

BEFORE THE FENCE

Written by

Joseph Cockrell

Inspired by actual events.

Joseph Cockrell  
joseph.alan.cockrell@gmail.com  
480.241.6992  
WGA Registration #2329977

**OVER BLACK: INSPIRED BY ACTUAL EVENTS**

**EXT. CASPER, WY - MATTHEW SHEPARD FUNERAL - DAY**

**SUPER: OCTOBER, 1998. WYOMING**

Snow and sleet mix. Chaos. POLICE BARRICADES groan under the push of a raging crowd.

Protesters SCREAM over each other, neon signs bobbing: MATT SHEPARD ROT IN HELL. GOD HATES FAGS. NO TEARS FOR QUEERS.

A sea of umbrellas cover hundreds of mourners trying to attend the funeral for Matthew Shepard. But the church is full. Police funnel them towards a park, passing the protest line.

News crews swarm. SATELLITE TRUCKS form a ragged line, dishes pointed to the sky.

JASPER ALLEN (24) stands amidst the frenzy in front of a tripod-mounted TV camera, next to a LIVE NEWS TRUCK.

He wears a suit and overcoat. Shivering. Wet. Raw-faced. Nothing like the polished Golden Boy we will come to know.

He holds a stick mic with a network news logo in one hand, a narrow spiral reporter's notebook in the other.

Jasper's eyes lock on a single sign: GOD HATES FAGS.

His grip tightens on the notebook. Hard. The sharp edge of the spiral wire bites deep into his palm. Blood wells. He doesn't flinch.

A heavy drop of CRIMSON hits the slushy snow below.

His jaw locks. His face does almost nothing. Almost. His eyes. Not grief. Not the performed gravity of a reporter bearing witness. Not anger. Horror.

BETH HERNANDEZ (late 30s) touches his arm.

BETH

Jasper. We're live in thirty.

He blinks once. The fissure closes. His face reassembles itself into an instrument of news.

JASPER

I'm ready.

He lifts the microphone.

The RED LIGHT on the camera comes on.

**SUPER: THREE YEARS EARLIER. AUGUST, 1995. IOWA.**

**EXT. IOWA STATE FAIRGROUNDS - NIGHT**

A LIVE NEWS TRUCK (WDMO-TV 3), sits idling beside a barn. Its telescoping mast piercing the night sky. TOM (50s), Cameraman, hoists a heavy TV camera and heads for the open barn doors.

**INT. FAIRGROUNDS BARN - CONTINUOUS**

Two glass-front REFRIGERATED DISPLAY CASES dominate the room, lit like museum exhibits: the BUTTER COW sculpture and a life-size butter ELVIS.

Tom locks the camera onto a tripod in front of Elvis and flicks on a filter light.

**INT. LIVE NEWS TRUCK - CONTINUOUS**

JASPER ALLEN (21), *tall, broad-shouldered, with the kind of face that cameras love. There's a precision to how he holds himself.*

He wears a WDMO-TV 3 polo shirt and perfectly pressed khakis. He sits at the editing station in studio headphones, jogging the shuttle dial.

Tom opens the side door and leans in.

TOM  
You ready for your first live shot,  
kiddo?

JASPER  
(pulling off headphones)  
It's just the Butter Cow.

TOM  
Folks love the Butter Cow.

Jasper pulls a small mirror from his bag and checks his hair. Adjusts it. Adjusts it again. He pockets the mirror and hops out of the truck.

**INT. FAIRGROUNDS BARN - CONTINUOUS**

Jasper places an IFB earpiece and tucks the cord under his shirt.

He paces quickly in front of the camera, clutching a stick mic with the station logo. He MUTTERS to himself, intensely rehearsing.

Tom is trying to frame a shot with the camera.

TOM

Stand still, will ya? Sound check.

JASPER

Hail Mary, full of grace. Testing one, two. Butter Cow bonanza. Tom, seriously, this humidity's got my balls sweatin'.

Tom chuckles, one eye glued to the viewfinder. He gives a thumbs up.

PRODUCER (O.C.)

(through earpiece)

Heard that. Maybe it's notta good night for khakis, eh?

JASPER

Everyone I know's watching.

PRODUCER (O.C.)

Ratings gold. Standby. In five, four, three, two...

The camera's RED LIGHT blinks on. Jasper's face transforms. Fear vanishes. TV smile locks in. *The switch.*

JASPER

Tonight, we are live at the Iowa State Fairgrounds to unveil this year's Butter Cow sculptures. It's a tradition dating back to nineteen-eleven. And for nineteen-ninety-five?

Jasper steps out of frame, revealing Elvis.

JASPER (CONT'D)

The King has entered the building. That's right, Elvis Presley. I spoke with artist Duffy Lyon earlier today.

PRODUCER (O.C.)

Roll package. Clear.

The red light blinks off. Jasper pulls out his earpiece with an exhale.

**EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - MOMENTS LATER**

Jasper helps Tom load equipment into the news truck.

TOM

Very smooth hit. You're a natural.

JASPER

Thanks. I've been wanting to do that since I was a kid.

TOM

Well, keep it up. They're askin' for a re-cut for the mornin' show. Musta impressed somebody.

LIGHTNING flickers on the horizon.

**EXT. WDMO-TV STATION - DES MOINES - LATER**

WDMO-TV station logo on the building. Satellite dishes. News trucks. Rain starts to fall as THUNDER and LIGHTNING escalate.

**INT. WDMO-TV STATION - CONTINUOUS**

Jasper is hunched at a station in an edit bay. He jogs the edit dial, Butter Cow footage whipping past on the monitor. The room lights flicker. He looks up, pulls off the headphones and heads for the studio.

**STUDIO - CONTINUOUS**

A typical 1990s news studio. Monitors. Cameras. Lights. Anchor desk. Sports and weather stations. Jasper enters. THUNDER RATTLES. He hurries to the weather desk. A dark red band on the radar marches toward the city.

JASPER

Oh fuck. That's not good.

A PIERCING ALARM SCREAMS from the weather teletype, spitting out a report. He grabs it. LISA (30s), a producer, sprints in.

LISA

Thank God you're here.

JASPER

Tornado warning-

LISA  
You need to go on air. Now!

JASPER  
Me?

Lisa clips a lavalier mic to his collar and thrusts an earpiece at him. Jasper scrambles to tuck the cord.

LISA  
Cory's in Master Control. You're all I've got. Read the feed. Tell them to take shelter.

She shoves him toward the weather monitor, slapping on studio lights and dragging a camera into position.

JASPER  
Lisa, I'm just a summer intern-

ZZZRRRT. The studio goes BLACK. CLUNK-HUMMM. Lights reboot. Monitors flicker back to life.

Lisa grabs a studio phone.

LISA  
Status? Got it. Cut to our feed on my mark.  
(slams phone down)  
Generator kicked in. We're still on air. Ready?

She yanks on a headset. Jasper takes a deep breath.

LISA (CONT'D)  
In three, two...

Jasper stares into the lens. The red light flares. *The switch.*

JASPER  
We interrupt programming with an emergency weather update. The National Weather Service has issued a tornado warning for Polk County.

He is calm and professional, pointing to the weather radar.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
We have a confirmed tornado on the ground, southeast of Des Moines and moving fast.

As Jasper continues, a tornado siren SCREAMS in the distance outside. Wind is ROARING around the building. CORY (30s), Master Control Operator, runs into the studio and joins Lisa behind the camera. The building SHUDDERS.

SMASH. In the distance, the lobby windows EXPLODE. Papers WHIP through the air. DUST blooms across the studio. Lisa and Cory duck beneath the weather desk.

JASPER (CONT'D)

We are taking a direct hit here at the studio. Do not wait. Take cover-

Studio lights SHAKE. One CRASHES to the floor.

Jasper, mid-sentence, drops down in front of the desk to shield them. The studio camera skews hard to one side, framing Jasper in a Dutch angle. The red light still burning.

Jasper looks toward the exit. Then back to the lens. He rises into frame, dust cascading from his shoulders, and continues with unbelievable calm.

JASPER (CONT'D)

If you are in the path of this tornado you need to take shelter immediately.

The ROAR fades. Lisa and Cory crawl out, right the camera, and reset the shot. Cory swings studio lights back onto Jasper, who continues to broadcast live.

#### **LATER**

The studio and newsroom are a wreck. The storm has passed. Lisa is behind the camera, red light still on.

JASPER

It has been a difficult night. We will continue to monitor this active weather pattern. Stay safe, Des Moines.

LISA

Go, Master Control... and we're clear.

Red light off. Jasper peels out his earpiece, unhooks his mic and dashes into the men's dressing room bathroom.

**INT. BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS**

Jasper locks the door and grips the sink. He stares at his smudged, drywall-dusted reflection.

He strips off his shirt and vigorously shakes it out. He turns the faucet on then dunks his entire head under the running water.

**INT. SMITH HOME - DES MOINES - LATE AFTERNOON**

A comfortable suburban home. MASON SMITH (21), *a college wrestler, thick through the chest and shoulders. Effortlessly handsome, with a brooding intensity. Around Jasper, something in him loosens.*

He sits cross-legged on the floor in front of the TV. Jasper sits watching on the sofa behind him. A VHS recording of the tornado hitting Jasper in the studio plays.

Mason reaches forward and hits pause. He turns, looking up at Jasper from the floor.

MASON

So calm. We here huddled in the basement. I was scared as hell. Weren't you?

JASPER

Shittin' my pants.

Mason smiles at that and moves to the sofa, sits beside him, sliding an arm around Jasper's shoulders.

MASON

You looked good.

JASPER

I looked like a mess.

MASON

You looked like you were born to do that.

JASPER

I have a meeting with the News Director tomorrow. He said he wants to talk to me about a job.

MASON

Really?

He pulls Jasper in for a kiss. Jasper gives in immediately. Slow at first, then with a sudden, desperate heat.

JASPER  
Your folks?

Mason doesn't pull away.

MASON  
In Minneapolis. My brother's with 'em. And I'm ignorin' Cindy.

Mason tips back onto the floor and draws Jasper down with him. They lose themselves in each other. Making out, hands roaming, breath catching, clothes shed.

**INT. MASON'S BEDROOM - LATER**

The room is dim. CRICKETS SING outside. Jasper and Mason lie naked, tangled in the sheets. Mason traces slow patterns across Jasper's bare chest with his finger.

MASON  
Stay over tonight?

JASPER  
Of course.

A quiet stretch of night. Just crickets.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
You ever think about Italy?

Mason's hand stills.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
Remember that night in Positano. On the beach. Just us...

Mason lets the memory hang between them.

MASON  
That was vacation. Nobody knew us... here, people'r watchin'.

Jasper exhales through his nose.

MASON (CONT'D)  
C'mere. Tonight, you're all mine, Tornado Boy.

A small smile. Mason kisses him. Jasper grips him tight.

**INT. WDMO-TV STATION - DES MOINES - DAY**

Construction crews DRILL and HAMMER in the wrecked newsroom. Jasper navigates through extension cords and equipment.

GENE (O.S.)  
Allen! In here!

GENE WATKINS (60s), the blunt, no nonsense News Director, stands in his office, sleeves rolled up. The glass wall is severely cracked and taped with blue tape in a pattern eerily similar to a split-rail fence.

**GENE'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS**

Jasper steps in. Gene kicks the door shut, muffling the repairs. His desk drowns under blueprints.

GENE  
Sit. Move the hard hat.

Jasper lifts a yellow hard hat from the chair.

GENE (CONT'D)  
Where'd you learn to read a Doppler sweep like a pro?

JASPER  
Grew up watching the news every night. Must've seen dozens of those tornado alerts. Guess it stuck.

GENE  
The network used your footage across the country.

JASPER  
They did?

GENE  
You stood tall and calm while the studio was coming down around you. That's not something I can teach. You either got it, or ya don't.

Gene shuffles through papers on his desk and hands him a contract.

GENE (CONT'D)  
I have a slot open. Weekend reporter, one-man band. Pays crap, but you'll get experience.

Jasper straightens, studying the document.

GENE (CONT'D)

I know raw talent when I see it.  
You've got instinct. Composure. I  
want to be the one who puts you on  
the air.

JASPER

But it's my senior year, I can't  
drop out-

GENE

It's weekends, Jasper.

Jasper flips to the second page of the contract. His eyes  
snag on a bold paragraph. He looks up.

JASPER

Morals and conduct clause?

GENE

Conduct unbecoming. The station's  
discretion. Standard language.

JASPER

What does that mean?

GENE

It means don't embarrass us.

The CONSTRUCTION NOISE SWELLS to a RHYTHMIC, OPPRESSIVE  
THUMPING. Jasper gazes through the taped-up glass at the  
bustling, damaged newsroom.

Gene extends a pen. Jasper stares at it, swallows hard, then  
takes it.

GENE (CONT'D)

Start this Saturday.

Jasper draws a breath and signs. They stand and shake on it.  
Jasper slips the pen into his pocket.

**INT. FRATERNITY HOUSE ROOM - NIGHT**

**SUPER: SIX MONTHS LATER. FEBRUARY, 1996.**

Bunk beds, two desks, mismatched dressers, mirrored closet  
doors. A LAVA LAMP casts a dim glow.

Jasper and Mason lie naked, bodies overlapping in the lower  
bunk. The door handle RATTLES. A KNOCK. Keys JINGLE.

Jasper reacts instantly, scrambling for his clothes and sliding under the bed just as the door swings open. Mason yanks the covers to his chest, scrubs a hand through his hair, forces a sleepy look.

TODD (21), Mason's roommate, steps in and flips on the light.

TODD  
Bro. Why's the door locked?

MASON  
Had to rub one out earlier. Thought you were goin' out?

Todd laughs and drops his bag. UNDER THE BED: Jasper stares at his terrified reflection in the mirrored closet door.

TODD  
Nah, man. I'm tired.

He walks to the dresser, absently picking up a WATCH.

TODD (CONT'D)  
Wait, whose fancy-ass watch is this?

UNDER THE BED: Jasper's hand flies to his wrist. Bare.

MASON  
Oh. Ah, Jasper's. He stopped by earlier. Left it. I'll see him at the gym.

TODD  
Why'd he take his watch off?

Mason shrugs.

TODD (CONT'D)  
Nothing weird goin' on, right?

MASON  
(a forced laugh)  
As if.

TODD  
Imma hit the shower.

Todd strips, wraps a towel around his waist, and grabs a toiletry bag. He heads for the door, then CLICKS it shut.

Mason exhales and stands, pulling on underwear.

MASON

Holy shit.

Jasper crawls out, clutching his clothes. He stands and starts dressing frantically, breath unsteady. He snatches up his watch.

MASON (CONT'D)

Just chill. He didn't see anything.

Jasper rushes to the door. He doesn't turn around.

JASPER

Maybe we shouldn't do this anymore.

MASON

What? But I-

The door shuts, cutting him off. The unfinished sentence hangs in the air. Mason's shoulders sink.

**INT. JASPER'S SUV - PARKED - CONTINUOUS**

Jasper drops into the driver's seat and pulls the door shut. His breath comes in shallow, uneven pulls.

He turns the key. The engine catches and an AGGRESSIVE BLAST of 90s ROCK EXPLODES from the radio. Jasper flinches and snaps it off.

He sits with both hands tightly on the wheel.

TAP. TAP. A knock on the passenger window. Jasper turns. Mason stands there, slightly out of breath. He wears a blue hoody with: IOWA COLLEGE WRESTLING embroidered in yellow on the front.

Jasper unlocks the door. Mason climbs in.

MASON

You okay?

Jasper gives a quick, rigid nod, his eyes remaining locked on the dashboard.

JASPER

We can't do it here. It's too risky.

Mason reaches over, touching Jasper's leg.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
I can't have the whole thing blow  
up because we got sloppy.

Mason squeezes Jasper's knee.

MASON  
Okay. We'll figure somethin' else  
out. We always do.

Jasper slowly takes Mason's hand. They sit holding hands for  
a moment. Jasper finally turns and looks at him.

JASPER  
Yeah, we do.

Mason lifts Jasper's hand and softly presses his lips to it.  
He holds it there for a moment. Then opens the door and slips  
out.

Jasper watches through the window as Mason crosses the  
parking lot and disappears.

**INT. DES MOINES AUDITORIUM - TOWN HALL - NIGHT**

The room is a powder keg of chanting and PROTECT MARRIAGE  
signs on one side, LOVE IS LOVE signs on the other.

Jasper stands at the back, eyes locked on a tripod-mounted  
camera, stick mic in hand, earpiece in place. Next to him:  
CHAD EVANS (19), a clean-cut college student in a button-up  
shirt.

A SUPPORTER (50s), wearing a PROTECT MARRIAGE button on a  
wool overcoat, steps into Jasper's space.

SUPPORTER  
You're that tornado guy, right? You  
look like a fine Christian young  
man. Tell the truth about these  
queers.

He gives Jasper a firm pat on the shoulder. Jasper glances at  
Chad. Then stares into the lens.

PRODUCER (O.C.)  
Five, four, three, two...

Red light on.

JASPER

Tonight, a town hall hosted by Congressman Ganske erupted when gay rights activists challenged his stance on same-sex marriage as Congress debates the Defense of Marriage Act.

Jasper guides Chad into the frame.

JASPER (CONT'D)

One of the people who spoke tonight is nineteen-year-old Chad Evans. Chad, what did you say to the Congressman?

CHAD

Uh, well, I told him we're just like everyone 'cept I have two moms.

JASPER

What's this been like for you? For your family?

CHAD

I dunno. Every time this comes up on TV, I have to watch old guys argue about whether my family's real.

Chad looks at Jasper. Searching. Trembling. Tears forming.

CHAD (CONT'D)

We just wanna be treated like everyone else.

Jasper's face fractures. Eyes wet. Brow crumpled. A pronounced frown before he opens his mouth, but nothing comes out.

An awkward moment of silence. It's dead air, the ultimate sin in broadcasting.

PRODUCER (O.C.)

(through earpiece)

Allen!

He flinches. Re-calibrates.

JASPER  
 (stammering)  
 Right, but, he's saying, you know,  
 that it confuses kids. How do you  
 answer those people?

CHAD  
 My family just feels normal to me.  
 My moms love each other. Why's that  
 a threat to anyone?

PRODUCER (O.C.)  
 Wrap!

JASPER  
 Thank you, Chad. Emotions are  
 running high here tonight. Back to  
 you.

**INT. WDMO-TV - GENE'S OFFICE - NIGHT**

Gene watches Jasper with Chad Evans on a monitor. A KNOCK.  
 Jasper stands in the doorway.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
 Lisa said you wanted to see me?

GENE  
 Close the door.

Gene doesn't look away from the monitor. He gestures to the  
 chair. Jasper sits. On screen: "We just wanna be treated like  
 everyone else." Gene pauses the tape.

GENE (CONT'D)  
 There. What the fuck was that?

JASPER  
 I just. I-

Gene swivels his chair to face Jasper.

GENE  
 People like watching you because  
 they see their son, their brother,  
 their fucking paperboy all grown  
 up. They trust that guy.

He jabs a thumb at the frozen frame.

GENE (CONT'D)  
 That? When that red light is on,  
 you stay a ghost. That's the job.  
 (MORE)

GENE (CONT'D)  
 And you sure as hell don't  
 editorialize with your eyebrows.

Gene ejects the tape and tosses it to him. Jasper grips it tightly with both hands.

GENE (CONT'D)  
 Just remember, the lens is  
 unforgiving. It shows everything.

#### **NEWSROOM - CONTINUOUS**

The newsroom is empty. Jasper crosses to his desk and sits. He reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a piece of paper, creased from repeated folding: KDEN-TV, DENVER, CO. FIELD REPORTER.

He looks at it for a moment. Then at the empty newsroom around him. He picks up the desk phone and dials.

JASPER  
 Hi. I'm calling about the reporter  
 position... A demo tape. Where  
 should I send it?

Jasper writes an address on the margin of job ad.

#### **INT. WDMO-TV STATION - EDIT BAY - NIGHT**

Jasper, tie loosened and sleeves rolled up, sits at the editing station. His reporting reel plays on the monitor. He shuttles it forward, pauses, shuttles it forward again.

The butter cow. The tornado. A crime scene taped off in rain. A massive industrial fire. Jasper standing knee-deep in a flooded cornfield. A ribbon cutting. Anchoring a weekend newscast.

He shuttles forward. Stops. A BREAKING NEWS graphic. Jasper in front of a courthouse.

JASPER (V.O.)  
 Five weeks of testimony, eighteen  
 hours of deliberation, and finally,  
 the word this community has been  
 waiting for. The verdict: guilty on  
 all counts.

He shuttles forward to a blizzard. He stands in a heavy snowfall, barely visible.

JASPER (V.O.)

The advice from the State Patrol is no longer a suggestion. It is a directive. If you are on these roads, you are a target for this storm. Stay home.

He shuttles forward again. Jasper stands toe-to-toe with the GOVERNOR OF IOWA (60s).

JASPER (V.O.)

Governor, can you look into this lens, right now, and guarantee these teachers that their jobs are safe?

The Governor fumbles. An aide steps in. Jasper holds his ground.

He watches himself for a moment. Then hits EJECT. The tape pops out. A neatly printed label: JASPER ALLEN - DEMO REEL.

**INT. WDMO-TV STATION - DAY**

**SUPER: MAY, 1996**

Gene strides out of his office into the newsroom with Jasper behind him.

GENE

All right, listen up. Our tornado boy has some breaking news. And it's not that he graduates as his class valedictorian tomorrow. Denver wants him! You're looking at the new field reporter for K-D-E-N!

APPLAUSE. Jasper tries to play it cool. Gene guides him back into the office.

**GENE'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS**

JASPER

I dunno what to say, Gene.

GENE

Don't ever let anyone say you got lucky. You earned this. Don't fuck it up. And Jasper? Denver's a bigger pond. Same water.

They shake hands. Gene gives him a half hug and pat on the back.

**EXT. FRATERNITY HOUSE LAWN - SUNSET**

A graduation-eve celebration. Kegs slosh. MUSIC POUNDS. Jasper weaves through the crowd, trading hugs and high-fives. Mason stands across the lawn. Their eyes meet. Mason tilts his head toward the house. Jasper hesitates, then follows.

**INT. MASON'S ROOM - MOMENTS LATER**

The top bunk is bare. Suitcases packed. A graduation cap and gown hang from the bedframe.

Jasper slips inside and CLICKS the lock. Mason sits on the edge of the lower bed, already shirtless. Music THUMPS outside.

Jasper tackles him. They fall back, kissing. Clothes scatter. Reflections blur in the mirrored closet door. Soft moans.

**LATER**

Darkness now. A LAVA LAMP pulses its molten glow. The party outside has faded to a DISTANT HUM. Jasper lies spooning Mason on the small bed. Mason stares at the mirrored closet door.

MASON  
You leave Wednesday?

JASPER  
Yeah. Hard to believe.

Mason takes a deep, shaky breath. He sits up and swings his legs off the bed, his back to Jasper. Rigid.

MASON  
You're goin' to Denver and I'll be-

He stops.

MASON (CONT'D)  
I think it's best if you and me are done.

Jasper sits up.

JASPER  
What?

Mason pulls on his underwear, stands and crosses to the mirror, not looking back at the bed.

Jasper stands. Naked. In the mirror, their eyes meet.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
We've been doing this for years.  
You can't tell me it's just—

MASON  
Don't!

JASPER  
I'm gay.

A long silence. Mason doesn't turn around.

Jasper rests a hand on Mason's shoulder. Mason flinches, but doesn't pull away. Jasper gently turns him. They're face to face.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
I love you.

Mason searches Jasper's eyes. A trembling hand rises, almost to Jasper's cheek.

MASON  
Jas, I...  
(his throat tightens)  
I...

The words die there. His hand falls. Tears gather. He turns away, wiping his eyes. Jasper catches his face in the mirror.

MASON (CONT'D)  
You know my ol' man. He'd never  
look at me the same way again.

Jasper steps in front of him, finding Mason's eyes.

JASPER  
(gestures to the bed)  
Does Cindy make you feel like that?

Mason closes his eyes. Pulls back.

MASON  
Don't go there.

JASPER  
Come to Denver with me.

Mason softens for a moment. Then shakes his head.

MASON

You're gonna be a celebrity up there. You'll hide twice as hard as me.

JASPER

At least we'd be together.

Mason finds his jeans and shirt, dressing with frantic, clumsy movements, fighting emotions. Jasper watches him with a wounded look.

JASPER (CONT'D)

I wish you weren't so fuckin' scared of who you are.

Mason crosses to the door, wiping tears. He stops, his face in agony.

MASON

Says the guy who hides behind a microphone.

JASPER

Mase, please-

Mason turns and unlocks the door without looking back.

MASON

Get dressed. Big day tomorrow, mister Valedictorian.

The door SLAMS. Jasper stands alone in silence. He exhales. Gathers his clothes and dresses.

A blue hoody draped over the desk chair catches his eye. He picks it up. IOWA COLLEGE WRESTLING embroidered on the front. He holds it a moment. Then tucks it under his arm and walks out.

**EXT. PARKING LOT - MOMENTS LATER**

Jasper walks toward his SUV, the blue hoody clenched in his fist. He hits the tailgate latch. POP. A cardboard box sits in the back.

He folds the hoody and places it in the box. He SLAMS the tailgate shut.

**INT. SUV - DRIVING - LATE AFTERNOON**

JASPER'S SUV, packed full with boxes and suitcases, glides across Interstate 80. A blue and yellow graduation tassel hangs from the rearview mirror. A gold '96 pendant catches the light.

Cornfields have given way to empty plains. Jasper grips the wheel. Eyes fixed forward. He exhales through his nose. He SLAPS the radio off. Silence. Only road noise.

A large blue sign approaches: REST STOP 1 MILE. He nearly drives past, but at the last second veers onto the exit ramp.

**EXT. I-80 REST STOP - MOMENTS LATER**

A desolate rest stop. Jasper steps out. He stares at a lone PAYPHONE on a brick wall. He walks over slowly, picks up the phone, inserts COINS from his pocket, and dials. RING.

MASON (V.O.)

Hello?

JASPER

Hey Mase.

MASON (V.O.)

Jasper?

JASPER

Yeah. I'm, ah, somewhere in Nebraska. The drive... it's... I just-

MASON (V.O.)

Jas.

Mason exhales. Jasper stares at the empty skyline.

JASPER

Work doesn't start 'til Monday. Fly out, just for a couple days. Help me pick out new furniture.

MASON (V.O.)

No. I can't.

JASPER

No one'd know. I can call right now and book you on a flight tomm-

MASON (V.O.)

I asked Cindy to marry me.

JASPER

What?

MASON (V.O.)

At our graduation party. In front  
of everyone. She said yes.

Jasper's knees buckle. He spins and catches himself, back against the brick wall. The metal phone cord stretches to its limit and snaps.

Jasper half stands against the wall, the dead receiver in his hand. He looks at it. Then at the frayed wires sticking out from the phone box.

JASPER.

FUUUUUCK!

He slumps to the ground, his chest heaving with wrenching breaths. He grips the receiver so hard his knuckles turn white. He forces deep, controlled breaths.

He stands and SLAMS the receiver into the cradle. The ECHO rings out across the empty rest stop. The disconnected cord dangles. He walks slowly to the restroom, kicking a rock along the way.

**INT. REST STOP - RESTROOM - MOMENTS LATER**

Jasper leans over the sink, splashing cold water onto his face. He does it again. And again. He looks in the mirror.

He reaches up to smooth his hair with surgical precision. He practices a TV smile. It's rigid.

**EXT. I-80 - NEBRASKA - MOMENTS LATER**

Jasper's SUV on the highway, driving past a split-rail FENCE. The SUV shrinks into the endless, flat horizon.

**INT. KDEN-TV STATION - KIM'S OFFICE - DAY**

*KIM VON (40s), dressed with the precision of someone who learned early that presentation was one of the few arguments nobody could refute. Her stillness is more commanding than most people's raised voices.*

*BETH HERNANDEZ (late 30s), a photojournalist with sharp eyes that have seen too many live shots go sideways to be surprised by anything.*

Kim sits at her desk watching various clips of Jasper reporting on a monitor above a BETA DECK. A label on the tape case: JASPER ALLEN - DEMO REEL.

Beth sits across from Kim, eyes fixed on the screen. Kim pauses the tape.

KIM

He starts Monday. I'm pairing him with you.

BETH

He looks like a fuckin' Ken doll. Cornfield Ken.

KIM

Says the woman who almost got us sued in ninety-three. Does that look like a first-year reporter to you?

BETH

Hang on.

Beth leans over and shuttles the dial back a few seconds. Hits play. The tornado scene.

BETH (CONT'D)

There. He looks around for an escape but goes right back to the camera.

Kim studies the screen.

BETH (CONT'D)

Tornado boy's got secrets. Everyone has a tell.

KIM

Even still, he's the kind of cub reporter grandmothers trust and housewives swoon over.

BETH

A jawline and a tie. God, straight women are so easy.

KIM

I want my best photog out there with him. That's you.

**INT. JASPER'S CONDO - DAY**

Summer sunlight floods through floor-to-ceiling windows in the 12th floor, corner condo in downtown Denver. Hardwood floors. A small stack of boxes and suitcases sit in the middle of the empty space.

The front door opens. Jasper enters, arms wrapped around a bulky television. He maneuvers it to the granite island that separates the kitchen and living room and sets it down.

**LATER**

The sun sinks behind the Rockies. From somewhere in the condo, a radio plays GEORGE MICHAEL's "Kissing A Fool". Jasper stands in his underwear, freshly showered. He opens the top box on the stack. Inside: a folded blue hoody. He lifts it.

He unfurls it. Embroidered in yellow: IOWA COLLEGE WRESTLING. He presses it to his face, inhales hard.

He drapes the hoody over his shoulders, crosses and picks up the cordless phone from the counter. He dials a number from memory. RING. RING. RING.

No answer. He sets the phone down.

He goes to the window. Denver lights flicker on below. He leans his forehead against the glass, looking out at the city.

Tears come. He lets them flow.

**INT. JASPER'S CONDO - DAY**

Jasper, dressed sharp in a new suit and tie, stands at the bathroom mirror. He adjusts his tie. Looks at himself.

He walks out of the bathroom, picks up his work bag and goes out the front door.

**INT. KDEN-TV STATION - DAY**

Kim sits at her desk, Jasper across from her.

KIM  
I'm impressed, especially  
considering you've only been-

The desk phone RINGS. Kim lifts her index finger at Jasper, tilts her head toward the phone, then picks it up.

KIM (CONT'D)  
 Yes? Ok... be right out.  
 (slams down the phone)  
 Come with me.

**NEWSROOM - CONTINUOUS**

Kim marches out of her office to the assignment desk. Jasper follows. SHANICE (40s), Assignment Editor, stands looking at an aerial shot of a protest in a monitor.

KIM  
 Scoop?

SHANICE  
 The bird has eyes on the G-eight protests downtown. Started as a peaceful march, couple thousand strong. It's turning.

KIM  
 Shanice, this is Jasper Allen, our new field reporter. He's live on this.

SHANICE  
 You're taller than I expected.

KIM  
 (turning)  
 Hernandez! You're up.

Beth walks to them, carrying a camera.

BETH  
 Oh, Tornado Boy.

JASPER  
 I prefer Jasper.

BETH  
 Earn it.

KIM  
 Go! Go!

**EXT. DOWNTOWN DENVER PROTEST SITE - LATE AFTERNOON**

A LOUD scene. Protestors CHANT, SIRENS, HELICOPTERS hover above. Police in riot gear line barricades. Signs wave: G8 NOT WELCOME HERE. News trucks cluster.

Jasper and Beth stand next to a KDEN news truck. Beth wears a headset and shoulders the camera focused on Jasper, the chaotic scene behind him.

BETH

Welcome to Denver! Different kind of tornado, huh?

Red light on. *The switch.*

JASPER

As President Clinton and world leaders gather in Denver, what began as a peaceful rally at Civic Center Park is turning into a protest.

A sharp POP. A tear-gas canister sails over the crowd. Gas billows. Protesters SCREAM and surge.

A PROTESTOR slams into Beth. The lens jolts as Beth stammers. Jasper's free hand shoots out and locks on her arm, anchoring her without breaking eye contact with the lens.

JASPER (CONT'D)

Officers have now deployed tear gas. This is escalating quickly.

Beth steadies. Jasper is the only still thing in a world of motion. Another POP. A gas cloud rolls closer. Police advance with shields. Jasper holds steady, eyes watering but voice even.

**INT. KDEN-TV STATION - CONTINUOUS**

Kim stands to the side of the control room, watching the broadcast on a bank of monitors.

JASPER (V.O.)

Police are moving forward in full riot gear. We are repositioning as conditions change. Back to you.

A PRODUCER (30s) turns to her.

PRODUCER

Jesus, he didn't even flinch.

KIM  
 Clip that gas hit. He leads live  
 again at ten.  
 (quietly)  
 That's armor.

**INT. LIVE NEWS TRUCK - PROTEST SCENE - CONTINUOUS**

The door SLAMS. The CHAOS outside becomes muffled. Jasper and Beth lean against opposite walls, COUGHING hard. Eyes red.

Jasper's hands find his tie. He straightens it. Then his collar. Then his hair. Beth watches him.

BETH  
 You don't break, do you?

Jasper looks up.

JASPER  
 Let's get sound bites. They want us  
 live again at ten.

Beth looks at him the way she looked at the monitor in Kim's office. She nods. Grabs the camera and reaches for the door. She pauses without turning.

BETH  
 For what it's worth, whatever  
 you're carrying in there, at some  
 point it shows up on camera whether  
 you want it to or not.

She pushes the door open. The ROAR of the protest floods back in. Jasper stands alone in the truck for a beat.

JASPER  
 (quietly)  
 That's what I'm afraid of.

He steps out.

**INT. NEWS TRUCK - DRIVING - LATER**

Denver at night. Beth navigates the truck through the city with ease. Jasper rides shotgun. A radio news program plays low.

RADIO NEWS REPORTER (V.O.)  
 ...a new report shows hate crimes  
 have surged by nearly eleven  
 percent in the last year alone.  
 (MORE)

RADIO NEWS REPORTER (V.O.) (CONT'D)  
Attorney General Janet Reno called  
the report a wake up call...

Jasper clicks it off. A long silence.

JASPER  
How long have you and your  
girlfriend been together?

BETH  
Five years. We live together.

Jasper looks out the window. The city moving past.

JASPER  
When did you know?

Beth glances at him, then back to the road.

BETH  
Know what?

JASPER  
You know.

BETH  
Fifteen. Maybe younger if I'm bein'  
honest.

JASPER  
Oh.

Beth lets the silence sit for a moment.

BETH  
Your turn.

A flash of panic hits his face.

BETH (CONT'D)  
You gonna be honest with me?

Jasper exhales.

JASPER  
I dunno that I... ever had, like, a  
moment. I just kind of... figured  
out what I wasn't.

Beth gives him a quick look.

BETH  
That'll do.

JASPER  
Is it that obvious?

BETH  
No. I actually wasn't sure. But I  
had a hunch.

JASPER  
Nobody knows.

BETH  
Your secret's safe with me, Tornado  
Boy.

Jasper loosens his tie.

BETH (CONT'D)  
You seeing anyone?

JASPER  
Back home... there was... it just  
didn't work out.

BETH  
That the whole story, Jasper?

JASPER  
We were friends. For a long time.  
And then one night there was a lot  
of beer and it happened. Then it  
got... real. I came to Denver. He's  
marrying a girl back home.

BETH  
That's not a small thing.

He turns back to the window.

**INT. KDEN TV STATION - NIGHT**

**SUPER: OCTOBER, 1996**

The newsroom has made a token effort at Halloween decorating. A few crew are in costumes. Jasper sits at his desk in a suit and tie, typing on his laptop.

Beth appears behind him in DEVIL HORNS and a PRESS PASS around her neck that reads: TO HELL. She carries a large shopping bag.

BETH  
It's Halloween. What are you doing?

JASPER  
Finishing a script for the morning.

Beth reaches over and shuts the laptop. Jasper's lips purse.

BETH  
There. You're done.

She drops the bag into his lap. He opens it. Pulls out a Batman mask, costume, and cape.

BETH (CONT'D)  
Whatever's back in Iowa can take a number. You don't have to be out to feel like you're one of us.

JASPER  
I dunno, Beth. I-

Jasper looks at the mask in his hands.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
Where are we going?

BETH  
The Foxhole.

Jasper looks around.

JASPER  
But that's-

BETH  
A gay bar, yes. Put it on. It hides your face. Your boy band hair. Nobody will recognize you. Come see what we are.

Jasper looks at her.

BETH (CONT'D)  
It's cheaper than therapy.

**INT. THE FOXHOLE BAR - LATER**

Loud. Crowded. Men dance closely. Women close to other women. Drag queens hold court. Strobes. Disco balls. Smoke.

Jasper, in mask and costume, and Beth enter. Jasper's eyes dart, scanning the room. Beth takes his wrist and guides him towards the bar, dodging through the crowd of creative costumes.

BETH  
Breathe. Nobody bites. Unless you  
ask.

Jasper gives her a look. They reach the edge of the dance floor. A MALE COUPLE leans together, laughing like nobody else exists.

Jasper watches them for a moment. Beth sees him watching.

BETH (CONT'D)  
Yeah. That.

ZACH NAGLE (21), *a law student. Lean, easy in his body, attractive. Entirely comfortable with being gay.*

Zach stands at the bar laughing with the bartender. He is in tight red shorts, a white tank top cut like a crop top, and a whistle around his neck. A lifeguard.

Beth and Jasper get to the bar. Beth orders drinks.

Zach turns, eyes instantly sizing up Jasper. A slow, intrigued smile. He moves closer.

ZACH  
Hey Batman, where's your Robin?

JASPER  
Oh... I don't have one.

Zach steps into his personal space, unbothered by Jasper's rigid posture. Extends a firm hand.

ZACH  
I'm Zach.

Jasper takes it.

JASPER  
Jasper.

ZACH  
You're tall.

Jasper doesn't know what to do with that. Beth hands him a drink.

ZACH (CONT'D)  
First time here?

JASPER  
Why do you ask?

ZACH  
Because you're standing like you're  
waiting for the fire alarm to go  
off.

Beth laughs.

JASPER  
First time anywhere like this.

Zach steps closer. The defensiveness in Jasper's chest begins to yield. Beth glances between them, sees the shift, and turns to look for her girlfriend.

ZACH  
Dance with me.

JASPER  
I don't really—

ZACH  
C'mon.

Zach takes Jasper by the hand. Zach slams his drink. Jasper does the same. Zach pulls him onto the dance floor. Jasper is stiff for a moment, then lets his hands find Zach's sides.

Zach is care free, allowing himself to get lost in the rhythm. Jasper smiles.

#### **LATER**

Jasper and Zach are sweaty, swaying close, the crowd dancing around them. Zach stills and reaches up for the mask. Jasper doesn't stop him.

Zach lifts it off carefully. Jasper's hair falls loose, flat with sweat. Jasper drags a hand through it.

They stand lost in each other's eyes. The music keeps going. Neither of them seem to hear it.

ZACH  
Better than I pictured.

Jasper flashes a bashful smile. Zach kisses him. It starts playful, then deepens. Jasper's hand slips to the back of Zach's neck.

They part to breathe.

ZACH (CONT'D)  
You wanna get out of here?

Zach offers his hand. Steady, unhurried. Jasper puts the mask back on and takes Zach's hand.

JASPER

I'm not looking for just a one-night thing.

ZACH

Good.

Jasper looks around for Beth. He spots her across the bar, now with her girlfriend MOLLY (30s).

He waves at Beth and nods toward the door. She smiles, gives a thumbs up and a wave.

Hand in hand, Jasper leads Zach through the crowd toward the entrance.

Near the door, Zach grabs a few condoms from a plastic jack-o-lantern sitting on a small table. A sign reads: TREAT YOUR TRICK. PLAY SAFE. FREE TESTING AVAILABLE AT THE CENTER.

Zach glances at Jasper with a smile.

**EXT. DOWNTOWN DENVER SIDEWALK - CONTINUOUS**

Jasper pushes the door open, still holding Zach's hand, as they exit. A heavy snow falls. They both look up at the sky. Jasper unties his cape and drapes it over Zach.

Zach points up the block.

ZACH

My Jeep is right there.

They jog to a bright red JEEP WRANGLER. Jasper notices a small RAINBOW HEART STICKER on the back.

**INT. ZACH'S JEEP - CONTINUOUS**

They climb in. Zach starts it. 90s music blares. He turns down the radio and cranks up the heat.

Their eyes lock for a moment.

ZACH

No pressure, okay?

JASPER

My place.

Zach nods. The Jeep pulls out into the snowy Denver night.

**INT. JASPER'S CONDO - MOMENTS LATER**

The condo is dark. They enter. Jasper closes the door and flips a light switch. It is furnished in a generic way, like a hotel room.

Zach unties the cape and drops it on the couch, taking in the room.

ZACH  
Nice place. Very... tidy.

JASPER  
Tryin' to tell me something?

ZACH  
You a serial killer?

Jasper laughs. He turns on a lamp, then crosses to the fireplace. He twists a brass knob, flicks a switch. The fire catches.

Zach stands and looks out the large windows. Jasper steps next to him.

JASPER  
Jesus. It's really coming down.  
Halloween blizzard.

ZACH  
I'm from Buffalo. Snow never  
surprises me.

Jasper heads into the kitchen and opens the fridge.

JASPER  
I've got beer. Wine. Not much else

ZACH  
What kind of wine?

JASPER  
Red. Cab.

ZACH  
Let's try that.

Zach moves casually around the living room. He notices a stereo under the TV.

ZACH (CONT'D)  
Mind if I put on some music?

JASPER  
Sure. No idea what CDs are in there.

Zach turns it on and presses PLAY. 90s music starts low.

Jasper brings over two glasses of wine. Hands one to Zach. They sit on the couch. Sip wine looking at each other.

Jasper puts his glass down. Zach does the same. Jasper moves in for a kiss. Slow at first. Then it deepens. Their bodies get closer. Zach reaches for Jasper's costume top. Jasper's hands find the hem of Zach's tank top.

They break the kiss just long enough for the costume and tank to come off. Zach looks at Jasper's bare chest.

ZACH  
(quietly)  
Hello.

Jasper laughs. Zach pulls him back in.

Zach's fingers working the buttons of Jasper's pants, his mouth finding Jasper's collarbone, then pecks, then abs as he pulls the pants down.

Jasper stands and kicks off his pants. Zach stands, his hands moving across Jasper's body. They move toward the bedroom with ease, kisses and hands exploring along the way.

#### **BEDROOM - LATER**

They lie in bed. Snow continues to swirl outside the window. The digital clock reads 2:23 AM.

Jasper is awake, staring at the ceiling. Zach sleeps beside him. He props himself up on one elbow and watches Zach for a moment.

Zach stirs, eyes barely open.

ZACH  
Hey. You good?

JASPER  
Yeah. Very.

Zach reaches for him, fingers lightly touching Jasper's chest. Jasper moves closer and takes Zach in his arms. They settle and drift to sleep.

**INT. BALLROOM ELECTION PARTY - NIGHT**

The ballroom pulses with victory energy. "DEGETTE FOR CONGRESS" banners ripple under balloons. Volunteers CHEER as election results flash across a projection screen.

Jasper walks backwards, slowly through the room, microphone in hand, talking into a camera with red light on. Beth shoulders the camera tracking him.

JASPER

While the rest of the country is handing Bill Clinton a second term, the tallies here show Bob Dole claimed Colorado's eight electoral votes.

He navigates through a CROWD of cheering campaign supporters toward DIANA DEGETTE (50s) at the front of the room.

JASPER (CONT'D)

But here in Denver's First District, the story is very different...

CUT TO: ZACH STANDING IN THE CROWD

Zach, wearing a "DEGETTE FOR CONGRESS" button, celebrates with other young volunteers. He claps as the results appear on the screen.

A fellow VOLUNTEER shouts.

VOLUNTEER

We did it!

Zach spots Jasper under the camera light across the room. For a moment, he just watches, impressed.

A smile spreads across his face. He pushes through the crowd to get closer.

CUT TO: BACK TO JASPER

JASPER

...and tonight it appears Diana DeGette has done it in a landslide.

Zach reaches him. He stands behind Jasper, just out of the Beth's camera frame. He watches Jasper.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
 Congresswoman-elect, the state went for Dole, but the city went for you. How do you plan to bridge that gap when you land in a Clinton-led Washington?

Zach reaches out. His hand finds the small of Jasper's back. Not sexual. Familiar. Affectionate.

Jasper hitches. A single involuntary contraction, there and gone in a flash.

His face doesn't change. But the microphone drops two inches before he catches it, lifts it to DeGette in one seamless motion.

His eyes flick sideways. He sees Zach, grinning. Jasper turns back to the Congresswoman.

DIANA DEGETTE  
 Denver knows exactly who it is, even if the rest of the state is still deciding. We're moving forward. Thank you.

Jasper turns to speak into the camera.

JASPER  
 A divided state and a new face for the city.

He glances again toward the crowd. Zach is gone. The space where he stood is filled by a stranger. Jasper lingers for a second too long.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
 I'm Jasper Allen, live in Denver.

Red light off. The camera lowers. Beth studies him.

BETH  
 You okay?

JASPER  
 Yeah.

He says it looking around the room. Beth watches him.

**INT. JASPER'S CONDO - LATER**

The door unlocks and swings open. Jasper steps in.

Zach is on the couch with a textbook, still wearing the DeGette button. He looks up, smiling.

ZACH

Hey!

Jasper moves into the room, staring at him.

JASPER

What were you doing there tonight?

Zach blinks.

ZACH

I told you I volunteered for her campaign. I didn't know you'd be there.

Jasper paces.

JASPER

You touched me.

ZACH

Okay.

JASPER

On camera. In a room full of—

ZACH

It was a hand on your back.

JASPER

I know what it was.

He paces. Coat still on.

JASPER (CONT'D)

I felt it before I saw you. I didn't know who it was and I just—

He stops.

ZACH

You just what?

A beat.

JASPER

I looked for you.

Zach's face asks the question his mouth hasn't formed yet.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
On live television, in front of  
however many thousands of people, I  
looked for you.

ZACH  
Is that the worst thing?

JASPER  
Yes. Right now, yes, that is  
exactly the worst thing.

ZACH  
Because someone might have noticed?

JASPER  
Because I noticed.

Zach closes his textbook. Sets it aside.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
I can't have that. You know I am  
not out.

Zach stands and slowly crosses to him.

ZACH  
Then don't think about that right  
now. Think about me. Waiting for  
you to come home. Every night this  
week. Us.

Zach kisses him. Slow. Grounding.

Jasper grabs his waist like a lifeline.

#### **JASPER'S CONDO - EVENING**

#### **SUPER: TWO WEEKS LATER.**

A mostly eaten pizza sits on the counter. A bottle of Merlot  
is half-gone. Music plays in the background.

Jasper and Zach sit on the floor in front of the lit  
fireplace, facing each other, playing cards across the coffee  
table.

Jasper stares intently at his cards. Zach is slouching,  
sipping wine, barely looking at his hand. Jasper discards a  
Jack.

JASPER

Your turn.

Zach doesn't hesitate. He picks up the Jack and lays down his hand.

ZACH

Gin.

Jasper looks at the cards.

JASPER

How? You didn't even organize your hand.

ZACH

I have a photographic memory.

Zach gathers the cards, shuffling with ease.

ZACH (CONT'D)

Can I ask you something?

JASPER

You just did.

ZACH

How many people have you been with?

JASPER

Is that a thing people ask?

ZACH

It's a thing I'm asking because I'm curious. That's all. You don't have to tell me.

JASPER

Not many.

ZACH

Meaning?

Jasper takes a sip of his wine.

JASPER

One girl. Prom night. A total disaster.

Zach waits.

JASPER (CONT'D)

One guy.

Jasper exhales.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
Well, just the one before you.

ZACH  
Okay.

Jasper pours more wine.

ZACH (CONT'D)  
When was the last time you got tested?

JASPER  
Tested. For?

ZACH  
HIV. Everything.

JASPER  
I haven't.

ZACH  
I get tested every three months.

Zach stops shuffling, sets the cards aside.

ZACH (CONT'D)  
I like you. A lot.

JASPER  
I like you too.

ZACH  
Come with me. There's a center on Colfax. Free, anonymous.

JASPER  
I can't just walk into a clinic.

ZACH  
Why not?

JASPER  
If somebody saw me-

Zach reaches out and takes Jasper's hands.

ZACH  
Nobody is looking for Jasper Allen, TV star. They're staring at their own feet, praying for a negative.

Jasper looks down at their hands.

ZACH (CONT'D)  
If we're going to keep fucking  
every night, I want us to know  
where we stand.

Jasper looks back up at him, then nods.

JASPER  
Okay.

**INT. THE CENTER - WAITING ROOM - DAY**

Fluorescent lights. Plastic chairs. Posters on the wall:  
SAFETY. T-CELLS. PREVENTION. A few men sit scattered around,  
flipping through old magazines.

Jasper sits wedged into a corner under a baseball cap and  
sunglasses. Zach sits next to him, trying not to laugh.

ZACH  
You're the most confident guy on  
TV. But in here you're drawing way  
more attention to yourself looking  
like the Unabomber.

JASPER  
Keep your voice down.

Jasper shifts.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
This feels so... I dunno.

ZACH  
Getting tested?

JASPER  
Being here. Having to be here.

ZACH  
Everybody in this room is being  
responsible. That's the whole  
point.

A NURSE leans out of the inner door.

NURSE  
Forty-one?

Zach checks his ticket and stands. He looks down at Jasper.

ZACH

You're next. This is for us. Thank you.

He disappears behind the door. Jasper stares at the floor. Then something across the room catches his eye.

A YOUNG MAN (19). Sitting alone. Jacket pulled tight. Looking down. His leg bouncing erratically.

Jasper watches him. The young man doesn't look up.

Slowly, Jasper reaches up. He takes off the sunglasses. Folds them. Sets them in his lap.

The Young Man's leg keeps bouncing. Jasper doesn't look away.

**INT. KDEN-TV STATION - THANKSGIVING - DAY**

Jasper and Beth sit side-by-side in an edit bay. Jasper is not yet in his blazer.

He holds a reporter's notebook and reviews notes scribbled on it, while she works the dials of the beta deck.

On the monitor: a local soup kitchen line. Volunteers hand steaming plates to bundled-up families.

JASPER

Cut it there.

Beth taps the controls. The edit snaps into place.

BETH

Done. That's your kicker.

Beth spins her chair around. She stretches, cracking her back.

BETH (CONT'D)

Molly's mom is in town. They've been in the kitchen all day, I'm sure. What's your plan for tonight? A Hungry-Man turkey dinner?

JASPER

Actually, Zach's already at my place. I'm cooking.

Beth stops.

BETH

Zach's already there?

JASPER

He's has finals coming up. It's just practical. He studies while I'm here, and then we'll do the turkey when I get home.

BETH

Are you guys dating, or just fucking?

Jasper looks at the door to make sure it's closed.

JASPER

Beth!

BETH

It's a valid question. You gave him a key. That usually implies something.

JASPER

I don't know what it is yet.

BETH

Yes you do.

Jasper doesn't respond, he just looks at her.

BETH (CONT'D)

Where's his family?

JASPER

His parents are in Belgium. They work for the U.S. Ambassador. He didn't want to go to Europe.

BETH

So he chose you instead.

Jasper shrugs then nods with a smile.

**INT. JASPER'S CONDO - NIGHT**

**SUPER: A YEAR LATER. DECEMBER, 1997**

The condo has evolved. New modern furniture. Color on the walls. Plants. Abstract paintings. A bookshelf crammed with law textbooks, two News Emmy trophies sitting on top.

The fireplace glows. A Christmas tree casts soft multicolored light. On the wall, framed photos of Jasper and Zach: smiling in the sun on a hiking trail; smiling in snowboarding wear on a snowy mountain; smiling shirtless in front of a waterfall.

The remnants of a Christmas dinner on the table. Candles. Christmas music plays low on the stereo. Jasper and Zach sit on the floor, facing each other in front of the tree.

Jasper hands Zach a box wrapped in silver paper.

JASPER  
Okay. You first.

Zach unwraps it. He opens the box to reveal a FLIP CELL PHONE.

ZACH  
Are you serious?

Jasper pulls a matching phone out of his pocket.

JASPER  
I put you on my plan. I programmed my number as speed dial one. With my crazy hours, I want to know you can reach me anytime.

Zach picks up the phone and flips it open. Presses Speed Dial 1. Jasper's phone RINGS. He closes the phone with a smile.

Zach reaches for a small velvet bag under the tree.

ZACH  
Now yours.

Jasper pulls out a velvet-covered box. Flips the lid. Inside, on a bed of black silk: a TAG HEUER WATCH. Stainless steel, glass face.

JASPER  
Zach... oh my god. This is too much.

ZACH  
My grandmother sends a check every Christmas. I decided to spend it on something that actually matters. Turn it over.

Jasper pulls the watch out and flips it. The polished metal of the back casing. Engraved, a small heart and inside it: J + Z.

Jasper runs his thumb slowly over the sharp grooves of the engraving. He sits looking at it.

Zach takes the watch from Jasper's hand. He gently buckles it over Jasper's left wrist. It fits perfectly.

ZACH (CONT'D)  
It belongs to you. Just like I do.

Zach stands up and extends a hand.

ZACH (CONT'D)  
Dance with me?

Jasper takes his hand. Zach reaches to turn up the stereo. A jazzy version of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" plays.

They move to the center of the room, bodies pressed flush, swaying slowly in the glow of the room.

**EXT. DOWNTOWN DENVER - LARIMER STREET - NIGHT**

**SUPER: JANUARY, 1998**

The Denver Broncos won the Super Bowl and an impromptu celebration by thousands is turning into a riot.

Jasper and Zach navigate the edge of the sidewalk after leaving a restaurant, moving fast through the crush of the mob.

ZACH  
We need to get out of here.

A group of RIOTERS is throwing bricks. A RIOTER in a shredded Elway jersey spots Jasper and Zach. He hurls a heavy chunk of brick at them.

It catches Zach squarely in the shoulder. He spins from the impact and falls, hitting the concrete hard.

JASPER  
Zach!

Jasper drops down to Zach. The Rioter steps forward, another brick cocked back, grinning.

Jasper snaps.

He springs up with terrifying speed and drives a brutal right hook straight into the man's jaw. CRACK. The rioter drops the brick and falls unconscious.

Jasper stands over him. Chest heaving. Fists still clenched. Hair disheveled.

Across the street, a CAMERAMAN from rival Channel 4 is rolling. Next to him is reporter TERRANCE FULLER (30s), watching Jasper.

The steady predatory red light of the lens locked directly onto Jasper's face. He doesn't notice.

Jasper crouches down and hauls Zach up by the arms, then guides him through the crowd, an arm around his shoulders.

**INT. JASPER'S CONDO - LATER**

Jasper sits on the couch, ice pack in hand. Zach sits beside him, shirt off. A large bruise already darkening across his shoulder. Jasper presses the ice pack carefully against it.

Zach winces. Jasper holds it steady.

ZACH  
I can't believe you knocked that  
fucker out cold.

JASPER  
I'd do it again.

Jasper's cell phone rings on the coffee table. He glances at it.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
Kim.

He flips the phone open.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
Hey-

KIM (O.C.)  
Turn on channel four. Right now.

Jasper holds the phone to his ear with his shoulder and reaches for the remote. Clicks it on.

ON THE TV: The Channel 4 news anchor. Then the footage. Jasper's right hook, crystal clear. Boxer-grade knockout. The camera zooming in on his face as he hauls Zach away.

CHANNEL 4 ANCHOR (V.O.)  
That man is K-D-E-N reporter Jasper  
Allen.

Zach looks at the TV. Then at Jasper.

KIM  
My office. First thing tomorrow.  
Don't talk to anyone.

Click.

Jasper sits holding the phone. The ice pack still in his other hand, forgotten now. On the TV, the footage loops.

Zach reaches over and takes the ice pack from him. Presses it back against his own shoulder.

Neither of them speak.

**INT. KIM'S OFFICE – NEXT MORNING**

Kim stands at the window. Jasper sits across from her. On the monitor, the paused image of Jasper landing the punch.

KIM  
Legal reviewed it. He threw the brick first. We can argue defense of others.

JASPER  
I told you. I was protecting my friend.

KIM  
Don't do that. Not in here, in private, with me.

JASPER  
Do what?

KIM  
Pretend. It's my job to know everything about my talent. I know you're gay.

Jasper gasps.

JASPER  
Why've you never said anything?

KIM  
Because you're the best reporter I've hired in a decade. But channel four just handed us a problem and we need to manage it carefully so you can keep your career.

She turns from the window.

KIM (CONT'D)  
Most people see a man protecting  
someone. That's the story we give  
them.

JASPER  
And Zach?

KIM  
Is your close family friend. You  
happen to be there when things got  
ugly.

A long beat.

JASPER  
I love him, Kim.

KIM  
I'm sure you do. We will put out a  
statement, and you'll address it on  
air. Tonight.

**KDEN STUDIO - LATER**

The studio is quiet. Jasper sits alone at the anchor desk in  
a navy suit. Immaculate. Eyes tight.

Beth is behind the studio camera. She gives him a single nod.

PRODUCER (O.C.)  
Four. Three. Two...

Red light on.

JASPER  
Before we leave you tonight, I want  
to take a moment to address the  
footage you may have seen on  
another station. Footage of me.

He takes a measured breath.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
I am saddened that a night of  
historic victory for our Broncos  
turned into a night of violence,  
but I do not regret my actions. I  
was with a close family friend.

**INT. JASPER'S CONDO – CONTINUOUS**

Zach sits on the couch watching Jasper on the TV. Ice pack strapped to his shoulder.

JASPER (V.O.)  
When he was struck by a brick and threatened with further harm, my instincts took over.

ZACH  
Close. Family. Friend.

JASPER (V.O.)  
Sometimes being part of a community means stepping in when someone's in danger.

Jasper offers a small, practiced smile to the camera.

JASPER (V.O.)  
From all of us at K-D-E-N,  
goodnight Denver.

Zach clicks the remote. The screen goes dark. He sits in the silence.

**INT. JASPER'S CONDO – LATER**

Jasper comes through the front door. Zach sits at the table with a textbook open. He doesn't look up.

JASPER  
How's the shoulder?

ZACH  
It throbs.

Jasper stands across from him. Zach closes the textbook. Looks up.

ZACH (CONT'D)  
You knocked a guy out to protect me.

JASPER  
Yes.

ZACH  
But you won't say my name.

Zach stands. Steps into Jasper's space. His voice is quiet.

ZACH (CONT'D)  
 I know what's in your heart. I know  
 you love me. I'm not angry at you.

He looks into Jasper's eyes.

ZACH (CONT'D)  
 I'm just tired. Tired of being the  
 secret of a man who throws a  
 perfect right hook in the dark but  
 stands like a ghost in the light.

Zach goes into the bedroom and closes the door. Jasper stands  
 alone in the living room.

**INT. MCGINTY'S BAR - NIGHT**

A dive bar. Mostly DU students. A television mounted in the  
 corner.

Zach and his friends MATT (20s) and LENA (20s) are wedged  
 into a booth. Three drinks on the table.

Zach has a newspaper folded open to a photo of Jasper mid-  
 punch, caught in perfect form, slightly blurry. Headline:  
 KDEN'S JAPER ALLEN DELIVERS KNOCKOUT COVERAGE

MATT  
 Guardian Angel. That's what they're  
 calling him.

ZACH  
 Yeah.

MATT  
 I'm just saying. Look at the form.  
 That was not his first punch.

LENA  
 He's a news anchor.

MATT  
 That's a guy who grew up fighting  
 somebody.

ZACH  
 He grew up in Iowa.

MATT  
 Okay, so he fought pigs and cows.

Zach chuckles.

ZACH  
He did what he had to do.

MATT  
Which part? The knockout or the erasure?

Zach takes a long drink.

ZACH  
He said he was tired of hiding.

MATT  
Did he say when he planned to stop?

ZACH  
It's more complicated than-

MATT  
I know it's complicated. It's been complicated since you started dating him. You didn't even tell us about him for months.

ZACH  
I know. But he said soon.

MATT  
You know what kills me?

ZACH  
What?

MATT  
He clearly loves you. That's obvious. That's not the question.

ZACH  
Then what's the question?

MATT  
Zach.

Zach looks down at the newspaper again.

On the television, a local news promo flickers. Jasper's face fills the screen. Zach looks up at it. Matt and Lena look up.

ZACH  
Another round?

Zach slides out of the booth and heads to the bar. Matt watches him go. He folds the newspaper closed, Jasper's face disappearing into the crease.

**EXT. SMITH HOME - DES MOINES - NIGHT**

Mason's truck pulls into the driveway. He sits for a moment before getting out. He steps out and walks to the front door, carrying a duffel bag over one shoulder.

**INT. SMITH HOME - CONTINUOUS**

Mason comes through the front door, drops the heavy bag, slips off his coat and walks into the living room. KAREN SMITH (50s) sits on the couch, eyes red and a balled tissue in her fist.

MASON

Mom-

FRANK SMITH (50s) marches in. He stops and stands in the center of the room with his arms crossed.

FRANK

Cindy called us.

MASON

I can explain-

FRANK

She was pretty clear.

MASON

Dad, it's not... it wasn't what she thinks. Derek and I, we were just... it wasn't what she thinks.

Frank looks at him.

KAREN

Cindy said what she saw.

MASON

Mom, I'm tellin' you-

FRANK

Do you think we are fools?

A beat. Karen looks at the floor.

KAREN

I've been praying since she called. I've been sitting in that kitchen praying for... I don't know what.

Her voice breaks. She stops. Starts again.

KAREN (CONT'D)  
This isn't... Mason, this isn't how  
God made you. This isn't-

MASON  
Mom. Please.

KAREN  
I love you. You know I love you.  
But that is a sin. What you-

MASON  
I know what you believe.

KAREN  
It's not what I believe. It's what  
is.

MASON  
Dad.

Frank still stands in the room with arms crossed. He looks at  
Mason with a long silence. When he finally speaks, his voice  
is level, contained.

FRANK  
You had a good woman. A woman who  
loved you. Who was going to marry  
you. Who told her family that she  
was going to spend the rest of her  
life with you.

MASON  
I know.

FRANK  
And you brought a man into your  
home. Her home.

MASON  
Dad, I need you to hear me-

FRANK  
I've heard enough.

MASON  
You haven't heard anything. You've  
heard Cindy's version but you  
haven't heard me-

FRANK  
Because there's nothing you can  
say. Be out of this house by the  
weekend.

Karen makes a small whimper.

MASON  
You're throwing me out.

Frank doesn't answer. Mason looks at his mother.

MASON (CONT'D)  
Mom.

She looks up. Her eyes are wet.

KAREN  
I don't know what to do.

MASON  
Neither do I.

Mason picks up the duffel bag. He looks at his mother one more time. She is crying. He goes up the stairs.

#### **MASON'S BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER**

Mason sits on the edge of the bed. The duffel bag at his feet. He looks around the room.

He leans forward, dropping his head into his hands and stays there. He sits back up, eyes watering.

He picks up a small notebook and a cordless phone from the night stand. He opens the notebook, looks at a number written on a page, and dials it. RING.

JASPER (V.O.)  
Hi it's Jasper. Leave a message.

BEEP.

#### **INT. JASPER'S CONDO - NIGHT**

Jasper and Zach enter, pulling off their coats. Zach moves toward the table, where textbooks wait for him. Jasper heads into the kitchen.

The answering machine blinks. Jasper notices as he drops his keys. He presses play. BEEP.

MASON (V.O.)  
Hey Jas, it's me.

Jasper stops.

MASON (V.O.)  
I uh, just wanted to. I really need  
to talk to you. I miss you. Call me  
back please. I'm back at my  
parent's house. For a couple days.  
It's important.

BEEP. Zach looks at the machine. Then at Jasper.

ZACH  
So that's him.

Jasper moves into the living room without looking at Zach. He  
sits on the edge of the couch.

JASPER  
Me and Mason... it was before  
Denver.

Jasper looks up.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
He was my first.

He pauses.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
And it was never... easy. We were  
always hiding.

Zach waits.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
I asked him to come with me. To  
Denver.

ZACH  
But he didn't.

JASPER  
No.

ZACH  
So now he calls and says he misses  
you.

Jasper looks down.

ZACH (CONT'D)  
Did you love him?

JASPER  
(quietly)  
Yes, I did.

ZACH  
And then you found me.

JASPER  
Yes.

ZACH  
I'm not him.

JASPER  
I know that.

ZACH  
Do you?

JASPER  
Yes.

ZACH  
Because you don't get to make me  
pay for somebody else leaving.

JASPER  
I know.

Jasper stands. He crosses to Zach. Takes his hand in both of his. Zach doesn't pull away. But he doesn't soften either.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
He's engaged. To a woman back home.  
He made his choice and I made mine.

ZACH  
Then why is he calling?

JASPER  
Because some people want a door  
they never have to walk through.

Jasper lets go. He crosses to the answering machine. Stands in front of it. The red light blinks. He looks back at Zach.

He presses DELETE. It WHIRS. The red light goes dark. Jasper crosses back to Zach.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
I love you.

The space between them holds for one more beat. Then Zach closes it with an embrace.

ZACH  
I love you too.

**INT. MASON'S TRUCK - DRIVING - DAY**

The flat, relentless expanse of Interstate 80 stretches out through the windshield. Mason drives with both hands on the wheel. Posture rigid. Face solemn. Eyes tight.

The truck is packed with a few boxes and suitcases. On the passenger seat, a large duffel bag rides shotgun.

Mason keeps his eyes fixed ahead. He doesn't look in the rearview mirror.

Through the windshield, a green highway sign approaches and flashes past: CHICAGO 120 MILES.

He tightens his grip on the wheel and drives.

**INT. JASPER'S CONDO - DAY****SUPER: FEBRUARY, 1998**

The morning light is gray. Jasper is already in his dress shirt and slacks, pouring coffee into two travel mugs.

Zach enters wearing a DU Law sweatshirt. He goes straight to Jasper, wraps his arms around him from behind.

JASPER  
Happy Valentine's Day.

ZACH  
Tonight?

Jasper turns in Zach's arms.

JASPER  
I'm out the door the second the show is over.

ZACH  
I'll hit the library and head back when you're wrapping up. The study group is working on Torts and Civ Pro.

Jasper pulls him in for a kiss.

JASPER  
Love you, law man.

ZACH  
I love you too.

They hold each other for a second longer than they need to.

ZACH (CONT'D)  
See you tonight.

**INT. DU LAW LIBRARY - NIGHT**

Zach packs up his books as the study group ends. He pulls out the cell phone and dials Jasper. It goes to voicemail.

ZACH  
Hey, it's me. Heading out now. I'll see you at home. Love you.

**EXT. FLOWER STAND - DOWNTOWN DENVER - LATER**

A small street-side flower stand glows under yellow bulbs. Zach pulls up in the red Jeep and parks. He hops out and goes to the counter.

ZACH  
A dozen red roses, please.

Zach pays, tucks the roses carefully under his arm and heads toward the Jeep.

**INT. ZACH'S JEEP - DRIVING - MOMENTS LATER**

The dashboard lights glow. On the passenger seat, the dozen RED ROSES rest atop a thick, CIVIL PROCEDURE TEXTBOOK.

Zach is behind the wheel. The radio plays SAVAGE GARDEN'S "TRULY MADLY DEEPLY."

Zach performs more than listens, one hand gesturing dramatically while the other stays on the wheel. He sings along.

ZACH  
I want to stand with you on a mountain. I want to bathe with you in the sea...

He glances at the flowers. A grin spreads across his face.

ZACH (CONT'D)  
I want to lay like this forever, until the sky falls down over me...

**INT. KDEN-TV STATION - CONTINUOUS**

Jasper sits at the anchor desk and looks into the camera, reading the teleprompter. He wears a red tie.

JASPER

...and for those of you on the roads tonight, drive carefully. Temperatures are dropping, and icy conditions are expected. I'm Jasper Allen. Happy Valentine's Day. Goodnight.

Red light off. Jasper rips out his earpiece. He stands and walks quickly toward the exit, loosening his tie. Kim steps into his path.

KIM

Jasper. Hold up.

JASPER

Kim, I'm really tight on time. I have plans.

KIM

Push them. We have a double fatal downtown. Looks like a drunk driver crossed the median.

Jasper groans.

JASPER

Kim, seriously?

KIM

It's a double fatal. Beth is already loading.

Jasper looks at the exit. He sighs, defeated.

JASPER

Where is it?

KIM

Speer and Logan.

JASPER

That's five minutes from my condo.

KIM

Perfect. You shoot the stand-up, grab a soundbite from the cops, and you're home by eleven.

JASPER

Fine.

KIM

That's the spirit.

**INT. JASPER'S SUV - DRIVING - MOMENTS LATER**

Jasper follows the KDEN news truck, one hand on the wheel and the cell phone pressed to his ear. RING.

ZACH (V.O.)

This is Zach. I'm either studying or sleeping. Leave a message.

BEEP.

JASPER

Hey, babe. I'm so sorry. A breaking story but it shouldn't take too long. I'll be there as soon as I can. Love you.

He hangs up. He sees the flashing red and blue lights ahead.

**EXT. CRASH SITE - MOMENTS LATER**

Police cars. Fire trucks. Ambulances. Flares hissing on the asphalt. Police tape stretched across the intersection.

Two vehicles are mangled beyond recognition. One is a sedan, crushed. The other is an SUV flipped upside down. Charred black from a fire just extinguished.

Jasper parks. Jogs over to Beth at the news truck.

BETH

Happy Valentine's Day, right? This one's ugly.

Jasper fixes his tie and ducks under the police tape. SERGEANT MILLER (50s) waves him forward.

SGT. MILLER

Driver in the sedan crossed the center line. Took out the other vehicle going northbound. High speed impact. Witnesses think the sedan driver was drunk.

JASPER

Anyone survive?

SGT. MILLER  
Both drivers D-O-A.

Jasper nods. He scans the wreckage. Skid marks. Glass.

Then his eyes catch on the overturned SUV. It's mostly blackened, but the rear is still intact. A red Jeep.

Jasper steps closer. Upside down, the Jeep's rear glints under the police lights. A RAINBOW HEART STICKER catches the red and blue strobes.

Jasper freezes.

JASPER  
No...

He shakes his head. Pulls out his phone with shaking hands. Speed Dial 1. RING. His eyes stay locked on the Jeep.

ZACH (V.O.)  
This is Zach. I'm either studying  
or sleeping-

Jasper hangs up. Walks closer. His breathing goes shallow. Miller starts toward him.

SGT. MILLER  
Jasper, stay back.

Jasper keeps walking. Something on the pavement catches his eye. A CIVIL PROCEDURE TEXTBOOK strewn open, face down in the slush.

Scattered amongst the shattered glass, RED ROSES. Petals smeared against the wet asphalt.

Jasper stares at them.

JASPER  
Oh God.

Miller reaches him.

SGT. MILLER  
Jasper, you need to step back-

Jasper grabs Miller's sleeve.

JASPER  
The Jeep. The driver's name.

Miller checks his clipboard.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
Zachary Nagle.

Miller gives a slow nod.

Jasper's legs collapse beneath him. Beth sees him go down and runs over.

BETH  
Jasper!

She kneels beside him. He grabs her coat, shaking violently.

JASPER  
(choking on the words  
through sobs)  
That's Zach's Jeep. Zach is dead.

**INT. NEWS TRUCK - CRASH SCENE - LATER**

Jasper is curled into a tight ball on the bench seat, his knees pulled to his chest. He rocks slightly.

Beth sits at the editing station. Her hands are unsteady, but she forces them to move. Jog. Cut. Splice.

She ejects the tape.

BETH  
It's done.

She reaches out, touching Jasper's shoulder. He flinches.

BETH (CONT'D)  
Let me take you home.

Jasper raises his head. His face is wrecked. Eyes red, wet, barely focused. He nods. A jerky, mechanical motion.

A KNOCK on the side door. Beth opens it to find Sgt. Miller holding a clipboard.

He looks over at Jasper.

SGT. MILLER  
I'm sorry to interrupt, but we need to get in touch with Mr. Nagle's next of kin.

Miller pauses.

SGT. MILLER (CONT'D)  
There were a dozen red roses in the  
Jeep.

Jasper covers his mouth with a clenched fist.

SGT. MILLER (CONT'D)  
Is there a significant other?  
Someone we should be calling first?

Jasper wipes his eyes, his voice a hoarse, hollow whisper.

JASPER  
We live together. He's my roommate.

Beth's face tightens, but she stays silent.

SGT. MILLER  
I see. Do you know how to get in  
touch with his family?

JASPER  
In Europe. Brussels. Zach has their  
number written down somewhere at  
home.

SGT. MILLER  
Have them call me at this number.

Miller hands Jasper a card.

SGT. MILLER (CONT'D)  
Can you identify the body for us?

BETH  
You don't wanna do that.

Jasper looks down.

JASPER  
Zach had his fingerprints taken for  
his application to the Colorado  
Bar. He's a law student. Can you  
get that?

Miller nods.

SGT. MILLER  
I'm sorry for your loss.

Miller steps away.

Jasper stands slowly, wiping his face with his sleeve. Beth  
helps him out of the truck.

Red and blue lights strobe, painting Jasper's face in a rhythmic, unforgiving cycle of color. He stares at a white van marked: DENVER COUNTY MEDICAL EXAMINER.

**INT. JASPER'S CONDO - LATER**

The door unlocks. Jasper stumbles in. He walks with a heavy, shuffling gait. Beth closes the door.

Jasper goes straight to the kitchen. He doesn't turn on the lights. The glow of the city dimly lights the condo. He grabs a bottle of vodka and shuffles into the living room. He flops onto the couch, the air leaving his lungs in a rush.

He takes a long pull from the vodka bottle.

Beth clicks on a light then sits next to him. He looks at the dining table. Zach's textbooks. A yellow highlighter. He stares at them.

A sob rips out of him, fresh and violent.

BETH

Oh, Jasper.

She wraps her arm around his shoulders, pulling him into her. Jasper leans in.

Beth looks at the vodka bottle in his hand. She gently pries it from his fingers. She takes a hard swig. She winces, then hands it back. They sit there for a minute.

Jasper takes another drink from the bottle and sets it down. He stands and goes to the table. Zach's DAY PLANNER sits on top of a stack of textbooks.

Jasper opens it to a page with a list of phone numbers. He sees one for: MOM AND DAD.

He picks up the phone and dials. RING. He sits back down on the couch next to Beth. She takes his hand.

**INT. NAGLE HOME - DAY**

A large, elegant kitchen in a Brussels townhouse. MRS. NAGLE (50s) stands in a silk bathrobe holding a cup of coffee, the morning sun hitting the polished marble. A phone on the wall RINGS. She answers.

**INTERCUT PHONE CONVERSATION**

MRS. NAGLE

Hello?

JASPER

Hello, Mrs. Nagle?

MRS. NAGLE

Yes. Who's calling?

JASPER

This is Jasper. I'm... Zach lives with me.

MRS. NAGLE

Oh Jasper, yes of course. Zach's told us all about you.

Jasper fights to keep himself steady, squeezing Beth's hand.

JASPER

He has?

MRS. NAGLE

Yes dear. Is something wrong?

JASPER

I'm afraid so.  
(takes a deep breath)  
There was an accident.

MRS. NAGLE

An accident?

JASPER

A car accident.

MRS. NAGLE

Jasper...

JASPER

He didn't make it.

He fights back sobs.

JASPER (CONT'D)

I'm so sorry. Zach was killed.

The sobs win. Mrs. Nagle drops her coffee cup. It SHATTERS on the floor.

**INT. ST. LUKE'S CHURCH - BUFFALO, NY - DAY**

A white casket sits amidst a jungle of flowers. A large PHOTO sits on an easel: Zach smiling, vibrant, mid-laugh. The church is packed.

On the front pew, an exhausted Jasper sits in a black suit and tie beside Mrs. Nagle. To her left is MR. NAGLE (50s) and Zach's younger sister, CLAIRE NAGLE (17).

REV. HARRISON (60s) speaks at the pulpit.

REV. HARRISON  
Zach Nagle was loved. Deeply.

A few soft nods in the congregation. Mrs. Nagle reaches over and gently squeezes Jasper's hand. He squeezes back.

REV. HARRISON (CONT'D)  
He had a laugh that could fill a room.... and a stubborn streak that drove his parents crazy.

A small ripple of sad chuckles. Mrs. Nagle smiles through tears.

REV. HARRISON (CONT'D)  
But what I remember most about Zach was his kindness. His love for others. He had the rare ability to make people feel important. Like they mattered. That kind of love doesn't leave. It stays. In every life he changed.

Rev. Harrison glances at Jasper. Mrs. Nagle reaches over and takes Jasper's hand. This time he grips it tightly.

**EXT. FOREST LAWN CEMETERY - BUFFALO - LATER**

Snow dusts the ground under a gray sky. The headstone reads: ZACHARY NAGLE, DECEMBER 2, 1977 - FEBRUARY 14, 1998. BELOVED SON, BROTHER, AND MORE.

Mourners linger in small clusters, slowly dispersing. Jasper kneels alone at the grave. He places a single RED ROSE on the fresh earth. His fingers trace the engraved name.

He pulls the TAG HEUER WATCH off his wrist and turns it over. His thumb traces the engraving.

A tear falls onto the metal. He closes his fist around the watch and presses it to his chest.

Mrs. Nagle walks over and stops beside him. Jasper stands, refitting the watch on his wrist. He wipes his eyes.

MRS. NAGLE  
Thank you for coming.

JASPER  
I had to.

She looks at him, then steps in with a hug. Jasper folds into her.

MRS. NAGLE  
He lit up when he talked about you.  
You brought him joy. Real, deep  
joy.

She leans back and gently cups his face. She kisses his cheek. She takes his arm. They walk away together.

Mr. Nagle watches from a distance.

MR. NAGLE  
(quietly)  
He loved that boy.

**EXT. CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL - DENVER - DAY**

**SUPER: SIX MONTHS LATER. AUGUST, 1998**

Bright. Clear skies. A small crowd gathers outside the hospital entrance. NURSES, DOCTORS, STAFF. A handmade banner reads: WELCOME CAPTAIN EVAN!

Beth shoulders a camera, adjusting focus. Jasper stands in front of it, mic in hand.

BETH  
This is a good one.

Jasper nods.

JASPER  
Yeah.

BETH  
Rolling.

Red light on.

POV: The camera shot.

JASPER

Today, one Denver boy is getting  
the chance to be a hero.

Beth slowly pans the camera to reveal a FIRE TRUCK parked at the curb. Lights flashing. A group of FIREFIGHTERS stand in full gear.

A small boy, EVAN CARTER (8), bald from chemo, sits in a wheelchair. His face glows with excitement.

JASPER (V.O.)

Through the Make-A-Wish Foundation,  
eight-year-old Evan Carter is  
spending the day as an honorary  
firefighter with Engine twelve.

**EXT. FIRE STATION - LATER**

Jasper kneels beside Evan, next to a fire truck. Jasper is holding a stick mic. Beth has the camera sitting low on a tripod.

JASPER

What's been your favorite part of  
today?

EVAN

Everything.

Jasper smiles.

JASPER

Everything?

EVAN

Yeah. I got to turn on the siren.  
And they let me hold the hose.

JASPER

That's a pretty big responsibility.

EVAN

I know.

JASPER

What do you want to be when you  
grow up?

Evan doesn't hesitate.

EVAN

A firefighter.

Jasper holds the smile. Just a second longer than necessary.

JASPER

I think you've got the job.

Red light off.

BETH

Nice. Real nice.

Jasper nods.

JASPER

Yeah.

He stands. Gives Evan a high-five.

Behind them, EVAN'S MOTHER (30s) hugs one of the FIREFIGHTERS. She's crying quietly, trying not to let Evan see.

Evan laughs as another FIREFIGHTER pins a badge on him.

Jasper watches. He looks at Evan. Then at the mother. Then away.

BETH

You good?

Jasper blinks.

JASPER

Yeah.

He adjusts his hair.

JASPER (CONT'D)

Let's get the stand-up.

Beth studies him for a beat.

She lifts the camera to her shoulder.

Jasper steps into position.

Red light on.

JASPER (CONT'D)

For one day, courage looks like flashing lights, a fire truck, and a badge worn with pride. But for Evan, it's something much bigger.

(MORE)

JASPER (CONT'D)  
He faces every day with the kind of  
strength most of us can't imagine.  
In Denver, I'm Jasper Allen.

Red light off.

Behind him, Evan laughs again.

Jasper doesn't turn around.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
Let's go.

Beth lowers the camera.

**INT. JASPER'S CONDO - NIGHT**

The door opens. Jasper stumbles in, dressed in a tuxedo, Emmy trophy in hand: BEST BREAKING NEWS REPORTING. Beth follows in an elegant cocktail dress.

He slams the Emmy down on the counter, heads to the couch and falls into it.

Beth flips a light switch. The condo is a disaster. Empty liquor bottles everywhere. Stacks of unread newspapers on the table. Pizza boxes and take-out containers strewn about. Dirty dishes stacked in the kitchen sink.

BETH  
Jesus, Jasper.

His voice is thick and slurred.

JASPER  
I'm fine. I just wanna Emmy.

She picks up two empty bottles from the floor next to the couch. Jasper reaches out and grabs her wrist.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
Leave 'em.

Beth looks down at his hand. He lets go. She sets the bottles down. She sits next to him.

BETH  
Jas.

Jasper takes a long pull from a bottle of WHISKEY that was wedged in between couch cushions. Beth watches him.

BETH (CONT'D)  
You're not fine, Jasper.

JASPER  
Go home, Beth. I'm fine.

Beth doesn't move.

BETH  
I'm not leaving you like this.

JASPER  
I don't need a babysitter.

Jasper looks at her. She's not moving.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
(quietly)  
There's nothin' to say tonight.

He drinks more whiskey.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
Some nights, there just isn't.

Jasper looks at the dark fireplace. Takes another pull of whiskey.

Silence.

Jasper's closes his eyes.

**INT. KDEN-TV STATION - DAY**

**Super: October 7, 1998**

Jasper sits at his desk, sipping coffee. As Beth walks up, Kim comes running out of her office holding a piece of wire copy. Her face is grim.

KIM  
Grab your gear. You're going to  
Fort Collins. Poudre Valley  
Hospital.

JASPER  
What's happening?

Kim slaps the paper down on Jasper's desk. **BULLETIN: STUDENT FOUND TIED TO FENCE. CRITICAL CONDITION.**

JASPER (CONT'D)  
(reading)  
University of Wyoming student found  
severely beaten and tied to a fence  
in Laramie.

KIM  
Twenty-one years old.

Kim's expression intensifies.

KIM (CONT'D)  
The sheriff in Laramie is saying he  
was targeted because he's gay.

BETH  
Holy fuck.

Beth and Jasper look at each other.

KIM  
This is going to be national. I  
need you live at five, six, ten,  
and probably network hits.

JASPER  
Understood.

Kim looks at him.

KIM  
You look like hell, Jasper. I need  
you sharp on this one.

JASPER  
I'm fine.

Kim studies his face. Beth is quickly packing up gear.

KIM  
Go.

**INT. NEWS TRUCK - DRIVING - LATER**

Beth is driving with aggressive precision. Jasper is in the  
passenger seat. He looks tired, but focused.

BETH  
What's our number today?

JASPER  
I'm a solid six.

BETH

Six is good. Six is functional.

JASPER

I saw the doc. He gave me something to help me sleep on the nights when my brain won't shut off.

BETH

Is it working?

JASPER

It's better than vodka.

Beth glances at him. Jasper looks out the window.

**EXT. POUDRE VALLEY HOSPITAL - LATER**

Overcast sky. The hospital entrance is relatively quiet. One other news truck is parked on the perimeter.

Jasper and Beth hustle toward the main entrance. Jasper with microphone in hand, Beth shouldering the camera.

They spot a man in a white coat, DR. VOSLER (50s), stepping out for a cigarette break near the ER bay. They approach him.

JASPER

Doctor? I'm Jasper Allen with channel nine news. Can you give us an update on the student from Laramie?

Dr. Vosler hesitates. He looks at the camera, then at Jasper. He drops his cigarette.

DR. VOSLER

I can't give his name.

JASPER

We know it's Matthew Shepard. We just need to know his condition.

DR. VOSLER

He remains in critical condition.

JASPER

From the exposure? The cold? They say he was tied to that fence all night.

DR. VOSLER  
 From the severe beating. The damage  
 is... extensive. Massive brain  
 damage. He is in a coma.

JASPER  
 Is he going to make it?

DR. VOSLER  
 We're doing everything we can.

He turns and walks back inside. Beth lowers the camera.

BETH  
 Got it. That's the soundbite.  
 Jesus.

Jasper stares at the ER entrance doors.

JASPER  
 Let's set up at the edge of the  
 lawn. We're gonna be here for a  
 while.

**EXT. POUDDRE VALLEY HOSPITAL - LATER**

The hospital lawn has transformed. News trucks everywhere.  
 Satellite dishes pointed skyward. News crews swarm.

A CROWD of hundreds has gathered with candles. A low HUM of  
 singing rises, building into "WE SHALL OVERCOME." Strangers  
 hold hands, weeping. Singing. Praying.

Jasper stands near the K DEN live news truck. He looks up. His  
 eyes reflect the sea of candlelight. He watches a YOUNG GAY  
 COUPLE holding each other in the crowd.

BETH  
 Network is cutting to us in thirty.

Jasper doesn't look away from the singing crowd.

JASPER  
 I'm ready. But I'd rather be  
 singing with them.

Beth stares at him for a beat before raising the camera.

Jasper anchors his gaze into the lens. The RED LIGHT flares.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
 (voice steady but solemn)  
 The mood here in Fort Collins is  
 one of vigil and shock.

(MORE)

JASPER (CONT'D)  
 Hundreds have gathered tonight to pray for twenty-one-year-old Matthew Shepard, who lies in a coma at this hospital after a brutal attack, allegedly targeted because he is gay.

Jasper holds the lens, the candlelight dancing in his eyes.

**EXT. HOSPITAL LAWN - NIGHT**

**SUPER: OCTOBER 12, 1998**

Jasper stands in a fresh suit among the line of news trucks. Beth works the camera, red light on. His eyes are glassy, voice heavy.

JASPER  
 For the past five days, the world watched and prayed for a miracle. Tonight, we are left only with the memory of a son, a brother, and a student who was tied to a fence and left to die in the cold.

Behind him, PEOPLE weep. Someone's SOB breaks through the crowd.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
 Hospital officials say the damage to his brain was simply too severe to overcome. The two suspects will now face charges of first-degree murder.

Jasper gestures slightly to the crowd behind him.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
 There is a sense of profound loss here tonight. Not just for a young man who died too soon, but for the sense of safety that died with him. A community, and indeed a country, is left asking how hate could thrive so violently in the middle of the American heartland... Reporting live from Fort Collins, I'm Jasper Allen.

Red light off. Jasper drops the microphone to his side. He doesn't move. He looks at the ground.

BETH  
You okay?

JASPER  
No.

Beth steps out from behind the camera and wraps her arms around him. He stands rigid.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
He was all alone, Beth. He was all alone on that fence for eighteen hours.

Beth holds him tighter. A beat.

Jasper clears his throat.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
They want me to cover the funeral.

BETH  
You don't have to go.

Jasper pulls back. He looks at the people mourning on the lawn, then turns back to her.

JASPER  
I have to see it through. You in?

She nods.

**EXT. MATTHEW SHEPARD FUNERAL - CASPER, WY - DAY**

**SUPER: OCTOBER 16, 1998**

*The film's opening sequence.*

Snow and sleet mix. Chaos. POLICE BARRICADES groan under the push of a raging crowd.

Protesters SCREAM over each other, neon signs bobbing: MATT SHEPARD ROT IN HELL. GOD HATES FAGS. NO TEARS FOR QUEERS.

A sea of umbrellas cover hundreds of mourners trying to attend the funeral for Matthew Shepard. But the church is full. Police funnel them towards a park, passing the protest line.

News crews swarm. SATELLITE TRUCKS form a ragged line, dishes pointed to the sky.

Jasper stands amidst the frenzy in front of a tripod-mounted TV camera, next to a LIVE NEWS TRUCK.

He wears a suit and overcoat. Shivering. Wet. Raw-faced. He holds a stick mic with a network news logo in one hand, a narrow spiral reporter's notebook in the other.

Jasper's eyes lock on a single sign: GOD HATES FAGS.

His grip tightens on the notebook. Hard. The sharp edge of the spiral wire bites deep into his palm. Blood wells. He doesn't flinch.

A heavy drop of CRIMSON hits the slushy snow below.

His jaw locks. His face does almost nothing. Almost. His eyes. Not grief. Not the performed gravity of a reporter bearing witness. Not anger. Horror.

Beth touches his arm.

BETH

Jasper. We're live in thirty.

He blinks once. The fissure closes. His face reassembles itself into an instrument of news.

JASPER

I'm ready.

He lifts the microphone. Red light on.

JASPER (CONT'D)

The funeral for Matthew Shepard is being held here under conditions that are difficult to describe and impossible to ignore.

He takes a measured breath. His voice is even. His eyes are not.

JASPER (CONT'D)

Behind me, a protest organized by the Westboro Baptist Church has assembled, with signs that I will not read, or show, on the air. They are here by legal right. And the Shepard family has asked that they be ignored.

He pauses. The professional mask holds. Barely.

JASPER (CONT'D)

Matthew Shepard was twenty-one years old. He died after spending five days in a coma following a brutal attack outside Laramie. Attacked because he was gay.

Jasper swallows. His eyes water.

JASPER (CONT'D)

His family intended for today to be a private funeral. But the world has shown up anyway. And not everyone is here to mourn. Reporting live from Casper, Wyoming, I'm Jasper Allen.

Red light off. Jasper drops the microphone and marches to the news truck. Beth watches him. He opens the side door, steps in and SLAMS the door shut.

Beth walks over and opens the door. Jasper is on his knees on the floor, SOBBING into his hands. She quietly shuts the door and leans back against it. She wipes her eyes.

**LATER**

Jasper stands with Beth next to the news truck, watching the protestors.

BETH

We need to film more for the next live hit.

JASPER

I'm not putting that hate on television. It's exactly what they want.

BETH

We're gay, Jasper. People need to see this. How awful they are.

JASPER

Go behind the barricade line. Shoot them from the back. Show a wall of hateful people screaming at a grieving family. But don't let a single word on those signs be readable.

TOWNSPEOPLE are coming from the side streets. Not just a few. A few dozen. Locals in cowboy hats, students in parkas, grandmothers in rain bonnets.

They line up on the sidewalk, shoulder to shoulder. They position themselves directly between the protesters and the church doors.

They begin to SING.

CROWD

Amazing Grace, how sweet the  
sound...

The hymn SWELLS, swallowing the sound of the screaming protestors. Jasper watches them. Beth is already moving, shifting her camera to capture every frame.

CROWD (CONT'D)

...I once was lost, but now am  
found... was blind, but now I see.

#### **EXT. LARAMIE - THE FENCE - NIGHT**

The song is still there, drifting. Carried on the wind.

An endless expanse of darkness under a cold moon. Cutting through the tall dead grass is the split-rail fence. Loose strands of yellow police tape FLAP and SNAP like a whip against the wooden rails.

The KDEN news truck sits alone near the fence, engine off, headlights dark.

Jasper sits in the open side doorway of the truck, his legs over the metal step. His suit jacket wrinkled, his tie pulled completely loose. He stares at the fence. Eyes wet.

A deep, violent tremor starts in his chest. He tries to clamp his jaw shut. A jagged, animal sob breaks loose.

Jasper folds completely over, his forehead nearly pressed to his knees as his body seizes with the weight of it. He puts a fist over his mouth to muffle the sound, but the convulsive sobs keep fracturing through.

In his other hand, he clutches the TAG HEUER WATCH. He presses the metal casing hard against his cheek, his thumb dragging desperately across the J + Z engraving on the back.

The sharp metal edges bite into his skin as he stares at the fence.

He reaches blindly back into the truck. His fingers wrap around the neck of a bottle of vodka. He drinks. He gasps for air, coughing against the alcohol, tears streaming down his face, sobbing.

He leans his head back against the metal doorframe, chest heaving, staring out at the fence.

**INT. MOTEL ROOM - CASPER, WY - LATER**

The room is dim. Only the amber glow of parking lot lights filters through thin curtains.

Jasper sits at a small round table near the window. Still in his dress shirt and slacks. Tie gone. Top button undone. Eyes raw.

On the table: the bottle of vodka, the watch, and a bottle of PRESCRIPTION PILLS with the cap off.

Jasper picks up the pill bottle. Shakes them into his palm. He looks at them.

Jasper's cupped hand moves to his mouth. He tips his head back. Then he reaches for the vodka bottle and drains the entire bottle down in gulps.

He SLAMS the bottle back on the table.

He stands. Picks up the watch. The room tilts. He moves toward the bathroom with the slow carefulness of a man trying not to fall.

**BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS**

He flicks the switch. Fluorescent light HUMS.

He climbs into the bathtub fully dressed. He curls onto his side. Knees pulled in. His breathing is slowing.

He presses the watch against his chest with both hands.

JASPER  
(weakly)  
Zach.

His eyes flutter. Then close. Body goes limp.

His hands loosen. The watch slides out onto the tub.

The watch glints in the light.

FADE TO BLACK.

### **THE NEXT MORNING**

Jasper lies on his side on the bathroom floor. Dress shirt wrinkled beyond recovery, large stains from vomit. His cheek pressed against the tile. The watch lies on the floor near his head.

A puddle of vomit near him. He doesn't move. His eyes open. Not all the way.

JASPER'S POV: Half open eyes. Blurry at first. Tile floor. The watch. The underside of the sink. The puddle of vomit.

He closes his eyes again. Opens them.

He lies there. He moves his fingers. They respond slowly.

His breathing shallow. Slower than it should be.

Slowly, with great effort, he shifts. Rolls onto his back. The movement takes longer than it should.

He closes his eyes. Opens them.

He turns his head and sees the watch on the floor. He reaches for it. Holds it above his face. His thumb finds the engraving on the back.

He slowly straps it back onto his wrist.

He rolls onto his side. Gets his hands under him. The first attempt fails. He tries again, slower, his arms shaking. He gets to his knees.

He stays there. Head down. One hand gripping the edge of the tub.

Then he pulls himself to the toilet and vomits. Long and hard.

### **LATER**

Jasper holds himself up at the sink with both hands, arms locked.

He looks at himself in the mirror for a long beat. He takes off the stained shirt and lets it drop to the floor.

He turns on the cold water. Cups his hands. Drinks. Once. Twice. A third time.

He straightens. Looks at himself again.

He turns off the water.

He opens the bathroom door. He stops in the doorway. One foot in the bathroom. One foot in the room.

The room is dim. Curtains still drawn. His work bag. His rolling suitcase. The bed unslept in. The table with the vodka bottle and the pill bottle on its side.

He slowly crosses to the window. Opens the curtains. Pale gold sunrise light floods in. He stands in it for a moment.

He sits on the edge of the bed. Elbows on his knees. Head down, resting on his palms.

He stays there.

#### **INT. JASPER'S CONDO - NIGHT**

Jasper enters carrying his work bag and rolling a suitcase. He flips on a light. Dark circles under his eyes.

The condo is still a disaster. Empty bottles and food containers strewn everywhere. He stands in the doorway for a moment looking at it.

He goes into the kitchen. The answering machine blinks. He presses PLAY.

MRS. ALLEN (V.O.)

Hi, honey. It's Mom. We saw the news about that terrible story out in Wyoming. Give us a call when you get home. We love you.

Jasper stares at the machine for a moment. Then picks up the phone and dials.

#### **INT. ALLEN HOUSE - IOWA - NIGHT**

MRS. ALLEN (50s) answers, standing in the kitchen.

#### **INTERCUT PHONE CONVERSATION**

MRS. ALLEN

Hello?

JASPER

Hey Mom.

MRS. ALLEN

Jasper! Oh honey, I'm so glad you called. We've been watching your reports on the national news. Every single one. Recorded them on the VCR.

Jasper leans against the counter.

JASPER

Yeah.

MRS. ALLEN

That poor boy. I just can't imagine what his family is going through.

JASPER

Yeah.

A beat. She doesn't push.

MRS. ALLEN

Well. You're home, that's what matters.

JASPER

I'm home.

MRS. ALLEN

Are you eating well?

JASPER

I'm fine, Mom.

MRS. ALLEN

I'll take that as a no.

He walks to the living room windows and looks out at the city.

MRS. ALLEN (CONT'D)

Oh, I ran into Karen Smith at the store the other day.

Jasper's face hardens.

MRS. ALLEN (CONT'D)

Have you talked to Mason lately? He moved. Chicago, I think.

Jasper doesn't respond. He looks out at the city. Mrs. Allen can sense something, but she's not sure what.

MRS. ALLEN (CONT'D)  
So, what about the holidays? We haven't seen you since Memorial Day. I know you're busy but—

JASPER  
Actually, I'm taking some time off after Laramie. It was... difficult. How about I fly home this weekend?

MRS. ALLEN  
Really? Of course, we would love to see you. Your father is going to be thrilled.

JASPER  
Okay. See you Saturday morning.

They hang up. Jasper sets the phone down. Looks around at the mess in the condo.

**INT. ALLEN HOME - DINING ROOM - EVENING**

A large oak dining table sits beneath a brass chandelier. Against the wall, a wood hutch displays a neat row of commemorative state fair plates.

MR. ALLEN (50s) sits at the head of the table. Mrs. Allen sits across from Jasper. SARA ALLEN (14) sits beside her mother. On the table, the remains of a home-cooked meal.

MRS. ALLEN  
You're not eating enough. I can tell just by looking at you.

JASPER  
I ate half a pot roast, Mom.

MR. ALLEN  
Let the man breathe.

MRS. ALLEN  
I'm just making an observation.

SARA  
You were on the national news every night. My friend Ashley's mom cried watching you.

JASPER  
That's... good. I think?

SARA  
She cries at everything, though.  
She cried at a dog food commercial  
once.

MRS. ALLEN  
Sara.

SARA  
It's true.

Jasper almost smiles.

MR. ALLEN  
How are you doing, son? Really.

Jasper looks down at his plate.

JASPER  
There's this thing where you cover  
a story and it stays with you. Most  
of the time you can file it away.  
This one... it didn't file.

They are all quietly listening.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
I kept thinking about how alone he  
was. Out there, tied to that fence.  
All night.

Mrs. Allen slowly sets her fork down.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
And then I kept thinking about all  
the ways a person can be alone that  
nobody else sees. Carrying  
something massive that nobody else  
knows about.

A silence settles over the table.

Jasper's thumb is unconsciously rubbing the edge of the Tag Heuer watch on his wrist. He looks up, meeting his father's eyes.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
I've been carrying some stuff. All  
these horrible stories about death.

MR. ALLEN  
You want to talk about it?

JASPER  
Not now. Maybe soon.

Mr. Allen nods once. A silent, unbreakable contract of patience.

MRS. ALLEN  
Well. You're here now. That's what matters.

SARA  
Jasper, I think you're the best reporter on television.

JASPER  
You're biased.

SARA  
Doesn't make it not true.

Sara grins at him.

MRS. ALLEN  
Who wants apple pie?

MR. ALLEN  
Obviously.

Mrs. Allen stands and walks into the kitchen. Jasper watches as his father and sister launch into a argument about when she can learn to drive.

**INT. JASPER'S CONDO - DAY**

Morning sunlight. Jasper in the middle of the messy living room with a black trash bag. He starts collecting bottles and tossing them into the bag.

CLINK. CLINK. CLINK.

He moves faster, sweeping them up from counters, tables, the floor. The bag grows heavy.

The bottom tears open. Bottles CRASH across the hardwood.

Jasper goes still, breathing hard.

He looks down at the shattered glass.

A beat.

He grabs another trash bag and starts picking up the glass. Careful now. Methodical.

#### **LIVING ROOM - LATER**

The condo is completely clean. Cardboard boxes sit on the floor.

Jasper carefully stacks Zach's law textbooks into a box. He flips through a notebook filled with Zach's neat handwriting. Doodles of hearts with "J + Z" in the margin.

His thumb lingers on the ink. He closes the notebook. Places it in the box.

He turns to the wall and carefully removes Zach's framed college diploma, leaving an empty space on the wall next to his own.

For a moment, he just looks at it.

Then he places it in the box.

RIIIIP. Packing tape. He seals the box.

#### **BEDROOM - LATER**

Jasper pulls clothes from the closet and folds them into another box.

His hand brushes a dusty box in the back of the closet.

He pulls it out and sets it on the bed. He pulls out a blue hoody. He unfurls it: IOWA COLLEGE WRESTLING.

His eyes flick to the phone on the night stand.

He puts the hoody back.

He sits on the bed and picks up the phone, dials a number from memory.

DO-DO-DO followed by a mechanical voice:

AUTOMATED FEMALE VOICE (V.O.)

We're sorry, you have reached a number that has been disconnected or is no longer in service. If you feel you have reached this recording in error, please check the number and try your call again.

He doesn't hang up. Just stares at the phone. A sharp, high-pitched OFF-HOOK TONE SCREAMS through the receiver.

BEEP-BEEP-BEEP-BEEP-BEEP

He clicks the phone off.

**INT. DENVER ANIMAL SHELTER – KENNELS – DAY**

A cacophony of BARKING and WHINING echoes off concrete walls.

Cages line both sides of the narrow aisle. Dogs jumping, scratching at the wire mesh, desperate for attention.

Jasper stands near the center of the row, microphone in hand. His suit is perfect. His eyes aren't. Beth's camera is on him.

Red light on.

JASPER

...with local facilities operating at more than double their capacity, shelter officials warn they are simply running out of space and time. To combat the crisis, the city is waiving all adoption fees, hoping Denverites will step up.

The red light blinks off.

BETH

Got it.

Jasper closes his eyes for a beat, letting the noise wash over him.

He walks toward the exit. Passing the blur of barking dogs without seeing them. Then he stops.

In a corner cage near the end of the row, a mixed breed MUTT, maybe two years old, sits on the concrete.

Unlike every other dog in the room, he isn't barking. Isn't scratching at the wire. He sits perfectly, uncannily still.

His eyes lock onto Jasper's face. A steady, unblinking gaze. Jasper looks back at him. A SHELTER VOLUNTEER walks by.

SHELTER VOLUNTEER

That one's been with us almost five months. We're not sure what breeds he is.

Jasper walks slowly to the cage and drops to both knees on the concrete floor, completely ignoring what it's doing to his suit.

He lifts his left hand and presses his palm flat against the wire mesh. The Tag Heuer watch glints under the fluorescent light.

The dog stands. He steadily walks over and presses his nose, matching the exact placement of Jasper's fingers through the wire.

JASPER

What happens if nobody takes him?

SHELTER VOLUNTEER

We do everything we can.

The volunteer walks away. Beth steps up quietly behind Jasper. She looks at him on his knees, then at the dog.

BETH

Kim wants us back for the block review.

Jasper hands her the microphone. He slides the latch on the cage open and the dog calmly steps out to him.

JASPER

Go ahead and load the gear.

Beth looks at the dog one more time. A small, quiet understanding settles across her face. She nods once and turns down the aisle.

Jasper pets the dog and scratches behind its ears. The dog closes his eyes.

JASPER (CONT'D)

Hey, buddy. Let's get you out of here.

The dog turns and licks his face.

**EXT. DENVER ANIMAL SHELTER - LATER**

Jasper comes through the front door. Leash in one hand. A paper bag of dog supplies in the other. The dog walks beside him, not pulling, not lagging. In rhythm with Jasper.

Beth leans against the news truck, arms crossed, watching them come.

BETH

Have you thought of a name for him?

Jasper looks down at the dog, whose face is pure joy. Tail wagging.

JASPER

Chance.

Beth nods.

BETH

C'mon Chance.

She opens the side door of the news truck. The dog jumps in like he's done it a hundred times.

**EXT. COLORADO STATE CAPITOL - LATE AFTERNOON**

**SUPER: JANUARY, 1999**

The capitol steps are clearing. Inaugural CROWD dispersing. News trucks parked on the street. Jasper stands at the top of the capital steps, earpiece in. Beth behind the camera. Red light on.

JASPER

Bill Owens was inaugurated as the state's first Republican governor in nearly a quarter century, with a mandate from voters who wanted change. Whether his margin, just over eight thousand votes, gives him the political capital to deliver, remains to be seen. From the Colorado State Capitol, I'm Jasper Allen.

The red light blinks off.

BETH

Good hit. I'm going to pack up.

JASPER

I'll be right there.

Beth shoulders the camera and walks down the steps toward the news truck. Jasper pulls his earpiece and makes a note in his reporter's notebook. TERRANCE FULLER, the polished reporter at the rival station, appears at Jasper's elbow.

TERRANCE

Jasper.

Jasper glances at him.

JASPER  
Terrance.

TERRANCE  
Been a while.

Jasper closes his notebook.

JASPER  
What do you want?

TERRANCE  
Just making conversation. How's  
your friend? The one you were  
protecting after the Super Bowl.

Jasper doesn't answer.

TERRANCE (CONT'D)  
I've been thinking about that. The  
way you went after that guy. That  
wasn't instinct. That was personal.

JASPER  
We were in the middle of a riot.

TERRANCE  
I also saw your 'friend' speak at a  
DU rally. Gay rights. Very  
passionate. Very out.

Jasper stills.

TERRANCE (CONT'D)  
Interesting company for a man like  
you to keep. The kind of story that  
writes itself.

Jasper looks at him.

JASPER  
His name was Zach.

Terrance blinks.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
Zachary Nagle. He was a law student  
at DU. He died on Valentine's Day.  
Drunk driver killed him.

The wry smile leaves Terrance's face.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
 So if you want to do that story, do  
 it. His name was Zachary Nagle.

Terrance looks away. Walks off without another word. Jasper  
 just stands there, motionless. Beth waves at the bottom of  
 the steps and tilts her head toward the truck.

**INT. KDEN NEWS TRUCK - DRIVING - LATER**

Beth drives through Denver traffic. Jasper rides shotgun. The  
 city moves past.

BETH  
 That was Terrance Fuller.

JASPER  
 Yeah.

BETH  
 Channel Four.

JASPER  
 Yeah.

BETH  
 He had something on you.

Jasper looks out the window.

JASPER  
 He saw Zach at a gay rights rally.  
 Put it together.

BETH  
 And now?

JASPER  
 And now nothing. He's got nothing.

BETH  
 What did you tell him?

JASPER  
 I told him Zach's name.

A long stretch of quiet. Beth doesn't push immediately.

BETH  
 How'd that feel?

Jasper looks down.

JASPER  
Like I'd been holding my breath for  
months and someone finally just—

He stops.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
Like saying it out loud made it  
more real, and less, at the same  
time.

Beth nods. Eyes on the road.

BETH  
Kim knows?

JASPER  
Yeah.

BETH  
Your family?

Jasper looks at her.

JASPER  
Beth.

BETH  
I'm just asking.

JASPER  
No. They don't know Zach existed.

Beth looks over at him.

BETH  
He existed, Jasper.

Jasper looks out the window. His hand covers the watch.  
Outside, Denver moves past.

BETH (CONT'D)  
I'm not pushing. I just—

JASPER  
I know what you're doing.

BETH  
Is it working?

Jasper looks at her.

JASPER  
Ask me again in a year.

Beth glances at him. Looks back at the road.

BETH

I will.

**INT. KDEN-TV STATION - DAY**

**SUPER: APRIL, 1999**

Jasper and Beth stand chatting in the newsroom, sipping coffee.

The newsroom erupts. People are shouting. Kim marches to Jasper and Beth.

KIM

Littleton. Columbine High School is under attack. Multiple shooters. Possible bombs. I'm sending you and Beth in the chopper. A live truck is rolling. Get there.

Beth scrambles. Kim turns and rushes to the assignment desk. Jasper freezes and just stands there for a beat too long, then grabs his jacket.

**INT. NEWS TRUCK - COLUMBINE SCENE - NIGHT**

Jasper types on his laptop, the light of the screen catching his solemn face. Beth is editing B-roll at the edit station: students fleeing the school, SWAT teams descending.

BETH

Kim wants a 'hope' angle for the ten o'clock. She wants you to talk about the 'Spirit of Littleton.'

JASPER

There is no hope angle. There are two dozen shot and thirteen dead kids. A school full of blood. I'm not going to lie to them.

A beat.

BETH

You called him a close family friend on live TV.

Jasper stops typing. He looks at her.

The footage of fleeing students plays silently on the monitor.

JASPER  
That was my life. This is theirs.

PRODUCER (V.O.)  
(through the intercom)  
Jasper, the network is cutting to  
you in sixty seconds. This is the  
biggest story in the country.

Jasper stands. He straightens his tie.

**EXT. COLUMBINE SCENE - LATER**

Mourners hold candles in the background. Jasper talks  
somberly into the lens. Red light on.

JASPER  
...and as the sirens fade here in  
Littleton, a deeper, more painful  
quiet has taken hold. A community  
that woke up in the suburban peace  
of an ordinary Tuesday morning is  
now grappling with a violence that  
defies explanation. Reporting live  
from Littleton, I'm Jasper Allen.

The red light blinks off. Jasper's gaze drifts to a temporary  
wire FENCE around the perimeter of the school. Flowers  
pressed against it. A small teddy bear. He looks at it for a  
long beat.

Beth lowers the camera. She sees where he's looking.

BETH  
You good?

Jasper doesn't look away from the fence.

JASPER  
There was this one dad. Standing  
outside the police line... he kept  
saying how his daughter hated math.  
Said if she'd skipped that class,  
like she always did... she'd be  
home right now.

He turns to look at her

JASPER (CONT'D)  
It made me think about how Zach's  
parents must've felt when I made  
that call.

Beth puts her hand over her mouth, her eyes filling.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
That's the thing about these stories. They leave a hole. In a family. In a town. And you can feel it.

He looks at the school one more time.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
Let's go.

**INT. KDEN-TV - DAY**

Jasper sits at his desk typing on the laptop. The desk phone rings. Jasper rubs his eyes and answers.

JASPER  
Allen.

**INT. WCHO-TV STATION - CHICAGO - DAY**

A polished office overlooking downtown Chicago. MICHAEL SANDERS (60s), News Director, sits at his desk.

**INTERCUT PHONE CONVERSATION**

MICHAEL  
Jasper Allen?

JASPER  
Yes.

MICHAEL  
This is Michael Sanders at W-C-H-O in Chicago. We've been running your coverage of Columbine. You've handled an incredibly difficult story with a lot of professionalism.

Jasper sits up straight.

JASPER  
Thank you.

MICHAEL  
We're expanding our team. I think you'd be a strong fit here.

Jasper glances around the newsroom.

JASPER  
That's... flattering.

MICHAEL  
It's also serious. I know all about you. The tornado in Iowa. Your coverage of Matthew Shepard. And now, Columbine.

JASPER  
My greatest tragedies.

MICHAEL  
You have a way of carrying the weight of a story without melodrama. That's rare.

JASPER  
I don't know what to say.

MICHAEL  
Here you'd be reporting. Anchor fill-ins. Major investigations. National stories in the Midwest.

JASPER  
Hypothetically, when would you want someone to start?

MICHAEL  
Soon as you're ready.

Jasper exhales slowly.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)  
Think about it. I'll call again tomorrow.

JASPER  
Alright.

MICHAEL  
And Jasper.

JASPER  
Yes?

MICHAEL  
Excellent work this week.

Jasper sets the phone down slowly. He stares at it for a moment.

Beth walks up, watching him.

BETH  
Everything okay?

JASPER  
Come with me.

He leads her into an edit bay and shuts the door.

**EDIT BAY - CONTINUOUS**

JASPER  
That was W-C-H-O in Chicago.

Beth raises an eyebrow.

BETH  
And?

JASPER  
They offered me a job.

Beth studies him for a moment.

BETH  
Well...

JASPER  
I don't know.

BETH  
Yes you do.

Jasper doesn't answer. Just looks at her.

**EXT. BROWNSTONE IN CHICAGO - DAY**

**SUPER: JUNE, 1999**

An elegant, three-story brownstone. A yellow moving truck in the driveway. Movers carry boxes and furniture in.

**INT. JASPER'S BROWNSTONE - CONTINUOUS**

Jasper directs the movers where to put the last of the boxes. Chance follows Jasper around closely.

**LATER THAT NIGHT**

The house is mostly settled. Furniture placed. One last cluster of boxes sit open near the hallway. Jasper works through them in sweatpants and a t-shirt.

Chance watches from a thick rug, tracking Jasper's movements with mild interest. Jasper pulls out books, stacks them. A lamp. A folded throw blanket. Ordinary things.

He reaches into the next box. His hand finds a frame.

He lifts it out. A FRAMED PHOTO: Jasper and Zach on the couch in the Denver condo, laughing at something off-camera. Zach's arm thrown around Jasper's shoulders.

Jasper looks at it. He reaches back into the box. Another FRAME: the two of them on a hiking trail in the Rockies, smiling in the sun.

He sets them on the floor, then sits down.

Chance gets up, trots over to sniff the frames.

JASPER

That's Zach.

Chance looks up at him.

JASPER (CONT'D)

You would've liked him. He would've let you sleep on the bed and blamed me for it.

He looks at Chance.

JASPER (CONT'D)

Don't get any ideas.

Jasper studies the photos.

Chance settles beside him on the floor.

JASPER (CONT'D)

I don't know if I can put you on the wall here.

Chance raises his head.

JASPER (CONT'D)

The watch goes with me everywhere.

A quiet moment.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
Is that enough?

Chance puts his chin on Jasper's knee. Jasper looks down at him.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
You're not helpful.

He puts his hand on the dog's back. A quiet stretch. The city outside. Chance breathing.

Jasper looks at the photos. Then at the bare wall.

**EXT. JASPER'S BROWNSTONE - DAY**

The sky is a sharp blue, the trees along the street full and green. The front door opens. Jasper steps out, holding a leash. Chance trots out, sniffing the air.

**EXT. BOYSTOWN STREETS - CONTINUOUS**

Jasper and Chance move through the neighborhood and onto Halsted St.

A fit young man walks past them. Jasper is looking down at Chance, making sure he doesn't eat a wrapper off the sidewalk.

He doesn't see the man stop. The man turns around. He stares. It's Mason.

MASON  
Jasper?

Jasper stiffens. Turns around. Sees him.

JASPER  
Mason?

Simultaneously, they both smile. Mason closes the gap. They collide into an embrace.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
Holy shit.

MASON  
I can't believe it.

Mason notices Chance sitting patiently at Jasper's heel and crouches down.

MASON (CONT'D)  
And who's this?

He scratches Chance behind the ears. The dog leans into it immediately.

JASPER  
Chance.

Mason looks up at him, still crouching. He holds Jasper's gaze.

MASON  
You look fantastic.

Jasper looks at Chance.

JASPER  
How's Cindy? Is she here, too?

Mason looks down for a beat. He stands.

MASON  
It's a long story. We're not together. I'm... I'm gay.

Stunned silence. The pedestrian traffic keeps moving around them like stones in a stream. Chance sitting.

JASPER  
(quietly)  
Okay. So you came out then?

MASON  
Not by choice. She walked in on me. With a guy. From my gym. Called off the wedding. Told everyone. Includin' my family.

Jasper looks at him.

MASON (CONT'D)  
What are you doing in Chicago?

JASPER  
W-C-H-O hired me. I just moved from Denver. I bought a renovated brownstone.

MASON  
Can I come see it?

**INT. JASPER'S BROWNSTONE - LATER**

Jasper enters. He unclips the leash.

JASPER  
Go get a drink, buddy.

Chance bolts inside, claws clicking on the hardwood.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
Come on in.

Mason steps inside and takes in the room. Jasper closes the door.

MASON  
This is stunning.

Mason moves around the room. He sees the framed photos of Jasper and Zach leaning against a wall.

MASON (CONT'D)  
Who's that?

JASPER  
Zach. My... he was my partner.

Jasper swallows.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
He died in a car accident.

Mason turns from the photos and looks at Jasper.

Jasper grabs the watch on his wrist. Mason notices.

Mason crosses to him. Pulls him in for an embrace. A quiet beat between them.

MASON  
I'm so sorry, Jas.

Chance wanders over and leans against Mason's leg. Mason looks down at him. He scratches behind the dog's ears.

MASON (CONT'D)  
You're still gettin' settled. I should probably get out of your hair.

Jasper looks at him but doesn't respond.

MASON (CONT'D)  
Do you want my cell number?

JASPER  
Yes, of course.

Jasper pulls out his phone and hands it to Mason. He types in his number and hands it back to Jasper.

MASON  
Let's get together?

JASPER  
Okay.

Mason walks toward the front door. He turns before opening it.

MASON  
He looks very happy. In the pictures. You both do.

He gives Jasper another short hug, then opens the door and steps out. The door clicks shut.

Jasper stands in the quiet. He looks at the photos.

**INT. JASPER'S BROWNSTONE - NIGHT**

Chance lies on the floor, tail thumping lazily. Jasper's phone is on speaker, sitting on the kitchen counter.

BETH (V.O.)  
...and the new guy can't write a script to save his life. I swear, Kim's losing it.

Jasper, still in a suit with a loosened tie, smiles as he pours a glass of wine.

JASPER  
You're gonna make him cry, aren't you.

BETH (V.O.)  
He'll survive. How's Chicago treating you?

JASPER  
Good. I like it here.

BETH (V.O.)  
How's your boss? Does he scream? I feel like all Chicago news directors scream.

Jasper chuckles.

JASPER  
No screaming yet.

In the background, Molly's voice drifts in. Soft, playful.

MOLLY (V.O.)  
Tell him we're watching Titanic  
again.

BETH (V.O.)  
Babe, he's heard enough about Rose  
and the door.

Jasper chuckles. He looks down at Chance.

BETH (V.O.)  
Sex life?

Jasper picks up the phone and his glass and walks to the bay window in the living room. Chance follows. The Chicago night glows beyond the glass.

JASPER  
I ran into Mason. On the street.

BETH (V.O.)  
Your Iowa heartbreak.

JASPER  
He's living here. He came to see my  
place.

BETH (V.O.)  
How was it? Seeing him?

JASPER  
Like finding something I stopped  
looking for.

Chance leans against Jasper's leg.

BETH (V.O.)  
Just be careful.

JASPER  
Things are different. With him. He  
got outed by his ex fiancé. And he  
knows about Zach.

BETH (V.O.)  
Are you happy?

Jasper looks at his reflection in the window.

JASPER  
I think I might be. Yeah.

BETH (V.O.)  
Then stop looking for reasons not  
to be.

JASPER  
I got to a bad place in Laramie.  
I'm not there anymore.

BETH (V.O.)  
I can sense that.

Something releases in Jasper's shoulders.

JASPER  
I miss you.

BETH (V.O.)  
I miss you more. Call me next week.

JASPER  
Promise.

BETH (V.O.)  
Love you, Tornado Boy.

JASPER  
Love you too.

Jasper pockets the phone and stays at the window. His reflection on the glass. He raises his glass slightly, a quiet toast to nothing in particular. Or maybe everything.

**INT. JASPER'S BROWNSTONE - NIGHT**

Chance snores on the rug. A bottle of red wine is half empty on the coffee table. Jasper and Mason sit on the couch, angled toward each other, holding wine glasses.

MASON  
So, I transferred to the Chicago  
office and packed up.

JASPER  
What did your dad say?

MASON  
He just looked at me with total  
disgust and told me I had to leave.

Jasper looks at his wine glass, takes a sip and sets it down.

JASPER

You got to fall apart. Pack a bag  
and start over. I had to do it  
while pretending I wasn't.

MASON

I know.

JASPER

I'm not saying that to hurt you.

MASON

I know.

Mason sets down his glass and takes both of Jasper's hands.  
Firm grip, looking into his eyes.

MASON (CONT'D)

I am so sorry, Jasper. For bein' a  
coward. For hurtin' you. Can you  
ever forgive me?

A silent look between them.

JASPER

Do you know what the worst part  
was?

Mason waits.

JASPER (CONT'D)

It wasn't the proposal. It's that I  
understood why you did it. I knew  
exactly why. I couldn't even be  
angry at you for it.

Mason looks down.

JASPER (CONT'D)

It's a lonely thing to understand  
someone so completely that you  
can't even hate him for destroying  
you.

Mason's eyes fill. He looks back up at Jasper.

MASON

I don't have anything that makes it  
better. I just need you to know  
that I know.

Jasper holds his gaze.

JASPER  
I forgive you.

Mason lets out a breath he's been holding for years. A tear runs down his cheek.

They lean into each other, foreheads touching. A long quiet beat. Then Mason kisses him.

Jasper breaks it suddenly and stands.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
I don't think-

He stops. Mason stands. Lingered silence between them.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
Fuck.

Jasper tackles Mason onto the couch with a passionate kiss.

#### **BEDROOM - LATER**

The room is dim. Candles. Soft music. Jasper and Mason lie naked in the sheets, holding each other.

MASON  
What are you thinkin' about?

Jasper hesitates.

JASPER  
Whether I can trust you or not.

Jasper looks at him.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
It might take some time.

Mason reaches and takes his hand. They lie there in the quiet.

MASON  
Should I stay over?

Jasper lifts Mason's hand and softly kisses it.

JASPER  
I'd like that.

**INT. JASPER'S BROWNSTONE - NIGHT****SUPER: NOVEMBER, 1999**

Mason leans against the counter, wine in hand, watching Jasper move through the kitchen with the focused efficiency of a man running through a checklist.

JASPER

Food's in the cabinet above the bowls. One cup morning, one at night. He'll tell you he's starving. He's lying.

MASON

Got it.

JASPER

Walk before eight or he gets anxious. He pulls left on Halsted, keep the leash short until you pass the coffee shop.

MASON

Jasper.

Jasper stills.

MASON (CONT'D)

I've got this.

Jasper nods. He picks up his wine.

Chance ambles in from the living room, surveys the situation, and settles on the kitchen floor between them with a heavy sigh.

They both look at him.

MASON (CONT'D)

He does that a lot?

JASPER

Constantly. He has opinions.

Mason looks at Jasper.

MASON

So, they asked for you to go to Laramie. Specifically. The network. You're in high demand.

He raises his glass.

MASON (CONT'D)  
How are you feelin' about going  
back?

Jasper takes a moment.

JASPER  
Better than I thought I would be. A  
year ago I wasn't sure I'd ever-

He stops. Takes a sip.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
I need to see it through.

MASON  
You know you can call me. Any time.

**INT. JASPER'S BROWNSTONE - THE NEXT MORNING**

Jasper stands at the front door in his overcoat, work bag and rolling suitcase beside him.

Mason stands in the kitchen doorway in his underwear, hair unruly, holding a mug of coffee. Chance sits at his feet, looking at Jasper with deep suspicion about the suitcase.

Jasper looks at the two of them. Just looks.

JASPER  
Don't let him sleep on the bed.

MASON  
Obviously not.

Jasper picks up his bag. Opens the front door. Cold air comes in.

He stops.

JASPER  
Mase.

MASON  
Yeah?

JASPER  
Thank you.

Jasper points at Chance.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
You be good. I'll call you tonight.

He steps out pulling the suitcase and the door closes.

Chance looks up at Mason. Mason looks down at Chance.

MASON

Don't tell him, but we're  
definitely gonna cuddle in that  
bed.

Chance barks. Mason reaches down and scratches behind his ears.

**EXT. ALBANY COUNTY COURTHOUSE - LARAMIE - LATE AFTERNOON**

Outside the courthouse, PROTESTORS in a blur of fluorescent yellow and hot pink signs: GOD HATES FAGS. THANK GOD FOR AIDS. FAGS DOOM NATIONS.

The courthouse lawn is full of news crews and reporters. News trucks line the street.

Standing along the edge of the sidewalk are the ACTION ANGELS. A row of people draped in white fabric that is stretched over PVC pipe, forming large wings.

JOE DOOLEY (30s), a photojournalist from WCHO, adjusts the camera on a tripod. Jasper stands in front of the courthouse steps, earpiece in place.

Jasper watches the angels for a moment.

JOE

You good?

JASPER

Yeah.

JOE

Thirty seconds.

Jasper straightens his tie. Exhales slowly.

Red light on.

JASPER

Seven months ago, these Action Angels formed a silent wall of white wings outside this courthouse when Russell Henderson became the first of Matthew Shepard's killers to face justice. Today, they are here again.

Jasper pauses.

JASPER (CONT'D)

Aaron McKinney, who was found guilty of murder, kidnapping, and aggravated robbery, will not face the death penalty. Dennis Shepard, Matthew's father, stood in the courtroom today and asked the judge to spare one of the men who killed his son.

Jasper swallows hard, his knuckles tightening around the microphone.

JASPER (CONT'D)

In a statement that silenced the courtroom, mister Shepard told McKinney that every day he wakes in his prison cell, he should know that gift came from Matthew. That Matthew's legacy will be written in light, not in more death.

His eyes move briefly toward the hills beyond the horizon. Toward the fence.

JASPER (CONT'D)

One year and twenty-five days ago, a twenty-one-year-old gay man was brutally beaten and tied to a fence on the outskirts of this town. Left to die in the cold. Today, his father stood in the place where justice was being decided and chose mercy.

He pauses, looking into the lens.

JASPER (CONT'D)

Reporting from Laramie, I'm Jasper Allen.

The red light goes off. Jasper lowers the mic.

He exhales.

Joe steps out from behind the camera. Nods at Jasper.

Jasper reaches into his pocket and pulls out his cell phone. He flips it open. Speed dial 1.

JASPER (CONT'D)  
Hey. It's over. Yeah. I'm coming home.

He closes the phone. Looks up at the Wyoming sky. Then back at the angel wings billowing in the breeze.

**INT. JASPER'S BROWNSTONE - NIGHT**

The front door opens. Jasper enters, dropping his bag and suitcase by the door. Chance lets out a sharp, joyful bark and skids across the hardwood. Jasper drops to his knees, burying his face in the dog's neck.

JASPER  
Hey, buddy!

Mason stands in the archway of the kitchen, leaning against the frame. He watches with a smile.

MASON  
Somebody missed you. And he did too.

Jasper stands and walks to him. Mason pulls him into a deep, grounding kiss.

MASON (CONT'D)  
I watched you. Every mornin' before work. Every night. You were incredible, Jas.

Mason leads him to the couch. Jasper sinks into the leather, Chance immediately jumping up to rest his head on Jasper's thigh. Jasper pets the dog with one hand, holds Mason's hand in the other.

JASPER  
I'm glad to be home. With my boys... with my boyfriend.

Mason smiles.

MASON  
Welcome home.

He reaches up to caress Jasper's face.

MASON (CONT'D)  
I love you.

They stare into each other's eyes for a long beat. Jasper leans forward and reaches up, taking Mason's face in both hands.

JASPER  
I love you, too.

They stay like that for a long moment, foreheads almost touching, before Jasper pulls him into a kiss.

**INT. UNIVERSITY - AUDITORIUM - DAY**

**SUPER: SEVEN MONTHS LATER. JUNE, 2000**

Packed house. An EMCEE (50s) stands at the podium.

EMCEE  
Please welcome Judy Shepard.

Sustained APPLAUSE. JUDY SHEPARD (40s) walks from the wings and takes the podium. Her presence fills the room with quiet, steely resolve. She waits for the applause to settle.

JUDY SHEPARD  
My son Matt was twenty-one years old when he was taken from us. The world has never let us forget him, but I will never stop fighting for all of the gay sons and daughters in this country.

Jasper stands in the wings, watching. Just listening. Joe shoulders a camera at the edge of the front row, filming the speech.

JUDY SHEPARD (CONT'D)  
...we have leaders who hesitate to punish those who hunt down our children...

Jasper looks out at the faces in the audience.

**INT. BACKSTAGE - LATER**

A makeshift interview space. Judy sits opposite Jasper. Joe mans the camera on a tripod. A soft light glows over them. Red light on.

JASPER  
Mrs. Shepard, it's been nearly two years.

(MORE)

JASPER (CONT'D)  
You're traveling constantly,  
speaking at events like today. What  
keeps you going?

JUDY  
Matt would want us to do something  
with this. With the voice we've  
been given. So that's what we do.

Jasper nods, absorbing the words.

JUDY (CONT'D)  
But I'll tell you what I tell every  
young person I meet. Silence is the  
enemy. History has proven that  
every single time. Progress only  
comes when people stand up and  
speak up. If we hide, if we stay  
quiet, we give them permission to  
keep hating.

She leans forward slightly.

JUDY (CONT'D)  
You have to live your truth. That  
is the only way to disarm the hate.

Jasper holds her gaze.

**INT. JASPER'S CAR - LATER**

Jasper gets in. Closes the door. He sits in the dark with his  
hands in his lap and lets the quiet settle around him.

He starts the engine. He drives. No radio. Just the sound of  
the road and the city moving past the windows.

At a red light he looks down at the watch. The light changes  
to green. He drives.

**INT. BROWNSTONE - LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS**

The TV glows with a sitcom rerun. Mason sits on the couch  
watching. Chance's head rests in his lap. Mason absently rubs  
the dog's ears.

Jasper enters. Mason stands, waking Chance, who jumps down  
and circles Jasper.

MASON

I saw your story. Wow. You had me  
in tears. Chance was licking my  
face like he was worried.

Mason senses something in Jasper's eyes.

MASON (CONT'D)

Everything okay?

JASPER

I need to go back to Iowa.

Mason blinks.

JASPER (CONT'D)

This weekend.

MASON

Okay.

JASPER

Will you come with me?

MASON

Of course.

**EXT. INTERSTATE 80 - IOWA - DAY**

An endless Midwestern horizon. Green cornfields. A wide blue sky.

Jasper's car glides on the highway. On the lower corner of the rear window, a RAINBOW HEART STICKER.

Parallel to the road, a long, weathered split-rail fence runs beside the fields.

**INT. JASPER'S CAR - CONTINUOUS**

The hum of the road. Light music from the radio. Chance is curled up asleep across the back seat.

Jasper drives with one hand relaxed on the steering wheel. The other rests on his thigh. Mason sits in the passenger seat, looking out at the passing landscape. The fence.

JASPER

Your family's missing out. My mom  
invited them.

Mason sighs and turns to Jasper.

MASON

Are you nervous about yours?

Jasper looks at him briefly with a quick nod. Mason reaches over and slides his hand over Jasper's, their fingers interlacing.

Outside the passenger window, the long split-rail fence comes to an end. The car passes it and keeps going.

**EXT. ALLEN HOME - BACKYARD - SUNSET**

Mr. Allen and GRANDPA ALLEN (70s) stand beside a slightly smoking grill, clutching sweat-beaded bottles of beer. Their low, easy laughter drifting across the lawn.

On the table, the remnants of a family meal. Mrs. Allen and GRANDMA ALLEN (70s) sit talking. Jasper sits at the far end, next to Mason.

Near the edge of the lawn, Sara tosses a tennis ball. Chance is a blur of frantic fur, paws thudding as he chases the ball.

Jasper takes a deep breath, pushes his chair back and stands up. Before he moves, he rests his hand gently on Mason's shoulder. Mason looks up and offers a confident nod.

Jasper steps to the head of the table. He picks up a spoon and strikes the side of a glass. CLINK. CLINK. CLINK.

The family chatter dies down. Head by head, they look up. Across the lawn, Sara pauses, holding the tennis ball.

JASPER

Hey, everyone.

Chance trots over and sits in front of Jasper.

JASPER (CONT'D)

I wanted to see you... because I have something important to tell you.

Jasper looks back at Mason. Mason stands up. He walks over, stepping right into Jasper's space until they are standing shoulder to shoulder in front of the Allen family.

MASON

We have somethin' to tell you.

Mason reaches and takes Jasper's hand in his.

The family stares at their joined hands. Mr. Allen looks at Grandpa Allen. Grandpa Allen looks back.

The silence hangs over the golden-hour backyard.

The first notes of SAVAGE GARDEN'S "TRULY MADLY DEEPLY" hit as Jasper opens his mouth to speak—

**SMASH CUT TO BLACK**

**TITLE CARD:**

In Memory of Matthew Shepard.

**TITLE CARD:**

On October 22, 2009, Congress passed the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act.

President Barack Obama signed it into law on October 28, 2009, 11 years after Matthew's death.

**TITLE CARD:**

For two decades, Matthew had no final resting place due to the family's fear that a grave would be vandalized.

On October 26, 2018, Matthew was interred at the Washington National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., where he will always remain at peace.

**TITLE CARD:**

Judy and Dennis Shepard continue their advocacy for the LGBTQ+ community through the Matthew Shepard Foundation.

**THE END**