

'CARNATION: THE MANY LIVES OF ORDELL CLAYTON HART

Written by

Matthew W Bertsch

Story by

Matthew W Bertsch, with contributions from Richard L. Nunez

Bigdaddywrites@gmail.com
(260) 444-1545

FADE IN:

EXT. SUBURBAN STREETS OF TEXAS - MORNING

[CREDITS ROLL THROUGHOUT INITIAL SCENES]

A peaceful suburban Texas morning is dawning; birds are chirping and butterflies are fluttering among some picturesque blue-bonnet flowers.

SUDDENLY the peacefulness is shattered by ...

[MUSIC UP FULL - QUEEN 'ANOTHER ONE BITES THE DUST']

A white van with a single BLUE LIGHT FLASHING on its roof screams through the streets of a Texas suburb. The name "CRITTER RIDDERS" is emblazoned on the side in bold letters, along with a cartoon exterminator giving a thumbs-up.

Through the windshield we see ORDELL CLAYTON HART (goes by CLAY, late-30s to mid-40s, white, blue-collar, male), with the intense focus of someone who takes pest control way too seriously. Queen's "Another One Bites the Dust" blasts from the speakers, the heavy bass line matching his racing pulse.

INT. CLAY'S VAN - CONTINUOUS

CLAY
(to himself)
Time to rid the world of another
menace.

A jogger at a crosswalk dives into the median's bushes as Clay roars past, horn blaring. In his rearview mirror, Clay catches the woman's indignant gesture and grins.

CLAY (CONT'D)
Sorry, ma'am, but duty calls! Can't
let them varmints get the upper
hand!

Up ahead, a police cruiser lurks in its usual spot. Clay kills the light, drops his speed to an innocent crawl, and turns down Queen until it's barely a whisper. He waves at the officer with exaggerated politeness.

Once clear, Clay cranks his tunes and guns it. The van's acceleration pushes him back in his seat.

CLAY (CONT'D)
Sweet mercy, I love this job!

The van SQUEALS into the Oak Haven subdivision. Clay checks his reflection in the rearview mirror, adjusting his custom-made exterminator's helmet - part motorcycle helmet, part space suit visor, with various homemade modifications.

EXT. COLONIAL HOUSE - CONTINUOUS - MORNING

[MUSIC GOES UNDER, THEN OUT]

Clay pulls up in front of a pristine two-story colonial. From his equipment bay, he assembles his gear with practiced efficiency. Each item on his utility belt has its specific purpose - though any rational person might question the need for a grappling hook when dealing with mice.

His custom-built "critter gun" - a modified paintball gun that now shoots tranquilizer darts - hangs at his hip like a cowboy's six-shooter.

CLAY

Time to saddle up.

He gives the gun a theatrical spin before holstering it. The weight of his equipment makes him walk with a slight waddle, tools jingling like a death-metal wind chime.

Clay marches up to the front door and presses the doorbell, bouncing on the balls of his feet. The door opens to reveal a well-dressed WOMAN (white, mid-upper class, 50's, graying hair) whose expression shifts from hopeful to bewildered as she takes in Clay's appearance.

CLAY (CONT'D)

Critter Ridders at yer service,
ma'am.

(doffing his helmet with a
flourish)

Name's Clay, and I'll be handlin'
your pest situation today.

(pauses for dramatic
effect)

Ma'am, you can rest easy now. The
cavalry has arrived.

The woman blinks several times.

WOMAN

(barely above a whisper)
It's... it's just a little mouse.

Clay's expression turns grave. He leans in close.

CLAY

Just a mouse? Ma'am, there ain't no such thing as 'just a mouse'. Where there's one, there's likely a whole army of 'em; plotting and scheming behind your walls. But don't you worry none - that's why I'm here.

Without waiting for a response, Clay shoulders past her into the house, his gear clattering against the doorframe. The woman watches him go, her mouth still hanging open, as if she'd just invited a tornado into her living room.

INT. COLONIAL HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Inside the immaculate home, Clay launches into his standard operating procedure - which is anything but standard. He drops to his hands and knees, pressing his ear to the baseboard like a safe-cracker listening for tumbler clicks.

CLAY

(excitedly)

Ah-ha! Just as I suspected. Classic infestation pattern, probably started in the fall of '22. You can tell by the way they're scratchin' - yep, I reckon they started building their fortress around September... no, October of '22.

The woman's polite smile grows strained.

WOMAN

I only saw the one mouse.
Yesterday. In the kitchen.

Clay waves off her amateur assessment as he begins setting an elaborate array of traps along the baseboards.

CLAY

Trust me, ma'am, I'm a professional. What you're dealin' with here is probably a whole syndicate. Organized crime, rodent division.

As he works, Clay mutters to himself about "proper trap spacing" and "tactical coverage zones." His concentration is so intense that when one trap snaps shut on his finger, he barely notices - at first.

CLAY (CONT'D)

Sweet mercy!

(jumping to his feet,
shaking his hand)

These new models got some real bite
to 'em!

(forced grin to the
homeowner)

Don't worry, ma'am, just testing
the tension. Gotta make sure
they're calibrated exactly right.

The woman presses her lips together, clearly fighting the urge to suggest he call the whole thing off. But before she can speak, a flash of grey darts across the kitchen floor.

Clay's entire demeanor changes in an instant. Gone is the bumbling exterminator, replaced by something closer to a Special Forces operator. He draws his critter gun in one fluid motion.

CLAY (CONT'D)

Ma'am, I'm gonna have to ask you to
step back. This could get ugly.

Clay spins around, accidentally backing into the homeowner. His protective gesture goes awry, his hand nearly landing somewhere far more personal than intended. The woman gasps - whether from the contact or from the sight of the ridiculously large dart gun, it isn't clear.

CLAY (CONT'D)

(oblivious to the social
faux pas)

Shh. There he is.

The mouse makes a break for the window. It scurries up the counter with impressive agility, squeezes through a small hole in the screen, and disappears into the backyard.

Clay lowers his weapon slowly, his expression unreadable behind his visor. Then, like a switch being flipped, he bursts into action.

CLAY (CONT'D)

Perfect! Didn't want to make a mess
of your nice clean walls anyway.
All part of the plan - we're taking
this outside!

Before the homeowner can protest, Clay charges toward her sliding glass door, his gear rattling like a one-man band in full swing.

His enthusiasm for the chase nearly costs him dearly as he almost runs face-first into the glass, catching himself at the last second, then sliding the door open.

CLAY (CONT'D)

Don't worry, ma'am! This is where the real magic happens. Outdoor pursuits are my specialty!

WOMAN

(under her breath)
That's what I'm afraid of.

EXT. BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS

[OPENING MUSIC RETURNS, UNDER AND UP FULL, TO ACCOMPANY THE ACTION]

Clay pauses to get his bearings. The morning sun casts long shadows across a pristine garden that looks like it came straight from Better Homes & Gardens. Clay's trained eye immediately identifies potential mouse hiding spots, escape routes, and one very unfortunate garden gnome that's about to have a really bad day.

A rustle in the flower bed catches his attention. Without hesitation, Clay snatches up a shovel leaning against the house. He tests its weight with a few practice swings that would have made a golf pro cringe.

CLAY

Say yer prayers, rodent!

Clay launches into a series of wild shovel swings. Each miss sends dirt, mulch, and unfortunately-placed garden decorations flying in all directions.

Through the sliding glass door, the homeowner watches in horror as her carefully cultivated flower beds become collateral damage in Clay's one-man war on rodents. Her prized petunias go airborne, her wind chimes perform their swan song, and her collection of decorative garden stakes become impromptu javelins.

The mouse, meanwhile, always managing to be precisely where Clay's shovel isn't. It darts along the fence line.

CLAY (CONT'D)

Come back here and face me like a man!

Clay trips over a garden hose and nearly face-plants into a bird bath.

The mouse pauses just long enough to seem almost contemplative before squeezing under the fence into the neighbor's yard.

Clay, his chest heaving and his uniform now decorated with an impressive collection of grass stains, eyes the fence with grim determination.

CLAY (CONT'D)

So that's how you wanna play it,
huh? Well, two can play at that
game.

Clay's first attempt to scale the fence results in a learning experience. His equipment belt catches on a picket, leaving him dangling like a Christmas ornament, on the same side of the fence, until he manages to release himself.

CLAY (CONT'D)

Tactical retreat.
(spotting a gate a few
feet away)
Ah-ha! The element of surprise!

He creeps toward the gate with all the stealth of a tap-dancing elephant, his gear jingling with every exaggerated tiptoe. As he sneaks through the gate into the neighbor's yard, Clay finds himself face-to-face with a couple enjoying their morning coffee on their patio.

The mouse, with impeccable timing, chooses that moment to sprint across their table.

Clay launches into action. The couple's peaceful morning dissolves into chaos as he dives across their patio, shovel swinging wildly. An empty chair goes sailing through the air, bouncing off the house's brick wall.

The wife's shriek pierces the morning air. Clay pauses mid-pursuit, remembering his professional credentials. He fumbles for his ID badge, holding it up like a shield.

CLAY (CONT'D)

I know, they're scary, aren't they?

Before they can respond, Clay spots the mouse and takes off again. He rounds the corner of their house, passing by an open window. Through it, he catches an unexpected glimpse of a young woman fastening her bra. Their eyes meet in the window glass.

CLAY (CONT'D)
 No worries! Official brazzier-ness,
 uh, bust...uh, Official business,
 ma'am. Stay in the house.

Clay's face turns a shade of red beneath his visor as he continues his pursuit.

CLAY (CONT'D)
 Sweet mercy, why do these things
 always happen to me?

JUMP CUT TO:

EXT. ADJOINING NEIGHBOR'S BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS

A family is dining on spaghetti at their backyard patio table. A brat of a kid, seemingly hyped up on sugar acting out and doing everything except eating.

MOTHER
 Now I'm not telling you again,
 Little Mister. Eat! Or you'll go to
 bed hungry!

The child disregards and continues in his mischief.

BACK TO:

EXT. BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS

Peeking around the corner, Clay spots the mouse scampering in his direction. Clay whips out his homemade "spike strip" - a series of mousetraps connected with duct tape and optimism. He rips the make-shift safety from the contraption, thus arming it and hurls it towards its target.

The device sails through the air with all the grace of a thrown brick. It lands perfectly in the mouse's path - and fails spectacularly as the rodent simply changes direction, leaving Clay staring at his invention in betrayal.

The mouse hops on top a central AC unit and stares at Clay defiantly.

Clay retrieves his paintball/tranquilizer gun and takes aim. Without hesitation, he fires; but the mouse is onto Clay and jumps to safety. The dart ricochets off the AC, upward and deflects again off of the neighboring house's gutter and back downward.

JUMP CUT TO:

EXT. ADJOINING NEIGHBOR'S BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS

The restless child is still out of control.

MOTHER

Alright, that does it, if you don't
settle down right now...!

Just then, the dart finds its mark in the back of the child's neck and he faints, face-first into his plate of spaghetti.

The mother is astonished and confused.

BACK TO:

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD BACK YARD - CONTINUOUS

Clay continues his pursuit of the rodent; punctuated by crashes, bangs, and what sounds suspiciously like another garden gnome meeting an untimely end. From overhead, the path of destruction traced through the suburban landscape would look like a deranged connect-the-dots puzzle, leading through no fewer than six backyards. The mouse darts under yet another backyard fence.

CLAY

This would be so much easier if
people would just coordinate their
fence heights!

Deciding he doesn't want to scale this taller fence, Clay belly-crawls under the particularly low, locked gate, his equipment leaving a rut in the grass. The pursuit finally leads him back to his starting point, leaving Clay covered in dirt, grass stains, and what he desperately hopes is mud from someone's vegetable garden - though it exudes an essence of 'natural' fertilizer.

[MUSIC FADES OUT]

The original homeowner stands on her front porch, mouth agape at the destruction that radiates out from her yard like ripples in a pond. Before she can speak, Clay holds up a professional finger.

CLAY (CONT'D)

All part of the service, ma'am.
Standard pursuit protocol. We'll,
uh... we'll get him next time.

The mouse, as if to put a final exclamation point on Clay's defeat, darts between his legs and disappears into a storm drain.

Clay watches the mouse vanish, his shoulders slumping slightly before he catches himself and straightens up.

CLAY (CONT'D)

Well, looks like this little fella's gonna need the deluxe package. I'll draw up the paperwork and get you an estimate for our comprehensive rodent elimination program.

The homeowner's face goes through an impressive array of emotions before settling on polite panic.

WOMAN

Oh, no, that's... that's quite all right. I think you've done more than enough.

CLAY

But ma'am, you can't just leave a situation like this half-handled. Why, that mouse could be back with reinforcements! You need someone with experience, someone with dedication, someone with-

WOMAN

(blurting out)

I'll call an exterminator!

Clay draws himself up to his full height, offended to his core.

CLAY

Ma'am, I am an exterminator.

WOMAN

(gently)

A... different one.

Clay opens his mouth to argue further, but something in her expression tells him this is one battle he isn't going to win. He sighs, reaching into his belt for a business card that has somehow survived the morning's adventure.

CLAY

Well, if you change your mind... Critter Ridders is always here to serve. No varmint too small, no pursuit too challenging.

As Clay trudges back to his van, he notices several neighbors on their phones, speaking with their insurance companies or local law enforcement, he was unsure. He slides behind the wheel, starts the engine, and cranks up "Another One Bites the Dust" to drown out the sound of approaching sirens.

INT. CLAY'S VAN - CONTINUOUS

CLAY

Some days you get the varmint. And
some days...

(glancing in his rearview
mirror at the chaos)

Some days the varmint gets you.

EXT. CLAY'S VAN - CONTINUOUS

An overhead shot pulls back until we see the US Continent. The earth rotates.

[MUSIC FADES AGAIN]

Shot now passing Australia zooms in to New Zealand and further to a quaint urban retail area and further to EXT. PRIMROSE CAFÉ...

INT. PRIMROSE CAFÉ - NEW ZEALAND - AFTERNOON

Sunlight streams through tall windows, catching tiny orbs of dust that dance above freshly wiped tables. MADDIE WARREN (late-30s to mid-40s, white, beautiful yet down-to-earth woman, New Zealand accent) traces the rim of her pearl cup with an absent finger. Across the table, her best friend EMMA (similar age to Maddie, African decent, Australian accent) watches her with keen attention.

EMMA

Penny for your thoughts? You've
been a million miles away since you
decided to take that research
position back in the States.

Maddie sighs, tucking an errant curl behind her ear.

MADDIE

I know it's the right move. Going
back to Dad's old university,
continuing some of his work...

Her gaze drifts to the window where a tūī bird performs aerial acrobatics among flowering kōwhai trees.

EMMA

But?

MADDIE

I've just been thinking about someone lately. Someone from back in Texas.

Emma's eyes light up with interest.

EMMA

Oh? Do tell!

MADDIE

His name was Ordell Clayton Hart, but everyone called him Clay. He was this absolutely fearless little boy with the biggest heart I'd ever known. Never met a challenge he wouldn't tackle head-on, even if it meant landing flat on his face.

As Maddie speaks, her acquired accent shifts subtly, Texas bleeding, temporarily, through her carefully cultivated professional tone.

EMMA

How, after all these years of knowing you, you've never mentioned him before. Must have been someone special to have you looking like that after all these years.

MADDIE

Like what?

EMMA

Like you just found something precious you thought you'd lost forever.

Maddie traces a drop of condensation down the side of her cup.

MADDIE

We were in 4-H together. He was like... imagine if Elon Musk met Lucille Ball, had a baby, and that baby was determined to teach every other kid in the club how to build an automated carwash for farm animals.

Emma laughs, the sound mingling with the gentle clatter of cups and saucers.

EMMA

Sounds terrifying.

MADDIE

Oh, it was! But Clay... Clay made everything fun. He'd name all the animals these ridiculous things -- called his sheep 'Sir Woolington, the Third' even though it was definitely female. And when it came time for competitions, he'd get so excited he'd practically vibrate out of his boots.

She pauses, caught in the memory.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

He never won first place -- or any place, really. But it never seemed to bother him. He'd just dust himself off, flash that infectious grin of his, and declare that next time would be his moment of glory.

EMMA

Sounds like quite the character. What happened between you two?

The question hangs in the air like morning mist. Maddie's smile fades slightly.

MADDIE

Life, I suppose. Dad's work brought us back here to New Zealand, and you know how it is at that age. We promised to write, to stay in touch...

She shrugs, but the casualness feels forced.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

I left him with a letter, right before we left. Poured my whole heart into it, told him how much his friendship meant to me, how special he was.

EMMA

And?

MADDIE
(quietly)
And nothing. Never heard back.

She straightens in her chair, squaring her shoulders against an old hurt.

MADDIE (CONT'D)
I mean, we were just kids. Probably for the best -- you know how childhood sweethearts usually turn out.

Emma watches her friend navigate the memory with careful precision, seeing perhaps for the first time why Maddie always maintains such emotional distance in relationships.

EMMA
Have you thought about looking him up? Now that you're heading back?

MADDIE
What? No, that would be...

She trails off, unable to complete the protest. After a moment.

MADDIE (CONT'D)
Maybe. I've caught myself wondering what became of him. He had such a gift with animals -- this innate understanding of them. I always thought he'd end up working at a shelter or rescue organization.

EMMA
(teasing)
Or maybe he became a rugged Texas rancher. Living that cowboy life, breaking hearts across the Lone Star State.

Maddie rolls her eyes, but a faint blush colors her cheeks.

MADDIE
More likely he's married with a house full of kids and pets. Living that perfect rural life with a vast, barbed-wire fence and Sunday barbecues.

EMMA

Or he's been pining for his
childhood sweetheart all these
years, wondering why she never
wrote him again.

MADDIE

(suddenly fierce)

Wrote him? He never wrote me!

She presses her fingers to her temples, trying to organize
her thoughts.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

I left him that letter. It had our
new address, our phone number --
everything he'd need to keep in
touch.

EMMA

And?

MADDIE

And nothing. Never heard back. I
waited for weeks, kept checking the
mail every day. I even tried
calling once, but international
calls were so expensive back then,
and when no one answered...

She shrugs again, the gesture heavy with old disappointment.

EMMA

You thought he'd moved on. Found
new friends, new interests... left
the past in the past.

MADDIE

Well, wouldn't you? We were young.
Life changes. People change.

EMMA

Some things don't change. The way
your eyes lit up when you finally
told me about him? That's not
nothing, Mads.

Maddie opens her mouth to argue, then closes it again. The
waiter approaches with Emma's refill, and they sit in
companionable silence as he tops off their cups.

MADDIE

(barely above a whisper)

He... he was special.

(MORE)

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Not just to me -- to everyone. He just had this... light about him. This incredible capacity for joy, even when things went wrong.

EMMA

You know, it's funny how we sometimes build stories in our minds to explain things we don't understand. How we take one outcome and construct whole narratives around it, never considering there might be other possibilities.

MADDIE

What are you saying?

EMMA

I'm saying maybe it's time to question some of your assumptions. You're going back to Texas anyway. What's the harm in looking him up?

MADDIE

(with a brittle laugh)

And say what? 'Hey, remember me? The girl who disappeared from your life about thirty years ago? Just wondering why you never wrote me back!'

EMMA

How about, 'Hey, remember me? The girl who never forgot you, even after all these years?' The girl who still smiles when she talks about you?

The café has begun to empty, lunch crowds giving way to the quiet lull of mid-afternoon. Maddie watches a pair of university students pack up their laptops at a nearby table, their easy laughter reminding her of simpler times.

MADDIE

You know what's funny? I used to imagine running into him somewhere. Some random airport or conference. He'd be this brilliant veterinarian or world-famous animal behaviorist, and we'd laugh about how we both ended up following the same path.

EMMA

And now?

MADDIE

Now?

Her lips curve in a self-deprecating smile.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Now I'm wondering if I've built him up in my head; made him into this perfect memory that no reality could possibly match.

EMMA

Or maybe you're just scared of finding out the truth -- whatever that might be.

The words hang in the air between them, too accurate to dismiss. Outside, clouds scud across the New Zealand sky, their shadows racing across the café's worn wooden floors.

MADDIE

You know, they used to have this saying in Texas; They used to say, 'Everyone wants to go to heaven, but no one wants to die to get there.'

Emma chokes on her coffee.

EMMA

That's rather morbid for a casual coffee chat, isn't it?

MADDIE

No, no -- hear me out. It wasn't really about death at all. It was about how we all want things from life - happiness, success, fulfillment - but we're not always willing to make sacrifices to get them. We want the reward without the struggle - the risk.

EMMA

And you think that's what you've been doing? Playing it safe?

MADDIE

Maybe.

She glances out the window, watching a young couple share an umbrella as the first drops of rain begin to fall.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

When Dad got the offer to come back to New Zealand, part of me was relieved. It was easier to leave than to face how much Clay meant to me. Easier to write one letter and tell myself he'd moved on than to keep trying, keep reaching out.

EMMA

But now?

MADDIE

Now...

She straightens in her chair, something shifting in her expression. Emma has seen that look before -- it usually preceded some of her friend's most significant life decisions.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Now I'm going back. And maybe it's time to stop playing it safe. To find out what really happened to that letter, to Clay...

EMMA

To the girl who wrote it.

Maddie nods, a familiar determination settling over her features.

MADDIE

He probably won't even remember me.

EMMA

Right. Because everyone forgets their first love. The person who saw them at their most authentic, most alive.

She reaches for the check, waving away Maddie's protest.

EMMA (CONT'D)

Consider this my investment in your romantic redemption arc.

MADDIE

It's not -- I mean, I'm not expecting...

EMMA

Of course not. You're just going to casually look up your childhood sweetheart, the boy who made your eyes light up like Christmas morning over decades later, and say a quick hello. Totally casual. No pressure at all.

EXT. PRIMROSE CAFÉ - NEW ZEALAND - CONTINUOUS

They step out of the café into the soft New Zealand rain, the kind that feels more like walking through a cloud than actual precipitation. Emma opens her umbrella, its cheerful yellow surface creating a small island of sunshine in the grey afternoon.

EMMA

You know what I think? I think there's a reason this is all coming up now. The research position, going back to Texas, thinking about Clay... Sometimes the universe has a way of bringing things full circle.

Maddie huddles closer under the umbrella, grateful for both the shelter and her friend's steady presence.

MADDIE

Since when did you become so philosophical?

EMMA

Since my best friend started getting that look in her eye -- the one that says she's about to either do something brilliant or completely mad. Possibly both.

They reach Maddie's car, but neither makes a move to end the conversation. The rain drums softly on the umbrella, creating a private atmosphere that invites confidences.

MADDIE

What if he's completely different? What if I go looking for that sweet, funny boy and find someone I don't recognize at all?

EMMA

Then at least you'll know. Isn't that better than spending the rest of your life wondering?

MADDIE

I suppose.

She fishes her keys from her bag.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

It's just... I have this perfect memory of him. The way he'd light up when he talked about animals, how he could find humor in any situation. The absolute conviction in his voice when he told me he was going to be the world's greatest veterinarian, even though he couldn't pronounce the word properly.

She smiles at the memory.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

He called it being a 'vetternaran' - - always dropped the 'i'. But he said it with such confidence that no one ever corrected him.

EMMA

Sounds like someone worth finding.

MADDIE

You know what's strange? All these years, I've told myself he forgot about me. Moved on. But what if...

She pauses, gathering courage.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

What if he's been wondering too? What if he's spent all this time thinking I was the one who forgot about him?

EMMA

Only one way to find out.

Emma pulls her friend into a tight hug.

EMMA (CONT'D)

Promise me something?

MADDIE

What's that?

EMMA

When you find him -- and notice I said 'when,' not 'if' -- you'll call me immediately. I want every detail, no matter what time it is here.

MADDIE

(laughing)

Even if it turns out he's married with six kids and a ranch full of cattle?

EMMA

Especially then. Because then we'll need to plan your dramatic entrance into his life, possibly involving a stolen horse and a sunset.

MADDIE

You've been reading too many romance novels.

But she's smiling. Emma pulls Maddie in for a parting hug.

EMMA

Don't you dare chicken-out!

EXT. STREETS OF CHRISTCHURCH - MOMENTS LATER

As Maddie drives home through the rain-washed streets of Christchurch.

INT. MADDIE'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

Maddie's mind wanders back to that last day in Texas and imagines the letter she'd pressed into Clay's hands.

MADDIE

(to herself)

Time to find out what really happened.

She takes an exit towards the Christchurch airport.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Time to find you, Clay Hart.

(pausing)

(MORE)

MADDIE (CONT'D)

I wonder what you're doing at this very moment.

CUT TO:

INT. CLAY'S VAN - DAY

Clay is cruising in his Critter Ridders van, still stinging from his latest mousecapade. A little pug romping in a suburban yard catches his eye.

CLAY

(to himself)

Well, well, well, what have we here...A stray! Them dang varmints, you let 'em run free and next thing you know they pack-up and now ya got a real problem on yer hands. Probably rabid too.

The pug is playfully ripping a plush toy to shreds. Some of the stuffing comes out of the toy and the pug grasps it in its mouth. Clay pulls along the curb in front of the dog's yard.

The pug turns to look at the visitor, white fluff hanging from its jaws.

CLAY (CONT'D)

Sweet mercy, foamin' at the mouth; he is rabid. Gonna have to put this one down.

EXT. TEXAS SUBURB - CONTINUOUS

Clay switches his exterminator hat with his dog catching hat and gets out of his critter mobile. He removes the magnetic "Critter Ridders" logo from the side of his van to reveal a painted logo that reads, "K9 Catchers".

Clay makes his way to the back of his van where he retrieves a small cage. He goes into commando mode, crouching and peaking around the van at the tiny dog. He starts to sneak towards the pup.

The dog wags its tail and begins to playfully prance towards Clay. The dog's OWNER (a senior-citizen, female, silver hair) curiously walks out of the open garage of a nearby house.

CLAY

Keep yer distance, Ma'am. I got it all under control.

Clay snatches a can of mace from his utility belt and aims it at the playful dog. The owner gasps and rushes to the scene. The pug runs to the arms of its owner.

OWNER

Hey! What do you think you're doing
to my dog?
(to pug)
Brutus, come!

CLAY

Your dog? Well, what ya lettin' him
run wild through the streets for?

OWNER

Running wild? I was just sitting in
my garage letting my dog...

CLAY

Now, ma'am, I heard it all a
million times before.

Clay whips out a note pad and starts writing out a citation.

CLAY (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

Now, Section 4, Paragraph B of the
municipal code clearly states ...

OWNER

Are you writing me a ticket?
Please, I've had such a hard day
already.

He peers up for a moment and sees the lady is tearing up. He pauses, then rips up the citation.

CLAY

Look, little Peter Lorre there
could have darted out into the
street and killed someone. Keep a
closer eye on him, would ya.

Clay tips his hat and walks back to his vehicle, puts the cage back, looks at his watch, then slaps the dirt from his hands proudly.

CLAY (CONT'D)

Sweet mercy, it's beer-thirty!
Wonder where I can get a drink
around these parts.

EXT. SMALL TOWN ALLEY - MOMENTS LATER

Clay pulls down an alley and parks. He hops out and exits the alley, scratching his head. Clay sees a pub a couple of doors down. He walks up to it where the sign reads, "The Garden".

CLAY

Stupid name for a bar, but as long as the beer is cold they can call themselves whatever they want.

INT. THE GARDEN - MOMENTS LATER

The bartender places a tall, cold mug of beer in front of Clay who is sitting at the bar. Clay is watching a baseball game on the TV above the bar and doesn't even notice that he's in a vegan establishment. The tavern door opens and BRUCE (early 30s, male, metro-look), still dressed in his male nurse outfit from work, removes his jacket, greets the bartender, and sits next to Clay at the bar.

Bruce looks over at Clay a couple times before saying:

BRUCE

So, you like baseball?

Clay barely glances over, focused on the TV.

CLAY

Sure do. Nothing like watching the boys of summer swinging some heavy lumber around, eh?

BRUCE

Indeed.

Bruce grins and scoots closer and offers a handshake.

BRUCE (CONT'D)

Name's Bruce. I'm a nurse down at Methodist. I also volunteer at the animal sanctuary on weekends.

Clay, oblivious and more interested in the game, scans for a bowl of beer nuts.

CLAY

Hey barkeep, you got some nuts I can munch on? Or better yet, you got any pork rinds? I need somethin' salty.

Bruce notices the exterminator logo on Clay's shirt and shows an expression of slight disapproval.

BRUCE

They have these amazing roasted chickpeas here. Much better for you than processed junk. Especially when you're on your feet all day like we are.

Clay perks up, offended.

CLAY

Chickpeas? What in tarnation? A bar's supposed to have nuts and wings and such!

Clay points at the TV.

CLAY (CONT'D)

...oh c'mon he was safe!

Clay gets a look of enlightenment on his face and slaps the bar.

CLAY (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

Yeah, that's it, you got any chicken wings you can rustle up for me? The hotter the better.

BARTENDER

We have some buffalo cauliflower; they're delicious. And not only are they healthier, they're humane.

Clay, still absorbed in the game, shakes his head in disbelief.

CLAY

What kinda bar ain't got no wings?

Clay takes another chug from his frosty mug while still mesmerized by the game.

BRUCE

So, you're an exterminator, huh? I don't suppose you use live traps and just relocate them; you know, win-win for everyone?

Clay squints at Bruce, then does a slow pan of the bar - a couple men in a booth with yoga mats propped next to them, the wheatgrass shots being served, the "Go Vegan!" posters on the walls. Clay nearly choked on his beer.

CLAY
Sweet mercy!

Clay frantically fumbles for his wallet, tosses a crumpled five on the bar, and beats a hasty retreat.

CLAY (CONT'D) (CONT'D)
Knock yerselves out, ya cabbage-fartin' do-gooders. All the more burgers for me.

As Clay exits, Bruce turns to the bartender and chuckles.

BRUCE
Well, there goes another one. You know, in our ER they patch up all of God's creatures - even the disrespectful ones.

EXT. RURAL ROADWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Clay is driving home, giving a shiver after his close encounter with the extremists. Just then, a squirrel darts out in front of his van and instead of slamming on the brakes, Clay swerves in an attempt to hit it. He looks in his rearview mirror and sees he missed the squirrel.

CLAY
Sweet mercy! I'll git ya next time, rodent!

Still looking in his mirror, a blaring horn snaps his attention back to the road. Clay's eyes bulge as he realizes he's drifted into the oncoming lane, and is now playing chicken with a massive semi-truck.

CLAY (CONT'D)
Sweet mercy!

Clay jerks the wheel hard to the right. The van careens off the road, bouncing through the ditch and coming to a shuddering stop in a cloud of dust.

For a moment, Clay just sits there, heart pounding, trying to catch his breath. He gives himself a quick once-over, checking for injuries. Miraculously, he seems to be in one piece. The van, on the other hand...

Clay hops out to survey the damage. It doesn't take a mechanic to see that his faithful steed is down for the count. The front axle is snapped clean in half, and smoke pours from the crumpled hood.

CLAY (CONT'D)

Well, ain't that just a kick in the giblets.

Clay gives the tire a halfhearted kick. With a resigned groan, he starts walking, thumb outstretched in the universal sign of the hitchhiker.

FADE TO:

EXT. CLAY'S HOUSE - LATER

The Texas sun hangs low on the horizon as Clay stumbles up the gravel drive to his ramshackle house. Every muscle in his body protests the day's misadventures, his clothes caked with the dust and grime from the day's adventures.

INT. CLAY'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Clay makes an unsteady beeline for the fridge, yanking it open with more force than necessary. The rush of cool air hits his face as he grabs a beer, cracking it open and draining half in one desperate chug. The liquid is a blessed relief as it slides down his parched throat.

CLAY

Sweet mercy, what a day.

His eyes drift to the calendar tacked crookedly on the wall, and suddenly the day's disasters don't seem quite so important. A circled date on the calendar has the bold letters of 'SHINE!' A slow grin spreads across his face as realization dawns.

CLAY (CONT'D)

(to himself)

Today's the day!

Clay sets his beer aside, smacking and rubbing his hands together with gleeful anticipation.

EXT. CLAY'S BACKYARD - MOMENTS LATER

Clay bursts from the screen door, the shed that houses his makeshift distillery beckons like a temple of forbidden delights. Clay hurries out back, the screen door banging shut behind him.

INT. SHED - CONTINUOUS

Clay takes a deep sniff, then smiles.

Clay grabs a weathered 5-gallon bucket from a shelf lined with dozens of mason jars, holding it under the spigot with the reverence of a beekeeper collecting his precious gold. The clear liquid gurgles out, filling the bucket with his prized creation. Once full, Clay dips a mason jar into the potent brew, admiring the way the light that sneaks through the gaps in the weathered boards plays across its surface.

CLAY
Lookin' good.

He swirls the jar with the affected sophistication of a wine connoisseur.

CLAY (CONT'D)
Lookin' reaaaalll good.

He takes a sniff from the jar.

CLAY (CONT'D)
Sweet mercy!

He blinks rapidly, his eyes stinging from the fumes.

CLAY (CONT'D)
I reckon that could strip paint!

He raises the jar in a mock toast to his reflection in the grimy window.

CLAY (CONT'D)
Well, here's to y'all, you ornery critters. This one's for all the troubles you gave me today.

And with defiance against the universe at large, Clay tips the jar back and takes a hearty swig.

The moonshine hits his throat like liquid lightning and Clay's eyes bulge as his face cycles through an impressive array of colors. His hands fly to his throat as he fights for air.

CLAY (CONT'D)
(wheezing)
Sweet... Mercy... That must be like... 200 octane! It's perfect!

Clay takes another sip, more cautiously this time, savoring the way the 'shine seems to light him up from the inside out.

EXT. CLAY'S BACKYARD - MOMENTS LATER

Clay wanders out, mason jar bobbing precariously in his grip as he weaves his way to a pair of lawn chairs that serve as his back porch furniture.

The crunch of gravel pulls his attention to the driveway, where a familiar figure is making his way up the path. It's PASTOR MATT (late 40s man, Tall and lanky).

PASTOR MATT

Well, well, well! If it ain't the varmint vigilante himself!

Clay struggles to focus, squinting against the setting sun.

CLAY

Pastor Matt? That really you, or has my 'shine started workin' its magic already?

Pastor Matt chuckles, coming to a stop a few feet away. His eyes take in the scene—the mason jar, Clay's disheveled appearance, the general air of celebration-meets-desperation.

PASTOR MATT

Thought I'd swing by and see how you were faring.

He nods towards the jar.

PASTOR MATT (CONT'D)

Though I'm guessing the critters drove you to drink, eh?

Clay lurches to his feet, swaying slightly as he tries to find his balance.

CLAY

Nah, nah, this here's just a little something I cooked up myself.

He thrusts the jar towards the pastor, sloshing some onto the grass.

CLAY (CONT'D)

A little taste of liquid relaxation, if you will. Care for a nip?

Pastor Matt eyes the jar like it might bite him.

PASTOR MATT

I'm not sure that's such a good idea, Clay. Looks like you've had enough for both of us already.

CLAY

Aw, c'mon now! Don't be such a stick in the mud! This is the good stuff, right here. Put hair on your chest and steel in your spine!

The pastor looks like he's about to refuse, but then something flickers across his expression. A glint of mischief, perhaps. Or maybe just a touch of that old-time religion that said sometimes the best way to save a soul was to meet it where it lived.

PASTOR MATT

Alright, alright. One sip couldn't hurt, I suppose.

He reaches for the jar, examining it in the fading light.

PASTOR MATT (CONT'D)

To your health, Clay.

With that, Pastor Matt raises the jar. The effect is immediate and electric. The pastor's eyes pop, his face turning an alarming shade of crimson. He doubles over, coughing and sputtering as the moonshine blazes its unholy trail down his throat.

PASTOR MATT (CONT'D)

Lake of fire and damnation! That's ain't moonshine, that's rocket fuel!

Clay cackles with delight, slapping his knee.

CLAY

Told ya it was the good stuff! Have a seat, Pastor. Let it settle in. First sip's always the hardest...just like salvation, right?

PASTOR MATT

I don't recall that particular comparison in my seminary studies.

Pastor Matt sinks into the empty chair, still trying to catch his breath.

CUT TO:

EXT. CLAY'S BACKYARD - LATER

The two neighbors sit in companionable silence for a moment, watching the stars sprouting from the darkening sky. Crickets are chirping. Clay takes another pull from the jar, then offers it to the pastor, who waves it off with a shudder, raising his can of beer in proxy.

Clay lets his head fall back to look into the vast majesty of space above. Then the self-damning thoughts start to creep in.

CLAY

You're the only friend I got.

PASTOR MATT

Why do you say that?

CLAY

'Cuz it's true. I'm a real bastard.

PASTOR MATT

That's the 'shine talking. Yeah, we all have our issues, but there's plenty to like about you.

CLAY

Like what?

PASTOR MATT

For one, you're a funny guy. A little edgy at times, but you've got a real quick wit about you. That's a sign of intelligence.

A flicker of something – pride, maybe, or embarrassment – crosses Clay's face before his defenses slam back into place.

CLAY

You're just sayin' that 'cause you're a pastor and you're tryin' to save me or somethin'.

PASTOR MATT

I can't save you, Clay. And you're not some special assignment to me; not a project. You're my neighbor, and you're a funny guy. Full of life.

CLAY

I hate life. It don't make no sense.

PASTOR MATT

You hate it? Tell me, how's the moonshine?

Clay blinks wide-eyed at the perceived irrelevance.

CLAY

What? What that got to do with the trice of pea in... chice of tree... what that got to do with anything?

Pastor Matt lets out one of those unexpected laughs where a small glob of spit unexpectedly pops out of your mouth and dangles from your chin like a climber repelling from a mountainside. Matt confirms, while cleaning up with his sleeve:

PASTOR MATT

Ha! See, it's good, isn't it?

CLAY

Huh?

PASTOR MATT

The drink. It's good. Life is good. Life is precious. I would even argue that everything is good. It's just that sometimes good things can get twisted.

Clay's face darkens.

CLAY

Life ain't no good! Can't you 'member all my stuff what happened to me? You were there.

His voice cracks slightly.

CLAY (CONT'D)

Next you'll be sayin' everything happens for a reason.

Pastor Matt pauses, weighing his words carefully. The moment stretches between them like a thread ready to snap. Finally:

PASTOR MATT

Well, I will say that nothing takes God by surprise. Mary and Joseph would have never been able to throw their kid a surprise birthday party, that's for sure.

Clay slams down his jar hard enough to make the moonshine slosh.

CLAY

It's gettin' late and you had too much to drink.

The pastor glances pointedly at his barely-touched beer, then at Clay's significantly depleted mason jar, but keeps his peace.

PASTOR MATT

Yeah, I probably should be getting back. Maybe you can come over for dinner later this week?

Clay mumbles something noncommittal, his eyes fixed on the moonlit shadows.

PASTOR MATT (CONT'D)

Well, thanks for the good drink and good company. You're a good neighbor, Clay. Let me know if you ever need anything.

As the pastor makes his way out through the side gate and into his own backyard next door, Clay tips back his jar, shaking the last drop of moonshine into his mouth. He leans his head back again, staring at the stars through the bottom of the empty glass.

CLAY

They sure don't make pitchers as big as they used to.

Then, a rustling sound draws his attention to the base of the old oak tree. There, illuminated by the rising moon, is his old nemesis – the armadillo. The creature is rooting around in the dirt, seemingly unconcerned with Clay's presence.

CLAY (CONT'D)

Hey!

Clay lurches to his feet, the world tilting dangerously around him.

The armadillo looks up, meeting his gaze before casually scuttling into a hole at the base of the tree.

Clay stumbles over, dropped to his knees and peers into the darkness. A leg trap he'd set near the entrance is still armed, waiting for its prey.

CLAY (CONT'D)
How the hell'd he get past this?

In his moonshine-addled state, Clay reaches for it, fascinated and confused by the gleam of metal in the growing darkness.

CLAY (CONT'D)
What the sam hill?

He tests the spring mechanism with unsteady fingers.

SNAP!

The trap closes on his hand. After a delayed reaction worthy of a cartoon character, Clay lets out a yelp that probably startled every nocturnal creature within a mile radius.

Nursing his throbbing hand and his wounded pride, Clay staggers back to the house. He returns moments later with a flashlight and – because, clearly, he hadn't ever learned any lessons about overkill – a chainsaw.

Clay stands swaying before the oak tree, shining his flashlight down into the armadillo's burrow.

CLAY (CONT'D)
C'mon out here and fight like a
man!

Clay fires up the chainsaw, its angry buzz shattering the peaceful night air. He attacks the tree with the unsteady determination of the thoroughly soused, sending sawdust flying in all directions.

CLAY (CONT'D)
Ya dadjim armadilla! I had it with
ya!

Suddenly, the chainsaw sputters and dies. Clay tries to revive it, several times, but nothin' doin'. He stands there for a moment, staring at the now-silent tool as if it had personally betrayed him.

Clay then, suspecting a cause, clumsily unscrews the gas cap and tilts the saw upward to peer into its tiny tank. Unwise, he concludes, as the last little bit of burning lava spills into his curious eye; proving that, indeed, there was still a little bit of fuel left.

Howling in pain, Clay stumbles across his yard like a drunken sailor in a storm, arms outstretched as he makes his way to the garden hose coiled against the house.

After several failed attempts to locate the spigot with his one good eye, he finally manages to turn it on full blast. Clay sticks his face directly into the stream, the cold water providing blessed relief as it washes away the burning gasoline.

Satisfied his eyeball isn't actually melting, and because clearly the situation called for more poor decisions, he lurches back to the shed for a gas can.

Returning, Clay attempts to refuel the chainsaw. In his current state, this simple task became a comedy of errors. More gas ended up on the ground than in the tank, creating a growing puddle around the base of the tree. When the can tipped over, sending fuel cascading into the armadillo's burrow, Clay's only response was an annoyed:

CLAY (CONT'D)
Comfound it!

He rights the can with exaggerated care, then drops to his knees to peer into the hole again. The borrowed flashlight from his shirt pocket provides only weak illumination, flickering like a lightning bug with dying batteries. No amount of banging or cursing could convince it to shine brighter.

As Clay pats down his pockets in search of inspiration, his fingers close around his lighter. A slow grin spreads across his face as he flicks it open, the small flame dancing in the darkness. He leans forward, squinting into the hole...

WHOOSH!

The tree goes up like a January Christmas tree, flames racing up the trunk with frightening speed. Clay stumbles backward, landing hard on his rear as tongues of fire lick hungrily at the ancient wood.

In the dancing firelight, something catches his eye—markings on the trunk that make his heart stop dead in his chest. There, carved into the bark and now illuminated by his own foolishness, were two sets of initials carved inside a jagged heart:

"C.H. + M.W."

CLAY
No! Maddie!

The word comes out as a broken whisper. Clay reaches toward the burning initials, his hand recoiling from the heat.

His wild gaze darts around the yard, finally landing on the garden hose that had recently become his eye's savior.

Clay scrambles to his feet, nearly taking a digger in his haste to reach the spigot. He cranks it on full blast, grabs the hose, and charges toward the blaze like a drunken firefighter. The hose unfurls behind him as he runs.

But ten feet from the tree, physics and fate conspire against him. The hose reaches its full length, and, thanks to Clay's iron grip on it, brings him to an abrupt and spectacular halt. His feet fly up in front of him, like a dog being tamed by its underestimated chain length, and he crashes to the ground.

Above him, the flames climb higher, sparks dancing against the night sky. Then he hears a sound, a wooden crack of a tree.

A large branch of the old oak begins to snap and topple. Clay watches in horror as it falls, as if in slow motion, directly toward his house. The impact shakes the ground, sending up a fresh shower of sparks as the burning trunk crashes into his roof.

CLAY (CONT'D)
(to himself)
What have I done?

He races around the yard, coughing and sputtering as smoke fills his lungs, looking for anything that might help extinguish the growing inferno. The garden hose, still pathetically short of reaching the blaze, sprays uselessly into the air.

Through the smoke and chaos and the open door of his shed, his eyes land on a 5-gallon bucket sitting innocently next to his moonshine still. In that moment, pickled by his own hooch and desperate for a solution, it seems like divine intervention.

CLAY (CONT'D)
Sweet mercy, that's it!

Clay stumbles toward the shed.

Snatching the bucket, he charges back outside. The burning tree had now fully breached his roof.

Without a moment's hesitation, Clay heaves the contents of the bucket at the base of the burning tree.

Time seems to slow.

EXT. WIDE SHOT OF CLAY'S NEIGHBORHOOD - CONTINUOUS

The dusk is lit up with a bright flash and a loud explosion rocks the neighborhood. A miniature, purple mushroom cloud rises from Clay's backyard into the darkening Texas sky.

FADE TO WHITE:

INT. CLAY'S CHILDHOOD HOME - LIVING ROOM - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Clay's life is flashing before his eyes.

A THREE-YEAR-OLD CLAY sits at a table with a birthday cake glowing with candles. His PARENTS beam at him from across the table.

PRESENT DAY CLAY (V.O.)
What in the...?

Young Clay blows out the candles with gusto.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. BACKYARD - DAY (FLASHBACK)

FOUR-YEAR-OLD CLAY rolls in the grass with a puppy. His laughter rings out, pure and sweet. His parents watch from the porch, faces soft with affection.

PRESENT DAY CLAY (V.O.)
Well, look at that. I was a
handsome little devil, wasn't I?

SERIES OF QUICK
CUTS:

- FIVE-YEAR-OLD CLAY snuggled with his mother during storytime
- SIX-YEAR-OLD CLAY in his Cub Scout uniform at swearing-in
- EIGHT-YEAR-OLD CLAY playing catch with his father

EXT. LAKE - DAY (FLASHBACK)

NINE-YEAR-OLD CLAY sits in a small boat with his GRANDFATHER, fishing lines cast into peaceful water.

INT. SIXTH GRADE CLASSROOM - DAY (FLASHBACK)

A teacher addresses the class.

TEACHER

Good morning, class. I would like you all to meet a new classmate of ours. Come on in, Maddie.

YOUNG MADDIE enters, blonde hair in braids, smiling shyly. Her eyes meet Young Clay's, and she gives him a little wink.

PRESENT DAY CLAY (V.O.)

Maddie?

INT. SCHOOL HALLWAY - DAY (FLASHBACK)

YOUNG MADDIE stands in front of a bulletin board, studying a 4-H club flyer. YOUNG CLAY watches from behind, eyes wide with admiration.

INT. CLAY'S CHILDHOOD HOME - LIVING ROOM - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Young Clay bursts in with the 4-H brochure, bouncing excitedly next to his mother's recliner.

YOUNG CLAY

Please, Ma, please?

MONTAGE - 4-H MEMORIES

-- A competition arena. Young Maddie proudly displays ribbons and trophies while Young Clay holds up his "participant" ribbon with equal pride.

YOUNG CLAY

What's a precipitant?

-- Clay's backyard. Young Maddie examines a patient cat while wearing her father's stethoscope. Young Clay holds popsicle sticks at the ready.

PRESENT DAY CLAY (V.O.)

Ha! We used to play vet instead of doctor, like normal kids.

-- The creek. Young Clay and Maddie chase each other. Clay looks back to wave, tumbles into a ravine. Maddie gasps, then giggles as she helps him up, brushing leaves from his hair.

EXT. TEXAS BEACH - SUNSET (FLASHBACK)

Young Clay and Maddie put finishing touches on a sandcastle. Clay suddenly stands, doing his best Godzilla impression as he stomps through their creation.

Maddie's shock turns to laughter. She tackles him into the sand. Their eyes meet. After a moment's hesitation, she leans in and gives him a sweet, innocent kiss.

PRESENT DAY CLAY (V.O.)
My first kiss...

The sun sets behind their silhouettes.

EXT. CLAY'S BACKYARD - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Young Clay carves initials into the oak tree, tears streaming down his face. Young Maddie touches his shoulder, turning him to face her.

YOUNG MADDIE
We can write each other every day.
It's going to be OK.

YOUNG CLAY
Why does your dad have to go back
to New Zealand? Why can't you just
stay here? You can stay with us.

Young Maddie holds up an envelope.

YOUNG MADDIE
I wrote you a special letter. But
you can't read it until after I
leave. It has my new address and
phone number. Promise me you'll
write me.

Young Clay nods, too choked up to speak. He hugs her tightly.

YOUNG CLAY
I will. As soon as I stop crying, I
promise. I'll mail you a letter
today.

Maddie cups his face in her hands, gives him one last kiss. Then she walks away, out of his life. Young Clay sinks to his knees, shoulders shaking with sobs.

In his grief, he doesn't notice the letter flutter from his hand, caught by a breeze. A curious baby armadillo snatches it up and scurries away into the underbrush.

PRESENT DAY CLAY (V.O.)
That dadjim armadilla! I shoulda
knowed it was him all along.

FADE TO:

INT. PARENTS' CAR - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

TEENAGE CLAY slumps in the backseat, half-asleep as his parents drive down a dark country road. Suddenly, a dog darts into the headlights.

His father's face fills with panic. The car swerves.

PRESENT DAY CLAY (V.O.)
Damn dog. That damn dog.

CRASH! The world spins, metal SCREAMS against wood.

Then -- darkness.

FADE TO:

INT. HEAVEN - CONTINUOUS

An endless white void. Clay gasps, coming-to on his knees, tears streaming down his face, his heart pounding visibly in his chest.

CLAY
Those memories... those precious
moments... those painful moments...

Gleaming pearly gates slowly appear before Clay's eyes, where a long line of people wait to enter. He watches as a humble couple exits a chariot and approaches the gatekeeper's podium.

PETE (an ancient white-haired and bearded man dressed in a robe) checks his list and waves the couple through. Another WOMAN approaches next, but Pete directs her to join the line after not finding her name on the list.

CLAY (CONT'D)
Sweet mercy! I been repo'd!

Clay strides up to Pete's podium with false confidence. Pete wears a simple name tag reading "PETE".

CLAY (CONT'D)
(catching himself)
Hey, what the hel- uh, heck's goin'
on here?

PETE
(calmly)
Your name, please, sir?

CLAY
(laughing nervously)
What, you mean you don't already
know?

Pete stares back, unamused. Clay clears his throat.

CLAY (CONT'D)
Uh, that would be Ordell Clayton
Hart. But you can call me Clay.

Pete scans his list methodically.

PETE
I'm sorry, sir. You'll have to get
in line.

CLAY
What? You sure about that? My folks
are in there - wouldn't want to
worry 'em, you know how it goes.

Pete remains stoically silent.

CLAY (CONT'D)
Look, Maitre D' or Concierge or
whoever you are, I'm sure we can
work out some sorta deal here...

Clay reaches for his wallet, finds it missing, and pats his
pockets frantically.

CLAY (CONT'D)
What the...?

He spots a suspicious-looking HIPPIE in line.

CLAY (CONT'D)
(accusingly)
I know it was you.

PETE
Sir, please...

Pete gestures toward the back of the line. Clay grudgingly complies. As Clay walks to the end of the line, he passes the Hippie.

CLAY

I know it was you. This ain't over yet.

Clay reaches the back of the line.

HEAVEN'S PA SYSTEM (V.O.)

(computer-like voice)

Gabriel, please report to the throne room. Gabriel to the throne room.

Clay scans the heavens, trying to locate the source of the voice. While he's standing in line, he notices the woman standing next to him has a shocked, devastated expression on her face. Clay gulps and shows signs of growing anxiety.

Moments later, another announcement blares out.

HEAVEN'S PA SYSTEM (V.O.)

Your attention please, will Ordell Clayton Hart please report to the front gate. Clay to the front gate, please.

CLAY

(hitching up his pants)

Well, it's about time they got their list straight!

As he passes the hippie again:

CLAY (CONT'D)

You're gonna get yours. Yes sir, you're gonna get yours!

At the front gate, GABRIEL (unknown age, fit, black man with graying dreadlocks), an angel, waits next to Pete.

GABRIEL

Please follow me, Mr. Hart.

CLAY

Much obliged!

Clay starts toward the pearly gates, but the angel walks in a different direction. Pete grabs Clay's arm.

PETE
(pointing)
Gabriel. Follow Gabriel.

Clay hurries to catch up with Gabriel.

CLAY
Oh, we must be goin' to the VIP
suites.

After a short walk, Gabriel stops and turns to face Clay.

GABRIEL
What happened, Clay?

CLAY
Well, I reckon I blowed myself up
pretty good...

GABRIEL
Not that. I mean, what happened to
Clay? The sweet young boy with so
much promise. What happened?

CLAY
(confused)
Whaddya mean?

Gabriel holds his gaze, demanding honesty. Clay shifts
uncomfortably.

CLAY (CONT'D)
I had me a rough life. But you
oughta know that already. Ain't
y'all supposed to be psychic or
somethin'?

GABRIEL
I know everything about you, Clay.
Even more than you know about
yourself. And way more than you're
willing to admit.

Clay squirms at the implications.

CLAY
Well, if you know everything about
me, why don't you tell me what
happened?

GABRIEL
How about that time you went
'fishing'?

CLAY

Fishin'? What's wrong with fishin'?
If God didn't want us to fish, he
wouldn't have created bait.

GABRIEL

I think you know what I'm talking
about, Clay.

Clay's face flashes recognition before he masks it.

CLAY

Nuh...I...

GABRIEL

Here, let me give you some help
remembering that.

Gabriel makes a gesture in midair. Using his two index
fingers, he brings them together at a single point and
spreads them diagonally, creating a floating window-like
display.

CLAY

Hey, that's pretty nifty.

GABRIEL

(with a slight smirk)
Isn't it? Mr. Jobs helped us with
that one.

Gabriel taps the window, and a scene begins to play...

FLASH TO:

EXT. RIVER - DAY (PAST)

Clay stands in an aluminum fishing boat, holding a lit stick
of dynamite with a manic grin.

CLAY

Here fishy, fishy, fishy. Ha!

A flock of ducks lands nearby. Clay's eyes light up. He
crouches down, trying to be sneaky - but fails to notice that
he's now accidentally lit several other sticks of dynamite at
his feet.

Clay hurls his stick at the ducks. As he waits for the
explosion, he finally notices the sizzling at his feet. His
eyes widen at the cluster of lit dynamite. After a moment of
panicked indecision, he dives overboard.

CLAY (CONT'D)
 (gurgling)
 Help! I can't swim! I can't swim!

He finds himself face-to-face with several surprised fish. Above, the first stick explodes, blowing a hole in the boat. The remaining dynamite now drops through, sinking all around Clay.

Clay attempts to run underwater, his limbs moving in comical slow-motion.

On the surface, the water erupts in a massive geyser as the sunken dynamite detonates.

AERIAL VIEW - RIVER

Dead fish float into camera, downstream, followed by Clay's unconscious form, like a parade of zombies.

BACK TO:

INT. HEAVEN - CONTINUOUS

The window winks closed. Clay's face has gone red with embarrassment.

CLAY
 (mumbling)
 Yeah, I uh...guess that probably wasn't the nicest thing to do, huh?
 (defensive)
 So what are you sayin'? Eatin' animals is bad or somethin'?

GABRIEL
 Not at all. We enjoy a good venison steak up here every now and again. Why do you humans have to compartmentalize everything into extreme, definitive boxes? Can't moderation, responsibility and reason be your guide?

Clay furrows his brow, struggling with the concept. Gabriel moves on, his expression serious.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)
 Tell me, Clay. What's the last thing you remember, right before arriving here?

CLAY
 What, you mean gettin' blowed up,
 or...?

Gabriel waves his hands again, creating another window despite Clay's silent head-shaking protest.

FLASH TO:

INT. PARENTS' CAR - NIGHT (PAST)

Teenage Clay slumps in the backseat, half-asleep. Suddenly, a dog darts into the headlights. His father swerves to avoid it, sending the car careening off the road and into a large tree.

CLAY (V.O.)
 (bitter)
 Damn dog. That damn dog.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - LATER

Teen Clay lies in bed, his face bandaged. A DOCTOR stands over him, delivering devastating news in silence.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

Teen Clay stands before two coffins, tears streaming despite his attempt at a hard expression. A younger Pastor Matt stands at his side, hand on Clay's shoulder.

CLAY (V.O.)
 Oh Matt... Pastor... why?

INT. LAWYER'S OFFICE - DAY

Clay, barely eighteen but already developing emotional walls, sits across from a somber LAWYER.

LAWYER
 Are you sure, Ordell? Your aunt and uncle in Oklahoma would gladly take you in.

TEEN CLAY
 I'm eighteen, I'm an adult. I can take care of myself.

BACK TO:

INT. HEAVEN - CONTINUOUS

The window dissolves. Clay stares into space, his eyes glistening.

GABRIEL

So, you can take care of yourself,
hmm? Don't need anyone else's help?

CLAY

(snarling)

That damn dog. How could God let
that happen? They were good people,
my folks.

GABRIEL

There is a season and a time for
everything. A time to be born, and
a time to die; a time to plant and
a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to...

CLAY

(cutting him off)

You expect me to be a saint after
what I been through? Y'all did this
to me! How can you hold me
responsible for the way I act?

(jabbing his finger at
Gabriel)

And what's with quoting the Beatles
at a time like this? What's that
stupid song got to do with
anything?

GABRIEL

Actually, that was The Byrds. And,
truly, it wasn't even them... they
borrowed that one from us.

CLAY

(humming to himself)

'nuh nuh-ything, turn, turn,
nuh...' Hmmm, I coulda sworn that
was the Beatles. Are you sure?

Gabriel's expression remains serene as he redirects:

GABRIEL

I have an offer for you, Clay. A
chance to regain what you've lost.

CLAY

Like one of them game shows where I get to pick what's behind the curtain?

GABRIEL

Not even close. How would you like to have a second chance? What if we send you back to try again?

CLAY

What, like a baby? I gotta go through them diapers and all that? I don't reckon I could handle eatin' them jars of mushed peas again.

GABRIEL

No, it's not like that. We're offering to send you back now. Presently.

CLAY

Can I go back as Gerard Butler? Or maybe that rich Facebook guy?

GABRIEL

Afraid not. There is a slight catch.

Clay tenses, waiting.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)

If you choose this option, and it's fully your choice, we'll be sending you back as an animal.

CLAY

Come again?

GABRIEL

We're going to send you back as an animal, Clay.

CLAY

What, you mean? Like 'carnation? I'm gettin' 'carnated? That ain't in the bible.

(considering)

'Least I don't think so.

(suspicious)

So why me? Why do I get a second chance when all them folks is waiting in line?

Gabriel puts a compassionate arm on Clay's shoulder as they begin to walk.

GABRIEL

Well, that's a good question, Clay. I asked the big guy that same question myself. He said, deep down, underneath all that blubber and whiskers, there's a really good guy in you. You've changed over the years, Clay. You used to be so respectful of God's creation. But somewhere along the line it all 'went south', as you might put it. Your actions lately don't match your heart, He said.

CLAY

Wait, back up a bit. He said blubber and whiskers?

GABRIEL

Well, I added that part. I'm paraphrasing.

Clay looks at Gabriel suspiciously.

CLAY

Well, you should listen to Him. He's right. Look, I don't know many people who likes all the stuff God made more than me. Why, I was in 4-H.

GABRIEL

Never mind. Back to the matter at hand. Make your choice -- do you want this special offer?

CLAY

What is this, an infomercial? I gotta act fast or the offer will dry up or somethin'? What if I choose to decline this offer?

GABRIEL

Then you go stand back in line and await your judgment.

(beat)

He will ask you one simple question. Just one.

CLAY

Multiple choice?

Gabriel's patience seems to be wearing thin.

GABRIEL

Look, Clay, not everyone gets this opportunity. If you don't want it, no one is going to force it upon you. So, what's it going to be?

Clay remains silent, sweat beading on his forehead as he wrestles with the decision.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)

You know Clay, let's just forget it. Why don't you just go get back in line.

CLAY

Wait! No. No, I reckon there's a pretty good reason I'm being given a second chance. I mean, if I was good to go, why would I need a second chance, right?

Gabriel looks intrigued by this logic. Clay nervously smacks his lips.

CLAY (CONT'D)

I... I accept.

Gabriel nods as if he'd known this would be the answer all along.

GABRIEL

Wise decision. Walk with me.

He leads Clay over to a lamp stand that holds a single, white, unlit candle. As Gabriel speaks, he simply looks at the candle and it ignites.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)

Do you know what this is, Clay?

Clay looks at Gabriel curiously, answering with careful consideration.

CLAY

A candle?

Gabriel turns to him.

GABRIEL

That is correct.

Clay gives a proud smile, licking his finger and making a gesture as if giving himself a point in mid-air.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)
But it's not just a candle, Clay.
This is your candle.

CLAY
OK, well that's mighty nice of you,
Gabriel. Thank ya. It's a really
nice candle.

Gabriel pauses, clearly wanting Clay to grasp something deeper.

GABRIEL
Pay attention, Clay. This is your
candle.

Clay scratches his head, at a loss.

CLAY
(sniffing)
Is it one of them smelly candles?
Them's nice. I kinda like the
cinnamon ones.

Gabriel shakes his head in disbelief.

GABRIEL
This is hopeless. But, let's get on
with it, shall we? Are you ready?

CLAY
Well, I reckon I am, but...
(searching for delay)
Real quick, what exactly is my
objective here? Is there a lesson
I'm supposed to learn or something?

GABRIEL
Clay, if I gave you all the answers
then there really wouldn't be any
point in giving you a chance to
learn it for yourself, right?

CLAY
Well...

GABRIEL
So you're ready?

Clay desperately tries to think of something else to say, his mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)

Good luck.

Before Clay can protest further, Gabriel grabs him by the seat of his pants and the back of his collar. With a mighty heave that would have done a professional bowler proud, Gabriel launches Clay into the unknown.

FADE TO:

INT. CLAY'S RUINED HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Clay suddenly materializes as a cockroach inside his wrecked home. Everything seems impossibly huge - walls tower like canyon cliffs, furniture looms like mountains.

CLAY (V.O.)

Sweet mercy, my house looks way
bigger than I remember.

He tries to look down at himself, but his new body refuses to cooperate. Everything feels alien - too many legs, antennae twitching with unfamiliar sensations.

CLAY (V.O.)

What in tarnation am I anyway?

He scuttles awkwardly across the debris-strewn floor. A gleam of light beneath the back door catches his attention.

CLAY (V.O.)

Well, might as well see where that
leads.

As he picks his way through the wreckage, Clay passes near a puddle of his homemade moonshine, leaking from a broken bottle. He catches a glimpse of his reflection and freezes.

CLAY (V.O.)

I'm a dadjim cockroach? Of all the
no-good, dirty-dealing...

The moonshine's aroma proves too tempting. Clay scampers over, his many legs working with unsettling coordination, and lowers his head to the puddle.

The first sip burns like hellfire. Clay belches, producing a high-pitched chirp that startles him.

CLAY (V.O.)

Sweet mercy! Reckon my tolerance
ain't what it used to be.

Clay makes his way toward the door, navigating an obstacle course of fallen beams and debris. The world sways slightly, whether from his new perspective or the moonshine, he can't tell.

Finally, he reaches a small platform just below the tantalizing strip of daylight. Clay pauses to catch his breath, his tiny lungs heaving.

CLAY (V.O.)
Just a few more inches...

He gathers himself, ready to make one final leap when his jump depresses the level he's standing on and...

WHAM!

A cinder block drops from above, turning Clay's insect body into purée.

CUT TO:

INT. HEAVEN - CONTINUOUS

Clay materializes as a human again, face-down and spread-eagle. Gabriel looms over him, stopwatch in one hand and clipboard in the other.

GABRIEL
Ah! We have a new record.

Clay groans, trying to move his previously flattened body. Gabriel makes the stopwatch and clipboard vanish with a flick of his wrist.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)
So tell me, Clay. What did you learn?

CLAY
(croaking)
Well...I learned my mousetrap invention works on cockroaches too.

Gabriel chuckles, shaking his head. Clay sits up, wincing.

CLAY (CONT'D)
Now I know how all them cartoon characters feel when they get smushed by a one-ton ACME anvil.

Clay struggles to his feet and brushes himself off. His gaze falls on the candle, still burning but shorter now, the flame guttering in a pool of melted wax.

GABRIEL

Yep, still burning.

(clapping Clay's back)

Perhaps we should start you off a little higher up in the food chain, yes?

Before Clay can respond, Gabriel grabs him by the collar and seat of his pants, hoisting him like a scruffed kitten.

CLAY

Wait! Ain't there supposed to be a mission or something? I'm not asking you to spell it out for me, but throw me a bone here! What's the dang point of all this? Can I buy a vowel or something?

Gabriel sighs, setting Clay back down.

GABRIEL

Okay, let's chat for a minute. Think back, Clay. When would you say the change in you really started? The moment it all began to go sideways?

Clay ponders, his brow furrowing in concentration. After a long moment:

CLAY

Before my parents died...it was Maddie. When Maddie left. That was the first terrible thing I can remember happening to me. I lost the letter she gave me, and her address along with it. She never wrote to me again after that.

A pang of old hurt flashes across Clay's face.

CLAY (CONT'D)

(softly)

Why didn't she write to me?

GABRIEL

Probably because you never wrote to her.

Clay's head snaps up, emotions playing across his face - astonishment, hurt, skepticism.

CLAY

But I lost the letter! My dog ate it! Well, actually, it was that dadjim armadilla's fault come to find out. I promised Maddie I'd write, but I couldn't. Y'all took that chance away from me. How is that fair? Why did y'all take Maddie away from me?

GABRIEL

(unmoved)

Based on your understanding of fairness? It's not. And don't you think it's a bit self-centered to think we took *her* away from you? Ever think that maybe we took *you* away from *her*? For *her* benefit?

Clay felt the sting of Gabriel's words. Humbled, he continued.

CLAY

What did it say? The letter, I mean. What was in it?

GABRIEL

(with a faraway look)

Ah, the brilliance of a child. Maddie had more life, more wisdom in that one letter than most folks manage in a lifetime. And she was just a kid.

Clay feels a pang of shame twist in his gut. He'd always known Maddie was special, that she saw things differently than he did.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)

She has what you lack. Discover the spirit of her letter, Clay. Let it seep into your bones, bury itself in your heart. Only then will you find the healing you seek.

Hope flickers in Clay's chest, but is quickly doused by confusion.

CLAY

But how? How am I supposed to find the 'spirit' of a letter I ain't even got? Heck, I don't even know if the dang thing still exists! Knowing my luck, it probably rotted years ago.

Gabriel holds up a hand, cutting off Clay's frustrated tirade.

GABRIEL

Actually, the letter does still exist. But you're missing the point, son. It's not about the physical object itself. It's about the essence of Maddie's words. The love and light she poured onto that paper.

Clay perks up when he hears the letter still exists.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)

Look at it this way. What do you think your life would have been like if you'd never lost that letter? If you'd stayed connected to Maddie all these years?

A shadow of regret passes over Clay's face.

CLAY

Well, for starters, I didn't lose it. Not really. If y'all hadn't let that armadilla steal it away, I wouldn't have broken my promise to Maddie. I would've written to her, kept her in my life. And who knows? Maybe things would've turned out different. Maybe I wouldn't have...

He trails off, unable to finish. Gabriel nods understanding.

GABRIEL

Perhaps. Her friendship certainly couldn't have hurt. But son, do you really believe one little letter is solely responsible for the man you became? For the choices you made?

Clay opens his mouth to argue, but something in Gabriel's gaze stops him.

CLAY

I...I don't know. I guess not. It's just...it's easier, you know? To blame it on something, someone else. Because if it's all on me...well, then...

Gabriel lays a gentle hand on Clay's shoulder.

GABRIEL

I know, son. Believe me, I know. But that's the funny thing about free will. It's both a blessing and a burden. The power to choose...and the responsibility that comes with it.

Clay rubs a hand over his face, suddenly looking very tired.

CLAY

So what now? I don't suppose we could just get on with...well, whatever this is? Send me back, let me take my lumps and be done with it?

GABRIEL

Not quite, I'm afraid. This isn't a punishment, it's an opportunity; it's not about the lumps. You've got quite a long way to go before you reach the level of understanding you lack.

The angel makes a twirling motion, urging Clay to turn around. With a heavy sigh, Clay complies.

CLAY

(muttering)

Alrighty then. Let 'er rip.

He braces himself, sticking out his rear end and squeezing his eyes shut. Gabriel obliges and flings Clay into the vortex.

CUT TO:

EXT. TEXAS SKY - DAY

Like a miniature starship exiting a hyperspace jump, Clay suddenly appears mid-air, his wings flapping frantically. He lets out a startled QUACK as he tries to get his bearings.

EXT. CITY STREET - CONTINUOUS

Clay sees a metro area below and manages a clumsy landing onto a sidewalk. He waddles along storefronts, catching his reflection in a display window. He shakes his head in disbelief.

CLAY (V.O.)
Sweet mercy, I'm a dadjim duck!

At an intersection, Clay instinctively stops at the crosswalk, waiting for the signal. PEDESTRIANS stare at the sight of a duck obeying traffic laws.

The walk signal changes. Clay starts across. Halfway through, a speeding truck BLARES its horn and swerves toward him. Clay scrambles to safety in a panicked flurry of feathers.

CLAY (V.O.)
Sweet mercy! Ya almost hit me, ya maniac!

Clay collapses against a wall, catching his breath. He glances thoughtfully at his wings.

CLAY (V.O.)
Hey, hold the boat. Why am I walkin' when I got these?

With determination, Clay takes off running down the sidewalk, his wings pumping furiously. Slowly, miraculously, he begins to lift off.

CLAY (V.O.)
Woohoo! Now this is more like it!

His triumph is short-lived. His flight path is erratic, sending him careening off lampposts and building facades like a feathered pinball. But gradually, he gets the hang of it.

FADE TO:

EXT. SKY ABOVE TEXAS COUNTRYSIDE - CONTINUOUS

Clay soars above the landscape, the wind ruffling his feathers as he executes wobbly loops and turns.

CLAY (V.O.)
(singing off-key)
Here I go, into the wild blue
yonder... Da da daaa, da da da
daaaa...

EXT. WETLAND AREA - CONTINUOUS

Clay spots a glimmer of water below. He banks toward it, envisioning a graceful landing.

Instead, he hits the water like a skipping stone, bouncing several times before pile-driving beak-first into a cluster of cattails.

CLAY (V.O.)
(dragging himself onto
shore)
Ugh. I really gotta work on my
landings.

As he paddles out into the tranquil water:

CLAY (V.O.)
So... what now? What am I supposed
to do?

A familiar voice sounds in his head:

GABRIEL (V.O.)
Find that which you have lost.

Clay spins around, scanning the sky.

CLAY (V.O.)
Gabriel? That you? Where ya hidin'?

A ripple draws his attention. Floating beside him is a green frog - unmistakably Gabriel.

GABRIEL (V.O.)
I'm not hiding, Clay. I'm right
here.

CLAY (V.O.)
What the... heck are you doin'
here? And why are you a frog, of
all things?

GABRIEL (V.O.)
(shrugging)
Just checking in. Seeing how you're
adjusting to your new form.

CLAY (V.O.)
How do you think I'm doin'? I'm a
duck, for cryin' out loud! I can't
talk, I ain't got no thumbs... how
am I supposed to figure anything
out like this?

The frog regards him calmly, then his gaze shifts to something over Clay's shoulder. Clay turns to see a cluster of decoy ducks bobbing on the surface.

GABRIEL (V.O.)
 Oops, gotta run. We'll talk later,
 Clay. Remember... find what you've
 lost!

With a cryptic wink, Gabriel vanishes beneath the surface, leaving only ripples.

CLAY (V.O.)
 Hey, wait! Come back here and
 explain yourself, ya green-faced
 son of a...

Clay glides over to join the decoy ducks, unaware they're not real.

CLAY (V.O.)
 Well ain't this just ducky. Hey
 there, fellas. Nice weather we're
 havin', huh?

The decoys, naturally, don't respond.

CLAY (V.O.)
 What's a matter? Catfish got your
 tongue?

Moving closer, realization dawns.

CLAY (V.O.)
 Of course. Y'all are just hunks of
 painted plastic. And here I am,
 talkin' to ya like a dang fool.

Suddenly, a DUCK CALL BLAST startles him. He whips around to see a HUNTER in camouflage crouched among the cattails.

CLAY (V.O.)
 Sweet mercy.

Clay freezes in place, trying to mimic the blank stares of the decoys around him. The hunter raises binoculars, studying him intently.

CLAY (V.O.)
 I'm just a decoy. Just a harmless
 little decoy, floatin' along
 without a care in the world...

Inch by inch, Clay starts drifting away, maintaining his rigid pose while his webbed feet churn furiously underwater.

The hunter lowers his binoculars and reaches for his shotgun with deliberate calm. Clay sees this and begins to panic.

CLAY (V.O.)

Well, guess this is it. I can almost see my headstone now: Here lies Clay, A fowl-mouthed wise-quacker.

Just as the hunter takes aim, a dark shape streaks through the water beneath Clay. He's violently sucked under, a split second before the shotgun BOOMS overhead.

Underwater, Clay comes face-to-face with his unlikely savior and screams. A giant catfish has grasp of his foot.

CLAY (V.O.)

Aaagh! It's Jaws! Jaws with whiskers!

Clay manages to wriggle free of the catfish's grip. With a mighty kick of his webbed feet, he rockets to the surface, exploding from the water in a geyser of foam.

Coughing and sputtering, he makes a beeline for shore. He dives into the first burrow he spots, collapsing in relief.

INT. BURROW - CONTINUOUS

Then - a low, menacing GROWL emerges from the depths of the tunnel.

Clay's eyes go wide. His feathers stand on end. He opens his bill to scream...

EXT. BURROW - CONTINUOUS

Clay shoots out like a cork from a bottle, leaving a plume of dirt and loose feathers in his wake.

CLAY (V.O.)

Dadjimmit, Gabriel! You got a sick sense of humor, ya know that?

EXT. SKY - CONTINUOUS

As he wheels into the sky, he spots something familiar in the distance - the charred remains of his house.

CLAY (V.O.)
 Hey, that's my place! Looks a
 heckuva lot smaller from up here...

As he approaches closer, he spots PASTOR MATT standing on the sidewalk, staring at the ruined house.

CLAY (V.O.)
 Pastor Matt?

Clay circles lower, aiming for the front yard. At the last second:

CLAY (V.O.)
 Sweet mercy - I don't know how to
 land this thing!

EXT. CLAY'S FRONT YARD - CONTINUOUS

He plows into the grass, bouncing and skidding before coming to an ungraceful stop at Pastor Matt's feet.

Clay wheezes, dragging himself upright to find Pastor Matt staring at him in astonishment.

CLAY (V.O.)
 Pastor! Boy, am I glad to see you!
 It's me, Clay! Your old buddy from
 next door!

But all Pastor Matt hears is a series of increasingly agitated QUACKS. He takes a step back, eyeing Clay warily.

The sound of a car pulling up draws Clay's attention. A figure steps out, and the world seems to grind to a halt.

CLAY (V.O.)
 Well, hellooooo there, gorgeous.
 Who is *that* absolute dish?

MADDIE approaches Pastor Matt with a hesitant smile, oblivious to the slack-jawed duck gawking at her.

As she draws closer, recognition hits Clay like a thunderbolt.

CLAY (V.O.)
 Maddie? Is that really you?

Before he can process this revelation, a shout shatters the moment:

PASTOR MATT
Sampson! No!

Clay spins around to see Pastor Matt's Rottweiler charging toward him from an open gate.

With a panicked flap of wings, Clay takes to the sky. He banks in a wide circle, watching as Pastor Matt wrestles Sampson back under control, one hand gripping the dog's collar while ushering Maddie inside with the other.

CLAY (V.O.)
Maddie!

His voice emerges as a desperate QUACK. He watches helplessly as she disappears into the house.

Now that Sampson is contained, Clay attempts another landing. He tumbles head over tail across the lawn before managing to flutter up onto a bush beneath an open window of Pastor's house.

INT. PASTOR MATT'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Through the window, Clay watches as Pastor Matt's WIFE passes Maddie a steaming cup of coffee.

MADDIE
Yeah, I think I remember you vaguely. You've always been Clay's neighbor, right?

PASTOR MATT
(pointing in a general direction across the street)
I grew up over there, actually. It's a bit foggy, but I think I remember you too. You used to come over to Clay's and play in his backyard, right?

A smile blooms across Maddie's face, transforming her from merely beautiful to radiant.

MADDIE
Yes. Yes we did. We set up our novice animal clinic right over there.
(glowing)
He turned out to be my childhood sweetheart.

CLAY (V.O.)
Oh, my Sweetie.

MADDIE
And funny. Oh my gosh, he was so funny! He could always make me laugh, even when I was having the worst day.

(eyes sparkling with memory)

There was this one time - he got it in his head to build us a clubhouse. Wouldn't let anyone help him, said he was going to do it all by himself. Well, apparently his carpentry skills weren't quite what he thought they were.

She dissolves into giggles. Through the window, Clay continues to take it all in.

MADDIE (CONT'D)
He was inside the shack, proudly showing off his handiwork, when the whole thing just... collapsed! Just came right down on top of him. I was terrified at first, but then he stands up in the middle of all this rubble, covered in sawdust, and says - cool as you please - 'Maybe we can just have a picnic on some soft blankets instead.'

The kitchen fills with laughter, but Clay notices something else in Maddie's eyes - a softness, a tenderness that makes his heart ache.

PASTOR MATT
That was the Clay I like to remember too. He was a good kid.

Pastor Matt's smile fades slightly, and Maddie catches it immediately.

MADDIE
How you *like* to remember him?

PASTOR MATT
(choosing words carefully)
Sometimes things happen in a person's life and it changes them. Life can be hard on a person.

Maddie's eyes plead for more information.

PASTOR MATT (CONT'D)

Look, don't get me wrong. Clay is a good guy. I grew up with him too. I know who he is on the inside.

(troubled)

It's just that after his parents passed, he sort of... sank down into himself. He seemed to have a hard time after that letting his heart come through.

MADDIE

Wait, what? His folks are gone? Oh my...

PASTOR MATT

Yeah, tragic. A sad day. Freak car accident took them both and nearly Clay as well.

MADDIE

Poor people. Poor Clay.

PASTOR MATT

Clay was devastated when you left, but this pushed him over the edge. He closed off from everyone. Insisted he could take care of himself from then on. Never been the same since.

Maddie furrows her brow, trying to reconcile the boy she'd known with the man Pastor Matt describes.

PASTOR MATT (CONT'D)

His job became his mission. So Clay became a 'varmint control specialist,' as he puts it. And maybe, deep down, his intentions are good. Maybe he genuinely wants to protect people from situations where nature and humanity clash. The problem is...

(hesitating)

Sometimes he might go...a bit too far. I wouldn't necessarily say he's cruel; just...ambitious. Zealous maybe.

Clay watches as understanding dawns in Maddie's eyes, followed by something that looks dangerously like disappointment. The look cuts him to the quick.

Pastor Matt notices Duck-Clay peering through the window. He excuses himself and walks over, gently shooing Clay away. Heartbroken, Clay obliges.

EXT. CLAY'S BACKYARD - MOMENTS LATER

Clay waddles into his ruined yard and plops down in the grass. As he dwells on what he's just witnessed, his gaze falls on the old oak tree - even charred and broken, its trunk still stands.

He waddles over for a closer look. His gaze falls on the blackened carving near the base: "C.H. + M.W."

CLAY (V.O.)
Maddie... Look what I've done. What
a mess I've made of everything.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spots the armadillo hole below. Clay crouches down, sticking his head into the gloom.

CLAY (V.O.)
(echoing)
It's your fault! You hear me, you
dadjim armadilla? This whole
thing... it's on you!

But the armadillo is long gone. As Clay starts to pull back, a flash of red catches his eye. Half-buried in the rubble is a familiar toy car - the same one he'd pined after as a boy.

Clay reaches out with his bill and drags the little vehicle into the light.

CLAY (V.O.)
Well, I'll be. I always wondered
what happened to this little guy.

Then, glinting in the depths of the burrow, he sees something else - something that makes his heart stutter in his chest.

An envelope, yellowed with age and slightly charred at the edges, but amazingly intact.

CLAY (V.O.)
Maddie's letter?

He lunges for it with a strangled cry, snatching it up in his beak and stumbling backwards.

CLAY (V.O.)
After all this time...

BARK! BARK! The sound of frenzied barking comes from next door, followed by the ominous CREAKING of straining wood.

Clay turns just in time to see Sampson launch over the picket fence like a furry projectile, grass clippings flying in his wake.

CLAY (V.O.)

Aw, heck.

Clay spots a fallen tree branch leading to his roof - his only escape route. But Sampson is closing fast.

With the dog hot on his tail, Clay makes a break for it, half-flapping, half-climbing his way up. He tumbles onto the shingles just as Sampson's jaws SNAP shut where his tail feathers had been.

CLAY (V.O.)

Not today, Cujo! Maybe next time, chump!

Clay looks down at the precious cargo clamped in his beak. This is it - the moment of truth. But as he reaches out to tear the seal, a sickening realization washes over him.

He has no hands. No fingers. Just a pair of useless, feathered stumps where his arms used to be.

CLAY (V.O.)

Dadjimmit. How the heck am I supposed to open this thing?

He tries everything - pecking at it with his bill, scraping at it with his webbed feet, even attempting to tear it open with his teeth. But the letter remains stubbornly sealed.

In desperation, Clay drags the envelope to the jagged edge of a fallen branch. If he can just snag a corner, maybe...

A gust of wind catches the envelope, pulling it from his grasp. It flutters down into the depths of his house through a crack in the roof.

CLAY (V.O.)

No!

Clay scrambles to the edge of the hole. There it lays on his bedroom floor, tantalizingly out of reach.

His eyes fall on the front door - blown off its hinges.

Clay flutters down and squeezes through the back door.

INT. CLAY'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

The fallen beams and debris prove too much for his duck form; there's no way to retrieve the letter from the wreckage.

EXT. CLAY'S BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS

As he emerges back outside, a sense of foreboding slowly floods over him. He hadn't thought that Sampson might still be lurking.

Panning to his right, he finds himself face-to-face with his nemesis. Sampson snarls.

CLAY (V.O.)
Oh, shiii...

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. HEAVEN - CONTINUOUS

Clay materializes, screaming into Gabriel's familiar face. Thinking quickly, Clay adjusts his exclamation to a more heaven-appropriate outcome.

CLAY
...iiiiiooooot!

GABRIEL
Well, well, well. Look what the cat dragged in. Or should I say... dog?

Clay levels a weary glare at his celestial tormentor.

CLAY
Aw, c'mon. Don't you think you're laying it on a bit thick with the whole karmic justice thing?

Gabriel just smiles, patting Clay on the back.

GABRIEL
You know what they say about karma - it's a real beast.

Clay huffs, gingerly contorting his body as if checking for injuries.

CLAY
So what now? You gonna send me back again? Turn me into a dung beetle or something?

The angel pats Clay's back with an almost sympathetic tone.

GABRIEL

Oh, Clay. Always so quick to assume the worst. Haven't you figured it out yet? This isn't about penance. It's about growth. About learning to see the world through different eyes.

Clay stares at him uncomprehending. Gabriel sighs.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)

Think about it. In the short time you were a duck, what did you experience? Fear, sure. Frustration, absolutely. But also wonder. Joy. The simple pleasure of the wind beneath your wings.

Clay thinks back to his first clumsy flight, the rush of exhilaration as he soared above the treetops, but...

CLAY

Hey, being a duck ain't all it's quacked up... cracked up to be. I mean, the flying thing was actually pretty cool, I guess; but that landing part... that sucks.

Gabriel motions for Clay to follow as he walks toward the candle.

GABRIEL

Every creature, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, has a place in the grand tapestry of life. A purpose, a unique perspective to offer.

(facing Clay squarely)

Your problem, Clay, is that you've been so focused on your own pain, your own wants and needs, that you've lost sight of that truth. You've closed yourself off from the world, from the beauty and meaning that's all around you.

Clay hangs his head, shame burning in his chest. He knows the angel is right.

Clay watches as Gabriel turns his attention to the candle. It's noticeably shorter now, the wax melting away like sand through an hourglass.

CLAY

Yep, that sure is a nice candle.

GABRIEL

(amused)

It sure is, Clay. Too bad it won't last forever.

CLAY

Yeah, I been wondering about that. I know you said this is *my* candle, but I think I might be missing some puzzle pieces here. Like, what happens when it runs out? Then what? That mean my time's up or somethin'?

GABRIEL

What do you think?

CLAY

Well... I think we're probably gonna need a much bigger candle if that's the case. Maybe a whole case of 'em.

GABRIEL

Maybe a whole warehouse of them.

Clay looks a bit uneasy as realization sets in.

CLAY

So, what's next? I guess I'm not done yet? How many last chances does a guy get? And please, I don't want to go back as an animal again. Just give me one more shot as myself. I gotta get back to Maddie, even if it's just to explain why I never wrote. Can't you do that for me? Please?

Gabriel's expression softens, understanding glimmering in his ancient eyes.

GABRIEL

With God, all things are possible. But what good would it do? You've proven who you are time and time again.

Clay's defensiveness flares, then quickly fades into bone-deep weariness.

CLAY

When you've lost everything, you start to think different about stuff.

Gabriel nods with understanding.

GABRIEL

I'll make you a deal, Clay. You try to figure out this thing called life, and if you show promise, I'll talk to the Big Guy, see what he's willing to do.

A spark of hope ignites in Clay's chest.

CLAY

I'll do anything. Anything.

GABRIEL

I don't need you to *do* anything. I need you to *learn* something!

Clay's mind races, grasping for understanding. Then...

CLAY

Hey, what's the deal with that dadjim armadilla? Is he Satan incarnate or something? How am I supposed to learn anything when he keeps jackin' up my world?

GABRIEL

What do you mean?

CLAY

What do I mean? He's always screwin' with me! Stealing my stuff, knowing full well I want it back. It's like he gets off on it or something.

The angel considers this for a moment, then realizes the opportunity.

GABRIEL

Hmmm, so you're suggesting that maybe he takes what isn't his, consumes more than he needs, and doesn't consider others in the process. That is a shame, Clay. Good thing you're not like that, right?

The words hit Clay like a sucker punch. Suddenly, the armadillo's antics don't seem so different from his own selfish behavior. He glances nervously at the candle.

CLAY

Uh, looks like we better get another candle. That one's getting shorter!

GABRIEL

(sadly)

There is but one, Clay.

Clay gets defensive, desperate.

CLAY

Look, my neighbor's a pastor. Don't make me go over your head with this.

GABRIEL

Ah yes, Pastor Matt. Your only friend, as I recall. If it wasn't for his incredible compassion and patience, you would've had no one at all.

(placing hand on Clay's shoulder)

Tell me - what do you think would happen if I sent you back as something small? Something that has to rely on wit rather than strength?

CLAY

Like what?

A mischievous glint enters Gabriel's eyes that makes Clay immediately regret asking.

GABRIEL

Oh, I don't know... perhaps something that knows what it's like to be hunted. To be on the other side of those traps you're so fond of setting.

Worry dawns on Clay's face.

CLAY

Oh no. No, no, no...

GABRIEL

Oh yes.

Before Clay can protest further, the angel sends him tumbling through the ethereal void.

CLAY
(fading away)
Sweet mercyyyyyy...

FADE TO:

INT. PET SHOP - NIGHT

Clay drops from above into a spacious plexiglass cage among several sleeping gerbils. Everything around him seems impossibly large - the water bottle hanging from the cage wall looms like a community water tower, while the exercise wheel looks like a giant Ferris wheel.

Clay twitches, his whiskers tremble with each sniff.

CLAY (V.O.)
Sweet mercy.

He examines his tiny hands, then twists around to look at his body, nearly toppling over.

Across the cage, other gerbils go about their business - some sleeping, others munching on food pellets, while a few scamper aimlessly about their enclosure.

Clay touches his face, then grabs the fur on top of his head, looking skyward as if seeking divine intervention.

CLAY (V.O.)
Nooooo!

His cry of dismay emerges only as a high-pitched SQUEAK that barely disturbs his cage mates.

FADE TO:

INT. PET SHOP - LATER THAT MORNING

Clay sits motionless in the corner of the cage, bored. A few customers pass by, barely sparing a glance at the rodents on display.

He watches in revulsion as one gerbil contentedly sniffs the rear end of another.

CLAY (V.O.)
Ya sick bastard!

Then another gerbil approaches from behind, clearly intent on giving Clay the same treatment.

Clay jumps to all fours, whirling to face the offender.

CLAY (V.O.)
 Buddy, you better stop buyin' whoop-
 ass tickets, 'cause you're fixin'
 to win the lottery!

The threat emerges as nothing more than an aggressive SQUEAK, but it does the trick. The other gerbil backs off.

Satisfied with his small victory, Clay turns his attention to a gerbil enthusiastically running on a plastic wheel.

CLAY (V.O.)
 Where ya think yer going, feller?
 Are you some kind a moron or
 somethin'?

At Clay's squeaked commentary, the gerbil hops off the wheel. Curiosity getting the better of him, Clay climbs into it himself, walking at a leisurely pace.

CLAY (V.O.)
 Seems kinda pointless to me.

But as he picks up speed, a familiar grin spreads across his furry face.

CLAY (V.O.)
 Hmmm, ha! Kinda fun!

Moments later, Clay is tearing around the wheel at top speed, the world blurring around him.

CLAY (V.O.)
 Wheeeeeeee!

His revelry is cut short by an unexpected sight. A massive boa constrictor looms outside the cage, its unblinking eyes fixed on Clay with predatory intensity. He freezes, the sudden stop sending him flying out of the wheel. He lands with a THUMP, finding himself nose to nose with the serpent through the glass.

TWO MEN stand before a gerbil cage, one holding a massive BOA CONSTRICTOR.

BOA OWNER#1
 Doesn't he look delicious, Crusher?

BOA OWNER#2

C'mon man, the mice are cheaper.

BOA OWNER#1

Just thought we'd give her a special treat.

Owner #2 smacks his friend's shoulder and leads him away. Clay SQUEAKS a sigh of relief. Then he spots Maddie strolling down his aisle.

Clay immediately begins scratching on the glass, frantically trying to get her attention.

CLAY (V.O.)

Maddie! Maddie! Over here! Save me!

Maddie notices his antics and approaches, pressing a finger to the glass. A delighted smile spreads across her face.

MADDIE

Oh, isn't he cute? Hi, lil' cutie!

Clay preens at the attention, launching into an impressive display - one-armed pushups, backflips, any trick he can think of to make her recognize him.

CLAY (V.O.)

Maddie, it's me, Clay! Get me outta here! Take me home with ya!

But to Maddie's ears, it's just the excited squeaking of a spunky little rodent. She giggles, charmed by his performance.

MADDIE

You're just the spunkiest little thing. I wish I could take you home with me, but I just can't.

She gives him a final smile and wave.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Take care, lil' guy!

Clay scrambles at the glass, mirroring her position.

CLAY (V.O.)

No! Come back, Maddie! Come back!

Clay slumps against the glass, his tiny shoulders shaking with despair. He's so lost in his misery that he doesn't notice the hand descending into the cage until it's too late.

BRUCE (O.S.)
Oh, aren't you just a little
firecracker!

BRUCE, once again dressed in his male nurse outfit from work,
lifts Clay up to his face.

CLAY (V.O.)
Put me down, weirdo! Hey, wait a
minute... I know you from
somewhere, don't I?

A memory flashes through Clay's mind - the bar, the awkward
interaction, the dawning realization. His eyes widen in
horror.

CLAY (V.O.)
Oh no. Not him. Anyone but him!

But it's too late. Bruce is already carrying him to the
register, chatting excitedly with the clerk as he picks out
an assortment of gerbil toys and accessories.

Clay finds himself unceremoniously dumped into a small
cardboard carrier. Through the holes, he catches snippets of
Bruce's conversation with the CLERK.

BRUCE
...going to love his new home...
got the deluxe habitrail all set
up...

CLAY (V.O.)
Although them accessories look like
they could've been a lot of fun, I
got way more important things to
do.

Clay starts chewing at the box frantically.

CLAY (V.O.)
This stuff tastes awful. But I'd
chew my own dang leg off if I
thought it'd get me outta here...

The lid opens and Clay finds himself dumped into a clear
plastic exercise ball by his tail.

BRUCE
You're going to love this!

He snaps the lid shut. Clay blinks, taking in his new prison.
Bruce sets the ball on the ground.

CLAY (V.O.)
 Alright, Brucie. You asked for it.

With a mighty kick of his hind legs, Clay sprints, propelling the ball across the store floor. He ricochets off shelves and displays like a pinball on meth.

CLAY (V.O.)
 Yeehaw!

Startled customers leap out of his way. Bruce and the clerk shout, trying to corral him. But Clay is a gerbil possessed, zigging and zagging with wild abandon.

He nearly takes out an old lady's ankle, sends a toddler sprawling into a stack of kibble, and upends a display of doggie sweaters.

CLAY (V.O.)
 Now this is more like it!

Clay makes a break for the automatic doors, hope surging through his tiny body. Maybe, just maybe, he could pull this off...

LITTLE BOY
 Ball!

A LITTLE BOY appears out of nowhere, eyes wide with delight. His chubby hands snatch Clay's plastic chariot out of thin air.

CLAY (V.O.)
 Sweet mercy, no...

The boy drop-kicks the ball like a little plastic soccer ball, sending Clay sailing out the door, onto the street and into oncoming traffic.

EXT. CITY STREET - CONTINUOUS

Clay's world explodes into screeching tires and blaring horns. He ricochets off a bumper, goes pinwheeling across the pavement, and nearly gets flattened by a city bus.

The ball bounces up onto the opposite curb, dangling at the edge of a concrete stairway.

CLAY (V.O.)
 Well, this ain't good...

The sphere reaches its tipping point and goes tumbling down the stairs, ass over teakettle. The plastic shell cracks more with each impact.

When he hits bottom, the ball EXPLODES, sending Clay pinwheeling through the air. He bounces twice before coming to a bone-rattling stop against the leg of a park bench.

CLAY (V.O.)
Sweet... Mercy...!

He struggles to his feet, fighting off a wave of nausea. Just as he's about to attempt a heroic, if slightly bow-legged, limp to safety, a shadow falls across him.

Clay raises his eyes to find himself staring into the slitted pupils of a very hungry-looking tomcat.

CLAY (V.O.)
Oh, you gotta be kidding me.

The cat crouches, tail twitching. Clay does the only thing he can think of - he turns tail and runs, scrambling up the leg of the bench like his fuzzy little butt is on fire.

The cat is hot on his heels, YOWLING and slashing with outstretched claws. But Clay is fueled by sheer, pants-wetting terror, and he manages to stay just a whisker ahead.

The cat chases Clay along the riverway path - zigging, zagging, pouncing, swatting.

Clay shimmies up to the seat of another bench, then makes a flying leap for the backrest. For one horrible moment, he hangs suspended in midair, certain he's misjudged the distance.

His paws hit wood and he scrambles up and over. Behind him, he hears a YOWL and a SPLASH. He glances back just in time to see the cat, who had leaped for him, hit the surface of the river below like a sack of wet cement.

A hysterical laugh bubbles up in Clay's throat. He does a little victory shimmy, shaking his fuzzy booty in the direction of his waterlogged would-be assassin.

CLAY (V.O.)
Ha! Take that, ya mangy feline!
Teaches you to mess with...
AAAAGH!!!

Another shadow blots out the sun, a piercing SHRIEK splits the air, and suddenly Clay is airborne, dangling from the razor-sharp talons of a very large, very determined hawk.

Then Clay notices the biggest buck he's ever seen sauntering up to take a drink. Its backside directly in line with Clay's trajectory.

Hearing the sonic whistle of Clay rifling towards him, the buck raises his head, then its ears, then its... tail.

CLAY (V.O.)
Sweet mercy, no...

Clay's tiny body hurtles at terminal velocity towards the puckered bullseye of the deer's unsuspecting sphincter.

CLAY (V.O.)
(accepting his fate)
Well, I reckon this is one way to go...

Just before Clay is about to be launched where no gerbil has gone before, a flash of movement cuts through the air. It's Hawk Gabriel yet again, swooping in to snatch Clay from his inglorious fate.

CLAY (V.O.)
Thanks... I think...

He peers up at Gabriel through shell-shocked eyes. The hawk somehow manages to shrug while flying.

GABRIEL (V.O.)
You're welcome. Though I gotta say... that was a real slobberknocker of an entrance you almost made back there.

Clay shudders at the thought of what could have been.

CLAY (V.O.)
Well, if anyone asks, that never happened, ok? Let's not get all gossipy and stuff.

GABRIEL (V.O.)
No promises.

As Gabriel continues to usher Clay to safety, he sees a familiar landscape below them. They descend.

EXT. CLAY'S FRONT YARD - CONTINUOUS

PASTOR MATT stands frozen, watching as the hawk gently deposits its tiny cargo in Clay's front yard.

PASTOR MATT
(checking his forehead for
fever)
Clay, what did you put in that
moonshine of yours?

Gerbil Clay scampers up the front steps of his ruined home, squeezing through a crack in the door. Inside, he hugs the baseboard, his tiny heart still racing. As he rounds a corner, he comes face-to-face with a mouse.

CLAY (V.O.)
Well, hello there, li'l feller.

The mouse SQUEAKS at him, gesturing with its nose to follow. The mouse leads him across the room to a mousetrap, loaded with an enormous (from their perspective) hunk of cheese.

Clay watches as the mouse inches forward, whiskers twitching as it sniffs at the tempting bait.

CLAY (V.O.)
No! Wait!

SNAP!

The trap springs with lethal efficiency, but through some miracle, the cheese goes flying, landing intact right in front of Clay. He stares at it for a long moment, his tiny conscience wrestling with his rumbling stomach.

CLAY (V.O.)
Ohhhh... Well, I guess one mouse's
misfortune is another mouse's
dinner. Boy, am I starvin'!

After wolfing down the cheese, Clay makes his way to his bedroom door. He squeezes underneath and his heart leaps - there lies Maddie's letter.

CLAY (V.O.)
Thank you, Lord! I got it. I
finally got it!

In his excitement, he grabs the letter in his teeth, but it's comically large from his rodent perspective. He stumbles and trips. Undeterred, Clay circles around to drag it backward like a determined puppy with an oversized bone.

He's so focused on his prize that he doesn't see the second mousetrap until it's too late.

SNAP!

CUT TO:

INT. HEAVEN - CONTINUOUS

Clay materializes in a puff of smoke near his ever-dwindling candle. His body is frozen in place, eyes bulging cartoonishly. Gabriel stands nearby, clearly struggling to maintain his celestial composure instead of laughing.

GABRIEL
Welcome back, Ordell.

Clay gradually regains his ability to move, eyeing Gabriel with suspicion.

CLAY
Did I miss something funny?

GABRIEL
I apologize. But you were the one who set all those traps.

Clay massages the back of his neck, then trudges over to stand beside Gabriel in front of the candle, shoulders slumped in defeat.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)
So... did you learn anything?

CLAY
Oh yeah, well I learned that having your neck snapped in a mousetrap is a whole lot more painful than your fingers when you're trying to set the damn thing!
(glaring accusingly)
What kind of- I mean, I had the letter. Why couldn't you just let me have that?

GABRIEL
I'm sorry, maybe I missed something. Is that letter magical or something? A talisman?

CLAY
You told me. You told me that the letter holds the key to what I'm lacking.

GABRIEL

Well, in a manner of speaking, I guess you could say that. But if I recall, I said something like, 'find the spirit of what's in her letter and you will be restored.'

CLAY

Well alright then, that's what I'm fixin' to do if y'all would just stop kickin' my ass for a moment.

(beat)

Oh, and what's up with that Bruce guy?

GABRIEL

What do you mean?

CLAY

You know...all that tree-huggin', animal-lovin' nonsense. He's one of them PETA people, ain't he?

Gabriel's expression hardens slightly. Clay elaborates.

CLAY (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

Bruce? All that 'bacon is murder' stuff?"

GABRIEL

Bruce is one of God's children. Are you more special, more compassionate than he?

Clay shrinks back, properly chastised. Gabriel turns his attention back to the candle, and Clay follows his gaze. The flame gutters slightly, the wax noticeably shorter than before.

CLAY

(quickly)

OK, so I get it. Everyone deserves a fair shot. Everyone is important. I've learned my lesson, so can I just get on with my harp strummin' now?

He gestures hopefully toward the pearly gates. Gabriel doesn't respond.

CLAY (CONT'D)

Sweet mercy, I'm fixed already. Ya fixed me.

GABRIEL

Oh?

CLAY

Yeah, I understand now. I should probably be more thoughtful. More sensitive to people and critters.

Gabriel looks solemnly at the candle, clasping his hands behind his back. Clay's heart sinks as he realizes this test isn't over.

GABRIEL

Well, you did try to stop that mouse from getting crushed by your trap, but that's not quite the whole picture.

CLAY

Why not? I tried to do a good deed.

GABRIEL

It's not necessarily about just doing good deeds; though those are important.

CLAY

No? What's all that stuff in the bible about do this and don't do that then? I gotta change my ways and be good, or you'll roast me.

GABRIEL

That's not what it says. The question is, *why* did you try to do a good deed?

CLAY

(exploding)

Cuz I'm tired of the beatdown! I wanna get in there and see my folks. You guys are just too hard to please. What do I have to do to get in? Tell me, please!

GABRIEL

There's nothing you could ever do, Clay, to put God in your debt.

The words hit Clay like a physical blow. He deflates, his anger dissolving into confusion and despair.

CLAY

(quietly)

Well then I guess I'm screwed.
 What's the point of all this then?
 Why send me back if there's nothin'
 I can do about it?

Gabriel remains silent, his eyes fixed on the guttering candle. Clay rallies for one last attempt.

CLAY (CONT'D)

Maybe if you'd send me back as
 somethin' normal, I might be able
 to figure this thing out.

Gabriel makes a gesture with his hand as if telling Clay to keep going.

CLAY (CONT'D)

Well, ya keep sending me back as a
 wild animal, out there in nature
 where everything's tryin' to kill
 me or eat me?

GABRIEL

I'm listening.

CLAY

Maybe send me back as a zoo animal
 or something; they at least get
 taken care of. Or how about
 something that has more abilities."

(wiggling his hands)

Like maybe something with opposable
 thumbs so I can open a letter for
 Pete's sake.

A disquieting gleam enters Gabriel's eyes that makes Clay immediately regret his words. His stomach drops as he recognizes that all-too-familiar look.

GABRIEL

(with unsettling
 enthusiasm)

Deal!

Clay begins backing away, waving his arms in front of him.

CLAY

On second thought...

But it's too late, Gabriel heaves him through the portal.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. ANIMAL LABORATORY AT UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS - MORNING

Clay is sitting in a warm bath, gentle hands working shampoo through his fur. Through the steam rising from the bath, he catches sight of his reflection in a nearby mirror and does a double-take as realization dawns - he's now a chimpanzee.

CLAY (V.O.)

Well I'll be a monkey's uncle.

He sees who his attendant is and his heart skips a beat.

CLAY (V.O.)

Maddie? Maddie! Sweet mercy, you sure get around!

Maddie's touch is professional but kind, each movement precise and purposeful. She hums softly as she works, wearing a peaceful expression on her face.

MADDIE

You're going to feel so much better once we get you cleaned up. There we go, sweet boy. See? Nothing to be afraid of.

Across the room, BOBBY, a freshman in the research program, casts furtive glances their way, his clipboard forgotten in his hands.

Maddie scratches behind Clay's ears. His eyes roll back in pleasure.

CLAY (V.O.)

Aaaaah. I finally died and gone to heaven.

Maddie continues bathing him. Clay becomes increasingly aware of his state of undress.

CLAY (V.O.)

Ho! Wait a sec, I'm naked, Maddie. We ain't even had a first date yet.

Bobby keeps sneaking glances their way, his eyes holding a mix of scientific fascination and unmistakable jealousy.

MADDIE

Let's get you all dried off, shall we?

Clay snatches the towel, trying to maintain some level of modesty, and hastily covers his 'giblets.'

MADDIE (CONT'D)
 (giggling)
 You silly! Shy are we?

She reclaims control of the towel. As she dries him, Clay finds himself distracted, playing with Maddie's curls.

DAVID, the department head, enters the lab.

DAVID
 Hey, Madelyn. How's it coming?
 Getting him all cleaned up?

MADDIE
 (beaming)
 I sure am, Boss. I'm so excited!
 This is a giant step up from rats.

DAVID
 Yes, it sure is...
 (glancing at Bobby)
 isn't it, Bobby?

Bobby, feeding a small food pellet to a rat, looks up resentfully but holds his tongue.

Maddie continues to towel off Clay. David turns his attention to the chimp.

DAVID (CONT'D)
 OK, here are your objectives, all
 laid out for you.
 (placing the folder beside
 Maddie)
 Take as much time as you need. Did
 you already give him is
 testosterone booster shots?

MADDIE
 Sure did.

DAVID
 Perfect.

Maddie secures a diaper around Clay's waist. She lifts him up in front of her. He reaches out, wanting to be closer. She pulls him in for a hug, not noticing the rather obvious sign of his affection tenting out the front of his diaper.

MADDIE
 Boy, you sure are friendly today!

INT. ANIMAL LABORATORY AT UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS - LATER

Maddie dumps a pile of multi-shaped blocks from a children's toy onto a table where Clay is sitting, then sets the plastic sphere in front of him. She holds up a banana.

MADDIE

You want this? Wanna banana?

She grabs one of the cubes and slips it through the matching hole of the sphere.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

See? Can you do that?

(slowly)

Ba-naaaan-na.

Clay looks at the cubes, grabs one immediately and slips it through the correct slot on his first try. Maddie's eyes light up.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Goood booy! Wow! That's my good boy!

CLAY (V.O.)

Pastor Matt was right. I ain't so dim after all.

Maddie peels the banana to give Clay a reward, but he comes up out of his seat, pushes the banana aside and goes for a kiss instead. Maddie giggles and gives him a big hug. She then puts him back down in his seat.

MADDIE

Again? Can you do that again?

Clay grabs the rest of the cubes and puts them in the slots as quickly as he can, then back arms the sphere off the table, climbs across it and jumps into Maddie's arms.

Bobby, who was putting some files into his backpack, stands frozen, staring, amazed at what he's witnessing. Maddie looks over at Bobby.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

I think we have a genius here!

Bobby looks down at his rat in disgust.

INT. ANIMAL LABORATORY AT UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS - EVENING

As the sun begins to set, Maddie secures Clay in his enclosure for the night. She bids him goodnight, flipping off the lights as she and Bobby prepare to leave.

Clay grabs the bars of his cage, rattling them in frustration.

MADDIE

Oh, it's OK, Casanova. I'll see you again in the morning.

Clay watches her leave.

CLAY (V.O.)

Help me, Maddie! I need another chance. I need your help! I'm being held captive by an angel with a dangerous sense of humor!

As the lab grows quiet, Clay turns to survey his cage. His eyes fall upon his cellmate - a female chimpanzee eyeing him with unmistakable interest.

CLAY (V.O.)

Sweet Mercy! Don't even think about it, you hussy!

INT. ANIMAL LABORATORY - NEXT MORNING - 5:30 AM

Maddie arrives to find Clay sitting at Bobby's desk, bag of chips in one hand and a beer in the other. On the TV screen, a rerun of "Baywatch" plays, the sound muted.

MADDIE

Buddy!

Clay freezes, eyes darting to the clock.

CLAY (V.O.)

Maddie, you're early.

Maddie's gaze travels from Clay to the TV, then to the female chimpanzee watching forlornly from the locked enclosure. Her mouth falls open as she struggles to process the scene.

Instead of scolding him, Maddie rushes over and scoops him into her arms. Clay notices her eyes are red and puffy, as if she'd been crying.

CLAY (V.O.)

You been cryin'? What's wrong?

He reaches up, gently wiping away a stray tear from her cheek.

Maddie carries him over to a plush armchair in the corner, sinking down with Clay cradled in her lap. She snuffles, her voice thick with emotion.

MADDIE

Oh, you're so sweet. I need a friend like you right now. I wish I could talk to you. I wish you could understand.

(beat)

Well, why not? I can share it with you. You're a good listener.

Maddie snuffles again.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

My heart's broken right now, Casanova. I just don't understand. I don't understand what happens to some people. How they can go to such dark places in their hearts. Why they don't reach out for help. Why they try to bear all their own burdens. And it crushes them. It robs their spirit. And they won't ask for help.

Maddie grabs Clay's cheeks, looking him in the eye.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

They could get help.

Clay's eyes well-up; she was talking about him.

CLAY (V.O.)

Oh, Maddie. I gotta figure this thing out. I know Gabriel said there wasn't anything magical about your letter, but it's the only thing I can think of to get a clue.

He gazes into Maddie's eyes and pets her head.

CLAY (V.O.)

I gotta break free from this. I gotta break free.

Maddie senses the chimp's sadness; she strokes his head and works up a smile.

MADDIE
 Awww, no. No li'l fella. It's ok.
 Don't you be sad.

She pulls him up to his feet.

MADDIE (CONT'D)
 C'mon, let's clean up before
 everyone gets here and have some
 fun, shall we?

CUT TO:

INT. ANIMAL LABORATORY - DAY

[MUSIC KICKS IN FOR TIME-LAPSE MONTAGE ("I WANT TO BREAK
 FREE" BY QUEEN)]

Maddie stands before a flip chart covered with various
 colored circles, squares, and triangles. Her face lights up
 as Clay correctly identifies each shape. His reward is her
 radiant smile.

CUT TO:

INT. ANIMAL LABORATORY - LATER

Clay sits in Maddie's lap. She places a ball under one of
 three cups, shuffles them. Without hesitation, he picks the
 right one. Instead of taking the offered banana, he plants a
 quick kiss on her cheek, earning a delighted laugh.

Then he turns the tables and he places the ball under one of
 the three cups and scrambles them. It is done so fast and
 coordinated that Maddie loses track and selects the wrong
 cup. Clay rewards himself with another kiss.

CUT TO:

INT. ANIMAL LABORATORY - NEXT MORNING

Maddie enters to find Clay has once again escaped his
 enclosure. He's rummaging through the refrigerator, a NASCAR
 race playing on the TV.

His subsequent confinement in a now-padlocked pen leaves him
 sulking, staring dejectedly at a banana while his female cage-
 mate picks through his fur.

CUT TO:

INT. ANIMAL LABORATORY - DAY

Maddie holds up four fingers and mouths "four." Instead of selecting apples from the basket in front of him, Clay spots a bouquet on her desk. He plucks exactly four flowers and presents them to her with a winning smile and a bow.

CUT TO:

INT. ANIMAL LABORATORY - LATER

Clay watches as David reviews Maddie's results, the head researcher's arm slipping around her shoulders in a congratulatory gesture that lingers too long. Bobby looks on with barely concealed jealousy.

Clay expresses his own displeasure by sending a carefully constructed Jenga tower clattering across the table.

CUT TO:

INT. ANIMAL LABORATORY - NIGHT

The bored SECURITY GUARD (semi-retired, old man, with bushy white mustache; think the bank security guard from Andy Griffith show) has become a regular visitor, unlocking Clay's pen for marathon poker sessions fueled by beer and whatever sporting event is playing. Now we know how Clay has been getting out of his cage each night. Once Clay is released, he runs to the fridge and grabs a six-pack, then sprints over to a shelf, grabs a pack of cards the case of poker chips. He delivers everything to a table where the guard is already seated and Clay slaps on a dealer's visor.

CUT TO:

INT. ANIMAL LABORATORY - DAY

David bursts into the lab, making a beeline for Bobby's desk. He slams down a cable bill, jabbing his finger at a long list of Pay-Per-View charges - WWE, UFC events, and more.

As Bobby stammers denials, David's threat of "One more chance" hangs in the air. Clay tries to direct Maddie's attention back to their puzzle, adopting his most innocent expression when she looks at him suspiciously.

CUT TO:

INT. ANIMAL LABORATORY - LATER

Maddie hands Clay a mixed-up Rubik's cube. He takes one look at it, shakes his head, and hands it back. Even he knows better than to attempt that challenge.

CUT TO:

INT. ANIMAL LABORATORY - NIGHT

The security guard's late-night visits have evolved into a carefully orchestrated routine. Clay brings out a poker chip case while his companion hauls in a cooler of beer.

Clay intentionally loses hand after hand, making sure to keep the guard's spirits high and his glass full. The man celebrates each victory with increasingly enthusiastic swigs, Clay faithfully replacing empty bottles with fresh ones.

After a particularly long session, Clay deals what he knows will be the final hand. The guard's bleary eyes light up at his pocket aces, and he pushes all his chips in with drunken confidence.

The flop brings two queens and an eight, followed by a five, and finally - the last queen on the river.

The guard lets out a triumphant laugh, slapping his aces onto the table. But his victory is short-lived; his head slowly drops to the table with a soft thud.

Clay checks that the guard is truly out, then takes the guard's jacket and gently places it under his head as a pillow. He retrieves the keys with the delicate touch of a professional pickpocket.

Before leaving, Clay returns to the table and flips over his own cards, revealing the fourth queen. With a satisfied smirk, he pulls all the chips to his side.

CUT TO:

EXT. UNIVERSITY LAB BUILDING - DAWN

The cool night air hits Clay as he emerges. His eyes fall on a moped parked nearby. Within moments he has it hot-wired. The engine sputters to life, and Clay feels the first true taste of freedom since his transformation as he speeds away.

[END MUSIC MONTAGE]

EXT. CLAY'S HOME - EARLY MORNING

PASTOR MATT emerges from his house, glancing furtively in both directions before proceeding with exaggerated stealth toward Clay's property. From his bathrobe pocket, he produces a brand-new Holy Water Sprinkler and its accompanying instruction pamphlet.

After a quick consultation with the manual, he begins solemnly sprinkling the charred house, moving methodically every few feet.

The relative silence of early morning is broken by the SPUTTERING approach of a moped. Matt catches the movement in his peripheral vision and turns just in time to see a chimpanzee riding down the sidewalk.

He does a double-take, flinching as if physically struck by the absurdity of the sight. Clay simply waves as he dismounts the moped.

CLAY (V.O.)
Mornin' Pastor.

Clay heads purposefully toward the backyard while Pastor Matt stands frozen, holy water sprinkler suspended in mid-air.

After a moment, Matt wordlessly tosses the sprinkler and pamphlet over his shoulder and retreats to his house.

CUT TO:

INT. MADDIE'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

A phone RINGS. Maddie startles awake, fumbling for the receiver.

MADDIE
Hello? Yes?
(bolting upright)
What? He escaped? But how?
(jumping out of bed)
Yes, I'll be right there.

CUT TO:

INT. CLAY'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Clay is making his way to where he last had the letter as a gerbil. He climbs over, under and through the wreckage of his house until he reaches a bit dehydrated gerbil jerky, still in the snares of the track, and...no letter. It's gone.

EXT. CLAY'S BACKYARD - MOMENTS LATER

Clay bursts out of the house and hustles to the armadillo's tree den. He crouches down at the base of what remains of the old oak—now just a blackened stump—and peers into the hole.

CLAY (V.O.)
(channeling The Shining)
Here's Clay!

CUT TO:

INT. PASTOR'S HOME - CONTINUOUS

Pastor Matt sips his coffee and reluctantly, cautiously looks out his window into Clay's backyard. Without changing his expression, he turns his back to the window and leans against the counter top.

We hear three BEEPS as he raises his cell phone to his ear.

OPERATOR (V.O.)
What's the emergency?

PASTOR MATT
(with eerie calm)
Yes, there's a monkey riding an
armadillo in the yard next door.

Through the window behind him, we now see the scene plays out exactly as described—a chimp is indeed attempting to ride the armadillo like a bucking bronco across the yard. The armadillo has Maddie's letter clenched firmly in its mouth.

EXT. CLAY'S BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS

CLAY (V.O.)
Give it up! Give it up!

Clay goes into professional wrestler mode, planting his feet and bringing the armadillo's escape attempt to an abrupt halt. He hoists the creature above his head and executes a perfect dropping back breaker move, bouncing the armadillo off his knee.

The armadillo drops to the ground, dazed, but maintains its grip on the precious letter.

CLAY (V.O.)
Now, dang it, let go. Don't be
tearin' it up. Just let go.

When gentle persuasion fails, Clay gets an idea. He clambers up the side of his house to the windowsill and launches himself into an elbow hammer move. At the last moment, the crafty creature rolls into a tight ball, causing Clay to miss and crash painfully to the ground.

BACK TO:

INT. PASTOR'S HOME - CONTINUOUS

Through his window, Pastor Matt ends his surreal conversation with emergency services, maintaining an unnaturally calm demeanor as he watches the spectacle unfold, taking another sip of his coffee. His WIFE stands behind him, her eyes bulging in amazement.

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. CLAY'S BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS

In the foreground of the Pastor and wife's window, we see Clay now utilizing the armadillo like a soccer ball, displaying remarkable athleticism as he bounces it off his knees, then his head, and finally executes a perfect back-flip Pele kick that sends the armored creature crashing into the fence.

The impact finally dislodges the letter from the armadillo's mouth. Dazed and defeated, the creature shakes its head groggily before wobbling back toward its den.

CLAY (V.O.)

Yes! Yes! Ha ha! Oh, Maddie, we did it!

After catching his breath, Clay reaches for the letter with trembling hands. He holds it aloft, like a champion hoisting a trophy. As he begins to slip his finger into the corner of the envelope, the SCREECH of tires brings his head up sharply.

Through the fence, he spots a police cruiser, and two OFFICERS are already making their way toward the yard.

CLAY (V.O.)

Really?
(looking skyward)
Really?

With a resigned sigh, he clamps the letter into his mouth and springs to his feet.

The officers close in, but Clay's agility serves him well as he jukes and weaves before deciding to make a leap over the back fence.

The officers pursue him, chasing him on foot across the street and into a park.

CUT TO:

INT. MADDIE'S CAR - MOMENTS LATER

Maddie speeds down the road, listening to a morning radio show when the personality breaks in with a news bulletin.

RADIO PERSONALITY (V.O.)

We just received word that there's a chimpanzee on the loose in the city. If you're on the northeast side of town, keep your eyes peeled as police are trying to capture the animal.

MADDIE

Oh, Buddy.

Maddie suddenly slams on her brakes as Clay himself darts across the street in front of her car, the pursuing officers close behind.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Buddy!

EXT. CITY STREETS - CONTINUOUS

Clay rounds the corner of a city block, quickly scanning his surroundings before his gaze locks onto a tall city square statue under construction. Without hesitation, he makes for it.

Moments later, the panting officers round the same corner and continue their pursuit.

EXT. CITY SQUARE - CONTINUOUS

Reaching the base of the statue, Clay glances back at the closing officers before beginning his climb. Meanwhile, Maddie's car screeches around the corner. She pulls over and jumps out, joining the growing crowd of onlookers.

Clay reaches the top of the statue and leans against the figurine, catching his breath. Below, the crowd continues to grow, including Maddie who calls out desperately.

MADDIE

Buddy! What are you doing? You come down here right now!

CLAY (V.O.)

Sorry, Maddie. I gotta do this. It's a matter of life or death.

As Clay begins to unfold the letter, something wet strikes the statue beside him. He looks up to find the source of the pigeon dropping and locks eyes with a familiar presence perched atop the statue's head. It's Gabriel as a pigeon.

GABRIEL (V.O.)

So you finally have the letter.

CLAY (V.O.)

Yeah, no thanks to you. Why did it have to be so difficult?

GABRIEL (V.O.)

Why is the letter so important to you?

CLAY (V.O.)

It's Maddie's. It's from Maddie. You said yourself it'll restore everything.

GABRIEL (V.O.)

Never said that, but what is it about Maddie that's so special?

CLAY (V.O.)

You ask some really dumb questions, you know that? One moment you tell me one thing, like how Maddie is one of your favorites, but then in the next breath you ask me why I think she's so special. You don't make no sense half the time.

GABRIEL (V.O.)

Oh, she is very special, no doubt of that. But why do you think she's so special?

Clay's expression softens as he considers the question.

CLAY (V.O.)

She's special. I don't know, I mean she's kind; she loves everything and everyone. She's always so happy. She never lets anything get to her. She's so easy-going, no matter what happens around her. She can be sad about somethin', but still has a smile goin' on inside.

GABRIEL (V.O.)

So, then why do you need that letter so badly? You know that Maddie is special. You don't need a letter to prove that to you, do you? You know her. She's always been so much more than a silly piece of paper.

Clay looks down at the letter in his hands, doubt creeping into his expression.

GABRIEL (V.O.)

Now climb down from here before momma and papa swallow return. They don't like anyone messing with their babies.

Clay notices a small nest with baby swallows resting in the bent elbow of the statue. Pigeon Gabriel takes flight, leaving Clay alone with his thoughts.

CLAY (V.O.)

Oh Maddie, why did you ever have to leave? I ain't been the same since you gone. I wanna be the same that I was before. Like when I was with you.

A sharp impact to his head interrupts his reflection.

CLAY (V.O.)

Ouch! What the--?

Looking up, Clay finds himself face to face with two very angry swallows, who begin taking turns diving at his head. In his effort to fend them off, the letter slips from his grasp.

From above, the scene resembles something out of an old monster movie—Clay swatting at the diving birds from his tower as they execute precision attacks, the crowd below watching in horrified fascination.

Driven to his knees by the relentless assault, Clay spots the letter inching dangerously close to the ledge. He reaches for it desperately, but at that exact moment, one of the swallows delivers a particularly well-aimed poke to his rear end.

Clay's reflexive jerk is all it takes—the letter catches a breeze and flutters away from the statue.

CLAY (V.O.)

Nooo!

The crowd below gasps collectively as Clay lunges for the letter, overbalancing in the process. Time seems to slow as he topples from his perch, the ground rushing up to meet him with terrible finality. He hits with a sickening thud, the impact driving the air from his lungs.

Through blurring vision, Clay sees Maddie rushing to his side, tears already streaming down her face. He tries to focus on her beauty one last time before darkness begins creeping in at the edges of his consciousness.

BYSTANDER

'Twas Beauty killed the beast.

The bystander glances around hopefully, waiting for someone to appreciate his cinematic reference, but is met with only uncomfortable silence.

As Clay's world fades away, his last coherent sight is of Maddie's smile.

FADE TO WHITE:

INT. HEAVEN - MOMENTS LATER

Clay slowly fades in, flickering like a TV with poor reception finally finding its signal. He finds himself staring at Gabriel, who stands beside the small stub of a candle.

With painful effort and a helping hand from Gabriel, Clay rises to his feet.

GABRIEL

How was life as a chimp, Clay?
Learn anything?

CLAY

(grudgingly)
Being a chimp ain't all bad, I
guess.

(MORE)

CLAY (CONT'D)

Once you get past the whole 'being locked in a cage with a horny chimpette thing.'

Gabriel laughs, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

GABRIEL

And you gotta admit, riding that armadillo like a bucking bronco had to be fun. And the smackdown? That's right up your alley. Am I right?

For a brief moment, Clay gets a sparkle in his eyes and chuckles, nodding in agreement, but then his eyes drift to the dwindling candle.

CLAY

(desperate)

Look, I found the letter. I completed my mission. I kept my end of the bargain; can't I just go in there and rest now?

GABRIEL

(sighing)

Back to the letter, again? Well, it's gone, Clay. The letter is disintegrating in some landfill now. It was never about the letter anyway; how can you still be missing the point.

Something in Clay snaps, the last of his bravado crumbling away.

CLAY

OK, I give up! I'm going to let you in on a little secret, Gabriel. I'm not the sharpest bulb in the drawer. My 'telligence quote ain't exactly tip-top. So I'm gonna need some help with all this! Help me, Gabriel!

(voice dropping to a hoarse whisper)

Please.

The angel's eyes light up, a smile spreading across his face.

GABRIEL

Now we're getting somewhere! First off, Clay, don't be so hard on yourself.

(MORE)

GABRIEL (CONT'D)

You're not as dim as you think.
 Much of what I'm trying to teach
 you, you already know. You just
 need to own those thoughts now,
 recognize what's already planted
 inside of you.

Gabriel lays a hand on Clay's shoulder.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)

Life is a vapor, Clay. Humanity is
 like drops of dew on the grass,
 gone before morning reaches noon.
 No flesh lives forever. Sooner or
 later, the Creator brings back to
 Himself what He has given. Some
 live long lives, some are brought
 back to Him much sooner...

CLAY

And some get blowed-up with an
 armadilla?

Gabriel laughs, a sound like summer rain.

GABRIEL

Yeah, I suppose that could happen.

CLAY

I reckon I shortened earth's life-
 expectancy with that one. That was
 quite a bit of carbon I spewed
 there.

GABRIEL

Quite.

CLAY

(pondering)

That's got me to wonderin', since
 you know everything... what's up
 with all this global warmin' stuff?
 Is that for real, or just a load of
 bullsh...

(catching himself)

...crap?

GABRIEL

Concern for the environment, Clay?
 What does it matter to you?

(studying Clay)

(MORE)

GABRIEL (CONT'D)

I could tell you the planet only has a few more years left before its tipping-point, or I could tell you it's all been politicized to redistribute wealth and gain power over others. But does the answer really matter to you?

Clay scratches his head, clearly puzzled.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)

(continuing)

Either way, don't you think you should keep your room clean?

Clay ponders, maybe Gabriel has a point.

CLAY

So what now?

GABRIEL

There's still something you lack. You've shown some signs of progress; I'm proud of you. But you still haven't found what you've lost. Not fully. But you're close, Clay. So close.

CLAY

(hopefully)

Maybe I'd get even closer if you'd help me out a bit?

Gabriel's interest seems to pique at this suggestion.

CLAY (CONT'D)

Yeah! I mean, you send me back as a cockroach, a duck, a gerbil, a chimp? What the heck! Why don't ya give me a fightin' chance?

GABRIEL

Such as?

CLAY

Well, send me back as something bigger. Better.

(eyes lighting with desperate inspiration)

Send me back as something with cajones; something with real teeth.

Clay sees it again - that mischievous look in the angel's eye as his celestial gears churn.

CLAY (CONT'D)

I sure don't like that look in your eye...but...I'm ready.

(with resolve)

Go ahead. Kick my ass into the vortex again. I don't care anymore. I ain't got much time. Send me back as whatever you like.

He closes his eyes, bracing for the rush of celestial power that would propel him back to the land of the living. When nothing happens, Clay cracks one eye open, confused.

CLAY (CONT'D)

Well? What're you waiting for?

GABRIEL

Oh, my hands-on approach, you know, tossing you violently back to earth...that was just for my own amusement. Much more fun that way. But all I really need to do is...

He waves a hand lazily, the motion almost casual, doing his best Captain Picard impersonation.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)

...lay in a course for earth.
Engage.

Clay stumbles back a step, the implication hitting him like a freight train. All this time, all the hurtling through space and unceremonious crash landings...

But before he can form a sufficiently indignant response, his body begins to shimmer, being transported back to earth. Gabriel's expression turns deadly serious as Clay fades.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)

No more last chances, Clay. No more excuses. It's time to make it happen.

The heavenly realm begins to fade around the edges, Heaven's ethereal glow giving way to the muted tones of earthly existence. As Clay feels himself being pulled back into the mortal realm, peacefully and painlessly this time, Gabriel's parting words echo in his ears.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)

Find what you've lost, Clay. Find it, and find yourself. Your future, your very soul...

FADE TO:

INT. SWAT VAN - DAY

Clay blinks, taking stock of his surroundings - the interior of a van, the low hum of an engine. Wearing a protective vest complete with an official SWAT team badge, his German Shepherd body is seated among a group of men. Their faces are tense with concentration.

CLAY (V.O.)

Sweet Mercy, I'm a cop!

The SWAT LEADER, a grizzled man with a cigar clamped between his teeth, outlines the impending operation, his voice a low, urgent rumble.

SWAT LEADER

The targets are suspected of running a massive drug operation in the old helium factory on the west side. They're using this site as a cover to push some nitrous, aka laughing gas, in balloons, to our teens.

Clay's ears perk up at that.

CLAY (V.O.)

Pushin' drugs on kids? Well, that's lower than a snake's belly in a wagon rut!

SWAT LEADER

The nitrous technically isn't illegal, but this application of it has resulted in deaths of our children and we suspect they may also be running other narcotics out of this facility. Be on alert as we're not sure what all may be involved here.

The leader points out entry points on a whiteboard.

SWAT LEADER (CONT'D)

Delta team, you'll be posted on the roof.

(MORE)

SWAT LEADER (CONT'D)

Once you're in place, Beta team will confirm reconnaissance and signal entry for the Alpha team, here.

(then, pointing towards
Clay)

Instead of our standard percussion grenades, our newest member will enter the window here, breaching entry and creating the diversion.

Clay gulps, panic rising as the implications sink in.

CLAY (V.O.)

What? You want me to go in first?
I'm the front line?

The briefing continues, heedless of his whimpers. The van rumbles to a stop, and the team begins to mobilize, checking weapons and adjusting gear. Clay begins to pant, nervously.

CLAY (V.O.)

This ain't what I signed up for.
I'm a varmint control specialist,
not some gung-ho SWAT dog. I barely
survived my last few misadventures -
the bird of prey, the armadilla
cage match, my ill-fated flights as
Clay the duck. And now they expect
me to take point on a drug bust?

The team files out of the van, falling into formation with practiced ease, Clay pulled along behind them by his handler.

EXT. HELIUM FACTORY - MOMENTS LATER

Delta team scales the sides of the factory. Once on the roof, they use silenced drills to cut through, inserting remote video equipment.

A flash of mirror signals glints between the teams.

BETA LEADER (V.O.)

(over radio)

We've got eyes. Stand by.

Alpha team huddles outside the factory's fence, SWAT Leader at point. He signals "eyes" to his men.

INT. SWAT VAN - CONTINUOUS

Beta team monitors their video equipment, watching the targets inside processing bags of cocaine and packaging them for distribution. Several guards stand post throughout the factory.

BETA LEADER

Bingo.

(into radio)

We're hot! We're clear. The southwest quadrant is secure. Get K9 in position.

EXT. HELIUM FACTORY - CONTINUOUS

SWAT Leader signals to ALPHA 1, who has Clay on a leash, to move into position. But as his handler starts down the fence row, Clay plants his feet, refusing to budge.

CLAY (V.O.)

Forget that. I ain't your dang guinea pig. Besides, I ain't got time for this.

Alpha 1 pulls a dog treat from his jacket, trying to entice Clay forward.

CLAY (V.O.)

You tryin' to bribe me with a scooby snack? If you had a beer or a pizza, we might have a deal, but I don't do tricks for no horse jerky.

Alpha 1 grabs Clay's collar, locks eyes with him, and jabs a warning finger in his face. The message is clear: behave, or else.

Leaving Clay by the building, Alpha 1 backs to a safer distance. He signals to the rest of Alpha team that the dog is in position, then gives Clay the hold signal.

Clay looks side to side and begins to ease away, planning his escape. A glance back shows Alpha 1 chambering a round in his assault rifle. Clay freezes, mistaking the standard preparation for a threat.

CLAY (V.O.)

Alright already.

He returns to his sitting position as Alpha team moves into strategic positions around the building.

SWAT Leader looks up to Delta Leader on the roof, signaling "in position." Another mirror flash bounces toward the van.

INT. SWAT VAN - CONTINUOUS

BETA LEADER (V.O.)
All teams in position. Hold for go.

Video feeds from inside the factory flicker across monitors.

BETA LEADER (V.O.)
Hold... hold...

EXT. HELIUM FACTORY - CONTINUOUS

Clay peeks through a small hole in the wall and his heart nearly stops - the guards inside are carrying machine guns.

BETA LEADER (V.O.)
(on radio)
Point man, GO GO GO!

Alpha 1 signals Clay forward, but notices his K9 is transfixed by something through the hole. He snatches up a small rock and throws it at Clay.

Clay spins around to see Alpha 1 urgently gesturing him forward. He stays put, fear gripping him.

CLAY (V.O.)
I'm sorry, I don't think I'm up for this.

BETA LEADER (V.O.)
(on radio again)
Alpha 1! Send the point! Send the point! Go now!

Alpha 1 motions his gun at Clay to move forward as an escalating incentive to follow orders.

Clay gulps hard, his eyes darting between his handler's gun and the window above. Clay hears Gabriel's words echoing in his head.

GABRIEL (V.O.)
Find what you've lost... Find yourself.

Making his choice, Clay darts through a hole in the wall.

INT. HELIUM FACTORY - CONTINUOUS

Clay finds himself behind a stack of helium and nitrous oxide tanks. No one has noticed his entry. Nervous and fearful, he crouches in his hiding place.

EXT. HELIUM FACTORY - CONTINUOUS

Outside, Alpha 1 smacks himself in the head with his pistol.

ALPHA 1

(on com)

The point is out of the game.
Repeat, the point is out!

BETA LEADER (O.S.)

Dammit!

(beat)

Engaging contingency plan
Hurricane. Alpha team, Delta team,
move in!

INT. HELIUM FACTORY - CONTINUOUS

The factory erupts into chaos. Delta team members crash through the upper windows, rappelling down on lines. Concussion grenades fly in from all directions, detonating in blinding flashes.

Alpha team bursts through ground-level entry points, catching the criminals by surprise. Both sides draw weapons, creating an instant Mexican standoff.

SWAT Leader strides forward to face the criminal KINGPIN, who sits at a table covered in cash and balloons.

SWAT LEADER

Order your men to stand down and
you might live to see another day.

KINGPIN

Take your troop of boy scouts and
leave now. I'll forget this ever
happened. Don't, and you'll suffer
the consequences.

SWAT LEADER

Ha! Yeah, right. You don't scare
me. I eat rabbit turds like you
for breakfast!"

Both sides exchange bewildered looks at this revelation.

SWAT MEMBER 1
 (whispering to member 2)
 Did he just say he eats turds?

SWAT MEMBER 2
 (responding)
 Yeah. From a rabbit.

SWAT MEMBER 3
 (to both, and as if
 another time of day would
 have been ok)
 For breakfast?

The kingpin and his men erupt in laughter. SWAT Leader pauses, reconsidering his words, then plays it off by drawing his pistol.

Up on the catwalk, a bad guy creeps up behind an unsuspecting Delta team member, grabbing him in a chokehold. Their struggle RINGS out metallic across the factory floor.

The factory explodes into chaos, bullets flying as everyone dives for cover. Gunfire punctures several large helium tanks, releasing jets of gas throughout the warehouse.

Clay tucks his tail and seeks deeper cover.

SWAT Leader ducks behind a massive leaking tank and calls to his team, his voice now comically high-pitched from the inhaled helium he just took to the face.

SWAT LEADER
 (squeaky)
 C'mon guys, let's get 'em!

Three thugs charge a SWAT member who's crouching in front of a large canvas-covered object. The officer spins, grabbing the canvas to throw like a net. As he yanks it away, he reveals an antique Circus Wagon with a built-in pipe organ and life-size animatronic clown. The canvas catches the power lever, activating the machine. Suddenly cheerful circus music fills the air as the clown begins to animate, its hands jiving back and forth to the tune.

SWAT Leader leaps from behind the tank, guns blazing in both hands as he runs in slow motion to new cover, diving behind a pile of crates.

SWAT LEADER (CONT'D)
 (helium voice)
 Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!

Clay pants heavily from his hiding spot, covering his eyes with his paws.

Some SWAT members take cover behind crates. After his teammates yell "Cover me!", Alpha 2 attempts a running summersault to another position. But with a half-baked mind at this point, his aim finds a pile of inflated balloons and he bounces like a basketball, crashing through a nearby window instead.

The clown continues its absurd dance to the circus music.

Across the way, a SWAT member jumps from behind some nitrous oxide tanks and executes a karate kick on a bad guy. The thug flies back into the wall, bounces off, and slams back into his attacker. They ricochet off each other like rubber balls, knocking over more NOS tanks. The tanks' valves snap off as they hit the ground, releasing clouds of nitrous oxide into the air.

Clay peers from behind a box and spots a man with a knife sneaking up on Alpha 1, who is unloading his weapon at various targets from behind a crate. One of the NOS tanks in front of Alpha 1 ruptures, giving him a face full of the gas.

Clay begins barking in a high-pitched chihuahua voice, trying to warn his handler. The knife-wielding thug grabs Alpha 1 from behind, pressing the blade to his throat.

THUG

(squeaky)

I'm gonna pop you like a balloon,
copper!

Alpha 1, now high from the gas, bursts into hysterical laughter.

ALPHA 1

Hahahahaha! Oh well. Hahahahaha!

Suddenly the thug drops his knife, letting out an ultra-high-pitched scream. Clay has his back teeth firmly clamped on the man's buttock. Alpha 1 seizes the opportunity and subdues the attacker.

Alpha 1 kneels to praise Clay.

ALPHA 1 (CONT'D)

Hahaha! Atta boy! Him a good lil'
baby! Hahahahaha!

CLAY (V.O.)

Whew! Wow, that was intense! Yeah,
well, I shoulda let him cut you up.

(MORE)

CLAY (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Pointin' guns at a defenseless dog
just ain't nice.

Still wide-eyed and panting from the adrenaline rush, Clay springs into action. He spots another thug across the warehouse hiding behind a crate. Clay sprints forward, launching himself like a missile and bowling the man over.

Alpha 1 witnesses this and celebrates before rejoining the firefight.

Across the way, SWAT Leader, now thoroughly high from the gas filling the warehouse, fixes his attention on the dancing clown still jiving happily to the circus music.

SWAT LEADER
(helium voice)
I hate clowns! Hahaha!

SWAT Leader takes aim and fires. His first shot hits the clown's thumb, blowing it clean off and spinning the hand around. Subsequent shots methodically remove more fingers until only the middle one remains, leaving the clown effectively "saluting" him to the music. SWAT Leader laughs even harder, but nearby ricochets pull him back into the action.

Everyone in the building is now blitzed from the mixture of gases. One stumbling thug fires randomly, accidentally striking a natural gas line running up the wall.

A sniper with a rifle lies atop a stack of crates, peering through his scope at the SWAT Leader. Just as his finger tightens on the trigger, he notices something blocking his view. Pulling back from the scope, he finds himself face-to-face with Clay.

Without hesitation, Clay lifts his leg and blinds the sniper with a stream of urine.

CLAY (V.O.)
Today's forecast? A hunerd percent
chance of showers!

The sniper clutches his burning eyes and rolls off the edge of the crates, crashing to the ground.

The SWAT team continues methodically taking down the bad guys.

SWAT Leader corners the kingpin, who's run out of ammo, behind a crate. After laying down suppressing fire, SWAT Leader's gun clicks empty.

When the kingpin realizes this, he stands, drawing a samurai sword from his back and charging forward.

KINGPIN
 (singing, drunk from the
 gas and high-pitched)
 Kungfu fightiiniinnng! Hahaha!

Suddenly, Clay leaps from behind another box and begins humping the kingpin's leg as he tries to run. This unexpected attack trips up the kingpin, who drops his sword and tumbles to the ground. SWAT Leader quickly moves in to make the arrest.

The Circus Wagon, having taken enough damage, finally sputters to a halt and its annoying circus music fades as the action winds down. The SWAT team has all the bad guys in custody.

SWAT Leader delivers the cuffed kingpin to another team member.

SWAT LEADER
 All in a day's work.

He fishes a cigar from his vest pocket with theatrical flair, placing it between his lips and reaching for his zippo lighter.

Clay's eyes go wide as saucers as the implications hit him. His keen nose can still detect the cocktail of gases saturating the air - helium, nitrous oxide, and that ruptured natural gas line. One spark and they'd all be meeting Gabriel a lot sooner than planned.

CLAY (V.O.)
 Sweet mercy! I ain't ready for
 another chat with that angel!

Across the room, Alpha 1's face drains of color as he spots his commander about to turn them all into a cautionary tale.

ALPHA 1
 (squeaky)
 No! The gas!

But SWAT Leader, ears still ringing from the firefight, just grins around his cigar, thumb descending toward the lighter's striker.

Clay doesn't hesitate. With lightning speed, he launches himself at his commander, jaws clamping down with pinpoint accuracy on his crotch.

SWAT Leader lets out a falsetto shriek that has nothing to do with helium, the cigar popping from his mouth as he doubles over. The lighter clatters harmlessly to the floor.

EXT. HELIUM FACTORY - MINUTES LATER

The cleanup is in full swing. As officers load the last of the perps into a paddy wagon, paramedics wheel SWAT Leader to an ambulance. He lay on the stretcher, hands cupped protectively over his injured groin.

Alpha 1 approaches the stretcher, layering on the concern so thick you could spread it with a knife.

ALPHA 1

Oh sir, this is just terrible!
Please get well soon - the team
won't be the same without your...
unique leadership style.

Behind his sympathetic expression, though, his eyes dance with barely contained glee.

Once the ambulance pulls away, Alpha 1's façade cracks. He turns to Clay with an ear-splitting grin, dropping to one knee and vigorously scratching behind the dog's ears.

ALPHA 1 (CONT'D)

Who's a good boy? Who just saved
everybody from becoming ceiling
decoration - and gave that blowhard
exactly what he deserves? You did!
Yes you did!

Clay endures the baby-talk with dignity, knowing he'd done the right thing. Even if it meant taking a bite out of crime in a rather... unconventional way.

Beta Leader's voice comes across Alpha 1's comm link.

BETA LEADER (V.O.)

Alpha 1, got forensics requesting
your K9 unit.

Still chuckling and patting his furry hero, Alpha 1 confirms:

ALPHA 1

Copy.

CUT TO:

INT. POLICE SQUAD CAR - LATER

Clay sits in the back of a squad car as Officer 1 pulls up to his half-blown-up home.

CLAY (V.O.)
Hey, my house. Perfect!

EXT. CLAY'S BACKYARD - DAY

The officer retrieves Clay from the car. A large wood chipper stands in the corner of the yard, set up in preparation to clean up the fallen tree.

OFFICER 1
(gesturing around)
Take a look around, buddy. See if you can find a trace of the explosive.

Clay looks at the officer with barely concealed exasperation.

CLAY (V.O.)
Oh, that's easy, it was moonshine.

All the officer hears is Clay's murmurs.

OFFICER 1
Now!

Clay turns toward the shed. He makes a deliberate "point" to the general area, not bothering to even pretend to sniff around.

OFFICER 1 (CONT'D)
What is wrong with you today? You didn't even sniff anything.
(walking to shed)
In here?

After letting Clay into the shed, the officer watches as his K9 immediately "points" at the moonshine still. Pulling on surgical gloves, the officer prepares to examine the evidence, his frustration with Clay's unusual behavior evident.

OFFICER 1 (CONT'D)
Alright, that does it. You're done. Just go outside and relax if you know what's good for you. I'll deal with you later.

Clay retreats as requested and finds a shady spot to lie down. Through a gap in the fence, he can see Sampson roaming his neighbor's yard.

CLAY (V.O.)

Well if it isn't the infamous duck
killer, Sampson. Bully!

Sampson prances over and sniffs at the fence, sensing Clay's presence. As the dog follows the fence line in Clay's direction, a strange rattling sound catches Clay's attention. Peering through another crack, he spots a rattlesnake coiled in defense, preparing for Sampson's approach.

Sampson hears the warning rattle and turns his attention to the snake. He begins to bark, pawing and nipping at the deadly reptile, which strikes back with several near misses.

The snake maneuvers closer to the fence to escape Sampson's harassment. In that moment, Clay makes his choice. With lightning speed, he grabs the snake's tail through the fence and yanks it backward. While shaking the rattler violently in his jaws and juiced up on adrenalin, Clay doesn't even notice that the serpent sunk its fangs briefly into his rump. But he persists, whipping it side-to-side like a wet rag doll. Flinging it across his yard, the snake quickly retreats under the back fence and out of sight.

Clay turns his attention back to his former nemesis.

CLAY (V.O.)

I shoulda let him bite you,
Sampson. It would serve you
rightly. But...you're welcome.

Suddenly, Clay feels an overwhelming wave of fatigue wash over him. He lay down, his limbs growing inexplicably heavy.

Clay struggles to keep his eyes open as the snake's venom begins to take effect.

CLAY (V.O.)

Mmmm, wow, feeling really tired.
What's going on here?

Clay rolls over onto his side.

CLAY (V.O.)

Oh, Maddie. Why didn't we ever get
our chance together? I know we were
just kids when we first met, but
you've turned out to be even more
than I could imagine. I think I...
I...

Clay's head lowers to the grass as consciousness slips away. His eyes drift shut, the world growing dim around him.

FADE TO WHITE:

INT. HEAVEN - CONTINUOUS

Clay slowly fades into existence, the ethereal expanse of Heaven giving way to a familiar scene. He looks over at Gabriel who stands solemnly by the candle - the flame now just a flicker atop a puddle of melted wax. Suddenly, deep alarms begin to SOUND, echoing through the vastness.

Clay walks over to stand behind Gabriel, who doesn't turn to greet him.

CLAY

Gabriel, don't end this. I'm not ready. I'm still broken. Give me another chance. Send me back. Please!

(desperate)

I'll even go back as a cat. Heck, send me back as a worm, a gnat...anything!

Gabriel turns, fixing Clay with a piercing stare that seems to bore into his very soul. Unspoken volumes pass between them in that weighted gaze.

The angel motions to the figures in the distance. Clay watches in disbelief as Pete and the others waiting in line hurriedly pack up the disassembled gates into the back of a pickup truck. The heavenly hosts shed their gowns, revealing ordinary street-clothes beneath.

CLAY (CONT'D)

No! No, I don't want to go! I want to live!

But the light is fading, the world dimming around him until only the weak glow of the guttering candle remains. Gabriel's form shimmers and vanishes, leaving Clay alone in the gathering darkness.

Hyperventilating, Clay rushes to cup his hands around the fragile flame, as if he could shelter it from a nonexistent wind.

CLAY (CONT'D)

(whispering frantically)

Don't go out. Don't go...

Silence falls like a heavy curtain; DARKNESS absolute. For a stretching eternity, there is nothing. No sound, no light, no sensation. Nothing.

Then, so gradually it's almost imperceptible at first, a low RUMBLING begins, rising in strength and volume until it's a deafening roar. Light EXPLODES back into being, searing in its intensity. Clay screams, shielding his eyes, gasping for breath like a drowning man finally breaching the surface.

He falls to his knees, shaking with great, wracking sobs as he beholds the source of the light. There, standing before him, is the CREATOR Himself, radiant and barely distinguishable in the brilliance that emanates from His form.

Peeking through his fingers, Clay gazes up at the figure, awe and terror warring in his chest. But as he looks, really looks, a profound peace settles over him like a warm mantle. His hands fall away from his face, tears still streaming down his cheeks.

CLAY (CONT'D)

I made a mess of things, haven't I?
I neglected life itself. But I
don't know what to do. It's been so
long for me like this.

(swallowing hard)

Even when I have a bright moment
from time to time, I just can't
seem to pull it all together. I
scare myself. It scares me what
sort of evil I'm capable of. I need
help. I need *Your* help. I want to
be happy like I was. I need help
like an armless man needs slip-on
shoes.

The bright light flickers, as if in sympathetic amusement at Clay's analogy. Emboldened, he presses on.

Clay meets the Creator's gaze with growing clarity.

CLAY (CONT'D)

You know what? I finally understand
why y'all kept sendin' me back as
different critters. Had to make me
walk in their paws, didn't ya?
Because I never showed 'em a lick
of respect.

(letting out a shaky
breath)

(MORE)

CLAY (CONT'D)

I treated Your creatures like they was nothing but problems to be solved. Turns out I was the real varmint all along.

The light pulses gently, encouraging him to continue.

CLAY (CONT'D)

And that fella Bruce...
(voice softening with shame)

When I first met him, I labeled him right quick, just like I done to everyone else who wasn't exactly like me. But that man showed me nothing but kindness, even when I was acting like a dadjim fool.

(running a hand over his face)

I was so busy judgin' others, I never stopped to look in the mirror. Maybe that's why you had me see all them reflections of myself - as a cockroach, a duck, a gerbil. Made me see how it feels to be on the other side of someone's wrath.

Clay shifts on his knees, the weight of understanding settling deeper into his bones.

CLAY (CONT'D)

And Maddie... sweet mercy, Maddie had it right all along. While I was stuffin' myself with moonshine and pride, worryin' about my own hurts and wants, she was out there carin' for every living thing that crossed her path. She understood what you made this world for. She respected your creation in a way I never did.

The light grows warmer, and Clay feels tears rolling down his cheeks again.

CLAY (CONT'D)

That's what was in her letter, wasn't it? That's what Gabriel was trying to tell me. It wasn't about the paper at all - it was about the heart behind it. Maddie's heart. The way she loves everything and everyone, no questions asked.

He looks down at his trembling hands.

CLAY (CONT'D)

I been chasin' that letter like it was some kind of magical fix, when really, I should've been chasin' the truth inside of it. The truth about how to live. How to love.

(voice cracking)

How to be the person Maddie saw in me all those years ago.

The Creator's presence seems to envelop him, and Clay feels decades of hardness melting away from his heart.

CLAY (CONT'D)

Ya know what's funny? When I was busy bein' all them different animals, there were moments - just moments - when I'd forget myself and do something good without even thinkin' about it. Like saving my SWAT buddies, or even that dadjim dog Sampson. In those moments, I wasn't worried about what was in it for me. I just... did what needed doin'.

The bright light pulses again, warming Clay to his core.

CLAY (CONT'D)

I think I'm finally gettin' it. Life ain't about what we can take from it. It ain't about judgin' others or provin' we're better than them. It's about...

(searching for the words)

It's about bein' part of something bigger than ourselves. Every creature, even that ornery armadilla, has its place in your plan.

Clay sits back on his heels, a lifetime of understanding washing over him.

CLAY (CONT'D)

You know what's really got me feelin' foolish? All this time I been blamin' you for takin' people away from me, when really, you was just tryin' to show me how precious every moment is. Every breath. Every chance to do right by someone else.

The light flickers, as if in gentle agreement.

CLAY (CONT'D)
Life is...precious...

Suddenly the light grows blindingly bright and PULSES with tremendous force. A deep RUMBLE shakes through him as distant voices begin to filter through the brilliance.

VOICE (O.S.)
Clear!

The light PULSES again, synchronized with a thunderous THUMP that rattles Clay's very bones. He flinches at the impact.

CLAY
What's that? What's going on?

The voices grow more urgent, more clear, then another command:

VOICE (O.S.)
Clear!

Another pulse, another bone-jarring thump. Clay's body jerks with the force of it. Medical equipment begins BEEPING in the distance, the sound growing clearer with each passing second.

The light surrounding Clay grows impossibly brighter, until it consumes everything - the darkness, the emptiness, even Clay himself.

FADE TO:

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - CONTINUOUS

The blinding whiteness slowly recedes, resolving into the beam of a penlight being flashed across his eyes. DR. REVIDA'S face swims into focus above him.

DR. REVIDA
He's back. He's back with us.

The steady BEEPING of hospital monitors fills the air. Clay lies in a hospital bed, his body wrapped in bandages, as the doctor lowers her stethoscope and pulls down her mask.

DR. REVIDA (CONT'D)
Can you hear me, Ordell? Can you squeeze my finger?

The doctor turns to speak to someone else in the room.

DR. REVIDA (CONT'D)

I'm not sure why he crashed; that was highly unusual. But he's back with us now.

Then a face he'd know anywhere appears above him - Maddie, her eyes brimming with tears of relief.

MADDIE

Clay? Oh, thank God. You gave us a scare!

Pastor Matt moves into view on Clay's other side. The two of them, Maddie and Matt, stand vigil as Clay struggles to focus, to force words past his parched throat.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

What's that, honey? What are you trying to say?

She leans in close, her ear nearly brushing his cracked lips.

CLAY

(his catch phrase now takes on a whole new meaning)

Sweet, sweet mercy.

Maddie's fingers are cool and gentle as they comb through Clay's singed hair. With what feels like a monumental effort, he turns his head to meet her tear-bright gaze.

CLAY (CONT'D)

(whispers)

Sunshine.

Then his eyes slide over to Pastor Matt, standing steadfast on his other side.

CLAY (CONT'D)

Friend.

PASTOR MATT

(warm smile)

Welcome back, pal. You've been in a coma for the past several weeks. It's good to see life in your eyes again.

Clay lets his head fall back against the pillow, gratitude and exhaustion warring in his battered body. But when his gaze finds Maddie's again, he sees a telltale glint of mischief sparkling there.

MADDIE

Matt filled me in on some things
while you were out. Sounds like
you've been a bad little boy since
I last saw you.

Clay huffs out a weak chuckle, even as remorse twists in his gut.

CLAY

(struggling with every
word as he regains
strength)

You have no idea. I done some
terrible things. Just terrible. And
I lost my lust for life.

(reaching for her hand)

But I got a second chance. Mercy is
sweet. And I ain't gonna waste it.
Life is a gift. Every day, a gift.
And if you'll have me, I'd love to
work through some things. With your
help.

Maddie's smile is like the break of dawn after the longest, darkest night.

MADDIE

Well, as long as you don't want me
to help you build a clubhouse, I
suppose that'd be okay. I seem to
recall your carpentry skills left
something to be desired...

Clay barks out a laugh, wincing as his ribs protest. But the pain is nothing compared to the joy, the sweet relief, of Maddie's teasing words.

A new figure bustles into the room - Bruce, clad in hospital scrubs and brandishing a sponge.

BRUCE

Welcome back, Slugger! Time for
another spongebaath!

Clay blinks, uncomprehending. His gaze darts from Bruce's beaming face to Maddie, a mute plea for rescue, for explanation.

But Maddie just smiles, a little quirk of her lips that holds a thousand unspoken promises.

Slowly, inevitably, Clay feels his own mouth curve in response. A grin tugs at the corners, spreading wider and wider until it crinkles the corners of his eyes.

He offers his grateful hand to Bruce and gives him a welcoming squeeze.

CLAY
Thank you, buddy.

Just then, Clay looks over through the hospital window and sees a stork perched on the sill. Before taking wing, the large bird seems to wink at him.

CLAY (CONT'D)
(uncertain)
Gabe...? Naw.

Clay closes his eyes and lets the laughter bubble up from some long-forgotten wellspring deep inside.

It felt like hope. It felt like...love.

CLAY (CONT'D)
(sincerely)
Sweet. Mercy.

FADE TO BLACK.

THE END