three.

REPORTER

Jax, how are you coping with your loss ...?

JAX

Ain't lost!

DESTINY

Just ain't found.

REPORTER

So you both still hold out hope?

JAX

Not hope, faith. I know she's finding her way back to us. I ...

DESTINY

"We" --we believe.

REPORTER

Is that why you both still go up into the mountains searching?

JAX

"God helps those that help themselves" --*mostly*.

DESTINY

Benjamin Franklin, 1757.

All look at Destiny.

DESTINY

What? I Google.

REPORTER

And what did you ask Santa to bring you?

INT. CAMERAMAN'S INTERNAL VIEWFINDER - CONTINUOUS

Camera zooms-in on Destiny's face.

Destiny goes to say something; freezes in stare of disbelief.

Camera pans to Jax's face; he has same stare of disbelief.

Camera pans to Reporter's face; she turns to stare same.

Cameraman shakes camera in frustration, then pans 180°.

Grace is outside looking in through the sliding glass-door.

INT. JAX'S GREAT ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Jax and Destiny rush over to throw open the sliding door.

Grace enters. She is muddy and thinner, but healthy.

Cameraman films Destiny and Jax hugging then kissing Grace. Destiny puts her reindeer antlers on Grace. Jax *laughs*.

Cameraman swings to Reporter who is caught off-guard crying. She sees the camera's light, recovers, and wipes away tears.

REPORTER

With Grace, all things are possible.

INT. JAX'S CHEAP MOTEL ROOM - SIMULTANEOUS

Jax's first-night motel up from same 24-hour gas station.

Bunny now sits on bed watching the static TV nursing a drink.

Reporter smiles at the camera now a professional again.

REPORTER (FILTERED)

Tune in tomorrow for our follow-up Christmas Day Special of their most wonderful of holiday reunions. Thank you all for watching --and believing. God Bless.

Bunny stands barefoot with her half-empty liquor bottle and toasts the TV with it.

BUNNY

God Bless us --everyone!

Bunny chugs her bottle drunk-crazy *laughing*.

INT. NEWS VAN OUTSIDE JAX'S HOUSE - SAME CHRISTMAS EVE

Tech sits watching his TV-monitor as Cameraman zooms-in on Jax and Destiny kissing Grace's muzzle. Grace looks at the camera, then gives a huge yawn. Tech flips master switch to *off*, then keys on his handheld radio.

TECH

Now that's, a Christmas Wrap!

Tech hums *Jingle Bells* while turning off his equipment.

INT. BUNNY'S CHEAP HOTEL ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Bunny throws bottle at the TV-screen which explodes both.

Liquor soaks into the carpet under her. *Pounding* at the door.

HOTEL MANAGER (O.S.)

What's going on in there!

BUNNY

Uh, the T.V., it uh, it broke!

Bunny pulls the TV off its bureau letting it fall.

SLO-MO: TV shatters on the wet carpet where Bunny stands.

EXT. BUNNY'S CHEAP MOTEL ON CHRISTMAS EVE - IMMEDIATELY

Empty parking lot. MANAGER stands outside Bunny's room. All the hotel's lights flicker and go out.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NOW CHRISTMAS DAY

Its bed-stand has a small plastic Christmas tree on it.

Bunny lies in a bed with air-tubing in nose and I.V. in one wrist. Her monitor beeps. She's been crying.

JAX

Looked better.

Bunny angry-wipes away her tears to see Jax standing in the doorway holding his hat.

JAX

Know what prejudice means?

Bunny looks at Jax, *Are you kidding?*

JAX

Had to look it up so not to forget.

(stands straight, quotes)

"Holding an opinion not based on reason --or experience."

BUNNY

Apology --

(looks out window)

not accepted.

Jax goes to and parts the window blinds to look out also.

JAX

Why is it folk don't see their own bias when looking at a child, but that's all they see in an adult?

(turns back to her)

Ain't my place in this world to pass judgement, ain't nobody's, so I c'aint leave till I asks.

BUNNY

For?

JAX

Forgiveness.

BUNNY

Keep asking.

Jax frisbees his hat so it hangs on top of her I.V. stand, then pulls a chair next to her bed and sits.

JAX

Know what drove a wedge between me and Benjamin that last Christmas?

(no response, answers)

Love. --My son still loved you as a human being and wanted to save you. Know what I said?

BUNNY

No.

JAX

Exactly. --Know what "Benjamin_ means in the Bible?

Jax tosses a small flat wrapped Christmas package onto her.

JAX

Means, son of my right hand.

Jax head-motions to his present. Bunny rips it open. It's the picture from the bureau of Benjamin as a boy. She hugs it.

JAX

Neither one of us had the best a' daddies, and I'm old enough to be yours. Which means --my time on this here Earth is drawing near.

Jax puts a hand on her's. Their eyes meet.

JAX

You brought something very special into this world. She's been through so much, and yet still chooses to be only a sweet and loving person.

Jax raises Bunny's hand and kisses the back of it.

JAX

Destiny deserves, no, she's earned, the right to have a loving adult care for her when I'm gone. So now it's your turn to choose what kind of person you really want to be.

Same Nurse enters with a prepared sedative-syringe.

JAX

So I used some of her inshury money to put you in a dry-out program. It'll take a lot out of you, trust me, but we'll ride it out together.

BUNNY

"Together?"

NURSE

You need to sleep now, things'll be better when you wake, always is.

Nurse injects Bunny's I.V. bag, then checks her pulse.

Jax stretches his legs out and pulls his hat over his eyes.

JAX

I also put Milly in a program, different type, which means her store'll be needing a new clerk with a new name tag --"Trinity."

Bunny is now TRINITY who flutter-closes her eyes. This is the first time we see she has a beautiful smile.

EXT. OUTSIDE PRISON'S PERIMETER FENCE - NEW YEAR'S DAY

Trooper One and Trooper Two lean back on their Cruiser hoods, wreathes now gone, with arms folded, watching.

TROOPER ONE

See the news about Grace?

TROOPER TWO

Saw it with my daughter.

TROOPER ONE

(head-motions)
Think they did?

EXT. INSIDE SAME PRISON'S PERIMETER FENCE - CONTINUOUS

Troopers are watching Bo and Ernie who wear striped prison clothes picking-up *Cow Apples* off the field by hand and putting them into burlap bags hung over their shoulders.

BO
Can't decide if this be a curse --

ERNIE
or a blessing. --kKnow the feeling.

BO
But do know, we finally got in a --

ERNIE
G.D. G.E.D. program.

BO
(head-motions)
Thanks to those --

ERNIE
(turns to look at them)
two law-guys.

Bo and Ernie tip their "imaginary" hats to Both Troopers.

EXT. OUTSIDE PRISON'S PERIMETER FENCE - MOMENTS LATER

Trooper One and Trooper Two tip their hats back to Bo and Ernie, then look at each other and smile.

TROOPER TWO
Renews my faith.

Trooper One and Trooper Two fist-bump each other.

TROOPER ONE
Go with grace.

Both get in their respective Cruisers and exit on the state road in opposite directions.

EXT. INSIDE PRISON'S PERIMETER FENCE - MOMENTS LATER

Prison loudspeakers turn on with *squelch-feedback*.

Bo and Ernie cover their ears.

Unseen PRISONER D.J. announces.

PRISONER DJ (FILTERED)
 Happy New Year every swinging duck!
 Here's a shout-out from some jolly
 judge for our two mule skimmers.
 It's --The Annual Braying Contest!

Sound of a needle *scratching on* a record, then it *plays* mules repeatedly *braying*.

Ernie and Bo uncover their ears, look at each other, shrug shoulders, lock arms, and dance in figure-eights re-locking arms to dance the other way.

INT. JAX'S GREAT ROOM - SIMULTANEOUS

Jax and Destiny sit at the dining table now with *Happy New Year* tablecloth, paper plates, and wall-banner decorations.

Grace is wearing a *Happy New Year* cone-hat and sits on her haunches eating treats off her plate. She's healthy, clean, with a shiny coat.

Knock on the carport door. All Three look at it.

JAX
 Enter --our New Year!

Door opens. TERRY JOHNSON, African-American, 30s, in worn Cowboy hat, clothes and boots, enters with a faded U.S. Army duffle bag over a shoulder. He takes off hat and closes the door. He stares at Grace who is chewing and staring at him.

TERRY
 It's true! Grace is amazing.

JAX
 Always will be. Tell us something, we don't know.

DESTINY
 Pappy means, how can we help you?

TERRY
 Other way around, saw you on T.V., come to see if I, can help --you.

Grace goes to rub the top of her head on Terry's shoulder knocking off her hat. He catches it. She kisses his cheek.

JAX
 Pretty strong endorsement you're gettin' there. You a waddie?

TERRY

Been a twine-twirler, puncher,
swamper --heck, even cut pecker
poles. But for some reason, my
first love's always been mules.

Grace nods up and down animated. Destiny looks at Jax.

DESTINY

School starts next week, you'll be
needing a day-hand.

(to Terry)

What about your family?

TERRY

(hangs head)

Ain't got none.

Jax pushes the empty chair on other side of the table out
from underneath with his boot.

JAX

Does now.

TERRY

(looks up grinning)

"Start by doing what's necessary,
and suddenly --you're doing the
impossible."

DESTINY

Saint Francis ...

JAX

a' Assistance.

Terry and Destiny tilt their heads at Jax.

JAX

What, he's patron saint a' animals?

Destiny sets a fourth place-setting for Terry.

DESTINY

When your heart is empty inside,
only two things can fill it.

Destiny spoons a heaping of *Hoppin' John* on Terry's plate and
re-sits at her own plate.

Terry drops his duffle-bag to frisbee his hat onto the coat-
stand next to Jax's and washes his hands in the kitchen-sink.

TERRY

What's the other?

Knock on the door. All Three look at Jax.

JAX
Place is busier than Grand Central.
(to door)
All Aboard!

Door opens part-way. Sheriff Jim enters removing his hat.

SHERIFF
Can't stay long, just --?
(sniffs the air)
Is that Hoppin' John?!

JAX
Yes sir, and plenty of it. Destiny
darling, get him a plate, please.

SHERIFF
Uh, got enough for two?

JAX
You bring the missus?

Awkward silence, then Sheriff opens door fully.

Trinity stands in a simple dress. Her real hair color is growing out. She's put on weight and looks healthy.

TRINITY
Asked the Sheriff to bring me here.
I have something to say --
(tears-up)
to my beautiful daughter.

Destiny runs to Trinity and they hug. Both start crying.

TRINITY
Oh Destiny my love, I'm so sorry
for never being there for you.

Terry stares at Trinity. Their eyes meet, sparks fly.

JAX
Being this be the first day of our
newer year, why don't we make it,
the first day, of the rest of our
lives? Trinity, when released next
week, why don't you move in here?
That is, of course --
(to Destiny)
that's alright with you?

Destiny smiles big nodding.

Jax opens his arms. Trinity runs to him and they hug. Destiny runs to them for a group hug. Jax talks over their shoulders.

JAX

Sheriff, meet my new ranch hand.
Terry, meet the nicest badge ever.

Sheriff and Terry shake, shrug, then man-hug.

Grace paws the floor with a front hoof.

EXT. JAX'S RANCH - MOMENTS LATER

Surrounding mountains are white-capped. White-smoke wisps out their chimney. It's a *Currier & Ives* card. Grace brays.

DESTINY (O.S.)

We are all searching --for Grace.

Sound of chairs being pulled out and sat in, then cutlery *clinks* as All Five eat, tell stories, and *laugh*.

A light snow begins falling as a white dove flies over their house, then into the camera.

WHITE OUT.

Note: Grace The Amazing Mule lives in Front Royal, Virginia, appearing in two films with her own IMDb page. On her Youtube channel, you can watch her do everything as written here.