

JACK CREEK

by

GP McClure

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GP McClure
858.254.7333
info@gpmcc.com

FADE IN:

EXT. JACK CREEK NEVADA - GHOST TOWN - DAY

OPENING CREDITS as: Tumbleweeds cross the streets of the ghost town, a town of dilapidated buildings. A soft wind moving doors and windows of buildings long abandoned. Chimes long forgotten still sing in the wind.

TONI (V.O.)

Strange. Strange how our actions or inaction's can influence all that we do. How our decisions can change our life forever, for good or bad. How the result of those consequences can affect our reason for living, our future, and our very soul.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. ELKO NEVADA - TRAIN STATION - EARLY JUNE - MONDAY - DAY

The California Zephyr pulls into the train station as a large American flag gently flies over the platform. It is a warm summer day and the station is buzzing with activity as a young and beautiful, but rugged woman (TONI BLAKE, a brunette of 25 years) waits at the freight booth. Her shoulder-length hair in need of a good washing but most of it covered by the hat she wears. She looks at her hands. Once clean and immaculate they now show wear beyond her young years. Her face sad, lonely, determined, and becoming wrinkled from too many hours in the hot desert sun. She waits for the dock master to unload the package she has come to claim.

DOCK ATTENDANT

Miss Blake?

TONI

Yes?

DOCK ATTENDANT

That package will be off-loaded in just a few moments.

TONI

Thank you. Can you help me load it in my jeep?

DOCK ATTENDANT

Sorry, I'm the only one here. The best I can do is provide a dolly.

TONI

(sighing, softly)
So what else is new.

DOCK ATTENDANT

What?

TONI

That's fine. A dolly will work just fine. Thank you.

Toni walks around looking at the people getting off the train. She sees him, a tall handsome man of about 30 (AARON JOHNSON). He's carrying a single bag and walks tall and straight. Not a man of means but a man of character. He looks around, confident, evaluating his surroundings, he leaves the platform and goes inside the building. Her eyes follow him until he disappears inside and then turn sad.

DOCK ATTENDANT

Miss Blake?

Turning around.

TONI

Yes?

DOCK ATTENDANT

Your package is ready.

TONI

Thank you.

She looks at the dolly and the large bulky box sitting on it. She pulls out the packing slip and reads it, satisfied all is in order. She begins to man-handle the dolly moving it towards her jeep where she puts it in position. The sides of the vehicle open but the top up, she opens the back making sure there is enough room for the big box. She looks around but no one is offering to help her and she sighs. With a determination she begins to pick up the box but it is too big, bulky and heavy. She can't get it off the ground. She tries again. No luck.

AARON (O.S.)

Looks like you could use some assistance.

She looks up. The stranger, Aaron, she noticed earlier is standing there. She looks at him, a little startled.

TONI

Yes. Yes I could.

Aaron moves into position and what looks like an easy movement puts the box into the back of the Jeep.

TONI (CONT'D)

That thing's heavy.

AARON
A little. What is it?

TONI
Generator parts. One of my backup
generators decided it had enough and
shorted out. I'm lucky it didn't
burn down the building. Thank you.

AARON
You're welcome. I'm Aaron. Aaron
Johnson.

He extends his hand. She looks at it, then takes it.

TONI
I'm Toni, Toni Blake.

AARON
Toni. Toni with an I?

TONI
Yes. So Mr. Johnson, what brings
you to Elko?

Silence.

TONI (CONT'D)
Sorry, too personal.

AARON
No, not at all. And it's Aaron.
It's just that I have no reason to
really be here.

TONI
Come again?

AARON
I just decided to get off here.
Looked like a nice place, so I thought
I'd check it out.

TONI
Elko? You thought you would just
check out Elko Nevada? No reason?

AARON
Sounds crazy I know. But here I am.

TONI
Yes you are.

AARON
You seemed surprised.

TONI

I am. Most tourist come here to see the ghost towns, maybe do a little mining, camping. But no reason... that has got to be a first.

AARON

Well... no reason. Can you tell me where I can find a good hotel, or motel?

TONI

What's your price range?

AARON

Reasonable.

Toni smiles and thinks.

TONI

This is the height of the tourist season, chances of finding something on such short notice is not in your favor. There may be something, but it will probably cost you. A lot.

Aaron shrugs.

AARON

Yeah. So much for spontaneity. Listen, you going to be all right with that thing?

TONI

I'll manage.

AARON

And that means...?

TONI

It means I'll manage.

AARON

So, no Mr. Blake to help you?

TONI

Oh I have a Mr. Blake, it's just that he's not capable of assisting me in these matters at this time.

AARON

Oh.

(extends his hand)

Well Mrs. Blake it was nice meeting you, and thank you.

TONI
It's Miss. And thank me for what?

Aaron taken aback.

AARON
Miss?

TONI
Thank me for what?

AARON
Oh... for the hotel information.

Aaron seems a little nervous. As Toni looks at him she thinks.

TONI
So how long you in town for?

Considers.

AARON
I have to be back at work in three weeks. So, I guess I have three weeks.

TONI
No place special to go?

AARON
No, not really. I'm just taking some time, seeing the country. Why?

TONI
I have a ranch just outside Jack Creek, at the base of Mount McAfee. I'm starting to look for seasonal ranch hands, would you like a job?

AARON
Ranching?

TONI
Yeah. You do know how to ranch don't you?

AARON
Nope. Never did it. But... I guess I could learn, if you're willing to take a chance.

TONI
Doesn't pay much.
(MORE)

TONI (CONT'D)

Two hundred a week plus room and board, fifteen hour days, maybe more. Less than minimum wage, but all under the table. Still interested?

AARON

(considering)

Yeah. I am.

She looks at the single bag.

TONI

That all your luggage?

AARON

I travel light.

TONI

Put it in the back and climb in.

Aaron stows the bag and begins to get in the jeep but stops short. He looks at her.

TONI (CONT'D)

What?

AARON

How do I know I can trust you? After all, you could be a psychotic killer for all I know.

TONI

Excuse me?

AARON

Fatal Attraction. The movie?

Disbelief.

TONI

Get in the damn Jeep!

Aaron smiles and gets in the jeep. She looks at him with an "unbelievable" look, puts the vehicle in gear and drives out of the parking lot.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Decisions, choices we each make everyday that can change our life forever. For good or bad.

EXT. ELKO NEVADA - DAY

Toni drives the jeep into the driveway of a beautiful home. Trees adorn the property providing much needed shade. Aaron looks at her.

TONI

I have to pick someone up here.
Only be a moment.

She leaves the jeep as Aaron watches her disappear inside the house. He waits. Toni comes back out holding the hand of a small boy (ADAM) about five years of age, followed by a much older, but pretty woman, JANET BLAKE. They approach the jeep.

TONI (CONT'D)

Aaron, I'd like to introduce you to
my mother Janet Blake and my son
Adam.

Aaron gets out of the jeep and extends his hand to the older woman, who looks at but doesn't take it. Janet looks at him with skepticism, dissecting him, distrustful, her eyes cold.

AARON

(humbly)
It's nice meeting you Mrs. Blake.

JANET

Humph. So you're the new ranch hand
that my daughter hired. She tells
me you've never ranched before.

TONI

Mother!

AARON

No Ma'am I haven't.

JANET

You're only here for three weeks she
says.

TONI

Mother! Stop the inquisition!
Please.

AARON

Yes Ma'am, three weeks.

Aaron looks at Adam and smiles. The boy unsure holds tight to his mother looking at the stranger before him.

AARON (CONT'D)
He's a good looking kid.

JANET
Takes after his father.

AARON
If you're uncomfortable with this arrangement Mrs. Blake, I don't have to accept the job.

JANET
I'm not comfortable.

TONI
I am! Mother... damn you make me so mad sometimes!

JANET
Toni, I'm only looking out for you and Adam. You know how I feel about strange men.

TONI
You mean like Josh? We have to go.

Toni straps Adam into the back seat and puts sunglasses and a hat on him. She kisses his head.

ADAM
Mommy, can we get ice cream?

TONI
Maybe.

She gets into the jeep. Aaron still outside, Toni looks at him,

TONI (CONT'D)
Well, you getting in or not?

Aaron looks at Janet, her distrustful look. He gets into the jeep as Toni puts it in gear:

TONI (CONT'D)
(to Janet)
You coming out to the ranch?

JANET
I'll be out there later in the week.

Toni nods and backs the jeep out of the driveway and drives down the road.

TONI (V.O.)

It was a fateful day, that day, the day of that decision. The choice made, the consequences of that choice, the consequences of all choices.

EXT. THE BLAKE RANCH - LATER

The ranch is large, single story. A large two story barn to one side, painted in typical red. Aaron looks at the barn and gives a small laugh as Toni brings the jeep to a stop in front of the house.

TONI

What's so funny?

AARON

I was just pondering...

TONI

Pondering?

AARON

Why barns are always painted red.

TONI

Well that's because...

(stymied)

Hell I don't know! They just always are!

Aaron and Toni get out of the jeep and looks at Adam who is nodding off. She begins to get Adam out of the seat harness.

TONI (CONT'D)

You have any kids Aaron?

AARON

No. Never found the time to start a family.

TONI

Ever been married?

AARON

No. I...

Silence, like he is remembering.

TONI

Who was she?

AARON

Just someone I use to know. Where do you want this generator stowed?

TONI

Be dark soon. There's a shed by the barn. You can stow it in there for tonight and tomorrow you can hook it up for me. Park the jeep in the barn when you're finished. Leave the keys in the ignition, that way I know where to find 'em. When you're finished come on back to the house... I'll start supper.

Toni picks up Adam and carries him inside the house. Aaron drives the jeep and finds the shed mentioned. He notices a large home-like building near the barn. He unloads the box and parks the jeep. He looks around then exits the barn closing and securing the doors. At the house he knocks at the door. Toni opens it.

TONI (CONT'D)

You don't have to knock.

AARON

Wasn't sure.

TONI

Come on, I'll show you where you'll be sleeping.

Toni leads him into the house, log cabin style, rustic, and functional, nicely furnished with a large living room, family room, giant fireplace, stereo, and flat-screen television. She leads him into a huge bedroom just off the kitchen. Again nicely furnished with it's own bathroom.

AARON

Nice place. Very nice.

TONI

Thank you. My uncle Steven built it years ago. My father's brother. When Uncle Steve died, I took it over. Made a few improvements. Upgrades.

AARON

I gather your father has also passed away.

TONI

You're very astute. Ten years ago, prostate cancer. Devastated mom.

AARON

And your uncle?

TONI

Four years ago. Old age. He was 98. Just put your bag anywhere. Dresser is empty, feel free to use it. You have your own bath, I'll get you some towels and soap.

AARON

I noticed you had a bunk house out behind the barn. Why am I not there?

TONI

My regular crew is arriving next week. They take the place over. You're only here for three weeks, they're here for four months.

AARON

Doesn't answer the question.

TONI

Dinner will be ready shortly. Let me get you some towels so you can wash up.

She leaves as Aaron looks at the room, pondering.

INT. THE BLAKE RANCH - DINING ROOM - EVENING

Aaron walks in to see Adam sitting at a special chair that allows him to reach the table. Toni is ladling something into the bowls.

TONI

Left over stew. Didn't have time to fix a real dinner.

AARON

(sitting)
That's fine, thank you. So Adam how old are you?

Silence, stare.

TONI

Adam, Aaron asked you question. Don't be rude.

Adam looks at his mother then Aaron.

ADAM

I'm five. So you're going to help my Mom?

AARON

I am. But I bet you help your mother a lot, right?

ADAM

I'm too small.

AARON

Nonsense. You're a big boy, a fine young man. I'm right, you help your mother a lot.

ADAM

(smiles)

Yeah.

Toni smiles and sits. She takes Adam's hand and bows her head, a movement which takes Aaron by surprise.

TONI

Lord, thank you for this fine day, my son, this food. Thank you for the help you have sent us
(Aaron surprised)
and the many blessings you have bestowed upon us. Amen.

Toni looks up to see Aaron looking at her. She smiles.

TONI (CONT'D)

You are an answer to my prayer.

EXT. THE BLAKE RANCH - NIGHT

Aaron outside looking at the desert as a full moon brightens the landscape making the night desert beautiful. Toni approaches him.

AARON

I didn't think it could be this impressive.

TONI

I like the desert. I've always like the desert.

AARON

Adam?

TONI

He's asleep.

AARON

He's a fine young man. Quiet and shy, but a fine boy.

TONI

He's my life. My reason for living.

She hesitates.

TONI (CONT'D)

You're curious about his father aren't you?

AARON

Not my business.

TONI

I know. Josh, Adam's dad, was my college sweetheart, I had a crush on him the very first time I saw him.

Tony remembering.

TONI (CONT'D)

Mom really like Josh. He was a fine young man she said. Someone I could depend upon. I thought the same thing. Long story short I thought I was going to spend the rest of my life with him. So, we had a premarital affair. It wasn't my intention to get pregnant, but I did. I was twenty years old.

Josh couldn't handle it. The thought of being a father scared him. That responsibility terrified him. So one day he gets up and leaves. Just like that. He left just before we were to be married. I was six months pregnant. I haven't seen or heard of him since. I have no idea where he is, or what he is doing.

Dad died five years prior to that. Good thing too. He would have hunted Josh down to the ends of the earth. Mom... she accepted the baby, her grandson, but reluctantly at first. She and Dad were of the old school, marriage before children. I guess I really disappointed her.

AARON

No brothers or sisters?

TONI

No. I'm an only child.

AARON

Regrets?

TONI

I made a choice. No one forced me to sleep with Josh... it's a choice I made all by myself. I have to live with the consequences of that choice. I was scared at first, very scared and very angry. I was an abandoned woman, betrayed by a man I thought loved me. But this young baby was mine. A part of me. I gave him life. So no, no regrets, not about Adam at least.

AARON

Did you ever consider abortion? Oh, way out of line. Sorry.

TONI

(smiles)

It never crossed my mind. I wanted this baby. I wanted a part of Josh.

AARON

You must really miss him.

Toni silent.

AARON (CONT'D)

It must be hard raising a son and running a ranch by yourself.

TONI

At times. But it's a good life. Hard sometimes, but good.

When I was a child I would come out here and spend some time with Uncle Steve and Aunt May, his wife. They were good to me and I loved them a lot. I loved coming here. I was about twelve when Aunt May had a stroke. She never regained consciousness and died three weeks later. She and Uncle Steve are buried on the land, a small cemetery we set aside where we bury all our relatives. Dad's buried there as well. One day Mom will be buried there, by Dad. And someday, so will I.

AARON

What did you mean when you said that I was an answer to your prayer?

TONI

So, what do you do for a living?

AARON

That's an evasive answer if I ever heard one.

TONI

Maybe, but what about you? You're not married, but you came close at least once.

AARON

So, Adam doesn't go to school?

TONI

Now who's being evasive?

(considers)

Adam is still too young for regular school. Technically he should be in kindergarten, but I home school him. And I'm proud to say he's doing the work of a first grader. I was always good in school, even wanted to be a teacher, until Adam came into my life. Next year Adam will be able to go to grade school in Tuscarora, there's a small school over there. After that he has to be bussed into Elko, but I think at that point I'm going to home school him again.

AARON

How big is this ranch?

TONI

A little over 25,000 acres.

AARON

That's huge. And you're here all by yourself?

TONI

Most of the time, yeah.

AARON

You say you have a crew coming in next week?

TONI

Yeah. Every year about this time Carlos and his men come in to help me. They're good ranchers, know how to work with cattle, rounding them up, getting them ready to sell. They cut and bundle the hay, stack it for me, do some farm work as well.

Carlos worked for Uncle Steve for as long as I can remember. He use to take me for rides on his back when I was little. I really enjoyed that. They lived in the bunk house for years, and called it home. His kids grew up here and went to school in Elko. The older ones graduated from there. The kids are grown and on their own now, but he and Maria, his wife, still come here every year just like clockwork. They're here for about four months then they go home. The rest of the year it's just me. During the winter it's up to me to feed the cattle and take care of the ranch.

AARON

And Adam?

TONI

He goes with me.

AARON

What happens if you get hurt?

TONI

I don't get hurt. But if I did, and I admit it's not all me alone all the time, I have friends from Tuscarora that help me. I have a short wave, if I need assistance I call for it. There's some good people over in Tuscarora and they come when I ask.

AARON

Toni the feminist.

TONI

I wish! No. Just a woman who loves to ranch, loves the desert, loves the freedom.

AARON
I'm more of mountain man myself.

TONI
Look behind you.

Aaron turns and sees the outline of a mountain looming behind him.

TONI (CONT'D)
You can't see it very well tonight,
but during the day, it's magnificent.

AARON
(astonished)
How the hell did I miss that!

TONI
Blind maybe.

AARON
(softly under his
breath)
Or distracted.

TONI
What?

AARON
So what's on the agenda for tomorrow?

TONI
The generator. That needs to be up
and going first thing. You'll find
tools in the barn, the generators
are in a special room behind the
barn. Think you'll have any problems?

AARON
Naw. I'm pretty good with machinery.

TONI
What about horses?

AARON
Never rode one.

TONI
This should be interesting.

INT. THE BLAKE RANCH - EARLY TUESDAY MORNING

Toni, dressed to begin the day, comes into the kitchen. The sun just beginning to shine through the kitchen windows. Her shoulder length hair now combed, silky, and attractive.

She wears makeup. She makes coffee and looks towards Aaron's room. The door is closed. She moves to his door and wants to knock but stops herself. She returns to the kitchen and begins to make breakfast. The door remains closed. She is beginning to get a little mad as she continues to glance at the closed door. Suddenly the kitchen door leading outside opens and Aaron walks in. He is dirty.

AARON
Generator's fixed.

Toni surprised.

TONI
How long have you been up?

AARON
About three hours. That coffee is smelling good.

TONI
Go wash up. Breakfast will be ready in a few minutes.

Aaron nods and moves to his room. Toni smiles and slightly laughs to herself. She looks at his door. She shakes her head in disbelief as she makes breakfast.

INT. THE BLAKE RANCH - MORNING

AARON
Thank you, that was a good breakfast.

Aaron looks at Adam who is playing with some of his toys.

AARON (CONT'D)
He was up early. I gather he doesn't sleep late.

TONI
Not often.

AARON
So now what?

TONI
Wait here.

She disappears and quickly returns holding a cowboy hat, shirt and a tube of sunscreen. She gives him the items.

AARON
What's this?

TONI

Nevada sun. You don't go outside without a hat. Or sunscreen. Apply it liberally to your face and neck.

Aaron looks at the sunscreen unsure.

TONI (CONT'D)

Apply it. I will not be responsible for you getting skin cancer. Long sleeve shirt. We don't wear short sleeve when we're in the field. Too much sun damage. Uncomfortable maybe, but a lot better for your body. Protects your arms from the sun.

Aaron smiles and removes his shirt. He is wearing a tee-shirt but his muscular form is clearly evident. Toni makes a small swallow. She sees the massive scar on his left arm disappearing under the tee-shirt but says nothing. He puts on the shirt which looks good on him.

AARON

Who's shirt?

TONI

Uncle Steve's. I still have a lot of his clothes around. That shirt fits good. You and he are about the same size. I'll give you some of his Levis as well.

AARON

So what now?

TONI

There's some fence that needs mending on the west pasture, grazing land for the cattle. I have two meadows that I rotate the cattle on, East and West. The rotation allows the grass time to grow, but time and elements can sometimes damage a fence. It needs to be repaired before I can move the herd there.

AARON

So we drive out there?

TONI

No. We ride.

AARON

Ride? As on a horse?

TONI

Yep.

AARON

Great. Just great. So when do we leave?

TONI

As soon as Mabel gets here.

AARON

Mabel?

TONI

A good friend. I can't take Adam, so she babysits for me when I need someone to watch him. She lives over in Tuscarora. I called her earlier this morning. She's on her way.

Aaron nods.

AARON

A horse.

TONI

Yep. But right now you and I have to pack the mule.

Aaron very unsure.

INT. THE HOUSE - SHORT TIME LATER

A pickup drives up the the ranch and a woman of about 60, MABEL LACKEY, a little heavy, graying hair gets out. Toni meets her at the door. She immediately sees Aaron and looks at Toni.

TONI (CONT'D)

Mabel, this is Aaron Johnson. He's helping me for the next three weeks. Aaron, this is Mabel Lackey.

AARON

It's nice meeting you Ma'am.

Extends his hand. Mabel shakes hands and sizes him up. She likes what she sees. She looks at Toni.

MABEL

Toni?

TONI

It's not what you want to think Mabel.
Aaron was looking for work, and I
figured that I could use an extra
hand around here.

Aaron slightly smiles.

MABEL

Isn't Carlos coming in next week?

TONI

Yes, but... a little more help is
always nice.

Aaron and I are going to repair that
stretch of fence on the West meadow,
the section that got damaged last
winter. It could be late before we
get back.

Adam?

(looks up)

You be good. I'll be back later.

MABEL

Don't forget your radio.

TONI

I have it, plus extra batteries, and
everything else I need.

ADAM

Be careful Mom.

TONI

I will sweetheart.
(gives Adam a kiss,
to Aaron)

Ready?

AARON

I guess.

EXT. ON THE TRAIL - DAY

Toni a pro at riding, Aaron still uptight. Toni is holding
the reins of a mule which carries equipment. Slow easy walk
over rugged land. Aaron nervous as Toni watches him.

TONI

You're getting good at this. When
we started out I really had my doubts.

She laughs.

AARON
What's so funny?

TONI
You.

AARON
Thanks. Thanks a lot.

TONI
You gotta admit, you trying to get
on Jesse was... It was a sight to
see.

AARON
Told you I never rode before. Never
been around a horse before.

TONI
Still... you accepted the challenge.
That's saying something.

Aaron looks at her and she smiles.

AARON
How come you lied to Mabel?

TONI
About you asking for a job?

AARON
Yeah.

TONI
I don't know. It just seemed the
right thing to say. Mabel has been
trying to fix me up with men for the
last three years. You know how many
blind dates I've had that never worked
out? Never mind, stupid question.

AARON
She's a nice lady.

TONI
Very. Without her and Jake, that's
her husband, this life would be a
lot harder.

AARON
She worries about you.

TONI
Yeah, she does.
(MORE)

TONI (CONT'D)

When I go out into the field in winter to feed the cattle, I always have to call her first. Then she sits by the shortwave and waits, listening for me to call in case I'm in trouble. Then, when I get home I have to call her again. If I don't call by a certain time, she sends out the Calvary.

AARON

That ever happen?

TONI

A couple of times.

AARON

What about your Mom?

TONI

I love my mother. She infuriates me sometimes, makes me mad as hell other times. But I really do love her. And we have a good relationship. She worries about me, too much I think. When Josh ran off, she was there for me. When Adam was born, she was there. She's always been there. Except for college I never really left home until I moved out here.

AARON

Have you lived on the ranch long?

TONI

About four years. When Uncle Steve couldn't ranch anymore we hired a full time ranch hand. Very dependable. Or so we thought. We found out later that he was stealing Uncle Steve blind. Adam was about a year old then, that's when I decided to move out of Mom's house and live here. Uncle Steve died shortly after that. He and Aunt May had a son, but he died when he was year old. They never had anymore children.

There was no one to take care of the ranch, so I decided to take on the job. Uncle Steve saw how much I loved it here, so he left it to me. I can't imagine living anyplace else.

AARON

So you were born here?

TONI

Oh heavens no. I was born and raised in L.A. Dad worked there, he was huge in investments. Made a lot of people a lot of money. Made himself a lot of money. Then one day he gets cancer. Dad was born in Elko, it was his roots, so he decides to shuck the city and come home. He came home to die.

For awhile it looked like Dad might beat the disease, but we were wrong. Dad was the baby of the family, Uncle Steve the oldest. I remember the effect Dad's death had on Mom and him, devastating. That's when Mom and I became really close. She and I may fight and disagree on many things, but no one had better dare come between us. There will be hell to pay if they try.

What about you? Your family.

AARON

My parents died in a car accident when I was two. Somehow I survived it. My grandparents raised me. My grandfather died about twenty years ago, I was about ten then. My grandmother died seven years ago.

TONI

No brothers or sisters?

AARON

One sister, Sharon.

TONI

She wasn't in the car when the accident happened?

AARON

No. We were going to pick her up at a friends house. She was my older sister, fourteen years my elder. I don't think Mom and Dad expected me to come along. Especially at the time I did.

TONI

Where is she?

AARON

She died.

Aaron turns sad as Toni watches him.

AARON (CONT'D)

Sharon got married when she was nineteen, her first year in college. She became a stock broker and her husband, John, was in insurance. They moved to New York and she went to work for a brokerage outfit that was located the World Trade Center, North tower to be exact. She left behind a husband and two kids.

TONI

I'm sorry. You ever see them?

AARON

Saw them about two months ago. He and the kids are doing well. Kids are almost grown now and he's dating again. Took John a long time to get over Sharon's death. I was glad to see him dating, he needs somebody. And she's a nice woman. Her name's Beth and she's good with the kids. And they like her.

TONI

Think they'll get married?

AARON

I don't know. Sharon and John were very close, high school sweethearts. They went to the same college, decided to get married, graduated the same time... When she died his world fell apart.

TONI

What about the girl you were going to marry?

He thinks, remembers.

AARON

Her name was Lacy and she was on the first plane that hit the towers. It hit the North tower.

Toni shocked as the news sinks in. She stumbles for words but all that comes out,

TONI
I'm sorry.

AARON
So am I.

They approach the damaged fence.

TONI
We're here.

AARON
So I see.

EXT. ON THE TRAIL - AFTERNOON

The repairs to the fence is complete. Toni is tired, hot, and sweating as she gets water. She drinks from the canteen and offers it to Aaron. He accepts.

TONI
Well I know one thing.

AARON
What's that?

TONI
You've had experience with barbwire. I couldn't have done this job without your help. As least not as fast as we got it done.

AARON
I will admit Toni, you are full of surprises. You really know how to ranch. We better start back if we want to get home before dark.

TONI
Home?

Aaron blushes a little as Toni eyes him and considers,

TONI (CONT'D)
Listen, there's a square dance tomorrow night over in Tuscarora. You want to go?

AARON
I don't know how to square dance.

TONI

Look who's full of surprises. You handle barbwire like it's second nature, but you don't know how to ride, or square dance? Just what the hell are you good at?

AARON

Things. Will you teach me? How to dance, square dance that is?

She looks at him with curiosity.

TONI

Yeah. Yeah, I'll teach you. We better start back.

They get on the horses.

TONI (CONT'D)

Do you really have to leave in three weeks?

Aaron thinks.

AARON

Not by choice Toni, not by choice.

He turns his horse and starts down the trail. She looks at him and follows.

INT. THE BLAKE RANCH - NIGHT

The snake, a Cobra, slithers through the skull, empty eye sockets no longer able to see. The reptile seems to vary itself in size and length. It approaches Aaron, fear fills his eyes. The snake plays with him. Aaron shakes, terrorized by the reptile. He can't move. Sweat pours from his forehead, as the snake sways, opening and closing its hood. Its tongue slithers in and out of its mouth. Its eyes beady and fierce. It strikes!

Aaron sits up in bed, sweat pouring from his skin. He shakes. He is afraid. He slowly gets up and moves to the window. The moon full over the desert but he doesn't seem to see. He continues to shake. He wonders the room then sits in one corner and balls his body up. He looks at his hands as they shake. Tears fill his eyes and he begins to cry.

INT. THE BLAKE RANCH - EARLY WEDNESDAY MORNING

Toni comes into the kitchen. Eggs in a basket on the kitchen cabinet. Coffee made. She looks at Aaron's door. It is closed and Aaron nowhere to be seen. She feels it, something's wrong.

She goes to Aaron's room and opens the door but the room is empty. She closes the door and goes back to the kitchen. Aaron enters through the kitchen door, coming from outside, carrying a bucket of oranges. She smiles. He returns the smile, but it is a forced smile.

TONI

Morning. I see you found the chickens.

AARON

Yeah. Something new I learned. How to gather eggs.

TONI

How did you sleep?

AARON

Not worth a shit. Sorry, language.

She feels the tension surrounding him.

AARON (CONT'D)

Didn't know you had orange trees out there. Fresh orange juice.

TONI

Just a few trees. Oranges don't grow very well in this part of the country. But sometimes they produce fruit. You made coffee I see.

(gets a cup)

How long have you been up?

AARON

A while.

TONI

What's wrong?

AARON

Nothing.

TONI

Was it something I did? Something I said?

AARON

No.

TONI

Listen, if I did something...

AARON

Toni! It's not you, it's me. I made a mistake... a long time ago. A mistake I have to live with. A horrible mistake...

(silence)

So what's on the agenda for the day?

Toni confused moves to the stove.

TONI

How do you want your eggs?

INT. THE BLAKE RANCH - MORNING

Aaron outside working on a tractor. Adam watching some cartoons on the television. Toni watches Aaron through the window, occasionally glancing at Adam. A look of concern on her face. The phone rings, she answers.

Background music from the TV: Kermit the Frog - THE RAINBOW CONNECTION

TONI

Hello.

JANET (V.O.)

So how's the new help working out?

TONI

He's working out just fine Mom. He's very handy. He's out fixing the tractor, he should have it ready by the time Carlos gets here.

JANET (V.O.)

Toni, I'm not so sure about this. You know nothing about this man.

TONI

I know something.

JANET (V.O.)

What?

TONI

That he lost his sister and fiancée on 9/11.

Silence.

JANET (V.O.)

I'm sorry.

TONI

So is he.

JANET (V.O.)

What about his parents?

TONI

They died when he was two.

JANET (V.O.)

Sounds like he's had a hard life.

TONI

Harder than us Mama.

JANET (V.O.)

You sound worried.

TONI

Something else happened to him,
something bad.

JANET (V.O.)

What?

TONI

I don't know. I just know it was
bad. When you coming out?

JANET (V.O.)

Be out tomorrow. I plan to stay a
few days.

TONI

Good. I invited him to the square
dance tonight. Plan on going over
there about six, have some dinner
and I get to teach him how to dance.

JANET (V.O.)

He doesn't know how to dance?

TONI

I guess not. So what time will you
be here?

JANET (V.O.)

I'll be there for lunch.

TONI

See you then. Love ya, bye.

She hangs up the phone and watches Aaron as he works on the tractor.

EXT. TUSCARORA - EVENING

Toni parks the jeep in front of a big red barn. Adam in the back seat. She looks at the grin on Aaron's face as he looks at the red barn.

TONI

Don't say it! Don't even think it!

AARON

(smiling)

Say what?

She gets Adam out of the harness and puts him on the ground. The area is full of vehicles and few more people are showing up.

AARON (CONT'D)

Does this happen often?

TONI

A couple of times during the summer. People work hard, they need some relaxation. Elko is too far away for most of the folk, and some are not as young as they use to be. So Barney Henderson lets us use his barn to hold the dance. His son works in Vegas with some of the hottest talent around. Jim's a whiz with lighting and sound. He gets up here a couple of times during the summer and brings all the audio equipment with him. And sometimes the lighting. When he wants he can really put on a show.

One year he scared the living daylights out of Mabel and she has never forgiven him. He toned it down after that.

An older black man (BARNEY HENDERSON) of about 65 approaches them. *

TONI (CONT'D)

Speak of the devil...

BARNEY

Toni! Adam!

(picks up Adam)

Long time no see. You are getting big young man.

Adam smiles.

TONI

Barney...

BARNEY

Let me guess, this is the new help.

Puts Adam down and shakes hands.

AARON

Aaron Johnson. It's a pleasure to meet you Mr. Henderson.

BARNEY

The name's Barney. We don't stand on formality around here. Mabel wasn't joking when she said you were good looking. A fox I think was the word she used.

Toni blushes.

BARNEY (CONT'D)

Mabel liked you, and that is saying something.

Another black man (JIM HENDERSON) of about 30 approaches.

JIM

Dad, the generator's out of gas. I thought you filled the tank?

BARNEY

Jim, where are your manners? Can't you see I'm in conversation?

JIM

Sorry. My apologies.

AARON

That's all right.
(extends hand)
Aaron, Aaron Johnson.

JIM

(shakes hand)
Jim Henderson.

AARON

You work Vegas? Movie stars, singers?

JIM

Some of the biggest talent around.

AARON

You must really like it?

JIM

I love it. Always something new and exciting. Which reminds me of why I came out here, Dad, gas?

BARNEY

You'll find a can over by the shed.

JIM

Thanks. If you'll excuse me, I need to get this show on the road. Nice meeting you Aaron, good seeing you again Toni, talk to you later.

Jim leaves.

TONI

He's looking good.

BARNEY

Yeah he is. I think he's beat it.

TONI

I hope so Barney, I really hope so.

Aaron questions but says nothing.

BARNEY

Well, if you will excuse me, I need to see to the rest of my guest.

He walks away towards the barn. Aaron looks at Toni.

TONI

Jim got involved with drugs. Bad. He almost lost his job, always high, late for work, could never be counted on. He became a typical drug addict.

AARON

How did he get over it?

TONI

He met a girl. She changed his life. She gave him a choice, her or the drugs. Jim still had enough sense about him that he chose her. She became his wife, and now he's getting ready to be a daddy. You'll meet her later.

Adam takes Aaron by the hand, Toni surprised. Aaron smiles. They walk towards the barn.

TONI (CONT'D)
That's a first.

AARON
Excuse me?

TONI
Adam never... strangers... it just
doesn't happen.

Aaron smiles. He picks up Adam. Adam smiles.

ADAM
So, you gonna marry my Mom?

TONI
ADAM!

AARON
(smiling)
You want me to?

ADAM
Yeah.

Toni shock. Aaron says nothing. Some kids show up and Aaron puts Adam down as he runs off to play.

AARON
He's a good kid.

TONI
He's a monster! I am so sorry!

AARON
For what?

Toni looks at him.

AARON (CONT'D)
They have anything to drink around
here? Punch? Something?

TONI
Inside.

She looks for Adam.

TONI (CONT'D)
ADAM! Stay where I can find you.
Don't run off. You remember what
happened last time?

ADAM
I'll stay here, promise.

TONI

You better.

AARON

What happened last time?

TONI

He found a skunk. Took a week to get the smell off him.

Aaron laughs, Toni smiles. They move

INSIDE THE BARN

Where they approach a large table full of drinks and punch bowls. Other tables have food on them. Still others for people to sit.

AARON

Quite an arrangement.

TONI

Yeah. Everybody chips in.

AARON

Did you?

TONI

Well... no. Mabel said she would cover for me. So I owe her. But I'll make up for it next time. Hungry?

AARON

Yeah, yeah I am.

They get food and sit at a table.

AARON (CONT'D)

What about Adam?

TONI

He knows how this works. He'll be in in a few minutes. Right now he's playing with the Jenkins kids. He doesn't get a chance to play much with other children. I guess it's not fair to him, all alone on the ranch. No other children around.

AARON

He helps you a lot.

TONI
With the things he's capable of doing,
yes. And he can do quite a lot.

AARON
Mr. Blake.

TONI
You just now catching that?

AARON
No, I knew it the moment I saw him
at your mothers house. Isn't she
coming out?

TONI
She'll be here tomorrow.

AARON
I don't think she likes me.

TONI
Give her time. She'll be staying a
few days, you'll have time to get to
know each other.

AARON
So what's on the agenda for tomorrow?

TONI
Forget about tomorrow. We'll worry
about that in the morning. Just
enjoy yourself. Relax, you've earned
it.

Adam runs up.

TONI (CONT'D)
There you are, hungry?

ADAM
Yeah.

TONI
You stay here, I'll get you something.

She leaves as Adam looks at Aaron. They smile at each other.

ADAM
I want you to marry my mom.

AARON
Why?

ADAM
You don't like her?

AARON
I like your mother very much. I like you very much. But why do you want me to marry your mom?

ADAM
Because I want you to be my daddy. I don't have one, and you're nice.

AARON
But you don't know me, we just met. How do you know I would make a good father?

ADAM
I don't know. I just know.

Aaron silent as Toni comes back with a plate of food.

TONI
What?

Aaron looks at Adam.

AARON
Men talk. Just men talk.

Toni confused but says nothing. Mabel comes over with a man, JAKE LACKEY.

MABEL
There you are. I was hoping you would make it. Jake this is the young man I telling you about. Aaron this is my husband Jake.

Aaron stands and shakes Jakes hand.

AARON
Nice meeting you sir.

JAKE
The pleasure is mine sir. Mabel was really impressed with you and that is nothing short of a miracle.

Aaron smiles at Mabel.

AARON
Your wife is one beautiful woman, and you are one lucky man.

Toni slightly embarrassed and Mabel blushing.

AARON (CONT'D)

I also want to thank you.

Gives Mabel a kiss on the cheek.

MABEL

What was that for?

AARON

For watching out for Toni when she needs it the most.

Toni stunned. Jake smiles.

JAKE

Well you two have fun, we'll see you later. Right now I gotta get something to eat.

Mabel speechless as Jake guides her away. Aaron sits and looks at Toni who is still stunned. He smiles and begins to eat.

INT. THE SQUARE DANCE - LATER

People are beginning to dance to the music Jim is playing. Rock and western. Toni and Aaron still sitting at the table. Adam playing with other kids. Toni watches Adam. Aaron observes her.

AARON

So Jim likes country and western music?

TONI

That surprises you?

AARON

Yeah, it does in fact.

TONI

Jim was raised on Charlie Pride. Barney loves Charlie Pride. But he's into all types of music, considering his job and all. Still he knows what the people around here want and he obliges them. That's his wife out on the dance floor with Barney. Her name's Cathy.

Aaron sees the old man and young pregnant black woman attempting to dance a western dance.

AARON

She looks nice.

TONI

I don't know her that well, but Barney is crazy about her. And she will deliver his grandson in about two months.

AARON

Where's Barney's wife?

TONI

Martha. She died, three years ago, cancer.

Conflict in her eyes.

TONI (CONT'D)

Like I said, Jim tries to get up here on a regular basis, and he takes Barney to Vegas with him sometimes. When Jim was on drugs I really thought Barney was going to lose it. He threaten to kill everyone who was hurting his only son. Then Cathy came into Jim's life and she changed him. She rescued him. That's why Barney loves her so much. He will do anything for that girl.

A song: MEMORIES sung by Barbra Streisand begins to play.

AARON

Dance?

TONI

I thought you didn't know how to dance?

AARON

Square dance.

She smiles as they go to the dance floor. He smells her perfume as they slow dance. The others look at the couple. She holds him a little tighter. They look in each other's eyes. He almost kisses her when the song ends. No kiss. Applause as Jim takes a bow. He starts another country and western song.

They show up, five of them. Rough looking, wanna be cowboys, seeking trouble. The music stops. The leader CHAD looks around as the dance comes to a complete stop. Barney steps up to him.

BARNEY

What do you want Chad? You know you're not welcome here.

CHAD

Barney, you hurt me. You hurt me bad. You think I would come here to cause you problems?

BARNEY

Well if that's the case, just leave the same way you came. But leave.

CHAD

Sorry Barney, can't do that. You see I heard that Toni found herself a new ranch hand. Just had to come introduce myself.

Chad sees Toni and walks over to her. Aaron stays in the background but Chad sees him.

TONI

What do you want Chad?

CHAD

Toni, you sound just like Barney, I'm crushed. You ain't glad to see me?

TONI

Barney asked you to leave.

CHAD

So who's this new ranch hand I heard about?

Chad looks at Aaron.

TONI

Leave!

Chad walks over to Aaron and sizes him up. The rest of the thugs begin to make moves that support Chad and any trouble he wants to cause. The people begin to move away.

CHAD

You must be him.

Aaron says nothing and doesn't flinch.

CHAD (CONT'D)

Did Toni tell you about us?

Aaron looks at Toni.

TONI

There is no *us* Chad. There has never been an "us". Get the hell out!

CHAD

(to Toni)

Toni, such language.

(back to Aaron)

You see Toni and I have this arrangement. She's my girl. I've been out of town a few days, just got back today. But I heard about you and well... I just had to see for myself.

AARON

Heard.

CHAD

What?!

AARON

You heard about me, not heard. No such word.

CHAD

You making fun of me?

AARON

No, you're doing a pretty good job of that all by yourself.

Toni looks at Aaron. Chad getting angry.

TONI

(scared)

Aaron! Just drop it, please!

Aaron eye-to-eye with Chad as his buddies begin to form a circle around Aaron.

CHAD

You have no idea who you're dealing with fancy boy.

AARON

Yeah? I know shit when I see it. And I'm looking at it.

Chad flares. Up in Aaron's face.

CHAD

I don't know who the hell you are, but no one!

(MORE)

CHAD (CONT'D)

NO ONE calls me shit and gets away with it! You owe me an apology! Apologize fancy boy!

AARON

(calmly)

I don't apologize to shit.

Mabel pulls Toni away. Jake is carrying Adam. The two men face each other as the thugs surround Aaron.

CHAD

Are you stupid?! I own this woman! Toni's mine! All mine! And you...

AARON

Toni is her own woman. No man owns her. Much less you. The only man that even comes close is her son, who I will admit is more of a man than you are.

Chad flares, hate in his eyes, he pulls a switchblade.

CHAD

(trying to keep it cool)

You have one chance to get the hell out of here, or you... you... you understand!

Aaron unmoved, calm, cold.

AARON

If anybody is leaving it will be you.

Chad thrust the knife at Aaron who quickly and efficiently puts Chad on the ground. The others attack but Aaron is too quick. Each goes down. Chad attacks again but is no match against advanced martial arts. Within moments all five of the thugs are down and out. Bleeding. Hurting. Calmly Aaron walks over and lifts Chad's head off the floor by his hair, Chad with fear in his eyes:

AARON (CONT'D)

(calmly, coldly)

If you threaten or bother Toni, or any of these people again, I will hurt you. Do you understand?

CHAD

(weakly)

Yeah...

AARON
I can't hear you.

CHAD
(louder)
Yeah... I understand...

Aaron lets his hair go. One of the thugs has recovered and attacks Aaron. Aaron performs a final advance martial arts movement and kicks the thug in the head who flies about eight feet (SLOW MOTION EFFECT), landing hard on the dance area floor. He's missing three teeth. Aaron looks at Chad who saw the action. Chad slowly gets up. Aaron cold, watching. Chad and the others help the toothless thug as they all limp out the door, hurting, bleeding. Aaron follows them out of the barn as the thugs leave the area. Aaron walks back in to see the look of stun on everyone's face.

AARON
(humbly)
Sorry for the show.

He looks at Toni who is amazed, baffled, stunned, confused all at once. She begins to pace, not sure where she is going. She looks with disbelief at Aaron. She comes, she goes. She looks at Aaron. She turns away, she turns back, almost in his face:

TONI
AND YOU WERE WORRIED ABOUT FATAL
ATTRACTION?!!!!

She turns walks away, she walks back, grabs Adam and goes outside. Jake approaches Aaron.

JAKE
You better drive.

Aaron nods, smiles and follows Toni outside.

EXT. THE BLAKE RANCH - NIGHT

Aaron stops the jeep, Toni in the back holding Adam. Still mad, confused, unsure. Looking at Aaron. Aaron gets out and lifts Adam off her. She gets out and takes Adam from him.

AARON
I'll park the jeep.

Silence. Those eyes. She carries Adam into the house. Aaron parks the jeep in the barn. At the front door of the house he finds it locked. He knocks. Nothing. He rings the bell. Toni answers. Silence. He enters the house, unsure. Adam not sure what to do.

Toni disappears into the kitchen. Aaron looks at Adam, Adam shrugs.

AARON (CONT'D)

Come on sport, let's get you ready
for bed.

Takes Adam's hand as they head off towards his bedroom.
Toni in the

KITCHEN

She gets a glass of water. She pours it out. She paces.
She repeats the water effort. She is still stunned. She
sits, she stands. She paces. Finally she calms.

TONI

(softly to herself)
Oh dear God, who did You send me?
What kind of man did You send me?
Adam.

She moves to Adam's bedroom. Adam in bed as Aaron has
finished reading him a bedtime story. She stops in the door
looking at the two of them. He tucks Adam in and kisses him
on the forehead.

AARON

Sleep well buddy. May all your dreams
be happy and funny.

ADAM

Good night Daddy.

Aaron chokes as he turns off the light. He turns and sees
Toni standing in the door. He begins to leave the room. As
he passes Toni in the door she grabs him and kisses him.
She looks in his eyes then moves to her room softly closing
the door behind her.

EXT. THE BLAKE RANCH - THURSDAY MORNING

The car pulls up to the ranch and Janet gets out. Toni comes
out to meet her.

JANET

What the hell happened?

TONI

Nice seeing you too Mother.

JANET

It's all over Elko.

TONI

What?

JANET

Chad and his thugs walk into the Sheriff's office and demand that they arrest your new ranch hand. They were bleeding and hurt.

TONI

What did the Sheriff do?

JANET

You know Kevin and his feelings towards Chad. He told Chad and his buddies that they had to fill out, in triplicate, a complaint. The last I heard Chad was still having trouble getting the spelling right. Mary told me that Kevin made Chad rewrite the report at least three times. I think he's still writing.

TONI

Payback?

JANET

Big time. Anyway Mary told me that Kevin is "thinking" about coming out here. Maybe. If he gets around to it. So what really happened?

TONI

Let's go inside. I will tell you all about it.

JANET

So where is he?

TONI

Adam wanted to show Aaron the fishing pond. They left about a half hour ago.

JANET

Do you trust him?

TONI

Yeah. Yeah I do. Completely. Let's go inside.

The two women move

INSIDE THE HOUSE

To the kitchen.

Coffee? TONI (CONT'D)

Please. JANET

Toni gets two cups of coffee as the two sit at the table.

So enlighten me already. JANET (CONT'D)

EXT. THE FISHING POND - MORNING

Aaron looks at the rather large pond. Adam gets some rocks and begins to throw them into the water. Aaron sees a small shed standing by itself.

So this is where you go fishing? AARON

Yeah. Mama brings me out here sometimes. ADAM

Catch any fish? AARON

Yeah. Sometimes big ones. Then Mama cooks them. They taste good. ADAM

So where do you keep the fishing poles? AARON

In the shed. ADAM
(looking at the shed)

The two move to a large tree and shade. A small picnic table and bench seat is situated under it. They sit. Aaron takes in the surroundings. He looks at a thinking Adam.

What are you thinking about sport? AARON

You. Thank you for getting rid of Chad... ADAM

I gather you don't like Chad. AARON

ADAM

He's mean. And he treats Mama bad.
He thinks he's God's gift to women.

AARON

Where did you hear that?

ADAM

Uncle Barney told me one time when
Chad tried to make Mama go with him.

AARON

Well that's all finished now. I
don't think Chad will be back. So
tell you what, why don't you teach
me how to fish?

ADAM

You don't know how to fish?

AARON

Not really, no. I could use some
lessons, so how about it? Teach me?

Adam runs to the shed and opens it. He grabs some fishing gear, and heads for the lake. Aaron follows, grabs the rest of the gear and follows him.

INT. THE BLAKE RANCH

JANET

That is amazing.

TONI

Tell me about it. It was like a
Jackie Chan movie. The way he moved,
five to one. I can't figure him
out. He doesn't know how to ranch,
square dance, ride, but he sure as
hell knows how to fight.

Janet looks at her daughter.

JANET

You're falling for him aren't you?

TONI

I kissed him last night.

Janet alarmed.

TONI (CONT'D)

I didn't sleep with him, but I did
think about it. Oh Mama what am I
going to do?

JANET
Sounds like Josh all over again.

TONI
Oh no. It's not anywhere close to Josh. I thought I loved Josh, but I don't think I ever really did, not deep down anyway. This is different. I feel different. With Josh I always had a doubt about my feelings.

JANET
Now you don't?

TONI
I don't know. I don't know how I feel. I just know I feel different.

JANET
You've only known him for three days.

TONI
That's the problem. I still don't know anything about him.

JANET
Is he still leaving?

TONI
Yeah. Yeah he is.

JANET
Can you make him stay?

TONI
I don't know Mama, I just don't know.

INT. THE BLAKE RANCH - LATER

Adam and Aaron come into the house. Janet sitting on the sofa reading a magazine. Adam sees Janet and runs to her.

ADAM
Grandma! I taught Aaron to fish, but we didn't catch anything.

Janet smiles at him.

JANET
Well maybe next time.

ADAM
Where's Mama?

JANET
Taking care of the horses.

Looks at Aaron, to Adam:

JANET (CONT'D)
Why don't you go help her.

AARON
I can do that.

JANET
No. Let Adam do it.

Aaron nods.

AARON
Go help your mother sport.

ADAM
Ok.

He leaves.

AARON
I gather you want to talk.

JANET
I guess we got off on the wrong foot
last Monday. I apologize.

AARON
For what, wanting to protect your
daughter?

JANET
You want something to drink. It's
warm out there.

AARON
Water's fine.

They move to the

KITCHEN

Janet gets him some water and they sit at the table.

JANET
Who are you Mr. Johnson? Where do
you come from?

AARON
Straight to the point. I'm just
passing through.

JANET
You still leaving in three weeks?

AARON
Yeah.

JANET
Why?

AARON
Because I have to.

JANET
That's no reason.

Aaron silent.

JANET (CONT'D)
I think Toni is falling in love with you. She told you about Josh?

Aaron unsure, uneasy.

AARON
Yeah.

JANET
Are you going to hurt her? Are you going to be another Josh?

AARON
That's not my intention Mrs. Blake, not my intention at all.

JANET
How do you feel about her?

AARON
Your daughter is... she's a reason... she's a very special woman.

JANET
But you're still leaving?

AARON
Yeah.

EXT. THE BLAKE RANCH - ONE WEEK LATER - WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON

Four pickups pull up to the house pulling horse trailers. An older Mexican man (CARLOS) and woman (MARIA) get out of the lead truck. Toni and Adam comes out to meet them. Smiles and greetings. Aaron stays in the back. The older man sees Aaron and looks at Toni. Toni motions Aaron to come over.

TONI
Aaron, this is Carlos and Maria,
their workers and my crew for the
season. Carlos, this is Aaron
Johnson.

The two men size each other up then shake hands. Carlos
says something to Maria in Spanish. Toni blushes.

AARON
I didn't know you spoke Spanish.

TONI
Yeah. I'm pretty fluent...

MARIA
When she wants to be. You are looking
good my dear, and Adam you are getting
big. Mr. Johnson it is a pleasure
to meet you.

AARON
The pleasure is mine Ma'am.

MARIA
And he has manners.

She looks at Carlos and hits him.

MARIA (CONT'D)
Something you could learn.

Carlos and the macho look.

TONI
The bunk house is ready. Aaron and
I got it cleaned and stocked this
week.

Carlos issues orders in Spanish and the team begin to move
the horses to the corral.

TONI (CONT'D)
Let's go inside, this sun...

They move

INSIDE

to the

KITCHEN

TONI (CONT'D)
How was the trip?

MARIA

Long. So Mr. Johnson, how long are you here for?

AARON

Please call me Aaron. I'm afraid I have to leave in a couple of weeks.

Maria sees the look of pain on Toni's face but says nothing.

TONI

So, how are the kids?

CARLOS

Grown!

MARIA

Carlos is still angry that they decided not to come this trip.

TONI

Have you heard from Philip?

MARIA

No. I worry about him.

TONI

(to Aaron)

Philip is their youngest boy, he joined the Marines and is currently in Iraq.

CARLOS

Have you ever been in the military Mr. Johnson?

AARON

Please call me Aaron. So how many kids do you have?

MARIA

Three boys and two girls. The girls are in their last year of college.

CARLOS

Ingrates.

MARIA

They have school and lives of their own. You cannot expect them to miss a semester or uproot their families because you want to be a macho.

CARLOS

I did not go to college, and I had a family and look at me.

Toni giggles.

CARLOS (CONT'D)

What?

TONI

Same argument every year, never changes.

Carlos smiles.

MARIA

Do not get the wrong impression Aaron, my Carlos is proud, very proud of his children. And he only pretends to be angry.

Carlos smiles and begins to laugh.

CARLOS

She knows me very well my Maria.

EXT. THE BLAKE RANCH - NIGHT

Aaron outside looking at the desert and the stars. Toni joins him.

AARON

They seem to be good people.

TONI

They're the best. And no they are not illegal. I pay my taxes on them.

AARON

You're paying me under the table.

TONI

You're a bonus.

AARON

So, if they're here for four months, what do they do the rest of the year?

TONI

About mid-to-late February they go to Arizona and help a rancher over there. A man by the name of Robert Coulter. He and Uncle Steve were good friends.

(MORE)

TONI (CONT'D)

He's four years younger than Uncle Steve and can't ranch anymore, so his son, Robert Jr., runs the place. Carlos and Maria will spend three to four months over there before they come here. Then they repeat the cycle.

AARON

Where's their home?

TONI

San Diego. Look at those stars... I love this time of night. Cool, clear, just nice to be outside.

They look at the night sky, the moon just below the horizon. Stars on black velvet. She looks at him as he observes the heavens.

TONI (CONT'D)

Stay.

AARON

I can't.

TONI

Why?

AARON

I just can't.

TONI

What are you running from?

AARON

I'm not running.

TONI

Yes you are. I know running when I see it. And you're running.

AARON

So what's on the agenda for tomorrow?

Toni silent. She looks at him.

TONI

Good night Aaron. Lock up when you go to bed.

She leaves and goes inside the house. Aaron watches her disappear inside.

AARON
(softly, to himself)
You're right Toni, I am running.

EXT. THE BLAKE RANCH - EARLY FRIDAY MORNING

Aaron gathering eggs, having trouble with the chickens.
Carlos watching him, slightly laughs. Aaron looks at him.

CARLOS
Miss Toni tells me you've never
ranchd before.

AARON
True.

A chicken plucks at Aaron, he pulls away quickly.

AARON (CONT'D)
Damn chickens.

CARLOS
She also tells me you're very handy
to have around, but the way you handle
those chickens I have my doubts.

AARON
Don't feel alone in that regard.

Aaron finally gets the eggs.

CARLOS
Put those in the kitchen then let us
take a ride my friend.

EXT. JACK CREEK NEVADA - GHOST TOWN

Carlos stops the pickup and the two men get out.

AARON
Jack Creek?

CARLOS
Si.

The two men begin to walk. Shuttered and abandoned buildings,
the only sound is that of old chimes that sing in the light
breeze. Aaron looks at and examines some abandoned buildings
then looks at Carlos who is observing him. They walk through
the town, both men silent, seemingly lost in thought.

AARON
Why are we here Carlos?

CARLOS

A good place to talk. A place to reflect. Do you believe in ghost Aaron?

AARON

Not really, no. Do you?

CARLOS

If you listen closely you can hear the voices of the past that still inhabit this place. Sometimes they speak, sometimes they remain silent. When they speak they tell us things we don't want to know. Or admit. Not even to ourselves. When they do communicate with us, it is a wise man who knows how to listen, and an even wiser man who accepts their counsel.

Silence as they walk.

CARLOS (CONT'D)

Miss Toni told me what you did to Chad and his friends. I fear that she is becoming attached to you.

Abandoned buildings, the gentle breeze, the chimes.

AARON

You care for her don't you?

CARLOS

She is like a daughter to me. I watched her grow up. Did she tell you about the time she fell in the well?

AARON

No.

CARLOS

She and Philip were playing here, they must have been about ten at the time. I don't know exactly how it happened, but Toni fell in the well...

They approach an old well that has newer, but weathered boards on it's platform. Carlos looks at the well, remembers.

AARON

I gather she didn't drown.

CARLOS

It's a dry hole, but she did break her leg.

AARON

You pulled her out.

CARLOS

Yes. Her parents were living in Los Angeles at the time. When her mother found out, she became frantic and didn't let Miss Toni come back that following year. I missed her that year.

As the years past she began to blossom into a woman and my Philip became sweet on her. But... she did not return the affection. Her beauty still radiates today as it did then, and believe me it was not lost on any of my boys. But she rejected them.

AARON

Racist?

CARLOS

Toni!? Not a racist bone in her body. She has a strong sense of right and wrong that girl. No, the chemistry just wasn't there. She cares for my boys, but not in a romantic way.

When Philip went to Iraq, she became very concerned. She still writes him, sends him care packages, worries about him. She didn't tell you that?

AARON

No.

CARLOS

She has that sisterly love for Philip, the chance for any romance has long past.

AARON

What does Philip do?

CARLOS

He's in the ground forces. They do sweeps looking for insurgents.

(MORE)

CARLOS (CONT'D)

Actually I prefer the term terrorist. He'll tell me about some of his missions and why they are so important. He tells me about the people, the culture, and how we are making a positive difference. Something I don't hear anywhere else. Shame.

I was hoping when his first enlistment was up that he and Toni would get together, but... She developed eyes elsewhere.

AARON

Josh?

CARLOS

I could have killed him. I still may. What he did to her was unforgivable.

What are you going to do Mr. Johnson, what are you going to do about Toni? Will you break her heart? Will you desert her, like Josh did? Will you run away?

AARON

I have to leave Carlos. I don't want to, but I have to.

CARLOS

Why?

AARON

I have a job to do. Something I have to complete. Philip the Marine would understand that.

The two men look at each other, then Carlos slightly nods.

INT. THE BLAKE RANCH - WEEK THREE - MONDAY EARLY AFTERNOON

In the KITCHEN:

JANET

He's leaving in three days.

TONI

I know. What am I gonna do Mama?

JANET

I don't know honey. When your father died, I died. The only thing I can say is that time heals.

TONI

Has time healed you Mama?

JANET

No.

Gunshots from outside. Toni approaches the window. Carlos and the crew are shooting cans off the fence posts. She and Janet move

OUTSIDE

where the men are speaking Spanish. Aaron and Adam watching them. Some are good shots. Toni approaches Aaron.

AARON

I think they're wagering.

TONI

They are.

AARON

How much?

TONI

Not how much, chores.

AARON

What kind of chores?

TONI

Loser gets to clean the stable.

Aaron smiles.

AARON

I thought that was my job.

TONI

It was, not anymore.

She looks at him. Aaron looks at her, sadness.

AARON

I have to leave.

TONI

Damn you Aaron Johnson!

She goes back inside the house. Janet looks at Aaron and follows Toni inside. He and Carlos exchange glances. Adam moves away from Aaron and Carlos to get a better view of the competition, out of hearing range. With a low voice,

CARLOS
You should tell her.

AARON
Tell her what? I think it's better this way. She doesn't need to worry. Promise me you won't say anything.

Thinks.

CARLOS
It is a promise I do not want to make my friend.

AARON
Please, for her.

Considers.

CARLOS
Will you come back?

AARON
No promises Carlos, no promises.

The gun fire continues. One of the men comes over, he's carrying a pistol. He gives it to Carlos.

CARLOS
My turn. Or maybe yours.

He hands the gun to Aaron, it is a Colt 45 revolver. A nice weapon. Aaron handles it with respect and care. He looks it over then hands it back to Carlos.

AARON
Not today.

Adam moves back close to Aaron,

AARON (CONT'D)
(to Adam)
Hey sport, why don't you and I play hooky and go fishing.

ADAM
Yeah!

Aaron looks at Carlos.

CARLOS
Catch a big one.

Aaron and Adam leave as Carlos watches them. His smile fades and concern fills his eyes.

INT. THE BLAKE RANCH - LATER

Toni cleaning Aaron's room. She's dusting. She's mad and hurt. She gets careless around the dresser and his wallet falls to the floor. It opens. She picks it up and sees his military ID card

ANGLE ON ID CARD

She looks at it, uncomprehending at first. She stares at it. A folded piece of paper is sticking out. She pulls it out and reads it. Tears fill her eyes as she sits on the bed and cries hard.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. THE BLAKE RANCH - TUESDAY MORNING

Several cars approach the ranch. In one of them is Jake and Mabel. Janet meets them at the front door.

JANET
Jake, Mabel, what in the world brings you over here.

MABEL
We came to convince Aaron to stay.

JAKE
He can't leave. After what he did to Chad, we got together and decided that he needs to stay. For Toni and for us.

JANET
How many of you came over?

MABEL
We brought most of Tuscarora.

JANET
Well come on in, all of you.

A crowd of almost twenty comes into the house.

BARNEY
Where is he?

JANET

He's out with Carlos. Tractor broke down again, he and Carlos are fixing it. They've been gone a couple of hours, should be back soon.

MABEL

Where's Toni?

JANET

She's still in her room. I don't think she's feeling well. She went to bed early last night, and hasn't come out of her room.

MABEL

He leaves Thursday doesn't he?

JANET

Yes. Listen anyone want coffee? I can break out the old coffee urn, serves forty.

There's some agreement. Toni shows up. She is not looking well. She has been crying. Notices the people.

TONI

(lifeless)

What's this?

MABEL

We came to convince him to stay.

TONI

He can't stay.

JANET

What are you talking about?

TONI

He can't stay Mama.

JANET

Listen to yourself. Why can't he stay?

TONI

Because he can't.

JANET

Toni, you're beginning to sound just like Aaron.

JAKE

Why can't he stay Toni?

She looks at him, her eyes dead. He waits for the answer. She looks at the crowd. They watch her.

BARNEY
Why can't he stay? Toni?

She looks at Barney.

TONI
(dead)
Because he's U.S. Army, and has orders to Afghanistan.

Silence.

TONI (CONT'D)
He's going to war.

Stun. The crowd looks at each other. Toni begins to cry again, Janet holds her.

TONI (CONT'D)
Oh Mama...

Softly Janet strokes her hair as if she was a child.

BARNEY
Why didn't he tell us?

JAKE
Didn't feel the need. He knew he was only here for three weeks. I can relate to that.

Mabel looks at her husband and holds his hand.

MABEL
So can I.

She starts to tear.

EXT. THE BLAKE RANCH - CONTINUOUS

The pickup pulls up to the house, no place to park.

AARON
What the hell?

CARLOS
They came to make you stay my friend.

Aaron looks at Carlos.

CARLOS (CONT'D)
What are you going to tell them?

Aaron quiet. He sees Adam playing on a farm machine.

AARON

Adam. We need to get him away from there.

Carlos sees Adam. They get out of the pickup.

CARLOS

He knows better. Kids. You always have to watch them.

One of Carlos's men is closer to Adam. Carlos yells in Spanish to the hired hand. The man turns around to see the boy. He heads for him when Adam falls crying in pain.

INSIDE

The sound of Adam in pain snaps Toni to life.

TONI

ADAM!

She runs

OUTSIDE

In time to see the hired hand stop short of the boy. He doesn't move. Others are approaching him and Adam, the man carefully signals them to stay away. Carlos coming up close, stops. Maria understands something is wrong and stops Toni from approaching.

TONI (CONT'D)

My son! Maria!

MARIA

Something is wrong, stay here!

Adam crying, then he sees it, a rattlesnake poised to strike. Adam freezes still crying, he tries to be strong but he is scared, very scared. Aaron sees the snake ready to strike the boy. Carlos moves quietly away but returns with the Colt 45. Aaron looks at him and requests the gun. Carlos looks at him,

CARLOS

If you miss...

AARON

I won't miss.

Carlos hands him the gun. Aaron takes aim and fires. The bullet takes the head of the snake off. The hired hand pulls Adam from danger.

Toni runs to her son, he has a bad cut on his leg and is bleeding. Maria sees the blood and quickly pulls a first aid kit from the pickup. Adam holding his mother, crying, scared. Jake takes the first aid kit and begins to apply first aid. He looks at the wound, begins to clean it up.

JAKE

We're going to need to get him to a doctor.

All eyes on the boy. Unseen Aaron approaches the snake, he shakes. He fires another bullet into the snake. The sound of gunfire taking the others by surprise. They look at Aaron. He fires again. Then again. He continues to fire until all he's doing is pulling the trigger on empty chambers. He shakes, he shakes hard. He begins to lose it. He sinks to his knees and begins to cry. He begins to cry hard:

AARON

I COULDN'T SAVE HIM!! GOD FORGIVE ME I COULDN'T SAVE HIM!!

Toni holding Adam tight watching Aaron. Aaron hits the ground with his fist, crying.

AARON (CONT'D)

HE DIED BECAUSE I FAILED!! I WASN'T STRONG ENOUGH!!! I failed...

Cry of anguish. Toni looks at her mother. Janet takes Adam. Toni approaches Aaron. She kneels beside him. He looks at her:

AARON (CONT'D)

(crying)
I killed him... I killed him... I let him die... I killed him...

Toni gently holds him, and he cries.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. THE BLAKE RANCH

Aaron sitting at the kitchen table, dead to the world. His eyes lost in time. The people gone, Carlos and Maria to one side watching Aaron. Toni standing in the doorway watching Aaron. Janet approaches her followed by Jake.

JAKE

Adam's cut is deep but not life threatening. But we still need to get him the hospital. He needs stitches.

TONI
I'll get him to the hospital... We
should call Doc Larson...

JANET
I'll take him.

TONI
Mom...

JAKE
There's not really much you can do
there Toni... but here...

Jake looks at Aaron.

JAKE (CONT'D)
Aaron needs you. He doesn't know
it, but he does.

TONI
(looking at Aaron)
What happened to him Jake? You were
in Vietnam, what happened to him?

JAKE
War.

Toni looks at Jake.

TONI
A mistake...

JAKE
Pardon?

TONI
Something he said once. A mistake
he has to live with.

JAKE
Now you know why they say war is
hell. We need to get Adam to the
doctor.

TONI
What do I do Jake?

JAKE
If he talks, just listen. That's
all you have to do, just listen.

EXT. THE BLAKE RANCH - MOMENTS LATER

Toni watches as Jake, Mabel, Janet and Adam drive away. She returns to the

KITCHEN

MARIA

You want us to stay?

TONI

No. If I need anything, I'll call.
Mom said she would take care of Adam.
She'll call if she needs anything.
Carlos I may not be here in the
morning...

CARLOS

We'll take care of everything.

TONI

Thanks.

Carlos and Maria leave, leaving Toni and Aaron alone. She looks at him. She sits next to him. He doesn't see her. Lost in thought, lost in time. She takes his hand. He slowly looks at her. His eyes, pain, guilt. She gets up and slowly approaches him. She gently sits on his lap, then softly puts her lips on his. The kiss is tender but not long. She gets up and takes his hand, then so gently leads him to her bedroom.

INT. THE BLAKE RANCH - NIGHT

Toni under the sheet, she lays next to him. Her hand carefully touches the scar on his left shoulder and arm. It is a bad scar. She looks at him but he is away again.

TONI

(softly)

Talk to me.

Silence. Then, away in another world,

AARON

We call him Snake. He has a birthmark on his left cheek that looks like a snake. So that's the name we gave him.

He's a mean bastard. He kills for pleasure. He threatens, he keeps the villages in check. If anyone tries to help us, he kills.

(MORE)

AARON (CONT'D)

Without mercy, without remorse. He lives to kill.

When Lacy died on 9/11 my world died. When I found out that Sharon died, all I could think of was killing the bastards. You asked me once what I was good at... I'm good at killing. Very good at killing.

Toni flinches.

AARON (CONT'D)

For a long time all I could think of was revenge. Revenge for a woman I loved, revenge for my sister. So I joined the Army. I found out that I was very good at...

This will be my fifth tour. It was my last tour that I met him, a young boy about the age of Adam. His parents had been killed by a suicide bomber about a year before so the local orphanage was keeping him. He loved Americans. His name was Fadil. It means generous, honorable. And he was all that. Some of us... Our hearts went out to him. He took a liking to me, I don't know why, but he did. It didn't take long that I felt like he was my son. I can't explain it, but... I was making plans to adopt him. I had no clue how I was going to do it, all I knew was that I wanted to be his father.

My squad got the orders to find Snake, the bastard was making a lot of trouble. I had tangled with Snake before, I had him in my sights, I got distracted... I missed the shot. I killed his brother instead. Snake knew it was me. I can still see the hate in his eyes, the eyes of a cobra. I knew that he wanted vengeance.

We set a trap, but it was us that fell into it. I had six men with me... Snake keeps a sharp sword, his favorite weapon. His pleasure is to cut the heads off his victims.

(MORE)

AARON (CONT'D)

He decapitated three of my men before I knew what happened. I made a mistake in judgment. I underestimated him.

TONI

(choking, softly)
It wasn't your fault.

AARON

I was squad leader, I was responsible. We had a hard fight, his sword almost took off my left arm.

She looks at and softly touches the wound.

AARON (CONT'D)

I went down, I couldn't move. I couldn't find the strength. I saw the last of my men go down. Then I saw that wicked smile on his face. He looked at me... Not ready to kill me yet. That's when one of his henchmen brought out Fadil. He was so scared. He looked at me, his eyes pleading. Snake laughing. He picked up Fadil by the hair and held him up. I can still hear his cries. Cries of pain, cries of fear. I couldn't move. As much as I tried I couldn't move. Then I saw his body drop. Snake laughing at me. He tossed Fadil's head and it landed in front of me. I can still see those young lifeless eyes.

I remember Snake standing over me, laughing. An evil laugh. I knew I was dead. Life no longer had meaning, I was ready to die. In that moment I accepted it.

The rest of my squad arrived, took the murdering bastard by surprise. The last thing I saw was him running away. The next thing I remember I was in Germany, laying in a hospital bed. I stayed there for awhile then got flown back to the States. I spent the last year recovering. But now it's time to go back.

Toni shakes. She tears.

TONI

Why?

AARON

I have a Snake to kill.

TONI

And if he kills you?

He looks at her. He gently caresses her face.

AARON

On 9/11 I lost all my reasons to live, then I met you and Adam. When that snake almost bit Adam, everything came rushing back. I couldn't let it happen again. I can't let it happen again. He has to be stopped. I have to stop him.

TONI

Let someone else.

AARON

I can't.

He looks in her eyes then gently kisses her.

EXT. THE MOUNTAINS OF AFGHANISTAN - TEN DAYS LATER - FORWARD
BASE CAMP

The transport truck stops and twenty men, all Army, mostly young, carrying their gear get out of the vehicle. A sergeant, CASPIN, is waiting for them to unload. Aaron leaves the vehicle and approaches the NCO.

AARON

Sergeant Caspin...

CASPIN

Sergeant Johnson...

The two men shake hands.

AARON

Been awhile.

CASPIN

That it has been.

AARON

New recruits.

CASPIN

Yeah. Listen when we heard that you were coming back some of the old gang got together and, well I think they want to join you. You going after him?

AARON

Yeah. It's all I could think about this last year.

CASPIN

I want to volunteer.

AARON

Thanks Casp, but... you have your own duties, besides... So how is it around here?

CASPIN

Same. Snake has all the villages scared. It makes it hard. Harder than it should be. Harwell is commanding now. He's on his way.

AARON

I'll wait for him.

Sweeps his hand at the men just standing around.

AARON (CONT'D)

You got a bunch of recruits to take care of.

CASPIN

That I do. Good luck Aaron. God speed.

The two men shake hands.

AARON

Thanks. Watch your back.

CASPIN

I always do.

Caspin heads off giving commands to the new arrivals as Aaron watches them move away. A jeep approaches with two men and stops. Aaron comes to attention and provides a sharp salute. A Colonel, JAY HARWELL, gets out, returns the salute and smiles, extends hand. Aaron shakes it.

HARWELL

Welcome back you old dog.

AARON

It's not good to be back.

HARWELL

You know if I had any sense I'd court martial your ass and ship it back to the States.

AARON

You never had any sense.

HARWELL

True. Put your gear in the jeep and let's take a walk.

Aaron stows his gear and the two men walk. Aaron looks at the tents and men moving about.

AARON

Forward base camp. How long has this been here?

HARWELL

About a month. My orders are to gather intel on enemy movement, and coordinate air strikes.

AARON

Any success?

HARWELL

A little... but not enough.

AARON

Snake.

HARWELL

The bastard is causing a lot of trouble. There's a tribal chief, Abbas, that wants to help us, but...

AARON

He's terrified.

HARWELL

He has one daughter and Snake has made it very clear what will happen to her and his wife if he cooperates. He lost his son to Snake a few months ago so it's hard to blame him. The bitch is, he knows the location of several top al Qaeda leaders. The intel he has can be invaluable.

AARON

Does he know where Snake is?

HARWELL

No.

AARON

What about other sources?

HARWELL

They follow the lead of Abbas.

AARON

If he knows so much, why doesn't Snake take him out?

HARWELL

He's too well liked and respected. Snake needs him alive to keep the villages in check. Lose Abbas, lose the villages.

The men walk slowly.

HARWELL (CONT'D)

Aaron, I want you to walk away from this one.

AARON

I can't do that Jay, and you know it.

HARWELL

I heard you met someone.

AARON

How the hell did you know that?

HARWELL

My job's intelligence remember. So who is she?

Aaron stops and pulls a small picture from his pocket. It is a picture of Toni and Adam. He hands it to Harwell.

AARON

Her name's Toni, with an i. That's her son Adam.

HARWELL

She's pretty. That explains this letter.

Pulls a letter from his pocket and gives it to Aaron. Toni's return address is on it. Aaron smiles.

AARON

You bastard. And I was wondering if you had some mystical power you kept hidden.

HARWELL

Go home. Be with her.

Harwell gives the picture back to Aaron, he looks at it.

AARON

I would like that more than anything Jay, but I can't. And you know why.

Harwell nods. They continue walking.

HARWELL

Some of the old team is here. Took me awhile to convince the brass not to put them on report, finally convinced HQ that they were needed here.

AARON

They went AWOL from their commands?

HARWELL

All of 'em. But... I took care of it. When do you want to leave?

AARON

First light.

HARWELL

Let's get you settled, then report to my tent for briefing. Sergeant.

Aaron snaps to attention and gives a sharp salute. Harwell returns it.

INT. FORWARD BASE CAMP AARON'S TENT - EVENING

Aaron is setting up his cot when four men, SMITTY (white), CHICO (Hispanic), DOG (black), LEX (black), enter. Aaron smiles and greets each of them.

SMITTY

Ain't you a sight for sore eyes.

AARON

Smitty don't you ever go home?

Shakes hands, manly hugs.

SMITTY

Not me.

AARON

Chico! Damn you're still ugly!

The two men hug.

AARON (CONT'D)

Dog! Lex!

The men shake hands and hug.

CHICO

When I heard you were coming back I knew where I had to be.

AARON

You went AWOL?

LEX

We all went AWOL. We all wanted to be here.

DOG

We have a job to finish.

Aaron acknowledges.

LEX

We taking a squad?

AARON

No, just the five of us.

SMITTY

Special team.

AARON

Yeah. Listen, you don't have to do this...

DOG

We know what's at stake Sarge. You don't have to tell us the risks.

CHICO

The bastard's gotta be stopped. If we don't stop him here, where will we stop him? Besides we owe him for what he did last time. Ain't no way I'm letting that bastard off the hook.

AARON

Colonel tells me they haven't been able to find him. That the unit has lost four men to his sword over the last two months. Including Harris last week. Diane... two kids... how do you explain to them that their father isn't coming home?

Somber group.

LEX

When do you want to leave?

AARON

First light.

The men nod.

DOG

(lightly)

Hey Sarge, check this out...

He pulls a small pistol from his pocket and hands it to Aaron. Aaron looks at the weapon, small, compact, but deadly.

AARON

Where the hell did you get this?

DOG

Found this small arms dealer...

AARON

Never mind! I don't want to know. Does the Army know you have this?

Hands it back to Dog.

DOG

You think I'm crazy? Hell no! They'd take it away from me if they knew. I call this my insurance policy... five extra bullets... put it in my vest, hidden, nobody knows...

AARON

Then keep it that way... hidden.

Dog smiles and puts the weapon away. Silence. Aaron looks at the team like he is remembering.

AARON (CONT'D)

I hate to break up this party but I think you guys better call it a night,
(MORE)

AARON (CONT'D)
 it's gonna be a long day, maybe a
 long search.

The men look at each other.

SMITTY
 Well, before we leave...

He breaks out a canteen. Chico breaks out some cups. Aaron
 puzzled. Smitty pours. Aaron takes his cup and smells it.

AARON
 Brandy! Where the hell did you get
 brandy?

SMITTY
 I have my sources. Wasn't my first
 choice, but... Beggars can't be
 choosy...

Aaron smiles. Chico raises his cup:

CHICO
 To fallen brothers.

ALL
 To fallen brothers.

The others toast, then drink.

INT. FORWARD BASE CAMP AARON'S TENT - NIGHT

Aaron settles on his cot and looks at the still unopened
 envelope. He hesitates like he is remembering. He slightly
 smiles, then carefully opens the letter, some pictures of
 Toni and Adam are in it, he looks at the photos then begins
 to read,

TONI (V.O.)
 My dearest Aaron. You left only
 this afternoon and already I miss
 you more than I thought possible.
 You're probably wondering how I got
 your address since you didn't tell
 me. I copied it off your orders.
 Please forgive me for prying, but I
 knew that you would never let me
 know where you are. I pray to God
 that this letter finds you and that
 you will answer it.

FOCUS on Toni writing the letter, her expression, her
 thoughts.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

You asked me once about you being the answer to my prayer. I didn't know how to answer then, and maybe I still don't.

I told you that the ranch was a good life, and that is true, but what I didn't tell you is that it is also a lonely life. It can be so lonely. The nights so hollow. My bed so empty. So I prayed for you. I know that sounds selfish, rude, and maybe even cruel, but when I saw you standing there that day at the train station, helping me with that generator, I knew, I knew that God had answered my prayer.

FLASHBACK, the first time he saw her. Remembering Toni on the ranch, under the moon, looking at him.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I love this life I have chosen but the loneliness can be so harsh and unforgiving. I love my son, but as a woman I need more, and you gave me that more.

I never tried to find Josh after he left. I don't think I really wanted to. And I know now that I didn't really love him. Why I fell in love with you, only God can answer. But I do love you, I love you so very much.

FOCUS again on Toni writing.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

The pain that you feel, the loss that you have suffered I cannot begin to understand. I was selfish to think that I was the only one hurting, that life had dealt me a cruel hand, and that I was being punished for sins I performed. You taught me otherwise, and for that, I am truly thankful. And always will be. Know that my prayers are for you and your safety. Always. All my love, Toni.

Aaron looks up, pain in his eyes.

EXT. THE BLAKE RANCH - THE MAILBOX - DAY

Toni is getting mail out of the mailbox that stands by the side of the road. She grabs the documents not looking at them but carries them back to the jeep, Adam secure in the child seat. She starts the vehicle and drives to the house.

INT. THE BLAKE RANCH - DINING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

She puts the mail on the dining room table.

ADAM
Mommy can I watch TV?

TONI
Sure. How's your leg feel?

ADAM
It hurts a little. I miss Aaron.
Is he coming back?

Toni smiles at her son.

TONI
I don't know Adam, I just don't know.
But I miss him too. Go watch TV.
In a few minutes I'll fix us some
ice cream.

ADAM
Before lunch?

TONI
Before lunch. We deserve it.

ADAM
Yeah!

Adam moves to the family room and turns on the television to some cartoons that are showing. Toni sighs and turns her attention to the mail. Bills. More bills. The letter. Her hands shake. She shivers, afraid to open it. A letter with a US Army seal. A return address with Aaron's name. She stares at the letter, then very carefully opens it. A picture falls out. Aaron and four other men are in it. There is writing on each of the men, names that make no sense. She looks at it, her eyes resting on Aaron then she begins to read the letter.

AARON (V.O.)
My dear Toni. Your letter took me
by surprise, it was something I had
not expected. You are still full of
surprises.

FOCUS on Aaron writing the letter, late night in his tent.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I wanted to write this as we leave at first light. Our mission is the one that you fear, but it is a job that has to be done. The picture that I have enclosed with this letter, I hope will give you comfort, for I do not face Snake alone. I have with me four of the bravest men I know, friends, comrades, that I have grown to respect. I would say that they are atypical of men over here, but they're not. The truth is that they are very typical of the men I work with. The only difference is that I have grown to love these men like brothers.

FOCUS on Aaron looking at the picture that Toni is looking at.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I have scribbled their names on the picture so that you can appreciate each for the talent they give to this mission. Each of these men risked disciplinary action just to be with me, and that is more precious than all the gold in the world.

FOCUS on Smitty's face in the picture.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Calvin Smith, also known as Smitty. He comes from a well-to-do family, but after 9/11 he committed himself to fighting the evil that we face. He didn't have to, but chose to. I asked him why once, his response was "because it needs to be done". A typical answer for most of the men stationed over here. Smitty has a talent for finding things. I swear this man can find a needle in one of your haystacks, given enough time.

FOCUS on Toni looking at the photo, she smiles, she continues to read.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Jose Hernandez, we call him Chico.

FOCUS on Chico's face in the picture.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

He's first generation American. His parents were illegal when they first came to the country from Mexico. That was back in the eighties. They managed to stay and eventually became American citizens.

She remembers. FLASHBACK to the day PHILIP left the ranch giving her a kiss on the cheek. Concern in her eyes. His smile. The last time she saw Philip as he, Carlos, and Maria drove away. She reads.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Like Carlos and Maria worry about Philip, Chico's parents worry about him. This is his third tour. Like Smitty, I asked him why, why did he join the Army. Why does he fight? He shrugged and had the audacity to answer me in Spanish. I still don't know what he said to this day, and I asked that question four years ago.

FOCUS on the four men, Dog, Smitty, Lex, and Chico, in their tent, playing cards, laughing. FOCUS on Doggett, laughing, winning the bet. The others disgusted.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Charles Doggett, also known as Dog. He was raised on the streets of New York, in a poor family of five siblings. No father to speak of, a mother who slept with anyone that would pay her rent. He has three brothers and one sister, all from different fathers. He was sixteen when the towers fell.

FLASHBACK on Doggett as a boy of sixteen, watching a plane hit a tower, then covered in dirt and dust from the falling towers. Fear on his face, shock.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

He watched them fall, he saw the planes hit, and he was smothered in their dust. The event left such an impression upon him that as soon as he turned eighteen he joined the Army and has proven himself in combat more than a dozen times.

(MORE)

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)
He can sniff out a terrorist better
than anyone I know, and I am honored
to call him brother.

A sound from the TV distracts Toni as she looks at her son who is laughing. She smiles a small smile and returns to the letter.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Mike Lexford. He has earned the
name Lex after the villainous Lex
Luther of Superman fame.

Toni looks at Lex's face in the picture.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)
The mischief he causes to the enemy
is priceless. Born and raised in
Oklahoma he brings common sense to
the team, something that is sorely
needed at times.

I could go on for hours talking about
my brothers, but time grows short
and the daylight beckons so I must
close this letter. I want you to
know that the time I spent with you
and Adam, I would not change for
anything. I know that you are asking
yourself if I am in love with you,
and to that I have no answer. The
feelings I have for you and Adam are
real but is it real love...

FOCUS on Aaron writing.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)
I do look forward to your letters,
for I have never had letters from
home, and I did not realize how
important they are. As I had no one
to write me, I too was alone, I just
didn't know it. I pray, I pray to a
God that I thought had abandoned me
that you will continue to write.
That you will find it in your heart
to respond to me. I just want you
to know that your letter has given
me strength. You are a reminder of
why I fight, for what I am fighting
for. Aaron.

Toni tears as she looks at empty space.

EXT. THE MOUNTAINS OF AFGHANISTAN

The five soldiers are searching caves and the mountainous area. They talk to the villagers, they are constantly on high alert, but they are frustrated. There is no sign of Snake. But they continue to search.

EXT. BASE CAMP - EVENING

Aaron laying on his cot reads a letter,

TONI (V.O.)

My dearest Aaron, it has only been three weeks since you left and my arms long for you, my heart cries for you. To say that I was not hurt when you told me that you may not love me would be a lie. I talked to Jake about it, as he is often a good sounding board when something is heavy on my mind. What I didn't realize about him was the wisdom he has concerning issues of war.

FOCUS on Jake and Toni talking, the conflict that Jake is experiencing, the resurrection of old memories, the pain of a time past, but not forgotten.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I also discovered something else... I knew that he was in Vietnam, what I didn't know was that he spent two tours over there and has experienced the horrors of war. His advice to me gave me comfort but I could see the pain in his eyes as he tried to explain, explain something that can only be experienced, never described. I have never seen that pain before, and I realized that the questions I was asking was unfair to him. So I stopped asking.

FOCUS on Mabel and Toni talking.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Mabel told me that she had the same feelings and fears for Jake when he left for war, and that he, like many men have trouble saying what they really feel. She told me that it is a curse born and carried by warriors, a curse as old as time itself.

(MORE)

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I have never been exposed to such brutalities before, and I am at a loss for understanding. But I am trying.

Toni looks at the picture of Aaron and the men. FOCUS on her writing.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Adam is missing you, almost as much as I do. A day doesn't go by that he doesn't ask about you. His leg is healing nicely, but he still has nightmares about the snake.

FOCUS on Adam waking up in the night and crying, Toni running to him, comforting him. Carrying him to her bed, him crying.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

He wakes up crying in the middle of the night. There are some nights I put in my bed, to comfort him, to hold him. If his nightmares are so bad, what must yours be like? That is a question that keeps me wondering at night, and during the day.

FOCUS on her, Carlos and the men rounding up cattle, on horses, ranching, farming.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

The round up is going well as we prepare for market. Carlos and Maria, they worry about me, ask about you. They ask if you are coming back. I don't know what to tell them. I don't know what to tell myself. So I ask you, what do I tell them? What will you tell me? All my love, Toni.

Aaron puts down the letter, his eyes empty.

INT. JACK CREEK NEVADA - GHOST TOWN - DAY

The town silent, no breeze, no sound. Only silence. Toni walks the deserted town, she stops at the well she fell in years earlier, she looks at new pictures, then she rereads the letter.

AARON (V.O.)

My dearest Toni. To say that I am not missing you would be lie.

(MORE)

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

During the quiet moments you constantly occupy my thoughts. It is at those times I see your face and feel your touch in all that I do, even though we are worlds apart.

Lex tells me that I'm crazy for leaving you, that I need to go home.

FOCUS on Lex talking to Aaron in the mountains of Afghanistan. The conversation, the look of defeat in Aaron's eyes. His pain as he listens to his friend.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

But that is something I cannot do, even though I often think about it. When I consider that maybe he is right, we discover another atrocity committed by this brutal killer.

FOCUS on dead, decapitated bodies. Flies buzzing around and the stench of death. An angry team. Aaron disgusted and frustrated.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I realize that until I finish this mission I can never go home. The consequences of running away would haunt me more than death itself. It is a dishonor I would feel, a shame that would haunt me and cause us misery all our lives should we ever be together. And that is something that cannot happen as long as Snake lives.

I wish I had known about Jake and his experiences in 'Nam. Perhaps his counsel could help me as it is helping you.

FLASHBACK on a young Jake in the jungles of Vietnam. Fighting, men dying. Explosions. Jets dropping napalm. The fear in his eyes.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I don't know much about that war, but from the warriors I have talked to, the hell that they suffered was far more than the hell we suffer today. My respect for them is far greater than I thought possible.

FOCUS on Toni sitting on the well reading the letter.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I am glad that Adam is recovering, I was worried about him. I pray that the nightmares he suffers will soon end, and with you there to hold and comfort him, I know that they will.
Aaron.

The sun beginning to set, Toni sitting on the well, sad and alone. The sound of the ghost town, silent.

EXT. THE MOUNTAINS OF AFGHANISTAN - DAY

An armored transport on the roads, the crew looking out for trouble. Alert. Aaron starts to become lost in thought. Dog motions to the others. The team watches their leader. Aaron pulls the letter from his vest and reads:

TONI (V.O.)

My dearest love, everyday I miss you more and I pray that you miss me as much. There is a part of me that believes that you love me, but there is another part of me that makes me wonder. But if you love me or not, I want you to know that I love you, more than life itself. My fear is that... you will forget me, and never forgive me.

FOCUS on Toni with her mother at the kitchen table. Toni hurt, gets up, paces, not believing what her mother is saying to her.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Mama and I had a long talk the other day, about you, about Dad, about life. She told me things I had not considered before, things that made me angry, that hurt me, but things that are true. Things I didn't want to hear. Things I didn't want to accept. But life happens, events that we don't expect. Barney had a heart attack two days ago.

FOCUS on Barney in the hospital room, laying in the bed, hooked up to monitors. Jim and Cathy by his side.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

The doctor is optimistic but Jim is worried. Barney lives alone, with no one to look after him and that scares Jim.

(MORE)

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

He and Barney are very close, and when his mother died, they became closer, just like Mom and me when Dad died. Jim wants to take him back to Vegas, to live with him and Cathy. Cathy approves, but Barney, the stubborn old man, is against it. He doesn't want to leave the land his beloved Martha is buried on. I can understand that. I can even respect that, but I cannot accept it. Barney needs someone to look after him, he needs Jim and Cathy. I pray they make the right decision. I pray he makes the right decision.

A bump in the road, alarm of the crew, but the vehicle continues to travel unimpeded. Aaron looks around at his friends. Smitty watching him, a slight smile. Aaron settles down then begins to read again.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

With Barney's heart attack, Mama made me realize how precious life really is. How short it is. And also how painful it can be. Mama told me that your pain is deeper than I can relate to. I didn't believe her, but then I began to think about it and realized just how right she was. I know the pain you suffer with the death of Fadil, and the guilt that you feel. When you told me your world ended on 9/11 with the death of Lacy and your sister, it didn't really register with me. I was caught up in my own world, my own pain, my own loneliness. But Mom made me think, to ask the question, how much did you love Lacy?

FLASHBACK to Aaron and LACY together. FOCUS on Lacy, her smile, her happiness. Walking down the street of New York, looking at the Twin Towers, she kidding him. He chasing her. Having fun, being together, being in love.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Mama made me realize how much you must have loved her... how much you miss her. I became jealous of a woman that you lost, a love that died a horrible death.

(MORE)

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

To lose the woman you loved and your sister on the same day, at the same time... I finally realized that I cannot even begin to relate to the pain you must carry every day.

FOCUS on Toni writing, crying, ashamed.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

The feelings you must have had, and still have, must be overwhelming. I am so sorry, and I am so ashamed of my actions, my feelings, my insensitivity. It is no wonder that you may hate me. It is no wonder that you don't love me. How can you love the monster that I became. But I love you so much, so very much that without you life has no meaning. Please forgive me, please say that you forgive me. That is all I ask. Toni.

The vehicle stops and the men get out.

EXT. THE BLAKE RANCH - THE MAILBOX - MORNING

Toni waiting for the mail. The mailman comes and she takes the letters from him. He departs and she goes through the mail, a letter is there. She opens it.

AARON (V.O.)

My dearest Toni, your last letter left me shocked, more so than I have been in a long time. I wasn't expecting your words to hurt me, to shame me the way they did. It was never my intention to make you feel guilt and I am so sorry if I did that. A monster? If you are, then you are the most beautiful monster I have seen in so many years. I still see your beauty and in my mind I can still touch your face. I can smell the scent of your perfume, and feel the warmth of your body. These many miles and the elapsed time have never diminished that sensation. I don't think it ever will. But your mother is right, I really loved Lacy and in a way I always will.

FOCUS on Janet and Adam at the ranch, Adam reading a book and Janet encouraging him, Adam smiling at her.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Lacy was my first real love, and it is said that the first love is also the strongest. That may be true, it may not be, but time has a way of dulling the pain, to help us move on. You moved past Josh, and you did it in a way that you did not expect. You had Adam and your mother. I had no one. I didn't know how to move on until I met you.

Toni reading. FOCUS on Toni's face and eyes.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

If I had to choose one thing about you that captivated me the most, it would be your eyes. The most beautiful eyes. And if I am honest, I know, I feel, that your eyes are more beautiful than Lacy's. And I loved Lacy's eyes.

Toni chokes. She stops reading. She smiles tenderly. She continues reading.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Our enemy still eludes us, but his presence is widely felt. We see examples of his handiwork, and it is grim reminder of who we face.

FOCUS on a village, three lifeless heads on a pikes. The team looking up into the lifeless eyes. Frustration and anger permeate the team. Aaron really mad.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

As long as Snake runs free he can spread his form of terror without hindrance. And the villages are too scared to speak, to tell us where he is. Thus it becomes what is known as a Catch 22. It's damned if we do, damned if we don't. But I will find him. One day. I will.

Toni shivers. Scared. She continues to read.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I got a letter from John the other day, it seems that he and Beth have decided to tie the knot.

FOCUS on JOHN and BETH, two older children making wedding plans, wedding dresses, smiling, having a good time, Beth and John in love.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I am so happy for him. He asked if I could come to the wedding, if it was even possible for me to attend. I wrote him back with my blessings and regrets for not being able to be there. Then I told him about you and Adam. I have yet to receive a reply from him but I am sure he is busy with wedding arrangements. I pray that she makes him happy. Pray... something I have not done in so many years.

FOCUS on Toni, in church, kneeling, praying, Adam by her side, Janet watching. Toni's tears as she pours out her heart to God.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I lost my faith so long ago. I believed that God had abandoned me. I can begin to relate how you must have felt when Josh abandoned you. That feeling of emptiness, loneliness. But you are there, so many miles away but still there. I find myself longing to hold you, to look into your eyes, to hold your hand. To touch your face. To be by your side.

No signature.

INT. THE BLAKE RANCH - NIGHT

Toni just put Adam to bed, she turns off the light and smiles at her son. She goes to the

DINING ROOM

Where she takes pen and paper and considers what to write. She looks at another envelope postmarked from New York. She begins to write.

TONI (V.O.)

My dearest love, I received both a phone call and a wedding invitation from John the other day. I must admit it surprised me as I have never met them. John and I talked for quite awhile about you, about me and Adam, about Sharon.

FLASHBACK to John and SHARON, Christmas morning, two kids opening presents, Aaron watching them. Sharon giving Aaron a Christmas gift

ANGLE ON CHRISTMAS GIFT TAG - TO MY BABY BROTHER, LOVE SHARON

Aaron smiling, opening the package. Sharon and John exchanging gifts and kissing.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

You were right, the love that he and Sharon had was remarkable. I asked him how Beth felt about it, she was on the extension and told me that she could never replace what he lost, only that she could try to fill the hole that existed in his heart and soul. Fill it with love and understanding.

FOCUS on Aaron, on his cot, in his tent, reading the letter.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I realized at that moment that I can never replace what you lost, no one can. All I can do is offer my love, my understanding, and my support to fill the void that I know exist in your heart. But only if you let me. Please let me. John told me that the day he lost Sharon was the blackest day of his life.

FLASHBACK to Sharon, in her cubical, working. Talking with others. Smiles and some laughter. She approaches a desk by the window to talk to someone. Sharon's POV, looking out the window she sees the plane approaching. She freezes. Seconds later the plane hits the tower several floors beneath her. Fear and panic as flames erupt. She moves, not sure to where. Smoke and flame as stumbles to her desk, she grabs the picture of her husband and children, then crawls under it as some debris falls from the roof above. She holds the photo close to her breast. She cries. Smoke. Flames. Panic. She looks at the picture, coughing, crying she holds the photo tightly. She feels the floor caving in. The tower falls.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I can't even imagine the thoughts that you had. I asked about Lacy, why she was on the plane. Then he told me. I am so sorry about your baby.

FLASHBACK on Lacy seeing a doctor, examining her, stomach problems, then giving her a baby rattle. Happiness. Her entering the plane, carrying the baby rattle. She sees the terrorist, slightly concerned but lets it pass. She smiles, happy, looks at children.

She takes her seat, holds the rattle dearly, happy, content. The plane takes off. Fear and tears as Lacy sees her coming death, the towers ahead.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

She was coming back to L.A., coming home to tell you the news that you were going to be a father. That you didn't know until later that she carried your child. I asked why she was in Boston, John told me that her job sometimes required travel, but that this was going to be her last trip. A little stomach nausea was going to turn into a happy family.

Aaron pulls a picture of Toni and Adam from his pocket and looks at it. He softly touches Toni's face and a tear falls. He continues to read.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Jake asks me how I am holding up and I try to be strong, but he knows. I see it in his eyes. He ask me about your battles, I tell him I don't know, for you never say.

FOCUS on a fierce firefight, the team battling terrorist, bullets flying, explosions, Aaron issuing orders, the team responding. Protecting innocent people, children, babies. The battle over, the children safe.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I cannot imagine the horrors you face everyday. I watch the news and hear only the negative, about how horrible we are treating those people, yet I know better. Jake says I'm finally growing up, accepting responsibility for my own thinking. I told him I was grown up, then I realized that I wasn't. I was letting someone else influence my thoughts, telling me things I knew in my heart not to be true. It is a lesson I am learning the hard way.

FOCUS on the team, medics putting bandages on wounds, dirty, tired, somber. Aaron rests, pulls the letter from his vest.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I know that you are doing the right thing.

(MORE)

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

You are protecting us and them from a horror that I cannot even imagine. I try not to think about... losing you. But it is so hard keeping those thoughts out of my mind. Just know that I love you. I will always love you. Toni.

Aaron looks at the carnage around him. The bandage on Lex's arm. Chico cleaning his rifle. He looks at the children, playing as though nothing has happened. It is a way of life for them. And his eyes grow sad.

EXT. THE BLAKE RANCH - THE MAILBOX - DAY

Toni gets the mail, a letter. She opens the envelope and begins to read. Slowly walking back to the jeep.

AARON (V.O.)

My dear Toni and Adam, these last few days have been difficult, for me, for my team. Snake continues to elude us and the frustration that I feel is more enraging than what I felt on 9/11. My commanding officer thinks that I should give this search up.

FOCUS on Aaron and Harwell, in Harwell's tent, having an argument. Aaron visibly upset. Harwell angry. Aaron paces, Harwell demands. The two men argue.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

He is pressuring me to do so, but he knows I won't. What he is not telling me, but what I learned, is that command is pressuring him, pressuring him hard. It is sad when politics gets in the way of the job. There is a rumor that I may be court martialed for these actions that I am taking. If that is the price I must pay for doing my job then so be it. But I will not stop. We are so close, I feel it, maybe just a few more days.

Toni sits in the jeep at the mailbox and continues reading. Adam in the back seat.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

My commanding officer is a good man, and a good friend.

(MORE)

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

His name is Jay Harwell and I have known him for a long time. He has a beautiful wife, Jill, and three great children, two girls and a boy. The boy is the youngest and he's six now, a year older than Adam. Should anything happen to me, Jay will write you. It will be an official letter, something I hope that you never receive. Jay knows about you and Adam as we have had many long discussions of home, the ones we love, and what we left behind. Which reminds me, you never told me how Barney is, what happened to him.

FOCUS on Barney leaving the hospital with the help of Jim and Cathy. Tears in his eyes as he leaves his home. He looks at the grave, situated under a large beautiful tree, of his beloved Martha as the car, with Jim driving, pulls away from ranch. The moving van close behind.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I pray that he is well and living with Jim and Cathy now, to think that he may... is unthinkable.

Smitty had a theory about where Snake may be hiding.

FOCUS on Smitty hovering over a map, telling Aaron and the team his theory. Pointing out a location. Aaron agreeing.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

When Smitty has a theory I listen, as he is more often right than wrong. I have arranged for us to go there in the morning. I do not know what awaits us at our destination, all I know is that this must end, one way or another. This chase grows long, and I grow tired of it.

A gust of wind, Toni holds her hat, she looks at Adam who somehow sits quietly in the back seat of the jeep. She continues to read.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I do not know how many more letters I can write. This feeling I have that Snake and I are destined to clash soon is overwhelming. For all I know this letter could be my last.

(MORE)

AARON (CONT'D)

If it is then I think I should tell you, tell you how much I love you, how much I miss you, how much I love Adam, how much I miss you both. It took me awhile to figure it out, leave it to Lex to put it in perspective for me.

FOCUS on Lex and Aaron talking, in Aaron's tent. Aaron stunned by what Lex is telling him.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I fell in love with you the moment I saw you at the train station. But my pride, my guilt would not allow me to admit it to myself, much less to you. I felt that I was betraying Lacy and our unborn child by allowing myself to fall in love with you. I could not have been more wrong. And for that error I am so sorry. You deserve better, better than me. If this is my last letter than my only want is for you to be happy.

Toni in her home, night, as she reads the letter again. Tears flow as she focuses on the words.

AARON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Lacy was my world, but that world died. Yet I was blessed because she came into my life and taught me how to live, how to love. I never thought that I could feel that way again. But I have been twice blessed, the second time when you came into my life. Because of these blessings I know that there is a God and that He has a plan for each of us. I want you to know, that you opened my eyes again, you helped me to love again, to believe again, and for that I will always be in your debt. What tomorrow may bring I do not know, but whatever it is, if anything, I realize that my only regret is that I didn't tell you sooner how much you mean to me, and how much I love you. Please be happy, and know that you made me happy too. All my love, Aaron.

EXT. A MOUNTAIN VILLAGE - DAY

The armored vehicle approaches the village and stops. Aaron and the crew get out of the vehicle. Aaron looks at the crewchief, he's on full alert. The driver and gunner too. The two men look at each other. The crewchief nods and Aaron and the team move away from the vehicle. Full alert. The village deserted. Tension in the air.

LEX

Where is everybody?

AARON

Smitty, you may have been right.

CHICO

Trap?

AARON

Don't rule it out.

DOG

More than likely they just saw us coming.

AARON

Maybe, but it smells.

DOG

Like a New York city sewer.

LEX

(lightly)

Maybe we should just call it a day, pack a picnic, grab a couple of beers...

The men fan out, ready for battle. The silence becomes deafening. Nervous. Fear. Aaron looks at the armored vehicle, the crew on full alert. Suddenly it erupts in a ball of flame as it explodes. The crew killed. Shrapnel as the team dives for the dirt and cover.

CHICO

WHAT THE HELL...!!

Gunfire erupts and bullets fly. The team scrambling for cover. They return fire. Some of the terrorist go down, but it seems like others take their place. The gunfight is intense. Terrorist arm an RPG and fire. Explosion as the projectile detonates. Aaron aims and takes out the RPG team. Smoke and flames. The team fights hard and more terrorist go down. Lex finds himself overwhelmed, he fights hard, killing many, but the enemy bullets rip his body to shreds. As he dies he pulls a grenade from his vest.

Blood covers his body, the enemy, many of them, approach the downed soldier, Lex, with his dying breath, pulls the pin, the handle opens and he dies with the explosive in his hand. The enemy close, too late they see the grenade, it explodes, killing them.

DOG

LEX IS DOWN! LEX IS DOWN!

More bullets fly. The team overwhelmed. Aaron makes every shot count, his aim deadly. One behind him, almost too late Aaron sees him, but Aaron's weapon empty. The terrorist aims his weapon to fire but Aaron throws dirt in his face, then kicks the weapon out of his hands. He attacks Aaron with his knife, but Aaron is too fast, grabs the terrorist and kills him with his own knife. Aaron quickly and efficiently reloads and begins to fire again. His aim deadly.

Smitty in hand-to-hand with two of the terrorist. He quickly and efficiently downs one, killing him. The other attacks and puts his knife in Smitty's back. Smitty grabs the terrorist using an advanced martial arts move, the terrorist surprised as Smitty uses the terrorists' own knife against him, slitting his throat. Smitty goes down to his knees, puts his hand on his back and pulls it away, full of blood. The look of defeat on his face, Smitty goes down.

Suddenly the bullets stop. Silence. Aaron looks around. No sign of Smitty, Lex or Chico. Dog slightly wounded, making his way over towards him. Crawling, hurting, bleeding. Aaron helps him, staying under cover.

DOG (CONT'D)

Looks like you're the only one that came out of this untouched.

AARON

Not quite.

Puts his hand on his side, pulls it out, blood.

AARON (CONT'D)

Let's take a look at you. Lex?
Smitty?

Begins to look at Dog's wounds.

DOG

I saw Lex go down hard. Took a bunch of the bastards with him. I don't know about Smitty. What about you?

AARON

I'm fine, just a scratch. Chico?

DOG

Don't know man. I... I don't know.
How many do you think?

AARON

Thirty at least. But I think we cut
'em to size.

DOG

Snake.

AARON

Yeah.

DOG

Why'd they stop?

AARON

Playing with us. I underestimated
the bastard once, I won't do it again.

DOG

Just the two of us Sarge.

Aaron looks at him.

AARON

Yeah. Yeah.

Dog looks at the man, nods.

DOG

To the death?

AARON

I don't think we have a choice
anymore.

DOG

Then let's kill the bastards.

AARON

How you set for ammo?

Dog looks at his supply of ammunition.

DOG

Running short. You.

AARON

Same. Make every shot count.

DOG

You taught us well Sarge.

(MORE)

DOG (CONT'D)

Just so you know... I hated you on that firing range. Wanted to put a bullet in your head. All the hell you gave us, day after day... thought you were one sick racist bastard. Damn! But you taught us good, real good. Thank you.

Aaron smiles.

AARON

Whatever happens, the honor was mine.

Holds out his hand, Dog looks at it, then hugs the man instead.

DOG

That's from Lex.
(tears forming)
I'm filling in for him.

Movement. The two men alert. A laugh, an evil laugh. SNAKE appears. Snake is a huge man, a mean looking man. The birthmark on his left cheek distinctive and evil. He is followed by two henchmen who hold Chico captive. Chico's hands tied behind his back, his mouth gagged. He struggles against his captors, they hold the Hispanic tight. Snake and his sword. An evil sword. A sharp sword. Aaron begins to flare but quickly regains his composure. Dog not so cool. Aaron restrains Dog.

AARON

An angry man makes mistakes. Keep it together. Keep it cool.

Dog looks at him then comprehends and calms down. He nods his understanding but there is hate in his eyes. Snake looks in the general direction of his enemy, not seeing them but knowing they are there, hidden. He laughs and examines his sword, looks at Chico. Chico scared. Suddenly Snake swings the sword at Chico's head but Chico is quick and ducks the blade which takes off the head of one of his captors. The move startles Snake as Chico takes advantage and escapes the hold of the second henchman, he then attacks Snake hitting him in the stomach. Snake caught off guard but quick to recover.

Aaron takes advantage and shoots the second henchman. He aims at Snake but other terrorist attack from each side. Dog takes one side, Aaron the other. Bullets flying but the aim of Dog and Aaron is deadly. Dog hit again, then Aaron goes down. Aaron sees Snake grab Chico by the hair, this time the blade does not miss. Snake holds the Hispanics head as the body drops.

Aaron stunned to see his friend die. Snake throws the head into the open space between them. Then he laughs. Snake steps into the open as the terrorist grab Aaron and Dog. They bring the two men before the large terrorist, throwing them on the ground. Snake looks at his men, there are only four of them left. His cobra eyes look down at Aaron, full of hate and anger. Aaron returns the look. He sees the body of Chico laying close to him. More anger swells within the American. Snake walks around the two wounded men, displaying his evil smile with pride. Aaron follows him as far as his head will take him. The terrorist behind him. Snake grabs Aaron, who wenches in pain. The two men eye-to-eye. Snake drops him, then kicks him. His sword comes up and slices into Aaron's right leg. Aaron cries with pain. Blood pours from the wound. Snake walks around the two men again. He looks at Dog, who returns the look with hate. He picks up the black man by the collar, holding him like a rag doll, the sword ready to strike Dog, but he stops short of striking. Snake looks at the black American, then smiles a wicked smile. Snake drops Dog and continues to walk around the two men.

DOG

Why didn't he do it?

AARON

He's saving you for something else.

DOG

Maybe a bar-b-que?

AARON

Don't discount it.

DOG

Shit!

Snake grabs Aaron then picks him up again. The pain Aaron suffers, Aaron hits the terrorist in the face, but it has no affect. Snake smiles, then roughly handles Aaron, hitting him, dropping him, kicking him. Snake kicks him again and again, Aaron in pain. Snake ready to strike the final blow, to take Aaron's head when Smitty hits the terrorist hard forcing him to drop his sword. The two go tumbling. Dog takes advantage, pulls the hidden pistol and quickly, but efficiently kills the four remaining terrorist. Aaron goes for Snake. He jumps and pulls the leg knife from Chico's body and throws it at the terrorist, it connects. Snake looks at the knife sticking out of his body, pulls it out then stabs it into Smitty, then uses it to slit Smitty's throat. He drops the lifeless soldier. Dog, flinching from pain fires at Snake, one bullet, missing but close enough to knock the knife from his hand. Dog fires again but an empty chamber is all he receives. Aaron and Snake see the sword and both go for it.

EXT. THE MOUNTAINS OF AFGHANISTAN - ABBAS TENT AFTERNOON

Jay Harwell is approaching Abbas's tent when a major, DON JENKINS, intercepts him.

HARWELL
Is Abbas in there?

JENKINS
Yes sir.

HARWELL
Have you talked to him?

JENKINS
His position is the same. He doesn't believe we can save his wife and daughter. Not after what Snake did to his son.

HARWELL
We need his cooperation. He knows the location of a lot of the al Qaeda leaders, command wants that info.

JENKINS
What about Sergeant Johnson?

HARWELL
He's overdue. I sent a team to look for him.

JENKINS
Command's not happy that you're spending a lot of resources on this ghost chase. Their intel says that Snake isn't even in the area.

HARWELL
Command is wrong.

JENKINS
How do you know?

HARWELL
Because Sergeant Johnson says he's still here.

JENKINS
You're betting your career on the opinion of one sergeant?

HARWELL
Yes.

JENKINS

You must trust this guy a lot?

HARWELL

More than you know Don, more than you know. Let's not keep the chief waiting, after you Major.

INT. THE MOUNTAINS OF AFGHANISTAN - THE CHIEFS TENT -
MOMENTS LATER

ABBAS is sitting in a prominent position, a position that tells everyone he is the Chief. Via an interpreter, he and Harwell exchange greetings. Abbas offers Harwell to sit. Jenkins sits next to Harwell, the interpreter in a prominent location between the two men. Harwell is trying to figure out how to begin when a commotion outside the tent captures their attention. Aaron enters the tent, Dog barely supporting him. Both men hurt, and bloody. Aaron and Harwell look at each other. Aaron reaches into a bag and retrieves something, he throws it in front of the Chief. Abbas looks at it, it is the head of Snake.

AARON

(in pain, barely able
to speak)

Please... Help us.

Interpreted. The chief looks at Aaron and Dog, then the head of Snake. Harwell and Jenkins stunned. The chief nods. Aaron starts to fall, Harwell on his feet fast catching his friend.

HARWELL

MEDIC NOW!

Aaron and Dog on the floor. Harwell holding his friend. Jenkins attends to Dog.

Aaron produces dog tags. Harwell looks at them, Smith, Hernandez, Lexford, plus three others.

AARON

(dying)

Dog can tell... what they did...
Had to get here... al Qaeda moving...
you need... intel... fast... don't
let 'em get away... Tell her....
tell her I love her.

Aaron slips and his eyes close.

HARWELL

WHERE THE HELL IS THAT DAMN MEDIC!!!

INT. THE BLAKE RANCH - DINING ROOM - DAY

Janet watches her daughter sit, then pace, then sits again. Toni nervously watches the clock.

JANET

It's been almost a month.

TONI

I know Mother. The mail should be here soon. Forty-five minutes, Henry will be delivering the mail in forty-five minutes. I think I'm going to drive down to the box, wait there.

JANET

Every day, every day you wait for his letter. What if he never sends another?

TONI

(angry)
He will! He will.

JANET

What if he... what if he can't send another one?

TONI

He's not dead mother!

JANET

How do you know?

TONI

Because I would have received an official letter! He promised me I would receive an official letter from his commanding officer if anything happened to him. I haven't gotten one...

The unvoiced "yet" lingers in the air. The sound of a car stopping outside. Janet heads for the door to she who has arrived when Jake enters quickly, he's carrying mail. Mabel follows.

JAKE

Henry's running late, but... he passed this to me for you.

Toni anxious, she takes the mail and looks through it. A letter. She looks at it, it is an official envelope. Return address of Colonel Jay Harwell. She shakes, she can't open it.

ADAM
What is it Mama?

Janet takes Adam in her arms. Toni still focused on the envelope.

ADAM (CONT'D)
Mama?

JANET
Shhh. Let mommy read.

Adam quiet. Toni frozen. Jake gently takes the envelope from her hands. Toni scared. Jake opens it and begins to read,

JAKE
Dear Toni, although we have never met I feel that I know you and Adam very well, like you are family, a part of my family. First and foremost let me tell you that Aaron is still alive...

Toni, feelings of relief, cries. FOCUS on Harwell writing.

HARWELL (V.O.)
...but he was critically wounded in his battle with Snake. A battle he won, but at a very high cost. We lost Lex, Chico, and Smitty in the fight. I just wrote the last letter to their families, a job I never liked and can never get use to. Each died honorably, and each has been recommended for high honors. They were good soldiers, and loyal friends. And they will be missed.

FOCUS on Aaron in a hospital bed, barely alive, unconscious. Dog, recovering from wounds, looking at his friend.

HARWELL (V.O.) (CONT'D)
For a couple of weeks it looked like we would lose him, but Aaron has a tendency to surprise you, something he's always been good at. The doctor tells me he's out of danger but will require time to heal. He has recommended a medical discharge and I agree. The man has lived his share of hell, it's time for him to go home.

FOCUS on Harwell considering, thinking, writing.

HARWELL (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Before I wrote this letter I considered a lot of factors, and have come to a conclusion that there are things you need to know about the man you are in love with. Factors you may find... but things you need to know.

I met Aaron Johnson three years before 9/11. I was a Captain in the Army Reserve at the time, living in L.A. with my new bride, Jill. Aaron told me that you were born there, and for that you have my condolences.

Toni and the others smile. Jake reads:

JAKE

Aaron, after a few years of drifting, attended college, and was studying to be a lawyer, when he met a young woman in one of his law classes. Her name was Lacy, and she was my younger sister.

FLASHBACK on college days, Aaron and Lacy in classes together. Becoming friends, falling in love.

HARWELL (V.O.)

I had already passed the bar and was beginning my practice, when Lacy said she and a friend needed help with some studies. I agreed to help them. That was the first time I met Aaron. It did not take long to realize how much we had in common, consequently he and I became fast friends. I could also see that he was falling in love with my sister, and that she was falling in love with him.

FLASHBACK on Aaron, Harwell, Jill and Lacy bowling. The two girls kicking ass, high fives, the two men miserable. Lacy sticking her tongue out at her brother. Jill and Lacy laughing at their humiliation.

HARWELL (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Lacy had just finished her studies when she hired on with a very prestigious company.

(MORE)

HARWELL (V.O.) (CONT'D)
However, it was a job that kept her bouncing between L.A., Boston, and Washington, much to Aaron's displeasure. But he supported her, and sometimes even accompanied her. There were a few times his sister, with her family, and all of us got together for the holidays.

FLASHBACK on Thanksgiving, the families all together, toasts, Sharon, Jill, and Lacy talking, doing dishes, serving food. Happiness. Aaron proposing, everyone looking on.

HARWELL (V.O.) (CONT'D)
When Aaron proposed to Lacy it became the happiest day of her life. Needless to say, Jill, Sharon, and I were not surprised. That was Thanksgiving of 2000. Those times are buried deep in my memory and I will treasure them forever, just as I cherished my sister.

FLASHBACK on Jill, Sharon, and Lacy at Chippendales. Lacy showing off her engagement ring. The girls having fun, the men, the flirting. Lacy admiring her ring. Love in her eyes. The girls happy, supportive.

HARWELL (V.O.) (CONT'D)
When Lacy found out that she was pregnant she called me, told me the news, and told me to keep my mouth shut, that only she could tell Aaron. I reluctantly agreed to her terms, but I was so happy for her. I knew Aaron would make a great father and it took all I had to keep quiet. That was on 9/10. On 9/11 she headed home. It wasn't until a week later that I told Aaron about the baby.

FOCUS on Toni and the others listening to Jake read.

JAKE
I say all that to say this, when Lacy and Sharon died Aaron snapped. All he could think about was revenge. It ate at him. It consumed him. And it destroyed him.

FLASHBACK to Aaron in tears, angry, destructive.

HARWELL (V.O.)

I was recalled to active duty immediately after 9/11. Shortly thereafter Aaron joined the Army, his goal, to kill those responsible. It's all he would, all he could think about.

He and I served together at least twice before, and he saved my life once. I could not believe the difference in the man I now faced and the man I knew before. They were two completely different individuals inhabiting the same body.

FLASHBACK to Aaron's military training. His discipline.

HARWELL (V.O.) (CONT'D)

As a soldier Aaron is a professional. He is cold, calculating, methodical, the professional killing machine. Quick and efficient he can destroy in a heartbeat. He keeps the enemy guessing. It's what makes him so valuable to us and such a nightmare to the enemy. He knows his job and accepts his responsibilities without judgment. He kills the enemy without remorse, and he protects those that cannot protect themselves.

Jake stops, Janet holding Adam, Mabel holding Toni's hand. He continues:

JAKE

But Aaron the man is something else. He feels guilt, shame, and dishonor for what he has done to himself and to the memory of Lacy and Sharon. In some ways he lost his humanity, his soul, but never his judgment or understanding. This makes the man complex, and sometimes unpredictable.

FOCUS on Aaron in the hospital bed, sad, alone.

HARWELL (V.O.)

That is why Toni, I fear that you may become a casualty of this war. The remorse that Aaron feels, for turning into the man he has become, has allowed himself to become, chose to become, may be more than he can

(MORE)

HARWELL (V.O.) (CONT'D)
endure. He let his lust for revenge dominate and manipulate him, control his actions and the direction of his life. That is until you entered it. Now he realizes that what he has become is an affliction, a cancer, that he does not want to share or burden you with. He told me once that you called yourself a monster, but he feels that it is he that has become the monster. And he has, in many ways. Because of what he allowed himself to become, he fears that you will repudiate him. Maybe not today, but someday, when the horrors of war comeback to haunt his dreams.

CAMERA On Toni, her face, her numbness. CAMERA moves to the faces of the others in the room. Jake continues,

JAKE
Aaron would never hurt you or Adam physically, it is not in the man to do so. But he can hurt you, kill you emotionally. He can shun you, close you out, destroy your love.

HARWELL (V.O.)
If he was returning to active duty it would not be an issue for him, he would direct his anger at the enemy, but that option is now off the table. He will be released from active duty, and he will be lost, so very lost. And I can't help him. But you can, if you choose to accept the challenge. A challenge that may strain your heart, and your soul, to the point of breaking. For you are now faced with a choice: you can release him to protect yourself from the emotional damage he can cause you and Adam, or you can accept him, knowing that the hell of psychological trauma, filled with guilt and sorrow, is coming.

The group listens to the words.

JAKE
Aaron loves you. He loves you so much that forgetting you is the only way he knows how to protect you.

(MORE)

JAKE (CONT'D)

And so, he plans to leave you, and thus you become a casualty in the war on terror. Be it physical or emotional, it is still death.

FOCUS on Harwell writing.

HARWELL (V.O.)

These are some of the hardest words I have ever written and I wish, I prayed that I did not have to write them. I love Aaron as a brother, the hell we've faced together, the loss we shared together, bonds us together. It always will.

FOCUS on Toni and the group.

JAKE

I have included some additional information with this letter that you may find useful. I cannot tell you what to do, you must let your heart decide that. But the emotional risks are real, the loss of love is real, and his nightmares will be real. I will pray for you for that is all I can now do. But know this, whatever you decide to do, I will support your decision to the best of my ability. Colonel Jay Harwell, United States Army.

Silence in the room.

EXT. ELKO NEVADA - TRAIN STATION - LATE DECEMBER - DAY

It is a cold but clear day as Toni waits on the train platform. Christmas ornaments decorate the area. A large Christmas tree stands in the center of the platform. Snow is on the ground. She wears a long coat, gloves, scarf and knit cap to protect her from the cold. She is alone as she waits for the train. Sad and unsure, she waits. She looks at the flag hanging limp as there is no wind. She sighs softly, she looks down the track. Others begin to come out of the building onto the platform waiting for the train to arrive. She watches them, she sees some children and smiles. She remembers the letter she wrote. FLASHBACK to her writing a letter.

TONI (V.O.)

My dearest Aaron, when I heard that you were alive my heart seemed to leap from my chest.

(MORE)

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Not hearing from you was the worst time of my life and my fear that you had died consumed my soul. I never had those types of feelings for Josh after he left me.

I ask myself why I fell in love with you and it is a question that to this day I still do not know how to answer. I had only known you a few days and it made no sense, and I still cannot figure it out. But I do, so I quit trying to analyze it and just accepted it. I will always accept it.

By now you know that Jay wrote and explained many things to me. I also spoke to Jill, we talked, and still talk, for hours on end. Beth and I talk all the time as well. We worry about you, they worry about me. One day I will actually get to meet them in person and it is my prayer that you will introduce us. One day.

Carlos and Maria also worry about you. Carlos thinks he wants to shoot you if you don't come back. But he also said that I could marry Philip if you decided to skip out. And yes Philip is doing well. He made officer, he's a second Lieutenant now. I think he plans to make the Marines a career. At least, for the moment, he is safe here in the States as his promotion comes with orders to the Pentagon for three years. Maybe I will marry him. No. That could never happen. You and only you hold my heart. I know this because Josh showed up last week.

FLASHBACK to JOSH showing up at the ranch, Toni shocked.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

After all this time, he comes back. Wants to get married. I kicked his ass out, told him I never wanted to see him again. I think I was more shocked than he was. He asked about his son, I told him Adam already had a father, I told him about you.

(MORE)

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

He's gone now. I have no idea where he went and frankly I don't give a damn. All I know is that he will never be back.

FOCUS on Toni on the train platform, still waiting.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Adam still has nightmares about the snake. Doc Larson, our family doctor, tells me that he may always have nightmares. All I can do is to ensure that he knows why he has the nightmares. Doc says knowledge is power, but Jake says that is only partially true, the application of knowledge is where the power is. I like Jake's version better.

Toni sitting on her bed, in her pajamas, reading, thinking and making notes. Camera to FOCUS on pamphlets and books concerning POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDERS.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I have been doing a lot of reading about war trauma and post-traumatic stress disorders. It's effects, how it manifests itself, and what we can do about it. I did not realize just how prevalent it is, and how many warriors carry the burden long after the actual events.

Toni in a doctors office talking to a doctor, DOC LARSON.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I also talked to Doc Larson about it, how PTSD will affect you at some point and what steps we need to take to minimize the effects, including any medications that we may need to consider. Some of my questions took Doc by surprise, but he understands what he may be facing, and is willing to help you, if you should decide to come home. Home to me.

Jake will also be there for us.

Jake looking at old photos, buddies long past, many of them dead, as his tears travel down his cheek. Mabel beside him, supporting him.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

There was nobody there for him when he returned from Vietnam. He was alone and he seemed to beat it. I firmly believe that his counsel will become invaluable to us as time passes.

A slight breeze, Toni chills, snuggles in her coat.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

For years I thought I was mature, grown up, then I met you and realized that I wasn't. I was a little girl living in a protected world, protected by men like you, from enemies I didn't think really existed. I believed all the hype, the fairy tales told by people who know better, but are only in for themselves. Now I am caught up in the real world, and I realize that men like you and Jake are the only thing that stands between us and subjugation. These are lessons I wish I didn't have to learn, but I discovered that ignorance and denial is just as deadly as a bullet. Only they kill slower.

She sees the train down the track, approaching slowly.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Jay says you plan to leave me, I say you better not even think about it. So this is where it's at, I know when you're being discharged, and I know when you can come home. I am sending you a train schedule. I have circled a time and date on that schedule. I will be on the train platform at that time, on that date. I will be waiting for you. If you are not on that train I will understand, I will not accept it, but I will understand it.

You fear that at some point I will reject you, but I never will. Coming back to the start of this letter, why the hell I fell in love with you is a mystery, one I cannot understand, but I accept. I ask that you accept it too. Whatever the future brings we will, we can, face.

(MORE)

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

And we will confront it together.
So I ask you for one last time, please
be on that train. All my love, Toni.

The train pulls into the station. People get off the train. The people on the platform getting ready to get on the train. She waits. The platform empties and she is alone again. No one else is getting off. As the train begins to move, she holds back her tears, when the train stops. A door, three cars down opens, the conductor places a bag on the platform and he helps someone off the train. The two men shake hands and the conductor gets back on. The train moves away from the station. The man uses a cane and limps, he stops when he sees her. Toni walks towards him, then she runs stopping just a couple of feet short. Aaron smiles and she leaps into his arms. They kiss a passionate kiss and she cries.

AARON

I'm moving a little slow these days.
Will you accept half a man?

TONI

I accept the man. Period.

AARON

Where's Adam?

TONI

With Mama. You have a homecoming
reception to attend. They're all
waiting for us.

Aaron smiles.

AARON

Still full of surprises.

Toni unbuttons her jacket, her bump is showing. She takes Aaron's hand and puts it on her stomach. He looks at it. She smiles, looking at his surprise.

AARON (CONT'D)

Why didn't you tell me?

TONI

Mama said I should, but I didn't
want to pressure you. Make you feel
obligated.

Aaron smiles, looking at her stomach, then her eyes.

AARON

Then I guess I better make an honest
woman out of you.

TONI

You're damn right you better.

She smiles and as the two kiss a passionate kiss we pull back to see the American Flag begin to wave gently in the breeze.

TONI (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Every day we make decisions, choices, both large and small, choices that directs which way life shall take us. And it is at the end of the day we discover we must live with the consequences of those decisions, for either good, or for bad.

ENDING CREDITS song: Jonathan Ansell - "Here's to the Heroes".

FADE OUT:

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