

COUNTING ON CHRISTMAS

by

KEN WHITE

KEN WHITE
1108 WELLESLEY AVENUE
MODESTO, CA 95350-5044
(209) 567-0600
KENWHITE@KW209.COM

FADE IN.

TITLE CARD.

"Forever is composed of nows."
- *Emily Dickinson*

EXT. CENTRAL VALLEY - MODESTO, CALIFORNIA. DAY.

The sun burns bright.

A crisp autumn day. Blue skies. Fiery fall colors. Faint
SEASONAL MUSIC.

The courthouse clock CHIMES the noon hour.

JESSICA (V.O)
No matter what was happening in my
life, I could always count on
Christmas to make me happy.

EXT. DOWNTOWN. SAME TIME.

Decorated with traditional Thanksgiving symbols and Day of
the Dead (*Día de los Muertos*) imagery.

PEOPLE walk along the storefronts. They window shop and greet
other SHOPPERS.

For a big town, it's still really a small town at heart.
Everyone knows everyone and everything.

The seasonal music has transformed into a CHOIR SINGING a
traditional Christmas carol.

EXT. THE BEDFORD FALLS SHOP. SAME TIME.

Inside the front display window sits a miniature, snow-
covered village with replicas of the various locations from
the movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*.

Dangling on a thread of red wrapping paper ribbon is a little
silver bell ornament. It TINKLES.

EXT. LEGION PARK. DAY.

The Tuolumne River snakes through the hibernating park.

It's the week before Thanksgiving. The need is great. The
line of HOMELESS is long.

Beneath the park shelter, tables are piled high with turkey
dinner and all the trimmings.

MEN, WOMEN, and CHILDREN file past the VOLUNTEERS, who smile as they ladle out the food, adding an encouraging word or two.

JESSICA RIVERS (30) places a fresh dinner roll on each plate.

A throwback to the sixties, she's a bit of a hippie chick. Her bright evergreen eyes twinkle. An elfin Stevie Nicks, she wears a short Santa suitcoat with leggings, one red and one green. Her hair is also streaked red and green. One intricately braided strand of hair, tied with a bough of holly, cascades down her back.

JESSICA
Happy Thanksgiving.

A YOUNG HOMELESS MOTHER (18), holding an INFANT GIRL, takes the offering. Averting her eyes, she walks away.

A painful memory washes across Jessica's face as she watches the mother and child disappear into the CROWD.

JESSICA (CONT'D)
There's so many of them, Melissa.
And so young.

MELISSA (O.S.)
It's heart-breaking.

MELISSA RIVERS (34) stands next to her younger sister, handing out packets of butter.

JESSICA
We're so lucky.

MELISSA
There but for fortune go you or me.

JESSICA
I count my blessings every day.

MELISSA
Instead of sheep.

JESSICA
Instead of reindeer.

They both CHUCKLE.

MELISSA
I'm glad we'll all be together this
year, Jess.

JESSICA
(she SINGS)
"If the fates allow."

She has a beautiful voice.

An OLDER WOMAN (60) stops in front of Jessica. She has white hair, cracked spectacles, and wears a threadbare red skirt and a very tattered, very ugly sweater with an embroidered Santa Claus. A battered flute hangs from her black leather belt.

OLDER WOMAN
Nothing ever happens by chance.

JESSICA
It's just a song I like. About
being together at Christmas.

OLDER WOMAN
You can't always get what you want.

JESSICA
I'm grateful for what I have.

OLDER WOMAN
You can't save everyone.

JESSICA
I do what I can when I can.

OLDER WOMAN
You've got to take care of
yourself.

JESSICA
I do the best I can.

OLDER WOMAN
You can't please everyone. You need
to please yourself.

JESSICA
I've been told that before.

OLDER WOMAN
Why do you dress like some old
hippie?

JESSICA
I like the way it makes me feel.

OLDER WOMAN
The sixties are dead.

JESSICA

It was a better time. People helped people. People changed things.

OLDER WOMAN

You can't live in the past.

JESSICA

I don't want to live in the past. I just don't want to lose it.

OLDER WOMAN

You can't control a river.

JESSICA

I can try.

OLDER WOMAN

Be very careful. If you don't know where you're going, you might not get there.

The woman places the flute to her lips. She plays a HAUNTING SONG as she moves off.

EXT. TUOLUMNE RIVER. LATER THAT DAY.

Jessica stands on the bank.

Melissa kneels beside her. She takes photos with an expensive digital camera.

Jessica stares at the water flowing directly in front of her. She looks upstream at where the water comes from. Her gaze then sweeps downstream to where the water is going.

JESSICA

It's all connected.

MELISSA

What's that?

JESSICA

The past flows into the present and feeds the future.

EXT. COLLEGE NEIGHBORHOOD. NIGHT.

A tidy, established neighborhood of California ranch-style homes.

Brightly-lit *luminarias* line the brick walkway leading to the front door of a festively decorated home.

INT. JESSICA'S HOME - VARIOUS ROOMS. SAME TIME.

Inside the Southwest-style home, the halls are all decked out for Christmas.

In the kitchen, the countertop is empty of electrical appliances. The juicer is manual. Coffee is made on the stovetop using a French press. Flour is ground from wheat.

In the master bedroom, an old dial radio provides low-tech tunes and time-telling.

In the window nook of the dining room, a rotating color wheel casts light on a well-used "Alcoa" aluminum tree, circa 1960.

In the sun porch, a very old music box plays "Frosty the Snowman" as a tiny plastic Santa dances in circles on a mirrored pond.

In the living room, a collection of hand-made Nativities from around the world is arrayed on an antique cedar chest.

Each piece of living room furniture is a refurbished family heirloom.

Draped across the couch is a woven cloth throw featuring an image of the main street of Bedford Falls.

Stacked on coffee and side tables, shelves, and the floor are books about Christmas. Nothing but Christmas. Fiction, non-fiction, poetry, children's, and cooking books.

Hanging from the fireplace mantle is a row of vintage Christmas stockings.

A piano is covered with colorful Santa Claus figures.

A 10-foot-tall, live Christmas tree stands in the floor-to-ceiling window of the living room. It's covered in old-school ornaments. It's strung with 50s-era colored lights. And topped with a star. A beautiful tree skirt with embroidered Christmas images encircles the base of the tree.

A long-playing record spinning round on a classic turntable plays Dean Martin singing "Let It Snow."

Jessica adjusts an ornament on one of the upper branches of the green tree. Staring at the lights, she squints her eyes. She smiles at a memory.

She wears a sweatshirt embroidered with a sprint race car and the words "Merry Christmas."

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
I hate Christmas.

JESSICA
It's never as bad as you think.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
Sure it is.

JESSICA
You don't have to believe
everything you think.

MICHAEL RIVERS (40) - the big brother - toys with an ornament stenciled with a snow scene. He holds a Bloody Mary in the other hand.

Jessica gently removes the ornament from his hand.

JESSICA (CONT'D)
Careful. That's for the store.

Michael points at her sweatshirt.

MICHAEL
Dad embroidered that.

JESSICA
He did. And taught me.

MICHAEL
I don't get the boys this
Christmas. She does. I get
Thanksgiving.

JESSICA
Be thankful you get that.

MICHAEL
It's tough on them. It's confusing.
They don't know who to please. I
think they're starting to hate it
as much as I do.

JESSICA
They're children, Michael. They'll
figure it out.

MICHAEL
I should just skip Christmas.

JESSICA
Bah, humbug!

MICHAEL
I'm not Scrooge, Jessica.

JESSICA
Sure you are.

MICHAEL
Didn't use to be.

JESSICA
No, you loved Christmas. Almost as much as me.

MICHAEL
Life will do that. And divorce.

JESSICA
There was a time you couldn't wait for Christmas.

MICHAEL
I miss those days. I miss the old neighborhood. It was better when we were kids.

JESSICA
Everything was.

MICHAEL
Not everything. Simpler, maybe.

JESSICA
Experiencing Christmas as a child. That's magical. Just pure, innocent joy.

MICHAEL
I could use a little of that spirit right now.

JESSICA
Christmas is about being a kid again. It's about giving gifts. Sharing. It's about being out of school. Remember what that first day of Christmas break was like?

MICHAEL
Freedom. No homework. "No more teacher's dirty looks."

JESSICA
Christmas is about sugar canes. It's about feeling good.
(MORE)

JESSICA (CONT'D)

It's about no obligations. It's about cookies and eggnog. It's about believing. It's about Peace on Earth. It's about optimism. And hope.

MICHAEL

Wow, what wound you up?

JESSICA

Pumpkin latte.

MICHAEL

I need to get me some of that.

JESSICA

You know, Michael, we were lucky. We had parents who loved us and each other. Who loved Christmas. Who would do anything to make us happy.

MICHAEL

And spent time with us. It was easier being a child then.

JESSICA

You could learn from them.

MICHAEL

What?

JESSICA

You could spend more time with the boys and less time at the office.

MICHAEL

I want to leave them something when I'm gone. Something more than we got. In case something happens.

That catches Jessica off-guard. She's not sure she heard right. And, if she did, if he's serious about what he just said. She quickly changes the subject.

JESSICA

I wish it was winter and Christmas all year round.

(she SINGS)

"Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow."

That enchanting voice again.

MICHAEL

"If I had my way every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips would be boiled in his own pudding and buried with a stake of holly through his heart!"

Michael recites Scrooge's line from *A Christmas Carol* with a smile on his lips, but there's a kernel of truth beneath the grin.

JESSICA

You keep Christmas in your way, dear brother, and I'll keep it in mine.

MICHAEL

I hate the cold. Give me summer. I'll take Honolulu over Jackson Hole.

JESSICA

I'd like to be there now. With all the schussing and the potsing.

He glances out the living room window at the gathering clouds then at the turntable surrounded by once state-of-the-art audio components.

MICHAEL

Whether it's the seasons or technology, change is a good thing.

JESSICA

There's too many things changing. I can't keep up with it. Besides, what has change ever done for me?

MICHAEL

Change happens, Jess. Change happens. It always wins. It's inevitable. Like -

JESSICA

I know. Like death and taxis.

Jessica sits on the couch. Piles of paper are neatly stacked on the coffee table in front of her. She sips from her mug of coffee.

Michael sits at an antique wooden card table nearby. It's covered with a complex Christmas puzzle. He instantly fits a piece.

He sets his wet glass on the table.

Jessica immediately slips a coaster beneath it.

JESSICA (CONT'D)
My Christmas list is done. Secret
Santa names are drawn. The
Christmas cards are in the mail.

She hands him an envelope.

JESSICA (CONT'D)
Special delivery.

Michael opens the envelope and removes the card. It's hand-made with beautiful calligraphy.

MICHAEL
Saved a stamp. You're learning.
You'll make it big in spite of
yourself.

A darkness flashes across Michael's face as he recalls an uncomfortable memory.

He opens the card. It reads: "To the best big brother in the world. I wouldn't be who I am without you. *Mele kalikimaka* (Merry Christmas)."

Jessica hands him a soft package simply wrapped in white tissue paper with red ribbon.

JESSICA
I wanted you to have this for
Christmas.

MICHAEL
Well, "Happy Holidays" to me.

JESSICA
You mean, "Merry Christmas."

MICHAEL
No, I mean "Happy Holidays."

JESSICA
If that's what you believe.

MICHAEL
It covers a multitude of sins.

JESSICA
As long as it makes you happy.

Michael opens the present.

It's a white pullover with an embroidered red Nutcracker.

Michael's face registers confusion and disappointment. This isn't his style at all.

MICHAEL

You shouldn't have.

He means it. He sets the present aside.

It's not the reaction Jessica was hoping for. Ever the optimist and not willing to let him spoil her Christmas, she pushes on.

JESSICA

If everyone is okay with it, I'd like to have the Rivers' family Christmas here this year.

MICHAEL

Sounds great. Less work for me.

JESSICA

Have you thought any more about everyone making donations instead of giving gifts?

Michael slips the Christmas card back inside the envelope.

MICHAEL

Take a breath, Jess. You can't orchestrate the future.

JESSICA

You can't stop me.

MICHAEL

That's not the way the world works. I've been around longer. I've seen it.

JESSICA

Now you're just being the big brother. And a cynic.

MICHAEL

No, a realist. Just being practical.

Michael stands and walks to the collection of Nativities. He picks up the baby Jesus.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
You're rushing it a bit aren't you?

JESSICA
It's never too early for Christmas.

She follows. She gently takes the figure from him and puts it back. She returns to the couch.

JESSICA (CONT'D)
Studies say people who trim trees earlier are happier. While people who decorate their houses sooner are friendlier.

MICHAEL
Likely underwritten by Walmart.

JESSICA
It's real. You can look it up.

MICHAEL
What, you're embracing technology?

JESSICA
No, I meant the library.

MICHAEL
You're such a creature of habit.

JESSICA
Christmas is comforting. It's something I can count on. Maybe the only thing.

MICHAEL
Doesn't it get a little old?

JESSICA
What?

MICHAEL
Being stuck in Christmas. In the past.

JESSICA
All our family, especially Mom, always loved Christmas.

MICHAEL
Until she didn't. That's a night I'd rather forget.

JESSICA

Me, too.

Jessica gently rubs the inside of her left wrist.

The phone RINGS. The phone is an old red Princess phone.

JESSICA (CONT'D)

I'll let the machine get it.

MICHAEL

It couldn't hurt to get a real phone. And sound system.

JESSICA

They still get the job done.

MICHAEL

The past isn't what it used to be.

JESSICA

Neither is the present.

Michael joins Jessica on the couch. He sifts through a basket of old photos on the coffee table.

JESSICA (CONT'D)

Christmas is a good time for looking back.

MICHAEL

Nostalgia is just bad memory. It was once considered a disease. A pathology.

JESSICA

There's nothing wrong with me.

MICHAEL

It's lonely there, you know.

JESSICA

I don't need anything. Or anybody.

MICHAEL

We all need somebody.

JESSICA

I can take care of myself.

MICHAEL

You're too damned independent.

JESSICA
Stubborn, you mean.

MICHAEL
That, too.

JESSICA
Tone of voice, Michael. It's
condescending.

MICHAEL
If it fits ...

JESSICA
'Sides, you have no room to talk.

MICHAEL
Can't imagine what you're referring
to.

JESSICA
The Mud Bowl. All you old guys
reveling in past glories. Talk
about sickness.

MICHAEL
It's one day, not 365.

JESSICA
Except when you're planning for it,
emailing about it, posting photos,
organizing the banquet, Facebooking
about it, printing up T-shirts -

MICHAEL
Okay, okay. Point made.

JESSICA
And don't forget the annual video.
How many hours do you put in on
that?

MICHAEL
Speaking of which.

JESSICA
Don't worry. I'm rehearsed and
ready.

MICHAEL
The video wouldn't be the same
without our song.

JESSICA

Proud to prolong the juvenilia.

Michael removes a small holiday box with a tiny bow from his inside coat pocket. He hands it to her.

MICHAEL

A small token of appreciation for taking the time.

JESSICA

I thought you hated Christmas.

MICHAEL

Just open it.

She does.

Inside is a Christmas tree pin dotted with rubies and emeralds.

JESSICA

It's beautiful, Michael. And expensive. I'm not sure I deserve it.

MICHAEL

You absolutely do.

He takes it and pins it to her Christmas vest. She hugs her brother.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

I'm just saying. It'd be nice if you had something - someone - permanent instead of dipping in and out of people's lives - our lives - like some kind of "Christmas Gypsy."

JESSICA

I've got Brandon. For now.

Michael reacts, confused. She ignores it.

KITCHEN. LATER

Jessica waters her collection of healthy, well-tended houseplants. She carefully cleans a blossoming Christmas cactus.

MICHAEL (V.O.)

He's a good guy.

JESSICA (V.O.)

He is.

MICHAEL (V.O.)

See you Saturday.

JESSICA (V.O.)

Saturday, it is.

She gazes out a set of corner windows.

The mirrored glass of the adjacent windows creates the illusion of Jessica with two faces, standing in two doorways.

Janus contemplating the road behind and the road ahead. One face looking backward, one face looking forward.

A beam of sunlight highlights the reflection on her left - the past.

EXT. THE BEDFORD FALLS SHOP. DAY.

The boutique store is located on the ground floor of an original Kress "Five and Dime" Department Store. The building has been renovated.

INT. SHOP. SAME TIME.

The shop is filled with Christmas decorations and memorabilia.

As the name suggests, most of the merchandise is related to the movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*. Ornaments, miniature buildings and figurines, blankets, cards, puzzles, snow globes, and calendars.

One corner of the store sells children's books. On a child-size table sits three children's Christmas books written by Jessica. "That Happiness Thing: A Hometown Fable," "The 12 Days of Central Valley Christmas," and "'Twas the Night Before Christmas ... In Modesto."

In another corner is a collection of framed and unframed Christmas watercolors also done by Jessica.

The silver bell ornament that was hanging in the front window now dangles inside a glass display case. A certificate of authenticity indicates that it is the actual prop used in the Frank Capra movie.

SHOPPERS browse the shelves, display cases, and artificial trees adorned with ornaments.

Melissa, dressed in a costume similar to that worn by the character Violet Bick in the classic holiday movie, assists a HIP FEMALE CUSTOMER (20s).

Jessica, dressed in a costume similar to that worn by the character Mary Bailey when she was renovating the old Grantham Place, rings up a sale on the ancient cash register.

The cash register very closely resembles the one in Martini's bar. PayPal, Apple Pay, Square, and Zelle aren't welcome here.

A BURLY MAN (30s) chats with Jessica.

BARRY

Thanks again for posting the flyers and sending out the cards about the toy drive.

JESSICA

Happy to help, Barry.

BARRY

And making all those phone calls. That took a lot of time.

JESSICA

I like talking to people.

BARRY

You really are our "Town Crier."

JESSICA

That's what they call me.

BARRY

I think I can speak for a lot of people when I say we appreciate everything you do for the community. You're a real MoTown "Energizer Bunny."

JESSICA

If it makes my home town a better place to live, then it's the least I can do.

BARRY

The flyers and cards were beautifully done. You're very talented.

JESSICA

I like the smell and feel of the paper and the paint. That's probably why I still read books. And advertise in the newspaper and on the radio.

BARRY

Staying old school.

JESSICA

And proud of it.

BARRY

It probably would've cost less and taken less time if you'd just emailed, texted, or posted to Facebook.

JESSICA

I don't own a cell phone or computer.

Barry is mildly stunned.

BARRY

How do you get along?

JESSICA

Quite nicely actually. Fewer distractions.

BARRY

Good for you.

JESSICA

It is. And good for everyone if they'd just unplug once in a while.

BARRY

Well, I don't know what I'd do without my toys.

JESSICA

Try it. You might like it.

BARRY

We'll see. Well, Happy Holidays.

JESSICA

Merry Christmas.

As Barry leaves, Melissa joins her sister.

MELISSA
Why do people do that?

JESSICA
What?

MELISSA
Say "Happy Holidays" instead of
"Merry Christmas"?

JESSICA
I guess it depends on who you're
saying it to.

MELISSA
It's so generic.

JESSICA
It's respectful. Not everyone is a
Christian. Different people,
different religions, have different
celebrations. Jews, Muslims,
Buddhists, pagans. They may all
celebrate this time of year, but
for different reasons.

MELISSA
Ah, the winter solstice.

JESSICA
December 21. A bleak midwinter's
day.

MELISSA
The shortest day and longest night
of the year.

JESSICA
In the dark and cold, we seek
warmth and solace in family and
community. Feasts, festivals, and
celebrations are held because it
means the return of the sun. The
return of hope.

MELISSA
Hope Solo that is.

JESSICA
Or Bob Hope.

They both LAUGH.

A YOUNG BOY (10) touches the display case holding the silver bell ornament.

JESSICA (CONT'D)
Beautiful isn't it.

YOUNG BOY
Is it magical?

JESSICA
I think so.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
Is it real?

A tense YOUNG MAN (20s) points at the ornament.

JESSICA
Certificate says it is.

YOUNG MAN
Where'd you get it?

JESSICA
A gift.

YOUNG MAN
Valuable?

JESSICA
To me.

YOUNG MAN
Good to know.

The shop door TINKLES as the young man exits the store.

MELISSA
(sniffing)
That one needs a bath.

JESSICA
I've been reading this book. *The Christmas Box*. One of the characters asks, "Which of the senses do you think are most affected by Christmas?" What's yours?

Melissa points at her camera, which sits behind the sales counter.

MELISSA
Sight, of course. What about you?

JESSICA

All of them. For different reasons.
The creamy eggnog, the soft tree
boughs, the music box carols, the
peppermint candles, and the colored
lights.

MELISSA

That's sensational.

JESSICA

I can taste, touch, hear, smell,
and see all the cheery things that
make me happy this special time of
the year. I wish the feeling could
last all year long.

EXT. DEL RIO NEIGHBORHOOD. DAY.

Large McMansions occupied by the country club set.

EXT./INT. MICHAEL'S HOUSE. SAME TIME.

Ultra-modern. Spare. Lots of hard edges, stark colors, and
stainless steel. A sharp contrast to Jessica's lived-in home.

OFFICE. SAME TIME.

The room serves as an office, an editing suite, and a
recording studio.

Signed sports memorabilia, industry award statues, and framed
advertising agency and communication industry certificates
fill the shelves and dot the walls.

Michael sits at a sound board connected to his Windows
computer.

Jessica sits in a tiny, dimly lit sound booth, acoustic
guitar cradled in her lap. She PLAYS A MELODY and SINGS a few
lines.

MICHAEL

What's that?

JESSICA

A Christmas song I wrote. I'm
working on it for the family
gathering.

MICHAEL

What's it called?

JESSICA
"Child of Song."

MICHAEL
It's good. You're good.

Jessica smiles, flattered, but slightly embarrassed.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
Of course, I tell you that every
time I hear you.

JESSICA
I never get tired of hearing it.

MICHAEL
I work with a lot of talented
singers and songwriters with the ad
agency. You're as good or better
than most.

JESSICA
That means a lot coming from you.

MICHAEL
If you bought a few pieces of gear,
you could start putting stuff out
there. You could be another on-line
phenom.

She SNICKERS.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
I'm serious.

JESSICA
As only you can be.

MICHAEL
Deadly serious.

JESSICA
I'm happy playing coffee shops and
street corners.

MICHAEL
You're blowing it. You really could
be something. Be somebody. Unlike
me.

That darkness crosses his face again.

JESSICA
You gave it your best shot.

MICHAEL

It wasn't good enough. I wasn't good enough. You are.

JESSICA

I'm fine the way I am.

He points at Jimmy Stewart captured in the movie poster for *It's a Wonderful Life*. A gift from Jessica, of course.

MICHAEL

Don't be him. "BC."

JESSICA

"BC?"

MICHAEL

"Before Clarence." He was a dreamer, not a doer. He didn't believe in himself. He didn't think he was worth anything or made a difference or had an impact. He thought he was a failure because he didn't achieve any of his dreams. He was foolish enough to actually think everyone - the world - would be better off without him.

JESSICA

Now who's wound up?

Michael holds up his Mud Bowl coffee cup.

MICHAEL

Kahlúa-infused Columbian.

JESSICA

That's not the way I saw George Bailey.

MICHAEL

Of course not.

JESSICA

He had all he needed or wanted. Friends, family, community, and work he grew to love. Work that made a real difference. He did good.

MICHAEL

Eventually, perhaps. It took some convincing. To finally see his own value.

(MORE)

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

To recognize who he was, what he
had to offer, and his role in life.
It took Clarence, a guardian angel.
It took dying. To do good.

JESSICA

Metaphorically.

MICHAEL

Don't let that happen to you.

JESSICA

I'd like to be as successful and
loved as he was.

MICHAEL

It was a fairy tale. There are no
happy endings. No "happily-ever-
afters."

JESSICA

Let me have my delusions.

MICHAEL

All I'm saying is you're better
than you think.

JESSICA

You're just saying that because
you're my big bro.

MICHAEL

You are. You have more to offer
than you can imagine.

JESSICA

I'm okay with the way things are.

MICHAEL

For now.

Jessica leans closer to the microphone. She smiles, but her
eyes say something else.

JESSICA

You know, I've been warned about
not becoming you.

MICHAEL

Wise advice. I'm tired of "have
to." Tired of being responsible.
The go-to guy. The one everyone
counts on.

JESSICA

We do count on you. Always have.
You're the one that leads the way.
That's always right.

MICHAEL

It's not easy being the first born,
you know.

JESSICA

I don't, actually.

MICHAEL

Good and bad, you'd always be the
first to start the circle game. I
was the experiment. Mom and Dad got
to make all their mistakes on me.

JESSICA

We thank you for that.

MICHAEL

They were tougher on me when it
came to behavior, grades, and
expectations. But, I was also their
only priority, their only
responsibility. It was worth it.

JESSICA

By the time they got to me, it was
pie.

A confused look from Michael.

JESSICA (CONT'D)

As in, "easy as."

He shrugs his shoulders.

MICHAEL

Over the years, I've done a lot of
stupid, selfish things to you guys.
It wasn't right and I knew it. I
didn't mean to do it. It just
seemed to happen. I felt badly
about it, but I couldn't seem to
help myself.

JESSICA

Sure you could.

MICHAEL

I didn't always think things
through.

(MORE)

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

After I'd done whatever I'd done,
I'd invariably wish I could take it
back. It was always too late and
the damage had been done.

JESSICA

You weren't that bad.

MICHAEL

I sometimes wonder what I would
have been like and how different
the world would have been if I had
been anywhere else in the birth
order. But, that's not the way it
played out.

JESSICA

No, it wasn't.

MICHAEL

I was the care-taker. Then. Now.
And always.

JESSICA

I like where I am in the birth
order.

MICHAEL

I wish I could say the same.

JESSICA

You've got a great life.

MICHAEL

That's what they say.

JESSICA

You okay, Michael?

MICHAEL

Enough therapy for the day. Let's
get back to the task at hand. I
need to get this done and edited.
The Mud Bowl banquet waits for no
one.

Jessica begins playing and singing a SONG about old friends.
Rewritten to fit the unique elements of The Mud Bowl.

EXT. DOWNTOWN MODESTO. DAY.

Jessica walks past a downtown cash store. A table sits near
the entrance. A SALESMAN registers people for high interest
credit cards.

Just beyond the table and down a side street, two MEN (30s) exchange heated words. It's about to escalate.

Just then, a YOUNG MOTHER cradling an INFANT passes by.

The salesman stops selling. The two men stop fighting.

INT. JESSICA'S HOME - SUN PORCH. DAY.

Jessica and Melissa bask in the weak sunlight streaming through the windows.

A VHS copy of the holiday movie *The Gathering* plays silently on the television.

Melissa flips through pages on her iPhone.

Jessica's eyes bore into her little sister.

JESSICA

For once it would be nice to see
your face and not the top of your
head.

MELISSA

You're no better.

She points at the children's Christmas book lying open on Jessica's lap.

JESSICA

You know me. Just an old-fashioned
girl. I prefer analog over digital.

MELISSA

Stuck in the past, you mean.

JESSICA

Call it what you will. I can stand
being bored for more than a second.

MELISSA

I'm not bored, believe me.

JESSICA

Distracted then.

MELISSA

It's important stuff.

JESSICA

Not as important as what you lose.

MELISSA

Like what?

JESSICA

Energy. Sleep. Patience. Health.
And time. Especially time.

MELISSA

As if there's enough hours in the
day for you.

JESSICA

To do the things I want to do.
Things that make a difference. That
make people smile.

MELISSA

Just because you're doing good
doesn't mean you're any less
hassled, preoccupied, or busy as
the rest of us.

JESSICA

Time is relative to your state of
motion. Technology speeds up time.
When you're moving quickly with all
these devices, time passes really
fast. Time literally flies.

MELISSA

I don't have time to notice.

JESSICA

Advertisers make promises and
plugged-in people believe that
technology improves our lives.
Makes it more efficient.

MELISSA

Advertisers have a loose
affiliation with the truth. It's
all subliminal seduction.

JESSICA

Technology keeps us from
interacting in a meaningful way. It
takes us away from the physical act
of doing things.

MELISSA

There are some physical acts I
don't mind avoiding.

JESSICA

Unplugging is a lot like the back to the earth movement of the Sixties. People want to get back to a purer way of living. Back to the garden.

MELISSA

Thank you, Joni.

JESSICA

Back to a life in balance.

MELISSA

I can dig it.

JESSICA

They want to rediscover hobbies, use their hands, get outdoors, interact with each other in a way that isn't dictated by bits and bytes.

MELISSA

I can multi-task with both hands tied behind my back.

JESSICA

Here's something you probably won't believe. The average person checks their phone 150 times a day.

MELISSA

I need to Google that.

Jessica glares at her older sister.

JESSICA

That addiction is having serious effects on our health. From rewiring our brain to reducing our attention span to spiking our blood pressure and even making us more stupid.

MELISSA

That ain't true, gosh darnit.

JESSICA

New York Times says it is.

MELISSA

Liberal rag.

Melissa smiles and pokes her sister in the ribs.

JESSICA

Another thing. The "dumbing-down" of communication. Because people want a quick answer, we ask questions that get quick answers.

MELISSA

It's efficient.

JESSICA

It's lazy.

MELISSA

What if I miss something?

JESSICA

It can wait.

MELISSA

What if it's important?

JESSICA

It's never that important.

MELISSA

What if I'm lost in the middle of nowhere?

JESSICA

Assuming you have service.

MELISSA

It could save my life.

JESSICA

I'll give you that one.

MELISSA

Thanks for being so generous.

JESSICA

We're raising a generation that has grown up with constant connection. They don't know how to be alone. For them, being alone means not being connected. If you don't learn how to be truly alone, you'll always be lonely.

MELISSA

Believe me, I know how to be alone. And lonely. At the same time even.

JESSICA
Loneliness is absolute.

MELISSA
That's so dismal.

JESSICA
It's interesting how people these days mistake sharing for having the original idea. It's not, "I think, therefore I am." Now it's, "I share, therefore I am." For some, the simulated experience is just as real as the actual experience.

MELISSA
It's a generation of simulators. A plague of plagiarists.

JESSICA
We're encouraged to live more and more of our lives "simulating" real life.

MELISSA
Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. I admire, therefore I copy.

JESSICA
You know what I think always being connected means to people?

MELISSA
Please share.

Another glare.

JESSICA
It represents hope and change and the new. The possible. Anything could happen. Things can be what they aren't now. I think we all want that.

MELISSA
Why wouldn't we?

JESSICA
To paraphrase Sylvester the cab driver in *The Bishop's Wife*.

Melissa rolls her eyes.

JESSICA (CONT'D)

"People don't know where they're going and they want to get there too fast." Let's slow down and figure out where we're going.

EXT. DOWNTOWN MODESTO. DAY.

Jessica walks through the Julio and Aileen Gallo Rose Garden.

She notices an abandoned bicycle with training wheels lying on its side. She stoops to stand it up. She sees the bright shiny spokes. She cries.

EXT. RESTAURANT. NIGHT.

The drifting fog muffles the neon sign.

INT. RESTAURANT. SAME TIME.

The annual Mud Bowl banquet is in full swing.

Framed photos, tarnished trophies, and ragged T-shirts from past games are scattered around the room.

One group of OLDER MEN (early 40s) - "The Dinosaurs" - sit on one side of a U-shaped table.

Another group of YOUNGER MEN (late 30s) - "The Youngbloods" - sit on the opposite side.

Michael sits with the "old farts." His younger brother, TIM, JR. (38), sits with the "new kids."

Sitting beside the men are a few WIVES, GIRLFRIENDS, and SIGNIFICANT OTHERS.

More alcohol than food litters the tables.

At the top of the "U," a video clip flickers on a television monitor.

The SONG Jessica recorded plays on the set of speakers sitting on each side of the monitor.

The images on the screen include shots of the men in this room - these "Boys of Winter" - through the years, playing football in the rain and mud.

The electronic images bathe the room in blue light. No one stirs. They are all mesmerized.

Michael and Jessica stand at the back of the room. He reaches out and squeezes her shoulder.

Jessica smiles and touches the pin he gave her. She turns to leave.

MICHAEL

Be careful out there. The fog is thick as mud.

JESSICA

I'll keep both eyes open, both hands on the wheel.

MICHAEL

I don't like hospitals.

EXT. LEGION PARK - THANKSGIVING DAY. DAWN.

Hundreds of RUNNERS of all ages prepare for the annual Turkey Trot, Gobbler Walk, and Kids Run.

The costumes are as creative as the participants are diverse.

Jessica is dressed as a Pilgrim. She wears a fabric turkey on her head.

Melissa is dressed as a Native American. She wears a fabric cornucopia.

INT. JESSICA'S HOME. EARLY MORNING.

Jessica and Melissa, still dressed in their Gobbler costumes, watch the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. They snack on pumpkin pie.

JESSICA

I hope Santa is sober.

MELISSA

If he isn't, they'll have a hard time finding Edmund Gwen.

JESSICA

I'd love to be in New York.

MELISSA

Why can't you be happy with where you are?

JESSICA

It's the place to be at Christmas.

MELISSA

That's so you. If you're on an adventure, you want to be home.
(MORE)

MELISSA (CONT'D)

If you're home, you want to be on an adventure. It's never Goldilocks with you. Nothing is ever just right.

JESSICA

Christmas in New York is the best. Josh and I loved it.

MELISSA

An old boyfriend. An old memory. Don't turn it into something it isn't. Or never was.

JESSICA

The Rockettes at Radio City, lighting the tree at Rockefeller Center, Times Square, St. Patrick's Cathedral, Saks Fifth Avenue, a snow-covered Central Park, visiting Macy's and seeing where Edmund Gwen sat when they were filming *Miracle on 34th Street*. I'll never forget those moments.

MELISSA

Or the police armed with automatic weapons.

JESSICA

It's a different world now.

MELISSA

They win if we don't show up.

JESSICA

We can't let that happen.

MELISSA

No, we can't.

They toast with their pumpkin pie.

JESSICA

Maybe it's the season. Or seeing the Nativities each day. Maybe it's hearing the carols. Whatever it is, I think more and more about religion this time of year.

MELISSA

There is something comforting about the essence of religion.

JESSICA

Things like love, peace, and forgiveness. Compassion, charity, and atonement. Acceptance and gratitude.

MELISSA

All good things to live by.

JESSICA

I sometimes wonder what it would be like to surrender to faith. To let someone else be in control. Be responsible. Make all the hard calls. To feel safe and comfortable knowing that living a spiritual life will lead to something better. Some day.

MELISSA

I don't see you as the surrendering kind.

JESSICA

Not always.

MELISSA

Plus, you really don't need religion for that. You can find the spiritual in nature, community service, the arts. All kinds of things that can soothe the soul.

JESSICA

Everyday things.

MELISSA

It's a wonderful story. An inspirational collection of myths and teachings. It doesn't work for everyone.

JESSICA

Buddha was not a Buddhist. Jesus was not a Christian. Muhammed was not a Muslim. They were teachers who taught love.

MELISSA

Love was their religion.

JESSICA

That's really why I collect so many Nativities.

(MORE)

JESSICA (CONT'D)

That's the heart of Christmas for me. A child. A journey. A mother's love. A celebration.

MELISSA

Unfortunately, there are those who turn that love inside out. Who do awful things in the name of religion.

JESSICA

I will never understand that. How can you kill someone in the name of your God, whoever or whatever that may be?

MELISSA

It's been going on since man started believing in a higher power than himself.

JESSICA

It's truly hard to believe.

EXT. THOUSAND OAKS PARK. LATER THAT MORNING.

Raindrops pelt a puddle of water.

The Dinosaurs and Youngbloods arrive alone and in small groups, with FAMILY and FRIENDS. Each wears the same "uniform" they've worn every year. Now tattered and torn and too many sizes too small.

The local NEWS MEDIA descends. Two TV CREWS. A NEWSPAPER REPORTER and his PHOTOGRAPHER. The reporters set up and begin interviewing PLAYERS and OBSERVERS.

Most of the players suck on a collection of alcoholic beverages, visit, or just hang out and catch up.

Flags are passed out and cinched over bellies five times the size of the school kids who normally wear them.

Some of the players try to hold their weary and worn bodies together with athletic tape and an assortment of ankle, knee, and wrist braces.

PARENTS, BROTHERS, SISTERS, CHILDREN, WIVES, and LOVERS appear and set up lawn chairs and blankets in the same location they do every year. Everywhere, DOGS and kids scurry underfoot.

On the sidelines and the field of play, the players go through pre-game rituals.

A few half-heartedly run patterns, catch passes, and kick punts.

Arrayed on the ground is the collection of iron: Individual trophies for MVP, "Best O," and "Best D," as well as the "Cheap Shot" rubber chicken and the commemorative plaque listing past game results and trophy winners.

Representatives for each team walk off the boundaries, marking end zones and first downs with orange traffic cones. They argue as they go. The SQUABBLING sounds like a schoolyard light years away.

Down at one end of the field, another game has already begun. Between the children of these "boys," as they prepare for the day when they will take up the torch from their fathers.

FIELD. SCENE SEQUENCE - FIRST HALF MONTAGE.

Michael and Tim, Jr. face each other on opposite sides of the line of scrimmage.

Jessica and Melissa watch from the sidelines. Melissa takes shots with her digital camera and an old Polaroid camera, likely given to her by Jessica.

The game starts slowly and badly for the old farts. They can't seem to move the ball.

The new kids march up and down the field at will, scoring two quick touchdowns.

A teacher's test clock DINGS, signaling the end of the half.

SIDELINES. SCENE SEQUENCE - HALFTIME MONTAGE.

The players head for drinks, chairs, and SIGNIFICANT OTHERS. The reporters descend again.

Michael and Tim, Jr. limp off the field and join their siblings.

Joining the four siblings are Tim, Jr.'s wife, LINDA (38), and their two sons, JARED (25) and TRAVIS (23). Both are covered in mud and sucking on beers, like their father and uncle.

MICHAEL

It's days like this I really miss
Mom and Dad.

MELISSA

And Willy.

TIM, JR.
They never missed a game.

JESSICA
This time of year, especially, we
think about them.

TIM, JR.
And all the others we've lost.

MELISSA
How many players are gone?

MICHAEL
A couple. Kevin, Don, and Brad.

JESSICA
And Gary.

MELISSA
That's more than a couple.

TIM, JR.
Sad to say, it is.

MICHAEL
I'm tired of losing people.

MELISSA
I was sorry to hear about Chris.

MICHAEL
I wasn't ready for that one.

TIM, JR.
We never are.

JESSICA
They're all here. In some way.

Michael reacts with a glance that says, "What are you
smoking?"

MELISSA
I believe that.

MICHAEL
You and Gary sure could harmonize.

JESSICA
He was easy to sing with.

MICHAEL

You guys made the Bowl videos special.

JESSICA

With a little help from middle brother Willie.

MICHAEL

Speaking of missing. I thought Josh was going to play this year.

TIM, JR.

And Brandon.

MICHAEL

No show at the banquet. Then today. I'm beginning to think they don't like us.

JESSICA

Brandon was going to play. But, he was afraid he might run into Josh.

MICHAEL

Concerned your ex-boyfriend might cheap shot him?

JESSICA

Something mildly *macho* like that.

TIM, JR.

And Josh? What was his alibi?

JESSICA

Thought Brandon was going to be here.

TIM, JR.

That's the problem with inviting boyfriends. Can't count on 'em.

Jessica punches her brother's arm.

MICHAEL

Since Josh didn't make it either, it was much ado about nothing.

JESSICA

They wouldn't have done anything.

MELISSA

Oh, to have two knights jousting
over you on the field of battle. A
dream come true.

TIM, JR.

Too bad. We could have used them
both.

MICHAEL

You guys didn't need more players.
You needed a doctor.

Michael playfully pokes his younger brother in the gut.

JESSICA

Brandon had to take care of some
out-of-town business.

MICHAEL

Nothing says a family holiday like
taking care of business in another
city.

MELISSA

Will we see him at Christmas?

JESSICA

Maybe.

TIM, JR.

Doesn't sound very promising.

JESSICA

It's no big deal.

MICHAEL

Too bad. I kind of like him.

JESSICA

Me, too.

MICHAEL

You should be more like him.

FIELD. LATER.

The Mud Bowl commemorative plaque is propped against a tree.
Taped to the face is the final score. The Dinosaurs won "Six
Touchdowns to Five."

A Polaroid GROUP PORTRAIT of the players leans against the
plaque.

EXT. DOWNTOWN MODESTO. FRIDAY MORNING.

On her way to open the shop, Jessica walks by the historic and beautifully decorated McHenry Mansion. As she passes the stairs that descend to a basement entrance, she hears a WHIMPERING. She retraces her steps to the stairs.

Huddled against the freezing cold is a HOMELESS GIRL (5) with no jacket or blanket.

Jessica steps down the stairs.

JESSICA
Are you okay?

No answer. Only the sound of CHATTERING TEETH.

JESSICA (CONT'D)
Where are you parents?

HOMELESS GIRL
Gone. Maybe jail.

JESSICA
Where's your home?

HOMELESS GIRL
I dunno. Sometimes here, sometimes
our car. Anywhere we can.

JESSICA
Come with me.

HOMELESS GIRL
Where?

JESSICA
Someplace safe.

HOMELESS GIRL
I'm safe here.

JESSICA
Somewhere warm, then. With food.
And hot chocolate.

HOMELESS GIRL
Really?

JESSICA
Really.

HOMELESS GIRL
Okay.

The girl stands.

Jessica wraps the girl in her coat.

FIRST METHODIST CHURCH - KITCHEN. LATER.

The girl sips steaming chocolate.

Jessica stands next to MARY (70), a member of the church who also sings in the choir.

JESSICA
She seems better already.

MARY
All she needs is a little food and
a mother's love and she'll be fit
as a fiddle.

Jessica reacts, glancing first at the child then at the Nativity sitting on a side table.

JESSICA
Let me know what you find out.

MARY
I will. She's lucky you found her.
I'm not sure how much longer she
would have lasted out there.

EXT. MCHENRY VILLAGE - SANTA'S WORKSHOP. EVENING.

SANTA CLAUS arrives in a little red deuce coupe pulled by two TULE ELK.

Jessica and Melissa are there, dressed in knockoffs of the Christmas gowns worn by Rosemary Clooney and Vera-Ellen in *White Christmas*. They wave to Santa and CHEER along with dozens of other SHOPPERS.

JESSICA
Look at those faces.

She points at the row of smiling CHILDREN.

MELISSA
That used to be us.

JESSICA
A long time ago.

MELISSA
Not so long ago.

JESSICA

I can't believe Thanksgiving has
come and gone already.

MELISSA

Who knows where the time goes.

A sadness crosses Jessica's face.

MELISSA (CONT'D)

Why so down?

JESSICA

Reminded me of something.

MELISSA

Or someone.

JESSICA

It all goes by so fast.

MELISSA

There you go again. Getting all
introspective.

JESSICA

Sorry. Old habits die hard.

MELISSA

We've got a lot of good years ahead
of us.

JESSICA

I hope.

MELISSA

Lighten up, my dear.

JESSICA

I'll blame it on the boys.

MELISSA

They deserve it.

JESSICA

All this talk of people gone too
soon just got me thinking.

MELISSA

About?

JESSICA

Mortality. How quickly it's all
gone.

MELISSA

Doom. Doom. You sound like a funeral bell tolling. Enough with the gloom. All the more reason to live the best life possible right now.

JESSICA

If the fates allow.

EXT./INT. SONORA FAIRGROUNDS - CRAFT FAIR. DAY.

The Sonora Craft Fair and Music Festival takes place each year over Thanksgiving weekend.

The festival features over 150 artisans, musical acts, street performers, costumed Christmas characters, carolers, and food.

Jessica sits inside her vendor booth. She's dressed in a replica of the gown worn by Vera-Ellen in the "Sisters" scene from *White Christmas*.

Arrayed behind her is her artwork. In addition to her Christmas work, she does watercolor and acrylic abstracts of Modesto and the Central Valley.

Spread across the table are her music cassettes, which feature original songs about her home town.

And her children's Christmas books, all of which take place in Modesto and the Central Valley.

Judging from the quality of the work and the number of BUYERS, she's a triple crown winner.

INT. FAIRGROUNDS. LATER.

Jessica sketches some of the craft fair PARTICIPANTS and VISITORS.

Melissa ceases wandering the miles of aisles to check in. She's dressed in a recreation of the gown worn by Rosemary Clooney in the "Sisters" scene from *White Christmas*.

MELISSA

When are you performing?

JESSICA

At 4.

MELISSA

Not a bad time slot.

JESSICA
After Sourdough Slim.

MELISSA
Tough act to follow.

JESSICA
Magnolia Rhythm after me. I feel
like an "Americana" sandwich.

MELISSA
Any of the cousins stop by?

JESSICA
Not yet.

MELISSA
I'd like to see them more often.

JESSICA
We could try harder, I guess.

MELISSA
Mom made it tough.

JESSICA
Once she was gone, she never looked
back.

MELISSA
Fourteen kids.

JESSICA
Living in a shack.

MELISSA
Outdoor plumbing.

JESSICA
Can you imagine?

MELISSA
Can't blame her.

JESSICA
We always thought we were better
than them.

MELISSA
No way to treat family.

Two TEENAGED SISTERS dressed as Elsa and Anna from *Frozen*
stop to admire a sketch Jessica did of them.

The young girls inspire Jessica and Melissa to re-enact the "Sisters" dance routine from *White Christmas*.

JESSICA/MELISSA
(they SING)
"Sisters, sisters.

There were never such devoted sisters. Lord help the mister
Who comes between me and my sister
And lord help the sister who comes between me and my man."

EXT. MODESTO - DOWNTOWN. LATER THAT NIGHT.

Jessica's hectic holiday continues at ModShop, a craft fair hosted by downtown merchants.

ARTISANS sell their handmade goods. MUSICIANS entertain the BROWSERS. The restaurants overflow with DINERS.

The downtown is hopping with shopping. LOCALS enjoy the festive scene of music, delicious food, tasty drink, and community.

INT. MISTLIN GALLERY. SAME TIME.

The art gallery is jammed with ARTISTS, LOOKERS, and BUYERS. Attendees check out the handmade goods, visit with friends, and sample the appetizers and libations.

In one corner, Jessica sits behind her antique wooden card table.

Her artwork, audiocassettes, and books are displayed.

Jessica takes cash, writes a receipt, places the merchandise in a recyclable bag, and thanks the PURCHASER, who steps aside to reveal ...

JOSH PATTERSON (30). The ex-. And SAVANNAH MARLOW, his girlfriend.

JOSH
Happy Holidays, Jessica.

JESSICA
Merry Christmas, Josh.

Jessica casts a glance at Savannah.

JOSH

Jessica Rivers, this is Savannah
Marlow. Savannah, this is Jessica.

Savannah nods and smiles.

Jessica comes around the table and hugs her.

JESSICA

You'll need that.

She returns to sit behind her table.

JOSH

Always taking the high road.

JESSICA

Always. My brothers wanted you to
know they missed you at the Mud
Bowl.

JOSH

We were at Savannah's folks.

JESSICA

Maybe next year.

JOSH

Of course. There's always next
year.

JESSICA

You must be a good influence.

SAVANNAH

Why's that?

JESSICA

He never did his Christmas shopping
until Christmas Eve.

JOSH

Which reminds me. I'd like a couple
of your books.

JESSICA

Who should I make them out to?

JOSH

Not sure yet. How about leaving
that part blank?

SAVANNAH

For now.

JESSICA
Absolutely. Inscription "blank" for
now.

MALE VOICE (O.C.)
Sounds semi-serious.

They all turn to see BRANDON JOHNSON (31), Jessica's
boyfriend.

JOSH
Hey Brandon. It's been a while.

An awkward "brother" handshake.

BRANDON
It has. I guess we're in trouble
with the Rivers boys for not making
the game.

JOSH
That's what I hear.

BRANDON
They're big boys. They'll get over
it.

JOSH
Absolutely.

Brandon turns to Savannah and extends a hand.

BRANDON
Brandon Johnson. I'm with her.

Brandon and Savannah shake hands. He turns on the charm.
She's affected, as most women are when they meet Brandon.

JOSH
We've done what we've come to do,
so I think we'll check out the rest
of the shops. Wonderful to see you,
Jess.

JESSICA
You, too. Nice to meet you,
Savannah.

SAVANNAH
Yes, lovely.

JOSH
Take care, Brandon.

BRANDON
See you around.

Josh and Savannah disappear into the crowd.

BRANDON (CONT'D)
That was awkward.

JESSICA
Not really.

BRANDON
Is he still doing that organic thing? Wine or something, I think you said.

JESSICA
We didn't get to that but, yes, that's the latest.

BRANDON
Good for him.

JESSICA
It is. And for the planet.

BRANDON
Of course. Of course.

Brandon checks his phone.

BRANDON (CONT'D)
What time do you think you're going to wrap up here?

JESSICA
I've still got another couple hours.

BRANDON
Really? You can't cut out a little early?

JESSICA
Not really. As you can see, it's going well.

SHOPPERS have lined up behind Brandon.

He picks up a cassette.

On the cover is a black and white photo of the Mud Bowlers from some long ago decade. The title reads: "The Greatest Hits of the Mud Bowl."

BRANDON
These selling well?

JESSICA
Not bad.

BRANDON
They should. You're as good as most.

JESSICA
Thank you, Brandon.

BRANDON
I mean it. I wish you knew it.

JESSICA
I'm getting there.

BRANDON
You splitting the profits with Michael?

JESSICA
All mine.

BRANDON
Big of him.

JESSICA
Why do you do that?

BRANDON
What?

JESSICA
Run him down. He likes you.

BRANDON
I like him to.

JESSICA
So ... ?

BRANDON
He takes advantage of you.
Thanksgiving rolls around and he expects you to record a song for his latest opus.

JESSICA
I enjoy it. I like all the guys. It allows me to spend time with him. And them.

BRANDON
And not me.

JESSICA
It's not a competition.

BRANDON
All I know is, he couldn't do it
without you.

JESSICA
I doubt that.

Brandon gives her a look. His cell phone RINGS.

BRANDON
I've got to take this. Besides,
your public awaits.

Brandon pushes his way through the crowd.

EXT. FLEUR DE LIS. LATER.

Exclusive gated community.

EXT./INT. BRANDON'S HOUSE. SAME TIME.

Large. Comfortable. Well-ordered. He has completely tech-ed
the halls.

BRANDON
How did you do?

JESSICA
It was a very good night.

BRANDON
Terrific.

JESSICA
It was nice seeing all those merry
faces downtown.

BRANDON
Consumers consuming.

JESSICA
It's more than that. It's
community.

BRANDON
I'm sure the Chamber of Commerce
was thrilled.

Jessica scans the house. It is completely bare of any Christmas decorations

JESSICA
Your decorations aren't up.

BRANDON
It's still early.

JESSICA
It might liven things up a bit.

BRANDON
I like it like this.

JESSICA
Even a little tree would help.

She pulls a small artificial tree from her voluminous handbag and sets it on the coffee table.

JESSICA (CONT'D)
There, isn't that better?

BRANDON
Here we go. Just like clockwork.

JESSICA
What?

BRANDON
You set yourself up.

JESSICA
For what?

BRANDON
You have this Capra-Bailey-Rockwellesque expectation of what the holidays should be. A picture-perfect illusion created by movies, TV, books, and social media.

JESSICA
I don't do social media.

BRANDON
Whatever. You compare yourself and what your Christmas is like to what other people's Christmases are like. You imagine everybody else is having a better time.

JESSICA

I'm a Californian. That's what we do.

BRANDON

It's not real.

JESSICA

Leave my illusions alone. What have they ever done to you?

BRANDON

The more realistic you are about the true meaning of the holidays, which is about celebration and togetherness - not perfection - the better off you'll be.

JESSICA

But that's why I love Christmas. I can be a child again. I don't have to act like an adult. I have no cares. No obligations. I can escape to ChristmasLand.

BRANDON

Grow up.

JESSICA

I'm Peter Pan. Here in California, we don't have to.

BRANDON

That's just not realistic.

JESSICA

That's peachy by me.

BRANDON

Each and every year, you hope - you expect - that the holidays will make up for all the problems that exist the rest of the year. That it will be a time of loving forgiveness and joyful reunion.

JESSICA

It can be.

BRANDON

It's a myth. The season magnifies everything we're missing. The people, the things, the emotions.

JESSICA
I know that. It's hard, but I get it.

BRANDON
All that grief and loss. It's just made worse.

JESSICA
It's my way of remembering what's gone.

BRANDON
That's why so many people go for the Remy and Remington.

JESSICA
That's depressing.

BRANDON
But so very real.

Her eyes glisten with tears. Her lip quivers.

BRANDON (CONT'D)
Okay, okay. I'll keep the tree.

He leans in to kiss her.

She SNEEZES.

He jerks back, hoping to avoid the spray.

BRANDON (CONT'D)
You getting a cold?

JESSICA
Maybe.

BRANDON
I can't afford to get sick.

JESSICA
Always seems to happen this time of year.

BRANDON
You're too busy.

JESSICA
To catch a cold?

BRANDON
To stay healthy.

JESSICA
I like being busy. It keeps my mind
off other things.

BRANDON
Let's not go there now.

JESSICA
Okay with me.

BRANDON
You get sick because you're too
busy doing things instead of being
something.

That stings.

JESSICA
You're busy, too.

BRANDON
I never see you.

JESSICA
You're wrong.

BRANDON
You have no time for me.

JESSICA
Wrong again.

BRANDON
I'm not your priority.

JESSICA
You are. You just don't see it.

BRANDON
I wish you were more like our other
friends.

JESSICA
In what way?

BRANDON
Less busy. Less generous. Less
involved. Less preoccupied. More ...
Motherly.

That last word hits her like a punch to the stomach.

JESSICA
Stop "Frankensteining" me, Brandon.
I am who I am.

BRANDON
Yes, you are. That may be the
problem.

JESSICA
We've had the talk about children.

BRANDON
Many, many times.

JESSICA
I haven't changed my mind.

BRANDON
I wish we could do something about
that.

JESSICA
Me, too.

INT. FIRST METHODIST CHURCH. SUNDAY MORNING.

The Sunday service. The church is full of CONGREGANTS thanks
to the long Thanksgiving weekend.

Jessica sits with the CHOIR behind the PASTOR.

PASTOR
Each of us has a special gift to
give to each other, our community,
and ourselves, especially at this
time of year. What is yours?
Compassion, loyalty, or hope?
Perhaps forgiveness or generosity?
These are the shining gifts that
bring us peace on earth. There are
so many lonely people out there
whose stocking is empty. It is in
each of us to bring them a little
comfort and joy. In helping them,
we show that we care more about our
neighbors than we care about
ourselves. Our life can truly be
about the lives we touch. For good.
No one is forgotten who eases the
pain of others. That is the true
gift of Christmas. What special
gift do you want to give to the
world?

INT. CHOIR ROOM. LATER.

The CHOIR rehearses for the annual Christmas Pageant. They sing "Bells of Christmas."

Jessica is loving every minute of it.

EXT. FIRST METHODIST CHURCH. LATER

Jessica exits the front door of the church and heads for her parked VW bus.

As she opens the car door, a HOMELESS BOY (10) with a limp approaches her. His legs are supported by an iron frame. He leans on a crutch.

LIMPING BOY

Spare change?

Jessica is bewildered and saddened by what she sees. She rummages in her shoulder bag, removes some change, and hands it to him.

He offers her a white lily and a red rose. She takes them.

LIMPING BOY (CONT'D)

Pretty.

JESSICA

They are.

LIMPING BOY

They're a lot like us.

JESSICA

Really? How?

LIMPING BOY

They're seeded. They grow. They bloom. They wither. They die.

JESSICA

I like the way you see the world.

LIMPING BOY

Unlike us, flowers have no memory. No thoughts of the past or future. They live in the present. Only for today. Simply to share their beauty.

JESSICA

Sounds like something someone said to me not long ago.

LIMPING BOY
Have you ever watched a river flow?

JESSICA
I have.

LIMPING BOY
When you look up river, then look
at where you're standing, then look
down river. It's like the past,
present, and future right before
your eyes. You learn from
yesterday, live for today, and hope
for tomorrow.

JESSICA
It's all connected, isn't it.

Jessica smells the flowers.

LIMPING BOY
Thanks for the change.

The boy tucks the money in his pocket and leaves Jessica
standing by the open car door.

INT. JESSICA'S HOME - DAY

On the television, the end credits roll for the movie,
Holiday Inn.

Watching are Jessica, Melissa, Tim, Jr., and Michael. Just
the sibs.

The coffee and side tables are laden with snacks and drinks.

A stack of VHS tapes towers beside the TV set. It includes
just about every Christmas movie ever made, including such
gems as *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians* with Pia Zadora.

MELISSA
Well, that's another traditional
Rivers' family Christmas movie
marathon in the books.

TIM, JR.
Thanks for organizing.

JESSICA
It's what I do best.

MELISSA
With that one done, I've got a new
one.

MICHAEL

There's not enough days in the calendar for all the holiday traditions you guys've come up with.

MELISSA/TIM, JR./JESSICA

(as one)

Humbug!

Melissa sets a large, poster-shaped package covered with Christmas wrapping paper on the arms of an easy chair.

MELISSA

As some of you may know, the "Countdown to Christmas" on the Hallmark Channels has started.

Michael GROANS. Everyone else APPLAUDS.

MELISSA (CONT'D)

The first one actually aired just before Halloween.

MICHAEL

That' sick.

TIM, JR.

No, that's Hallmark.

MELISSA

So, when I was Googling the movie schedule, something popped up that caught my eye. A woman in Fort Worth, Texas, posted this on Facebook.

With a flourish, Melissa removes the wrapping paper. At the top of the poster, she has hand-written: "Hallmark Drinking Game."

MELISSA (CONT'D)

Ta da! I give you the "Hallmark Christmas Drinking Game."

More HOOTS and APPLAUSE.

Below the title, the poster lists the number of drinks to be taken for each of the predictable incidents that happen in a Hallmark movie. For example, "Take a Drink ..." any time there is a "Reference to a dead relative." Take two if there is a "Near miss kiss." Take three "When the family business takeover is thwarted." And so on.

MICHAEL

Now this is a Christmas tradition I
can get behind.

TIM, JR.

The tree isn't the only thing
getting lit today.

MELISSA

The rules are pretty self-
explanatory. You take one drink if
any of these things happen.

She points.

MELISSA (CONT'D)

Two if you see any of these.

She points.

MELISSA (CONT'D)

And three for these.

She points one more time.

MELISSA (CONT'D)

You must finish your drink "When
the cynic is filled with the
Christmas spirit" or "When it snows
on Christmas."

JESSICA

What about it snowing in the
Central Valley?

TIM, JR.

That never happens.

MELISSA

There's also a bonus. You have to
take a shot if the movie stars
Candace Cameron-Bure or Lacey
Chabert.

MICHAEL

I don't know those people.

JESSICA

Sure, you do.

TIM, JR.

You'll recognize them as soon as
you see them.

Melissa checks her watch.

MELISSA
Okay, it's almost time. Everyone
have a full glass?

JESSICA/TIM, JR.
(together)
Yes, Melissa.

They all look at Michael.

MICHAEL
Yes, Melissa.

MELISSA
Ladies and gentlemen, start your
engines.

Jessica flips on the TV. Melissa flops down on the couch.

The music SWELLS and the opening credits appear.

Jessica, Melissa, and Tim, Jr. CHEER and take a sip.

MICHAEL
I'm just here to drink.

TIM, JR.
Then this game's for you.

Michael takes a long drink and pours another one.

In the very first scene of the movie, the main character is
named Holly and she's drinking chocolate.

MELISSA
That's a double off the wall right
out of the gate.

Everyone takes two drinks.

Michael keeps chugging away.

MELISSA (CONT'D)
You're not playing it right. All
you're doing is drinking.

Michael toasts her and drinks.

MELISSA (CONT'D)
You're no fun.

MICHAEL
I'm the "no fun" guy.

JESSICA
Buckle up, it's going to be a tipsy
night.

SCENE SEQUENCE. HOLIDAY OUTREACH.

Jessica plays MUSIC for the RESIDENTS of the Senior Center.

JESSICA (V.O.)
There was never a moment of rest
this time of year.

Jessica READS one of her children's Christmas books to SICK
CHILDREN at the local rehabilitation hospital.

JESSICA (V.O.)
I wanted everyone to feel the same
way I did about Christmas.

Jessica teaches DISABLED CHILDREN and ADULTS how to paint
watercolors.

JESSICA (V.O.)
I wanted the less fortunate and
lonely to truly experience this
most wonderful time of the year.

It's a blizzard of activity. She is exhausted. But happy.

JESSICA (V.O.)
I wanted to bring Christmas to
life.

INT. JESSICA'S HOME. NIGHT.

Jessica and Brandon watch a VHS copy of *A Christmas Carol*.
She sits on the couch. He sits in a chair nearby, scanning
his phone.

JESSICA
Did I do something?

BRANDON
Sorry, what?

JESSICA
Are you upset with me?

He stands.

BRANDON
I think we should take a break.

JESSICA
There is something wrong.

BRANDON
You're too wrapped up in Christmas.
I just don't get it.

JESSICA
It's once a year.

BRANDON
Not for you.

JESSICA
It makes me feel good.

BRANDON
Not me.

JESSICA
That hurts.

BRANDON
It's just too much.

JESSICA
That's not true.

BRANDON
You're more interested in your
family. And doing for others. Not
me.

JESSICA
I have room in my heart for all of
it. For all of you.

BRANDON
I wish that were true.

He tucks the phone in his pocket and leaves her sitting alone on the couch, the blue light of the television flickering on her face.

EXT./INT. MCHENRY MUSEUM. DAY

Jessica and Melissa wander through the museum's annual display of Christmas artifacts.

They stand in the lobby, gazing up at the massive Christmas Tree that fills the entry rotunda.

MELISSA
Just like that?

JESSICA
Just like that.

MELISSA
No explanation?

JESSICA
Not enough.

MELISSA
Men.

JESSICA
Actually, it's probably okay. I was
kind of thinking the same thing.

MELISSA
You both seemed to be doing so
well.

JESSICA
It was always a battle. He just
doesn't get it.

MELISSA
Get what.

JESSICA
Why I love Christmas so much. Why
it's important to me. Why it makes
me feel good.

MELISSA
That's definitely an irreconcilable
difference.

JESSICA
Why be with someone who doesn't
feel the same way you do?

MELISSA
I never liked him, anyway.

JESSICA
Me, neither.

They both LAUGH until they cry.

INT. BEDFORD FALLS STORE. AFTERNOON.

The shop is crammed with SHOPPERS.

Jessica is alone. She's working the cash register. She can barely keep up with the sales, questions, and other distractions.

STORE. CLOSING TIME.

Jessica shuts everything down for the night.

JESSICA

No, no, no!

The display case that held the silver bell ornament is empty.

INT. MICHAEL'S HOUSE - VARIOUS ROOMS. EVENING.

The Rivers family gathers for their annual December birthday celebration slash family Christmas gift exchange. It's early this year because of holiday commitments and travel schedules.

In the kitchen, Melissa and her boyfriend, ELLIOT (35), graze on the munchies spread across the countertops.

In the great room, HOLIDAY MUSIC plays in the background. A muted college football game plays on the TV.

Pictures of Jessica's parents, TIM, SR. and CORA, and their middle child, WILLIE, are displayed in a prominent place on the fireplace mantle.

Tim, Jr. sits on the couch with Linda. They munch on appetizers and watch the game.

Jared and Travis play grab-ass on the floor in front of them.

In the massive entryway to the house, Michael and Jessica talk quietly and urgently.

JESSICA

Couldn't we at least broach the idea? Maybe they'd like to donate to worthy causes instead of doing the gift exchange?

MICHAEL

What's the rush?

JESSICA

They need time to plan. If they're like me, they may already be done with their shopping.

MICHAEL

Here you go again.

JESSICA
Here I go again, what?

MICHAEL
Orchestrating things.

JESSICA
I just think it's something we
should consider.

Michael glares at his sister. He takes a deep breath and
plunges forward.

MICHAEL
Why do you waste your time doing
all this stuff?

JESSICA
What "stuff"?

MICHAEL
Feeding the homeless. Planning the
name draw. Entertaining old people.
All this Christmas stuff.

JESSICA
It's not a waste of time. It makes
me happy. It makes other people
happy.

MICHAEL
Why don't you do something
important? Something that really
makes a difference?

JESSICA
I feel like, in a small way, I am.
I'm doing something good. I can't
do anything else.

MICHAEL
We both know you can.

JESSICA
It's what I do. People count on me.
Like we count on you.

MICHAEL
Jessica. Nobody cares.

Jessica reacts like she's been slapped in the face.

LIVING ROOM. LATER.

The family sits on the sofa, chairs, and the floor, which is now strewn with shredded wrapping paper, torn ribbon, and discarded bows. Everyone is relaxed, food comatosed, and filled with Christmas spirit.

JESSICA

This is a new Christmas song I've been working on.

Jessica slides a cassette into a small boom box perched on a table. She hits play. A beautiful CHRISTMAS CAROL about home and family fills the air.

Everyone smiles. Everyone but Michael. He gets up and crosses to the table. He hits stop.

Jessica can't believe what her big brother has just done.

She gathers her gifts. She grabs her coat and hat. She heads for the door.

Tim, Jr. intercepts her in the entryway.

TIM, JR.

He can be an ass.

JESSICA

It's more than that.

TIM, JR.

He's got a lot going on.

JESSICA

Good for him.

As she goes out, she leaves the Christmas tree pin on a side table by the front door.

INT. BEDFORD FALLS SHOP. NIGHT.

The shop is closed. Jessica and Melissa sit at a small table sipping tea.

MELISSA

He was out of line. He doesn't get to do that, even if he is the big brother.

JESSICA

Maybe he's right. Maybe it is time to grow up. Get over this "obsession."

MELISSA

There's nothing wrong with you.
He's got the problem. He's the one
that hates Christmas.

JESSICA

I wonder why. He used to love it.

MELISSA

"AD."

Jessica is confused.

MELISSA (CONT'D)

"After divorce."

Jessica shrugs.

JESSICA

He did apologize. He left a message
later.

MELISSA

Damage done.

JESSICA

Michael got me thinking, though.

MELISSA

About?

JESSICA

He said "nostalgia" was a sickness.

MELISSA

He really can be a butt.

JESSICA

So I did a little research.

MELISSA

Typical. Such a deadtreehead. Any
reason to hang out in a musty old
library.

JESSICA

Nostalgia comes from the Greek word
nostos, or homecoming. Homer came
up with that in *The Odyssey*.

MELISSA

Always the Greeks. Or the Romans.

JESSICA

It's more than just the usual
homesickness.

MELISSA

Like being at summer camp?

JESSICA

It was a longing to feel at home in
the world. Finally. On the surface,
the story was about Ulysses'
journey home. It involved all kinds
of trials and tribulations.
Encounters with mythic creatures,
sickness, love, and the dead.

MELISSA

Just your usual bedtime story.

JESSICA

The end of the journey is the
discovery of who you truly are. An
arriving at that place where you
really belong.

MELISSA

So, it's not really about
Christmas.

JESSICA

No, it's not.

MELISSA

Never has been.

Jessica passes a letter over to Melissa.

JESSICA

The building's been sold.

MELISSA

You're kidding me.

Melissa scans the document.

MELISSA (CONT'D)

Will you have to close?

JESSICA

Maybe.

MELISSA

That would be horrible.

JESSICA
Might be a sign.

EXT. VINTAGE FAIRE MALL. NIGHT

Two VOLUNTEERS wait behind the counter at the Soroptimist Christmas gift booth.

Nearby, Jessica stands beside an artificial Christmas tree festooned with 4 x 6 tags. Each has the name of a child whose family can't afford Christmas.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
I'd love to get them all everything
they want.

Startled, Jessica turns to see Josh.

JESSICA
Me, too.

JOSH
You do this every year?

JESSICA
I do.

JOSH
Me, too.

JESSICA
I'm surprised we haven't bumped
into each other before.

JOSH
I'm not. If you were here, I'd come
back later.

JESSICA
Was it that bad?

JOSH
You broke my heart.

Jessica turns back to scan the tags.

JESSICA
They all want bikes.

JOSH
So did I.

JESSICA

There's nothing that says Christmas
and kids like the bright, shiny
spokes of a brand new bike.

INT. MALL - RESTAURANT. LATER.

Jessica and Josh sit in a booth. She nurses a coffee. He a
glass of red wine.

JOSH

He was always tough on you.

JESSICA

Expectations are lethal.

JOSH

That's what big brothers do.

JESSICA

What if he's right?

JOSH

That's for you to find out.

JESSICA

I guess I always knew that.

JOSH

I don't deal much with the past or
the future. For me, it's all about
right now. This moment. The grapes
always keep me focused on the
present.

A YOUNG BOY (5) races past them chased by his MOTHER (mid-
20s).

For a moment, Jessica drifts away, distracted by a memory.

Josh touches her on the sleeve.

JOSH (CONT'D)

Where are you?

JESSICA

Back in high school.

Josh's reaction to this is mixed.

JOSH

You always said Christmas is a good
time for looking back.

JESSICA
Not everyone feels that way.

JOSH
And for telling the truth.

Jessica raises her cup.

JESSICA
To old times.

JOSH
To now.

Jessica touches Josh's hand. He hesitates, then withdraws it.

EXT. DRY CREEK BRIDGE. NIGHT.

Jessica stands mid-span of Dry Creek Bridge. The swollen river roars below her.

She looks upstream to where it's been, she gazes below at where it is, and sweeps her eyes downstream to where it's going. The past feeds into the present and then flows downstream, into the future and out of sight.

LIMPING BOY (V.O)
When you look up river, then look
at where you're standing, then look
down river. It's like the past,
present, and future right before
your eyes. You learn from
yesterday, live for today, and hope
for tomorrow.

JESSICA (V.O)
It's all connected, isn't it.

She closes her eyes.

JESSICA (CONT'D)
(SINGS to herself)
"I wish there was a river I could
skate away on."

INT. JESSICA'S HOME - KITCHEN. MORNING.

Jessica opens the flap labeled with a "1" on her Advent Calendar. It reveals an image of Marley's Ghost from the movie, *A Christmas Carol*.

Her eyes stare blankly. Her movements seem dream-like, as if under a spell.

EXT. HOME - DRIVEWAY. MOMENTS LATER.

Jessica retrieves the morning newspaper.

As she reaches for the handle of the front door, she notices something out of the ordinary about the knocker. There appears to be a face etched into the metal. The face of her FATHER.

Mildly stunned, she blinks her eyes and peers closer. Whatever was there is gone.

KITCHEN. NIGHT.

Jessica tastes a deliciously decorated sugar cookie shaped like a bell. She suddenly seems transported.

SCENE SEQUENCE - TASTE MONTAGE.

A young Jessica makes fudge with her FATHER. They pour it into a chipped oval platter. He dabs a smidge of fudge on her nose. She bites into the fudge and SMACKS her lips.

Jessica savors a figgy pudding during "Breakfast with Santa" at the Gallo Center for the Arts. All around her, FRIENDS and NEIGHBORS CHATTER and linger over the bounty.

Jessica carefully decorates a gingerbread house at the local Boys & Girls Club. The CHILDREN SHOUT and LAUGH as they devour the building materials.

Jessica sips tea at the benefit for the Center for Human Services being held in the banquet room adjoining Green's Restaurant. VOLUNTEERS mingle as they pour the soothing beverage for DONORS and GUESTS.

Jessica distributes red plastic Christmas stockings filled with assorted hard candies at the SENIOR CENTER. The ELDER RESIDENTS seem enchanted by memories as they eat the merry fare.

Jessica attends a neighbor's holiday party. There is food, FRIENDS, and MUSIC. The mood is joyous as they all crowd around tables filled with seasonal edibles.

Jessica hands out fruit to the HOMELESS. Their skeletal eyes are filled with gratitude more dear than gold.

Jessica eats steaming chestnuts on the street outside Macy's in San Francisco. Other SAN FRANCISCANS crowd around the small cart, seemingly taken back to a simpler, gentler time.

Jessica trades cookies with FRIENDS at a cookie exchange hosted by Melissa and Elliot.

Everyone seems to have abandoned the holiday hustle and bustle as they dip their cookies in hot chocolate.

Jessica frowns as an overweight TEENAGED BOY gobbles down a sandwich as he ignores the outstretched hand of an emaciated BLIND BEGGAR.

INT. JESSICA'S HOME - KITCHEN. NIGHT.

Jessica sits alone, sipping eggnog and eating a slice of fruit cake. Bewitched by a memory.

A grandfather clock CHIMES the hour.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)

Bet it doesn't taste as good as my
fudge.

Jessica reacts to the VOICE. She's not shocked. It's almost as if she were expecting this visit.

JESSICA

I've never tasted anything as yummy
as your fudge, Daddy.

TIMOTHY RIVERS, SR. (60) stands in the kitchen doorway. Transparent and glowing.

TIM, SR.

You seem lonely.

JESSICA

I'm not really.

TIM, SR.

Even when you're in a crowd, you
always seem so alone.

JESSICA

We're all alone together.

TIM, SR.

"Loneliness is absolute."

Jessica reacts to her own words.

JESSICA

It's easier. Less complicated.

TIM, SR.

Why are you beating yourself up,
sweet pea?

JESSICA
I expect too much.

TIM, SR.
"Expectations are lethal."

She's a little sorry now she said that, too.

JESSICA
When things don't turn out, I get
disappointed. Then mad. Then I give
up. And don't care anymore. And
don't want anyone around.

TIM, SR.
You're not that kind of person.

JESSICA
Feels like it lately.

TIM, SR.
You were always the one who gave
people the benefit of the doubt.

JESSICA
Taking the high road isn't always
the best road. It's not always
appreciated.

TIM, SR.
Your compassion is what makes you
... you.

JESSICA
Everyone wants me to change. To be
something I'm not.

TIM, SR.
You're fine just the way you are.
Just be yourself.

JESSICA
If I could change, maybe just a
little, I could make some people
happy.

TIM, SR.
Things around you, outside things,
will change. You can't stop that.
Embrace it. But, as for you,
there's only one you. Embrace that,
too.

The clock CHIMES again. Her father disappears.

Jessica takes another sip of nog and another bite of cake.

INT. JESSICA'S HOME - KITCHEN. MORNING.

Jessica opens the flap labeled with a "5" on her Advent Calendar. It reveals an image of Dudley the angel from the movie, *The Bishop's Wife*.

INT. JESSICA'S HOME - LIVING ROOM. NIGHT.

Jessica touches the boughs of the Christmas tree. She appears lost in another world.

SCENE SEQUENCE. TOUCH MONTAGE.

Jessica lightly strokes the lighted and glitter-covered Christmas scene fabric artwork in the Keller's Christmas Gallery. She watches as nearby SHOPPERS act like children as they touch ornaments and nutcrackers.

Jessica sits at a small table inside the Barnes & Noble bookstore. She is surrounded by copies of her children's Christmas books. She feels the cloth cover of one book before opening and inscribing it. She hands it to an excited YOUNG GIRL (8), who clutches the book to her.

Jessica runs her hand along the bare adobe wall of the Custom House in the plaza of Old Monterey, which has been decorated for Christmas. She enters to see RE-ENACTORS in *Californio* costume dancing the *fandango*.

Jessica caresses the wooden BABY JESUS in the center of the Nativity collection in her home. Whatever burden she may be carrying seems lightened.

Jessica compacts the round face of a snowman made of freshly fallen snow at the snowline just above Twain Harte. She watches as other VISITORS exuberantly pelt one another with snowballs.

Jessica rubs her thumb over the soft stenciling of the 50s-era ornament dangling from the decorated Christmas tree in the lobby of the DoubleTree Hotel.

Jessica walks the banks of iced-over Pine Crest Lake. She tilts back her head and swallows a falling snowflake. She observes CHILDREN lying on their backs, arms and bare hands outstretched, creating snow angels.

Jessica fluffs the tufts of cotton spread around the miniature scene of Bedford Falls in the shop. She studies the figurines of Mary and George Bailey, trapped in a troubling thought.

Jessica spreads the velvety leaves of a poinsettia plant tucked among rows and rows of plants in the Duarte Nursery greenhouse. The other SHOPPERS seem carried away by nature's gentle, comforting touch.

Jessica frowns as she fondles the edges of her hippy threads while a WOMAN about her age strolls by dressed in pathologically hip threads.

INT. JESSICA'S HOME - LIVING ROOM. NIGHT.

Jessica slides her fingertips down the Christmas stocking hanging from her fireplace mantle. It is a richly embroidered southwest design.

Her Christmas clock announces the hour by PLAYING "Joy to the World."

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)
Your father and me spent a lot of
time on that.

JESSICA
It's beautiful, Mommy.

CORA RIVERS (59), Jessica's mother, stands near the fireplace.

CORA
Like you.

JESSICA
I bet you say that to all your
kids.

CORA
I confess I do.

JESSICA
We forgive you.

CORA
That's so you.

JESSICA
What?

CORA
So loyal.

JESSICA
Isn't "loyal" just another word for
"co-dependent?"

CORA
Depends on the circumstance.

JESSICA
Doesn't everything?

CORA
It's tempered by your love. I've
never known anyone so full of love
as you.

JESSICA
Again, a problem.

CORA
If only the rest of the world were
as compassionate and forgiving as
you.

JESSICA
That's a heavy burden to carry. I
recall one man died because of it.

CORA
Let there be peace on earth, my
child, and let it begin with you.

The clock PLAYS "Mary, Did You Know?". Her mother disappears.

Jessica touches the embroidered stocking.

INT. JESSICA'S HOME - KITCHEN. MORNING.

Jessica opens the flap labeled with a "10" on her Advent
Calendar. It reveals an image of Bing Crosby, Danny Kaye,
Rosemary Clooney, and Vera-Ellen from the movie, *White
Christmas*.

INT. JESSICA'S HOME - SUN PORCH. NIGHT.

Jessica winds up a matchbox music box. The sound of "White
Christmas" fills the room. She's entranced.

SCENE SEQUENCE. SOUND MONTAGE.

Jessica bounces up and down to the CACOPHONY OF SOUND as the
"Festival of Lights" Christmas parade winds through downtown.
THUMPING marching and rock BANDS, RUMBLING street rods,
SQUEALING CHILDREN, TOOTING trucks, and JINGLING jingle bells
fill the night air.

Jessica attends CarolFest at California State University,
Stanislaus. The ATTENDEES are enraptured by the sacred songs.

Jessica sings the MESSIAH at the First Methodist Church. The voices of the SINGERS rise to the heavens.

Jessica sways in her seat as she watches "The Nutcracker" performed by Central West Ballet at the Modesto High School auditorium. The AUDIENCE appears carried away to the Land of Sweets.

Jessica follows a group of CAROLERS serenading SHOPPERS at McHenry Village. As they listen, the adult PEDESTRIANS become as child-like as their CHILDREN.

Jessica stands transfixed on Christmas Tree Lane by a display of Christmas lights synced to ROCK MUSIC. The sidewalks are filled with OBSERVERS, many of whom dance to the music.

Jessica pops a cassette of *A Happy Trails Christmas* by Roy Rogers and Dale Evans into her Walkman and rides her bike through the college neighborhood. She merrily HUMS along with the songs.

Jessica sits in a pew at St. Stanislaus Church listening to the Modesto Symphony and Choir perform their annual Candlelight Concert. The sanctuary is filled to the rim with CELEBRANTS who share the holy spirit of the music.

Jessica dances as a ROCKABILLY BAND belts out Rockin' Christmas SONGS beneath a giant flashing Christmas tree at Tenth Street Plaza. Man-made snow floats through the night sky and onto the BYSTANDERS who CLAP along with the tunes.

Jessica frowns as she listens from the doorway of an all-ages club as a LOCAL BAND that's generated some buzz finishes an uninspired performance. She can tell their heart just isn't in it. She steps into the night and spies across the street a LOCAL SINGER/SONGWRITER who plays real good for free.

INT. JESSICA'S HOME - SUN PORCH. NIGHT.

Jessica plays and sings the same Christmas SONG Michael abruptly turned off at the family gathering.

A vintage Charlie Brown clock PLAYS the theme from "A Charlie Brown Christmas" by Vince Guaraldi to mark the hour.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)

Music is the universal language of love, peace, and understanding. It can transfigure us. Music is life. That's why our hearts have beats.

JESSICA

Sweet Willie. You knew that well. And lived it. Before we lost you.

WILLIE RIVERS (30), her youngest older brother, stands silhouetted by the sun porch windows.

WILLIE
You're very gifted, you know.

JESSICA
That's high praise considering the source.

WILLIE
I wish you'd let it go.

JESSICA
What?

WILLIE
The fear of failing. I don't want you to regret not doing what you wanted - needed - to do. Like I did. Like Michael did. He wanted to be a triple threat like you. A writer, a musician, an artist.

JESSICA
It's hard.

WILLIE
Don't I know it. I had my shot. Problem is, I liked home cooking.

JESSICA
So do I.

WILLIE
Don't give up hope. Without hope and dreams, we've got nothing.

The clock PLAYS another song from "A Charlie Brown Christmas." Her brother disappears.

Jessica plays and sings her original Christmas SONG from the top.

INT. JESSICA'S HOME - KITCHEN. MORNING.

Jessica opens the flap labeled with a "15" on her Advent Calendar. It reveals an image of Edmund Gwen playing Santa Claus from the movie, *Miracle on 34th Street*.

INT. JESSICA'S HOME - BEDROOM. NIGHT.

Jessica smells the peppermint candle flickering on the side table beside her reading chair. She's trapped in a reverie.

SCENE SEQUENCE. SMELL MONTAGE.

Jessica stands at the back of the annual gathering of ALUMNI, FRIENDS, and FAMILY of Modesto Junior College at the school's Agriculture Pavilion. The aromas of the holiday waft through the air. She inhales it all.

Jessica crinkles her nose at the salty ocean smells as she watches the parade of Christmas-themed boats glide through the Santa Cruz Harbor.

Jessica smiles as a whiff of sweet chocolate drifts under her nose inside the See's Candy Store. YOUNG and OLD can't help but be intoxicated by the decadence.

Jessica sniffs the crisp cinnamon emanating from the candy canes dangling beneath the tree at Galletto's Ristorante. A YOUNG GIRL presses her nose against a low hanging cane. Jessica catches her breath at a memory.

Jessica breathes in the heavenly incense wafting through the Napa caves hosting "Carols in the Caves." Like her, the other REVELERS rejoice in the experience.

Jessica waves the steam of freshly-cooked turkey toward her nose as she waits for dinner at Noah's Hof Brau. She observes other PATRONS savoring the steaming scents.

Jessica draws in the fresh evergreen coming from the Christmas wreaths lining the walls of Hart Floral. A YOUNG COUPLE (20s) quietly arguing as they walk suddenly stop as they reach the corridor of wreaths and are enveloped in the bouquet.

Jessica searches for the source of the relaxing fragrance of vanilla and cinnamon as she watches the Beach Blanket Babylon Christmas Show in San Francisco. The odors send her back to some long ago holiday kitchen.

Jessica catches a puff of the burning candle as she follows a DOCENT on a tour of the decorated McHenry Mansion. The waxy smoke encircles her head like wreath.

Jessica frowns at the stale mustiness billowing from stacks of memorabilia and detritus reaching the ceiling of the estate sale. There is too much stuff and too many memories here. She thinks of Michael's house that is too empty and has too few memories.

EXT. MISSION SAN JUAN BAUTISTA - GRAVEYARD. NIGHT.

Jessica snuffs in a noseful of the smothering fog as it swirls around the gravestone in the graveyard beside Mission San Juan Bautista following the performance of *La Pastorela* by *El Teatro Campesino*.

The mission bell CLANGS the hour.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
Apartment hunting?

JESSICA
Very funny, Gary.

GARY RAWLINGS (40), Michael's oldest friend, stands near a stone statue of an angel.

GARY
Just trying to keep things light.

JESSICA
Almost as funny as your best friend.

GARY
Your brother has no sense of humor.

JESSICA
He used to.

GARY
So did you.

JESSICA
Life does that.

GARY
You've grown up.

JESSICA
Life does that, too.

GARY
I remember that scrawny little kid who had acne, wore her hair in a bun, and was always ready for a late dinner or early breakfast at Denny's.

JESSICA
Usually when you and Michael had had too much to drink.

GARY

Sometimes I think you're a little hard on him. A bit too judgmental.

JESSICA

I try not to be. I know it's not good. And it makes things worse. Problem is, I never think before I speak.

GARY

You should always think before you speak. Or, is it sit before you spit?

JESSICA

Yogi's got nothing on you.

GARY

Ah, Mr. Berra. My hero. But seriously, folks. You don't always have to say what's on your mind.

JESSICA

It's gotten me in trouble more than once.

GARY

You always talk about taking the high road. Maybe you should try a little forgiveness.

JESSICA

Thanks for the reminder, Otis.

GARY

Just the messenger.

JESSICA

One I wish was still here. We could all use your unique point of view. Your humor always put things in perspective.

GARY

Humor's always in need of repair.

JESSICA

Clever, Jimmy.

GARY

Another hero.

JESSICA
Parrotheads rule.

GARY
You staying the night or driving
back?

JESSICA
Driving back.

GARY
It's pretty foggy. Be careful.

JESSICA
You sound like my big brother.

GARY
Felt like it, too.

JESSICA
You were. More than him, sometimes.

GARY
I remember coming back one time
with Michael. And our wives at the
time. He had to open the car door
to see the center divider.

JESSICA
That's pretty foggy.

GEORGE
Keep your eyes open.

JESSICA
I will.

GEORGE
Don't do what I wouldn't do.

The mission bell CLANGS again. Her brother's dearest friend
disappears.

Jessica blows out the peppermint candle, covering her nose to
avoid the smoke.

INT. JESSICA'S HOME - KITCHEN. MORNING.

Jessica opens the flap labeled with a "20" on her Advent
Calendar. It reveals an image of Clara and the Nutcracker
from the ballet, *The Nutcracker*.

INT. JESSICA'S HOME - DINING ROOM. NIGHT.

Jessica sees, without seeing, the slowly turning light wheel as it splashes colors across the aluminum Christmas tree. She appears to be in a hypnotic trance.

SCENE SEQUENCE. SIGHT MONTAGE.

Jessica marvels at the creativity of the "Festival of Trees" in the lobby of the Gallo Center. The holiday displays were created by different businesses to raise money for local charities.

Jessica watches the excited faces of CHILDREN OF ALL AGES lined up to sit on Santa's lap at Vintage Faire Mall. The frown she'd been wearing is turned upside down.

Jessica visits the Chartreuse Muse gallery on the Art Walk. Her eyes brim with wonder at the talent and creativity of the local ARTISTS. The GALLERY GOERS appraise the arts and crafts.

Jessica rides her bike dressed as *Sinterklaas* among a throng of other SANTA CLAUSES riding brightly lit and decorated bikes through downtown. It's SantaCon. The joy radiates from everyone's eyes.

Jessica keeps her eyes on "The Grinch," as she and a pack of RUNNERS chase the Christmas character in the Spirit of Giving 5K Run and Walk, coursing through the streets of her neighborhood.

Jessica is dressed as Mary Bailey during the high school dance scene as she watches *It's a Wonderful Life* on the big screen at the historic State Theatre in downtown. Other MOVIEGOERS are dressed in characters from the film. The celluloid image flickers in their upturned eyes.

Jessica assembles a complicated puzzle featuring the traditional image of Santa Claus by Thomas Nast. Her merry eyes twinkle as she fits the last piece.

Jessica holds a photo of her mother and father, Willie and Gary, as she stands among a crowd of ONLOOKERS while the Community Hospice tree is lit in front of Memorial Medical Center. There is a sadness, but also a collective comfort, in everyone's eyes.

Jessica follows close behind JOSEPH and MARY as they re-enact the "Streets of Bethlehem" (*Posada*) through Salinas. Her reverent eyes weep with love for the homeless parents of Jesus.

Jessica frowns as she views the stark contrast before her. A well-dressed, well-groomed BANKER sitting alone and a boisterous group of raggedy CONSTRUCTION WORKERS sitting together.

INT. JESSICA'S HOME - LIVING ROOM. NIGHT.

Jessica projects old 8mm home movies on a tattered screen. The images shine in her misty eyes.

A lonesome train WHISTLE signals the late hour.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
Have you seen the likes of me
before?

JESSICA
I have seen your kind.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
We but turn another page.

JESSICA
One shadow more.

CHRISTOPHER LOWNY (40), Michael's college roommate, sits on the couch beside Jessica.

The film continues to roll.

CHRIS
There's a time and place for
nostalgia.

JESSICA
In old home movies?

CHRIS
In the past.

JESSICA
Your college roommate hasn't always
thought so.

CHRIS
Your brother likes reeling in the
years.

JESSICA
Until he loses control.

CHRIS
I still think he thinks "in the
moment" is a bad yoga pose.

JESSICA
He's too occupied putting out
fires.

CHRIS
"Doing instead of being." That's
not a good thing.

JESSICA
You were a notorious "doer."

CHRIS
Guilty as charged. Until I
couldn't.

JESSICA
It's hard to ignore the needs.

CHRIS
It takes focus.

JESSICA
Strike one.

CHRIS
And courage.

JESSICA
Strike two.

CHRIS
And generosity.

JESSICA
You're outta there!

CHRIS
Give yourself some credit.

JESSICA
When it's due.

CHRIS
You're one of the most generous
people I've ever known.

JESSICA
For an irresponsible, judgmental co-
dependent Luddite with a low self-
image who lives in the past all
alone while always doing
unimportant and unambitious things
who will never go anywhere.

CHRIS

I disagree. You're not a Luddite.
(he smiles)
You know exactly where you're
going. You just need some help
getting there.

The train WHISTLE blows once more. Her brother's college buddy disappears.

Jessica watches the double-exposed film as a dolphin jumps through an aluminum Christmas tree.

EXT. JESSICA'S HOME. MOMENTS LATER.

Jessica stares at the *luminarias* lighting the path to the front door. They have been blown over by the wind.

All but FIVE.

INT. JESSICA'S HOME - KITCHEN. EVENING.

Jessica opens the flap labeled with a "24" on her Advent Calendar. It reveals an image of George Bailey and Clarence the Angel from the movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*.

INT. VARIOUS ROOMS. LATER.

The eggnog coagulates.

The needles on the Christmas tree drop to the floor.

The matchbox music box slowly winds down and grinds to a halt.

The peppermint candle wax hardens.

The color wheel is dark.

Jessica removes the Christmas cards from the mantle and puts them in the recycling bin.

She pours the glass of milk into the sink and tosses the small dish of peanut butter chocolate chip cookies, along with the note to Santa, into the trash.

She carelessly dumps the Nativities in the wrong boxes.

She shoves the collection of decorative Santas into their storage containers.

The phone RINGS. She answers. The shock on her face says it's not good.

EXT./INT. CITY HOSPITAL. LATER.

Michael lies in a hospital bed. Battered and bruised and tethered to monitors and IVs.

MICHAEL
The tree won.

JESSICA
Were you drunk?

MICHAEL
I'd had a few.

JESSICA
You know better.

MICHAEL
I got lost. For a moment.

JESSICA
Don't do it again.

MICHAEL
You, either. It's not worth it. I warned you. Don't be me. There's so much to live for.

A DOCTOR enters. He appears troubled.

DOCTOR
Let's allow him to rest, shall we?

JESSICA
Can the others come in? All our family is here.

DOCTOR
I'd rather they didn't. Not now.

His expression indicates it's much more serious than Jessica thought.

SCENE SEQUENCE. CHURCH MONTAGE.

Jessica lights a candle for Michael at St. Stanislaus Church.

Jessica bows her head in prayer at First Presbyterian Church.

Jessica sits alone at the back of Congregation Beth Shalom.

Jessica attends the late Christmas Eve service at First Methodist Church. She sits alone in the balcony pew.

Unsmiling, she acknowledges her fellow CHOIR MEMBERS and CONGREGANTS.

Far to her right, she notices a solitary man. He resembles Dudley from *The Bishop's Wife*. He smiles.

EXT. DRY CREEK BRIDGE. NIGHT.

Jessica has returned to the bridge. She peers into the raging waters below her.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)

It's the easy way out, you know.
And a bit selfish.

A white-haired OLD MAN stands at the end of the bridge. He's almost transparent. At his back, what appears to be a small pair of wings rustles in the breeze.

JESSICA

I'm good.

CLARENCE

The last time I was in a place like this, the person I spoke with wasn't.

JESSICA

I'm not him.

CLARENCE

Then you've come to your senses?

JESSICA

Jury's still out.

Clarence moves closer. A bright light seems to follow him.

CLARENCE

Can you even begin to imagine all the wonderful things that won't happen without you?

JESSICA

Must not be very important if they're counting on me.

CLARENCE

Ah, but you have so much to offer.

JESSICA

If only.

CLARENCE

You have value. You have a very important role to play in this community. And for the people who live here.

JESSICA

I don't see it.

CLARENCE

Let people in. Embrace change. Be, don't do. Live here, now.

JESSICA

It's too much.

CLARENCE

True happiness is living in the present. With people who value you. And your uniqueness.

JESSICA

Could count them on one hand. Maybe.

CLARENCE

People you don't have to hold your breath around.

JESSICA

Easier said than done.

CLARENCE

You must first be who you really are, then, do what you need to do, in order to have what you want. Find peace and everything will fall into place.

JESSICA

Tone of voice. You're pontificating.

CLARENCE

I do that sometimes. From my days as an actor. I once played a Pope. But, that's another story for another time.

Jessica steps nearer to the edge of the bridge.

Clarence moves closer.

CLARENCE (CONT'D)

If you're happy with yourself,
everyone and everything around you
will be happy, too. If you're
grateful and thankful for who you
are and what you have, happiness
will always be there.

JESSICA

I wish I could believe you.

CLARENCE

I feel sorry for those who don't
understand that. It's a gift. And
you have it, young lady. You have
it. All you have to do is enjoy it
and share it.

JESSICA

That's too much responsibility.

CLARENCE

Over the years, I've found that
true happiness isn't about getting
what you want, but wanting what
you've got.

JESSICA

If only I knew what that was.

CLARENCE

I think you do.

Clarence hands her the Christmas tree pin her brother gave
her.

CLARENCE (CONT'D)

Lecture over.

The river rushes away into the night.

EXT. HOUSE. NIGHT.

A festively decorated Arts and Crafts bungalow near downtown.

Jessica stands in the street. She can't make up her mind.
Finally, she hurries up to the front door and KNOCKS.

Josh answers. He is very surprised, but pleasantly so. He
steps aside.

INT. JOSH'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM. LATER.

Josh and Jessica sit facing each other on the couch.

JOSH

How can it possibly be your fault?

JESSICA

I don't know. It just feels like it is.

JOSH

It was an accident.

JESSICA

I hope so.

JOSH

What are you saying?

JESSICA

He made a mistake.

JOSH

You're making one now.

JESSICA

By being here?

JOSH

No, by believing you're to blame.
I'm glad you're here.

JESSICA

You are?

JOSH

Absolutely.

JESSICA

What about Savannah?

JOSH

She's great. What about Brandon?

JESSICA

He's terrific, too. But, -

JOSH

So, we both just assumed the other
loved someone else.

JESSICA

You know what they say about
assumptions.

Josh leans in and kisses her. Jessica kisses him back.

She opens her eyes, as if she's just awakened from a spell.
She kisses him again.

JOSH
Wow, I almost forgot.

JESSICA
You really don't love me?

JOSH
Funny. Don't move.

He goes to the Christmas tree, selects a small wrapped box nestled beneath it, returns, and hands it to Jessica.

JESSICA
You shouldn't have. I didn't get you anything.

JOSH
Just open it.

Jessica unwraps the box and lifts off the lid.

She removes the tiny silver bell ornament stolen from the store.

JOSH (CONT'D)
It was in the garbage can in front of your store. I guess whoever took it figured it wasn't worth much.

Jessica smiles and kisses him again.

The bell TINKLES.

INT. CITY HOSPITAL. AFTER MIDNIGHT.

Michael appears much better. His color is back. He's smiling.

MICHAEL
Nothing was ruptured, just bruised.

JESSICA
You're a tough old bird.

MICHAEL
I'm trying to talk them into letting me out for Christmas.

JESSICA
You can be very persuasive.

MICHAEL

When it's important enough.

He kisses his sister on the cheek. He notices the Christmas tree pin. He touches it.

JESSICA

See you *mañana*, I hope.

MICHAEL

You mean today. It's past midnight.
Happy - Uh, I mean, Merry
Christmas, Jess.

JESSICA

Merry Christmas, Michael.

EXT. CITY HOSPITAL. MOMENTS LATER.

As Jessica exits the hospital, it begins to snow. A very rare occurrence for California's Central Valley.

Jessica opens her mouth wide and gulps down the snowflakes.

INT. BEDFORD FALLS SHOP. LATER.

Jessica stares at the empty display case.

She hears something behind her. Spooked, she spins around.

Near the front display window and haloed by the moonlight are her father, her mother, Willie, Gary, and Chris.

JESSICA

I haven't lost my senses. I've
finally come to them. I'm not who I
was. I've been trying so hard to
bring Christmas to life, I'd
forgotten that the first gift of
Christmas is love. The love of a
mother. Of friends. Of a community.
Of a family.

She steps closer to the window.

JESSICA (CONT'D)

Your spirits. The spirits of
compassion, loyalty, hope,
forgiveness, and generosity have
helped me understand that. They
shall live within me all year long.
Thanks to you, I now know I can
learn from yesterday, live for
today, and hope for tomorrow.

(MORE)

JESSICA (CONT'D)

From this day on, I will bring life
to Christmas.

On her last words, the five apparitions disappear.

INT. JESSICA'S HOME - VARIOUS ROOMS. SUNRISE.

Jessica holds the Advent Calendar.

She pours a fresh glass of eggnog.

She sweeps up the fallen pine needles.

She winds up the matchbox music box.

She lights the peppermint candle.

She turns on the color wheel.

She puts up all the decorations she had put away.

She switches on the rest of her Christmas lights inside and
out.

She pops an audiocassette of Bing Crosby's *Merry Christmas*
album into the cassette player.

LIVING ROOM. LATE MORNING.

Everything is a shambles. Wrapping paper is scattered
everywhere, along with bows and ribbon, empty food plates and
drinking glasses.

The extended family is sprawled around the room.

All but one.

Jessica hangs the silver bell ornament on the tree. It
TINKLES.

JOSH

Aren't you going to put it
someplace safe?

JESSICA

This is where it belongs.

The back door to the kitchen opens and closes.

MELISSA

Now, who could that be?

TIM, JR.

It's Christmas, for heaven's sake.

Just then, two BOYS (14 and 10) enter the living room followed by Michael, leaning on crutches.

Jessica smiles, jumps to her feet, and rushes to her brother.

Beneath his pleasingly rumpled overcoat, he wears the Nutcracker pullover.

MICHAEL

Careful. Don't knock me over. I'm still figuring these things out.

Jessica kisses Michael on the cheek. She hugs her two nephews, TYLER and ERIC, and plants an unwelcome kiss on their cheeks.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

My ex- made an exception this year. Considering the circumstances.

JESSICA

Well, now they won't have to wait for their gifts.

Jessica takes them by the hand and leads them to a pile of presents set under the tree.

KITCHEN. LATER.

As she did what feels like a long time ago, Jessica gazes out the set of corner windows.

Jessica's two faces are reflected in the windows.

She touches the reflection on the right - the future.

LIVING ROOM. THAT NIGHT.

Everyone is pleasantly exhausted. They wear the new clothes they were given, fiddle with new gadgets, play with new toys.

TYLER

Can we do this again next year, Aunt Jess?

JESSICA

If the fates allow.

ERIC

Awesome.

In the far corner of the room, a shimmering APPARITION appears.

It is Mrs. Claus, the Limping Boy, the Homeless Girl, Dudley, and Clarence. They smile and wave, then disappear.

JESSICA

It really is the most wonderful
time of the year.

Jessica finds her guitar. She SINGS her newest Christmas song, entitled "Counting on Christmas."

The smiling faces of her family fill the room with peace, love, and happiness.

JESSICA (V.O.)

In the end, Christmas wasn't the
only thing I could count on to make
me happy. It was family. The one
thing we take for granted when it's
the one thing we should treasure
most.

At the end of the song, the tiny bell ornament on the tree swings to and fro with a SILVERY TINKLE.

Jessica goes to see what caused it to RING. She peers closely at the ornament.

She sees a sad WOMAN about her own age standing on the bridge above Dry Creek.

EXT. HOME. SAME TIME.

All the *luminarias* are upright and burning brightly.

The colorful Christmas lights fringing the house glow festively.

Through the large picture window stenciled with frosty Christmas images, the Christmas tree sparkles amid the joyous chaos.

Jessica rejoins the circle of family and friends.

The courthouse clock CHIMES the midnight hour.

A full Winter's moon hangs high in the night sky.

A ring circles the bright moon. It begins to rain.

FADE OUT.