HIGHER PLANE

Sacred Vow

Based on a novel by
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EXT. UNITED KINGDOM - NIGHT

AERIAL SHOT over London.

CLAY THOMPSON (V.O.)
In a world where the Spirit realm and Earth coexist, there lies a fragile boundary. Sometimes that boundary is breached, releasing secrets and unfulfilled promises to honor sacred vows.

INT. QUEENSGATE SHOPPING MALL, PETERBOROUGH - THE PERFUME FACTORY - DAY

STORE CLERK
Next in the queue, please. How can I help you today?

CLAY THOMPSON (53, Black, retired Marine veteran) strokes his greying beard.

CLAY THOMPSON
Hmm, I'm looking for recommendations for men's cologne - - for myself.

The young woman's face lights up, and she gestures toward the adjacent counter.

STORE CLERK
Please follow me to the men's selection. I'm sure we'll find something you like.

Before he can respond, a persistent buzzing from his shirt pocket interrupts his focus. With an apologetic smile, Clay steps back.

CLAY THOMPSON
Excuse me, Miss, but I need to take this call -- it's my godson.

Clay answers.

SPLIT SCREEN:

CLAY THOMPSON (CONT'D)
Hello?

There is a long pause before the caller, MARK JOHNSON (34, British Army Captain), responds.

MARK JOHNSON
Hi, Clay, this is Mark. Do you have a few minutes to chat?

Clay struggles to hear over the ambient noise of the Christmas rush.

CLAY THOMPSON
I'll be home in about 15 minutes. Is it important?

MARK JOHNSON
Yeah, she's gone.

Clay hurries to the exit, pressing his phone against his ear. Beads of perspiration form on his forehead.

EXT. QUEENSGATE SHOPPING MALL - CONTINUOUS

He steps out into the chill of the courtyard, where he finds a quiet corner to speak in private.

CLAY THOMPSON
Okay, I can hear you clearly now. Who's gone?

MARK JOHNSON
(grieving, distraught)
Mum...she died this morning. She was my rock...and now she's gone.

Mark's voice quivers with sadness.

Clay freezes, the weight of the news anchoring him in place.

There is an extended moment of silence.

MARK JOHNSON (CONT'D)
Clay? Are you there? Hello?

Clay murmurs.

CLAY THOMPSON
(disbelief, torn)
Yes, I'm here.

Mark's voice trembles.

MARK JOHNSON
I'm broken and lost. She wanted to watch Thea grow up...and now that's not going to happen.

MARK JOHNSON (CONT'D)
We haven't told Thea that her Nana isn't coming back -- she's only four.

CLAY THOMPSON
(helpless and disoriented)
Mark, I don't know what to say. There has to be something I can do to help.

MARK JOHNSON
What do you have in mind?

CLAY THOMPSON
I'll need some time to think...to get my head around this.

Mark sighs.

MARK JOHNSON
The world just became a darker place. I'll keep you updated on the arrangements. Speak soon.

END SPLIT SCREEN

Clay stares into space. He has two choices: plunge into the abyss of sorrow or suspend reality for as long as possible. He chooses the latter.

INT. GUARDIAN ANGELS SPIRITUAL CHURCH, KETTERING, UK - DAY

OFFICIATING MINISTER
(stoic)
In her life's journey, Leslie gave us love. She is preceded in death by her loving grandmother, Donna Taylor, her dear husband, Nigel, and her angelic daughter, Chloe. Leslie leaves to cherish her wonderful and loving memories: her doting mother and father, Debra and Joseph Roberts of London, her devoted son, Captain Mark Johnson of Brisbane, Australia, two dear sisters, Glenda Townsend of Devon and Barbara Young of York; and her beloved granddaughter Thea, and a host of cousins, nieces, nephews, and friends.
(MORE)

OFFICIATING MINISTER (CONT'D)
Please rise as we proceed to Leslie's final resting place at Eastfield Cemetery in Peterborough. May God rest her soul. Amen.

The MINISTER glances into the pews and closes his Bible.

The REVEREND motions for the pallbearers to approach the powder-blue casket at the front of the sanctuary. The six pallbearers, including Leslie's son Mark and longtime family friend Clay, march toward the casket in a military-synchronized fashion, coming to rest as they assume their positions. Each of them grabs one of the golden handles in unison.

MARK JOHNSON
(mourning)
Ready, hoist!

Mark's voice echoes throughout the sanctuary.

Dressed in black suits and white gloves, the pallbearers slowly proceed to the vintage hearse. Nonstop outbursts of sobbing fill the sanctuary as heartache overpowers the room. Leslie's casket is shown one last time as it exits the sanctuary. The organist plays a poignant spiritual tribute while the hearse takes the casket away.

EXT. GUARDIAN ANGELS SPIRITUAL CHURCH - DAY

One by one, cars file out of the parking lot as the hearse leads the way to the cemetery under a light drizzle and an overcast sky. Clay trails behind the family car, tormented by the lack of closure from his last conversation with Leslie. The finality of her death sets in as he realizes he has lost a dear friend forever.

EXT. EASTFIELD CEMETERY - DAY

OFFICIATING MINISTER
(heavy-hearted)
We commit the body of our beloved Leslie Johnson to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

CLOSE UP ON CASKET AND FACES

As the casket is lowered into the ground, family and close friends gently toss flowers into Leslie's final resting place. Everyone soon departs for the Dolphin Inn for refreshments and fellowship, except Clay.

Tears blur his vision as he wipes his eyes, watching the long-stemmed white rose slip between his fingers and land softly on the casket below. He says his final goodbye to Leslie, but his last conversation with her weighs heavy on his mind.

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

INT. PETERBOROUGH CITY HOSPITAL - DAY

CLAY THOMPSON
(hopeful, tearful)
Leslie, I know you'll beat this.

Clay sits beside LESLIE (53, attractive, White, blue eyes), who is lying in a hospital bed. She turns to him and sighs.

LESLIE JOHNSON
(resigned to accept fate)
Don't worry about prayers, Clay.
(beat)
Sometimes bad things happen to good people.

Emotion sets in and her blue eyes become red from crying.

LESLIE JOHNSON (CONT'D)
There's one thing that I need from you. Just one thing.

Clay gets up.

CLAY THOMPSON
I'll do it. I swear. What is it?

Summoning the little strength she has, Leslie sits up in her hospital bed.

LESLIE JOHNSON
Promise me you will...

She grimaces in agony, tears spilling down her cheeks.

CLAY THOMPSON
(concerned, panicky)
Leslie, are you okay?

She shakes her head, struggling to curb the excruciating pain in her back and abdomen. As she presses the panic button, several dialysis alarms simultaneously go off. Multi-colored lights flash, and a robotic computer voice is activated.

ALARM SYSTEM
Warning, system safety check...
Warning, system safety check.

The HEAD NURSE on duty sprints into the room and renders assistance.

HEAD NURSE
(stressed)
Sir, I'm gonna have to ask you to leave now.

CLAY THOMPSON
But, but...

HEAD NURSE
Sir, please leave now. You can come back tomorrow during visiting hours.

Clay leaves her bedside and waves goodbye to his friend...for the last time.

END FLASHBACK

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. DOLPHIN INN - DAY

The mood at the funeral reception lightens a bit as guests mingle and line up to sign the guest book in honor of Leslie. Clay is last in line. Soft rock and Elvis songs play in the background, fulfilling Leslie's request only days before her passing.

MARK JOHNSON
So glad you could make it. I knew how close you and Mum were.

CLAY THOMPSON
I visited her the day before she passed, she fought a brave fight. If anyone could have beaten this, it would've been Leslie.

MARK JOHNSON
I wouldn't wish kidney failure on my worst enemy. It's the family curse, and it's hereditary.
(sighs, looking distant)
Well, she's with Chloe, Nigel, and her Nana now.

Clay hands Mark a few tissues from his breast pocket to wipe away the endless tears.

As he moves up in the queue, a lady in front of him turns around to make conversation.

MARGARET
Hi, I'm Margaret. I was Leslie's hairstylist. She had the most beautiful head of hair. It had so much body, with long flowing locks of curly jet-black hair. How did you know Leslie?

Margaret's question sends Clay back in time to his very first conversation with Leslie at a parent-teacher conference.

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

INT. ST PETERS SCHOOL, HUNTINGDON - DAY

LESLIE JOHNSON
Please take a seat, Mr. Thompson.

Leslie gently slides into her seat, exposing her proud baby bump.

CLAY THOMPSON
How far along are you?

LESLIE JOHNSON
Seven months and six days. Not that I'm counting. I'm going to call her Chloe. I've always wanted a girl, a mini-me. I have a son, and now he'll have a little sister he can love and protect. Anyway, I'd like to speak with you about your son.

CLAY THOMPSON
Uh oh, is he in trouble?

LESLIE JOHNSON
Oh, no. Nothing like that at all. I think he's troubled.

Clay crosses his arms.

CLAY THOMPSON
(defensive)
What makes you think that?

LESLIE JOHNSON
I overheard him confiding in Mark after class. Clay Jr. knows you're going to Bosnia, and he doesn't know where he's gonna stay while you're away. It's a lot to process for an eight-year-old who has only arrived in the country a few weeks ago.

CLAY THOMPSON
Hmm... I think he heard the message on the answering machine. It's a two-week assignment to Sarajevo. Maybe I'll ask Mark's family. It might be kinda odd because I haven't met them, but Clay spends a lot of time there and raves about the shepherd's pie Mark's mom makes.

Leslie slowly stands.

LESLIE JOHNSON
Well, I guess that settles it then.

CLAY THOMPSON
Settles what?

LESLIE JOHNSON
Mr. Thompson, I thought you knew. Mark is my son. Clay Jr. can stay with us. He's a very well-behaved kid. And like you said, it's only two weeks.
(folding her arms)
Mark just lost his dad a few months ago. Your son's friendship has really brought him out of his shell.

Clay stands and shakes Leslie's hand with gratitude.

CLAY THOMPSON
You have no idea how much this means. God is a miracle worker. Thank you, Ms. Johnson.

Leslie smiles.

LESLIE JOHNSON
Call me Leslie.

END FLASHBACK

INT. DOLPHIN INN - DAY

Clay returns from his trip down memory lane and re-engages with Margaret.

CLAY THOMPSON
That's where it all began. My son would have been here, but he's deployed.

As Clay signs the guest book, he overhears a conversation between two casual acquaintances, BARBARA and GRACE, who taught at Leslie's school.

BARBARA
What's the meaning of the white feathers on the back of the obituary?

GRACE
Leslie believed white feathers were a sign that the dead are always watching over the living.

Barbara scrunches her forehead in thought.

BARBARA
Hmm, interesting. I never knew she even had a daughter. That's news to me.

GRACE
Yeah. The baby died shortly after birth in the recovery room under mysterious circumstances. Leslie was absolutely gutted; she never got over it. It tormented her till the day she died. Poor thing.

Mark approaches Clay, his eyes bloodshot and weary as he holds two glasses of Prosecco. He offers Clay a glass and proposes a toast.

MARK JOHNSON
(sorrow, empty)
Here's to Mum, the best mother any son could ever ask for. I would give anything to hear her voice, just one more time. I miss you, Mum. Cheers.

DISSOLVE TO:

SUPER: SIX YEARS LATER

INT. THE BRITISH HEART FOUNDATION CHARITY SHOP - DAY

Clay impatiently waits in the customer service queue, hoping for the staff to return from lunch. Behind him, a restless young couple keeps checking their watches.

CLAY THOMPSON
All I want is to arrange a pickup for my old couch. It's been sitting in my backyard for three days, and it's gonna rain soon.

The young man, PAUL, chimes in.

PAUL
We just want to drop off this briefcase and be done with it.

He hoists a large, tattered black case onto the counter, releasing a small plume of dust into the air. His wife wanders off to browse, leaving her husband in the queue.

PAUL (CONT'D)
We're new around here, and we just bought our first home. I think the previous owner died. My wife says the house is haunted, ha! The house was completely empty, but we found this old briefcase in the loft. We live in Alconbury Village, near the chapel. It's the old Victorian-style house. The one with the Gothic arches and the stained glass windows.

Clay strokes his mustache.

CLAY THOMPSON
I know that house, 44 Ermine Street. In fact, I know it quite well. It finally sold, huh? It was on the market for quite some time. Buyers kept backing out at the last minute. That house had been in the family for almost 50 years, if not longer.

PAUL
So you know the family?

Clay sighs.

CLAY THOMPSON
Yes. Very well, in fact. I spent a few holidays in that home many years ago.

Paul smiles.

PAUL
If you would be so kind as to return these belongings to a next of kin, we would be so grateful. We didn't have the heart to just chuck it in the bin. My name is Paul.
(pauses and points to his left)
And there's my wife, Tina, over there by the antiques.

Clay nods in acknowledgment, and leaves with the briefcase. Though curiosity tugs at him, he decides to wait until he gets home to uncover its contents and satisfy his growing inquisitiveness.

EXT. CLAY'S RESIDENCE - DAY

After parking in the driveway, he stares at the briefcase secured by faded leather straps. It has a strong and discernible presence, and a moldy smell wafts from it.

INT. CLAY'S RESIDENCE - DAY

Clay walks into the house with the briefcase in hand, placing it in the middle of the living room, right in front of the flickering fireplace.

He circles the case several times, his curiosity mounting, until a sudden knock at the door startles him.

When he opens the door, he is greeted by two members of a local church who are spreading the gospel.

MALE EVANGELIST
Good afternoon, sir. Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?

Before Clay can respond, a black cat with white paws darts inside the house. He is distracted by the cat purring and nudging his ankles.

CLAY THOMPSON
As a matter of fact, I have.

The young woman's eyes light up with excitement as she fixates on the cat.

FEMALE NEW CONVERT
Oh my, she's so adorable. Just look at her.
(stroking cat)
Oh dear, what happened to your tail? Its tail is kinked at the tip.
(turns to Clay)
Do you think animals have souls? I think anything capable of giving love must have a soul. In ancient times, cats with white paws were believed to be able to protect against evil spirits.

The older gentleman huffs in annoyance.

MALE EVANGELIST
Rebecca!

He then tips his hat and addresses Clay.

MALE EVANGELIST (CONT'D)
G'day to you, sir.

He then scolds the new convert as they walk out of view.

Clay shuts the door and marvels at the affectionate cat. They bond immediately. He attempts to feed it, but she rejects the food.

He picks up his newfound friend.

CLAY THOMPSON
You're too beautiful to be a stray. Your eyes are...humanlike.
(MORE)

CLAY THOMPSON (CONT'D)
Where do you come from? Where's your home? What's your name?

The cat follows him into the living room. He glances at the cat and then back at the case.

CLAY THOMPSON (CONT'D)
Should I open it?

The cat tiptoes toward the case, gently headbutting it several times while purring.

With a sense of growing anticipation, Clay slowly unfastens the straps.

As he opens the case, its presence is undeniable. He carefully retrieves the contents one by one: an old photo album, a pregnancy journal, a diary, newspaper clippings from the 1920s about the family home, and an earlier version of an Android mobile phone.

CLAY THOMPSON (CONT'D)
(while reading the newspaper clippings)
The house, built in 1926, faced construction delays after excavators discovered human remains dating back to the late 1700s. While local authorities asserted that all remains had been recovered for reburial, some contractors challenged the accuracy of these claims. The house was destroyed by fire in 1928, but was rebuilt later that year.

CUT TO:

INT. 44 ERMINE STREET - NIGHT (1928)

A drunken HUSBAND stumbles to bed with his WIFE by his side.

His lit cigar slowly tumbles from his hand, igniting the carpet. Flames engulf the room as the inferno spreads throughout the house.

CUT TO:

EXT. 44 ERMINE STREET - NIGHT (1928)

AERIAL SHOT: The house ablaze, flames shooting into the night sky. The structure collapses.

BACK TO:

INT. CLAY'S RESIDENCE - DAY

Clay frowns at the clippings.

CLAY THOMPSON
What am I supposed to do with this?

He opens the photo album and flips through the pages. The album contains photos of Leslie and her sisters growing up from an early age.

In many of the pictures of her, there is a black cat with identical markings to Clay's newfound friend in the background.

One of the last pictures shows Leslie holding her cat with a bandage around the tip of its tail. The inscription reads, "Leslie aged 6 and Tori."

The last photo is a Polaroid of Leslie cradling Chloe immediately after delivery. Leslie is on top of the world, and her smile screams unbridled love.

A whirlwind of thoughts and emotions fill Clay's mind as he reminisces about his close friend Leslie. At the same time, he becomes suspicious of his feline friend. He stares at the cat.

CLAY THOMPSON (CONT'D)
You know, you had me at...meow, but please don't be some kind of time-traveling ghost cat.

Clay points his finger at her.

CLAY THOMPSON (CONT'D)
Okay, here's the deal, house rules. No scratching furniture. No pooping in the house. And there's one more.
(beat)
No paranormal bullshit. No shape-shifting, no demonic voices...none of that. Do we have an understanding...Tori?

Clay's new pet climbs in his lap and blinks before stretching out with a huge yawn.

INT. CLAY'S RESIDENCE - DAY

MONTAGE: For the next few weeks, Tori greets Clay at the front door every day when he returns from work.

However, on this particular day, he finds it odd that Tori isn't there to greet him.

Clay walks past the living room briefly and stops in his tracks. He immediately backtracks.

CLAY THOMPSON (V.O.)
Whoa. Why is the briefcase in front of the fireplace? I know I left it in the study.

Tori sits right next to it, her tail whipping the case back and forth. Her eyes are slightly squinted, and her ears are folded back. She hisses at Clay. She then emits a haunting, oscillating growl.

He is drawn toward the case. He drops his keys on the floor and approaches the case with caution. Tori watches from her peripheral vision, still growling.

With a steady hand, he reaches inside and retrieves the Android phone, which activates the moment he touches it.

Clay acts obsessed with the phone as he browses through the stored contacts in Messenger.

He notices Leslie is online. Instantly, he falls into a trance-like state, as if he is on autopilot. He connects the call with Leslie.

A loud, deafening sound of white noise blares into his ear, causing Clay to recoil in discomfort. The phone starts to ring, and he hears a faint voice answer.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN (V.O.)
Hello?

Clay questions his state of mind. He can't believe what he's hearing.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN (V.O.)
Hello?

Clay cautiously places the phone to his ear. Across from him, Tori rapidly whips her tail as she observes him.

CLAY THOMPSON
(perplexed, confused)
Leslie, is that you?

LESLIE JOHNSON (V.O.)
Clay, why are you calling me on this number?

Clay snaps out of his daze.

CLAY THOMPSON
Leslie, you're back?

LESLIE JOHNSON (V.O.)
I never left.

CLAY THOMPSON
So...you're alive?

LESLIE JOHNSON (V.O.)
Yes, I'm alive for now, but I'm slowly dying. Between kidney failure and cancer, one of 'em is sure to take me out.

Clay paces the room with the phone glued to his ear, his mood shifting from utter confusion to anger.

CLAY THOMPSON
So, you're dying. Again? Is that right?

Clay scoffs.

LESLIE JOHNSON (V.O.)
Clay, where's your compassion? What's gotten into you?

CLAY THOMPSON
Hang on a second, my head is literally about to explode.

LESLIE JOHNSON (V.O.)
I honestly thought you accepted my apologies during lunch last week. Obviously, I was mistaken. I don't want to fall out with you, but you're really starting to upset me.

CLAY THOMPSON
Lunch last week? Apologies for what?

LESLIE JOHNSON (V.O.)
I was late for your wedding, and I missed your vows. I'm so sorry. I don't know why you decided to marry on your 55th birthday. Maybe you wanted to make sure you'd never forget your anniversary.

Clay struggles to make sense of the conversation, feeling utterly lost.

CLAY THOMPSON
(puzzled)
Leslie, I'm not married. I'm not even in a relationship. And I just turned 53 in January. What are you talking about?

LESLIE JOHNSON (V.O.)
I have a picture of you and your beautiful bride, Sylvia, on my coffee table. It was the most beautiful wedding ever. I'm glad you found your soulmate. I keep telling you, you need to learn her language and study the Ghanaian culture. That's just my two cents from a friend.

Clay is disturbed by the level of detail in this bizarre tale.

CLAY THOMPSON
Leslie?

LESLIE JOHNSON (V.O.)
Yes?

CLAY THOMPSON
What day is it?

LESLIE JOHNSON (V.O.)
It's Wednesday, February 15th.

Clay sighs.

CLAY THOMPSON
Okay, what year is it?

Leslie laughs.

LESLIE JOHNSON (V.O.)
Are you serious?

CLAY THOMPSON
Please, just tell me what year it is.

LESLIE JOHNSON (V.O.)
It's 2028, why?

CLAY THOMPSON
(getting frustrated)
Leslie, hear me out. It's not 2028 here. It's 2026. We buried you six years ago. I have your obituary in my study. Something is not making sense.

LESLIE JOHNSON (V.O.)
I don't know what to tell you, but I'm very much alive right now. If I were dead, I wouldn't be chatting with you on the phone. I'd be out haunting the living shit out of my ex. What a narcissistic cheating bastard.

CLAY THOMPSON
I have your diary. The first page talks about when you met Nigel for the first time when you were 13.

LESLIE JOHNSON (V.O.)
(increasingly concerned)
That's impossible. All that was destroyed in the fire.

Leslie seems just as confused as Clay.

LESLIE JOHNSON (V.O.)
(bewildered)
How is this possible? Okay, I believe you. Let's figure this out. This has happened for some reason. Let's be rational about this.

CLAY THOMPSON
(perplexed)
There's nothing, nothing rational about this. I can't even repeat this to anyone. How are you in the future when you don't even exist in the present?

LESLIE JOHNSON (V.O.)
Clay, it's February 15, 2026, right? The fire happened on February 25, 2026. It was an electrical fire that killed a young couple. I think it was a faulty fridge or something. There was another fire in the house almost 100 years earlier, and a couple died in that fire too. Remember the Channel 4 documentary Real Haunted Houses, when they interviewed the couple just before they bought that house? I think it aired about two years ago. We watched it together, remember?

CLAY THOMPSON
(disbelief)
Leslie, that hasn't happened yet. I don't think they finished filming. But I met the couple. They led me to you. The wife thinks the house is haunted. Do you believe in ghosts?

Clay shakes his head, feeling conflicted for asking a dead person if they believe in ghosts.

CLAY THOMPSON (CONT'D)
(to himself)
This is nuts!

LESLIE JOHNSON (V.O.)
I grew up with ghosts in that house. I remember my sisters and I got all dressed up for Halloween. I think I was ten at the time. When we went downstairs, every room was completely trashed. It looked like a crime scene. When we went back upstairs, same thing...every room was turned upside down. What I remember most was the stench...it smelled like rotting flesh. Something upset them, not sure what it was. My mum made us swear to never speak of what happened that evening.

Leslie sighs.

LESLIE JOHNSON (V.O.)
Clay, if I leave this earth before you -- and I probably will -- I'll send you a gentle sign that I'm okay and I'm watching over you. I promise you.
(urgent)
Wait. If it's February 15th, you need to see your mom, Brenda, in Georgia right away.

CLAY THOMPSON
I have tickets to visit her on Mother's Day.

LESLIE JOHNSON (V.O.)
(pleading)
No, you have to get there by Friday, please?

CLAY THOMPSON
You're scaring me. Okay, I'm booking tonight.

Clay takes a deep breath.

CLAY THOMPSON (CONT'D)
Leslie, one more thing. The day before you died, you asked me to promise you something, but you never told me what it was. What was it?

There is an extended moment of silence.

LESLIE JOHNSON (V.O.)
(solemn)
That could only be one thing. Find Chloe.

Clay grips the phone.

CLAY THOMPSON
(saddened)
Leslie, Chloe died. We attended her funeral, remember?

LESLIE JOHNSON (V.O.)
(adamant)
She's not dead. She's out there somewhere, lost. Find her...for me, please? I've got to get ready for a hospital appointment. Bye for now.

INT. CLAY'S RESIDENCE - LATER

Clay has developed a plan, but he will have to call in a few favors.

He dials a number on his phone.

ALLISON (V.O.)
Alconbury Housing Compliance Office, this is Allison, how can I help?

SPLIT SCREEN:

CLAY THOMPSON
Good morning, Allison. It's been a long time. How are you?

ALLISON
(jovial)
I'm surviving. One day at a time. You know how it is. Okay, let me guess, you've finally come to your senses and want me back? Is that it?

CLAY THOMPSON
It's a little more complicated than that. I need a big favor. Can we talk about it over dinner tonight?

ALLISON
Hmm, where?

CLAY THOMPSON
How about the new Japanese restaurant that just opened in Huntingdon? Say about 6:30?

ALLISON
Hmm, I guess I could squeeze you in. Ciao, dahling.

END SPLIT SCREEN

INT. CLAY'S RESIDENCE - DAY

The sound of the doorbell sends Clay into sprint mode.

CLAY THOMPSON
Harvey, glad you could make it on short notice. Please have a seat. I realize you're always booked solid, but I need to ask you a favor.

HARVEY sets his electrician's toolbox beside the front door and follows Clay into the kitchen. Once Harvey takes a seat, Clay fires up the kettle.

HARVEY
I can't make any promises, but what is it?

CLAY THOMPSON
Are you familiar with the Victorian house in Alconbury Village, next to the chapel?

Clay hands Harvey a cup of tea.

Harvey nods.

HARVEY
Of course. I know its history very well.

CLAY THOMPSON
History? What history?

Harvey leans forward and clasps his hands together on the table.

HARVEY
(straight-faced)
About 100 years ago, Isaiah and Anika Roberts were the first owners. Isaiah owned a couple of cigar and perfume shops on the high street. Apparently, he was an abusive and jealous man. His wife, on the other hand, was a beauty queen from Mumbai, India, as the story goes.

CUT TO:

INT. ROBERTS' HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT (1926)

ISAIAH prepares for a black-tie event, shaving while a cigar dangles from his lips.

ANIKA, fresh from the shower, dabs perfume behind her ears and clasps a diamond necklace around her neck.

She lays out a beautiful turquoise sequined ballgown on the bed.

MOMENTS LATER

During a heated argument, Isaiah snatches the necklace from around Anika's neck. He grabs the gown and storms downstairs, ignoring Anika’s pleas.

They argue in front of the fireplace. He holds the gown for a fleeting moment, then tosses it into the roaring flames -- the diamond necklace hidden within its folds.

As the fire consumes the fabric, he exhales a slow puff of cigar smoke, letting it drift in her direction, a smirk on his face.

BACK TO:

INT. CLAY'S RESIDENCE - DAY

Harvey sips his tea and continues.

HARVEY
People in the village say they never left the house.

CLAY THOMPSON
What do you mean they never left the house?

HARVEY
I inspected the property for the new owners a few weeks ago. As I approached, I could hear someone playing Ragtime music inside.

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

INT./EXT. ROBERTS' HOUSE - DAY

SPLIT SCREEN - HARVEY APPROACHES THE HOUSE/ANIKA AND ISAIAH'S DANCE MACABRE

Harvey approaches the house.

Upstairs, Anika’s apparition applies her lipstick, while below, Isaiah’s apparition increases the volume of the phonograph. The eerie melody fills the space.

Anika emerges atop the staircase -- turquoise sequined gown shimmering, diamond necklace catching the light. She is radiant.

Dressed in a white tux, Isaiah stands at the base of the stairwell holding a cigar. He is momentarily disarmed by her beauty. He extends a hand.

Harvey unlatches the metal gate and steps onto the path leading to the house.

Anika descends gracefully, each step measured, deliberate. Upon reaching Isaiah, she places her hand in his. They share a lingering kiss before launching into a waltz -- fluid, passionate -- moving in perfect synchrony to the haunting music.

Harvey enters the house.

The apparitions vanish. He never sees them.

END SPLIT SCREEN

END FLASHBACK

BACK TO:

INT. CLAY'S RESIDENCE - DAY

Harvey sips his tea and continues.

HARVEY
As I climbed the stairs, I smelled a strong cigar odor, but when I got to the top, I could smell a lady’s perfume. It was slightly pungent. The music continued playing but there was no one in the house. I just went on with my job.

Clay is befuddled.

CLAY THOMPSON
Did you finish the job?

HARVEY
Yes, I did.

CLAY THOMPSON
Why did you stay?

Harvey grins.

HARVEY
Ghosts are harmless. That wasn't my first encounter.

Clay scratches his head.

CLAY THOMPSON
That's nuts. I would have been gone...so fast. I knew the previous owners and spent some time at the house, but I never noticed anything strange.

HARVEY
Channel 4 just finished filming there.

CLAY THOMPSON
Did they capture any paranormal activity on film?

Harvey shrugs his shoulders.

HARVEY
I guess we'll see when they air it next month.

Clay regroups and gets back to business. He retrieves an "internal use only" electrical certificate from a yellow folder and passes it to Harvey.

After studying it closely, Harvey hands it back.

HARVEY (CONT'D)
I performed this inspection. This is the original. How did you get this?

CLAY THOMPSON
I had to call in a favor.

Clay makes his case.

CLAY THOMPSON (CONT'D)
Can you and your team remedy all the faults in the report and bring it into compliance?

HARVEY
I'm surprised the sale went through. But yes, I can do it, but it will take two days. When do you need it sorted?

CLAY THOMPSON
I need it completed by Tuesday.

Harvey almost chokes on his tea.

HARVEY
Impossible. Can't do it, matey. I'm sorry. I'm chock-a-block until mid-March.

Clay reaches for an unsealed envelope from the same folder and slides it across the table to Harvey.

Harvey removes his glasses and counts the bills, a smirk appearing on his face.

HARVEY (CONT'D)
I guess the real estate market has been good to you. I can start first thing in the morning. Who should I say paid for the work?

CLAY THOMPSON
Hmm, tell them the work was paid for by a prospective buyer but the deal fell through.

INT. HARTSFIELD-JACKSON ATLANTA INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT - DAY

CLAY THOMPSON
Hey, Sis. I'm coming out now. Can we stop by Cracker Barrel on the way to the house? I'm seriously craving a Smokehouse breakfast with buttered grits on the side.

Ping! A new voicemail notification pops up on Clay's screen. He presses play and listens.

HARVEY (V.O.)
This is Harvey. Job done. The property has a clean bill of health. I'll email you the report. Enjoy time with your mum.

Clay is relieved. He speeds through the "Nothing to Declare" corridor to greet his sister.

INT. CRACKER BARREL - DAY

Clay polishes off a hearty breakfast and sips his sweet tea, feeling gluttonous. Sitting across from him is his sister, MELANIE (mid-40s, Black woman).

MELANIE
I took Mom to the doctor yesterday, like you asked, and everything looks good for her age. In fact, they recommended taking her off some medication. I told you there was nothing to worry about. She's good.

Clay is relieved.

CLAY THOMPSON
Okay. Can you log into the Ring app? I wanna see what she's doing.

Melanie opens the app to calm her brother's concerns.

MELANIE
Are the plans we made for Mother's Day still on? We've been planning this for a while now.

Clay smiles and nods.

CLAY THOMPSON
Of course. Also, thank you for keeping this a secret. You know how much I love surprising Mom. Tomorrow is Saturday. What's on the agenda?

Melanie doesn't know what to make of Clay's spur-of-the-moment trip home. Her suspicions subside once her brother's mind is put at rest about their mother's well-being.

INT. MELANIE'S RESIDENCE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

When they arrive home, their mother is fast asleep on the couch.

MELANIE
(whispering)
Shhh, she's sleeping. Let's not wake her. Your room is ready. I'm going to bed now, but I'll see you in the morning, big brother. It's good to see you. Love you.

Both Melanie and Clay tiptoe through the dark living room. He smiles ear to ear seeing his mother resting so peacefully.

INT. MELANIE'S RESIDENCE - BEDROOM - MORNING

Clay is awakened by footsteps coming from his sister's bedroom. He rolls over and closes his eyes but soon reopens them when he hears the crash of glass shattering.

Melanie's wail pierces the silence.

MELANIE
Clay! Mom won't wake up!

His sister falls to her knees, cupping her mouth with both hands.

INT. MELANIE'S RESIDENCE - LIVING ROOM - MORNING

Clay's stomach clenches as he sprints into the room. His mother lies still, her face serene yet unnervingly pale. He leans over his mother, pressing two trembling fingers to her neck. When he struggles to find a pulse, he quickly calls the paramedics.

EXT. MELANIE'S RESIDENCE - ESTATE ENTRANCE - MORNING

A speeding ambulance with blaring sirens and flashing lights is waved into the complex by security.

CLAY THOMPSON
(worried, scared)
Paramedics are on their way.

Melanie grabs Clay's hand.

MELANIE
(panicky)
Let's pray.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. LONDON HEATHROW AIRPORT - DAY

Clay quickly breezes through the biometric booth and makes a beeline to the arrivals where NEAL, his courier, awaits him.

Clay is unusually quiet and distant, which creates a cool and abrupt encounter when Neal offers to collect Clay's garment bag.

INT. CAR - DAY

The first 45 minutes of the journey are utterly silent.

CLAY THOMPSON
(decompressing)
Neal, I apologize for my aloofness. My visit back home was extremely traumatic. My mother...I watched helplessly as life was escaping her body. Then...

Neal is intrigued as he maintains sporadic eye contact in the rear view mirror.

NEAL
Then...what?

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

INT. MELANIE'S RESIDENCE - MORNING

Two PARAMEDICS kneel beside Brenda, working with urgent precision. One compresses her chest in steady, calculated motions, while the other monitors her vitals, adjusting the oxygen mask.

MALE PARAMEDIC
(sweating profusely)
Breathe! Breathe! Come on, Mrs. Lewis!

FEMALE PARAMEDIC
(stressed, panicky)
I've got no pulse!

Both paramedics look at each other with defeat.

MALE PARAMEDIC
(resigned to accept no sign of life)
Mr. Thompson, I'm afraid...

A strong rumbling emerges from underneath the floorboards, causing hanging pictures to fall off the wall and dishes to rattle in the cupboards.

MELANIE
(momentarily distracted by the thunderous sound and jolting in the room)
Clay! What's happening? I think it's an earthquake!

A strong gust of wind blasts through the open door, causing it to slam against the wall.

CLAY
(turning to the paramedics)
Keep going! Don't stop! Please!

Howling, turbulent wind shatters two windows, sending everything in its path spiraling up towards the ceiling. There are three distinct funnels tearing through the house.

FEMALE PARAMEDIC
(fearful, yelling over the ruckus)
Mr. Thompson! I'm sorry! So sorry!

MALE PARAMEDIC
(fearful, yelling)
It's an earthquake, hunker down!

Laptops, sofa cushions and debris swirl around the room at high rates of speed.

CLAY
(trying to be strong)
Melanie! Let's pray!

Melanie and Clay kneel and pray. Melanie becomes trance-like, speaking in tongues.

The three funnels gradually converge into one with greater strength, which makes a path toward Brenda. As the raging funnel draws closer, Brenda's pale complexion returns to its normal vibrant tone. The funnel dies out as it reaches Brenda's right side. Her eyes flutter open and she awakens.

Clay and Melanie smother their mother with hugs and kisses.

END FLASHBACK

BACK TO:

INT. CAR - DAY

CLAY
The logical part of my mind pays tribute to the paramedics, but in my heart, I know there was an intervention, not of this world. I can't really explain it, but all I know is Brenda Augustine Lewis is alive.

Neal remains speechless, amazed by the story.

As Clay's journey home comes to an end, he engages in some light conversation.

CLAY THOMPSON
Anything newsworthy happening in town?

Neal cracks a smile.

NEAL
Well, there's a Wendy's grand opening in Huntingdon, and Channel 4's Real Haunted Houses is airing next month. It's featuring the house on 44 Ermine Street.

CLAY THOMPSON
(mildly enthused)
Do you think it's haunted, Neal?

Neal adjusts his rear view mirror to get a better look at Clay.

NEAL
(stoic)
It's the land. During the Gordon Riots in the Summer of 1780, angry mobs descended on a farm offering refuge for catholics, killings dozens.

CUT TO:

QUICK FLASHBACK/MONTAGE: An angry mob on horseback wielding torches mount a midnight raid on the safe house. Makeshift gallows rise in the darkness. Bound captives await their fate. Lifeless bodies are cast into freshly dug pits -- some set ablaze, creating a grim bonfire. Screams echo throughout the night. The mob sings songs, reveling in their hate, as they set fire to the farm and the gallows after the final hanging.

NEAL (V.O.)
Heretics and atheists were hanged and burned alive on those grounds. They were denied proper burials, and their bodies were dumped in shallow graves across the lot. In some cases, entire families lost their lives that night. The land is cursed by Satan himself. To die there is a one-way ticket to hell.

END FLASHBACK/MONTAGE

BACK TO:

WOOOOSH! A car approaches at a high rate of speed from behind, forcing Neal to abruptly swerve to the left and pull over.

Clay immediately looks back.

WHOOSH!

CLAY THOMPSON
What's going on? There's another car right behind us. It looks like a police car. I can see the flashing lights.

Neal shakes his head.

NEAL
That's not a police car; it's a doctor's car. There must be a medical emergency in town.

CLAY THOMPSON
(wary)
We will pass 44 Ermine Street on the way, right?

NEAL
Yes, mate.

Just then, the blaring sirens of fire engines echo in the vicinity.

Clay frantically attempts to call Harvey, but the call goes straight to voicemail.

Tall shooting flames can be seen from three blocks away. As Neal turns the corner, the police officer diverting traffic turns him away.

Neal parks in Clay's driveway, and Clay hurries out.

INT. CLAY'S RESIDENCE - DAY

Within minutes, Clay has the local news on. He sits in his La-Z-Boy recliner and makes repeated unanswered calls to Harvey.

The news reporter on the scene is interviewing a neighbor who had been flying a drone overhead when the fire broke out. The drone footage plays in the background while the reporter provides commentary.

NEWS REPORTER (ON TV)
Now, as you can see, right there next to the house is a wooden shed. Something in that shed ignited and engulfed the entire house. It happened so fast, I have never seen anything like it. And there you have it, Cambridgeshire news. Back to you at the station.

Clay frantically searches for the briefcase. He desperately wants to make contact with Leslie. He always keeps it under the computer desk in the study, never moving it. He searches every single nook and cranny of the house, except for the loft, where it remains undiscovered. The only evidence he has proving the case existed is a single photo of Leslie and Chloe in the delivery room from 26 years ago.

As Clay leans back in his recliner, Tori jumps into his lap and purrs as if to soothe his sadness and guilt. Clay grabs a Bible tucked in the side pocket of his chair.

A red ribbon marks a page in the Bible with yellow highlighted text. He is drawn to the scripture. He reads it out loud to himself.

CLAY THOMPSON
(trance like)
Matthew 12:44-45: "When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there."

CUT TO:

EXT. 44 ERMINE STREET - NIGHT

LOW AERIAL SHOT

Light fog. Smoldering ashes and crimson rubble, with a backdrop of haunting Ragtime music.

Haunting voices whisper in low volumes, followed by the sounds of weeping.

We see a TIME-LAPSE reconstruction of the house. The haunting voices continue, increasing in intensity.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT./EXT. 44 ERMINE STREET - NIGHT

The house is now completely reconstructed, with a "For Sale" sign out front. We pass through the interior of the house. The whispers and weeping fade to silence.

OVER BLACK:

TRAPPED SOUL (V.O.)
(young woman, Old English, British accent)
Lord, have mercy on our souls.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CLAY'S RENTAL PROPERTY - DAY

Clay waits for a prospective tenant to view his four-bedroom, two-story property.

It has been vacant for almost four months, and he is eager to finally rent it. He hears a car pull into the driveway, so he peers through the upstairs blinds.

A stunning Black lady dressed in a form-fitting grey skirt with a matching top gracefully emerges from a silver Toyota. She has shoulder-length dreads that complement her cocoa-tanned, heart-shaped face.

CLAY THOMPSON
(speaking to himself)
Hmm, maybe I need a lodger instead of a renter.

He hurries downstairs to greet his 2:30 appointment. To inspire confidence and make a good impression, he always meets his clients dressed in business casual.

Clay opens the door and greets the woman, AKOSUA (early 40s, absolutely stunning Black woman), with a welcoming smile.

AKOSUA
Is this 138 Derwent Close?

CLAY THOMPSON
Yes, it is. And I'm Clay. Please come on in.

AKOSUA
Hello, I'm Akosua. It's a pleasure to meet you.

As she wanders through the house, she first notices the light-grey porcelain flooring that complements the sky-blue painted walls. She is equally impressed by the soft cove lighting and the light tan carpeted stairs leading to the second floor. A faint hint of cotton diffuser oil fills the air as she ventures further inside.

CLAY THOMPSON
Please take a seat. Can I make you a cup of tea or coffee, Akoshua?

Clay realizes he butchered her name. He is embarrassed.

AKOSUA
Why yes, tea, please. Earl Grey if you have some?

Clay is quick to accommodate.

AKOSUA (CONT'D)
Hmm, I detect an American accent. Maybe Chicago?

He pours the boiling water into the cup.

CLAY THOMPSON
Close, very close. I hail from Detroit.

He notes her ring finger when she lifts her cup of tea. He childishly imagines placing a diamond ring on her barren finger. They engage in light conversation over tea.

AKOSUA
This is a beautiful home. So tell me...why does a single man require such a large house?

Clay chuckles.

CLAY THOMPSON
I was a single parent. My eldest, Stephanie, is a registered nurse living in California. And my son, Clay Jr., is a software engineer. He lives not far from here. My kids mean the world to me, and we're very close.

AKOSUA
Hmm, may I see some pictures?

Clay whips out his phone and swipes to a photo of a recent family gathering.

CLAY THOMPSON
...and these are my grandchildren, Tandy, Nischa, DJ, and Elijah.

AKOSUA
You have a beautiful family. Since we are playing show and tell, here's a photo of my family. This was taken at my oldest daughter's wedding last year. This is Constance and her husband, Issac. This one is Juanita. She's my youngest, and my one and only son, Ernest.

CLAY THOMPSON
You must be very proud of them. They look so happy.

AKOSUA
Yes, I am. Ernest is working in London for an international financial firm. Constance is a pharmacist, and Juanita is in her last year at Uni, where she's studying economics. I'm a part-time empty nester now, living in Peterborough. God has been good.

CLAY THOMPSON
Shall we make a toast?

Clay raises his cup of tea.

AKOSUA
Sure.

CLAY THOMPSON
To long life and prosperity.

AKOSUA
And...to destiny.

They clink their cups.

She stands up and approaches the patio sliding doors, fixating her gaze on the gazebo secluded in the corner of the yard beside the outdoor spa.

Clay joins her, standing by her side as he sips his tea.

CLAY THOMPSON
(politely prying)
So tell me, why would a single woman require such a large house? If I may ask?

AKOSUA
I'm so sorry. I should have made that clear over the phone. It's not me who is interested in renting. I'm an agent for companies that relocate their employees abroad. I just recommend suitable properties. Ultimately, it's the client's decision. It's a good deal for the landlord because the housing expenses are paid by the employer.

Clay is slightly discouraged. He was hoping for an opportunity to connect with this mystery woman who completely disarmed him. He regroups and slowly returns from his fantasy world.

CLAY THOMPSON
(discouraged)
Oh, I see. Sure. Well, let me show you the rest of the house.

At the end of the viewing, he is disappointed that he let a brief encounter impact him so profoundly.

INT. CLAY'S RESIDENCE - DAY

Clay anxiously awaits the arrival of his son, Clay Jr., and Elijah, his grandson. He peers through the kitchen window in anticipation.

CLAY JR.
Hello, hello, hello!

CLAY JR. (33, bald, clean shaven) enters with ELIJAH (8, mixed race), who loosens his backpack and lets it drop to the floor.

ELIJAH
Hi, Grandad.

Greetings are followed by a group hug. The elder Clay is excited to break bread with his family.

INT. CLAY'S RESIDENCE - KITCHEN - EVENING

Shortly after dinner, Elijah asks to be excused.

ELIJAH
Dad, can I play Xbox in the living room?

Clay Jr. smiles and nods with approval, and Elijah runs from the room.

CLAY JR.
Dad, I didn't know you had a cat. She's beautiful. Her eyes are almost humanlike. Have you noticed that?

Clay smiles.

CLAY THOMPSON
It's part of her charm. Her name is Tori. She's very intuitive for a cat. She definitely has a calming presence about her. She's stuck with me now.

CLAY JR.
Dad, me and sis have been talking.

CLAY THOMPSON
About what?

CLAY JR.
Well, we know you're lonely sometimes, and it's our wish that one day you'd settle down. You've had it rough on the dating scene since you and Mom split.

Clay stares at the ceiling, reminiscing.

CLAY THOMPSON
Yes, you're right, but dating wasn't all bad. Kay was a decent person.

CLAY JR.
(adamant)
Dad! No, Dad, she really was not. I remember vividly. Remember, she attacked you that morning. Six stitches. Six!

Clay Jr. counts on his fingers.

CLAY THOMPSON
Yeah, but...

CLAY JR.
But there's more. Remember when she confessed that she shot her last boyfriend...in the groin?

CLAY THOMPSON
Yes, but she beat that in court.
(exhaling)
Looking back, I guess you're right. Maybe I dodged a bullet.

CLAY JR.
No, Dad, you dodged a nuclear detonation. Money sometimes makes people cray-cray. I think she thought she could buy love with the millions she inherited. I'm glad you walked away from that situation.

CLAY THOMPSON
All of my friends thought I was the one who was cray-cray for leaving her. But I knew she wasn't the one.

Clay closes his eyes and lets out a big sigh.

CLAY THOMPSON (CONT'D)
I did meet someone the other day.

Clay Jr. leans in.

CLAY JR.
I'm listening. Is she nice?

CLAY THOMPSON
I can't explain it. We only met briefly, but her presence was so profound and extraordinary. She's absolutely stunning, but it was her smile that sucked me in. She had a slight accent too.
(MORE)

CLAY THOMPSON (CONT'D)
Unfortunately, I kept fumbling with her name -- it was embarrassing. She never corrected me. She had this intoxicating perfume that robbed me of my common sense and logic.

CLAY JR.
Tell me more.

CLAY THOMPSON
(reminiscing)
During our conversation, I wanted to interject and say, "This was not by chance we met. I could spend the rest of my life looking for a queen and never find one more disarming than you."

CLAY JR.
(annoyed)
Dad, you're not a teenager -- you're 53. This isn't rational. You always taught me and Steph to be critical thinkers. This makes no sense.

CLAY THOMPSON
She said she would be in touch if the deal went through, but that was last week. So I guess it wasn't meant to be. Perhaps it was fantasy.

After a re-attack on Sunday's crab boil, Clay Jr. relays the latest news about his recent presentation to INTERPOL.

CLAY JR.
(excited)
They loved it. I think I might be looking at a three-year contract. It's an AI-supported tool that will expand capabilities and reduce costs. The next time you're over at the house, I'll show you.

CLAY THOMPSON
(beaming)
I'm very proud of you. You've done well, very well.

Clay slumps back in his chair, deep in thought.

CLAY THOMPSON (CONT'D)
I'm digging into something, and I need your expertise.

Clay Jr. rises to clear the table and wash the dishes.

CLAY JR.
Sure, Dad. What is it?

CLAY THOMPSON
I need help. I'm looking for information on Chloe.

Clay Jr. turns off the running tap and turns around slowly.

CLAY JR.
(confused)
Chloe...who?

Clay hesitates for a second before replying.

CLAY THOMPSON
Chloe Johnson.

Clay Jr. wipes his hands on the dish towel.

CLAY JR.
(giving him the side eye)
Dad, I know where Chloe Johnson is. She's buried next to her mom in Eastfield. We attended her funeral. Remember?

Clay stands, eager to explain. He is put off by his son's tone of voice.

CLAY THOMPSON
Okay, hear me out. What if she's alive? What if she's out there somewhere, lost in the world.

CLAY JR.
(annoyed)
Dad, you are trippin'!

Clay is agitated by his son's attitude.

CLAY THOMPSON
(assertive)
As long as you are in my house, you will show some respect, young man!

Clay Jr. scowls as he shakes his head.

CLAY JR.
Elijah!

His son pokes his head in the doorway.

ELIJAH
Yes, Dad?

CLAY JR.
Collect your things and tell Granddad goodbye, now!

Clay Jr. then turns to his father.

CLAY JR. (CONT'D)
Dad, I don't know what's happened to you lately, but you're losing the plot. And it's not like you.

Elijah stands in the doorway with his game controller.

ELIJAH
(bewildered)
But, Dad, you said we were going to spend the night with Granddad.

Clay Jr. grabs his coat and hat.

CLAY JR.
Elijah, I'm not going to tell you again. Let's go!
(to Clay)
Dad, Chloe is dead, and she's never coming back. Fact. You're slipping. Good night.

The door slams shut. Clay hears the engine revving and watches the brake lights fade into darkness.

INT. CLAY'S RESIDENCE - DAY

The night before, sleep evaded Clay. The past and present twisted together in his mind, forming questions he wasn't sure he wanted answered. He turns over in his bed to check the time. It's 6:00 a.m. and still dark outside.

He spots Tori sitting in the bedroom doorway. Since Tori turned up on his doorstep, Clay hasn't experienced any more night terrors. He previously experienced periodic nighttime PTSD relapses from his various deployments in the Marines, particularly his tour in Mogadishu, Somalia.

Clay's slumber is interrupted by an early morning phone call. He answers.

CLAY THOMPSON
(groggy)
Hello?

SPLIT SCREEN:

STEPH
Hi, Papa! How are you?

Clay sits up in his bed for a welcome video chat with his beloved daughter STEPH (33, half Filipino, half Black, great smile).

CLAY THOMPSON
Yawn! Hey, pretty girl. Your father is much better now that you called!

STEPH
Papa, Jr. called me last night and he's worried about you.

CLAY THOMPSON
Yes, I know. I must have come across like a nutter last night. I knew he would call you. I just knew it. What did he say?

STEPH
He told me about the woman you met and the impact she had on you. I know that feeling. I knew Damone was my soul mate the moment we first met.

CLAY THOMPSON
Steph, you always bring me up. You're my super fast charger. I can go from 10% to 100% in seconds just during normal conversation. I love you, my daughter, and you keep me grounded.
(a beat)
Steph, do you believe in ghosts?

STEPH
I believe in angels. Sometimes the dead communicate with us -- either to protect us or warn us. I know Grandma watches over me even in death.
(MORE)

STEPH (CONT'D)
Sometimes her presence is so strong it's like she's standing right next to you. She's my guardian angel. Papa, I'll call Clay and tell him not to worry. He's just being protective, that's all.

As the conversation comes to a close, Clay remembers a few pressing questions he wanted to ask his daughter.

CLAY THOMPSON
From your nursing experience, why would a child be separated from its mother following birth?

STEPH
Normally, immediately following delivery, you want the mother and child to bond skin to skin. Bonding is so important between a mother and her child. But sometimes, the mother is so exhausted she just wants to rest alone. Other times, neonatal care is required if the baby is in a state of duress.

CLAY THOMPSON
(intrigued)
Any other circumstances why the baby would be separated?

STEPH
Well, if testing is required.

CLAY THOMPSON
What kind of testing?

STEPH
For example...DNA testing.

Clay leans forward, curious to know more.

CLAY THOMPSON
Why would a mother want a DNA test on her own child? I don't understand.

STEPH
Sometimes the father wants confirmation he is indeed the father. Sometimes the mother wants to know. It happens all the time. But there is another valid reason.

Clay raises his eyebrows.

CLAY THOMPSON
Such as?

STEPH
Sometimes a DNA test is done to check for genetic markers of hereditary diseases.

CLAY THOMPSON
Could kidney disease be inherited?

STEPH
Absolutely. The most common inherited kidney disease is probably ADPKD, which causes cysts to form on the kidneys.

CLAY THOMPSON
Okay, what if, hypothetically speaking, the DNA result indicated the child was not related to the mother? Then what?

STEPH
That almost never happens, but if it did happen, there would be a code red alert to locate the mother, that's for sure.

Clay jumps out of bed and paces the room.

CLAY THOMPSON
(highly inquisitive)
And if they were unable to locate the birth mom, then what?

Steph sighs.

STEPH
Then that child would be placed into state custody.

Clay stands still.

CLAY THOMPSON
Is it possible for a child to have a different set of DNA than the mother?

STEPH
Yes, but it's so rare. It's a condition called Chimerism.
(MORE)

STEPH (CONT'D)
It's when the mother or father has two distinct sets of DNA. We have better testing now to diagnose Chimerism than we did 20 years ago.

END SPLIT SCREEN

CUT TO:

INT. TRAIN LINK - EVENING

CLAY THOMPSON
(straining to hear)
Jr., I'm on the train coming back from King's Cross. We have a terrible connection. See you at your house around 7 tonight.

When he sees the eleven missed calls from Jr., he grows increasingly concerned. It is extremely unusual to receive so many missed calls from his laid-back son.

INT. CLAY JR.'S RESIDENCE - NIGHT

Once Clay arrives at his son's house, he wastes no time shouting his name.

CLAY THOMPSON
(worried, disheveled, sweating profusely)
Clay! Clay!

CLAY JR.
Dad, I'm upstairs in my office. Check this out.

Clay feels immediate relief knowing his son is okay. He catches his breath and proceeds upstairs.

CLAY THOMPSON
(hunched over with armpit sweat stains)
Okay, what's the emergency? You had me panicking.

Clay Jr. turns around and hugs his dad.

CLAY JR.
(apologetic)
I'm sorry I barged out of the house like that last week.

Clay pats his son on the back.

CLAY THOMPSON
It's fine. But I don't get the urgency. You called me eleven times? For an apology? I don't get it.

Clay Jr. plops down in his lush executive chair and opens his laptop.

CLAY JR.
I started snooping on the net to find out what I could about Chloe.

Clay interjects.

CLAY THOMPSON
But you said...

CLAY JR.
Dad, just follow me for a second. In this folder, I have Chloe's death certificate. It was super easy to find.

Clay leans over his son's shoulder and squints his eyes to bring the screen into view.

CLAY THOMPSON
I'm not following. Where are you going with this?

CLAY JR.
For the past few days, I've been trying to locate her birth certificate, but I couldn't because it's sealed by the courts.

CLAY THOMPSON
(puzzled)
Son, I'm still not tracking. What are you trying to say? What does this mean?

His son spins around in his chair.

CLAY JR.
Dad, why would someone have a birth certificate sealed by a court order?

Clay scratches his head and racks his brain, trying to make sense of it all.

CLAY THOMPSON
I dunno, why?

CLAY JR.
A birth certificate would most likely be sealed by a court order if you were adopted. To keep the child from knowing the identity of their biological parents.

CLAY THOMPSON
But we know Leslie wouldn't have given Chloe up for adoption. It doesn't make sense.

CLAY JR.
Dad, I know Leslie wouldn't have given Chloe up. But what if there was a mix-up at the hospital? We all have heard stories about babies accidentally swapped. In fact, there was a documentary on it last week on Channel 4 called Swapped at Birth.

Clay closes his eyes and collates all the information into one sentence.

CLAY THOMPSON
(epiphany)
Or maybe Chloe was a Chimera.

CLAY JR.
What? A who?

CLAY THOMPSON
A Chimera is someone who carries two distinct sets of DNA. If Chloe's DNA could not be matched with her birth mom, it is highly probable she was awarded to the state at birth. You're right. If she was adopted, her birth certificate would be sealed by the courts. It's starting to make sense now.

CLAY JR.
Dad, if Chloe is out there, she'd be 26 years old now. Mark's sister would be 26. Wow.

CLAY THOMPSON
Leslie's daughter would be 26.

CLAY JR.
Dad, let me show you my new toy, the one I've been telling you about. I developed a patented AI tool for INTERPOL to catch high-value and dangerous criminals on the Red Notice. I'm talking about cartel families, organized crime, terrorists...I could go on. My AI tool makes ChatGPT look like child's play. If I can find elusive criminals, I can find Chloe if she's out there. Just watch this.

Clay Jr.'s fingers type at a high rate of speed.

CLAY JR. (CONT'D)
I'm going to search a 100-mile radius around the hospital where Chloe was born. My keywords are: birth date 7 July 2000, female, white, adoption birth certificate, first name unknown, last name unknown. And then press enter.

CLAY THOMPSON
But we know her first and last name. And why did you enter adoption birth certificate? I thought you couldn't find hers?

CLAY JR.
If she was adopted, she probably has a new first and last name to match her adoptive parents. Also, adopted kids have birth certificates but they are different from traditional ones. Adoptive birth certificates are discoverable but will show only the adoptive details of the person with no information that relates to the biological parents.

Filled with anticipation, Clay Jr. drums his fingers on the desk.

CLAY JR. (CONT'D)
Wait for it, wait for it. BOOM!

Clay Jr. is visibly disappointed in the high number of returned results.

CLAY JR. (CONT'D)
That's disappointing. Hmm, thinking of another keyword to narrow the results.

CLAY THOMPSON
Try chronic illness, medical history.

Clay Jr. amends his search criteria.

The computer algorithm yields one result.

"Anna C. Cason, 26, female, DOB 7 July 2000; Residence unknown; Employment status: Cambridge Children's Social Services; single; no dependents; Current location: Stamford and Rutland Hospital; Medical History: Autosomal Dominant Polycystic Kidney Disease."

CLAY JR.
What is Autosomal blah, blah, blah?

Clay strokes his grey beard, his pupils widening in astonishment.

CLAY THOMPSON
(astonished, overwhelmed)
It's ADPKD. It causes cysts to grow on your kidneys. That's what Leslie died of. It's Chloe. My God, Chloe is alive.

CLAY JR.
Dad, how do you know all this medical jargon? I'm super impressed.

CLAY THOMPSON
It's your sister, Steph. Without you two, this wouldn't be possible. Glory to God.

CLAY JR.
Dad, if Chloe is alive, who's in her grave?

CLAY THOMPSON
That's a great question, one that probably won't be answered.

CLAY JR.
Dad, you knew Chloe was alive. But how?

Clay hesitates, then shrugs his shoulders.

CLAY THOMPSON
I didn't know, I just had a feeling. It's hard to explain.

CUT TO:

MONTAGE: Shortly after a mind-meld session between the father and son, Clay video calls his daughter, Steph, to discuss the best way forward.

STEPH (ON VIDEO CALL)
Hmm, Papa, we only have one shot at this, we don't want to scare Chloe off.

CLAY JR.
Steph's right, Dad. She might think she's getting pranked or something.

Clay is in deep thought.

CLAY THOMPSON
(enlightened)
I have a plan.

INT. STAMFORD AND RUTLAND HOSPITAL - DAY

Clay sits quietly in his chair by the window and marvels at Chloe as she sleeps peacefully. She is a carbon copy of Leslie, with her thick, jet-black curly hair and a signature mole above her upper lip. However, some of his joy is overshadowed by the number of tubes in her left arm, which are connected to a monstrous dialysis machine that constantly beeps and occasionally flashes.

Chloe's eyes flutter open several times. As the drugs in her body wane, she manages to keep her eyes partially open, fixating on Clay.

CHLOE
(cautiously intrigued)
I know who you are?

Clay sits upright and clears his throat.

CHLOE (CONT'D)
Is it true that you knew my birth mother?

Clay nods.

CLAY THOMPSON
Yes, I did. Her name was Leslie. We were very close.

CHLOE
Did you know my birth father too?

Clay drops his head slightly.

CLAY THOMPSON
No, I didn't. His name was Nigel. He passed away during your mother's pregnancy...in a car accident.

Chloe starts to gain strength in her voice and her body.

CHLOE
(searching for answers)
How do you know she didn't give me up? I need to know. The mediators said you would explain.

Clay rises from his seat, a solemn expression on his face.

CLAY THOMPSON
(stoic)
I have something to show you. May I approach you?

When she nods, he steps forward, a folder clasped in his hands.

CLAY THOMPSON (CONT'D)
(holding back tears)
I've kept this for 26 years.

He hands it to her.

CLAY THOMPSON (CONT'D)
This is an obituary.

Chloe's eyes widen with intrigue as she reaches for the faded memorial tribute.

CLAY THOMPSON (CONT'D)
Chloe Leslie Johnson is your birth name. A few days after you were born, your mother, Leslie, was informed you didn't survive during routine testing. She insisted on having a proper funeral and burial even though you were only a few days old.
(MORE)

CLAY THOMPSON (CONT'D)
I've kept this obituary for 26 years now, and it's a true honor to finally meet you.

CHLOE
(processing)
Who died if it wasn't me?

Clay shrugs.

CLAY THOMPSON
We don't know. Some hospitals have high infant mortality rates. You may have been accidentally swapped with an infant who didn't survive.

CHLOE
(catharsis)
All my life I have tried to fit in this world. I've been in and out of foster care, and it's hard, especially when you don't look like your adoptive family. I've always wanted my own family -- a family that looks like me.

She wipes the tears away on her hospital gown.

CHLOE (CONT'D)
How did you find me? I've been Anna Cason all my life.

CLAY THOMPSON
(joyful)
I'll tell you all about it after you're out of this place.

Clay lets out a big sigh.

CLAY THOMPSON (CONT'D)
I have a small token I'd like to give you, Chloe.

CHLOE
Sure, what is it?

Clay hands her a Polaroid of Leslie holding Chloe shortly after her birth.

CHLOE (CONT'D)
(emotional)
That's my mother! She's beautiful. I look just like her.
(MORE)

CHLOE (CONT'D)
She looks so happy. Now I know who I got this hair from.

She runs her fingers through her thick black curly hair.

CLAY THOMPSON
I told you. Does that look like a mother ready to give her child away?

Chloe shakes her head, then clutches the photo close to her heart.

CHLOE
No way, no. Look at her smile. Can I please have this picture?

CLAY THOMPSON
Of course.

For a few minutes, Chloe gazes at the old photo with tears of joy glistening in her eyes, completely lost in the moment. Eventually, she turns to Clay.

CHLOE
Have you spoken to my doctors?

Clay shakes his head.

CLAY THOMPSON
They didn't say much at all since I'm not kin.

She glances up at the ceiling and sighs.

CHLOE
I was so depressed, and scared. I just want to live. They said they finally found a match for me. Without a transplant, I would only have about seven days to live. After my recovery, I want to meet my family. My dream is to have a family photo with me in the middle. Does my family know about me yet?

CLAY THOMPSON
No, I wanted to talk to you first. It's your call, Chloe.

CHLOE
Yes, please. But not now. After the surgery. Thank you.

Chloe reaches out for a hug. Clay is more than happy to oblige.

He kisses her forehead.

CLAY THOMPSON
Get some rest. You've got a big day coming up soon. I'll see myself out.

INT. HOSPITAL RECEPTION - CONTINUOUS

Clay passes reception and overhears NURSE RAMOS and DR. HANCOCK discussing Chloe's test results.

NURSE RAMOS
(anxious, slightly overwhelmed)
Dr. Hancock. Dr. Hancock, could I have a word?

Dr. Hancock spins around quickly, glancing at his watch.

The hallway is bustling with activity.

DR. HANCOCK
(hurried, preoccupied)
Make it quick, Nurse Ramos. I'm needed in the ICU. Is this about one of your patients?

NURSE RAMOS
Yes, it's Ms. Cason in Room 132. Anna Cason.

Nurse Ramos hands Dr. Hancock a clipboard with lab results. Dr. Hancock adjusts his glasses for readability and studies the data carefully.

DR. HANCOCK
(grim, focused)
Hmm. I see why you requested a second round of tests. It's rare -- extremely rare -- for a patient to have two genetic profiles. This complicates everything.

Dr. Hancock sighs and rubs his temple, lost in thought.

NURSE RAMOS
How should we proceed, Doctor?

DR. HANCOCK
(frustrated, empathetic)
The risk of organ rejection is too high. I concur with Dr. Blumsteins's preoperative assessment. We can't move forward with the surgery. Dammit!

NURSE RAMOS
(tearful, guilt-ridden)
I feel awful. She had her first visitor today. I told her not to worry and I gave her hope. Can we reinstate her on the donor registry?

Dr. Hancock places a steadying hand on Nurse Ramos' shoulder. He lets out a deep sigh.

DR. HANCOCK
(stoic, resigned)
It's too late for that. I'll speak with Ms. Cason myself and explain. Nurse Ramos, contact the duty chaplain for spiritual support if needed. It's not your fault. These things happen.

INTERCOM (V.O.)
Paging Dr. Hancock.

Dr. Hancock checks his watch again.

DR. HANCOCK
I'm late for ICU.

INT. CLAY'S CAR - DAY

CLAY THOMPSON
(pleading)
Why would you give her hope for a new life just to snatch it away? Lord, please help me understand.

INT. STAMFORD AND RUTLAND HOSPITAL - DAY

CLOSE UP ON CHLOE

Chloe lies emotionless in her hospital bed. The effects of the last morphine injection are beginning to wear off.

The room is silent, except for the beeping of the heart rate monitor. Guests tiptoe inside, bearing flowers, balloons, and cards. It is fairly crowded, and the sound of footsteps catches Chloe's attention, stirring her awake.

Letting out a big groan, she squints and spots Clay standing at the back of the small crowd.

CHLOE
Clay, what's going on? Who are these people?

One by one, they introduce themselves.

GLENDA
Hi, Chloe, I'm your Aunt Glenda.

BARBARA
Hi, Chloe, I'm your Aunt Barbara.

WILLIAM
Hi, Chloe, I'm your nephew, William.

THEA
Hi, Chloe, I'm your niece, Thea. You look like my Nana.

CHLOE
(smiling)
Aww, come here you. Give your auntie a hug.

The introductions continue and end with Clay Jr.

Chloe is moved to tears of joy by the overwhelming love from her newfound family.

Amidst all the commotion, Dr. Hancock makes his way to the foot of the bed.

DR. HANCOCK
(encouraging, uplifting)
Chloe, I'm very happy to report that the transplant was a success, and we expect you to make a full recovery. It was a perfect match, with no complications. You'll have plenty of time to connect with your new family.

Everyone applauds, their cheers echoing throughout the hospital floor.

DR. HANCOCK (CONT'D)
(cheerful, optimistic)
Before I go, are there any questions?

Chloe musters all the limited strength she has left.

CHLOE
(fulfilled, grateful)
Just one question, Doctor. When can I finally meet my donor?

The room grows silent. Clay Jr. escorts the donor in a wheelchair to meet Chloe.

MARK JOHNSON
(heartwarming, sincere)
Hi, Chloe, I'm your brother, Mark, I'm pleased to meet you.

Her eyes well up, and in an instant, she bursts into tears. She reaches out for a hug.

CHLOE
(with gratitude)
Thank you, thank you for saving my life.

The room falls into a hushed silence of happiness as Mark embraces Chloe. Even Dr. Hancock discreetly dabs at his eyes.

All of a sudden, Clay's phone goes off. He answers right away.

CLAY THOMPSON
One second, it's for you Chloe.

Chloe takes the phone and places it to her ear.

SPLIT SCREEN:

STEPH
Hi, Chloe, I'm Steph, Clay's daughter. I wish I could be there to celebrate with you. I just wanted you to know that you were never forgotten or left behind. I love you and can't wait to meet you.

CHLOE
(tearful)
Awww, I love you too, Steph.

END SPLIT SCREEN

Chloe sniffles as she passes the phone back to Clay.

Chloe has one request.

CHLOE (CONT'D)
Can I have a family photo? I want to remember this day forever.

All the family members huddle around her bed, smiling while holding their balloons and gifts. Clay whips out his phone and prepares to take the picture.

CHLOE (CONT'D)
(politely insistent)
Clay, I said family. You are my family now. Clay Jr., you too, come here next to me.

Nurse Ramos enters the room and raises her hand.

NURSE RAMOS
(joyful)
I'll take the photo.

She stands to the side and peers through the camera lens. Chloe drapes her right arm around Mark's neck and the other around Clay. Her eyes are bloodshot from tears of joy. Big smile.

NURSE RAMOS (CONT'D)
Say Chloe.

FAMILY, FRIENDS AND STAFF
CHLOE!

With a grin, Nurse Ramos snaps the photo.

JUMP CUT TO:

INT. CLAY'S CAR - NIGHT

On the way home, Clay apologizes to the Lord for questioning Him. This long and sometimes traumatic journey has finally come to an end.

INT. CORNER STORE - NIGHT

Clay stops at the corner store and picks up some cat treats for Tori.

INT. CLAY'S RESIDENCE - NIGHT

CLAY THOMPSON
Tori, where are you? I have some treats for you.

Clay shakes the bag, a familiar gesture that always prompts Tori to come out of her hiding place. He searches under the bed, behind the curtains, and everywhere else. Then he realizes Tori is gone, never to return. Clay is saddened by the loss of his furry companion with the spooky past.

INT. CLAY'S RESIDENCE - DAY

The next morning, Clay steps into the kitchen to make himself a cup of coffee. As he prepares his drink, the honking of a large gaggle of geese flying overhead catches his attention.

Glancing out the window, he notices a tiny dust devil forming in the center of the front garden. Its intensity grows, pulling bits of dust and small leaves into its swirling vortex. Particles and debris scatter high into the air only to flutter gently back to the ground.

While sipping his coffee, Clay watches as a beautiful white feather drifts onto the windowsill. For a brief, fleeting moment, it feels as if Leslie is standing right beside him.

DISSOLVE TO:

SUPER: SIX MONTHS LATER

INT. QUEENSGATE SHOPPING MALL - THE PERFUME FACTORY - DAY

Clay samples several cologne testers before narrowing his options down to three choices: Millions, Burberry, or Hugo Boss.

He leans over the counter, deep in contemplation, when a sultry voice whispers in his ear.

AKOSUA
Pick Burberry.

Clay instantly recognizes the scent of the woman directly behind him. As he turns around, his eyes light up. He is happy to see her again.

AKOSUA (CONT'D)
(good energy)
What brings you to Peterborough, huh?

She places her hands on her hips.

CLAY THOMPSON
(calm, mildly persuasive)
Well, I only moved into the neighborhood last month. There's a great Italian coffee shop within walking distance just outside the mall, Akosua. Wanna join me?

Akosua returns the smile with the same energy.

AKOSUA
Why not?

Clay holds the door open for her on the way out.

EXT. QUEENSGATE SHOPPING MALL - DAY

It's a beautiful spring day, with people dashing by, trying to get to wherever. A sudden cold gust of wind blows through the courtyard, prompting Akosua to draw closer to Clay. She slips her arm around Clay's waist.

AKOSUA
Clay, you actually pronounced my name correctly this time. I know it's hard for some to pronounce since it's Ghanaian.
(a beat)
Most people just call me by my nickname, Sylvia.

FADE TO BLACK.

THE END