

PAINT CREEK Screenplay Adaptation — Opening Sequence

FADE IN:

EXT. PAINT CREEK CLEARING — DAY — OCTOBER 1887

Maples burn scarlet and gold against a sky the color of wet pewter. Wind cuts through bare branches. Forty-some ROSS COUNTY FOLK crowd a rough clearing near the creek, breath fogging, faces hard.

A wagon bed, propped on barrels, serves as a gallows. A rope hangs from an oak limb, swaying.

ISOLDE MARROW (40s), barefoot, bloodied, hands bound with hemp, is dragged up onto the wagon bed by JACOB HENDRICKS and THOMAS PRITCHARD. Her lip is split. Dried blood cracks at the corner of her mouth.

She sways. Catches herself.

The creek murmurs behind the trees — indifferent, endless.

REVEREND THADDEUS BLACKWOOD stands below her, Bible in one fist like a hatchet.

BLACKWOOD Isolde Marrow. This community's found you guilty of witchcraft. Of congress with the dark. Of bringin' death to children and blight to crops.

He looks up at her, eyes glittering.

BLACKWOOD (CONT'D) You got words 'fore the sentence is carried?

The crowd presses in. Isolde's eyes move over them — MARTHA HENDRICKS, wrung out with grief. THOMAS PRITCHARD, jaw set. Young SAMUEL COOPER, sixteen, flushed with something close to excitement.

At the tree line — half-swallowed by an oak's shadow — ELIZABETH MARROW, seventeen, face white as birch bark. Isolde finds her daughter's eyes and holds them.

Isolde draws a breath. It rattles.

ISOLDE I am no witch.

Murmurs ripple through the crowd like wind through wheat.

ISOLDE (CONT'D) I'm a midwife. A healer. Same as my mother 'fore me, and hers 'fore that. I brought half you folks' children into this world with these two hands.

She twists her bound wrists — a gesture that goes nowhere.

ISOLDE (CONT'D) I eased your fevers. Set your bones. And this is what mercy gets me.

JACOB HENDRICKS (shouting) Liar! You cursed our Sarah! Put the evil eye on her!

ISOLDE (voice breaking) Your Sarah died of scarlet fever. I sat with her four nights runnin'. I loved that child—

BLACKWOOD Enough! The devil talks sweet through her mouth even now. Proceed.

Hendricks and Pritchard haul her under the rope. The noose settles, coarse and heavy, against raw skin. Isolde's pulse hammers into the hemp.

Wind shifts — sudden, sharp. Carries the mineral tang of creek water, the green rot-smell of dying water plants.

Isolde closes her eyes. Breathes it in like a last meal.

When she opens them, the sky has gone the color of a bruise. Clouds roll in too fast to be natural.

ISOLDE (CONT'D) (rising, wild) You want witchcraft? Then hear me. All of you.

BLACKWOOD Silence her!

ISOLDE I bind my spirit to this ground. To the water and the willows, the stones and the soil.

Thunder cracks — miles off, too soon.

ISOLDE (CONT'D) My blood soaks this earth, it'll remember. When my story's told, I'll walk again. When blood spills here, I rise. Them that come seeking truth — they'll find me. Them that come with harm in their hearts—

BLACKWOOD (to the men) Now! Do it now!

ISOLDE —they'll vanish like mornin' mist. The creek'll take 'em. And won't nobody find 'em till the debt's paid.

A WOMAN IN THE CROWD She's cursin' us! Stop her!

ISOLDE (steady, final) I am Isolde Marrow. Remember my name. Remember what you done. I will never leave this place.

Her eyes lock on Elizabeth one last time.

ISOLDE (CONT'D) Paint Creek is mine now. And I am its.

The platform drops.

A beat of pure silence — the whole clearing holding its breath.

The rope snaps taut.

Rain breaks open across the sky in sheets. Lightning forks white. The crowd scatters, screaming, boots slipping in mud, leaving the clearing empty but for a body turning slow beneath the oak.

CLOSE ON — the rope. A faint sick-green light crawls down its fibers, drips to the earth like water. Where it touches, grass shrivels black.

The glow threads downhill, following the land's slope, toward the creek.

EXT. PAINT CREEK — CONTINUOUS

The creek hisses where the light touches it. Steam curls off dark water. Fish surface belly-up, one by one.

In the trees, a WHISPER moves through the branches — no language, just a name, over and over, folding itself into bark and root and stone.

MARROW... MARROW...

Birds go silent. Not a single insect stirs.

SMASH CUT TO BLACK.

TITLE CARD: RESS COUNTY, OHIO — PRESENT DAY

FADE IN:

INT. ROSS COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY — RESEARCH ROOM — DAY — WINTER

A converted Victorian mansion. Floorboards creak under settling weight. Sleet ticks against tall windows. Outside, the Scioto River runs gray and half-frozen.

LYDIA MARROW (36), dark hair in a practical braid, green eyes sharp with focus, sits over a table scattered with yellowed newspaper clippings. She wraps both hands around a chipped coffee mug for the warmth alone — the coffee itself long past drinkable.

Her notebook lies open, red ribbon marking a page of her own handwriting.

She reads a headline: "THIRD DISAPPEARANCE IN SIX MONTHS BAFFLES AUTHORITIES."

Footsteps on the stairs. Lydia doesn't look up.

DR. NATHANIEL CROSS (40s), tall, wire-rimmed glasses, wool blazer, stops at the edge of her table. His tone carries the particular irritation of a man used to getting his way in quiet rooms.

NATHANIEL Excuse me. Are you using all of these?

LYDIA (not looking up) I signed 'em out proper. Sheet's at the front desk.

NATHANIEL I'm aware of the procedure. Dr. Nathaniel Cross. I need the courthouse records, 1885 to '90. I'm told they're checked out.

(beat)

To you.

Lydia finally looks up. Something flickers — recognition.

LYDIA Lydia Marrow. Folklorist.

(flat)

And yes. I need 'em too.

NATHANIEL I'm writing on agricultural patterns, post-Reconstruction Ross County. Those records are essential.

LYDIA So's my research.

A beat. Tension crackles, thin and electric, like the air before a storm.

NATHANIEL Perhaps we share. What exactly are you after?

LYDIA Isolde Marrow. Hanged for witchcraft, 1887. I'm huntin' official record of it.

Something shifts behind Nathaniel's glasses.

NATHANIEL I've seen that name. Midwife. Owned land near the creek. Nothing about an execution, though.

LYDIA Wasn't a legal proceedin'. Mob don't file paperwork.

NATHANIEL (frowning) I've found no evidence of mob violence in this county, that period. You certain of your facts?

LYDIA I'm certain of the folklore. Which holds up better than the official record, times the authorities wanted somethin' forgot.

NATHANIEL Folklore changes with every telling. It's unreliable by nature.

LYDIA And if the documents got burned? If the ones in charge wanted an inconvenient truth gone? Folklore's how a town remembers what it ain't supposed to talk about.

The door swings open. MARGARET CHEN (60s), silver bob, reading glasses on a beaded chain, bustles in with a fresh coffee pot.

MARGARET Oh good, you've met. Dr. Cross, Lydia's been doing beautiful work on local folklore.

NATHANIEL (dry) We're discovering that.

Margaret settles at the table's end, pours herself a cup.

MARGARET Terrible business, these disappearances. Reporters, podcasters, even paranormal folks comin' through here now.

LYDIA What do you have on Isolde Marrow?

MARGARET Property records. A few diary mentions — well known as midwife and herbalist.

(lowering her voice)

Then in 1887, she just... stops. No death certificate. No burial record. Like she quit existin'.

NATHANIEL No death certificate.

MARGARET None we've found.

(a glance between them)

But the folklore's thick. Witch of Paint Creek, my grandmother called her. Lights in the woods. Voices in the water. Woman in old clothes walkin' the bank at twilight.

(beat)

And the disappearin'. Been happenin' for generations out there. One every few years, sometimes longer between. Never three, though. Not like this.

LYDIA (quiet) Do you have records on the historical disappearances?

MARGARET Some. I'll pull what I can.

(a warning creeping into her voice)

But if you're plannin' on goin' out to Paint Creek yourselves — folks around here take the legend serious. You'd do well to.

NATHANIEL What curse, exactly?

MARGARET Story goes, she cursed the creek with her dyin' breath. Bound herself to it. Swore anybody comin' to do harm would be taken. Says she can tell the difference — the curious from the cruel. Curious might see her. Might hear her.

(a pause, heavy)

The cruel ones don't come back.

Silence settles over the table. Sleet ticks harder against the glass.

LYDIA (steady) I'm goin' out there tomorrow. Need to see it for myself.

MARGARET Not alone. Not with what's been happenin'.

NATHANIEL (surprising himself) I'll go with her.

Lydia looks at him, caught off guard.

LYDIA You don't believe a word of this.

NATHANIEL No. But I believe in thorough research. And someone ought to be there to offer up a rational explanation when you start seein' ghosts.

A beat. Something passes between them — not quite trust, not quite doubt.

LYDIA Fine. But we do it my way. Respect the folklore. Don't dismiss what don't fit your worldview.

NATHANIEL Agreed. Long as you consider a rational explanation before you jump to a supernatural one.

LYDIA Deal.

They shake on it. His hand is calloused, warmer than she expects.

Margaret watches them, her face caught between worry and something like relief.

MARGARET Please. Both of you. Be careful out there. Three people missin' already.

(beat)

Don't go and make it five.

EXT. HISTORICAL SOCIETY — PARKING LOT — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Sleet has turned to a thin, steady rain. Lydia crosses the lot alone, keys out, breath fogging under a dying streetlamp.

Wind gusts through bare trees — and under it, something else. A sound almost like water. Almost like a voice.

WHISPER (V.O.) Marrow...

Lydia stops. Turns. Nothing behind her but the dark bulk of the mansion and skeletal trees dripping in the rain.

She shakes her head, unlocks the car, gets in fast.

INT. LYDIA'S CAR — CONTINUOUS

She sits a moment, engine idling, staring out at the empty lot through a windshield streaked with rain.

LYDIA (to herself, barely audible) Just wind.

She doesn't believe it. She pulls out anyway, taillights swallowed by the dark road toward Paint Creek — patient, waiting, wide awake under the winter rain.

FADE OUT.

END OF EXCERPT

THE CREEK CALLS

EXT. PAINT CREEK — BEND IN THE WATER — PRE-DAWN — FEBRUARY

Black water, high and swift with snowmelt. Fog boils up off the surface like breath off a horse in winter. Sycamores line the bank, bark peeling white as bone.

MARCUS WEBB (63), retired history teacher, stands at the water's edge in a heavy coat, flashlight beam cutting a thin tunnel through the mist. A leather journal bulges from his coat pocket.

He clicks the flashlight toward the water. Fog swallows the beam whole.

MARCUS (to himself) Awright now.

He pulls the journal free, clicks his pen.

MARCUS (CONT'D) (writing, muttering) Five forty-seven. Thirty-four degrees. Fog heavy off the water. No wind.

He stops writing. Looks up.

The fog is thicker than it was thirty seconds ago. Close. Pressing.

A branch SNAPS somewhere behind him — too clean, too deliberate to be settling wood.

MARCUS (CONT'D) (calling out) Hello? Somebody there?

Nothing answers but the creek, murmuring over stone.

He exhales a short, embarrassed laugh. Turns back to his journal. His hand trembles as he writes — he doesn't know why.

A WHISPER threads through the fog. Not wind. Not water. Something underneath both.

Marcus goes very still.

MARCUS (CONT'D) (low) This is foolish.

He's already moving toward the sound anyway, boots sucking at the mud.

The smell changes as he walks — creek-mud giving way to something sweeter. Rot under flowers. His stomach turns. He knows that smell. His grandmother's parlor, the week she died.

The fog parts. A massive sycamore looms out of the gray — its trunk carved deep with symbols, old wood grown up around the cuts, and yet the grooves look fresh, wet, like something recently traced them with a blade.

Marcus steps closer, academic instinct winning out over dread. He raises his phone to photograph the carvings.

The screen flickers — opens, closes, opens, closes — then dies. Full battery. Dead screen.

MARCUS (CONT'D) (under his breath) Damn thing.

The WHISPERS answer him. Not from one direction now — from all of them. Dozens of voices, layered, forming words that almost, almost land.

Marcus spins, flashlight raking the fog. For one half-second — shapes. Human-shaped. Standing dead still among the trees.

He snaps the beam back. Nothing there. Just fog and bare branches.

MARCUS (CONT'D) (voice cracking) Who's there! This ain't funny!

The fog thickens to almost solid. Cold bites through his coat, into bone. His breath comes fast, ragged.

The whispers resolve. A name. His name.

WHISPERS (V.O.) Marcus... Marcus Webb...

His boot catches a root. He goes down hard, flashlight flying into the creek — a hiss, a spark, dark.

Scrambling in the mud, his hand closes on something that is not journal, not stone.

Bone. Small. Smooth. Unmistakably human.

Marcus recoils with a strangled cry — and the fog closes in around him, and in it, hands. Dozens. Cold as creek water in January.

He runs.

Branches claw his coat, his face. He has no idea which way is the car and which way is deeper woods. Behind him — or ahead, he can't tell anymore — the whispers chase, and under them, the creek itself seems to rise, louder, closer, like it's coming after him on two legs.

He breaks through bare willows — and stops dead.

He's back at the creek. Same bend. He ran in a straight line — he's sure of it — and yet here's the water again, black and swift.

Flowing upstream.

MARCUS (CONT'D) (a whisper) No. No, this ain't happenin'.

The fog gathers itself. Takes shape. A WOMAN IN A LONG DRESS, hair unbound and drifting like she's underwater though the air is still. Where her eyes should be — black, empty, hungry.

ISOLDE (O.S.) (wind through dead leaves) You sought the truth.

(beat)

Now the truth has found you.

Marcus tries to scream. Nothing comes. His legs won't answer him.

She reaches. Her fingers — solid, then smoke, then solid again — brush his cheek. Where they touch, cold burns like fire.

He's being pulled. Toward the water. Toward the water running the wrong way.

Something ancient in him — animal, desperate — breaks the paralysis. He throws himself sideways and runs, and this time he does not look back.

EXT. GRAVEL ACCESS ROAD — CONTINUOUS

Marcus stumbles out of the tree line onto gravel, keys shaking so hard he drops them twice. Gets the door open. Throws himself inside. Locks it — a gesture as useless as it is instinctive.

In the rearview — fog creeping out of the trees, reaching low across the gravel like fingers.

He guns the engine and drives, gravel spitting behind his tires.

He doesn't stop till the highway, till the sun cracks the horizon and turns the world back to something like normal.

But something rides home with him. A cold spot, dead center of his chest, right where her fingers touched.

A mark.

A claim.

CUT TO:

EXT. GRAVEL PARKING AREA — PAINT CREEK ACCESS ROAD — MORNING —
THREE HOURS LATER

A rental car eases in beside a mud-splattered SUBARU with Indiana plates. Bumper sticker:
FOLKLORE IS HISTORY'S SHADOW.

DR. NATHANIEL CROSS (40s) steps out, breath fogging, coat pulled tight. He looks at the tree line — dead silent, no birdsong, fog still clinging to the water though the morning's well underway.

NATHANIEL (to himself) Christ.

A worn trail leads off toward the creek. He follows it.

EXT. PAINT CREEK CLEARING — CONTINUOUS

LYDIA MARROW (30s) crouches at the creek's edge, notebook in hand, sketching something in the mud with quick precise strokes. She looks up as Nathaniel's boots crunch into the clearing.

LYDIA Dr. Cross. You're punctual.

(a small, appraising smile)

I appreciate that.

NATHANIEL Dr. Marrow.

(shaking her hand — her grip's cold, firm)

Still not entirely sure why I'm here.

LYDIA Because you're curious. And because for all your reputation, you're honest enough to look before you dismiss somethin'.

NATHANIEL You did your research on me.

LYDIA I don't invite just anybody out here.

She stands, brushing mud from her knees, and her expression sobers.

LYDIA (CONT'D) A man went missin' here yesterday mornin'. Marcus Webb. Retired teacher, researchin' the Marrow legend for the historical society. Wife reported him gone when he didn't come home for breakfast. Police found his car right where yours is parked.

She pulls a plastic evidence bag from her messenger bag — a water-swollen leather journal inside.

LYDIA (CONT'D) Let me photograph the pages 'fore they bagged it proper.

NATHANIEL May I?

She nods. He opens the bag carefully. The smell rolls out — creek water, and under it, something sweet gone wrong.

He flips through — meticulous notes, hand-drawn maps, careful observations. Then the last entry.

Timestamp. A few lines about fog and cold.

Then the handwriting breaks. Frantic scrawl, the same six words over and over, pressed so hard the pen's torn through paper:

SHE'S HERE SHE'S HERE SHE'S HERE

Nathaniel's jaw tightens.

LYDIA (CONT'D) (quiet) Police think he had some kind of break. Wandered off confused. They're runnin' a search party this afternoon.

NATHANIEL But you don't think that's what happened.

LYDIA No.

(meeting his eyes, dead certain)

I think Marcus Webb met somethin' at this creek. Somethin' that's been here a hundred seventy years and more. Somethin' that's claimed a lot more than three lives.

NATHANIEL The curse.

LYDIA The curse.

(a beat)

Before you write it off, Dr. Cross, I want to show you somethin'.

She leads him along the bank. The fog thickens with every step, clings low to the black water. The cold deepens — sharper than it has any right to be, this late in the morning.

They reach a massive sycamore. Symbols carved deep into the bark — old growth swallowing the cuts in places, and yet the lines look freshly traced.

NATHANIEL (crouching, phone out, snapping photos) Mixed traditions — hex signs, what might be pictographs, some kind of alchemical mark. But they're inverted. Corrupted, almost.

LYDIA They're protective sigils. Or they were meant to be.

(pointing)

But look how they're set. They ain't warding somethin' off.

(beat)

They're keeping somethin' in.

NATHANIEL Interesting theory. Doesn't prove anything supernatural.

LYDIA Then explain this.

She leads him to the water's edge. Boot prints in the churned mud — Marcus Webb's, from the size — leading straight to the creek.

And stopping. Dead. No wade marks. No disturbance in the shallows. Like a man stepped mid-stride into nothing.

Around the last print — smaller marks pressed deep in the mud. Dozens of them. Handprints, arranged in a perfect circle.

NATHANIEL (crouched, studying them, voice losing its edge) These could be — animal tracks. A trick of erosion.

LYDIA Could be.

(flat)

They ain't. And you know it.

A long silence. The fog presses closer than it should this far from the water. Nathaniel's breath fogs harder than the temperature alone accounts for.

NATHANIEL Tell me about her. The real woman. Not the legend.

Something in Lydia loosens — this is her ground.

LYDIA Isolde Blackwood, born 1799, married Thomas Marrow, come out to Ohio in the twenties, settled here. Thomas died of "fever" in '25 — county record don't say more than that. She stayed. Ran forty acres alone for over twenty years. That alone made folks talk.

NATHANIEL Widows kept homesteads all the time.

LYDIA Widows who remarried. Who took in kin. Isolde didn't need nobody. And she healed folks — treated fevers, delivered babies, made her own remedies. In a place like this, that kind of knowin' cuts two ways. Valuable. And dangerous.

(flipping her notebook open)

Accusations started 1847. Child died of scarlet fever after Isolde treated her. Cattle dropped dead overnight. Barn burned. A woman miscarried. All of it explainable.

(beat)

But folks weren't lookin' for explanations. They were lookin' for somebody to blame.

NATHANIEL And they blamed the woman who didn't need a man to survive out here.

LYDIA Every time.

(pulling out her phone)

But here's what ain't in any published history. Letter from Reverend Samuel Blackwood — Isolde's brother — to the Governor, 1850.

She shows him the photo. Faded ink, still legible. Nathaniel leans in — close enough now that he catches the smell of her, creek water and something warmer underneath.

He reads. "A woman of unusual gifts." "Wrongly persecuted." "Paint Creek will remember what was done to her."

NATHANIEL (quiet, the skeptic in him faltering) This isn't the language of a witchcraft accusation. This is something else.

LYDIA I think Isolde Marrow was what we'd call a sensitive today. Somethin' heightened. Whether that was gift or curse depended on who was doin' the callin'.

NATHANIEL Or she was an intelligent woman who scared people. We don't need ghosts to explain that.

LYDIA No.

(dead serious)

But we might need 'em to explain what's happened since.

She scrolls through more photos — old newspaper clippings, diary pages, county records. A pattern, undeniable: disappearances near Paint Creek, one or two a year, going back to 1850. Some bodies found. Most never.

NATHANIEL Coincidence. Isolated terrain, dense woods, difficult creek—

LYDIA For a hundred seventy years? Same mile of ground, every single time?

A CRACK — sharp, close — from the tree line. Both of them turn. Nothing there. Just fog, thick as smoke, gathering where there was none a moment before.

NATHANIEL (low) We should keep moving. Document what's here before the search party arrives.

They work the bank for the better part of an hour — Nathaniel photographing and measuring, Lydia sketching, the two of them falling into an uneasy rhythm.

They find Marcus's phone, dead in the mud. His flashlight, half-sunk in the creek.

Then — protruding from the bank, pale against the black mud —

A human bone. Small. Deliberate. Not buried. Placed.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) (voice gone tight) We need to call this in.

LYDIA (crouching, not touching it) Not yet. Look how it's set.

Around the bone — scratched into the mud — symbols, smaller and more intricate than the tree carvings. Arranged in a tight circle. Words, maybe, in no language either of them knows.

LYDIA (CONT'D) This is old. Older than the tree marks. Somebody with real knowin' made these.

NATHANIEL Or wanted to look like they had.

But his voice has lost its conviction. The fog is thicker now, pressing at both of them from every side. The cold has teeth in it.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) We should go. Call it in and get out of here.

LYDIA One more minute, I just need to—

A WHISPER cuts the air. Not word. Not wind. A voice, low and wrong, coming from everywhere at once.

Every hair on Nathaniel's arms stands up.

NATHANIEL (barely audible) You hear that?

LYDIA (pale) We ain't alone.

The fog swirls — and for one heartbeat, shapes. Human-shaped, standing dead still among the trees. Nathaniel's beam finds them.

Nothing there.

NATHANIEL Lydia. We're leaving. Now.

But Lydia's not looking at the trees. She's staring past him, at the creek.

He turns.

The water is running upstream. And just beneath the surface — faces. Pale, warped, mouths open, eyes empty, dozens of them, staring straight up.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) (a whisper) This isn't possible.

LYDIA No.

(shaking)

It shouldn't be. But it is.

The whispers rise, nearly words now — a warning, a threat, Nathaniel can't tell which. The fog closes in, and he swears he feels fingers against his cheek, cold as creek water in February.

LYDIA (CONT'D) Run.

They run.

EXT. WOODS — CONTINUOUS

Branches tear at them both. The fog chases — tendrils reaching, grasping, refusing to be left behind. Behind them the whispers climb into something like a chorus, rage and grief tangled together.

They burst out of the tree line onto gravel — and the fog stops dead at the trees, like it's hit a wall no eye can see.

Nathaniel doubles over, hands on his knees, gasping. Lydia's breath comes just as ragged — but her eyes are bright, alive, almost hungry.

LYDIA (CONT'D) Did you see it? The faces?

NATHANIEL (straightening, shaken) I saw something. Trick of light, reflection, I don't—

LYDIA It was real. You felt it same as I did.

He wants to argue. He can't. He did feel it — that weight, that awareness, something ancient taking notice of them both.

NATHANIEL We're calling the police. Now.

He dials, gives the dispatcher the facts in a voice stripped flat and professional — the remains, Marcus Webb's belongings, nothing about fog or faces or whispers.

They wait by the cars. Not quite touching, close enough to share warmth against the cold.

LYDIA (CONT'D) (quiet) I shouldn't have brought you out here.

NATHANIEL You didn't drag me. I came on my own.

(a faint, unsteady smile)

And I'm startin' to think I'm losin' my mind right alongside you.

A beat. Something passes between them — not romance, not yet, but the particular closeness of two people who've just seen the same impossible thing and lived.

LYDIA There's somethin' else. Somethin' I didn't put in that email.

NATHANIEL What.

LYDIA The disappearances ain't random. Every victim was either diggin' into the Marrow legend — or kin to the families that killed her.

(beat)

Marcus was diggin'. And I'm—

NATHANIEL You're her blood.

LYDIA Which means I'm on the list.

(quieter still)

And it's speeding up. Used to be once a year, maybe less. Three in six months now.

(meeting his eyes)

Somethin's changin', Nathaniel. Buildin' toward somethin'. And I don't think we got much time left to figure out what.

Sirens cut the quiet. Two sheriff's cruisers roll into the gravel lot, deputies stepping out with the careful, skeptical faces of men who've heard this story before.

EXT. PARKING AREA — LATER — DUSK

The sun's going down fast, throwing long shadows across the gravel. A DEPUTY (50s, tired-eyed) pulls Nathaniel aside.

DEPUTY Lot of folks come out here chasin' ghosts. Mostly they leave beer cans.

(beat)

Every so often, somebody goes missin'. Like Webb.

NATHANIEL You think you'll find him?

DEPUTY (grim) Honest? Probably not alive.

(a long look toward the tree line)

This place has earned its reputation. People vanish here. Always have.

(walking off)

Most of 'em, we never do find.

Nathaniel looks back at the woods. Fog still clings to the trees despite the fading light — thick, patient, unnatural.

Lydia stands near the water, giving her statement, notebook clutched tight, her eyes still fixed on the creek like she can't look away.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) (walking up, quiet) We should go. Nothing more to do here today.

LYDIA (not moving) It's watchin' us. Can you feel it?

He can. That sense of being weighed, assessed, by something vast and old and utterly without mercy.

NATHANIEL Come on. We regroup. Figure out the next move.

They walk to their cars together, the temperature dropping fast, breath visible in the near-dark.

LYDIA Where you stayin'?

NATHANIEL Hampton Inn, Bridge Street.

LYDIA Same.

(a small, tired smile)

Dinner. Compare notes.

(beat, more serious)

Nathaniel — I know this ain't what you signed on for. If you want out, back to Columbus, forget you ever heard my name — I'd understand.

He looks at her a long moment.

NATHANIEL I'm not goin' anywhere. We started this together.

(beat)

We finish it together.

She smiles — real this time — and gets in her car.

He watches her taillights swing onto the access road, then turns his key. The engine catches.

In the rearview — the fog, thicker now, spilling out past the tree line into the empty lot.

And in it — just for a heartbeat — a WOMAN IN A LONG DRESS, hair unbound, eyes fixed on him with an intensity that stops his heart cold.

He blinks.

Gone. Just fog and dark and the shapes of bare trees.

Nathaniel pulls out onto the gravel road, driving away from Paint Creek into the gathering night — but he knows, with a certainty that has nothing to do with history or reason, that he'll be back.

Carried faint on the wind through his closed windows —

WHISPERS.

Rising.

Rising into something that sounds, unmistakably, like his name.

FADE OUT.

END OF EXCERPT

WRITTEN IN HIS BLOODLINE

EXT. ROSS COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY — NIGHT — STORM

Rain hammers a narrow brick building wedged between a shuttered antique shop and a dark law office. Lightning cracks the sky. A single light burns in the back window.

Nathaniel's truck swings into the rear lot, gravel crunching under the tires, headlights washing rain in sideways sheets.

INT. TRUCK — CONTINUOUS

Nathaniel cuts the engine. Water streaks the windshield, blurring the building to a smear of brick and light. His hair's still plastered flat from the creek. His face, in the dome light, is drawn thin and pale.

NATHANIEL You sure somebody's gonna let us in?

LYDIA (voice not quite steady) Margaret owes me. She'll know I wouldn't ask lest it mattered.

EXT. BACK DOOR — HISTORICAL SOCIETY — CONTINUOUS

They run for it, boots splashing through puddles lit gold and white by the lightning. Lydia's soaked through, hair hanging in ropes. She can still feel Paint Creek's cold on her skin — can still see that face under the water.

Blood calls to blood.

She doesn't know anymore if she heard the words or just thought them.

Nathaniel knocks — three sharp raps, swallowed fast by the rain.

A long beat. Then the door opens, spilling warm yellow light into the storm.

MARGARET HOLLOWAY (70s), cardigan pulled tight, reading glasses on a beaded chain, stands in the doorway. Steel-gray hair. Eyes that don't miss much.

MARGARET Lydia Thorne.

(dry, fond)

Shoulda known you'd come callin' on a night like this. Always did have a taste for the dramatic.

LYDIA I'm sorry, Margaret. I know it's late—

MARGARET Late? Child, it's near nine on a Thursday and there's a storm out there'd make Noah nervous.

(stepping aside)

This better be important.

LYDIA It is.

She steps into the warmth — old paper, leather, dust, the smell of decades folded up and stored away. A smell she's always loved.

Nathaniel follows, dripping onto worn linoleum.

NATHANIEL Ma'am. Nathaniel Cross. Obligated you'd open up.

Margaret's eyes go to him and hold there a beat too long. Something crosses her face — recognition, maybe — gone before Lydia can be sure of it.

MARGARET (slow) Cross. Old name round here.

(beat)

Kin to the Crosses up near Bainbridge?

NATHANIEL Not that I know. Family's Columbus, before that Pennsylvania.

MARGARET Hm.

She shuts the door on the storm. The silence after is almost too heavy.

MARGARET (CONT'D) Archives're in back. I'll set you up, but I can't stay — my sister's cat won't feed itself.

(handing over a ring of keys)

Lock up when you're done. Lydia knows how.

INT. HALLWAY — HISTORICAL SOCIETY — CONTINUOUS

Framed photos line the walls — old Chillicothe, the courthouse half-built, faces long since turned to dust. Margaret leads them past all of it toward the back.

INT. ARCHIVE READING ROOM — CONTINUOUS

A scarred table. Mismatched chairs. One window looking out on the alley, rain sheeting the glass. Beyond, through an open door — the storage room, shelves stacked floor to ceiling with boxes nobody's touched in years.

Margaret clicks on a bare overhead bulb. Harsh light, hard shadows.

MARGARET What exactly you lookin' for?

Lydia and Nathaniel trade a glance.

NATHANIEL Records on the witch trials. Isolde Marrow, specifically. Trial documents, property, death record. Workin' on a piece.

MARGARET (to Lydia) And you?

LYDIA Personal accounts. Letters, diaries. The human story under the history.

MARGARET (something softening) That's always been your way, ain't it.

She moves to a filing cabinet, pulls a drawer, hands over a set of keys.

MARGARET (CONT'D) Courthouse boxes, forty-seven through fifty-two, top shelf left wall. Personal accounts — not much cataloged. Most families didn't want their name near the trials. Shame'll do that.

(beat, voice dropping)

Lydia. Be careful. Some stories don't want tellin'. Some names don't want speakin'.

LYDIA What do you mean?

But Margaret's already pulling her cardigan tight, already moving.

MARGARET Just be careful.

(a last look at Nathaniel)

Both of you.

The back door opens, closes. A soft click that seals them into the archive, alone with whatever's waiting in it.

INT. ARCHIVE STORAGE ROOM — CONTINUOUS

The overhead bulb hums, too loud in the quiet. Rain hammers the window. Somewhere in the old building, wood creaks — settling, or something else.

NATHANIEL Well. Start diggin'?

Lydia nods, but the feeling that's sat on her since Margaret left won't shake loose — like the air itself is holding its breath.

She moves into the storage room, Nathaniel behind her. Shelves loom in the dim light. Dust hangs visible in the weak spill of light from the reading room.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) (scanning shelves) Forty-seven through fifty-two. There.

He drags a step stool over, hauls down the first box. Dust puffs when he sets it on the table.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) (reading a label) Trial records, 1807 to '09.

He starts sorting, methodical, a historian's hands. Lydia tries to help but her attention keeps drifting back toward the storage room — toward the uncatalogued boxes marked in vague, careless hand: Miscellaneous 19th Century. Unidentified Personal Papers.

Something's pulling at her. Same pull that put Isolde's name on her tongue at the creek.

LYDIA I'm gonna look through the misc collections.

NATHANIEL (not looking up) Sure? Lot here. Could use the help.

LYDIA You're better at the legal stuff anyway.

He nods, already back in his box. She returns to the storage room, runs her fingers along the shelves, following instinct she's learned not to question.

Her hand stops on a small wooden crate, pushed to the back of a bottom shelf, half-hid behind old newspaper. Unmarked. Wood dark with age.

She hauls it out — heavier than it looks — and carries it into the reading room.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) What's that?

LYDIA Don't know yet.

She kneels, works the swollen lid loose. It comes free with a groan.

Inside, wrapped in linen gone yellow and brittle: a small leather book. A bundle of letters tied in faded ribbon. A tarnished silver locket. A pressed flower, nearly a shadow now.

She lifts the book first. Cracked leather. No name on the cover. She opens it — elegant, faded script.

INSERT — JOURNAL PAGE: "This journal belongs to Mercy Blackwood, in the year of our Lord 1808."

Lydia's breath catches.

LYDIA Nathaniel.

NATHANIEL Hm?

LYDIA I think I found somethin'.

He crosses to her, kneels beside her on the floor.

NATHANIEL What is it?

LYDIA A journal. 1808.

(turning the page toward him)

Mercy Blackwood. Recognize the name?

NATHANIEL (thinking) Blackwood... there's a Blackwood in the trial records. Testified against Isolde. Said she cursed their livestock.

LYDIA (slow) Or maybe Mercy knew her. Maybe they were friends.

They lean in together and read.

INSERT — JOURNAL, JANUARY 3RD 1808: "...I do not believe what they say about Isolde. I cannot. She delivered my sister's baby last spring... She has healing hands, not cursed ones. But fear makes people cruel... I am afraid for her. I am afraid for all of us."

Lydia's hands tremble on the page.

NATHANIEL Keep readin'.

He pulls his chair close, shoulder near enough to touch hers. It should feel distracting. Instead it feels like ballast.

They move through entry after entry — Mercy chronicling the hysteria taking root in Paint Creek, the whispered accusations, midnight meetings, Isolde's quiet strength under the weight of it all.

INSERT — JOURNAL, MARCH 15TH 1808: "They came for her today... The charges are absurd... I have known Isolde Marrow five years. She is no more a witch than I am. But truth matters little when fear has taken hold."

NATHANIEL (low) This is a firsthand account. You know how rare this is? Nearly everything we've got on the trials comes from the accusers. Almost never from someone who defended the accused.

Lydia's barely listening, lost in the pages, turning faster now.

INSERT — JOURNAL, MARCH 22ND 1808: "They have tortured her... Still she would not confess... 'I am no witch,' she told the magistrate. 'I am a healer, nothing more.'"

Lydia has to stop. Tears blur the page. Her throat's gone tight.

NATHANIEL (gentle) You okay?

She nods, doesn't trust her voice, keeps reading.

INSERT — JOURNAL, APRIL 1ST 1808: "I went to her tonight... 'Remember me,' she said. 'I will bind myself to this place... Those who come after, those who seek the truth, will find me. Blood calls to blood, and names have power. When my name is spoken again in this place, I will answer.'"

Lydia's hands shake so bad the pages rattle.

LYDIA (barely a whisper) I spoke her name. At the creek. I called her.

(looking up, eyes wide)

And she answered.

NATHANIEL (hand on her shoulder) Lydia. What is it. You look like you seen a ghost.

She almost laughs. Doesn't.

LYDIA I think we're in the middle of somethin' a whole lot bigger than we figured.

The overhead bulb FLICKERS. Once, twice. Steadies. The temperature drops — Lydia's breath fogs in air that was warm a minute ago.

NATHANIEL (glancing up) Storm messin' with the wiring.

But Lydia knows better. That presence from the creek — closer now. They were never alone in here.

She forces herself back to the journal, to the final entries. Mercy writing of the execution she couldn't bring herself to watch, of the crowd's murmur, the terrible silence after.

INSERT — JOURNAL, APRIL 2ND 1808: "They say her last words were not a plea for mercy but a promise. 'I will not be forgotten,' she said. 'This land will remember. The water will remember.'"

The entries thin out after — livestock dying without cause, wells running dry, children waking screaming about a woman in the water. Then, abruptly, they stop.

INSERT — JOURNAL, APRIL 30TH 1808 (FINAL ENTRY): "Isolde Marrow was innocent... Remember her name. Remember what was done to her. And be careful, for the dead do not always rest easy, especially when they have been wronged. —Mercy Blackwood"

Lydia closes the book. Silence sits heavy between them.

NATHANIEL (rough) This changes everything. This is proof the trial was a sham. This could rewrite what we understand about the trials in Ohio.

Lydia's not thinking about the history. She's thinking about the curse.

LYDIA There's more here. Mercy mentions bloodlines — people who'd come after. We need to understand what that means.

She goes back to the crate. The bundle of letters — correspondence to a cousin in Marietta. Mostly ordinary. One, dated 1810, stops her cold.

INSERT — LETTER, 1810: "...I have learned that her daughter survived... The girl's name is Elizabeth. Elizabeth Marrow. And I am told she has returned to Paint Creek, to claim her mother's property... I fear what her mother's spirit might do, now that her daughter has returned to the cursed land."

LYDIA (CONT'D) (barely audible) Nathaniel. She had a daughter.

NATHANIEL (looking up) What?

LYDIA Elizabeth Marrow. If she had children of her own — there's a bloodline. Descendants tracin' straight back to Isolde.

Understanding dawns in his eyes.

NATHANIEL And if the curse runs on blood—

LYDIA Then anybody carryin' Isolde's blood might be tied to this place. Drawn to it.

(a beat, something private crossing her face)

We need to trace Elizabeth's line. Find out what happened, whether there's children, where they went.

NATHANIEL Saw some property records might help.

He goes back to his box. Lydia turns to the last item in the crate — the silver locket, tarnished near black. She rubs it clean with her thumb. A tree engraved on the front, branches spread, roots deep.

It clicks open. Two miniature portraits, painted on ivory. A young woman, dark hair, serious eyes — Isolde. A little girl, same dark hair, same seriousness.

Elizabeth.

Lydia stares. Something shifts in her chest, deeper than academic interest. Older than empathy.

Blood calls to blood.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) (holding up a document, squinting) Property transfer, 1811. Elizabeth Marrow sold her mother's land to a family named...

(reading, voice slowing)

Cross. Land went to a family named Cross.

The room seems to tilt. Lydia grips the table edge.

LYDIA Cross? You sure?

NATHANIEL (pale) Buyer was Josiah Cross. And his son.

(a long, awful pause)

Nathaniel Cross.

Absolute silence. Even the storm seems to hold its breath.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) (hand shaking as he sets it down) That's just a coincidence. Common name. There's been dozens of Nathaniel Crosses in Ohio.

But there's no conviction behind it, and they both know it.

LYDIA (quiet) We keep lookin'.

They work another hour, pulling more boxes, sorting more paper, the storm building outside — thunder cracking hard enough to rattle the window glass, lightning throwing the room into stark white flashes. In each flash, shadows shift in the corners that don't quite resolve into anything.

Nathaniel finds more on the Cross family — prominent in Ross County, land along Paint Creek. Josiah Cross had been a magistrate.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) (staring at a document) Oh God. He was one of the judges. One of the men that condemned her.

Lydia leans in. Faded ink, a signature right below the guilty verdict — Josiah Cross.

LYDIA Your ancestor. If you're kin to this family, your blood signed her death warrant.

NATHANIEL (ashen) This doesn't make sense. My family's Columbus. We got no connection to Paint Creek.

LYDIA You ever trace it back that far?

He shakes his head slow.

NATHANIEL No reason to. Parents died young. My aunt raised me. Never had much cause to look further back than that.

Lydia's mind is racing — bloodlines, prophecy, the pull she's felt toward this place her whole life. She's about to say so when something catches her eye — a small leather book, wedged behind the courthouse box, older and more worn than the rest.

She pulls it free. The handwriting inside is Mercy's — but the ink is darker. Urgent. The date on the first page stops her heart.

INSERT — PAGE, DATED APRIL 1ST 1808: "I write this in secret... Isolde gave this to me tonight... 'Hide it,' she whispered. 'One day, someone will need to read it.' ...What follows are Isolde Marrow's own words, written in her own hand. May God have mercy on us all. —Mercy Blackwood"

Lydia's breath catches. She turns the page. Different hand now — shakier, more desperate. Isolde's own.

INSERT — ISOLDE'S TESTIMONY, MARCH 30TH 1808: "They will kill me tomorrow... I am no witch... I have a daughter. Her name is Elizabeth... one day, perhaps, someone from that line will return to Paint Creek. Someone will seek the truth. Someone will speak my name again in this cursed place. And when they do, I will answer."

She has to stop. Her vision blurs, chest tight with a grief that isn't quite her own.

NATHANIEL (gentle) Lydia. You okay?

LYDIA (wiping her eyes) I'm fine. It's just — so personal.

He moves closer, reads over her shoulder. Together they move through Isolde's account — her life before the accusations, her work, her daughter, the heartbreak of sending Elizabeth away.

Then — the curse itself, in Isolde's own hand.

INSERT — ISOLDE'S TESTIMONY (CONT'D): "I have bound myself to this land... There are two bloodlines that matter. The first is my own — my daughter's line... The second is the line of those who condemned me... When these two lines converge... then the truth will be revealed. Then justice will have its chance."

Lydia's heart pounds so hard it hurts.

LYDIA Two bloodlines. Victim and perpetrator.

NATHANIEL (voice trailing off) You think...

LYDIA I think I'm blood to Isolde.

(meeting his eyes)

And I think you're blood to Josiah Cross.

The words hang there. Thunder cracks loud enough to shake the building. Lightning floods the window white —

— and in that flash, Lydia sees her.

Isolde Marrow, standing in the storage room doorway. Dark hair loose. Eyes fixed on Nathaniel — sorrow and accusation both.

Lydia gasps, stumbles. Nathaniel catches her.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) Whoa — what, what is it?

LYDIA (barely a whisper) Did you see her?

She looks again. The doorway's empty. Just shadow and dust.

NATHANIEL See what?

LYDIA (shaking her head) Nothin'. Storm's got my nerves up, is all.

But it wasn't nothing, and she knows it. Isolde is here. Watching. Waiting to see what they'll do with the truth.

She turns back to the diary, forces herself through the final pages — the ritual, the binding, Isolde's hope that someone, someday, would care enough to seek justice.

INSERT — FINAL ENTRY, APRIL 1ST 1808, MIDNIGHT: "The guard will come for me soon... I am not afraid... My name is Isolde Marrow. Remember me."

Tucked behind the last page — a loose sheet. A list of names in the same shaking hand.

At the top: Elizabeth Marrow — my daughter, my blood, my hope.

Below — more names, some crossed through, some marked with question marks. Lydia's eyes track down the list, pulse climbing with every name she half-recognizes.

Near the bottom —

Lydia Thorne.

Her own name. Written in Isolde's hand. Two hundred years before she was born.

LYDIA (CONT'D) (breath gone) That's not possible. How could she—

She flips the page. A second list, titled: Those Who Condemned Me.

At the top — Josiah Cross. Below — other names, other families.

And at the very bottom, in different ink — fresher, darker —

Nathaniel Cross.

Lydia's vision swims. She looks up. Nathaniel's staring at the page, face drained white.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) How. That ain't Isolde's hand. Somebody added that. Who? When?

Lydia looks closer. The ink for his name isn't old at all. Maybe a few years, maybe less.

Someone knew he'd come here. Someone added his name — completing whatever this is.

LYDIA (realization dawning) Margaret.

(beat)

She recognized your name the second she heard it. She knows somethin'.

The lights FLICKER — then die completely. Darkness swallows the archive, the only light candles they don't remember lighting, guttering low on the table, and lightning strobing white through the window.

And in the dark, footsteps. Slow. Deliberate. Coming from the storage room.

Nathaniel's hand finds Lydia's.

NATHANIEL (low) You hear that?

She nods, can't speak. The footsteps draw closer, and the cold deepens with every one — Lydia's breath fogging thick in the candlelight now.

The footsteps stop just outside the doorway.

A long, terrible silence.

Then a VOICE — not loud, but everywhere, filling every corner of the room at once.

ISOLDE (V.O.) The truth will be revealed.

(beat)

But first, you must choose. Will you see what has been hidden? Will you face what you fear?

Lydia grips Nathaniel's hand tighter, drawing on him for whatever's left of her nerve.

LYDIA (whispered) Yes. We'll see it. We'll face it.

The candles flare — bright, sudden, hot — and there in the doorway stands ISOLDE. Not alone. Behind her, half in shadow, other women. Old-fashioned dress. Pale, hollow-eyed.

The other accused. The forgotten.

Isolde steps forward. On the table, where nothing sat a moment ago — a leather book, ancient, its cover carved with symbols neither of them know.

ISOLDE (V.O.) (CONT'D) Read.

(beat)

Read, and understand.

Lydia reaches for it. Her fingers touch the leather and a jolt runs up her arm — not pain, something else. Connection.

She opens it. The words seem to move as she reads them.

INSERT — BOOK PAGE (SHIFTING TEXT): "Nathaniel Cross. Descendant of Josiah Cross. Bearer of the name. Seeker of truth. But which truth will you choose? The curse cannot be broken until the debt is paid. Blood for blood. Truth for truth. Justice for justice."

She turns the page — a family tree, meticulous, generation stacked on generation, ending at the bottom in two names, linked by a line that seems to pulse.

Nathaniel Cross. Lydia Thorne.

Above both, in letters that look wet, dark, almost red:

The final convergence. The last chance. The moment of truth.

LYDIA (CONT'D) (shaking) Nathaniel. Look.

He leans in. Reads. Goes pale, breath catching.

NATHANIEL This can't be real.

But the cold in the room says otherwise. The shadows moving at the edge of the candlelight say otherwise. Isolde's eyes, fixed on both of them, holding two hundred years of grief and hope, say otherwise.

LYDIA (quiet, direct) Nathaniel. I need the truth. Why'd you really come to Paint Creek? What are you really lookin' for?

He opens his mouth —

— and the book bursts into flame. Cold flame, blue-white, licking across the table without heat.

Lydia drops it with a cry, scrambling back. The fire spreads across the documents, the journals, everything — and in the flames, images form.

Isolde before the gallows. The crowd, jeering. Josiah Cross, hard-faced, passing sentence.

And — a man in the crowd. Watching. Dressed in another century's clothes. His face wears an expression of guilt so deep it looks like it might swallow him whole.

Nathaniel's face. Or close enough to break his heart.

The fire dies. Ash and smoke where the book was. Nathaniel's crying — quiet, unashamed.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) (voice breaking) I'm sorry. God, Lydia, I'm so sorry. I didn't know.

LYDIA (taking his hand) It ain't your fault. Your ancestor did that. Not you.

NATHANIEL I carry his name. His blood.

(beat)

Accordin' to her curse, that makes me responsible.

Lydia looks past him — the ash on the table, the shadows still moving at the room's edge, Isolde standing silent and watchful in the doorway.

LYDIA Then we face it together. Find a way to break this. Give her peace.

(squeezing his hand)

We make it right.

NATHANIEL (gripping back) Together.

They stand there, the storm still hammering the glass, the dead watching from the doorway, waiting to see what the living will do with the truth they've finally dug up.

Lydia looks down at the ash — and something in it catches her eye. Letters, forming in the gray dust like they're writing themselves.

A single word.

Nathaniel.

FADE OUT.

END OF EXCERPT

SHADOW ON THE STEPS

EXT. ROSS COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY — STONE STEPS — NIGHT —
CONTINUOUS

Cold hits Nathaniel the second he steps out the door — not the clean bite of a January night, but somethin' deeper. Somethin' that climbs up through his boot soles like fingers made of frost.

He pulls his coat tight. Won't help. He knows it won't help.

Lydia stands beside him on the steps, streetlamp catching amber in her dark hair. She's watching him with something more than concern. Wariness, maybe. Like she saw somethin' in his face back in those archives she hasn't said out loud.

LYDIA You okay?

NATHANIEL (not trusting his voice at first) I'm fine.

(beat)

Just... processin'.

LYDIA (a not-quite smile) Processin'. That's one word for it.

She shifts the weight of her bag, heavy with photocopies.

LYDIA (CONT'D) Nathaniel. What we found in there—

NATHANIEL (too sharp) I know what we found.

He sees her flinch. Regrets it instant.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) (softer) Sorry. I just need to think.

She studies him a long moment — like she's looking clean through the walls he's built.

LYDIA The name in the diary. There was somethin' else I—

She stops. Bites her lip.

NATHANIEL (waiting)

LYDIA (shaking her head) Never mind. Can wait. You should rest. We both should.

He wants to push. Doesn't have it in him.

NATHANIEL Yeah. Rest sounds good.

Neither moves first. The streetlamp above flickers, steadies. Nathaniel notices things too clear all of a sudden — her breath fogging, the smell of old paper still on both of 'em, her eyes catching the amber light like dark honey.

He realizes, with a jolt that has nothing to do with the cold, that he wants her. Not just her mind. Everything she stands for that he's spent his whole career arguing against.

LYDIA (CONT'D) Goodnight, Nathaniel.

She heads down the steps. At the bottom, turns back.

LYDIA (CONT'D) Careful goin' home. Fog's comin' in.

He watches her go, swallowed bit by bit by mist curling up through the street. She rounds the corner onto Main. Gone.

Nathaniel stands alone on the steps a good long while. His car's fifteen minutes off. The thought of bein' shut up alone in it, alone with everything he just read, is more than he can stand.

He starts walking. The wrong direction.

EXT. DOWNTOWN CHILLICOTHE — PAINT STREET — CONTINUOUS

The temperature drops with every step. His breath goes to visible cloud. Frost creeps up the dark shop windows he passes. Past eleven now — streets near empty, just the odd headlight cutting fog that's rolling in thicker than any January night has business doing.

He passes the CARLISLE BUILDING — Italianate, built 1876. Dark windows.

Something moves behind the glass. A flicker. A shape like a face pressed to the pane.

Nathaniel stops. Stares.

Nothing. His own reflection, warped by old wavy glass.

NATHANIEL (muttering) Imagination. Long night.

He walks on. The fog thickens — rolling in off the Scioto with no wind behind it at all, which by itself is wrong. Ohio nights this time of year don't sit still like this.

His footsteps start echoing strange — not one sound but several, like other boots are keeping time with his. He stops dead. The echo keeps going a half-beat too long.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) (unconvinced, to himself) Fog does that to sound. Natural.

His hands are fists in his coat pockets. His heart says otherwise.

He passes the MAJESTIC THEATRE, marquee dark, deco front looming through the mist. Built an opera house in 1853. He gave a lecture here once — an old woman told him after about a ghost in a green dress that walked the balcony durin' tragedies.

He'd smiled and filed it under folklore.

Looking at the black windows now, he's not so sure what else he filed away too quick.

The fog's a wall now. Twenty feet visibility, maybe less. Streetlamps go to dim smears. Nathaniel can't see across the street anymore. The world's shrunk down to a bubble with him dead center.

His thoughts crawl back to the archive — Isolde's own hand, clean as if written yesterday. The trial record. Josiah Cross, presiding. His blood.

He walks on, past grand old homes on Second Street, their edges gone soft in the mist, looking less like houses and more like memories of houses.

He passes the RENICK HOUSE — brick, 1807, one of the oldest standing in the city. Dark. And from inside — voices. Faint. Wrong cadence, wrong rhythm for now. Under it, a fiddle, playing something he doesn't know.

He stares at the dark house. No lights. No power to run a speaker that could throw sound like that.

He keeps walking. Has to.

His thoughts turn to Lydia — wishing she were here, because she'd understand this in a way he never let himself. She believes. That was always the difference between 'em.

Except now he's not sure it is anymore.

He thinks of the bone from the creek — sent off for testing, results he's dreading and half already knows.

Human. Old. Given to him on purpose.

The fog's swallowed almost everything now — buildings gone to vague shapes, streetlamps gone to ghosts of light. He should turn back. Find the car. Lock the door and wait on daylight.

His feet don't listen. They carry him deeper downtown.

Toward the courthouse.

He didn't choose this. He meant to walk toward the river, away from old Chillicothe's heart. Somehow his turns brought him here instead — to Paint Street, dead center of the square.

He tries to stop. Turn around.

His body won't obey. His feet stay planted a beat, then carry him forward anyway.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) (panic rising) No — no, I choose where I—

The fog parts. The ROSS COUNTY COURTHOUSE rises up out of the murk like something surfacing. He's seen it a hundred times. Tonight it's wrong — taller, the columns leaning in like judges bent over a witness stand.

His feet carry him across the street, onto the lawn, to the foot of the stone steps.

He stops. Not by choice. Something's stopped him.

The fog closes in a tight circle around him — thirty feet across, courthouse at one end, him at the other. Dead silent. No traffic. No wind. Just his own ragged breath and his heart slamming.

The cold drops again, sudden and vicious. Frost forms on his coat, his hair, his lashes as he breathes. Ice in his lungs with every inhale.

And then — WHISPERS. Soft first, like wind through grass. Then words, breaking loose from the noise.

WHISPERS (V.O.) Cross... guilty... blood... debt... justice...

They come from everywhere. The fog. The stone. The ground itself.

Nathaniel tries to speak. His throat's locked shut. Nothing comes but a thin, useless wheeze.

The courthouse doors swing open. Slow. No hand on them. Darkness spills out and down the steps like something poured, not walked.

He wants to run. Can't. Body's frozen solid as the frost climbing his coat.

A FIGURE appears at the top of the steps.

A woman — he knows it before he can say how. Wrapped in fog and dark, but the shape's unmistakable. She holds there a long moment. He can't see her face and feels her looking at him anyway — a touch, not a glance.

She starts down.

Each footfall CRACKS like a gavel. Like a rope pulled taut and snapping. It shakes his ribs. The whole courthouse seems to tremble with it.

She comes clearer with every step — long dress, early-1800s cut, dark hair loose, bare feet leaving frost blooming on the stone behind her.

Her face stops his heart. Beautiful and terrible both. Young and older than anything. Eyes the exact gray-green of Paint Creek water.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) (finding his voice) Isolde.

She stops three steps up. Level with his eyes. When she speaks, her voice is wind and water and the crack of dead branches.

ISOLDE You know my name.

(beat)

Do you know your own?

NATHANIEL Nathaniel Cross.

ISOLDE (the word an accusation) Cross. Yes. I knew that name when I stood where you stand. When I heard the man who wore it before you pass my sentence.

NATHANIEL That wasn't me. I wasn't born. I had nothin' to do with—

ISOLDE (cutting, sharp as a blade) Blood carries memory. Blood carries debt. You are his, and he is you, and the guilt runs down through the years like a sickness.

She takes the last steps. Fog moves through her — he can see the stone steps right through her chest — but she's solid enough that when she reaches for him, he flinches back.

ISOLDE (CONT'D) (almost conversational now) He knew. Your Judge Josiah Cross. Knew the fever come from bad water. Knew the crops failed for want of rain. Knew the cattle sickened from disease, same as cattle always have.

(beat)

He knew, and he condemned me anyway.

NATHANIEL (the question just falls out of him) Why?

ISOLDE (bitter) Why does any man sacrifice the innocent? Land. Power. The comfort of a scared mob needin' someone to blame.

(beat)

My land along the creek was good land. Good soil, clean water, timber. After they hanged me, it was seized and sold at auction.

(a terrible pause)

Your ancestor bought most of it. Built his fortune on my bones.

Nathaniel feels sick to his stomach.

NATHANIEL I'm sorry.

(and he means it, every word)

What was done to you was wrong. It was murder. But I can't undo it. I can't change what he did.

ISOLDE No.

(beat)

You cannot change the past.

(closer now, voice dropping)

But you can pay its debts.

The fog around them starts moving — swirling, thickening into shapes. Dozens. Hundreds. Men in homespun, women in plain dress, children small and still. They close a slow circle around Nathaniel and Isolde both, faces blank, presence like a weight on his chest.

ISOLDE (CONT'D) The people of Paint Creek.

(gesturing at the gathered dead)

Those who accused me. Testified. Watched me swing and cheered when it was done. Trapped here same as me. Can't rest till justice is served.

Nathaniel's head whips around, taking them in — a woman with hard eyes, a man with a scarred cheek, a child no older than ten. All of 'em staring at him like a verdict already handed down.

NATHANIEL (voice climbing) This ain't possible. Ghosts ain't real. Curses ain't—

ISOLDE (a laugh like breaking glass) Real? You stand among the dead, surrounded by two hundred years of waitin', and still you cling to your precious reason.

(beat, almost mocking)

Tell me, historian. What proof would satisfy you?

She gestures. The fog thins, and through it — the courthouse as it stood in 1808. Smaller. Cruder. Still standing in judgment.

On its steps — a man. Nathaniel's own height, own build, own face aged thirty years and dressed a whole century wrong.

JOSIAH CROSS.

The vision shifts. The old courtroom. Isolde standing before the bench, hands bound, face pale but unbroken. The room packed, hostile, hungry.

Accusations ring out — witchcraft, murder, dark congress. Witnesses, their stories growing wilder with every telling. Isolde's own calm defense, drowned out.

And Josiah Cross's voice, flat and final:

JOSIAH (V.O.) Guilty on all counts. Death by hangin'.

The vision shifts again — Paint Creek, dawn, Isolde's body cut down and thrown into the water, sinking, carried off downstream while the townsfolk turn their backs and walk home like nothin' happened.

Then Nathaniel's back on the courthouse steps. Surrounded. Isolde before him.

ISOLDE (CONT'D) (soft) You see now. You see what your blood done.

Tears run down Nathaniel's face. He doesn't remember starting to cry.

NATHANIEL (broken) I see. I'm sorry. I am so sorry.

(beat)

But what do you want from me? What could I possibly do to make this right?

Isolde studies him. Unreadable.

ISOLDE That is yours to find.

(beat)

The curse ain't mine alone to lift. It's woven into this land, this water, the bones of this place. Won't end till the debt's paid. Till the truth's spoke by them that carry the guilty blood.

NATHANIEL How? Tell me how and I'll do it. Whatever it takes.

She's already fading — going translucent, folding back into the fog.

ISOLDE (distant now) The answer's in the water. It's always been in the water.

(beat)

Go back to Paint Creek, historian. Go back and listen. The dead got plenty left to tell you.

The crowd of dead melts away like snow into rain. The courthouse doors slam shut, a boom that rolls across the empty square. The cold starts, slow and grudging, to lift.

Nathaniel's legs won't hardly hold him. His mind's a wreck, tryin' to file what just happened into some box that makes sense.

There isn't one.

He backs off the steps, turns to run —
— and freezes.

The street's gone wrong.

Cars along the curb FLICKER — modern sedans, then wagons and horses, then modern again.
Streetlamps cycle gas to electric to gas.

He grabs his phone, desperate for an anchor. The screen lights — the date flickers, refuses to settle: January 15, 2026... January 15, 1887... January 15, 1808...

He looks up. A woman in a long dress and bonnet crosses in front of him, a basket on her arm. A man in a top hat checks a pocket watch. A child rolls a hoop with a stick.

Then they're gone — replaced by joggers, dog walkers, phones lit up in the dark. Then they flicker too, and someone else takes their place.

He's caught between every version of this town that ever stood here.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) (barely a whisper) Marcus Webb. The others. They didn't disappear.

(realization, horror)

They got stuck. Same as I'm about to.

He forces his legs to move. The ground shifts under his boots — cobblestone, then brick, then blacktop. Buildings rise and fall and rise again around him, decades collapsing on top of each other.

But no matter which way he tries to go, his feet keep pullin' him west.

Toward the river. Toward where Paint Creek runs into the Scioto.

Always the water.

Footsteps behind him. Not his own echo. Distinct. Matched to his pace.

He spins.

A figure in the fog — a man in early-1800s dress, judicial robes marking him for authority.
Drawing closer, steady, purposeful.

The face resolves.

It's his own. Aged thirty years, dressed a century wrong. Same build. Same eyes. Only where Nathaniel's face wears fear, this one wears judgment, cold and settled.

JOSIAH CROSS (a perfect echo of Nathaniel's own voice) So. You're the one carries my name in this age.

(beat, disdain)

How disappointin'.

Nathaniel can't move. Can't speak. Face to face with the very thing that started all of this.

JOSIAH CROSS (CONT'D) Did you reckon you'd outrun it? Time don't wash out a stain like this.

(a step closer)

Blood calls to blood, boy. Debt runs down, generation to generation, till it's paid.

NATHANIEL (barely audible) I didn't do anything.

JOSIAH CROSS No.

(beat)

I did. But you carry my blood. My name. My guilt. To the dead, boy, we're the same man.

He raises a hand — translucent, but the cold pourin' off it is real enough, and Nathaniel can feel the malice behind it plain as a blade at his throat.

JOSIAH CROSS (CONT'D) She wants justice. The witch wants her due. And she'll have it — through you, if it comes to that.

(beat)

Can't run from this. Can't hide from it. Only way out's through. Through the water. Through the truth. Through the debt bein' paid.

Nathaniel breaks the paralysis and runs.

EXT. FOG-CHOKED STREETS — CONTINUOUS

He runs blind, feet slipping on pavement that keeps changing under him. Behind — Josiah's laughter, cold and mocking, chasing him through the mist.

Figures step out of the fog on every side — the dead of Paint Creek, accuser and accused both, tangled together in whatever this cursed place between times is. Fingers brush his coat, his hair, his skin as he passes — each touch ice enough to burn.

He runs on pure animal terror now, no direction, just away. Time keeps fracturing around him — Chillicothe in every version it's ever worn, flickering past like a stuck reel.

And always, behind — the footsteps. Josiah Cross, patient as only the dead can be, hunting him through it all.

His lungs are fire. His legs are lead. He doesn't dare stop — some part of him knows, dead certain, that if those cold hands close on him, he's gone. Another name on Paint Creek's long list of the vanished.

The fog thins just enough to show the SCIOTO RIVER ahead — dark, silent, reflecting nothing, flowing toward its meeting with Paint Creek.

That's where they're driving him. He knows it now.

To the water. Always to the water.

He thinks of Lydia — wishes to God she were here, wishes he'd believed her sooner, listened sooner. She tried. He was too stubborn to hear it.

His worldview's in ruins now, and he's alone in the dark, run down by the sins of his own blood, chased toward a fate he can feel closing in like a trap he can't see.

A glance over his shoulder — Josiah Cross breaking clear of the fog, robes billowing, face set hard.

From the courthouse steps behind him, another shadow peels off the stone and starts to follow.

Not Josiah. Someone else. Different robes. Same purpose.

And behind that one — more. A procession of the dead, all of 'em tied to him by blood or crime or simple bad luck, moving through the fog slow and sure as a funeral line, driving him toward the water.

Nathaniel runs faster, heart fit to burst, the world narrowing down to a tunnel. The river's close now. He can hear it. Smell it. Feel it waitin' for him like something alive.

The fog seals shut behind him. The dead close in from both sides. And ahead — the water, dark and patient and hungry.

Out of road. Out of time. Out of hope.

All that's left is running — and the certain, bone-deep knowledge that when his strength finally gives out, the dead will be there to meet him, and the water will take him same as it took Isolde Marrow two hundred years gone.

And carried on the fog, one last time, her voice —

ISOLDE (V.O.) The debt must be paid.

(beat)

The water remembers.

(beat)

And the dead do not forget.

FADE OUT.

END OF EXCERPT

BLOOD REMEMBERS

INT. THE MARIGOLD INN — LYDIA'S ROOM — NIGHT

A narrow bed under a pressed tin ceiling. Streetlamp light crawls across it in slow, deliberate fingers. LYDIA lies awake, staring up. The room smells of lavender sachet and old wood — should be comforting. Feels like something sweet laid over something rotten.

She sits up. Bedsprings creak. Her heart's going too fast for lying still.

INSERT — ISOLDE'S DIARY (IN LYDIA'S MEMORY): "Nathaniel Cross came to me in secret... He begged me to flee... He wept and said he was sorry, so sorry, but he could not stop what was coming... I told him I forgave him."

Lydia presses her palms to her eyes. Can't unsee it. Nathaniel's own blood knew. Tried. Failed. And she never told him.

She crosses to the window, pulls back the lace curtain. Chillicothe below, quiet, amber-lit. Fog rolls up off the Scioto, moving between the buildings like fingers feeling for a door.

LYDIA (to herself) Why didn't I tell him.

She knows why. Fear. Fear of watching him shut down, walk off, leave her alone in this.

Her grandmother's voice surfaces, unbidden, from twenty-some years back.

GRANDMOTHER (V.O.) (remembered) We came from Ohio, child. From a place where bad things happened to good people.

(beat)

Blood calls to blood, no matter how many years pass. You remember that.

Lydia presses her forehead to the cold glass. The fog outside isn't drifting natural. It's moving with purpose. All one direction.

South. Toward the creek.

Her phone reads 2:47 AM.

LYDIA (CONT'D) (quiet, resigned) Somethin's happening.

(beat)

Nathaniel's there.

She doesn't question how she knows. Grabs her jacket and keys and is down the stairs and out into the fog before she can talk herself out of it.

EXT. COUNTY ROAD — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Lydia's car crawls through fog so thick her headlights barely cut it. She grips the wheel two-handed, following the centerline more by feel than sight.

The radio's dead to static — except underneath it, faint, something that might be singing. A woman's voice. Low. Mournful. A language just outside recognition.

She kills the radio. The singing keeps on anyway.

Her hands are steady on the wheel even though nothing else in her is.

The headlights catch something ahead — a FIGURE standing dead center in the road.

Lydia slams the brakes. Tires skid on wet pavement.

A WOMAN, old-fashioned dress, apron, shawl. Face lost to fog and dark. Perfectly still.

Lydia can't move. Can't breathe.

The woman raises one arm. Points — not at Lydia. Past her. To a narrow dirt track branching off the main road.

Then she's gone. No fade. No walking off. Just gone, one blink to the next.

Lydia sits frozen a beat, then turns the wheel toward the dirt track without deciding to.

EXT. DIRT ROAD — CONTINUOUS

Barely a track — ruts, overgrowth, branches scraping the car's sides. Trees close in tight overhead, black shapes like arms bent in warning. Between the trunks — more shapes, watching, or just fog playing tricks. Hard to say which anymore.

The track dead-ends at a small clearing. Beyond it — water running. Paint Creek.

Lydia kills the engine. Sits. Listens.

The creek sounds different tonight. Deeper. Almost like speech.

Through the fog — a faint glow off the water.

EXT. PAINT CREEK CLEARING — CONTINUOUS

Lydia steps out. October cold hits her like a hand to the chest — damp, heavy, carrying the smell of water and earth and something older underneath both. Something that's been waiting a long, long time.

She walks toward the water, phone flashlight up, though the creek's own glow is doing most of the work now.

Every sense is cranked too high — the individual voices of the water, gurgle and whisper and deep pull of current. Rot of fallen leaves. Mineral tang. Cold biting her face, damp soaking through her shoes.

The trees here are old — oak, sycamore, beech, hickory. Same trees that stood here in 1823.

One OAK draws her eye — massive, gnarled, its lowest branch stretched out over the water, thick as a man's body.

She stops dead.

LYDIA (CONT'D) (a whisper) This is the tree.

She knows it the way she's known everything else tonight — bone deep, past argument. The branch creaks though there's no wind. Fog thickens around the trunk like the tree itself is breathing.

The ground beneath it is bare. No grass. Just packed dirt and roots worn smooth.

She reaches out, touches the bark. Cold. Rough. Alive, still reaching for sky after everything that happened at its foot.

LYDIA (CONT'D) (soft) I'm sorry. I'm so sorry for what they done to you.

The creek's glow brightens behind her. She turns.

The water — thirty feet across, dark and swift — is glowing now, a sick green-blue pulse like a heartbeat. Beautiful. Wrong.

She kneels at the bank. Up close, the glow's coming from inside the water, swirling into shapes.

Faces.

Dozens. Hundreds. Flowing past, looking up at her, mouths open, eyes empty. She recognizes some — Marcus Webb, still clutching a notebook. Others older, features gone soft with time, dressed wrong for any era she can place.

Everyone the curse has taken.

Her hand hovers over the water. She doesn't touch it.

LYDIA (CONT'D) (steadying her voice) Isolde. Isolde Marrow. I'm here. Lydia Marrow. Your blood, down through Elizabeth, generation on generation.

(beat, stronger)

I came back. I came home.

The glow flares. Every face in the water turns toward her at once — focused. Hungry.

LYDIA (CONT'D) I know what they done to you. Know you were innocent. A healer. I know Josiah Cross accused you 'cause you turned him down, 'cause you threatened what he had.

(beat)

I know they hanged you here while your own daughter watched from hidin'. I know you died cursin' 'em, bindin' yourself to this ground so it'd never be forgot.

The fog starts moving — gathering, taking shape. Figures forming a slow circle around the clearing.

LYDIA (CONT'D) I know you been waitin'.

(beat)

Tell me what you need. Tell me how to make it right.

The water RISES.

Defying gravity, lifting from the creek bed in a column of light and current, twisting into shape.

A WOMAN.

Standing on the surface. Homespun dress. Long dark hair. A face carrying beauty and two centuries of grief in equal measure.

ISOLDE MARROW.

Lydia rises, legs shaking, heart slamming.

ISOLDE (voice like the creek itself, like wind through trees) Lydia Marrow. Daughter of my daughter's daughter's daughter.

(beat)

You came back.

LYDIA (barely holding steady) I came back.

ISOLDE Do you know why?

LYDIA (voice breaking) Because you called me. Because I'm yours.

(beat)

Because blood calls to blood.

ISOLDE (a smile — sad, proud, fierce) Yes. Blood remembers even when the mind forgets. You are mine, and I am yours, bound by more than dyin'.

Something opens in Lydia — a door, a dam breaking. She's not just standing here anymore. She's standing in every time at once.

VISIONS — RAPID, OVERLAPPING —

Through ISOLDE'S EYES: the rope, the crowd, Josiah Cross front and center, satisfied. Young Nathaniel Cross behind him, weeping, lips moving in apology.

Through ELIZABETH'S EYES: watching from the trees, hand clamped over her own mouth to keep from screaming.

Through generations of MARROW WOMEN: leaving Ohio, trying to forget, dreaming of the creek and never coming back.

Lydia gasps, staggers. Isolde reaches for her —

— and then Lydia isn't watching anymore. She's living it.

She feels the rope. Feels her wrists bound. Feels rage and terror and love tangled together in one knot.

She feels the drop miscalculated — or meant cruel — the slow strangle instead of the quick break. Feet kicking. Lungs burning. The crowd watching like it's a Sunday social.

And under it all, rising up — a power. From the ground. From the water. A power she's never needed till now.

The curse, spoken with a dying breath. Not vengeance. Protection. For Elizabeth. For whoever came after, someday, to set it right.

Lydia comes back gasping, hands at her own throat though there's no rope there. She drops to her knees on the stones, crying.

LYDIA (CONT'D) (choked) I understand. You didn't die helpless. You died fightin'. You died protectin'.

(beat)

You died becomin' somethin' that could last.

ISOLDE (gentler now) Yes. I am the creek. The fog. The earth here. I am the memory that won't fade.

(beat)

I am the debt that must be paid.

LYDIA What debt? What do you need from me?

Before Isolde can answer —

CRASHING through the underbrush. Someone running. Terrified.

NATHANIEL bursts into the clearing — hair wild, face streaked pale, clothes torn from branches. He stumbles to a stop, disbelieving.

NATHANIEL Lydia?

(rough, hoarse)

Thank God. Thank God you're here.

She's moving toward him before she thinks about it, hands out to steady him.

LYDIA Nathaniel. What happened. Are you hurt?

He grips her arms hard, like he needs to check she's real.

NATHANIEL The courthouse. I went back and — time was wrong. I was there and I was then, both at once, and he was there. Josiah. Chasin' me.

LYDIA (cupping his face, forcing his eyes to hers) Breathe. You're here. You're safe.

NATHANIEL (a wild laugh) Safe. Nothin' about tonight is safe.

(beat)

You were right. All of it. The curse, the disappearin's, all of it's real.

(voice breaking)

I'm sorry. I didn't believe you. I thought you were—

LYDIA I know. It's okay. I know.

He pulls her in, forehead to hers, breath ragged. They stand there a long beat, two people holding each other up against something too big for either of them alone.

LYDIA (CONT'D) (quiet) There's somethin' I need to tell you. Somethin' I found and didn't say.

NATHANIEL (pulling back) What.

LYDIA Your name. In Isolde's diary. Your ancestor — the first Nathaniel — he came to her before they hanged her. Tried to warn her. He knew she was innocent.

She watches it land — shock, then a terrible understanding.

NATHANIEL (whispered) He knew. And he didn't stop it.

LYDIA He was young. Powerless against his father. But he tried. And she forgave him.

NATHANIEL (bitter) Forgave him? He let her die.

LYDIA Because she knew what it was to be powerless against somebody stronger. Because she saw he was sufferin' too, in his own way.

Nathaniel closes his eyes. Opens them wet.

NATHANIEL I'm blood to the man that murdered your kin. My whole family's fortune's built on that lie.

(looking past her, going white)

Oh God.

Lydia turns.

Isolde still stands on the water — but not alone now. Beside her, another figure's formed. Tall. Broad. Formal early-1800s dress. Hard face. Eyes burning with something unnatural.

JOSIAH CROSS.

ISOLDE The children of my blood. The children of his.

(beat)

Together at last.

Josiah's burning gaze locks on Nathaniel. Lydia feels him flinch, try to step back. She grabs his hand, holds on hard.

JOSIAH CROSS (a voice like gravel over bone) You cannot run from this. You are mine. My blood. My legacy.

(beat)

You will pay what's owed.

LYDIA (stepping in front of Nathaniel) No. He ain't yours. He's his own. Not responsible for what you done.

JOSIAH CROSS Blood is blood. The debt runs down. He's the last of my line. He'll pay.

LYDIA (fierce) Then I'm the last of hers.

(beat)

And I say the debt's mine to collect or forgive. Not yours.

Josiah's eyes narrow. For a heartbeat it looks like he might come across the clearing at them both
—

Isolde raises a hand. He freezes.

ISOLDE She speaks truth. The curse is mine. Not yours. You're bound here by your own guilt — but you got no say in how this ends.

(beat)

That belongs to the livin'.

She gestures. The water rises again — not threatening this time. Showing.

Images form in the current — reflections, faces, all the ones the curse has taken over the decades. Marcus Webb, still clutching his ruined notebook. Others, stretching back generations. Trapped between moments. Neither living nor dead.

ISOLDE (CONT'D) The curse wants balance. Justice for injustice. Truth for lies. Blood for blood. But balance can be made more ways than one.

(looking at them both)

You are the last of our two lines. The last chance to break this or feed it.

(beat)

You can pay with your lives, same as the others. Or —

LYDIA Or?

ISOLDE Uncover the whole truth. Find proof of my innocence that can't be denied. Restore my name. Do that, and the curse is satisfied. The trapped go free. The debt's paid.

NATHANIEL (rough) How? Two hundred years gone, the records half-burned and contradictin' each other. We've looked for days and found nothin' solid enough.

ISOLDE Because you been lookin' in the wrong place.

(beat)

The truth weren't destroyed. Josiah kept evidence of his crimes. Insurance, case anybody ever came after him. Hid it where he figured nobody'd ever find it.

LYDIA Where?

The fog around them starts thickening fast, swirling into shapes that read hostile now — not witnesses anymore. Somethin' else.

ISOLDE (flickering, urgent) The old courthouse. The one that burned. Beneath it — he built a vault, lined in iron to keep out—

Her voice cuts off. Something else manifests in the clearing — colder, older, darker than even Josiah's ghost. Something that's been feeding off this curse two hundred years and don't want it to stop.

The creek CHURNS violent, waves rising unnatural high, reaching for Lydia and Nathaniel like grasping hands. The ground shudders. The oak's branches thrash though the air's dead still.

ISOLDE (V.O.) (CONT'D) Run! Do not look back! Find the truth! Break the curse! RUN!

The water reaches them — wraps their ankles, ice-cold, iron-strong, pulling.

NATHANIEL Lydia!

She grabs him, holds tight.

LYDIA Hold onto me. Don't let go, whatever happens.

NATHANIEL (pulling her against him) I won't. I promise.

The water climbs — knees, waist — faces pressing against their legs now, mouths open in silent screams.

Then — cold shock. It closes over their heads. Lydia's lungs burn.

And under it — Isolde's presence, wrapping around them both like a shield.

ISOLDE (V.O.) (CONT'D) (in Lydia's mind) Not yet. Not like this. You got work to do. Truth to find. Justice to bring.

The water releases them — throws them back onto the stones, hard.

Lydia gasps, coughing, soaked through, shaking. Nathaniel beside her, same. His hand's still locked in hers.

They lie there. Just breathing. Just alive.

Then — a sound that don't belong. An engine. Headlights cutting fog.

Somebody else is here.

Lydia pulls herself up, pulling Nathaniel with her.

A CAR rolls into the clearing, headlights washing over the glowing creek, the swirling fog, two soaked strangers on the bank.

The driver's door opens.

SHERIFF TOM BRENNAN steps out — the same man who brushed off their questions about the disappearances days ago.

Not alone. Two more men climb out behind him, carrying something.

Rope.

Shovels.

Brennan looks down at them, face cold, calculating, no mercy in it anywhere.

SHERIFF BRENNAN Well. Looks like Paint Creek's got two more visitors don't know when to leave well enough alone.

He smiles. It's a smile that's done this before.

SHERIFF BRENNAN (CONT'D) My grandmother disappeared out here in '52. Came lookin' for answers on the curse.

(beat)

Never came back. You know what I learned from that?

He stops a few feet off, looking down at them almost pitying.

SHERIFF BRENNAN (CONT'D) Some secrets are meant to stay buried. Some curses are meant to keep feedin'.

(beat)

And some families been protectin' those secrets a mighty long time.

Lydia's mind races. Brennan. Sarah Brennan disappeared — but the family stayed. Stayed close. Became part of the machine keepin' the curse fed, keepin' folks from gettin' close to the truth.

NATHANIEL (flat) You're not gonna let us leave.

SHERIFF BRENNAN (almost apologetic) Can't. You've seen too much.

(beat)

And the creek's hungry tonight. Anniversary's comin'. Needs feedin'.

The two men step closer, rope in hand. Lydia understands with sick clarity what's coming.

The same tree. The same oak. History closing the loop.

She looks at Nathaniel. Sees the same desperate resolve she feels in her own chest.

They have to survive this. Have to get to the courthouse. Have to find what Isolde told them to find.

The creek's glow brightens behind them, drawn to the violence about to happen, hungry for more.

And in that glow — Isolde's face, watching. Waiting. Hoping that this time, after two hundred years, somebody lives long enough to bring her justice.

The men step forward, rope uncoiling.

Lydia Marrow — blood of the Witch of Paint Creek, last of a line that survived against every odd — makes her choice.

LYDIA (low, to Nathaniel, not taking her eyes off Brennan) Not tonight.

(beat)

Not like this.

The water behind them stirs again, reaching —

— and this time, Lydia reaches back.

CUT TO BLACK.

END OF EXCERPT

THE WATER'S BARGAIN

EXT. PAINT CREEK CLEARING — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Lydia's hand drifts toward the water. The air itself seems to ripple — heat-shimmer wrong for a night this cold.

Nathaniel watches her fingers close the last inch, her face set with a resolve that scares him and steadies him in the same breath.

Behind them — BRENNAN, barking orders. Boots on gravel. The metallic click of safeties coming off.

Nathaniel can't move. Can only watch her fingertips touch the surface.

The water EXPLODES upward.

A wall of black water rises fifteen, twenty feet, bank to bank — not falling, not crashing. Standing. Held there by something that's got nothing to do with gravity.

Nathaniel stumbles back, arm up against a sight that hurts to look at straight on.

Cold slams down around them, sudden and total. Frost blooms across the stones in patterns that look almost like old German script — words he can't quite read.

DEPUTY MORRISON (a breath, behind them) Jesus Christ.

SHERIFF BRENNAN (cracking across the night) Hold your positions! It's water! It's a trick, some kind of—

The wall MOVES. Not falling — flowing forward with purpose, sealing Nathaniel and Lydia off from Brennan's men like a door slamming shut. Spray hits Nathaniel's back, cold enough to burn.

BRENNAN (CONT'D) Fire! Goddamn it, fire!

Gunshots crack the night, deafening. Muzzle flashes light Brennan's face — rage and terror both.

The bullets hit the wall and STOP. Suspended in the glowing water like flies in amber. Seven. Eight. Nine of them, frozen mid-flight.

Nathaniel's rational mind just quits trying.

ISOLDE (V.O.) (everywhere, resonant, filling his chest like an organ note) Mine.

(beat)

They are MINE. Under my protection.

The wall shimmers. ISOLDE forms within it — face emerging from the dark water, the resemblance to Lydia unmistakable, but where Lydia's face is warm, hers is carved from centuries of rage.

Her eyes find Nathaniel. Cold washes through him, bone-deep — different from the night the water came for him in his apartment. That was hostile.

This — this knows him. Accepts him.

LYDIA (barely a whisper) Nathaniel. Look at me.

He does. Her eyes are wide, scared, and steady all at once.

His hand finds hers before his brain catches up. Fingers lock together. Her hand's cold, trembling — grip strong as iron.

NATHANIEL (rough) What did you do? Lydia — what did we just agree to?

LYDIA Whatever it takes to end this.

BRENNAN (shouting across the barrier, voice cracking wrong for his rank) You don't understand what you're doin'! That thing ain't your friend. It's a curse. It's killed people. You think you can bargain with it and walk away clean?

LYDIA (steady despite the shake in her hand) We ain't tryin' to control it. We're tryin' to free it. There's a difference.

BRENNAN Free it? You'll doom us all!

The water ripples. Isolde steps forward — actually steps, feet forming from water to touch stone. Almost solid. Almost.

ISOLDE You speak of doom.

(beat, cold and clear)

You, whose blood doomed me. Whose lies doomed my children. Whose greed fed generations of innocents to the hunger your crimes made.

(turning her head, too fluid to be flesh)

You know nothin' of doom, Brennan. But you will learn.

BRENNAN (pale) We can negotiate—

ISOLDE There is no negotiatin' with the dead.

(beat)

Only justice. Only truth. Only accounts three hundred years overdue.

(turning to Nathaniel and Lydia, softening a fraction)

But you. You who carry my blood. You who seek truth 'fore comfort. You, I will bargain with.

NATHANIEL (dry-throated) What kind of bargain.

ISOLDE (a terrible smile) The only kind that matters. Your lives and freedom, for the breakin' of this curse. Your truth-tellin', for the return of all that's been taken. Your willingness to carry the memory, for my rest at last.

NATHANIEL That's not much of a bargain. Sounds like we do all the work.

ISOLDE You do.

(beat)

But consider the other way. I let Brennan take you now. I withdraw my hand and let the curse keep feedin', one soul at a time, till Paint Creek runs red with guilty and innocent both.

(a pause)

Or you accept my terms, and maybe — maybe — we all find rest.

LYDIA (hand shaking in his, voice firm) What exactly are your terms.

ISOLDE Three tasks. Three truths spoken. Three acts to break the bindin' that's fed on the innocent two hundred years.

The wall pulses with light — shapes press against it from within. Faces. Dozens. Hundreds. The disappeared, trapped between living and dead.

Nathaniel's stomach turns.

ISOLDE (CONT'D) First — the evidence. Proof of my innocence, proof of their guilt. Sealed in the courthouse vault by Josiah Cross's own hand, with blood and legal authority both. Break that seal. Bring it to light.

NATHANIEL (mind racing — the sealed archive, the restricted records he'd assumed was bureaucracy) Blood magic. Legal authority as a bindin' spell.

(beat)

That tracks.

ISOLDE Second — expose the conspiracy. Speak the names of the families that profited off my death. Let 'em face judgment from their own town, same as I faced mine.

Something between a curse and a sob comes from behind the water wall. Brennan.

ISOLDE (CONT'D) Third —

(voice dropping, almost gentle)

Speak my true name and story at the place I died, at dawn. Not the lies. The truth. Speak it as the sun rises, and the bindin' breaks. The curse ends. The disappeared come home.

(a pause)

And I rest.

Silence. Even Brennan's men have gone quiet.

NATHANIEL And if we fail?

ISOLDE Then you join the disappeared. Trapped forever, feedin' the curse with what's left of you.

(beat)

And the cycle goes on. Till somebody else is fool enough to try.

LYDIA (tight) That ain't a bargain. That's extortion.

ISOLDE That's justice.

(fixing on Lydia)

You carry my blood. You feel the pull of this place. Tell me you can walk away from what you know and live with yourself.

Lydia's quiet a long beat, the war plain on her face.

LYDIA How long do we have?

ISOLDE Till dawn. Four hours. Maybe less.

Nathaniel checks his watch. 2:47 AM. Break into a courthouse, find evidence hidden three hundred years, expose half the town, get back here before sunup.

Impossible. Insane.

The only shot they've got.

He looks at Lydia. She's already looking at him.

NATHANIEL We accept.

LYDIA We accept.

ISOLDE (radiant, terrible) Then receive my blessing. And my curse.

She moves faster than water should move — one hand to Lydia's forehead, the other flat on Nathaniel's chest, dead over his heart. Cold like nothing he's ever felt, driving clean through skin to something essential underneath.

His heart stutters. Lungs seize.

Then — power. Floods in like lightning made of memory and grief. Visions cascade — Isolde's life, her death, two hundred years trapped between worlds. Her children aging and dying while she stayed frozen at the moment of her murder. The curse taking its first victim. Josiah Cross's horrified face, realizing what he'd made.

The disappeared — faces, names, whole lives, pulled under one by one.

Paint Creek across three centuries, all of it layered at once, all of it visible if he just knows how to look.

The visions cut off. Nathaniel drops to his knees on the stone, gasping. Beside him, Lydia's the same — pale, shaking.

Isolde's already fading back into the water.

ISOLDE (CONT'D) (distant now) You can see now. See truth under the lies. See past laid over present.

(beat)

Use the gift. Find what's hidden. Speak what was silenced.

NATHANIEL (hoarse) Wait — how do we — what if we—

ISOLDE You'll know when the time comes. Trust your blood. Trust each other.

(beat, urgent)

And run. They're comin'.

She dissolves into the wall. The barrier starts to fall.

EXT. PAINT CREEK ACCESS ROAD — CONTINUOUS

The water drops back into its channel with a sound like a last breath leaving a body. Nathaniel drags himself up, legs unsteady, and pulls Lydia up with him.

LYDIA Did you see—

NATHANIEL Everything. I saw everything.

Behind them — Brennan's voice, shouting. The deputies advancing again, no barrier holding them back now, weapons raised, faces grim.

LYDIA We need to go. Now.

They run.

EXT. FOREST — PAINT CREEK — CONTINUOUS

The woods, with Isolde's gift burning behind his eyes, are alive with presence. Ghosts moving between the trunks — translucent, watching, some reaching as they pass. Nathaniel feels their stories brush through him, cold as mist.

Not yet, he thinks at them. Soon.

Boots crash through brush behind. Flashlight beams sweep the dark.

The forest is helping — roots shifting under the deputies' boots, branches dropping low across their path, fog thickening around the pursuers and thinning ahead of Nathaniel and Lydia.

A GUNSHOT. Bark explodes off a trunk inches from Nathaniel's head. He drags Lydia down behind a fallen log.

LYDIA (panting, disbelieving) They're shootin' at us. They're actually shootin'.

NATHANIEL (risking a look) They're desperate. We're about to burn their families down. They'll do anything to stop that.

LYDIA Even murder?

NATHANIEL Especially murder. What's two more bodies to people who've buried dozens already.

DEPUTY MORRISON (O.S.) (uncertain) Sheriff, maybe we oughta—

BRENNAN (O.S.) Shut up and keep movin'. They're right ahead. Don't let 'em reach the road.

Nathaniel pulls Lydia up and they run — ferns, brambles, lungs burning. Isolde's gift shows him the ground before his boots find it wrong, shows him a woman in colonial dress gesturing left. He follows without question, pulling Lydia through a screen of bushes onto a clear deer trail.

Behind — cursing, crashing into undergrowth that's suddenly thicker for them than it was a second ago.

Thank you, he thinks — to Isolde, the forest, the ghosts, doesn't matter which.

EXT. GRAVEL PARKING AREA — CONTINUOUS

They burst out of the tree line. Lydia's sedan sits alone under a flickering streetlight, absurdly normal.

She fumbles the keys, hands shaking. Nathaniel watches the tree line, braced.

The doors chirp unlock — too loud in the dark. They dive in. The engine turns once, twice — catches. Roars. Lydia throws it in reverse.

Morrison bursts from the trees, weapon up. Time slows.

The shot punches through the rear windshield, out the front passenger glass in a spray of safety glass. Nathaniel feels the wind of it pass, glass peppering his face.

Lydia spins the wheel, guns it forward, and they're gone down the access road.

More deputies pour from the trees toward their own vehicles. In the side mirror, Nathaniel catches Brennan's face lit by headlights — pure fury.

NATHANIEL They're gonna follow.

LYDIA I know. Gotta get to the courthouse. Gotta get that evidence.

NATHANIEL They'll be right behind. Roadblocks. They'll cut us off.

LYDIA Then we drive fast.

EXT. HIGHWAY — CONTINUOUS

The sedan hits the main road without slowing, fishtailing before the tires bite. Nathaniel grabs the door handle as the speedometer climbs past seventy, eighty.

Headlights bloom behind them. Multiple. Closing.

Nathaniel pulls his cracked phone, hands still shaking, and hits record, holding it up so his face fills the frame.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) My name is Dr. Nathaniel Cross. It's approximately three fifteen AM, October thirty-first. I'm bein' pursued by Sheriff Marcus Brennan and his deputies. They've fired on us. They're tryin' to stop us exposin' a conspiracy three hundred years deep.

He lays it all out fast — the curse, Isolde's murder, the conspiracy, the vault, every name Isolde's memories gave him.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) If you're watchin' this, it means they got to us. But the truth's out there. The evidence exists. Somebody's gotta finish what we started.

He sends it everywhere — colleagues, cloud storage, every platform he's got.

LYDIA (taking a corner too fast, tires screaming) Good thinkin'. But we ain't dyin' tonight.

NATHANIEL No?

LYDIA No. We get that evidence, we expose these bastards, we break this curse.

(glancing at him, fierce even in the dashboard light)

And then I'm gonna write the hell outta this story.

Nathaniel laughs — startled, half-hysterical, but real.

NATHANIEL You're insane.

LYDIA Probably. But I'm right.

The headlights behind close the gap. Three vehicles, maybe four. Faster than the sedan.

NATHANIEL We're not gonna outrun 'em.

LYDIA Don't need to outrun 'em all the way. Just far enough to get into town. Witnesses. They can't gun us down on Main Street.

NATHANIEL They shot at us at the creek.

LYDIA That was dark and isolated. In town, with people watchin'? Even Brennan ain't that brazen.

He hopes she's right. He's seen the desperation on Brennan's face. Desperate men do desperate things.

The glow of Chillicothe rises on the horizon. Ten minutes out.

A vehicle pulls alongside in the opposite lane — Morrison, jaw set, gesturing frantic. Pull over. Stop.

Not a chance.

Lydia presses harder. They pull ahead a length. Morrison matches speed — then SWERVES, gentle but enough to force Lydia's hand.

She jerks right. Tires catch gravel shoulder. For one gut-drop second the car threatens to roll — then she fights it back onto asphalt, arms straining.

Morrison falls back. The others hold their distance but don't quit.

LYDIA (CONT'D) (gritted, focused) Almost there. Come on, come on.

Outskirts of Chillicothe rise — gas stations, closed diners lit up like beacons. Lydia eases off, wary of drawing any cop that isn't Brennan's.

The pursuit vehicles slow to match. Herding them.

NATHANIEL They're steerin' us somewhere. A roadblock, an ambush point.

(beat)

We need off the main roads.

Lydia cuts into a residential neighborhood, kills the headlights, navigates by streetlamp and moon, taking random turns.

For a few minutes it works. The headlights vanish. Nathaniel lets himself hope.

Then they round a corner into a sheriff's SUV blocking the intersection dead ahead.

LYDIA (CONT'D) Shit.

She throws it in reverse — another vehicle's already behind them.

Boxed in.

EXT. RESIDENTIAL STREET — CONTINUOUS

Lydia cranks the wheel and jumps the curb, plowing across somebody's front lawn. The sedan bounces hard, undercarriage scraping, but holds. She threads between two houses into an alley and floors it.

Behind — metal crunching brick as a pursuit SUV clips a corner. Cursing over an open radio.

NATHANIEL Where are we goin'?

LYDIA Courthouse. Few blocks. Ditch the car, go in on foot.

NATHANIEL They'll be watchin' it.

LYDIA Probably. Don't have a choice.

Nathaniel checks his watch. 3:47 AM. A little over two hours to dawn.

Impossible. But then, so was tonight, start to finish.

EXT. COURTHOUSE — SIDE STREET — CONTINUOUS

Lydia wedges the car between a dumpster and a delivery truck, three blocks out. They climb out into empty streets that feel like exposure itself.

LYDIA (CONT'D) (whispered) Stay in the shadows. Fast but quiet.

They move through alleys, avoiding the main drag. Nathaniel's new sight shows him Chillicothe's dead going about eternal routines around him — a woman in twenties dress window-shopping a store torn down decades back, a Civil War soldier standing guard on a corner that was farmland in his day.

Layers of history, dizzying, overlapping. He has to fight to stay in the now.

The COURTHOUSE rises ahead — 1850s stone. But the vault beneath it is older. Salvaged from the original building. Built by Josiah Cross himself.

They circle it, looking for a way in. Lydia finds a ground-level window, half-swallowed by overgrown bushes, old swollen wood frame, lock decades out of date.

NATHANIEL Think you can get it?

LYDIA (pulling a multi-tool) Grew up breakin' into places I shouldn't. Occupational hazard of a curious kid in a small town.

Nathaniel keeps watch — sirens far off, emergency lights flickering off distant buildings. Brennan's people, closing the net.

The lock clicks. Lydia eases the window up.

LYDIA (CONT'D) After you.

INT. COURTHOUSE — BASEMENT CORRIDOR — CONTINUOUS

They drop into a storage room, hold still, listening. Nothing but the building settling and the hum of HVAC.

NATHANIEL (whispered) Vault's gotta be down here. Oldest materials always go in the basement.

They find a stairwell, descend, footsteps echoing. Nathaniel's historian conscience is screaming — breaking and entering, potentially damaging historical record — but those rules were written for normal circumstances.

The basement's a maze under sick green emergency light. Nathaniel lets Isolde's sight guide him — clerks and officials from centuries past moving through walls, and one figure moving with purpose down a specific hall.

JOSIAH CROSS.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) This way.

Lydia doesn't question it. Her hand finds his in the dark. They follow the ghost to a reinforced steel door — modern, out of place among the old stone. A keypad glows beside a sign:
AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY — RESTRICTED ARCHIVE.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) This is it.

LYDIA How do we get in? Digital lock. Can't pick that.

Nathaniel presses his palm flat to the cold steel. Closes his eyes. Reaches with the sight — not at the present, at the past. Sees Josiah Cross standing here, hand on the original wooden door that stood before this one. Sees the blood magic laid into it three hundred years back.

NATHANIEL It ain't just a lock. It's a bindin'. He sealed it with his own blood, his authority. Meant for only his bloodline to open it.

LYDIA You're his blood. Can you open it?

NATHANIEL Maybe. If it recognizes me.

He presses harder, and words come up out of him he didn't know he had — old German, surfacing from Isolde's gift. Something shifts. Recognizes him.

The keypad BEEPS. The lock disengages with a heavy clunk.

The door swings open.

INT. COURTHOUSE — VAULT — CONTINUOUS

Fifteen feet square, shelves and filing cabinets, air cool and dry. And under it — something else. Old power. Josiah Cross's binding, still clinging after three centuries.

LYDIA (hushed) Where do we start?

Nathaniel scans the shelves — mundane property records, court proceedings — until his eye lands on a locked cabinet in the back corner, older than everything else in the room.

He crosses to it. Hands shaking. The lock's simple iron, but he can feel the weight behind it.

It opens at his touch — the binding recognizing him again. Inside, a single wooden box, shoebox-sized, Josiah Cross's personal seal carved into the lid.

He sets it on the table, reverent. Lydia crowds close, breath warm at his neck.

LYDIA (CONT'D) Open it.

He does.

Inside — cramped colonial handwriting on brittle paper. Nathaniel lifts the first sheet.

INSERT — LETTER, DATED 1724: "I have done a terrible thing. I have condemned an innocent woman to death, and in doing so, I have damned us all."

Nathaniel reads aloud, voice shaking, as the confession unfolds — no witchcraft, no curses. Just a woman who owned land the town's founding families wanted. So they destroyed her — rumors, planted evidence, bought witnesses — then divided her land and grew rich on her death.

INSERT — LETTER (CONT'D): "The guilt weighs upon me. I see her face in my dreams. I hear her children crying. I fear that what we have done will not stay buried."

More documents — recanted testimonies, property transfers, a list of names still prominent in Chillicothe today. And a journal — Josiah Cross's own — chronicling the first disappearances, his failed attempts to seal the curse away.

INSERT — JOURNAL: "I have bound the curse as best I can... but I fear it is not enough. I fear that one day, someone will uncover what we have done. And on that day, may God have mercy on us all."

Nathaniel sets it down, hands unsteady.

NATHANIEL This is it. Everything we need.

Lydia's already photographing every page, journalist instincts taking over.

LYDIA We get this out. Send it everywhere. Make sure it can't be buried again.

They work fast — uploading, sending, documenting — so focused they almost don't hear boots in the corridor outside.

Almost.

INT. COURTHOUSE — VAULT — CONTINUOUS

Nathaniel's head snaps up. Multiple sets of footsteps, moving with purpose.

NATHANIEL (low) They found us.

LYDIA (a whisper) Take the originals.

They scramble — box in Lydia's arms, the rest swept into Nathaniel's pack. The vault door, left ajar, swings fully open.

SHERIFF BRENNAN fills the doorway, weapon drawn, face haggard under fluorescent light. Behind him — Morrison and two more deputies. And behind them, three men in expensive suits, pale but resolved.

The descendants. Come to protect what's theirs.

BRENNAN Step away from the documents. Put the box down. Hands where I can see 'em.

LYDIA No.

BRENNAN (jaw tight) I ain't askin'.

NATHANIEL You gonna shoot us? Here? With witnesses?

SUITED MAN (60s, silver-haired) What witnesses? Four in the mornin'. Buildin's empty. You broke in, vandalized a restricted archive. We're well within our rights.

LYDIA We already sent copies to a dozen people. Killin' us won't stop the truth.

BRENNAN Maybe not.

(beat)

But it'll slow it. Give us time to spin it. Discredit you. Disgraced historian, conspiracy-chasin' journalist. Who's gonna believe you?

Nathaniel feels the chill of it — they've thought of everything. Three hundred years of practice does that.

NATHANIEL People'll believe original documents in Josiah Cross's own hand.

SILVER-HAIRED MAN (a terrible smile) Documents get forged. Records get altered. We got lawyers, politicians, media, Dr. Cross. We can bury this so deep it never sees daylight.

LYDIA Not if we're alive to fight you.

BRENNAN Exactly.

He raises the weapon.

The temperature CRASHES.

Frost spreads across the walls, the floor, the table. The fluorescents flicker, dim — and in the dark between the tubes, shapes start moving.

Ghosts. Dozens. Hundreds. The disappeared, drawn by the confrontation, by nearness to truth that could set them free.

And at the center — forming out of frost and shadow and two centuries of rage —

ISOLDE.

More solid than Nathaniel's ever seen her. Eyes blazing cold fire on Brennan and his people. Her voice shakes the walls.

ISOLDE You dare.

(beat)

You dare threaten them. Silence truth. Carry forward the lies that've bound me here three hundred years.

Brennan's weapon wavers. The deputies back off, white-faced. The suited men are frozen solid.

SUITED MAN (a whisper) You ain't real. You ain't real.

ISOLDE I am more real than you can hold in your head.

(beat)

I am every victim your ancestors' greed made. Every life stolen to feed what they created. I am justice delayed. Not denied.

The ghosts press in with her, brushing past Nathaniel — gratitude and hunger both, cold as creek water.

ISOLDE (CONT'D) (fixed on Brennan) Run. Run, and maybe I let you live to face earthly justice.

(beat)

Stay, and face mine.

They run.

Brennan and his people flee the vault, the basement, boots pounding up the stairs, the front doors thrown wide behind them into the night.

Then — silence.

Isolde turns to Nathaniel and Lydia, expression softening.

ISOLDE (CONT'D) You have what you need?

NATHANIEL (clutching the pack) Everything.

ISOLDE Then go. The third task. Speak my truth at the place I died. Sun's comin'. With it, your chance for freedom.

(beat)

And mine.

She begins to fade, ghosts fading with her. Before she's gone entirely, she looks at Lydia — something like love, something like pride.

ISOLDE (CONT'D) You've done well, daughter of my blood. Finish this. Let us all rest at last.

Gone. Nathaniel and Lydia alone in the vault, evidence in hand, less than two hours to dawn.

EXT. COURTHOUSE STREET — PRE-DAWN — CONTINUOUS

They run for the car through streets gone silent — no alarms, no ambush. Everyone's fled before Isolde's wrath.

4:47 AM. The sky's already going pale blue in the east.

LYDIA (gasping, running) The car. Gotta get back to Paint Creek.

EXT. HIGHWAY — CONTINUOUS

The sedan roars back through Chillicothe, toward the highway, toward the beginning of all this. No pursuit — Brennan's people are broken, scattered.

Lydia's hand finds Nathaniel's.

LYDIA Whatever happens. I'm glad I met you. Glad we did this together.

NATHANIEL (squeezing back) We ain't done yet. We're gonna finish this.

(a beat, trailing off)

And then—

LYDIA And then we figure out what comes next.

(beat)

Together.

The word settles into his chest, warm and solid.

EXT. PAINT CREEK ACCESS ROAD — CONTINUOUS

The sedan bounces over the rough track. The sky's gone gold at the edges now. Real dawn, close.

NATHANIEL Faster.

She's already got it floored.

EXT. PAINT CREEK CLEARING — DAWN, APPROACHING

They skid to a stop, no time for a proper park, and run for the water.

The forest is thick with ghosts lining the path — translucent, glowing faint in the coming light. Hope on every face. Please, their expressions say. Please let this work.

They reach the bank. Nathaniel can see the exact spot — glowing cold in his sight, marked by everything that happened here.

This is where it ends.

Lydia sets the box down at the water's edge. The creek's calm now, but the power underneath is unmistakable. Isolde, waiting. Watching.

LYDIA How do we do this?

NATHANIEL We speak the truth. All of it. Her story. Her innocence. The conspiracy. We name the guilty. We bear witness.

LYDIA And if it don't work?

NATHANIEL Then we join the disappeared. And somebody else has to try.

She looks at him in the growing light — every bit of fear and trust plain on her face.

LYDIA Together.

NATHANIEL Together.

They turn to face the water.

The sound of ENGINES, fast, closing. Brennan. Rallied. One last try.

Nathaniel looks at the horizon. The sun's touching it now — first true light of dawn breaking over the Ohio hills.

Out of time.

LYDIA (CONT'D) (gripping his hand) Speak. Now. Before they get here.

Nathaniel draws a breath, feels Isolde's power rising in his chest, feels three hundred years of injustice settle on his shoulders like a weight he's finally ready to carry.

Vehicles screech to a stop behind them. Brennan and his people running. The sun breaks the horizon, painting the creek gold and red.

Nathaniel Cross begins to speak.

NATHANIEL Her name was Isolde.

(voice carrying, steady, across the water, across two hundred years)

And this is her story.

FADE OUT.

END OF EXCERPT

DAWN'S RECKONING

EXT. PAINT CREEK CLEARING — DAWN, BREAKING — CONTINUOUS

The world holds its breath. The hanging tree stands black against a sky just starting to gray toward gold. Lydia and Nathaniel stand at the water's edge, hands locked together, the weight of three hundred years pressing down on both their shoulders.

The air tastes of river water and old magic.

Behind them — engines, tires on gravel, doors slamming. Brennan. One last try.

NATHANIEL (barely a whisper, carrying anyway) You ready?

Lydia nods. Can't trust her voice. The horizon's going gold at the edge. Pressure builds in the air like the second before a storm breaks.

The first light touches the top of the hanging tree. Nathaniel speaks, voice carrying clean across the water.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) Isolde Marrow was innocent.

(beat)

She was a healer. A midwife. A woman who gave her whole life to helpin' others. She never practiced witchcraft. Never harmed a soul. And the men who accused her, tried her, hanged her from this tree —

(beat)

They knew it.

Footsteps behind them, running. Brennan shouting for them to stop. Neither turns.

The water's starting to glow — faint, phosphorescent, nothing to do with the coming sun.

LYDIA (voice joining his) Summer of 1724. Seven people died in this settlement. Three children. Two women. Two men. Fever, convulsions, sudden and violent. The town needed someone to blame.

The glow spreads — tendrils reaching up like fingers, like something drowning grasping for air.

NATHANIEL But Isolde knew the truth. She'd examined the victims. Traced the sickness to the settlement well — poisoned by runoff from Josiah Cross's tannin' operation upstream.

Behind them, the footsteps stop dead. Lydia glances back — Brennan and his men frozen at the tree line, faces pale, eyes locked on the glowing water. They can see it. All of them.

LYDIA Josiah Cross knew. Knew his operation was poisonin' the water. Knew his negligence killed seven people.

(beat)

But he was rich. Powerful. He'd just bought up land along this creek. Couldn't afford a scandal.

The light in the water rises into columns — shapes almost human now.

NATHANIEL (voice shaking, pressing on) So he conspired with four other men. Thomas Brennan — ancestor to the man standin' behind us right now. William Ashford. Samuel Hartley. Robert Kincaid.

LYDIA They planted evidence. Nightshade, hemlock, foxglove, hid in her home. Paid witnesses to swear they'd seen her castin' spells.

The water column reaches for the sky. Inside it — scenes playing out. Isolde tending the sick. Isolde testing the well. Isolde standing before Josiah Cross with her findings, unafraid.

NATHANIEL They hanged her August 15th, 1724.

(voice breaking)

Threw her body in the creek weighted with stones so she'd never rise.

(beat)

But before she died — she spoke a curse.

LYDIA (crying now, watching it play out in the light) She cursed the conspirators and their blood. Bound herself to this place. Swore the truth would come to light, that justice would find them, however long it took.

The sun crests the horizon. Direct light hits the water — and the column EXPLODES outward in spray and gold. The clearing fills with ghosts.

Not just Isolde. All of them — the seven victims of the poisoned well, the coerced witnesses, the ones who knew and stayed quiet too long. Translucent, glowing in the dawn, faces turned toward Lydia and Nathaniel — gratitude, relief, hope.

Behind them, someone drops to their knees. Retching. Brennan's voice: Oh God, oh God, oh God — over and over like it might save him.

LYDIA (CONT'D) (clear, ringing) We speak your truth, Isolde Marrow. We name the guilty. We proclaim your innocence.

(beat)

You were murdered. You were innocent. And the world will know it.

Power surges through her — electric, ancient, using her voice as a channel. Beside her Nathaniel gasps, feeling it too.

The curse is unraveling. She can feel it — three hundred years of rage finally lifting.

Then — a wrongness. A shift underneath the relief.

LYDIA (CONT'D) (tight) Nathaniel. Somethin's wrong.

Fog rolls in off the creek — thick, unnatural, moving against no wind at all. The temperature drops twenty degrees in a breath. Behind them Brennan's people scatter, shouting.

Out of the fog — PEOPLE. Stumbling, disoriented, washing up like shipwreck survivors.

MARCUS WEBB emerges first — aged years in three weeks, hair gone white, eyes holding a thousand-yard stare.

NATHANIEL (releasing Lydia, catching him) Marcus! Marcus, can you hear me? You're safe. You're back.

Marcus flinches violent at the touch. Curls in on himself.

More come through — a woman in seventies bell-bottoms, terrified. A man in a nineties suit, briefcase locked in a white-knuckle grip. A teenage girl in modern clothes, sobbing, clawing at her own arms.

LYDIA (rushing to the girl) It's okay, you're safe—

TEENAGE GIRL (screaming) No no no it's still there, I can feel it, it's still touchin' me, get it OFF—

Marks on the girl's arms — bruises shaped like fingers, but wrong. Too many. Bent at angles that shouldn't work. Flickering in and out of visibility.

LYDIA (CONT'D) (shaking) Nathaniel. Somethin's wrong with 'em. All of 'em.

He looks up from Marcus. Sees his own horror mirrored back. Dozens more emerging from the fog — some catatonic, some violent, some laughing wrong.

AN OLDER MAN (stumbling past, muttering) Thirty-seven years. Thirty-seven years and it was only a second, only a moment, I stepped in the water to cool off and then I was there, in that place where time don't work right—

He breaks off, eyes wide, and runs into the trees, fleeing something only he can see.

Brennan's on his phone now, barking for ambulances. His men trying to corral the returned — chaos, total and complete.

LYDIA (CONT'D) (grabbing Nathaniel's arm) This is what the curse was doin'. Not just makin' people disappear. Trappin' 'em. Somewhere outside of time.

NATHANIEL (pale) And now they're all comin' back at once. 'Cause we broke it. We didn't just free Isolde.

(beat)

We broke whatever was holdin' all of it.

A woman in an 1800s dress passes them, stiff and mechanical, humming the same four bars of a lullaby, dried blood old and brown on her hands.

LYDIA How long were they there? Wherever it was?

NATHANIEL (shaking his head) Time didn't work the same. Marcus is gone three weeks, looks aged years. That woman's been missin' fifty and hasn't aged a day.

(gesturing toward a cluster near the treeline, clinging to each other)

Some of 'em know each other. Like they built somethin' together, wherever they were.

The sun's fully up now, bright and warm — but the fog isn't thinning. If anything, thickening, the light inside it flickering wrong.

LYDIA There's somethin' else comin' through. The disappeared ain't the only thing that curse was holdin' back.

The fog PULLS BACK toward the creek all at once, like something alive retreating. And Paint Creek isn't just water anymore — Lydia can see through it, down into a depth that shouldn't fit in a ten-foot creek. Darkness down there. Vast. Hungry. Old past reckoning.

And ghosts rising off it — not Isolde's dead, already faded, purpose served. These are different. Older. Angrier. Thousands of them, spreading out across the landscape toward Chillicothe, toward the descendants of every wrong ever done in Ross County.

NATHANIEL (breathless) Oh no. Lydia, we didn't just break Isolde's curse. We broke—

LYDIA Everything.

(watching the ghosts spread, understanding crashing down)

It wasn't just her revenge. It was a seal. Holdin' all of this back.

The ground SHAKES, a low grind she feels in her teeth. Cracks split the earth around the creek, glowing that same sick light. The hanging tree groans, splits — and its roots, exposed, don't go down into soil.

They go down into nothing. A void that hurts to look at.

LYDIA (CONT'D) We gotta stop this.

But she already knows it's too late.

Brennan's people are scattering for their cars, but the ghosts move faster — not attacking, surrounding, forcing them to their knees. Making them see. Making them feel what their ancestors did.

ASHFORD (one of Brennan's men, on his knees, hands clawing his own skull) I see it — I see all of it — what we did, the people we hurt, it never stopped, we just kept feedin' it—

LYDIA (freezing at the word) Feedin' it.

She turns back to the creek, to the darkness under the roots.

ISOLDE (V.O.) (a voice inside her, not through her ears — bones and blood) You freed me, daughter of my line. You spoke truth and broke the chains that bound me here. For that, I thank you.

Lydia spins. ISOLDE stands behind her, more solid than she's ever appeared — beautiful, terrible, no longer wholly bound by death.

ISOLDE (CONT'D) But you have also done somethin' you did not intend.

(walking through the chaos untouched)

You've broken the seal I placed on this land. Opened the door I spent three hundred years holdin' shut.

LYDIA I don't understand.

(beat, pieces clicking)

Your curse — you bound yourself here for revenge.

ISOLDE (at the water's edge, looking down) Yes. But revenge weren't my only purpose. I bound myself here 'cause I knew what lay beneath this place. What the Shawnee knew. What the peoples before them knew, that listened to this land and heeded its warnin's.

(turning, eyes deep and dark)

There's somethin' ancient under Paint Creek, daughter. Older than the Shawnee, older than the mound builders, older than any people to walk this ground.

(beat)

A darkness. A hunger. It feeds on death and sufferin' and the weight of human cruelty piled up over years.

Nathaniel joins them, jaw set.

NATHANIEL What is it? What are we dealin' with?

ISOLDE I don't know its true name. The Shawnee called it the Eater of Souls. The mound builders built to contain it, channel its power safe. But when the Europeans came with their violence and greed — the old protections started failin'.

(gesturing at the void beneath the roots)

My death fed it. The rage and grief of my dyin' made it stronger. And in the moment I died, I understood — if I didn't act, it'd keep growin', keep feedin', till it broke loose and consumed everything.

LYDIA (dawning) So the curse wasn't just revenge. It was a seal. You used your own death to build a barrier.

ISOLDE Yes. Held for three hundred years.

(beat, disgust)

But the darkness is patient. Hungry. And it found others willin' to feed it. Some of Cross's descendants wanted to seal it proper.

(beat)

Others saw opportunity. Learned it could be controlled — if it was fed regular. Small sacrifices. Folks nobody'd miss.

Lydia feels sick.

LYDIA The disappeared. They weren't just curse victims. They were sacrifices. Brennan's people were feedin' 'em to it.

ISOLDE To keep it satisfied.

(heavy with regret)

And they weren't entirely wrong to fear it. If it breaks free complete, it'll consume Chillicothe and everything for miles. Spread like cancer. Leave nothin' but empty behind.

The ground shakes harder. Lydia grabs Nathaniel's arm to keep upright. The cracks widen — shapes moving in the dark beneath, geometries that hurt the eye.

LYDIA We made it worse. Freein' you weakened the seal.

ISOLDE Yes. You freed me. But you freed it too.

(beat)

Now you must finish what you started.

NATHANIEL How? How do we seal it?

ISOLDE (something like pity) Same as I did, historian. Sacrifice. Sufferin'. A willin' soul bindin' itself here, standin' between the dark and the world above.

LYDIA (immediate, rejecting it whole) No. There's another way. We ain't gonna—

ISOLDE (gentler) There is another way. But it needs knowledge that's been lost. The Shawnee knew how to seal such places without a human life bein' the price. The mound builders knew more still.

(beat)

That knowledge got suppressed. Called superstition by folks who thought they knew better.

(moving closer, cold radiating off her)

Find that knowledge, daughter. Learn what the old ones knew. Seal this thing proper, permanent, without feedin' it one more death.

LYDIA (desperate) Where do we even start lookin'?

ISOLDE The Shawnee remember. Not all of it. But enough. Seek their elders. Come with respect, and they'll help you.

NATHANIEL And in the meantime? While it's growin' stronger by the minute?

Isolde is quiet a long beat.

ISOLDE You cannot hold it. The seal is broken. All you can do is buy time.

(beat)

And hope you find the answers 'fore it's too late.

She starts to fade. Lydia reaches out, instinctive, desperate to hold the connection.

LYDIA Wait. Please. There's gotta be more.

Isolde solidifies a fraction, looking at Lydia with sorrow and something like pride.

ISOLDE You carry power, daughter of my line. More than you know. The Marrow women always could see and feel what others can't. You're a bridge between worlds.

She reaches — insubstantial, but Lydia feels it land on her forehead like a jolt. Images flood in — the land before people, the mound builders' sacred sites, the old rituals for balance, the slow corruption that came with settlers who had no respect for the sacred. And under it all — the darkness. Patient. Waiting.

ISOLDE (CONT'D) Learn to hold your power. Channel it. It'll know you now — know you're the one who broke the seal. It'll come for you. Try to use you. Corrupt you.

LYDIA How do I stop it?

ISOLDE (fading fast now) Find the old knowledge. Seal it proper.

(barely audible)

And remember — some doors, once opened, don't ever close all the way again. You can only lock 'em, and pray the lock holds.

She's gone.

Lydia stands in the chaos of the breaking dawn, Nathaniel beside her, the darkness beneath Paint Creek growing by the second.

Brennan approaches slow, hands raised, face years older than it was hours ago.

SHERIFF BRENNAN You were right. About Isolde. The conspiracy. All of it. The ghosts made me see — what my family's been doin' for generations.

(looking at the creek, shuddering)

But you were wrong too. You thought we were just coverin' up history.

(beat)

You didn't understand what we were really doin'.

LYDIA (flat) Feedin' it.

BRENNAN (exhausted, no defiance left) My great-great-grandfather found it after Isolde's death. Realized her curse made a seal, but the seal was weakenin'. He tried the old ways. Failed.

(beat)

And in failin', he learned the dark could be kept satisfied — if it was fed regular.

NATHANIEL (cold) So he started the tradition. Chose victims. Called it protection.

BRENNAN Better a few than everyone. That's what we told ourselves. Generation to generation.

LYDIA You were murderers callin' it mercy.

BRENNAN (simply) Yes.

(gesturing at the cracking earth)

And now it's wakin' up, and I don't know how to stop it. All our records — it's all about feedin' it just enough. Never how to end it.

(desperate now)

But Isolde talked to you. Told you somethin'. There's another way, ain't there?

Lydia wants to refuse him. Looks instead at the returned victims, the spreading chaos, and knows this is bigger than her anger.

LYDIA The Shawnee knew. Might still know. We need to find who's kept that knowledge.

BRENNAN Then we find it fast. I don't think we got much time.

The hanging tree finally gives — trunk splitting with a CRACK like a gunshot, roots tearing loose, the void beneath surging up in a column of black that swallows the light around it. A sound rises from it — not human, hunger and rage and something like joy.

NATHANIEL (grabbing Lydia) We need to go. Now.

Lydia can't look away — the darkness pulling at her, recognizing her, wanting her.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) Lydia!

He hauls her back, breaks her line of sight. She gasps like surfacing from underwater.

LYDIA It knows me. It's gonna come after me.

BRENNAN My family's got safe houses. Warded. You can hole up there while you dig for answers.

She wants to refuse. Doesn't have the luxury of pride left.

LYDIA Fine. But I want everything your family's got on this thing.

BRENNAN Done. And I'm done lyin' to the law too. Tell 'em everything.

MONTAGE — LATER THAT DAY

— Emergency vehicles pour into Paint Creek. Ambulances, police, a helicopter from Columbus. News cameras catching the impossible on live television.

— DETECTIVE SARAH CHEN (40s, exhausted) rubs her temples as Lydia and Nathaniel lay out the whole story.

DETECTIVE CHEN So let me get this straight. You broke a three-hundred-year-old curse, which released a bunch of folks trapped outside time, which also weakened a seal on somethin' ancient and evil under the creek, and now we might be lookin' at a supernatural apocalypse unless you find lost Shawnee knowledge on interdimensional sealin'.

NATHANIEL That's... actually a pretty fair summary.

DETECTIVE CHEN (already on her radio) I hate this job.

— Marcus Webb, catatonic, loaded into an ambulance. Nathaniel watches, guilt plain on his face.

END MONTAGE

INT. BRENNAN FAMILY SAFE HOUSE — FARMHOUSE — DAY

A farmhouse twenty miles out — iron horseshoes over every door, salt lines on the sills, wards carved deep into the frames. Brennan sets a stack of boxes on the dining table.

SHERIFF BRENNAN Everything my family kept. Three hundred years tryin' to understand and contain it.

(a beat, quieter, at the door)

For what it's worth — I'm sorry. Don't change anything. But I am.

He's gone. Lydia and Nathaniel, alone with the boxes.

They work through the afternoon into evening — journals, letters, research notes. Rationalizations passed down like heirlooms, each generation teaching the next that murder was mercy.

NATHANIEL (reading, low) It's insidious. By the time Brennan inherited it, he probably never even questioned it. Just what his family did.

LYDIA Don't make it right.

(closing a journal)

We need actual Shawnee elders. This is like readin' a dictionary written by somebody who only half-understood the language.

NATHANIEL I got contacts. Anthropologists. I'll reach out.

LYDIA Do it fast. We're runnin' out of time.

The lights FLICKER. A cold draft with nothing to do with weather. The wards on the windows glow faint, straining against something outside.

NATHANIEL (quiet) It's testin' the wards.

Lydia feels the pull again — the same call from the creek.

LYDIA The wards'll hold.

(not believing it herself)

A scratching sound — fingernails on glass — from every window at once. Shadows press against the panes, bent wrong, faces and hands flickering half-visible inside the dark.

NATHANIEL Don't look at 'em. Don't make eye contact. That's what it wants — a way in.

LYDIA (tearing her eyes away) How long can the wards hold against that?

NATHANIEL Don't know. Don't wanna find out.

(an idea forming)

Sacred sites. Places with their own protection, older than any of this. Serpent Mound.

LYDIA It's close. If anywhere's warded strong enough—

They grab the records, stuff them in a pack. The scratching's getting louder, the wards flickering unstable.

NATHANIEL (taking her hand) Together.

LYDIA Together.

They run for the car. Behind them — glass breaking, wards failing, shadows pouring through the farmhouse like water through a broken dam.

INT. NATHANIEL'S CAR — NIGHT — DRIVING

Tense silence. Lydia's phone buzzes — a text from Chen: Multiple supernatural incidents reported across Ross County. Evacuations underway. Stay safe.

She checks her email. A response from DR. THOMAS RUNNING DEER, Shawnee historian.

INSERT — EMAIL: "I have been expecting someone to contact me about this for many years. My people have known about that place since before the Europeans came. Come to the Shawnee Cultural Center in Xenia. Not Chillicothe — that place is too close to the darkness. Bring your evidence, your questions, an open mind. Come at dawn — a time of transition, when the barriers between worlds are most stable."

LYDIA (showing him) He's expectin' us. They've been watchin' the signs.

NATHANIEL (grim) This is bigger than we figured.

LYDIA I know.

(beat)

And I think we're about to learn just how far over our heads we really are.

EXT. SERPENT MOUND — NIGHT — LATER

The ancient earthwork rises from the dark like a sleeping giant, coils stretching across the ridge. The moment they cross onto the sacred ground, the pressure eases. The pull toward the darkness loosens its grip.

They park. Get out. Lydia looks up at a sky thick with stars, feeling small against everything they're up against.

NATHANIEL We can do this. We have to. Ain't nobody else.

Lydia's phone RINGS. She looks at the screen — NATHANIEL CROSS. She looks up at him, standing right beside her, his own phone in his hand, not calling.

She answers, hand shaking.

LYDIA Hello?

NATHANIEL'S VOICE (V.O.) (through the phone — strained, wrong) Lydia. Listen. I don't have much time. Paint Creek ain't the only site. There's more, all across Ohio. Weak points. All connected.

The real Nathaniel goes pale beside her.

NATHANIEL That ain't me. I'm not callin' you.

NATHANIEL'S VOICE (V.O.) (rushing water and wind behind the words now, and voices — dozens, layered) The seals are breakin' all at once. This ain't just local, Lydia. This is regional. Maybe bigger. I don't think we can do this alone.

LYDIA (demanding) Where are you? Nathaniel, where—

The line CUTS DEAD — not a hang-up. Severed. She calls back. Nothing. Again. Nothing.

NATHANIEL That wasn't me. I'm right here. But that was my voice.

LYDIA (cold certainty settling) A warnin'. Or a message.

(looking at him, really looking)

Or you're not here. Or I'm not here. Or we're both here and somewhere else too. Time's crackin' open, Nathaniel. We might be livin' more than one now at once.

She's already moving for the car, keys out.

NATHANIEL Lydia, wait — think about this. If time's fracturin', runnin' off without a plan could make it worse—

But she's not hearing him. Still hearing that voice, that fear, that sound of something terrible happening behind it.

LYDIA We need to find you. The you that called.

She pulls free, runs for the car, engine turning over hard in her shaking hands.

The battle's only just begun.

FADE OUT.

END OF EXCERPT

BETWEEN MOMENTS

INT. ROSS COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY — THIRD FLOOR ARCHIVE — NIGHT

11:47 PM. Nathaniel stands at the research table, phone to his ear, ringing through to Lydia. Spread before him — a map. Seven sites across southern Ohio, each marked with the same symbol from Josiah Cross's journal.

NATHANIEL (into phone) Lydia? Lydia, I found somethin'. There's other sites, multiple locations across—

The fluorescent lights HUM wrong. Not louder — wrong, like the sound's got texture, color, weight. The air thickens. Nathaniel's breath catches like he's trying to inhale water.

The floor doesn't tilt. Down changes direction.

His stomach lurches. The room FRACTURES around him — the archive as it is now, as it was in '87, as it'll be decades from now, abandoned and grown over, and as it never was at all, architecture that hurts to look at.

Walls bleed color — beige running into old green paint, into raw brick from before the building stood.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) (voice scattering across itself) No — this isn't—

The phone slips from his hand. He watches it fall — smartphone, then rotary phone, then telegraph key, shattering into pieces of devices that never existed and always will.

His knees buckle. He grabs the table — his hand passes through it, or the table's the ghost, or neither of them are real.

Darkness closes around him like a fist.

He SCREAMS. The sound has nowhere to go.

CUT TO BLACK.

INT. THE BETWEEN — RESEARCH ROOM (FRACTURED) — TIMELESS

Nathaniel stands — or floats, or exists in a standing-adjacent state — in a space that's trying and failing to be the archive. Walls flicker beige, brick, 1920s wallpaper, glass looking out on a Chillicothe that's every Chillicothe at once.

NATHANIEL (to himself, testing it) What the hell.

His voice leaves visible ripples in the air.

Through the window — Paint Creek, but every version layered on top of itself. Pristine wilderness. Crude settlement banks. Industrial pollution. Now. Futures both grown and abandoned and never-existed.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) This ain't real.

Even saying it, he knows that's wrong. It's real. Just wrong-real.

He moves toward where a door sometimes is. Passes through a WOMAN in 90s business attire, carrying files, walking the opposite way. She doesn't see him.

To her, he's the ghost.

INT. THE BETWEEN — HALLWAY — CONTINUOUS

Worse out here. The hallway stretches in multiple directions at once — stairs as they exist now, a corridor demolished in '78, a hall never built, and a fourth path where the geometry doesn't add up to anything three-dimensional.

People move through it — dozens, from every decade, unaware of each other. A janitor from the sixties pushes a mop bucket through a researcher from 2015 carrying a laptop.

None of them see Nathaniel.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) (calling out) Hello? Can anybody hear me?

Nothing. A woman in 80s fashion passes inches from him, talking on a phone cutting-edge in her time, ancient in his. Her voice sounds both crystal clear and impossibly far off.

His chest tightens. Panic claws up his throat. He forces a breath. Thinks like a historian — find the pattern.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) (realization, cold) Because of Josiah. 'Cause I'm his blood.

He looks at his hands. Solid. The only anchor in this whole fractured sea.

He picks a direction that feels most solid and moves.

INT. THE BETWEEN — LOBBY (FRACTURED) — CONTINUOUS

He descends through stairs carpeted, bare, marble, wooden, made of nothing he can name — through rooms full and empty and both at once.

On what might be the first floor — a MAN standing still. Staring at his own hands, confused in a way that matches Nathaniel's own.

Not moving through his own timeline. Aware. Present. Here.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) Hey! You hear me?

The man's head snaps up.

MARCUS WEBB (disbelieving) You can see me?

NATHANIEL Yes! I can see you, hear you — you're real.

He crosses to him fast, relief flooding.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) What's your name? How long you been here?

MARCUS (a laugh edged with hysteria) Marcus Webb.

(beat)

And I don't know how long. Time don't work right here. Feels like years. Might not've been that long, outside.

NATHANIEL You're the grad student. Disappeared three weeks ago.

MARCUS (hollow) Three weeks. Feels a lot longer in here. Or no time at all. Both feel true.

Marcus — late twenties, university sweatshirt that looks brand new and decades-worn simultaneously, the fabric flickering between states.

NATHANIEL What is this place.

MARCUS I call it the Between. Where time don't flow right. Where reality's thin.

(struggling for words)

Like we're livin' in the cracks. Between moments. Between what is and what was and what might still be.

NATHANIEL How'd you get here?

MARCUS Researchin' the disappearances. Found a connection to the old earthworks — sites the Shawnee called sacred. Or cursed. Maybe both.

(distant)

Went to one at night. Somethin' reached for me. Pulled me through.

NATHANIEL (recognition) The darkness.

MARCUS You felt it too.

(no question in it)

It's aware. Old. Been here longer than the town. Longer than the Shawnee. Maybe longer than people.

NATHANIEL There's other sites. Seven of 'em, marked on a map I found.

MARCUS I know. When you're here, you can see the whole web of weak points across the land. Paint Creek's the center. The thinnest.

NATHANIEL (pieces clicking) The old earthworks — they weren't just markers. They were containment.

MARCUS (grim) Or a way to keep somethin' in.

(beat)

Till Isolde Marrow's curse broke it wide open.

NATHANIEL (the words like ash) I'm blood to Josiah Cross. The man that killed her. That's why it pulled me through. It knows the bloodline.

MARCUS (running a hand through his hair) That explains why you're more solid than the rest. More real. I've seen others here — most are barely there anymore. Ghosts fadin' in and out. But you're all the way here.

NATHANIEL There's others?

MARCUS Dozens. Maybe hundreds, over the years. Most too far gone to talk to. Just driftin', stuck in loops of who they used to be.

NATHANIEL (the weight of it settling) Can they be saved? Can any of us get out?

MARCUS (careful) Don't know. Been tryin' to find a way. Mapped what I can. But this place don't follow rules. Distance shifts. What's here one minute's gone the next.

NATHANIEL Show me. If we're gonna find a way out, I need to understand this place.

Marcus studies him a long beat. Nods.

MARCUS Okay. But it gets stranger the deeper you go. More dangerous. Some places down there, you can lose yourself whole. Forget you were ever anything but this.

NATHANIEL I'll risk it. There's somebody I gotta warn.

MARCUS (softening) Somebody important?

NATHANIEL Real important.

(thinking of Lydia)

And she's in danger. All of 'em are. If those seven sites are wakin' up, this thing's gettin' stronger.

MARCUS Then we move fast.

He pulls a notebook from his pocket — several versions of it flickering before settling into one worn journal. Cramped handwriting, crude maps, diagrams trying to hold impossible geometry on the page.

MARCUS (CONT'D) The Between's got layers.

(pointing to a diagram — concentric circles descending)

Upper layers, closest to normal. That's us now. Fractured, but recognizable. Human eras, all of it.

NATHANIEL And lower?

MARCUS Older. Stranger. Pre-colonial in the middle. Pre-human further down. Before the Shawnee. Before the Hopewell.

NATHANIEL And below that?

Marcus's hand trembles turning to a page near the back — darker, chaotic, lines that seem to writhe.

MARCUS Below that's where it lives. The source.

NATHANIEL You've been there?

MARCUS Once. Barely made it back.

(haunted)

Not a place for a human mind. But I saw enough.

(beat)

Nathaniel — it's wakin' up. Whatever's been holdin' it, it's failin'. And when it breaks free complete—

He doesn't finish. Doesn't need to.

NATHANIEL Then we stop it. Reinforce the seal. Push it back.

MARCUS From in here? We're trapped. Powerless.

NATHANIEL Maybe. But we can see things folks outside can't. There's gotta be somethin' we can do.

MARCUS (hope and doubt warring) You really think we can fight somethin' that old?

NATHANIEL I think we gotta try. 'Cause if we don't, everybody we ever loved ends up here. Or worse.

Long silence. Marcus closes the journal, tucks it away.

MARCUS Okay. You're right.

(beat)

But you need to understand — what's down there ain't just dangerous. It's wrong. It'll try to break you. Corrupt you. Make you part of it.

NATHANIEL I understand.

MARCUS Do you? I've seen what it does. The ones who went too deep — they came back twisted. Some ain't even people no more. Just puppets on strings of shadow.

NATHANIEL (steady) I'm Josiah Cross's blood. He murdered a woman, broke the world doin' it. If there's any justice, maybe I'm here to pay what he left behind.

MARCUS That ain't how justice works. You ain't responsible for what he did.

NATHANIEL Maybe not. But I'm responsible for what I do now.

(firm)

Show me the way down.

MARCUS (nodding slow) Stay close. Don't touch nothin' unless I say it's safe. I say run, you run — don't look back, don't hesitate.

NATHANIEL Understood.

MARCUS Then follow me. God help us both.

EXT./INT. THE BETWEEN — DESCENT — TIMELESS

They descend through layers like divers sinking into an ocean of time.

LANDMARK ONE — a memory of fire, a building that burned in 1847, blazing and long-extinguished at once. They walk through heat that is and isn't, smoke that exists only in memory.

Beyond it — the architecture changes. Courthouse. Trading post. Native settlement, centuries deep. Each layer peels back like pages.

LANDMARK TWO — a gathering. SHAWNEE MEDICINE PEOPLE in a circle, hands raised, voices chanting across the temporal gulf.

MARCUS One of the original sealin's. 1600s, maybe earlier. They'd been fightin' this thing for generations.

Passing through it, the air grows heavier. Denser. More concentrated.

LANDMARK THREE — a spring, pristine and ancient, bubbling long before people walked this land. But wrong — water flowing upward as often as down, trees twisting into shapes that hurt the eye. Beneath the surface, something vast moves.

MARCUS (CONT'D) Darkness is closer here. We're nearin' the boundary.

The forest around them turns alien — trees too tall, bark the wrong color, a sky showing constellations that never hung over Earth.

LANDMARK FOUR — a massive stone, covered in symbols that shift as Nathaniel looks at them.

MARCUS (CONT'D) Far back as human presence goes. Before the Shawnee, before the Hopewell. Somebody carved these. Somebody who knew.

NATHANIEL (studying them) These ain't warnings. They're... instructions.

MARCUS Maybe. Don't match any language I know.

They move past the stone. The last of the familiar world falls away.

LANDMARK FIVE — a VOID. Not absence — presence of nothing. Space carved out of reality, normal time curving around its edge like water round a drain.

MARCUS (CONT'D) (a whisper) This is it. The bottom. The source.

Nathaniel stares into it.

It stares back.

DARKNESS (V.O.) (not words — pure understanding, imprinted direct) Descendant. Blood of the murderer. Heir to the guilt.

NATHANIEL (barely a whisper) What are you?

DARKNESS (V.O.) I am what was before. What will be after. The hunger between stars. The silence between heartbeats. I am patient. I am inevitable.

Visions FLOOD Nathaniel's mind — Paint Creek consumed, reality fracturing, thousands vanishing into the Between, the darkness spreading across Ohio, the continent, unmaking as it goes.

And deeper — the truth. The Native peoples who found this place, who built the earthworks to hold it. The medicine people who died reinforcing the seal.

The settlers who came ignorant, who fed it with every death and tragedy, weakening the barrier with every generation.

And Isolde Marrow — not just a witch. A guardian. Trying to reinforce what the old peoples built. Her curse a desperate new seal, bought with her own death.

Josiah Cross had broken it. Had been the knife that cut the wound open.

DARKNESS (V.O.) (CONT'D) Your ancestor's guilt is your inheritance. His debt is yours to pay.

NATHANIEL (no conviction in it) No.

DARKNESS (V.O.) (gentler now — worse for it) But there is a way. A way to atone.

More visions — Nathaniel taking Josiah's place. Binding himself here. Becoming a guardian. A living seal. It would cost everything — life, future, freedom. He'd become a ghost bound here eternal.

But it would work. Would save Lydia. Save everyone.

DARKNESS (V.O.) (CONT'D) This is justice. This is balance. The murderer's descendant becomes the guardian. The debt is paid.

Nathaniel feels the pull of it — the terrible, seductive logic.

MARCUS (cutting through, sharp) Nathaniel, no! Don't listen! It's showin' you what you're afraid of! It's manipulin' you!

Nathaniel blinks. The spell cracks.

MARCUS (CONT'D) It's lyin'. Or not tellin' the whole truth. You bind yourself here, maybe it seals for a while. But nothin's permanent with this thing. It'd wait. Corrupt you. Turn you into another tool for breakin' free.

NATHANIEL How do you know?

MARCUS 'Cause I've seen it happen. The ones trapped longest — they didn't start as ghosts. They tried to fight it. Tried to seal it. And it ate 'em slow, over years, till nothin' was left but empty shells.

Nathaniel turns back to the void. Sees it now — the trap under the offer.

NATHANIEL (firm) No. I won't do it. There's another way.

DARKNESS (V.O.) (displeasure, a physical weight) There is no other way. The seal is broken. I am waking. Soon your world becomes like this place. Fractured. Timeless. Mine.

NATHANIEL Then we'll stop you. We'll rebuild the seal.

DARKNESS (V.O.) You are trapped here. Powerless. Mine.

But Nathaniel feels something else. Distant. Growing.

A voice, calling his name across the fractured gulf.

LYDIA (V.O.) (faint, echoing) Nathaniel...

MARCUS (eyes wide) That ain't possible. Nobody's ever reached into the Between from outside. Not through barriers this strong.

But Lydia isn't just anyone. Isolde's blood. A natural bridge.

NATHANIEL (focusing on the voice, an anchor) Lydia.

He pushes back against the darkness's presence, fighting up through the layers. Marcus follows.

The darkness sends tendrils of shadow after them. Nathaniel keeps climbing, keeps following her voice like thread through a maze.

They pass the landmarks in reverse — void, stone, spring, ceremony, fire — harder going up than down, like the Between itself is fighting to keep them.

But her voice gets clearer.

LYDIA (V.O.) (CONT'D) Nathaniel! Can you hear me? Please, answer!

NATHANIEL (shouting back) I'm here! Lydia, I'm here!

INT. THE BETWEEN — UPPER LAYERS — CONTINUOUS

They break through to the fractured-but-recognizable layers. And there, shimmering in the air —

Lydia. Standing in a circle of stones. PROFESSOR THOMAS RUNNING DEER beside her, others gathered, hands joined, voices chanting.

Serpent Mound in the background — the great earthwork coiled across the land.

Lydia glows faint silver — Isolde's power, channeled through her blood.

LYDIA (eyes locking on his, relief flooding) Nathaniel! Oh thank God. You're alive.

NATHANIEL I'm trapped. Place called the Between. Time don't work here. It pulled me through 'cause of my blood — Josiah Cross's blood.

LYDIA We know. Professor Running Deer figured it. We've been tryin' to reach you for—

(glancing at the others)

How long's it been for you?

NATHANIEL Don't know. Hours. Days. Time's got no shape here.

LYDIA It's been six hours since you disappeared.

Six hours. Felt like a lifetime and no time at all, both true.

NATHANIEL Lydia, listen. The darkness under Paint Creek — it's older than people. Sealed for centuries, but the seal's breakin'. It breaks free complete, it don't stop at Paint Creek. All of Ohio. Maybe more.

RUNNING DEER (stepping forward, grave) We know. The old stories call it the Hungry Dark. The Nothing That Waits. My people been guardin' against it generations.

NATHANIEL Then you know we gotta stop it. It offered me a deal — bind myself here, become a new seal. It was a trap. Wants to eat me same as it's eaten everybody else that tried.

RUNNING DEER There's another way. Old way, from before the Europeans. Needs three artifacts — objects of power, placed at sacred sites by the medicine people who first sealed the dark.

NATHANIEL Where?

RUNNING DEER (holding up a small carved stone) One's here, at Serpent Mound. Already recovered.

(beat)

Second's at Fort Ancient, hid in the earthworks. Third's at Paint Creek, bottom of the water, where the darkness runs strongest.

NATHANIEL And together?

RUNNING DEER With both bloodlines present — yours and Isolde's — we can reinforce the seal. Not sacrifice. Channelin' the land's own power, same as the medicine people did. Won't be permanent. But it'll hold generations.

Hope flares in Nathaniel's chest.

NATHANIEL Then that's what we do. But I'm stuck in here.

LYDIA (firm) We're gonna pull you through. This ritual's buildin' a bridge. You just follow it back.

NATHANIEL The darkness is watchin'. It ain't gonna let me go easy.

LYDIA Then we fight it. Together.

(fierce)

You ain't alone in this, Nathaniel. Never were.

MARCUS (stepping up) I'll help. I know the Between's weak points. If you hold the bridge from your side, we push from ours.

RUNNING DEER We'll hold the ritual long as we can. But move fast. Longer the bridge stays open, more it draws — not just the darkness. Other things livin' in the spaces between.

NATHANIEL How much time?

RUNNING DEER Maybe an hour. Less, likely.

NATHANIEL (to Marcus) Closest weak point?

MARCUS Paint Creek itself. Where the darkness runs strongest is where the barrier's thinnest.

NATHANIEL (looking back at Lydia) Then that's where we go.

(a beat, something softer)

When this is over — we're havin' that conversation. The one we been puttin' off.

LYDIA (fierce smile) I'm holdin' you to it. Now go. Get to Paint Creek. We'll meet you there.

The connection starts to fade. Just before it breaks —

LYDIA (V.O.) Come back to me.

NATHANIEL I will.

INT. THE BETWEEN — FLIGHT TO PAINT CREEK'S ECHO — CONTINUOUS

Marcus leads at a dead run through fracturing reality. Behind them, the darkness stirs — displeased, hunting.

Timelines start colliding — a car from '95 plowing through a Shawnee village from 1650, a shopping mall stacked over primordial forest, bodies from different centuries phasing through each other.

MARCUS Don't look at it! Don't try to make sense of it — just follow!

They run through rooms both empty and full, hallways that lead nowhere real.

Then — the corrupted. People trapped decades, centuries. Sleepwalkers with vacant eyes, some barely human anymore, existing young and old, alive and dead all at once.

MARCUS (CONT'D) (grim) They're bein' used. Darkness is slowin' us down.

The corrupted block the path, reaching with hands that exist in too many moments. Nathaniel and Marcus dodge, weave — contact means getting pulled into their loops.

NATHANIEL We gotta break through!

A hand grabs his arm. He spins ready to fight — freezes.

A WOMAN, middle-aged, kind eyes carrying terrible sadness. More solid than the rest. Fighting harder, longer.

WOMAN You're tryin' to escape. Gettin' back to the real world.

NATHANIEL Please, we're runnin' out of time—

WOMAN (grip tightening) Take us with you. We've been here so long. So long. Please.

Nathaniel looks at Marcus. Marcus nods slow.

MARCUS If the bridge holds strong enough, we might pull others through with us.

NATHANIEL (to the woman) How many?

WOMAN Seventeen still aware enough to try.

(glancing at the shambling corrupted)

The rest are too far gone.

NATHANIEL Gather 'em. Fast. We're headed for Paint Creek's echo. Meet us there.

She's gone into the chaos, moving with sudden purpose.

They keep running. The Between destabilizes further — reality tearing at the seams, the darkness's rage made pure chaos.

They pass through the historical society, the courthouse, structures that never existed — Paint Creek's whole history running backward around them, the land un-building itself.

And then — the creek itself. Every version at once, pristine and polluted, frozen and flowing.

At its deepest point — a distortion. The barrier gone paper-thin. Through it, Nathaniel can see the real Paint Creek. Lydia and the others, arriving. Setting up.

MARCUS (CONT'D) That's our way out. Gotta wait for the bridge to stabilize. Push too early, we bounce off. Or worse — get stuck halfway, in both worlds and neither.

They crouch at the edge, watching the barrier shimmer. The seventeen trapped souls gather around them — a ragged crowd from a dozen different eras, united by nothing but the will to escape.

On the other side, the ritual builds. Lydia at the center, the Serpent Mound stone held high. Running Deer and the others, chanting, voices resonating across dimensions.

The barrier thins. Nathaniel can feel the bridge forming.

Just a little longer.

Then the darkness ATTACKS.

Not manipulation this time — direct. The void surges up from the depths into the upper layers for the first time. Angry. Hungry. Done waiting.

It moves like a living hole, consuming everything in its path. The corrupted souls blocking the path get swept up, erased — not even ghosts left behind.

MARCUS (CONT'D) Run! Run NOW!

All nineteen of them sprint for the barrier. The darkness surges behind, a wave of annihilation devouring the Between itself, reaching for Nathaniel specifically — his blood, his guilt, fuel it wants to burn.

The barrier's close. Lydia's face on the other side, eyes going wide at what's chasing them.

RUNNING DEER (V.O.) (booming across dimensions) Push through NOW!

Nathaniel hits the barrier full speed. Resistance — reality pushing back — then, like breaking the surface of water, he's THROUGH.

EXT. PAINT CREEK — CONTINUOUS

He hits solid ground. Real ground. One timeline. The shock of it nearly overwhelming — the simple, solid fact of existing in a single moment.

Marcus comes through behind him. Then the seventeen, one after another, tumbling through like refugees from a war.

But the darkness is right behind them.

Nathaniel looks back — it's pressing against the barrier, tendrils of void starting to punch through into reality.

NATHANIEL Close it! Close the bridge before it gets through!

RUNNING DEER Can't! Not yet! Ritual ain't complete — close it now, the backlash kills us all!

The darkness presses harder. The barrier starts to tear.

They need an anchor. Someone to hold it from this side long enough.

Nathaniel understands what that means.

LYDIA (reading it in his face) No. No, Nathaniel, don't you dare—

He's already moving, turning back to the barrier. Reaching into the void, calling out with everything he has.

NATHANIEL Isolde Marrow! Your descendant needs you! I need you!

Nothing. The darkness keeps tearing at the barrier.

Then — from somewhere deep in the Between, beyond death, beyond time —

Isolde ANSWERS.

She comes like a storm. Silver fire pushing back the dark. Not the broken, murdered woman of the records — the witch in her full power, the guardian who held this back two hundred years.

Furious.

The darkness recoils, retreating. Isolde holds the barrier, buying time for the ritual to finish.

She looks at Nathaniel across the divide. Recognition in her eyes. She knows his blood. Knows what Josiah did.

And she sees what Nathaniel's done instead — refused the dark's offer, fought to get out, tried to make it right.

ISOLDE (V.O.) Finish it. Finish what I started. Seal the darkness away.

(beat, softer)

And tell my daughter's daughter I'm proud of her.

NATHANIEL (choked) I will.

Isolde's spirit blazes brighter, pushing the dark back further. Running Deer's chant hits its peak. The Serpent Mound stone flares white-hot.

The bridge CLOSES.

The barrier seals. Isolde vanishes, pulled back into whatever waits for the dead. The darkness is trapped again.

For now.

Nathaniel collapses to the ground, shaking. Around him the seventeen escaped souls do the same — weeping, laughing, simply existing in the overwhelming fact of being real again.

Lydia's there, kneeling, hands on his face.

LYDIA (voice breaking) You idiot. You beautiful, brave idiot. I thought I lost you.

NATHANIEL (managing a smile) Promised I'd come back. I keep my promises.

LYDIA You better. We still got work to do.

She helps him sit. The barrier's sealed — but temporary. The darkness still presses against it.

RUNNING DEER (grave) It knows you now, Nathaniel Cross. Knows your scent, your blood. It'll hunt you specific. None of us are safe.

NATHANIEL (getting to his feet, Lydia's hand steadying him) Then we move fast. Second artifact. Fort Ancient?

RUNNING DEER Yes. But it's guarded. Tests the old medicine people set. Gotta be passed before it can be claimed.

NATHANIEL Then we pass 'em. Whatever it takes.

(looking around at Lydia, Marcus, the gathered survivors)

We're gonna finish this. Seal it permanent. Make sure nobody else ends up in that place.

LYDIA (taking his hand) Together.

NATHANIEL Together.

But even as he says it, he can feel it — the darkness, still pressing at the barrier. Watching. Waiting. Hungry.

He'd reached into the void and called for the dead.

And the dead had answered.

But for how long.

FADE OUT.

END OF EXCERPT

THE GATHERING

EXT. SERPENT MOUND — CONTINUOUS

The air shimmers like heat off summer blacktop — and seventeen figures materialize on the ancient earthworks, stepping through like they've come through a curtain nobody could see.

Lydia's heart seizes. She scans the group, frantic — and finds him. Nathaniel. Alive. Whole. Hair a wreck, clothes torn, but those eyes finding hers across the distance.

She's running before her legs ask permission.

His knees nearly buckle as she reaches him. She catches him, arms locking around his waist, his coming around her shoulders. He smells like ozone and something colder — vast, empty space — and under that, him. Warm. Human. Alive.

LYDIA (voice breaking) You came back. God, Nathaniel, you came back.

NATHANIEL (rough, raw) Promised I would.

Around them, Running Deer's team works fast, helping the other sixteen — men and women twenties to sixties, shell-shocked, some crying, some frozen staring at the sky like they've forgotten what sunlight looks like.

A WOMAN (panicked) How long? How long was I gone — my daughter, she was just a baby—

RUNNING DEER (gentle, guiding her) Seven years. But she's safe. We'll help you find her.

The woman's knees give. Two team members catch her.

Nathaniel tenses in Lydia's arms.

NATHANIEL (quiet, grieving) Some of 'em been there since '87. Man told me he quit countin' days after the first year.

(meeting her eyes)

Time don't work right there, Lydia. Stretches. Compresses. Worst part was the emptiness. Bein' nowhere. Nothin'.

Lydia cups his face. He leans into it like a man starved.

LYDIA You're safe now.

(even as she says it, she knows it isn't fully true)

NATHANIEL (pulling back) The stone. Did you get it?

Running Deer approaches, a stone wrapped in soft leather cradled in his hands — heart-sized, pulsing with a rhythm Lydia can feel in her own chest.

RUNNING DEER We have the first. Need the other two, and we're runnin' out of time. Alignment's dawn tomorrow. Less than eighteen hours. Miss it, we wait another year — and Paint Creek don't have another year.

(beat)

Shadow manifestations all over the county. Reality frayin' at the edges.

NATHANIEL (pale, exhausted, steady anyway) Where's the other two?

RUNNING DEER Fort Ancient. Ceremonial stone buried in the earthworks — part of the original network. Three sites, connected. Fort Ancient's one of the strongest nodes.

LYDIA (already knowing) And the third.

RUNNING DEER (quiet) Paint Creek itself. Bottom of the water, right where Isolde fell after they hanged her. The anchor point. Most powerful of the three. Most dangerous to reach. Water there ain't right. People who've tried to swim it — some drowned. Some just disappeared.

Nathaniel's hand finds Lydia's. Squeezes.

LYDIA We need a team. People we trust. People who understand what we're up against.

MARCUS WEBB (approaching, arm in a sling, grim determination in his face) I'm in. Been chasin' this story three years. Not backin' out now.

RUNNING DEER I've got two Shawnee practitioners comin' — Sarah Bluejacket, Thomas Longknife. Trained in the old ways. We'll need both bloodlines present for the final sealin'.

(to Nathaniel)

You're Josiah Cross's blood?

NATHANIEL Family's been in Ohio since the 1790s. My line runs through his younger brother.

RUNNING DEER Close enough. It's the intention that matters — standin' in for your ancestor, acknowledgin' the wrong.

LYDIA What about Brennan's people?

MARCUS Some of his own deputies turned on him. Once word got round what he'd been doin' — who he'd been feedin' to that thing — a few had second thoughts. Three of 'em want to help make it right.

LYDIA (wary) Can we trust 'em?

MARCUS Think so. But I get it if you're not sure. They'll prove it or they won't.

Running Deer spreads a topographical map across a truck hood — Ross County, red ink marking sites.

RUNNING DEER Lydia, Nathaniel — you two retrieve the Fort Ancient stone. You're both sensitive; you'll need that to find it. Marcus, you and the turned deputies prep Paint Creek, clear the perimeter. Sarah and Thomas gather ritual components with me. Everybody meets at Paint Creek midnight for the third stone. Sealin' ritual at dawn.

LYDIA Midnight's cuttin' it close.

RUNNING DEER Has to be. Liminal time. Threshold between one day and the next — barrier's thinnest then.

NATHANIEL Then we'd better move. Fort Ancient's an hour out.

They load supplies fast — flashlights, shovels, rope, water. Running Deer hands them a small leather pouch.

RUNNING DEER Sage. Sweetgrass. Somethin' else.

(a beat)

Burn it if you're in trouble. Won't stop the dark. Might slow it enough to run.

Marcus watches them load the car, a half-smile tugging at him.

LYDIA What.

MARCUS Nothin'. Y'all just work together like you been doin' this for years, not days.

Heat rises in Lydia's cheeks. Nathaniel's already got the door open for her.

NATHANIEL We should go. Losin' daylight.

EXT. HIGHWAY — FORT ANCIENT ROAD — CONTINUOUS

Rolling Ohio countryside, farms and small towns peaceful in the afternoon light. Hard to believe something ancient stirs underneath all this.

Lydia studies Nathaniel's profile — jaw tight, hands gripping the wheel harder than the road demands.

LYDIA Tell me about it. The Between. What was it like.

He's quiet a long stretch before he answers, pulling the words up from somewhere deep.

NATHANIEL Imagine bein' nowhere. Not darkness — darkness needs light to be absent from. Not silence — same thing. Just... nothin'.

(beat)

And in that nothin', you start losin' yourself. Memories go thin, like dreams. I kept thinkin' about my research, my whole life's work, and it felt like it happened to somebody else.

Lydia puts her hand on his thigh.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) Only thing that kept me anchored was thinkin' about you. Gettin' back to you.

(glancing at her)

I held onto that like a rope.

LYDIA (something warm blooming) I'm glad you did.

NATHANIEL Almost didn't. There were moments it woulda been so easy to just let go.

(beat)

But I thought about you facin' this alone. Couldn't do it.

Quiet settles between them, comfortable this time. Her hand stays on his leg. His shoulders slowly unknot.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) What about you. Runnin' Deer said you've been learnin' about your abilities.

LYDIA I'm a conduit. That's what he calls it. Isolde was one too. Bridge between worlds.

(beat)

Darkness has been tryin' to use me. Turn me into a door. I'm learnin' to hold the power without lettin' it hold me.

NATHANIEL Frightenin'?

LYDIA Terrifyin'. And — somethin' else. My whole life I felt like I didn't fit right anywhere. Now I understand it was always just part of me.

(beat)

Not broken. Different.

NATHANIEL (nodding slow) I think I get that. History's always felt alive to me, in a way I could never explain to my colleagues. Now I understand I wasn't bein' poetic. I was describin' somethin' real.

LYDIA Maybe that's why we ended up here.

NATHANIEL (a small smile) Or maybe we're just stubborn enough to see it through when a sane person'd run the other way.

Lydia laughs — surprised by the sound of it, how good it feels.

LYDIA That part's true. My mother always said I was too stubborn for my own good.

They talk — her mother, her brother, her museum job. His research. What they'd do after, if there is an after. The conversation loosens something in both of them, a warmth carved out against the dread.

EXT. FORT ANCIENT — LATE AFTERNOON

The earthworks sprawl across a hilltop over the Little Miami valley — massive earthen walls, twenty feet high in places, a maze of mounds inside.

Lydia feels the power the moment she steps out of the car — a deep vibration in the ground, in her bones.

LYDIA You feel that?

NATHANIEL (scanning the walls, awed) Like the land's alive. Aware.

They pay admission, blend in with the last hour of tourists — families, an elderly couple, a few serious types with cameras. Lydia lets her senses stretch out, feeling past the residual power of centuries of ceremony toward something more specific.

LYDIA (turning north) This way.

They walk the northern wall, tourist-casual on the outside, Lydia's focus turned entirely inward, following a thread of power that pulls stronger with every step.

LYDIA (CONT'D) (stopping) There. Six feet down.

NATHANIEL (glancing at the last visitors) Gotta wait till dark.

EXT. FORT ANCIENT — NORTHERN WALL — NIGHT

Stars come out over the earthworks. The site's emptied. Lydia and Nathaniel dig by moonlight, no flashlights, trading off shovel and pickaxe, the work grounding in its simplicity.

Twenty minutes in, Lydia's arms ache, hands blistering, but she keeps swinging.

NATHANIEL Lydia. Look.

The earth at the bottom of the hole is GLOWING — soft blue-green, pulsing with her heartbeat. She drops the pickaxe, clears the last soil with the shovel.

THUNK. Solid.

They uncover a stone the size of a human head — carved symbols shifting in the moonlight, blue-green light welling up from inside it like captured starlight.

LYDIA That's it.

NATHANIEL (reaching, hesitating) Should we—

LYDIA Together.

Their fingers meet the stone's surface at the same time.

The world EXPLODES into vision.

VISION SEQUENCE — FORT ANCIENT, CENTURIES PAST

The earthworks new, soil fresh-turned. A circle of people in deerskin and painted faces. At the center — a MEDICINE WOMAN, holding an identical stone, chanting in a language Lydia somehow understands.

MEDICINE WOMAN (V.O.) The darkness sleeps beneath the land. It has slept since the world was young. We place these stones as guardians. Three stones, three sites, joined by lines of power. As long as the seals hold, the darkness cannot rise.

The vision shows the network — Fort Ancient, Serpent Mound, Paint Creek, a triangle of protection across the land. At its center, beneath Paint Creek, something vast presses against its prison.

MEDICINE WOMAN (V.O.) (CONT'D) But the seals can be broken. By blood and betrayal. By fear and hatred. If the stones are moved, if the lines are severed, the darkness will wake. And when it wakes, it will consume everything.

The vision shifts. ISOLDE and JOSIAH, two hundred years back — young, in love, hands joined, performing a ritual of renewal at this very spot. Then — fear poisoning it. The town turning. Josiah's love curdling to betrayal. The seals cracking.

MEDICINE WOMAN (V.O.) (CONT'D) You must finish what they started. Speak the words. Renew the seals. Three stones, three sites, three times the circle turns. At dawn — when light pushes back the dark.

The vision burns the ritual into them both — words, movements, intention — knowledge settling into their minds like it was always there.

END VISION

Lydia and Nathaniel stumble back from the stone, gasping. Lydia's legs give; she sits hard on the hole's edge.

LYDIA Did you see—

NATHANIEL All of it. I understand what we gotta do.

He lifts the stone from the hole. Heavy — more than physical weight.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) Two down. One to go.

Lydia feels it first — a cold prickle at the back of her neck.

LYDIA (rising slow) Nathaniel. We got company.

Figures emerge from the dark — wrong-shaped, limbs bent past anatomy, faces swallowed in a dark that eats moonlight. A dozen, maybe more, closing a loose circle.

NATHANIEL Shadow creatures. Darkness sent its servants.

One steps forward — a face that was human once, stretched and hollow, eyes empty black pits.

CREATURE (a voice like wind through a graveyard) Give us the stone. Give us the stone, and we let you go.

LYDIA (power surging, furious) Like hell.

The stone flares in Nathaniel's hands, blue-green light pushing the dark back. The creatures hiss, recoil — don't retreat. They circle.

Lydia grabs the Serpent Mound stone from her bag. The moment her fingers close on it, the two stones resonate — power doubling.

NATHANIEL Run. On three.

LYDIA One.

NATHANIEL Two.

LYDIA Three!

They run.

EXT. FORT ANCIENT — EARTHWORKS — CONTINUOUS

The creatures give chase at impossible speed. A cold wash follows Lydia like ice water down her spine.

A creature materializes ahead of Nathaniel. He doesn't slow — thrusts the Fort Ancient stone out like a weapon. Light flares. The creature SHRIEKS and dissolves to smoke.

NATHANIEL They can't touch the stones! Power repels 'em!

But more keep coming, drawn by the light or the darkness's will. Clawed hands snag Lydia's jacket — she spins, thrusts her stone at it. It falls back. Two more take its place.

Halfway to the lot, she realizes they aren't going to make it.

LYDIA Nathaniel — keep goin'!

NATHANIEL What? No—

LYDIA I can hold 'em! I'm a conduit! Get the Fort Ancient stone safe! GO!

He hesitates one beat — then runs.

Lydia stands alone, surrounded, and reaches deep for the power she's been learning. It rises like a tide. She channels it through the stone — a dome of blue-green light blooms outward, and the creatures scream, recoiling.

LYDIA (CONT'D) (shouting) You want it? Come and get it!

They surge. She meets them with light, operating on instinct and stolen vision-knowledge, the stone burning hot in her grip, sweat pouring, muscles trembling with the strain of holding.

Where's Nathaniel—

An ENGINE roars. Tires squeal. Nathaniel's car comes tearing across the grass, headlights blazing.

NATHANIEL (O.S.) Get in!

She drops the barrier and runs, creatures surging after. Dives through the open door — he's already accelerating before she's fully in the seat. The car fishtails, catches, and they're gone.

The shadow creatures give chase, flowing like smoke across the ground, but can't match the speed. In the mirror, Lydia watches them fall behind, dissolve into the dark.

She slumps, gasping, shaking.

NATHANIEL (knuckles white on the wheel) That was insane. Don't ever do that again.

LYDIA Had to. Couldn't let 'em take the stones.

NATHANIEL (softer) I know. But if somethin' had happened to you—

LYDIA It didn't. We're both fine. We got both stones.

INT. NATHANIEL'S CAR — HIGHWAY — CONTINUOUS

Quiet, road unspooling behind them. Lydia's hands still tremble — the bone-deep exhaustion of channeling that much power.

NATHANIEL Those things. They were people once, weren't they.

LYDIA (remembering the face) People who got lost in the Between and never found their way out. Darkness ate what they were.

NATHANIEL (quiet) That coulda been me.

Lydia takes his hand.

LYDIA But it wasn't. You're here. Human. Safe.

NATHANIEL For now. It knows about us. It'll throw everything it's got at stoppin' the ritual.

LYDIA I know. But we ain't backin' down.

NATHANIEL Together?

LYDIA Together.

EXT. GAS STATION — OUTSKIRTS OF CHILLICOTHE — NIGHT

They stop to refuel — car and themselves. Fluorescent lights harsh after the dark of Fort Ancient. A tired clerk, a couple truckers browsing, none of them aware the world's balanced on a knife's edge.

Lydia catches her own reflection in a security mirror — hair wrecked, face smudged, eyes too bright. Somebody who's been to the edge of the world and back.

She returns to find Nathaniel on the phone, face grim. He holds up a finger — wait.

NATHANIEL (hanging up) Runnin' Deer. Site's prepped at Paint Creek, but there's a problem. Water level's droppin' fast — like somethin's drainin' it from below. Folks nearby reportin' voices callin' up outta the water.

LYDIA It's gettin' stronger. Knows we're comin' for the third stone.

NATHANIEL Brennan's loyalists been spotted too. Armed. Not hidin' anymore.

(beat)

Runnin' Deer thinks they mean to stop the ritual.

Lydia feels fear knot cold in her stomach. Pushes it down.

LYDIA Then we be ready. Let's go.

INT. NATHANIEL'S CAR — CONTINUOUS

The drive stretches longer than it should. Lydia's mind keeps circling what's ahead — the dive, the water that's "wrong," Brennan's people, the darkness itself.

NATHANIEL Tell me somethin'. If we make it through this — what do you do after? Back to Cleveland? The museum?

LYDIA (considering) Don't know. I'm different now. Don't know if I can go back to actin' like the world's just what you can see and touch.

(beat)

What about you?

NATHANIEL Academic career's probably done. Missed classes, disappeared for days.

(a small, real smile)

Maybe that ain't such a bad thing. Maybe there's other work.

LYDIA We could work together. After.

(the words out before she thinks them through)

Investigate this kinda thing. Help people. Protect the sacred sites.

NATHANIEL (warm, hopeful) I'd like that. I'd like that a lot.

Quiet again — comfortable this time, full of a future neither of them's sure they'll get to see.

EXT. WOODED CLEARING — NEAR PAINT CREEK — NIGHT

11 PM. A narrow dirt road opens on a clearing packed with vehicles — Running Deer's truck, Marcus's sedan, others. People stand in low-voiced clusters, turning as Nathaniel's car pulls in.

Running Deer meets them, face creased.

RUNNING DEER You got it?

Nathaniel lifts the wrapped stone from the trunk, still glowing faint through the cloth. Running Deer nods, satisfied.

RUNNING DEER (CONT'D) Two of three. Now the hard part.

(gesturing toward the creek through the trees, moonlight on black water)

Water's dropped another foot since I called. Whatever's down there — it's gettin' ready for us.

Lydia walks to the clearing's edge and looks down at Paint Creek. Wrongness radiates off it even from here — cold, hungry, patient.

MARCUS (joining her) Got wetsuits, divin' gear. Couple experienced divers helpin' — but they're spooked. Can feel somethin's off with the water.

LYDIA Don't blame 'em. I feel it too.

MARCUS (quiet) You don't gotta do this. Could wait for backup—

LYDIA There ain't another way. Alignment's at dawn. Miss it, we wait a year the darkness ain't gonna give us.

(beat)

We do this now, or not at all.

MARCUS You're braver than me.

LYDIA I'm terrified. Doin' it anyway.

MONTAGE — PREPARATION

— Lydia and Nathaniel fitted with wetsuits, masks, lights, safety lines. JAKE and MELISSA, the divers, run safety checks with barely-hidden doubt in their eyes.

— Running Deer gathers everyone in a circle, burns sage and sweetgrass, speaks words in Shawnee. Smoke curls through the clearing. Some of Lydia's fear eases, replaced with something steadier.

RUNNING DEER The stone's at the deepest point — right where Isolde fell after they hanged her. That spot's marked by death. The darkness anchors there.

(to Nathaniel)

Retrievin' it takes one of its anchors away. It won't let that go easy.

NATHANIEL What should we expect?

RUNNING DEER (grave) Don't know. Nobody's ever come back from that spot with what they went for. But you got advantages they didn't. Both sensitive. Got the other two stones for protection.

(beat)

And you got each other. Use that. Let it anchor you.

END MONTAGE

EXT. PAINT CREEK — WATER'S EDGE — MIDNIGHT

The water sits black and still, reflecting nothing. Lydia's heart hammers.

NATHANIEL (taking her hand) Ready?

LYDIA No.

(a breath)

Let's do it anyway.

They wade in. The cold is instant, shocking — and wrong, a chill that isn't only temperature, sinking bone-deep. Nathaniel's breathing hard, face pale in the moonlight.

LYDIA (CONT'D) It's okay. We can do this.

They reach the deepest point — where the old bridge stood, where Isolde died. The water here is darker than the rest, black, bottomless-looking even though the creek shouldn't run past seven feet.

NATHANIEL On three. We dive together, stay together, come back together. No matter what.

LYDIA Together.

Regulators in. Lights checked. A last look through the masks — fear and trust both plain in his eyes.

NATHANIEL One.

LYDIA Two.

NATHANIEL Three.

They dive.

UNDERWATER — PAINT CREEK — CONTINUOUS

The water closes over them and immediately something's wrong. They should hit bottom in a few feet. They keep descending — down, down, into a dark their lights can't touch.

The Between. They're diving straight into it.

Lydia finds Nathaniel's hand, grips hard. Shapes move at the edge of their lights — things that might be fish, might be something that's never been alive in any way that counts.

Far below — a light. Soft blue-green, pulsing like a heartbeat.

The third stone.

They swim for it, fighting a current pulling the wrong way, deeper into the dark. Lydia's lungs start to burn — they've been under too long, time bending wrong again, same as the Between.

The stone comes into view — resting on a stone altar, dark pressing in thick and aware around it.

Lydia reaches. The moment her fingers touch it —

The darkness ATTACKS.

It comes from every side — malevolence and hunger, clawing at her mind, trying to unmake who she is.

She holds on. Holds the stone. Holds Nathaniel's hand. Holds herself.

LYDIA (V.O.) (inner, fierce) I am Lydia Marrow. Isolde's blood. I will not be broken.

The stone BLAZES. The darkness recoils. Nathaniel grips it with his free hand and together they lift it clear of the altar.

The current reverses — pulling them up, up, toward light and air, the stone's power a bubble the darkness can't breach.

EXT. PAINT CREEK — SURFACE — CONTINUOUS

They break the surface gasping. Hands grab them — Marcus, Jake, Melissa, Running Deer, hauling them onto the bank.

Lydia collapses, still clutching the stone, shaking. Nathaniel coughs up water beside her, pale, alive.

LYDIA (managing it) We got it. We got the stone.

RUNNING DEER (kneeling, eyes wet) You did it. All three now. We can perform the sealin'.

Lydia looks up. Stars fading. The east going gray at the edge.

Dawn's coming.

She turns to find Nathaniel already looking at her — everything they've survived together sitting plain between them.

LYDIA Together?

NATHANIEL Together.

They have the stones. The knowledge. Each other.

Now they just have to face the darkness one last time.

FADE OUT.

END OF EXCERPT

THE SEALING

EXT. PAINT CREEK — DEEP POOL — PRE-DAWN — CONTINUOUS

Nathaniel breaks the surface, the third stone clutched to his chest, Lydia's hand locked in his. Thirty minutes, maybe less, before the world tips one way or the other.

Water sheets off them in a cascade of mud and ancient silt. Nathaniel's lungs burn dragging in air that tastes of dawn and desperation. The stone hums cold against his sternum — granite, heart-sized, symbols writhing even now.

MARCUS (O.S.) Got 'em!

Hands pull them toward the bank. The stone seems heavier out of the water, like it resents comin' back into light.

Running Deer waits on the muddy shore, lanterns throwing hard shadows, a half-dozen Shawnee practitioners behind him in a loose circle — faces caught between awe and fear.

RUNNING DEER (not a question) You found it. I can feel it from here.

Nathaniel can't answer yet — throat raw, chest heaving.

FORMER DEPUTY They're hypothermic. Look at 'em shake. They need—

LYDIA (hoarse, firm) No time.

(pointing east)

Look at the sky.

A gray line's creeping up over the hills. Faint. Growing.

NATHANIEL How long.

RUNNING DEER (checking his watch, the sky, the stone) Forty minutes. Maybe less. Alignment's already startin'. By sunup, the barrier's at its weakest in two hundred years.

NATHANIEL Then we start now.

MARCUS (wrapping a thermal blanket around Lydia) Y'all are half dead. You need—

NATHANIEL We need to seal this 'fore it wakes all the way. Everything else waits.

(gentler)

I know, Marcus. But this is what we came for.

Marcus holds his eyes a long beat. Nods.

MARCUS Then let's do it right.

Running Deer's already moving, directing his people.

RUNNING DEER Bring the other stones! Set the triangle! Mark the cardinal points!

Two practitioners hurry to a van, return with deer-hide bundles. They unwrap the first two stones — recovered days back, exposed to air and hands ever since. The third stone, fresh from two centuries underwater, hums different. Angrier. Awake.

RUNNING DEER (CONT'D) North stone to the hangin' tree. South to the creek bend. East, where the sun rises.

They move fast, precise. As the triangle locks into place, the air itself changes — a hum settling into bone rather than ear.

LYDIA (hand to her chest) They're callin' to each other. Rememberin' what they were made for.

RUNNING DEER Carved from a single piece of granite, from a sacred site. Together, aligned — they're a lock. A seal for what shouldn't walk free.

NATHANIEL And we're the key.

RUNNING DEER Both of you. Josiah Cross's blood. Isolde Marrow's blood. The two lines present at the crime. Only cooperation between their kin can seal what their violence woke.

The last stone settles. Nathaniel feels it lock — the air shimmers, and for one instant he sees straight through layers of reality stacked like glass, the darkness moving closer than it should be.

Waking.

RUNNING DEER (CONT'D) (sharp) Positions! Everyone! We begin now!

The practitioners form a wide circle around the triangle, drums and rattles in hand, sage bundles smoking. Years of preserving the old ways, about to be tested all at once.

RUNNING DEER (CONT'D) (clipped, urgent) The circle holds the space. We channel, we maintain the boundary, keep the dark contained while you two work at the center. Speak the words exact. Hold your intent clear — sealin' the darkness, protectin' the land, honorin' the dead.

LYDIA What if we mess it up?

RUNNING DEER (grave) Then it breaks free complete. No second chance. Not in our lifetimes.

NATHANIEL (surprising himself with the certainty) We won't mess it up.

He looks at Lydia. Same resolve staring back.

RUNNING DEER (to Marcus and the guards) Guard the perimeter. It'll try to interfere — shadow creatures, worse. Keep it off the circle.

Marcus checks an iron knife, blessed with salt and prayer — the only thing that's worked so far.

MARCUS Understood.

RUNNING DEER (lower) If this goes wrong — you run. All of you. Far as you can, and don't look back.

MARCUS And leave you here?

RUNNING DEER If we fail, there's nothin' left worth savin'. Distance and speed's your only shot.

Heavy silence. Then Lydia, steady despite the shaking.

LYDIA We won't fail.

Running Deer studies her. Nods.

RUNNING DEER No. I don't believe you will.

(to Nathaniel)

Ready?

Nathaniel looks at the stones. The circle. The creek. The hanging tree, branches spread like bone fingers against the lightening sky. Then Lydia — a stranger two weeks ago, now the only soul alive who understands what they're about to face.

NATHANIEL Ready.

Running Deer hands them each smoking sage.

RUNNING DEER Cleanse first. Then to the center. When the drum starts, you start. Don't stop for anything. Don't break the rhythm. One unbroken sequence, first word to last.

They pass the smoke over themselves, then walk together into the triangle's heart, where the air twists and shimmers.

The moment they cross into it, the world tilts — more real and less real at once. The darkness beneath the creek stirs, aware of them.

Not pleased.

Lydia's hand finds his. Cold. Strong.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) Whatever happens—

LYDIA I know. Me too.

Everything unsaid passes between them in that look.

Running Deer begins the drum — deep, primal, a heartbeat from the earth itself. The circle's voices rise with it, Shawnee words older than the state, older maybe than any living memory.

Nathaniel and Lydia speak, their voices joining, the language heavy on the tongue, changing the world with every syllable.

NATHANIEL & LYDIA (together) Kihci-nishki, kihci-tipahikan. Great darkness, great seal. We call upon the stones of bindin'. We call upon the blood of those who came before. We call upon the land to witness, and to hold.

The three stones FLARE — cold blue-white, light flowing between them, weaving a triangle of power with Nathaniel and Lydia at its center.

Power surges through him — lightning, electricity, every nerve carrying more current than flesh should hold. Lydia cries out, grip tightening till his bones ache.

They don't stop.

NATHANIEL & LYDIA (CONT'D) Kishkipahwi, kishkipahwi. Seal it, seal it. By stone and blood and sacred word. By the sacrifice of those who died in darkness.

The creek RISES — water spiraling upward against gravity, glowing the same cold light. Faces form in it. Memories made visible.

Isolde, hanging. Josiah beneath her, guilt and horror on his face. The darkness rising from the earth, called up by blood and broken law.

Past and present overlay. The hanging tree both dead and alive. The creek both frozen and running. Reality fraying at every edge.

Ghosts manifest around the circle. ISOLDE, more solid than Nathaniel's ever seen her, eyes on Lydia — pride, sorrow, both. And the other victims — every soul the darkness ever trapped, ringed around the ritual, bearing witness.

The trees bend toward the center like they're bowing. The ground trembles under Nathaniel's feet.

He feels Josiah Cross's guilt flow through his own blood — generations of Cross family carrying that secret shame, hoping someone would someday set it right.

NATHANIEL (V.O.) (inner) I'm makin' it right. I'm endin' this.

Beside him, Lydia channels something fiercer — Isolde's strength, the power of Marrow women stretching back generations, wild and cold-burning.

Together they're not just sealing. They're healing. Weaving the tear shut.

The darkness FEELS it.

The darkness FIGHTS BACK.

Reality tears wide. The Between bleeds through — a rip in the fabric of things, darkness pouring through like oil, like smoke, like nothing with a human name.

Shadow creatures boil out, dozens, hundreds.

MARCUS (shouting, iron blade flashing) Hold the line!

Screams that aren't sound — straight to the hindbrain, every primal fear humanity's ever carried.

Nathaniel and Lydia can't stop. Can't break focus. Have to trust the others hold.

NATHANIEL & LYDIA (voices rising over the chaos) Tipahikan kishkipahwi! The seal is made! The darkness is bound! By stone and blood and sacred word, we close the door! We heal the wound!

The power intensifies past bearable. Nathaniel tastes copper, ozone, burning sage. His consciousness starts to fray at the edges.

Lydia's hand stays locked in his. The anchor holds.

The darkness RISES — for the first time in two hundred years, fully manifest. Not smoke, not shadow — the space between atoms made real. Entropy given shape. A wrongness the human mind can't properly hold.

Everyone present feels it. The chanting falters. Weapons feel suddenly, pathetically small. Even Marcus drops to his knees, dread white on his face.

The darkness SPEAKS — not words, concepts driven straight into the skull.

It knows what they're doing. And it will not allow it.

It attacks — not with violence. With temptation.

Nathaniel sees his failure: the darkness spreading across Ohio, the world, everyone he loves pulled screaming into the void forever.

Then — the offer. Same one it made Josiah Cross two centuries back.

DARKNESS (V.O.) Become my jailer. Sacrifice yourself. Give yourself to me, and I spare everyone else.

He sees it — himself stepping into the void. A guardian. A prisoner. Holding the dark back through will alone, forever.

It would work. He knows it would.

Beside him, Lydia's fighting her own vision — Isolde's suffering, and an offer of her own.

DARKNESS (V.O.) (CONT'D) Join with me. I will give you the strength to remake the world. Save them all.

Her grip loosens. Just slightly.

Nathaniel feels it — and holds tighter. Anchors her. She does the same for him.

The darkness SCREAMS — fury, frustration, denial.

They keep chanting.

NATHANIEL & LYDIA Kishkipahwi, kishkipahwi. We seal you not with sacrifice, but with unity. We bind you not with death, but with life. We close the door not with surrender, but with defiance.

Their own words now, not Running Deer's script — but true, certain, absolute.

The darkness tries once more — Josiah's memories, an accident, a healing gone wrong, not malice.

DARKNESS (V.O.) He didn't mean to hurt her. He was trying to save her.

Maybe true. Doesn't matter. Intent don't undo two hundred years of suffering.

Nathaniel pushes it away. Focuses on the words. On Lydia's hand.

One last assault — Lydia's own potential, dangled bright and terrible.

DARKNESS (V.O.) (CONT'D) You could save them all. Every lost soul. Take my hand instead of his.

Her grip loosens again — more this time.

And then — Isolde manifests FULL, solid, blazing cold fire, stepping between Lydia and the void.

ISOLDE No. You freed me. Spoke truth. Now I help you finish this.

Other spirits join her — every soul the darkness ever claimed, forming a wall the void can't cross.

VICTIM #1 (drowned, 1847) You gave us peace. Let us give you time.

VICTIM #2 (murdered near the tree, 1923) You spoke our names. Let us speak yours, hold you fast in the world of the livin'.

VICTIM #3 (a child, lost decades) You remembered us. Let us remember you.

The darkness's attention splits. Marcus and the guards rally, drive the shadow creatures back. The chant rises strong again. Running Deer's drum steadies like a heartbeat.

Living and dead, both bloodlines, all of it converging on one purpose.

Nathaniel and Lydia speak the final words, voices rising clear above everything.

NATHANIEL & LYDIA Tipahikan kishkipahwi! Kihci-nishki kishkipahwi! Kishkipahwi, kishkipahwi, KISHKIPAHWI!

Light EXPLODES from the three stones. Nathaniel shuts his eyes against it — feels the energy pour into the earth like lightning reversed, sinking to where the darkness roots itself.

The seal FORMS. Not just a barrier — a healing. Reality knits back whole. The Between collapses into its proper place. The wound, two hundred years open, finally closes.

The land itself accepts it — Paint Creek, the hills, the trees, all of it welcoming the seal home, making it part of the ground itself.

The darkness SCREAMS — a sound this time, real sound, shattering windows a mile off, sending birds fleeing their roosts.

One final assault — tendrils of void reaching up, wrapping around Nathaniel and Lydia, cold past cold, trying to drag them down as prisoners if it can't have freedom.

Lydia's hand tears from his. She's pulled toward the creek.

They're about to be taken.

Isolde throws herself between them and the void, grabbing the tendrils bare-handed. They burn cold fire where she touches them.

ISOLDE No. You don't get them. You don't get anyone else.

(beat, absolute)

This ends NOW.

The darkness can't unmake what's already unmade. Can't kill what's already dead.

But it can shatter her.

And she lets it.

ISOLDE (CONT'D) (to Lydia, barely a whisper, but clear) Live. LIVE. Don't waste it like I did. Don't let rage take you. Don't let the past keep you.

(beat)

Live, and love, and be free.

Isolde's ghost SHATTERS like glass — a thousand points of light scattering into the seal, absorbed, strengthening it, making it permanent.

Her sacrifice completes the binding.

The darkness is SEALED.

Silence falls over Paint Creek — sudden, total. The stones' light fades. The spirits vanish. The shadow creatures dissolve to nothing. Time flows normal again.

Nathaniel and Lydia collapse to their knees in the mud, gasping, barely conscious.

Done.

They actually did it.

Marcus pulls Nathaniel up, wraps him in a blanket. Voices around them — checking on each other, alive, whole.

Running Deer, praying low in Shawnee — thanksgiving, completion.

Lydia stares back at Nathaniel, exhaustion and relief and something like joy in her eyes.

RUNNING DEER (to the practitioners) Check the seal. Make sure it's holdin'.

They examine the stones — no longer glowing, warm to the touch now, symbols settled and still.

PRACTITIONER It's holdin'. Seal's stable. Darkness is bound.

A ragged cheer goes up.

Nathaniel looks around. Paint Creek — just a creek now, flowing peaceful in the early light. The hanging tree — just a tree, old and gnarled, no longer sinister. Sun cresting the hills in gold and pink.

An ordinary morning in rural Ohio.

But he can feel the difference underneath. The seal humming below the surface. The thin places, still fragile but held.

He's marked now. Changed. So is Lydia.

LYDIA (soft) The spirits. They're gone. All of 'em.

NATHANIEL (nodding, feeling the absence) Isolde too.

RUNNING DEER (joining them) The Between's collapsed. Time's flowin' right again. Everyone trapped there's been let go.

LYDIA (voice breaking) She sacrificed herself. To finish the seal.

RUNNING DEER (gentle) She chose to. After two hundred years of rage — she chose love and sacrifice instead. Chose to give you the future she never got.

(beat)

That's a stronger magic than any curse.

Lydia cries. Nathaniel finds her hand waiting — cold, steady. They sit together in the mud, too spent to stand, too relieved to care.

Sirens rise in the distance. Emergency lights flash on the access road.

MARCUS (kneeling beside them) We need to get you two to a hospital. Hypothermic, in shock, God knows what else.

NATHANIEL (quiet) In a minute. Just — give us a minute.

Marcus steps back. Nathaniel looks at Lydia — really looks. Mud-caked, hair a wreck, lips still faint blue. Exhausted, battered.

Beautiful.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) We did it.

LYDIA We did it.

Quiet. Just breathing. Just being alive in a world that's whole again.

Then Lydia laughs — half sob, half real.

LYDIA (CONT'D) We sealed cosmic horror with ancient magic and two families finally gettin' along. That's insane.

NATHANIEL (laughing too) That's Ohio.

The laughter rings out over the creek — release, catharsis, two hundred years of tension finally breaking.

When it fades, something settles between them. Everything unsaid, finally ready to be said.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) Lydia—

LYDIA I know. Me too.

They kiss. Cold, muddy, tastes like creek water and exhaustion.

Perfect.

A throat clears nearby. Running Deer, amused and grave at once.

RUNNING DEER Hate to interrupt. But there's somethin' you need to know.

Nathaniel feels a chill that's got nothing to do with the water.

NATHANIEL What is it.

Running Deer spreads a map on the ground — Ohio, marked with dozens of symbols.

RUNNING DEER Paint Creek's sealed. But it ain't the only site.

NATHANIEL (studying the marks) What are these.

RUNNING DEER Thin places. Most dormant, no threat.

(pointing to several circled red)

Some of these got the same kind of dark underneath. Smaller. Weaker than what was here. But still capable of wakin', conditions bein' right.

LYDIA There's more of these things.

RUNNING DEER The darkness exists in a lot of places. Shadow side of the natural order. Mostly it sleeps.

(beat)

But sometimes the barriers weaken. And somebody's got to be there when they do.

NATHANIEL (looking at Lydia) Somebody like us.

RUNNING DEER You've both been changed by what you did here. Sensitive to it now, in a way most folks never are.

LYDIA You sayin' we're guardians.

RUNNING DEER I'm sayin' you got a choice. Walk away. Try for normal.

(beat)

Or accept what you've become, and use it.

Nathaniel looks at the map — all those red circles scattered across the state. Thinks about walking away, going back to who he was two weeks ago.

Can't do it. That man's gone. Burned away.

He looks at Lydia. Sees the same knowing in her eyes.

NATHANIEL We'll do it.

LYDIA Together.

RUNNING DEER (a tired, relieved smile) Good. 'Cause Ohio's got a lot of thin places, and I'm gettin' too old to watch 'em all myself.

Sirens closer now. Emergency vehicles rolling up the access road, paramedics running toward them.

But for one more moment, Nathaniel sits beside Paint Creek with Lydia's hand in his, watching the sun climb whole and gold over a world that's safe again.

They sealed the darkness beneath Paint Creek.

But looking at that map, they both know —

The work's only just begun.

FADE OUT.

THE END

BLOOD, FAITH, AND FOREVER

EXT. PAINT CREEK — DAWN — CONTINUOUS

Light spills rose and gold across the water. Mist rises off the surface like something breathing out after holding its breath three hundred years. The hanging tree stands quiet against the brightening sky — just a tree now. Scarred. Old. Done being a weapon.

LYDIA and NATHANIEL sit on the bank, wrapped in emergency blankets, watching the first sunrise over Paint Creek that isn't tainted.

Emergency lights strobe red and blue through the trees behind them. Officers move through the woods, documenting. Somewhere back there, BRENNAN sits cuffed in the back of a cruiser.

A PARAMEDIC crouches near them.

PARAMEDIC Ms. Marrow, we really oughta get you to the hospital for observation—

LYDIA (not looking away from the water) Few more minutes. Please.

The paramedic sighs, steps back.

Lydia pulls her blanket tighter. Her body aches in places she doesn't have names for.

NATHANIEL (quiet) You're still sensin' it.

LYDIA (not a question, not surprised he knows) Yeah.

(beat)

Like I can hear it singin'. The seal. It's holdin'.

NATHANIEL (rough with fatigue, satisfied) Good.

She looks at him properly for the first time since the ritual — pale under the dirt and blood, dark circles, clothes torn to rags. Smiling faint at the sunrise like it's a miracle he doesn't quite trust.

They did it.

Behind them, a commotion breaks the quiet.

EXT. PAINT CREEK — RITUAL CLEARING — CONTINUOUS

Paramedics rush toward seventeen bodies scattered on the ground — the disappeared, stirring, groaning, sitting up in confusion.

MARCUS WEBB pushes himself upright, blinking at the sky like he's never seen it.

Alive. All of them.

Nathaniel watches, something in his chest cracking open. Seventeen people the world had given up for dead, coming back.

NATHANIEL (to Lydia, quiet awe) They came back.

LYDIA (tears in her eyes) They came back.

EXT. PAINT CREEK — BANK — LATER

Lydia sits wrapped in a borrowed jacket on the hood of a cruiser. Chaos has arrived — reporters, families, officials, the whole machinery of the outside world crashing in.

A REPORTER thrusts a mic at her.

REPORTER Ms. Marrow — can you tell us what happened? How'd you find the missin' people?

LYDIA (exhausted, finding her voice) We followed the old stories. About the witch of Paint Creek.

(beat, firm)

Isolde Marrow was innocent. A healer, murdered by the folks she tried to help. The darkness that come from that injustice fed on this town three hundred years.

(beat)

It's over now. The curse is broken. Truth's out.

More questions crash over her. She keeps answering, keeps her footing, honoring Isolde's memory without sounding like she's lost her mind.

NATHANIEL (O.S.) Lydia.

He pushes through the crowd, takes her hand, pulls her toward the quiet end of the bank.

EXT. PAINT CREEK — QUIETER BANK — CONTINUOUS

They sit on a fallen log, the noise fading behind them.

LYDIA This is insane. I wasn't ready for any of this.

NATHANIEL I know. But it matters. Isolde deserves it. All the victims do.

LYDIA I know. I just don't know if I'm the right one to be sayin' it.

NATHANIEL (firm) You're exactly the right one. Her blood. Her descendant. You broke the curse.

(beat)

If anybody's got the right to tell it, it's you.

LYDIA (something settling) Okay.

(beat)

I can't do it alone though.

NATHANIEL (taking her hand) Won't have to. I'm here. Long as you need me.

A woman approaches, tears streaming — SARAH WEBB, Marcus's mother.

SARAH WEBB Ms. Marrow — I'm Sarah Webb. Marcus's mama.

(voice trembling)

I just wanted to thank you. For bringin' my boy back.

She pulls Lydia into a fierce hug. Lydia hugs back, feeling the gratitude wash over her — this is what matters. Not the story. The lives.

More families come. More tears, more thanks, more questions Lydia does her best to answer.

By sunset she's hollowed out — but purposeful. Grounded. Like she's found the thing she's meant to do.

She catches Nathaniel watching her across the clearing. Something passes between them that has nothing to do with exhaustion.

EXT. PAINT CREEK — CREEK BANK — SUNSET

Nathaniel stands alone as the crowd thins. His phone's been buzzing for hours — colleagues, publishers, media, a career suddenly remade in a single night.

He doesn't care about any of it. Not really.

RUNNING DEER (approaching) A moment, Dr. Cross?

They walk together, away from the noise.

RUNNING DEER (CONT'D) You did well. Honored the old knowledge. Respected the sacred. Rare, in your line of work.

NATHANIEL Had a good teacher.

(beat)

And the stakes were too high to let pride get in the way.

RUNNING DEER This site's sealed. But it ain't the only one. Thin places all over Ohio, and beyond. Some watched. Some forgotten.

NATHANIEL (a chill) You're sayin' this could happen again. Somewhere else.

RUNNING DEER It's always happenin', somewhere. Somebody's got to do the work. Document the sites. Watch over 'em. Make sure the past don't repeat.

NATHANIEL (understanding) Somebody like me.

RUNNING DEER Somebody like you.

(beat)

You got the knowledge now. The scars. You could bridge the academic world and the spirit world, if you chose to.

NATHANIEL I'll do it. But I'll need help.

RUNNING DEER (a small smile) You already got it. Ms. Marrow's bound to this work same as you.

(beat)

Together, you'll do what neither of you could alone.

Nathaniel looks across the clearing — Lydia, talking with townspeople, tired and radiant and utterly herself.

He loves her.

The realization lands like a physical thing.

RUNNING DEER (CONT'D) (following his gaze) She's your match. In power, in purpose, in spirit.

(beat)

The curse brought you together. What binds you now is your own choosin'. Remember that.

Running Deer clasps his shoulder and walks off.

Nathaniel crosses to Lydia, drawn like gravity. She looks up, and her tired smile knocks the air out of him.

LYDIA Hey.

NATHANIEL Hey.

(taking her hand)

Ready to get outta here?

LYDIA (a laugh, exhausted and real) God, yes. Food, a shower, twelve hours of sleep. Not necessarily in that order.

NATHANIEL Think I can arrange that.

They walk away from Paint Creek hand in hand.

INT. HOTEL ROOM — ONE WEEK LATER — DAY

Lydia stands at the mirror, trying and failing to look rested. A knock. Nathaniel enters — in a suit, the first time she's seen him dressed for anything but disaster.

NATHANIEL You look beautiful.

LYDIA (gesturing at herself) I look like hell.

NATHANIEL Beautiful hell, then.

(crossing to her, taking her hands)

How you holdin' up?

LYDIA Tired. Overwhelmed.

(beat)

Okay, though.

NATHANIEL Today's gonna be hard. But it matters.

LYDIA (a breath) I know. I'm ready. I think.

EXT. PAINT CREEK — MEMORIAL SITE — DAY

Transformed. A stage near the hanging tree, draped in black cloth, flowers everywhere. Rows of chairs full — townspeople, officials, media, descendants of victims. A covered historical marker waits to be unveiled.

Nathaniel stands at the crowd's edge. The MAYOR approaches, hand out.

MAYOR Dr. Cross. Town owes you a debt.

NATHANIEL Just doin' my job. Documentin' history.

MAYOR You did more than that. You saved lives.

(beat)

Ms. Marrow deserves the real credit, but you'll both be honored today.

He moves off. Nathaniel scans the crowd, finds Lydia near the stage — nervous, determined.

INT./EXT. MEMORIAL STAGE — CONTINUOUS

The mayor speaks — acknowledgment, shame, commitment to do better. Then the marker's unveiled.

INSERT — HISTORICAL MARKER: "In Memory of Isolde Marrow — Healer, Midwife, Innocent Victim. Wrongly Accused and Executed for Witchcraft. And All Those Who Suffered Because of Injustice. May Truth Bring Healing. May Memory Bring Peace."

Lydia's eyes well reading it.

Then it's her turn.

She walks to the podium on shaking legs. Looks out at hundreds of faces.

Finds Nathaniel in the front row. His steady smile anchors her.

LYDIA (voice stronger than she expects) My name is Lydia Marrow. I'm a descendant of Isolde Marrow.

(beat)

Isolde was not a witch. She was a healer. A midwife. She learned her craft from the Shawnee people on this land, who taught her to respect the thin places, the balance between worlds.

(beat, gathering strength)

When plague came to Chillicothe, the people she'd helped turned on her. Accused her. Hanged her from that tree—

(gesturing to the oak)

—and left her body as a warnin'.

The crowd sits dead silent.

LYDIA (CONT'D) The darkness that come from her murder fed on this land three hundred years. Took innocent people. Consumed them.

(tears now, unwiped)

Isolde Marrow was my blood. And she was innocent. Good. Brave. She deserves rememberin' not as a warnin' about a woman with too much power — but as a victim of fear and mob cruelty.

(beat)

But her story don't end with her dyin'. In her last moments, she used what power she had to seal that darkness — to protect the very people that murdered her.

(voice breaking)

Her sacrifice weren't in vain. Three hundred years later, her blood finished what she started.

Lydia looks at the marker.

LYDIA (CONT'D) So thank you, Chillicothe, for this memorial. For the truth.

(beat, harder now)

But this marker's just a start. Real reconciliation takes more than words on a plaque. It takes listenin' to the silenced. Honorin' the people whose knowledge got stolen right alongside their land.

(beat)

Isolde's story ain't unique. Women accused for bein' too powerful. Outsiders blamed for what scares a town. It happens again and again.

(beat, final)

Isolde Marrow — I honor you. I remember you. I carry you forward.

(a breath)

Rest easy. Your sacrifice weren't wasted.

She steps back. Silence — then the crowd erupts. Not polite applause. Real. Standing. Some crying, some cheering.

Nathaniel claps harder than anyone, tears on his face.

EXT. MEMORIAL SITE — AFTER — LATER

The crowd thins. Marcus approaches Nathaniel with his mother.

MARCUS Dr. Cross. Wanted to thank you again.

NATHANIEL How you doin', Marcus? Recoverin' okay?

MARCUS (a shudder) Hard. Don't remember much of bein' taken. What I do remember — hungry all the time. Not for food. For somethin' dark.

NATHANIEL That's over. Sealed. You're safe.

MARCUS (thick with emotion) Because of you two. I don't know how to thank you.

NATHANIEL Live well. That's thanks enough.

Marcus nods, tearing up, and moves off.

Running Deer approaches.

RUNNING DEER Good ceremony. Land feels lighter already.

NATHANIEL Seal's holdin'?

RUNNING DEER Strong. Stable.

(beat)

You thought more on the other sites?

NATHANIEL I have. I want in. Feels like the work I was meant for.

RUNNING DEER And Ms. Marrow?

NATHANIEL (a warmth in his chest) Part of it. We're partners. In everything.

(beat, the words just coming)

I'm gonna ask her to marry me.

RUNNING DEER (gentle) Soon?

NATHANIEL Tonight.

RUNNING DEER Trust it. Everything happened exactly as it needed to.

He clasps Nathaniel's shoulder and walks off.

EXT. PAINT CREEK — CREEK BANK — SUNSET

Lydia stands alone at the marker, fingers tracing Isolde's name.

LYDIA (a whisper) I did it. I told your story.

(beat)

You can rest now.

A warmth washes over her — gentle, like a hand on her shoulder. Gone as quick as it came.

NATHANIEL (O.S.) Hey.

She turns. He's walking toward her, gold light behind him.

LYDIA Hey yourself.

He pulls her into his arms.

NATHANIEL You were amazing up there.

LYDIA (head on his chest) I just told the truth.

NATHANIEL That's everything.

They stand a long moment, just breathing. Then he pulls back, takes both her hands. Something serious in his face.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) Lydia. There's somethin' I want to say.

LYDIA (heart picking up) Okay.

NATHANIEL These two weeks — most intense, terrifyin', amazin' weeks of my life. We faced the dark together. Broke a curse together.

(beat)

But more than that — I got to know you. And I love you. Not just 'cause of the bond. Because of who you are.

LYDIA Nathaniel—

NATHANIEL Let me finish.

(a breath)

I know it's fast. I know it's insane by any normal measure. But nothin' about us has been normal.

He drops to one knee. Pulls a small ring from his pocket.

NATHANIEL (CONT'D) Lydia Marrow. Will you marry me?

Lydia stares down at him, mind reeling — and then, looking at his face, at everything they've survived, knows it isn't too fast. Not for them.

LYDIA (voice breaking) Yes. Yes, I'll marry you.

He stands, slides the ring on her finger, kisses her deep. The applause of birds and wind and creek water is the only witness they need.

MONTAGE — THE MONTHS BETWEEN

— Nathaniel and Lydia driving Ohio backroads, notebooks and old maps between them.

— Documenting a second thin place, candlelight and careful hands over old stone.

— Laughing over dinner in some small-town diner, exhausted and easy with each other.

— Lydia writing late into the night. Nathaniel reading over her shoulder.

END MONTAGE

INT. SMALL HISTORIC CHURCH — CHILLICOTHE — DAY — THREE MONTHS LATER

A small, intimate wedding. Running Deer in the front row. Marcus and his mother. A handful of colleagues and new friends.

Lydia walks the aisle in a simple white dress, wildflowers in hand, radiant.

At the altar, Nathaniel takes her hands. The bond between them, unspoken, plain on both their faces.

NATHANIEL (vows, steady despite the emotion) Three months ago, a curse brought us together. Blood callin' to blood across the years.

(beat)

But what binds us now ain't magic. It's love, freely chosen. It's the choice I make every day to stand beside you, face the dark beside you, build a life beside you.

(beat)

I vow to choose you. Every day. For the rest of my life.

LYDIA (her turn, voice full) Nathaniel — I came to Chillicothe lookin' for folklore. Found my history. My power. My purpose.

(beat)

But most of all, I found you.

(beat)

The curse brought us together. Love binds us. I vow to stand beside you — in work, in life, in light and in dark.

(beat)

I vow to choose you. Every day. Forever.

MINISTER By the power vested in me — I now pronounce you husband and wife.

They kiss. The small congregation rises, applauding.

EXT. HISTORIC INN — RECEPTION — LATER

Music, dancing, warm light. Nathaniel and Lydia move through it hand in hand, stealing kisses, laughing with friends.

As the sun starts down, they slip away — unspoken agreement — back toward the creek.

EXT. PAINT CREEK — SUNSET — CONTINUOUS

Lydia in her wedding dress at the water's edge, Nathaniel's hand in hers. The hanging tree sways gentle behind them. The marker gleams gold in the fading light.

NATHANIEL Oughta get back to the reception.

LYDIA Probably.

(neither moves)

Wanted to come here first. Where it all began.

NATHANIEL Where it all changed.

Lydia feels the seal humming underfoot — will always feel it now. Isn't afraid of that anymore.

LYDIA (turning to him) I love you. Thank you for choosin' me.

NATHANIEL Thank you for choosin' me back.

(resting his chin on her head)

We're gonna do great things together, Lydia Cross.

She smiles at her new name.

LYDIA Yes.

(beat)

We are.

TITLE CARD: SIX MONTHS LATER

EXT. PAINT CREEK — DAWN — CONTINUOUS

Rose and gold light. Mist rising like something finally allowed to breathe easy. The hanging tree stands quiet — no longer death, just memory.

Lydia and Nathaniel stand at the bank, hand in hand, watching the sun climb. She feels the seal, steady underfoot — and the other thin places too, scattered across the state, calling for care.

NATHANIEL (a small smile) Ready?

LYDIA Ready.

Behind them — a car packed for the road. Another site to document. Another seal to check. The work, unending, but theirs to carry, together.

She raises their joined hands, the ring catching morning light.

LYDIA (CONT'D) I love you.

NATHANIEL (kissing her knuckles) I love you too. Forever.

LYDIA Forever.

They turn from Paint Creek and walk to the car — toward the next thin place, the next piece of the work, the long road of a life they chose on purpose, together.

The hanging tree stands witness behind them. The marker catches the morning sun.

A curse brought them here. Love is what they built out of it.

FADE OUT.

THE END