

EXT. ROUTE 66 - DAY

An old Ford Focus runs on Route 66. It rises slowly into view through the refracting heat of the Mojave Desert.

INT. FORD FOCUS - DAY

RATTLING in the trunk is a collection of oddities: WHITE PAIL BUCKETS, SHEARS, MICROSCOPE SLIDES, among other things that bounce dangerously during the bumpy ride.

A PHONE RINGS. A woman picks up the screen and grimaces at AUNTIE MARIE's profile. She chucks it back into a cupholder.

EXT. MOJAVE DESERT - DAY

She pulls onto a dirt path that veers from the highway.

LOW ANGLE

Dirt-caked ankle boots hit the ground and head to the trunk. She piles equipment into a bucket beside her feet. She closes the TRUNK with a THUD, turns, and...

INHALE...

EXHALE...

She opens her eyes.

This is AINSLEY MILLER (23), a botanist and soon-to-be college grad who's come here to escape the world.

She hauls the bucket into the desert. She finds what she's looking for: the Eureka Valley Evening Primrose. She kneels to examine the flower, snapping pictures with a cheap Kodak.

RUSTLING. In the BRUSH. Looks like... fur?

She parts the dry brush and finds an injured DESERT KIT FOX.

AINSLEY

Oh, my god.

It's immobile from a gash on its hind leg. She reels back from the stench of its rot. It WHINES faintly, pleading.

Ainsley pulls a towel from the bucket and carries the fox back to the car. She hits the road, eyes peeled open for any sign of life.

EXT. ROUTE 66 - DAY

Ainsley spies a cute, 2-story home seemingly lifted from the suburbs and dropped into the desert.

She takes a sharp breath and pulls into the driveway, when...

Her CAR TIRE POPS. She yelps.

EXT. DESERT HOME - FRONT PORCH - DAY

The rickety car rolls into the driveway and sadly deflates. She gets out, cradles the fox in a towel, and walks up to the front door, contemplating the doorbell -- she wants to leave, this is absurd.

AINSLEY

Please, don't murder me.

She hits the doorbell with her elbow.

Faint SHOUTING on the other side of the door. Rapid FOOTSTEPS. Ainsley shrinks.

ROSE ORTEGA (24), a Hispanic-Native American woman, opens the door. Ainsley is awestruck! She's gorgeous. Rose looks first at Ainsley, her sorry-looking car, then the fox.

ROSE

Oh! What happened to this little one?

AINSLEY

I found it... injured. In the desert.
I was looking for flowers. I'm a
botanist and--

ROSE

And your car?

AINSLEY

A tire blew when I pulled in. I'm
sorry, I shouldn't have--

ROSE

Say no more. Come inside.

INT. DESERT HOME - FRONT ROOM - DAY

Ainsley sets the fox down on the front room table while Rose examines the wound with a flashlight. The fox hardly reacts.

ROSE

It's ugly, to be honest. Infected. I need to clean the wound right now.

Rose picks the fox up, but hesitates.

ROSE (CONT'D)

I should tell you my name first! I'm Primrose, but you can call me Rose.

AINSLEY

I'm... Ainsley.

ROSE

Oh! I need to introduce you to everyone!

INT. DESERT HOME - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Mortified, Ainsley follows Rose into the living room where over a dozen women await. They're aunts, cousins, and nephews. One is an ancient grandmother who knits feebly.

They stare daggers into Rose, Ainsley, and the little fox. The sole boy in the room, fixated on his iPad, waves punily.

AINSLEY

Nice... to... meet you...

Too many people. Ainsley stumbles outside after Rose.

EXT. DESERT HOME - BACKYARD - DAY

WIDE SHOT - MOJAVE DESERT

Ainsley tries to block the sun as Rose heads toward the BARN.

EXT. BARN - DAY

Rose sets the fox on a steel table and prepares to treat it. Ainsley follows, far less decidedly.

ROSE

I'm sorry for my family. We don't see guests very often.

AINSLEY

I can relate. I don't see people that much.

ROSE
So, you said you're a botanist?

AINSLEY
Yeah, I am.

ROSE
(beat)
Care to tell me about it?

AINSLEY
Oh, right. I'm studying wildflowers in the Mojave Desert. My thesis is about the Eureka Valley Evening Primrose. It was endangered, and I'm researching how it recovered so we can save other wildflowers as well.

Rose HUMS. She's ready for surgery: hair tied back, gloves fixed, tools assembled. Ainsley less so.

ROSE
Ok, I'm going to start by shaving the fur. I'll just ask you for tools.

Ainsley nods. The RAZOR BUZZES and the grisly wound is exposed. Rose uses a topical anesthetic and gets started.

AINSLEY
Um, how did you learn to do all this?

ROSE
I grew up on this ranch all my life. I've done everything: gardened, delivered calves, played cowboy.

AINSLEY
I could never do something like that.

ROSE
I've found that people can do all sorts of things when they set their minds to it.

AINSLEY
Not me. I have... issues with people.

Rose glances at Ainsley as she stitches.

ROSE
You're not anxious with me.

AINSLEY
(stutters)
Well, kind of.

ROSE
That's ok.

Silence hangs in the air as Rose threads the last stitches.

ROSE (CONT'D)
It's done! Thanks for helping. It'll
need to recover for a few days, but
it's looking like a clean recovery.

Rose puts it in a dog crate, fit with a fuzzy blanket.

ROSE
Can you take it to the guest room?
It's up the stairs and to the left.

INT. DESERT HOME - LIVING ROOM - EVENING

Ainsley braces herself and enters the living room. Eyes sear into her. She shuffles to the hall and up the stairs.

INT. DESERT HOME - GUEST ROOM - EVENING

She shuts the door and slides to the floor.

INHALE...

EXHALE...

She collects herself and gets up to examine some dusty picture frames.

They tell a story: Mexican cowboys in the 19th century with Native American wives and husbands. The prosperous family grew until the late 20th century, when smiles faded and the cowboy era ended. The most recent picture is of the current family, with Rose at the center -- the only one smiling.

Ainsley frowns. She opens her phone to AUNTIE MARIE's contact page, thinking of her own family. Hesitant.

A KNOCK.

Ainsley jumps. Rose opens the door and waves.

ROSE

Sorry if I scared you. How's the little one doing?

AINSLEY

Still asleep.

ROSE

Good. I checked on your car. That tire is totally destroyed, so we'll need to send someone out to get a new one. You'll have to wait a few days until we take a trip into town.

AINSLEY

Oh. Well, thanks for checking.

ROSE

I also came up to tell you that supper is ready.

AINSLEY

Oh, god. I appreciate it, I really do, but I can't go down there.

ROSE

I'm sorry about my family. But I promise you, they will warm up to you if you give them a chance.

AINSLEY

(beat)

I don't know about this.

ROSE

I'll be right there at the table. I can save you if something goes wrong.

AINSLEY

...Ok.

ROSE

Alright, let's go.

INT. DESERT HOME - KITCHEN - NIGHT

CAMERA LOOMS across a dinner table so packed with food we can't see the tablecloth. CAMERA PULLS BACK and we see the scowling faces of the family.

Ainsley smiles meekly at them.

She takes a seat at the head of the table. Opposite of her is the gentle old grandmother who reads like a blank slate.

MAMA stands from her seat.

MAMA

We are here today to give thanks for the meal and our guest. We have not had one in some time, so we are most thankful.

Rose nudges Ainsley's foot under the table. She gestures to her outstretched hand -- they're supposed to be praying. Ainsley hastily takes her hand and seeks out her other neighbor's hand. The woman glares.

MAMA (CONT'D)

Lord, we thank you for providing our crops and cattle. Without them, we would have no place in this world. We thank you for this meal, this land, and this guest among us. Amen.

ALL

Amen.

Hands release and lunge for the table. It's carnage. Forks joust, hands bicker over tamales, beans fly onto plates. Ainsley freezes up, eyes darting. She's going to bolt.

Suddenly, Rose swaps their plates.

ROSE

I got the best of everything for you.

Like a frightened animal, she shakily takes a bite...

It's delicious.

TEASING SHOTS: Ainsley opens up. She laughs a little, drinks some wine, and happily talks with her table mates.

Dinner ends with a clean plate and the family's approval.

CUT TO:

INT. DESERT HOME - GUEST ROOM - NIGHT

Ainsley is fast asleep in bed. The crate is on the floor beside her where the fox is also sleeping soundly.

Rose opens the door and gently wakes her.

ROSE
Hey, sorry to wake you.

AINSLEY
What is it?

ROSE
I have something to show you.

Ainsley blearily gets up and follows Rose out the door.

EXT. DESERT HOME - DRIVEWAY - NIGHT

Rose climbs onto the roof of the truck parked in the driveway. She helps Ainsley up beside her.

AINSLEY
So, what is it you wanted to show me?

ROSE
Look up.

The sky is full of stars.

AINSLEY
Wow, that's... I've never seen a sky
as clear as that.

ROSE
There's some benefits to living out in
the middle of nowhere, you know.
(beat)
I'm sorry for my family's behavior. I
shouldn't have forced you to dinner.

AINSLEY
It's ok. Honestly, it wasn't that bad.

ROSE
They shouldn't be so stubborn in the
first place. If they act like this
every time we have a guest...

She reclines back and looks at the stars.

ROSE (CONT'D)
I wanted to be a vet, you know. As a
girl, I loved all of the animals on
our ranch.

ROSE (CONT'D)

I still remember when I helped deliver my first calf. The cows usually take care of themselves, but this one was a first-time mother and had been mopey for weeks. We were really worried about her, so we brought her into the barn and she went into labor. My mom was shouting at me, "Go get my gloves! I need towels!" But the whole time, I was just amazed. The baby was beautiful, but I spent the weeks caring for the mom. Every time my chores were done, I'd run out with a stethoscope and listen to her heart.

(sighs)

I wanted more than anything to go to school. But, I realized that my place was here, preserving the family business. They just don't realize that we have to change. We can't live in the middle of the nowhere forever!

AINSLEY

Then, if you could change your family, what would you do?

ROSE

I'd sell our land and open a small ranch south of here, where there's more people and we're closer to water. Then, I'd move my family to the coast so they could enjoy the beach and be with other people.

AINSLEY

Aspirational.

ROSE

Well, what would you do?

AINSLEY

No clue. I like my plants and not much else.

ROSE

(beat)

Can I ask you a question?

AINSLEY

Sure.

ROSE

Why are you really out here? I mean, it's not like anyone -- much less a girl like you -- to be studying plants alone in the sand.

Ainsley winces. This is a question she'd been avoiding.

AINSLEY

It's for my thesis. You know that.

ROSE

No one comes out here in 120-degree, sun-baked wasteland to study flowers alone. Come on, tell me why.

Ainsley rubs her arm and glances away.

AINSLEY

My mom's in rehab. And... I don't know if I can see her again.

ROSE

Oh, god. I'm sorry.

AINSLEY

She and my dad broke up when I was a kid. I didn't know it at the time, but she drank a lot because of it. She would forget things when I got older.

(beat)

We had the most beautiful garden in the backyard. That was our happy place during those years. Then, I went to a summer camp for two weeks in high school. When I came home, everything had wilted -- brown and dead. All she needed to do was water them. But she couldn't even do that for her daughter. Though, it wasn't the gardens that upset me. Well, that was part of it, but what it was really how she'd forget the parts of me that make me... me. Sometimes, I wonder if she even knows who I am.

Rose opens her mouth to respond, but Ainsley continues.

AINSLEY (CONT'D)

That's why I admire you. You're staying here with you terrifying family to take over the business because that's what you were born to do. I'm just running away from mine.

ROSE

I think you're looking for something, not running away. A key to bring back to re-enter your family.

AINSLEY

What do I have to do to find it?

ROSE

Oh, a little bit of everything. Meet new people. Pick up a hobby. Stare at the stars. You'll find something somewhere that'll click in your heart as soon as you see it. That's what I've found, at least.

AINSLEY

Hmm. So, does that mean you want to leave this desert?

ROSE

Did you listen to anything I just said?

They look at each other, laughing. Time slows down and as the CAMERA ZOOMS on Ainsley's face, her expression tightens.

She realizes: she's in love.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. DESERT HOME - DRIVEWAY - DAY (6 DAYS LATER)

Ainsley and Rose wave as Mama pulls into the driveway, a stack of tires tied down in the back of the truck.

AINSLEY

Thank you so much. I-I owe you.

MAMA

You're welcome.

Rose gestures.

MAMA (CONT'D)

Mija.

Mama passes them both and enters the house. Rose shrugs.

AINSLEY

Ok, well, now we can get to work.

MAMA

Hold on!

Mama and everyone else fills into the driveway, toolboxes in hand, excited smiles all around.

MAMA (CONT'D)

Let's get to work.

MONTAGE: the defunct tire is removed as various family members help Ainsley and Rose. Sweaty brows, water bottles, and wrenches are among the moments captured. The kids and elders sit in foldable chairs with fans and phones in hand.

And... voila! Ainsley's car is fixed.

ROSE

Wow! Looks great, you all.

AINSLEY

Thank you!

Smiles and nods from the family.

ROSE

Well, are you ready to do this thing?

AINSLEY

Yeah. I'll go get it.

Ainsley briskly enters the house.

INT. DESERT HOME - FRONT ROOM - DAY

She takes a turn up the stairs.

INT. DESERT HOME - GUEST ROOM - DAY

And opens the guest room to see the fox's crate on the floor. She kneels and checks inside: it's wide awake and curious.

She gently lifts it and heads to the door, but the OLD PICTURE FRAMES catch her eye. She pauses, again remembering her own family. With resolve, she exits the room.

EXT. DESERT HOME - DRIVEWAY - DAY

Ainsley heads to the car, where Rose is waiting.

ROSE

Here, I'll take it.

Rose gets in the passenger's seat with the crate in her lap. Ainsley gets in the driver's seat, revs the engine, and pulls out.

EXT. MOJAVE DESERT - DAY

Ainsley's car drives onto the dirt path where she first found the fox. Ainsley and Rose open the trunk, take the crate out, and walk into the desert.

They set the crate down and undo the latch. The fox steps out, uncertain, before tearing away into the desert.

ROSE

Wow! That little guy is fast.

AINSLEY

See you later!

The dust settles. It's time to go home and say goodbye.

EXT. DESERT HOME - DRIVEWAY - DAY

They pull into the driveway and are greeted by the family. They're smiling; opposite to their picture in the guest room.

Ainsley steps out and prepares to say her goodbyes, nervous.

INHALE...

They embrace her. She's startled, but smiles wide and sighs.

AINSLEY

Yeah, I'll miss you, too.

The family gathers on the front porch. Rose lingers behind the crowd, awkward. Ainsley takes her hands.

AINSLEY

This has been... really unexpected, to say the least.

ROSE

That's for sure.

AINSLEY

I'll visit sometime.

ROSE

I'd like that.

They're still for a beat. Finally, Ainsley drops their hands.

AINSLEY

Alright, I should get going.

She gets in and grips the wheel, sighing. She rolls down the window as Rose approaches... and gets a peck on the cheek.

ROSE

The next time you visit, we'll be on the coast!

AINSLEY

That's right. I'll keep watch for you.

Ainsley pulls out of the driveway. We see Rose and the family waving goodbye. With a smile, Ainsley flies onto the road.

EXT. ROUTE 66 - DAY

Ainsley settles into her seat and holds the wheel comfortably. She glances at her phone in the cupholder. With a deep breath, she opens Auntie Marie's number. Her finger lingers, uncertain, but she calls her.

She leans further back into her seat as the dial rings, eyes closed. The CAMERA LOOMING.

INHALE...

EXHALE...

Then...

AUNTIE MARIE

Hello? Ainsley? Is that you?

THE END.