

THE GATEKEEPERS

Written by

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We open with a black screen.

We hear GUNSHOTS – sharp, echoing – followed by a woman's SCREAM and a child's terrified sob.

CUT TO:

EXT. CUL-DE-SAC - NIGHT

Flashing RED and BLUE LIGHTS slice through the darkness.

Multiple police cruisers and emergency vehicles crowd a quiet suburban street. Neighbors watch from behind curtains.

At the rear of an ambulance, a woman and her young daughter sit wrapped in blankets. The woman stares straight ahead, shell-shocked. The girl clutches her mother's side, trembling.

INT. FRONT ROOM - SAME NIGHT

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Inside the house: chaos frozen in time.

A MAN'S BODY lies face-up on the carpet. Two gunshot wounds mark his chest – blood soaking into his shirt.

A CORONER'S INVESTIGATOR kneels beside him, quietly taking notes. Flashbulbs pop. Forensics markers dot the floor.

Near the doorway, a UNIFORMED OFFICER speaks quietly with a DETECTIVE.

UNIFORMED OFFICER

Looks like a burglary gone bad.

(beat)

Victim must've surprised the guy.

Took two in the chest before he could get the bat off the wall.

DETECTIVE

(sighs)

House was ransacked. Back window's shattered.

(pauses)

Daughter saw it all.

Somewhere upstairs, a child's toy begins to play music. Off-key. Broken.

EXT. MOUNTAIN ROAD - DAY

A weathered JEEP bounces down a rutted dirt path surrounded by dense pines. Dust clouds rise in its wake.

INT. JEEP - CONTINUOUS

LANEY SHAW (now 14), quiet and watchful, peers out the window. Her face is older, not in years, but in something behind her eyes.

Her MOTHER (early 40s), rugged and pale, drives in silence. Hands tight on the wheel. A faint scar near her temple.

The world outside rushes past – deer, trees, empty trailheads – until the road disappears into nothing.

EXT. CABIN - DAY

The Jeep crests a hill. Below, a small ****wooden cabin**** nestled in a clearing. Solar panels on the roof. A garden in the back. A world of its own.

They unload in silence. No neighbors. No mailboxes. Just wind and pine.

INT. CABIN - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The room is simple, warm. Books stacked high. A fireplace crackles. On a small wooden desk, a battered ****laptop**** – the screen cracked but glowing.

On the screen: "Final Draft - Untitled Project."

Laney types.

CLOSE ON SCREEN:

> EXT. MOUNTAIN - NIGHT

> The girl watches the flames. She isn't running. She's waiting.

She stops. Thinks. Deletes the line. Stares into the fire for real – same posture as her character.

MOM (O.S.)
Time to log off, honey. Power's
fading.

LANEY

Almost done with the first scene.

MOM

(chuckles)

You've said that every night this week.

Laney smiles - faint, private. But it's real.

INT. CABIN - LANEY'S BEDROOM - LATER

Laney lies in bed, flashlight under the covers. She's reading a weathered copy of *Little Miss Sunshine: The Screenplay*.

Handwritten notes fill the margins. Her pen underlines:

"The ending should feel earned."

She closes it. Looks out the window.

The wind rattles the trees.

EXT. WOODS NEAR CABIN - DAY

Laney wanders alone with a **journal** in hand. She sketches a tree, then flips the page.

A new entry:

> "WILDERNESS BOUND - SCENE 12

> The girl hides in the hollowed tree as strangers search for her mother."

She pauses, then writes:

> "The forest doesn't protect them. It tests them."

She looks up. Hears a distant coyote cry. Keeps walking.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

Laney and her MOM eat in silence at the small table. Candlelight flickers. A pot of stew between them.

LANEY

Can I ask something?

MOM
You just did.

LANEY
Funny.
(beat)
When my script is done... do you
think I could submit it somewhere?

Mom freezes.

MOM
Submit it where?

LANEY
Like a contest. Or—someone online.
There's this site called
Script—something.

MOM
(discomforted)
I thought the writing was just for
you.

LANEY
It is. It was.
(beat)
But what if it could be more?

MOM
We came out here to get away from
more, remember?

LANEY
That wasn't my choice.

Beat. The tension hangs in the room like fog.

MOM
We'll talk about it later.

Laney looks down, disappointed. She grabs her bowl, takes it
to the sink.

INT. CABIN - LANEY'S ROOM - LATER

Laney's at her laptop again. Her brow furrowed. She's typing
fast now, possessed.

ON SCREEN:

INT. TREEHOUSE - NIGHT

The girl lights a candle. It flickers in the wind. Outside, the wolves circle.

Her fingers hover. She adds one more line:

"But she kept writing anyway."

EXT. CABIN DRIVEWAY - DAY

A beat-up pickup truck pulls into the clearing, kicking up dust.

Out steps RAY KINSELLA (60s), the town's park ranger - weathered, kind-eyed, always with a thermos in hand.

Laney is outside chopping kindling. She looks up.

LANEY

Morning, Ranger Ray.

RAY

You're taller. What'd your mom feed you - elk?

LANEY

Deer jerky and rebellion.

RAY

(laughs)

Sounds about right.

Laney wipes her hands on her jeans as her MOM steps onto the porch.

MOM

Ray. You didn't call.

RAY

Figured you wouldn't answer. Just checking the trail cams. Had a black bear sniffing around the creek again.

He hands her a manila envelope.

RAY (CONT'D)

Also brought that permit renewal you never mailed back. Thought maybe...

His voice trails as he notices Laney's **notebook** on the railing, pages flapping in the breeze. Words, dialogue - dialogue formatting.

RAY (CONT'D)
You writing something?

LANEY
Just a script.

RAY
A what?

LANEY
Like a movie script. Screenplay.

RAY
I'll be damned. Can I see?

Laney hesitates. Then... hands him a few pages.

INT. CABIN - MOMENTS LATER

Ray sits with coffee, reading. Eyes scanning page after page. A beat.

RAY
This girl in the story... is that you?

LANEY
Sort of.

RAY
And the mom?

Laney looks at her mother. Doesn't answer.

RAY (CONT'D)
This is... really something, Laney. You got a hell of a voice.

LANEY
Really?

RAY
You should be sending this to somebody.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

Laney sits cross-legged in front of the TV, remote in one hand, notebook in the other.

On-screen: JUNO. She rewinds a scene. Plays it again. Pauses.

CLOSE ON SCREEN:

"This is the most magnificent discarded living room set I've ever seen."

She scribbles it down, circles it twice.

INT. CABIN - LANEY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Laney's wall is now cluttered with taped-up screenplay pages, film quotes, and beat sheet index cards.

She studies the structure from *Little Miss Sunshine* on her laptop.

LANEY

(reading softly)

"Inciting incident... break into
act two... midpoint..."

(scribbles)

So that's how they do it.

She opens a new browser tab:

"Where to find screenplays PDF free"

INT. CABIN - NEXT MORNING

She scrolls through The Black List, Nicholls Fellowship, Reddit threads, PAGE. Finds a downloadable Final Draft sample script.

Her face lights up.

INT. CABIN - LIVING ROOM - LATER

She digs through old boxes. Finds a dusty external hard drive. Plugs it into her mom's old laptop.

CLICK. The screen loads slowly... but it opens:

"Final Draft 9 - Last Opened: 2016."

Laney gasps.

INT. CABIN - LANEY'S ROOM - NIGHT

MONTAGE:

- She tests out formatting - dialogue, scene headers, transitions.
- Frustrates when nothing aligns right.
- Finds a free PDF guide: "How to Format Like a Pro."
- She rewrites her first page three times.
- Drinks coffee for the first time in her life.
- Pauses a film, rewinds, matches what she sees to what she's written.
- At one point, she mimics the voice of an actress from a film.

LANEY

(as if pitching)
She hides under the floorboards...
but she's not scared. She's hunting
too.

She smiles. Hooks.

INT. CABIN - LATE NIGHT

Laney's asleep at the table, head down, Final Draft still glowing beside her.

Her MOM enters quietly. She picks up Laney's notebook.

Reads a few lines.

Stops.

Tears begin to form. Not from anger. From something deeper.

She places the notebook back and gently pulls a blanket over Laney's shoulders.

MOM

She's not ready for that.

RAY

Well, that may be... but I read
scripts all the time from my niece
in LA. This ain't no backyard
scribble.

He leans in.

RAY (CONT'D)

What you've got here – it's raw.
Honest. That's rare.

Laney swallows hard. Emotion creeping in.

INT. CABIN – LANEY'S ROOM – NIGHT

Laney sits at her laptop, staring at the title page she just added:

"WILDERNESS BOUND"

Screenplay by Laney Shaw

She hits SAVE.

And then, for the first time... PRINT.

INT. CABIN – LANEY'S ROOM – MORNING

The printer whirs. Final page slides out.

Laney stacks the script. Flips through it. Smells the paper.
She smiles.

INT. CABIN – KITCHEN – MOMENTS LATER

Laney places the script beside her mom's coffee mug.

LANEY

Read it. Please?

MOM

I already read the pages Ray saw.

LANEY

Not those. The real thing.

Her mom glances at the title page:

WILDERNESS BOUND – by Laney Shaw

INT. CABIN – LIVING ROOM – LATER

Her mom sits by the fire, script open in her lap. She reads slowly. Thoughtfully.

Laney pretends to be reading a book across the room. She's not. She watches.

A long beat. Her mom closes the script.

MOM
You know this isn't just fiction.

LANEY
I know.

MOM
The wolves. The girl with the map
no one believes in.

LANEY
You saw it?

MOM
I lived it.

They sit in silence. Not uncomfortable. Just full.

MOM (CONT'D)
You're good, Laney. Really good.

LANEY
Thanks. That means a lot.
(beat)
But it can't stop here.

EXT. CABIN - DAY

Laney strings up ****index cards**** between two trees - each one a scene from her script.

She paces the "outline" like it's a chessboard. Rewrites one card. Shuffles another.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

Laney sits cross-legged with her script open, taking notes. Margins filled with scribbles:

"Scene 24 too soft?"

"Make the wolves metaphor clearer."

INT. CABIN - LIVING ROOM - LATER

She searches online again:

"Teen screenplay competitions."

Clicks one:

Pine Valley Regional Storytellers Contest. Submissions open.
No entry fee.

Her eyes light up.

EXT. CABIN - FOLLOWING DAY

She walks to the edge of their long drive where the mailbox
leans against a stump.

She opens the box. Places the script inside, addressed in
neat handwriting.

Tapes it shut.

Her mom joins her, holding a stamp she found in an old
drawer.

MOM
Go get 'em, kid.

They smile.

INT. CABIN - LANEY'S ROOM - DAY

Laney sits at her desk, scribbling notes all over her
printout of Wilderness Bound.

She circles a scene header:

INT. TREEHOUSE - STORM NIGHT

Next to it, she writes:

"Raise stakes. Girl must make the choice to stay or run."

She flips through the script, layering in edits.

EXT. CABIN - PORCH - DAY

She reads the new version aloud to her mom - playing both
roles. Mom listens, a little stunned at how confident Laney
sounds.

LANEY
(reading)
The forest isn't dangerous because
of what lives in it.
It's dangerous because of what it
makes you remember.

Her mom nods, emotional.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

On the laptop: she watches an old Academy Awards acceptance speech – a screenwriter thanking their “weird little hometown” for letting them be odd.

Laney mouths along silently, practicing.

LANEY
(whispering)
I didn't expect this... but maybe I
did.

She shuts the laptop and grins.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT (LATER)

An email alert appears on her screen.

SUBJECT: Thank You for Submitting to the Pine Valley
Storytellers Showcase!

She clicks.

CLOSE ON SCREEN:

“While your script wasn't selected for presentation, we were moved by your voice. Please keep writing.”

Laney beams.

EXT. CABIN - NEXT MORNING

She walks the trail with her journal in one hand, coffee in the other.

She pauses, looks out at the forest.

LANEY
(into nothing)
This is gonna work.

INT. CABIN - LIVING ROOM - DAY

She dials an old cordless phone. It connects.

LANEY

Hi, yes - I saw your post about reading amateur scripts? I have something. Just finished the second draft...

She listens. Nods. Writes something on her hand.

MOM (O.S.)
Someone famous?

LANEY
Maybe someday.

INT. CABIN - LANEY'S ROOM - NIGHT

She's compiling a list of contests. Highlighting the word "open submission".

Her screen glows. Her eyes glow brighter.

She clicks:

"Submit to Women of Tomorrow Screenwriting Challenge - FREE"

A long breath.

SEND.

INT. CABIN - LANEY'S ROOM - NIGHT

Laney sits at the desk, fingers trembling over the keyboard.

Her Final Draft file is complete. Clean. Tight.

The title:

WILDERNESS BOUND
by Laney Shaw

She opens a browser window. Slowly types:

"Screenplay contests accepting submissions."

INT. CABIN - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Laney reads fine print out loud to her mom.

LANEY

Entry deadline: May 1st. Fee:
thirty-five dollars.

MOM

You know we don't have that right
now.

LANEY

I can skip my birthday.

Mom doesn't answer. Just stares at her.

EXT. SMALL TOWN LIBRARY - DAY

Laney and her mom park outside a tiny rural library. A sign
reads:

"Free Wi-Fi. 10MB speed. No streaming."

INT. LIBRARY - COMPUTER TERMINAL - LATER

Laney sits hunched over a slow terminal. The progress bar
crawls across the screen.

Uploading... 22%.

A mouse click. A freeze.

Error.

LANEY

No. No no no no...

She tries again. Uploads a PDF copy this time instead of the
Final Draft file.

Success.

A pop-up confirms:

"Your script has been received. Thank you for your
submission."

She exhales. A smile creeps in.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

Laney refreshes her email.

Nothing.

INT. CABIN - ANOTHER NIGHT

Refresh.

Nothing.

INT. CABIN - ONE WEEK LATER

She opens her inbox to a new email:

"RE: Your Screenplay Submission - Wilderness Bound"

Her eyes widen.

She clicks.

CLOSE ON SCREEN:

"Thank you for submitting. Unfortunately, due to the volume of submissions, your script was not selected..."

Laney stares.

Then quietly closes the laptop.

She walks outside, into the trees.

EXT. FOREST CLEARING at NIGHT

Laney stands beneath a full moon.

In her hand: the printed copy of her screenplay.

She doesn't cry.

She just stands there, pages fluttering in the breeze, clutched to her chest like a shield.

INT. CABIN - LANEY'S ROOM - NIGHT

Stacks of screenplay PDFs litter the floor. Her browser tabs are endless:

"Oscar-Winning Scripts," "Why Structure Matters," "What Not to Do in a Screenplay."

Laney furiously takes notes in a spiral notebook titled:

"Things They Don't Teach You in School."

ON SCREEN:

A split scene from Lady Bird plays. She freezes it. Backs it up. Watches it again.

She writes down the exact line.

LANEY
 (whispers)
 "Different things can be sad...
 it's not all war."
 (beat)
 That's it. That's... honest.

INT. CABIN - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

She practices reading dialogue aloud, holding pages in one hand, pacing like a director.

LANEY
 (as her character)
 "She didn't leave because she
 stopped loving them.

She left because she loved herself enough to start over."

She tries it again, this time softer. She scribbles a note:
 "Better when whispered."

INT. CABIN - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Her mom enters quietly. Finds Laney standing on a chair, hanging notecards with string above the kitchen counter.

The headings:

ACT ONE - ACT TWO - ACT THREE

Under each: hand-scribbled scene beats.

MOM
 You building a conspiracy web?

LANEY
 Structure. It's how you get them to
 feel things on cue.

MOM
 Who's "them"?

LANEY
 The gatekeepers.
 (beat)

MOM
Then make them feel it, kid.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT - MONTAGE SEQUENCE

- Laney watches behind-the-scenes footage of Greta Gerwig, Jordan Peele, Diablo Cody, scribbling in her notebook:

"They all broke rules - but knew them first."

- She Googles: "How to write a coverage-worthy script."

Prints out The Black List's 10 Tips.

- She studies three versions of Juno's script - the early draft, the production draft, and the final shooting script.

She underlines a passage in red:

"Good writers revise. Great ones bleed all over it."

- Her wall becomes a shrine of index cards, character arcs, rejection emails, and motivational quotes:

"You can't open the door if you're afraid of the knock."

INT. CABIN - LANEY'S ROOM - NIGHT

Laney looks at her reflection in the mirror - dark circles, messy hair, script pages taped behind her like wallpaper.

She lifts a pen and autographs her own notebook, just above the words:

"Property of: Laney Shaw, screenwriter."

She nods once. And goes back to work.

INT. CABIN - LIVING ROOM - MORNING

The fireplace crackles. Laney stirs her oatmeal, distracted. Her mom watches from across the table, holding a mug.

MOM
You didn't sleep.

LANEY
I was formatting.

MOM
That word again.

LANEY

It matters.

(beat)

It's like music – if you play the wrong note, nobody hears the song.

Her mom takes this in. Slowly.

MOM

What happens if you play it right?

Laney doesn't answer.

NT. DREAM – MOVIE THEATER – NIGHT

Laney and her DAD (mid-30s, warm, movie-buff energy) sit side by side in a retro-style movie theater. A classic film plays on the screen – maybe *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Stand by Me*.

They both sip from giant sodas. Share popcorn.

DAD

That line. You hear that? That's writing, sweetheart.

LANEY

It was good. But I would've made the mom less–

DAD

–Less helpless?

(smiles)

That's my girl.

They both laugh. The screen glows across their faces.

DAD (CONT'D)

You should've written this script. Would've made it better.

(beat)

Maybe someday I'll see your name up there.

Laney beams.

LANEY

Promise you'll be in the front row?

DAD

Wouldn't miss it.

He squeezes her hand.

Suddenly, a LOUD CRACK. The sound distorts. The theater warps.

INT. DREAM - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

They're no longer in the theater - they're now back in their old house. Same living room from the opening crime scene.

Laney's dad stands by the fireplace. Confused. Alert.

DAD
Laney... stay back.

Laney's breath quickens. She knows this moment. Can't stop it.

LANEY
Dad-no! Don't-

BANG.

A GUNSHOT followed by another shatters the silence.

Her dad drops. Blood splashes the floor.

Laney screams-

INT. CABIN - LANEY'S ROOM - NIGHT

Laney jolts awake in bed. Sweating. Gasping.

She looks around. Alone. Safe.

But not really.

She slowly grabs her journal. Writes one sentence:

"Some ghosts never die. They just change scenes."

INT. CABIN - LANEY'S ROOM - LATER

A ding from the laptop.

SUBJECT: RE: SCRIPT FEEDBACK REQUEST - WILDERNESS BOUND

Laney blinks. She opens it.

ON SCREEN:

"Laney, I read your script. You have something real. I'd like to talk."

Beneath it: a Zoom link. The name: "A. Weston - IndieGate Films"

EXT. FOREST TRAIL - MORNING

A gentle mist hangs between the pine trees. Birds chirp faintly in the distance. Laney and her mom walk side by side down a narrow trail, their boots crunching the damp forest floor.

For a long moment, neither speaks. Just the sound of the woods - living, breathing.

MOM

You screamed last night.

Laney glances over, startled.

MOM (CONT'D)

I came to your room, but you were back asleep. Curled up like nothing happened.

LANEY

I didn't mean to-

MOM

You don't have to explain.

(beat)

I still have them too. Not every night... but enough.

Laney stops walking. Looks down at her boots.

LANEY

It started as a good dream. We were in this old movie theater... just me and Dad. We were watching To Kill a Mockingbird. He was making fun of the script-like he always did. Saying how I could've written it better.

MOM

(small smile)

That sounds like him.

LANEY

He told me one day I'd write something better.

(MORE)

LANEY (CONT'D)

That he'd be in the front row when
I won something big.

MOM

(softly)

He would've been. He still is.

Laney swallows hard.

LANEY

Then everything changed. We were
back home. In the living room. I
knew what was coming but I couldn't
stop it. He said my name. Told me
to stay back.

She can't finish. Her voice catches.

Her mother gently puts a hand on Laney's shoulder.

MOM

Every day you write... every scene
you survive... I believe your dad
is right there with you. Standing
behind you. Whispering, "Keep
going, Laney."

Laney blinks. The emotion cracks her chest wide.

LANEY

How do you do it?

MOM

Do what?

LANEY

Wake up. Move forward. Pretend like
the hole isn't still there?

Her mom kneels slightly so they're eye to eye.

MOM

I don't pretend it's not there. I
just plant something in it.

(beat)

You planted stories. Scripts. Hope.
That's brave.

Laney takes a shaky breath.

LANEY

What do you dream about?

Her mom straightens. Looks out at the woods.

MOM

Sometimes... the way your dad used to dance in the kitchen when he thought no one was looking.

(smiles)

And sometimes... I dream it went differently. That we left one day earlier. That he came with us.

She shakes it off gently.

MOM (CONT'D)

Dreams aren't facts. But they're not lies either.

They're just... the parts of us we haven't written down yet.

Laney looks at her. That line lands.

LANEY

Can I use that?

MOM

(straight-faced)

Absolutely not. I'm saving it for my own screenplay.

They both laugh, just a little.

MOM (CONT'D)

C'mon. Let's get back before the printer decides it's too cold to work.

LANEY

Maybe I'll write a dream scene into the new one. One that ends different.

MOM

Sounds like the best kind.

They start walking again, side by side. This time, closer.

INT. CABIN - LIVING ROOM - SAME DAY

Laney paces in front of the laptop, breath fast.

LANEY

(to herself)

Don't smile too much. Don't stutter. Don't apologize for being young.

She opens the laptop. The Zoom loads.

ON SCREEN: A. WESTON (40S)

Quietly cool. Indie glasses. Piles of scripts behind him.

WESTON
Laney Shaw?

LANEY
Yes. Hi. Hello. I mean—yeah.

WESTON
Read Wilderness Bound twice. It
stuck with me. Especially the
metaphor. The forest as trauma.
That's... good.

Laney's frozen. Speechless.

WESTON (CONT'D)
Look, I don't know how old you are,
or where you learned to structure
like that, but I'd be interested in
reading whatever you do next.

Beat.

LANEY
Wait, so... no notes? No "but it
falls apart in Act Two"?

WESTON
I didn't say that.
(grins)
You've got rough edges. But most
people have no edges at all. That's
worse.

LANEY
So... what now?

WESTON
Now you keep writing.
(beat)
Then send me your next one.

Zoom ends. Laney sits back.

Silence. Then...

A small, growing smile.

INT. CABIN - MOM'S BEDROOM - LATER

Laney bursts in, holding her laptop.

LANEY

He called. He actually called. Said I had something real. Said "forest as trauma." He got it.

Her mom watches her - proud, but also scared.

MOM

That's good, baby.

LANEY

I want to start a new one. Like... tonight.

Her mom nods... but her smile fades as Laney rushes off.

EXT. CABIN - NIGHT

Laney paces in the moonlight, journal in hand, whispering fragments:

LANEY

She wasn't scared of being hunted.

She was scared of being seen.

She writes the line down.

Then adds a title:

"The Gatekeepers"

INT. CABIN - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Laney slams the laptop shut, frustrated. She paces. Her mom watches from the kitchen table, sipping tea, concerned.

MOM

Another rejection?

LANEY

No... just nothing. Again.
(sits hard on the couch)
It's been weeks. Months. You submit, you wait, you refresh your inbox a thousand times a day... and for what?

MOM

That's how it works, right? Takes time?

LANEY

It's not just the wait, Mom.

It's them.

MOM

Them?

LANEY

The gatekeepers.

(reads off her notebook)

You know there's like—literally—hundreds of thousands of scripts floating out there? Most never even opened.

MOM

That many?

LANEY

Yeah. And guess what? Half the industry's closed off unless you "have reps" or "know someone." I read this article — one of those industry pros said no unsolicited scripts. None. You have to be invited.

(beat)

I'm 14. No agent. No fancy film school. Just a cracked laptop, a forest, and a dream. You think they're lining up for me?

MOM

Laney—

LANEY

And don't even get me started on the Nicholl.

MOM

What's a Nicholl?

LANEY

Only the biggest screenwriting competition in the world. Used to be open to nobodies. People like me. But this year? Nope. Shut it down for us. Indies not welcome.

(scoffs)

(MORE)

LANEY (CONT'D)

One post said: "Due to shifting Academy priorities..." Translation: If you're not in the club, don't knock on the door.

MOM

That can't be the whole story...

LANEY

Oh, it is. And meanwhile, they keep greenlighting sequels nobody asked for and biopics about people no one remembers.

(beat)

You know how many people have said "This is your calling" – and then in the same breath, "But there's no money in it. Get a real job."?

MOM

Laney, I didn't mean–

LANEY

I'm not talking about you. I'm talking about the system.

(rising anger)

There's this one producer – some blog post went viral – he said most coverage readers are unpaid interns who skim the first five pages and dump the rest in a slush pile.

(beat)

And God forbid you're a teenage girl with an actual voice. Then you're "emotional." Or "inexperienced."

MOM

I had no idea it was this–

LANEY

–rigged? Yeah. That's the word.

Laney slumps back onto the couch, exhausted. Her mom sits beside her.

MOM

But you're still writing.

LANEY

I don't know why. Some days I feel like I'm yelling into a void and praying it echoes.

MOM

Because something inside you says
it matters.

That's not nothing.

Laney doesn't respond. Her throat tightens.

MOM (CONT'D)

I may not understand "structure" or
"gatekeepers," but I know this:

When you were five, you'd make up bedtime stories so I
wouldn't have to. At eight, you turned your nightmares into
puppet plays. Now, you've written an entire screenplay. Out
here. With no signal. No help.

LANEY

And no one to read it.

MOM

You read it.

And now you know you can do it again.

A long beat.

Laney wipes a tear from her cheek.

LANEY

I just want one shot. One person to
see it and say, "You're not crazy.
You belong here."

MOM

Then let's keep knocking until
someone opens the damn door.

Laney looks at her mom – surprised. Grateful.

LANEY

That was a good line.

MOM

It's yours.

(pauses)

But I want a "story by" credit if
it makes it to Sundance.

They smile – tired, but united.

FADE OUT.

INT. CABIN - LANEY'S ROOM - NIGHT

Laney stares at her printed script.

She takes a red pen and writes across the title page in giant letters:

"VERSION 2 - No Fear."

She flips to page one - and starts slashing scenes.

MONTAGE - LANEY'S REVISION STORM

She rewrites her opening scene with a stronger hook.

Scribbles out an entire subplot.

Adds a new character: a mysterious drifter in the woods - the girl's spiritual twin.

Adds more raw emotion.

Makes the wolves scarier, more symbolic.

Writes until sunrise.

INT. CABIN - LIVING ROOM - MORNING

Laney hands the new draft to her mom.

LANEY
It's different.

It's me. With teeth.

Her mom flips a few pages. Nods - impressed.

EXT. SMALL TOWN LIBRARY - DAY

Laney logs into an old Reddit account. Her fingers hover.

She searches: r/Screenwriting

She reads:

"Post your logline - I'll roast it gently."

"Just got my first 8 on The Black List!"

"Anyone else submitting to Women of Tomorrow this year?"

She's hooked.

INT. LIBRARY - COMPUTER - LATER

She creates a post: "14, writing from the woods. Just finished 2nd draft. Am I wasting my time?"

She hits POST.

She waits.

Nothing.

Then—

"You're not wasting your time." -u/InkDrifter

"We see you. Keep writing." -u/ScreenplaySamurai

"Link to script?" -u/CarlaWrites

Laney's mouth drops. Encouragement. Connection.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

Laney reads every message, every suggestion.

One DM stands out:

"You've got a hell of a voice. Send me the PDF. If it sucks, I'll tell you. If it sings - I'll tell someone."

-C

She hesitates.

Then... sends it.

FADE OUT.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

Laney sits at the kitchen table, laptop open, an array of contest tabs open. Each one has fine print: "We do not accept unsolicited material." "Representation required for submission." "Entry fee: \$55. Deadline: closed."

She rubs her temples.

LANEY

(quietly, to herself)

How does anyone break through?

INT. CABIN - LIVING ROOM - LATER

Laney and her MOM sit by the fire. A tense silence. Then-

LANEY

I sent the second draft. A few people responded.

MOM

That's great, right?

LANEY

Yeah, but... the real thing? The actual contests? The agents?

(beat)

It's like shouting into a canyon.

MOM

You've come this far.

LANEY

Most of them won't even open a PDF. "Unsolicited." That word's everywhere.

(beat)

I read this post - said over 400,000 scripts are written every year. Most never make it past an intern. If that.

MOM

People get discovered.

LANEY

People with reps. Or connections. Or famous last names. The rest of us? We spend months polishing something... then get a form rejection. Or silence.

(beat)

Even the Nicholl Fellowship changed. No more indie writers. Just students with industry mentors and labs.

Mom shifts in her chair, not sure how to respond.

MOM

That doesn't seem fair. So... now what?

LANEY

Now I learn the hustle.

INT. CABIN - LANEY'S ROOM - NIGHT

Laney sits with a notebook open. At the top:

THE GATEKEEPER WALL - HOW TO BREAK THROUGH

She lists:

Query letter samples

Logline workshop threads

PDF: "How to cold query from IMDbPro"

Blacklist coverage - \$75? Worth it?

She writes underlined:

HOOK THEM FAST

BRAND = VOICE + PERSISTENCE

EXT. CABIN - PORCH - NEXT MORNING

Laney reads aloud to her mom while sipping cocoa.

LANEY
(half-joking)
Step One: "Be born into a Hollywood
family."

They both laugh - a little too hard.

EXT. CITY COUNSELING CENTER - DAY

A modest but clean mental health clinic in a mid-sized city. Strip malls and chain restaurants surround it.

The Jeep pulls into a parking lot. Laney and her mom sit for a moment in silence.

MOM
You don't have to say anything you
don't want to.

LANEY
I know.
(beat)
(MORE)

LANEY (CONT'D)

I probably won't say anything at all.

INT. THERAPIST'S OFFICE - DAY

A cozy, neutral room. A sound machine hums softly in the background. Bookshelves, tissues, gentle lighting.

Laney and her MOM sit on a loveseat. Across from them: DR. ELLEN MARTIN, late 50s, kind-eyed, quietly observant. No notepad. Just presence.

DR. MARTIN

It's okay if we don't talk about what happened that night. We can talk about today. Or nothing at all.

(beat)

Sometimes silence is part of healing.

Mom nods gratefully. Laney stares at the carpet.

INT. THERAPIST'S OFFICE - LATER

MOM steps out to take a call. Dr. Martin sits with Laney alone.

DR. MARTIN

You wrote "screenwriter" on your intake sheet.

LANEY

Kinda. Trying to be. I guess.

DR. MARTIN

Trying is doing. That's better than most.

Laney lets that sit.

LANEY

My dad used to say I'd win an Oscar one day.

(beat)

Not the actress kind. The writing kind.

(beat)

We used to watch movies and pause them, and he'd be like, "You could've written that better."

DR. MARTIN
Sounds like he saw something in
you.

LANEY
Yeah. But now there's this wall.

DR. MARTIN
Gatekeepers?

Laney blinks, surprised.

LANEY
Yeah. Everyone says you can "break
in" – but no one says how.
(beat)
Agents won't read anything. Studios
only want "established voices."
Even contests – they changed the
rules. It's all about fellowships
and connections and branded
content.
(beat)
You read the trades and it's like,
"Another reboot of a reboot." Or
some preachy Oscar film no one
watches twice.
(beat)
And then they say there's a "new
voice" coming – but they never let
us speak.

Dr. Martin nods. Thoughtful.

DR. MARTIN
I have a patient. He's retired now.
Used to produce mid-budget dramas.
(beat)
Smart guy. No filter.
(beat)
You remind me of him.

Laney straightens slightly.

DR. MARTIN (CONT'D)
I can't promise anything – ethics
and all – but...
(beat)
If he agrees, I could pass your
script along.

Laney's heart skips. She nods, eyes wide.

LANEY

Okay.

DR. MARTIN

And for the record... everything you just said? About the system?

(beat)

I've heard the same rant from people who actually work in it.

Laney laughs – really laughs – for the first time in the entire film.

INT. CABIN – NIGHT

Laney and her mom sit at the dinner table in near silence. The only sound is the faint ticking of the clock on the wall. The phone RINGS.

MOM (ANSWERING)

Hello?

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. THERAPIST'S OFFICE – NIGHT

The THERAPIST (50s, thoughtful, sharp) is seated behind her desk, after hours.

THERAPIST

Hi, this is Dr. Margo Roth – I wanted to follow up about today's session with Laney. She's bright. And honest. And... very driven.

MOM

She is. Sometimes a little too much for her own good.

THERAPIST

She mentioned her writing. I know that wasn't today's focus, but she's clearly channeling something powerful.

(beat)

One of my long-time patients – a retired director – lives nearby. He's... opinionated. But he knows the industry inside and out. I mentioned Laney in passing. He was intrigued.

MOM

I'm not sure she's ready for that kind of attention...

THERAPIST

Nothing dramatic. He just wants to talk. Only if you're okay with it.

MOM (AFTER A BEAT)

What's his name?

INT. CABIN - KITCHEN - MORNING

Laney stirs her cereal as her mom stands nearby, phone in hand.

MOM

So... someone might be calling today. A retired film director. Name's Martin Greene. He's a patient of Dr. Roth.

LANEY (SQUINTS)

Really? Dr. Roth said she was going to reach out to him, but no promises. So he really was a director/producer?

MOM

Used to be. He asked for permission to reach out. So if your phone rings, be polite.

LANEY

I'm always polite.

(beat)

Unless someone produces crap movies.

They both laugh - a rare moment of ease.

INT. CABIN - LANEY'S ROOM - LATER

Laney's phone BUZZES. Unknown number. She stares at it. Breathes. Answers.

LANEY

Hello?

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. MARTIN GREENE'S STUDY - SAME

Stacks of scripts, vintage film posters, and coffee cups.
MARTIN GREENE (70s, quick-witted, weathered voice) adjusts his glasses.

MARTIN

Laney Shaw?

LANEY

That's me.

MARTIN

I'm Martin. Dr. Roth told me a little about you. Said you've got fire in your bones and final draft in your blood.

LANEY (SMILING)

Something like that.

MARTIN

Look, kid - I won't sugarcoat. Hollywood's a goddamn graveyard of good stories. Gatekeepers left and right. But I liked what she said about you - that you've got something worth listening to.

LANEY

I don't know anymore. I mean, I write and rewrite and submit... and every door feels locked. The Nicholl Fellowship just slammed its doors on indie writers like me. Even the "free" contests are a maze of fine print and most are not free at all. And if you cold-query agents on IMDbPro? They all say the same thing: We don't accept unsolicited material.

MARTIN

Oh, I've said that line a hundred times myself.

(beat)

Because most unsolicited material... well, sucked.

LANEY

Nice.

MARTIN (CHUCKLING)

But the great ones? You remember them. They cut through the noise.

(softer)

Send me your script. "Wilderness Bound," right?

LANEY

Yeah. But I—wait, really?

MARTIN

And let's meet next week. I've got a favorite coffee place in town. Neutral ground.

LANEY

Okay. Yeah. I can do that.

MARTIN

Good. Bring your voice. And don't dress it up for me. Truth wins.

They hang up.

EXT. CABIN - PORCH - MOMENTS LATER

Laney steps outside, phone in hand. Her mom's stacking firewood.

LANEY

(Excited) He wants to meet.

MOM

You okay with that?

LANEY

I think so.

(beat)

I've waited so long to be heard — now I'm terrified of what happens if I actually am.

MOM

That's what makes you ready.

INT. COFFEE SHOP - CONTINUOUS

Laney fidgets with her napkin. Stanton slides the printed copy of WILDERNESS BOUND in front of him, coffee ring staining the title page.

STANTON

You know, back then, you could hand someone a script. If they liked it, they made a call. Doors opened.

(leans back)

Now? It's not a door. It's a fortress. With three receptionists, five assistants, and a legal waiver before you even get a "no."

LANEY

(sighs)

Tell me about it. Every contest I enter, every query I send - it's like screaming into a canyon. Half the sites say, "We do not accept unsolicited material."

STANTON

I know. I've said it myself - when I was on the other side of the desk.

(beat)

STANTON (CONT'D)

Hollywood's not a business of ideas anymore. It's a business of risk management. IP, franchises, pre-branded content - they want sure bets. Not kids with laptops and dreams.

LANEY

But how are new voices supposed to get in?

STANTON

They're not. Not unless they've got money, reps, connections... or luck so damn loud it rattles windows in Burbank.

LANEY

And the irony? The movies still suck. Even the "Oscar-worthy" ones. Half of it's just sad people staring at each other in beige kitchens.

STANTON

(laughs - loudly)

My god, you sound like me twenty years ago. Before I got tired.

LANEY

My dad used to joke that I'd win an Oscar before I could drive. He believed in me. He made movies seem like magic. Now I see it's mostly smoke and bullshit.

STANTON

Was he in the business?

LANEY

No. But he loved it. Used to pause scenes and ask me how I would've written it.

(beat)

He was shot... during a break-in. I saw it.

STANTON

(softening)

I'm sorry. Truly.

LANEY

I think writing helps. But then you hit a wall, and it's like... what's the point if no one ever sees it?

STANTON

There is a point. You wrote something honest. That matters. Even if no one reads it - yet.

(taps the script)

You've got voice. Timing. Heart. It's not perfect - but it's real. And real is rare.

LANEY

So now what?

STANTON

Now... you email me the latest draft. Make sure you have it copyrighted. I'm old-school, but not prehistoric. I've got a few people I still trust - not many. And next week, we meet again.

LANEY

Really?

STANTON

I don't promise anything. But I don't bullshit either. If there's a spark here, I'll help you fan it.

LANEY

Deal.

They shake hands. She's still shaking slightly, but her eyes gleam with something new – hope.

EXT. COFFEE SHOP - LATER

Laney steps out into the afternoon light. Her mom joins her, holding a vintage sweater.

MOM

Well?

LANEY

He didn't laugh. He listened.

LANEY (CONT'D)

I think... this might actually go somewhere.

They walk off, the script tucked safely under Laney's arm.

FADE OUT.

INT. WILDERNESS CABIN - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

A much younger Laney taps out her first screenplay by candlelight. Her mom reads a book beside her. Wind howls outside. Inside, they're safe. Creating. Her dad in the background smiling.

BACK TO PRESENT

INT. CABIN - KITCHEN - NIGHT

The last of dinner is scraped into a compost bin. Dishes clink in the sink. Laney dries her hands, glances at her mom.

LANEY

Thanks for letting me go today... alone, I mean.

MOM

He seemed decent. And you didn't stop smiling the whole way home. That told me enough.

Laney nods, then heads toward her laptop in the living room.

INT. CABIN - LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Laney opens the laptop. A new email notification flashes across the screen:

From: Stanton Reed

Subject: Thoughts on Your Script - Wilderness Bound

She hesitates. Clicks.

INSERT: EMAIL ON SCREEN

Laney-

First off, thank you for trusting me with your script. That alone takes guts. I meant what I said: you've got something.

That said... writing is rewriting. You ready for the hard part?

Some thoughts:

1. Page 10 - You've got a great inciting incident (the shooting), but consider tightening it. Less "what happened," more "how it shaped her." Let the audience feel the trauma without explaining it all.

2. Pages 20-30 - Laney's writing journey is strong, but I'd love to see her make at least one real mistake. A stumble. Maybe she mimics another writer too closely or sends a query that backfires.

3. Stakes - What's at risk emotionally if she fails? Dig deeper into the cost of this dream. Let us see the cracks - not just in the industry, but in Laney herself.

4. Mom's arc - She's strong and layered, but I think she accepts the whole screenwriting thing too easily. Maybe she's scared Laney will get hurt again - or maybe she once had a dream of her own.

5. Final scenes - They're strong... but maybe too polished. Don't be afraid of some mess. Life is messy. Let the ending feel earned, not wrapped.

When you're ready, send me a new draft in PDF. No rush - I'm not going anywhere.

Proud of you. That script made me feel something. That's rare these days.

-S

Laney leans back in her chair,
stunned... then slowly starts
smiling.

INT. CABIN - BEDROOM - LATER

Laney prints the email. Tacks it to the wall above her writing space. Then grabs her notebook and begins scribbling new ideas like wildfire.

On the Final Draft screen, she types:

"Rewrite - Draft 2"

WILDERNESS BOUND
by Laney Shaw

FADE IN:

EXT. CABIN - EARLY MORNING

A quiet stillness hangs over the mountain. Laney sits outside, wrapped in a blanket, laptop open in front of her.

Her inbox is open. A NEW EMAIL from Stanton blinks at the top:

SUBJECT: Notes - Wilderness Bound

She clicks. Reads:

STANTON (V.O.)
"Laney - this is more than a script. It's a survival story wrapped in fiction. But you need to dig deeper. Trim some fat. And make your wolves mean something. See my notes in PDF. No rush. But don't be gentle."

Laney exhales, then opens the attachment. It's bleeding red.

INT. CABIN - LANEY'S ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

The pages of her printed script are now covered in handwritten notes - circled lines, slashes, arrows.

Laney rubs her temples. She opens a blank document. Types:

"Rewrite - Draft 2 - F*cking kill your darlings."

She begins cutting.

INT. CABIN - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Her mom enters to find pages scattered across the table.

MOM
You okay?

LANEY
No.

MOM
Want to talk about it?

LANEY
Not yet.

She resumes typing. Mother turns and leaves.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT - LATER

Laney posts a sample of her new opening scene to a screenwriter forum.

INT. CABIN - THE NEXT DAY

She checks the post - dozens of replies:

COMMENT 1: "Nice voice. But too much interior monologue."

COMMENT 2: "You're FIFTEEN?! This reads better than some pro scripts I've seen."

COMMENT 3: "Don't let anyone dilute this. Keep going."

A private message pops up:

"This has something. If you need a reader, I'm here."

She smiles - for the first time in hours.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

Laney lies in bed, tossing and turning.

DREAM SEQUENCE:

INT. MOVIE THEATER - NIGHT

A younger Laney sits beside her DAD, both laughing over popcorn. Onscreen: a ridiculous rom-com. Her dad elbows her.

DAD

You should've written this.
Would've been ten times funnier.

Laney blushes.

DAD (CONT'D)

Remember what I said? Don't wait
for permission. Write the damn
thing.

Suddenly - GUNSHOTS. Her dad slumps.

Laney SCREAMS-

INT. CABIN - LANEY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

She jolts awake. Breathing hard. Tears in her eyes.

She wipes her face. Turns on her laptop.

INT. CABIN - LANEY'S ROOM - LATER

The glow of the screen reflects on her face. She's rewriting the campfire scene.

New line:

"She didn't need saving. She just needed to be heard."

She hits Save.

INT. CABIN - LIVING ROOM - MORNING

Laney stares at her inbox. Still no reply from Stanton.

She sighs. Steps outside.

EXT. FOREST EDGE - MOMENTS LATER

Laney throws a stack of cut pages into the wind. They flutter like leaves.

LANEY
(screaming)
What do you WANT from me?!

Silence.

She sits on a log. Pulls out her journal.

Begins to write.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

Her inbox dings.

Email from Stanton:

"I can't stop thinking about your last scene. Can we talk?
Also—I may have passed it along. Hope that's okay."

Laney's eyes widen.

She exhales. Then opens a new draft.

EXT. CABIN - NEXT MORNING

Laney walks to the mailbox. Places the new script inside.
Tapes it shut.

Her mom joins her. They look at the box.

MOM
Another one?

LANEY
A better one.

FADE OUT.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

Laney and her mom eat dinner. Quiet.

LANEY
He wrote back.

MOM
Stanton?

LANEY
Yeah. He... sent notes. A lot of
them. Said he passed it along too.

MOM
Without asking?

LANEY
He said, "Hope that's okay." Which
is code for, "I already did."

MOM
Are you okay with it?

LANEY
(pause)
I don't know.

Beat.

LANEY (CONT'D)
Do you think I'm crazy? For
thinking I could actually... do
this?

MOM
I think you were crazy not to try
sooner.

Laney smiles. Then her phone dings.

A NEW EMAIL. Subject line: "Request for Zoom." From: Rachel
Sterling - Creative Exec / Northlight Films

Laney blinks.

LANEY
Holy shit.

INT. CABIN - NEXT DAY

A montage begins:

Laney picking out an outfit. (Casual-but-not-trying-too-hard.)

Her mom adjusting the lamp lighting for good Zoom angles.

Laney practicing answers in the mirror.

She opens her laptop. Nervous.

Click: JOIN MEETING.

INT. ZOOM SCREEN (INTERCUT)

RACHEL STERLING (40s), composed, sharp, upbeat. Laney's nervousness is palpable.

RACHEL
Laney. Hi! Thanks for making time.

LANEY
Of course. Thank you.

RACHEL
We read Wilderness Bound. Twice.
Once for story, once for tone. It's
got voice. Bite. A little
unfiltered, but that's not a bad
thing.

LANEY
I wrote it with a flashlight and no
idea what I was doing.

RACHEL
Then maybe that's what more writers
should do.

(beat)
Look, nothing's official. But we'd
love to talk about options.

LANEY
Like, "options" options?

RACHEL
(Laughing) Yes. First-look rights.
With revisions, of course.

Laney processes that.

RACHEL (CONT'D)
We'd assign a story editor to help
shape the arc. More commercial
appeal. Maybe shift the protagonist
a bit older. We want to amplify
your voice... just give it some
polish.

Laney forces a smile.

LANEY
Cool.

INT. CABIN - LANEY'S BEDROOM - LATER

She paces. Her laptop glows.

The offer felt real - and a little soul-killing.

INT. CABIN - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Laney talks to Stanton on the phone.

LANEY

They want to age up the lead. Tone down the trauma. Remove the wolves.

STANTON (V.O.)

(sighs)

That's the trade-off, kid. You either play the game... or change the rules.

LANEY

What would you do?

STANTON (V.O.)

At your age? I'd burn it down. Then write a better one.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

Laney climbs into bed. She closes her eyes.

DREAM SEQUENCE:

INT. WOODED CLEARING - MAGIC HOUR

Laney walks through the forest. Sunlight filters through the canopy. Her DAD steps out from the trees.

DAD

You still rewriting?

LANEY

Yeah. Again.

DAD

Don't chase their voices. Write with yours.

She nods.

DAD (CONT'D)
You've already made it further than
I ever dreamed. Keep going.

His figure fades into the light.

BACK TO:

INT. CABIN - BEDROOM - MORNING

Laney wakes. Peaceful this time.

She reaches for her laptop.

INT. CABIN - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Laney's mom walks in.

MOM
Coffee's on.

LANEY
I think I finally figured out what
the ending should be.

FADE OUT.

INT. CABIN - LANEY'S LAPTOP - LATER THAT DAY

Laney's at the screen again. The cursor blinks. She types:

FADE IN:

A girl walks through fire. And comes out carrying her story.

She pauses. Opens her email. Subject line catches her eye:

SUBJECT: "Saw your scene. I'm not Hollywood. But I'm
listening."

She clicks.

ON SCREEN - the email from:

JACKIE RIVERA, mid-30s, indie filmmaker. Female. Gritty.
Honest.

"Laney - your voice hit me like a hammer. I make films on my
own terms. Not much money. No red carpets. But we tell the
truth. Would love to chat if you're up for it."

Laney stares.

LANEY
(softly, to herself)
Another door.

She scrolls Jackie's signature: website, trailer links, a short film that won Tribeca two years ago.

INT. CABIN - KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER

Laney shows the email to her mom, who reads it silently.

MOM
Looks legit. But... you're still waiting to hear back from Stanton's people, right?

LANEY
Yeah. But this feels different. She's not a gatekeeper.

MOM
Maybe it's not either-or.

Laney nods.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

Laney watches one of Jackie Rivera's films. Raw. Unfiltered. A woman screams at an empty hallway. Beautiful and haunting.

Laney wipes a tear.

INT. CABIN - ZOOM SCREEN - THE NEXT DAY

Laney clicks into a Zoom call. JACKIE appears - hoodie, no makeup, real as hell.

JACKIE
Hey, kid. Let's talk about burning it all down.

NT. CABIN - LANEY'S ROOM - NIGHT

Laney sits curled up on her bed, script open beside her, laptop on her lap. Her inbox dings.

A new subject line:

SUBJECT: "Not Hollywood. But I'm listening."

Laney clicks it open.

INSERT EMAIL
TEXT ON SCREEN:

Laney – I read your forum post and the campfire rewrite. I don't usually reach out like this, but... you've got a voice.

I'm an indie filmmaker. Gritty budgets, small crews, zero patience for BS.

But we make things. Real things.

Want to chat? No strings. Just real talk. – Jackie Rivera

Laney stares. Eyes scanning the signature line:

"TRIBE Films – Winner, Tribeca '21 | Slamdance Jury '23"

She looks out the window, conflicted. Then types.

LANEY (V.O.)
Thanks for reaching out.

I'd love to talk.

Tomorrow?

INT. CABIN – KITCHEN – NEXT MORNING

Laney nervously sips tea. Her mom watches as she checks her email again.

MOM
Zoom call with your mystery
director today?

LANEY
Yeah. I Googled her last night. She
made a short that won everything –
and walked away from the studio
offers.

MOM
That's... interesting.

LANEY
She said she wanted to keep her
voice. Not be "packaged."

MOM
Sounds familiar.

Laney smiles.

INT. CABIN - ZOOM CALL SETUP - LATER

Laptop webcam on. Laney adjusts her hoodie. Breathes deep. Clicks Join Meeting.

JACKIE RIVERA (35) appears onscreen – dark curls in a loose bun, hoodie half-zipped, tattoos on both forearms. Raw charisma.

JACKIE
Hey. Laney, right?

LANEY
Yeah. Thanks for–

JACKIE
Let's skip the awkward compliments. You're good. That's rare. And you're young, which means this industry will try to eat you alive.

Laney chuckles. Jackie grins.

JACKIE (CONT'D)
I've had three agents. Fired all of them. Sold my last film from the trunk of my Subaru. Still made Deadline.

LANEY
You're... kind of badass.

JACKIE
I'm just tired of the gates. And the keepers.

A pause. Then–

JACKIE (CONT'D)
You said your script was about surviving the wilderness.

You weren't just talking about trees, were you?

Laney slowly shakes her head.

LANEY
No.

JACKIE

Good. Because I think this industry
needs your kind of feral.

Beat.

JACKIE (CONT'D)

Send me your script if it's
copyrighted. Let me tear into it.
But I won't ask you to change your
soul. Deal?

LANEY

Deal.

They smile.

INT. CABIN - LIVING ROOM - LATER THAT MORNING

Laney sits cross-legged on the rug, notebook in hand, her mom
reading across from her.

LANEY

Do you think I should call him?
Stanton?

MOM

He's the one who reached out last.
If you need to know where things
stand... ask.

Laney nods, hesitates, then opens her laptop.

INT. CABIN - LANEY'S ROOM - MINUTES LATER

Laney types an email:

SUBJECT: Quick Check-In - Wilderness Bound

Hi Stanton - just circling back on the new draft.

Appreciate the notes - they lit a fire.

Just wondering if there's been any movement. No pressure.

Gratefully,

Laney

She hits Send. Then stares. Waits.

INT. CABIN - KITCHEN - AN HOUR LATER

She paces. The laptop dings again. She runs to it.

INSERT EMAIL ON
SCREEN:

FROM: Stanton

Laney -

I'm glad you wrote. Yes, there's been movement. One of the
execs I shared it with - small studio, mostly prestige dramas
- wants to meet.

I gave them your mother's contact for safety. They'll reach
out formally.

Don't get spooked. You earned this.

- S

Laney sits back. Eyes wide. Then-tears. Relief, fear, joy.

INT. CABIN - LATER THAT DAY

Laney and her mom sit at the kitchen table, staring at an
open calendar.

MOM

So... you're driving into the city
again?

LANEY

Yeah. Thursday.

MOM

You want me to come?

LANEY

Maybe just to the door.

Her mom nods. Laney looks down at her draft. Scribbles across
the cover: FINAL(ISH).

SCENE: INT. CABIN - LIVING ROOM - MORNING

Laney finishes re-reading her dad's words from her dream the
night before.

LANEY
(mutters)
Don't chase their voices...

She opens her latest draft and highlights a scene – deletes it. Then replaces it with something raw, personal, hers.

SCENE: INT. CABIN – MOMENTS LATER

Laney's mom is finishing breakfast. The phone rings.
She answers.

MOM
Hello?
(listens)
Yes, this is Laney's mother.

INT. CABIN – LANEY'S ROOM – CONTINUOUS

Laney watches from the hallway, curious.

MOM (O.S.)
...Yes, she's here.
(beat)
Oh. Sure, I'll put you on speaker.

MOM walks into Laney's room, sets the phone down.

MOM (CONT'D)
Laney, it's Stanton.

STANTON (V.O., SPEAKERPHONE)
Laney, morning. I wanted to give you a heads-up – another exec reached out to me this week. Smaller outfit, indie side, but they're hungry for fresh voices. I showed them your latest draft.

LANEY
Really?

STANTON
They want a Zoom. No pressure. But they liked the script's voice. Said it felt... urgent.

LANEY
(stunned)
Wow. Okay.

STANTON

Also – my friend at the Institute?
She's putting together a panel on
new voices in screenwriting. If
you're willing... I'd like to
recommend you.

LANEY

Me?

STANTON

You're the voice, Laney. Just keep
doing what you're doing.

SCENE: EXT. FOREST TRAIL - AFTERNOON

Laney walks with her mom. The leaves crunch beneath their
feet.

MOM

You okay?

LANEY

No idea. But I think I'm supposed
to be.

(beat)

I just want it to matter. All of
it.

MOM

It does. Whether they see it or not
– it already does.

EXT. FOREST TRAIL - CONTINUOUS

Laney and her mom walk in silence for a bit. A soft PING from
Laney's phone breaks the moment.

She pulls it out. Her breath catches.

LANEY

(reading)

It's... not Stanton.

MOM

Who is it?

LANEY

Someone named Callie James. Says
she was a creative exec at Second
Horizon Films... says she read
Wilderness Bound.

She scrolls.

LANEY (CONT'D)

(reading aloud)

"I haven't felt this connected to a script in years. Would love to talk - no pressure, no promises. Just... curiosity."

(beat)

"She left her number."

MOM

Well, what are you waiting for?

LANEY

To finish panicking.

MOM

Ten seconds. Then you call.

LANEY

Five seconds. If I wait ten, I'll chicken out.

Laney dials.

INTERCUT - INT. CALLIE'S HOME OFFICE - DAY

CALLIE JAMES (40s, sharp yet warm) sips coffee, pacing.

Her phone lights up: Laney Shaw - Incoming Call.

She answers.

CALLIE

Laney. Hi. Thanks for calling.

LANEY

(stammering slightly)

Hi. Yeah. Thanks for... emailing. I didn't think... I mean, I hoped...

CALLIE

It's okay. This isn't a pitch meeting. I just wanted to tell you... your voice is rare. And raw. The good kind of raw.

LANEY

I don't know if it's ready.

CALLIE

It probably isn't. But I don't care. That script moved me. And this industry needs more of that.

Laney lets the words land. For once, someone gets it.

CALLIE (CONT'D)

If you're open to it, I'd like to talk more. Zoom? Coffee? Your call. And no rush.

LANEY

(softly)

Coffee sounds terrifying. But okay.

INT. CABIN - LANEY'S ROOM - NIGHT

Laney stares at her screen. Cursor blinking. She opens a new message.

Subject: "Weird question... but I need your take."

She types:

LANEY (V.O.)

"Stanton - got an email from someone named Callie James. Says she used to be a creative exec at Second Horizon. She read Wilderness Bound. Wants to talk."

(beat)

Is this... a thing that happens? Should I be excited or scared?â€

She hovers. Then hits Send.

Laney closes her laptop. Stares at the ceiling.

INT. CABIN - AFTERNOON

Laney refreshes her inbox. A new email blinks from a production company. Subject: INTEREST IN WILDERNESS BOUND.

She opens it. Reads aloud.

LANEY

"Hi Laney - we'd love to talk representation and the possibility of an option agreement."

She freezes.

INT. CABIN - MOMENTS LATER

Laney paces. Calls Stanton. Her mom watches from the kitchen.

LANEY

What do I do? It sounds real... but
I don't know.

STANTON (V.O.)

Don't sign anything. Let's research
who they are. I've seen too many
kids get swallowed up. A deal isn't
always a break. Sometimes it's a
leash.

Laney sits. Nods.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

Laney scrolls Reddit screenwriting threads. Reads horror
stories.

SCREEN TEXT:

"We do not accept unsolicited material."

"Cold querying is like yelling into a hurricane."

"Hollywood doesn't care how good you are without heat."

She scribbles in her notebook:

Maybe the gatekeepers aren't people. Maybe they're systems.

INT. CABIN - NEXT MORNING

A package arrives. Thick envelope. An actual option
agreement. Laney and her mom stare.

MOM

Looks... official.

LANEY

So did the tooth fairy.

INT. CABIN - EVENING

Zoom call. Stanton's glasses low on his nose. He scans the
contract.

STANTON

Eighteen-month hold. No guaranteed money. Final cut is theirs. This isn't a deal - it's a trap.

LANEY

But it's something, right?

STANTON

So is a bear trap.

(beat)

If they believe in the story, they'll still believe in it after you say no.

Laney exhales. Heavy.

FADE OUT.

INT. CABIN - LANEY'S ROOM - LATER

Laney tosses the option agreement onto her bed.

Her mom stands in the doorway.

MOM

You okay?

LANEY

I'm going to pass... like Stanton said I should. But part of me wonders - what if this was it? My one shot?

Laney drops to her knees beside the bed.

LANEY (CONT'D)

(whispering)

Dad... if you're listening - just tell me I didn't blow it.

She folds her hands. Eyes closed.

INT. STANTON'S GARAGE - LATE MORNING

Laney stands in the doorway of a dusty, cluttered garage. Movie posters peeling off the walls. A faded Screenwriting Expo 2004 banner hangs above a workbench stacked with scripts, film reels, and unopened Amazon boxes.

STANTON in jeans and a flannel shirt, waves her in.

STANTON

Don't mind the mess. Organized chaos.

LANEY

This looks exactly like what I thought a retired director's mind would look like.

STANTON

Then I'm doing something right.

He motions to a rickety card table. Two folding chairs. A coffee maker bubbles in the background.

STANTON (CONT'D)

Brought your latest draft?

Laney hands him a printed script. He flips through it, nodding.

STANTON (CONT'D)

You rewrote the campfire scene.

LANEY

Again.

STANTON

This one hurts more. In a good way.

Beat.

STANTON (CONT'D)

You ready for some war stories?

Laney leans forward.

LANEY

Absolutely.

STANTON

I once wrote a script about a firefighter who loses his hearing in an explosion and has to retrain as a dispatcher. Gritty. Human. Based on a real guy I knew.

LANEY

And?

STANTON

Studio notes came back: "Can he be a talking dog instead?"

Laney bursts out laughing.

LANEY
You're kidding.

STANTON
I wish. I actually pitched that script four times. Every time it got a little more... dumb. By round four, they wanted it set in space. With a love triangle.

LANEY
Please tell me you walked.

STANTON
Ran.

Laney studies him, sobered.

LANEY
How did you not just quit?

STANTON
Because sometimes – just sometimes – the right person reads your script and sees the damn heartbeat inside it. And those moments? They're rare. But they're oxygen.

He hands back her script.

STANTON (CONT'D)
You've got oxygen, kid. Don't let anyone bottle it and sell it back to you.

Laney swallows hard. She nods.

LANEY
I won't.

A beat of silence. Then:

LANEY (CONT'D)
Did you ever write something just for yourself?

Stanton opens a drawer. Pulls out a script with duct tape on the spine.

STANTON

Never sold. Never even pitched. But it's my best work. Because it told the truth – not the market.

Laney runs her fingers across the cover: "The Ones We Lost" by Stanton Reed

STANTON (CONT'D)

You're not chasing Hollywood, Laney. You're chasing honesty. That's rarer than any agent.

Laney sits back. Soaks it in.

LANEY

Do you ever feel like the system's... built to break you?

STANTON

Laney, the system isn't broken. It's working exactly as designed – to keep out anyone without a key to the back door.

LANEY

And what if no one's handing out keys?

STANTON

Then you break a damn window.
(beat)

But yeah... I've seen it up close. You've got "script doctors" now charging a thousand bucks to tell you your second act sags. Then when you fix it? Another one tells you it's "too structured." It's like asking two IRS agents the same question and getting indicted for following the wrong one.

LANEY

Yeah. Or getting told you "need a rep" to submit... but no rep will take you unless you've already sold something.

STANTON

Exactly. You cold-query? Ninety-nine percent won't even open the email unless you drop a magic name. But that magic name won't help unless they already believe in you.

(MORE)

STANTON (CONT'D)

(leans in)

You ever try calling Netflix?
Amazon? Sony? Good luck. You'll hit
a black hole of interns with canned
responses, NDAs longer than your
script, and a "no unsolicited
material" sign tattooed on their
inbox.

LANEY

It's hopeless.

STANTON

It feels hopeless. But that's when
the real writers get mean. Gritty.
Smart. That's when you stop playing
their game and build your own damn
table.

FADE OUT.

INT. CABIN - STORAGE CLOSET - AFTERNOON

Laney rummages through an old plastic bin labeled "STUFF - DO
NOT THROW AWAY."

She's looking for a spare notebook... but pauses when she finds
a manila envelope, worn with time.

She opens it. Inside: a short story, yellowed with age,
titled "When the Rain Came First" by Marissa Shaw.

Also inside: a form letter rejection. Dated 2003.

LANEY (SOFTLY)

Mom...?

INT. CABIN - LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Laney places the envelope on the table between them.

LANEY

You wrote this?

Her mother doesn't answer at first. Just looks at it.

MOM

A long time ago.

LANEY

It's good. I mean... really good.

MOM

It wasn't good enough.

LANEY

That letter was BS. I've gotten the same one. Different font.

MOM

It stung. Back then, I thought that was the sign – the universe saying "this dream isn't for you."

LANEY

And now?

MOM

Now I think I was just scared. One rejection felt like the whole world saying no.

LANEY

But you kept it.

MOM

I couldn't let go of all of it.

A beat.

MOM (CONT'D)

Maybe watching you – stubborn, relentless, hopeful – maybe it's helping me find that piece again.

LANEY

We could submit it somewhere. Together.

Her mom looks at her – surprised.

MOM

You think they want stories from women who left their dreams on a shelf?

LANEY

Hell yes. That's a movie I'd watch.

They smile.

FADE OUT.

EXT. WOODED CLEARING - EARLY MORNING

A makeshift set has been built from sticks, blankets, and string lights.

JACKIE RIVERA, the indie filmmaker who messaged Laney after reading her script online, is now fully in her orbit - hoodie, DSLR, no Hollywood sheen.

A makeshift set has been built from sticks, blankets, and string lights. Jackie Rivera holds a beat-up DSLR camera on a tripod. Laney adjusts a prop log.

Jackie holds a beat-up DSLR camera on a tripod. Laney adjusts a prop log.

JACKIE

Remind me why we're filming this in mosquito central?

LANEY

Because this is where I wrote it. Where she ran. Where she healed.

JACKIE

And here I thought it was just a cheap location.

They grin.

JACKIE (CONT'D)

Alright, kid. Let's get your shot.

INT. CABIN - MOMENTS EARLIER

Laney's mom rummages through a drawer and pulls out two LED lanterns and an old boom mic rig.

MOM

If you tell anyone I used to run lights for high school theater...

LANEY

Your secret dies with me.

EXT. WOODED CLEARING - LATER

Laney directs a local teen actress - dark hoodie, messy hair - who sits by a fake campfire.

LANEY

Don't look scared. Look like you've finally decided not to run.

ACTRESS

Got it.

JACKIE (O.S.)

Speed... and... action!

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

Laney watches raw footage on her laptop. Her hands tremble slightly.

JACKIE (O.S.)

(on video)

Cut! Damn. That's a wrap.

Laney exhales. Her mom walks in with two mugs.

MOM

So?

LANEY

It's not perfect. But it's mine.

MOM

Then it's perfect enough.

EXT. SMALL TOWN CAFE - NEXT DAY

Jackie, Stanton, Laney, and her mom sit at a patio table.

STANTON

I saw the rough cut. Gritty. Unfiltered. Not a drop of Hollywood polish.

JACKIE

That's the point.

LANEY

I want people to see this and feel like they walked through the same woods.

JACKIE

They will.

STANTON

I know execs who would never touch this. And that's exactly why we should finish it.

FADE OUT.

INT. DOLBY THEATER - NIGHT (DREAM SEQUENCE)

Laney stands in an absurdly oversized gown made of screenplay pages. Spotlights blaze. A red carpet stretches for miles. Paparazzi shout nonsense.

PHOTOGRAPHER #1

Who are you wearing?

LANEY

Uh... Courier New?

Camera flashes blind her. Giant Oscar statues wink at her as if alive.

A HOST - robotic, too smooth - steps up to the mic.

HOST

Welcome to the 99th Annual Legacy IP Awards, sponsored by streaming, synergy, and six identical superhero franchises!

Applause.

HOST (CONT'D)

Tonight's award for Best Original Screenplay goes to...

(beat)

HOST (CONT'D)

Wilderness Bound by... wait, this can't be right... a teenager with no reps?

Gasps ripple. A studio exec faints. A CGI wolf walks onstage and howls.

CGI WOLF

The forest thanks you.

Laney steps up, confused.

LANEY

I just wanted to tell the truth.

PRODUCER IN CROWD
Is the truth marketable?

MARKETING VP (O.S.)
Can we turn it into a TikTok
series?

DEVELOPMENT EXEC (O.S.)
Or a YA trilogy about trauma
wolves?

Suddenly, her script explodes into confetti.

LANEY (DEADPAN)
This explains so much.

CUT TO:

INT. CABIN - LANEY'S BEDROOM - MORNING

Laney jolts awake.

She grabs her notebook. Scribbles one line:

"They'll sell the truth back to you - as long as it's bite-sized and branded.

She underlines it. Twice.

FADE OUT.

INT. CABIN - LANEY'S ROOM - NIGHT

Laney's on a Zoom call with JACKIE RIVERA, her no-BS indie mentor. Jackie lounges in a hoodie, bare walls behind her.

JACKIE
So, you rewrote the wolves. Bled
some truth on the page. That's
good.

LANEY
It didn't suck?

JACKIE
It didn't suck.
(beat)
But here's the thing. Everyone's
got one good script in 'em. Hell,
even my ex has one - and he can't
spell "structure."

Laney leans forward, sensing the challenge.

JACKIE (CONT'D)

You want to be real?

Write something new.

No trauma safety nets. No flashbacks to Dad.

Just *you*, standing naked on the page, swinging hard.

Laney swallows.

LANEY

What if it's garbage?

JACKIE

Then set it on fire and write again.

(beat)

Two weeks. One scene. Send me something *I haven't seen a dozen times in coverage hell.*

Zoom call ends.

Laney stares at her screen, heart thudding.

CUT TO:

INT. CABIN - LANEY'S ROOM - NIGHT (LATER)

Pages, notes, and coffee cups litter every surface. She rips out one index card and scrawls across it:

"WRITE THE THING THAT MAKES YOU SWEAT."

INT. LIBRARY - COMPUTER TERMINAL - DAY

Laney logs back into Reddit. Her fingers tremble slightly as she types:

"Looking for volunteer voices for a virtual table read. Scene from a new indie script. Nothing polished. Just real. DM if you're game."

She hits POST.

INT. CABIN - LANEY'S ROOM - NIGHT

Laney stares at her inbox.

Ding.

Ding.

Ding.

ON SCREEN:

u/scriptboy22: "I'll read stage directions." u/DevonReads:
"Send me the pages." u/CarlaWrites: "Can I be the mom?"

INT. CABIN - ZOOM CALL - NIGHT

A low-fi Zoom grid: strangers from different states, reading from their bedrooms, offices, kitchen tables.

Laney watches, barely breathing.

READER 1 (AS CHARACTER)

She didn't scream. She just stared at the man in the hallway like she'd already buried him in her mind.

READER 2

She wrote it down that night. Not for therapy. Not for revenge. Just so someone would finally read the truth.

Laney's eyes fill. It's not perfect - they stumble, mispronounce, talk over each other...

...but the words land.

She glances at the corner of the screen - her mom is there too, just listening. Frozen. Stunned.

LANEY

(whispers to herself)
It works.

INT. CABIN - LANEY'S ROOM - AFTER THE CALL

She sits in the dark.

A soft chime. A message from one of the readers:

"That line about memory not needing a flashlight? Damn. That's gonna stick with me."

Laney smiles.

She types one word on a sticky note and pins it to the wall above her laptop:

LISTENED.

INT. CABIN - LANEY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Laney lies in bed, exhausted. Her laptop screen still glows faintly, displaying the working title: **THE GATEKEEPERS - Draft 3**

Her eyes drift shut.

CUT TO:

INT. MOVIE THEATER - DREAM

Darkness. A projection flickers to life.

Laney, now about ten years old, sits in the middle of an empty theater. Rows and rows of vacant seats surround her.

Suddenly, her FATHER appears beside her. Alive. Wearing his faded denim jacket. Soda in hand.

DAD
You're still rewriting?

LANEY
Always.

He chuckles. Then his expression softens – something heavier behind his eyes.

DAD
Can I ask you something?

LANEY
Of course.

DAD
Why do you still need strangers to tell you you're good?

Laney blinks. That one lands hard.

LANEY

I guess... because I don't believe
it yet.

DAD

Then stop waiting to believe it.
(leans closer)
Write anyway.

Laney looks at the movie screen.

ONSCREEN: A blank white frame. No scene. No dialogue. No approval.

DAD (CONT'D)

Don't chase the applause. Chase the
echo.

If the story's true... it'll ring.

Suddenly, the theater around her starts to dissolve – not
violently, but gently, like paper burning at the edges.

DAD (CONT'D)

You already got one believer in the
front row.

He touches her shoulder.

DAD (CONT'D)

Now earn your own.

Laney turns to look at him – but he's gone.

INT. CABIN – LANEY'S BEDROOM – MORNING

Laney wakes up. No gasping. Just stillness.

She stares at the ceiling.

Then turns to her laptop.

Deletes the first line of her new script.

Types instead:

A girl walks through fire. And comes out carrying her story.

INT. STANTON'S GARAGE - NIGHT

Stacks of old scripts and memorabilia surround Stanton as he sits at an ancient desktop, lit only by a flickering desk lamp.

On his screen: a video of Laney's virtual table read.

The resolution is grainy. The performances are rough. But her words - they land.

READER (ON SCREEN)
She didn't need saving.

She just needed to be heard.

Stanton leans back, arms crossed. He nods slightly.

A half-smile tugs at his mouth - one part proud, one part wrecked by how rare this is.

He pulls up his email. Starts typing.

INSERT - ON
SCREEN:

To: CJames@SecondHorizonFilms.com Subject: New voice worth your time

Body: Her name's Laney Shaw. She's unpolished. Untamed. Fifteen. But she's the real damn thing. If you're looking for someone who doesn't sound like everyone else... this is it.

He hovers over SEND.

Then clicks it.

BACK TO SCREEN:

The video continues.

LANEY (ON SCREEN, NARRATING)
If no one opens the door...

build one out of rejection letters.

Stanton smiles again - this time, a little prouder.

STANTON
Hell of a builder, kid.

INT. STANTON'S GARAGE - NIGHT

Stanton is pouring himself cheap whiskey when his phone lights up.

CALL INCOMING: CALLIE JAMES

He answers with a gravel-voiced grunt.

STANTON

Yeah?

CALLIE (V.O.)

I got your email. About the girl -
Laney. That table read link? Jesus.

Who the hell is she?

STANTON

Nobody. That's the point.

(beat)

Nobody with a cracked laptop, a
dead father, a stack of rejection
emails - and a voice that doesn't
sound like 14 million MFA clones
who all read the same save-the-cat
blog.

CALLIE (V.O.)

I'm intrigued.

STANTON

Intrigued?

Callie. They're making another live-action *Bambi*. Another.
One.

(beat)

You want to talk *voice*? This girl bleeds it. She doesn't
know the rules well enough to copy them - and that's what
makes her dangerous.

CALLIE (V.O.)

But there's... no representation.
No WGA. No development lab behind
her.

STANTON

You know what that used to be
called?

Talent.

(pacing now)

But now? You need an agent to submit to a contest. You need a fellowship just to get ghosted by a CAA intern. You need "branded voice," "algorithmic resonance," and – God help us – you need to be "packaged."

(beat)

Hollywood used to *find* people like her. Now they ignore them, then reboot them in fifteen years.

CALLIE (V.O.)

The industry is shifting. We're–

STANTON

No, the industry is bleeding out.

And it's not from piracy. Not from streaming. It's from cowardice.

Every time we greenlight another legacy sequel or animated rehash, we tell kids like Laney: "Your voice doesn't matter unless it can open in China."

(beat)

She's the real thing. So either you pick up the phone... or I do it myself, the old-school way – pitch deck, car trunk, film fests in damn Idaho if I have to.

A beat. Silence.

CALLIE (V.O.)

I'll set up a call. No promises.
But... you got me listening.

STANTON

That's all I needed.

He hangs up. Down the rest of his drink. Stares at the glowing screen.

STANTON (CONT'D)

Let's kick the damn door in, kid.

SUPER: SIX MONTHS LATER

INT. PRODUCTION OFFICE - DAY

Laney sits around a long conference table. Assistant directors, producers, and department heads flip through shooting schedules and call sheets.

On a stack of scripts in front of them:

****WILDERNESS BOUND - Written by Laney Shaw****

PRODUCER

We're cutting Scene 18. Snow machine's busted and the new location doesn't fit.

LANEY

But that's... her breakdown scene.

SECOND PRODUCER

We'll shoot something else. Trust me, no one notices emotional continuity.

Laney glances at Jackie across the table. Jackie offers a half-smile - "welcome to the club."

INT. SOUNDSTAGE - WEEKS LATER

Crew moves. Lights shift. The lead actress paces, script in hand.

ACTRESS

Do I have to say the line about the wolves again? It's... a little on the nose.

LANEY

It's the point.
(softer)
But yeah... say what feels honest.

Laney turns away, frustrated.

EXT. SOUNDSTAGE - LATER

She leans against a trailer, sipping lukewarm coffee.

STANTON (O.S.)

You look like I did on my third divorce.

Laney smiles weakly. Stanton sits beside her.

LANEY

It's not mine anymore. They keep sanding it down until it's... safe.

STANTON

That's the game. You fought to get on the field. Now you fight to keep your voice on the scoreboard.

(beat)

And kid? Your name's still on the damn script. That's oxygen.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

Laney sits at her laptop. A tab open: "Wilderness Bound - IMDb Listing - Now in Post-Production"

Another tab: "How to deal with losing creative control of your script"

She closes them both. Stares at the ceiling.

INT. COFFEE SHOP - DAY

Jackie walks in and tosses a newspaper on the table in front of Laney.

FRONT PAGE: *Wilderness Bound Receives Early Awards Buzz After Festival Premiere*

JACKIE

Still think this was a mistake?

Laney stares. Then slowly smiles.

EXT. RED CARPET - NIGHT

Flashes explode. Reporters shout names. The cast poses in gowns and tuxes.

In the background, LANEY SHAW (now 15, still wearing boots under her dress) stands stunned, holding a clutch like a live grenade.

REPORTER (O.S.)

And over here - the girl who wrote the story everyone's talking about!

She turns. Smiles. Cameras flash.

Behind her, Stanton watches from the rope line, hands in pockets. Jackie smirks beside him.

STANTON
Goddamn right.

INT. DOLBY THEATRE - NIGHT

Gowns glitter. Champagne flutes clink. The screen flashes:

****BEST ORIGINAL SCREENPLAY - NOMINEES****

Clips play from each film. When **WILDERNESS BOUND** appears, Laney's words ring out:

ON SCREEN CHARACTER (V.O.)
She wasn't afraid of the dark.

She was afraid no one would ever ask what it meant.

CUT TO:

Laney seated between Jackie and her MOM. Stanton sits behind them, slightly uncomfortable in a bow tie. They all watch the stage.

The PRESENTER opens the envelope.

PRESENTER
And the Oscar goes to...
(beat)
Laney Shaw - **Wilderness Bound**.

Gasps. Applause.

Laney freezes.

Jackie nudges her. Her mom whispers:

MOM
Go get 'em, kid.

Laney stumbles up, heart pounding, dress slightly crooked.

INT. OSCARS STAGE - MOMENTS LATER

She stands at the mic. Dwarfed by the stage. Blinded by lights. The golden statue trembling in her hand.

She breathes.

LANEY

I was told a hundred different ways
this wouldn't happen.

That I was too young. Too weird. Too rural. Too...
unsolicited.

(laughter)

I wrote my first draft under a solar-powered lamp, surrounded
by trees and rejection letters.

It was messy. Raw. Mine.

(beat)

To the other writers out there – with cracked laptops and no
reps and nothing but a story you can't shake – keep going.
Kick the door in.

And to my dad...

You promised you'd be in the front row.

(she glances at the sky)

I hope you saw it.

The crowd rises. Applause swells.

INT. STANTON'S GARAGE – NIGHT (LATER)

Back home. Stanton watches the replay on an old TV, a beer in
hand.

STANTON

Told you.

INT. CABIN – NIGHT

Laney, back home now, sits in front of her laptop.

A new file is open.

UNTITLED – Draft 1

By Laney Shaw

She stares at the blinking cursor.

Then types:

FADE IN:

POV: COMPUTER SCREEN.

A girl opens the door... and finds no one there.

So she builds her own world, one word at a time.

FADE OUT.

ENDING

INT. DOLBY THEATER - NIGHT

The orchestra swells.

The crowd is electric. Camera flashes. Gowns. Tuxedos. Hope.

Laney, now composed and radiant, sits beside her MOM – both dressed modestly, but elegant. They hold hands tightly.

Nearby, STANTON (60s) sits two rows back – proud but unseen by most, wearing an old suit that doesn't quite fit. He smiles, small and knowing.

ON STAGE, a FAMOUS ACTRESS opens the envelope.

ACTRESS

(softly, into the mic)

And the Academy Award for Best
Original Screenplay goes to...

(beat)

Laney Shaw, for Wilderness Bound.

The crowd ERUPTS.

Laney freezes. Her mom GASPS.

MOM

Go!

Laney rises, trembling. She walks down the aisle.

As she moves past studio execs and A-listers – the gatekeepers – many rise to clap. Some cheer. Some just nod politely.

A flash of light catches Laney's eye – in the wings of the stage, she sees a silhouette: her DAD, proud, hands in his pockets.

A tear slips down her cheek.

She climbs the stairs.

The ACTRESS hands her the statue. Whispers something inaudible.

Laney steps up to the mic.

LANEY

(voice trembling)

I wrote this in a cabin... in the woods... with no power, no plan, and no permission.

(beat)

I just wanted someone to hear me.

(looks out – spots

Stanton, then her mom)

Thank you... for listening.

The audience rises to its feet. Applause swells.

Stanton wipes a tear. Her mom is sobbing.

On stage – Laney holds the Oscar high. Her DAD'S silhouette lingers in the background – then fades gently into the light.

OVER THIS:

“Magic” by The Cars plays – soft at first, then full blast.

FADE TO BLACK.